# Residents' Perception and Support Before and After a Mega-Religious Event During COVID-19 in India

Devkant Kala
*University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India*, devkala@gmail.com

Dhani Shanker Chaubey
*Uttaranchal University, India*, chaubeyds@gmail.com

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**Devkant Kala**

School of Business, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India.
devkala@gmail.com

**Dhani Shanker Chaubey**

Department of Management, Uttaranchal University, Dehradun, India
chaubeyds@gmail.com

This study investigated residents' perceptions, perceived risk, trust in government, and support for a mega-religious event during the COVID pandemic. The study was conducted in the setting of the *Kumbh Mela*, India's largest peaceful gathering of Hindu pilgrims. The respondents in the survey rated thirty-two statements related to positive impact, negative impact, perceived risk, trust in government, and support for the mega-religious event. Levene's test for equality of variances and an independent samples t-test were used to investigate differences in residents' perception and support before and after the mega-religious event. The pre-event and post-event results indicate that respondents underestimated the risk of the COVID infection before the event. As the event progressed, the residents' perception, trust in the government, and support for the event became unfavourable. Several implications are suggested for staging mega-events during a pandemic.

**Key Words**: resident perceptions, perceived risk, trust, mega-religious event, COVID, India

## Introduction

Festivals and events can be global, diasporic, or rooted in local and religious traditions (Newbold & Jordan, 2016). Religious festivals and events have been identified as a tool for preserving spiritual, cultural, and historical practices; creating a sense of value and belief; enhancing community cohesiveness; promoting social development; and displaying ethnic aspects of the destination, and have thus become an important part of destination tourism strategies. Residents are the key stakeholders in mega-events because they share their infrastructures, supra-structures, services, and surroundings with visitors, and their support is needed for event success (Kim & Petrick, 2005; Ritchie *et al.*, 2009; Yang *et al.*, 2010; Deery *et al.,* 2012; Gursoy *et al.*, 2017). Several studies have been undertaken to examine perceptions of residents towards mega-events and their impacts on host cities (Florek *et al.,* 2008; Ritchie *et al.,* 2009; Yang *et al.,* 2010; Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012; Ma *et al.,* 2013; Gursoy *et al.,* 2017; Vetitnev & Bobina, 2017, Sox *et al.,* 2020; Hallaq *et al.,* 2021).

According to Gursoy *et al.* (2011), residents' perceptions of an event change over time. Residents may be enthusiastic before and throughout the event, but as real problems emerge, their attitude can shift from neutral to slightly unfavourable (Florek *et al.,* 2008; Ritchie *et al.,* 2009; Gursoy *et al.,* 2011; Scholtz *et al.,* 2018). According to Han *et al.* (2018), mega-events cause significant community disruptions and may have a negative impact on residents' lives. Residents appreciate the economic benefits, but are often unwilling to cope with the associated negative consequences. The government is the principal actor in organising such mega-events (Bramwell 2011), and the degree of trust in the government or organising institutions can influence the residents' perception and support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon 2012, Gursoy *et al.,* 2017). Residents who trust the government are more likely to believe that the government and event organisers will devise effective strategies to maximise positive outcomes while minimising negative consequences. Consequently, locals may be more prepared to support the mega-event (Gursoy *et al.,* 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mega-events are at high risk due to the sheer number of people that attend, the requirement of adequate health and safety regulations, and risk management (Davies, 2021). Consequently, festivals and events were forced to cancel or postpone

their 2020–2021 editions. Besides the regular impacts of mega-events, hosting a mega-religious event amid the COVID-19 pandemic results in mass gathering, which creates a considerable perceived risk of infection transmission across borders and within communities. Residents may object to hosting and supporting such a large event because it has always been difficult for the government to implement effective protection measures in a mega-event (Mubarak & Zin, 2020). Despite having a vast network of festivals and religious centres, very few studies in India (Zhuang *et al.,* 2019) have examined the perception of residents towards and support for religious events.

The *Kumbh Mela* is one of the most celebrated religious events in India. As the first population in the world to organise a mega-religious event amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical to analyse the residents' perceptions of and their degree of support for the event as Haridwar prepared to host the *Kumbh Mela* event 2021. Residents' perceptions need to be considered before and after an event to understand possible risks and suggest strategies to manage mega-events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the present work examines the relationships between residents' perceived impacts, perceived risk, trust in government, and support for a mega-religious event amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

## *Kumbh Mela*

India's festivals reflect the country's cultural and religious heritage, which is firmly based on and inextricably linked to Hinduism in its various forms. *Kumbh Mela*, celebrated for many centuries, is the world's largest peaceful gathering of Hindu pilgrims, during which visitors bathe in a sacred river (Figure 1 & 2). Worshipping God and taking a holy bath in the sacred river at this time is thought to cleanse a person's soul and lead to salvation (Gayathri *et al.,* 2017). The Intergovernmental Committee has inscribed the *Kumbha Mela* on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is organised at an interval of 12 years at four religious cities in a sequential manner: Haridwar (river Ganga), Prayagraj (confluence of rivers Yamuna, Ganga, and Saraswati), Nasik (river Godavari), and Ujjain (river Kshipra).

The month and days of *Kumbh Mela* are predetermined based on planetary positions and religious beliefs. During the COVID-19 epidemic, Haridwar *Kumbh Mela* 2021 was one of the world's largest mass-religious gatherings. It happened from April 1 to April 30, 2021. An estimated 9 million people attended the event over a month (BBC, 2021).

## Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is one of the most extensive theories that attempts to comprehend changes in residents' perceptions of event impacts. According to SET, residents are more likely to support mega-events if they believe they will receive sufficient benefits from the event. But, if the perceived negative impacts outweigh the perceived positive impacts, they are more likely to oppose the event (Kim & Petrick, 2005; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Gursoy *et al.,* 2017). While the impact of mega sports events has been extensively researched, there has been much less attention directed towards mega religious events. A particular angle to be aware of in this research is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, organising a mega-religious event was much more dangerous. In this literature review section, we highlight residents' perceptions of mega-events and their impacts on them.

### *Positive Impacts*

The importance of festivals and events (particularly sports events) in generating revenue for host cities and communities is well documented. Residents often consider festivals and events as positive opportunities to strengthen their economic benefits, preserve their cultural and environmental resources, facilitate cultural exchange, create business and employment opportunities, improve public service infrastructure, and increase tax revenue for the government (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Gursoy *et al.,* 2011). Delamere *et al.* (2001) investigated a wide range of non-economic advantages and costs associated with staging community festivals, as well as residents' perceptions of the event's social impacts. They discovered that organising an event could provide residents with opportunities for socialisation and entertainment by allowing them to spend leisure time with their families. Kim and Petrick (2005) investigated how residents perceived the 2002 FIFA World Cup in

**Figure 1: Haridwar Kumbh Mela 2021**



Source: Authors

**Figure 2: Haridwar Kumbh Mela 2021**



Source: Authors

Korea and Japan and found that image enhancement, consolidation, and cultural interchange were the most important social factors. Residents can also meet people from different cultures at festivals and events, which boost community pride and cohesion, improve the city's international reputation, reinforce cultural values and customs, and provide entertainment and relaxation (Alves *et al.,* 2010; Gursoy *et al.,* 2011; Suntikul & Dorji, 2016; Gursoy *et al.,* 2017). According to Kim *et al.* (2015), residents value the favourable social impacts of mega sporting events (i.e., community visibility and image enhancement, as well as knowledge and entertainment opportunities) more than positive economic impacts.

Looking particularly at perceptions in India, Zhuang *et al.* (2019) examined residents' perceptions and support for tourism development in Puri and Varanasi, two major sacred cities. They discovered that enhancing the prominence of pilgrimage cities helps to create employment possibilities, stimulate cultural activities, preserve social growth, and protect local culture.

### Negative Impacts

Despite the potential economic benefits of events, locals are concerned about negative environmental and social consequences. Residents perceive that tourism can harm a destination's economic, socio-cultural and environmental characteristics (Gursoy *et al.,* 2011; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). In the case of festivals and events, a massive influx of tourists has significant environmental impacts. Several studies have revealed that mega-events cause high living costs, traffic and overcrowding, noise, pollution, natural and physical environmental degradation, and deterioration of traditional and/or cultural resources (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Kim & Petrick, 2005; Kim, Gursoy & Lee, 2006; Ritchie *et al.,* 2009; Prayag *et al.,* 2013; Mair *et al.,* 2021). Additionally, residents perceive that organising an event could result in increasing crime (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Kim *et al.,* 2015). Zhuang *et al.* (2019) revealed that religious events may increase overcrowding and pollution and, consequently, affect the natural resources and the appearance of the city.

### Perceived Risk

The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive and disastrous effects on the global economy and human civilisation. In particular, the tourism and hospitality sectors experienced significant impacts from the pandemic. Human health and risk have been the central issues of discussion during the pandemic. Le and Arcodia (2018) defined risk as the sum of negative outcomes and the probability of their occurrence. Tourism has been identified as one of the most important causes of the spread of infectious diseases (Hall, 2006). Besides the fear of new and unknown viruses in the pandemic, media coverage and word of mouth also shaped the risk perception of tourists and residents. During a pandemic, residents of tourism-dependent regions must decide whether to welcome tourists to help the economic recovery or to oppose their arrival to minimise the risk of infection (Rey-Carmona *et al.,* 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, residents of various destinations faced this issue, thus, residents would have perceived risks related to tourism activities. Residents may only suffer minor risks from tourism in typical circumstances, but when confronted with an immense inflow of tourists during a pandemic, their levels of perceived risk would be much higher (Zenker & Kock, 2020; Joo *et al.,* 2021).

Hosting a mega religious event during the COVID-19 pandemic was a critical situation. Since mega religious events attract a massive inflow of visitors, residents would be expected to feel sceptical about the staging and support of the event (Mair *et al.,* 2021). Due to the highly contagious nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, residents would not support mega religious events. Rey-Carmona *et al.* (2022) found that residents' support for tourist development has been influenced by their perception of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Residents' Trust in Government

Trust in government is the basis for the stability of democratic political systems and good governance (Nunkoo, Ramkissoon & Gursoy 2012). Because it is closely connected to government legitimacy and performance, residents' trust in the government is a critical aspect in the successful organisation of a mega-event (Nunkoo, 2015; Ouyang *et al.,* 2017; Men *et al.,* 2018). Residents want the government to make policy decisions that are in their best interests, and they hold them accountable (Bramwell, 2011). Residents must first trust the government before they can support any

policy or development proposal (Bronfman *et al.,* 2009). Moreover, the government performs its functions through its ministries and departments. Residents' trust in government institutions expresses their belief that they will perform properly and will not misuse power (Luhiste, 2006). According to Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012), residents who gain from tourism are more inclined to trust the government than residents who do not benefit from tourism. Residents with poor trust in their government are more likely to be concerned and apprehensive about a mega-event than to expect benefits from it. Several studies have demonstrated that residents' trust in government leads to favourable and supportive behaviour of residents during a mega-event (Nunkoo, 2015; Ouyang *et al.,* 2017, Gursoy *et al.,* 2017; Hallaq *et al.,* 2021). A recent study by Kim and Manoli (2022) confirmed that resident trust in government is a crucial element in their support for mega-sport events.

### *Support for Mega-Religious Events*

All stakeholders must be involved and supportive for a mega-event to be a success. Residents' support, on the other hand, is critical to the success of such an event (Gursoy *et al*., 2017). Since residents share their physical facilities and resources with tourists, provide services to tourists, and experience impacts on their quality of life, their readiness to support and be involved in organising the mega-events is crucial. There is substantial evidence that perceived positive impacts have a major positive influence on residents' support, whereas unfavourable perceptions have a significant negative impact on residents' support (Wang & Pfister, 2008; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Prayag *et al*., 2013; Gursoy *et al*., 2017; Hallaq *et al*., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, would appear to have put residents' support for tourism activities in peril. Contrary to this, some studies have argued that communities are ready to accept some of the negative social and environmental consequences of mega-events in exchange for some economic benefits (Kim *et al*., 2006; Stylidis *et al*., 2014). This argument holds true in the case of mega religious events, as Kala's (2021) research pointed out that people prefer to participate in religious events and activities to regain their energy in the post-COVID phase. Moreover, when an event

is considered a source of national pride and a way to improve the image of the host city, residents support the mega event enthusiastically (Oshimi & Harada, 2019).

### Methodology

The sample population for exploring resident support of mega-religious events consisted of individuals who reside in Haridwar - *Kumbh Mela* City, India. This study employed a two-stage questionnaire and stratified sampling of residents aged 18 years or older.

The first stage was conducted before the *Kumbh Mela* from February 15 to March 20, 2021, during which time questionnaires were administered in locations where people were likely to gather, such as religious centres, universities, and offices. Of the 500 questionnaires distributed before the event, 398 were returned, and 387 were valid. The response rate was 77.4%.

The second stage of research was conducted after the event ended. This took place from May 10 to June 5, 2021. In this stage, the post-event questionnaires were circulated to the 387 participants who returned valid questionnaires during the first stage. 217 participants returned this second questionnaire, of which, 205 were valid, yielding a response rate of 53%. The surge in the number of COVID-19 cases during the month of May was seen as the main reason for the non-response (see Annexure 1). To increase the validity of the research, 94 new responses were collected to normalise the data. Thus, the post-event sample size was 299.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first part of the questionnaire examined the demographic profile of respondents. The second part contained five constructs which were generated from prior studies:

- *positive impact* (Jackson 2008, Yang *et al.,* 2010, Ma *et al.,* 2013, Kim *et al.,* 2015, Vetitnev & Bobina, 2017, Sox *et al.,* 2020, Hallaq *et al.,* 2021);

- *negative impact* (Jackson, 2008, Yang *et al.,* 2010, Ma *et al.,* 2011, Kim *et al.,* 2015, Gursoy *et al.,* 2017, Vetitnev & Bobina, 2017, Hallaq *et al.,* 2021);

- *perceived risk* (Kim, 2010, Kala, 2021, Joo *et al.,* 2021);

| Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Profile | Categories | Pre-event (N = 387) | | Post-event (N = 299) | |
| | | F | % | F | % |
| Age | < 20 Years | 37 | 9.56 | 31 | 10.37 |
| | 21-30 Years | 107 | 27.65 | 95 | 31.77 |
| | 31-40 Years | 140 | 36.18 | 106 | 35.45 |
| | 41-50 Years | 72 | 18.60 | 40 | 13.38 |
| | > 50 Years | 31 | 8.01 | 27 | 9.03 |
| Gender | Male | 285 | 73.64 | 221 | 73.91 |
| | Female | 102 | 26.36 | 78 | 26.09 |
| Occupation | Salaried Employee | 130 | 33.59 | 107 | 35.79 |
| | Self-Employed | 178 | 45.99 | 131 | 43.81 |
| | Student | 56 | 14.47 | 45 | 15.05 |
| | Housewife | 23 | 5.94 | 16 | 5.35 |

- ***trust in the government*** (Nunkoo, Ramkissoon & Gursoy 2012, Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012, Nunkoo & Smith, 2013, Gursoy *et al.,* 2017) and;
- ***support for mega-religious events*** (Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012; Gursoy *et al.,* 2017; Sox *et al.,* 2020; Joo *et al.,* 2021).

The researchers altered and adjusted some statements for content validity and to emphasise research objectives. These statements were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 5 representing 'strongly agree'. Two professors in the tourism domain vetted and validated the initial questionnaire for content validity. For reliability, a pilot test was performed using 20 randomly selected residents (excluded from the final survey) to ensure that they clearly understood the items before the official questionnaire was administered. The Cronbach's Alpha index value was found to be 0.803 for the pilot survey and 0.896 for the complete survey, which supports the acceptable reliability coefficient. All data received was analysed using SPSS software. The demographic profile of respondents is shown in Table 1.

| Table 2: Demographic Profile | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Profile | Categories | Pre-event (N = 387) | | Post-event (N = 299) | |
| | | F | % | F | % |
| Age | < 20 Years | 37 | 9.56 | 31 | 10.37 |
| | 21-30 Years | 107 | 27.65 | 95 | 31.77 |
| | 31-40 Years | 140 | 36.18 | 106 | 35.45 |
| | 41-50 Years | 72 | 18.60 | 40 | 13.38 |
| | > 50 Years | 31 | 8.01 | 27 | 9.03 |
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| | Self-Employed | 178 | 45.99 | 131 | 43.81 |
| | Student | 56 | 14.47 | 45 | 15.05 |
| | Housewife | 23 | 5.94 | 16 | 5.35 |

| Table 3: Descriptive Statistics | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Constructs & Items** | **Pre-event (N = 387)** | | **Post-event (N = 299)** | |
| | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** |
| **Positive Impact** | **3.93** | **.737** | **3.80** | **.701** |
| *Kumbh Mela* will provide employment opportunities for residents. | 4.01 | .910 | 4.02 | .910 |
| *Kumbh Mela* will encourage a variety of cultural activities by the residents. | 3.71 | .954 | 3.68 | .975 |
| Without tourism revenue, the city would not be able to meet its financial obligations. | 3.90 | 1.013 | 3.84 | 1.059 |
| Because of *Kumbh Mela*, there will be more religious/recreational activities available for residents. | 3.83 | 1.025 | 3.76 | 1.017 |
| During *Kumbh Mela*, there will be increased business opportunities. | 3.71 | .950 | 3.65 | .937 |
| *Kumbh Mela* will improve the city's appearance. | 3.65 | .938 | 3.65 | .945 |
| **Negative Impact** | **4.03** | **.613** | **4.07** | **.561** |
| *Kumbh Mela* will increase littering and disorganisation in the city. | 3.76 | .907 | 3.76 | .914 |
| *Kumbh Mela* will damage the natural resources & environment. | 4.16 | .828 | 4.15 | .822 |
| This religious mega-event will increase crime. | 4.20 | .821 | 4.22 | .814 |
| This religious mega-event will increase noise, air, & water pollution. | 4.23 | .818 | 4.24 | .800 |
| This religious mega-event will result in unpleasantly overcrowded religious centres for residents. | 4.02 | 1.024 | 4.11 | .952 |
| Tourists will disrupt the peace and tranquility of our community. | 3.89 | 1.122 | 3.97 | 1.065 |
| Tourists will disrupt the normal routines of residents. | 3.97 | .980 | 4.04 | .932 |
| **Perceived Risk** | **3.82** | **.705** | **4.05** | **.632** |
| Incoming tourists will increase my anxiety/stress related to COVID-19 prevention. | 3.71 | 1.035 | 4.11 | .937 |
| Incoming tourists will increase the risk of COVID-19 infection. | 3.86 | 1.090 | 4.16 | .828 |
| Residents of the city will be more likely to get coronavirus disease than other people. | 3.98 | .917 | 4.07 | .875 |
| Incoming tourists will make residents reduce their outdoor activities. | 4.02 | .903 | 3.89 | .882 |
| Coronavirus will inflict serious damage in my community. | 3.51 | 1.009 | 4.02 | .910 |
| **Trust in Government** | **3.51** | **.578** | **3.20** | **.553** |
| I believe that the government has made the right decision to organize this religious mega event. | 3.81 | .985 | 3.35 | 1.029 |
| The government has made a sincere effort to incorporate residents into the event planning process. | 3.53 | 1.152 | 3.24 | .887 |
| The government looks after the interests of the community about organizing this event. | 3.13 | 1.239 | 3.14 | 1.225 |
| I am confident that the government is able to provide all the support needed to manage this mega religious event during COVID. | 3.50 | 1.128 | 3.03 | .789 |
| I am confident that the government has adequate and reliable health-related facilities to manage the unprecedented situation. | 3.51 | 1.181 | 3.14 | .704 |
| I believe the government can make people follow precautionary measures to prevent the community disease from COVID. | 3.67 | 1.098 | 3.13 | .814 |
| I am confident that the government can manage the overcrowding of religious places in the city. | 3.41 | 1.063 | 3.38 | 1.065 |
| **Support for Mega-Religious Event** | **3.48** | **.567** | **3.32** | **.543** |
| I am glad that City is hosting this religious mega-event. | 3.64 | .704 | 3.35 | .703 |
| The idea of hosting *Kumbh Mela* gives us national pride. | 3.45 | .887 | 3.39 | .910 |
| *Kumbh Mela* will increase the pride of residents. | 3.64 | .907 | 3.38 | .885 |
| I support my City hosting this religious mega-event. | 3.31 | 1.204 | 3.24 | 1.200 |
| *Kumbh Mela* will enhance the city's international identity through world media exposure. | 3.39 | 1.023 | 3.30 | 1.012 |
| Overall, the positive impacts of hosting over seven million people to Haridwar will outweigh the negative impacts. | 3.47 | .939 | 3.44 | .941 |
| I will support attracting more tourists to Haridwar during *Kumbh Mela*. | 3.46 | 1.000 | 3.13 | 1.013 |

| Table 4: Independent Sample Test (Pre-event and Post-event) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Constructs** | **Status** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Levene's Test for Equality of Variances** | | **t-test for Equality of Means** | |
| | | | | **F** | **Sig.** | **t** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** |
| | | | | 1.033 | .310 | 3.843 | .000 |
| Negative Impact | Pre-event | 4.03 | .613 | 11.648 | .001 | -2.569 | .010 |
| | Post-event | 4.07 | .561 | | | | |
| Perceived Risk | Pre-event | 3.82 | .705 | 21.190 | .000 | 4.791 | .000 |
| | Post-event | 4.05 | .632 | | | | |
| Trust in Government | Pre-event | 3.51 | .578 | 11.483 | .001 | 5.702 | .000 |
| | Post-event | 3.20 | .553 | | | | |
| Support for Mega Religious Event | Pre-event | 3.48 | .567 | 6.947 | .009 | 6.274 | .000 |
| | Post-event | 3.32 | .543 | | | | |

## Results

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 3 indicate the mean values of constructs and items in the pre-event and post-event contexts. In the post-event stage, the mean values of positive impact, 'trust in government', and 'support for the mega-religious event' decreased. However, the values of 'negative impact' and 'perceived risk' increased in the post-event.

The independent samples T-test was used to investigate differences in residents' perceptions and support before and after the mega-religious event (Table 4). Levene's Test for equality of variances was used to test one of the assumptions of the t-test, i.e., that the variance in the two groups is equal. Except for positive influence, the probability (Sig. = 0.000) for the F value is less than 0.05 for all constructs. Thus, the variances of the two groups are not equal, and therefore the output in the 'Equal variances was not assumed' row was used for all constructs, except positive impact. The t-values and sig. (2-tailed) for all the constructs (positive impact, negative impact, perceived risk, trust in government, and support for mega-religious event) were less than 0.05. Thus, the findings show that there was a significant difference between the pre-event and post-event stages in terms of positive impact, negative impact, perceived risk, government trust, and support for the mega-religious event.

## Discussion

The pre-event and post-event comparison revealed that as the event progressed, residents appeared to realise that the results of the event were more dangerous than expected. Therefore, the relationships between positive impact, negative impact, perceived risk, trust in the government, and support for the event were more adverse after the event compared with before the event. Furthermore, the adverse effect of perceived risk on support for mega-events strengthened. Residents' increase in perceived risks after the event indicated that they underestimated the risk of the COVID-19 infection before the event.

Through the lens of 'trust in the government and event organisers', results indicate that residents' trust in the government appears to be a significant factor in their support for the event. However, as the event progressed, residents' trust turned unfavourable. Research shows that the primary reasons for the low trust were the unmanageable numbers of visitors; low COVID-19 testing at the entrance of the event; failure to make visitors follow precautionary guidelines; lack of adequate healthcare facilities; and importantly, the surge in the number of COVID-19 cases in the city and nearby areas.

The organisation of mass-gathering events during the second wave of the pandemic reinforced a belief in the insensible nature of government towards the public. The public distrusted the government since it appeared to have failed to act in its best interests or

| Table 5: COVID-19 Cases and Vaccination in India | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date | Total cases | Active | Deceased | Vaccination |
| 31 Dec 2020 | 10,286,329 | 255,525 | 149,018 | Not Applicable* |
| 31 Jan 2021 | 10,758,619 | 170,203 | 154,428 | 3,758,843 (1st Dose) |
| 28 Feb 2021 | 11,112,056 | 170,293 | 157,195 | 11,845,075 (1st Dose) 2,456,191 (fully vaccinated) |
| 31 Mar 2021 | 12,220,669 | 585,215 | 162,960 | 55,783,201 (1st Dose) 9,334,695 (Fully vaccinated) |
| 30 Apr 2021 | 19,157,094 | 3,270,400 | 213,691 | 125,376,952 (1st Dose) 26,621,155 (Fully vaccinated) |
| 31 May 2021 | 28,173,655 | 1,889,376 | 345,340 | 167,191,085 (1st Dose) 43,258,810 (Fully vaccinated) |
| 30 June 2021 | 30,410,577 | 529,580 | 399,475 | 271,410,023 (1st Dose) 57,748,116 (Fully vaccinated) |
| 31 July 2021 | 31,654,584 | 415,136 | 426,575 | 359,820,313 (1st Dose) 101,695,166 (Fully vaccinated) |

Source: Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India.
*Vaccination started in India on January 16, 2021.

fulfil its responsibility to safeguard them in the face of a pandemic. Unacceptably high death rates among middle-aged people significantly damaged the government-public relationship. Low confidence in the government's ability to respond to the ongoing crisis and its economic repercussions made the public extremely sceptical and afraid. The political fallout widened the level of distrust between the government and citizens.

Hosting a mega-event during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging and dangerous, especially in developing countries like India (see Table 5). Developing nations - usually characterised by huge populations, low vaccination counts, lack of healthcare facilities, casual approaches towards hygiene and sanitation, a conservative mindset of people, poor governance, and lack of trust in the government - face unique challenges in staging a mega-event. Since hallmark events are viewed by audiences worldwide, governments and event organisers should avoid hosting these events during a pandemic or else make proper provisions to manage the crisis if avoidance is not possible (see Figures 1 & 2 - Photographs of Haridwar *Kumbh Mela* 2021).

Understanding this pandemic's far-reaching and enduring effects, improving tourism infrastructure, hygiene, sanitation, quality healthcare services, providing reliable safety information, and gaining public trust will be significant for organising mega-events. The absence of these will undoubtedly lead to poor support from residents, low tourism arrivals, hostile destination or event image,

low economic activity for locals, and mistrust among event stakeholders. In the future, governments and event organisers should assess local sentiment and readiness, and the provision of adequate healthcare and other facilities should be incorporated into event and festival planning. Furthermore, organisers must find ways to minimise perceived risks, reduce negative impacts, and build public confidence.

To ensure the successful and safe organisation of mega-events, all stakeholders (residents, event organisers, governments, religious leaders, visitors, and tourism product owners) must collaborate. This will also increase trust among stakeholders, encourage locals to support events, create a favourable destination or event image, and improve visitor satisfaction.

The involvement of the health department in the planning phase, restriction on the number of visitors, compulsory negative RT-PCR tests (i.e. that participants are not infected), crowd management training for officials, deployment of more health workers, and the creation of quick-response healthcare facilities near the event site should be made mandatory. In addition, religious leaders have to play a significant role in deterring people from attending mega-religious events during a pandemic to ensure public safety and event sustainability. Although the government and event organisations are resilient and well equipped to deal with such issues, a careful, sustainable, and long-term strategy along with legal frameworks is required.

## Implications

This study on *Kumbh Mela*, a mega religious event, highlights the shades of management systems within which religious tourism operates in India. Religious tourism operates beyond government regulations and is highly governed by people's feelings and values. The findings investigated the role of perceived risk and trust in government in explaining residents' support for a mega-religious event. Previously, the construct 'perceived risk' was studied to explain tourist and resident perceptions of the risk of tourism development and its impact on their decision-making. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brings the significance and relevance of residents' perceived risk to the forefront. The results of the study serve as a basis for future research on residents' behaviour towards tourism and sports events during a crisis. Although the focus of the study was on mega-religious events, the study constructs would also be relevant to other events, tourism development activities, or destinations.

Findings of this study suggest that besides tourism impacts, residents' perceived risk and the level of trust in government are two of the most critical elements that can influence their support for organising a mega-event. It is critical for policymakers and event organisers to understand comprehensively the important roles these constructs play, independently and jointly, in shaping residents' behaviour. Identifying residents' perceptions of an event in the early stages, involving them in decision-making, listening to them, and addressing their concerns might increase their trust and support for mega-events during a pandemic. The government and event planners should use the findings of this study and other similar studies to understand the expectations of residents regarding such events. This will also assist them in increasing the level of support from locals. Additionally, since religious leaders hold strong positions in society, it would be beneficial for the government and event organisers to use religious leaders to act as a bridge between residents and event organisers for religious events.

## Conclusion

Mega-events have enormous impacts on the residents and cities hosting them. This study sought to investigate residents' perceptions, perceived risk, trust in government, and support for a mega-religious event. This study is the first to examine the pre- and post-event perceptions of residents at a mega religious event (*Kumbh Mela*) amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Hosting a mega-event during the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging and risky, particularly in developing and populous countries like India. Using Social Exchange Theory, the results confirm that the residents' perceptions, trust in government, and support for the event are more negative in the post-event phase. The study recommends the need for more collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, including government institutions, residents, local business owners, and tourists, in organising mega-events to make them successful, especially during difficult times.

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