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Vaishno Devi, the Most Famous Goddess Shrine in the Siwāliks

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Abstract. Vaishno Devi in Jammu has been designated as the “Elder Sister” among the six other Devi shrines in a fairly narrow belt of the Siwaliks between the Yumunā and Chenāb Rivers. During the last few decades Vaishno Devi has become especially important. Pilgrimage to the shrine has increased from 30,000 to almost 7 million since Independence, when the political geography of the region increased accessibility, both physically and perceptually. The growth in the number of visitors can be attributed also to a change in administration of the shrine and to the tremendous increase in religious tourism. Vaishno Devi is now the preeminent goddess among the Seven Sisters of the Siwaliks.

Keywords. Vaishno Devi, Siwaliks, meaning, performances, changes, administration, pilgrimage.

1. Introduction

In recent years, worship of the Devi has become very important in the Siwalik region of northern India. The potential significance was recognized by Bhardwaj (1971) several decades ago when he focused attention on numerous Devi shrines concentrated in a fairly narrow belt of the Siwaliks between the Yumunā and the Chenāb (Fig. 4.1). What he found significant was the relative abundance of popular Devi shrines in the sparsely populated hill region and their contrasting scarcity in the adjoining populous Punjab plains. He theorized that:

The popularity of these shrines largely rests on the pilgrimages performed by the people of the plains region. The motive of the pilgrims suggests an intimate association of the Devi cult with the material aspects of mundane existence. Association of the Devi cult with blood sacrifice
[is] its relative popularity among the scheduled castes and with the folk element of the society, and the religiously peripheral nature of this cult to Sanskritic Hinduism, particularly to Vaishnavism. The spatially marginal nature of this cult may be due to the spread of the cults of male deities under Vaishnavism in the populous areas. The relatively poor accessibility of the Siwalik Hills region may have served as a refuge area for this cult as well as a less disturbed domain for its autonomous existence. Increased circulation and contact with the plains people is bringing about fundamental changes in the rituals of worship and among the priestly caste.

Fig. 4.1. Siwalik Region: Devi (goddesses) shrines.

At the time of his study, Bhardwaj did not mention Vaishno Devi as being more important than the other Devi shrines; in fact, he did not even include the Vaishno Devi shrine among the five he studied in greater detail. However, fifteen years later when Erndl (1993) did intensive research on the Devi shrines in this region, the relative importance of the shrines had changed. She found that Vaishno Devi had become much more popular than the other six “Sisters” (Mansā Devi, Chintāpurni, Nainā Devi, Jvālijī [Jvālāmukhi], Kāngra [Kāngrevāli Devi or Vajreshvari], and Chāmundā).

Pilgrimage to the shrine increased rapidly after 1976, when physical changes were made to accommodate 5,000 per day. By 1981, the annual number of pilgrims to the Vaishno Devi shrine was approximately 900,000 (Foster 1986: 52), but by a decade later, the total was over three million. In 2001 the number of visitors exceeded five million, and by 2007 almost seven and a half million pilgrims came to the shrine.

What are some possible explanations for the rising popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine? We seek reasons by looking at changes in the
meaning of the goddess, in administration of the shrine, in the accessibility of the holy site, and in the characteristics of those who journey to this popular pilgrimage place.


The mythological journey that the pilgrims take up the mountain, following the one illustrated on posters, is superimposed over the physical geography. It follows the footsteps of Vaishno Devi as she fled up the mountain from the home of the Vaishnavite Brahmin, Shri Dhar, in Katrā. Using her special powers, she had helped provide the food for a Bhandārā, or feast for mendicants, which she had advised Dhar would bring him the boon of sons. However, also coming to the feast were Bhairavanāth and Gorakhanāth, two adepts of the Shākta sect, who had to be included in the broad invitation. They were displeased to not be provided with meat, but Vaishno Devi told them it was not allowed in a Vaishnava vegetarian household. When she sensed that Bhairava had “evil intentions” towards her, she fled up the mountain, using her powers to travel distances. But Bhairava, as he now is called, followed her. The first spot that marks her route is the Bal Ganga, where she struck a rock to bring forth a stream for the monkeys, who were now accompanying her, to drink. Further up the mountain she entered a first cave where she remained for “a full nine months, as a child in the womb of her mother.” Through his occult telescopic powers, Bhairo Nāth/Bhairava could see her going up the Trikuta Mountain and he followed her. When Bhairava entered the cave, she struck an opening at the other end of the cave with her trident and went on up the mountain to another cave. When Bhairava began to enter this next cave, Langur Vir (the monkey) attempted to restrain him but was unsuccessful. Therefore, Vaishno Devi assumed the form of Mahā Kāli and cut off the head of Bhairava. She did this with such force that his head was flung up the mountainside. As the head of Bhairava flew up the mountain, its voice recognized her and said, “Oh mother, I was not familiar with this form of your holiness. I have met my fate at your sacred hands ... but if you don’t pardon me, coming generations will hate my name.” In response the Devi granted him his own temple, located at the spot where his head had landed, but she stipulated that pilgrims could only go to his temple after visiting her shrine.

The origin myth of Vaishno Devi is, of course, a local variant on the story of the Dei Māhātya, wherein all the gods call upon Devi to kill Mahisha, who is destroying all the sacrifices given to them; and they each give her a weapon with which to do that. They cannot use these weapons
themselves because the demon has been given the boon, through his austerities, of being killed only by a woman. Destroying many others in the Mahisha army, and ultimately cutting off his head, is done for all the gods. But in the Vaishno Devi myths, especially as framed in recent years by the Dharmārth Trust, the Devi is given instructions only by Vishnu, in his form as Rāma, to be incarnated and to dwell in this region on the Trikuta Mountain. The main origin myth of this type features Vaishno Devi, as a daughter of Ratna Sāgar (who is said to live in “the South”), who meditates and performs penance in the forest, in order to have Rāma as her husband, in the same manner as Pārvati did to marry Shiva. She meets Rāma as he is going to Lanka to rescue Sitā. On his return, he tells her that he is married to Sitā, so cannot marry her in this Age. He instructs her to go and dwell in a cave in the Trikuta Mountains and meditate; she will retain the powers she has gained from remaining a virgin, and she will be honoured there. This explains her title, Ādikumāri, Virgin Forever. This version de-emphasizes the fighting and blood sacrifice, as in the offering of the head by devotees, which is a central part of the myth at Jvālāmukhi.

Many other myths of the Jammu region illustrate how Vaishno Devi helps her devotees gain the boon of sons, bountiful harvests, and protection from enemies. All of these traditions bolster the assurance that coming to her is auspicious.

One type of myth relates the Devi’s protection of poor peasants who are exploited by kings and landlords. One version of this type is found in “The Story of Bābā Jittoo” (Kaul 1980). In this long and complex myth, a poor peasant devotee of Vaishno Devi, Jītmal (Jittoo) had a bountiful crop of grain, due to Vaishno Devi, who had been incarnated as his daughter. The king (Vir Singh), upon seeing this abundant crop, demanded half of the harvest instead of the one-fourth as agreed upon, and sent his men to get it. In despair, Jittoo prayed to the Devi, who tells him to leave the world, and dwell with her, and she will deal with the king. Jittoo takes his own life and lies bleeding on the grain, which pollutes it for anyone who eats it. In the conclusion of the myth, King Vir Singh becomes a leper, his property burns, and he and associates go insane.

The association with Jittoo is collaborated by another source (Drieberg and Sahni 1978: 56), which describes the Jhiri Fair (held west of Jammu City in the fall). This fair is held at the height of the pilgrimage season to Vaishno Devi in honour of the “memory of Bābā Jittoo, who died 500 years ago fighting feudal tyranny.” At the fair, descendants of the thieves who robbed Jittoo of his grain are compelled to furnish free food for a feast.
Another myth has Vaishno Devi protecting a king of Jammu, Mahārājā Ranjit Dev, who is her devotee at the time of the reign of Aurangzeb in Delhi. The kingdom of Jammu was a very small hill state at the time; hence the Mahārājā was frightened when he was called to Lahore by the regional Moghul governor. According to the story, Mahārājā Dev pretended to go hunting, but instead went to seek out Vaishno Devi. He found her “sitting on the top of Trikuta Mount” (Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi: 83). He asked for her help when he went to Lahore, and with the help of Vaishno Devi, the Mahārājā was able to survive by cutting a deal with the Moghal governor, Mir Mannu, to keep Jammu from being swallowed up. It is said that, in his gratitude, Ranjit Dev cleaned and established huts and water along the path to Vaishno Devi, and every year he went barefoot to her cave.

Associated with Vaishno Devi is vegetarianism, an attribute that sets her apart from the other Devis in this region. Even though the shrine to Vaishno Devi relates to a local goddess, the name carries the advantage of representing the gentle side of Mahādevi, especially the vegetarian aspect of the Goddess. The name Vaishno refers to the style or manner of Vishnu, which in northwest India commonly means vegetarianism and hence greater ritual purity. Bhardwaj gives as the reason for the spread of Vaishnavism in the hills and the increased pilgrimage of those from the plains, who are not from the lower castes, to the rejection of animal sacrifice (Bhardwaj 1971). These are the same people who contribute to modernization and active renovation of the temples. Although the other Devi temples no longer practice animal sacrifice, their ritualistic histories are not as “pure” as that of Vaishno Devi. As Erndl observed (Erndl 1993: 70-71), although every other temple in her study had done animal sacrifices in the past, the Vaishno Devi temple never did so. Consequently, this goddess shrine developed a reputation for maintaining a high degree of ritual purity and for a high level of efficaciousness.

In addition, the shrine is regarded as unique because it contains “the holiest of holy Pindis, manifesting Mātā in her three forms of Mahā Kālī, Mahā Lakshmi, and Mahā Sarasvatī” (Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi Shrine Board). Again, this is not to deny that other shrines may have certain distinctive characteristics, but the unsurpassed distinction of combining all three manifestations of the Goddess furnishes a strong incentive to travel to this particular shrine.

The above religious associations are not the only ones relating to Vaishno Devi. As Rohe states (2001: 76): “...... there is no single, authoritative source of knowledge concerning Vaishno Devi, for no particular text is recognized as indisputable when it comes to her particular
form, identity, and origin.” In general, earlier versions emphasized the ways that inhabitants of Jammu called upon her to help them and how she came to them where they were, illustrating a tradition that may have been before she was felt to dwell only in the mountain cave to which devotees had to make a pilgrimage. It is obvious that now, however, Vaishno Devi has gained an even richer heritage of beliefs that attract a much wider variety of worshipers. This is not to say that each of the other six Devi “sisters” does not also have traditional myths associated with her origins and importance, but none is as comprehensive as those surrounding Vaishno Devi. Only Vaishno Devi has evolved as the Devi who can meet the spiritual needs of the majority of contemporary pilgrims.

3. Changes in the Administration

The development of the shrine began in 1846 when Mahārājā Gūlāb Singh “bought” Jammu and Kashmir from the British. He established, or drew into his organization, which was eventually named the Dharmārth Trust, several temples and shrines, including Vaishno Devi. The Trust continued under the descendants of Gūlāb Singh, who, along with their kingship, retained the position of sole hereditary trustees. At the time of Independence, Karan Singh, the last descendant of the family and who were 18 at that time, became responsible for the operation and administration of the shrine.

During this time, several physical changes were made to facilitate the arrival and movement of pilgrims. These included improving and changing the approaching road, installing water and food stations along the road, and cutting a new exit into the side of the mountain to allow pilgrims to leave immediately rather than returning through the tunnel. Alterations at the site, besides changing the pilgrims’ patterns of physical movement, may also affect the nature of the visit. For example, the shortened new road bypasses the temple of Bhairava and thus diminishes the proportion of pilgrims who worship at his temple (cf. Foster 1986).

In 1986, the governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Shri Jagmohan initiated the Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, which was later confirmed by the state legislature (India Today, 1989).

The need to make these changes was cited by Governor Jagmohan because he was appalled at the “material and moral corruption” at the shrine and “swept by a desire to regenerate this cultural wasteland” (Jagmohan 1989). The implementation of improvements was made on a crash basis, apparently so they would be observer by many people and the takeover could not be easily reversed. However, Karan Singh condemned
the action, as did thousands of Baridārs who had traditionally depended on the shrine for their income. Governor Jagmohan, in his impressions of the pilgrimage, also mentioned that there was deforestation, that the sparkling streams and the thick woods through which the pilgrims formerly were said to pass were no longer present. Thus, part of the improvement plans included rose-gardens around the toilets, 50 small gardens, and 1.8 million trees.

This act, which changed control of the shrine from the Dharmārth Trust and the hereditary priests to a governing statutory board, resulted into “what appears to be one of the most efficiently run temples in India” (Erndl 1993: 58).

4. Changes in Accessibility

The Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has continued to develop facilities that cater to the comforts of visitors and improve conditions meant to encourage more pilgrims. These include modifying the physical environment of the shrine and adding accommodations that make the 13km approach trek less arduous. In contrast to the previous steep climb to the sacred cave, the approach is now via a smooth, gently sloping tiled surface lined with night lights. Along the way are necessities such as potable water, sanitation accommodations, vending and food stands, and medical services. Another type of improvement is control over tours; for example, over those who offer the “service” of easing entrance to the cave, sometimes by taking bribes to help patrons jump the queues.

The previous rocky entry to the cave via a ninety-foot tunnel has been completely closed and replaced with new entrances and exits. Currently a third tunnel is planned to smooth the progress of pilgrims into and out of the shrine cave. The cavern now is floored with spotless white marble. Within the holy sector the Shrine Board provides numerous services such as a medical dispensary, chemical shop, post office, telephone exchange, bank, and police station.

These changes in the physical conditions may not always be viewed positively. For example, by closing the original tunnel, worshippers bypass the temple of Bhairava (Foster 1986) and therefore do not symbolically enter the womb of the goddess; nor can they step on the headless body of Bhairava (Mehra 2000). In fact, some devout pilgrims regard the hardships encountered when approaching the sacred site as essential for gaining full merit, while enjoying the luxuries of an easy access to the shrine diminishes its religious significance.
Also, the conditions that make a pilgrimage easier and thus attract greater numbers, in turn, create other negative factors. The tremendous number of pilgrims burdens essential services (e.g., sanitation and crowd control) that are necessary for moving the thousands of daily visitors. This is illustrated dramatically by the fact that movement of the massive number of visitors allows each pilgrim an average of only five seconds to view the three holy Pindis. It should be noted that, after the third tunnel is completed and the movement of pilgrims can be made faster, the pause for darshan is expected to be thirty seconds.

Policies have been established to relieve congestion and provide security. After June 2007, when an average of 37,000 persons per month visited the holy site, the Shrine Board decided to allot only 30,000 entries each month in subsequent years. This regulation is achieved by issuing yatra registration slips, either through the Internet or at a counter located near the Darshani Darwazā, which permit entrance for the holders. In addition, security has been increased by photographing and fingerprinting each visitor.

These changes contrast with administration of the other Devi sites, which have not changed from their traditional types of governance. Even though some roads have been improved and public facilities have been upgraded at the other shrines, there has not been the dramatic change in administration and accessibility that have occurred for Vaishno Devi (cf. Fig. 4.2). This is not to say that all pilgrims necessarily regard the other Devi shrines as less worthy goals. In fact, some worshipers consider the popularity of the Vaishno Devi pilgrimage as a deterrent to achieving the highest religious merit. This view of earning merit is even recognized at the Vaishno Devi shrine by not providing motorized transportation all the
way to the sacred area; instead the last 13km of the pilgrimage must be achieved on foot. Nevertheless, in terms of the total patronage, the development of the Vaishno Devi shrine does suggest that administrative policies and site improvement affect pilgrimage patterns.

The element of accessibility also applies at a regional scale. Accessibility to the Vaishno Devi shrine has been increased by the extension of the railroad network and the speed of trains.

Likewise since Independence, numerous roads were constructed in the mountainous regions for military purposes, as well as for pilgrims. Now roads connect all the Devi shrines (Fig.4.2), but those connecting Vaishno Devi to major cities of northern India allow faster travel than to the other holy sites. For example, visitors from Delhi can now make the journey in a weekend and be back in their offices on Monday.

Another way of getting to the Vaishno Devi shrine by helicopter was used by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1980. It was announced in 1999 (India Abroad, 1999) that helicopter service was to be extended to regular pilgrims who could not undertake the arduous trek to the shrine. Also at that time, plans were being made to use a small aircraft that could land on the Mantalāi airstrip near the Vaishno Devi shrine.

No comparable travel service is provided to the shrines of the other Sisters. This disparity, however, is probably more the result of special demands for convenient and speedy transportation than the initial causative factor for large differences in pilgrimage numbers. Popularity affects the perceptual accessibility of places. Not only has travel to these shrines become easier through time but also the perceptions of accessibility have changed. For most human movement, it is not just the physical ease of travel that affects behaviour but also the perception about how easy it is to get to a desired destination. Changes in perceptions have been influenced greatly by the mass communications and popular culture. Although debates arise about the impact of popular culture on religious behaviour in general, most observers have noted an increase in many religious practices with the rise of mass media. As Milton Singer (1972) observed, urbanization and the increased use of mass media do not necessarily result in more secularization, but rather the democratization of religious practices.

Mass communication has changed the perceived accessibility of these Himalayan shrines, which were once considered remote and difficult to visit. Now, with greater publicity provided through pamphlets, radio, television, cinema, and even Internet, potential pilgrims regard the Devi shrines as attainable destinations. When combined with the actual ease of
taking group tours to the shrines, the increase in pilgrim numbers is not surprising.

Tours and the popularity of visits to the shrines of the Seven Sisters have affected the number of pilgrims to all the shrines. However, as with most activities those depend largely on mass publicity, the most popular gains the greatest. Whether they are music idols in Japan or sports heroes in the United States, those who gain an advantage over their "competitors" usually rise rapidly in popularity as success creates even more popularity. It seems very plausible, therefore, that any increase in the popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine is soon amplified by publicity through mass media and informal networks, which are facilitated by modern technology.

5. Rise of Religious Tourism

The tremendous rise in pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi is undoubtedly an expression of religious fervour occurring in many parts of the world and displayed in diverse forms. This rise in the popularity of certain religious forms coincides with the increasing stresses of modern life, conflicts resulting from crowded living conditions, uncertainties about changing economic conditions, challenges to traditional lifestyles, and increasing material desires promoted by consumerism. In addition to the usual requests for good health, a favourable marriage, and sons, pilgrims now may seek success in finding housing, school examinations, and employment. Because Vaishno Devi is interpreted in a wide variety of meanings, she meets the needs of a broad spectrum of pilgrims.

Concurrent with this growth in pilgrimage is the tremendous increase in tourism. In recent decades tourism, with its huge employment force and supporting infrastructure, has become a major component of the global economy. Reasons for recreational travel have been studied in numerous academic books and journals and they are not the focus of this paper; instead, this explosion of tourism is considered as an important element in the extraordinary popularity of Vaishno Devi. As rightly stated by Timothy and Olsen in their book (2006: 1): "Religiously or spiritually motivated travel has become widespread and popularized in recent decades, occupying an important segment of international tourism, having grown substantially in recent years both in proportional and absolute terms."

Scholars who have recognized that because "we live in a re-sacralised world with a blurring of spirituality between religious and secular domains" (Degance 2006: 37), the term "religious tourism" is appropriately applied to this phenomenon. The term has become relevant
as religious sites, rituals, and festivals become attractive destinations for leisure-time travellers. This merger is encouraged by government officials and the tourist industry "as a resource that can be transformed and commodified for tourist consumption, which in turn encourages the growth of leisure and other activities" (Olsen 2006: 104).

Some scholars consider religious tourism as a description of vacationers who visit religious places, and they do not differentiate according to the motivation of the travellers. Others do regard motivation as implied in the terms “pilgrim” and “tourist” (see for example, Singh 2005: 417). The diversity of motivations for travelling to a religious site makes it difficult for most scholars to differentiate between “tourism” and “pilgrimage. Some insist that, rather than considering two distinct categories, it is more realistic to envision a continuum with pilgrims at one end and purely recreational tourists at the other (Smith 1992; Stoddard 1996). The intermediate zone of the tourism-pilgrimage continuum is the result of many travellers who are motivated by both leisure and spirituality. In addition to a mixture of motives affecting a tourist-pilgrim, the primary motive of a pilgrim may shift during a visit. For instance, one who visits the mountains primarily for recreation may decide to include time for worship at a holy shrine; and one who commences a journey as a pilgrim may later engage in some non-religious activities.

The component of tourism alters the ambience of the sacred site and the characteristics of visitors. With the increasing popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine have come changes in the composition of the pilgrim population. Originally Vaishno Devi was patronized primarily by devotees from the local region, which meant not only a small number of worshipers but also greater homogeneity in their socio-economic characteristics. In more recent decades, there has been a major increase in pilgrims from members of the prosperous and educated mercantile, industrial, and professional classes from urban areas, especially from the Punjab, who have new discretionary income to use for religious purposes. In recent decades, Vaishno Devi has gained the reputation of giving wealth, which seems to increase her popularity with the rapidly increasing middle class.

These changes in the motivations and characteristics of visitors have occurred concurrently with the improvements in the shrine facilities and with the infrastructure of tourism.

In the vicinity of the holy site are not only the conveniences of water, sanitation, and basic lodging but also the selling of CDs, souvenirs, fast foods, comfortable accommodations, and numerous other commodities associated with popular culture. Throughout the country, numerous
companies advertise through posters, newspapers, television, and internet to promote special tours to the Vaishno Devi shrine. Governmental tourist departments that attempt to lure visitors to this mountainous setting may advance the merits of paying homage to the shrine. Home entertainment systems with large TV screens and surround sound deliver a virtual pilgrimage that entices potential religious tourists to make the trip in reality. Vasudev (2002) summarizes the situation by stating: “Vaishno Devi is one of the most popular pilgrimage places in India perhaps because here religion validates the currency of consumerism.”

Although religious tourism appears to be a critical element in explaining the increased popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine, other motivations may also lead visitors to the shrine. The popularity and importance of Vaishno Devi affects, and is affected by, prestigious visitors such as Prime Ministers, Presidents, and Commanders-in-Chief of India. As declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1980), she made the trip to this famous pilgrimage site because “the people want me to go.”

Any place where thousands of people congregate creates the climate for providing a multitude of economic goods and services; consequently, the entrepreneurial incentive must be included as another broad category of motivations. In addition to those maintained by the Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is the ones offered by individuals, small businesses, and large companies. Associated with these businesses are the managers and workers who add to the economy of the region. Even individuals who engage in illegal activities (e.g., thieves) are lured to the area where multitudes gather. The magnitude of this economic component is revealed by an annual income that ranks among the top of all religious centres in India.


In recent years, the veneration of Vaishno Devi has become very important, both in the spread of places where she can be worshiped and in the number of pilgrims going to her shrine in the Siwāliks. The importance is demonstrated partly by the several temples and shrines in the Punjab, Delhi, and elsewhere that replicates the original and provides additional opportunities for worship. For example, a large old temple in Ludhiana was rededicated to her, with the entrance flanked by Bhairava and Hanumān. By 1995 a new temple in Ludhiana and a reconfigured one in Delhi featured tunnels like the one at the cave on Trikuta, which allow one to make the pilgrimage to the Devi without leaving one’s own city. The extreme examples of this trend toward making Mātā Vaishno Devi...
more accessible are the websites that provide *darshan* (auspicious glimpse) of the goddess electronically.

The importance of this Devi of the Siwaliks is acclaimed in song, *bhajans* (devotional songs), children’s stories, and videos. Her popularity is also displayed by the multitude of signboards and pictures on trucks, buses, vendor carts, calendars, and posters (Fig. 4.3). Invariably the goddess is riding on her *vāhana* (vehicle), dressed in red wedding attire, with all her jewellery. She wears the “victory mangala” garland, and in her four to eight arms she holds several weapons symbolic of Vishnu and Shiva. The connection with the Vaishno Devi shrine is often indicated by its setting among snow capped mountains, particularly among the three peaks of Trikuta. Also included are the accompanying attendants of Hanumān (the Langur Vir of the myth), carrying a red flag with *garuda* on it, and Bāla Bhairava (a child Bhairava), carrying a severed head. In these cases the artists have literally interpreted both the iconography of Shiva/Bhairava and Bhairo, who was tamed and became like a child to his mother after he realized his mistake in fighting the great mother. The image illustrates a benign goddess virgin, auspiciously dressed as a bride.

Fig. 4.3. Vaishno Devi, a popular poster.
The major indication of growing importance is the increased number of pilgrims who visit the original Vaishno Devi shrine. During the last couple of decades, the annual number of pilgrims has more than tripled to approximately seven million. Certainly this growth far exceeds that to the shrines of her Sisters in the same region.

It is impossible to apportion the degree to which various factors have contributed to this increased popularity, but several concurrent changes suggest possible reasons for this rise. One concerns the shift in administrative policies that have occurred in recent decades. In contrast to the other Devi shrines in the Siwalik region, this site has been “developed” in a manner that encourages a larger number of visitors, especially those who do not have the time nor desire to undergo an arduous journey to an “isolated” place, which has few amenities. The increased patronage of this shrine has produced more income, which the Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has invested in even more facilities and services expected by many visitors.

Accompanying the developments at the site are the improvements in transportation that have occurred in recent years. With better roads and facilities for travellers, the journey to this sacred site has become much easier. Although improved transportation networks throughout the Siwaliks allow greater access to all the Devi shrines in this region, the speed and ease of travel to Vaishno Devi has been especially accentuated.

Another contributing factor in the popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine is the rise of religious tourism, which involves motives that are both religious and recreational. The religious element results from the diversity in interpretation and meaning attributed to Vaishno Devi. The increased number of pilgrims creates a broader range in the religious perspectives of visitors, which then encourages many others to make a pilgrimage. This is not to say that all devotees are pleased with the growth of crowds coming to this sacred site; nevertheless, the net effect is the rapid growth of pilgrims.

In conjunction with those who are normally regarded as traditional pilgrims are the multitudes of visitors who incorporate leisure into their travel to religious sites. This worldwide phenomenon depends on extensive advertising by individuals and businesses utilizing a whole gamut of media outlets. Mass media publicize the advantages and benefits from including both religious sites and tourist places in travellers’ itineraries.

Although several factors have contributed to the popularity of the Vaishno Devi shrine, the worldwide growth of religious tourism seems especially applicable to this pilgrimage destination. Thus, within a few
decades, Shri Mātā Vaishno Devi has become the preeminent goddess among the Seven Sisters of the Siwaliks.

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