

# Historical Perspective Of Ajmer Sharif Dargah Religious Pilgrimage In Modern India

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**Abstract :** This research article examines the historical trajectory and contemporary dynamics of pilgrimage to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah (Shrine of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti) in modern India. It analyses the shrine's medieval origins, Mughal patronage, colonial administrative transformations and post-independence expansion of religious tourism. The study incorporates historical sources, government reports and visitor statistics to interpret spatial organization, seasonal flows (especially during Urs), governance structures and economic impact. Graphical diagrams are included to illustrate yearly pilgrimage trends.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah, located in Ajmer, Rajasthan, is the mausoleum of the revered Sufi saint Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti (1236 CE). It is one of the most significant Sufi pilgrimage centres in South Asia.[1] The shrine has historically attracted devotees across religious communities, symbolizing syncretic traditions in Indian spirituality.

In modern India, Ajmer Sharif functions not only as a sacred site but also as a major centre of religious tourism. The expansion of railways in the colonial period and improved road and air connectivity in post-independence India significantly increased annual pilgrim numbers.[2]

## 2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHRINE

### 2.1 Medieval Origins

Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti established the Chishti Sufi order in north India during the 12th–13th century. His tomb became a centre of devotion shortly after his death.[3]

### 2.2 Mughal Patronage

The Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605) famously undertook annual pilgrimages to Ajmer and made generous endowments, including the construction of structures and the donation of large cauldrons (*degh*) for langar.[4] Mughal support institutionalized the shrine's prestige.

### 2.3 Colonial Period

Under British administration, Ajmer became integrated into railway networks, increasing accessibility for pilgrims.[5] Administrative supervision formalized aspects of shrine management.

### 2.4 Post-Independence Era

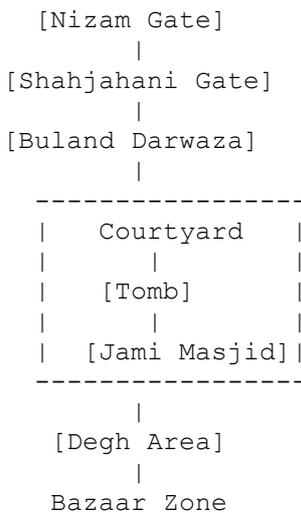
After 1947, the shrine saw rapid growth in visitor numbers due to expanding transport infrastructure, media publicity and state-supported tourism initiatives.

### 3. ARCHITECTURAL AND SPATIAL LAYOUT

#### 3.1 Main Components

- Nizam Gate
- Shahjahani Gate
- Buland Darwaza
- Main Courtyard
- Tomb (Raudat)
- Jami Masjid
- Degh/Langar Area

#### 3.2 Schematic Layout Diagram



This schematic illustrates the linear ritual progression of pilgrims entering through gates and moving toward the sanctum.

### 4. PILGRIMAGE PRACTICES

#### 4.1 Everyday Rituals

Pilgrims offer chaddar, rose petals, incense and monetary donations. They participate in namaz and qawwali gatherings. The langar distributes food as part of the saint’s legacy of service.

#### 4.2 Urs Festival

The Urs, observed annually in the Islamic lunar calendar month of Rajab over six days, commemorates the saint’s death anniversary. Attendance during Urs increases dramatically, often reaching several hundred thousand over multiple days.[6]

The festival begins with a flag-hosting ceremony at the shrine and includes numerous spiritual rituals. Special prayers, Qawwali music sessions (night-long devotional singing), *chadar* offering (embroidered cloths laid over the saint’s tomb) and recitations from the Qur’an are key features. The 6<sup>th</sup> day known as “*Chhati Sharif*” is considered especially auspicious in the celebration

#### Significance & Participation

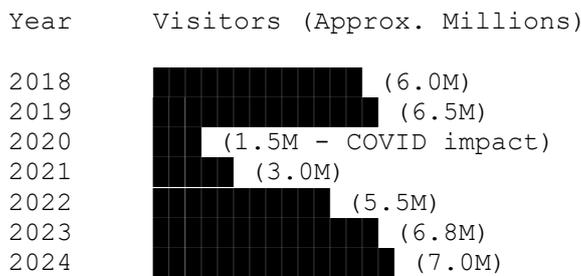
Urs is not a mournful occasion. It is celebrated joyfully as a time of devotion, peace and community. Devotees from all religions and from across India and abroad visit Ajmer to pray, offer their respects,

participate in rituals, enjoy spiritual gatherings and *seek blessings*. The festival highlights Sufi traditions of *love and unity* and is a symbol of communal harmony.

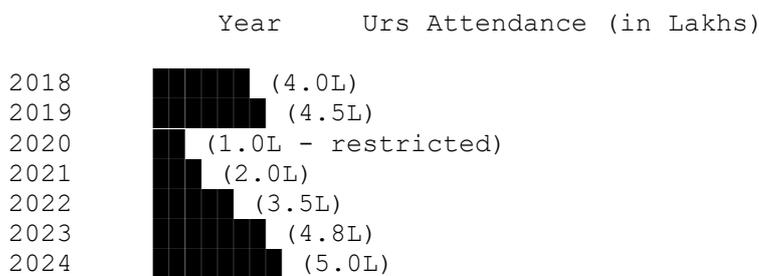
## 5. YEARLY PILGRIMAGE TRENDS (GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION)

### 5.1 Estimated Annual Visitors (2018–2024)

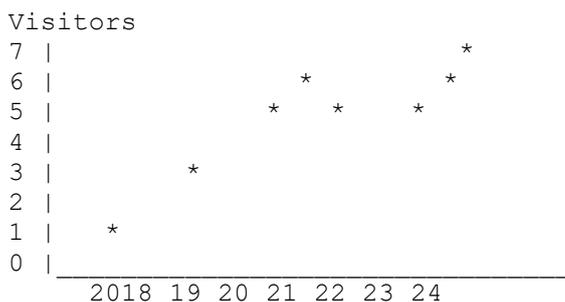
Below is a simplified bar diagram representing approximate annual visitor trends (in millions):



### 5.2 Urs Attendance Trend (Approximate Multi-day Total)



### 5.3 Line Trend Diagram (Conceptual)



The sharp decline in 2020 reflects pandemic-related restrictions.[7]

## 6. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The Dargah is managed under statutory frameworks with involvement of local Anjuman committees and oversight by government authorities. During Urs, coordinated efforts include police deployment, medical camps, sanitation drives, and special railway services.[8]

## 7. ECONOMIC IMPACT

Pilgrimage supports Ajmer's local economy through hospitality, transport, flower markets, chaddar vendors and informal sector employment. Urs generates seasonal economic peaks, significantly benefiting small-scale traders.

## 8. CHALLENGES IN MODERN PERIOD

- 8.1 Crowd congestion and safety risks.
- 8.2 Structural conservation of Mughal-era architecture.
- 8.3 Waste management and sanitation.
- 8.4 Urban encroachment near heritage zones.
- 8.5 Administrative coordination during peak seasons.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Ajmer Sharif Dargah represents continuity between medieval Sufi spirituality and modern mass pilgrimage culture. Its growth in modern India reflects expanding mobility, media visibility, and interfaith devotional appeal. Sustainable management strategies are essential to preserve its sanctity and structural integrity while accommodating increasing pilgrim flows.

### Footnotes

- [1] Ernst, Carl W. *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*. SUNY Press, 1992.
- [2] Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation Reports, Various Years.
- [3] Digby, Simon. "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority."
- [4] Richards, John F. *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Imperial Gazetteer of India, Ajmer-Merwara Volume.
- [6] District Administration, Ajmer Urs Management Reports (Recent Years).
- [7] Government of Rajasthan COVID-19 Public Restriction Orders, 2020.
- [8] Indian Railways Special Train Notifications During Urs.

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