

# Spiritual Tourism: The Confluence of Religious Faith and Spirituality of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi, Satna

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## Abstract

Spiritual tourism, a special form of tourism that has evolved in the tourism industry and has emerged from the global need of people, though rooted in religion, yet it, goes beyond the spirit of religion. Spiritual tourist seeks something that is worth being and can give people their lives new richness or even a new direction. Many travelers are very widely connected with such diverse expressions of spirituality, faith, and culture. The interaction spurred by such encounters has the potential to evoke profound spiritual experiences and transformational spiritual growth. Moreover, the cultural exchange and dialogue evoked by spiritual tourism are the very cornerstones of mutual understanding, tolerance, respect, and building the fundamental of sustainability. Above all, attaining sustainability requires that the local traditions, spiritual values, and rich cultural heritage of visited destinations are understood and respected, and that the host communities can directly acquire the benefits of tourism development. Therefore, the spiritual activity in Sri Paramhans Ashram motivated all the people for seeking their spiritual well-being and experience through spiritual tourism without a reference to religion or faith. This research paper presents a way of healthy living through spirituality, and discusses about controlling social crime as well as creating job opportunities by responsible and sustainable use of natural and cultural assets in the development of spiritual tourism, thereby generating income. Spiritual tourism can reduce poverty and curb it at the regional level. It has also reduced rural migration, and accelerated product diversification. It has nurtured a sense of gratification among communities and destinations.

**Keywords:** Spiritual tourism, Spiritual values, Sri Paramhans Ashram, Dharkundi.

## Introduction

The philanthropic inclusion of the word spirituality in the tourism industry is a phenomenon that was manifested in the 20th century through conceptual discussion among researchers. In the 21st century, more attention is being given to spirituality than in the earlier centuries. The main reason behind this is that people no longer trust religion, as well as people, try to go to spiritual places to get the worthiness of their lives and to get answers to the questions that exist. One can be surprised to learn that India's spiritual holidays are successful. Although religion and spirituality are mutually used, they are not the same thing, but they are not very different from each other too; they are used in two different ways but with the same purpose. In place of greatest sanctity in search of moral, religious, or spiritual attainment, spiritual tourism can be called a journey of people/groups for spiritual realization. It is an unforgettable journey of conviction and personal faith, seeking divine and godly awakening and commitment to what one believes. Often, this journey is equivalent to a pilgrimage or a spiritual yatra.

The ashram is associated with specific religions and spirituality. India offers wellness tourism through a number of spiritual ashrams. A unique confluence of nature and spirituality is seen in Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi. This ashram is situated amidst the dense forest and springs in the Vindhyaachal mountain range. Therefore, nature's beauty here is unique. A pure water stream flows uninterruptedly by the treaty of the Vindhyaachal mountain range and forms a natural cistern (Dubey-Pathak & Clottes, 2017). The speed of the water stream falling in here is the same in all the seasons. That is, no matter how dry or rainy it is, the water stream always flows as fast. Among the treasures of the mountain, are the rare rock paintings, rock shelter, the stream of water flowing continuously from the mountains, and the deep trenches amidst the dense forest surrounded by mountains. All these features and the Sri Paramhans Ashram have united tourism and spirituality in this place. Valuable medicines and fossils are also found in this area (Trust Report, 2011). The various yogis and devotees always come in Sri Paramhans Ashram for the purpose of meditation and yoga. Every day various tourists and devotees also take food in the form of offerings. After visiting this ashram, devotees do not feel like going from this ashram, because they always feel as if life comes to a halt here. The mind of devotees and visitors are very relaxed, they have no answer to the natural beauty of this place. Sri Paramhans Ashram is very helpful and important in communicating spiritual power among the visitors and devotees. The present paper deals with the study of spirituality and the glory and divine beauty of the ashram. All nature lovers should experience the knowledge of natural beauty and spirituality of this place. Spiritual tourism can reduce poverty and curb it at the regional level, and can also reduce rural migration, and accelerate product diversification and nurture a sense of gratification among communities and destinations.

## Location and Connectivity of the Ashram

The ashram is situated in the middle of a forest and is located on the top of Dharkundi hill. The name of Dharkundi comes from 'dhara' (stream) and 'kundi' (in local language) a big hole into which the river flows. The Dharkundi area (24° 47' 42' N and 81° 9' 8' E) is situated in the north-east of Satna, at the border of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Sri Paramhans Ashram is a supernatural pilgrimage and center of spiritual knowledge. This place is well connected with both road and railway routes. It is located 60 km away from Satna via Birsinghpur road, 60 km from Rewa via Semariya road, and 60 km from Chitrakut via Manikpur road. It is 22 km from Manikpur railway station, and 180 km. from Khajuraho airport. The ashram is located at an altitude of 1050 feet above sea level. It provides the heavenly beauty of nature and a renewable source of spiritual energy. The minimum temperature is 2 °C to 4 °C in December-January while the maximum temperature is 18 °C in the month of June. The minimum temperature is 20 °C and the maximum temperature is 45 °C. The atmosphere is calm, quiet, and fully sattvic where all the visitors feel a supernatural experience and are provided proper guidance towards their lives. It is full of greenery, with the natural waterfalls and mountains all around. Dharkundi area occupies the Vindhyan range of mountains. The place is also famous for sandstone formations. It harbors hundreds of rock shelters, sometimes with extensive overhangs (Dubey-Pathak, 2013). The landscape mainly consists of jungles with abundant wildlife including leopard, bear, wild boar, deer, antelope. etc. All the necessary resources for simple needs are available in the ashram. The code of conduct and time table are very strictly followed to maintain the discipline of the ashram.

## Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows-

1. To study the various activities of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi on its hinterland.
2. To assess the role of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi in the development of spiritual tourism.
3. To enumerate the impact of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi as a growth point in the region.
4. To examine the importance of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi as a spiritual hub.
5. To explore the inclinations and prospects of spiritual life of Ashram.
6. To know the perspectives and strategies used to promote ashram tourism in India.

## Material and Methods

This study is mainly based on a survey method. We have organized a visiting program to visit the Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi and have collected every information related to the ashram. We had also participated in a full-day program and in all the activities which are related to the ashram. The collection of secondary sources of data included numerous

research work related to wellness (Ashram) tourism especially in the spiritual life of ashram in India, books on spiritual tourism, doctoral dissertation and research paper related to areas of ashram tourism, various websites, newspapers, and tourism and travel magazines that acted as a potential source about the ashram tourism.

## Literature Review

Spiritual tourism has expanded the traditional concept of "the most difficult journey, and the best reward", to a broader concept of the desire for change and relief from the boring everyday life and enthusiasm and the divine nature of a common man. Accordingly, academic interests in analyzing different aspects of spiritual tourism as a new sector have been increasing the power of momentum. Spirituality has become an increasingly significant area in social, health, and spiritual research (Sharma et al., 2008). Travels to spiritual places have recorded a phenomenal increase in the recent years (Phukan et al., 2012). An extensive review of literature is essential in order to define the concept of spiritual tourism. At best, 'Spiritual Tourism' can be called a journey of the people/group, to a place of the greatest holiness in search of moral, religious, or spiritual realization. It is an unforgettable journey of firm faith and personal faith, in search of divine awakening and commitment to what one believes. Often, this journey is equated to 'Pilgrimage' or 'Yatra' (Mukherjee et al., 2019). In the spiritual approach, life is based on a balance between wellbeing in the body, mind, and spirit (Smith & Puczkó, 2009). In order to meet the challenging needs of tourists, spiritual tourism offers activities that combine therapies and counseling, pathways to spiritual development, creative enhancement, and many other routes to the reconciliation of body, mind, and spirit (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Rinehart (2004) has explained the difference between 'spiritual tourism' and 'religious travel'. A spiritual quest and volunteering for self-development are essential in spiritual tourism. In this segment, often formal agencies such as institutions (ashrams) of charismatic gurus and specialized tour operators cater to the international and upmarket clientele by offering products such as yoga journeys and spiritual healing. The proliferation of hundreds of self-proclaimed and charismatic gurus illustrates the entrepreneurial role they play in driving this market. Thus, spiritual tourism is a tourism that is motivated by faith or religious reasons, and has been in evidence for centuries. Few studies tried to verify the prerogative that individuals can seek spiritual fulfillment through spiritual tourism (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Although the accepted concept is that tourism is a spiritual journey (Willson, 2011), the spiritual dimension is included in new forms of tourism, such as wellness (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) or holistic tourism (Smith, 2003). In more recent times, however, it has been suggested that spiritual tourism has become the functional and symbolic equivalent of more traditional spiritual practices, such as festivals, pilgrimages, yoga, and holy places (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Spiritual tourism activities, events, and places are characteristically located in aesthetically pleasant and environmentally lush surroundings (Singh, 2014, pp.5-13). Many scholars argue that individuals seek their spirituality through travel; specifically, they travel to search a greater meaning in life trying

to understand more about themselves as individuals (Banerjee, 2015). Despite this, there has been little research exploring how the spiritual movement influences tourist's experiences and motivations (Shanthakumari, 2017). The new tourists want to live an experience, more than simply contact with cultures, people, landscapes, or places. These travelers are cantered towards self-transformation and constitute new ground for spiritual travel experiences (Holladay & Ponder, 2012). Thus, the spiritual tourism of ashram acted to devotional faith of spiritual healing to all mankind.

## History of Sri Paramhans Ashram

Sri Paramhans Ashram is an ancient site that is described in the Mahabharata period in the name of Aghamarshan Tirtha. It is said that the Pandavas stayed at this place during the unknown dwellings in the Mahabharat period. Aghamarshan Kund is about 500 meters away from the ashram. The Pandavas had given water to Draupadi from this Kund during their unknown abode. When Draupadi was thirsty, the Pandavas had gone to get water from here, in which a cursed Yaksha lived as a dragon; the Yaksha would only give water to the Pandavas after answering the question. On not answering the questions, the four brothers were made desperate, then on the answer of Yudhishtira, the four brothers were freed by the Yaksha, and at that time the Yaksha was also saved (Matilal, 1989). After that, the Kund came to be known as Agha + Mradha i.e. Aghamarshan i.e. Kund free from sin, and since then a large number of devotees come to bathe here on Saptami Sunday. This kund has natural sulfur springs that cure many illnesses and skin diseases. There is a historical belief that the cave of Ashram has been the place of penance of Mahatma Veda, the sage (Trust Report, 2011).

Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi has been founded by Sri Swami Sachchidanand Ji Paramhans with the service and cooperation of the devotees. Sri Swami Sachchidanand had come to this deserted forest in 1956 with the blessings of his Gurudev Bramhaline Shri Swami Paramanand Ji Paramhans and stayed here and built the ashram for self-power of meditation and penance. At this time, around 80 sadhus and mahatmas reside in the ashram and are engaged daily in sadhana and bhajan, etc. as per the instructions of the ashram. Devotees from far and wide come to Ashram to worship and meditate. Their meals and lodging are arranged by the ashram. Daily one hundred to five hundred people come here, but there is a lot of crowd in the ashram on Saptami Sunday, Gurupurnima, and other festivals. This Dharkundi ashram is located in the forest. At a distance of 3 km from this ashram is the boundary of Ranipur Wildlife Sanctuary of Uttar Pradesh. In this ashram, the pilgrims come on their vehicles, so a park has been arranged for the safety of the vehicles so that the devotees do not face any inconvenience. During the fair days, extensive arrangements are made for devotees by the trusty of the ashram.

Basically, the Ashram has been established as a trust by Swami Sachchidanand Paramhans so that the system and tradition that has been in place since earlier times may continue to run

properly, due to which the sadhus and mahatmas present in the ashram are properly looked after, as well as the well-being of the devotees and other people who come here is taken care of. This Ashram has around 105 acres of land, on which various food items like wheat, rice, pulses, and vegetables, etc. are grown. These food items are used for the food of the seekers and devotees on behalf of the ashram. A gaushala has also been built on behalf of the ashram in a place called Kalyanpur (Uttar Pradesh), 8 km from the ashram. There are about 150 cows and 18 buffaloes in that gaushala. Milk and ghee received from them are used for the food of the pilgrims, devotees, and Mahatmas who come to the ashram. Various food items, clothes, money, etc. are given as a donation from time to time by the devotees who visit the ashram. All these things are also used for mahatmas and devotees. Some bank accounts of the ashram have also been opened, and devotees donate money which is used in large treasures of the ashram, in the festivals, in the treatment of diseases of the seekers, and for other essential services used by the ashram.

On behalf of the ashram, a thirty-bed hospital is also operated since 25 July 2015 at village Bhataha (5 kms from the ashram). The area, where this hospital is operated, is very backward. Majority of the population in this area is tribal and backward caste people. There is a lack of education and health facilities in this area. It is considered highly necessary to have this hospital in this area for the treatment of the people because no good hospitals are available within a radius of around 60 km of this place. Proper care is taken and the required treatment is provided to the patients in this hospital. Health care is provided to the patients coming here at minimum service charges. About 1200 patients are treated each month. In this hospital, arrangements have been made for accidental cases, and mini operation theaters, medical stores, X-ray machine, modern pathology for blood tests, etc have also been arranged. A canteen has also been arranged for food, tea, snacks, etc. for the doctors, staff, and attendants of patients coming to the hospital. On behalf of the Trust of the Ashram, two unique spiritual books namely Manav Bodh and Gita Prabodhan are available in the Sahitya Sevak Sadan to guide the seekers and devotees (Trust Report, 2011).

## **Religious Faith and Spirituality of Sri Paramhans Ashram**

Spirituality means having an understanding with deep, often religious, feelings, and beliefs, including a person's sense of peace, purpose, connection to others, and beliefs about the meaning of life. The essence of spirituality is inner feeling through love. Spirituality is one word that puts a human being on the highest pedestal of life. It is living life as it was meant to be not as we may have desired or wanted to live it. It is a certain fact that only the true seekers of spirituality become the masters of their destiny (Vembu, 2017). Knowingly or unknowingly, many people who have a materialistic goal in life travel the path of spirituality and become successful in life (Ralston, 1989). These highly acclaimed individuals unknowingly tread the path of pure spirituality and achieved the goal of their life. Spirituality in other terms means that before we ask God the almighty for material riches to be bestowed upon us, we need to compensate by giving something equivalent or more back to the

community. In terms of spirituality, we are not supposed to get anything unless we promise to do something in return in the system of God.

Sri Paramhans Ashram is a place for practicing yoga, meditation, and other spiritual programs such as bhajans and spiritual dialogues to evolve and grow spirituality for every human. This ashram is typically set away from the community population. The environment of the ashram is quiet and peaceful. It consists of only basic facilities with living quarters, dining hall, yoga hall, library, and gardens. This place is an oasis of serenity and calmness. There is no need for luxury life. The purpose is to go back to the basics and become independent from regular habits, patterns, and indulgences. Traditionally, this ashram is the home of a spiritual *sadhu* and *mahatama*.

People visit this ashram to seek guidance and spiritual wisdom. Visitors that stay at an ashram become a part of the devotional spirituality. They follow the daily routine of the ashram and help with chores while pursuing their spiritual goals. Therefore, Sri Paramhans Ashram is originally founded as Indian hermitages. Since a few decades, the concepts of every ashram have become more accessible to tourists and devotees for spiritual practices because spirituality is an integrated part of the Indian culture, and tourists and visitors are regular visitors to temples and ashrams. In India, it is an inherent belief and a deeply internalized concept that is “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience”. Moreover, spirituality is an essential part of the daily life of the Indian people. People in India grow up with the ideas of self-awareness and self-development. The concepts of spiritual evolvement and enlightenment are taught here from an early age.

The lifestyle at this ashram is for the most part very different from the one that people are used to back home. Here they have to wake up early with the rising sun, practice breathing exercises, meditate, sing chants to release emotions, eat simple food, practice yogasanas to improve the condition of the body, and discuss philosophies to open the mind. Throughout the day, devotees follow a strict routine in a basic setting without any distractions. This simplicity helps us understand the importance of these things in life that generally people take for granted. It also helps us reflect on our mental conditioning, our habits and our addictions, which we sometimes confuse for necessities. Various people of the western culture are connected to stress, an imbalance between emotion and logic, and an overall lack of discipline. This ashram provides a safe space, free from distractions and routines of daily life, and the chance to get rid of excess emotional and material baggage. Visitors come back to themselves and reflect on the true purpose and meaning of their life. Sri Paramhans Ashram promotes a healthy lifestyle and self-awareness through self-discipline and reflection. Thus, this ashram is a place with a great potential to develop spiritual tourism for its outstanding peaceful atmosphere and natural beauty.

## Attraction of Spiritual Programs in Sri Paramhans Ashram

All ashrams are typically set deep in the natural world and at the simplest level are a place of religious hermitage. The role of the guru is more important in an ashram and they are also unanimously respected and revered by the devotees and visitors (Bharta, 1979). Typically inhabitants of the ashram are involved in activities like yoga, music, or meditation (Giri, 2006). All spiritual devotees and visitors seek something that is worth being and can give their lives new richness or even a new direction. Additionally, it can also be observed that the majority of the devotees and visitors are attracted and driven by religious values and beliefs. On the other side, it has also been observed that a spiritual person only seeks the essence of spiritual experiences without any religious references (Singh et al., 2017). Although spiritual activities are a wider form of religious activities through which devotees experience more than their expectation. Thus, following programs are regularly organized in this ashram-

**Yoga:** Yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline that originated in India. It is a way of life that offers guidelines for behavior and beliefs, and the "asanas" (poses) are one small aspect of these guidelines. Although yoga stems from the Vedas and the Hindu religion, it has been co-opted by those of many different faiths. Yoga programs of the ashram have proved to be a way to achieve the goal, control the body and mind, and are practiced as part of Ayurveda.

**Satsang:** Satsang means "encounter with the truth". In Sanskrit, 'sat' means the truth, and 'sanga' means company. Thus, Satsang represents the meeting with the highest truth and with an enlightened Guru. Satsang is one of the nine parts of bhakti yoga according to the Narada Bhakti Sutras. Satsang is a part of this ashram's life; all devotees have participated in Satsang because Satsang provides good company in which we nurture our spirituality and bhakti, and where we are led by the Uttana (the principle of going higher in the spiritual evolution), as opposed to kusang (bad company, where we are led by Patana – that leads us to the decline in spiritual evolution). It is also said that Satsang is so important that a mere word at a Satsang can save one's life. There are countless stories and bhajans, which confirm this fact.

**Ayurveda:** It is a traditional system of Indian medicine and life sciences. In contemporary research and replacement parts, Ayurveda is very popular in eliminating various diseases through traditional medicine. Sri Paramhans Ashram provides Ayurveda treatment because herbal medicines are also available in the surroundings of Dharkundi forest.

**Meditation:** Meditation refers to various practices designed to promote relaxation, develop internal energy or life force, and develop interest. The various devotees come here and channel their devotion by mediation.

**Aarti:** Aarti is a pleasant ritual of worshipping God. It is organized and performed in this ashram by a Vedic Priest in the morning and evening every day. Aarti starts with chanting of mantras, singing of bhajans, beating drums, bells and diyas, prayers, and sacred rituals that take place around a fire, with oblations offered to Agni, the God of fire. The fire spreads



positivity in the surrounding. Therefore, many devotees visit the ashram and join the Aarti program there.

**Cultural Activities:** Sri Paramhans Ashram is a site of historical significance, a place of religious faith, reflection, and meditation to search for the soul. This means cultivating and practicing religious beliefs or performing religious duties. Various devotees also come here and join all the cultural activities especially on Guru Purnima.

All the above activities are called spiritual activities in Sri Paramhans Ashram. The majority of the prominent spiritual programs generally involve various forms of yoga and meditation practices; various satsang programs, religious and spiritual celebrations like Guru Purnima, birth anniversary, bhajans, morning and evening arti are also organized. In addition, they also offer various kinds of treatments like physiotherapy and other Ayurveda treatment for visitors. The spiritual activities carried out by the spiritual bodies attract not only religious tourists but also spiritual expeditors with unpredictable desires and preferences regarding their lives and satisfaction.

### **Analysis and Finding**

Religion, faith, and spirituality are so intertwined that a clear differentiation of all the three aspects is necessary for a deeper understanding of the role of spiritual tourism (Tharien, 1984, pp.127-128). In fact, Buddhism and Hinduism can be considered as philosophical thinking instead of religious and some of the authors have documented this element and called for a definition of "spiritual" tourism. Spiritual Tourism is limited or vague with a close link between religion and culture, where it is difficult to separate the motivation for travel, except in the specific case of legitimate and religious festivals. Virtually all monuments and tourist places have some connotations to religion and form the backbone of tourism to connect the circuits of Chitrakut. The study has clearly identified areas of interest that appeal to the spiritual aspects of travel, and administrators and travel professionals should collect this information, as accurate data and universal application are essential for marketing and promotions. In the absence of modern places, the villages linked tourism to religious sites in antiquity.

The concept of Sri Paramhans Ashram is, in fact, quite special. It can also be compared to a monastery, but the comparison falls short as ashrams are not only the residing place of monks, saints, and spiritual Gurus, but are also open and accessible to anyone and everyone. People from all backgrounds, ages, and beliefs can visit and stay at this ashram for any period of time. Management trusty of this ashram also helps and welcomes them regardless of their beliefs and faith. Many people want to grow and live spiritually, but they do not want to become a monk and leave everything and everyone in their lives. Ashrams provide a middle ground, giving people the opportunity to escape their daily routines and temporarily relinquish regular dependencies and addictions. During this break, balance can be brought

back to one's life and one can learn and strive to maintain that balance upon return to daily 'normal' life. Based on the above discussion, we can say that spiritual tourism at Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi has great potential to develop spiritual tourism to all mankind who believe in spirituality.

## Conclusion and Suggestion

Spiritual tourism has gained force in the world as travelers search for activities and programs that bring balance to their lives. We hope our study will help to analyze the main predictors of spiritual tourism, and to make a profile of these new luxury tourists, namely knowing what motivates them, how engaged they are with this tourism product, and their perception about the authenticity of the tourism experience. Spiritual tourism is the largest tourist sector in which more than 70 percent of the national tourist traffic is for spiritual purposes. 20 percent of income in the tourism industry is generated from religious tourism. It is believed that spiritual tourism will gain importance to contribute peace and wellbeing of people if spiritual destinations maintain their isolation. Various studies have revealed that the largest proportion of trips is religious, accounting for 50 percent, while recreational travel packages account for 28 percent. Satna district is famous for various tourist destinations (Singh et al., 2020). The connection to tourism circuits from Satna to Chitrakut includes various types of ashramas are established. Ashram tourism has been developed accordingly and receives various types of tourists from India and abroad.

The growth of spiritual tourism suggests that there is an increasing desire to focus on the 'self' rather than the 'other', and in 'existential' rather than 'objective authenticity'. The spiritual guru has motivated the desire of visitors to escape but not in the classic way (i.e. escape from society turbulence). It's a desire and a need to escape but in order to find oneself. Also, spiritual tourism can be a key tourism product in many regions. Sri Paramhans Ashram presents all the ingredients to be an important destination for this kind of tourism. We hope that tourists will understand the majesty and spirituality of Sri Paramhans Ashram as a spiritual tourist destination and will imbibe spirituality in their lives. Some suggestions in this aspect are as mentioned below:

1. Effective public relations and advertising campaigns should be adopted by the ashram to develop spiritual tourism grounded on market information.
2. Improve prospective tourist's awareness and understanding of spiritual tourism in Satna and Chitrakut circuit and other circuits linked with this area also.
3. Develop links from surrounding destinations around Dharkundi to attract various tourists. Improvements should also be made to existing spiritual products to improve their value among potential tourists.
4. Innovations of spiritual tourism must be merged with culture and nature tourism in this area because potentially this region is naturally more sounded.

5. Policies and strategies must be developed by the management trusty of Sri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi to solve the seasonal and overcrowding problem during the occasion of Guru Purnima.
6. Sustainable guidelines issues must be enhanced by the tourism department of both M.P. and U.P. for the advancement of spiritual tourism in the holistic region from Satna to Chitrakut circuit or/from Prayagraj to Chitrakut Circuit.

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## Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest. The authors have approved the final version of the manuscript with equal contribution.

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