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Presenting a Model for Development of Religious Tourism in Mazandaran Province (Case study: Sari city)

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Article Info	Abstract
	Religious tourism is one of the world's most critical current types of tourism, especially in Islamic countries such as Iran, which has a high potential for development and progress in this field. However, the development of this type of tourism in our country is not restricted to only religious cities but includes other cities in Iran. With its religious-pilgrimage functions, Sari city in Mazandaran province provides an appropriate ground for developing religious tourism as one of the main forms of tourism. The present research first conducted a set of observations in the region after studying library documents using the field method. After analyzing data from the observations, research questions were evaluated by organizations, experts, and the local community. The results were quantitatively examined by SWOT analysis. Finally, according to extracted concepts from qualitative and quantitative analysis, a model for the development of religious tourism was obtained based on library and field studies using interviews and then evaluated by experts. Results show that religious places of Sari city aren't on the list of development priorities. It presents a model for development in this region with more challenges. Therefore, the qualitative and quantitative analysis results of this research imply a very appropriate situation and a high potential for religious tourism, emphasizing Imamzadeh in Sari city.

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Introduction

Pilgrimage and religious tours are usually considered the origin of tourism that has so far existed in human life as a good action and duty and continued from generation to generation. In other words, tourism and journey have been considered physical, spiritual, and natural human needs in all religions and religious schools, especially Islam. Thus, it seems to be necessary for tourism in the holy lands to maintain its importance in the modern world, countries, and Islamic communities (Doiran, 2020, p. 84). Religious tourism is one of the fastest-growing types of tourism, so there are about 600 million national and international religious trips worldwide, according to World Tourism Organization (WTO) (WTO, 2016). This growth in religious tourism has brought a suitable potential to improve conditions of sustainable development and provide a convenient ground for employment and investment in required infrastructures, stimulation of local culture, handicrafts, and food and ultimately has led to the development (WTO, 2016).

Religious tourism has been found increasingly important around the world. Part of this situation is certainly due to the explosion of the general tourism phenomenon, which is supported by increased revenue, technology, information circulation, or promotional measures. Nevertheless, religious tourism is directly growing along with people's extreme tendency to know and understand other religions but their own (Ali et al., 2019).

Religious tourism has a wealthy and historical background as one of the important sub-sectors of the tourism industry in Iran. It can play an influential role in the development of cities and villages insofar as it provides the field of achieving sustainable development in an interconnection process between four fundamental pillars of development, namely economic, socio-cultural, structural, and natural developments (Dehshiri, 2015). These cultural-religious attractions include Imamzadeh , shrines, historical mosques, Hussainiya , etc. Many people worldwide travel to seek holiness and spiritual guidance and attain holy and sacred places. In other words, the most concentrated tourism sector is religious tourism (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). Iran, as an Islamic country, is one of the countries that can be very active and successful in religious tourism and attracts a large number of tourists interested in religion. In addition to the cities of Mashhad, Qom, Shiraz, and other religious cities, other cities of the country with tombs and sacred places can also be known as tourist destinations. Hence, identifying religious capacities can significantly contribute to tourism development in Iran, emphasizing religious tourism.

Mazandaran province is one of the country's top provinces and tourism hubs regarding the natural and geographical situation in the tourism sector. Similarly, in addition to natural attractions, sacred places

and Imamzadeh of this province have historical and religious aspects that have provided a capacity for developing the industry of tourism in this province. But, these religious attractions have received less attention.

Mazandaran is among the provinces with unique tourist specifications for tourists, and everyone with any taste can enjoy traveling to this region. In general, historical or ancient monuments and this region's pristine and elegant nature can leave memorable memories for people visiting these sites. Also, people interested in this region's spiritual atmosphere can enjoy the visit of its shrines and Imamzadehs. Recognizing and prioritizing the capacities of religious tourism and its development is one of the significant issues in tourism attraction. Due to its unique geographical position and proximity to the sea and mountains, Sari city can be a successful tourist attraction. Also, there are many Imamzadeh in this city, each of which has a valid genealogy. Still unfortunately, this city is not sufficiently able to develop in this field because of its shortcomings. In this study, the capabilities and potentials of Sari city in the development of religious tourism, its current situation of religious monuments, and ways to improve and promote its religious tourism have been qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. Finally, it has been presented as a model for the development of religious tourism in Sari.

Theoretical foundations
Religious tourism

Religious tourism is one of the world's oldest and most prosperous types of tourism (Ajit, 2004). Religion-motivated tourism is a global phenomenon as old as religion itself, and it is one of the characteristics of all religious sects. The relationship between two terms, religion and tourism, has been studied from different perspectives. For example, Bremer (2005) refers to three approaches that have been focused on the intersection of religion and tourism by researchers: spatial approach (occupying a place by pilgrims and tourists with different behaviors), historical approach (relationship between religious forms of travel and tourism), and cultural approach (pilgrimage and tourism as modern methods in the postmodern world) (Olsen & Timothy, 2006).Similarly, religious tourism is a recurring phenomenon in the history of religions, and it refers to forms of tourism with religious associations. Kim et al. (2020) believe that people's understanding of religious tourism has evolved and gone beyond pilgrimage so that the holy and religious place is now considered a tourist destination. In other words, recent studies have developed beyond visitors' motivations, such as individual religious affiliations, to assess their identity (Kim et al., 2020).

One of the advantages of religious tourism is that climatic problems or unfavorable weather can't prevent its growing process, and it dates back to religious culture (Aghjani & Farahanifard, 2015). In other words, religious tourism can be introduced as the most sustainable type of tourism because

pilgrimage and religious tourism are rooted in religious beliefs and do not belong to a specific time and place. After all, religious tourism, with its components and different types, is included in the context of global tourism due to its special structural and functional features that have influenced the whole world (Arabshahi et al., 2017).

Of course, it should be noted that there is a need for more specialized research and studies in this area to attain the sustainable development of religious tourism in Iran. The development of religious tourism will be led to the recognition of spiritual culture, economic and commercial transformation, earning a lot of money, creating employment, and removing the inappropriate and unrealistic image resulting from other communities' propaganda about the host society (Imani Khoshkhoo & Shahrabi Farahani, 2018). Also, religious tourism is defined as "to visit the holy places such as shrines, tombs of Imamzadeh, etc., by tourists." According to this definition, tourists are divided into two main groups: the first group consists of tourists who visit the holy places in their country, and the second group consists of tourists who visit the holy places of other religions and countries (Pishghadam et al., 2018).

Development of religious tourism

Researchers have studied various categories of elements of religious tourism, such as the experiences of religious participants, their marketing, influences, and motivations (Hung Lee et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism has social, economic, and environmental dimensions, but the environmental dimension has always received more attention. In the literature on sustainable tourism development, the main sustainability issues include the economic and local economic benefits, controlled economic growth, improvement of local and regional relations, and equitable distribution of local economic benefits. It should be noted that activity has achieved stable conditions when it continues for a long time without harming the (natural and human) environment and its required resources. Sustainability in the tourism industry, including the choice of location, structure, facilities, and equipment, and in general providing the tourist product in proportionate to the demand of tourists, is subject to preserving the environment and nature by the host and guest (Ziari et al., 2018). The new paradigm of sustainable development of tourism has different environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. Therefore, to evaluate the sustainable development of tourism in Sari City as a concept that includes economic, ecological, social, and cultural factors, it is necessary to take into account a comprehensive system of different parameters in the way that the sustainable development of tourism can be analyzed at a deeper level.

Religious attractions

The religious attraction includes all the sacred buildings and monuments that are honorable, sacred, and noble for the followers of a particular religion. In Iran, these attractions can be divided into five

categories: mosques , Imamzadeh and tombs , old Tekyeh and Hussainiya, fire temples , and monasteries and Khanqahs . Each of the above religious attractions can have local, national, regional, trans-regional and international dimensions. (Imani khoshkho**o** & Shahrabi Farahani, 2018)**.**

literature Review

Although extensive research has been conducted in the field of religious tourism, however, it has not specifically examined the concept of religious tourism and its development in Sari City. Therefore, we can only mention some researches are to some extant closer to our studied subject. For example, Hashemi (2021) examined and prioritized competitive strategies for the development of religious tourism in Rezvanshahr in his research. The results of this research showed that factors such as establishing camps and tourist villages with amenities and recreational facilities in the margin of religious monuments, constructing accommodation camps, and providing low-cost banking facilities to investors interested in investing in tourism areas of these regions could have a tremendous impact on the development of religious tourism (Hashemi, 2021, p. 75). Another research has been conducted by Amiri et al. (2022), who considered the impact of all three indicators of the capabilities and potentials of religious ceremonies, visual beauty, and the responsibility of urban organizations as important factors in their studies. Also, Sharifi Ghalehnavi et al. (2021) analyzed factors affecting the development of religious tourism in the holy the City of Mashhad. They concluded that it should be attended to 5 main dimensions and 21 development factors and explain causal relations between them to develop religious tourism in this city.

Regarding infrastructures, Hanifehpour et al. (2021) considered transport complexes with various facilities as the most important factor affecting research on religious tourism in Shahr-e Rey, emphasizing its introduction of tourist attractions. Of course, these restaurants' lack of adequate and appropriate health facilities can lead to dissatisfaction with tourists. Additionally, the results supported the impact of Shahr-e Rey's traditional market on attracting tourists. In other studies, Salah et al. (2021) studied the factors affecting the development of tourism in the religious cities around the shrine of Seyed Alaeddin Hossein in Shiraz in their research. They concluded that social and environmental standards, preservation of cultural heritage with proper planning, public awareness of the value of the natural heritage, and respect for tourists and pilgrims could lead to tourism development in this city.

Romanelli et al. (2021), in a study "Towards religious tourism based on a sustainable development," emphasized the role of roads in religious tourism. They believed these roads could be considered an opportunity to advance the goals of sustainable tourism development. Regarding the process of evolution of religious tourism, Iliev (2020) indicated how evolving and changing available concepts, paradigms, and practices related to religious tourism over the years in his research. This research shows

that religious tourism is gradually changing and promoted, as well as going through the stage of segmentation, creating new markets, and developing new identities. In addition, it showed that the concept of tourism is a complex structure with dynamic quantitative and qualitative changes. Therefore, this concept in the global market requires a postmodern and multidisciplinary approach.

Methodology

In this research it was used a mixed-method including qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. It had been collected the data research data has been collected for this study through library and field methods. In the qualitative part, descriptive-analytical methods of theoretical concepts, interviews, and observation were used; in the quantitative part, SWOT analysis was used. The interview was conducted in the form of in-depth interviews with experts in which it focused on the issues, including tourism specialists and Mazandaran organizational specialists (including provincial government, organization of cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism municipality, endowment and charity affairs office, transportation). Also, it has been conducted in-depth interviews with the local community it was useful researcher's observations in collecting data. Since the target of the development of religious tourism in Sari city is to emphasize the Imamzadeh, the researcher has presented a specific suggested model for this city.

Findings

This research has obtained results in the qualitative part using the observations and interviews with experts, related organizations (municipality, endowment, and charity affairs office, provincial government, transportation, and cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism), and the local community and has also obtained results in the quantitative part by the SWOT analysis that will be further explained in the following.

In this province, it is paying more attention to pristine nature and the elegant sea by tourists. For this reason, the researcher catches tourists' attention the religious tourism in this region by presenting an appropriate model and respect for the city's capabilities for the development of religious tourism and the importance of this province as a tourist region.

According to observations, this region has the best geographical and climatic situation, with Imamzadeh and religious monuments. However, it does not receive much attention from tourists despite the holding of local rituals and religious ceremonies and its people's religious capacity.

The lack of coherence and coordination of the relevant organizations in this sector has led to disintegration and decentralization in the type of organizations' approach to religious tourism. Similarly, the lack of job information in these organizations resulted from a lack of proper information, and the

organizational system has led to the neglect of religious tourism in Iran. The proposed solution, in this regard, is that practitioners of religious tourism provide the necessary information to the people using purposeful educational workshops to be avoided arbitrary measures. Because most of the Imamzadeh of Mazandaran province is situated in impassable or mountainous areas, one can reconstruct the passageways to these areas depending on the appropriate infrastructure for religious tourism. Additionally, because security issues in Imamzadeh have not received much attention from the trustees or officials, many villages are attacked by thieves, which prevents tourists from visiting this region and, as a result, reduces the number of tourists. As we know, the main trustee of religious places in Iran is the Endowment Organization, and, of course, the Heritage Organization is also involved in managing some places. Since Endowment Organization the lack an independent budget and thus earns its income from public donations to Imamzadeh situated in remote areas, then it can't be very effective in providing an appropriate budget for the necessary arrangements in order to expand religious tourism in this region, and it encounters religious tourism with the financial challenges.

Although people's attitude to these sacred places has changed compared to the past kingdom system, their beliefs about these have still remained. However, it is necessary to be provided a proper cultural ground to learn about health issues people that their non-observance can harm the environment.

Table 1. Results of Interview with Organizations

Results of Interview with Organizations			
Organizations	**Questions**	**Questions**	**Questions**
	Capacities of Sari city in the development of religious tourism	Current situation of religious places in Sari city	Methods of improving and promoting religious tourism in Sari city
Endowment and Charity Affairs Office	The religious places and attractions and the importance of the region in terms of tourism	The current situation in religious places is not very satisfactory.	Construction of accommodation and development of travel routs
Municipality Office	In addition to using the spiritual atmosphere and tranquility, the tourist also enjoys other recreations due to its proximity to nature and the sea.	The current situation in religious places is not very satisfactory	Planning in religious tourism and lack of arbitrary measures in this field

Table 2. Classification of Interview with Experts

	Results of Interview with Experts		
Questions	Capacities of Sari city in the development of religious tourism	Methods of development of religious tourism in Sari city	The suggestion of a (micro and macro) solution to improve religious tourism in Sari city
Answers	1) Temperate climate 2) Beautiful and unique landscapes 3) Hospitality of the people 4) The city's reputation in terms of tourism 5) Shrines and sacred tombs and Imamzadeh 6) Enjoying the appropriate religious infrastructures 7) Universities in this city 8) Enjoying spiritual, religious, and recreational places 9) High religious capacity of people	1) Tourist information services and introduction of Imamzadeh 2) Planning to attract specialized people 3) Attracting educated and academic people	1) Preparation of brochures, maps and their distribution among tourists 2) Establishment of hotel and restaurant in proximity to Imamzadeh 3) Asphalting the roads leading to Imamzadeh

Table 3. Classification of Interview with Local Community

	Results of Interview with Local Community
Questions	Capacities of Sari city in the development of religious tourism
Answers	According to the interview with the local community, holding religious ceremonies and rituals, being on the road with Mashhad, and the existence of a guesthouse in the Imamzadeh are among the tourist capacities of this city.

Sari city's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats obtained from all observations and interviews with organizations, experts, and the local community using SWOT analysis are given in the following table.

Table 4. Results of Quantitative SWOT Analysis Based on Priorities

Strengths	Opportunities
1. Shrines and sacred tombs and Imamzadeh 2. Natural and cultural tourism along with religious tourism 3. People's adherence to religious rites 4. Proximity to the sea, forest, and mountain 5. Temperate climate	1. Increasing the motivation and welcoming of pilgrimage tours by local people 2. Suitable climate and locating some Imamzadeh in green areas 3. Planning government to equip and develop religious places 4. Developing transportation technologies 5. Studying and planning to create exemplified tourism areas in the province
Weaknesses	**Threats**
1. lack of sufficient attractions in religious places for tourists 2. Weakness of infrastructures in religious places 3. Lack of services, facilities, and welfare equipment in religious places 4. lack of an adequate health and service ground 5. Lack of knowledge of the needs of religious tourists	1. Lack of funds for the development of tourism services 2. Eliminating or weakening people's traditional and indigenous culture with the arrival of tourists 3. Environmental adverse outcomes and damage to religious and historical monuments due to the arrival of tourists 4. Increasing social conflicts due to encountering local people with tourists 5. Reducing the government allocated budget for tourism development

Results obtained from observations, interviews, and SWOT analysis show that religious tourism is one of the types of tourism that can be developed in Sari city. The following table summarizes the concepts extracted from the qualitative analysis of observation and interview.

Table 5. Extracted Concepts from Theoretical Foundations, Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Questions	Extracted Concepts from Theoretical Foundations, Qualitative and Quantitative
An integrated view of the development of religious tourism in Sari city	Creating a positive attitude to the development of religious tourism in Sari city Presenting an integrated approach to the development of religious tourism in Sari city Creating a developmental perspective Integrated targeting of religious tourism in Sari city Integrated and unique planning for religious sites
Pillars of development of religious tourism in Sari city	The geographical position of Sari city Endowment, municipality and cultural heritage, handicrafts, and tourism organizations Local community Unique specifications of religious sites in Sari city
Attitudes based on sustainable development of religious tourism in Sari city	Cultural, social, religious, environmental, economic, political, and technological sustainability
Grounded conditions for the development of religious tourism in Sari city (Oriented-site)	Training employees of relevant organizations Educating local community Educating tourists Employing specialists in the field of religious tourism Developing specialized knowledge of religious tourism in universities and scientific centers of Sari city
Strategies of development of religious tourism in Sari city (emphasizing offensive strategies)	Planning for the development of religious tourism in Sari city Management and organization of religious sites in Sari city Marketing of religious sites in Sari city Monitoring religious sites in Sari city
Measures for development of religious tourism in Sari city (oriented-site)	Measures for physical development Accommodation Food and beverage industry Transportation industry Agencies of travel service Measures for non-physical development Staff Site beauties Visual and auditory specifications History and culture Traditional rituals

Grounded conditions:
Training employees of relevant organizations
Educating local community
Educating tourists

Sustainable attitude: Cultural, social, religious, environmental, economic, political, technological sustainability

Pillars of development of religious tourism in Sari city: Geographical position of Sari city Endowment, municipality and cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism organizations Local community Unique specifications of religious sites in Sari city

Measures for development of religious tourism in Sari city (oriented-site): Measures for physical development
Accommodation
Food and beverage industry
Transportation industry
Agencies of travel service
Measures for non-physical development
Staff
Site beauties
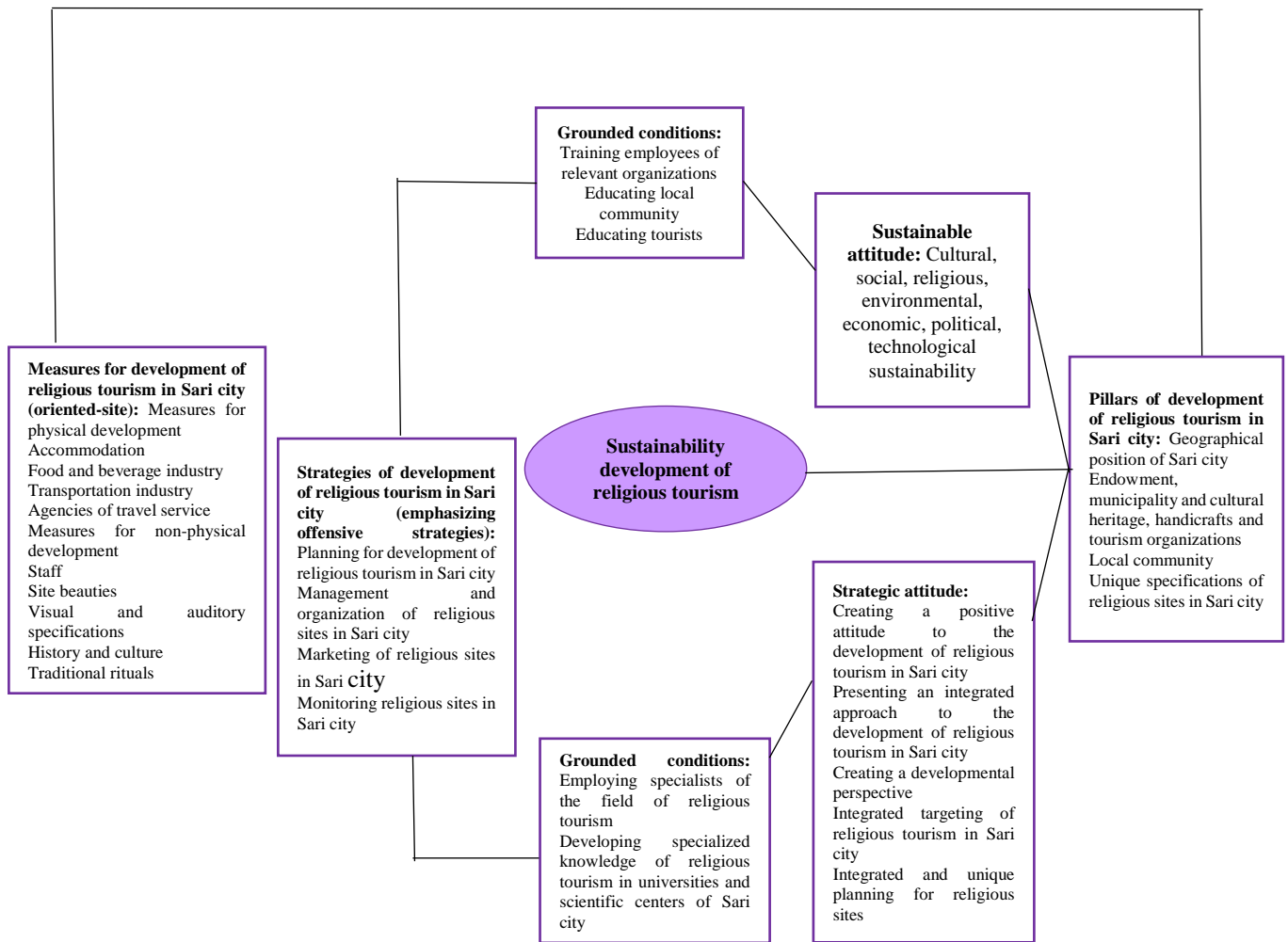Visual and auditory specifications
History and culture
Traditional rituals

Strategies of development of religious tourism in Sari city (emphasizing offensive strategies): Planning for development of religious tourism in Sari city
Management and organization of religious sites in Sari city
Marketing of religious sites in Sari city
Monitoring religious sites in Sari city

Sustainability development of religious tourism

Strategic attitude:
Creating a positive attitude to the development of religious tourism in Sari city
Presenting an integrated approach to the development of religious tourism in Sari city
Creating a developmental perspective
Integrated targeting of religious tourism in Sari city
Integrated and unique planning for religious sites

Grounded conditions:
Employing specialists of the field of religious tourism
Developing specialized knowledge of religious tourism in universities and scientific centers of Sari city

Figure 1. Proposed model

Discussion and Conclusion

Today, tourism is one of the largest economic industries in the world. Therefore, in many countries, it is an important source of income, employment, social and cultural growth, increasing levels of welfare, and private sector growth. Iran has several thousand-year history, and many tourist attractions have a good position in this field; as we know, after the spread of Islam and the Shiite sect, villages and cities of Iran became regions for the living of some Imamzadeh, and, after their death, their tombs became a place for pilgrimage. Therefore, people's belief in Imamzadeh and shrines attracts the attention of other people of the world, especially Muslims in these places. Mazandaran province has many Imamzadeh in its different regions that make it a destination for religious tourism in addition to receiving many tourists every year who enjoy its natural attractions. Thus, it has been tried to look at this province from this perspective and in respect of its capacities for religious tourism in this study. The results of this research show that the lack of adequate health facilities and parking, lack of proper travel roads, lack of private sector investment, government neglect of these places, etc., are among the obstacles to the development of religious tourism in this region. However, one can utilize the vastness of religious and pilgrimage places for the prosperity of religious tourism in this province by proper planning.

To improve the development of religious tourism in Sari city, it is suggested to be informed on the benefits of pilgrimage tourism to the local community, its development in the questioned region, and, especially, employment of youth and entrepreneurship of the residents of this region. Advertising appropriately, such as distributing brochures and billboards, can help to understand these places better. Also, one can today introduce this region to many people with the availability of internet technology and attract more tourists. In addition, providing facilities such as libraries, restaurants, proper toilets, etc., in Imamzadeh to provide services to tourists can attract more tourists. Holding seminars and national and international conferences to identify the province's religious tourism potential can be very helpful.

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