



AN ANALYSIS OF PILGRIMS AND PILGRIMAGE SITES OF KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

For centuries past, Kashmir has been considered as one of the holiest lands of India. It was a land of Parvati in ancient India and later became Rishi Bhumi. Pilgrimage tourism sites of various religions are spread throughout the length and breadth spots of Buddhists spread in the far and vide of this Gulistan (Garden), Amarnathji Cave, Kheer-Bhawani Temple, Mattan Temples, Shankaracharya Temple, etc, are among the main Hindu Pilgrimage spots of the Valley. Pilgrimage spot of Sikhism, like, Chatti Padshahi, Chhevin Patshahi Param Pillan, Patshahi Pehli, etc, are frequently visited by Sikhs from within and outside India. For Muslims, Hazratbal Shrine, Charar-e-Shareef Shrine, Baba Rishi Shrine, etc, are the revered places for pilgrimage. In addition, many legends are attached with some religious spots located in the Valley of Kashmir and much more is still to be explored. The research paper has been presented in two parts, analytical profile of pilgrimage in Kashmir and the second is evaluation of infrastructure at the pilgrimage sites. The survey at the sites and discussion with pilgrims and management of the pilgrimage sports brought into sight the deficiencies in services at these spots. Based on the findings it was suggested that Public Private Partnership (PPP) should be done in constructing accommodation infrastructure and the J&K TDC should be involved in providing food and catering outlets at the pilgrimage sites of Kashmir.

KEYWORDS : *Pilgrims, Pilgrimage, Kashmir, PPP - Public Private Partnerships.*

Travelling for the pilgrimage purpose is the base which has led to the evolution of a phenomenon called Tourism. Travel which initially started with the intention to fulfil the religious/spiritual/pilgrimage needs of a person is again becoming the largest motivator to undertake travel. Pilgrims

on pilgrimage though do not count the gains and losses from it but there are enough benefits to the residents of locality at the pilgrimage spots and other players of the tourism industry who are providing services to these special tourists.

For millennia people have travelled in search of Deity or deification in one form or another. Russell (1999) defines religious travel as “a journey to one or more sacred places, undertaken for religious motives”. Religious motivated travel has grown so significantly in recent years, involving millions of international travellers that some travel agencies and tour operators have begun to specialize specifically in this form of travel (Olsen and Timothy 1999; Russel 1999; San Filippo 2001). Apart from devotional aspect, looked at from the broader point of view, pilgrimage involves sightseeing, travelling, visiting different places and, in some cases, voyaging by air or sea, etc., and buying the local memorabilia, almost everything a tourist does (Gupta 1999). Given the importance and magnitude of religiously motivated travel, the infrastructure and services at the pilgrimage sites needs to be evaluated and created according to the profile of the visiting pilgrims so as to deliver better services and create more satisfied tourists/pilgrims.

For centuries past, Kashmir has been considered as one of the holiest lands of India. It was a land of Parvati in ancient India and later became Rishi Bhumi. Finally after embracing Islam, the land became “Peer Veer” means ‘An Abode of Saints’. The different religions in Kashmir, viz, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam have interacted harmoniously and Kashmir has absorbed the better aspect of each religion in itself. This absorption, however, led to the development of a tolerant culture in the Valley of Kashmir. A concept of adjustment was set in and people believed in accepting everything new and progressive. It is due to this complexity of religious character of Kashmir that all aspects of life of a Kashmiri are intertwined and mixed up. Thus the shrine whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or Sikh is a place not only for worship or the communion of followers of one particular religion but for all religious groups of the society.

Pilgrimage tourism sites of various religions are spread throughout the length and breadth of the Valley. Parihaspora, Panderathan, Harwan, etc, are the revered pilgrimage spots of Buddhists spread in the far and wide of this Gulistan (Garden). Amarnathji Cave, Kheer-Bhawani Temple, Mattan Temples, Shankaracharya Temple, etc, are among the main Hindu Pilgrimage

spots of the Valley. Pilgrimage spot of Sikhism, like, Chatti Padshahi, Chhevin Patshahi Param Pillan, Patshahi Pehli, etc, are frequently visited by Sikhs from within and outside India. For Muslims, Hazratbal Shrine, Charar-e-Shareef Shrine, Baba Rishi Shrine, etc, are the revered places for pilgrimage. In addition, many legends are attached with some religious spots located in the Valley of Kashmir and much more is still to be explored.

Pilgrimage Tourism has played a vital role in revival of the tourism industry of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly Kashmir division. Pilgrimage traffic during the period of turmoil has kept the industry alive and created a favourable atmosphere for the passage of tourists to the Valley. Pilgrim traffic particularly to pilgrimage spots of Amarnathji Cave Shrine, Kheer Bhawani temple, Gurdwara Chatti Padshahi, Shankaracharya temple, Hazratbal shrine, etc, has increased with the passage of time. The traffic has increased many folds even during the period of turmoil. In this scenario, it has become more important to create a strong base of infrastructure for making more satisfactory pilgrims so as to help the tourism industry through word of mouth publicity and by increasing length of stay of pilgrims in the Valley.

Objective of the Study

The study has been done with the following objectives in sight:

- i) Profiling pilgrims to the Valley for better understanding their needs.
- ii) To evaluate the infrastructure at the pilgrimage spots of Kashmir for the safe and comfortable stay of pilgrims.
- iii) Finding deficiencies and suggesting the remedial measure for the improvement of infrastructure at the pilgrimage sites.

Methodology

The study is survey based. Data from 300 pilgrims was collected from five pilgrimage spots of Shankaracharya Temple & Kheer Bhawani Temple, Parihaspora, Gurdwara Chatti Padshahi, and Hazratbal choosing 60 from each spot. The main section of the study, profiling pilgrims to Kashmir, has been analyzed through the use of Tables and Percentage. For the second section on Evaluation of Infrastructure, an analysis of 4 A's of Tourism is done. Based on the Findings from Profiling Pilgrims and analysis of 4 A's of Tourism, findings are given. In order to cope with some main problems some recommendations have been put forward.

Presentation of the Study

For the presentation of the study and highlighting the objectives, the paper has been divided into three sections:

Section A) Profiling Pilgrims and its analysis,

Section B) Evaluating infrastructure of the Pilgrimage spots, &

Section C) Findings and Recommendations of the Study.

Section A) Analytic Profile of Pilgrims in Kashmir

For profiling pilgrims to the pilgrimage sites of Kashmir, a questionnaire based survey was done at five pilgrimage spots of Shankaracharya Temple, Kheer Bhawani Temple, Parihaspora, Gurdwara Chatti Padshahi, and Hazratbal shrine. In order to avoid repetition of data by showing response of pilgrims at all the five pilgrimage spots separately, an aggregate of responses of respondents at all the surveyed spots has been taken into account while doing the analysis. Any prominent variation at any spot from aggregate values has also been highlighted. Further trend of local pilgrims which came to light during survey to the spots has also been given.

Profiling Pilgrims

Gender

	Male	Female
%age of Respondents	58	42

Most of the survey participants who were pilgrims visiting the pilgrimage spots were males 58%; while females were 42%. But in case of local pilgrims, females outnumber males at various pilgrimage spots of the Valley, particularly at Muslim pilgrimage spot.

Age

	>15 years upto 30 years	>30 years upto 45 years	>45 years upto 60 years	>60 years
%age of Respondents	23	54	14	9

Domestic as well as foreign tourists visiting tourist spots of Kashmir are mostly from >30 years to 45 years age group. This age group comprised 54% of the total respondents surveyed, followed by >15 years to 30 years

age group which comprised 23%, >45 years upto 60 years age group 14% and >60 years age group comprised 9%.

Profession

	Govt. Service	Business	Housewife	Student
%age of Respondents	24	41	13	22

As illustrated in Table 1.3 the largest number of survey participants reported that their profession was business. The smallest group of survey participants were housewives.

Income (in Rs/-, per month)

	Nil/Zero	Below 10 thousand	10-20 thousand	20-30 thousand	Above 30 thousand
%age of Respondents	25	34	17	13	11

The survey included a question that asked the participants their income/salary per month. It is of note that 34 percent of those who completed the survey had an income/salary of less than 10,000 Rs/- which is a salary of US\$ 203.436 or less per month. Also in the survey there were 11 percent who had an income/salary of greater than 30,000 Rs/- which is equivalent to US\$ 610.308.

Nationality

	Domestic	Foreign
%age of Respondents	76	24

Domestic tourists, as on other tourist spots of Kashmir, outnumber foreigners. Same is the case with pilgrimage spots also. Out of the surveyed pilgrims, 76% were Domestic and 24% were foreign nationals.

Religion

	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Buddhist	Others
%age of Respondents	39	19	16	15	11

As the Valley of Kashmir is a multi-religious spot so the tourists of different faiths visit here. So far as the religion of pilgrims visiting different pilgrimage spots of survey is concerned, majority of them visiting this Muslim dominant State are Hindus 39%. Pilgrims of other religions visiting the Valley are 19% Muslims, 16% Sikhs, 15% Buddhists and 11% others. Among the 11% 'others' are included tourists belonging to the religions like, Christianity, Judaism, etc.

It hence became evident from the above analysis that tourists/pilgrims of different religions visit pilgrimage spots of Kashmir. It has also come to fore during the site survey that pilgrims visit the pilgrimage spots of different religions, not only of the religion which they profess. Pilgrims mostly of budget category visit the pilgrimage spots which hence call for minimum facilities but with good services.

Section B) Evaluation of Infrastructure at the Pilgrimage Spots

Profiling of pilgrims brought to fore some glaring facts regarding the pilgrims who visit the pilgrimage spots of Kashmir. Besides, individual analysis of the pilgrimage spots, interaction with pilgrims and discussions with the management of these spots has further enhanced the understanding of pilgrimage phenomenon in Kashmir. Hence, to make satisfactory services to pilgrims, four A's of tourism (Attractions, Accessibility, Accommodation, and Amenities) were evaluated at the five pilgrimage spots covered under survey schedule.

- 1) *Attractions:* Kashmir pilgrimage tourism is not restricted to any particular religion. There are pilgrimage interests for almost every individual professing any faith, whether, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or Islam. Infact, Kashmir is a spiritual land. Almost all great religious personalities have found a spiritual call in its environs and have travelled towards it, without any distinction on any basis. It gives a call towards humanity and does not restrict a pilgrim to any particular religion. Hence, the varied nature of pilgrimage motivations increases the sphere of pilgrims visiting the Valley of Kashmir and gives more reasons to increase our statistical figures of tourist arrivals.
- 2) *Accessibility:* Accessibility to any tourist/pilgrimage spot is the main criterion for the success or failure of a destination. So far as the pilgrimage spots covered under this study are concerned, only two pilgrimage spots

are located outside the summer capital, Srinagar, they are Kheer Bhawani and Parihaspora. These two spots are connected with a budget class transport service available at regular intervals. Besides, the sumo service, cheap and comfortable, available throughout the Valley has made the inaccessible areas accessible. For the city pilgrimage spots, regular city transport service is available. Hence accessibility is not a hindrance in visiting any pilgrimage spot of Kashmir.

- 3) *Accommodation:* There is not any difficulty in getting accommodation for staying near the city pilgrimage spots, where budget class and executive class hotel and houseboat facility can be availed. But so far as Kheer Bhawani is concerned two yatriniwas have been created but they too are not sufficient to tackle the rush of pilgrims during festivals at the shrine and hence the pilgrims have to travel back to Srinagar for availing the facility. At Parihaspora, no accommodation facility is available and the pilgrims/tourists have to travel back to Srinagar for night stay. It can be said that the pilgrims visiting pilgrimage spots located outside the city premises have to travel back to the city to avail accommodation facility.
- 4) *Amenities:* Amenities like, public utilities, food and catering outlets, souvenir shops, information sources, etc, have been evaluated under this section. At Parihaspora, all sorts of amenities mentioned above are totally out of scene. At Kheer Bhawani, a small market sufficient for catering to very few tourists possessing minimum facilities is available; hence the scene here too is very bad. At city pilgrimage spots of Hazratbal, Chatti Padshahi and Shankaracharya, only Hazratbal provides good quality of amenities in the form of public utilities, souvenir shops, information sources and food and catering outlets. At Shankaracharya temple, public utilities are not of good standard. But the spot being located near the main tourism hub of the city, pilgrims can avail most of the amenities at a walk of few kilometres. Picture of these facilities is also very bad at another surveyed spot, Chatti Padshahi.

Section C) Findings and Recommendations

Some main findings of the study which came to fore during the profiling of the pilgrims and the survey of pilgrimage spots are:

- i) Pilgrims of different sections, with a major proportion of budget class category visit pilgrimage spots of Kashmir, as has been highlighted from Profession, Income and Age of the pilgrims covered under the survey.

- ii) From the religious background of the surveyed pilgrims it has come to fore that Pilgrims professing different religious beliefs, with a major proportion of Hindu pilgrims visit the Valley.
- iii) It has been found that foreign tourists also visit pilgrimage spots in Kashmir, mostly due to their architectural marvel and their spiritual character. This is highlighted from the fact that most of the foreign tourists/pilgrims during the survey were found at Shankaracharya temple and Parihaspora, which are very ancient pilgrimage sites and some also them were also found at Hazratbal, being the most revered pilgrimage spot of Muslims in Kashmir.
- iv) Accessibility is not an issue when it comes to visiting the tourist/pilgrimage spots in Kashmir. Infact, Sumo transport service in the Valley has made most of the tourism/pilgrimage spots at an easy reach.
- v) Availing accommodation service is impossible at Parihaspora which is devoid of it as well as most of the amenities. Kheer Bhawani has also least accommodation facility for minimum a tourist, which becomes a major issue during festivals. Accommodation service is not an issue for tourists visiting city pilgrimage spots as they can avail this facility at nearby city accommodation centres, house boats, guest houses, hotels, dharmshalas, etc.
- vi) All the pilgrimage spots covered under the survey are devoid of most of the amenities, with the exception of Hazratbal. It can be said that Hazratbal is the only pilgrimage spot in Kashmir which is an example of excellent management in terms of its environs and the quality amenities for pilgrims.
- vii) Besides, there is apathy from tourism department towards the pilgrimage spots in one more aspect, i.e., lack of marketing of pilgrimage spot of Kashmir to the national and international tourists visiting Kashmir for the purpose of tourism.

From the major findings of the study and the survey of the spots, following measures needs to be adopted for satisfactory services to the pilgrims.

- i) While creating infrastructure at different pilgrimage destinations for catering to pilgrims, multi-religious behaviour of pilgrims should be taken into consideration so as to make the Valley a unique pilgrimage destination calling upon people of different faiths.

- ii) J & K TDC should set up food and catering outlets at some prime pilgrimage destinations so as to provide a solution to this major problem faced by pilgrims at most of the pilgrimage sites of Kashmir.
- iii) Accommodation infrastructure at the pilgrimage spots of Kashmir should be built through Public Private Partnership (PPP) and the same should be run by private firms. By doing so, at one side employment avenues can be generated and on the other quality infrastructure can be built.
- iv) As the pilgrims needs to purify himself before visiting a deity, so public utilities is the first demand that should be created at all the pilgrimage destinations. These should be set up by private firms. Regular maintenance and cleanliness should be done and the same should be checked weekly by the management of the concerned Pilgrimage spot.
- v) There is an urgent need to aware world about the rich resource of pilgrimage tourism of the Valley. Multi-religious character of the Valley should be highlighted so as to attract that segment of tourists who are interested in art, culture, history, architecture, spiritualism and religious places and hence were not getting attracted towards visiting Kashmir for only natural beauty. Effective marketing through print and electronic media should be done on the pattern of Incredible India campaign.

Conclusion

The Valley of Kashmir is known for its tourism treasures among which Pilgrimage is the one motive which has kept this industry alive in Kashmir during the turmoil period. It has played a vital role in bringing back this industry on rails. Keeping the importance of these special tourists in view, the study was done to better understanding them and their needs by Profiling Pilgrims in Kashmir. Further the survey at the sites and discussion with pilgrims and management of the pilgrimage spots brought into sight the deficiencies in services at these spots. Based on the findings it was suggested that Public Private Partnership (PPP) should be done in constructing accommodation infrastructure and the J&K TDC should be involved in providing food and catering outlets at the pilgrimage sites of Kashmir.

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