



Spirituality And Prosperity: Analysing Socioeconomic Impact Of Amarnath Yatra On Local Communities

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Abstract

The Amarnath Cave Temple, one of the sacred Hindu sites of India located in Jammu and Kashmir embodies a deep spiritual significance for millions of devotees. It is considered as one the abodes of Lord Shiva, who took shelter in Amarnath, situated at an altitude of 3888 m. Every year lakhs of Hindu Pilgrims visit this holiest place. While the pilgrimage holds immense spiritual importance, it also plays a crucial role in shaping the socioeconomic fabric of the surrounding communities. The paper explores the dual dimension of spirituality and prosperity by analysing the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of pilgrimage tourism in Kashmir Valley, with a focus on Amarnath Yatra on local residents. By utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, It examines how the annual pilgrimage at Amarnath cave temple stimulates local employment, boosts local businesses, drives cultural exchange and helps in maintaining communal harmony. It also delves into the paradigm of sustainable tourism along with maintaining the strong cohesion between spirituality and ecology. The results indicate that although the yatra plays a substantial role in enhancing regional wealth, sustainable management strategies are crucial for maintaining a harmony between spiritual tourism and enduring socioeconomic stability.

Keywords: Spirituality, socioeconomic, Sustainability, Amarnath Yatra

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir is a renowned state in India, celebrated for its stunning landscapes and situated in the northern part of the subcontinent. The area is rapidly developing its tourism sector and holds immense potential for further growth. It boasts distinctive geographical and historical characteristics, having been governed by both Muslim and Hindu rulers throughout history. The state has a rich heritage that reflects various socio-cultural influences, including Islamic, Dogra, and Buddhist philosophies. These influences manifest in both tangible and intangible forms, contributing to the unique identity of its three divisions. Key elements encompass languages, traditional dress, culinary practices, festive celebrations, marriage customs, music, dance, family structure, and distinctive handicrafts. Each of these socio-cultural facets enhances the state's geographical and historical significance. For individuals these cultural aspects serves as important markers of identity. Tourism plays a crucial role in highlighting the region's socio-cultural fabric, attracting a significant number of visitors from around the globe. The local population's reliance on tourism indicates promising growth in this sector.

The Amarnath Yatra, devoted to Lord Shiva, is a significant Hindu Pilgrimage held annually during July and August. Pilgrimage Journey to Amarnath cave, located at an elevation of 3,888 meters, to witness the naturally formed ice "Lingam". Aside from its religious value, the Yatra has substantial socioeconomic repercussions for the communities in Jammu and Kashmir. The Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir is famous throughout the world for its natural beauty and breath-taking tourist destinations, offering unique experiences year around. The valley of Kashmir is home to several places of worship, a plethora of sacred tombs and shrines. There are certain magnificent temples and revered Sufi shrines, which attract a large number of pilgrims both Hindu and Muslims throughout the year. Tourism sector undoubtedly has been playing a multifaceted role in the socio economic development of Jammu and Kashmir. From social tourism to pilgrimage tourism, the valley of Kashmir is a unique quintessence of all forms of leisure and tourism. The valley of Kashmir, is historically being referred to as The Land of Rishis and locally as *Pir-Vaer* (abode of saints) presents a sacred geography that places her at the central place of pilgrimage tourism. The cave shrine of Amarnath is visited through Pahalgam and Baltal routes is such a place that attracts lakhs of devotees and tourists across the country(even foreigners) every year culminating into a sacred atmosphere and religious fervour, besides leading to the interfaith understanding and facilitating communities. The annual influx of yatra stimulates local businesses and provides employment opportunities to local communities and derives socio cultural exchange that signifies the age old tradition of socio cultural diversity with deep rooted unity and tolerance.

Historical and cultural signifance

The cave shrine of Amarnath is considered as one of the abodes of lord *Shiva*ⁱ. It is treated as one of the world's oldest pilgrimage centers by some of the Hindu thinkers arguing that it was lord *Shiva* himself who visited this shrine along with his wife goddess *Parvati*ⁱⁱ. Even some thinkers reject this discovery theory of cave and is believed that it was some hundred or two hundred years ago that a muslim named *Butta Malik*, a shepherd from Batkot Pahalgam who was raring his cattle discovered the cave of amarnathⁱⁱⁱ. It is also said that the cave is mentioned in almost all the hindu scriptures like in the *Bhirgu Samhita*, *Nilmata Purana*^{iv}, *Kalhan's Rajtarangni* etc. The fact is Kalhana's rajtarangni has mentioned the existence of pilgrimmage centre, however in subsequent centuries of turmoil; the cave seems to have been forgotten till was rediscovered. The *Bolay Baba* (lord shiva) who drives lakhs of yatris (pilgrims) to the holy cave of Amarnath located at an altitude of 3888 m from the sea level in central kashmirs ganderbal district is a symbol of forbearance faith brotherhood and sustained mutual and pluralistic relations among the locals and outside visitors. According to Hindu mythology when *lord shiva* accompanying goddess *Parvati* came to narrate *Amarkatha* to the *Parvati* at the Amarnath shrine. He left his *Wahan* (vehicle) at pahalgam, put of the moon (mukut or chandarma) decorating his head at chandanwari and left even the serpents round his neck at Sheeshnag and then left the five elements (

panchtatave or five elements of creation) viz, *prithvi*(earth), *Jal* (water), *waayu* (air), *Agni* (fire) and *akash*(space) behind him at Panchterni and marched only with his soul towards the cave. Because *shiv* believed the *Amarkatha* needs to be narrated worldwide in the sacred environs alone^v.

Vigne (1844) says, the ceremony at the cave of Amarnath takes place on the 15th of the Hindu month of Sawan, 28th of July, not only for Hindus of Kashmir but those from Hindustan of every caste and rank can be seen, collecting together and travelling up the valley of ladder towards the celebrated cave. Lawrence^{vi} (1895) mentions that on the commencement of yatra the Brahmins of mattan joined the pilgrims to Amarnath and further upto Batkot the maliks used to take charge of the pilgrimage. According to Lawrence the Malik's were supposed to keep the track in order to guide and escort the pilgrims, carry the sick and ensure nothing was stolen, they received the one third of the offerings made at the Amarnath. The other two shares used to go to the pandits of Mattan and the Giri Manhants of Amritsar, who still used to and still lead the pilgrimage with *Chaddi Mubarak* from Srinagar .The tradition of dividing the offerings into three has now been done away with. In the year 2000, the shrine was taken over by state govt and currently its affairs are managed by the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board(SASB) headed by the It governor of the UT of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Amarnath yatra, a journey towards spiritual growth, self discovery and quiet contemplation also acts as the journey that derives cultural exchange and fosters unity and promotes inter faith harmony. The pilgrims from different state of India and abroad accompany their cultures and traditions with them along with their religious beliefs and also experience the cultural traditions of the locals that help in maintaining and reinforcing cultural continuity. It showcases a fusion of spiritual practices and local customs that transcends religion weaving mythology, history and communal bonds into India's cultural fabric, that further derives the idea of unity in diversity. It also helps in building bridges lessening hatred and maintaining peace and order in the conflict ridden societies like Kashmir. Besides being a potential ambassador of peace, it helps in doing away with the notions of prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentrism. It is a vehicle for change in building peace, social solidarity, improving the inter cultural understanding and contacts thereby fostering social integration.^{vii}

Economic significance

The Amarnath yatra which lasts for 40 to 45 days generates temporary employments for the local businesses likes hotels, shop owners, taxi owners etc. As per the report 5.1 lakh devotees in 2024 visited Amarnath cave shrine, highest in 12 years^{viii}.

S.No.	Year	No. of Yatris Visited
1.	2013	3,53,969
2.	2014	3,72,909
3.	2015	3,52,771
4.	2016	2,20,490
5.	2017	2,60,003
6.	2018	2,85006
7.	2019	3,42,883
8.	2020-2021	Cancelled due to covid-19 pandemic
9.	2022	3,65000
10	2023	4,45,338
11	2024	5,12,252

The data is retrieved from government websites along with reports from different newspapers.

It provides employment to local labourers like those who travel on horse backs employs horse pullers (poni walas) . The pilgrims who travel by foot employs local labourers to carry their luggage (pittu walas) and certainly elders usually prefer palanquins (palki's) that is carried by four labourers like a cot in the air up to the cave, locally known as dandi walas. The accommodation at the base camps and at the higher altitudes is primarily provided by tent owners who come from adjoining areas of Pahalgam and Sonamarg, resulting in higher revenue. Small businesses also flourishes well, tons of fruits and vegetables are sold, petty shop keepers earn good profits during the season, as fruits, water and other basic items like telecommunication are needed by locals themselves also besides shopping by pilgrims. These visitors also explore other tourist destinations in the region^{ix}. It also helps in promoting handicrafts and Souvenirs, local artisans sell religious artifacts, woollen goods, and handicrafts, supporting traditional crafts. It provides a way for temporary markets along both the pilgrimage routes and gives direct market access for over thousands of small vendors, also improved roads, healthcare services, and sanitation facilities benefit both pilgrims and residents. It increases government revenue through taxes, registration fees and service charges.

Environmental challenges

Many locals depend exclusively on earnings from the Yatra causing a financial instability during the off-peak season, Amarnath yatra being the backbone for the local business and a centre for cultural interactions has devastating effects for the environment too. There are serious implications of large unregulated visitations in the two valleys viz. Pahalgam and Sonamarg. Both the valleys are ecosensitive and the region is precarious in nature and is critical in providing water and environment stability to the valley. The increasing number of yatris and local employers has led to problem of overuse, overcrowding and unwanted impacts. The rise in waste, deforestation, and pollution threatens the delicate Himalayan ecosystem. The solid waste management is one of the core issue which has severly effected the ecosystem of the region; both the routes are turned into garbage sites. The lush green meadows and pastures are been continuously turned into dumping sites which have serious implications for the environment and nomadic tribes that are dependent on these pastures. The Baltal base camp turns into a heap of garbage through out yatra season except during rains when it turns into filthy and muddy. An alarming issue that converts the basecamps and water bodies into filth and dirt is the absence of portable restrooms and latrines for both Yatris and residents. Without any sense of collective social responsibility, both locals and tourists are damaging everything that comes their way, including the soil, water, and air. The economy of Kashmir benefits greatly from pilgrimage tourism, but it has also become problematic because of ineffective management and public anxiety. Problems appear to be becoming worse every day as a result of the increased, haphazard mobility and large, unplanned influx of people to the pilgrimage site, all these things leads to security issues, the region's geopolitical sensitivity necessitates extensive security measures for large gatherings, sometimes disrupting everyday life. The devotees and locals are not well disciplined and they never maintain the sanctity, sanitation and decorum of the sacred place^x. The langgars(free food points of charity and social service) and Dhabba owners dump their wastes in their surroundings or any other that seems suitable without taking into consideration its possible threats, enhancing the deterioration of the surrounding environment. The tent owners are free to encamp their tents at their own choice and are haphazardly spread across the route and no proper management is being taken to dump wastes and also the lack of latrines have turned the area and nearby water streams into filth and dirt, these water streams are acting as the tributaries of river Lidder that in turn is the tributary of river Jehlum, thus posing a great threat to the flora and fauna of the catchment area and local population that is dependent on river Jhelum. The helicopter service is also posing great threat to the environment in general and surrounding ecosystem in particular^{xi}.The fact that workers and pilgrims alike leave heaps of plastic, polythene, bottles, dirt, and other solid waste throughout the pilgrimage season, oblivious to their responsibility to maintain a clean and unpolluted local environment, raises ecological concerns. Soil water contamination is caused by drainage from restrooms, latrines, small eateries, motels, etc., much

like the piles of trash and waste products along riverbanks. Beside all this hazardous challenges there is a vendor survey research conducted in Pahalgam and Baltal showed that 70% of seasonal vendors rely on Yatra revenue for their annual income and the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism department reported a 30% increase in revenue during Yatra months.

Impact of Terrorism

The region of Jammu and Kashmir has been severely impacted by the turmoil political conditions and frequent terror events that have greatly impacted the economic setup of the region. The region was declared as the disputed territory between India and Pakistan that undermined the role of local populace. It resulted in the organised terror attacks by the Pakistani regime on both the local populace and the tourists. In the same manner several attacks were carried on the amaranth yatris that severely affected the influx of both the yatris and the tourists either national or international.

on August 1st 2000 an attack was carried out on the CRPF convoy that was guarding the amaranth Yatra route via Pahalgam route. The then home minister admitted to having received general intelligence about a possible attack and accepted that the CRPF had been alerted but unfortunately attack could not be averted. The government believed that an administrative inquiry would be adequate to reveal the truth. It opted against a judicial inquiry, concerned that it might negatively impact the morale of the armed forces. Consequently, an inquiry committee was established led by lieutenant-General J.R Mukherjee. However, the findings of this report have not been made public, and the gunmen remain unidentified. Some members of parliament also brought up the topic of compensation for the victims. In the discussion regarding the attack on the Amarnath yatra , the focus was on the pilgrims who lost their lives, while there was no mention of the horse owners who supported the yatris. Few MPs also brought up the topic of compensation for those who lost their lives.

In another incident on 21 July 2001, an unidentified gunman threw two grenades near the Sheesh Nag campsite, resulting in twelve fatalities and thirteen injuries. The minister of external affairs claimed that the assailant was associated with Lashkar-E-Taiba but did not provide any evidence beyond the assertion that he was found with an incriminating document.

In both cases, the government stated that the attacks were intended to undermine peace negotiations. However, no inquiries were conducted, nor was any substantial evidence presented linking the assailants to the groups mentioned by the Indian government.

A third attack on the Yatra took place on August 6, 2002, when two unidentified gunman struck at the Nunwan camp, killed fifty people^{xiii}.

All these happenings raise the question of why, despite the strong military presence and extensive intelligence operations, government failed to prevent these attacks. In 2000, the government even acknowledged having intelligence about a potential attack but was unable to thwart it. If the significant military deployment did not prevent the three attacks that occurred between 2000 and 2016 and large scale protests in 2016^{xiii}, and the similar attack in 2017 near Anantnag that claimed the life of 7 pilgrims and injured over 30, then their emerges a question of security failure.

The recent attack on tourists on april 22, 2025, at Baisaran Pahalgam claimed 26 innocent lives. The attack led to the closure of all tourist destinations in wake of security issues. Later tourists were allowed after thorough scrutiny of the region to prevent further such attacks.^{xiv}

Need for Sustainable tourism

Taking into consideration the ecosensitive and volatile nature of the region it is pertinent to go for a sustainable tourism otherwise it will have a devastating effect on the concerned region. Even though most pilgrims applaud it, Amarnath pilgrimage management still requires additional empowerment and enhancement. While the UT run administrative system and the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board have managed the yatra effectively, The SASB needs to re-evaluate its administrative procedures in relation to policy implementation. It is imperative that local residents and various administrative entities, including security agencies, maintain a harmonious relationship. The local population has always been helpful in managing the yatra effectively, although they have not received recognition yet. A significant social policy intervention is required for the Amarnath yatra on a number of fronts. Proper waste management should be carried at every resting place including the base camps and important sites; it includes maintenance of infrastructure and ensure post Yatra preservation of roads and healthcare facilities for local residents. Portable latrines and bathrooms should be constructed throughout both the routes, and use of polythene should be strictly prohibited and in turn eco friendly materials including carrying bags should be taken into consideration^{xv}. To investigate the problems and difficulties of a successful beginning and a blissful completion while maintaining professional skills, the use of the latest technology while keeping in view human sensitivity, health and dignity should be taken into consideration. Training programs should also provide skills development in hospitality and entrepreneurship for year-round job opportunities. There is a need of a stable strategy that includes a 15 day yatra period, registered labourers with valid identification cards, a rate list for all types of labour, and a more employment opportunities for locals. Furthermore, pilgrims who are older than 65 years should not be permitted to participate in the yatra and to create a consistent policy of active participation from all security agencies with specific responsibilities in order to improve the effectiveness and ease of pilgrimage for yatis.

Suggestions

1. Although Shri Amarnath shrine board in collaboration with state run administrative mechanism has effectively managed the Yatra management. Both the agencies have to reconsider their administrative approaches in relation to their policy implementation to effectively and sustainably manage the tourism at Shri Amarnath ji Shrine.
2. It is imperative to maintain a harmonious relationship between various administrative agencies, including security agencies.
3. The local population should be credited as the local population has consistently proved beneficial in handling the yatra well and their role has not been yet credited.
4. To examine the Dhaan accounts (donations made by pilgrims) and utilize the amount for the welfare of local workers, basic facilities to the pilgrims. In addition, all Muslim and Hindu trusts should be made accountable responsible and audited properly.
5. In order to manage yatra effectively there is a dire need of policy intervention at both macro and micro levels.
6. As in the world there is a rising voice for the conversion of tourism into a sustainable and eco-friendly project, steps should be taken along with planning and policy intervention to make the tourism more eco-friendly.
7. Waste Management Initiatives: implement strict anti-littering laws and require biodegradable packaging
8. The arrangement made for pilgrims should be updated and upgraded regularly and locals who assist pilgrims need to treat with utmost compassion.
9. Skill Training Programs: Equip locals with skills in hospitality, eco-tourism, and crafts to ensure steady income throughout the year.
10. Fair Wage Regulations: Establish wage standards for pony Wallahs and porters to safeguard them against exploitation.

11. Support for local crafts: create government- sponsored outlets for authentic Kashmiri goods like Saffron and Shawls.
12. Foster respect and understanding between pilgrims and the predominantly Muslim local population.
13. Educate Campaigns and inform pilgrims about environmentally friendly practices and the importance of cultural sensitivity.

Conclusion

Tourism despite its benefits has certain dark sides and threats. There is a pressing need for the sustainable and eco friendly tourism so that a friendly relation could be maintained between the stakeholders and environment, as the conflict with the environment will directly effect the formation of stalagmite (the shiv ling) that will adversely affect the Amarnath yatra. The tourism sector especially the pilgrimage tourism has succeeded in addressing the grave employment, it has proved to be a premier sector in back tracking the ruined/shattered economy besides bringing about the reunification of the bridged communities and broken families. It has emerged as a sustainable, spiritual and religious link joining holistic India by spreading and fostering brotherhood, cooperation, integrity and mutual interaction besides facilitating the interfaith dialogue, sense of brotherhood and understanding the beauty of diversity among different communities while upholding the idea of Kashmiriyat. The Amarnath Yatra serves as a crucial link between Spirituality and socioeconomic growth for local communities. While it significantly enhances the regional economy, implementing sustainable practices is vital to address environmental and economic challenges. A balanced approach that honours religious sentiments while fostering long-term development, mutual cooperation between locals and security agencies and eco-friendly practices will ensure the yatra continues to be a vehicle for holistic progress.

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