



Impact of Religious Tourism on The Ecology and Environment of Katra Town: A Case Study of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the major engine to boost the economy of the state and it is having significant impact on the development of the area. Pilgrimage tourism to Shri Mata Vaishno Devi shrine has both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, tourism boosts the economy and on the other hand it can prove detrimental to the environment.

Religious tourism upgrade the civic conveniences of the area but this also lead to the impacts such as soil erosion, pollution discharges, population immigration, non judicious use of natural resources, waste generation and increased vulnerability to habitat loss. Therefore the present paper aims to highlight the the possible environmental impacts arising out from the developmental activities and unregulated tourism through population study, analysing the positive and negative impacts of tourism and to suggest amelioration strategies.

KEYWORDS : Amelioration strategies, Banganga, Katra, Organic waste, Pilgrimage tourism, Trikuta hills, Vehicular growth, Waste Disposal system.

Introduction:

Tourism is considered as a growth engine for the state as it holds a great potential for creating employment opportunities for various sections of society. Tourism is considered to be an important vehicle for economic and social development but, if not properly planned it can have destructive effects on biodiversity and pristine. The state of Jammu and Kashmir is blessed with diverse and varied geographic, agro-climate, topographic and religious features. The larger set of tourists inflow within the state is accorded to the pilgrims such as Mata Vaishno Devi shrine in Katra and Baba Amarnath Shrine in Pahalgam. Shri Mata Vaishno Devi is one of the most important pilgrimage centers of the country. The belief is that no one can go on this pilgrimage unless the goddess calls. The journey to the Holy Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is an enchanting journey of the places where Mata Vaishnavi had spent some time while observing various spiritual disciplines and penances. The culmination of this journey is at the Holy Cave where She merged Her Human form with the astral form of Her creators, the three Supreme Energies.

This place is visited by people from all faiths. The ever increasing number of the religious tourists to the Shrine is leading to adverse impacts on the local population, ecology and the environment of Katra, which is the base town for the pilgrimage.

The town of Katra itself witnessed the inflow of 100 million pilgrims in the year 2011 (Saurabh and Jamwal, 2015). The number of tourists visiting the holy shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi is continuously rising as it is evident from the tourists statistics given by Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB) as depicted in Table No. 1.

Table No.1 Table depicting the number of tourists visiting the Holy Shrine on year wise basis from 2000 to 2015

S.No.	Year	No. Of Tourists (In lakhs)
1	2000	52.17
2	2001	50.57
3	2002	44.32
4	2003	54.00
5	2004	61.00
6	2005	62.52
7	2006	69.50
8	2007	74.17
9	2008	67.92
10	2009	82.35
11	2010	87.49
12	2011	101.15
13	2012	104.95
14	2013	93.24
15	2014	78.03
16	2015	77.76

(Source: www.maavaishnodevi.org/yatra_statistics.aspx)

Though, pilgrimage tourism to Katra town constitutes an important component of total tourism in J&K and has contributed significantly to the growth and development of Katra town. Nevertheless, this ever increasing number of tourists is directly or indirectly influencing the environment of the town. It has put enormous pressures and lead to impacts such as waste generation, water scarcity, improper waste disposal, loss of natural habitat and cost escalation of various commodities (Sharma and Raina, 2015).

Study Area:

Katra (latitude 32 59N), longitude 74 55E) and average altitude of 2840 feet above mean sea level is the most important town from religious and economic point of view. It is situated at the foot hills of Trikuta mountains, a part of sub-Himalayan Shivalik Range in Reasi District of J&K state. Katra is 48kms from Jammu city. It is one of the most flourishing religious tourism destination in India which offers facilities like hotels, restaurants, guest houses, railway stations, dhabas, fast food junctions etc. Regular influx of large number of tourists has direct or indirect impact on the economy and environment of the area.

Such developmental activities are not restricted only to base camp but are also carried out extensively on the 14 km track from Katra to cave shrine. The change in land use pattern of Katra town has resulted in closely knitted shops, hotels and other commercial establishments which all are approachable by narrow lanes (Sharma and Raina, 2014).

Material and Methods:

To study the impact of religious tourism on forest and environment, primary data collection through questionnaires were adopted.

Primary data for the study were collected with the help of 100 questionnaires. These questionnaires were filled by local people, tourists, hotel owners, dhaba walas, pony owners, shopkeepers, teachers and doctors. These people were living and serving in this area from long time and had witnessed the environmental changes.

The results of the primary data collection were represented in Table no 2.

Table No. 2

Table reflecting the results compiled after the analysis of 100 questionnaires

S.no	Themes	Persons agreed to the questions asked through questionnaires (out of 100)
1	Population (Local)	76.6%
2	Population (Migrant)	23.4%
3	Monthly income	

3(a)	3000- 5000	56%
3(b)	10,000 - 15000	6.6%
3 (c)	Above 20,000	37.4%
4	Persons employed in a family	
4(a)	Only one	50%
4(b)	2 – 3	50%
5	Is tourism beneficial	97%
6	Improvement in civic amenities	85%
7	Dependence on fuel wood	48%
8	Dependence on forests for wood	36.6%
9	Dependence on forests for grazing	25%
10	More waste generation	53.3%
11	Poor waste management	87%
12	Provision for sewage treatment	21.6%
13	Problem of water scarcity	96.6%
14	Problem of water pollution	90%
15	Observed impact of noise pollution	55%
16	What Government organisations should do?	
16(a)	Plantation and Protection	60%
16(b)	Implementation of laws	26.6%
16(c)	Strict vigil on the transport and use of fire wood	4%
16(d)	Construction of large hotels should be checked	4%
16(e)	Awareness generation	33.3%

(Results shown in percentage of the persons agreed)

Results and Discussion:

The questionnaires were collected and their results were analyzed. The findings were scaled between 0 to 100 and were represented in percentage in Table no 2.

After the detailed analysis of the questionnaires it has been observed that out of total studied population 76.6% is local and 23.4% is migrant population. Monthly per capita income showed different categories. About 56% of the total studied population falls in less than rupees five thousand, 6.6% lies between ten to fifteen thousand and 37.4% earns more than twenty thousand. In the studied population, 50% households are having only one earning member whereas other 50% households are having more than one earning member. About 97% of the population studied agreed that tourism is beneficial and 85% agreed that it has improved the basic amenities of life.

Dependence on forests of this sample population has also been assessed. The results revealed that about 48% of the studied population is dependent on fire wood, this percentage of population comprises of restaurants, hotels and dhabas. 25% of the studied population is dependent on forests for grazing and 36.6% are dependent on local forests for wood.

To cater such huge number of tourists, there is a mushroom growth of hotels, eating points, shops and other establishments. Most of these establishments lack facilities for proper waste disposal. This population study revealed that 53.3% of the studied population agreed that tourism activities leads to more waste generation and 87% agreed that the existing waste management practices are not sufficient. Among the studied population only 21.6% is having proper sewage disposal mechanism.

Such tourism pressure also put strain on the water resources of the area, which are already in scarcity. About 97% of the studied population reported water scarcity and 90% reported the problem of water pollution due to the entry of sewage directly in to *Banganga*. About 55% of the studied population observed the raised noise pollution level, directly or indirectly due to tourism related activities.

In the present study the suggestive measures were also asked from the inhabitants of the areas. The data collection and analysis revealed that 60% of the population suggested that various Government organisations should plant more and more trees, 26.6% suggested strict implementation of laws, 4% suggested strict vigil on transportation of firewood, 4% suggested that construction of large hotels can be checked and 33% suggested that awareness generation among the beneficiaries of the tourism should be started.

However, it has also been reported by Sharma and Raina (2015) that the contents of SO_2 and NO_2 in the ambient air of Katra town, reflect the impacts of increasing vehicular growth with increase in number of tourists, burning of fossil fuels in hotels, restaurants, dhabas etc. which require immediate attention of the researchers and concerned authorities.

Conclusion:

As observed during the study, there is no waste disposal system. Waste generated from houses, shops, restaurants etc. are simply dumped round the corners, open plots and road sides. Polythene bags and empty water bottles are scattered everywhere giving filthy appearance to the holy town. Mule dung forms the major category of organic waste which is also not disposed of properly. Most of the waste generated is either burnt out in open or simply dumped in drains and ultimately falls in *Banganga*.

From the study it can be concluded that tourism is beneficial for the economy of the town, in particular, and for the state, in general. But such un-planned and un-regulated tourism seems beyond the carrying capacity and rejuvenating potential of nature. Major threat to nature is the generation of huge waste, that too in absence of any scientific waste disposal system. The need of the hour is that the holy town and shrine should be declared as 'No Plastic Zone' and scientific waste management system has to be introduced.

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