



## GEOGRAPHY OF DISASTER AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN KASHMIR HIMALAYAS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF AMARNATH PILGRIMAGE- 'A DORMANT ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER IN MAKING'

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**ABSTRACT** Amarnath cave has been a place of Religious tourism or faith tourism since times immemorial and has been one of the most popularly and revered annual yatra among Hindus from all over the India, trekking the Himalayas most hostile and ecologically fragile routes to reach the cave situated at an altitude of 12,756 feet above sea level. This type of pilgrimage tourism has all along remained economically significant for different stakeholders linked with tourism sector. But there is another side of the coin, the inflow of yatries has alarmingly increased thereby badly affected the pristine and fragile environment and destroyed the ecology of Pahalgam- world renowned tourist site.

In this backdrop, the present study aims to analyse the impacts of Amarnath Yatra on ecology of Pahalgam and geo-environmental issues & concerns thereof. The study is mainly based on secondary data sources obtained from offices of different organisations, different reports, journal articles etc. The study concluded that there is need for better management of Amarnath yatra to improve the pilgrimage tourism without disturbing pristine environment of tourist site of Pahalgam. The authors also suggested several recommendations for making pilgrimage tourism more sustainable, and further preventing it to emerge as a 'dormant environmental disaster in making'.

**KEYWORDS :** Geography of Disaster Management, Religious tourism, Amarnath pilgrimage, Ecological imbalance, Environmental Disaster.

### INTRODUCTION:

Amarnath cave has been a long-established place of Religious tourism or faith tourism and has been one of the most popularly and well-regarded annual yatra among Hindus from all over the India, tramping the Himalaya's most hostile and ecologically fragile mountainous routes to reach the cave situated at an altitude of 12,756 feet ASL. But the huge number of pilgrims enroute the amaranth cave affect and most of the times badly, the pristine environment and destroy the unique topography of Pahalgam, world's famous tourist destination. Apropos to this, the better management of this annual yatra needs attention of not only policy makers but also the researchers and social scientists to find out better ways and means to conduct this pilgrimage without disturbing the fragile environs and geo-ecological settings of this region. More over the significance of this study is to attempt impact assessment of this yatra and prevent it to become a 'dormant environmental disaster in making' for Kashmir valley.

### STUDY AREA:

Location: 34°12'N & 75°1'E

Altitude: 12,756 feet (3888 m) ASL

Dimension: 27m (Length); 45m (Height)

*Geo-environs:* The cave of Amarnath is one of the most beautiful and unique geographical features of the natural world, located in a narrow gorge of Lidder valley. The floor of this cave is perfect sheet of ice out of which the pillar structure Stalagmites rise.

### OBJECTIVES:

The Precise focus of the present study is:

1. To analyse temporal trends in flow and pattern of Amarnath pilgrims.
2. To highlight the issues & concerns and remedial measures pertaining to Amarnath yatra.

### DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY:

The present study is mainly based on secondary sources and the Supplementary data related to the present study has been gathered using a variety of methods to gain a better understanding of the perspectives and priorities. Secondary data were obtained from publications of different organizations and offices of different organisations, different reports, journal articles etc. The methodology adapted in the present study was of integrative, supplementary and complementary nature, to fulfill the set objectives related to the study area.

### Highlights of Major Findings:

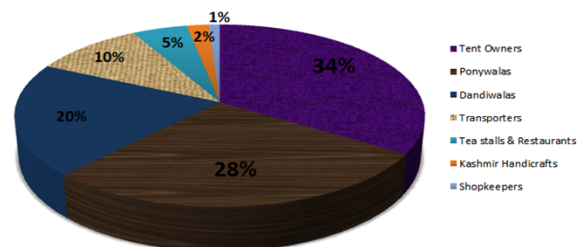
Table 1 below clearly reveals that there has been marginal increase in number of yatries in early 1990's, but it showed an abrupt increase in first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century and there has been phenomenal growth in

yatri arrivals post year 2004, especially in years 2011-2012 when it reached the maximum (above 6 lakh).

**Table 1: Temporal Trends in Flow of Amarnath Yatries**

Year	Yatries (in Lakh Numbers)	Year	Yatries (in Lakh Numbers)
Early 1990's	0.05	2006	2.65
1995	0.60	2007	2.96
1996	1.20	2008	5.33
1997	0.79	2009	3.81
1998	1.50	2010	4.55
1999	1.14	2011	6.36
2000	1.73	2012	6.22
2001	1.19	2013	3.53
2002	1.11	2014	3.72
2003	1.53	2015	3.52
2004	4.00	2016	2.21
2005	3.88	2017	2.60

Source: Economic Times (2017)



Source: Compiled by Author (2015)

**Figure 1: Economic Benefits of Yatra (n=100)**

The figure 1 highlights the per capita income vis-à-vis economic benefits of yatra and it is clear that mostly Tent Owners and Ponywalas get economically benefited (62%) on account of Amarnath Yatra.

### Amarnath Yatra: A Dormant Environmental Disaster in Making!

Experts on glaciology have warned rapid environmental degradation, ecological imbalance & adverse impact on the *Nehnar* glacier, situated around Baltal, if same influx of yatries is continued in future years. Almost all the Indus line glaciers, Pakistan's water houses, are melting and receding at an alarming rate, more rapidly than other Himalayan

glaciers. The snout of the famous as well as one of largest glaciers in Himalayas- *Kolhai* glacier in Kashmir, has recorded to have receded in this decade by around 22m.

Precisely 'Bigger the Yatra, more the damage': The fact is that with prolonged and bigger yatra there are alarming reports of pollution and environmental degradation and considerable damage to ecology & environs of whole area enroute Amarnath cave. The most important factor about the Lidder valley, (the area of Amarnath Yatra) is that it forms a lap for the *Kolhai* Glacier. It is, however, melting fast and has shrunk considerably during the past three decades. "Obviously the reason is human intervention - Yatra...." "Baltal base camp is sunk in dust and filled with filth everywhere" (Indian Youth Climate Network). It is vivid that Sindh river has turned into a cesspool owing to the heavy flow of sewage and open defecation in the area. The water is unfit for potable purposes and a major cause of Water-borne diseases in the locality. Natish Sengupta Committee (1996) recommended "Regulation of the number of people visiting the cave & allocation of fixed quota to the States".

- Demographic Profile of Yatries: Majority of the yatries are *Youngsters* turning it "Leisure/Recreational Activity" rather than a "Religious/Pilgrimage"



Baltal remains sunk in dust throughout the Yatra season except during rains when it turns too muddy and filthy. The lack of civic sense has always been a direct threat to the health of people, to the rich and serene atmosphere. Therefore, some urgent steps from the Shrine Board authorities and the State government must be taken and timely implemented to make at least the base camps a little hygienic and pilgrim friendly. The lack of mobile latrines and bathrooms for both locals and pilgrims is an alarming problem and turns the very base camps, small routes, water bodies, etc, into dirt and filth. The fact remains that general conduct of both pilgrims, visiting pilgrimage centers and workers/ locals towards the environmental and religious sanctity of our pilgrimage sites has never been hygienic or eco-friendly. Visitors including locals are polluting whatever comes their way be it water, air, soil, etc, without any collective social responsibility. Pilgrimage tourism, on one hand is the boon of Kashmiri economy but on the other it has become a problem due to lack of efficient management and public concern. Also due to the increased and haphazard movement and high unsystematic influx of people to the pilgrimage centers problems seem to be increasing day by day.

The fact is during pilgrimage season pilgrims and workers leave tons of plastic, polythene, bottles, dirt and other solid garbage, unmindful of their duty to keep the local environment clean and unpolluted, which invites the ecological concern. Like the heaps of waste products and garbage along the river banks, drainage from bath rooms, latrines, small eating stalls, hotels, etc, leads to the environmental pollution. Furthermore, it also badly affects the natural habitat of tons of floral and faunal species found in this ecological zone. The river from Pahalgam flows through various villages and is the only source which means the pollution goes down to other villages through this river, giving rise to water borne diseases. The new practice of air transportation for visiting the holy cave has added to the woes despite making the Yatra of some elites easy. The Baltal remains too noisy for the full day due to helicopter service operation, thereby disturbing the peace of mind. Moreover, the frequent use of helicopters, tremendous noise, more use of fire has resulted in the increase of temperature which leads to the melting of glacier snow.

#### WHAT IS SUGGESTED/RECOMMENDED!

The study concluded that there is need for better management of

Amarnath yatra to improve the pilgrimage tourism without disturbing pristine environment of Pahalgam.

- Regularity in Flow of Yatra:- It has been observed that there remains a poor and irregular flow of Yatra. In the beginning days of Yatra, pilgrims exceed 4000 and even at times touch 10,000 Yatries/day. But in the later period i.e. after 1 month the number comes down to below 300 Yatries.
  - Trimming Yatra Period:- Change as well as increase in Yatra period since 2004 has an adverse effect on environs of area. Before 2004 Yatra period was only 1 month, Now it has been extended to 2 months.
- A Tourism Policy facilitating a regulated/rationed number of visitors and Time Gap between successive Re-visits, to the ecologically-fragile environs; must be introduced on actual carrying capacity of the region.
  - The collection and disposal of solid waste during yatra period is a problem area which needs to be focused on.
  - The Amarnath Yatra must be conducted in accordance with the principles of preservation, conservation and sustainability as upheld by the National Environment Policy, the State Forest Policy and also Nitish Sengupta Committee recommendations and on pattern of Gangotri pilgrimage.
  - Having the privilege of being located in the heart throbbing landscape of Himalayas, the holy cave of Amaranth shares the vicinity which is highly diverse in flora and fauna.
  - Therefore any attempt to upgrade the related infrastructure must be in line with the delicate environs which add to the aesthetics of holy shrine.
  - Education is a crucial ingredient in strategies for integrating biodiversity conservation and ecotourism.
  - Yatries, local people and other stakeholders- all need to be educated about proper behavior and practices in environmentally and culturally sensitive areas.

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