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Research Article

Economic Impact of Religious Places on Local Communities in the Central Kashmir

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Abstract. Religious sites in the Kashmir Valley play a vital role in shaping the local economy by driving tourism, supporting livelihoods, and enhancing regional infrastructure. This study explores the economic significance of major pilgrimage destinations of central Kashmir such as Hazratbal Shrine, Charar-e-Sharif, Shankaracharya Temple, Khanqah-e-Molla, Jamia Masjid Srinagar, Tulmul and Gurudwara Chhatti Patshahi, analyzing their impact on various sectors, including hospitality, transportation, handicrafts, and local trade. The influx of pilgrims stimulates demand for accommodation, food services, and religious artifacts, providing income opportunities for hoteliers, transport operators, artisans, and vendors. Seasonal religious events, particularly the Urs celebrations, Sikh festivals and Mela Kheer Bhawani Tulmul Yatra generate temporary employment and boost business activities. Additionally, religious institutions contribute to community welfare through charitable initiatives such as free meals and accommodations. While religious tourism significantly benefits the local economy, challenges such as environmental degradation, infrastructural strain, and seasonal dependency require sustainable management strategies. This study underscores the need for

policy interventions to balance economic benefits with environmental and social sustainability, ensuring long-term economic resilience for communities dependent on religious tourism.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Economic Impact, Local Communities, Kashmir, Pilgrimage

INTRODUCTION

Religious travel, particularly pilgrimage, is one of the oldest forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992). Over the past five decades, globalization and technological advancements have significantly facilitated travel, leading to the expansion of religious tourism worldwide. This growth is driven by a rising interest in spirituality, cultural exchange, and heritage exploration (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Religion, traditionally defined as belief in a higher supernatural power expressed through rituals (Tanner & Mitchell, 2002), has evolved into a more diverse and personal phenomenon, shaped by individual beliefs and societal influences. Anthropologist Spiro (1967) argued that religion should be defined by how individuals and communities perceive and practice it. Given this complexity, religious tourism encompasses a broad range of activities, from deeply devoted pilgrimages to visits by tourists drawn to the cultural and historical significance of religious sites (Shinde, 2007). It includes various forms such as missionary travel, monastery stays, and faith-based retreats (Wight & Victoria, 2022).

Religious tourism has been a key contributor to economic development in regions with historical religious significance. The Kashmir Valley, known for its spiritual and cultural diversity, is home to several prominent religious sites, including Hazratbal Shrine, Amarnath Cave, Charar-e-Sharif, Shankaracharya Temple, Khanqah-e-Molla, Jamia Masjid Srinagar, and Gurudwara Chhatti Patshahi. These religious centers not only serve as places of worship but also function as economic hubs, supporting local businesses, artisans, transport providers, and the hospitality industry (Bhat et al., 2023). Annual pilgrimages such as the Amarnath Yatra, Urs celebrations, and Sikh festivals significantly contribute to the regional economy. This paper examines the economic impact of these religious sites, particularly in employment generation, infrastructure development, and the challenges of sustainable religious tourism management.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted during 2024-22 in Kashmir valley. In this study group discussion with local people as well government officials were held and photographs available in the literature as well as on internet, taken during field study were reported. The observations were recorded and reported in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The field visit as well as on the basis of literature available, it has been observed that local as well as nonlocal people frequently visit religious places in Kashmir since long. The historical buildings suffered a lot due to political disturbances, earthquakes and floods. The lack of manpower is witnessed the main issue for maintaining our

historical places in study area. The main significant places in Central Kashmir (i.e., district Srinagar, Budgam and Ganderbal) are discussed below:

Religious Tourism as an Economic Driver

Religious tourism plays a crucial role in Kashmir's economy, particularly in cities such as Srinagar and Anantnag, where pilgrimage destinations attract large numbers of visitors. Unlike conventional tourism, religious tourism is often seasonal, with peak activity occurring during specific festivals and pilgrimage events.

Hospitality Industry

The influx of religious tourists boosts the hospitality sector, including hotels, guesthouses, and homestays. Events like the Amarnath Yatra, Urs at Hazratbal, and other religious festivals generate high demand for accommodations, benefiting both large hotels and small local establishments. The Hazratbal and Jamia Masjid areas, in particular, experience increased lodging demand due to their spiritual significance (Kaul, 1971).

Transportation Sector

Religious tourism drives growth in road transport, air travel, and local commuting services. Kashmir sees increased flights and bus services during peak pilgrimage seasons. The Amarnath Yatra, for example, requires dedicated transport services such as helicopters, ponies, and palkis for pilgrims navigating the mountainous terrain. Auto-rickshaws and taxis in Srinagar, Pahalgam, and Baltal benefit from the steady flow of devotees visiting religious shrines (Bhat et al., 2023).

Food and Beverage Industry

The presence of religious tourists enhances the food and beverage sector, with local food stalls, tea shops, and restaurants thriving around major religious sites. Popular Kashmiri foods such as Kahwa, Noon Chai, and Rogan Josh attract visitors, while street vendors near Jamia Masjid and Hazratbal experience increased sales on Fridays and during festivals.

Handicrafts and Local Trade

Kashmir's handicraft industry greatly benefits from religious tourism, with high demand for:

- Pashmina shawls and woolen products
- Papier-mâché artifacts featuring Islamic and Buddhist motifs
- Handmade carpets and rugs crafted by Kashmiri artisans
- Copperware and walnut wood carvings, popular souvenirs among pilgrims

The Khanqah-e-Molla shrine, linked to Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, has played a significant role in Kashmir's handicraft traditions, many of which continue to thrive due to religious tourism (Khan, 1978).

Employment Generation

Religious sites in Kashmir serve as direct and indirect sources of employment, supporting a diverse range of workers, including:

- Guides and Historians: Providing insights into religious and historical landmarks like Shankaracharya Temple, Jamia Masjid, and Amarnath Cave.
- Vendors and Artisans: Selling religious souvenirs, handicrafts, saffron, and dry fruits near pilgrimage centers.
- Construction and Maintenance Workers: Engaged in shrine renovation, infrastructure development, and conservation projects.
- Local workers around Hazratbal, Charar-e-Sharif, and Jamia Masjid rely heavily on religious tourism for their livelihoods (Kak, 2002).

Economic Contribution of Major Religious Sites in Kashmir

1. Hazratbal Shrine: The Hazratbal Shrine, home to the sacred relic of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), attracts thousands of devotees, supporting markets and businesses in the region. The area has also evolved into an educational and commercial hub, hosting the University of Kashmir (Bhat et al., 2023).
2. Jamia Masjid, Srinagar: Located in Nowhatta, Srinagar, the Jamia Masjid is a key religious and cultural center. The nearby Maharaj Gunj Bazaar thrives on religious gatherings, particularly Friday prayers and Islamic festivals, driving local commerce.
3. Amarnath Cave Temple: The Amarnath Yatra, one of India's most significant Hindu pilgrimages, generates substantial revenue for local porters, pony providers, hoteliers, and transportation services in Pahalgam and Baltal. Religious organizations run langars (free community kitchens), while the state government earns revenue through permits and tourism-related fees.
4. Shankaracharya Temple, Srinagar: Dedicated to Lord Shiva, this 9th-century temple is linked to Adi Shankaracharya's visit and is a major pilgrimage site. Its location on Shankaracharya Hill makes it a dual attraction for both spiritual and general tourism, boosting the local hospitality industry.
5. Gurudwara Chhatti Patshahi & Other Sikh Shrines: Gurudwara Chhatti Patshahi (Srinagar) and Gurdwara Parimpillan (Uri) are important Sikh pilgrimage sites, attracting devotees from Punjab and beyond. These sites generate income through hotel bookings, transportation services, and sales of religious souvenirs (Khan, 1978).
6. Christian Churches in Kashmir: Holy Family Catholic Church, St. Joseph's Church, All Saints Church, and St. Mary's Church (Gulmarg) serve the local Christian community and attract religious tourists, especially during Christmas and Easter, benefiting local vendors and businesses.

Hazratbal

The Hazratbal Shrine, home to the sacred relic of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), attracts thousands of devotees, especially during major Islamic events like Eid Milad-un-Nabi and Jumat-ul-Vida. Located on the banks of Dal Lake, this shrine has a long-

standing spiritual and cultural importance. It also supports local businesses through increased demand for transport, food, and retail.

Annual Pilgrim Visits to Hazratbal Shrine (2019–2023)

Year	Estimated Devotees
2019	9,50,000
2020	2,10,000 (COVID restrictions)
2021	4,50,000
2022	8,75,000
2023	10,20,000

Source: Waqf Board of J&K, Local Administrative Records

Jamia Masjid, Srinagar

Located in the heart of Srinagar, Jamia Masjid is a focal point for weekly congregations and major Islamic celebrations. Fridays see a regular influx of worshippers, with numbers swelling dramatically during Ramadan, Eid, and special prayers.

Annual Footfall at Jamia Masjid (2019–2023)

Year	Estimated Visitors
2019	7,00,000
2020	1,80,000 (COVID restrictions)
2021	3,25,000
2022	6,50,000
2023	7,75,000

Source: Jamia Masjid Management, Local Police Estimates

Charar-e-Sharif

Charar-e-Sharif, the shrine of the revered Sufi saint Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani, receives significant footfall, particularly during the annual Urs. The site is vital not only for religious reasons but also for sustaining local food stalls, inns, and craft markets in the Budgam district.

Annual Pilgrim Numbers at Charar-e-Sharif (2019–2023)

Year	Estimated Pilgrims
2019	3,75,000
2020	90,000 (COVID restrictions)
2021	1,50,000
2022	3,25,000
2023	4,10,000

Source: District Budgam Waqf Board, Urs Committee Records

CONCLUSION

There is so much for one to explore Kashmir. Kashmir is rightly an experience of a lifetime and a must visit destination for everybody which has so much to offer. Praising the beauty of Kashmir many often recite the famous quote “Gar firdaus bar-rue zamin ast, hami asto hamin asto hamin ast” which means, if there is heaven on earth it’s here it’s here. Kashmir is indeed is heaven on Earth. Form comforting splendor of nature to the beauty of the historical, religious places. Although some of

the historical places here might not be in great shape. But once you visit and witness it you will be able to connect to its beauty because though in ruins it still speaks of the emotions behind it. The religious places of Kashmir are a true representation of the historical monuments which have historical, cultural, social, economic and religious significance. Urgent attention is needed by ASI to preserve and restore old historical monuments, otherwise, they will disappear.

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