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# Rural Tourism and its sustainability in Kashmir: A Case study of District Shopian

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of the current study is to examine the sustainability of rural tourism in Kashmir, specifically focusing on District Shopian. It explores the local residents' perceptions and reactions to the impacts of tourism, particularly in relation to challenges that hinder the development of sustainable rural tourism.

**Methodology/Design/Approach** - The research delves into qualitative analysis, gathering insights from local residents regarding the impacts of tourism. It assesses their concerns about the exploitation of local resources and examines the participation (or lack thereof) of local communities in government-led rural tourism initiatives. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of these initiatives and policies.

**Finding** - The findings indicate that local residents are concerned about the negative impacts of tourism, particularly the exploitation of natural and cultural resources. They feel that the benefits of tourism are minimal, and the government's rural tourism initiatives have not contributed significantly to the improvement of the village economy. There is a clear dissatisfaction with the limited participation of locals in tourism-related decision-making processes.

**Originality/Value** - The study offers new insights into the dynamics of rural tourism in Kashmir, particularly focusing on the alignment of tourism policies with the needs of local communities and the goals of sustainable development. It calls for significant reforms in the approach to rural tourism, emphasizing the need for genuine community involvement to ensure long-term sustainability and equity.

**Keywords:** Rural, Tourism, Sustainability, Kashmir, Shopian

## Introduction

Term "rural tourism" refers to a category of tourism activities where the visitor's experience is connected to a variety of products typically associated with outdoor recreation, rural culture, and sightseeing, (UNWTO, 2001). Rural tourism offers an alternative to busy urban tourist destinations, allowing visitors to enjoy a healthier and more culturally enriching experience. It can also serve as a buffer during times of overcrowding in popular tourist destinations by absorbing some of the tourist influx. The aim of tourism development in rural areas is to solve key business objective outside motivation and satisfaction of tourism and economic issues related to the depopulation of areas caused by migration of rural population to urban centers. Rural Tourism is playing a significant role not only in the global scenario but also it has the potentiality to become equally important in rural India. Such form of tourism not only provides rewarding and individualized holiday products to tourists by ensuring absolute peace from monotonous urban city life and its traffic, noise and pollution but also it generates employment for the local community and diversifies the economy and regional employment.

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## Rural Tourism

Rural tourism refers to an activity in which tourists experience and explore rural areas, often engaging in nature-based activities such as rural culture immersion, sightseeing, and trekking in hilly regions. It involves enjoying and experiencing the rural way of life. The definition of “rural” may be socially constructed and varies from place to place. However, common attributes include low population density, minimal built environments, and a sense of open space. These areas often feature traditional social structures, prominent natural landscapes, and limited accessibility (OECD, 1994). Agriculture may be practiced, but not always, and rural tourism is not necessarily synonymous with farm tourism.

Definitional ambiguities surrounding both rural areas and rural tourism persist (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004), as both are multifaceted concepts open to interpretation. A destination’s geography and context shape the understanding of rural tourism, as seen in comparisons between the Scottish Highlands and the Australian outback. According to Oppermann (1996), academic inquiry into rural tourism dates back to the 1950s, with Ager’s (1958) work highlighting the benefits of tourism in Alpine regions for local farmers. These benefits include additional income, job creation, and a reduction in rural depopulation.

Research during the 1960s and 1970s focused primarily on the economic impacts of rural tourism, though socio-cultural and environmental effects were also considered. The growing importance of rural tourism was underscored in 1994 when the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* dedicated a special issue to the topic—a milestone later noted by Sharpley and Roberts (2004). More recent studies suggest rural tourism can catalyze socio-economic development and regeneration, particularly in areas facing agricultural decline (Sharpley, 2000; Cavaco, 1995; Hoggart, Butler, & Black, 1995). It is often promoted as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Getz, 1998; Ghaderi, 2004; Sharpley, 2000) and is pursued even in the world’s poorest regions (Holland, Burian, & Dixey, 2003).

Nonetheless, concerns remain regarding poor financial returns from some forms of rural tourism and the potential for harm to both natural and cultural landscapes (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Frederick, 1993). Sustainability theories (Butler, 1999; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002) increasingly influence the discourse on rural tourism (Leeuwis, 2000), inspired by the Rio Earth Summit’s Agenda 21 and its 12 key principles for sustainable development.

A sustainable approach is deemed essential. Lane (1994) identifies four main reasons for adopting sustainable management systems: conserving sensitive areas, balancing conservation and development, encouraging community-based economic growth, and preserving the intrinsic characteristics of rural areas. The identification and involvement of stakeholders is widely recognized as critical (Byrd, 2007; Hunter, 1997; Richards & Hall, 2000). Many studies explore sustainability from the perspective of rural communities (Aronsson, 1994; Bachleitner & Zins, 1999; Bramwell, 1994; Walpole & Goodwin, 2001), finding that locals typically support tourism when it delivers socio-cultural and economic benefits and protects the environment.

There is evidence of both success (Aronsson, 1994; Mitchell & Hall, 2005; Sharpley, 2001) and failure (Singh, 2003; Tosun, 1998) in the implementation of sustainable rural tourism. Nevertheless, it continues to be promoted as a potential solution to various challenges faced by rural and peripheral regions (Gannon, 1994; Kieselbach & Long, 1990; Thibal, 1988). Much of the research, however, is centered on economically advanced regions such as Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Hill, 1993; MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Developing regions in Asia and Africa, as well as the Middle East, are less represented in the literature—though there are some accounts, such as rural tourism in Israel (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997).

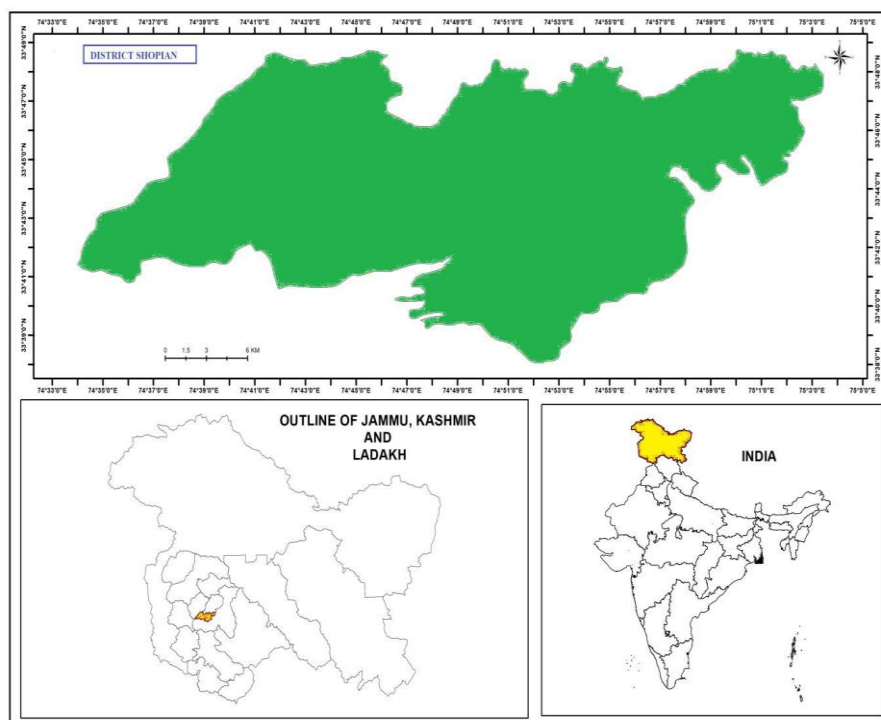
## Kashmir and its Tourism

Kashmir is bestowed with ample natural resources. The valley is rich in lush green forest resources, fresh water bodies and waterfalls, deep gorges, scenic splendor, snowcapped mountains & large glaciers, carpets of green grass, perennial rivers, floating gardens in Dal Lake, and medicinal plants. The state, particularly Kashmir valley, is also well known for its horticulture production of dry fruits like walnut, almond, apricot as well as fruits like pears, peaches, plums, figs and different varieties of apples. The valley is famous

worldwide for its snow-clad mountain peaks, glaciers, fresh water lakes and gushing streams, green forests, meadows, pasture lands and hill stations. Being India's highest hill station Gulmarg is known for its winter sports and cable car throughout world. The other tourist destinations like Pahalgam, Sonmurg, Yousmarg, and Mughal Gardens like Nishat bagh, Shalimar bagh, Pari Mahal in Srinagar, Kokernag, Veerinag, Achawal in Anantnag, Peer ki gali and Dubjin in Shopian, Aharbal water fall in Kulgam and Tulip Garden is Asia's largest tulip garden are famous throughout country. Because of natural beauty and greenery Kashmir is known as a paradise on earth. Some people used to call it Switzerland of India. A significant portion of the state's workforce—about 20%—is also directly or indirectly reliant on the tourist industry, which has grown to be one of the biggest service sectors in the world. Large sites, picturesque places, and a variety of tourist attractions are all present in Kashmir. As an agricultural community, Kashmir may use tourism as a tool for rural development. The paths to success for rural development and rural tourism can be facilitated by one another. In turn, this might expand and diversify the rural economy (Shodhganga 2014).

### Study Area of Shopian

Shopian is the first ancient town of Kashmir, it is oldest town situated in the south of Kashmir in the foot hills of Peer Panchal Mountain range and is commonly known as hill distinct of Kashmir. It shares its boundaries with Kulgam, Anantnag, Poonch, Pulwama and Budgam districts of valley. Shopian is called the "Apple town of Kashmir" as majority of the population is engaged in growing, marketing practices of Apple. It also provides employment to more than 80% of the population of its natives and people living in neighboring districts. It is 2nd richest district in Kashmir region after Srinagar. Shopian is religiously honored as Sheikh Hamdani (Ra) an Islamic priest entered valley via Shopian. The weather in Shopian is pleasant in spring and summer and most of the domestic and national tourists prefer to visit it in summer, but it is extremely cold in winter. Agriculture is constrained by the climate as during winters agricultural practices are not possible under the blanket of snow, but in summer orchards thrive and the entire district is covered with apple, walnut, apricot, cherry, plums, peaches and mulberry trees. The famous tourist destinations in Shopian includes, Peer Ki Gali, Dubjin, Tourist parks along with Mughal Road and Jamia masjid. Tourism on a commercially significant scale has a short history in Shopian and its villages. Adventurous travelers exploring the region once visited the villages and have been followed in the last one decade by more conventional domestic tourists looking for new experiences and escape from modernized urban environments.



**Figure 1.** Map of study area (Maqbool, S., & Singh, V. 2023)

Most of the tourists are day travelers but maximum tourists are independent travellers. On other occasions like Eid or in summer hot days, Padpawan Borihalan Tourist Park is usually a stopover on a longer tour and visitors spend a few hours there and do sometimes shopping at roadside stalls and enjoy the scenic beauty of pine trees and cool and fresh breezes from Rambhara. It is a river and tributary to the River Jhelum located in Shopian, which originates from confluence of two streams, "RUPRI NAR" and "YANGA NAR", "rising in high altitude lakes and snow-covered peaks and glaciers in the rupri ridge of the Pir Panjal & Naba Pir Pass" "Key attractions are the architecture, heritage buildings, folklore, customs, carvings and other craftwork and natural beauty."

There are various small scale tourist ventures such as souvenir shops and accommodation in private homes which have increased as agriculture and other allied sectors have declined. Although there are no official figures, it is estimated that there are now around 3-5 lac tourists especially locals from other districts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh every year mainly during summer and winter seasons and most of the national visitors from other states of India and international tourists prefer to reach Kashmir via Mughal Road Shopian and that makes Shopian as the gateway of Kashmir.

### Research Methodology

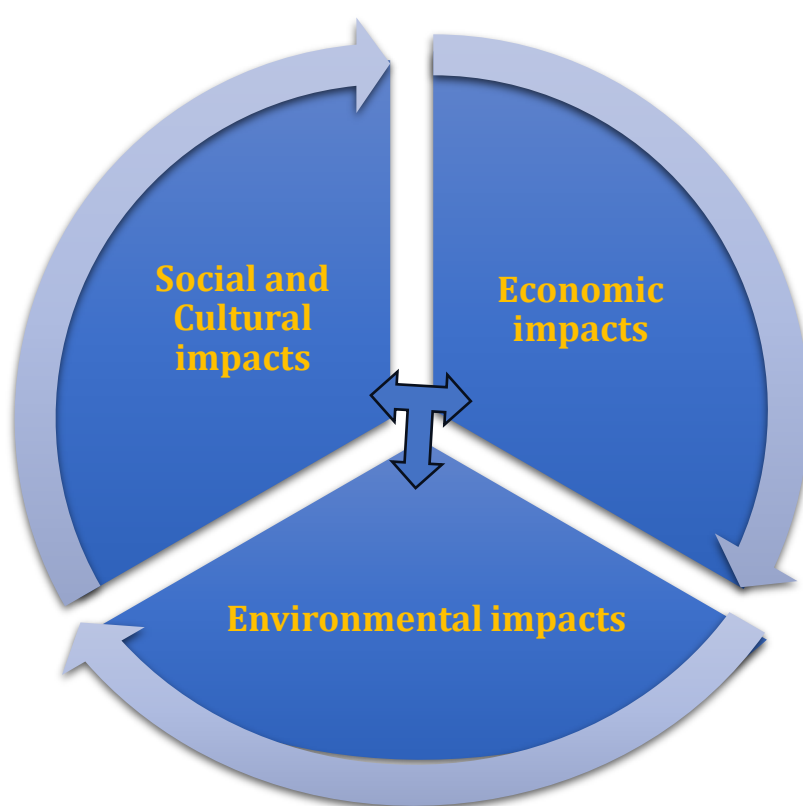
The data used in the study includes both primary and secondary data to satisfy the objective of the study. Secondary data has been collected from published sources of ministry of Tourism of India, including official reports and plans. Face to face interviews were conducted with villagers mostly head of the families was selected as the most appropriate method of collecting primary data. It allows an enumerator to have open discussion on study topic, encouraged to make comparisons of responses of respondents. A sample of 305 respondents, or 25% of the total households living nearer to tourist places in Shopian, was selected by systematic random sampling of households which are living alongside the Mughal Road leading to famous tourist destination of Shopian. The population was listed in random order with an interval size of 10. Interviews were conducted in Kashmiri Language, the discussions lasted for 30 to 45 minutes, and entire data were completed two and half months in between June and September 2023. Of the 164 households contacted, 145 interviews were carried out and the response rate was therefore 88.41%; 103 participants were male and 42 were female. Those refusing proffered a variety of reasons such as lack of interest, absence from home and insufficient time.

Five research scholars with a tourism background, knowing local language undertook the fieldwork and the survey was based on 20 questions about rural tourism mainly related to the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism in the villages situated along Mughal Road leading to famous tourist places in Shopian. Responses were also solicited about the role of women in tourism, government support in developing tourism in the village and understanding of and perceived barriers to sustainable tourism development. Respondents were prompted to elaborate on their views after answering the initial question. Information was then analyzed thematically in alignment with the key themes. Qualitative thematic analysis is widely used in social science research, not least tourism, and appropriate for the current exercise which is concerned with the personal reflections and thoughts of respondents. Limitations are, however, acknowledged and include the possibility that respondents did not speak freely about certain matters deemed sensitive. The sample size was also dominated by males and women were reluctant to answer, even though they sometimes headed the household.

### Research Findings

The social and cultural impacts of tourism are distinguishable, but are often considered together as the 'people' impacts (Glasson, Godfrey, Goodey, Absalom, & van der Borg, 1995) which arise from interactions between residents and visitors (Smith, 1995). Such contact may expect some changes in the everyday life, traditions, values, norms and identities of destination residents (Zahed Ghaderi, Joan C. Henderson, 2012). Responses of respondents cited favorable socio-cultural impacts of tourism in the village, although stances tended to be more positive when the locals felt that they were profiting financially from tourists. The rapid demand of locally made art and crafts by tourists was welcomed as was the awakening amongst residents to

the importance of preserving rural heritage which had been in danger of vanishing a decade ago. Villagers enjoyed interacting with new people and trying to practice their language skills and appreciated some of the village amenities which owed their origin to tourists. An advantage for several was the chances offered to women due to the fact that most tourism enterprises were family-based and small scale. Women had once been confined to agricultural labour and the making of handicrafts, but tourism development afforded other opportunities; this could enhance their status in society and lead to a degree of emancipation. Male household heads were asked if they did or would allow females from their family to be employed in tourism and 65% replied in the affirmative; 48% said they would refuse and 55% maintained it would depend on the job. Almost one third of households already had females working directly or indirectly in tourism. Men opposed to the idea adhered to the traditional belief that a woman's place was at home, looking after the house and family. Nevertheless, the extent of female involvement and its acceptance supports the findings of *Devedzic (2002)* that rural tourism can modify gender roles and relationships within communities, giving women greater independence and a stronger sense of identity.



**Figure 2.** Key Themes (own contribution)

### **Economic impacts**

Nearly all respondents believed that tourism generated income and employment, constituted a market for local products and helped to diversify the economy. Despite doubts by some individuals about the propriety of women's greater prominence resulting from rural tourism, it was agreed that they had become the main breadwinner in certain households. Money was earned by females from the making and sale of handicrafts and cooked foods and operating home-stay accommodation. Economic rewards for locals were, however, comparatively small and it was calculated that less than 18% of village residents depended on tourism for their livelihoods. Any employment was seasonal and poorly paid. National tour operators and travel agents were thought to gain most as tourists came primarily from towns and bought packages from businesses there. Service providers such as transportation companies were also often based outside the locality and overnight tourists were rare.

## Environmental impacts

Tourism was felt to have heightened villager awareness of the environment and its value and had led to the directorate of forests make efforts to conservation forests by fencing and implement different laws to protect pine trees from smugglers. Nevertheless, without exception, respondents concurred that tourism had negative impacts on the environment. Erosion, degradation, littering, fire risks and vandalism were highlighted. The majority (80%) of interviewees claimed that uncontrolled construction had occurred with undesirable consequences. There had been a rush to open teahouses, small supermarkets, guesthouses, and handicraft shops which the village had not the capacity to accommodate. In addition to physical damage, land and property prices had escalated. There were complaints that trees and stones had been illicitly used for building, depleting natural resources. However, it was noted that general development was to blame for much environmental destruction which was then exacerbated by tourism.

## Sustainable rural tourism and barriers to development

In reply to a question about how they understood sustainable tourism and their preferred type of tourist, respondents spoke about tourism that brought assorted benefits to local people and assisted in preserving their culture. Destination residents should be involved in decisions, not dictated to by outsiders, and enjoy an improved life because of tourism. Jobs should be available for their children and overall resources better protected for the younger generation. Visitors who were responsible, respectful of customs and traditions and cared about nature and the environment were desired. In reality, most (83%) respondents agreed that tourism threatened fragile natural environment due to intensive tourist activity. A minority (27%) described some positive effects such as the safeguarding of monuments, but opponents believed that conservation of rural culture and nature was inadequate and had been neglected by both policy-makers and practitioners. Officials had encouraged villagers to participate in rural tourism schemes on the grounds that it would help end their poverty and improve the local infrastructure. Tourism was presented as a substitute for agriculture and husbandry which had been in long term decline. However, a majority (81%) of respondents said there had been very little interest and engagement in formal rural tourism initiatives by the local community. There were expressions of disillusionment, stemming from past failures to fulfill promises, leading to reluctance to participate. Other impediments to taking part were perceptions of insufficient resources devoted to the programmers, an absence of administrative mechanisms and a feeling of exclusion. It emerged that locals had not been consulted previously in decision-making about tourism development or been offered assistance to help them make the most of opportunities. There was a desire for empowerment through means such as the acquiring of the skills essential to set up a tourism business and access to funding.

Speaking about current conditions in the village, most (74%) respondents referred to serious weaknesses in infrastructure and public services. Examples were quoted of unsatisfactory transport networks, telecommunications, water supply, waste disposal and sewage. Shortcomings in the stock and standard of tourist accommodation, catering, attractions and transportation were also observed. There were calls for more art galleries and rural museums to educate tourists about local culture and heritage. Household heads asserted that the village could not cope with the rising volume of tourists without investment in infrastructure. They explained that the main road leading to the settlement was only wide enough for two cars passing side by side and often closed when there was only a little snow. In addition, roads to other villages were not surfaced with asphalt and in a very bad state of repair so that travel could be arduous and dangerous. The gravest anxiety was the lack of sewage and waste disposal in the village. Visitors were adding to the population and pressures on public services, but poor sanitation and the accumulation of rubbish was endangering hygiene and introducing disease.

## Conclusion

The interviews revealed that villagers had an appreciation of the concept of sustainable rural tourism, but felt that it was not being practiced by either private industry or government or, indeed, fellow villagers. While recognizing some advantages popularity with tourists had brought to the village and its population,

these appeared to be offset by fears of harmful consequences. Economic rewards were perhaps the most welcome, followed by the stimulation of socio-cultural and natural heritage awareness and conservation. The manner in which traditional society and culture was at risk from tourism was, however, a primary concern alongside the over-burdening of infrastructure and degradation of the fabric of the village and its physical environment. Unsurprisingly, vested interests exercised an influence and those who gained most from tourism were likely to be more enthusiastic in its support. There seemed to be some resentment within the community about inequalities in how the financial returns from tourism were shared. It is also worth noting that many respondents were keen to set up tourism businesses and critical of official failure to help them do so. Dissatisfaction with government and its tourism strategy was a dominant theme of discussions and there was a divergence between the aims of rural tourism projects and the manner in which execution had been attempted, stated goals proving elusive. It may be that unrealistic objectives were set by policy makers and planners who had insufficient experience and expertise and that the expectations of villagers about tourism's contribution to economic and social revitalization were over-optimistic. Authorities appeared reluctant to communicate with local residents and take into account their needs, compounding any misunderstandings.

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**Declaration****Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Not applicable.

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials**

The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Author contributions**

DIR and SAB conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis. AD and KB investigation, data curation, writing - original draft preparation, writing. DIR and PA review and editing, supervision. PA project administration. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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