

# Urban Tourism In Kashmir Valley: An Assessment Of Srinagar City

<sup>1\*</sup>Qurat Ul Ain, <sup>2</sup>Mukhtar Ahmad Bhat,

## **Abstract**

*Urban tourism, stimulated by historical and cultural attractions has attained enormous significance in the contemporary dynamics of tourism. A term, urban tourism is generally referred to as encompassing multiple tourist activities where in cities have begun to emerge as the main destinations and places of attraction. Tourism within cities is strongly connected with their growth and technology development as well as roads, transportation, and railway. In this context, India owing to its rich and potential urban tourism along with the living of almost one-half of its population in urban areas assumes supreme importance. Within India, however Kashmir Valley whose entire economic base is based on tourism is in itself a very special case to look into. However, the general misperception regarding tourism in Kashmir Valley prevalent in academic writings is that it is taken to be an overwhelmingly rural phenomenon. This article rather makes a case for urban tourism, since most of the tourist destinations are located in urban areas. In doing so, the article identifies various research objectives; (I) examining the case of Srinagar being the main urban city of valley; (II) critical assessment of urban tourism in Srinagar in general; (III) evaluate its potentials and problems; and (IV) a modest attempt to look into the future prospects of tourism in Srinagar city by providing a way forward. The proposed outcome of this article while examining the viewpoint from various stakeholders especially, tourists, entrepreneurs and locals of the area, would be a comprehensive policy paper encompassing the aforementioned research objectives.*

**Keywords:** Urban Tourism, India, Kashmir Valley, Srinagar, Survey Research

## **INTRODUCTION**

Urban tourism is a wider concept, blending various activities wherein cities particularly remain the main tourist destinations. Adding the word urban to the notion of tourism locates an activity in a spatial context but does not in itself define or delimit that activity. UNWTO<sup>3</sup> defines urban tourism as, ‘the trips taken by travellers to cities or places of high population density. The duration of these trips is usually short (one to three days) therefore it can be said that urban tourism is closely linked to the short – breaks market’ (Tourism 2020 Vision, UNWTO 2002). For G. Ashwoth (1989), one of the renowned experts in the field of urban tourism, ‘this is not only the amount of tourist activities in cities, but is a particular case of tourism that is part of the specific urban life’. However, urban tourism according to the National Conference on Urban Tourism (Rennes, 1988), encompasses a set of resources or activities located in the city and made available to visitors outside having the purpose of entertainment, business or other reasons. If at first urban tourism was considered a result of population mobility, for which the city was only a short break, now because of the alterations and behavioural changes that took part, the city became a cultural centre, a place of relaxation, where people are shopping, meet with friends and spend their free time. As a result, we can say that urban tourism is not just a form of tourism, but also an integral, traditional and characteristic part of urban life (Howie, 2003). It is the product of changes in the behaviour of people who managed to transform cities into cultural centres or places of relaxation, where people can go shopping or to participate in various events. Furthermore, urban tourism came to be regarded as a multi-segmented industry, therefore providing different types of jobs like hotel managers, receptionists, guides, tour operators, travel agents, photographers & many other jobs which are required to strengthen the tourism. The Global Report on City Tourism<sup>4</sup> is a timely contribution to the debate of the role of cities in the growth of global tourism and conversely the role of tourism in contributing to the well-being, environmental quality and cultural identity of city dwellers worldwide.

In a region like Kashmir, blessed with enormous sites and locations of tourist attraction, there is much potential for accelerating the process of tourism. About 20 percent of the workforce in the Kashmir valley directly or indirectly depends upon tourism. New areas need to be identified and developed in urban areas in order to attract more and more tourists. Urban tourism is a challenging service among the landscapes and cultural heritage of urban communities. This activity vividly generates local incomes, employment and growth of welfare and is a valuable contributor to urban economy. Urban tourism can serve as an important source of tax revenues for local jurisdictions and promotes the usage and sale of local food products. Urban tourism prevents viable traditional occupations from being displaced and offers urban residents the business opportunities and creates new employment opportunities. Urban tourism is one of the important options for the economy of Kashmir valley, its agencies especially those concerned with the urban development. Kashmir valley is the most urbanized region in the Himalayas and during the last few decades, it has experienced excessive

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<sup>1\*</sup>Research Scholar at department of Political Science, University of Kashmir

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar at department of Political Science, University of Kashmir.

<sup>3</sup> UNWTO: United Nations world Tourism Organisation 1945

<sup>4</sup> world Tourism Organization (2012), Global Report on City Tourism - Cities 2012 Project, UNWTO, Madrid

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population and economic development which has retained in large scale unplanned urbanization and urban Sprawl. The development of a strong platform around the concept of urban tourism is definitely useful for a region like Kashmir where more than 30 percent of the population resides in urban areas. However, these cities are rich in various material as well as human resources but tourism is amicably a multi sectoral resource which can engage large number of people. The progress of urban tourism in turn can facilitate the process of urban development of the urban cities. Taking initiative for introducing urban tourism in Kashmir primarily demands the development of the urban infrastructure. Moreover, it is imperative for the cities of Kashmir valley to pick up the low hanging fruit i.e., urban tourism as one of the main builders of economy. By bringing the urban areas and urban people on the scene of tourism, it would be fruitful for urban development and diversifying the urban economy.

Kashmir valley is known for its beauty, generosity, and unity in diversity and gives the calmness in heart and mind. The rich beauty of its attractions, temperate climate, historical monuments, its grandeur snow crowded mountains, its green forests and grasslands, its quiet backwaters and beaches, it's beautiful rivers and lakes which makes Kashmir valley 'Heaven on Earth'. It represents century's old heritage of culture, religion, language, traditions, architecture and art forms. Kashmir valley has continued to be an internationally commended tourist destination, every year a huge number of tourists from all across the world are visiting various tourist spots in the valley (Rai, R. A. 2007, Nengroo.A.H 2014). Historically, tourism in the Kashmir Valley traversed its course from the time of Mughal monarchy till its present era. Apart from the natural beauty of Kashmir valley, it was the Mughal rulers and other religious saints who widened the scope of tourism in Kashmir valley by their established legacies like Hari-Parbat Fort, Nishat Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, Pari Mahal, Makhdoom Sahib, Jamia Masjid Srinagar and others located in different parts of Kashmir like Sun temple Anantnag, Kheer Bhawani Ganderbal, Charari-Shareef Budgam and so on<sup>5</sup>. However, Kashmir valley became very popular among the tourists due to its rich tourism resources and the most popular tourist destination among the domestic as well as foreign tourists. Therefore, Kashmir valley has significant potential for becoming a national as well as global tourist destination. It has always attracted people from all over the globe through its supreme & sublime hospitality. It is also popularly known as 'Switzerland of East' and is famous for its wealth of beauty. All these provide immense potential for developing a fabulous variety of tourist attractions. Its strategic location within India enhances the scope of dual or multiple destinations tour package promotions.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Kashmir valley, popularly called Heaven on Earth comprises everything to make life enjoyable, scenery for artist, flowers for botanist, ruins for archaeologist and thrill for adventurist (Lawrence, 1967). Pt. Nehru said that Kashmir has been one of the biggest seats of Indian culture and learning through the history (Shafi, 1994); all this enhances the chances for people to develop mutual sympathy and understanding and to reduce their prejudices (IIPT, 2000). Urban tourism has a potential to boost economy of cities in one way and provides inputs towards sustainable development on the other way (Christopher law 2002). Srinagar being an urban city with large number of scenic Tourist destinations like dal lake, anchar lake, Mughal Gardens gives a clue towards the potential of tourism to stakeholders and other agencies (I Ahmad 2007). However, being a popular tourist destination, the militancy disturbed the tourism industry of Kashmir since early 90s, which caused the decrease of tourist arrivals in India's most beautiful tourist destination (Chauhan & Khanna, 2005). The terrorism has also influenced the choices regarding the mode of transport and in some cases, whether to travel at all or not (Hall, 2002); these issues are influencing the tourist decision making (Hall & Sullivan, 1994), further, the tourism is playing a vital role in creating the image of destination in the minds of others by the word of mouth (Fordness & Murry, 1997). The travel and tourism is considered as a global peace industry (Amman Declaration – first Global Summit on Peace, Nov. 2000) it can undermine international boundaries by bringing people together through understanding of different cultures, heritages, beliefs and to reduce their prejudices (International Institute for Peace through Tourism, 2000; Minhó, 2006). Thus, once peace secured, it would lead towards the positive economic benefits (WTO, 2000); therefore, sympathy and mutual understanding can bring peace and reduce tension in world (UNEP, 2007).

## Objectives and Methodology

Urban tourism is a highly prospering industry with growing economic presence in other sectors of Kashmir valley like hotels, transport and commerce. The present study focusses on;

1. To examine the process and potential of Urban tourism In Kashmir valley particularly focuses on Srinagar being the main urban city of Kashmir.
2. To critically assess the urban tourism in Srinagar city and the problems which hampers flow of urban tourism in Srinagar city.
3. A modest attempt to look into the future prospects of urban tourism in Srinagar city by providing a way forward. The proposed outcome of this paper while examining the viewpoint from various stakeholders especially, tourists, entrepreneurs and locals of the area, would be a comprehensive policy paper encompassing the aforementioned research objectives. To achieve these objectives the primary analysis will be conducted within the broad parameters of survey research by using two of the most convenient research techniques of data collection, namely questionnaire and interview. used. Secondary sources of data have been collected from tourism department, economic surveys of J & K, government

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<sup>5</sup> Tourist destinations in Kashmir valley (Jktourism.jk.gov.in)

policies, reports and other regulations. Moreover, owing to the limitations effectuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, mailed questionnaires and telephonic interviews become a preferred choice to get the information pertaining to this research work.

### **WHY URBAN TOURISM MATTERS?**

Urbanization is a process which has taken a golden shape in reviving the urban cities and focuses on the physical development of the cities. Urbanization gives a flip towards the development of cities which is the prerequisite for opening the doors of tourism in the cities. Urban tourism matters a lot and to examine its significance one must go through following points;

1. It needs the diverse and flexible products a city can offer and cities need tourism to achieve their social and economic objectives.
2. Urban tourism brings vitality and dynamism to cities along with new patterns and changes to their urban landscape.
3. Urban Tourism connects people, creates relationships, it teaches them how to live in close proximity to one another.
4. Urban Tourism is now becoming one of the main pillars and economic drivers of many countries. It plays an important role in terms of employment, income and maintenance of urban infrastructure and public services.
5. Urban Tourism has triggered a more competitive approach and destinations are focusing on their product offering and becoming more specialized in order to stay ahead and change together with the city.
6. The Urban tourism industry has to implement innovative strategies to provide the city with a consistent image and therefore provide significant revenue and added value to its residents.

### **PROSPECTS AND POTENTIAL OF URBAN TOURISM IN SRINAGAR CITY**

Srinagar, the largest city in the Kashmir valley is situated on the banks of the famous river Jhelum, a tributary of the Indus, and Dal and Anchor lakes. There are number of beautiful tourist resorts located around Srinagar city which form the base of tourism. Being an urban city, Srinagar had always been discussed and mentioned as an influential tourist destination with its cultural as well as natural scenic beauty. Srinagar city is constantly growing and in a constant state of change to provide its visitors the experiences and products they expect and these products and experiences are also constantly changing in order to adapt to an increasing demand. All this triggers a constant investment in infrastructure, promotion and conservation ultimately benefiting tourists and local residents of Srinagar city. The city's substantial growth of population during the holidays and religious occasions, booked hotel reservations and increase of sales resembles the constant flourishing of urban tourism. Since the last few decades, the Srinagar city has undergone dramatic changes where traditional roads, hotels and tourist spots are replacing with modern roads, houses, apartments, Gondolas etc. As Srinagar city renews and meets the new wave of urban tourism potential, the commercial status has seen a divergence into its benefit with different areas of city now stylizing with diverse tastes in business and commerce. Srinagar, an ancient city is now globally recognised as a tourist resort because of various tourist/pilgrimage sites like Dal Lake, Nishat Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, and Chashme Shahi, Pari Mahal, Hari Parbat Fort, Makhdoom Sahib, Nagashband Saheb, Hazratbal Shrine, Jamia Masjid, Shankaracharya temple etc. These places make the good sustenance to the Srinagar city as well as employment to the people of Srinagar city. Therefore, tourism is a very important element in all policies related to urban development, it is not just a strategy to provide a competitive product to meet visitors' expectations but a way to develop the city itself and provide more and better infrastructures and bring good conditions to residents. The employment opportunities provided by this industry are comparatively higher than other industries. The positive economic benefits of urban tourism in Srinagar city include; contribution to State's income generations, expansion of employment opportunities, transformation of regional economy, develops social and cultural ties and up-gradation and expansion of basic infrastructure.

Srinagar city has been gifted with nature's bounty. It has an unrivalled coastline, impressive water bodies ranges, scenic valleys, rich forests, dazzling wildlife and splendid memorial masterpieces. The recent incentives that have been accorded to the tourism industry in many parts of India prove that, finally public and private sectors have understood the socio-economic potential of this industry for the general good of the country (The Hindu,1999)<sup>6</sup>. The status accorded to tourism in ministerial levels (in central as well as state levels) earns status from all sides. To increase flights from other parts of the country to Srinagar city is a worthy step towards improving the travel component of the gigantic industry. The up gradation of Srinagar airport has also given a boost to international tourism inside Srinagar city. Furthermore, the recent remarkable growth of road and rail networks which connects other areas of Kashmir valley to Srinagar city is a good sign for growth of urban tourism industry. It is sufficient to say now that despite improvements, this sector, as a significant component of the tourism industry in Kashmir valley has been rapidly widens over the years. Hence, it is crucial to consider the inclusion of urban tourism development policies in every tourism potential urban regions of Kashmir valley. There are lot of challenges in front in order to broaden the scope of urban tourism in Srinagar city. There is a scarcity of hotels and land for dumping of the wastage generated by the human activities during the tourist seasons in the Srinagar city. In one-way, urban tourism in Srinagar opens our eyes and in other way it closes our eyes. It has been seen that Dal Lake and Jhelum River is facing severe problems of pollution. Noise pollution, water pollution, air pollution and traffic jams are other problems faced by the Srinagar city. To all these problems, tourism is but one of the casual variables.

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<sup>6</sup> The hindu (<http://www.indiaserver.com/thehindu>) 1999

Centralizing tourists within a particular area of Srinagar city has various ill consequences and such a planning is neither desirable nor safe for the city people and administration, hence must be addressed.

### **PROBLEMS/CHALLENGES OF URBAN TOURISM IN SRINAGAR CITY**

To a greater degree than most activities, Travel and tourism depends on a wide range of infrastructure services- airports, roads, railheads and ports, as well as basic infrastructure services required by hotels, restaurants, shops and recreation facilities (e.g. telecommunications and utilities). As per our field survey, we find following problems which hampers the urban tourism in Srinagar city;

#### **Lack of infrastructure;**

The travel and tourism industry across the world suffer from poor infrastructure and Srinagar has no different scenario. The infrastructure includes overall facilities provided by the stakeholder. Srinagar faces range of infrastructural issues from just having one airport (which is not technically sophisticated) to no rail connectivity with other states. The road accessibility to most of tourist spots of the Srinagar city remains affected during winters which definitely leaves an image of disgust on visitor's mind. Not only tourist arrival is hampered but tourism stakeholders find it difficult to provide the amenities at particular destination because of poor accessibility.

#### **Lack of Professionalism;**

Tourism being the service sector requires professionalism as the quality of service is largely dependent on how professionally services are offered. The travel and tourism sector include tour operators, hotel employees, guides and escorts and other people involved in carrying out tourism operations. The lack of professionalism in the service offering of the tourism sector leaves a negative vibe in the mind of tourists and they may prefer not to visit again therefore giving a challenge to the marketing of tourism. The students graduating from the only Hotel Management institution running in the state look for career opportunities outside the state/Srinagar city. Even due to less developed hospitality sector the valley also reasonably fails to produce the professionals.

#### **Less sophisticated TIC/TRC (tourist information/reception centres):**

The tourist information/ reception (TRC) centres that are technically sound and with proper information are prerequisite of tourist spots. Being politically disturbed area there is much more need for sophisticated tourist information or tourist reception centres. It has been seen there is absence of an updated information systems with quick retrieval facilities at TIC/TRC in Kashmir causing inconvenience to tourists.

#### **communication skills Weak;**

No matter how high-end tourist may come but for some basic services like guides, escort, pony etc they have to rely on the local intimates of destination only and due to lack of communication skills services get affected. As most of local workers are not familiar with non-local languages and their services doesn't meet the expected standard of the tourist that adds to the challenges faced by tourism industry.

#### **Political Instability;**

Urban tourism in the Valley in general and Srinagar city in particular has been the victim of political disturbances since early 90's. Since then, the valley has seen countless incidents of violence from both state as well as non-state actors and that has been one of the major setbacks for the urban tourist sector. Tourism is an activity that needs peace and without peace, tourism has no chance to either survive or to flourish. The continuing political instability, frequent curfews, along with other destabilising activities, the tourism industry has been kept on ventilator in an ICU.

#### **Loopholes in the safety and security of the Tourists;**

Tourist arrivals act as a barometer of the safe and secure image of a state. Not only terrorism or political outrage but thefts, other crimes and safety related issues are also matter of concern in marketing of the Srinagar city. E.g.: The Gondola accident that took place on 25/06/2017 causing death of 7 persons including 4 tourists.

#### **Seasonality;**

Despite being one of the most beautiful and attractive tourist spots most of the destinations in Kashmir have failed to be round the year tourist destinations. The poor infrastructure and dynamic weather to a large extent is responsible for making Srinagar a seasonal tourist destination. The seasonality has two major outcomes that create a challenge for tourism in Kashmir. Firstly, the tourism business is unable to provide round the year salary to their employees as during some part of a year they don't earn a penny and that forces employees to switch from their workplace, which puts the industry in challenging position. Secondly the tourism in Srinagar is working in seasonal phase, the tour operators, travel agents, local service providers, hoteliers etc most of the time over charge the guest in order to compensate the expenses during the slack season. The tourist has to pay more for the services that are provided at much lower costs at other places.

### **Media Prejudice;**

The national and local media plays a crucial role in tourism boosting and in Kashmir; media is reasonably biased when it comes to updating the ground reality of overall situation. As media being on negative lines, it has resulted in downfall in arrivals of tourists in recent past. Media reports about Kashmir have added to negative marketing of the region which has become a big challenge for tourism industry to overcome. The obsession of media with instability and chaos had pushed the other part of the story for which the valley is known all across the globe to the margins.

### **CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD:**

Urban Tourism is the life line of Kashmir valley and all possible efforts needs to be undertaken for retaining, maintaining and sustaining it. It opens up new window for resources, both investment generation and revenue generation leading to employment generation as well as socio-economic development of the cities. Even though it creates jobs and contributes significantly to economic growth, it is not automatically a solution for poverty reduction. Therefore, it is important for government of the state, local investors and other stakeholders to actively participate in urban tourism and its related activities. The local workforce can also help by engaging and encouraging the use of local companies for the provision of transport, services and food in order to assist in alleviating local poverty. On the other way, urban tourism plays a vital role in connecting different sects of people and builds intercultural/interreligious understanding. Srinagar being an urban city possesses a lot of tourism potential but the primary need is to tackle its challenges in order to make it more viable. The rail-road mix of transport in the Kashmir valley is hardly to connect other areas with the Srinagar city. There is dire need to build alternative roads in some places to ensure better connectivity towards Srinagar city. There is also a need to upgrade many of the existing roads from two lanes to four lanes. Thus, it is important to balance any decision to develop an area for urban tourism against the need to preserve fragile or threatened environments and cultures. However, once a decision has been taken where an area is appropriate for near urban tourism development or that an existing tourist site should be developed further, then good infrastructure will be essential to sustain the quality, economic viability and growth of travel and tourism. If travel and tourism is not managed well, it can have a detrimental effect- it can damage fragile environments and destroy local cultures. The challenge is to manage the future growth of the industry so as to minimize its negative impacts on the environment and host communities whilst maximizing the benefits it brings in terms of jobs, wealth and support for local culture and industry, and protection of the built and natural environment.

To boost urban tourism in Kashmir valley in general and Srinagar city in particular, the media has to play an encouraging role rather than a discouraging one by only highlighting the destabilising activities. Kashmiris are known for their humane and brotherly attitude all over the world. Moreover, there hardly has been any incident of targeting tourists making the valley one of the preferred safe tourist destinations. When it comes to hospitality, the valley has a privilege of being one of the most favoured places to visit. Despite all this, the media by highlighting such a wonderful part of the story has an important role to play in furthering the urban tourism in Kashmir. The administration has lot of responsibilities to make arrangements for safety and security of tourists by developing the much-needed infrastructure. It also had to look into the issues of sanitation and the local encroachment as the case of Dal Lake underscores. Being one of the most important tourist attraction cities, it is astonishingly lamentable to argue that the administrative mismanagement, corruption as well as the local encroachment has turned the famous Dal Lake to a 'Dull lake'. Hence there is a dire need to pay special attention to save this lake which would underscore the promotion and development of urban tourism in the Srinagar city. Furthermore, there also is a need to promote professionalism as for as urban tourism is concerned along with enhancing the skills of local work force to make urban tourism a living and thriving activity. Besides, to exploit the huge potential of urban tourism in the valley, there must be political stability over which every other aspect of tourism remains hinged. Keeping in mind, the role tourism can play in promoting the spirit of belongingness, brotherhood, by bringing people from various diverse backgrounds, ensuring a stable environment could open flood gates of opportunities. To add further, as we have ourselves experienced, tourism in the valley has a quintessentially secular dimension that keeps the public sphere a living enterprise of debates and discussions. So, if on the one side tourism requires a politically stable environment, on the other side it has an important role in furthering peace and stability in the valley. Finally, the promotion and development of urban tourism must not come at the expense of the environment and that will require a smart and sustainable strategy of balancing the development and environment nexus. It may appear a delicate balance, but a collective choreography involving all the stakeholders must be prioritized to promote the urban tourism industry keeping in mind its huge potential on the one side and its environmental fallouts on the other.

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We the author of above Research work have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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