

KASHMIR VALLEY AS A TIMELESS TOURIST DESTINATION: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Kashmir Valley has long been celebrated as a timeless tourist destination, attracting travelers, pilgrims, scholars, and rulers across centuries. This qualitative study explores the historical evolution of tourism in the Kashmir Valley by examining travel accounts, historical texts, cultural traditions, and heritage sites. From ancient times, Kashmir served as a center of spiritual pilgrimage, learning, and natural retreat, drawing visitors due to its scenic landscapes, sacred shrines, and rich cultural life. During the medieval period, Sufi traditions, Mughal patronage, and artistic developments further enhanced the valley's appeal. In the colonial and post-colonial eras, Kashmir emerged as a prominent leisure destination, shaping modern tourism infrastructure while retaining its historical charm. The study highlights how geography, culture, spirituality, and hospitality collectively contributed to Kashmir's enduring tourist identity. By emphasizing continuity and transformation, the paper underscores the historical depth of tourism in Kashmir Valley and its significance in understanding the region's cultural and economic heritage.

Key words: *Tourism, Legacy, culture, attraction, spots, transformation*

INTRODUCTION

Jammu and Kashmir State has a greater potential to become a major tourist destination in the world. The role of tourism in the economic development of J&K state has been an area of immense interest from policy perspective. In Jammu and Kashmir, the northern most state of India, tourism has been identified as an industry with potential of development next to agriculture and horticulture. The lush green forests, sweet springs, perennial rivers, picturesque alpine scenery and pleasant climate of Kashmir valley, has remained an internationally acclaimed tourist destination, whereas Jammu region-the land of temples is attracting a large number of pilgrims. Tourism has grown as a significant contribution to the state economy. Kashmir, often known as "Paradise on Earth," has long captured the hearts of travellers with its magnificent scenery, tranquil lakes, and majestic mountains. Once considered the crown gem of Indian tourism, it is currently experiencing a change, combining its traditional appeal with modern trends to attract a diverse audience. As tourism returns to unprecedented levels, with more than 21.1 million visitors expected in 2023, the valley embraces innovation while remaining entrenched in its cultural heritage.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TOURISM IN KASHMIR

Tourism in Kashmir has a long history, owing to the region's natural beauty, strategic location, and rich cultural legacy. Kashmir has always drawn travellers, scholars, pilgrims, and kings, who have documented its gorgeous landscapes and pleasant temperature. Sanskrit literature and classical writings

contain the earliest references to Kashmir as a tourist destination. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (12th century CE) praises Kashmir as a "paradise on earth," emphasizing its lakes, gardens, and beautiful surroundings. During the ancient period, Kashmir became an important centre of scholarship and religion. Buddhist monks, academics, and pilgrims from Central Asia, China, and Tibet visited Kashmir, influencing the early development of religious and scholarly tourism. In the seventh century CE, Chinese travellers such as Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) wrote vivid accounts of Kashmir's natural beauty, monasteries, and intellectual life. Kashmir remained popular among Sufi saints, traders, and travellers during the medieval period, following the introduction of Islam. Mughal monarchs played an important influence in developing leisure travel and tourism. Emperor Jahangir notably lauded Kashmir's beauty, and Mughal rulers created splendid gardens like Shalimar, Nishat, and Chashma Shahi, making Kashmir into a royal retreat and early recreational destination.

Tourism fell during Afghan and Sikh rule due to political instability. However, during the Dogra period (1846–1947), sophisticated tourism infrastructure began to emerge. Roads, rest houses, and lodging facilities were built, and Kashmir became a popular summer destination for British officials looking to escape the heat of the plains. During this time, the Dal Lake houseboat culture flourished as well. Following India's independence, tourism in Kashmir developed further thanks to official assistance, improved transportation, and promotional strategies. Despite periods of political upheaval, Kashmir has long been renowned as a timeless tourist destination moulded by centuries of cultural interaction, royal patronage, and natural beauty.

FAMOUS TOURIST SPOTS IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY

The Kashmir Valley is famous for its wide range of tourist attractions that include natural beauty, historical sites, and religious places. Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, is the main cultural and tourism center of the valley. It is well known for Dal Lake and Nigeen Lake, where tourists enjoy houseboat stays, shikara rides, and floating gardens. Srinagar is also home to the famous Mughal Gardens such as Shalimar Bagh, Nishat Bagh, and Chashma Shahi, which show the artistic taste and leisure life of the Mughal period. Gulmarg, located in the Pir Panjal range, is one of India's leading hill resorts and is especially popular for skiing and the Gulmarg Gondola. Pahalgam, in the Lidder Valley, attracts visitors with its green meadows and rivers and also serves as the base for the Amarnath pilgrimage. Aru Valley and Betaab Valley add to its charm. Sonamarg, meaning "Meadow of Gold," is known for glaciers and trekking routes, while Doodhpathri is becoming popular for eco-tourism because of its untouched natural beauty. Important religious sites like Hazratbal Shrine, Jamia Masjid, Shankaracharya Temple, and Amarnath Cave highlight Kashmir's spiritual diversity and tourism importance.

- The iconic Dal Lake in Srinagar is known for its houseboats, shikaras, floating gardens, and panoramic views.
- Nigeen Lake is a quieter and more serene extension of Dal Lake, perfect for calm stays.
- Gulmarg is known as the "Meadow of Flowers" and is renowned for skiing, trekking, and the Gulmarg Gondola.
- Pahalgam is a scenic hill town in Lidder Valley that serves as a base for environmental tourism and the Amarnath Yatra.
- Sonamarg, known as the "Meadow of Gold," is a gateway to glaciers and high-altitude hikes, such as Thajiwas.

Mughal Gardens & Historical Landscapes

- Shalimar Bagh, built by Emperor Jahangir, is a prime example of Mughal garden architecture.
- Nishat Bagh overlooks Dal Lake and is known for its terraced lawns and water canals.
- Chashma Shahi is known for its natural springs and Persian-style decor.
- The Pari Mahal, a historic monument associated with Dara Shikoh, combines science, spirituality, and architecture.

Religious & Pilgrimage Sites

- The Hazratbal Shrine is a Muslim shrine that houses Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) relic.
- Shankaracharya shrine, an ancient mountaintop Hindu shrine with panoramic views of Srinagar.
- Jamia Masjid, a grand wooden mosque in Srinagar, with Indo-Saracenic architecture.
- Amarnath Cave is a major Hindu pilgrimage place in the Himalayas.

Adventure & Eco-Tourism Destinations

- Gulmarg (Ski Resort) is an internationally recognized winter sports destination.
- Aru Valley is a base camp for trekking and alpine adventure.
- Betaab Valley, a lush green valley made famous by Bollywood cinema.
- Doodhpathri is a pristine meadow with flowing streams, perfect for eco-tourism.

Cultural & Urban Attractions

- Visit Old City Srinagar, a historic neighbourhood with wooden buildings, mosques, and traditional markets.
 - Floating Vegetable Market - A unique early-morning market on Dal Lake.
 - Handicraft centres offer pashmina, rugs, papier-mâché, and walnut wood carvings.
- These tourist attractions highlight Kashmir Valley's natural beauty, historical evolution, religious variety, and cultural richness, making it a timeless tourist destination from antiquity to the present day.

ATTRACTIONS FOR FOREIGN TOURISTS IN KASHMIR

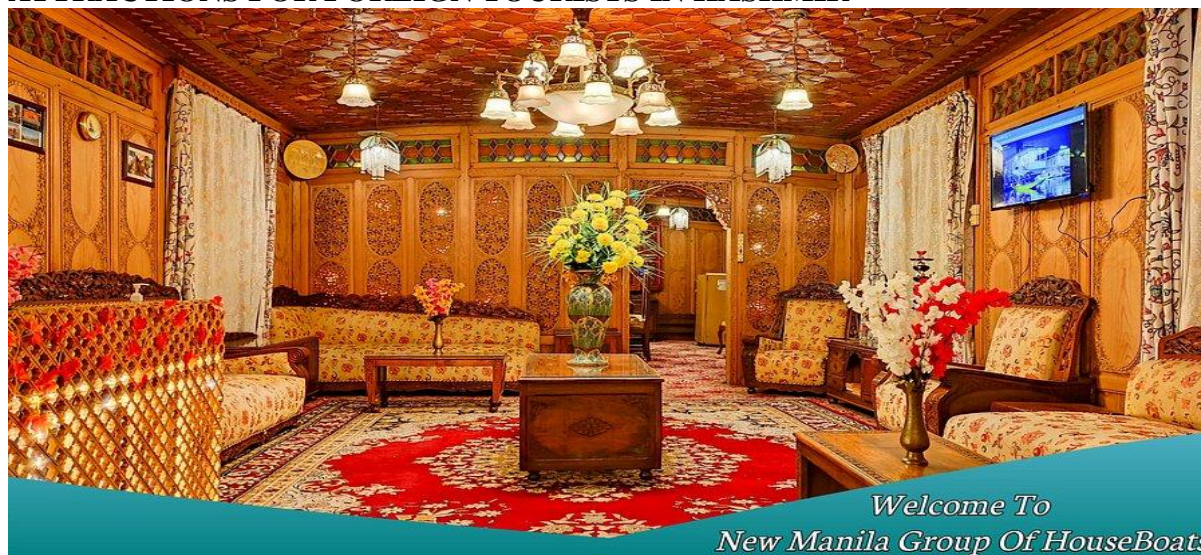


Figure 1.1 Room inside the House boat

Kashmir has long attracted foreign visitors due to its remarkable natural beauty, cultural richness, and historical significance. The Kashmir Valley, sometimes known as "Paradise on Earth," provides experiences that are particularly appealing to international travellers looking for picturesque landscapes, heritage, or alternative tourism. Dal Lake and its houseboat culture are popular among foreign tourists because they offer a unique type of housing that is uncommon anywhere in the globe. Traditional shikara rides, floating gardens, and a lake-based lifestyle entice international travellers seeking leisurely and immersive tourism.



Figure 1.2 View of Dal Lake, Srinagar

The Mughal Gardens of Srinagar—Shalimar Bagh, Nishat Bagh, and Chashma Shahi—attract foreign visitors with their Persian-influenced landscape architecture, tiered lawns, and water channels, which represent a unique blend of Central Asian and Indian garden traditions. Gulmarg is extremely popular with European and East Asian tourists who like winter sports, particularly skiing and snowboarding. The Gulmarg Gondola, one of the world's tallest cable cars, expands its global appeal. Gulmarg and Pahalgam are popular summer destinations for foreign visitors who enjoy trekking, alpine meadows, riverside camping, and photography. Heritage and cultural tourism, which includes trips to the Old City of Srinagar, Jamia Masjid, Hazratbal Shrine, and traditional Kashmiri neighbourhoods renowned for their wooden crafts and architecture, also attracts foreign visitors. In international marketplaces, handicrafts including rugs, papier-mâché, walnut wood carving, and pashmina are highly sought-after. In recent years, Kashmir has become even more appealing to foreign travellers looking for genuine and sustainable travel experiences thanks to eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and wellness tourism, which includes nature hikes, bird viewing, and spiritual retreats. The **Gulmarg Gondola** is one of the highest cable car systems in the world and a major tourist attraction in Kashmir. Located in Gulmarg, it connects the resort town to the higher reaches of Mount Apharwat. The gondola operates in phases, offering breathtaking views of snow-covered mountains and alpine meadows. It is especially popular among tourists, skiers, and adventure lovers, enhancing Gulmarg's importance as a year-round tourism destination.



Figure 1.3 Gulmarg Gondola riding during snow fall time, winter season in Kashmir Gulmarg is noted for its heavy and consistent snowfall during the winter, which typically occurs between December and March, transforming the region into a popular skiing resort. Gulmarg's thick natural snow cover makes it excellent for both beginner and experienced skiers. It is most known for its powder snow, which is rated among the greatest in Asia. The Gulmarg Gondola supports skiing activity by providing simple access to high-altitude slopes and attracting tourists from India and abroad.

EXPORTS AND IMPORTS IN KASHMIR'S TOURISM TRANSFORMATION

(i) Tourism Exports of Kashmir

In tourism studies, *tourism exports* refer to the local goods, services, and experiences that Kashmir offers to visitors from outside the region. These exports play a vital role in the valley's economy and cultural identity.

1. Natural Landscapes

Kashmir's mountains, lakes, meadows, and valleys—such as Dal Lake, Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Sonamarg—are major tourism exports. Tourists spend money to experience these natural attractions, generating income for local communities.

2. Cultural and Heritage Attractions

Mughal gardens, historical monuments, shrines, temples, and traditional architecture are cultural exports that attract heritage and religious tourists.

3. Handicrafts and Local Products

Pashmina shawls, carpets, papier-mâché, walnut wood items, saffron, dry fruits, and spices are tangible tourism exports purchased by visitors and taken to other regions and countries.

4. Hospitality and Services

Houseboats, hotels, guesthouses, shikara rides, guides, and transport services represent service exports consumed by tourists during their stay.

5. Adventure and Leisure Tourism

Activities such as skiing in Gulmarg, trekking, camping, and eco-tourism experiences are important non-material exports.

Overall, tourism exports help promote Kashmir globally, support livelihoods, preserve cultural traditions, and contribute significantly to regional economic development.

(ii) Tourism Imports of Kashmir

Tourism imports of Kashmir refer to the goods, services, capital, skills, and ideas that enter the region from outside to support and sustain the tourism industry. With the growth and modernization of tourism, Kashmir has increasingly depended on such imports to meet the expectations of domestic and foreign tourists. One of the major tourism imports is infrastructure and capital investment. Hotels, resorts, transport facilities, communication networks, and tourism-related construction materials are often sourced from outside the valley. These investments have helped improve accommodation standards and accessibility to tourist destinations like Srinagar, Gulmarg, and Pahalgam. Another significant tourism import is technology and sophisticated services. Online booking platforms, digital marketing technologies, innovative hotel management systems, ski equipment, and adventure tourism gear are all primarily imported. These technologies have turned conventional tourism into a more structured and globalized enterprise. Human skills and professional experience are important tourism imports. Outside institutions usually provide training in hospitality administration, adventure sports, guiding, and language abilities, which has an impact on service quality and professionalism. Tourism also leads to the import of consumer goods such as packaged food, beverages, luxury items, furniture, and decorative materials used in hotels and houseboats. In addition, global tourism concepts like eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, and wellness tourism are imported ideas that are adapted to local conditions. While tourism imports have improved quality and competitiveness, excessive dependence can cause economic leakage. Therefore,

balancing imports with strong local production is essential for sustainable tourism development in Kashmir.

Tourism Transformation and Its Impact

The combination of tourist imports and exports has transformed Kashmir from a traditional leisure and pilgrimage destination to a multifaceted tourism economy. While tourism exports have increased cultural visibility and cash production, an overreliance on imports risks economic leakage. Sustainable tourist planning seeks to enhance local exports while minimizing unneeded imports, so assuring community engagement and cultural preservation.

TOURISM IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY AFTER 1947

The year 1947 marked a turning point in the history of tourism in the Kashmir Valley. With the end of Dogra rule and the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, tourism entered a new phase shaped by political change, state intervention, and modern planning. Despite initial disruptions caused by Partition-related conflict, tourism soon emerged as a key sector for economic development in the valley.

Early Post-Independence Phase (1947–1960s)

In the years immediately after 1947, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir recognized tourism as an important source of employment and revenue. Institutional frameworks were created with the establishment of the Tourism Department, which took responsibility for promotion, infrastructure development, and regulation. Improved road connectivity, restoration of hotels and houseboats, and publicity campaigns helped revive tourist inflow. Srinagar, Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Sonamarg became the main centers of tourist activity.

Expansion and Popularization (1970s–1980s)

The 1970s and 1980s are often regarded as the golden phase of modern tourism in Kashmir. The valley gained national and international popularity as a leisure destination. Bollywood films shot extensively in Kashmir, projecting its scenic beauty to a global audience. Gulmarg developed as a winter sports destination, while Pahalgam and Sonamarg emerged as major summer resorts. Tourism infrastructure expanded with new hotels, guest houses, transport services, and travel agencies, providing livelihoods to thousands of local people.

Decline during the Period of Insurgency (1990s)

Tourism suffered a severe setback in the early 1990s due to political instability and armed conflict. Tourist arrivals declined sharply, houseboats remained vacant, and many people dependent on tourism lost their means of livelihood. This period represents the most challenging phase in the post-1947 tourism history of Kashmir, disrupting decades of growth.

Revival and Diversification (2000s onwards)

From the early 2000s, gradual improvement in the security situation led to a revival of tourism. Government initiatives focused on confidence-building measures, infrastructure renewal, and destination diversification. Adventure tourism, eco-tourism, pilgrimage tourism, and heritage tourism gained importance alongside traditional leisure tourism. Events, festivals, and improved air connectivity further boosted tourist inflow. In recent years, tourism in Kashmir has shown resilience, adapting to changing political and economic conditions. Emphasis has increasingly been placed on sustainable tourism, community participation, and cultural preservation to ensure long-term growth. Tourism after 1947 in the Kashmir Valley reflects a dynamic trajectory of growth, decline, and revival. Despite recurring challenges, tourism continues to remain a vital sector, deeply linked with Kashmir's economy, culture, and global image.

CONCLUSION

Kashmir Valley has rightly earned the title of a timeless tourist destination due to its enduring natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and deep historical continuity. From ancient times, when scholars, pilgrims, and travelers were drawn by its serene landscapes and centers of learning, to the Mughal era that transformed the valley into a symbol of royal leisure through gardens and architectural marvels, tourism has remained an integral part of Kashmir's historical identity. The Dogra and colonial periods introduced modern infrastructure, linking Kashmir to wider tourism networks, while the post-1947 era witnessed both expansion and challenges shaped by political realities. Despite periods of decline, particularly during times of unrest, tourism in the Kashmir Valley has shown remarkable resilience and capacity for revival. Its ability to adapt through diversification into heritage, pilgrimage, adventure, and eco-tourism highlights the valley's dynamic character. Overall, the historical evolution of tourism in Kashmir reflects a harmonious interaction between nature, culture, and history, ensuring its continued relevance and appeal as a timeless destination for generations to come.

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