

# CONVERSATIONS ON THE EDGE OF DAL LAKE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TOURISM, UNCERTAINTY AND POVERTY AMONG THE SHIKARA RIDERS IN DISTRICT SRINAGAR OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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## ABSTRACT

The current study intends to explore the prevalence and nature of poverty faced by the boatmen in district Srinagar due to lockdown imposed in the aftermath of de-operationalization of article 370 of the constitution of India, which gave special status to the then state of Jammu and Kashmir. Based on primary data collected by interviewing twenty boatmen, this study seeks to examine the challenges faced by the boatmen during the lockdown and alternative methods adopted by them to earn their livelihood. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Open-ended interviews, field observations and case studies proved helpful in collecting the required data. After critical analysis of data, the key themes that emerged are (i) political instability, (ii) seasonal dependence and (iii) lack of infrastructure. The study results revealed the widespread prevalence of poverty and uncertainty among the shikhara drivers of Dal Lake. The government help, if any, has proven too little to solve their main problems.

**Keywords:** *Poverty; Political instability; Tourism; Shikara riders; Government apathy*

## INTRODUCTION

Being one of the oldest civilisations in the world, India is a medley of multiverse experiences. India features among the most popular tourist destinations globally because of its culture, heritage, history and other forms of myriad attractions. Covering about 32,87,263 sq. km, India has diverse geographical landscapes such as the Himalayas in the North, tropical rainforests in the South, the Bay of Bengal in the East and deserts in the West within its territory. There is a good reason for calling Kashmir the Switzerland of Asia. The region of Kashmir is surrounded by high and low altitude mountains from all sides, has a pleasant climate, gushing water streams, alpine forests, vast grazing fields, and numerous other attractive places to draw tourists from all over the world to enjoy its scenic beauty. The World Tourism Organisation (2021) regards tourists as people "travelling to and residing in places outside their habitual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes". In India, some states and Union Territories (UTs) like Kashmir, Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala where tourism plays an essential role in the region's economy. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is also known for the tradition of pilgrimage and tourism and has almost all forms of tourism, such as religious, historical, and leisure tourism (Sachdeva and Ganai, 2017). The travel and tourism industry is one of the most vital sectors because it generates income, promotes interaction, improves social development and creates jobs (Sofronov, 2017). The tourism industry in Kashmir is faced with both external and internal troubles. Given all these challenges, J&K is the only region in India with zero crime records against tourists (PTI, 2018). The doubts and fears spread on social media or electronic media are not based on facts, but rather some incidents presented out of context or are completely fake news. The main problems in tourism development in J&K are political instability (Shah, Wani and Mustafa, 2013; Khaki et al., 2016), poor air connectivity, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate road transport facilities, lack of human resources, and the mismanagement of funds (Wani, Mir and Akhter, 2016) meant to upgrade the tourism industry.

One of the most enjoyable and relaxing ways to enjoy the scenic beauty of Srinagar is by taking a ride in a shikara in Dal Lake. Nehru Park, Char-Chinari, Hazratbal mosque, Nishat and Shalimar gardens are some places one can enjoy with a shikara ride. In order to break the monotony in life, breaking the routine to enjoy and experience new things is essential to retain balance in life. Travel and tourism help an individual to enjoy new places and experience new

things hassle-free. In this manner, tourism may be considered a social phenomenon (Ritchie, Burns and Palmer, 2005). Apart from social, recreational and economic benefits, tourism plays a crucial role in cross-cultural exchange. It helps individuals see and acknowledge new forms of lifestyle and traditions, listen to new languages, interact with people from different backgrounds, and appreciate the world's diversity. Tourism also helps conserve local art, craft, drama, music and places and monuments of historical importance. Globally, tourism can raise the pace of development, especially in the developing countries of the world. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates, tourism receipts hit a record by earning US \$1075 billion in 2012 globally (Mir, 2014). Being a tourist spot throughout the year, Kashmir has vast potential to draw the attention of tourists, both national and international, towards its art and culture, scenic beauty and religious places. Kashmir also produces various handicraft products, including woodcrafts, pottery, jewel stones, carpets, shawls, rugs, paper Machie etc. Though the potential of large-scale industries in Kashmir is inadequate, the tourism industry has immense potential to develop by leaps and bounds. One of the main reasons for not realising the tourism potential in the region of Kashmir is conflict and political instability. As a result, both national and international investment is meagre in the region. Travel and tourism remain at the edge in times of turbulence. Peace and stability is quintessential for the growth and development of any region; Kashmir is no exception.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The study has the following two-fold objectives

1. To assess the impact of lockdown in the aftermath of abrogation of article 370 of the constitution of India on the tourism industry of district Srinagar of Jammu and Kashmir.
2. To examine the coping mechanism(s) and challenges Shikara riders to face in the backdrop of political instability in Kashmir.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In conducting this study, the author used the phenomenological approach. To know the first-hand experience of an individual(s) in detail, phenomenology as an approach is feasible. Belonging to district Srinagar of Jammu and Kashmir, the author seamlessly conducted interviews of Shikara riders. The following criteria were kept in attention for choosing

participants for the interview: (i) 21 or above years in age (ii) resident of district Srinagar of Jammu and Kashmir (iii) associated with Shikara riding for five or more years (iv) permission of the participant. The social and demographic information about participants is given in Table 1. Data saturation was the basis for collecting data as it is the profundity of data and not the number of participants, which helps proper understanding of the different perspectives (Saunders et al., 2018). Twenty working men associated with the Shikara riding were interviewed to understand the impact, challenges, coping mechanisms, and other relevant information related to the tourism industry.

**Table 1: Social and Demographic Profile of the Participants**

Serial No.	Age	Residence	Years of experience
1.	37 years	Semi-Urban	8
2.	34 years	Urban	11
3.	38 years	Urban	16
4.	33 years	Semi-Urban	12
5.	47 years	Urban	9
6.	34 years	Rural	11
7.	37 years	Urban	8
8.	43 years	Rural	22
9.	39 years	Semi-Urban	14
10.	55 years	Urban	16

11.	39 years	Rural	9
12.	35 years	Semi-Urban	11
13.	36 years	Rural	22
14.	30 years	Urban	8
15.	33 years	Rural	13
16	41 years	Urban	22
17	36 years	Semi-Urban	
18	39 years	Urban	18
19	36 years	Urban	12
20	44 years	Urban	19

*Source Field Survey, 2020*

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Before collecting data, either recorded or taking notes and memos, permission was sought from every participant. For those participants who did not wish their names to be documented, their request was upheld. Time limits of the participants were taken into attention; only in the allotted time by the participants' interviews were held. To maintain privacy, only the maiden names of the participants are stated in the socio-demographic division. Family names were omitted deliberately.

## **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

Multiple themes developed from the data collected from the participants. These themes could be broadly categorised into three different experiences that reflect financial constraints resulting from loss of livelihood, loss of trust in government machinery, recourse to menial jobs to sustain their families.

## FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

The economy of J&K has undergone similar structural changes as has happened in the rest of India (Yadav and Josep, 2018). The share of agriculture in GDP has been declining every year while the share of the services sector has been growing (Malik and Rather, 2017). The data reveal that agriculture had recorded a decreasing trend in value from 24.07 in 2010–11 to 16.18 in 2017–18. As per estimates of 2017–18, worked out on regular 2011–12 prices, the share of the secondary sector increased to 27.55 from 24.14 in 2010 and the tertiary sector to 56.27 per cent from 51.67 (Gulzar, Khan and Hamid, 2019). Tourism, the key component of the services sector, plays a crucial role in developing the economy of Jammu and Kashmir as a whole. For many people residing in Kashmir, tourism-related business as their primary source of income until the start of the armed insurgency in 1989 (Ahanger, 2018). Since no permanent solution was reached between government forces and resistance forces, political, social and economic instability in the region continues. However, over the past few years, the government has given tourism very much importance. As a result, the year 2011 saw the arrival of pilgrims in large numbers from around the country.

Income-related inequalities and financial exclusion differ across the states in India. However, the severity of financial exclusion, particularly among the poor households in India, is profound. Shikara riders, locally known as *Naaye Wael*, belong to society's most socially and economically vulnerable groups (Fazal and Amin, 2013). Given the seasonality of their business, economic distress was seen as the primary worry among them. Most of these riders do not have any education and skill set to switch their jobs. Hence all they do in the odd days of tourism is survive on their savings. Since the political instability in the region has cast doubt on tourism, some of the shikara drivers have even lost hope. Participant 12 revealed:

Shikara is my only source of livelihood. I have been riding Shikara for more than 20 years now. We have also seen good days. However, we have always lived in one or another kind of fear. As far as I remember, there always has been conflict and political instability in Kashmir. Even my father and grandfather have a lot to speak about the Kashmir conflict. Nevertheless, the announcement of the government for tourists to leave Kashmir was very fearful and different. None has been asked to leave Kashmir even during the '90s when insurgency was at its peak.

On the issue of financial constraints, participant 6 revealed:

When there is some stability in the region, we earn 100-1500 Rs per day. But after article 370 was abrogated, there was none in Kashmir. Leave alone people from another place; even the locals were caged inside their home. Our Shikaras were idle on the dock for more than three months. As the government allowed tourists after some four months, winters had arrived, only a few tourists enjoy Shikara in winters. So, all year long, except for the initial two months, we had no source of livelihood. I sold bangles of my wife to sustain ourselves in lockdown.

Having gone through a lot of problems due to lack of money in lockdown, participant 9 said:

When you do not have money and have a family to feed, humiliation and restlessness overwhelm a human being. Life was very much miserable then. Not once have we got new clothes for our children. Even on the day of Eid, my children wore old clothes, and I did not give them *Eedie* [Money given on the day of Eid]. Article 370 was already emptied by the government of India successively; imposing such a harsh curfew was not necessary. Already all the political leaders, both separatists and mainstream, were behind bars. None would have united the people massively to protest against the abrogation of this article. It was all game of India to break the will of the people of Kashmir and show them who is the real boss. In all this political drama, it is ordinary people like you and me who are badly hit. All the leaders are united behind the curtains; even if curfew remains imposed for a decade, they have nothing to lose at all.

As a result of lack of money, participants revealed that they were under overwhelming stress, which called upon their physical and mental well-being and overall quality of life. As a result, some families' social harmony was damaged mainly due to increased depression and frustration due to lockdown in the valley.

## **GOVERNMENT APATHY**

The government of India has taken a progressive step in the contemporary poverty alleviation schemes by going beyond linking poverty with lack of money. It is increasing the poor people's

capabilities by creating opportunities and capacity building by better educational, health, and skill development to live meaningful and dignified lives. Some of the latest schemes developed by the government, such as Skill India, are living examples of a new attitude of the government. India is a socialist state and has a constitutional obligation to protect its vulnerable sections (Mohsin, 2020). Help from the government to such sections is not charity. Instead, it is the state's constitutional duty. Not helping such citizens lays bare the apathy of government machinery. Government can help its citizens in different ways, say through monetary benefits, non-monetary benefits or providing some incentives to resolve their issues. In the case of Shikara riders, a little help arrived that too late, and in other cases, there was no help from the government. Participant 12 revealed:

If you happen to see the local or national news, you think everything is taken care of by the government. In reality, in times of distress, there is none to stand by your side. I received a sum of 1 thousand rupees in 8 months. Most of my fellow Shikara riders did not even get that. How can a person survive on one thousand rupees for eight months! There is no one to listen to our grievances; all the money meant for poor sections of society does not reach them. Corruption in government offices has deepened from peon to principal.

Speaking of government apathy, participant 9 revealed:

Big promises on the TV screen does not change anything on the ground. They say there would be development in the region after article 370 is abrogated; when will that development come. It has been months since that article has been erased, and nothing has changed. The only thing that happened is that people lost their jobs, mental well-being, and hope for a better future. News channels implant some Kashmiris and give them money to speak precisely what Indian people want to hear, but in reality, they [read government] have lead Kashmir and its people into a dark abyss by their unilateral decisions.

## **COOPING STRATEGY**

As per a report on India of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2017, the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the



industry, was eight per cent of total employment (41,622,500 jobs). This was expected to rise by 3.1 per cent in 2018 to 42,898,000 jobs and by two per cent per annum to 52,279,000 jobs in 2028 (8.4 per cent of the total). Tourism is a popular source of revenue for both the private and public sectors.

A substantial share of the labour force in the Kashmir valley is reliable in the tourism and allied sectors. Hotels, the transport industry, local restaurants, local craftsmen and women are among those who are directly or indirectly impacted by tourism in Kashmir. Since this labour force is unskilled and uneducated (Aykac, 2010), tourism and allied activities are the only sources of livelihood. Some studies reveal a positive relationship between tourism and the development of a region. Participant 16 revealed:

During the lockdown, I used to sell plastic items on the main gate of my house. Since the market was completely closed down, that was the only place safe for me to sell those items. For many days, I did not earn a single rupee. I had got Shikara on lease for one year, having used it just for two months, and everything was closed down. I had to get money from my relatives and friends to give Shikara owner his lease money. Depending on tourism for living is the most foolish business idea one can have. I never wish my sons to depend on Shikara riding to earn their living. This can be a part-time job, but never should anyone entirely depend on it.

Causes of stress can be multiple. While Kashmir was cut off physically and digitally from the world in the aftermath of de operationalisation of article 370 of the constitution of India, people lost their income and jobs, contact with their loved ones and all-around day and night frequent police raids were happening (Tribune News Service, 2020). Many people lost mental balance as well. People made themselves busy writing personal diaries, watching dramas and movies and other sorts of indoor entertainments. However, this was not enough to ward off the economic distress. Most of the people had to recourse to low earning jobs to earn their living. In this connection, participant 3 revealed:

I just used to stay idle at home at the beginning of lockdown. Since there was no communication either, all of us were not feeling mentally well. Then I told a colleague of mine to give me a temporary job. He introduced me to a vegetable seller. Then I used to buy vegetables from him predawn and sell them in the local market all day. I used to earn 200 to 300 Rs profit. When the lockdown was eased, even then, there were no

tourists. I have permanently switched to selling vegetables now because I feel there is more security in selling vegetables in Kashmir than opting for hospitality and tourism services

Among the unhealthy coping mechanisms, resorting to drug abuse, alcoholism and gambling was also observed among several participants.

## **CONCLUSION**

The tourism industry is one of the leading employers in the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Nevertheless, for over three decades, the industry has seen feeble employment outcomes. The findings of this study show that there has been a rapid decline of tourists in the Kashmir division. The critical reasons for this decrease are local and cross border militancy, state policies, the boiling conflict with Pakistan on the line of control and negative publicity of the media. The industry will remain in an unfortunate condition if due steps are not taken in the future. This will parallelly ruin all other parameters of development in the region as well. The economy of Kashmir is the economics of ambiguity and turmoil. All this has had severe consequences on social, political and economic development. The extended political instability has created what economists call macroeconomic instability and crisis volatility, which refers to dangerous shocks exceeding specific cut-off points. To correct this, the periodic shutdowns, curfews and other costs of unrest must be brought to an end, and the policy of repression needs to be replaced by conciliation measures to restore normality and enhance the economy of the region.

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