

Sustainability in Trekking Traditions: A Sociological Perspective on Kashmir's Hiking Practices

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ABSTRACT

Trekking holds deep cultural, social, and historical significance in Kashmir, where the region's majestic landscapes and traditional practices have shaped its socio-cultural identity. This study examines trekking traditions through a sociological perspective, exploring their historical evolution, cultural relevance, and profound impact on local communities. Trekking in Kashmir is not merely a recreational activity; it reflects community values, collective heritage, and a vital connection between people and nature. The paper explores how trekking practices foster a sense of community identity, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to cultural preservation. It also highlights trekking's role in promoting sustainable tourism, offering economic benefits while emphasizing environmental stewardship. The paper investigates the governmental role and initiatives for preserving trekking traditions, including policies that support eco-friendly tourism and the involvement of local communities. By analyzing sustainability in trekking and hiking traditions, the research identifies ways to balance growth with environmental and cultural protection. It also addresses challenges faced by traditional trekking practices, such as environmental degradation, the influence of modernization, and the loss of cultural authenticity, proposing strategies for revitalizing these traditions while ensuring their sustainability. The review provides a comprehensive understanding of how trekking interconnects with the social, cultural, and ecological dynamics of Kashmir.

Keywords: Hiking, Trekking, Environmental degradation, Commercialization, Sustainability

Introduction

Trekking in Kashmir is not merely an outdoor activity; it is a profound practice intertwined with the region's cultural and historical tapestry. The breathtaking landscapes of the Himalayas, characterized by lush valleys and towering peaks, have long attracted adventurers and nature enthusiasts (Apollo, 2017). This practice has evolved over centuries, reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics of the Kashmiri people (Aijazi, 2018). In history, trekking in Kashmir dates back to ancient times, when nomadic tribes including the Gujjars and Bakerwals used to traverse these mountains in search of grazing lands for their livestock (Badam, 2001). Seasonal migrations helped nurture a deep connection with the land, shaping the kind of unique cultural identity that is very much alive today. As tourism picked up in the 19th century, more established trekking routes were embarked upon by not only local trekkers but international tourists seeking to experience the natural beauty and rich heritage of Kashmir (Lawrence, 1895; Baloch et al., 2023). Trekking goes a long way towards giving expression to community identity and helping maintain cultural heritage in Kashmir (Dar, 2014). The amount of business generated through the guidance and accommodation services provided by locals enhance the economic benefits, which are self-perpetuating in terms of the reinforcement of social ties (Dar, 2014). Much cultural information and values are conveyed through storytelling and the presentation of local cuisine during trekking. Such events as the Kashmir Great Lakes Trek make the cultural interplay complete, letting trekkers actually experience the folklore and traditions of the region (Byers and Shrestha, 2022). Trekking is becoming well understood as a means of sustainable tourism development in Kashmir. Sustainable practices focus on responsible tourism to not only protect the fragile environment of the Himalayas but also

support local economies (Hussain Najar, 2023). Practices such as preserving traditional trekking routes not only conserve the environment but also contribute to environmental awareness among locals and visitors. Modern challenges, however, are a threat to these traditional practices. The danger of rapid modernization and environmental degradation threatens the sustainability of trekking in Kashmir. The resultant commercial tourism has led to over-exploitation of natural resources, with changing lifestyles resulting in decreasing traditional skills related to trekking. Climate change impact such as glacial melting that affects the landscape as well as the livelihoods of those dependent on the features formed by these ecosystems. Trekking in Kashmir is a multifaceted practice that embodies historical evolution, cultural significance, community identity, and sustainable development. As modernization continues to challenge these traditions, there is an imperative call for concerted efforts in order to preserve this unique facet of Kashmiri heritage while making sure the aspect stays beautiful and rich enough to be experienced by successive generations.

Review of Literature

A review of literature is a critical analysis of existing information regarding a given topic in order to present an overview of what is already known, identify areas lacking, and place the current study in the broader academic context. It is crucial for a review paper as it synthesizes previous work, determines the relevance of the topic, and points out open questions or problems. This would be to ensure the understanding of the subject matter and avail guidance for future research. For this study, the following papers have been reviewed:

A Long Walk in the Himalaya: A Trek from the Ganges to Kashmir by Garry Weare in 2007 is an exciting journey into the country's euphoric landscapes and cultures. Weare drives his narrative as he shares his subjective journey through the Himalayas, including the challenges and rewards of trekking from the Ganges to Kashmir. From being a tourist travelogue, the book ventures into the historical and cultural importance of the terrain passed through, thus giving readers an idea of local customs and culture. Vivid descriptions and reflections by Weare make this a great read for trekking enthusiasts and armchair adventurers alike, pointing out the charm of Kashmir as a trekking destination.

Rao, A., & Casimir, M. J. (2016) adequately discusses the peoples and cultures of the Kashmir Himalayas as being strongly interlinked with trekking and hiking practices that serve both as a mode of exploration and as a point of access to the rich cultural heritage of this region. Trekking in Kashmir has gained popularity in recent times, with local communities embracing this activity increasingly as a form of recreation and cultural expression. Trekking routes, such as the Tarsar Marsar Trek and the Kashmir Great Lakes Trek, vary in diversity, reflecting unique alpine lakes and snow-capped peaks. It is also an opportunity to appreciate local cultures and traditions. Historically, trekking was one of the ways locals used to get about in their mountainous landscape, their strong sense of community and identity building up over centuries. In fact, since 2013, trekking clubs have sprouted all over the place, further deepening the rapport that beckons people together, sharing experiences and the love for local culture. This rise in trekking has, however, come with challenges, such as the unsustainable use of tourism to save the vulnerable ecosystems and cultural sites. With more and more people turning to the mountains for solace and adventure, preserving the cultural landscape of Kashmir becomes necessary while retaining the enjoyment of such natural wonders.

M.A. Mir in 2021 examines the multifaceted relationship between tourism and local cultures in "Host Community's Perception towards Socio-Cultural Impacts of Tourism: An Anthropological Study of Host Destinations of Kashmir." It is found how trekking, carried out in places like Gulmarg, attracts visitors but also significantly contributes to holding in place local traditions and boosting community pride. Mir underlines that trekking, though enhancing economic opportunities among the locals, raises some issues like commodifying the culture. The study informs of the issue in which sustainable tourism practices respect and integrate the socio-cultural fabric of host communities so that trekking can still be an experience for tourists and within the context of locals.

Aijazi, O. (2018) in "Kashmir as Movement and Multitude" explains the cultural importance of trekking through Kashmir, creating a strong sense of bridging communities and preserving such traditions within the local place. The narrative highlights that trekking up the trails not only gives one complete views but also raises significant opportunities for interactions amongst the trekkers in relation to local populations, hence vastly enriching the cultural exchange. Aijazi observes, "Trekking is personal as well as social activity, which in a way enables the trekkers to experience the cultural historical milieu of the region." This anthropological approach underlines the necessity of sustainable trekking practices that respect and enhance the socio-cultural fabric of Kashmir; thus, both visitor and local people benefit from these shared experiences.

S. Singh in (2004) elaborates on the significance of trekking in the cultural as well as spiritual scenario in the Indian Himalayas, especially in Kashmir. The Vaishno Devi pilgrimage is a good example where devotees walk 12 kilometers in difficult conditions from Katra to reach the sacred cave at 5,200 feet. This pilgrimage isn't just a physical exercise but also a deep-spirited experience, which allows trekkers to be in touch with the region's rich heritage and traditions. Singh describes this trek, which helps to enhance community ties and contributes to the local economy while preserving their cultural practices, as one that embodies the need for sustainable tourism respecting not only the environment but the socio-cultural fabric of Kashmir.

M. Apollo (2017) goes to great length to explain why trekking is an important cultural and recreational activity in the Kashmir area. The author points out that trekking routes, like those heading to picturesque

locations like Kedarnath and the Vaishno Devi shrine, are not only good locales but also paths for spiritual journeys. Trekking is also anchored in rich local traditions and dates back hundreds of years; it therefore reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of communities in Jammu and Kashmir. According to Apollo, trekking connects tourists with local cultures while encouraging sustainable tourism, which preserves the cultural heritage of the Himalayas. This intertwining of adventure and cultural exploration explains the role that trekking plays in both building personal experiences and community identity in Kashmir.

M.S. Wani et al (2023) highlight the importance of trekking for the Kashmir Valley and, at the same time, for locals. The tourism practice has proven to be a cultural as well as economic activity, besides helping people get an in-depth understanding of the customs and lifestyles of the people living there. The trekking routes, for instance, at Gulmarg and Pahalgam, present unique experiences in adventure tourism, allowing the trekkers to relate with the tremendous cultural heritage of the place. The authors discuss this further by indicating that tourism development contributes to their pockets financially but only if the socio-cultural dimensions are taken into account about indigenous people, thus letting the safe trekking practices that respect the way of life. This emphasis on responsible trekking practices is crucial for preserving Kashmir's natural beauty and cultural identity amidst the pressures of modern tourism.

Singh, et, al (2024) discussed that Kashmir treks provide an exclusive experience to explore the marvelous vastness in the region, while at the same time promoting sustainably conducted tourism. The variety of landscapes covers lush meadows as well as rough mountains, and thus, many trekking routes exist for all skill levels. Trek to the Dudhpathri, which is a pristine place that offers trails down to Tosa Maidan, while in Pahalgam, the gentle slopes and tremendous sceneries are amazing. In addition, horse riding is another complementary activity with trekking where visitors can travel through difficult terrains with minimal impact on the environment. This combination of adventure activities would not only encourage a tourist's stay but also benefits the local economy through rural tourism initiatives with sustainable approaches to this exploration of Kashmir's rich cultural and natural heritage.

Badam, G. L. (2001) examines that Trekking in Kashmir is a quintessential intermingling of natural beauty along with being culturally rich. It makes the Indian Himalayas an experience way above the ordinary. What the region does boast of are treks such as the Kashmir Great Lakes Trek, those amazing alpine lakes and breathtaking mountain vistas, and also Tarsar Marsar that has two lakes present within meadows filled with vibrant colors. The treks also offer a rich opportunity to engage with local communities so that trekkers can immerse themselves in the real cultural heritage of Kashmir while enjoying a diverse range of landscapes, from lush valleys to snow-capped peaks. The best time to trek will be in June and September, when trails are accessible, and the scenery is at its most breathtaking. Whether beginners or experienced hikers, they will enjoy an unforgettable adventure.

Tiwari & Rani (2024) examines trekking in Kashmir is an adventure of unparalleled beauty, encompassed by majestic mountains and pretty meadows, and alpine lakes. Thousands take on the popular routes like the Kashmir Great Lakes Trek or Tarsar Marsar Trek every year, conquered by the sheer beauty and the cultural heritage attached to the region. This rising number of tourists takes a lot out of these ecologically fragile places, littering them and resource depletion. There are initiatives promoting responsible trekking practices and environmental conservation, thereby ensuring that the natural beauty of Kashmir is preserved for future generations while availing sustainable economic opportunities for local communities.

Karim, et, al (2022) Treks and trekking: The premier destination for trekking and hiking fans, Kashmir offers a wide variety of trails that reflect the beautiful landscape of the region. Modernization and ecological degradation can be considered as major obstacles for traditional trekking activities. Local ecosystems become overstrained due to overcrowded trails and increased waste generated by tourists. Modern amenities have benefited this scenario but also brought in relatively unprepared trekkers who lack respect towards both nature and local culture. But infrastructure building makes the natural habitats get destroyed and also reduces the authenticity of the trekking experience. This holds in making the sustainability of trekking in Kashmir at stake while preserving its unique cultural heritage, which will be driven towards a balanced tourism approach that understands both the health of the ecology and community participation.

Byers & Shrestha (2022) examines the Himalayan alpine ecosystems, particularly in regions such as Kashmir, face new challenges to adventure tourism in the 21st century, especially concerning trekking and hiking activities. These are vital ecosystems for biodiversity that house quite unique flora and fauna and are increasingly threatened by modernization and environmental degradation. Habitat loss and increased waste through overcrowding result from trekking tourism, while climate change continues to impair the delicate balances of these ecosystems, leading to a shift in vegetation cover and animal populations. The culture and tradition to conserve sustainable grazing and medicinal herb harvesting are being violated by modern infrastructure and commercial exploitation. Restoration and protection of these fragile alpine environments require effective conservation strategies that integrate local community engagement, support sustainable trekking and hiking practices respectful of both nature and culture.

Rashid (2018) explores the Himalayan alpine ecosystems, mainly in areas such as Kashmir, challenge new adventure tourism in the 21st century in terms of trekking and hiking activities. These are extremely biodiversity-supporting areas for unique flora and fauna but are increasingly threatened by modernization and environmental degradation. Overcrowding from trekking tourism leads to habitat destruction and increased waste, while climate change alters the delicate balance of these ecosystems, causing shifts in the distribution of

vegetation and wildlife populations. Traditional practices, such as sustainable grazing and harvesting of medicinal herbs, are being undermined by commercial exploitation and the introduction of modern infrastructure. Rising adventure sports, such as skiing, rafting, and mountain biking, further add pressure to these sensitive habitats. Thus, the restoration and protection of these alpine ecosystems can only be enhanced by linking conservation to a favorable approach from local communities and sustainable trekking and hiking that respects nature and culture.

Kohli, M. S. (2000) makes a strong case about the attraction of trekking and climbing adventure in the Himalayas, especially in Kashmir, which is known for its breathtaking beauty and adventure opportunities. However, such activities remain majorly deterred from thriving in this region due to modernization and ecological degradation. High levels of touristic activity have resulted in crowded trails with habitat destruction and increased litter. In addition, the impacts of climate change on higher temperatures as well as altered precipitation patterns further exacerbate these challenges. Sustainable practices in trekking and adventure sports are important to preserve the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage with a responsible tourism model that benefits local communities.

Objectives

1. To analyze the role of trekking in fostering community identity and cultural heritage in Kashmir.
2. To explore the relationship between trekking practices and sustainable tourism development in Kashmir, and to assess the sustainability of trekking and hiking traditions in the region.
3. To investigate the challenges faced by traditional trekking practices due to modernization and environmental degradation
4. To discuss the governmental role and initiatives in preserving and promoting trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir.

Statement of the Problem

Trekking traditions in Kashmir are deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of the region. Modernization, environmental degradation, and changing tourism dynamics have plunged this activity into some critical challenges. Historical importance and development of community identity and cultural heritage notwithstanding, these practices face threats from erosion of cultural authenticity and increasing pressure on the environment. The potential of trekking towards sustainable tourism remains largely unexplored. The review addresses these issues by looking at the historical development of trekking in Kashmir, analyzing its socio-cultural significance, and investigating its role in community cohesion and heritage preservation. It also identifies challenges that hinder the sustainability of these practices and brings forward strategies to preserve and promote trekking traditions as an integral aspect of Kashmir's identity. It underlines the urgency of protecting these traditions for subsequent generations.

Methodology

The review paper adopted a descriptive and qualitative methodology to explore the trekking and hiking traditions of Kashmir. The study synthesizes existing literature, including journal articles, research papers, government reports, and case studies, to analyze the socio-cultural, historical, and ecological dimensions of trekking in the region. By using a descriptive approach, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution of these traditions, their role in fostering community identity, and their contributions to sustainable tourism. The qualitative aspect of the methodology focuses on analyzing non-numerical data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. It examines how trekking and hiking practices in Kashmir reflect broader socio-cultural dynamics, addressing challenges like environmental degradation and modernization. By interpreting existing studies and expert opinions, the research uncovers gaps and proposes strategies for preserving these traditions. This method ensures an in-depth understanding of the subject and supports the development of actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders in cultural preservation and sustainable tourism.

Theoretical Framework

Trekking traditions in Kashmir reflect a rich interplay of culture and history and social dynamics, thus making for a fascinating sociological subject. The majesty of the region's landscapes and vistas has been used as a backdrop for communal bonding, spiritual reflection, and cultural expression for years. Three theoretical frameworks can be applied to analyze these trekking practices through a sociological lens: Symbolic Interactionism by George Herbert Mead (focusing on the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences), Social Identity Theory by Henri Tajfel (considering how group membership influences self-concept and behavior), and Sustainable Development Theory by Gro Harlem Brundtland (developed in order to meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs). Symbolic Interactionism is applicable in understanding the way trekkers in Kashmir create shared meanings around

their experiences, like communal bonds formed during trekking, which enhances social cohesion. This theory would elucidate whether the local folklore that exists in a region, like proverbs that talk about friendship forged in mountains, enhances the value of the trekking experience. Social Identity Theory applies to the way trekking fosters a sense of belonging among participants, particularly within local communities that identify strongly with their natural environment and cultural heritage. This identity is critical as it fosters local pride and community resilience under external pressures. Lastly, Sustainable Development Theory applies since it caters for the balance between promoting tourism and preserving unique ecological and cultural landscapes in Kashmir. Modernization and degradation of environment have created challenges in the form of sustainable practicum in the protecting environment as well as the socio-cultural fabric of These theories together provide a significant framework for the analysis of complexities surrounding the trekking traditions of Kashmir, placing emphasis on their cultural significance and the need for sustainability in the tourism practices.

Result and Discussion

Historical evolution of trekking traditions in Kashmir and their socio-cultural significance

Trekking in Kashmir has deep roots in the region's culture, with ancient routes serving multiple purposes, including trade, pilgrimage, and exploration (Lawrence, 1895). Historically, these paths facilitated the movement of goods and people across the rugged terrain, connecting various communities. The Silk Road, for instance, passed through parts of Kashmir, allowing traders to exchange spices, textiles, and other commodities with neighboring regions (Kohli, 2000). The trekking traditions in Kashmir have undergone great changes over centuries because of the rich history, different cultures, and wonderful landscapes in the region (Karim et al., 2022). Kashmir has been always a crossroads of several civilizations throughout history. Its early references are found in ancient Vedic texts. Earlier known as "Sharada Peeth," it was revered by the goddess Saraswati and later turned out to become a center for Buddhism during Emperor Ashoka's reign in the 3rd century BCE. This early cultural context provided the beginning of a tradition of pilgrimage and exploration which would continue throughout the ages (Karim et al., 2022).

During the medieval period, particularly since the late 16th century under the Mughals, Kashmir became a preferred retreat for emperors such as Akbar and his successors. The visits of Akbar in 1589 and the subsequent years not only popularized the region as a summer destination but established routes that assisted royal expeditions as well as local trade. Mughal gardens, which have been known for their beauty, were often accessed through these trails and entrenched trekking into the socio-cultural flavor of Kashmir. The appreciation of the Mughals for nature and aesthetics led to customary usages of local populace in Kashmir and made trekking a part of the natural delights that could be savored by the visitors (Jan, 2017). With the formation of the Dogra dynasty and British influence in the 19th century, European adventure and explorers began to take an interest in trekking. Restrictions regarding land ownership raised houseboats on Dal Lake as the icons of Kashmiri hospitality and culture. These developments transformed local lifestyles and facilitated easier access to trekking routes for those interested in witnessing the pristine landscapes of Kashmir (Mir, 2021).

The socio-cultural importance of trekking in Kashmir overshadows mere recreation. It forms an interaction opportunity for those trekkers and local communities such as the Gujjars and Bakerwals, who are traditionally living in these mountains. These visitors cross paths with the local cultures, customs, food, and living scenarios that survived the harshest political conflicts and adversities of the times. The annual influx of trekkers feeds the local economy while creating a sense of pride in heritage for the people (Menon and Kumari, 2022). In fact, trekking in Kashmir is recognized today not just for its ethereal beauty but also for the one that can be used as sustainable tourism (Hall and Myrvang Brown, 2022). Tarsar Marsar and Bodpathri, among several others, not only underline the scenic beauty but also reveal the historical landmarks such as ancient monasteries and traditional villages. As consciousness about eco-tourism increases, there is growing concern over conserving not only the environment but also all cultural traditions linked to trekking. The historical development of trekking traditions in Kashmir has been characterized by a complex interplay between nature, culture, and history. While it commences with old Pilgrim routes, and culminates into contemporary eco-tourism trails, trekking has remained the lifeline of Kashmiri identity and continues to mold its socio-cultural landscape.

Kashmir's Premier Trekking Destinations

Kashmir is home to numerous breathtaking trekking destinations, each offering unique landscapes and experiences (Patel, 2022). The Kashmir Great Lakes Trek, spanning about 72 kilometers, leads trekkers to stunning high-altitude lakes and lush meadows, reaching altitudes of 13,750 feet. The Tarsar Marsar Trek covers about 48 kilometers to the twin lakes of Tarsar and Marsar, beautiful in alpine scenery, while the Bodpathri Tosamaidan Trek showcases ancient ruins of Buddhist monasteries over a distance of 50 kilometers (Rashid, 2018). Nafran Valley Trek, known for its pristine beauty, travels through thick forests and alpine meadows at an elevation of 13,800 feet. The Gurez Valley Trek is aptly described as diversified and easy to moderate, quite suitable for nature lovers. Tulail Valley Trek offers a visit through the breathtaking landscapes and wonderful views. On the other hand, the Gangbal Lake trek commencing from Sonamarg showcases rocky terrains and narrow ridges over about 20 kilometers. Vishansar Lake Trek takes tourists across the beautiful meadows and serene lake located over 12,000 feet above sea level. There is also the one-day trek to Khilanmarg. It leads to lush meadows and to the frozen Alpathar Lake. The Bangus Valley, situated in Kupwara district at a

height of around 10,000 feet, is becoming popular because of its pristine landscape and serene environment (Prabhu, 2022). It is accessible by routes from Handwara or Kupwara and features lush meadows surrounded by mountains and forests. This valley offers various trekking options which lead through beautiful pastures and dense forests, making this one a gem for adventure-seekers (Mitchell, 1983). Each of these treks not only proves to be an adventure but also introduces the trekkers to the rich cultural heritage of Kashmir along with its stunning natural beauty.

Trekking in Kashmir reflects the richness of traditions by rituals, festivals, and community practices (Rani and Sharma, n.d.). The Amarnath Yatra is a big pilgrimage that builds communal ties among thousands of devotees. Festivals like Kheer Bhawani Mela and the Tulip Festival celebrate local culture and gather people together in shared devotion and revelry. Moreover, events like the Saffron Festival emphasize traditional practices and strengthen their identity in the community (Mitra, 2013). The routes of trekking also aid interfaith dialogue, especially at the Urs related to the Muslim saints, which unifies different groups (Rao and Casimir, 2016). In a nutshell, trekking can be considered an important phenomenon of Kashmiri cultural identity and community integration.

Role of trekking in fostering community identity and cultural heritage in Kashmir

Trekking is quite prevalent in the Kashmir Valley, which is characterized by its gross natural landscapes and strong traditional commitments (Singh and Kaur, 1985). There has been a renewed interest in trekking during the past years, especially post-pandemic, that has seen an appreciation of the mountains and valleys that are the fabric of the Kashmiri identity (Tiwari and Rani, 2024). They venture out into the wilderness not just to get fit but also to reconnect with their roots and community relationships. Throughout history, trekking has been inextricably entwined with local life, especially the nomadic groups such as the Gujjars and Bakerwals (Singh et al., 2024). These groups have managed to continue their lifestyle based on herding while crossing the mountains. Here they found specific areas, crafts, music, and folklore that reflected deep relationships between humankind and nature. Trekking permits people to engage directly with the given traditions, something which allows them a sense of belonging and continuity in the broader cultural narrative of Kashmir (Singh, 2004). More specifically, the revitalization of trekking clubs in 2013 also played an active role in this movement. Organized into 18 active groups from a small amount in the beginning, the club has grown due to social media and by means of local initiatives towards more adventure tourism. Hailing Mahmood Ahmad Shah, whose efforts at revitalizing the Jammu and Kashmir Mountaineering and Hiking Club have become crucial in popularizing trekking as a collective activity that fosters deeper bonding among participants (Shah, 2013). By connecting people economically within local communities, trekking is considered a form of economic development. The more the trekkers are visiting Kashmir; opportunities begin to open up for local business, which will eventually contribute to preservation of heritage through increased awareness and appreciation of the tradition (Veblen, 1899). This symbiotic relation of trekking and community identity depicts how outdoor activities may be used to enhance cultural pride along with sustainable tourism practices that respect the region's ecology as well as social fabric.

Governmental role and initiatives for trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir

The government of Jammu and Kashmir plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainable trekking and hiking traditions in the region, particularly given the increasing popularity of trails such as the Kashmir Great Lakes Trek and Tarsar Marsar Trek (Jammu & Kashmir Adventure Tourism Policy, 2021). With trekking tourism surging, especially from 2021 to 2022 when footfall on the Kashmir Great Lakes trail doubled, the need for a structured approach to manage this influx has become paramount (Guidelines for Adventure Tourism Activities, 2023). In response to environmental concerns, the Jammu and Kashmir government initiated several programs aimed at sustainable trekking practices. The Forest, Ecology & Environment Department has been actively involved in establishing trekking routes that prioritize ecological balance (Forest, Ecology & Environment Department, 2024). In 2024, they opened 35 rest houses and inspection huts in forest areas, which not only provide accommodation for trekkers but also serve as educational centers for promoting environmental conservation. These facilities were previously used by officials but are now accessible to nature enthusiasts.

To further enhance sustainability, the government is developing a regulatory framework that includes guidelines for adventure tourism activities. This framework aims to certify adventure tourism companies and register guides, ensuring that all trekking expeditions adhere to environmental standards (Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019). Key components of this regulatory framework include the Jammu and Kashmir Adventure Tourism Policy (2021), which outlines sustainable practices and emphasizes environmental conservation; the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act (2019), which restructured governance and highlighted the need for sustainable resource management; and the proposed Guidelines for Adventure Tourism Activities (2023), aimed at setting safety and environmental impact standards. Experts have emphasized that such regulations are essential to mitigate the adverse effects of unregulated tourism on Kashmir's fragile ecosystems (Lone, 2024).

By implementing these frameworks, the government seeks to protect the natural environment while promoting responsible tourism practices that benefit local communities and preserve Kashmir's unique landscapes for future generations. Training programs for local guides and porters are being implemented to equip them with

skills necessary for promoting eco-friendly practices among trekkers. These initiatives are designed to foster a sense of responsibility towards nature among both locals and tourists. As noted by Riyaz Ahmad Lone of Kashmir Hikes, these efforts are crucial in addressing the challenges posed by climate change and preserving the region's natural beauty (Lone, 2024). The government is also focusing on community involvement in eco-tourism. By engaging local communities in conservation efforts and providing them with economic opportunities through trekking tourism, the administration aims to create a sustainable model that benefits both the environment and local livelihoods. This approach not only helps protect Kashmir's natural resources but also enriches the cultural experiences of trekkers. The governmental initiatives reflect a growing recognition of the need for sustainable practices in trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir. By balancing tourism growth with environmental preservation, these efforts aim to ensure that future generations can enjoy the stunning landscapes of this region without compromising its ecological integrity.

Sustainability in trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir

Sustainability in trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir is increasingly crucial as the region faces environmental pressures from tourism. The Kashmir Great Lakes Trek, which has gained popularity since its establishment in the early 2000s, attracts thousands of trekkers annually (Rashid, 2018). In 2022 alone, the number of trekkers on this trail surged, raising concerns about littering and ecological degradation, particularly around sensitive areas like alpine lakes (Patel, 2022). To mitigate these impacts, eco-tourism initiatives have emerged. These initiatives promote responsible travel practices that minimize environmental footprints while benefiting local communities (Rani & Sharma, 2019). For instance, eco tours in Sonamarg and Pahalgam emphasize guided treks along established paths to protect fragile ecosystems (Prabhu, 2022).

In 2024, eco-friendly practices are being actively promoted through local awareness programs that educate trekkers on waste management and conservation (Wani et al., 2023). The Jammu & Kashmir government has recognized the need for sustainable tourism regulations. This includes training local guides in eco-friendly practices and encouraging the "Leave No Trace" principles among trekkers (Weare, 2007). These measures aim to balance the influx of tourists with environmental preservation, ensuring that future generations can enjoy Kashmir's natural beauty. Trekking organizations are increasingly adopting sustainable practices such as carrying reusable water bottles and avoiding single-use plastics (Rao & Casimir, 2016). By fostering a culture of sustainability, trekking in Kashmir can continue to thrive while protecting its unique landscapes and biodiversity for years to come. As climate change accelerates, prioritizing sustainable trekking practices is essential for safeguarding this pristine environment.

Relationship between trekking practices and sustainable tourism development in the region

The relationship between trekking practices and sustainable tourism development in the region has gained maximum attention, particularly since the early 2000s (Kohli, 2000). These places, including majestic mountains, lush valleys, and immense biodiversity, attract trekkers from all over the world (Hall & Myrvang Brown, 2022). However, the growing number of visitors has brought forth a sense of environmental degradation and the long-term sustainability of tourism practices in this region (Karim et al., 2022). To these, the "Green Trails J&K" initiative was initiated in 2018. This stresses ecotourism while contributing to wilderness conservation through active participation from local communities (Jan, 2017). The visitors are called to participate in waste management and tree planting activities that would give minimal ecological footprint while trekking and would also help them ensure more preservation of natural resources. Through training and resources allocated to them, local communities are well positioned to take stewardship over their environment (Karim et al., 2022).

Sustainable trekking practices have also become significant contributors to the local economy. Eco-tourism activities since 2010 have generated significant revenue and employed many residents (Hussain Najar, 2023). Home stay and eco-park promotion offer opportunities for the authentic culture of Kashmir but allow economic benefits to be dispersed to local populations. This is vital to ensure the successful development of tourism and the protection of the environment. Still, challenges persist. Issues of infrastructure development, waste management, and equilibrate needs from tourists with those of local communities also demand careful planning and collaboration among stakeholders (Karim et al., 2022). Issues relating to these challenges need to be addressed to fully realize the potential of sustainable tourism in Kashmir. The need for trekking will continue in Kashmir, hence integrating trekking with sustainable tourism practices could be a potential opportunity to protect the natural beauty of the region while supporting socio-economic development. This means stakeholders will ensure Kashmir stays an elite destination for eco-tourists while conserving its unparalleled cultural and environmental heritage for future generations through responsible trekking practices.

Economic and Social Impacts of Trekking on Local Communities in Kashmir

Trekking in Kashmir provides livelihoods for the local communities through employment as guides, porters, and home stay operators (Dar, 2014). Trekkers provide support for living by rendering services that support the local livelihoods and in turn stabilize the family economy (Apollo, 2017). For example, by enabling women to participate as trekking guides, it would empower them in being financially independent and break down conventional gender roles for a more inclusive community (Baloch et al., 2023). Socially, trekking promotes

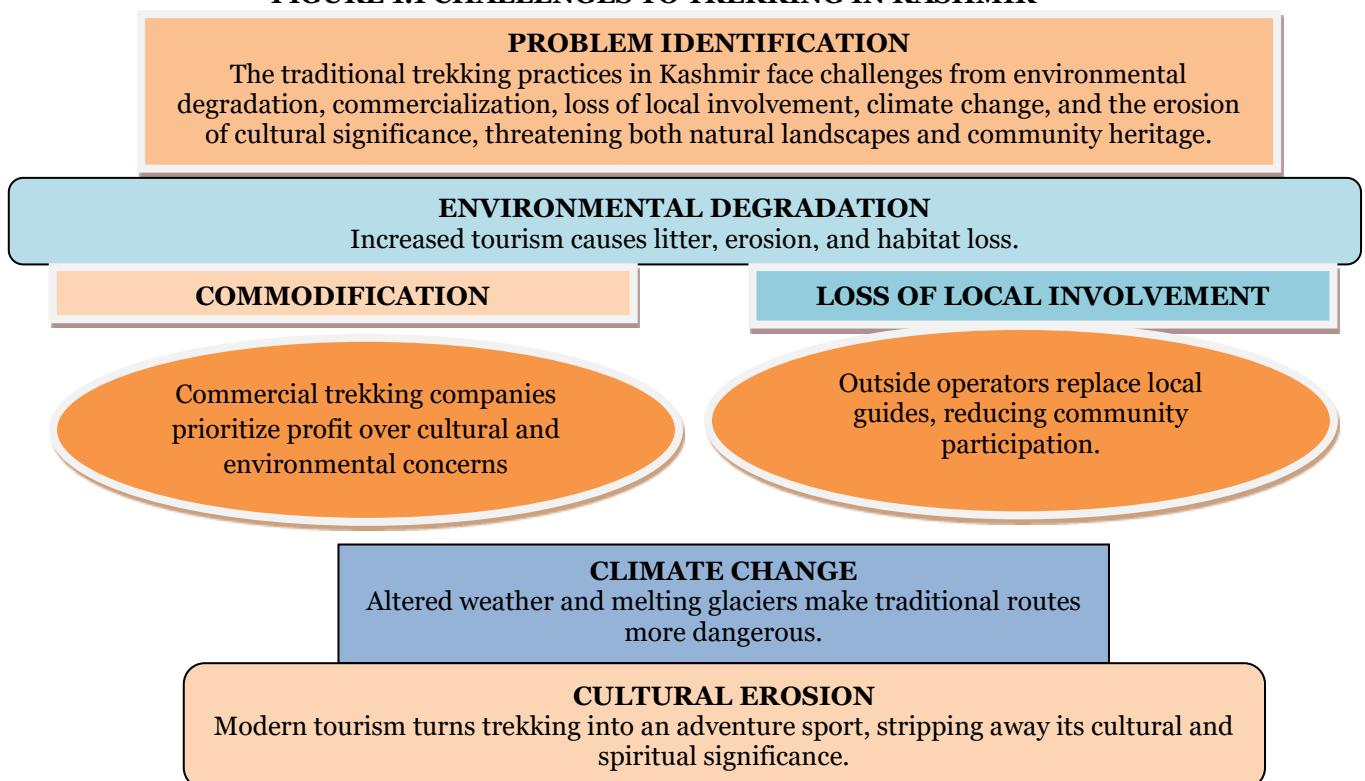
empowerment and community identity. It encourages locals to work together with each other to offer services to tourists while strengthening social bonds and building a sense of belonging (Badam, 2001). Cultural exchanges between the trekkers and the local communities enrich both parties with mutual respect and understanding (Byers & Shrestha, 2022). On the other hand, there are some adverse impacts associated with trekking commercialization. The high inflow of tourism may severely cause environmental degradation and lead to cultural dilution because the common practices may no longer gain prominence in the light of a more influential tourism industry (Dar, 2014). This commercialization risks transforming authentic cultural experiences into mere commodities that would erode the essence of what makes trekking in Kashmir so unique. Trekking provides vital economic benefits and social empowerment for local communities in Kashmir; but it also poses challenges that must be managed to preserve the region's cultural heritage and environmental integrity.

Challenges faced by traditional trekking practices due to modernization and environmental degradation

The old trekking traditions of Kashmir are greatly challenged by modernization and environmental degradation. When tourism picked up in the region, many trekkers who throng the area put additional pressure on the fragile ecosystems that feed the trekking routes (Byers & Shrestha, 2022). Litter, erosion, and habitat loss from new trails and infrastructure to accommodate tourists are signature marks on what could have been pristine landscapes (Baloch et al., 2023). This shift poses not only a threat to the natural beauties of the area but also the local flora and fauna, without which the trekking experience would be incomplete (Apollo, 2017). This has brought mechanized ways of traveling and staying that go contrary to traditional trekking practices. The growth in commercial trekking companies has standardized the trekking experience, usually putting commerce before environmental management (Aijazi, 2018). This commodification would thus almost reduce the powerful cultural significance of trekking in Kashmir, stripping off the spiritual content and reducing it to a mere adventure sport. Increasingly, local communities, who once guided trekkers through their ancestral lands, are sidelined, as outside operators seize ever larger shares of the market (Badam, 2001). Environmental degradation worsens these problems. Climate change is altering weather patterns in the Himalayas, and so unpredictable conditions can now sometimes make more treacherous the traditional trekking routes used for centuries (Byers & Shrestha, 2022). Melting of glaciers and altering trends in vegetation lines threaten not only landscapes trekkers cherish but also the livelihoods of the local communities dependent on these ecosystems for sustenance and cultural identity.

Modernization, while opening the door to economic opportunities through tourism, threatens traditional trekking practices in Kashmir in very serious ways. The balance between preserving the environment and accommodating growing tourist demands is a delicate issue that requires urgent attention by policymakers, the local community, and stakeholders within the tourism industry to ensure that both nature and culture are preserved for future generations (Aijazi, 2018; Baloch et al., 2023).

FIGURE 1.1 CHALLENGES TO TREKKING IN KASHMIR



Final Reflections of the Study

1. Trekking and hiking in Kashmir are integral parts of regional cultural identity. They make a tool used to actualize and reinforce connections with local tradition, landscapes, and community histories in common terms.
2. Hiking in Kashmir is much more than just an enjoyable leisure activity; it is instead a means of transferring cultural values, folklore, and survival techniques from one generation to the other.
3. Trekking unites people into different backgrounds and communities through its communal nature. Common experiences on trails promote solidarity and then further bonds between people.
4. Commercialization of trekking has brought in new and innovative ideas, sometimes over-gaining the traditional methods adopted by trekkers to the form a hybrid practice that risks the extinction of indigenous trekking knowledge.
5. Trekker influx from outside the region presents both opportunity and challenge-the local economy gets boosted, but the established traditional routes and practices risk being transmuted.
6. Previously, trekking in Kashmir was a male-prescribed activity; however, this has currently begun to change as more women join the area to trek, creating new spaces for empowerment against gender norms.
7. Trekking-related activities, such as guiding or pottering, have become a way for some local families to achieve economic stability and social upward mobility.
8. The changing climate alters trekking routes and schedules, forcing communities dependent on trekking to change their practices, thus reshaping their socio-cultural dynamics.
9. Trekking clubs and eco-tourism initiatives have helped revitalize the trekking culture of Kashmir by blending tradition with sustainability for preserving its socio-cultural and ecological identity.

Implications of the Study

The study has given a holistic understanding of trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir, highlighting their cultural, historical, and ecological importance. It contributes by analyzing the evolution of these practices, their contribution to community identity, and their potential in furthering sustainable tourism, thereby filling gaps in research on the subject (Menon and Kumari (2022)). Providing findings on preserving and reviving trekking and hiking traditions in Kashmir amidst the clutches of modernization and environmental degradation, it widens the scope for establishing new cultures. The study emphasizes to the policymakers to have plans on integrating trekking and hiking into sustainable tourism to conserve the environment, develop the local communities, and eradicate cultural erosion through focused education and infrastructure developing programs Baloch et al. (2023).

Suggestions to Preserve and Promote Kashmir's Trekking Traditions

1. Preservation and promotion of trekking traditions in Kashmir will depend on the integration of traditional knowledge into trekking practices. Techniques and practices of local communities, such as Gujjars and Bakerwals, must be documented and integrated into modern activities through workshops and training programs conducted by the members of the local communities. The involvement of local communities in the organization and management of activities can promote community-based trekking tourism, thus authenticating culture and economic benefits. Incentives must be given to local entrepreneurs towards home stays, guided tours, and cultural experiences that one can give during trekking.
2. Cultural Trekking Trails, which represent important cultural and historical landmarks like pilgrimage sites, traditional villages, and ancient pathways, would also add value. There should be interpretive signs and storytelling points for the education of trekkers about their cultural and spiritual importance. Gender-inclusive trekking initiatives are essential, and programs can be tailored to allow participation of women as guides or members. Creating Safe Trekking Environments and Necessary Infrastructure will Support Female Participation
3. Introductions to trekking should be provided by schools and colleges for instilling love for Kashmir's landscapes and cultural heritage among youth. Trekking expeditions annually undertaken by schools with local guides can help inter-generational learning. Technology can also be exploited to develop digital platforms and mobile applications that can showcase trekking routes and their cultural importance, thereby preserving these traditions. In locations that cannot be visited physically, virtual reality or augmented reality tools can provide immersive experiences.
4. Sustainable trekking practices should be enforced. Activities should not negatively impact the environment. Plans to create proper waste management, control the group size, and camp in appropriate areas. Trekkers should be instructed on the aspects of respect for local culture, wildlife, and no-trace principles. Nomadic and marginalized communities should be identified, recognized, and supported; subsidies or grants should be given to ensure the livelihood of these communities and the sustenance of trekking traditions. Involving them as stakeholders in trekking tourism development will ensure that their knowledge is preserved.
5. Cultural trekking festivals may also be held annually to display the culture of trekking in Kashmir, with local music, crafts, food, and storytelling. Hiking expeditions can be participated by tourists during such festivals. Climate and environmental issues should be addressed by installing climate monitoring systems on the trekking routes. Collaboration with environmental organizations can help mitigate the impact. Policies

regarding trekking tourism must grow with the balance of culture and nature, backed by a regulatory body to ensure that the local stakeholders are treated fairly

6. Academic and sociological research should be encouraged to find out about the cultural, historical, and sociological dimensions of trekking in Kashmir. The policy and community-based initiatives should be set up based on the studies conducted by these practices so that trekking traditions of Kashmir are maintained and focused in the appropriate culling as part of its identity and heritage.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to the understanding of sustainability in trekking traditions **by offering a** sociological perspective on Kashmir's hiking practices, highlighting the intricate relationship between environmental preservation, cultural continuity, and community empowerment. It underscores how trekking in Kashmir is not merely a recreational activity but a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon that shapes social identity and livelihoods, particularly among indigenous and local populations. By examining the impact of modernization, tourism influx, and climate change, the study reveals both the opportunities and challenges faced in maintaining ecological balance and preserving traditional knowledge systems. It brings attention to grassroots and governmental efforts toward sustainable trekking, such as eco-tourism initiatives, community engagement, and policy interventions, emphasizing the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches. The research provides valuable insights for policymakers, sociologists, and environmental planners seeking to harmonize tourism development with socio-cultural and ecological sustainability in the fragile Himalayan region.

Conclusion

Trekking in Kashmir invites the most remarkable adventure in glorious landscapes steeped with cultural heritage. Famed for its breathtaking routes such as Kashmir Great Lakes or Tarsar Marsar treks, this region boasts green meadows and sparkling lakes amidst white peaks. Trekkers are blessed with warmth and traditions of local communities that merely heighten the depth of the journey. However, unpredictable weather and environmental concerns make planning all the more imperative in order to conserve the beauty of Kashmir and yet enjoy the trekking there. History behind the evolution of trekking traditions in Kashmir: It has a rich tapestry of cultural, economic, and environment dimensions. In ancient times, trade and pilgrimage routes have formed the early roots of trekking in this region over commerce, spiritual journeys, and for people who merely explored. These routes connected communities and facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas, fostering a sense of shared identity among the diverse populations inhabiting the valleys and mountains. Trekking is deeply intertwined with Kashmiri culture, often showcasing local traditions through rituals and festivals linked to the natural landscape. For instance, many trekking routes lead to sacred sites where local communities engage in yearly pilgrimages, reinforcing cultural heritage and community bonds. Such a relationship between trekking and cultural identity matters because it conserves customs and maximizes community integration. On an economic point of view, trekking has become essential income for locals. It generates employment opportunities for guides, porters, and home stay operators, which empowers communities by providing them with sustainable streams of income. However, in contrast, this commercialization can prove detrimental by driving out traditional practices and principles for profit. Environmental factors are also prevalent as far as trekking in Kashmir is concerned. The ecosystem in Kashmir is severely fragile and is being threatened by an increase in foot traffic as well as climate change. Sustainable tourism practices are very important to reduce these effects while ensuring trekking remains an available means of livelihood for local communities. Modern tourism and globalization have affected traditional trekking traditions immensely. They have opened different avenues in this sense of adventure and discovery, but they also alter the authenticity of the local culture. The influx of external tourists brings both benefits and challenges, necessitating a balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modernity. Trekking in Kashmir is not merely a physical journey through breathtaking landscapes; it embodies the region's historical evolution, cultural identity, economic vitality, and environmental sustainability. In this view, adaptations of traditions to the kind of contemporary challenges do come with an ongoing need for research that might look into gender-specific experiences when trekking-to still canvass all voices within the community.

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