

IMPACT OF CULTURAL TOURISM IN INDIA: CASE STUDY ON KERALA

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Abstract. Cultural tourism significantly impacts social progress, economic prosperity, and cultural preservation. This study examines the effects of cultural tourism in Kerala, India. Kerala effectively leverages its unique blend of vibrant traditions, rich history, and natural beauty to attract tourists. The study explores the positive impacts, including economic growth through job creation and income generation, community empowerment through local participation in tourism, and cultural preservation through the revival of traditional arts and crafts. However, it also acknowledges potential drawbacks such as urbanization, environmental damage, and the risk of cultural commodification. The findings emphasize the need for sustainable tourism practices to safeguard the environment, support the well-being of local communities, and authentically showcase Kerala's rich cultural heritage.

Key Words: Economic growth, community empowerment, cultural preservation.

1 Introduction

Cultural tourism is an important part of India's tourism industry, attracting visitors from all over the world who want to experience its rich traditions, historical landmarks, and diverse cultural heritage. India's long history and vibrant customs make it a unique destination for travelers. Among the many states known for cultural tourism, Kerala stands out for its deep-rooted traditions, art, festivals, and way of life. Often called "God's Own Country," Kerala offers visitors an authentic experience through its famous classical dance forms like Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, Ayurveda treatments, and grand festivals such as Onam, Thrissur Pooram, and Theyyam.

Apart from its beautiful landscapes and serene backwaters, Kerala's culture is reflected in its literature, cuisine, and traditional art forms. The state is home to ancient temples, folk music, martial arts like Kalaripayattu, and skilled artisans who create handloom textiles, coir products, and wooden crafts. Cultural tourism not only allows visitors to appreciate these traditions but also provides a source of income for local communities.

This study examines the impact of cultural tourism in India, with a focus on Kerala. It looks at how tourism contributes to the economy by creating jobs, supporting small businesses, and helping preserve cultural heritage. Additionally, it explores how tourism strengthens local identity and encourages communities to take pride in their history and art. However, cultural tourism also faces challenges, including commercialization, sustainability concerns, and the need for responsible tourism practices. This paper aims to highlight both the benefits and challenges of cultural tourism in Kerala while offering insights into how it can be developed sustainably for the future.

2 Literature Review

Cultural tourism has become a prominent sector within India's tourism landscape, providing an engaging insight into the nation's varied traditions, heritage, and artistic expressions (Smith, S. 2015). Among the Indian states, Kerala is particularly distinguished as a leading destination for cultural tourism, owing to its extensive history, distinctive customs, and profound cultural legacy. Numerous studies emphasize that cultural tourism in Kerala is instrumental in fostering economic development, Sebastian, L. M., & Rajagopalan, P. (2009) enhancing social progress, and safeguarding traditional practices, thereby serving as an essential element of the state's tourism framework. The cultural tapestry of Kerala is influenced by its long-standing history, which encompasses both indigenous customs and external influences (Ravichandran, G., & Nam, S. 2024). The state is celebrated for its classical dance

forms, such as Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, lively temple festivals, and the traditional martial art of Kalaripayattu. These facets of Kerala's cultural identity draw a significant number of tourists, both from within the country and abroad. Research indicates that the promotion of these cultural attributes has resulted in a rise in tourist numbers, thereby facilitating job creation and the expansion of local businesses. Furthermore, studies reveal that cultural tourism in Kerala encompasses not only performing arts but also heritage sites, architectural marvels, and culinary experiences. The state's backwaters, alongside its historic forts, temples, and churches, provide a distinctive cultural journey (Singh, R. P. 2015). Visitors in search of genuine experiences are attracted to traditional Kerala homes, ayurvedic wellness centers, and homestays that embody the local way of life. Many researchers have observed that cultural tourism has bolstered the local economy by creating income opportunities for artisans, performers, and craftsmen who depend on tourism for their livelihoods. Despite the positive impact of cultural tourism on Kerala's economy, some studies have also addressed the challenges it faces. Issues related to the commercialization of cultural practices, the erosion of authenticity, and the potential loss of cultural integrity have been raised.

3 Cultural Tourism: Positive and Negative Impacts

Cultural tourism in Kerala has brought both advantages and challenges, shaping the state's economy, society, and environment in different ways (Venugopalan, T., & Kumar, D. 2017).

On the positive side, it has significantly boosted the local economy by creating jobs and supporting traditional businesses. Many artisans, craftsmen, and performers have benefited from the growing interest in Kerala's rich cultural heritage. Visitors from different parts of the world seek authentic experiences, such as watching Kathakali performances, purchasing handmade crafts, and exploring Ayurveda-based wellness treatments. This increased demand has helped in preserving these cultural traditions, which might have faded over time. Additionally, tourism has provided many local communities with stable income sources, improving their quality of life. Another benefit is the cultural exchange that happens when people from different backgrounds interact, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

However, cultural tourism also has its downsides. One major concern is the commercialization of traditions (Zhao, K. 2024), where performances and rituals are sometimes altered to suit tourist preferences rather than staying true to their original form. This can lead to a loss of authenticity over time. Popular tourist destinations like Fort Kochi, Munnar, and Alappuzha often face overcrowding, putting pressure on local infrastructure and resources. Pollution, waste management issues, and environmental damage are common problems in such areas. The rise in tourism-driven businesses has also caused property prices to increase, making it difficult for local residents to afford housing in some places. Furthermore, exposure to different cultures sometimes creates social tensions, as rapid modernization can clash with traditional values and lifestyles.

To ensure that the benefits of cultural tourism outweigh the drawbacks, Kerala needs to adopt sustainable tourism practices (Chettiparamb, A., & Kokkranikal, J. 2012). Encouraging responsible tourism, preserving heritage sites, and involving local communities in decision-making can help maintain the balance between economic growth and cultural preservation. By doing so, Kerala can continue to thrive as a cultural hotspot while protecting its unique identity.

3.1 Environmental Impact : Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism in Kerala has played a pivotal role in enhancing the state's economy and elevating its global profile; however, it has also introduced various environmental challenges. The growing number of tourists, particularly in culturally rich locations such as Fort Kochi, Kumarakom, and heritage sites like the Muziris region, has raised significant sustainability concerns (Munoth, N., Thomas, L., & Gehlot, S. 2025). Apple Academic Press.. A primary environmental issue is the generation of waste. Popular tourist spots experience a notable increase in plastic waste, food packaging, and other pollutants, which often overwhelm local waste management systems.

Numerous traditional festivals and cultural events draw large crowds, resulting in littering and improper waste disposal, thereby impacting both the natural environment and cultural heritage. The escalating demand for infrastructure to accommodate cultural tourism has prompted rapid urbanization in certain heritage areas. The construction of hotels, resorts, and commercial establishments can disrupt the ecological balance, particularly in coastal and backwater regions. Furthermore, the increased foot traffic in historically and culturally significant sites has led to the deterioration of monuments and traditional structures, necessitating extensive restoration efforts. Water consumption presents another critical challenge. Many cultural sites in Kerala, including temple towns and festival venues, witness a significant rise in water usage due to tourist activities, which adversely affects local communities dependent on limited water resources (Cosgrove, W. J., & Loucks, D. P. 2015). Additionally, the backwaters and rivers, integral to Kerala's cultural tourism, are increasingly contaminated by tourism-related activities, such as houseboat operations and unregulated sewage disposal. The transportation sector associated with tourism also raises environmental concerns. A higher influx of visitors results in more vehicles on the roads, contributing to increased carbon emissions. Areas of cultural significance often face traffic congestion, which disrupts local life and exacerbates air and noise pollution.

3.2 Challenges and Issues

Cultural tourism in Kerala has introduced both advantages and difficulties for the region. It has played a crucial role in bolstering the economy by generating employment, enhancing local crafts, and fostering traditional art forms. However, it has also given rise to various issues that impact the social, economic, and environmental landscape of the state. A primary concern is the over-commercialization of cultural practices. As tourism expands, there is a growing inclination to alter or embellish cultural traditions to meet tourist expectations. This often leads to a compromise in authenticity, where traditional art forms, festivals, and rituals are modified to create a more marketable image. The commercialization of cultural heritage can divert attention from its original meaning and significance, transforming it into a performance rather than a true representation of tradition. (Santa, E. D., & Tiatco, A. 2019). Another critical issue pertains to the effects on local communities. Although tourism generates revenue, it also contributes to increased living costs in certain regions, particularly in popular tourist spots such as Fort Kochi, Kumarakom, and Wayanad. Rising land prices, rental costs, and the price of goods can make it challenging for local residents to maintain their livelihoods. Furthermore, a growing cultural divide between locals and tourists can lead to social tensions and a decline in traditional lifestyles. Environmental degradation is yet another challenge associated with cultural tourism (Nair, V., Mohamed, B., Thomas, T. K., & Teare, R. 2016). Popular cultural sites draw large numbers of visitors, resulting in waste production, pollution, and pressure on natural resources. Historical sites, temples, and heritage buildings often experience deterioration due to heavy foot traffic, and without adequate conservation measures, these locations face the risk of long-term damage. Unregulated tourism in ecologically sensitive cultural areas can also result in deforestation, water pollution, and habitat destruction.

3.3 Cultural Festivals and Tourism

Cultural festivals are integral to the tourism framework of Kerala. These occasions not only highlight the state's diverse traditions but also draw thousands of visitors from both domestic and international locales, thereby making substantial contributions to the economy and the preservation of cultural heritage. Among the most renowned festivals is Thrissur Pooram, celebrated for its magnificent elephant parades, traditional drumming, and breathtaking fireworks displays. This festival, which is deeply embedded in Kerala's cultural legacy, attracts tourists eager to experience its lively festivities. The surge in visitors positively impacts local enterprises, including hotels, restaurants, and artisans who create decorative items for the elephants. Nonetheless, the environmental and logistical issues associated with managing large crowds and preserving the festival's authenticity pose significant challenges. Onam, the harvest festival of the state, serves as another prominent attraction. It is marked by

traditional dances such as Thiruvathira, intricate floral arrangements, and the renowned Vallamkali (boat races). Onam fosters community spirit and acts as a platform for cultural tourism, allowing visitors to indulge in Kerala's traditional cuisine, particularly the Onam Sadya, a lavish vegetarian meal served on banana leaves (Ozukum, L., & Aswathy, V. K. 2024). This festival is vital for maintaining Kerala's cultural identity while simultaneously appealing to tourists in search of genuine experiences. The Nehru Trophy Boat Race in Alappuzha stands out as a distinctive cultural event that captivates adventure and sports enthusiasts. The synchronized rowing of snake boats, accompanied by rhythmic chants and enthusiastic spectators, creates a mesmerizing spectacle. This event has significantly promoted water tourism in Kerala and has spurred the development of tourism-related infrastructure in the area.

3.4 Impact on Local Handicrafts and Cuisine

Cultural tourism in Kerala has profoundly influenced local handicrafts and cuisine, yielding both beneficial and adverse effects. The state's rich artistic heritage, encompassing coir products, mural paintings, Aranmula mirrors, and handwoven textiles, attracts numerous tourists. This heightened interest has resulted in increased demand for these crafts, thereby providing artisans with broader market opportunities and aiding in the preservation of traditional skills that have been handed down through generations. Many local craftsmen have modified their offerings to align with contemporary preferences while maintaining their authenticity (Suroyo, S., Soedjiwo, N. A. F., Entas, D., & Putra, B. M. 2023). Nonetheless, the commercialization of handicrafts has led to mass production, which can sometimes undermine quality and originality. In a similar vein, Kerala's varied cuisine has garnered international acclaim as a result of cultural tourism. Tourists are eager to sample traditional dishes such as Sadya, Malabar biryani, appam with stew, and an array of seafood specialties. This rising interest has prompted the growth of local restaurants, food festivals, and culinary tourism initiatives, including spice plantation tours and cooking classes. While tourism has contributed to the preservation of traditional recipes, it has also prompted alterations to cater to global tastes, occasionally diluting the authenticity of the flavors. Furthermore, the increased demand for unique local ingredients has influenced pricing, affecting accessibility for local communities.

3.5 Role of Government and Policy Framework

The government plays an essential role in influencing the effects of cultural tourism in Kerala through a variety of policies and initiatives. The tourism industry in Kerala is significantly fueled by its abundant cultural heritage, (Cherian, A. M., & Natarajamurthy, P. 2024). which encompasses traditional art forms, historical monuments, religious sites, and vibrant festivals. To safeguard and enhance these cultural treasures, the state government, in collaboration with the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), has enacted numerous strategies aimed at fostering sustainable development. A primary focus of government involvement is the preservation of heritage sites. Initiatives such as the Muziris Heritage Project have been pivotal in restoring and maintaining historical landmarks, ensuring their continued relevance as attractions for cultural tourists. By revitalizing ancient trade routes and structures, the government has not only safeguarded historical significance but also generated economic opportunities for local communities. To stimulate the growth of cultural tourism, financial assistance and policy frameworks have been established. Incentives for local artists, performers, and craftsmen are designed to support traditional art forms such as Kathakali, Theyyam, and Mohiniyattam, which may otherwise face decline due to modernization. Furthermore, the government organizes and funds cultural festivals to draw both domestic and international visitors, providing a platform for local artisans and performers to display their talents. Sustainability has been a central theme in policy formulation, as cultural tourism must reconcile economic advantages with the imperative of conservation. Rigorous guidelines are enforced on infrastructure development to prevent adverse effects on cultural heritage. Additionally, the promotion of homestays and community tourism initiatives has been encouraged, enabling visitors to engage with Kerala's culture in an authentic manner while benefiting local communities.

3.6 Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is a vital component of Kerala's tourism sector, drawing visitors from around the world to engage with its diverse traditions, heritage, and artistic expressions (Sebastian, L. M., & Rajagopalan, P. 2009). As the appeal of cultural tourism grows, it becomes increasingly important to adopt sustainable practices that safeguard local traditions and heritage sites while simultaneously benefiting the surrounding communities. In Kerala, sustainable cultural tourism aims to strike a harmonious balance between economic development, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of cultural identity. A fundamental element of sustainable cultural tourism in Kerala is the commitment to safeguarding and promoting traditional art forms, including Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Theyyam, and Kalaripayattu. The rise in tourism has led to greater recognition of these art forms, motivating local artists to continue their craft. However, the challenge of commercialization can lead to alterations in performances to cater to tourist expectations. Sustainable practices focus on maintaining the authenticity of these art forms while ensuring that artists receive equitable compensation and acknowledgment for their work. When sustainability is prioritized, local communities reap substantial benefits from cultural tourism. The emergence of homestays and locally-owned lodging options enables tourists to immerse themselves in Kerala's traditions, providing financial support to local families. Additionally, artisans who produce handicrafts such as coir products, mural paintings, and Aranmula mirrors benefit from heightened tourist interest. Initiatives that advocate for responsible tourism help ensure that these crafts are not mass-produced in environmentally harmful ways or exploitative to the artisans. Religious and spiritual tourism also plays a significant role in Kerala's cultural tourism landscape. Pilgrimage destinations like Sabarimala, Guruvayur, and Padmanabhaswamy Temple attract millions of devotees and tourists annually. While these sites bolster the local economy, issues such as overcrowding and pollution pose risks to their sustainability. Implementing measures like eco-friendly infrastructure and effective waste management is essential to address these challenges.

Conclusion

Cultural tourism in Kerala has had a profound impact on the state's economy, society, and the preservation of its heritage. It has created employment opportunities for local artisans, performers, and small enterprises, while simultaneously aiding in the sustenance of traditional art forms, festivals, and customs. The arrival of tourists has fostered the promotion of Kerala's rich historical narrative, architectural marvels, and culinary diversity, establishing it as a prominent cultural destination on the global stage. Nonetheless, the swift expansion of tourism has introduced challenges such as commercialization, cultural erosion, and environmental issues. The overcrowding of heritage sites and places of worship, coupled with the excessive exploitation of natural resources, threatens the sustainability of cultural tourism. Although government initiatives and responsible tourism policies have made strides in reconciling economic development with cultural preservation, ongoing efforts are essential to uphold this balance. Looking forward, the future of cultural tourism in Kerala hinges on sustainable practices that honor local traditions while welcoming innovation. With a strategic approach, cultural tourism can continue to flourish, providing benefits to both local communities and visitors in search of genuine experiences.

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