

Himalayan natural heritage threatened by overtourism

Kashmir's picturesque landscape faces widespread environmental destruction through unchecked tourism. Problems are largely put down to insufficient implementation of existing laws and regulations, although it appears that the government went ahead with development plans to promote tourism despite indications of potential hazards, our author reports.

By Athar Parvaiz

One of the abiding memories for Muzammil Khan, a young social and environmental activist in the enchanting Gurez Valley in Kashmir Himalayas (northern India), is that of the pristine Kishanganga River which flows through Gurez. Often described as the hidden gem in the Himalayas, Gurez falls on the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto fenced border separating the Indian and Pakistani controlled parts of Kashmir. Twenty-nine-year-old Khan and his fellow villagers would “directly drink from the clean river” during his teenage when Gurez was not a popular tourist destination and plastic was yet to make entry in the as yet virtually untouched valley. These days, Khan is not only worried about the growing pollution in Kishanganga because of increasing tourist footfall, but also about “uncontrolled concrete construction”. He says: “This place will soon be turned into a concrete jungle if we don't act fast.”

People in Gurez have traditionally built houses with wooden logs. But now, life as the people of Gurez used to know it is changing rapidly. For example, before Covid-19, there was only one wooden guest house with six rooms in Dawar village. “Now, more than twenty guest houses, ten multi-story hotels and numerous homestays have sprung up in the small valley. The area has become congested with concrete structures and appears quite disorganised,” says Khan, who is also President of the Youth Association of Gurez, which engages in preserving the valley's environment and culture. Given the present developments, young people in the region are particularly worried about their future. “If tourism is conducted this way in Gurez, we are certainly heading for a disaster,” warns 25-year-old Arsalan Aslam. “But we will do everything to stop further destruction. Our immediate demand is that our area should be developed strictly in light of environmental laws,” he asserts. Khan's application to a local government office recently revealed that by mid-July 2024, Gurez had received 46,026 tourists in just over six weeks, a far cry from the paltry annual four-digit figure a few years back. “There is an urgent need for controlling and regulating tourism in Gurez Valley,” he asserts and asks: “Who will come to see Gurez if this environmental destruction continues?”

Kashmir has already witnessed transformation of its prized landscapes like Sonamarg and Gulmarg into urbanised zones with these picturesque mountain areas resembling concrete jungles and sprawling bus terminals. According to Faiz Bakhshi, a noted Kashmiri environmentalist, many regulations for the protection of the environment are in place, which include the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Policy, the Forest Conservation Act, the Environmental (Protection) Act and other policy documents. But none of them had helped preventing the environmental destruction. “There is nothing wrong with them,” Bakhshi says. “It is only that they are not being implemented strictly.”

Laws not sufficiently implemented

The government's own Tourism Policy 2020 affirms that the Tourism Department will ensure development of sustainable and eco-friendly tourism by considering social and environmental aspects – and in accordance with the acts and rules referred to above – while developing Tourism in Jammu and Kashmir. But experts and environmental activists criticise that tourism development is not taking place under strict implementation of environmental protection laws. “What I have observed is that environmental laws are given a pass during tourism infrastructure creation and tourism promotion,” says Saleem Beg, a prominent Kashmiri conservationist. For example, roads had been dug up in eco-fragile areas which wouldn't be possible if laws like the Forest Conservation Act had been implemented in letter and spirit. In 2006, the Ministry of Tourism commissioned a study for the development of Bungas Valley, a scenic meadow in northern Kashmir. The study proposed that Bungas be declared a biosphere with its core area protected from anthropogenic intervention such as infrastructure development. But today, Beg notes, the valley was facing a threat, just like Sonamarg and Dodpathri. Thirty-five-year-old environmental activist Rasikh Rasool from Handwara-Kashmir has filed public interest litigations in India's National Green Tribunal

(NGT) to seek its intervention for haphazard construction in and around the Bungas Valley, which, he says, has led to environmental destruction. “There are clear guidelines in the Forest Conservation Act that a road should be only constructed through a forest if there is no alternative. But the government department concerned chose to construct a road through an unlocked thick forest despite two other roads leading to Bungas Valley,” explains Rasool. This, he says, entailed not only felling at least 25,000 forest trees, but also destruction of wildlife habitats and heavy mechanical mining in a nearby stream. “In their reports to NGT, the government departments have accepted felling of only over 1,000 forest trees and have provided deceptive details about permission for usage of forest land for road construction. But I am confident that they will get fully exposed during NGT hearings,” Rasool says.

On top of environmental destruction during road construction, Rasool continues, over half a million tourists visited Bungas in the past



A traditional walkway over a stream in Gurez.



Environmentalists in Kashmir complain that "Sonamarg has been turned into a concrete jungle".



In this Himalayan health resort, a section of the forest has been turned into a parking area.

Photos: Athar Parvaiz

two years without any arrangements for treating liquid and solid waste in Bungas. In recent weeks, the local and national press also highlighted how Gurez and Bungas were suffering pollution and mismanagement.

The problem of plenty

Quoting the examples of Dodpathri, Bungas and Gurez, Beg says that lately, the government has adopted the policy of promoting lesser known tourist destinations under which ecologically sensitive areas were being heavily intervened. "Mass tourism cannot be stopped in a country like ours where hoteliers, travel agents, the burgeoning middle class and,

above all, the government are fuelling tourism promotion," Beg observes. Environmentalist Bakhshi also emphasises that mass tourism has resulted in haphazard infrastructure development and lack of proper arrangements for pollution control. Both Beg and Bakhshi argue that, owing to this focus on mass tourism, even master plans for tourism infrastructure in Sonamarg, Gulmarg and Pahalgam have been violated – although on certain occasions, the government claims it is taking action against the violators.

However, a scientific study on Sonamarg Master Plan reveals interesting details: "From the high resolution satellite data, it is evident that in 2015, Sonamarg itself had already crossed the level of the projected developmental activities set out under the Master Plan for 2025. Against the proposed built-up of ~60 ha for the infrastructure development by 2025, the area has witnessed the built-up infrastructure spread over ~58 ha area in the Sonamarg bowl in 2015." Several attempts to get the government's version proved futile as officials of Jammu & Kashmir government didn't respond – neither to the physical visits nor to emails. However, during a recent meeting with World Bank officials in Srinagar, Commissioner Secretary Tourism, Yasha Mudgal, was quoted as saying that the need for development of additional tourist spots was to relieve pressure on the traditional ones which were "being explored (sic!) beyond their carrying capacity".

Same story in other parts of the Himalayas

What the environmentalists in Kashmir fear is already happening in other Himalayan regions such as Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, where haphazard tourism-related construc-

tion around some Himalayan landscapes has spelled disaster in various forms. According to Sumit Mahar, a young environmental activist of Himdhara Environment Research and Action Collective in Himachal Pradesh, mountains were cut through indiscriminately for the Char Dham road project in Uttarakhand ignoring environmental standards to bring more tourists to the Char Dham pilgrimage. "Now, its consequences are witnessed in the form of landslides, cracks in villages and drying up of water sources," Mahar says. In the ten years since the Uttarakhand tragedy of 2013, when a cloudburst caused devastating floods and landslides in the North Indian State, neither the government nor the policy-makers paid attention to what kind of tourism should be there in the Himalayas. "The way construction activities for tourism and other projects are taking place, we are already seeing their impacts in more ways than one," he says. For example, in 2023, floods and landslides in the Beas Valley in Himachal Pradesh not only affected the tourism sector, but the produce of local gardeners and farmers was not able to reach the market on time.

Quoting an article in Hindustan Times, Mahar notes that the influx of tourists since the opening of Atal Tunnel in Himachal Pradesh at Rohtang Pass in October 2020 surged from 130,000 visitors in 2019 to 730,000 in 2022. He says that like other Himalayan landscapes, Lahaul Valley's fragile environment and ecology needed to be protected from overtourism and further destruction. The opinions of experts and local people, Mahar emphasises, should be taken seriously.

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