

# Tourism in Ladakh: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges

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**Abstract:** Ladakh being a geographically arid, dry, and cold rarified has very limited scope for large scale industrialization and scarce potentialities for agricultural development. From the three sectors of the economy, service sector mostly dominated by tourism has major contribution in the economy of Ladakh. This paper aims to study tourism as an Industry and its trends, opportunities and challenges. The present paper used both primary and secondary data and tried to examine the various parameters such as tourists' inflow, changing trends, increased in number of hotels, future plans to expand connectivity and environmental threats. With the passage of time, the role of tourism has increased manifold in the region. Therefore, a detail analysis of tourism is need of the hour. Besides, the study also has strong relevance from policy perspective as newly formed union territory of Ladakh, further, necessitates the policy makers to develop a new tourism policy which should be coherent equally.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Tourist Inflow, Domestic Tourist, Foreign Tourist, Economy.

**1.0 Introduction:** Ladakh, generally, known as the 'Land of mountain passes'<sup>1</sup> was a self-sustained agriculture based economy before it was thrown open to the outer world<sup>2</sup>. Ladakh, also known as the cold desert<sup>3</sup>, usually remains cut off from the rest of the country for 5-6 months because of heavy snowfall on two main passes viz. Zojila and Rotangla which results into the blockage of 434-km Srinagar-Leh and 473-km Manali-Leh Highways<sup>4</sup>. During winter season, air service is the only mode of transport to reach Ladakh, therefore, major tourists flow got limited to

the summer months. Leh-Srinagar road was opened in 1960 while Leh- Manali road was opened in September, 1989<sup>5</sup>. In 1974 Ladakh was thrown open for the foreign tourists and hundreds of European tourists mainly from Germany visited Ladakh in the first phase<sup>6</sup>.

The Government of India has agreed that tourism is one of the important tools to develop such a backward region having rich cultural heritage<sup>7</sup>. Subsequently, air services like Indian Airlines was also allowed to the region and Leh-Srinagar route was

<sup>1</sup> Pellicciardi V. 2010a. Sustainability Perspectives of Development in Leh District (Ladakh, Indian TransHimalaya): an Assessment. CIRPS, University of Rome Sapienza: PhD

<sup>2</sup>Dawa, S, 'Economic development of Ladakh:Need for a New Strategy.Recent Research on Ladakh 8,Sterling Publishers pvt LTD pp- 367

<sup>3</sup> Ibid pp-15

<sup>4</sup> Wangchuk.R.N,(FEB2018), 'Story Behind one of Jaitley's biggest budget Announcements', THE BETTER INDIA, Media Company

<sup>5</sup>Jia,P.S, "Touris in ladakh himalaya",Indus publishing company,New Delhi.pp-70

<sup>6</sup> Tourism Department Leh

<sup>7</sup> Jina,P.S, "Tourism in Ladakh Hamalaya'Indus Publishing Company,pp pp

opened in 1979 with two flights per week<sup>8</sup>. Since then new phase of tourism got started.

**2.0 Tourism Trends:** Ladakh having a unique rich culture and preserved Buddhism has its distinct features than any other hill tourist destinations. In the initially phase, inflow of foreign tourists was greater than the domestic tourists as made clear from table 1.1.

Percentage of Foreign Tourist Arrival  
(Table 1.1)

Years	Foreigners	Total tourists	%of Foreigners
1982	12786	14286	90
1983	12833	12933	99
1984	11785	12300	96
1985	12245	18911	65
1986	12825	16411	78
1987	13688	17802	77
1988	16256	24864	64
1989	16079	22748	74
1990	06342	06738	94
1991	08014	09055	89
1992	13580	16018	85

Source: Department of Tourism Leh

The main purpose of the foreign visitors was exploration of the untouched Buddhist culture, trekking to backward areas and understanding the self-sustained local life style of Ladakhi people. In September, 1980 Zasker was opened for tourism and the opening of many more tourist areas including trekking routes like Zasker to Manali or Leh to Lamayuru have attracted more foreign tourists<sup>9</sup>.

However, tourism in Ladakh got severe setback during 1989 because of political agitation and even after, the militancy problem in Kashmir caused huge fall in tourist's flow, particularly those who came via Kashmir. It is only after the opening of Leh-Manali road and increased frequency of flights from Delhi, recovery phase started<sup>10</sup>. With the increasing rate of tourist inflow, economy of Ladakh particularly of Leh town, shifted from agriculture based to tourism oriented service sector. However, in economic development theories, it is mentioned that in the process of development, economy shifts from agriculture to industry and then to service sector<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, Ladakh being a graphically cold, arid, dry and rarified, different from the plain areas of country have very limited scope for the industry.<sup>12</sup>

Tourist arrivals in Ladakh first touched the six-figure mark in 2011 when 1, 79,491 tourists including 36,662 foreigners visited the region. The zenith was achieved a year after sudden flash floods occurred in August, 2010 caused heavy damage to the town and nearby villages.

The figure below depicts the foreign and domestic tourists' arrival since year 1985:

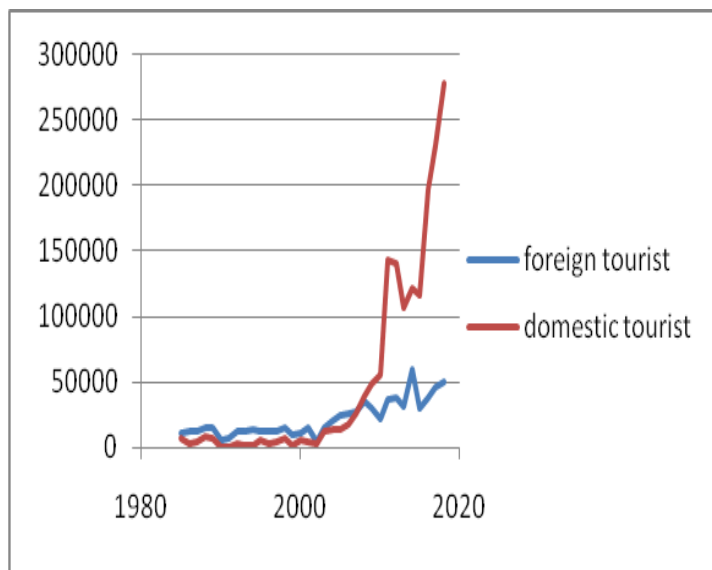
Tourist Arrival Trends (Figure.1)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid pp49  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid,pp 49

<sup>10</sup> Jina.p.s, 'Tourism in Ladakh Himalaya'Indus Publishing Company,New Delhi,pp 50

<sup>11</sup> Taneja&Myer, 'Economic Development and Planning'Vishal Publishing co.

<sup>12</sup> Kaul.H.N, 'Rediscovery of Ladakh',Indus Publishing Company,New Delhi.



Source: Department of Tourism, Leh

The above diagram shows that the domestic tourists exceeded foreigner for the first time in 2008. Since then the domination of domestic tourist persists which seem to be the near future trend.

In 2018 total of 3.27 lakh tourists, including 49.47 thousand foreigners have visited Leh, marking an increase of 18 percent compared to the previous year; and it crossed 3 lakh marks for the first time which cited a new record.

Ladakh as a tourist destination became famous among the domestic tourists only after the few Bollywood movies like Dil Se, 3 Idiots, Jab Tak Hai Jaan, shoots in Ladakh. Since then, Leh- Ladakh has become one of the favorite destinations for domestic tourists.

**2.1 Factor Affecting Tourism Inflow:** it has been

witnessed that whenever there is unstable situation caused by political, natural calamities or national and international reasons, tourism got affected as case shown in table 1.2

However this year total tourist’s inflow has decreased to 12 per cent as compared to last year during the same period (Up to September 2019). The supporting details with figures are shown as under in month-wise arrival record of table 1.3.

Month-wise tourist Arrival Records of Foreign and Domestic Tourists during 2018-2019. (Table 1.3)

Years	Decrease In Arrival (in thousands)	%Fall	Reasons
1989	22.74 to 6.73	70%	Political agitation in Leh/militancy in Kashmir.
1999	21.99 to 12.34	44%	India-Pakistan war or (Kargil war)
2002	19.69 to 8.07	59%	India Parliament terrorist attack (Dec 2011) and us terrorist attack (sep 2011)
2010	79.08 to 77.80	2% (28% fall in foreign tourist)	Western economic slow-down/flash flood (Aug 2010)
2013	79.08 to 77.80	23%	News spread about Chinese incursion
2015	181.30 to 146.50	19%	Cloudburst in July/Sept Kashmir
2019		12% up to	Cancellation of flight/Kashmir shutdown/late opening of Manali road

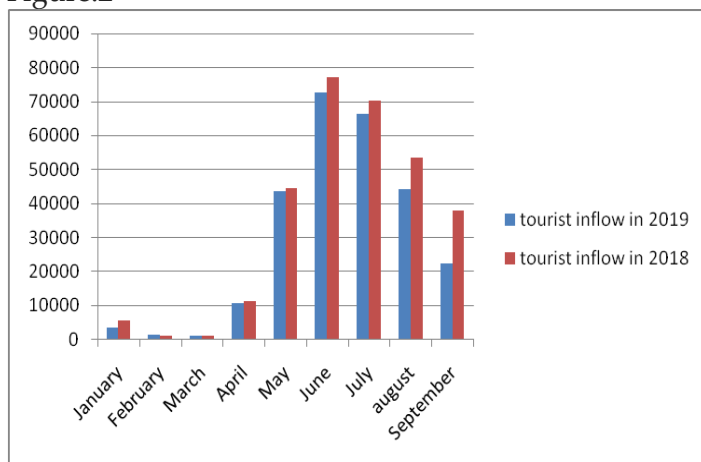
  

Months	Tourist inflow (2018)			Tourist Inflow (2019)			Total %
	foreigner	domestic	total	foreigner	Domestic	Total	
January	421	5244	5665	340	3307	3647	-36%
February	476	660	1136	424	1173	1597	-41%
March	523	775	1298	431	874	1305	1%
April	2678	8599	11277	596	8027	10623	-6%
May	2785	41798	44583	1936	41736	43672	-2%
June	6209	70832	77041	4384	68411	72795	-6%
July	12226	57913	70139	10585	55652	66237	-6%
August	13033	40588	53621	10179	33928	44107	-18%
September	7355	30694	38049	5082	17257	22339	-41%

Table 1.2 Decreases in Tourists Arrival and Reasons

Source: Department of Tourism, Leh.

Figure.2



Source: Tourism Department Leh

The above figure 2 shows month-wise gap in tourist's arrival during 2018 and 2019. The interview survey was conducted on the hoteliers and shopkeepers in order to ascertain the reasons for low inflow of tourists during the year 2019; and apparently it is found that the main reasons were Lok Sabha elections, curtailed flight services and late opening of Leh-Manali road etc.

- Late opening of Leh-Manali road:** This year Leh- Manali road was reopened on 10<sup>th</sup> June after much delay for the transportation, but during 2018 it was opened in the month of May. In 2018 up to the month of October, 6,405 tourists visited Ladakh via Manali but this year only around 5,000 tourists have visited via Manali during the same period.
- Security-related concerns in Kashmir:** Due to the curfew in Kashmir for security reason,

around 4,000 tourists visited Ladakh via Srinagar compared to around 6,000 tourists up to the month of October. After the bifurcation of state into two union territories, Kashmir remained close for few months and the inflow of tourists from Srinagar curtailed to some extent.

- Low frequency of flight operations:** The tourism in the region has also been affected by Jet Airways which used to operate extensively on the route in summer, stopped its operations during 2019.

According to the some hoteliers, the occupancy rate during the secondary peak season falls to 50 to 70 per cent as compared to 90 to 100 per cent of occupancy during 2018, although occupancy rate during the peak season remains more or less similar.

**2.3 Tourist Inflow in winter:** The tourist arrivals usually remain restricted between the month of April and October, due to which around five months of the year records a very low turnout to the tourist related business. But it has been a few years that domestic tourists in flow during the winter season have increased because of Chader trek to Zangskar for around 7-8 days (table 1.3). It seems that the tourism in Ladakh is now becoming the whole year business which may have favorable effects on the hotel industry, travel agents, and the trekking guides in particular, besides, over all favorable impact on economy as a whole. Therefore, during the survey it is found that connectivity should be better during the winter season also via road so that more and more tourists may arrive to their destination. In winter season Ice Hockey, Chader Trek, Losar Festival, Spituk Gostor etc. do

also attract more tourists, domestic as well as foreigners.

Tourists' inflow during Winter Season in 2018 and 2019. (Table 1.4)

Months	Tourist inflow during winter 2018			Tourist inflow during winter 2019		
	foreigner	Domes- tic	total	foreigner	Domestic	total
January	421	5244	5665	340	3307	3647
February	476	660	1136	424	1173	1597
March	523	775	1298	431	874	1305
April	2678	8599	11277	596	8027	10623

Source: Department of Tourist, Leh

The given table 1.3 indicates that in January 2019, 3,647 tourists have arrived followed by 1,597 in February, 1,305 in March and 10,623 in April as the Leh-Srinagar highway reopened only in the last week of April. Tourists in flow have declined to 3,647 in 2019 compared to last year 5,244 in January. The main reasons are less operation of flights in winter and high airfare as it touched around 25,000-30,000 per person to reach Leh. Given the above facts, many tourists prefer to choose other options rather than to visit Ladakh. However, other facilities like accommodation, transportation services are not compromised, as many as 10 hotels with all facilities for the winter season are accessible.

**2.4 Future Plan to Expand Connectivity:** Keeping in view the harsh climate condition of Ladakh and in order to tackle the major hardships faced by the tourists during winter to reach their destinations, the Central government had last year approved the construction of 14.2-km long tunnel project-Asia's longest bi-directional Zojila Pass tunnel at an estimated cost of ₹6,089 crore. It will provide all-weather connectivity between Kashmir to Leh which may further give a boost to the tourism sector in the region once com-

pleted<sup>13</sup>. According to the border road organization (BRO) official, the region will also be accessible in all-weather condition by a double –

lane motor able road from Manali through Zanskar<sup>14</sup>. Besides, the Indian railways have also planned to connect Ladakh region through the world's highest railways line to give all weather access which will again boost tourism in the region<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, the Airport Authority of India has planned a new terminal building at Leh airport with 18,000sq m of built up area, the annual capacity of terminal will be 1.6 million per annum and the project will cost Rs. 480 crore<sup>16</sup>.

### 3.0 Opportunities

In Ladakh, tourism creates both direct and indirect employment opportunities which are comprised of employment in hotels, guest houses, travel agencies and government tourist departments, all these comes under direct effect; while the employment in shops, foodstuff market, vegetable and fruit market fall under indirect effect. Tourism in Ladakh is accelerating with every subsequent year. The pace of development of hotels, guest houses, restaurants and travel agency (table 1.4) has created good em-

<sup>13</sup> 2 March,2019,Economics Times.

<sup>14</sup> 27 Nov,2018,Greater Kashmir.

<sup>15</sup> 18 oct,2018 ,India Today,New Delh.

<sup>16</sup> 3 Sep,2019,by Faizan Haidar,Hindustan Times,New Delhi.



ployment opportunities and entrepreneurship spirit among Ladakhis which helped to solve the unem-

YEAR	Number of hotels	Number of guest houses	Number of travel agents
2011	149	386	352
2012	153	337	303
2013	175	420	379
2014	190	397	426
2015	213	433	468
2016	213	433	468
2017	234	467	527
2018	274	602	636

ployment problems to some extent.

Number of Hotels Guest House and Travel Agent (Regd) in Leh as on ending March 2019.

(Table no.1.5)

Source: Tourism Department Leh

The above table shows that the Leh district has over 274 hotels and 725 guest houses with 8,400 beds in hotel and 7,243 beds in guest houses in 2019 to cater to the needs of foreign and domestic tourists. There are around 140 restaurants and around 636 travel agencies and 71 camping agents in different tourist spots which provide employment to both skilled and unskilled workers<sup>17</sup>. In addition to such opportunities, there are 3,821 commercial establishments in leh district which also offer employment to 3,963 persons; and there are 11,252 registered shops which do provide employment to 11,692 persons as per 2017-18 data.<sup>18</sup> It seems obvious that the tourism in the region has been the major contributory factor for the construction of hotels, shopping centers, road and related infrastructures which have accelerated other business opportunities.

#### 4.0 Challenges

Though, of course, tourism has contributed immensely towards the economy of Ladakh, but it has also posed many challenges to the people and region as well. Pointing towards the challenges, one of the shopkeepers said that tourism in Leh has become a mere traffic. Adventure tour operators also fear that foreign clientele may decline. Keeping in view the scarce resources and fragile environmental condition, the people are in the dilemma of Ladakh's capability to bear the increasing pressure of tourist inflow. Given the fact that Leh has been experiencing water scarcity due to rapid increase in hotels and guest houses and there is no modern town sewage system. Bikes and Cars during summer are more than the population; Internet is still fragile, electricity fails and the roads in Leh are reek of generator fumes.

The increasing number of motor vehicles are generating and adding more air pollution to this fragile eco-system. According to the official records 3,487 commercial taxis in Leh and 1,218 were registered in Kargil district and the huge emission from vehicles are now recognized as a major contributor to human induced climate change causing glaciers to melt. During the tourist season 16-18 tonnes of waste are being collected from Leh city per day, while the annual waste production is 374 tonnes, including 2,500,000 plastic water bottles. In Kargil around six tonnes of waste is generated each day<sup>19</sup>.

Ironically, the very competitive package trips do beat down prices for the domestic tourists. The low priced tourist's package attracts traffic every year and the subsequent tourist arrivals often beat the previous statistical predictions except in 2019. If such situation remains over the year, would it be able to accommodate, what is Ladakh's carrying capacity?

The main issue what Ladakhi emphasizes today is not foreign tourist versus domestic tourist rather

<sup>17</sup> Tourism Department Leh

<sup>18</sup> Statistical Hand Book Leh 2017-18

<sup>19</sup> Tashi Lundup, Murtaza Fazily and Sunetro Ghosal, 'Development in Ladakh: is more tourism the answer?', Stawa magazin, Leh

the major concern is preservation of destination for future generations. Hence there is an argument in some sections of the tourist trade in Ladakh that instead of appealing to everyone, the region should be preserved as a high-priced, modest-volume destination, which also accommodates interested budget travelers.

However things are not an easy task. The young Ladakhis following completion of their higher studies from other parts of the country typically return backs to Ladakh in search of jobs, although the region has only three main sources of income – agriculture, tourism and the armed forces. These people are expecting a lot from the small economy. But on the other hand, if the authority chooses to downsize tourism traffic, would it be able to accommodate all the young graduates? What would happen to new hotels and mortgages, should tourism falter?

These are the two contradictory questions, which really needed to be discussed and deliberated. The policy makers and the stakeholders of tourism industry do also need to ponder upon the same issue so that a coherent tourism policy may put in place to regulate and guide the sector. Although There have been efforts by LAHDC, Leh to adopt a tourism policy but somehow remained on paper. In newly formed UT of Ladakh, a decent new tourism policy which is equally eco-friendly and sustainable can only be expected.

## 5.0 Conclusion and suggestion

Tourism has increased manifold in Ladakh since it partially opened for the foreign tourists. There have been many ups and downs in the tourism trend due to some or the other reason. Evidence from the fact, that tourism inflow depends on many factors which may or may not be under the control of local people and authority. Therefore, it is necessary to be cautious as too much dependence on one sub-sector can lead to

fragile economic foundation. Although the numbers of hotels, guest houses, travel agencies, rental business has flourished and many locals and non-locals have got employment opportunities in this sector. It has generated more income and improved the standard of living of many people especially in and around the cities. Urbanization and modernization has been the part and parcel of this tourism induced economic growth process. On the other extreme, it has resulted into unequal distribution of income, as a very little of economic benefit of tourism was accrued to maximum population of the region which has created dissatisfaction and competitive nature among the masses. The tourism multiplier rate of tourist's expenditure both in income and employment in Ladakh seems low because of the high leakages rate, as number of workers in hotels and shopkeepers especially in handicraft are mostly non-local as per the survey record. The Increased influx of tourists has contributed in economic development of the locals is a tectonic challenge because it has also increased pressure on land and infrastructure which led to many environmental issues. It is provocative to address two different paradigm opinions; appealing for maximum vs. carrying capacity.

## 5.1 Suggestions

- Generation of equal benefits of tourism industry seems very pertinent and in order to materialize the same, rural tourism need to be encouraged as there are many unexplored villages far from main cities and tourists often wish to see such preserve old customs and traditions. The department of tourist should provide proper infrastructures by encouraging the residents for home stay facilities.
- The younger generation should be encouraged to pursue training and skills in hotel management and diploma in tourism from district institutions; and the local hotels should recruit

these students instead of outsiders through campus placement process.

- Although it is very difficult to strike balance between tradition and modernity, but, some traditional practices like Losar celebration in different villages with their own unique customs should be revived.
- The Power supply needs to be improved in order to ensure proper heating facilities during the winter season. The Production of organic fruits and vegetables should be encouraged and the hoteliers should demand the same material from the local cultivators.
- Local authority should identify the environmentally fragile areas and such areas do need to be declared as restricted areas.
- A proper drainage system and garbage recycle plant is the need of the hour. During summer, some labourers should be deployed on different tourist spots in order to check, segregate and to dispose it properly with local coordination.

Ladakh also known as Cross road of high Asia is having unparalleled uniqueness in every facets of lives and the same has attracted many travelers and tourist since it has opened the door for foreigners in 1974. The exposure of the region to the outside world has a mixture of opportunities and challenges and there is a strong to strike a balance between the two.

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