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Cultural tourism in India: Lessons and insights from Kerala

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Abstract

Cultural tourism has become one of the most meaningful ways for people to experience India, a country known for its deep traditions and incredible diversity. This study looks closely at cultural tourism in India, with a special focus on Kerala—often celebrated as one of the nation's richest cultural destinations. By examining Kerala's festivals, performing arts, handicrafts, and major heritage initiatives, the study shows how the state has managed to preserve its cultural identity while also welcoming tourism as a path to development.

The study also highlights the challenges that stand in the way of sustaining cultural tourism in Kerala, such as increasing commercialization, gaps in infrastructure, seasonal tourist flow, and the declining interest of younger generations in traditional art forms. Using descriptive and analytical methods and drawing on both primary observations and secondary sources, the study explores how major initiatives like the Muziris Heritage Project and the Responsible Tourism Mission have helped support artisans and strengthen community participation.

The findings suggest that cultural tourism not only boosts Kerala's economy but also reinforces a sense of identity and pride among local communities. To ensure its long-term survival, the study emphasizes the need for stronger policy support, wider cultural awareness, better use of digital platforms, and more active involvement of local people. Overall, the study shows that cultural tourism in Kerala is not just about attracting visitors—it is about preserving a living heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, Kerala, heritage preservation, performing arts, handicrafts, community participation, sustainable tourism

Introduction

India, with its rich traditions, ancient history, and creative excellence, is regarded as one of the world's most significant cultural destinations. Its colourful festivals, traditional crafts, music, dance styles, and architectural achievements ensure that India remains an open-air museum of human history. Among the many states in India, Kerala, often referred to as "God's Own Country," holds a prominent place on the cultural tourism map. With its combination of stunning natural beauty and rich traditions, Kerala offers visitors a unique experience in exploring India's living culture through festivals, arts, crafts, and heritage sites. Cultural tourism is one of the fastest-growing areas of the country's tourism sector, and it also fosters mutual understanding. Additionally, it helps preserve heritage and fosters the development of local communities. The current article primarily focuses on cultural tourism-related activities in the state of Kerala, while also addressing the challenges of developing such activities and exploring potential sustainable pathways for the future.

Objectives of the Study.

1. To Explore Cultural Tourism Activities in Kerala
2. To review the Challenges faced by Cultural Tourism in Kerala

Methodology

This study relies entirely on secondary data and uses a descriptive and analytical approach to understand the development of cultural tourism in India, with a special focus on Kerala. Information was gathered from a variety of reliable sources, including academic books, research articles, government publications, tourism reports, UNESCO documents, and credible online materials. Reports from Kerala Tourism, the Responsible Tourism Mission,

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and the Muziris Heritage Project were especially useful in understanding current cultural initiatives and policies. All collected information was carefully reviewed and organized to identify major themes such as cultural tourism activities, heritage conservation efforts, community participation, and the challenges faced by the sector. The data were then interpreted qualitatively to draw insights, compare Kerala's experience with national and international trends, and suggest ways to support sustainable cultural tourism in the future

Literature Review

Cultural tourism has been widely recognized as a powerful mechanism for heritage preservation, economic development, and cultural exchange. Globally, scholars argue that cultural tourism allows visitors to engage meaningfully with the traditions, history, and identity of host communities (Seaman, 2008) ^[11]. Cultural tourism contributes significantly to India's tourism revenue and promotes both national cohesion and rural development (Bhatia, 2002) ^[1]. However, issues such as inadequate infrastructure, excessive commercialization, and insufficient global promotion continue to challenge the sector (Yadav *et al.*, n.d.)

Kerala is frequently highlighted in literature as one of India's most successful cultural tourism destinations. The state's festivals, performing arts, temple traditions, and multicultural history have helped shape its distinct cultural identity (Huybers & Bennett, 2003) ^[4]. Studies emphasize that Kerala's history as a hub of the ancient spice trade and its heritage of pluralism enhance its appeal to cultural tourists (Jose, 2019) ^[6].

Research also shows that Kerala has adopted innovative cultural tourism models, particularly through community participation. The Responsible Tourism Mission is widely noted as a pioneering approach that integrates local communities into tourism supply chains, ensuring equitable benefits and authentic experiences (Responsible tourism in Kerala with special reference to responsible tourism in Vaikom, n.d.). Similarly, the Muziris Heritage Project stands out in academic literature as one of India's largest conservation initiatives, reviving archaeological sites, museums, and intangible heritage linked to Kerala's ancient port city (The Muziris Heritage Project: Excavations at Pattanam-2007 | Request PDF, n.d.).

Scholars also highlight the economic and social benefits of cultural tourism in Kerala. Traditional crafts such as Aranmula Kannadi, mural painting, and handloom weaving have gained renewed prominence and sustainability through tourism-linked markets (P & Sharma, 2025) ^[8]. Cultural tourism strengthens community identity, supports artisanal livelihoods, and fosters inter-cultural understanding (Cherian & Natarajamurthy, 2024) ^[2]

Despite these achievements, literature identifies several challenges. Over-commercialization has threatened the authenticity of cultural experiences, particularly in heavily visited areas (Rahman & Halim, n.d.) Seasonal fluctuations in tourist arrivals result in inconsistent income for performers and craftspersons (Livelihood Security and Sustainability of Ecotourism Destinations in Kerala# | Request PDF, n.d.) Researchers also identify inadequate infrastructure, limited youth participation in traditional arts, and weak global marketing strategies as ongoing issues (Heritage And Culture In A Creative Economy: The

viswakarma craftsmanship in Kerala, India, n.d.). These concerns underline the need for digital engagement, stronger policy support, and improved cultural education to ensure sustainable growth of cultural tourism.

Overall, the literature presents Kerala as a leading model of cultural tourism in India, while also indicating areas needing further attention. The existing studies offer valuable insights, but there remains a gap in integrated analyses that connect cultural activities, heritage initiatives, challenges, and future pathways—a gap this study aims to address.

Cultural Tourism in Kerala

Kerala, fondly known as “God’s Own Country,” has carved a unique place for itself in India’s cultural tourism map. The state’s temples, vibrant festivals, classical performing arts, and traditional crafts offer visitors an authentic window into India’s rich cultural heritage. Celebrated events such as Thrissur Pooram and the Aranmula Vallamkali draw crowds from across the world, while classical dance forms like Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, and Koodiyattam showcase Kerala’s artistic depth and legacy. Adding to its charm are the state’s historic spice trade connections, colonial-era architecture, and longstanding tradition of religious harmony—all of which contribute to Kerala’s exceptional cultural appeal.

Growth of Cultural Tourism in Kerala

Kerala’s cultural tourism has expanded remarkably over the past few decades, driven by innovative efforts such as the Responsible Tourism Mission, Heritage Village Projects, and the revival of the historic Spice Route. Among these, the Muziris Heritage Project stands out as one of India’s largest and most meaningful conservation initiatives. By bringing together museums, archaeological sites, and everyday cultural practices, the project breathes new life into the ancient port city and offers visitors an immersive journey through history.

Digital platforms and global cultural events—like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the Kerala International Film Festival—have further elevated Kerala’s presence on the world stage. These initiatives not only highlight the state’s creative and cultural richness but also draw international attention. Official tourism data consistently place Kerala among the top Indian states for foreign tourist arrivals, underscoring its success in blending age-old traditions with modern tourism experiences.

Importance of Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism plays an important role in strengthening both the economy and the cultural identity of communities. By turning heritage into a source of sustainable income, it creates valuable opportunities for artisans, performers, and craftspeople. In Kerala, traditional industries such as the Aranmula Kannadi, handloom weaving, and mural painting have gained renewed visibility and support through tourism, helping these art forms thrive in a modern context.

Beyond its economic contributions, cultural tourism fosters meaningful connections between visitors and local communities. It encourages dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect, allowing travelers to experience culture in a genuine and enriching way. By promoting community-based and low-impact tourism models, Kerala emphasizes responsible travel and authentic cultural exchange—offering experiences that go far beyond commercialized entertainment.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite its many achievements, Kerala's cultural tourism sector still faces several ongoing challenges. Over-commercialization in some areas risks diluting the authenticity of cultural experiences, while seasonal patterns in tourism create uncertainty for those who rely on it for their livelihood. In many rural regions, infrastructure remains inadequate, limiting accessibility and visitor comfort. Another growing concern is the declining interest among younger generations in traditional arts and crafts, which threatens the continuity of these cultural practices. Additionally, Kerala's cultural tourism often lacks strong marketing outside the state, reducing its visibility on the global stage.

To overcome these challenges, Kerala needs to strengthen supportive policies, integrate cultural education into learning spaces, promote digital platforms, and establish cooperative societies to empower artisans. Finding the right balance between modernization and heritage preservation is crucial—ensuring that cultural experiences remain authentic while allowing traditions to adapt and survive in a changing world.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Cultural tourism in India serves as a bridge between the past and the present, helping people understand the nation's rich traditions while also supporting social and economic progress. Kerala stands out as a strong example of how heritage and development can go hand in hand. The state's commitment to responsible and inclusive tourism has shown that cultural preservation can become a powerful tool for community growth.

Key Suggestions:

- Strengthening policy support and ensuring financial security for artisans can help safeguard their livelihoods and encourage the continuation of traditional practices.
- Introducing cultural education at school and university levels can nurture awareness and appreciation among young people.
- Expanding community-based and village tourism models will make tourism more inclusive, ensuring that benefits reach local communities.
- Using digital tools—such as storytelling platforms, virtual tours, and online archives—can bring Kerala's culture to a global audience while preserving its legacy.
- Targeted marketing campaigns and the appointment of cultural ambassadors can help enhance Kerala's visibility on national and international platforms.
- Upgrading infrastructure at heritage and cultural sites will improve the overall experience for visitors and help preserve these locations.
- Maintaining authenticity through ethical tourism practices is essential to ensure that cultural traditions are not diluted or commercialized.

Cultural tourism in Kerala is more than an industry; it is a vibrant expression of the state's identity, creativity, and heritage. By safeguarding its intangible traditions while embracing modern innovation, Kerala continues to stand out as a global model for sustainable and culturally rooted tourism.

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