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Adventure sports in Kashmir: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Given its rich, diverse and varied topography, adventure sports holds huge scope and significance in Kashmir. Lofty slopes, vast meadows, enthralling picturesque, placid lake waters, gushing streams, breathtaking waterfalls, world famous skiing and trekking grounds and much more make Kashmir Valley an apt destination for adventure sport.

Exploring new and innovative arenas and activities in adventure sports would not only throw gates of opportunities wide open, but would provide an ample opportunity to tourism players to explore innovative ways to grab domestic and foreign footfall, facilitate adventure sports organizers, professionals and lovers to pool in their efforts to explore more possibilities and potentialities. This would encourage more adventure sports activities, promote adventure tourism, bring in more areas on tourism world map, generate more income and livelihood, enhance skill management, earn more profits and ensure well-being.

More adventure sports opportunities would mean secure and sustainable livelihoods for those directly or indirectly related with sports and tourism sector. Establishing a sustainable adventure sports portfolio for the Valley also means investing in building infrastructure and developing skill sets. The existing infrastructure offers just a baseline support; real push will emerge from strong public-private partnerships. Huge challenges on account of planning, connectivity, infrastructure, marketing, promotional strategies, trained human resources and other skills cannot be underestimated. All these gaps could be timely and thoroughly addressed to sustain adventure sports activities on eco-friendly and sustainable lines.

Keywords: Adventure sports, Kashmir, sustainable livelihood, promotional strategies, connectivity, skill management

Introduction

As adventure sports gain popularity worldwide, Kashmir Valley has much to offer. Its spectacular landscape, breath-taking waterfalls, sparkling streams, picturesque alpine scenery, adventurous tracks, skiing grounds/turfs and lofty mountains offers great promise for adventure sports in the Valley. Bike riding, mountain biking, water-surfing (water sports), snow skiing, nature walks, trekking, mountaineering expeditions, trekking, rafting, rock-climbing, sky-running and so on are some impressive adventure sports that Valley can offer. The sustainability of adventure sports in the Valley however, calls for developing professional human capital apart from exploring and introducing adventure sports events, developing eco-friendly structures and upgrading existing sports infrastructure and promoting little known or new adventure sports destinations.

Being the most vibrant activity, adventure sports encourage local trade, promote culture, strengthen livelihood generation, generate foreign exchange and develop societies. Being one of the fastest growing sectors, India offers huge scope and potential for adventure sports given its huge geographic nature, diverse land forms and rich traditional history. Adventure tourism has recently picked up in India from exploration of remote areas to exotic locales to rock climbing, skiing, camel safari, para-gliding, rafting, mountaineering to various other activities. For adventure tourism in India, tourists prefer to go for trekking to places like Ladakh, Sikkim and Himalaya. Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir are popular for skiing facilities.

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For whitewater rafting tourists flock to Uttarakhand, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, various kinds of adventure on water, land and air can be enjoyed in India (Arunmozhi and Panneerselvam, 2013)^[1].

Given the trends emerging in both the tourism and sports sectors, it is not surprising that significant growth is also occurring in travel for sports related purposes. Sports tourism attractions are destinations that provide tourists with things to see and do related to sport. Attractions can be natural (parks, mountains, wildlife) or manmade (museums, stadiums, stores). General characteristics represented in this core area of sports tourism include visits to state-of-the-art sports facilities and/or unique sports facilities that generally house sporting events such as stadiums, arenas and domes; sports museums and hall/walls of fame dedicated to sports heritage and honoring sports heroes and leaders; hiking trails developed for exploring nature and so on. Sports tourism resorts are well-planned and integrated resort complexes with sports or health as their primary focus and marketing strategy. In many situations, these vacation centers offer high-quality facilities and services to sport tourists. Sometimes even adventurous camps lead participants down white-water rapids, over rugged canyons or off steep cliffs including hiking, biking and climbing (Gozalova *et al.*, 2014)^[4].

In this context, the research article would focus on growth, possibilities and potentialities of different adventure sports in Kashmir Valley given its rich, diverse and scenic geographic forms, patterns and distribution. It will also help to identify major challenges that could act as barriers in devising, designing and promoting adventure sports activities on the lines of sustainability and development. Thus, the article would focus to encourage adventure sports football in the Valley by promoting its diversity, variations and capacity, designing interesting adventure sports events, exploring unique selling points of existing adventure sports activities and opportunities. This would also facilitate in developing more possibilities to earn foreign exchange for the country and offer a distinctive leisure, relaxing and rejuvenating option for people, at large.

Review of literature

Several studies have been conducted related to nature, concept and significance of adventure sports that has been increasingly growing over the recent past. Adventure sports also popularized as 'Extreme Sports' are much more adventurous than routine outdoor sports activities. Being an appealing sports activity, it involves element of risk as well.

Adventure sports have a long tradition. In the 19th century exploration of arctic areas and climbing in the Alps were new adventurous pursuits. In the 20th century alpine skiing, kayaking, sailing, parachute jumping and other risky sports were developed. From 1970s and onwards, there has been a sharp increase and development of new forms of adventure sports. On one hand, the popularity of adventure sports can be seen as a quest for excitement and on the other hand, it represents key ideas in modern societies like individualism, entrepreneurship and transcendence (Breivik, 2010)^[2].

Outdoor and adventure sports have been linked to positive health and wellbeing outcomes. Participation in adventure sports goes beyond enjoyment and excitement. Kerr & Mackenzie (2012)^[5] found multiple motives for participation in adventure sports and those included risk taking, goal achievement, social motivation, escape from boredom, overcoming fear and connecting with natural environment.

Collins and Collins's (2015) Adventure Sports Coach Model

(ASC) was designed under the influence of theoretical frameworks used in sports coach research. The Model's components include the intervention focus, ASC's ability to remain in the natural environment, risk management and decision-making processes and the personal epistemological structure at the basis of their intervention.

Thus, exploring and understanding adventure sports become all the more important as it throws light on various aspects of physical and mental wellbeing as well as helps to connect with nature and promotes growth, decision-making and the spirit of entrepreneurship.

Objectives: The specific objectives of the article were to:

- Understand the broader purpose of adventure sports
- Explore its growth and status in terms of infrastructure development, skill enhancement and marketing strategies
- Examine its viability as a sustainable livelihood opportunity
- Identify various bottlenecks that create hurdles in promoting it as a viable option to rest, relax and rejuvenate.

Discussion

Adventure sports not only acts as recreational, outdoor physical activity but an equally important socio-economic activity to be explored in terms of sustainable livelihood, infrastructure development and skill enhancement. It offers a huge potential to be explored in terms of identification of adventure sports spots, their accessibility and infrastructure development and providing an opportunity for sports professionals, sports lovers and adventure tourists to explore, learn and entertain.

Growth, Development and Significance of Adventure Sports

Usually, it is said that adventure sports is full of enthusiasm, energy, excitement and is undertaken to explore nature. These sports activities are derived out of adventurous interest of individuals who are curious to know and explore nature and its diversity. These activities include rafting, surfing, mountaineering, trekking, and likewise. These sports can be further classified as water adventure sports, land adventure sports and aero adventure sports. All the three categories have their own uniqueness and significance to offer and sell. For example; water adventure sports include rafting, surfing and likewise; land adventure sports include mountaineering, trekking and so on and aero adventure sports include paragliding, and likewise.

Kashmir Valley offers huge space, scope and opportunities to almost all these activities. Abound with innumerable natural resources, Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most sought after destinations in India for adventure activities be it the lakes, waterways and valleys of Kashmir or foothills of Jammu. It offers huge possibilities and potentialities for sportspersons as well as sports lovers, visitors and tourists. Abundant in water resources, Kashmir Valley offers plenty of opportunities for water adventure sports activities. Pahalgam is one such destination that offers immense potential for kayaking and canoeing. Rocky and lofty mountains and snowy slopes available in large numbers across the Valley too offer perfect locations for trekking and skiing. While Gulmarg is a world famous hill station for skiing; Sonmarg to Pahalgam is covered with dense alpine, providing ample scope for alpine skiing. Skiing and mountain climbing too offer unlimited possibilities for adventure sports professionals and lovers.

Other adventure sports like paragliding, hot air ballooning too are grabbing attention from adventure sports professionals and lovers.

Let us discuss some of the major adventure sports attractions in Kashmir Valley:

1. **Kayaking and Canoeing:** These are two of the oldest known water adventure sports. The lakes of Kashmir offer innumerable potential for these activities. Dal Lake, Nagin Lake and Wular Lake are its major attractions.
2. **Mountaineering:** In India it came as a sport in the 18th century with the Europeans (kashmir-tourism.org). The peaks in Jammu and Kashmir are frequently visited by sports professionals, sports clubs, sports associations and organizations and sports lovers. The lofty mountains offer endless adventure and recreational opportunities. Scaling high altitude mountains is also gaining popularity among youth. Even amateur mountain climbers wish to enjoy mountaineering trips and expeditions. For example; Kolahoi and Harmukh in Kashmir valley are frequently visited by the people.
3. **Trekking:** This too forms an integral part of adventure sports. Several routes passing through densely covered forests, hills, glaciers and vast meadows offer great scope for adventurous trekking. There are short term treks and long term treks. This can be carried out with various sports professionals, sports groups and associations, tourist groups, students and other professionals with the purpose to enjoy different facets of nature and promote physical and mental wellbeing. For example; Naranag Gangabal Trek, Kolahoi Glacacier Trek and Kashmir Alpine Lakes Trek offers a mesmerizing view of exquisite meadows and snow-capped mountains – an excellent opportunity to attract adventure sportspersons, nature lovers and landscape photographers.
4. **Golf:** Kashmir is gifted with some of the best golf courses. Situated at almost 8,700 feet, Gulmarg Golf Course is the highest golf course in India as well as the oldest. The first golf championship was played in Gulmarg in 1922. Gulmarg Golf Club was established in 1904 by Sir Neville Chamberlain. Later, it was redesigned by famous golf architect, Peter Thompson (kashmir-tourism.org). Pahalgam Golf Course is situated almost 2,400 meters above sea level and the Royal Springs Golf Course located on the banks of world famous Dal Lake is sprinkled by lush green scenery around.
5. **Paragliding:** Being one of the most popular aero-sports, paragliding is also picking up in the Valley. It is an adventure sport that involves flying through the air with the help of parachute-like canopy. Domina C. Jalbert, in 1954, invented advanced governable gliding parachutes with multi-cells and controls for lateral glide. Paragliding is classified as light-weight gliding, free flying glider and foot-launched glider: Foot launched glider is like an aircraft with no rigid primary structure (kashmir-tourism.org).
6. **River Rafting:** This involves thrill, excitement, speed and adventure. River rafting on the Lidder River is an adventurous activity that has gained a lot of popularity in the past few years.
7. **Skiing:** This is a major sport among adventure enthusiasts. Known world over, Gulmarg draws ski-lovers from all over the globe. Apherwat Peak in Gulmarg, is the main heli-skiing base in Kashmir. After

Canada, it is the best destination for heli-skiing lovers (kashmir-tourism.org).

8. **Water Skiing:** This too has tremendous scope and potential in adventure sports sector in the Valley. World famous Dal and Nagin lakes in Srinagar and Manasbal Lake in district Ganderbal are the most popular destinations for water skiing.

Apart from these impressive adventure sports attractions, Kashmir Valley offers huge potential for bike riding, mountain biking, nature walks, rock climbing and so on. Thus, taking into consideration the abundant scope and potential of adventure sports in the Kashmir Valley, it becomes imperative that infrastructure required for the same is developed on eco-friendly and sustainable lines and emphasis is laid on skill management and trained human resources.

Adventure Sports as an instrument of socio-economic development and employment generation

The importance of adventure sports as an instrument for socio-economic development and employment generation has been recognized world over. Taking a cue from there it can be used to identify new potential areas and avenues in the Valley and develop them accordingly to attract more influx towards the adventure sports. As Kashmir offers huge scope and potential for adventure sports, it would open up new window of opportunities for generating and utilizing resources both in terms of investment and revenue generation leading to employment generation as well as socio-economic growth of the local population.

The identification and development of new areas would pave way for development of infrastructure in those areas and increase in footfall that would in a way create or enhance livelihood opportunities for many. The local and remote areas would get developed and locals would explore and adopt means of livelihood. Consequently, the same would lead to socio-economic development of individuals, families, societies, communities and region as a whole. This would also help in exploring new areas, developing new facilities, building linkages, grooming talent, creating and maintain pool of resource persons, strengthening tourism and hospitality sector and enjoying nature. Thus, creating and developing skill and encouraging spirit of entrepreneurship.

Nature of Adventure Sports and Risks involved

Scaling heights, physical exertion, speed and patience are some of the basic requirements for adventure sports. Being a challenging field, it involves number of risks and challenges on account of planning, connectivity, infrastructure building, trained human resources, marketing skills, promotional strategies among others.

Krein (2007)^[6] observed that one of the characteristic features of adventure sports is the level and type of risk encountered when participating in these events and activities. Because of the nature of adventure sports, the remoteness of the settings in which they typically take place and the factors that are beyond the control of participants, such as weather and rock fall in mountaineering, it is impossible to remove such risks from the activities. One simply cannot climb big and steep mountains, ski rough terrain and paraglide in the open and vast sky without exposing oneself to the potential of serious injury or even death.

Adventure sports coach's practice in environments that are dynamic and high in risk, both perceived and actual. The

inherent risks associated with these activities, individuals' responses and the optimal exploitation of both combine to make the processes of risk management more complex and hazardous than the traditional sports where risk management is focused almost exclusively on minimization. Pivotal to this process is the adventure sports coaches' ability to make effective judgments regarding levels of risk, potential benefits and possible consequences. The exact nature of this decision making process should form the basis of coaching practice and coach education in this complex and dynamic field (Collins & Collins, 2013)^[3].

Care has however, to be taken that all the adventure sports activities are carried out in eco-friendly manner and on sustainable development model. Eco-friendly structures to be developed wherever required; wildlife and flora and fauna to be protected, water resources to be preserved and environment around to be kept pollution free.

Theoretical Framework

Collins and Collins (2012) attempt to conceptualize the role of Adventure Sports Coach (ASC) proposing that the broad range of motivations for participation in adventure sports creates a parallel need for a broad skill-set. It requires a pedagogic skill set that encompasses coaching, leadership and personal development skills in order to respond to differentiated needs of a client group. Besides, its nature generates a need for personal ability in the activity itself that underpins these professional skills. This does not require ASC to be a high performer but certainly to be skillfully independent in teaching and adventure environment. The components: Coaching, leadership, development and personal ability must be integrated with highly developed judgment and decision-making skills as shown in the figure below:

Collins and Collins (2013)^[3] further observed that ASC must deploy a careful and considered approach to risk management, balancing the challenge of an activity with potential benefits, while maintaining a level of risk that is authentic for a learner.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Being unique in its nature and approach, adventure sports are carried out in natural settings. They offer tremendous scope and opportunities to be explored and promoted. They have a potential to grow, diversify and emerge as viable sustainable livelihood model. At the same time, they create an adventurous aura around. From health and physique point of view, these sports activities provide new pathways for maintaining physical and mental well-being and creating new source of activities to relax and rejuvenate.

It is essential to have a holistic understanding about potentials, possibilities and gaps in adventure sports. This would help in identifying and locating new adventure sports destinations, modifying and upgrading the existing ones, designing and developing marketing strategies that would help to create a niche for this sector. As times are changing and people are more into working under tight deadlines that impact their lifestyle and socializing patterns, scope for adventure sports gets wider and broader.

The planners and policy makers need to understand and evaluate the existing status and forms of adventure sports, its related facilities and infrastructure and at the same time identify new areas and their unique selling points. This will help them to devise strategies and target the prospective customers, sports lovers and professionals in planning, promoting and managing adventure sports sector in the

Valley. Promotional activities will help it to grow, expand and diversify. Mass media and social media can be used for these promotional activities apart from organizing different events and publicity campaigns.

Various loopholes in terms of infrastructure development, accommodation, transport services, connectivity and other facilities need timely attention and intervention that would help in examining and analyzing the structural changes required to be brought in this sector.

To explore possibilities and potentialities for growth of adventure sports in Kashmir Valley, following strategies and measures need to be looked into:

- existing adventure sports infrastructure and the need to upgrade it
- Infrastructure gaps and possible solutions to fill these gaps
- Identification and development of new adventure sport forms and activities
- Develop skill sets and trained human resources
- Promote sustainable adventure sports model

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