

The Role of Tourism on the Quality of Life of Rural Families Living in Religious Tourism Destinations (Case Study: Mashhad County)

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

A common pattern of rural tourism is religious tourism; it is one of the oldest and most thriving types of tourism both in the past and present all over the world. Given all the components and various types of this tourism, it has been placed at the core of world tourism due to its particular structural and functional features, occupying 26% of the whole global tourism flow. Currently, there exist 5800 registered tombs attributed to Imamzadehs (descendants of Imams). In this regard, there are 22 monuments located in 14 rural settlements surrounding Mashhad. Mashhad as the center of pilgrimage of Iran attracts millions of tourists every year (almost 28 million people in 2016, for instance). Since the goal of 84% of tourists in Mashhad is pilgrimage, the spreading of these tourists across the city would enforce the tourism structures at the region. Studies show that rural regions with religious tourist attractions have somewhat been placed at the religious tourism flow of Mashhad in the recent decade. In 2016, nearly 14.5% of tourists in Mashhad also traveled to religious rural tourist destinations of Mashhad. Experts in the field of tourism believe that the profit generated from the tourism industry in rural regions is not exclusively limited to economic benefits which can be assessed from different angles such as improved quality of rural residents' lives. Studies show that the growth of tourism in rural areas leads to a number of social, economic, and environmental changes and reforms within the host society. Consequently, tourism development has the potential to influence the improvement of quality of life. Accordingly, the present study seeks to provide answers to the following question: What is the effect of religious tourism on the quality of rural residents' lives?

2. Review of Literature

In many studies, the construct of the quality of life has been considered in economic, social, and environmental aspects while others have taken objective and subjective dimensions of the quality of life into account; certain studies have also examined the quality of life components such as housing, income, participation, etc. As a platform to introduce social and economic changes in rural regions, many studies show that religious tourism plays an effective role in the rural residents' quality of life; such consequences can be examined through

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sociocultural, environmental, and economic aspects. By offering subsistence diversity and providing new opportunities, income generation, creating new markets, and the development of other economic sectors, religious tourism can affect the economic aspect of the quality of life. Furthermore, tourism may also result in shortcomings in the economic area of rural regions and negatively affect the quality of life such as increased prices of lands, income gaps, seasonal occupations, increased prices of commodities and services, etc. Through a social perspective, the reception of religious tourists in rural regions could affect viability and interactions between humans. Moreover, religious tourism can also lead to a number of changes in value systems, individual behaviors, family relations, collective lifestyle, traditional ceremonies, and social institutions. It can also be effective in improving the quality of life through the development of infrastructural investments including transportation and increased environmental sensitivity of the natives. In addition, the presence of religious tourists may also increase environmental pollutions, traffic, and litter.

3. Method

This study was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected using field studies and documents. Using the data extracted from the endowments office, fourteen villages were identified as religious tourism destinations among 480 rural settlements of Mashhad as a result of the presence of monuments attributed to Imamzadehs. The independent and dependent variables were quantified as correlated. The effect of religious tourism on rural residents' quality of life was analyzed in three environmental-physical, economic, and social aspects with 13, 16, and 11 variables, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha for the quality of life construct with 39 items was obtained 0.91, suggesting the suitable reliability of the research instrument. Among the total population of 3674 families, the sample was randomly chosen 194 families using Cochran's formula, with 0.068 error. Questionnaires were distributed among the sample population.

4. Results and Discussion

As pointed out in background and theoretical framework sections, tourism development can play an important role in improving the natives' quality of life. However, the study showed that religious tourism has not significantly improved rural residents' quality of life in Mashhad. Among the examined variables in the economic aspect, "creation of job opportunities in the service sector" variable with a mean value of 2.75 was higher than other variables. Moreover, religious tourism has not considerably improved the quality of life in the social aspect as well; among the examined variables, the "increased interaction and participation of rural residents due to the presence of Imamzadeh in the village" was assessed as the highest with a mean value of 3.55. Additionally, religious tourism has also failed to offer significant improvement in the physical-environmental aspect of the quality of life; the "increased awareness and sensitivity of residents toward the problem of environment" was assessed as the highest with a mean value of 3.52. The mean values of religious tourism in economic, social, and physical-environmental aspects of quality of life were shown to be below average with values of 2.09, 2.71, and

2.93, respectively. With a mean value of 2.50, religious tourism had an insignificant effect on rural residents' quality of life. The highest mean values of quality of life were found in Miami, Aman Abad, and Tabadkan, respectively.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study show the fragile role of religious tourism in improving rural residents' quality of life. This can be justified by considering the insignificant volume of religious tourists in certain villages (Rezavan, Gounjouk Aliah, and Ziarat with an average of 3000, 3500, and 3500 annual tourists, respectively) along with the negative impacts resulted from the presence of a multitude of tourists (Miami) in the host society. The higher the number of tourist entering a destination, the more effective their presence can be. Though the results of the study did not deny the influence of religious tourism on the quality of life, the intensity of such an influence was assessed as insignificant. Contrary to the results of studies conducted by Rezvani, Akbarian Rounizi, Badri and Sepahvand (2012), Akbarian Rounizi and Khorasani (2013), Ghadami, Aligolizadeh Firozjaye and Ramazanzadeh Lasboyei (2009) which demonstrate the considerable impact of tourism on the quality of life in general, this study was focused on religious tourism which was found to be insignificantly effective. Regardless of the relatively high income generated from vows (nadh) to monuments (more than 25 billion Tomans in 2015), a large portion of the income is taken out of the village while a small percentage is spent on the constructions related to the monument itself. Taking the subjects mentioned in the theoretical framework section and the results of the study into account, it appears that in addition to the reception of the "religious tourism" concept instead of "pilgrimage destination", there are three necessary actions to be taken in the short term in religious tourism destinations within rural regions: 1. Creation and improvement of secondary attractions; 2. Qualitative and quantitative development of facilities and services required by tourists; and 3. Preventing the egression of the income generated from the presence of tourists (such as vows) from religious tourism destinations. Clearly, these actions can increase tourist retention along with creating diverse non-agricultural job opportunities, generating more income directly and indirectly for the village; subsequently, improvement in the economic status of families would result in an improved quality of life in different aspects.

Keywords: Imamzadeh, Mashhad, Religious Tourism, Quality of Life, Tourism Destinations

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