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An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Industry: Growth, Challenges, and Policy Outlook

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Abstract

Tourism constitutes a cornerstone of Uttarakhand's economy, contributing significantly to its socio-economic development and regional identity as the 'Dev Bhoomi' or Land of Gods. This paper, titled 'An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Sector: Growth, Challenges and Policy Perspective', examines the growth patterns, infrastructural evolution, and sustainability challenges of the state's tourism sector from 2014–15 to 2023–24. Drawing upon secondary data from official tourism reports, government policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of tourist arrivals, accommodation expansion, self-employment initiatives, and eco-tourism trends. The findings reveal a remarkable recovery in total tourist inflows following the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 7.8 million in 2020–21 to nearly 59.6 million in 2023–24, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Domestic tourism dominates the sector, while foreign tourist arrivals remain relatively limited, signalling the need for enhanced international promotion and infrastructure development. The study also highlights the steady growth in hospitality facilities, including hotels, lodges, and homestays, alongside the success of government initiatives such as the Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana, which fosters entrepreneurship and local participation. Despite these positive trends, challenges persist in maintaining ecological balance, managing carrying capacity in fragile zones, and ensuring sustainable development. The paper concludes that Uttarakhand's tourism industry exhibits strong resilience and diversification, but requires integrated policy measures that emphasize environmental sustainability, community engagement, and equitable growth.

Keywords: Tourism, Uttarakhand, Sustainable Development, Eco-Tourism, Economic Growth, Hospitality Sector

Introduction:

Tourism plays a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural development of Uttarakhand, a state renowned for its unspoiled natural beauty, rich spiritual heritage, and diverse ecology. Popularly known as 'Dev Bhoomi' or the Land of the Gods, Uttarakhand

An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Industry: Growth, Challenges... Lucy Kumari & Narinder Singh attracts millions of pilgrims, adventure seekers, and nature enthusiasts each year. The state's topography, biodiversity, and rich cultural traditions make tourism one of the most significant contributors to its gross domestic product (GDP) and employment generation. This paper, titled 'An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Sector: Growth, Challenges and Policy Perspective,' aims to evaluate growth trends, infrastructural developments, and changing patterns in the tourism sector by analysing relevant data from 2014–15 onwards 2023–24. Over the past decade, Uttarakhand's tourism industry has undergone both expansion and temporary decline due to socio-economic, environmental, and global factors. From 2014–15 to 2019–20, total tourist arrivals increased from 29.4 million to 36.8 million, illustrating a consistent upward trajectory and growing domestic popularity. However, the sector faced a severe downturn in 2020–21, when tourist visits plummeted to 7.8 million as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global travel. Despite this setback, the industry demonstrated strong resilience and adaptability, with total visits rebounding to nearly 59.6 million by 2023–24—surpassing pre-pandemic levels. This recovery reflects improved infrastructure, renewed domestic travel interest, and the government's proactive policy measures.

At a broader level, tourism in Uttarakhand reflects global trends where natural, cultural, and spiritual attractions drive regional development (Bhatt & Rawat, 2024; Tiwari, 2019; Singh, 2018). The state's dual identity as both a pilgrimage center and an adventure destination—makes it uniquely positioned to attract diverse tourist segments. The Kumaon and Garhwal regions, each with distinct ecological and cultural features, contribute to this diversity (Joveriya & Mariya, 2019). The rise of community-driven and eco-tourism ventures demonstrates increasing awareness of the need for sustainability and inclusivity (Dangwal, 2024; Sharma & Hasti, 2023).

Economically, tourism is one of the largest contributors to Uttarakhand's service sector GDP, with a 150% increase in income over a decade (Uttarakhand Development Report, 2011; Tiwari, 2019). The sector provides both direct employment in hospitality, transport, and guiding services, and indirect livelihood opportunities in agriculture, handicrafts, and construction (Bhatt & Rawat, 2024; Sharma & Hasti, 2023). For many rural communities, tourism offers a viable alternative to outmigration, helping preserve local heritage and sustain rural economies.

However, the sector faces several challenges. Inadequate infrastructure, weak connectivity, and environmental degradation resulting from unplanned growth and waste generation pose significant threats to long-term sustainability (Roy & Saxena, 2020; Dangwal, 2024; Jacob et al., 2024). The state's vulnerability to natural disasters floods, landslides, and forest fires worsens these challenges, as reflected in temporary declines in tourist arrivals following calamities. Climate change exacerbates these risks, impacting livelihoods and environmental stability (Jacob et al., 2024). Recognising these challenges, the state government has adopted multiple strategies to promote sustainable tourism. The *Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023* emphasizes eco-friendly practices, community participation, and equitable benefit-sharing (Singh & Semwal, 2024). Homestay programs and small-scale tourism enterprises have emerged as successful models for sustainable tourism development (Sharma & Hasti, 2023; Prajapati et al., 2023). However, barriers such as limited training, inadequate awareness, and institutional constraints continue to impede widespread community participation (Kala & Bagri, 2018; Verma et al., 2024).

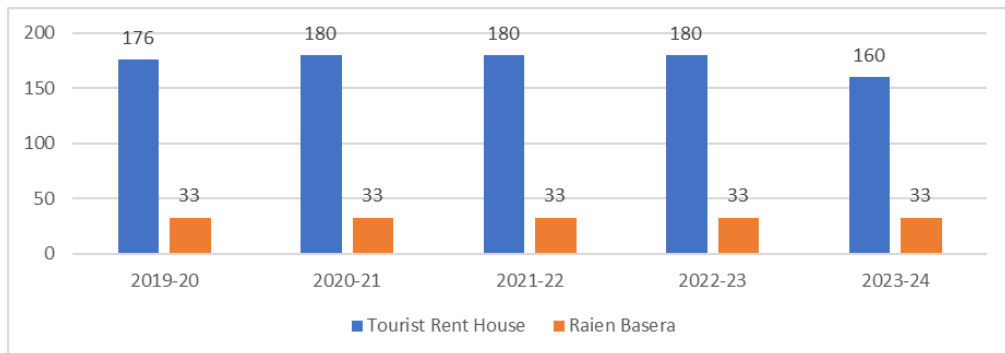
Overall, this research paper provides a comprehensive assessment of Uttarakhand's tourism industry, exploring its growth patterns, infrastructural evolution, and sustainability concerns. By synthesizing statistical data with contemporary research, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism and propose strategies for inclusive, resilient, and environmentally responsible development. Uttarakhand's experience, with its blend of opportunities and challenges, offers valuable insights into how mountain regions can achieve balanced growth while preserving their ecological and cultural heritage.

Methodology:

This study presents a descriptive and analytical research design to assess the growth, development, and sustainability of the tourism industry in Uttarakhand. The methodology is based on secondary data collected from official government sources, including the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (UTDB), Statistical handbook from Directorate of Economics and Statistics, and other published documents, covering the period from 2014–15 to 2023–24. Statistical tools such as trend analysis and percentage change have been used to interpret the data and identify patterns in tourist arrivals, accommodation facilities, and tourism-related employment initiatives. The *first objective* of this paper is to analyze the growth trends in Uttarakhand's tourism sector over the past decade. The *second objective* is to assess the impact of government initiatives and infrastructure development on promoting sustainable and inclusive tourism. By graphical representation, the paper aims to provide understanding of the tourism sector's performance and challenges, thereby contributing to policy formulation and regional development strategies.

Results and Discussion:

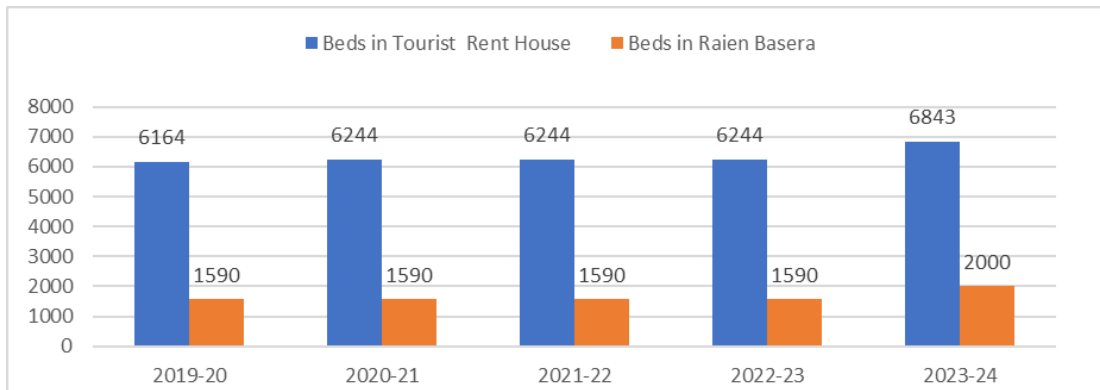
Figure 1: Distribution of Tourist Rent House and Rain Basera in Uttarakhand from 2019-20 to 2023-24.



Source: Statistical Handbooks, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Uttarakhand

Figure 1 reveals a consistent pattern in the operation of Rain Basera accommodations, maintaining a steady figure of 33 throughout the five-year period. Tourist Rent Houses show slight fluctuations, reaching a peak of 180 from 2020–21 to 2022–23, before declining to 160 in 2023–24. This decline suggests either a decrease in tourist demand or a shift in accommodation preferences toward alternative forms of accommodation.

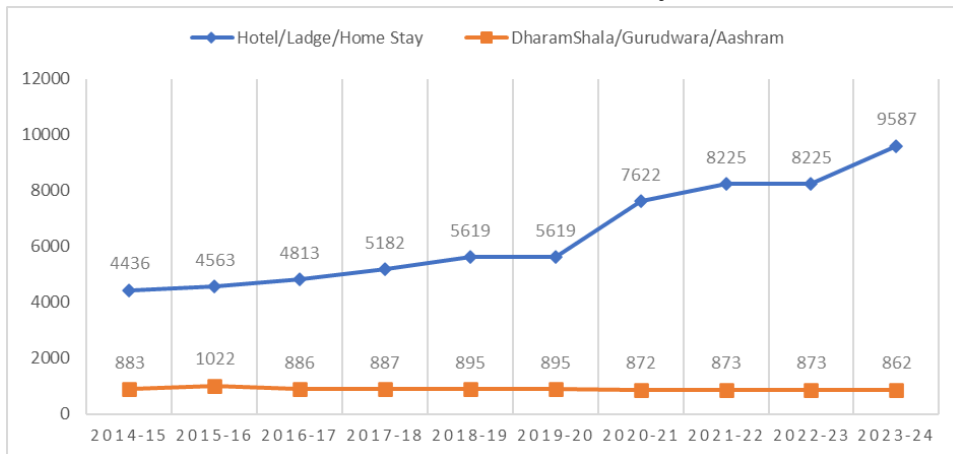
Figure 2: Distribution of Beds in Tourist Rent House and Rain Basera in Uttarakhand from 2019-20 to 2023-24.



Source: *ibid*

Figure 2 presents data on the number of beds available in *Tourist Rent Houses* and *Raien Basera* facilities in Uttarakhand between 2019–20 and 2023–24. The number of beds in Tourist Rent Houses remained relatively stable from 2019–20 to 2022–23, fluctuating between 6,100 and 6,200, followed by a notable increase to nearly 6,900 in 2023–24. Similarly, beds in Raien Basera showed consistent availability at around 1,500 to 1,600 during the first four years, before rising to approximately 2,000 in 2023–24. The recent upward trend indicates an expansion of accommodation capacity, likely due to government and private efforts to enhance tourism infrastructure after the pandemic.

Figure 3: Distribution of number of Hotels/ Lodges/ Homestays and Dharamshala/Gurudwaras/Aashrams/ over the years in Uttarakhand



Source: *ibid*

Figure 3 presents the trend in the number of *Hotel/Lodge/Home Stay* and *Dharamshala/Gurudwara/Aashram* facilities in Uttarakhand in last decade, highlighting the progressing structure of the state's accommodation sector. The data show a consistent increase in commercial lodging facilities, rising from 4,436 in 2014–15 to 9,587 in 2023–24, indicating a significant expansion in the hospitality infrastructure. However, the number of religious or traditional accommodations, such as Dharamshalas and Aashrams, has remained relatively stable, fluctuating slightly between 870 and 1,020 during the same period. The rising trend of hotels and homestays demonstrates increasing tourist arrivals,

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 diverse tourist preferences, and the government's efforts to encourage sustainable and community-led tourism initiatives.

Figure 4: Distribution of year-wise number of tourist visits in Uttarakhand.

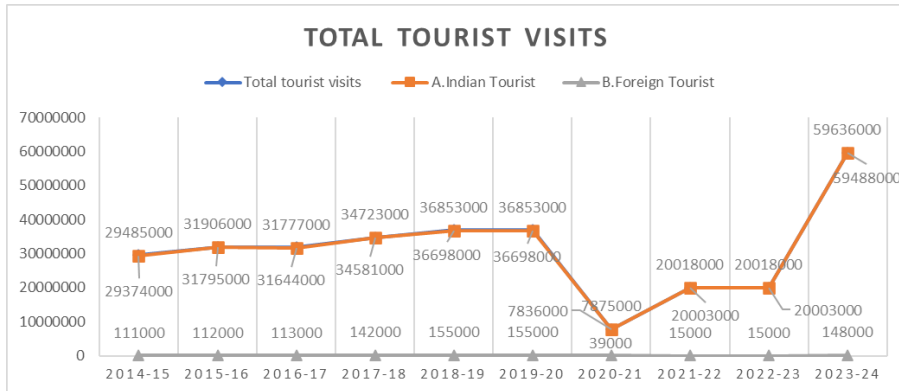


Figure 4 illustrates the trend of total tourist visits in Uttarakhand from 2014–15 to 2023–24, highlighting the differences between domestic and international visitors' tourists. The data reveal a steady increase in total tourist arrivals from 29.4 million in 2014–15 to 36.8 million in 2019–20, reflecting the state's growing prominence as a tourism destination. However, a sharp decline occurred in 2020–21, when total visits dropped drastically to approximately 7.9 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions. In subsequent years, the industry experienced a steady recovery, culminating in a notable resurgence by 2023–24, with total visits reaching 59.6 million. Importantly, domestic tourists make up the vast majority of visits, while foreign tourist numbers remain relatively low, showing only slight fluctuations throughout the period.

Figure 5: Distribution of total tourist visits in important national parks

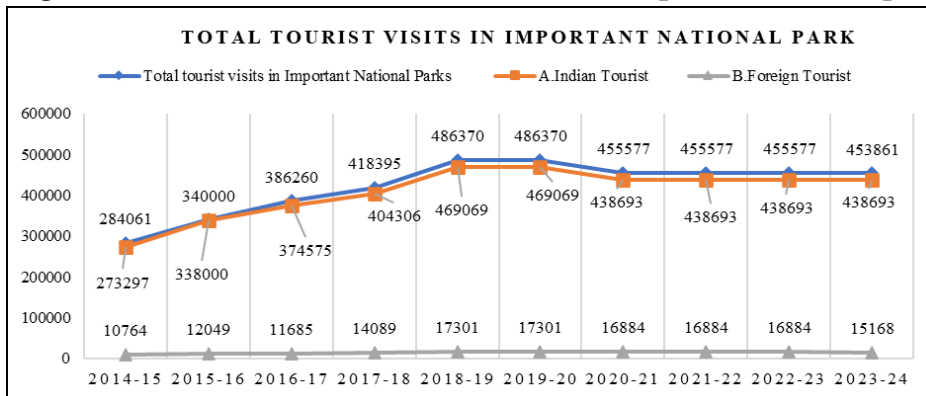
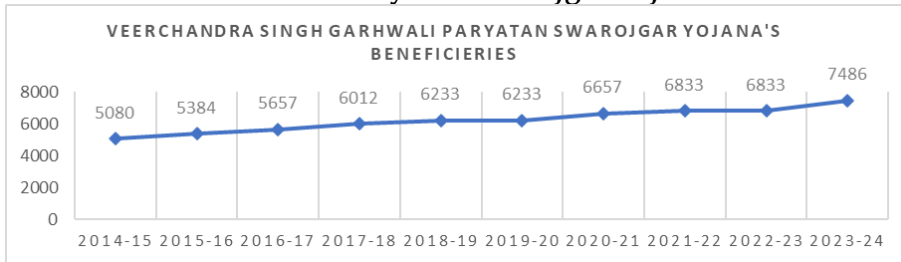


Figure 5 illustrates the trend in total tourist visits to key national parks in Uttarakhand from 2014–15 to 2023–24, offering insights into the significance of eco-tourism within the state's tourism sector. The data indicate a steady increase in total visitors from 284,061 in 2014–15 to a peak of 486,370 in 2018–19, followed by a slight decline and stabilization around 455,000 to 453,000 visitors between 2019–20 and 2023–24. Indian tourists consistently constituted the overwhelming majority of visitors, while foreign tourist arrivals remained relatively low and stable, fluctuating between 10,000 and 17,000 across the years. This trend highlights the sustained popularity of Uttarakhand's national parks, such as Jim Corbett and Rajaji, among

An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Industry: Growth, Challenges... Lucy Kumari & Narinder Singh domestic travellers, despite the limited international influx. The marginal decline post-2019–20 likely reflects the temporary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on wildlife tourism.

Figure 6: Distribution of year-wise number of beneficiaries of Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana



Source: *ibid*

Figure 6 illustrates the trend in the number of beneficiaries under the *Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana* from 2014–15 to 2023–24, reflecting the state government's efforts to promote self-employment in Uttarakhand's tourism sector. The data indicate a steady upward trend, with the number of beneficiaries increasing from 5,080 in 2014–15 to 7,486 in 2023–24. This consistent rise shows growing participation and reliance on the scheme as a means of promoting entrepreneurship and livelihood opportunities linked to tourism. The remarkable growth after 2020–21 suggests an enhanced focus on tourism-based economic recovery in the post-pandemic period.

Key Findings and Suggestions:

The analysis of tourism data from 2014–15 to 2023–24 reveals a steady and resilient growth trajectory in Uttarakhand's tourism sector. Total tourist arrivals more than doubled from 29.4 million to 59.6 million, underscoring the state's rising prominence as a premier travel destination known for its religious, adventure, and nature-based attractions. Domestic tourism continues to dominate the sector, forming the backbone of the state's tourism economy, while foreign tourist arrivals remain relatively modest, averaging between 111,000 and 155,000 before the pandemic. The sharp decline in 2020–21, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic when arrivals fell to 7.8 million, was followed by a swift recovery, demonstrating the sector's strong resilience and the effectiveness of government-led revival initiatives.

Parallel to this growth, the state's hospitality and accommodation infrastructure expanded significantly. The number of hotels, lodges, and homestays nearly doubled from 4,436 in 2014–15 to 9,587 in 2023–24 indicating increased private participation and supportive policy measures. Government schemes such as the *Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana* have strengthened local entrepreneurship, with beneficiaries rising from 5,080 to 7,486 during the same period. Expansion of tourist rent houses and Raien Basera facilities enhanced accommodation capacity, while eco-tourism maintained a strong presence, with visits to Jim Corbett and Rajaji National Parks increasing from 284,000 in 2014–15 to nearly 486,000 in 2018–19. These trends highlight the sector's diversification into adventure, eco, and community-based tourism alongside traditional pilgrimage circuits.

Despite these achievements, several challenges persist that may constrain *sustainable development*. The increasing tourist pressure in ecologically fragile zones has raised serious environmental concerns, including waste generation, deforestation, and strain on local water resources. Seasonal overcrowding at popular pilgrimage and hill destinations, uneven infrastructure development, inadequate transport connectivity in remote areas, and limited

An Assessment of Uttarakhand's Tourism Industry: Growth, Challenges... Lucy Kumari & Narinder Singh international promotion also impede balanced growth. Weak coordination among agencies and insufficient capacity for environmental management further exacerbate these challenges.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of Uttarakhand's tourism sector, a comprehensive policy approach is essential. Prioritise strengthening environmental governance by implementing stricter carrying-capacity norms, promoting low-impact tourism models, and expanding eco-friendly infrastructure. Greater investment in digital marketing and international connectivity could boost foreign tourist inflows, while expanding training and awareness programmes would empower local communities to engage in sustainable tourism enterprises. Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and local stakeholders are vital for achieving an inclusive, resilient, and environmentally responsible tourism model that safeguards Uttarakhand's unique natural and cultural heritage.

Promoting sustainable and community-based tourism should be a cornerstone of future policy action. Encouraging homestays, local handicrafts, and cultural tourism can enhance livelihood opportunities while preserving regional identity. The government should encourage eco-friendly practices such as waste management, renewable energy use, and green building certifications for hotels and resorts. Developing carrying-capacity norms for environmentally sensitive destinations like Kedarnath, Auli, and the Corbett landscape will help preserve ecological balance and ensure visitor safety. To boost the sector's global presence, international marketing and digital promotion must be prioritised. Forming partnerships with international travel platforms, improving signage in foreign languages, and enhancing air and road connectivity can attract more overseas tourists. Moreover, creating a Tourism Sustainability Index for Uttarakhand could assist in monitoring progress across environmental, social, and economic aspects. Finally, regular skill development and capacity-building programmes under initiatives like the Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana should be expanded to foster entrepreneurship, particularly among women and young people, ensuring Uttarakhand develops as a model of sustainable mountain tourism that balances economic growth with ecological preservation.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation:

The assessment of the tourism industry in Uttarakhand from 2014-15 to 2023-24 reveals significant growth, diversification, and resilience, with total tourist arrivals increasing from 29.4 million to 59.6 million, despite a temporary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. The post-pandemic recovery, coupled with the expansion of accommodation facilities and an increase in self-employment under the Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Paryatan Swarojgar Yojana, highlights the sector's vital role in economic development and livelihood generation. However, challenges remain, including limited foreign tourist inflow, infrastructural gaps in remote areas, and environmental pressures on ecologically sensitive zones. To tackle these problems, policy measures should focus on sustainable tourism practices, better international marketing, and improved infrastructure connectivity. Strengthening community-led tourism, promoting eco-tourism initiatives, and enforcing strict environmental regulations are vital for balancing growth and ecological conservation. Moreover, integrating technology, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive policy frameworks can ensure that tourism in Uttarakhand develops as a model of sustainable mountain tourism, promoting both economic growth and environmental conservation. Promoting sustainable and community-based tourism should be a cornerstone of future

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policy action. Encouraging homestays, local handicrafts, and cultural tourism can enhance livelihood opportunities while preserving regional identity. The government should incentivize eco-friendly practices such as waste management, renewable energy use, and green building certifications for hotels and resorts. Developing carrying-capacity norms for ecologically fragile destinations like Kedarnath, Auli, and the Corbett landscape will help maintain ecological balance and visitor safety.

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