

Harnessing Digital Platforms for Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of Bani Tehsil, Kathua

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Abstract—Tourism contributes significantly to global economic growth, especially in regions like Jammu and Kashmir where it fosters revenue generation, job creation, and infrastructural development (World Tourism Organization, 2022). This study investigates popular tourism sites in the Bani Tehsil of Kathua district, Jammu and Kashmir, using secondary data derived from Instagram tourism advertising accounts and official government sources. Analysing Instagram profiles such as @Bani_the_heaven, @bani_valley_explorer, and @bani_valley, alongside official tourism statistics, we identify several tourism sites in Bani Tehsil that have the potential for further development.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Sustainable Development, Bani Tehsil, Adventure Tourism, Eco-Tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a global activity that stimulates economic growth by generating revenue, fostering employment, and providing a significant contribution to taxes (Pan et al., 2014). The World Tourism Organization (2022) defines tourism as the activity of individuals traveling and staying in places outside their usual environment for less than a year, for leisure, business, or other purposes. Globally, tourism has become a dynamic and rapidly growing sector, contributing to approximately 10% of the world's GDP and supporting millions of jobs (Leung et al., 2013). The role of digital platforms in promoting tourism is also well documented, with social media platforms such as Instagram significantly influencing destination choices (Mele et al., 2021). This paper focuses on the Bani Tehsil in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, which is a region of immense natural beauty but remains largely underdeveloped in terms of tourism infrastructure.

Bani Tehsil offers a wide range of scenic spots and cultural heritage sites, yet tourism has not been fully capitalized upon. Social media platforms, especially Instagram, provide an effective channel for promoting these lesser-known destinations (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). The use of social media in tourism research is vital, as it allows for the collection of real-time data and insights into visitor preferences (Karaca & Polat, 2022). This study utilizes Instagram data and official tourism statistics to identify and assess the potential of various rural tourism sites in Bani Tehsil.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

II.I. TOURISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Research indicates that social media has transformed how travelers choose their destinations, especially for rural tourism (Leung et al., 2013). Jacobsen and Munar (2012) highlight the growing importance of Web 2.0 platforms in shaping travel decisions, as travelers increasingly rely on peer-generated content to select vacation spots. Falk and Hagsten (2021) examine the role of Instagram in driving visitor flows to World Heritage Sites, noting that user-generated content can significantly impact destination popularity.

Hoffmann, Braesemann, and Teubner (2022) underscore the potential for using online platform data to measure sustainable tourism practices, while Stoica et al. (2022) discuss how digital storytelling can be used to enhance place branding. According to Akehurst (2009), blogs and other user-generated content are pivotal in tourism marketing, providing both organizations and tourists with platforms for sharing and receiving valuable information. Similarly, Mele et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of understanding cultural differences when promoting tourism on Instagram, suggesting that social media content should be tailored to fit local cultural values and communication styles.

II.II. TOURISM IN RURAL SETTINGS

Rural tourism has garnered significant attention due to its potential for sustainable development and its capacity to preserve local cultures and environments (Stetic, 2012). The specific features of rural tourism destinations make them ideal for eco-tourism and cultural tourism. Studies by Stoica et al. (2022) and Verma et al. (2022) have discussed how local storytelling can foster a strong connection between tourists and rural areas, thereby promoting sustainable tourism practices. Moreover, Verma et al. (2022) highlight that virtual tourism can further promote these rural destinations, particularly during periods of reduced physical travel, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jasrotia and Manhas (2018) argue that community development through tourism is possible in rural regions like Bani Tehsil, as long as the local populace is involved in decision-making and development processes. Their case study on Jodiyan Trek in Kathua emphasizes the need for a sustainable, community-driven approach in promoting rural tourism.

III. OBJECTIVE

To identify the potential rural tourism sites in Bani tehsil of district Kathua.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary data approach to explore popular tourist destinations in Bani Tehsil. Instagram tourism promotional pages and official data from the Kathua District's tourism website were the primary sources for this research.

IV.I. DATA COLLECTION

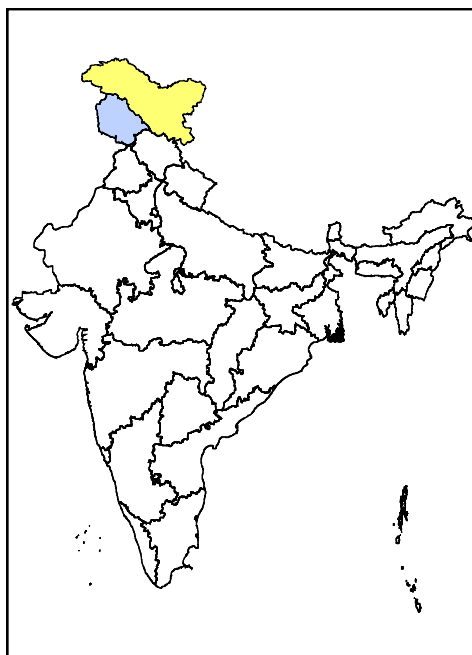
Instagram Data: Instagram pages like @Bani_the_Heaven, @bani_valley_explorer, and @bani_valley were analyzed for tourism-related posts in Bani Tehsil.

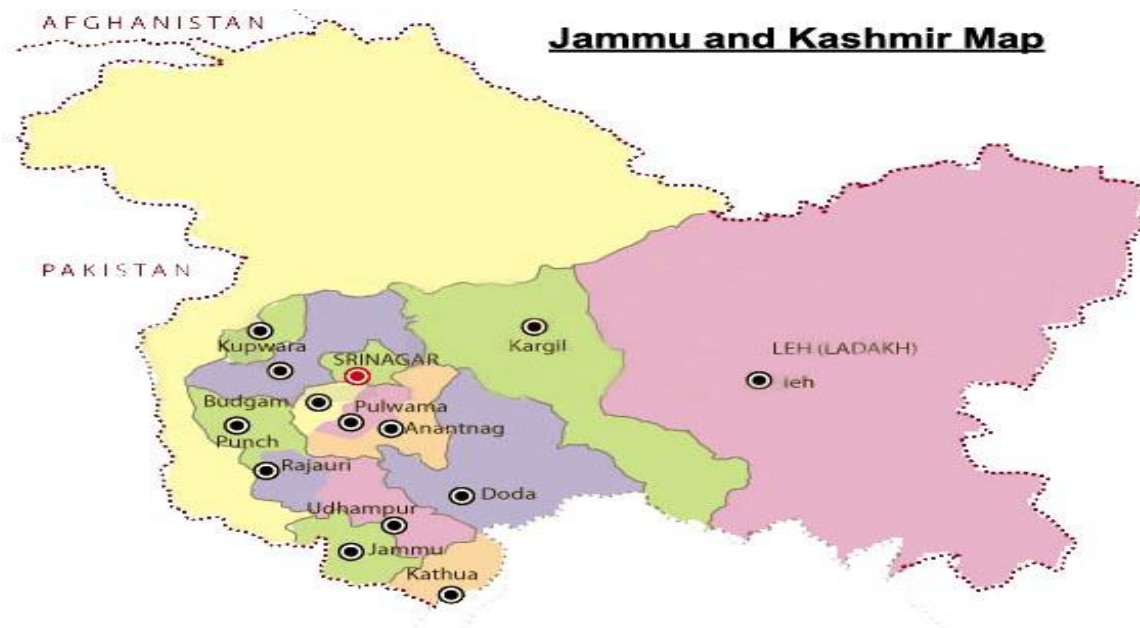
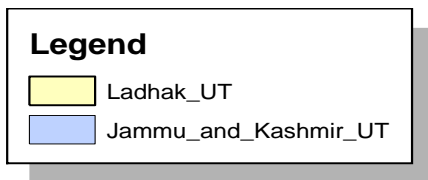
Official Tourism Data: Data from Kathua District's official website (<https://kathua.nic.in/tourist-places/>) were used to validate and supplement the Instagram findings.

IV.II. STUDY AREA

Bani Tehsil, located in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, is a hilly region with diverse geographical features, including lush meadows, dense forests, and scenic valleys. The region is home to significant cultural and natural sites, such as the Sarthal Valley, Chattargala, and Dhaggar, making it ideal for tourism (Census India, 2011). Bani Tehsil has a population of approximately 45,996, spread across 33 villages, with tourism potential in areas like Jorian Mata Mandir and Chandel Valley (Kathua Census Handbook, 2011).

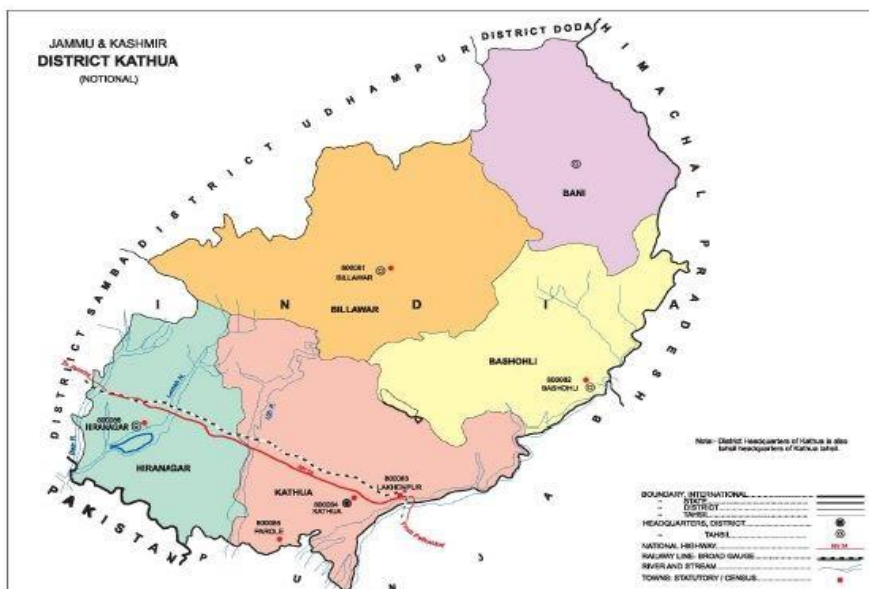
Map of India





Source – Maps of India

Map of Kathua District



Source - District Census handbook Kathua 2011

In Bani tehsil there are 33 villages and 0 town (census 2011)

Description	Urban	Rural
Number of households	0	8096

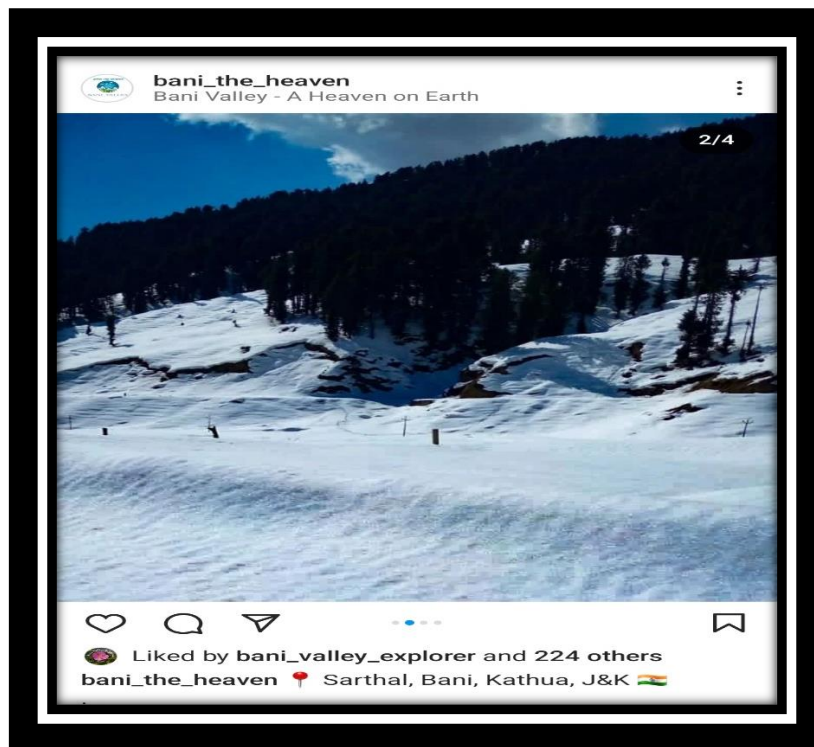
Total population	0	45996
Population (%)	0	48.06%
Male population	0	23889
Female population	0	22107
Sex ratio	0	925
Literacy	0	44.27%

Source-Bani tehsil population censusindia2011.com

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

V.I. SARTHAL

The results and findings of this study reveal the rich tourism potential of Bani Tehsil, Kathua District, with key sites such as Sarthal, Chattargala, Jorian Mata Mandir, Dhaggar, and Chandel Valley standing out as prime locations for development. Each site offers unique opportunities for tourism growth, though they remain underdeveloped and under-promoted. The data, sourced from Instagram profiles and official tourism websites, show that Sarthal, situated at an elevation of around 7,000 feet and experiencing six months of snow annually, holds immense potential for winter sports tourism. Currently, the site remains relatively untouched by large-scale tourism initiatives, but its scenic beauty and the availability of snow position it as a candidate for activities like skiing and snowboarding. The Instagram profile @Bani_the_Heaven highlights Sarthal’s landscapes, showcasing its appeal throughout the seasons, particularly in winter. These findings suggest that, with the right infrastructure in place, Sarthal could rival established winter sports destinations like Gulmarg. By investing in ski resorts, chairlifts, and eco-friendly accommodation, Sarthal could attract adventure tourists, thereby extending the tourist season and contributing to the local economy throughout the year. The development of such facilities would also support the global trend towards eco-tourism, fostering sustainable practices while promoting adventure sports.



V.II. CHATTARGALA

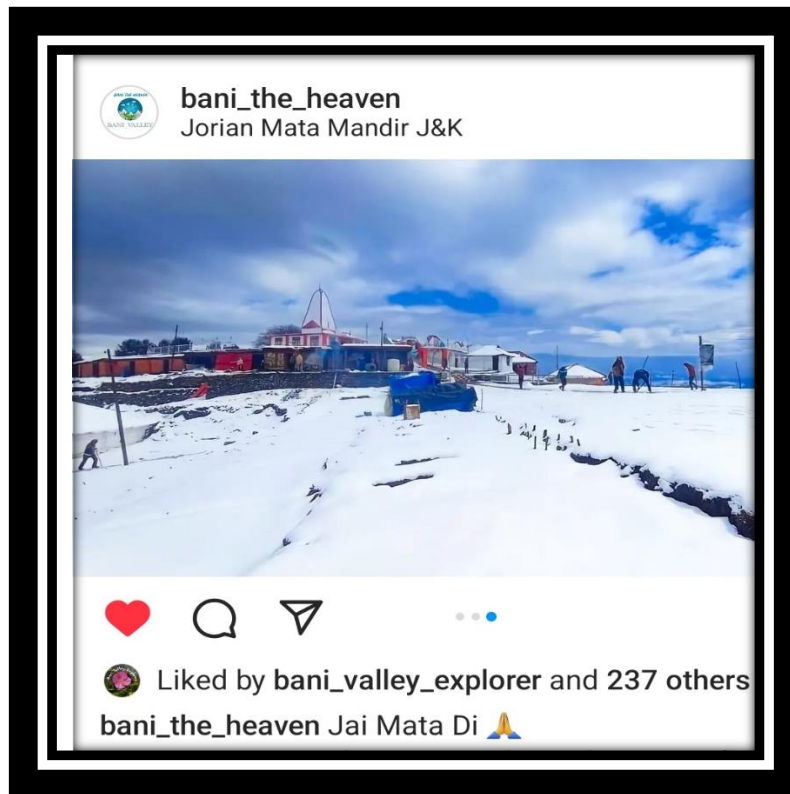
Chattargala, another key site, is known for its natural beauty and trekking routes, making it an attractive destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Despite its potential, the area suffers from a lack of infrastructure, which limits its accessibility. However, this

underdevelopment also preserves its pristine environment, creating an opportunity for sustainable, eco-friendly tourism. Instagram accounts like @bani_valley_explorer often feature Chattargala, promoting it as an ideal spot for nature lovers. Developing the area to accommodate trekkers while maintaining its natural integrity would align with sustainable tourism practices, which are becoming increasingly popular worldwide. Investments in eco-lodges, guided tours, and educational programs on the local ecosystem could transform Chattargala into a model of responsible tourism development. This would not only attract eco-conscious travelers but also create local employment opportunities, particularly in the guiding and hospitality sectors.



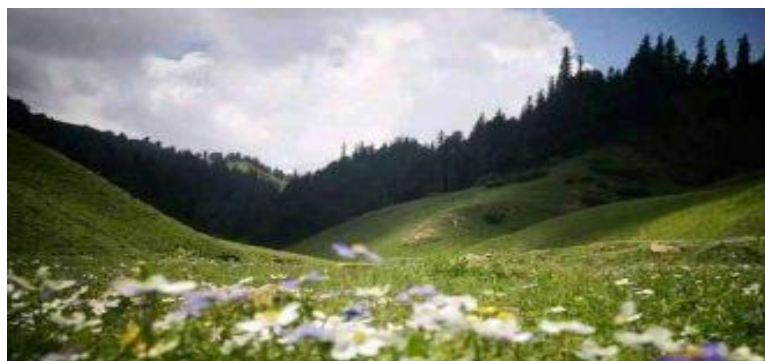
V.III. JORIAN MATA MANDIR

The religious significance of Jorian Mata Mandir, located at a similar elevation to Sarthal, presents another dimension of tourism potential. The temple attracts large numbers of pilgrims during Navaratri, yet lacks the necessary infrastructure to support a significant increase in visitors. Social media posts, especially from @bani_valley, highlight the spiritual and scenic appeal of the temple, which combines religious tourism with the adventure of reaching this remote site. Religious tourism is a major driver of domestic travel in India and enhancing the facilities around Jorian Mata Mandir could attract more pilgrims. The development of transportation, accommodation, and amenities for pilgrims would not only increase visitor numbers during festivals but also create opportunities for year-round religious and adventure tourism. This dual appeal could help sustain the local economy, offering consistent tourism-related income even outside of peak pilgrimage seasons.



V.IV. DHAGGAR

Dhaggar and Chandel Valley, rich in natural beauty and biodiversity, offer unique opportunities for nature-based and agritourism. Dhaggar, in particular, is known for its diverse flora and fauna, while Chandel Valley's serene ambiance and fruit orchards make it an attractive destination for those seeking a peaceful retreat. The Instagram account @bani_valley_explorer frequently showcases the untouched landscapes of these regions, although they remain relatively unknown in the broader tourism market. These areas could attract tourists looking for personalized, immersive experiences, away from the commercialization that often accompanies popular tourist spots. Agritourism in Chandel Valley, where visitors could participate in fruit-picking and other rural activities, presents a unique way to engage tourists while supporting local farmers. Similarly, Dhaggar's potential for ecotourism, including bird-watching and wildlife conservation tours, aligns with the increasing global demand for nature-based tourism. Promoting these areas for slow tourism could generate income for local communities while preserving their natural beauty and biodiversity.



Source: <https://kathua.nic.in/tourist-place/dhaggar/>

V.V. CHANDEL

This little valley, near Bani, is a peaceful getaway known for its clear spring and attractive orchards that grow apples, almonds, and walnuts. The existence of these orchards enhances the valley's pastoral attractiveness, providing tourists with a tranquil and bucolic experience. The fresh, crisp air is laced with the aroma of fruit trees, and the soft sounds of spring create a serene mood.

The valley's agricultural wealth and natural calm make it a great location for anyone looking for a peaceful retreat into nature, where the simplicity of rural life mixes smoothly with the surrounding picturesque beauty



Source: : <https://kathua.nic.in/tourist-place/chandel/>

The broader implications of these findings are significant for the future of rural tourism in Bani Tehsil. First, the untapped potential of these sites suggests that with the right investments, the region could become a major tourism hub, bringing substantial socio-economic benefits to local communities. The integration of digital platforms like Instagram for destination marketing also highlights the power of social media in attracting tourists, as these platforms provide a visual narrative that can inspire travel decisions. Social media, as demonstrated in this study, is an invaluable tool for promoting lesser-known destinations, helping to bring them into the global tourism market. The findings also suggest that rural tourism development in Bani Tehsil should prioritize sustainability to ensure that the natural and cultural heritage of the region is preserved. Developing eco-friendly infrastructure, promoting responsible tourism practices, and involving local communities in tourism planning and decision-making are critical to achieving this balance.

Moreover, the diversification of tourism offerings in Bani Tehsil—from adventure and religious tourism to eco and agritourism—could help reduce the region's reliance on traditional tourist destinations in Jammu and Kashmir, such as Srinagar and Gulmarg. This diversification would not only spread the economic benefits of tourism more evenly but also reduce the environmental pressure on more popular destinations. Additionally, the focus on sustainable, eco-friendly tourism aligns with global trends, which are seeing a growing number of travellers seeking out destinations that offer responsible travel experiences. By capitalizing on this trend, Bani Tehsil could attract a new segment of tourists who are interested in nature, adventure, and culture.

The development of tourism in Bani Tehsil, if managed sustainably, has the potential to transform the region into a prominent destination in Jammu and Kashmir. The findings emphasize the importance of strategic investments in infrastructure, the use of digital platforms for marketing, and the adoption of sustainable tourism practices. By doing so, Bani Tehsil could realize its tourism potential while preserving its natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

VI. CONCLUSION

This inquiry, through an intricate examination of secondary data, has elucidated the latent potentialities of rural tourism within Bani Tehsil, a locale distinguished by its topographical and cultural idiosyncrasies. The research avers that the integration of natural and cultural tourism elements, when synergized with modern digital platforms such as Instagram, has the capacity to reshape both the perception and engagement with rural tourist destinations. The intrinsic aesthetic allure of sites like Sarthal and Dhaggar, coupled with the spiritual resonance of locales such as Jorian Mata Mandir, manifests a multifaceted appeal that transcends conventional tourist categorizations. In this vein, the findings articulate a compelling narrative for the sustainable and eco-conscious development of rural tourism in Bani, emphasizing the necessity of harnessing its untapped potential without succumbing to the deleterious effects of over-commercialization or environmental degradation.

VII. REQUISITE FOR SUSTAINABLE PRAXIS AND ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

Moreover, the study foregrounds the imperative of ecological stewardship, wherein the promotion of tourism must be concomitant with sustainable practices that preserve the integrity of the region's biodiversity. The pervasive encroachment of tourism, if left unchecked, poses an existential threat to the fragile ecosystems and cultural heritage endemic to Bani. Thus, the study advocates for a holistic approach to tourism development, integrating environmental conservation with community engagement to mitigate adverse effects and foster long-term sustainability.

VI.II. EPISTEMOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

However, despite its contributions, this study is not without its epistemological limitations. The predominant reliance on secondary data, particularly the extraction of information from digital platforms and government repositories, delineates a methodological boundary that circumscribes the depth of empirical insight attainable. The absence of primary data collection mechanisms, such as ethnographic immersion or stakeholder interviews, impedes the granularity of understanding required to fully encapsulate the lived experiences of both tourists and indigenous populations. Consequently, the study's findings, while indicative of broader trends, remain contingent upon the representational accuracy and comprehensiveness of the secondary data utilized.

VI.III. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Constraints on Scope and Representational Bias

The study's reliance on digital and governmental sources inherently introduces representational biases, as the data reflects curated depictions of tourism rather than the unmediated realities experienced on the ground. Moreover, the scope of the study, while identifying key tourist sites, does not encompass a comprehensive exploration of lesser-known or emergent destinations within the tehsil. As such, the conclusions drawn, though informative, necessitate further corroboration through empirical research involving direct stakeholder participation.

VI.IV. PROSPECTIVE RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES AND METHODOLOGICAL REFINEMENTS

Future scholarly endeavours should seek to transcend these limitations by incorporating mixed-methods approaches that include both qualitative and quantitative primary data collection. This could involve longitudinal studies assessing the impact of tourism on local economies, ecosystems, and cultural landscapes over time. Additionally, research into the efficacy of digital marketing strategies, including the role of social media influencers and user-generated content, in shaping tourist behaviours and preferences would yield valuable insights. There exists a need to explore the socio-economic repercussions of tourism on local communities, particularly in terms of employment generation, cultural commodification, and the potential for community-driven tourism models. Such inquiries would not only augment the findings of this study but also provide a roadmap for the equitable and sustainable development of rural tourism in Bani Tehsil.

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