

Religious Tourism: A key sector for Pakistan's Socio-Economic Growth

* Dr. Inayat Kalim

** Dr. Minhas Majeed Khan

*** Ms. Areeja Syed

Abstract

Religious tourism, a form of travel with a deeply religious spirit, is an olden drill and has been in practice from the beginning of civilization. For eons, pilgrims have traveled to the revered and holy places to honor them and their guardians throughout the world. Pakistan is abounding with numerous religious sites, which can be promoted to create Pakistan's positive image and perception worldwide. Apart from image restoration, religious tourism can contribute enormously in amplifying Pakistan's economy by projecting the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs sites existing in the country. In this paper, the authors affirm the significance of a long time neglected religious places of Muslims as well as non-Muslims while giving a special value to religious tourism as an economic booster for Pakistan.

Key words: Tourism, Religious Tourism, Soft Power, Economic stability

Introduction

In the 1980s, Nye introduced a new term, "Soft Power" defined as a resounding influence to get your work done by others without using violence which is now the essential policy in international politics.¹ To Nye, both hard and soft powers are significant for progress in the global order, hence a successful state must be aware of the tactics that when and how to force or persuade others to achieve national and international goals. Image building is one of the most significant tools in the foreign policy of States, as it creates a soft image of a country to other peoples.² 'Person-to-person' interaction also indicates bilateral or mutual contact between the inhabitants of two countries at different levels with or without the indulgence of high officials or governments. The government only issues visas and grants traveling permission while the people make friends, meet one another, travel, exchange gifts or thoughts, and form their views about others. These interactions can be at a professional or personal level. Books, authors, media, channels, programs, shows, dramas, films, newspapers can also play a part to form and enhance person-to-person contact as they exercise influence on the masses.³

In today's time, every country is obligated to form interest-based relations with other countries. Mostly the focus of attention for the countries is the development in various fields such as science and technology, transport, and communication services. But now the tourism industry is also paid due heed as a leading source of revenue. Striking and adventurous places attract locals and foreigners, creating a soft and positive image of the country by promoting its culture and language. In this way, it serves as a key sector for the economic growth of the country. According to Edward R Murrow, tourism is one of the best ways to enhance and develop interpersonal interaction.⁴

Pakistani culture is one of the diverse and elegant cultures to promote a positive image of Pakistan globally. Several famous and ancient archaeological sites are located in Pakistan. The traces of ancient and primitive Indus civilizations have been found in Pakistan such as

* Dr Kalim, Department of Humanities under the program of International Relations, COMSATS University Islamabad

** Dr. Minhas, is the chairperson at the department of International Relations, University of Peshawar.

*** M.Phil research Scholar at the department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad

Gandhara and Indus Valley (Mohen-jo-Daro). These civilizations paved the way for the promulgation of the most influential religions of the world; Islam and Buddhism in this region.⁵ Religious tourism, also called 'Faith or Spiritual Tourism' played a distinctive role during ancient tourism history for the promotion of certain religions.⁶

In almost every religion, 'religious visits' carry a remarkable position for worshippers. It is considered as an inspirational journey and homage by visiting religious sites. This is normally performed by spending a certain amount of time and days in the form of pilgrimage. It is evident that the believers of Islam and Jews particularly perform pilgrimage as part of their religious obligation, provided that they can afford it. Muslims travel to Makkah for Hajj and Jews visit Jerusalem.⁷ This obligatory worship is conditional in both religions. Apart from the Pilgrimage obligation, they can visit other places too that are close to their heart due to religious sentiments. Pilgrims are eager to obtain knowledge about their past events, history, culture, and religion. All the followers of a certain religion have full right to visit their Holy Places. In 1948, article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereinafter UDHR) proclaimed the right of religion, thought, and conscience as a basic human right. The article reads that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance".⁸ The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion allows an individual to freely perform pilgrimages to holy places. Performing pilgrimages is an essential element of the majority of the religions in the world and it is pertinent that national and international pilgrimage must be safeguarded under international human rights law.⁹

In Iran and Saudi Arabia, religious pilgrimage and visits are the main sources of revenue and income. World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in its latest studies unwrap that in 2018, the total revenue generated by Iran's travel and tourism sector augmented by 1.9% and contributed 1,158 trillion rails (\$8.83 billion) or 6.5 percent of GDP in general and produces 1,334 jobs (5.4 percent of total employment) to the country's economy.¹⁰ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, generates \$12 billion to its total GDP annually, merely by Hajj and Umra and enhances 20% of the country's non-oil GDP and 7% of GDP in total.¹¹ Pakistan contains numerous sacred sites of different religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism that can easily be transformed into tourist spots and also make a source of generating revenues by opening them for the pilgrims.¹² Giving to the 2015 figures, 24.1% of the total world population is Muslim. Whereas Hindus are 15%, Buddhists 6.9%, and Sikhs are fewer than 1%.¹³ By projecting these sites Pakistan can lift its economy and can also portray its positive image to other people that will eventually benefit Pakistan in the longer run. This paper comprises of five parts; the first one is about the Holy Places of Muslims in Pakistan and their significance for religious tourism, second is related to the Buddhist places in Pakistan. Religious places of Hinduism and Sikhism have been discussed in parts three and fourth. The fifth part discusses the possibilities of economic growth in Pakistan through religious tourism.

Islamic Tourism in Pakistan:

Historically, the tourism industry in Pakistan couldn't flourish due to fragile law and order situations and security concerns. The key setback was the actual disregarding of the importance of tourism by the governments, along with the poor strategies and lack of medical facilities at the religious sites. Consequently, it caused massive damage to the

tourism industry in Pakistan; In the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led government, a whole heap of planning has been completed for the effective promotion of religious tourism. Religious tourism is the need of the hour and promoting it is indeed a laudable step but focus on holy places of Muslims is also equally desirable. It has been observed that the governments have ignored planning and promoting the holy shrines and places that belong to Muslims.¹⁴ Various countries all around the world including Sri Lanka, Turkey, India, France, the United States, etc. suffered from terrorism and safety risks, but they did not succumb to their feebleness and kept endorsing tourism in their country.¹⁵

Pakistan's tourism department has never made any numerous significant moves to encourage the religious tourism industry. Pakistani soil is enriched in terms of religious tourism since it has a number of beautiful mosques. The historically valuable mosques of Pakistan are the true epitome of its rich and diverse culture.¹⁶ Be it the extravagantly embellished Mahabat Khan mosque of Peshawar or Badshahi mosque of Lahore or the mosques in Multan, every single mosque is uniquely built and perfectly reflects the architectural craftsmanship of their time.¹⁷ Regrettably, Never have Pakistan tourism development cooperation (PTDC) and *Tourism Development Corporation of Punjab* (TDCP) did much work to accentuate the city tours of the mosques as they faced a lot of challenges within their departments and planning.¹⁸ That's why people in and outside Pakistan are only aware of the famous mosques like Badshahi Mosque, Faisal Mosque, or Wazir Khan Mosque. Muslims from all corners of the world visit mosques in other parts of the world like Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi, Putra Mosque and Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque Putrajaya in Malaysia, Hagia Sophia or Blue Mosque in Turkey, Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat, Oman and so many more around the world but they do not visit Pakistan to view historical and culturally rich mosques. There is also a need to use a strategy of branding to let people know about the beautiful Mosques which are an asset for Pakistan.

Why is the Pakistani government overlooking several mosques in Pakistan for tourism? Here is the list of few ancient and new mosques which are highly populated in the vicinity. These are Shah Jahan Mosque in Thatta, Moti Masjid, Saleh Kamboh Masjid, Begum Shahi Masjid, Chinian Wali Masjid, Dai Anga Masjid, Sonehri Masjid, Bakan Khan Masjid, Wazir Khan Masjid, Badshahi Masjid, Neevin Masjid, Oonchi Masjid, and many other in Lahore, Faisal Masjid in Islamabad, Bhong Masjid in Rahim Yar Khan, Mahabat Khan Masjid in Peshawar, Ilyasi Masjid in Abbottabad, Masjid-e-Tooba in Karachi, ShahiEidGah Masjid in Multan, Shahi Masjid in Chitral, Abbasi Masjid, Derawar Fort in the Cholistan, Jamia Masjid Eidgah in Gujrat and many more.¹⁹ Pakistani government needs to take serious measures and turn these mosques into tourist sites; establish tourist information centers, social media, and web portals. Pakistan and the rest of Asia have a rich, diverse history that has the potential to grow the market as well through Islamic tourism.²⁰ Its high time to initiate a fiery marketing campaign for the promotion of these mosques of Pakistan. The campaign first should aim at encouraging local tourists and then gradually expand it to international tourists. The opening of mosques for international tourists will help to restore its better image globally. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Malaysia are some most visited tourist states since they have successfully promoted religious tourism and are getting numerous benefits from it. OIC members also need to engage in such type of activities which could help in the promotion of Islamic tourism.²¹

Sikhism as a mean of Religious Tourism in Pakistan:

The land of Pakistan is pious for people who belong to the Sikh religion as historically and religiously significant Gurdwaras are situated in Pakistan. These places in Pakistan are holiest for Sikhs as their religion originated there. In 1947, Punjab was divided between Pakistan and India as a result of the independence of the Subcontinent. The holiest place of Sikhs, Nankana Sahib where the Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak in Pakistan. It is also the birthplace of their Guru as well. Almost 195 Gurdwaras are situated in Pakistan making it the number one holiest place for Sikhs.²² There are many significant Sikh pilgrimage places in Pakistan for tourists.²³

Kartarpur Sahib is as significant for Sikhs as Nankana Sahib, because Nankana Sahib, is the birthplace of Guru Nanak while in Kartarpur, the Guru took his last breath.²⁴ Recently Pakistan took a wonderful step by opening the Kartarpur border between India and Pakistan, which promotes a positive image of Pakistan all over the world.²⁵ Punja Sahib in Hasan Abdal is a holy Gurdwara where the Guru Nanak's hand impression on a gibber, is saved. Many Sikhs from India, Europe, Canada, and other countries visit these holy places in Pakistan. Sikhs have a special reverence for Pakistan as Nankana Sahib, their Guru's birthplace, and Kartarpur Sahib, their Guru's death place are situated in Pakistan. Punjabi is spoken in both Indian and Pakistani Punjab. Iqbal Haider, a historian authored a book, 'Historical Sikh Shrines in Pakistan' containing comprehensive information about the holy places for Sikhs in Pakistan. The book depicts the Kartarpur project as a breakthrough for both states, India and Pakistan. He states that during the partition in 1947, Punjab was divided and after this partition, India and Pakistan emerged as two independent states which marked the end of British rule in the sub-continent. He added that the Kartarpur Corridor opened for all Sikhs, can bring Punjabis of both states closer and promote people-to-people contact as well.²⁶

The historical Narankari Bazaar in Rawalpindi needs special attention from Pakistan's government. The market place is situated in the heart of the city and is said to be one of the ancient markets not only in Rawalpindi but also in the larger region of Potohar. Today, nevertheless, it is tragic that the majority of the residents are ignorant about the history of this market and the city managers have failed in performing their duties in this regard. According to Iqbal Qaiser between 1770 and 1780, the Sikh leader and the revenue officer of the 10th Sikh Guru Gobind Singh Bahi Vasakha Singh, was the first one to settle in this neighborhood (Asghar, 2019). Afterward, his son Baba Dyal Singh, a contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh later built a Gurdwara in the area of Narankari Bazaar and commenced sermonizing over there. Numerous Sikhs from Kashmir visited this area at that time for preaching and other religious purposes and also established their businesses nearby the Gurdwarabuilt by Baba Dyal Singh.²⁷

In 1947, the Sikh followers migrated to India, and the majority of them settled adjacent to Chandigarh. Unluckily no signboard in the market is found anywhere that tells the history of the market for its visitors and tourists. National College of Arts Director Dr. Nadeem Omar Tarar shares that Rawalpindi is as ancient as Lahore and Narankari bazaar is one of the initial and primitive bazaars in Rawalpindi, but no serious measures have been taken for the conservation of this historical bazaar unlike the historical sites of Lahore.²⁸ The historical value of the market as well as the culture of Rawalpindi must be refurbished and adorned in

its original elegance.²⁹ Not only Rawalpindi, but the whole Punjab is also replete with historically valuable sites that must be preserved and stimulate to attract religious tourists.

Buddism and religious tourism:

In this inescapable era of information and technology where the whole world has become a global village, Pakistan outshines in many ways and holds a repository of ancient civilization and cultural heritage. Though Pakistan is a Muslim state yet it has somehow saved and perpetuated most of the religious sites, buildings, or commodities of other religions, in which one of them is Buddhism. These religious assets can attract followers of Buddhism. Numerous Buddhist artifacts are found in Pakistan's Museum.³⁰ Bikram Pandey, a specialist of Buddha Circuit Tourism stated that Pakistan has a rich ancient Buddhist heritage and it should sign a deal with International Buddha Circuit for its protection and promotion. There are numerous ancient Buddhist objects, sculptures, Buddhist shrines in Swat.³¹ In Swat, the Taliban also damaged a huge carved statue of Buddha by blasting its face. That statue was one of the largest Buddha statues after the Bamiyan Buddhas.³² Later the Italian government recovered that stupa. Taliban abolished and damaged plenty of other Buddhist Gandhara heritage in Swat and its suburbs as well. They spoiled and abolished Gandhara Buddhist remnants as they damaged brutally several schools, colleges, mosques, shrines, etc.³³ Hundreds of archaeological sites have been preserved with the help of the government of Italy who is collaborating with local authorities in anticipation of once again converting it into an attractive site for pilgrimage as well as dollars. The Italian government has granted Rs1.2 billion soft loan to improve the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) archaeology department and help religious tourism in the region.³⁴ So far, in the past five years, the Italian government has endowed \$2.9 million (2.5 million euros) for the conservation of Swat's cultural heritage. In this effort of preservation, the maximum involvement of the local population has been ensured.³⁵

Pakistani officials have taken quite some measures for the development and progress of tourism. The Pakistani government should make more special policies and attractive tour package for foreign tourists particularly coming from Japan, China, Singapore, South Korea to visit Buddhist places at Takht-i-Bahi, Taxila, Peshawar, and Swat.³⁶ Recently Pakistan's government is exploring different religious sites in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa intending to build a Buddhist trail to entice the devotees of Buddhism from all around the world. The trail is expected to be stretched from Swabi and Swat, up to Taxila, which is known for several Buddhist sites.³⁷ Pakistan is all set to host the 3rd annual Ministerial Meeting on Tourism Cooperation to be held in 2021 where Pakistan will be represented by Zulfiqar Bukhari in the meeting. Zulfiqar Bukhari further added that the D-8 countries had earned up to 1 Billion dollars from efficient tourism within a year.³⁸ This is certainly a ceiling shattering move for the flourishing of tourism in the developing states.

Hinduism

Pakistan came into being in 1947 with a chiefly Muslim population. Before partition, in the subcontinent, people belonging to various other religions including Hinduism co-existed in the region. Hinduism first was embraced by the Indus civilization, between 2300 BC and 1500 BC.³⁹ Today, some of the primitive and initial Hindu temple traces can be seen in Pakistan, in different degrees of decay. A historian mentioned that in the Indus Valley, the first religion which emerged was Hinduism.⁴⁰ The Indus River is the treasure house of many ancient civilizations such as the Hindu Vedic Civilization which was once named, Sindu

denoting Hindu. These religious sites are sacred for both Muslims and Hindus living in Sindh. Some Sufi legacies are also revered by Hindus. For instance, Jhule Lal, the title of Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, is the Hindu name, which means the god of water.⁴¹

No importance was given to the Hindu temples in Pakistan before, but the new administration of PTI while breaking the ice took an initiative to restore and revamp the debilitating Hindu temples to present a softer image of Pakistan at the international level. An enhanced proclivity for the restoration of even unfamiliar temples has been witnessed in Pakistan. This new government intends to refurbish and reconstruct nearly 400 old temples for its Hindu minority. In this regard, a 1000 years old temple has been renovated as the first project in Sialkot and is currently opened for the local Hindu community after a 72 years long break.⁴² The recent government has renovated, almost 11 temples in Sindh, four in Punjab, three in Baluchistan, and two in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were operational in 2019.⁴³

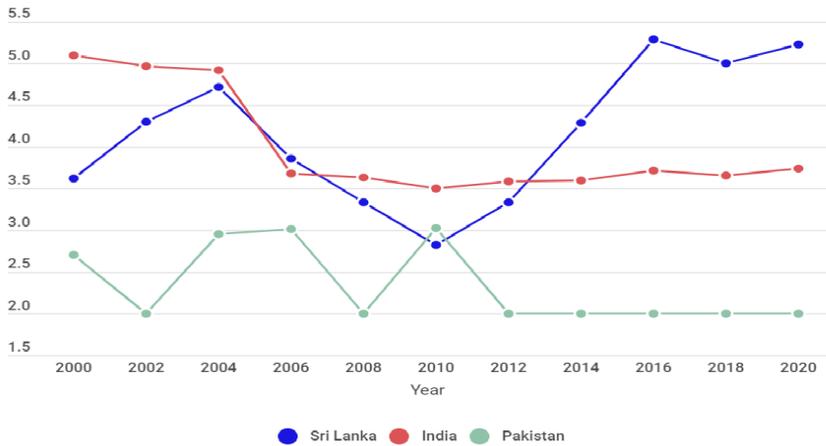
One of the most recognized temples is the Krishna Temple located in the hustling city; Rawalpindi. The inscription on the entry door of the temple states that Ujagar Mal Ram Richpal built this temple in 1897. This temple is the only temple in Rawalpindi City which is open for visitors and allows them to perform their worship and rituals.⁴⁴ There are some other primitive temples in the old part of Rawalpindi city that direly require immediate rebuilding and they might become history soon if no measure is taken. Temple of Katas Raj is another famous temple which is situated in the northern part of the salt range about 40 kilometers away from Chakwal city. This temple was visited by Hindus twice a year for Puja before the partition of the Subcontinent. Alan Cunningham who, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1872-73 CE believes that after Jawala Mukhi, for Hindu pioneers, Katas raj the second leading sacred place in Punjab because the renowned Pandwas brothers stayed for 12 years in Katas.⁴⁵ In 2005, the Department of Archaeology and Museums Government of Pakistan gave away the Katas Raj Complex to the Directorate General of the archaeology Government of Punjab. If this temple and land are given proper care and attention and promoted for religious tourism, it holds immense potential for tourists and visitors from outside Pakistan. This site calls for immediate attention for the renovation and upgrades to stop it from crumbling down and developing religious tourism⁴⁶. Besides the Katas Raj complex and Krishna temples, there are a lot more significant Hindu temples located in Pakistan, like the Sun temple and Prahlad Puri temple in Multan, Shri Varun Dev Mandir in Karachi, Hinglaj Mata temple in Balochistan, and the Kalka Devi cave and Sadhu Bela temple in Sindh. All these shrines, nevertheless, badly need the attention of authorities. The Muslim majority of Pakistan also needs to exhibit religious tolerance as this is the true essence of Islam.

Economic strength through Religious Tourism:

In 2015, the travel and tourism sector of Pakistan's direct contribution to Pakistan's gross domestic product was just 2.8 percent in comparison to the regional average of 3.5pc.⁴⁷ In terms of receipts from foreign tourists across South Asia (\$33.82 billion in 2016), Pakistan predicaments a share of less than 1pc of this valuable source of foreign exchange as compared to India's share of 69pc, Sri Lanka's 10pc and Maldives' 7pc.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in sharp contrast to the dramatic improvements in the share of travel and tourism, Pakistan's economy has been persistently pretty dull unlike India's robust performance in this regard. If

the international tourism sector of Pakistan had contributed to the economy at the same rates as the rest of South Asia, the profit to GDP would have been \$1.5 billion.

Travel and tourism's direct contribution to GDP (Percentage share of total GDP)



Source: (World Bank)

If Pakistan had exceeded South Asia and its international tourism had been booming at the same rates, the gains to GDP would be \$3.5 billion, equal to the value of Pakistan's largest current export item, cotton.⁴⁹ The graph below depicts the contribution of overseas tourism to the GDP of Pakistan, which shows that Pakistan direly needs to work on foreign Tourism in Pakistan.

In recent years, the Pakistan tourism industry has improved in comparison with the previous years because of the improvement in the security situation in the country. Nevertheless, Pakistan can generate more revenues if proper consideration is given to the tourism sector. The current government of Pakistan under the administration of Imran Khan has shown a keen interest in reviving the sector of tourism. A national task force on tourism, followed by approval of a National Tourism Coordination Board has been established and a new and better visa policy has recently been announced.⁵⁰ A plan to offer an online visa facility for 175 nations is in the pipeline and the system of No Objection Certificate for certain regions has been relaxed.⁵¹ Nonetheless, still, there are some unaddressed aspects. Its highly crucial to have a proper institutional and monitoring structure that facilitates the preservation and regulation, provision of facilities, efficient supervision, and immaculate planning to entice and comprehend the tourists in an environmentally sustainable fashion. Current institutional and regulatory tourism measures are poorly planned and intricate and must be reformed instantly. The involved agencies and departments lack the required experience in dealing with heritage and religious sites and have no conformity in practicing international or UNESCO standards. Specific management structures like the Walled City Authority are there, still, a steady attitude that applies to all important sites is needed.

Conclusion:

In Pakistan, religious intolerance and antagonism can be declined by remembering and commemorating the mutual legacy and past of the subcontinent. Pakistani soil is enriched with exceptional history, diversity in religions, and ethnicity which is a huge source of enticement to a myriad of people all around the globe. Sadly, Pakistan has been a victim of religious radicalism and militancy over the past few decades. Other South Asian states performed better in promoting tourism regardless of their share of political and social challenges. Religious tourism can wondrously foster tolerance as well as the country's economy. Now Pakistan can also join their bandwagon as the military operations hurled by Pakistan armed forces during 2013-2017 against radicals have whacked terrorism and militancy throughout the country. At present, Pakistan is far behind as compared to its regional counterparts and its overall global rank is 121 in tourism metrics. The key reasons for this underperformance in its tourism industry are the deficit of the facilitating environment, policy and favorable conditions, infrastructure, and cultural resources.

Pakistan is in dire need to take drastic measures to promote religious tourism encompassing the appropriate security to the pilgrims; the provision of the maximum prospects to the worshippers to delve into their religious history; offering them convenient access to their holy destination; retention of the original structure and the religious monuments of the other faiths; and offering the tourists comprehensive advice and dispersal of the information and ideals of the Muslims as well as non-Muslim religious traces in Pakistan. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in its 2020 report stated that the travel and tourism industry in 2019 sustained at a growth rate of 3.5%, surpassing the overall economic growth (2.5%) for nine consecutive years. After chemicals and fuels, tourism is considered the third leading category for international exports and is worth almost USD 1.6 billion. This sector has generated one out of four employment opportunities in the past five years and contributed almost USD 8.9TN (10.4%) to the global economy.

The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) listed 480 sites solely for the ongoing tour. It includes 106 historically important sites, 120 religiously and 26 both historically and religiously vital places. Since PTI has come into power, the administration is paying special attention to the promotion of tourism in the country. It is also focusing on religious sites, especially for Sikhs and Buddhists. Tourism is a flourishing industry, benefiting the economy of the relevant state and world tourism industry. It is socially and financially significant as it employs people. According to the international ranking regarding the promotion of tourism, Pakistan is in the 112th position among 132 countries. Nevertheless, mosques, Buddhist heritage, gurudwaras, temples, churches, historical and holy sites of different religions, are the best tourist destinations for pilgrims and other visitors. If religious tourism is used as a means of soft power, it will hugely fortify the religious tourism industry in addition to Pakistan's economy.

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