

REVITALIZING BALOCHISTAN'S UNTAPPED TOURISM POTENTIALS UNDER CPEC

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ABSTRACT

Balochistan is mini Pakistan and Pakistan is mega Balochistan. The province has a great deal of significance as far as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is concerned. The geo-strategic importance of Balochistan appears to be a cliché. However, tourism potential of the province is overlooked under CPEC. Balochistan is blessed with the distinctive characteristics. The coastal area of Makran has one of the best beaches of the world. Mehargarh Civilization in Balochistan is a great asset for the civilizational tourism. Noshki district possesses desert that can be capitalized for tourism. Nani- Mandar a Hindu temple in Balochistan is emerging as a beacon for religious tourism. Astole Island is well-known island in the world. Ziarat district is the coldest place in Balochistan having the residency of the founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam. Ziarat produces wild tourism. Hazar Ganji Park in Quetta is famous for wild tourism. Hingol Balochistan National Park spanning in three districts is the largest park in Pakistan. Balochistan holds immense potential of railway tourism. This paper, thus, will explore Balochistan's tourism potentials by applying mixed research method using both primary and secondary data. The paper will also shed light on challenges to tourism sector in the province and will also provide concrete suggestions to improve tourism under CPEC.

Keywords: *Beaches, Mehargarh Civilization, Wild Tourism, Hingol National Park*

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism, ostensibly, plays an important role in the economic growth of states in international arena offering numerous dividends to host destinations boosting national income, creating employment opportunities, improving infrastructure and projecting cultural exchange between locals and visitors. The tourism industry paves the way for creation of jobs across various sectors, encompassing transportation, healthcare agriculture, and education (Seyyed, 2024).

Apart from economic growth, it also provides foreigners opportunities to experience a new culture, embarking a path to local entrepreneurs to start innovative products and services that might not flourish only on local demand. However, residents are likely to get maximum benefits from the economic benefits tourism brings. Arguably, tourist spending, bringing reinvestments by large, will contribute immensely to the local economy. A large share of tourism-generated income is constantly invested, having multiplier effects where financial gains from tourism circulate and foster further economic growth (Hussain, 2024).

Meanwhile, Balochistan the largest province of Pakistan in terms of area blessed with immense tourism potentials. The province is a land of amazing beauty bestowed with country's most fascinating tourist destinations. Having 347,190 square kilometres, the province boasts a diverse landscape that includes picturesque beaches, rich archaeological sites, breath-taking mountain ranges, a tranquil coastline, mesmerizing deserts, majestic waterfalls. Many regions in Balochistan have extreme temperatures while Ziarat Valley experiences some of the coldest conditions. On the other hand, the deserts of Kharan and Chaghai bear the highest temperatures (Tahir, 2021).

Objectives of the Study

- To explore Balochistan's key tourism potentials.
- To examine how tourism potential can be capitalized under CPEC.
- To analyze reasons behind the neglect of the key sector.

Research Questions

- What are Balochistan's key tourism potentials?
- How will the provincial government explore the province tourism sector under CPEC?
- What are the key changes to the exploration of the province tourism sector?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research paper, the author has applied mixed-methods research approach to explore the tourism development under CPEC encompassing manifold dimensions, like infrastructure, cultural heritage and economic impact. Quantitative data will provide quantifiable insights into tourist trends in employment rates in Balochistan's tourism sector and investment statistics while qualitative data sheds light on challenges, the perceptions, and aspirations of policy makers, local communities, and businesses. In primary data, interviews were conducted with experts on tourism. In the secondary data books, research papers, archives and newspapers served as a source of secondary data. The blend of both methods will provide strong, data-driven policy recommendation for sustainable tourism growth in Balochistan.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This section focuses on key potential areas of tourism and tourist points in Balochistan and presented an analysis on these sites and how these sites can be made more attractive for tourists from within Pakistan and abroad. The paper also discussed how the CPEC could

help in boosting up tourist industry in Pakistan in general and Balochistan in particular. Following are the key tourism potentials of Balochistan

Coastal Tourism

The province is blessed with 760 km-long coastline, having key ports of the country like Gwadar, Jiwani, Pasni, and Somiani, and holds great potential to attract both inbound and outbound tourists. Balochistan has having the world's most fertile marine ecosystems, and produces more than 60 species of fish, rare sightings of the Arabian Humpback whale, 10 varieties of prawns. The coastal attractions of Kund Malir Beach, located in Hingol National Park are being ranked among Asia's top 50 beaches, increasing Balochistan natural beauty and coastal areas. Astola Island, most importantly known as the "Seven Hills of Pakistan," is Pakistan's largest island (Kakar, 2024). This vacant island is a popular site for beach camping, fishing, and deep-sea diving. It is an established fact that waters give visibility up to 20 feet, offering stunning views of sunsets, brilliant sunshine, soaring birds, and a refreshing sea breeze. However, first phase of CPEC ignored these areas. The policy makers need to strive in CPEC 2.0 to improve infrastructure, projects connectivity, enhancing Balochistan's socio-economic growth and increasing tourism opportunities (Barrech, 2019).

Meanwhile, blue economy contributes 34 percent to the GDP. As mentioned earlier that Balochistan has 760 km-long coastline in which blue economy will be generated. The 70 percent people in coastal area are dependent on blue economy but the provincial government has not given enough attention to modernize the blue economy. The modernization of blue economy will pave the way for bolstering tourism sector in coastal areas. (Khalid, Baloch, 2024) Pakistan needs to replicate the Maldives blue economy model with the aim of boosting coastal tourism and local economy under CPEC 2.0.

Civilizational Tourism

Balochistan is having Mehrgarh, a 9,000-year-old civilization site providing vital insights into early human civilization. Mehrgarh ancient archaeological site attracts foreign travellers to Mehrgarh, which is one of the oldest archaeological sites in South Asia, situated at the hills of the Bolan Pass in the northern Kachi Plain of Balochistan. It was discovered in 1974, the site remained excavated, discovering valuable insights into the ancient civilization that once flourished there (Baloch, Baloch & Faiz, 2022). Mehrgarh is offering valuable insights into civilizational tourism and early human civilization to the inbound and outbound tourists. It attracts foreign tourists to travel its historical mysteries. However, under CPEC it requires proper preservation including the development of a dedicated museum are important to make it a global tourist attraction (Irum, 2023). China has initiated the Global Civilization Initiative GCI attributed to promoting civilizational ties, openness and inclusivity. Pakistan can benefit massively from GCI under CPEC embarking on a path to civilizational tourism in Balochistan and promoting its soft power across the globe (Barrech, Malgani & Naz, 2024).

Religious Tourism

Balochistan has an immense religious tourism potential and having Mata Hinglaj Temple (Nani Mandir), located in Hingol National Park, which is the largest river in the country. In April every year more than 250,000 Hindu pilgrims from Pakistan and India visit in the Hinglaj Yatra. The temple is considered as one of the 51 Shakti Peethas, sacred shrines devoted to Goddess Sati (Parvati). As far as the Hindu mythology is concerned, the Sati's head fell at this site after Lord Vishnu cut her body into pieces to pacify Lord Shiva's grief. The temple remained a place of worship for thousands of years, dating back to pre-Vedic times. It is considered a symbol of Hindu presence and heritage in Pakistan. Most considerably, local Muslims respect the temple, and there is a tradition of shared respect for Hinglaj Mata.

The visits of massive Hindu pilgrims make it one of Balochistan's most promising religious tourism destinations (Ansari, 2015). Balochistan former Chief Secretary Abdul Aziz Uqaili states that "The Hindu temple is the best and most well-known tourist site in the province and its development would create facilities for the visitors," (Syed, 2023). Balochistan has some of the oldest and most sacred Hindu religious sites, coaxing visitors of all faiths. The environmental landmarks the historical, religious, along with breathtaking natural beauty of Balochistan can be developed into major tourist destinations under CPEC. The CPEC 2.0 gives a great deal of attention to tourism and people-to-people contact. Unlike, other infrastructure, religious tourism does not require whopping amount to be spent it only requires a strong will to foster the religious tourism (Rubina, 2024).

Railway Tourism

Ostensibly, installation of railway network in Balochistan is amazing engineering achievement of British rule in India. The construction of a railway track through the iconic Bolan Pass deserves to be visited. This railway line over a century old continues to fascinate rail enthusiasts worldwide (Mughal, 2006). Against this backdrop, railway tourism in Balochistan produces a unique and scenic experience, displaying the province's historical sites, rugged landscapes, and rich cultural heritage. The railway network developed by the British colonial era in Balochistan is an engineering marvel, passing through tunnels, mountains, and bridges providing breath-taking views for tourists. This route runs through the iconic Bolan Pass, which is believed to have been one of the most picturesque railway journeys in Pakistan offering a glimpse into Balochistan's history and natural beauty.

The railway tunnels and bridges built by the British add to the charm of this journey. There are 17 stunning railway tunnels a great source of tourism for the world (Carson, 2023). This railway line connects Quetta, the provincial capital, to Chaman, near the Afghan border. It passes through stunning landscapes, including mountainous terrains

and lush valleys. A historic railway link between Pakistan and Iran is an important route for both trade and tourism. Travellers can experience the vast desert scenery and historic stations along the way.

Ziarat Valley

Ziarat is a famous tourist spot, well known for the historic Ziarat residency, where founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah spent his last days. This historic structure enhances an elegant wooden design with amazing architectural value. Ziarat residency originally was built as a sanatorium; it was later changed into the summer residence of the Governor-General. Currently, it is a national landmark, attracting visitors with its distinctive location and historical importance. The Quaid-e-Azam Residency is a momentous monument honouring the long-lasting legacy of the founder of Pakistan. This iconic site, arguably, has been serving a symbol of national pride and reverence and reminding us of the struggles and sacrifices rendered during the Pakistan's creation (Speed Bell, 2017).

Ziarat is also famous for its vast Juniper forests, which are considered its greatest natural resources. The Zarghoon Mountain Range encompassing with several other ranges in the province, covering an expansive 247,000 acres, forms the second-largest juniper forest in the world. This distinctive ecosystem is having a diverse range of wildlife possessing various species of animals, birds, and plants. In winter season during the snowfall blankets the landscape, Juniper Valley changes into a wonderful winter wonderland, producing a fascinating sight. Ziarat is abundant with natural items in summer and winter during the season of cherry and apple. The honey of Ziarat is well known. In pre-summer, the atmospheric conditions remain captivating. Ziarat needs special attention under CPEC as far as the projection of the tourism in Balochistan is concerned. (Express Tribune, 2020). On the other hand, the province forests have been shrinking by leaps and bounds. Balochistan has only 0.2 percent province olive forests. It has Ancient forests include wild olive, juniper, cypress, and palos trees. Some forests have 5,000 to 7,000 years old, especially in Ziarat, Zhob, and Shirani. These forests are

habitat to over 70 animal species, 350 birds, and 90 reptiles. Sadly, in 2022 recorded 16 forest fire incidents, damaging 154 hectares. However, lack of gas, extreme poverty, and severe winter impel people to cut trees. Wild olive, juniper, cypress, and palos trees are essential for wild tourism.

The Hingol National Park

The Hingol National Park (HNP) was established in 1997. It is the largest national park in Pakistan, covering a total area of 619,043 hectares. HNP is located across three districts in Balochistan Provinces Awaran 58 percent, Lasbela 34 percent and Gwadar 8 percent. The Hingol River flows through the park and forms a bay before draining into the Arabian Sea generating an important habitat for migratory water birds. HNP is located along the Makran coastal region in South-Western Balochistan extending parts of Lasbela, Gwadar, and Awaran districts (Syed, 2008). The park is situated nearly 190 kilometers northwest of Karachi along the coast. The Park has diverse landscape and habitats, stretching from arid subtropical forests in the north to arid montane landscapes in the west. Huge areas of the park are shielded in drift sand, categorizing it as a coastal semi-desert (Azam, 2020). The park includes the Hingol River estuary, which provides a rich variety of bird and fish species (Wind, 2025).

The Hingol National Park has nearly 185 species of birds, 35 species of mammals, 65 species of amphibians and reptiles respectively. It gives an ideal habitat for wildlife along with the Sindh Ibex, Balochistan Urial, and Chinkara Gazelle. The Park has unique characteristic combination of three ecosystems such as mountains, desert, and marine. It also has cultural, geographical archaeological features. It is pertinent to mention here that the Hingol River, the longest river in province, stretching nearly 350 miles and winds through the park. Archaeologically, the park once remained as a passage for Alexander the Great's army. The "Princess of Hope," a naturally sculpted rock formation resembling a beautiful female figure, adds to the park's stunning beauty. It is very unfortunate that

the largest and historic part of Pakistan so far has not been capitalized under the CPEC (Khan, 2004).

Pir Ghaib Waterfall

Pir Ghaib Waterfall is situated in the Bolan district of Balochistan. It is nearly 70 kilometers from Quetta. It can be easily accessed by road, offering tourists a picturesque journey. Pir Ghaib has a great importance in Balochistan's history and folklore. According to legend, a Sufi saint, or "Pir," mysteriously disappeared near the waterfall, giving rise to its name, which means "The Vanishing Saint." With the passage of time, Pir Ghaib has evolved into a site of spiritual importance and pilgrimage enhanced the interest of tourists (Muhammad, 2021). The landscape of Pir Ghaib is amazing. Towering cliffs and rugged rock mountains surround the waterfall, producing a striking contrast against the clear blue sky. The calming sound of flowing water increases the peaceful and tranquil atmosphere of the area. Lush greenery flourishes along the banks, adding a vibrant touch to the natural beauty of the rocky terrain. (Speed Bell, 2015)

Pir Ghaib provides a variety of activities for tourists to obsess with natural beauty. Adventure seekers embark on hikes via the surrounding mountains and valleys, enjoying spectacular panoramic views of the Bolan site. Photography fans will find opportunities to capture the captivating beauty of the waterfall and its surroundings, while picnickers can relax and relax in the calm embracing nature. Some attractive destinations near Pir Ghaib are worth exploring. Prominent landmarks include the historic Bolan Pass, an ancient trade route that has been crossed for centuries, and the magnificent Machh Bela, a striking natural rock formation known for its impressive size and grandeur. Pir Ghaib Waterfall represents the amazing beauty and rich cultural heritage of Balochistan. From its spiritual origins and magnificent landscapes to its diverse entertaining opportunities and nearby attractions, it offers a memorable experience for those who are obsessed with tranquillity, adventure, and exploration. However, where does Pir Ghaib stand under CPEC? This question requires a

serious attention to ponder over explore the Pir Ghain under CPEC (Guide to Pakistan, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The importance of tourism in the globalized world cannot be overlooked. It is a key tool in generating economy, fostering soft power of the country. The US earns annually USD 214 billion from tourism while Pakistan earns merely USD1 billion. Pakistan has 94 percent domestic tourists while only 4 percent foreign tourists. Only 2 percent international tourist visits Balochistan. Tourism is just contributing 2 percent to the GDP of the country. Balochistan is blessed with great potential of tourism. Mehargarh Civilization in Balochistan is oldest civilization than the Egyptian civilization, which is a great asset for the tourism. Noshki district in Balochistan has desert that can be capitalized for tourism. Balochistan is the fruit basket of Pakistan and is effective for tourism.

Ziarat district is the coldest place in Balochistan having the residency of the founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam and has the world's second largest juniper forest. Ziarat is a good place for the domestic and foreign tourists to visit the place particularly in summer. Ziarat has a great potential for the wild tourism. Hazar Ganji Park in Quetta is famous for wild tourism. Hingol National Park in Balochistan spanning in three district is the largest park in Pakistan. Balochistan has a great potential of railway tourism. The old railway installed by the British has a great potential. In 1970s, Quetta was the hub of tourism. The coastal areas of Makran have the world's best beaches be capitalized for the tourism. Nani- Mandar a Hindu temple in Balochistan is paving the way for religious tourism. Astole island of Balochistan is well-known island in the world. Roads are not good for the accessibility. For the accommodations, hotels are not up to the mark. For activity, the policy makers should create activity some strategy.

Like Dubai created attraction for the tourists. The internet province needs travel agents. Tourists need clean rooms, medical, banks, nets

but they are low in Balochistan. Balochistan has unprecedented potential of tourism, such as Eco tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, Maritime tourism, adventure tourism. Tourism can become agent of change in Balochistan. Tourism under CPEC in Balochistan will prove agent of change. The first phase of CPEC in Balochistan further enhanced the sense of deprivation, securitization and centralization of power. The CPEC 2.0 should be ray of hope for Balochistan in mitigating sense of deprivation and improving untapped tourism potential with the aim of bringing peace, development and prosperity in the impoverished province. Policy recommendations are given as under:

Tourism in Balochistan requires attraction, accessibility, accommodation and actuality, thus, Balochistan government needs to improve management of tourism sector;

The policy makers should focus on improving infrastructure, healthcare promotion, access networks, transportation, hospitality, and other travel-related services requires attention;

Provincial government ought to promote entrepreneurships through soft loan for tourism and business and engage local community in investment in tourism;

The province government has to foster a well-planned tourism infrastructure to major challenges, including security solid waste management, coastal pollution, freshwater scarcity, and marine life conservation;

Establishing a dedicated coastal authority will provide a platform for research, policy-making, and tackling key issues in the country's coastal tourism sector' and

To foster tourism sector in the province and establish it as a global destination, a well-structured marketing strategy is important. By adopting the model of sustainable development, Balochistan soft image could be projected. The provincial government should display Balochistan's tourist attractions via different platforms like social media, digital media, travel expos, documentaries, visual content, magazines, and virtual tourism.

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Received: June 6, 2025

Revision Received: July 20, 2025

Published: August 25, 2025