FAITH-BASED TOURISM AND PROMOTION OF PEACE IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Religious tourism and religious diplomacy serve as two significant components that foster commonality, establish connections, and encourage tolerance and harmony among various societal groups. This global relationship dismantles barriers of animosity and unfamiliarity, advancing inclusiveness and pluralism, stimulating economic activities, and contributing to worldwide economic prosperity. Regional tourism represents a substantial global sector, offering considerable opportunities for visitors to sacred sites and locations of religious significance during various events. Pakistan, characterized by its diverse society, boasts a profound cultural and religious legacy encompassing faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the country's historical sites of significance to various faiths can be used as a bridge for interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Faith-based tourism in Pakistan is an important sector that can contribute to promoting peace, unity, and cultural understanding. Pakistan is home to a rich diversity of religious communities. This paper will discuss the challenges, which hinder its growth in the country and find out possibilities of religious excursions to assist in bridging the gaps between the people of different religions.

Keywords: *Faith-based Tourism, Religious Tourism Diplomacy, Promoting Peaceful Co-existence, Fostering Intercultural Understanding & Tolerance.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered the largest industry globally, employing roughly one in nine workers and accounting for 6% of the global

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Gross National Product (GNP). In many countries, especially in developing regions, it has been viewed as a solution to numerous social and economic challenges (McMinn, 1997). As a multifaceted activity, tourism encompasses all aspects of human life, resulting in various types such as sports tourism, heritage tourism, health tourism, leisure tourism, and religious tourism, among others. Over the last fifty years, the expansion of globalization and technological progress has made travelling and communication more accessible, leading to a worldwide increase in religious tourism in various forms due to a heightened interest in spirituality and cultural exchange (Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

In the good old times, travelling used to be considered as to gain insights and knowledge. The works of Aristotle, Plato, and William Shakespeare remain timeless due to their extensive travels and their efforts to learn about various societies, which they subsequently incorporated into their writings. It is rare to find a successful individual who has not dedicated a portion of their life to travel. This reality underscores the significance of tourism. Saint Augustine, an early theologian and philosopher, states that 'To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.' This quote serves as an allegory that inspires individuals to explore and experience the world beyond their own borders. It holds profound meaning, as each journey contributes a new chapter to a person's understanding and perspective of the world. Eventually, exposure to new cultures enables individuals to uncover new insights. South (1990) suggests that travel can challenge existing beliefs about different cultures. Furthermore, travel driven by religious motivations, such as pilgrimage, is recognized as one of the earliest forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992). Though historically, the religious obligations and manifestations of belief in the powers and influence of Spiritual beings overlap faith-related activities, yet spirituality remains the core tenet of every faith.

Participation in faith-oriented activities is compulsory in the majority of religions and is regarded as a service rendered in exchange for or

in anticipation of spiritual and other rewards. These activities are believed to provide answers to unresolved inquiries or satisfy unscientific desires. This elucidates why individuals engaged in faith-based activities travel to their respective sites of interest for spiritual enrichment. Religious tourism is arguably the most ancient form of tourism, given the extensive history of travel inspired by religious motives (Rinschede, 1992). Consequently, despite its spiritual implications, religious tourism, akin to any other type of tourism, also functions as a lucrative business venture (Sharman, 2013)

Defining Faith-Based Tourism

The religious tourism is predominantly viewed as a type of tourism where visitors are driven either partially or entirely by religious motivations (Rinschede, 1992). It can be interpreted as modern trends of visiting locations of religious importance or pilgrimage sites where individuals aim to satisfy both their spiritual and leisure desires (Shinde, 2007). Religious tourism may also be defined as a journey where individuals primarily concentrate on destinations linked to religious history, places of worship, sacred festivals or events, and consecrated structures, both historical and modern. It can be seen though, as a spectrum that includes a variety of activities and entities, ranging from participants on a 'holy' pilgrimage to tourists who are completely secular or 'alien' in religious contexts (Smith, 1992). Forms of religious tourism encompass missionary travel, visits to monasteries, and faith-based camps (Wight & Victoria, 2022)

Types of Tourists

Wight and Victoria (2022) propose that contemporary religious tourists can be classified into two distinct categories.

1. Who have spiritual belief and faith (Hajj, Bhuddists' religious sites, Dajia Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan, Tibetan pilgrims,)

2. Who travel for exploring the world and cultures (Bhuddist Temples, Psychological Healings, Japanese' 'Kumano Kodo' for relaxation and wellness, Rivers like Ganges)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Landmarks – Revenue Generation Tools

Contemporary issues also arise, emphasizing the exploitation of religious landmarks as tools for national branding or revenue generation. This is particularly evident in sacred sites recognized as UNESCO World Heritage, where tourism often intersects with preservation and cultural significance. For instance, the Shaolin Monastery in China attracts millions of visitors annually, (Hung et al., 2017), potentially disrupting the visitor experience and deterring repeat visits.

The Hajj pilgrimage has experienced considerable commercialization, with pilgrims increasingly seeking comfort and luxury during their journey, thereby transforming the traditionally austere spiritual experience into one resembling high-end tourism (Qurashi, 2017). In Indonesia, 'Hajj Plus' packages offer five-star accommodations and additional itineraries to pilgrims from Turkey, Egypt, Dubai, Singapore, and Hong Kong (Utomo et al., 2019).

The integration of religious practices with consumer culture on one hand transformed the trends and on the other hand lead to a more commercialized and brand-focused pilgrimage experience. Wong (2017: 185) observes that locations such as the Big Buddha statue on Lantau Island in Hong Kong exemplify a Disneyfication of sacred sites, a tool for political messaging, asserting that it represents 'a symbol of the Chineseness of Hong Kong' (Wong, 2017, p. 185). This narrative is disseminated to both local residents and international visitors. The growing commercialization and political utilization of religious landmarks, coupled with their evolution into tourist attractions, warrant closer examination by scholars in the domain of tourism geographies. The risk of over-commercialization of religious heritage may also be linked to political agendas.

Faith-based Tourism and Sustainability

Research in the domain of religious tourism is expanding its focus beyond the behaviours of visitors and the management of sites to observe its effects on local communities. There is an increasing emphasis on the sustainability of these practices for destinations, residents, and ecosystems. Research indicates that religious tourism can foster economic growth, expand a location's tourism offerings, and aid in poverty alleviation (Choe & Bagadion, 2024). The economic impacts of various types of religious tourism can be substantial in remote areas that have meagre income sources. By adopting the creation of lodging and other hospitality businesses, abandoned and rural villages along the Camino de Santiago in Spain have undergone economic revitalization. In rural Japan, specific religious tourism initiatives have served as a means of economic diversification to address the challenges presented by a quickly aging population and the decline of traditional economic sectors such as agriculture (Progano et al., 2021). Religious food tourism has surfaced as a differentiation strategy for rural development, as demonstrated in countries like Italy (Sgroi, 2021). Despite its potential benefits, religious tourism in developing countries frequently encounters challenges in sustainable management (Muriuki, Bururia & Mutegi, 2018). These challenges may encompass inadequate funding, insufficient power distribution, a deficiency in business expertise, low levels of awareness, poor infrastructure, conflicts among various stakeholders, concerns about the commercialization of religious heritage, and corruption issues.

Though the religious tourism helps contributing in local and national economies, yet sometimes, at the expense of the wider town and community (Alipour et al., 2017), as mostly it tends to benefit local elites rather than the residents and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Relationship between Peace & Tourism

The connection between peace and tourism is complex, encompassing both direct and indirect aspects, influenced by the management, development, and integration of tourism within a society. Tourism holds the potential to aid in peacebuilding, foster economic growth, and enhance intercultural understanding; however, it may also pose challenges if not approached with care. Below are several ways in which peace and tourism are interrelated:

Fostering Intercultural Understanding and Tolerance

Peace-building through Cultural Exchange: Interactions among individuals from diverse backgrounds often lead to the realization that, despite cultural variances, shared values and common human experiences exist. Mitigating Stereotypes: Tourism can play a significant role in dismantling stereotypes and misconceptions by exposing individuals to various cultures. This is particularly crucial in post-conflict areas where reconciliation is essential.

Economic Development as a Basis for Peace

Economic Incentives for Stability: Economic stability is vital for sustaining peace, as it diminishes the chances of conflict stemming from poverty and unemployment. When individuals possess livelihoods and access to improved living conditions, social tensions are likely to decrease.

Empowerment of Local Communities: Tourism has the potential to empower local communities by generating economic opportunities, particularly in rural or underserved regions. As local economies flourish, stability increases, which can lead to a more peaceful society. Community-based tourism, where local residents participate in the tourism process, can cultivate pride and a sense of ownership in sustaining peace.

Encouraging Diplomatic Relations

Cross-Border Relations and Diplomacy: Tourism frequently serves as a mechanism to enhance diplomatic relationships between nations. The connections formed through tourism can foster goodwill and collaboration among countries. For instance, international tourism events, festivals, or shared pilgrimage sites can unite individuals from various nations, thereby promoting peaceful diplomacy.

Regional Cooperation: In areas where nations share cultural, historical, or religious connections (such as South Asia, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia), tourism can serve as a means to alleviate political tensions and promote regional collaboration, as common tourism interests can establish a foundation for unity.

Supporting Conflict Resolution & Promoting Respectful Travel

Tourism in Post-Conflict Areas: Cultural pride and identity can be restored through the promotion of heritage tourism leading to long-term peace.

Establishing Trust in Destinations: Security is the first thing to ensure peaceful tourism. For both residents and tourists.

Responsible and Inclusive Tourism: In order to enhance the harmonious co-existence for the community's satisfaction, ethical tourism needs to be addressed. This will contribute in local economies and reduce the adverse environmental effects.

Strengthening Social Cohesion

Social Integration: Social integration carries paramount significance in diverse societies and tourism can rightly play a role to promote social integration.

Cultural Pride and Unity: The individual become inclined to preserve peace when they undergo a collective sense of identity.

Faith-Based Tourism & Its Contribution in Promoting Peace

Pakistan embodied with cultural, religious and historical culture can be a significant player in promoting faith-oriented tourism. It can bring difference in following ways;

Encouraging Interfaith Dialogue: For peaceful co-existence can be encouraged through inter-faith dialogue.

Cultural Exchange and Appreciation: It can bring respect among different religions and more tolerance towards each other.

Economic Advantages and Community Advancement: It can lessen the socio-economic inequalities.

Promoting National Cohesion: It can help in national cohesion by acknowledging the spiritual importance of locations and the contributions of various faiths to the nation's narrative

Pilgrimage as a Tranquil Endeavour: It can help as a reminder of shared human principles and the potential for peaceful coexistence.

Educational and Awareness Initiatives: It can add to remove the misconceptions of different communities.

Establishing Collaborations among Religious Institutions: It can promote harmonious interactions among pilgrims of different faiths.

Challenges to Peace through Tourism

While tourism offers numerous potential advantages for fostering peace, it can also produce adverse effects if not managed with care.

Exploitation and Conflict: When tourism disproportionately benefits specific groups or external entities, it may result in inequality, exploitation, and local discontent, potentially igniting conflict.

Cultural Invasions and Disrespect: At times, tourism can lead to cultural insensitivity or the commercialization of local customs, generating friction between residents and visitors, particularly when their religious or cultural beliefs are not honoured.

Environmental Strain: Excessive tourism and the depletion of natural resources can cause environmental deterioration, which may incite social unrest and intensify local disputes, especially in vulnerable areas.

However, the promotion of peace faces many obstacles and challenges which could be; Religious Extremism and Sectarianism; Security Concerns; Political Instability; and Economic Challenges.

Unless countries establish an environment conducive to the flourishing of faith-based tourism, which can aid in achieving the overarching objectives of peace and reconciliation, a collaborative initiative involving the government, local communities, religious authorities, and the private sector is crucial to surmount these challenges and unlock the potential of religious tourism.

What Needs to be Done- Lessons from Southeast Asia

Pakistan can gain significant insights from Southeast Asian nations, many of which have successfully advanced their tourism industries, including faith-based tourism, while preserving cultural heritage, promoting peace, and stimulating economic development. Some of the essential lessons that Pakistan could derive from Southeast Asia are;

Utilizing Cultural and Religious Diversity: Nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have adeptly highlighted their abundant cultural and religious diversity as a key aspect of their tourism appeal. For instance, Indonesia's tourism leverages both Islamic sites and Hindu-Buddhist heritage, while Malaysia promotes a blend of Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian sites. Pakistan boasts a rich array of religious and cultural landmarks, encompassing Islamic heritage as well as Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist sites. By effectively promoting this diversity in a manner that fosters interfaith dialogue and mutual respect, Pakistan can draw a wider spectrum of tourists and create avenues for peace building through cultural exchange

Establishing Strong Infrastructure: Numerous countries in Southeast Asia have made substantial investments in tourism infrastructure, which encompasses modern airports, dependable transportation systems, high-quality accommodations, and services that cater to tourists. For example, Thailand has established a well-coordinated tourism infrastructure that accommodates millions of international travellers annually. Pakistan stands to gain from enhancing infrastructure around its primary tourist attractions. This entails upgrading road systems, constructing contemporary lodging facilities, improving connectivity, and ensuring the safety and comfort of visitors. A solid infrastructure base renders tourism more accessible and sustainable, yielding benefits for both tourists and local communities.

Advocating for Sustainable and Responsible Tourism: Nations such as Vietnam and Cambodia have taken steps to foster sustainable tourism by ensuring that tourism practices honour local ecosystems and cultural heritage. For instance, eco-tourism projects in locations like Bali, Indonesia, emphasize environmental conservation and community involvement. Given its rich natural landscapes and historical landmarks, Pakistan could implement similar eco-tourism and community-oriented tourism projects. By engaging local communities in tourism development and safeguarding heritage sites, Pakistan can establish enduring sustainable tourism that serves both the environment and local residents.

Cultivating Niche Tourism Markets: Southeast Asia has effectively engaged with niche markets such as wellness tourism, adventure tourism, medical tourism, and faith-based tourism. For instance, Malaysia and Indonesia draw significant numbers of Muslim travellers through their offerings in "halal tourism." Pakistan possesses a rich array of historical, spiritual, and natural sites that could be leveraged through niche tourism markets. Areas such as faith-based tourism, adventure tourism (for example, trekking in the Himalayas or northern regions), and medical tourism (notably with the medical facilities available in cities like Lahore and Karachi) could

represent significant opportunities for growth in the nation.

Collaborative Efforts between Public and Private Sectors (PPP): Countries in Southeast Asia have effectively established public-private partnerships to develop and oversee tourism initiatives. In Thailand, for example, the government collaborates closely with private sector operators to ensure that tourism remains both profitable and sustainable. Pakistan stands to gain from enhancing collaboration between the public and private sectors to advance its tourism industry. This partnership could emphasize the establishment of joint ventures aimed at promoting tourism, investing in infrastructure, and offering incentives for local enterprises to engage in the tourism value chain.

Marketing and Branding: Southeast Asian Nations have excelled in marketing their tourism destinations through national tourism initiatives (e.g., "Incredible India," "Malaysia, Truly Asia," and "It's More Fun in the Philippines"). These initiatives are bolstered by robust branding strategies that showcase each country's distinctive offerings. Pakistan has the opportunity to enhance its tourism branding to cultivate a more attractive image for both domestic and international visitors. By capitalizing on its historical, religious, and natural attractions through strategic marketing campaigns, Pakistan can alter perceptions and position itself as a safe and inviting destination.

Promoting Safety and Security for Tourists: Nations such as Singapore and Thailand have made considerable progress in ensuring the safety and security of tourists. They have established tourist police forces and clear protocols to protect visitors from fraud, theft, and other potential hazards. Pakistan has the opportunity to adopt Southeast Asia's strategies for creating a secure environment for tourists. This may involve the establishment of specialized tourist police, providing safety information to travellers, and ensuring that well-frequented tourist locations are safeguarded against criminal activities. A robust security framework and a strong emphasis on the

welfare of tourists can greatly enhance the confidence of potential visitors.

Engaging Local Communities in Tourism: Numerous countries in Southeast Asia have successfully involved local communities in tourism by training them as guides, artisans, or operators of small-scale tourism enterprises. This strategy not only bolsters the local economy but also fosters cultural exchange and preservation. Pakistan could implement similar community-oriented tourism initiatives, where local populations are actively engaged in the tourism sector. For example, local guides could impart their knowledge of historical landmarks, and local artisans could market traditional crafts. This would ensure that the advantages of tourism benefit the grassroots level and promote cultural pride.

Promoting Religious and Pilgrimage Tourism: Southeast Asia boasts a multitude of religious and pilgrimage sites, including Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Golden Temple in Thailand, and the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Malaysia. These locations attract millions of religious and spiritual travellers. Pakistan has the potential to further develop its religious tourism offerings, encompassing Islamic, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist pilgrimage sites. By promoting religious tourism, Pakistan can attract visitors from various faiths and contribute to peace-building and interfaith dialogue. Enhancing facilities, accessibility, and safety at these religious sites can significantly increase Pakistan's appeal in the global religious tourism market.

Emphasizing the Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Countries in Southeast Asia have made significant efforts to maintain their cultural heritage by restoring historical sites and encouraging cultural practices. For instance, Cambodia has prioritized the preservation of Angkor Wat and its surrounding temples, which serve as major attractions for tourists. With its rich historical background and varied cultural heritage, Pakistan has the opportunity to invest in the conservation of its archaeological and historical landmarks, including Mohenjo-Daro, the Badshahi Mosque, and numerous Mughal era

sites. By protecting its cultural treasures, Pakistan can develop a tourism experience that showcases its historical importance.

CONCLUSION

The successful tourism strategies employed by Southeast Asia provide valuable insights for Pakistan in establishing a strong, sustainable, and inclusive tourism sector. By concentrating on infrastructure development, effective marketing, community engagement, niche tourism, and safety measures, Pakistan can realize the full potential of its tourism industry, generating economic benefits while fostering peace, cultural exchange, and international goodwill.

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