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# TOURISM IN PAKISTAN

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Pakistan's tourism sector possesses immense potential. It holds the capability to foster employment opportunities, safeguard cultural legacies, enhance capacity and portray a favourable global image of the nation. Nevertheless, this endowment remains untapped. Frail policy frameworks, security concerns and unsustainable practices derail the process of tourism development. Substantial reforms and inclusive strategies are imperative to capitalise on these goals and give a leg up to the nation in terms of socio-economic opportunities and image building.

Pakistan is located at the crossroads of civilizations and has immense value for travellers and knowledge seekers.

According to World Economic Forum,

Pakistan ranked 83<sup>rd</sup> out of 117 countries

in terms of tourism and travel competitiveness.

Recent global recognition is reshaping

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perceptions, highlighting its stability and peace. Renowned entities like the British Backpacker Society declared Pakistan as the top travel destination in 2018. Pakistan's evolving global <sup>acknowledgement</sup> signals its emergence as an appealing travel destination.

Pakistan offers a plethora of tourism prospects. The spectrum includes not only recreational travel, but also sports, archaeological research and religion-based tourism. Pakistan is richly dotted with thousands of historical and cultural sites.

It includes six sites inscribed in UNESCO World Heritage List and twenty five sites included in tentative World Heritage List.

The region of Gilgit Baltistan allures many explorers as an iconic adventure and recreational destination. The

Hunza valley is treasured by trekkers and mountaineers. Passu cones and Attabad lake are known for their breath-taking views. Phandar lake and Broghil valley offer serene surroundings and high altitude lakes. Other destinations like the Swat valley<sup>and</sup> Kalam region appeal to nature enthusiasts. The Deosai National Park adds an ecological facet to tourism with its rich biodiversity. Pakistan's northern areas are rife with natural beauty and exquisiteness.

Simultaneously, Pakistan's landscape is intertwined with religious sites, inviting cultural and religion-based tourism. It is held in high regard by Sikh pilgrims as the birth place of Baba Guru Nanak and Panja Sahib. Janam Asthan, one of the holiest Sikh sites, attracts 10,000 visits per year. The Golden temple in Amritsar

is visited by

a whopping 50 million pilgrims every year. The Gandhara region is revered by Buddhist pilgrims as an abode of peace and spirituality. There are almost 50 archaeological sites in a radius of 30 km around Taxila. Hundreds of Hindu temples, notably Katas Raj temple with icons of Lord Shiva, Sadhu Bela Mandir, Krishna Mandir and Jagannath Mandir hold high importance for Hindus. Moreover, Sufi shrines like Data Darbar and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar are reservoirs of Sufi spiritual experience for Muslims. The diverse range of religious sites attract believers of multi-faceted faiths and are a <sup>colossal</sup> source of revenue.

Sports tourism represents a burgeoning sector in Pakistan. "Tour de Khunjerab", a cycling event held across Karakoram Highway attracts many enthusiasts from around the globe. The Shander

Polo festival held at the world's highest polo ground combines both sporting prowess and cultural festivities. In recent times, the "Pakistan Super League" has also garnered massive attention both domestically and internationally and <sup>has</sup> attracted many visitors to Pakistan.

Furthermore, "Research Tourism" intrigues many scholars and researchers to explore Pakistan's rich history and archaeological destinations. Sites like "Mohenjo-Daro" and the ancient "Silk road" are venerated by historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. The "Taxila museum" houses invaluable artifacts from the Gandhara civilization. Moreover, the "Deosai National Park" is cherished by environmentalists, climate change activists and biodiversity researchers.

Pakistan's tourism sector promises enormous growth. The year 2023 witnessed a notable surge in international tourist arrivals, reaching 5.5 million visitors. The average

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daily expenditure stands at \$100 per visitor. Resultantly, the projected revenue for 2023 is 3 million US Dollars with an annual growth rate of 6.14%.

However, these figures are dismal compared to Pakistan's untapped tourism potential in many segments.

For instance, the "WB Gallup survey" 2015 revealed that 0.9 million sikhs

from the US, UK and Canada are interested in Pakistan's religious

sites. Catering to a mere 5% of this market can yield 92 million US Dollars

in revenue. Similarly, South Asian tourists from Thailand, Malaysia,

Sri Lanka, Japan and South Korea can contribute 62 million US Dollars

to the economy <sup>even</sup> if one percent of the tourist market is realized.

Unfortunately, there is a huge disparity among local and foreign visitors - a whopping 45 million individuals!

Pakistan <sup>government</sup> has implemented several



strategic initiatives to bolster the tourism sector. It has effectively enacted a "10-year National Tourist Plan", enabling visa free entry for tourists from 30 destinations and enhancing infrastructure. Projects like "Emerging Pakistan" and "Amazing Pakistan" aim to orchestrate policies that foster inter-provincial coordination. The National Tourism Board enacts strategies for cultural and archaeological domains. The government is actively working on programs like "Brand Pakistan" and a dedicated portal with PTDC (Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation) as part of the 10-year plan. Moreover, Pakistan is actively promoting religious tourism. It recently issued 3000 visas to Sikh pilgrims for celebrating Baba Guru Nanak's birth anniversary.

However, there is a myriad of issues that hinders Pakistan from capitalizing

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on its true tourism potential. After the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, tourism became a provincial subject. Corporations like Tourism Corporation of Khyber Pakhtun-Khwa, Sindh Tourism Development Corporation, and departments in Balochistan, AJK and Gilgit took the responsibility to manage tourist affairs. The institutions are maligned with inefficiency and a dearth of expertise. Moreover, provincial tourism websites lack information on accommodation, transport and guides, which hamper's the tourist's ability to navigate through destinations.

The hotel industry falls short of international standards due to a lack of government initiatives.

The implementation of certifications <sup>remains</sup> lacking despite plans for a "star system" to improve performance. Laws such as "Pakistan

"Tourist Guides Act", "Travel Agencies Act" and the "The Pakistan Hotels and Restaurants Act" have not been put into operation.

The infrastructure development in Pakistan paints a dismal picture.

Poor road accessibility, under developed tourist routes and shortage of

visitor services are some of the most pressing issues the tourism industry faces.

Neither the government nor the provincial departments are paying

any heed to devise a plan for the <sup>Moreover,</sup> development of these facilities. There is

~~is~~ no plan to revamp existing infrastructure, thereby leading to further deterioration of the industry.

Pakistan's image is marred by security concerns which adversely affect its

tourist market. It has been on the

radar since 9/11 as a safe haven for

few opine that terrorist groups. Moreover, ↑ politics aimed at identity by the military envisage Pakistan as a "Praetorian, security state". Consequently, visitors from around the globe are apprehensive about visiting the country due to its "supposed" security <sup>issues.</sup>

The authorities' blatant negligence towards the conservation of heritage sites and maintenance of tourist destinations is a deplorable reality.

Many Buddhist and Sikh landmarks remain unexplored. Mohenjo Daro is poorly managed and withering away with time. Popular tourism spots like Taxila are frequently littered and in bad shape.

Furthermore, the Pakistani community is largely untrained in domains of tourism and hospitality. Many tourist guides are unprofessional with inadequate

training. Moreover, there have been instances of hostility and harassment by the locals. The culture of intolerance and ethnocentrism is prevalent among Pakistani masses.

The country direly needs sweeping reforms and intricate planning to curb all the aforesaid issues. Pakistan can draw on the Canadian and Australian model to curtail challenges posed by the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. This entails forming a "National Tourism Council" which includes members from the federal as well as provincial governments. The council's role would be to devise a National General Strategy and specific strategies tailored according to each province. The council would ensure inter-provincial cooperation and supervise tourism management and development.

Pakistan's tourism institutions require

substantial empowerment and capacity building. Initiating comprehensive training programs and collaborations with international organizations like "Pacific Asia Travel Association", "World <sup>Tourism</sup> Organization" etc can enhance institutional capabilities.

Pakistan is a signatory of the Sustainable Development Goals and its partnership with "Global Sustainable Tourism Council" will align its <sup>Tourism and institutions</sup> agenda <sup>↑</sup> with SDG 12: sustainable economic growth and SDG Target 8.9 <sup>↑</sup> <sup>To</sup> promote sustainable tourism and local culture.

The Government must prioritize adequate infrastructure development. Infrastructure not only entails roads, hotels and services, but also air traffic and energy sectors. If we consider the case of Thailand, the country seamlessly blends modern infrastructure with its natural scenic beauty. A well

maintained road network and highways of over 702,000 km effectively manage millions of tourists. A diverse range of accommodations and transport options cater to the needs of all economic classes. Moreover, it adeptly attracts air traffic by alliance of Thai airlines with Star Alliance and providing <sup>world class</sup> facilities to its customers.

Effective marketing and branding techniques are also imperative to promote tourism in Pakistan. Renowned film makers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy should be employed to showcase Pakistan's cultural heritage and scenic beauty to international media. The Government should also make use of embassies and High Commissions in various countries. The foreign offices need to open liaison offices to actively promote tourism and provide information about visas, travel destinations etc.

Public-Private Partnerships can be a panacea for Pakistan's tourism industry. There are multifarious competitive travel agencies in Pakistan like Pluto travels, North X, Adventure Tours Pakistan etc. The government can follow "Spain's model" and enter into joint ventures with these businesses to boost <sup>the</sup> tourism industry and <sup>in return</sup> offer large tax incentives. In this way, Pakistan can facilitate conservation of cultural sites and improve travel ~~destination~~ experience by collaborating with experts on a shared vision of development.

In conclusion, Pakistan is rife with tourism opportunities. Its natural endowment is well suited to attract a wide spectrum of visitors <sup>with</sup> multi faceted interests. However, institutional incapacity and weak



policy frameworks have stymied the progress of its tourism sector.

It is imperative to iron out all these obstacles by effective reforms and National Plans. A collective commitment to address these challenges and adopting innovative approaches from successful countries is sine qua non to unlock Pakistan's tourism prowess.