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Promoting Tourism in Pakistan: Opportunities and Challenges

Outline

(1) Introduction

"Pakistan is packed with historical and natural wonders that provides it an ^{numerous} opportunity to promote tourism within itself, but before it can do that it must confront the challenges that plague the country's society and industry as a whole."

(2) Challenges ^{to} Promoting Tourism (within Pakistan)

(2a) Poor Communication Infrastructure

(2b) Underdeveloped Hospitality
Industry

(2c) Prevailing Security Situations

(2d) Visa Issues and Bureaucratic
Hurdles

(2e) Lack of Upkeep of Tourist Attractions

- (2f) Societal and Local attitudes
- (2g) Environmental Degradation of Tourist sites
- (2h) Negative Role of media
- (2i) Prevailing economic conditions in the country.

(3) Opportunities for Promoting tourism (within Pakistan)?

- (3a) Massive Potential for Adventure Tourism
- (3b) Development of Sites for Religious Tourism
- (3c) Sustainable Eco-tourism as a new opportunity
- (3d) Social media and new age of tourism.
- (3e) Hunger for exploration in Pakistan's middle class.
- (3f) Restructuring PTDC to promote tourism and improve efficiency.
- (3g) CPEC and enhanced connectivity
- (3h) E-Governance and Visa-Free Regime
- (3i) Improving Women Safety and National Security.

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(4) Conclusion

"The country must streamline its efforts and solve the challenges that are presented in front of it.

By doing so, only then can capitalize on the opportunities of promoting Tourism."

Man, in a bid to know the unknown, has spent many suns and moons travelling the vast plains, rugged mountains and treacherous oceans of this world. Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and many others spent their lifetimes exploring this very world. Today, more than 1.3 billion people, as per the World Tourism Organization (2023), engage in this activity. Pakistan is also ^{captures} forms an integral part of this bulk/number. With 40 million domestic and 1.25 million foreign tourists, the country has set its sight on becoming a popular tourist destination for all. Pakistan is packed with natural, historical and modern wonders that give it an edge over others when it comes to tourism, but to further enhance the prospects it must

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confront the challenges that plague the industry, society and country as a whole. These challenges include the poor communication networks (roads, highways and so on) to maintaining the environment around tourist sites.

Communication networks play an important part in the birth or demise of any sector in the world. With an efficient road networks, people are more connected and businesses begin to witness ^{growth}. However, the opposite is also true, a poor road or communication network results in the demise of the industry and most of all, it furthers the gap between people. The communication network spread throughout Pakistan is limited to only the major cities. Major tourists attractions are served using dilapidated roads that are often at the mercy of the elements. The KKH, Karakorum Highway, often touted as the 8th wonder of the world is closed for weeks on an end due to frequent landslides. In 2020, the highway was blocked at 20 different locations due to landslides. Without a proper channel, ^{neither} tourism ^{nor} ~~neither~~ business can flourish in the area.

Roads and highways bring in tourists, however, there is no point of them

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if the hospitality sector of the area cannot serve them efficiently. That is true for all the country, the hospitality sector which forms the backbone of the tourism industry is underdeveloped and lacks the capacity to accommodate the influx of visitors in the region. The lack of know-how further compounds the issue. Hoteliers and restaurateurs are ill-equipped and untrained to handle the new tourists; who are demanding a high-level of service for them. Moreover, the hospitality industry has seldom received any proper attention from educational institutes. Programs like 'Hospitality Management', 'Tourism Management' neither receive the support from the institutes nor the public. The untrained staff later goes on to start their chains with zero formal training.

It is not only service that concerns a tourist but also their safety and security. The prevailing security situation in the country has put it in a tough place when it comes to tourism. Foreign and domestic visitor worry about their safety, when it comes to visiting any place. Furthermore, incidents like those in the Fairy Meadows Basecamp in which 10 foreign climbers and 1 local got gunned by miscreants exacerbate the situation.

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and add more hype to the unstable situation. The spillover from the war on Terror (WOT) in Afghanistan affected this country a lot. Bomb blasts, shootings have now again become the norm in the western parts of the country. These reporting on these incidents further deteriorates the security and perception of safety in the region. Even if the security situations is resolved bureaucratic hurdles and visa problems create numerous headaches for tourists.

Foreign tourists often complain of the uncertainty of the Pakistani visa system. Moreover, pristine locations in Gilgit Baltistan require NOC's (No-objection certificates) issued by the government, to people, to allow them to visit. The red-tapism involved in the process of acquiring and processing the visas and NOE's are immense. As the popular Youtuber, Mark Weins, put it, that applying for the Pakistani visa is literally a guessing game as the embassies response is dismal and there is no certain guarantee that a person will be issued one. Opinions like these dissuade foreigners from visiting as they find this hurdle too much for themselves. Local tourists also suffer from bureaucratic roadblocks literally and figuratively.

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They also suffer due to arbitrary decisions taken by the local or provincial government. Such measures include the curtailment of visitors to certain areas/locations, imposition of curfews and so on.

Bureaucratic hurdles not only impede the influx of tourists but also the upkeep and maintenance of the tourists sites. Both local and government functionaries are to blame in this negligence. Historical sites like Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, Badshahi Mosque, Wazir Khan Mosque are suffering due to the lack of maintenance. In the 2022, UNESCO reportedly warned that these sites could be taken off the World Heritage list if these sites were not maintained according to the world body's recommendation (DAWN). Furthermore, the lack of funds available to the culture and heritage departments is barely enough to keep these operational. For maintaining them, these departments have to rely on foreign grants or aids which seldom arrive. Due to which, these attractions suffer at the hands of the governments' and negligence.

It would not be fair to pin all the blame on the government as the locals also have failed to maintain these sites due to their passive attitudes. It has been

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widely reported that the local entrepreneurs seem to think that tourists are an easy target and try their level best to fleece them by offering them subpar services at exorbitant prices. Similarly, the cleanliness and upkeep of various tourists sites is seldom done by their ~~responsibility~~. Rather than taking responsibility for the area ^{around} and their spot, they shift the blame onto the municipal administration citing their inefficiency. In Tokyo, the municipal administration has set out rules that vendors/cart-owners are not only responsible for their enterprise's cleanliness but also their surroundings too. However, these rules and attitudes are absent in Pakistani entrepreneur who are adamant on promoting tourism.

Societal attitudes are also important in promoting sustainable and environmentally-friendly tourism. However, that is lost on ~~our~~ the country's budding tourism industry which plans to make money at the expense of the environment. Kumra Kalam might be the best example of this, has seen hotels and restaurants encroach into its main river. The city's main river now houses many different private establishments. If what was once a beautiful and pristine valley has now

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turned into environmental nightmare. deforestation, encroachment in the rivers and releasing raw untreated sewerage into the those very waterways has made it into any other city in Pakistan. In 2022, the valley paid the ultimate price when flash floods wrecked havoc in the entire valley. Complete hotels, especially those situated in the river, were swept away. Roads and smaller structures stood no chance at in front of those raging torrents.

The media played an important role during the 2022 floods, and highlighted the destruction of the valley. However, it also has played the pivotal role of highlighting and portraying a negative image of the country. Banking on sensationalism and negative press, the media has shown the country as a worn-torn nation. Rather than promoting the positive image; the country has always received negative press, locally and globally. Constant news of bomb blasts, violence has desensitized the nation and instilled sense of fear for particular regions. This has impacted not only domestic tourism but also foreign tourists. Perceptions and positive press matter a lot for a prosperous tourism industry. Unfortunately, both have never been received by the country in the recent years. The

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media rather than acting as a responsible outlet for information, misused its position and tarnished the country's image.

It is no fact that sensationalism sells across the world. The media also has to make its ends meet in this era of economic turmoil. Pakistan's domestic tourism ^{market} which makes the bulk of the visitors every year, has taken a massive hit. Sky-high inflation, rocketing fuel prices has made travelling expense for the majority. The country, according to the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), witnessed 38% inflation in urban areas whereas it saw 41% in rural areas in 2022. This inflationary push was driven by rising fuel prices which reached above Rs 330 per litre. The rupee devaluation further compounded the miseries for citizens. For foreign visitors, the country was extremely cheap to travel in but the domestic tourists suffered the most at the hands of the economic turmoil.

All is not lost, as the country is full of people who have weathered the extremes and persevered. The country went through dark times and today it has finally emerged onto the other side of the tunnel.

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There are massive opportunities for promoting tourism in Pakistan. The rugged peaks give an opportunity for alpine / adventure tourism while the stupas and gurdwaras provide a base for religious tourism. As the popular saying is, it is not over till the fat lady sings, it tells us the tourism sector has much opportunities that it can offer before it can call it a day.

The country is home to mountain peaks over 8000m in height. It has 3 mountain ranges that contain peaks from 2000m to above 8000m. It is no wonder that alpinists flock to the Northern Areas of Pakistan. After Nepal, the country is home to the second highest number of 8000m peaks. This provides the sector an opportunity to capitalize and cash in on. Proper training of porters, and staff is needed to ensure this sector thrives. Moreover, the infrastructure needed to reach these peaks must also be looked at. Public private partnerships can be utilized to fund the projects which enhance the numbers of visitors in these areas. Moreover, other adventure sports such as white water rafting, sky-diving, paragliding can also be developed in conjunction with the above model. These sports are popular around the world, and

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sufficient support from both Public and Private partners. These can be used to increase the scope of adventure tourism in Pakistan.

where the potential for adventures tourism is endless, the room for religious tourism is also not limited. The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, in a report stated that there are 480 tourist destinations out of which 120 are of religious significance.

Numbers published by the government reveal that after the Kartpur Corridor Initiative, the number of pilgrims rose from to 10,000 every year. Moreover, ancient Buddhist sites also have the potential to lure in religious pilgrims. In order to attract the most returns these sites need to be developed and maintained to the highest possible standards. The communication links must be strengthened and the highest degree of standards must be maintained by those working in the hotels and restaurants as to not let these pilgrims feel any distress or worry during their journey.

Development of adventure or religious must be done in an environmentally friendly and sustainable tourism. Nowadays, countries are cashing in on the phenomenon

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of eco-tourism. Pakistan, has huge potential for this, as it can easily capture a significant portion of the market. The country can turn its curses into blessing by promoting the outdoors and conservation effort of the outdoors as the new face of tourism. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) has already on a trial basis started camping villages in which tourists get to actively participate in preserving nature and enjoying the outdoors. These initiative can be scaled to the national level and foster/usher in growth for the industry.

The boom of social media is undeniable and has brought in a period of unprecedented access to information. During the COVID lockdown, famous museums like the ^{London} Natural History Museum began offering virtual tours. This led to the creation of the digital tourism industry. Where people can access various sites from the comfort of their own. Pakistan can also use this to promote tourism in the country. Creation of content that appeals to the viewer can also ^{encourage} ^{courage} them to step out and the that place too. Moreover, the museums in Pakistan in a bid to increase Footfall can also adopt the above-mentioned methods

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Virtual tours and specially created content can help the country increase footfall in not only museums but also across the country. Documentary programs play a lot to this, as the historical significance can be explored through them. All of this content can be used to entice viewers to visit the country and create a new market segment.

Social media's success is also dependant on the economic conditions of the middle class. This economic strata is most hit due to economic turmoil, moreover they also contribute the most in revenue and services. Over the years, this segment has grown in size; new found wealth and better living standards have created an appetite for adventure and exploration. What the typical journey of a person looked 20 years back is completely different from today. People are pushing the limits and exploring into the unknown. This segment provides hopes that even through economic turmoil, people are willing to travel. This hunger ~~can~~ is a catalyst for new growth and opportunities in the sector. By providing adequate infrastructure and service, tourism can be propelled sky high. For this, both private and public sector engagement is required to capitalize on this opportunity.

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Public sector entities are the drivers of economic growth. They set the standards for the private sector and allow them to takeover. Pakistan's tourism development and promotion lies in restructuring the country's premier tourism body, PTDC (Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation). The body is a relic of what it used to be. Today, it hemorrhages millions in lost revenue, due to which it cannot maintain and renovate its motels and properties. Administrative restructuring on a public-private basis can ensure the body is run effectively and efficiently. Moreover, private sector expertise can be used to rebrand, reorient and renew the body. During the 2019, a massive restructuring campaign was launched, PTDC was restructured and privatized. Through this, the losses were stemmed and ^a new PTDC emerged. It is now the responsibility of the private sector to leverage PTDC's vast network and promote and capitalize on the tourism industry.

Connectivity, along with administrative reforms, is also important. The country's communication networks were hampering the quality and quantity of journeys being made. However, CPEC has reinvigorated the communication networks/infrastructure within the country. Journey times have been cut miraculously and today,

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people are more connected than ever. A journey which used to take 8 to 9 hours from Islamabad to Multan can now be completed in only 5 hours. Similarly, the road infrastructure has also been upgraded throughout the country especially the Northern Areas. The infrastructure investments made under CPEC are acting as a catalyst for not only promoting economic growth, connectivity within the country but also tourism too. This new found connectivity has brought people closer and more importantly, tourists in the country and to the regions.

Improving roads and connectivity is only aspect of capitalizing on the opportunities of promoting tourism within the country. By shifting to E-Governance and enhancing the country's bilateral visa agreements, it also add more ease to the tourists' journey. In July 2014, the government did so, it granted visa-on-arrival facility to people from 124 countries. Moreover, the government also removed the requirements of obtaining a NOC to visit certain areas of Pakistan. These moves are bound to improve the inflow of foreign and domestic tourists in the country. Ease of travel is a major concern for all travellers around the world. By making it easier,

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for tourists to apply for necessary documentation the numbers surely can be increased. Moreover, single window operations can also help the tourists as it will be a one-stop shop for all the documentation needs.

The country has made great strides in eliminating visitor discomfort. However, it also needs to make a considerable effort to improve the law and order situation and women safety. The country is again embroiled in a conflict in its western flank. Considerate efforts are needed to root out the surge of terrorism from the country and rehabilitate the area. Moreover, the country was ranked as the 4th most worst country, in 2017, for women according to the Women Peace and Security Index. However, the country has shown improvement but much needs to be done to improve the situation. It has climbed up the ranking from 150 out of 153 to 158 out of 177 in 2023/24.

Improving the law and order, enforcement of punishments and deterrence of the law can yield positive outcomes. A concerted effort is required, one which all stakeholders agree to; promote safety and security across the country. Thereby ensuring an environment conducive to promoting tourism.

All in all, the country has

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massive potential for promoting tourism within its borders, but the challenges that are presented by different aspects of the society, industry must be covered and solved. It must be ^{made} clear, that man ~~is~~ has always been travelling since the dawn of time, the need for the country now is to capitalize on this and use his passion ~~to~~ to make him explore Pakistan. Tourism was always ^h here and will always be here. The only thing needed is to streamline the country's efforts.