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**Gilgit-Baltistan matters**

Their beauty on the verge of being defaced and serenity being spoiled due to unplanned and unregulated tourism, the picturesque valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan are becoming exposed to many irreversible threats.

Degradation of environmental resources, fraying socio-cultural fabric and disintegration of indigenous ethics are some of the visible threats. This is a pernicious transition, one that was not imagined or owned by the local people themselves. Outright commercialization has resulted in the loss of their most coveted assets – the garden, and largely nature. However, less visible and more pernicious threats lie in a transition being imposed on the collective life of two million people who do not matter in an emerging new economy of tax evaders and land grabbers.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan are going to pay the price of their accident of birth t in the new economy as promotional objects of honesty, hospitality and simplicity – which however do not fill the famished bellies of the poor. “Tourism without social responsibility and fair regulation brings litter, dirt and greed without generating a single penny to public funds”, says a local anthropologist. The hospitality industry being shaped by unregulated, unplanned and irresponsible tourism also ends up curbing the flow of decent tourists and nature loving visitors to Gilgit-Baltistan.

The untrained, semi-educated and short-sighted hoteliers and restaurant owners charge exorbitantly – as if it were their last chance to fleece the visitors. A vast majority of domestic tourists act as they do in their daily lives where throwing litter in public places is not an unusual or an unethical practice in the big cities of the country. Urbane, educated and decent visitors find it hard to put up with all this and they flee the area with a bad impression and to never come back. Educated locals have already left the area in search of better future prospects for themselves and their children.

Some of the most famous tourist destinations, like Hunza valley, face insurmountable problems and a collective sense of dispossession and xenophobia. The selling stories of 100 percent literacy rate, longevity and a highly educated society look like fabricated fables of some commercial intent with little relevance to a society on the verge of fast decay. The town centers of Hunza valley do not have clean drinking water and they face 18 hours of power outages, food and fuel insecurity, lack of health and education facilities and political oppression.

Despite all its natural beauty, Hunza seems impossible to decent travelers and a place of despair for those who come in search of reasons for serenity. With no water, no electricity, low quality hospitality services, inorganic food and unregulated prices, Hunza does not offer any comparative edge over Murree and Naran valleys for decent visitors.

Even small cafes charge 150 rupees for a cup of tea and this tax-free money goes to the owner. You will face an unpalatable reaction from the hoteliers for a rational question about the exorbitant food charges – at the cost of them losing their civility and peace. The medieval myth of longevity in Hunza does not hold water anymore because the area is now home to many physical and psychological ailments like hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular complications, kidney failures and schizophrenia. Those who would happily drink glacial water as a source of longevity would find out that this turbid water is actually harmful to health. The malnourished population, emaciated faces and increasing cases of anemia tell the full story of the real Hunza, which is now on the verge of complete decay.

Some devout Hunzuktz may be annoyed by this naked truth but this is the time to recognize the issue, reflect and find out a solution to reverse the social regression. Rich and superstitious tycoons are spending millions to purchase lands and properties across Gilgit-Baltistan to construct hotels and commercial plazas. There are no building codes, construction guidelines, water distribution and land acquisition policies and all is done in collusion with relevant government departments, local agents and powerful institutions of state.

The once green region of Gilgit-Baltistan is turning into a yellow, blue and red spot of ecological disaster in the country where millions of smoke-emitting vehicles plying on the roads have already turned the area into an inferno. The average temperature in the summer has increased significantly, coupled with an increasing pace of glacial lake outburst floods, freak weathers and increasing incidents of deaths due to the land-sliding. If we visualize the state of these tourist destinations in 10 years from now, they will be unlivable places for the local people. This is a heavy price the local people will pay for selling out their lands to greedy tycoons who are not sensitive to the rich ecology of the region.

The role of the government to regulate tourism and its allied industries has been very rudimentary, despite all the claims of green initiatives. It is important to protect the environmental and hydrological resources of Gilgit-Baltistan for sustainable development. The region offers an excellent opportunity to build a prosperous, energy rich and healthy society governed by the ethical framework of human development.

Though there are many well-mannered tourists visiting Gilgit-Baltistan, out of their genuine love for nature, they will soon stop coming if we fail to regulate tourism. There are some well-mannered hoteliers and restaurant owners who charge fairly for their wonderful services but they face tremendous pressure to change ways or lose the business. The provincial government does not have a functional tourism policy and regulation mechanism to manage the tourist influx, price control and environmental safety in one of the most ecologically sensitive zones of the world. Gilgit-Baltistan is losing its commutative edge of tourism and is turning into a hub of illegal and unfair commercial activities like other border regions of the country.

A few weeks ago, social media was outraged when the launch of a newly published book titled, ‘Hunza Matters’ by Hermann Kreutzmann was banned. The launch ceremony was arranged at one of the oldest and extant historic sites in Hunza and there was supposed to be a scholarly discussion on various aspects of the book.

Typical of a book launch event, the ceremony attracted many knowledge enthusiasts who had either read the book or wanted to know more about the contested and deeper aspects from the author himself. Banning a book launch is not an unfamiliar episode in Gilgit-Baltistan, in particular books written by ‘outsiders’. Just a few months ago, a masterpiece book written on Gilgit-Baltistan by Nosheen Ali invited the wrath of the provincial government.

It seems as if the government of Gilgit-Baltistan is active only to suppress sane voices while it has turned a deaf ear to the ills of those who are spoiling ecology, peace and serenity by minting money at the cost of the people and the planet. Gilgit-Baltistan matters to its people; this calls for some long-term policy initiatives, institutional and governance reforms and articulation of a vision to make the new economy a boon not a bane to the people of the area.

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