**Hospitality and tourism in GB**

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Friday, Oct 08, 2021

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Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has become the hub of private investment in the hospitality industry with the growth in tourism in recent years.

The thriving tourism is a boon as long as it helps transform the socioeconomic conditions of the poor but a bane if it becomes a profiteering game of the rich to extract local resources for private gains. A vast majority of people associated with local tourism in GB think that the advent of the exotic hospitality industry without a regulatory policy framework is proving disastrous as it tends to dislodge the evolving indigenous entrepreneurial base. The mushroom growth of concrete hotel buildings for short-term economic gains poses a serious threat to the fragile ecology of this region in the long run.

According to a local tourism expert, “tourism as a public good was never promoted by private companies in GB but it was Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) which first introduced affordable hospitality facilities in the 1970s. PIA established the first hotel in GB which was later taken over by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and was then transformed into the Gilgit Serena Hotel.

“The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) was incorporated on March 30, 1970; it established two hotels – K-2 Motel in Skardu and Chinar Inn in Gilgit – and it was much later that the private tourism companies started to operate in GB. It is, therefore, misleading to attribute tourism promotion to private companies which entered GB with profit-making motives either by taking over public enterprises through political favours or by exploiting the weak regulatory systems to use the existing tourism infrastructure including the hospitality industry. Today private companies are making inroads with unabated greed to make money in the absence of an effective tourism policy framework.”

Let me share with readers some basic facts from a discussion with tourism experts in GB which, I hope, will help people understand the severity of threats to the ecology of GB.

A standard room in a five-star hotel consumes 700 liters of water per room per day, and it generates 1.9 kg of solid waste per guest per day on an average. Imagine the overall impact of a hotel with 40 rooms on the local environment and natural resources. The worst part is the proposed master plans of four and five star hotels in the residential areas of Hunza in particular and GB in general, which will displace local populations or ghettoise them on their own land.

The hospitality industry is now growing like a concrete jungle without any regard to the environmental, social and cultural sensitivities of the area. It is an insidious but lucrative profiteering agenda which will destroy the natural habitat, biodiversity and scenic landscape to fill the bellies of the rich. In some of the touristic destinations like Hunza valley the adverse impact of unplanned construction and usurpation of public assets by the hospitality industry is a case in point. These big businesses in Hunza valley consider local resources like water, fuel wood, cheap labour and peace as positive externalities of their business plan.

A vast majority of farmers, professionals and young educated people in Hunza think that these big hospitality businesses have become a burden on scarce local resources without contributing even a single penny to replenish them. The main towns of Hunza valley face a severe water crisis as most of their traditional community owned water resources are now being diverted to the water intensive hospitality industry. In the absence of a proper solid waste management and sanitation system, the fertile lands and orchards have become exposed to irreversible toxification.

Imagine the severity and magnitude of health hazards, water crisis and overall damage to the local environment when the big chains of five-star hotels start their operations in GB. Some of these multistoried five-star hotels are already under-construction while others are at the planning stage but none of them have any elaborate plan for water resource development, solid waste management and quality sanitation services.

Commercial intent is intrinsic to all private businesses universally but then it is governed through national laws to protect the interests and wellbeing of the local communities and their resources from extractive commercialisation. There must be even more stringent laws and regulations in case of ecologically fragile geographies like GB because of their significance to national wellbeing.

The fragile ecology of GB is already under stress because of the adverse impact of climate change, the rising temperatures and increasing phenomenon of Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF). The fast-melting glaciers cause heavy flooding in the rivers of GB to destroy the livelihood of the low riparian communities on the one hand and by posing a threat of consistent droughts with the depletion of the frozen waters on the other.

Some people would argue that this is how capitalism works – with the primary objective to reduce the cost of doing business. But this argument is utterly flawed when it comes to measuring the social and environmental cost of unbridled profiteering. The losers of this money-making scheme are the local people of GB whose scarce natural resources are being usurped for private gains. In the absence of a regulatory policy framework and a weak system of accountability, the industrial exploitation of the natural resources of GB will lead to irreversible losses to its biodiversity and traditional means of livelihood.

The Upper Indus ecology is the backbone of the national economy, food security and sustainable future for our generations because of its hydrological resources. The increased carbon footprints of the unregulated hospitality industry and mining activities will trigger the climate change adversities posing existential threats to the population of the Indus Basin.

There is an intriguing silence on the part of civil society, environmentalists, development activists, geostrategic stakeholders and political parties in Pakistan when it comes to the ongoing extractive industrial practices across Gilgit-Baltistan. However, the fragile ecology of the Upper Indus Basin has attracted regional and global attention to protect the fast-depleting hydrological resources through trans-boundary collaboration of states that share the Basin. The trans-boundary arrangements call for joint research, knowledge exchange, collective action, and an effective policy framework of sustainable development. The irresponsible and unaccountable extractive businesses in the Upper Indus Basin will jeopardise the regional efforts for restoration of ecological resources.

This calls for an inclusive economic development plan with local ownership of resources and collective or community-based management of water resources, mineral sites and commercial land use. It is a myth that big private businesses bring employment and prosperity; they instead transform a huge majority into an irrelevant crowd on their own land for a few hundred jobs. In the case of GB, I can see this happening soon where a vast majority of local people will be relegated to minion jobs and underpaid laborers on their own lands. We have seen this happening in other tourist places like Murree and Naran where local populations have become aliens in their own land.

In my next article I will focus on how local cultural heritage in Gilgit-Baltistan is being transformed into private businesses and how cultural relics and history are being defaced for profiteering.

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