**Promoting Tourism**

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March 12, 2024

Former PM Kakar said a month ago that the development of communication infrastructure is extremely important to boost tourism in Gilgit, Baltistan. The communication system requires fast Internet speed to promote tourism. Presently, the Internet speed in the Gilgit region is dismally slow and service inefficient. The region has a system which is not in harmony with the networks operating in the rest of the country.

Pakistan has beautiful green landscapes and valleys in the upcountry regions to attract tourists from all over the world. For instance, the country has five mountain peaks 8000 meters high while there are only fourteen peaks of the same height in the world. Climbing these peaks is the dream of many foreign mountaineers but they get limited facilities of movement by road and communication by cell phones, despite paying heavy charges for the visit.

The Karakoram Highway is the only means of traveling but it’s not advisable to travel during certain periods of the year. Travelling on this road is nothing less than an adventure. On one side of the KKH is the deep river with gushing water and on the other rocky wall and high mountains throughout the journey up to Gilgit. Hazards of landslides during the rainy season are a part of the journey. At some stages, only one vehicle can pass while others have to wait even though the road is supposedly meant for both-way traffic. A concrete embankment is urgently needed to prevent vehicles from falling into the river. Quite a few accidents occurred when vehicles slid into the river deep down.

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As for travelling by air, the PIA uses ATR-42 planes to Gilgit since the airport there is only designed to handle small planes. But both ATR-42 and A320 land and take off at Skardu airport, which is of international level and can handle large planes. The seating arrangement in PIA’s ATR-42 planes is uncomfortable for the passengers with little leg space. Tall foreign tourists have a hard time travelling on these planes. Most of the planes have already seen their good days and many seats in them don’t recline. Tall and hefty tourists seem bamboozled when getting off the plane.

However, travelling by the KKH to Gilgit and further on to Hunza and Nagar is the dream of tourists. The culture of Hunza is markedly different from other areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. The education level of Hunza is positively higher than in other areas; even the dress code of both genders is different compared with the people in the rest of the area. The people of this town are welcoming and hospitable; they’re mainly followers of Sir Agha Khan’s school of thought.

What is lacking is an organized system to manage and promote tourism at the government level. If you talk to an official of the tourism department, you will hear lofty plans in the future for promoting tourism. Dr Naeem Khan, former chairman of the Economics Department University of Peshawar, claimed tourism could bring direct foreign investment to the country. He quoted: ” China had earned about $ 814.1 billion from the tourism and travel industry in 2022, Malaysia’s 13.13 billion ringgit and Indonesia’s tourism share was 413.73 trillion rupiahs in 2021.”

Dr Peter from Britain, who taught for some years at the prestigious GIK Institute of Science and Technology near Tarbela, claimed that were he to manage tourism in northern areas, he could easily earn millions of dollars for Pakistan. Himself an enthusiastic mountaineer, he knew how scenic and beautiful the northern areas were and how they could fascinate the foreign tourists provided the travelling and living arrangements were better organized and security ensured.

On a positive note, a couple from Britain recently travelled to Pakistan and stayed with us. The gentleman was an academic in the UK. My son, himself a professor with a PhD from the UK, took them out on a guided tour of the inner city. Both guests thoroughly enjoyed the visit, including a ride in an open rickshaw. The tour ended with dinner in the food street, which they thought was a treat. Similarly, their visit to the Lahore museum impressed them greatly.

The visiting academic was even interviewed for his comments about the museum. Then followed a visit to the Shalimar Garden in Lahore and the Hiran Minar in Sheikhupura. Both husband and wife immensely enjoyed visiting the places of great historical importance. In the end, they only wondered why more foreign tourists didn’t visit Pakistan.

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