**The downside of unplanned tourism**

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In the Dardic Belt (Torwali and Gawri) and Gujari areas of Swat, people did not have access to modernity and modernization some 50 or 60 years ago.

The area was closed – seen as unattractive and even barbaric to the rest of the world. There were no roads. There were very few visitors – if any – from the outside. People used to go up to the pastures for summers and come down to the main river valley in winter. Most of the folkloric songs were about pastures, mountains and rivers. Major wars were fought over pastures because livestock were the main source of the economy.

If we look at the current problems from the perspective of the past, it will show not only our lack of knowledge but also our stupidity because the area is no longer closed. Roads have been constructed, new livelihoods have emerged and with it new socio-political contests pushed in. The region is no longer isolated. A system of one state has been implemented, albeit very poorly and inefficiently. With the development of tourism in the area, the value of land has increased and disputes over it have intensified. Tourism has also brought new tensions with new opportunities.

With the promotion of tourism in this area, the local people started developing buildings on the lands. In this process, the valuable land along the road was lost, so the greedy were obviously fixated on the distant mountains. When the nearby lands were sold and consumed, a habit for cash among the locals grew, triggering them to sell distant lands. In such a situation, the eyes of the government also focused on these beautiful lands. Some friends claim that this tourism has boosted the local economy 40-50 per cent.

If there had really been an impact of tourism on the boost of the local economy, there would have been a reduction in seasonal and permanent migration from our region in the last three decades, but that did not happen. Rather, this modern economic competition has forced many people to migrate permanently, and this migration has increased. For instance, about 40 per cent of the Torwali population has permanently migrated to the cities; and from faraway areas like Utror, Matlitan, Kalam, Pushmal, Badai and Sehrai estimates show that the seasonal migration is almost 80 per cent.

Tourism has brought money for the few, and has now exceeded every relationship, every value, every personal dignity and morals. If this was not the case, we would not have seen boys and girls begging or selling things on the main roads. These children are already forced to beg under the guise of selling biscuits, bottles or other such items. An increase in tourism has also given rise to internal disputes while impacting the environment greatly.

As Kalam and its valleys are the most popular tourist destination in the entire north, land disputes are more acute here. Be it the Desan pasture or Ushu Jungle, the Shahi Bagh ground or Mahudand, these conflicts arise and escalate, along with huge damage to the forests and water resources in these areas. The area’s elders have also become parties to these conflicts and many enthusiastic young people have become warriors bent on showing the essence of their ‘bravery’ against their own race, language and place so that they can gain a high position in their ‘tribe’. In recent times, the result of more than two decades of animosity between two villages in Torwal/Bahrain is before us. After confronting each other, these two sides finally came to the table and resolved this ‘enmity’ through negotiations, repeating the same lesson that the final and lasting solution to every conflict is dialogue and negotiations.

The conflict between Kalam and Utror has no end. The state has left the conflict to private parties to resolve, which they cannot as they do not have any arbitrary jurisdiction. The state has a huge responsibility and should facilitate negotiations between the parties and find a solution to these disputes where both parties believe they have won and are happy. It can be resolved only through negotiation. The conflict is still intact and can again trigger violent reactions by both sides.

Under the World Bank funded project for tourism, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Integrated Tourism Project usually referred to as KITE project, new roads are to be made to high altitude pastures in the Mankial Valley in Bahrain, Swat and in Utror and Mahodand Valley in the Kalam area.

The moment feasibility for a new road from Mankiyal town to Jaba, a highland pasture, has been conducted the locals have started selling their pasturelands to investors from the cities. These lands are being sold at very low prices. The sale of these lands has regenerated and amplified disputes among the local people who have claims of ownership to these lands. A few years back, scores of pasture huts were burnt down because of disputes. The parties involved in the conflicts have also cut down forests mercilessly.

Externally the greater and increased influx of tourists to the valleys of Bahrain and Kalam in Swat has greatly contaminated the river water, cut the forests and made the environment dirty. In Mahodand, which was a beautiful pasture along a big lake a few years back, people have built many structures in the names of restaurants and hotels and the pasture now presents a look of a slum camp.

The big hotels in Kalam and Bahrain have used precious deodar timber from the forests. Many of these hotels have their sewerage direct into the Swat River, too.

As the increased influx of tourists demand more and big hotels, many investors have built huge hotels in the riverbed which intensified the recent devastating floods in Swat in August 2022. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has passed a bill known as the River Protection Act 2014 to protect the rivers against encroachment, but it has no clue how to implement it. The government also builds huge structures right on the riverbed and surprisingly does not regard it as an encroachment. Near Bahrain town the camp and project plant of the Daral Khwar Hydropower project is in the riverbed; its walls diverted the floods of August 2022 to people’s land and caused erosion of a peach orchard.

The beautiful upper reaches of the Swat valley are victims of unplanned and ignorant tourism. People say that it has improved the local economy but, looking at the environmental hazards it has brought to the area, the cost of this haphazard tourism is greater on the environment than how much it is boosting the local economy.

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