

Tourism as a CBM in J&K

Renewing Old Routes and Exploring New Areas in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh

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Until sometime ago, the most hyped phrase in the sub-continent was “cross-border terrorism”. However, things appear to have moved in a positive direction with the focus now having shifted to “cross-border tourism”. The state of Jammu and Kashmir with its varied topography, climate, landscape, and rich cultural mosaic is indubitably the most ideal tourist destination in the world, with the valley of Kashmir often described as the “Eden of the East” and “Paradise on Earth.” Ladakh, on both sides, represents the stark beauty of the challenging mountain destinations – the Himalayas and the Karakoram. Jammu, in the foothills of the Himalayas, is a repository of the composite culture of the state and houses the world-famous school of miniature paintings. In addition to some of the highest mountain peaks in world, the area is also home to the multiple cultures of the hardy mountain people. Unfortunately, uncertain conditions in the past have prevented a full exploration of the tourism potential of the different regions of the state. Gilgit-Baltistan (formerly the Northern Areas) and Ladakh are perhaps the most promising regions for the promotion of tourism. The main Kashmir Valley with dozens of side valleys, are perfect resorts for leisure tourism. The shrines in Kashmir, temples in Jammu, and monasteries in Ladakh are major attractions in the area of pilgrimage tourism. In brief, J&K holds tremendous, albeit unexplored potential for the development of tourism.

TOURISM & J&K ECONOMY MYTHS AND REALITIES

The usual refrain of politicians has been that tourism is the backbone of Kashmir’s economy. This is not only factually incorrect, but also completely misleading. This is a falsehood sold to everyone by a powerful lobby within the state with strong political connections. At present, Kashmir has a predominantly agriculture-based economy. Agriculture, horticulture, and handicrafts constitute its mainstay. The bulk of handicrafts are exported and the retail sale is a small portion of the total production. Tourism has at most been an additional, albeit undependable source of revenue. Although tourism has definite potential to become the mainstay of Kashmir’s economy, the concomitant effort required in this regard has largely been lacking. At the moment it does not constitute even 10 per cent of the state’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). If peaceful conditions return to the state and the tourism potential is explored to the fullest, the entire economy of the state can be supported by tourism. It is supposedly the biggest export industry through which a



country can earn foreign exchange without having to physically export anything, other than goodwill and the occasional souvenir. Being a service-oriented industry, tourism can also provide employment to many people in the state

Apart from the uncertainty in the state, the other major obstacle to promoting tourism in foreign markets is the adverse travel advisories which discourage organized group movement. The only choice available therefore, is to tap into the domestic market. Surprisingly, the Indian domestic market exceeds 300 million compared to 5 to 6 million foreign tourists. According to estimates, the size of the Indian middle class which can afford to travel is larger than the entire population of the United States. The only hurdle that hinders the tapping of this huge market is the negative image of Kashmir built up by the media over the years. The ideal way to correct this image is to promote cross-border travel and organize certain tourist-based and cultural events.

For over half a century, people living on the two sides of the divide have not interacted and are ignorant of the actual ground situation on each others' sides. The freedom to travel if allowed to all sections of society, would be a significant step towards lowering tensions in the region. It will also give an insight into understanding cross-cultural behaviour and help build a harmonious intra-state relationship. This, in turn, will facilitate improving the battered image of the state. Once the two sides allow free travel for their citizens, not limited to blood relations alone, as is presently the case, the natural corollary would be to allow tourists from the

two mainland countries to travel freely from one side of Kashmir to the other and vice versa. It is this measure which holds tremendous potential for tourism development. The freedom for tourists from the two antagonistic countries to travel unhindered can subsequently be extended to all foreign tourists, allowing them to cross the divide for an open circuit tour.

II TOURIST ROUTES OF J&K PAST & THE PRESENT

J&K has been the prime destination for Indian tourists for at least half a century. However, they have not been allowed a chance to visit the other side of the border. Measures can be adopted at a policy level to enhance cross-border interaction and tourism. Cross-border tourism across the two countries through Kashmir will be successful and will contribute substantially to Kashmir's economy on either side.

It would be a major breakthrough if foreign tourists could be allowed to cross the Line of Control (LoC) from the two sides of the border to complete an open circuit tour especially in the greater Ladakh region. Every year an estimated 150 or more foreign climbing expeditions are undertaken to different peaks in the Karakoram range on the Pakistani side. Moreover, there are hundreds of trekking groups in these mountains. Additionally, there are regular bus tours which start from Samarqand, go through Gilgit-Baltistan and terminate in Islamabad. These groups arrive in Samarqand from the US and various other European countries, take a luxury coach tour to various Central Asian destinations and finally cross over to Gilgit-Baltistan on the famous Karakoram Highway going right up to Islamabad. From here these people fly back to their home countries.

Another tour route goes via Yargand. The Canadian travel agency, Bestway Tours and Safaris, for instance, organizes a 24-day safari from Yargand to Hunza, which has become very popular with foreign tourists from different parts of the world. It is a cultural tour of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Pakistan..The 24-day safari traverses the most important parts of the ancient Silk Road, considered the most significant in Central Asia, Chinese Turkistan (Sinkiang) and Northern Pakistan (India of pre-partition days). The journey has been



Thiksey Monastery

tailored to bring back the memories of the bygone era of the bazaars, camel routes, sand dunes, majestic mountains, unique culture, and ancient peoples. It is a fascinating and unforgettable tour which begins at Tashkent where the tourists arrive by flight from their home countries and ends in Islamabad wherefrom they take off back home. After exploring the cities of Samarqand, Bukhara, and Khiva, the tourists reach the great game centre of Kashgar. From here they drive to Tashkurgan, Hunza and Gilgit.



Kashmir's great King Zain-ul-Abidin (Budshah), spent seven years in the court of Tamerlane at Samarqand; Tamerlane is regarded the founder of Uzbekistan. While in ancient times the journey from Samarqand would take months on the backs of Bactrian camels and horses, the journey in present times, can be concluded in a matter of days in luxury cars or coaches. The journey from Kashgar to Gilgit can now be completed in only 16 hours by luxury coaches, which operate thrice a week. Both Chinese and Pakistani authorities are planning to start the service on a daily basis shortly. Kashgar, locally called Kashgi, is a city where time seems to have stood still; a walk through the narrow lanes of this old town, reminds one of scenes from the Arabian Nights. Most people in the town are either coppersmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, jewellers, or cobblers, all using tools that are at best antique. Miles from nowhere, mid-way between Rome and Beijing, this exotic oasis used to be the last outfitting station along the centuries-old Silk Road. Trade continues as in the past and on Sundays, the entire community gathers at the world's liveliest market known as the "Pearl on the Ancient Silk Road." The bazaars had stalls selling everything, including specialized local produce, arts and crafts, garments, knives, timber, coal, and animals.

The two most important landmarks of Kashgar are the Id Kah Mosque, the largest in China and the Abakh Khoja's Tomb, the most revered monument, which is an architectural marvel. The journey from Kashgar along Karakuli Lake and Muztag-Ata

Mountain is breathtaking. Tashkurgan, the border town of Turkmenistan, inhabited by Tajiks, is the next stop before entering Pakistan through the Khunjerab Pass. The road to Hunza is a beautiful drive, with majestic views of the high mountains of the Karakoram and the distant Pamir Mountain Ranges. Hunza is well-known for the longevity of its people, due to their simple lifestyle and diet, combined with the unpolluted mountain air. Tibetan traders often referred to the beauty of this humble paradise as "Shangri-La". James Hilton was probably inspired by Hunza when he penned his famous novel, the "Lost Horizon of Shangri La". A while ago, a team of German scientists had declared it to be the only cancer-free place in the world. En route to Gilgit, one can witness what is surely the most spectacular view of the majestic Rakaposhi peak; one feels so close to the peak, yet it takes days of trekking before one can reach its base. The glacier of the peak almost touches the road and there are a number of tall pines on the mountain.

The Pak-China memorial, built to honour the memories of those workers who sacrificed their lives during the construction of the Karkoram Highway is located just before entering Gilgit. There is also a historical rock carving of the Buddha at Kargah. From Gilgit the tour goes through Chilas, Abbotabad, and Taxila to reach Islamabad where it finally ends. It would take only eight hours from Gilgit to reach Kargil if the road had been open to use. The travel from Gilgit to Skardu is four hours and from there one can reach Kargil in another four hours. Instead of terminating in Islamabad, the tour could be re-worked

to end in Leh or Srinagar. A motorable road already exists between the LoC and Kargil. A longer variation of the tour (stretching over one week to ten days) could be considered from Skardu to Khaplu, Turtuk, Deskit (Nubra Valley) across Khardungla (the highest motorable road in the world) to Leh, Kargil and finally, Srinagar. Such a tour would provide tourists a peek into the rich and varied history and culture while also providing them the thrill of adventure along this route..The travel from Kashgar to Kargil would only take two to three days with a night halt at Gilgit. In the ancient times, there had been regular traffic between Kashmir and Yarqand. Leh was an important hub along this route with the Leh-Yarqnd route remaining open throughout the year. From Leh, the caravans would go through the Nubra Valley across Saser La and the Karakoram Pass in summer and during winter, they would reach the base of the pass near Daulat Beg Oldi over the frozen Shyok River.

III

TOURISM IN LADAKH DIFFERENT ROUTES, MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES

Now let us consider tourism on our side of Greater Ladakh. From about 500 foreign visitors in 1974, the numbers had increased to 75,000 in 2008, including 50,000 foreigners. Tourism has been the

greatest boon to the economy of Ladakh. In fact, the initiation of direct civilian flights to Srinagar, Jammu, and Delhi, mainly prompted by foreign tourist arrivals, has ended the centuries-old isolation of Ladakh. At the moment, Leh is the most developed town of its size in the entire country. Still the potential of tourism in Ladakh has not been fully explored. It is the most challenging destination for adventure tourism, whether for mountain sports like mountaineering, trekking, or for white water sports like rafting and kayaking.. In case of the Siachen Glacier which still remains closed to foreign expeditions, peaks like the Saser Kangri and Mamostang Kangri are the most challenging to climb. The Siachen Glacier itself can take in over a dozen expeditions without any problem. Large areas of Ladakh like the Chanthang Plains, Siachen Glacier, and a number of other valleys, still remain out of bounds for foreigners. On the other hand, Pakistan has allowed foreign expeditions freely even in the “No Man’s Land.”

By relaxing these restrictions and allowing foreigners to visit some of these areas even if in conducted groups,,the tourist arrivals will increase appreciably. This can help re-direct tourist traffic to newer destinations, thereby relieving the pressure on the most frequented areas. In fact, it will also be possible to extend the tourist season presently limited to July, August, and mid-September until the end of October. One could even consider starting it sometime in mid-April. However, the greatest boost will come from allowing cross-border tourism for foreign visitors on both sides. Such revolutionary steps will straight away double tourist figures across the borders. Apart from the natural avenues for adventure tourism that are available, there are varied cultural, religious, and ethnic resources that can attract tourists Newer and more exquisite offers such as camel safaris, mountain biking, trips on ATVs’ (All Terrain Vehicles) and so on could be introduced. Among sports, the Polo matches in summer and ice-hockey in winter are the two most popular attractions which could be made more interesting by turning them into intra and inter-state level competitions.

Cross-border travel has another interesting third dimension which in spite of repeated Indian requests has received a cold shoulder from the Chinese. This is the opening of a round-the-year route to Kailash-Mansarovar through Demchok. One could even travel right up to Lahasa in Tibet through this route which in the past had been frequently used by the Lamas of Ladakh for advanced studies



The Majestic Pangong Tso

in Buddhism there. If this connection is restored, the travel safari in this area would be one of its kind in the world. While speaking of safaris, one is also reminded of the Himalayan Car Rally. The original rally started in 1988 from Delhi to Srinagar. It was known as the Great Desert Himalaya Raid. Starting from Delhi, the participants in the rally would first traverse the deserts of Rajasthan and then proceed to Manali in Himachal Pradesh. From here, the rally went to Leh and Kargil and then finished in Srinagar. It traversed among the most difficult terrain and out of the 130 odd participants, only 33 reached Srinagar.

Due to the turmoil in 1990, the rally could no longer go up to Srinagar. It returned from Leh and subsequently was given up. However, the Himalayan Motor Sport Association based in Simla revived the rally as the Raid de Himalaya in 1999. The rally went from Simla to Leh and returned by the same route. In 2001, the rally was extended up to Kargil and finally, in 2005, it terminated in Srinagar. In 2007, due to unusual snowfall of more than 5 feet in early October, the rally had to turn back. 2008 again was a year of turmoil in Srinagar and the rally once again had to turn back from Leh. However, in 2009, the rally once again went right up to Srinagar. This time they also visited Padam, the headquarter of Zaskar. Once again the challenge the rally faced was such that out of 105 participants who had started from Simla, only 63 were able to reach Srinagar. These included 55 four-wheelers and 8 two-wheelers. Visiting Srinagar was a big event for these participants, who had been greatly alarmed by the media reports, but were surprised to see everything going on normally in the city. They travelled all over Srinagar and were given a grand reception by the state Tourism Department. In fact, House Boat Owners' Association offered them 15 complimentary rooms for two days while some hotels in Pahalgam also offered them free accommodation. This has been an important event to convey the possibilities of tourism across all corners of the country from where these participants came.

An interesting project to promote cross-border tourism can be extending the rally to the other side. One can plan a rally from Delhi to Islamabad across the Himalayas and the Karakoram. The rally after starting from Delhi could go to Simla and thence to Manali for a night halt. It would then pass through Manali and go to Leh. In between, one could plan a night out in an open camp along the Manali-Leh



road, possibly at Sarchu. From Leh, the participants could drive down to Kargil and after crossing the LoC, stop for a night halt in Skardu. The following day they could cross Gilgit and stop over for a night in Astor to enjoy the breathtaking view of Nanga Parbat. Finally, from here they could drive down to Islamabad for the finish. A rally without many diversions could be completed in a week's time. However, with variations, including driving along the Pangong Lake, and crossing over Khardongla, the highest motorable road in the world, and visiting Zaskar and Kashmir Valley (Srinagar), the rally could take up to 10-15 days. This would be, in the true sense, something far more challenging than the famous Paris-Dakar rally. One could call it a dream rally for the future for motoring enthusiasts. Apart from competitive rallies of international standards, the routes could also be used for adventure safaris by regular tourists.

Thus, the possibilities of cross-border tourism are immense. These may not seem feasible, but given the political will from both countries and the urge to follow the European Union model for solving intra and inter-regional problems, this goal can be achieved; one only has to proceed in a systematic way.

IV THE ROAD AHEAD RECOMMENDATIONS

The first step would be to make travelling across and around the LoC absolutely free of any national or international restrictions. Here, it would do well to

look at the example of travel between India and Nepal. The only requirement for the cross-border travel between India and Nepal is an ID card. This is the era of smart cards, which have come into use in a big way even in the sub-continent. These cards are made using micro-chips which can store all necessary details about an individual and through which a person's movements can be tracked through satellite. Thus, after allowing for mobility of regular tourists, this facility can be extended to conducted group tours as well. For this, an interaction between the tour operators and travel agents across nations can be organized. In addition, FAM tours to tourist destinations can be conducted. Further, there can also be exchanges between students, professionals, media persons and so on. In order to facilitate travelling, people should also be allowed to travel by their own private cars. This will make easier the actual travel and also increase the number of travellers.

The second stage in cross-border tourism may be difficult to achieve because of the nature of the border. The LoC is not a recognized international crossing point. However, visitors from mainland Pakistan can be allowed to visit the Indian side without an Indian visa on a temporary permit issued in Muzaffarabad, on the condition that they do not travel to the other two regions - Jammu and Kashmir Valley and the rest of mainland India and would have to return to Pakistan. Similarly, visitors from India can be issued a permit in Srinagar or Baramulla to cross the LoC. They too will not be allowed to go to mainland Pakistan and would have to return by re-crossing the LoC. Similarly, many other ways can be devised to allow people from India and Pakistan to visit all parts of the erstwhile

state of J&K. The same procedure can be used for foreign travellers visiting the two countries. They can be allowed to visit the entire state and also exit from either side provided they have visas of both countries. These are some suggestions to develop and promote cross-border tourism. The detailed procedures can be worked out jointly by the authorities on the two sides once it is agreed upon in principle.

There are a number of organizations promoting peace through travel and tourism. One of these, based in Vermont USA, is known as the International Institute for Peace through Tourism (IIPT), which can be approached for assistance in working out arrangements and procedures for cross-border tourism. Their mission statement states, "The International Institute For Peace Through Tourism (IIPT) is a not for profit organization dedicated to fostering and facilitating tourism initiatives which contribute to international understanding and cooperation, an improved quality of environment, the preservation of heritage, and through these initiatives, helping to bring about a peaceful and sustainable world." They already have a chapter on Pakistan, but not India.. The chapter on India can be established after contacting the Institute.

It may also be possible to approach the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) for guidance as both the countries are members of this body that specializes on monitoring tourism activities in a globalized era. However, these measures will be required once the final stage of cross-border tourism has already been reached. If

the détente between the two countries progresses to a reasonable level, the two sides may be able to resolve all problems without any international assistance. The prime requirement is to accept the necessity of introducing cross-border tourism as an activity for reconciliation, peace, and economic development for the people, particularly those living in the region. Once this belief is concretized, other actions will follow their natural course.

Photos are courtesy of a forthcoming travelogue on Ladakh written by SDS Jamwal and Tashi



Monastery in the picturesque Zaskar