

Unlocking Kashmir's Tourism Potential: Examining Challenges and Intersecting Opportunities with the Freedom Movement

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Abstract

This research study aims to explore and unlock the Azad Kashmir's diverse tourism potential, identify contemporary challenges and unfold impact of tourism development upon the ongoing Kashmir freedom movement across the region. The descriptive research is predominantly based on secondary sources of the data, observations and experiences from personnel field visits in the area, and interactive sections with the tourism professionals, destination managers, community representative and the tourism bodies operating in the area. The study unveiled diversity of tourism enriched with natural splendor, socio-cultural heritage, adventure, spiritual sites, and dark tourism destinations. Study identified challenges in the development of tourism potential include; lack of infrastructure including rudimentary road network, lack of accommodations, nonexistent of entertainment facilities, security concerns and quality of tourism services. The study endorsed that besides offering socio-economic benefits, tourism development in Azad Kashmir positively contributes in fostering international focus on the Kashmir dispute, sympathetic consideration for its solution, and reinforces consciousness and openings for advocacy about the conflict resolution. The study offers recommendations for improvement and policy implications for transforming tourism through sustainable practices. The study suggested stockholders collaboration and public private partnerships to improve tourism infrastructure, security mechanism, and community involvement to enable the existing diversity of tourism attractive and rewarding for all in near future.

Key Words: Tourism potential, Kashmir, Tourism diversity, challenges & opportunities, implications for freedom movement.

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is self-governing administrative unit located in the northern part of Pakistan, well-known for its splendid natural landscapes, magnificent mountains, and rich cultural heritage. The region is blessed with diverse geographical topographies and natural beauty characterized by its scenic valleys, rivers, lakes, forests, and snow-capped mountains that fascinates tourists around the globe making it an amazing tourist destination (Arshad, et.al. 2018). Azad Kashmir undeniably holds significant tourism potential, but it is true that its tourism offerings, destinations and attractions are often overlooked or less known on a global scale. The lack of cognizance and inadequate promotion has contributed to the virtual obliviousness of Azad Kashmir's tourism potential by the global community (Ahmed, et.al. 2022). One reason of the key reason for this unawareness is the political milieu surrounding Azad Kashmir. Its disputed standing, geopolitical sensitivities and inadequate marketing have resulted in limited international publicity. The focus of mass media and transnational attention is often engaged with other popular and most frequently visited tourist destinations, thereby overshadow the offerings of Azad Kashmir.

Another contributing irritant is the perceived security concerns for potential tourists emanating from the Indian Occupied Kashmir across the line of control. The sensitivity of a persistently conflict-ridden region, undoubtedly, dissuades tourists from visiting this paradise. Moreover comparatively underdeveloped road infrastructure; inadequate network connectivity, scarcity of tourists' accommodation and the nonexistence of all-inclusive marketing promotions have mired the region's prominence on the international tourism map.

The prevalent ignorance surrounding its rich and diverse tourism potential can be progressively overcome via improved visibility of destinations, advertising, and development. Showcasing of region's natural and cultural beauty can attract a diverse range of international visitors, contribute to the local economy, and present a soft image of hospitable and peace loving nation (Baloch & Rehman, 2015). To overcome this ignorance and unlock the tourism potential of Azad Kashmir, there is a need for concerted determinations by the government, tourism bodies, political parties and business stakeholders to adopt an all-inclusive approach that encompasses guaranteeing security, refining infrastructure, defying negative opinions, and aggressively promoting the region's distinctive tourism attractions and socio- cultural heritage.

Statement of the Problem

The research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the tourism potential in Kashmir, evaluate and analyze opportunities and challenges prevailing in the region and explore ways to leverage this potential for sustainable economic development and capitalize soft image of Kashmir's tourism in support of freedom movement. The study's insights and implications help enlighten policymakers, stakeholders, and local communities in developing policies for unveiling diversity of Kashmir's tourism while addressing environmental, socio-cultural, and economic apprehensions, benefiting both the local communities and the visitors. The focus of the research remained on the following salient aspects to suggest relevant implications:

- a. Identify the natural and cultural attractions that make Kashmir a looked-for tourist destination. This include scenic sites, historical places, spiritual and cultural landmarks, traditional sculptures and crafts, and local cuisine.
- b. Assess the adequacy and quality of prevailing tourism infrastructure, including lodging facilities, transport networks and quality of hospitality sector and tourist services.
- c. Explore tourism practices adopted in Kashmir to confirm positive impacts and long-term sustainability of tourism including; ecological conservation, cultural preservation environment friendly community behavior, all inclusive involvement and responsible tourism management.

The study is mainly evolved from the secondary sources of data, literature review, and tourism statistics, reinforced with the information gathered from the field visits to tourist destinations, and interactive informal sessions with local communities, and tourism experts and policymakers. However, the study engaged various stakeholders in the tourism industry to seek their perspectives on the potential of Kashmir's tourism, their challenges, and opportunities.

Diversity of Tourism Potential

Kashmir indeed holds ironic tourism potential owing to its diverse geographical landscapes, scenic beauty, snowcapped mountains, gushing rivers, and serene lakes, thrilling tracks,

cultural heritage, historic sites, loving traditions, respecting values and warm hospitality (Aziz, 2021). By leveraging its topographic, natural, cultural, and archeological and historic assets, Kashmir can position itself with soft imaged peace-loving and must-visit destination for tourists looking for unique experiences (Hussain, 2018) . Literature on tourism unveils that countries benefitting from their tourism potential rally their resources and investment priority in infrastructure development, heighten security measures, encourage sustainable practices, advance user-friendliness, and conduct brand marketing to appeal international visitors (Fang & Fang, 2020). Some key aspects highlighting Kashmir's tourism potential are as follow:

Natural and Cultural Tourism: Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is branded for its splendid natural settings, breathtaking landscapes, vibrant culture, rich heritage and warm hospitality. The stunning beauty offers an amazing experience for visitors looking for a pleasant-sounding blend of natural sensations and cultural fertility; make it a haven for nature lovers, adventure enthusiasts, and history buffs (But & Majeed, 2020). Some of the leading attractions for the natural and cultural tourists in Azad Jammu and Kashmir are:

a. **Neelum Valley:** Located in the upper part of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Neelum Valley is famous for its breathtaking picturesque beauty, stunning attractiveness, serene and lush green valleys, sparkly rivers, gushing waterfalls, and snow-capped peaks. The valley offers panoramic sights, leaving visitors mesmerized and provides captivating opportunities for nature lovers and photographers. The sparkly crystal-clear Neelum River water is ideal for boating and fishing. Shounter Valley, Athmuqam and Dudhnial village are veiled pearls and a joy land for adventure explorers because of their absorbing landscapes, alpine meadows, orchards and virgin lakes, riding tracks and camping grounds. These destinations offer a serene sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of urban life, with openings for relaxing walks and picnics amid nature. Ratti Gali is a fabulous glacial lake bordered by lofty peaks and exciting wildflowers. Magnificent Kutton Waterfall (Jagran Waterfall) with its gushing water from the Jagran River makes a fascinating sight fascinates tourists from far and wide. Neelum Valley allows tourists to engage with tranquility of nature with a breathing respite from the urban chaos.

b. **Muzaffarabad:** The capital city of Azad Jammu and Kashmir is nestled along the Jhelum River and offers blend of natural and cultural attractions blend of natural and cultural attractions with surrounding mountains. The tempting tourist destination is blend of natural beauty, historical spots, and leisure activities. The elegant Neelum River passing through Muzaffarabad, augments its picturesque views of panoramic landscapes, creating it a model destination for nature lovers and photographers. Tourists cherish serene and peaceful experience of walking along riverside, fishing, and boating. The diversity of Muzaffarabad's tourism potential has somewhat to offer for everyone visiting there.

Muzaffarabad is also known for numerous historical and cultural landmarks. The legendary Red Fort (Rutta Qila) offers a preview into the region's rich past that houses a gallery showcasing artifacts, relics and exhibits connected to the heritage of Kashmir. Pir Chinasi and Toli Pir are scenic hilltop shrines located near Muzafarabad (Snedden, 2015). Both of these spiritually well-regarded shrines offer captivating panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. Most

of the tourists willingly slog to the shrines and relish the breathtaking landscapes. The city is encircled by different wildlife sanctuaries and natural protracted areas. These protected areas including Pir Chinasi Wildlife Park and Neelum Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, offer prospects for nature lovers to witness varied flora and fauna such as; Himalayan brown bears, leopards, and various bird species. Visitors explore flavor of the local cuisine, traverse local markets for handicrafts, embroidered Kashmiri shawls, and woodwork. In short blend of immaculate natural splendor, historical spots, and entertaining activities make it an appealing must-visit tourist's destination for the nature admirers and adventure seekers from Pakistan and beyond.

c. **Rawalakot:** Rawalakot is home of the Sudhan tribe, acknowledged for their rich culture and customs. Hospitality and cuisine of the Sudhan community is a big value addition to the cultural charm of the area (Shah, et.al, 2015; Arif, et.al. 2021). This picturesque town is branded for its serene beauty, enchanting landscapes, pleasing climate and a gateway to natural wonders like; Toli Pir, Banjosa Lake, and Poonch River (Mohyuddin & Farooq, 2016). Toli Pir hilltop shrine offers a absorbing outlook of the neighboring valleys, while Banjosa Lake is known for a relaxing haven amidst thick pine timberlands. The lake is a frequently visited popular spot for picnic and relaxation, and boating services in the lake amidst serene surroundings adds to its charm considerably. The crystal-clear water of Poonch River, curving through the town, adds to its charm further. Sudhan Gali, an appealing hill place, is known for its cool climate, lush green meadows, beautiful hiking trails, offering an outstanding view of the adjacent valleys and highlands (Hussain, et.al. 2017).

d. **Kel and Arrang Kel:** Kel and Arrang Kel are two pretty towns of Neelum Valley, which are known for their superb natural beauty and offer an exclusive and unforgettable experience to visitors (Ghfar, et.al. 2007). Kel is located at 6,879 feet height and offers incredible views of the Neelum River, lush green pastures, adjoining mountains, and serves as a gateway to the upper region. Kel's peaceful, relaxing, and pleasant climate makes it an ideal spot to visit. Kel serves as a base camp for discovering the mesmerizing Shounter Valley and starting point for treks to Arrang Kel, a scenic village located at a higher altitude. Both Kel and Arrang Kel are bordered by lush green meadows dotted with colorful wildflowers, adding to their scenic beauty further. Kel and Arrang Kel own immaculate and untouched natural beauty making visitors spellbound with refreshing experience amidst the breathtaking landscapes.

e. **Bagh:** Bagh is known for its lush green woodlands, fruit orchards, and historic sites. It lures to the fascinations such as Bagh Fort, Dhirkot, and Ganga Choti, providing a preview into the region's history, natural beauty, and cultural heritage. Bagh Fort echoes architectural heritage of 19th century as a symbol of its historical significance (Chandrashekhar, 2018). The town itself showcases traditional architecture and craftsmanship. Bagh district is also branded for its captivating waterfalls including Sudhan Gali Waterfall and Las Danna Waterfall. Scenic beauty, historical sites, cultural heritage and opportunities for adventurers of Bagh district has something to offer for every visiting tourist. Some of the other nearby destinations in Bafgh District include:

- Nearby Ganga Choti, reaching an altitude of nearly 9,000 feet offers panoramic outlook of the Bagh Valley and the Pir Panjal mountain range. Trekking to Ganga Choti by adventurists is a most popular activity that provides an exciting experience.
- Small town of Dhirkot, known for its panoramic views, is an ideal spot for nature fans that provides openings for climbing, trekking, and relishing the scenic landscapes.
- Mahgla Dam reservoir, bordered by scenic landscapes, provides facilities for boating and fishing.

f. **Leepa Valley:** Leepa Valley is a remote and less-explored valley that is known for its pristine beauty, lush green forests, and scenic meadows, surrounding grand mountains and traditional way of life. The Valley is home to indigenous Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes who have been custodian of their old culture and traditions. The valley is famous for its incredible landscapes, pristine surroundings, and unique cultural heritage and traditional wooden houses. The Leepa River, flowing through the valley, provides visitors with opportunities; riverside walk, fishing, and relaxing sound of flowing water. The Leepa Pass, at an altitude of about 13,000 feet, links Leepa Valley with Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Leepa Valley offers a relaxing and must visit destination that allows visitors to engage themselves with the natural serenity, exclusive cultural heritage, and superb landscapes.

Historic & Cultural Tourism Attraction: Cultural tourism goes beyond sight-seeing, and refers to the travel to tourism destinations showcasing history, cultural life styles, local fashions, values, traditions, ceremonies, fiestas, cuisine, architecture, artistic expressions and cultural heritage of a specific community or area (Csapo,2012). Cultural tourism focuses on exploring diverse cultures and fostering reciprocated respect for cultural diversity, multicultural exchanges, conservation of cultural heritage and stimulating sustainable development (Raj, et.al. 2013). Historic tourism, also branded as heritage tourism or cultural tourism, denotes to tourism and exploration of destinations having substantial historical and cultural significance (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Heritage tourism allows travelers to explore, understand, connect and appreciate the legacy of the preceding generations (Chhabra, 2010) while pursuing following aims:

- Generate consciousness, gratitude, and economic support from the visiting tourists for the conservation, preservation and promotion of socio-cultural heritage, historic sites, and artifacts (Isa, et.al. 2020).
- Facilitate learning and transmission of knowledge across generations about the cultural ideals of a destination's past and fostering mutual respect and appreciation for varied cultures and historic contexts (Isa, et.al. 2020).
- Historic tourism helps host communities to preserve their identity, and foster pride in their sense of belonging by rejoicing their historical and cultural heritage (Isa, et.al. 2020).

Azad Kashmir is also endowed with rich cultural heritage, with age-old archaeological sites, historic landmarks, religious memorials and shrines. Azad Kashmir's ironic cultural and social heritage echoes diverse customs, traditions, artistic expressions artistic expressions of the region's past. These sites divulge the region's cultural diversity and deep-rooted history, art, and

spirituality. Some of the prominent cultural sites include the ancient remains of Kotla, the ancient town of Bagh, and numerous shrines and mosques across the region (Snedden, 2015). Cultural tourism allows tourists to appreciate cultural diversity, familiarity with the warmth and hospitality of the local communities. Here are some of the cultural and social heritage attractions in Azad Kashmir (Li, et.al. 2022):

- a. **Historical Mosques and Shrines:** Azad Kashmir houses numerous historical mosques and shrines that reflect the region's Islamic heritage and people love for their religion. The Shahdara Sharif Shrine in Neelum Valley and the Pir Haji Ali Shah Bukhari Shrine in Bagh are most frequently visited popular pilgrimage spots, inviting people looking for spiritual consolation and holy experiences.
- b. **Red Fort, Muzaffarabad:** The Red Fort, built in the 17th century, is considered to be a logo of the area's rich historic architecture. The fort that once functioned as a imperial house for local rulers, offers panoramic views of the Jhelum River and the neighboring mountains.
- c. **The Kotli Fort (Raja Man Singh Fort),** built by Raja Man Singh in the 16th century, is a conspicuous historic spot in Kotli. The fort was made as a strong defense line as it oversees the Poonch River.
- d. **Bagh Fort:** The Bagh Fort is a historical fortification that has stood the test of time. Built during the Mughal era, it served as a strategic stronghold. The fort showcases architectural elements from different eras and provides visitors with insights into the region's historical significance.
- e. **Ancient Ruins of Kotla:** The ancient remains of Kotla village, located adjacent to Rawalakot, are traced back to the 6th century. The site includes the remnants of a fortress, temples, and other structures, showcasing the region's earliest history and architectural wonders.
- f. **Sharda Peeth, Neelum Valley:** Sharda Peeth is an ancient Hindu pilgrimage site located in Neelum Valley. It holds great religious significance for Hinduism and is believed to be the residence of the goddess Sharada. The ancient temple attracts Hindus devotees and spiritual consolation seekers coming to seek blessings and experience spiritual ambiance (Fida, et.al. 2017).
- g. **Kotla Ruins, Kotla:** The Kotla ruins are remnants of an ancient fort complex that dates back to the 6th century. Located in Kotla village near Rawalakot, the site offers glimpses into the region's ancient history, including the architecture and cultural practices of the time.
- h. **Mughal Road:** The Mughal Road, which connects Poonch and Shopian districts, has historical significance. It was an ancient trade route used by Mughal emperors to travel between the Kashmir Valley and the plains of

Punjab. Today, the road offers scenic beauty and a glimpse into the historical trade and travel routes of the region.

- i. Ancient Archaeological Sites: Azad Kashmir is home to various ancient archaeological sites that hold archaeological and historical importance. These sites, including archaeological sites in Bagh, provide insights into the ancient civilizations that once thrived in the region.
- j. Traditional Wooden Houses: Throughout the region old-fashioned wooden houses are found exclusively in the towns like Rawalakot and Bagh (Anwar, et.al. 2021). These traditional wooden houses replicate the region's century's old architectural style and craftsmanship. The sophisticated woodwork and exclusive designs of these houses are a tribute to the cultural heritage and customary life style.
- k. Local Festivals: The region rejoices a range of fiestas that showcase the Kashmir's live culture and social fabric. Fiestas such as; Basant, Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid ul Azha, and Shab-e-Qadr are commemorated with fervor superimposed overt cultural events, including melodious music, folk dance, customary cuisines, and traditional performances.
- l. Handicrafts: The Kashmir region is acknowledged for its traditional handicrafts that spotlight the workmanship and talent of the indigenous artificers. Tourists can choose to purchase hand-woven cloths, embroidered fabrics, intricately engraved woodwork and ceramics, all reflecting Kashmir's cultural heritage.
- m. Local Cuisine: The Azad Kashmir's cuisine offers a blend of customary flavors and influences from adjoining areas. Widespread popular dishes include; 'Kashmiri pulao, Rogan Josh, Gushtaba' and numerous meat-based recipes.
- n. Cultural Music and Dance particularly the soulful melodies of Sufi music and customary musical gadgets like Rubab and Santoor, resound he cultural heritage.

Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is prevalent across faiths and refers to travelling and visiting holy sites of spiritual significance, joining rituals, and seeking spiritual contentment (Kim, et.al. 2020). This type of tourism has a long deep-rooted history that involves human desire of engaging in spiritual practices, joining religious commemorations, and seeking spiritual enlightenment and healing (Puşcaşu, 2015). History of religious tourism dates back to ancient period when travelers journeyed extended distances to holy places, such as the excursion to Mecca for Muslims or the voyage to Jerusalem for Christians and Jews (Luz, 2020). Religious tourism continues to thrive even today, allowing millions of people find solace in spiritual their visits to religious sites, explore their faith and learn religious heritage, contributing to cultural transactions, socio-economic and spiritual development of the people hosting such sites (Durán, et.al. 2018).

Religious tourism nurtures community structure and fastens bondage amongst individuals and societies sharing a common belief or faith (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2017).

Azad Kashmir has significant potential for religious tourism due to its historical and religious importance. The region is home to several religious sites that attract pilgrims and tourists seeking spiritual experiences. Religious tourism in Azad Kashmir allows visitors to explore the spiritual heritage of the region, experience the devotion and rituals of the local communities, and find solace in the peaceful surroundings of the shrines. It provides an opportunity for spiritual enrichment, cultural immersion, and a deeper understanding of the religious fabric of Azad Kashmir. Here are some of the religious tourism potentials in Azad Kashmir:

- Pir Chinasi: A famous pilgrimage site, located near Muzafar Abad, that attracts believers from all over the country to seek blessings and offer prayers. The monument is hovering on a hilltop, offering panoramic views of the city and the neighboring mountains.
- Shahdara Sharif: Shahdara Sharif, a revered shrine located in Neelum Valley, is dedicated to Sufi saint Pir Shah Hussain Bukhari. Thousands of devotees visit shrine to seek blessings, mystical healing, and celebrate Sufi traditions of the region.
- Dhirkot Shrine: Dhirkot Sharif town is home to a holy shrine that is dedicated to Sufi saint Pir Budhan Ali Shah. Devotees come to shrine to pay their salutations, seek spiritual assistance, and join rituals and congregations held at the shrine.
- Chakothi Shrine & Baba Ghorī Shrines: Chakothi and Baba Ghorī Shrine are differently located shrines, are legendary in character and hold religious importance for the people of Azad Kashmir. The shrines have peaceful ambiance, and visitors, particularly from the Muslim community, come to seek blessings, healings, offer prayers and witness religious practices.
- Sharda Peeth: Sharda Peeth is an ancient Hindu pilgrimage site, located in Neelum Valley, and believed to be the abode of the goddess Sharada. The site holds great significance and offers a serene and peaceful environment for the devotees, particularly from the Hindu community, visiting Sharda Peeth to seek spiritual solace and offer prayers (Fida et.al. 2017).

Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism refers to travel and involvement in sensational, thrilling, risk seeking explorations and substantially challenging events in natural or adventurous settings (Huddart & Stott, 2019). Adventure explorers' push their limits to participate in outdoor pursuits such as mountaineering, scaling iconic peaks, ridge climbing, trekking, hiking, scuba diving, river navigations, snowboarding, zip-lining, white-water rafting, paragliding, skydiving, wildlife safari tours, and other nerve-racking undertakings (Janowski, et.al. 2021). Adventure tourism suggests thrill seekers to step out of their coziness, test themselves physically and psychologically in

exciting and extraordinary ways (Huddart & Stott, 2020; Janowski, et.al. 2021). These adventure persuading actions offer a sagacity of excitement and exhilaration for those looking for high-risk adventures.

Azad Kashmir offers immense potential for adventure tourism due to its stunning natural landscapes and diverse topography. These adventure tourism and sports activities allow visitors to engage with the region's natural beauty, experience adrenaline-pumping adventures, and create unforgettable memories in this breathtaking part of the world (Li, et.al. 2022). Adventure and Sports tourism in Azad Kashmir not only provides thrilling experiences for adventure seekers but also offers an opportunity to appreciate the region's natural beauty and engage with the local communities. Visitors can enjoy the excitement of sports activities while immersing themselves in the serene and picturesque landscapes of Azad Kashmir Here are some of the adventure tourism opportunities and activities available in Azad Kashmir:

- a. **Trekking and Hiking:** The region is endowed with stunning highland including the Himalayas and the Pir Panjal Range, providing numerous hill scaling, trekking and hiking openings. Popular trekking paths include the Neelum Valley trek, Pir Chinasi trek, and Leepa Valley trek. These treks offer incredible views, serene landscapes, and encounters with indigenous flora and fauna.
- b. **Mountaineering and Climbing:** Several lofty peaks are making Azad Kashmir a paradise for mountaineering and hiking fans. Peaks like Nanga Parbat (the world's ninth-highest peak) and Ganga Choti offer exciting mountaineering experiences. Adventurers, escorted by specialized guides and support, test their skills and stamina in their pursuits of scaling these majestic heights.
- c. **Paragliding and Hang Gliding:** The scenic valleys and mountains of Azad Kashmir provide perfect settings for paragliding and hang gliding. Places like Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot offer launching points with stunning in-flight sights of the surrounding landscapes.
- d. **River Rafting and Kayaking:** The Rivers of Azad Kashmir, including the Neelum River, Jhelum River, and Kunhar River, offer exhilarating prospects for river rafting and kayaking. The fast-flowing waters, torrents, waterfalls and defiles provide nerve-racking practice for adventure seekers to navigate through the perplexing river courses.
- e. **Wildlife Safari:** Azad Kashmir is home to diverse wildlife with rare kinds of Himalayan brown bears, snow leopards, and Markhor etc. Wildlife safaris in protected areas like Danna, Las Danna, and Khunjerab National Parks offer a chance to spot and observe these wonderful creatures in their natural environments.
- f. **Camping and Bonfire Nights:** The picturesque sites of Azad Kashmir offer model camping grounds for nature lovers to set up their tents amidst the scenic

splendor, relishing bonfire nights. Camping nights allow tourists to connect and relax in serene environments, and cherish the peacefulness of the region.

- g. Skiing and Snowboarding: Throughout the winter season, the region gets substantial snowfall, turning it into a winter sports paradise. Ski resorts like Pir Chinasi and Ganga Choti bid gradients for sports like skiing and snowboarding. Adventure fans relish gliding down the snow-covered gradients and indulge in winter sports undertakings.
- h. Rock Climbing: The rocky terrain and cliffs in the region offer plenty of rock climbing opportunities. Places like Haji Pir, Sudhan Gali, and Rawalakot offer suitable rocks for climbers of different skilled level.
- i. Cricket is a widespread sport in the region, and Azad Kashmir has initiated its own Primer League with indigenous teams and stadiums. Sports fans can observe or contribute in sports like cricket, football and volleyball, commonly played in local communities.
- j. Golf: Azad Kashmir golf courses provide an exclusive experience for golf lovers. The Kashmir Golf Club in Muzaffarabad with its stunning background amongst the mountains allows performers to relish the game surrounded by fabulous natural scenery.

Dark Tourism

Dark tourism, also known as ‘thanatourism or grief tourism’ refers to the tourism and visitation of locations related with death, catastrophe, tragedy, or gruesome occasions (Lewis, et.al, 2021). Dark tourism is obsessed by an inquisitiveness to engage with the darker side of human history. This involves traveling to the destinations having historic or modern-day linking to sorrow, natural or manmade catastrophe, war memorials, social tragedy, genocide sites, concentration camps, haunted locations or other dark themes (Light, 2017). A traveller to dark tourism approaches to the sites with sensitive feelings, reverence, and an aspiration to learn about the context and importance of visiting places (Shekhar & Valeri, 2022).

Azad Kashmir is primarily known for its natural splendor and cultural heritage, but there are a few places of interest to dark tourism. Owing to the cultural sensitivities of the local communities, the study suggests prior knowledge and preparation to confirm a responsible and reverent visit to sites associated with dark tourism. Some examples of cites are:

- a. Line of Control (LoC): The Line of Control that separates Azad Kashmir from Indian occupied Kashmir, a heavily militarized area, offers lot of potential for the visitors interested in witnessing and understanding the historical setting of the conflict (Singh, et.al. 2022). It is essential to comply with local regulations and restrictions when visiting this area.
- b. War Memorial Museum Muzaffarabad: The Museum showcases artifacts and exhibits associated with the region's history of conflicts and wars provide understandings into the struggles and sacrifices made by the people of the area.

- c. Neelum Valley: Though predominantly branded with its natural beauty, the Valley was also severely affected by the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. Visitors intended to revisit disastrous impact of the earthquake may see the remnants, such as smashed structures and destroyed buildings in certain areas.
- d. Ruins of Bagh: Bagh town was cripplingly affected by the shattering earthquake of 2005. The wrecks and remnants of the earthquake serve as recaps of the catastrophic event. It is advised the travellers to approach these places with sympathy and respect for the local community.

Environment Analyses

The region boasts some of the most beautiful landscapes with lush green valleys, rivers, and snow-capped mountains, which makes it a potentially lucrative area for tourism. Like any region, Azad Kashmir tourism environment has its own set of opportunities reinforcing its potential, and challenges concerning tourism. The region's picturesque landscapes provide ample opportunities for adventure tourism, nature-based activities, and scenic tourism (Khan, 2022). Developing and promoting trekking routes, camping sites, wildlife reserves, and water sports can attract nature enthusiasts and adventure seekers. Stakeholders' collaboration in infrastructure investment, capacity building, target marketing, and sustainable tourism practices help the region to realize its tourism potential in its fullest (Wani, et.al. 2021). A detailed analysis of Azad Kashmir tourism environment calls for an approach looking at different facets such as; natural and cultural attractions, infrastructure, political climate, economy, and socio-cultural environment. Examination of Azad Kashmir tourism potential reveals that it is not only surrounded with mix of challenges and opportunities, but offers positive resource for their freedom movements (Nyaupane & Timothy, 2022).

Building Soft Image & Impacting Kashmir Freedom Movement: Tourism is considered to be one of the vibrant antecedents in modeling soft image of a community (Li, et.al. 2021). Soft image is derived from the term soft power that denotes to the all-inclusive positively perceived repute of a nation amongst transnational communities (Nye, et.al. 2019). Soft Image involves several characteristics such as cultural values and traditions, heritage, warmth and friendliness, natural splendor, security, and wellbeing of the people (Khan, et.al. 2020). It is vital to note that a progressive soft image is not exclusively reliant on tourism, but also on geopolitical situation, political solidity, human rights, historic milieu, media exposure, and transnational relations (Dubinsky, 2019). However, tourism turns as a potent instrument to form and develop the soft image of a country by showcasing its distinctive qualities and nurturing progressive insights amongst tourists and the global community. Contented travelers will often communicate their positive experiences from hospitable and serene Kashmir with others, thereby developing soft image of the Kashmiri people (Azad,2020). The word-of-mouth of satisfied visitor builds positive image Kashmir, underlining its natural splendor, cultural fertility, and the warmth they received, helps to profile a positive view of soft image view (Azad, 2020).

The influence of tourism development on the Kashmir freedom movement is certain but an intricate and multifaceted question. Discussions on the Kashmir dispute are sensitive and

implicate geopolitical reflections, historic milieu, and wavering viewpoints. The study concedes that the effect of tourism development on the Kashmir freedom movement is idiosyncratic and fluctuates subject to differing perspectives. However, intricacies of the dispute and aspirations of the Kashmiris need to be of central focus when judging the correlation amid tourism growth and the freedom struggle. Amplified acquaintance and dialogue with transnational visitors is likely lead to better understanding, influence perceptions, and make a positive image of Kashmir. Resultantly, a positive insight profile the narrative surrounding the area, converging on its natural attractiveness, socio-cultural heritage, local's hospitality, and need for coexistence, instead of the political conflict. However, It's imperative to note that the effect of tourism on the transnational community's viewpoint about the Kashmiris self-determination struggle greatly influenced by other factors, such as; media exposure, geopolitical setting, and historic milieu.

Cross-border tourism in Kashmir is an intricate question on the face of a longstanding territorial dispute, oppressive ruling regimes, and security concerns. Opening borders for tourism, without addressing the issue, is tantamount to undermining the people aspirations for self-determination (Chari, et.al. 2011). There is no denying the fact that cross-border tourism in Kashmir holds the potential to positively contribute in people-to-people exchanges, create openings for dialogue, and bridging the gap amid two brethren communities force to live apart for the last 75 years or so (Batala,et.al. 2016). Besides the political paybacks, the cross-border tourism has potential to fetch economic benefits for the region by generating employment openings, boost trade, and create revenue for the home-grown economy (Shah, 2016). However, the enabling environment for cross-border tourism entails diplomatic engagement aiming to resolve the issue in line with the aspirations of the people of Kashmir (Chari, 2008).

There exist two contracting perspectives on the consequences of cross border tourism. One perspective holds that increased cross border tourism can distract attention away from the freedom struggle and focus on economic development, whereas, others consider that it would foster international focus and create openings for advocacy and more consciousness about the conflict (Bali & Akhtar, 2017). Recently held Group of 20 (G20) tourism conference in Indian Occupied Kashmir was an Indian diplomatic project to influence international opinion after revoking Kashmir's special status in 2019. The meeting, instead of attracting investment or bolstering Indian diplomatic influence, has been counterproductive venture drawn that sparked controversy and invited sever criticism underlining severe human rights abuses by India in Kashmir (Aljazeera, 2023). Instead of projecting a sense of normalcy or peace in the Valley, the G20 Tourism Summit intensified the debate on the legacy of longstanding dispute surrounding the situation. The Tourism Summit failed in showcasing a peaceful and thriving Kashmir under heightened surveillance, curfews, closures and heavy deployment of security contingents, rather contributed in bringing the dispute on forefront, stressing the need for a resolution that compliments the rights and aspirations of the people of Kashmir (CBC News, 2023). The take-home lesson from the G-20 Tourism Conference is that the tourism promotion and growth is tangent upon respecting the aspirations for self-determination, basic human rights, and security concerns of the people living in the area. Tourism in Azad Kashmir

plays a role in softening the international opinion towards the Kashmir freedom struggle in the following ways:

- a. International tourists visiting Azad Kashmir on engaging local community are likely to be exposed to the narratives, gain a deeper appreciation of the aspirations and grievances of the locals (Charag, et.al, 2021). The resultant experience learnt by the tourists help in raising awareness about the complexities of the situation compounded with Indian's state terrorism and occupation forces. This acquaintance with local narratives challenges predetermined views and media versions, and help to nurture a more balanced and sympathetic understanding of the Kashmir freedom struggle.
- b. Tourists having learnt about the Kashmir issue and state's abuses and oppressions in India occupied Kashmir become activists for Kashmiris human rights, peace, and justice (Okoli & Alumona, 2020). This advocacy help garner support from the transnational community and human rights organizations, inducing opinions and calling for response.
- c. The conservation and festivity of Kashmiri culture spotlights the region's past and harmonized culture endowed with peace, tolerance and cordiality of relations with neighbors.
- d. Transnational tourists visiting Kashmir serve as a catalyst for their ambassadorial and partisan engagement, expediting dialogue, consultations, and negotiations aiming at finding a nonviolent resolution.

Challenges in the development of Tourism

Besides the diversity of tourism potential and promising opportunities for growth, there are number of challenges impeding the sustainable development and growth of Azad Kashmir's tourism industry. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multi-dimensional stakeholders approach, involving cooperation between the public & private sector, host communities, business managers, destination managers and the tourists. By tackling security related apprehensions, spending in infrastructure, encouraging sustainable practices, and engaging locals, Azad Kashmir can overcome these challenges and unravel its tourism potential (Karim, et.al. 2022). Some key challenges include:

- a. **Political Sensitivity and Security Concerns:** Because of its disputed status amid India and Pakistan, the region often deters tourists on account of security concerns and political instability (Singh, et.al. 2022). The geopolitical condition and sporadic border pressures raise safety fears for prospective tourists (Timothy, 2022). Guaranteeing safe environment for the tourists' confidence is central to drawing and retaining tourists.
- b. **Underdeveloped Infrastructure:** Inadequate and underdeveloped infrastructure, mainly in far-flung areas, raises a big challenge for the tourism growth. Inadequate accommodation, deficient transport, and nonexistence of elementary facilities hamper movement of tourists. The shortage of adequate

number of hotels, motels, and boardinghouses lead to overcapacity or overtourism amid peak seasons or holidays. The excessive overflow than the capacity has damaging effect on the atmosphere and ecology of Azad Kashmir thereby causing challenge to the sustainability of environment. Public-private partnership in developing hospitality sector in Kashmir can help resolve the issue. Therefore, immediate focus on investing in infrastructure, including accommodation, transports, road network, and provision of basic amenities and tourists services is mandatory.

- e. **Service Quality and Standards:** Sustaining high service quality is vital for the tourism and hospitality sector's image, brand repute and market competitiveness. The sustained provision of quality service is tangent upon the availability of skilled workforce for the sector. Inadequacy of hospitality training institutes, low awareness about the career openings, and the relocation of skilled workforce to urban areas add to the challenge further. Therefore, guaranteeing availability of well-trained and well versant workforce to customer services and hygiene standards is essential to address the challenge.
- f. Inadequate budgets, disjointed marketing efforts, and scanty digital presence hamper the sector's visibility and scope. All inclusive marketing promotions, leveraging digital media platforms, increase frequency of tourism exhibitions and destinations network help overcome the challenge and enhance sector's visibility.
- g. Narrow community engagement and uneven sharing of paybacks cause socio-cultural challenge. Confirming fair sharing of benefits and encompassing local people in the development related decision-making process can raise a sense of proprietorship and empowerment.

Study Implications

The study implications for tourism development in Azad Kashmir are expected to have far-reaching contributory impact on socio-economic side of the region and empathetic consideration of their longstanding quest for self-determination. Kashmir freedom struggle and international opinion are multifaceted in their interwoven character, and positivity of their end is contingent upon the environmental dynamics, including political situation, media exposure, and global sensitivities. These research implications are vital to balance the tourism development with the people aspirations for their right to self-determination, evidence-based decision-making, policy making relevant to sustainable tourism in Azad Kashmir. Some of the key implications of the study are:

- a. **Impact on Freedom Movement:** Tourism development and growth in Azad Kashmir can seek global attention and awareness about the region's political situation. Transnational tourists would their observations on political aspirations and human rights concerns of Kashmiris people. The nonpartisan

exposure of the freedom movement across transnational community is likely to harvest worldwide support to their cause.

- b. **Narrative Building:** Tourism development and growth help outline the awareness and Kashmiri political narrative, and present positive image of the region as a peaceful and attractive destination. This positive image can affect global view and constructive discourse on the prevailing political scenario and their right to self-determination.
- c. **Diplomatic Opportunities:** The growth of tourism in Azad Kashmir can provide opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Hosting international tourists and facilitating cultural exchanges can create channels for dialogue and interaction with foreign governments, diplomats, and organizations.
- d. The research study findings endorse that the tourism is a catalyst for socio-economic progression and inclusive development for the local communities. The tourists' influx brings along revenue to the region, creating employment opportunities and boosting local businesses. The revenue generated can be consumed for infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and other socio-economic initiatives targeted on improving the overall well-being of the local population.
- e. **Sustainable Development:** The focus on sustainable tourism development can contribute to the overall well-being of the region. Sustainable tourism practices promote environmental conservation, community engagement, and cultural preservation. By integrating sustainable principles into tourism development, Azad Kashmir can showcase its resolve to responsible tourism and gain transnational appreciation for its efforts.
- f. **Policy Recommendations:** Development and promotion of tourism in Azad Kashmir necessitate series of actions to improve the region's attractiveness, advance infrastructure, facilitate visitor experiences, and construct a sustainable tourism environment. Here are some suggested measures.
 - Designing and initiating a target marketing campaigns to raise awareness about Kashmir's diverse tourism destinations. Use of webpages, social media platforms are recommended to showcase itineraries, and travel information in partnership with tour operators, destination managers and community representatives.
 - Renovate refurbish and preserve historic-cultural sites, religious shrines and showcase traditional culture and arts through regular conduction of festivals, and exhibitions.
 - Develop and uphold Policies aiming to develop infrastructure and connectivity with key destinations including; hiking tracks, living accommodation, cafeterias, and camping sites with public amenities to confirm provision of quality services for tourists.

- Initiate stakeholders training and capacity-building packages to augment their customer service skills, sustainable tourism practices, and security arrangements.
- g. Recommendations for Future Research: Future research is suggested to study the impacts of initiatives related to environmental management, cultural preservation, communal engagement, and responsible tourism. Few other topics for the future investigations may include:
- Role of tourism in promoting peace, dialogue, and reconciliation in the conflict prone region.
 - Role of tourism diversity in augmenting Kashmir's visibility on the global tourism map and sympathetic consideration of Kashmir freedom struggle on vibrant political and diplomatic platforms.

Conclusion

The research paper introduces the diversity of tourism potential in Azad Kashmir; identify challenges associated to its true exploration and politico-diplomatic implications on the ongoing Kashmir freedom movement across the region. Azad Kashmir holds rich natural splendor, socio-cultural heritage, historic places, opening for adventurers, places of spiritual significance, and prospects for sports and recreations. The study underscores that tourism development is a catalyst for economic growth, community's socio-economic empowerment, and worldwide recognition. The intended development underlines the necessity for concerted efforts, sustainable practices, and inclusive planning. The outcomes of the said development would benefit both the tourists and the local populace while maintaining the region's natural and socio-cultural legacy.

The study also spotlights some challenges that include inadequate infrastructure, scarcity of services, political volatility, safety apprehensions, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability. The study suggests destination marketing and promotion, infrastructure improvement, capacity up gradation, products diversification, preservation of socio-cultural heritage, public-private partnerships, and community participation, and safety and security of tourists. The study emphasizes upon respecting the nature, preserving socio-cultural heritage as part of sustainable tourism practices. The study provides valuable resource inputs for future tourism policies, strategies, and initiatives, and suggests leveraging tourism development as a means to project soft image and influence universal outlook in favor of the Kashmir freedom struggle.

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