
Peace & Economy beyond Faith: A Case Study of Sharda Temple

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Abstract

This study is focused on the importance of Sharda temple as a source of peace and stability for achieving viable socio-economic advancement by promoting the spiritual and cultural tourism in the region. The rich tradition of Kashmir has promoted religious tolerance through adoring the holy places by the people of different religions as Sharda Temple is one of the classical examples of this religious harmony, which was built in diverse phases while ancient Sharda civilization had a deep impact on the lives and culture of the people of the Kashmir for many centuries. The temple has been completely deserted after the partition of British India in 1947 as all Hindus migrated to the other side of the Line of Control (LoC). Due to ignorance, this temple has been damaged which renders this archaeological asset endangered; hence, the government should take exceptional measures towards its preservation and conservation. The reciprocal political restrictions are discouraging for the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim pilgrims to visit their respective holy sites across the LoC which are against the international human rights law (freedom of thought, consciousness and religion). Hereafter, both India and Pakistan should design a joint mechanism to ease the crossing on LoC for religious pilgrims and visitors which will not only generate revenue but also support in building peaceful atmosphere for managing the regional conflicts.

Introduction

The former princely State of Jammu & Kashmir is blessed with several holy sites in its natural beauty. Amongst these ancient holy sites, numerous temples are located in the Azad Kashmir region but due to the Line of Control (LoC) and the

migration of Hindu population in 1947, these temples have become unattended and as a result, many temples have been ruined; however, a few could scarcely survive. Sharda temple is one of these survivors, which was once the celebrated centre of learning in the Indian sub-continent. In the absence of any solid evidence, its origin is enigmatic itself. In Kashmir, the holy sites have not only been the worship places for different religious groups but also have the universal philosophy of peace, love and harmony under the dominant influence of the Rishi order of Sufis.

The beginning of travel for reuniting the divided families at a limited level across the Line of Control (LoC) did not benefit the Hindu pilgrimages to visit their holy sites in Azad Jammu and Kashmir which is against the international human rights law. The frequent reciprocal visits of people across the LoC can increase the understanding between the communities and in return, it will be helpful in earning peace and stability of the region which will ultimately bring about the regional prosperity. The shocking earthquake of 2005, smuggling of antiques and reckless role of government have endangered the future of this archaeological site, however, there is an immediate need to address the concerns regarding the protection of this highly imperative, consecrated and archaeological site.

Historical Background

Jammu & Kashmir region (hereafter Kashmir) has a number of holy sites in its everlasting beauty. The region of Kashmir has its rich culture which echoes the values, traditions and insight of its natives as “Jammu is known for its temples; Ladakh is the land of Gompas, while Valley of Kashmir has a number of temples and mosques” (Muqem, 2011, p. 145). These places are always bursting with holy sites of all religions. Religious harmony has been a distinctive character of the people of Kashmir since centuries where they visit holy places irrespective of their faiths and religions (Riyaz Punjabi, personal communication, March 13, 2015).

Sharda Temple, one of the oldest temples of Kashmir is amongst those holy sites which are equally respected by the people beyond the religions and borders. Located in the isolated village of Sharda in Neelum Valley in Azad Jammu & Kashmir (shortly Azad Kashmir),¹ at a distance of around 140 Kilometers from Muzaffarabad, (the capital city) and nearly 30 km from Kupwara (a town in Indian Held Kashmir), it lies few miles from the Line of Control (LoC) in a very sensitive military zone. It was built on the right bank of Madhumatti stream,² (its water originates from Sarasvati lake which is located on the top of Narda peak, the another holy place for Hindus because it is considered to be the birth place of Shivajee),³ therefore, Sharda Temple has been dedicated to the goddess Sharda Devi⁴, which is the supreme divinity by Hindu community, while other

communities consider it as an important component of their common cultural heritage and glory of their land from ancient times. Hence, Kashmir has also been known as Sharda Peeth (celestial place). Nazki says “I strongly felt the spirit of my forefathers there who have visited the shrine (temple) for thousands of years and it is difficult to put in words the time I spent at the shrine.”⁵

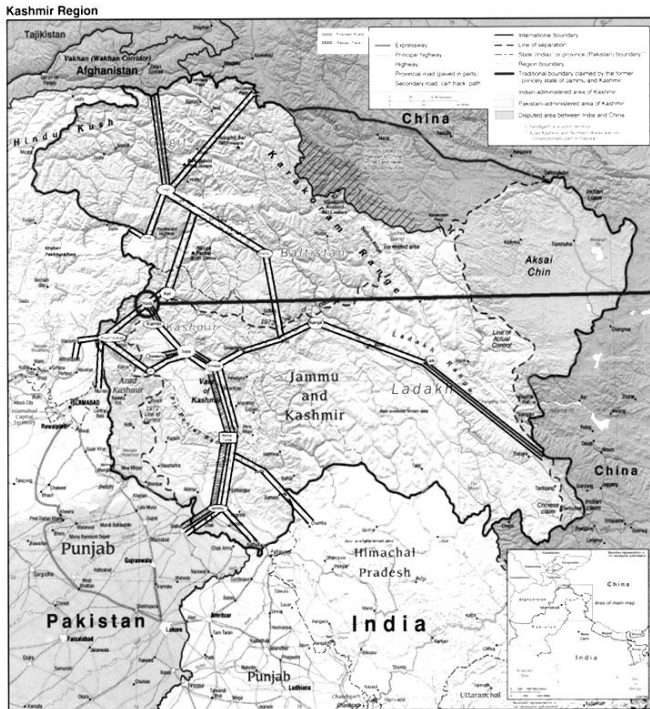
The Pioneers

How and why the people settled in this mountainous terrain with excruciating climatic environment is still a question mark for researchers, however, some social scientists argue that after crossing the passes from the north, one of the offshoots of Aryans lost its way to India and settled there in this region around 3000 B.C. (Kaul, n.d.). Being an educated class, they considered themselves superior to the others, therefore, they established their own small kingdom and system of worship by creating Sharda Devi in spiritual form of Sarasvati⁶ and with the passage of time, they developed a new civilization there (Ghani, 2009). Later, with the advent of Buddhism in Kashmir, a tolerant culture was introduced and promoted by the Buddhist rulers. Particularly, Asoka (the great Buddhist ruler), the pioneer of religious tolerance and multiculturalism in this region, built a Shiva Temple at Vijeshwari (Bijbehra) and won the hearts and minds of the local population, who were mostly worshippers of Lord Shiva (Bazaz, 1954). Hence, the development of Buddhism in Kashmir was an important chunk of the classical Kashmiri culture and from there, Buddhism spread to the neighbouring Ladakh and beyond.⁷ It is said that the second Buddhist Council was held in Kashmir around 1st century A. D. (Encyclopedia Britannica, Buddhist Council, 2008). With the passage of time, Kashmiri Pandit families (Hindus) including priests and local traders were settled in Sharda village around the Temple (Godbole, n.d.).

Rise of the Temple

Due to nonexistence of accurate evidence, the exact timeframe of the origins of Sharda Temple has been mysterious and a matter of debate amongst researchers and archaeologists. There is one conventional story that it was built during the rule of Kushans. Though certain innovative studies are coming up which indicate that Buddhists have a strong involvement in the Sharda region as the evidence of different architectural remains and variety of documented cultural material from surroundings of Sharda Temple reveals that there was another grand structure and area was inhabited by diverse populous in different periods of time (Khan, 2014), yet researchers could not find any solid evidence that Buddhist followers had constructed this temple. However, due to its close resemblance with Martand Temple⁸ in architecture, design, motives and construction style, some academics believed that Raja Lalitaditya was the builder of Sharda temple not

only for his passion for building temples but possibly for containing the religious and political influence of the Buddhism in the region (Maria Khalid, personal communication, January 12, 2016). Several historians differ with this theory and claim that it was not raised at once but in diverse stages (Kaul, n.d.). The portion of its north end which is still standing, indicates that the inside porchway was of the trefoil or the Aryans construction style with a simple square entrance in the centre (Bates, 1873). As far as the construction of temple inside the yard is concerned, researchers admit that there is a possibility that it would have been constructed during the reign of Lalitaditya as he was a great builder who built massive temples including the world famous at Martand Temple (Bates, 1873). Stein also supports this theory that the temple was built much later than the protective wall as the quality of material used in its construction was superior to the temple (Kalhana, 1991). Hence, despite the Buddhists' influence in this region, it can be assumed that existing structure of the Sharda Temple was raised during the reign of Lalitaditya.



Sharda Temple

Edited Map of Kashmir (lib.utexas, 2004)

Centre of Wisdom

In ancient times, the religious centres were not only the worship places but also the centres of learning and Spirituality. History clearly indicates that Sharda civilization had a very deep impact on the lives and culture of the Kashmiris where the new philosophical approaches of Hinduism or Brahmanism were developed while Kashmiri architecture got contemporary innovation there (Ghani, 2009). The Sharda script developed by the Kashmiri scholars in the 8th century was widely spoken and written in different parts of India (Kaul, n.d). Even linguistics endorsed that in past, Kashmiri language was written in Sharda script, was an advanced form of Brahmi script (Bhat, 1987).

The fame of Sharda as a centre of learning had spread over a vast stretch of land and scholars from the neighbouring countries were travelling to Sharda for spiritual gratification as Alberuni, a celebrated traveler of the 10th century, has mentioned that pilgrims from all over the Kashmir and adjoining regions reached Sharda for receiving the blessings of goddess Sharda (Alberuni, 2011). While the Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuanzang or Hue-en-tsang who visited Kashmir in 632 A.D, stayed at Sharda for nearly two years, has valued Pandits who were remarkably brilliant, gifted with insightful wisdom and were genius (Chitkara, 2002). Some historians have talked about the existence of Sharda University during the Kushan eras on Kashmir, however, nobody could find its ruins at the Sharda Temple. There is a possibility that University or educational institution had existed in its surroundings but it needs a comprehensive investigation at national level.

Restricted Access

Sharda Temple is important for Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who visit this blessed place irrespective of their creed but due to the partition of Indian Subcontinent in 1947, followed by migration of Hindu community to the other side of the LoC, Sharda Temple has been absolutely isolated as far as its worshippers are concerned, however, the indigenous visitors all over the country visit this site as a part of their cultural heritage. This is not the case with non-Muslim pilgrims only, but LoC has also restricted the Muslims to visit their holy places across the LoC, however, due to the insecurity and instability in the region, the religious rights of followers have been affected while the political governments are blaming each other for creating the uncertainty in the region (Daalat Ali, personal communication, September 8, 2015). Sharda has not only been restricted for Hindu pilgrims but is almost impossible for foreigners to visit this site as they need 'no objection certificate' from ministry of interior Islamabad which involves a very rigid procedure.

From an Oasis to a Mirage

The beginning of travel across the LoC through bus service between Srinagar-Muzaffarabad in April 2005 followed by Poonch-Hajira bus service in 2006 was the most substantial development in recent history. The basic objective of this service was the reunification of the divided families which benefitted the Muslim community because divided Muslim families are dwelling on both sides of LoC.⁹ Normally, the relative on either sides of LoC are under the prerequisite in light of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)s but “it is a very strenuous process which takes three-four months and after the clearance of agencies on both the sides of LoC, one can get the travel permit, but needs to declare the areas/cities (maximum four areas) of travelling” (Fazal Hussain, personal communication, January 20, 2016). As no Hindu family is residing in Azad Kashmir, hence, under this policy, practically, through the LoC, Hindus have been restricted to travel Azad Kashmir and even within 30 km of travel from Kupwara; it has become daydream for the Hindu pilgrims to visit Sharda Temple (Ambassador Arif Kamal, personal communication, February 17, 2016).

A Hindu pilgrim from Kashmir valley who wants to travel Sharda Temple, needs a valid visa for Pakistan to start his journey from Srinagar-Amritsar-Lahore-Rawalpindi-Islamabad and after getting the “No Objection Certificate” (NOC), from ministry of interior (Islamabad), one can enter Azad Kashmir and then under extraordinary observation, he/she will reach Sharda Temple. For this purpose, one will have to travel 1160 km as compared to 120 km from Srinagar to Sharda via Kupwara (route-planner, 2016). These are reciprocal hurdles which are discouraging not only for the Hindu pilgrimages but also for the Muslim followers who want to visit their holy places in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK). These restrictions are against the “International Human Rights and Humanitarian Laws” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Hence, calming barriers will give a positive gesture to the non-Muslims which will ultimately help in promoting the soft image of country in the world community.

Pilgrimages as Freedom of Thought, Consciousness and Religion

Provision of rights to the people is a guarantee to world peace as described in the objectives of UN Charter (Charter of the UN, 1945). The UN Charter then supplemented by various instruments of human rights like Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): collectively known as international bill of rights; both India and Pakistan are the signatories to all these three documents (Manson, 1993).¹⁰ Article 18 of both documents UDHR and ICCPR protect the freedom of thought, conscious and religion (Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights, 1966). Several UN resolutions speak about the right to pilgrimage as a component of freedom of thought, consciousness and religion.¹¹ Human rights law helps the individual in both the peace and war times, and same rights are non-derogable and remain permanent in all circumstances. ICCPR, through its Article 4, stresses upon the right to freedom of religion, while Article 18 cannot be suspended even in war environment (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as regional document, puts the same emphasis on this right. Moreover, a few fundamental guarantees are provided through law of war or the humanitarian law for civilians during armed conflicts or post conflict circumstances. These laws protect the cultural property, like religious shrines during an armed conflict; again India and Pakistan are signatories to these conventions (Article 54 of Geneva Convention, 1949). Sources of international law (Brierly, 1963); treaty law (W. Park & Yanos, 2006), customary law (Bhardwai, 1973) and general principles of law recognized by civilized nations provide support to this fundamental right i.e. right of pilgrimage to religious shrines. All these above described arguments narrate the story of pilgrimage as a right which is a component of freedom of thought, consciousness and religion, which must be protected for the pilgrims on national, regional and international level for long-lasting peace, harmony and development of the whole world. Islam also respects the prestige of religious places as “when Hazrat Umer (R.A), the second Khalifa of Muslims’ caliph, conquered the city of Jerusalem (known as Bait-ul-Muqqadas) had refused to accept the invitation to offer prayer in the church on the ground that it would be converted into the mosque later” (Mufti Khadim Hussain, personal communication, March 3, 2016).

Culture of Communal Harmony

Kashmiris have developed a unique culture of religious tolerance under Rishi order of Sufis¹² which has been dominating its influence on Kashmiri state and society in relation to their mutual model of Kashmiriyat,¹³ which advanced in the Kashmir since 15th century, while Kashmir valley had already been acquainted with the traditions of Hindu asceticism and Buddhist renunciation, hence, Kashmiris were riveted to the distinctive philosophy of the Rishi order which was universal in nature (Shaheen, n.d.). Since 1989, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs have been attending the annual conjugation (spiritual gathering) of Saeen Mitha Sarkar Ziarat in Leepa (AK) near LoC without any travel permit or visa which was the classical example of religious harmony (Mudassar Ahmed, July 2013). Therefore, the message of Rishis was above the borders of doctrines without any discrimination and it plays key role as a binding force between the different communities through the message of peace, divine love and universal

brotherhood. For instance, Sheikh Nuruddin known as Nund Rishi, who spread his message of harmony, peace and understanding among his followers, was equally respected by the Hindus and the Muslims (Khan, 1986). Once he said:

“We belong to the same parents.
Then why this difference?
Let Hindus and Muslims (together)
We came to this world like partners.
We should have shared our joys and sorrows together” (Shaheen, n.d.).

A prominent Kashmiri holy-women Lalla Arifa (Lal Ded) has articulated:

“Siva is all-pervading and present in each particle. Never differentiate between a Hindu and a Muslim. If you are shrewd and intelligent, know Thy Self. There lies acquaintance with god” (Raina, n.d.).

The practice of worship has been one of the Hind-Muslim differences since centuries but this was not the extreme case with Rishis as they had no reluctance in enunciating their love for idols of gods and goddesses. Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi of the Kubravi Order had expressed his instructions in poetry as following:

“O, Sarfi! What benefit are you going to gain from the pilgrimage,
If Kaaba, temple and tavern are not identical with you.
O, Sarfi! As on every side a ray has
fallen from His face to light the night,

Impossible it is for you to say that Somnath
has not the Kaaba’s light ” (Shaheen, n.d.).

This is the indigenous Kashmir culture under the influence of Rishi order what made the Kashmiri society distinctive from the contemporary Muslim societies.

Economic Benefits

A lot of revenue can be collected by encouraging the indigenous visitors and relaxing the measures for foreigner tourists and the pilgrimages in particular. We can take the examples of advanced countries on how they generate revenue from their local resources, such as, South Wales collects revenue equivalent to approximately Rs. 400-billion each year from ‘toll tax’ that applied on Severn Bridge between England and South Wales (Severn River Crossing, n.d.). Exactly on the same pattern, the government of AJ&K can generate the revenue of around Rs. 100-million annually by imposing ‘toll tax’ (Rs. 100) at Noseri

Bridge on each vehicle (excluding local transport) as around half-million tourists travelled to Neelum Valley during the summer 2015,¹⁴ and this money can be utilised on the development of local roads infrastructure, which will multiply the revenue in future and with the completion of Economic Corridor, it is expected that the tourism industry will flourish many times in this region. Additionally, the government can generate further revenue of around Rs. 50-million by applying Rs 50 to each visitor (over the age of 12 years) at the entrance gate of Sharda Temple which is a normal practice for tourists to visit the historical sites around the world and this income can be used on the development and extension of its inside yard towards north-east side or a small park can be developed which will attract the tourists that will reflect its fame as a tourist spot too.

Conflict Resolution

The peace process and changing attitudes have always produced a greater transparency in negotiations for a solution to the problems as we have the example of France and Germany who have been involved in wars for centuries but by the end of the day, both countries have mutually settled their differences and now both the old rivals are important members of European Union (Ghulam Hussain, personal communication, September 6, 2015). It is an irrefutable fact that development and prosperity of the states always navigates through the peace routes, hence, to reach its full political and economic potential, Pakistan and India should develop a joint mechanism to allow crossing of LoC for Kashmiris to visit their religious places and make flexible policy in promoting tourism, which will help in developing an understanding through people to people contact that will ultimately have a positive impact on regional stability. On top of the tourists from the regional countries, Sharda (region as a holy place) will also attract the Buddhists from countries of Far East as it has been a Buddhist centre of wisdom during the Kushans rule in Kashmir (Rukhsana Said Mohammed, personal communication, February 20, 2016). Sharda Temple is exceptionally important as the spiritual and cultural legacy of Kashmir, which is unattended and needs attention regarding its preservation.

Preservation of the Heritage

The appropriate preservation and conservation of all the archaeological sites including Sharda Temple is needed under the Government directions. There is no policy in place at the moment related to the heritage conservation; even there is no archaeology department in any university in the Azad Kashmir to work on preservation and promotion of this one of the most valuable archaeological sites in Subcontinent, while there is a nominal archaeological department at government level without any professional employees. The preservation and

conservation will help in broadening the archaeological map of Pakistan which will attract the international scholars, tourists, pilgrims and will create the soft image of the country at home and abroad.

Potential Threat

The October, 2005 earthquake has partially damaged this temple, however, no step has been taken towards its conservation. There is a chance of its collapse if proper steps towards its preservation are not taken in time by the Government of Azad Kashmir. In the worst-case scenario, the government will lose huge revenues from this potential tourist site while the people of Kashmir will lose their spiritual and cultural heritage which was the symbol of their glorious past (Dr. Shahnazar Khan, personal communication, November 7, 2015). Moreover, there have been some reports of antiques theft from the Sharda Temple since 2013 as one of its stone tub (Kunda) has been recovered from Abbas Institute of Medical Sciences (Hospital) Muzaffarabad, while the civil society has filed a case in Azad Kashmir High Court, Muzaffarabad against one of the government ministers in 2013 (Dr. Abdul Rehman, personal communication, December 12, 2015).

Museums

Museums are not the primary lure for the archaeological sites and a better place to display the ancient coins, antiques and sculpture discovered during the excavation but are the most important means to protect the ancient civilizations, However, the government of Azad Kashmir could not establish even a single museum on its territory.

Recommendations

Sharda Temple is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Asia which needs publicity at certain levels:

- Azad Kashmir is rich in archaeology and historical heritage; however, there is a desperate need to identify and document the archaeological assets in different areas.
- The Ministry of Tourism should organise awareness workshops, seminars and exhibitions on the importance of archaeological heritage and tourist sites in coordination with Kashmir Cultural Academy, Kashmir Liberation Cell and NGOs (working on similar lines) at main campuses of AJ&K Universities (Muzaffarabad,

Rawalakot, Bagh, Kotli and Mirpur) and post-graduate colleges for men and women in Azad Kashmir.

- The Ministry of Tourism should use the electronic and print media for the publicity of its archaeological sites, develop and upgrade the tourism websites, display archaeological heritage and tourist sites on electronic boards in main cities and roads of the country.
- Communication infrastructure should be developed for tourists for their easy access to this remote region.

Conclusion

Earth is one planet but there are many worlds with diverse understandings which not only have substantial socio-political and socio-economic impacts on civilizations but they also determine the way in which people perceive and interact with nature, hence they develop their own specific cultures. Many religions attach spiritual significance to the particular places as Sharda Temple is one of them, which is not only a relic of old civilization but also a sacred place for Hindus and Buddhists, which has provided the spiritual satisfaction not only to its followers but also the people from other religions. Sharda Temple was constructed in two different epochs however, the existing architectural structure of the temple is similar to Martand Temple; therefore, it can be assumed that it was constructed or reconstructed during the Lalitaditya rule in Kashmir. Due to the political or geographical access restrictions, this holy site is not easily approachable for its followers across the LoC and beyond the borders which is against the International Human Rights and Humanitarian Laws. The improved infrastructure and easy access to this holy place can develop an understanding between different religions and communities that can be supportive in managing the regional conflicts. It will be an important source of generating revenues from local resources, which will create more economic opportunities for the local population; therefore, it is imperative to take steps regarding its preservation and conservation.

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- 1 Azad Jammu & Kashmir or Azad Kashmir is a self-ruling territory of almost 5,134 square miles under the Pakistani controlled with its capital at Muzaffarabad.
 - 2 It was an old tradition that Hindus pilgrims were used to take bath in Madumatti stream before entering into the Sharda Temple.
 - 3 One of the Hindu gods.
 - 4 Sharda Devi is one of the new spiritual shapes of Sarasvati which is Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, arts, wisdom and learning and remained a significant spiritual head (goddess) from the Vedic period through modern times of Hindu mythology.
 - 5 Prof. Ayaz Rasool Nazki, former registrar at Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri, gave an account of his visit to Sharda Temple.
 - 6 In Hindu mythology, Sarasvati is a divine mother who is extremely beautiful, graceful and is considered as the goddess of learning, intelligence, crafts, arts, and skills. She is the consort (wife) of the

Hindu god Brahma (the creator). There is myth that Sarasvati Lake is situated on the top of Nadra peak opposite to the Sharda Temple.

- 7 During the reign of King Ashoka (between 3rd century B.C), Madhyantika (a great Buddhist philosopher), introduced Sarvastivad Buddhism in Kashmir and brought many Bhiksus for settlement and stayed in Kashmir for almost 20 years. King Ashoka built two Shiva temples at Vijayeshvara (Bijbihara) and built a number of viharas and stupas including Jalora Vihara in Baramulla District and Vitastatra in Anantnag district.
- 8 The Martand Temple, the outstanding sample of Kashmiri architecture, was built by Lalitaditya Muktapida in 8th century; however, it was utterly wrecked on the instructions of Sultan Sikandar Butshikan (iconoclast), the ruler of Kashmir in 15th century.
- 9 However, special permission can be given to a delegation/people working for the peace and stability of the region.
- 10 The UN has added three parts international bill of rights in its Charter Including: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, G.A. Res. 2200, U.N. GAOR, 21st Sess., Supp. No. 16, at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, G.A. Res. 2200, U.N. GAOR, 21st Sess., Supp. No. 16, at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966).
- 11 GA Res. 1781, 17 U.N. GAOR Supp. No. 17 at 33, U.N. Doc. A/5217 (1962).
- 12 The Rishi order is the continuation of great Sufi traditions allied with religious coherence.
- 13 A collective culture of the society through the integration of people from diverse beliefs.
- 14 Tourists' data 2015 available with Military Check Post at Noseri.