

Cheng Linsheng *

The Cross-border Tourism in the Hindu Kush - Karakoram Region: A Prospect

Abstract

As of right now, the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region remains the hardest place on earth for anybody to enter. Owing to its distinct natural geographic setting, it is said to be a location that is challenging for humans to access. Tourism-related activities like outdoor adventure, rock climbing, wading, etc. have gained popularity in recent years. The Hindu Kush-Karakoram, the center of Asia, is continuously coming into view. But because of the intricate ethnic groupings, the rugged landscape, and the need for safety, travelers frequently cringe when they see the highways and mountains. This study posits that the area has rich and distinct natural and humanistic tourist resources, making it one of the most distinctive in the world, based on the categorization and arrangement of these resources. With the development of infrastructure like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Karakoram Highway, it is anticipated that four or at least two neighboring nations will collaborate to increase cross-border tourism, opening up a new travel destination for travelers from around the globe. It can, on the one hand, enhance the quality of life for locals while, on the other, fostering the amicable and peaceful growth of the area and constructing a secure and tranquil border between the four nations.

Keywords: Cross-border Tourism, Gilgit, Kashgar, Hindu Kush-Karakoram

1. Introduction

The huge territory in the central and southern regions of the Asian continent made up of various terrains such mountains, valleys, and plateaus is known as the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. This is the global roof that joins the alpine platform of the Pamir Plateau with the Himalayas, Hindu Kush Mountains, Kunlun Mountains, Tianshan Mountains, and Karakoram Mountains. From a geographical, climatic, and biological standpoint, it is one of the most complicated regions on Earth. This is the meeting point of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan in today's regional countries. This is the sole route in the lengthy history that allowed the ancient East and the West to trade material and spiritual civilization. The Tajiks and Kyrgyz people also reside there, where they prosper and develop a vibrant material and spiritual culture. The natural and sociocultural environment, as well as its resources for the region's growth, are formed by these variables combined.

* Dr. Cheng Linsheng, Adjunct Researcher (2018-2023), Center for Pakistan Studies, North Minzu University, Yinchuan, China, 750030. Assistant Professor, School of Humanities, Beibu Gulf University, Qinzhou, China, 535000. E-mail: chenglinsheng009@gmail.com.

Because to its unique natural geographical setting, it is one of the most difficult places to travel and has not been developed to a high enough standard.

Most of the academic researches on this region focus on natural science, such as the research on climate change¹ and its impact², geological disaster³ and mineral resources⁴, grassland productivity⁵, precipitation⁶ and regional hydrology⁷. The special geographical and natural environment of this region provides rich research potential for related disciplines. And in the humanities and social sciences, Current research focuses on linguistic diversity⁸, geographical mapping history⁹, and regional linguistic diversity, religious beliefs, folklore and literature, cultural heritage, ethnic groups and history, and economic and social development, which were the focus of the four international Conferences on Hindu Kush Culture held in 1970¹⁰, 1990¹¹, 1995¹² and 2022¹³. Although these studies focused on cultural studies, they did not discuss how to use these resources.

This study examines and categorizes the abundant natural and human resources in the area from the standpoint of cross-border tourism. It then talks about the approaches and plans for growing cross-border tourism in the region.

2. Types of Resources in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram Region

The Hindu Kush-Karakoram region spans a fairly large geographic area. The Wakhan corridor in northeastern Afghanistan, southeastern Tajikistan, northern KPK province, Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral, and Kashgar (Takkurgan Autonomous County) in southern Xinjiang, China, make up the majority of the research region covered in this work. These locations have a lengthy history of human activity, leaving behind rich cultural legacies. Owing to unique geographical features, the Hindu Kush and Karakoram Mountains split these regions into their southern and northern halves, resulting in drastically differing living conditions due to the disparities in climate between the two regions. We may broadly categorize the resources in this region into two groups based on the inventory: resources from the natural environment and resources from socio-cultural contexts.

2.1 Natural Environment Resources

The Tianshan Mountains, Kunlun Mountains, Himalayas, and Pamirs are all connected by the Hindu Kush-Karakoram. It produces a rare natural geographical landscape that is particularly valuable to humans because of its high height, distinct topography, and numerous river intersections. There are still plenty of high and treacherous mountains, snow-capped peaks, gorges, rivers, plateau meadows, etc., which makes it a perfect location for both adventure seekers and scientific study.

Bounded by the Hindu Kush-Karakoram, this area is divided into north and south sides, of which the north side from west to east is northeastern Afghanistan, southeastern Tajikistan, southwestern Xinjiang (Tashkurgan Autonomous County) and the Wakhan Corridor, the intersection of the three countries; from west to east on the south side, is the regions of Chitral, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

1) North Side: Mountains, Rivers, Pastures, Canyons

Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province is a globally recognized source of lapis lazuli and is rich in minerals. It is also abundant in emeralds, rubies, and other gemstones. This province also includes the Wakhan River, grasslands, and the Wakhan Corridor Nature Refuge. There are Buddhas of the Bamiyan ruins here as well. Southeast Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region is home to the Pamir and Penchi rivers as well as Badakhshan National Park. The Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County is situated in the Tashkurgan uplift of the West Kunlun fold belt, which includes the meeting point of the ridges from the Kunlun Mountains, the Karakoram Mountains, the Hindu Kush Mountains, the Alai Mountains, and the Sarekole. Kashgar, Xinjiang, China, is home to the China-Pakistan border. The region is home to endless snow-capped peaks and ravines that rise to an average elevation of almost 4,000 meters. Mountains, valleys, basins, and hills make up the majority of the topography, creating a unique natural landscape with a varied climate ecology and coexisting glacier grasslands. The biological resources of the county are abundant. A wild animal nature reserve was created in 1985. The plateau is home to rare species such as wild yak, brown bear, argali, ibex, and yellow sheep. It also produces highland barley, plateau maca, snow chrysanthemum, and other distinctive agricultural products, as well as wild sea buckthorn, angelica, Codonopsis, palm ginseng, and black wolfberry. Resources for Chinese herbal medicine are abundant, as are metal, mineral, and gemstone resources. Muztagh Ata, also known as the "Father of Iceberg,"¹⁴ is the second-highest peak in the world and home to the K2 summit.

2) South Side: Mountains, Rivers, Pastures, Canyons

Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan are the principal regions on the south side. With numerous peaks, including the well-known K2 peaks and Nanga Parbat, rivers, including Chitral, Gilgit, and Hunza, glaciers, and mountain lakes, this region at the base of the Hindu Kush-Karakoram Mountains is neatly divided into numerous river valleys, creating a distinctive geographical landscape. Important bases for mountaineering are Skardu and Gilgit. The well-known natural settings include Fairy Meadows, Karimabad in Hunza Valley, the Skardu Cold Desert, Lower Kachura Lake (sometimes called Shangri-La Lake), etc.

2.2 Socio-cultural Resources: Type of Ethnic Group (people), Culture and Social Composition

Humans are always changing and adapting to their surroundings, creating cultural assets with unique qualities. For many years, people have flourished in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region, developing their own distinct socio-cultural resources. For instance, Eric Newby, one of the great British travelers of the 20th century, wrote "*A short Walk in the Hindu Kush*," a story of travel and exploration through the interior of Eurasia and into Afghanistan and into the Hindu Kush mountains,¹⁵ which has become a travel guide for many travelers.

The majority population of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and the Kashgar Tashkorgan Autonomous County in northern China are Tajiks; in other words, the Tajiks inhabit these countries, and their civilization and culture are also part of their

ethnic culture. Additionally, there are some Uzbek and Hazara residents in the Hindu Kush Valley's western and central areas, as well as a Wakhi group in the valley's eastern section. They both practice Islam. Using the Tashkurgan Autonomous County in China as an example, this region is home to numerous ethnic groups, the majority of which are Tajik, as well as numerous social and cultural resources that have developed there. It offers exceptional tourism resources and enormous growth potential. There are a number of notable scenic spots (attractions) such as Stones City, Princess Castle, Xiangbaobao Tomb Group, Khunjerab China-Pakistan International Boundary Monument, Aral Golden Grass Beach Wetland, and 485 immovable cultural relics. There are also twenty-six national museums in four categories. "One county be adjacent to three countries, two ports lead to two parts of Asia, two roads connect east and west" describes the county, and the 314 national highway passes across the entire area, serving as a major conduit for international tourism. Important routes for international trade are the Khunjerab Pass between China and Pakistan and the Karasu Pass between China and Tajikistan. There are plenty of historical and humanistic riches throughout the Wakhan Corridor. Since ancient times, this section of the Silk Road has been crucial. Cultural imprints from the Han Dynasty ambassador Zhang Qian, the Eastern Jin Dynasty monk Fa-Hsien, the Tang Dynasty Xuanzang, the Italian explorer Marco Polo, the British archeologist Stein, and others can be seen here. They have also written insightful descriptions of this place. For instance, Faxian expressed the difficulty of crossing the Wakhan Corridor when he described Congling (Pamir Plateau) in his "Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms" as "along the mountains, in a south-westerly direction, they journeyed for 15 days, over a difficult, precipitous, and very dangerous road. The mountains are like a stone wall 1000jen in height. Coming near the edge, the sight gets confused; and wishing to advance, the foot finds no resting-place."¹⁶

The Kho people, the Kalasha people (tribe), the Nuristani people in Chitral, the Gilgit and Balti people in Gilgit-Baltistan, and the Swat people in Swat are the principal inhabitants on the southern side. They established their own culture and society, flourished in Pakistan's north, and produced a wealth of social and cultural riches. The region of Chitral is home to several notable landscapes, including Shandur Pass, Bumburet Valley, Kalash Valley, Rumbur Valley, Chitral Fort, and Chitral National Park. Every ethnic community has its own traditions, including meals, drinks, and celebrations like the Shandur Polo Festival and the Kalash Festival. The China-Pakistan International Highway, petroglyphs and inscriptions, Altit and Baltit Forts, and other landscape features can be found in the Gilgit-Baltistan region. A residential distribution region in the shape of a belt has been developed, with the key urban hubs being Skardu, Gilgit, and Chitral. They all practice Islam and have their own languages, customs, cuisines, and holidays. Its cultural regions are dispersed over the mountain valleys from west to east. In the past, it served as a crucial commercial route connecting Pakistan and India to the ancient Silk Road. Here lived numerous traders, invaders, pilgrims, and natives who left behind numerous cultural artifacts. The past is narrated by these petroglyphs and stone engravings. Although the majority of the population in this region is Muslim today, Buddhism formerly flourished there and left behind numerous Buddhist artifacts for succeeding centuries.

3. Feasibility of Developing Cross-border Tourism in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram Region

Known as the "Roof of the World", the region of Hindu Kush-Karakoram is the meeting point and birthplace of several mountains and rivers. Throughout history, it served as a crucial hub for culture and trade along the Silk Road. Nowadays, an increasing number of individuals like traveling outside of their homes to take in the scenery, investigate the unknown, test their limits, and learn about history. One of the best places for humans to live, the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region is a collection of natural, geological, human, historical, and cultural resources. It has also become a popular tourist destination in recent years.

First, the abundance, distinctiveness, and diversity of the tourism resources create the groundwork for the growth of distinctive tourism in high mountain regions. The Hindu Kush Mountains and the Karakoram Mountains split the enormous Hindu Kush-Karakoram region into its north and south halves. Rich tourism resources may be found on both sides, including mountains, rivers, canyons, meadows, and other natural features; also, the ethnic groups with the majority being Tajiks, Chitralis, Gilgits, and Baltis, as well as their respective cultures, are abundant. It also has a long history and was a major route for commercial and cultural interactions between the East and the West in the past. These natural and humanistic resources must be utilized to the fullest extent possible for the benefit of locals and visitors from around the globe. They can also be used to further the popularization and understanding of natural science among the general public, to foster social and cultural exchanges between various ethnic groups, and to advance global understanding. It also helps a lot of people become aware of and knowledgeable about Asia's core.

Second, there is a specific infrastructure that makes it easy to improve the link with the outside world. Sub-arterial roads and main trunk roads, like the Karakoram Highway, are present in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. Small airports can be found in the Pamirs, Khunjerab, Chitral, Gilgit, and Skardu. These airways and highways facilitate traveler admission and departure while also making it easier to connect and communicate with the outside world. Each of these areas has a certain background and level of expertise in developing tourism. For instance, the well-known regional tourism attractions of Tashkurgan Autonomous County in China, Chitral, Gilgit, and Skardu in Pakistan, all provide a basis for providing lodging for visitors. It makes it easier for visitors to live and experience the traditions of the area.

Third, the needs of locals for development are very great. The majority of the people who reside in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region are nomadic farmers, and part of the younger generation leaves the area to work in other cities in order to make a living. As locals who have lived here for many generations, they can make the most of the resources available to them to raise their level of living, advance the local economy, and construct their own physical and spiritual homes. In addition, tourism allows the region to export agricultural and ancillary products to other locations in exchange for financial gains while also strengthening its connections with the outside world by providing fresh information to advance its own perception and comprehension of the world. In addition, the government

needs to help the local tourism industry grow and give regular people jobs. Furthermore, the tourism industry provides a means of sustaining the livelihoods of the countless millions of people living in the region and addressing the persistent issues of poverty they have faced for a very long time.

Fourth, many nations in the area can collaborate to support the growth of international travel inside the region. The Hindu Kush-Karakoram region is a territory with many borders. Its natural ecosystem is not only varied, but it also comes from several nations. It is the duty of all nations to safeguard regional security and peace while fostering regional growth. We have witnessed multilateral cooperation like the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, or ICIMOD¹⁷, as well as bilateral cooperation like the economic cooperation between China and Pakistan, CPEC. The intellectual support and coordinated action on regional economic development, social security, and ecological protection are made possible by these international collaboration efforts.

4. Countermeasures for the Development of Cross-border Tourism in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram Region

Tourism was once known as a “smoke-free industry”¹⁸ and is also a service industry that has been valued and vigorously developed around the world. The natural geographical environment of the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region limits its potential for economic growth. For this reason, it has long been thought of as an underdeveloped or even backward area. People are pursuing new interests as a result of the global economy's improvement, and many are drawn to the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region in order to explore adventures, experience nature, push themselves, and learn about history. Consequently, this region has been progressively impacted by the growth of tourism. It's also a chance for the locals to interact with the outside world and grow as individuals. In order to encourage the growth of cross-border tourism, it is advised that government agencies in this area take the lead in tourism development planning and collaboration. Additionally, businesses should run tourism-related businesses and actively fortify their connections with international tourism organizations or groups.

The so-called cross-border tourism refers to the fact that adjacent tourist destinations belong to different countries, and tourists need to cross national borders in the process of traveling to this destination. Countries might establish specific regions and tourism service organizations within the framework of this tourism destination in order to coordinate development with one another. Such regions are also called as cross-border tourism cooperation zones¹⁹. These establishments have the potential to foster cooperation between academia and business, as well as aid in the growth of international travel within the area.

First, evaluate the area's tourism resources and create a focused tourism plan. This region's tourism resources are distinct in their own right, encompassing both natural and socio-cultural features. For instance, this region's natural landscape, which is made up of cliffs, rivers, and mountains, is quite distinct from other regions. The area's mountains, rivers, and valleys may be used to create outdoor tourism experiences including mountaineering, river rafting, wading, snow sports, hiking, and trekking. Establish varying security levels for the travel routes within

the safety range. Cultural sports are intended to give visitors from around the world a chance and a platform to learn about, experience, and appreciate the cultures of various ethnic groups. This is achieved by combining socio-cultural resources with the social and cultural traits of the ethnic groups in the area. Plan and create point- and belt-shaped tourism routes and landscapes based on the region's resource characteristics. For instance, routes for ecotourism, cultural tourism, etc. To draw both local and foreign visitors, adventure and cultural sports must be promoted as tourism offerings in this area. To attract more tourists, a variety of traditional cultural activities need to be revived. Beautiful ski resorts can be found in Northern Pakistan, which is promoting adventure sports like snowboarding, skiing, and skating as events to draw both local and foreign visitors.

Second, bolster the infrastructure with an emphasis on location, comfort, safety, and convenience. The Hindu Kush-Karakoram Mountains' primary tourism infrastructure consists of lodging and transportation. The region presents significant challenges for the growth of tourism due to its steep topography, complicated climate, and difficult transportation system. Nonetheless, this region's features include the majority of the communities being dispersed along the river valley, the majority of land-based travel within the region, and the majority of land-based and air-based trade between the regions. The traffic flow is generally limited and the mountain roads are steep due to area environmental limitations. As a result, the infrastructure in this area has to be built with convenience, comfort, and safety in mind. When it comes to tourist services like lodging and dining, it's also important to consider the locality principle in terms of convenience, safety, and comfort. You can also increase the value of tourism by emphasizing local culture. Infrastructure upgrades enhance locals' quality of life as well as the arrival of tourists. For example, the Tashkurgan Autonomous County in China has relatively extensive transportation and lodging facilities for tourists, which is sufficient to meet the region's tourism potential. Additionally, there are specific tourism infrastructure foundations in Pakistan's Chitral, Gilgit, and Skardu, which serve as the region's core radiating cities. In order to provide a strong basis for the growth of cross-border tourism, it is advised to take advantage of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's construction to promote and enhance the state of roads, transit, and lodging. The northern end of the Karakoram Highway is in Kashgar, China, and the southern end ends in Thakot, a city in northern Pakistan. Along the way, it connects important tourism destinations in northern Pakistan. It can also link Swat, Chitral, and Skardu from east to west using Gilgit as a node. In the meantime, it's crucial to concentrate on raising the standard of tourism services in order to satisfy visitors, particularly in the areas of hospitality management, travel, tour operations, and guiding.

Third, employ non-governmental organizations and domestic and international educational institutions to develop tourism talents and teach tourism concepts to locals and tourism industry practitioners. Establishing a small public welfare tourist talent training school in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region's central metropolitan area is advised. The objective is to educate the locals on broad tourist principles and to offer business advice or training to tourism practitioners operating within the jurisdiction. To provide in-depth instruction or hands-on

mentoring, renowned domestic and international universities with a focus on tourism, managers of travel agencies, and exceptional representatives of non-governmental organizations in the travel industry can serve as substitute teachers at these training centers. By organizing conferences, seminars, symposiums, and expos on tourism at the national and international levels, this type of training aims to promote Pakistan as an ideal destination and is beneficial to the growth of tourism. It focuses on improving the professional ability level of the training objects as well as the education and cognition of modern tourism concepts.

Fourth, strengthen the region's marketing of its tourism benefits. To increase the number of visitors to the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region by promoting the area's tourism attractions, such as summer resorts and natural exploration and experience, to travelers from across the globe. Engage in active local, national, and international academic conferences and events pertaining to natural ecology and sociocultural issues in the area. Make use of these opportunities to foster communication between professionals and scholars from various fields and nations, increase awareness, and exert influence. To gather the humanistic tales and scenic landscapes of the area and turn them into easily shared materials such as postcards, stickers, handicrafts, short films, and stickers. It has the potential to both increase awareness and encourage the preservation and repurposing of local handicrafts. By treating tourism as a business, creating a social atmosphere that is conducive to travel, and obtaining extensive media coverage from prominent travelers, bloggers, and international visitors, Pakistan can be elevated to the status of a must-visit travel destination.

Fifth, create a network of international travel that crosses regional boundaries and bolsters cooperative growth and protection amongst nations or organizations in the area. Governments and civil society organizations from various countries in the region must work together to develop tourism in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. This cooperation is essential for both environmental protection and the development of regional tourism resources. Additionally, visitors must help one another, encourage trade, cultural, and economic exchanges among locals, foster emotional interactions between individuals of different nationalities, and contribute to the upkeep of peace and stability in the border regions between the region's several nations. ICIMOD, an independent international center for mountain research and knowledge innovation serving the eight member countries of the Himalaya region as well as the global mountain community, is currently located in Nepal. It is also a member of the "Belt and Road" alliance of international scientific organizations. The organization's goal is to create safe, prosperous, and ecologically sustainable mountain communities. A local group called the Chitral Association for Mountain Area Tourism (CAMAT) works to promote travel to Chitral. Its goal is to use ecologically conscious and culturally authentic tourism as a means of reducing poverty.²⁰ When the time comes, it might take the initiative to join the Hindu Kush Karakoram Region's Inter-Regional Tourism Collaboration and handle interregional tourism-related issues. In order to safeguard the environment and promote sustainable development, the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region must also establish an environmental basis. Currently, China and Pakistan are the two nations in the region that collaborate closely in a variety of fields. It is my recommendation that both sides seize the chance presented by

China's development in the western region to fortify their deep collaboration in the areas of tourism, culture, and education. To turn this area into a historical and realistic tourism spectacle, the culture and tourism agencies of the two nations can work together more closely to explore and develop tourism resources. The China-Pakistan land border is open from April to November each year due to weather conditions²¹, and the region is a good place to spend a summer vacation. Using Chinese visitors as an example, it is the most popular destination. Since the majority of Chinese people are interested in this region, there should be a sizable number of short- and medium-term visitors on the grounds of safety, as the interactions between common people can improve people-to-people friendships and fortify the civic diplomacy between the two nations.

5. Conclusion

Cross-border tourism is a unique benefit of growing tourism between nations that share borders and link areas with abundant tourism resources. A huge territory at the intersection of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan is known as the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. There are plenty of natural and cultural tourism resources in this area. There hasn't been much of a tourist industry in this region up to this point, and communication with the outside world is scarce. The majority of people believe that this region of the planet is unreachable. It still has some element of mystery and intrigue. It also boasts a distinct geographical and natural environment. Many people who love adventure and mountaineering wish to visit this location. The two nations in this region with the largest populations are China and Pakistan. Travel is preferred by most individuals, and there is a potential tourism market. If the government departments of the four countries can cooperate on cross-border tourism in the area, it can promote the development of tourism here, and can also expand cooperation in the fields of culture and education, which is conducive to the economic development of the region and improves the standard of living of the local inhabitants, then makes this area a peaceful and stable frontier of the four countries.

Notes and References

Notes and References

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