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# Religious Tourism for Fostering Civilizational Harmony: A Case Study of the Buddhist Sites in Gilgit Baltistan

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**KEYWORDS**

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*Civilizational harmony*  
*religious tourism*  
*social unity*  
*kargha Buddha*  
*Manthal Buddha.*

**ABSTRACT**

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Pakistan is a country enriched with religious heritage which sparks the attention of tourists around the globe. The study aims to explore and understand the potential of religious tourism in fostering civilizational harmony and cultural appreciation with a specific focus on Buddhist sites i.e., Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha Rock. Despite the potential benefits of religious tourism, the Buddhist sites in Gilgit need to be explored in this context. The study used mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative. Data is collected through e-books, articles, news reports, and data from government official websites. Moreover, it used a sample of people of Gilgit, to know about their perspective on religious tourism on Buddhist sites fostering social unity and civilizational harmony. The results of this study will give important new insights into how religious travel could act as a catalyst to promote socio-cultural harmony in diverse communities. The study's findings help in formulating strategies for maximizing the advantages of religious tourism while safeguarding religious history and promoting a more tolerant and inclusive global society.

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**Introduction**

Pilgrimage and sightseeing activities that include viewing religious artifacts and sites are included in religious tourism. Religious travel, also referred to as faith-based travel or pilgrimage travel, entails people or groups visiting holy places, places of worship, or significant locations. It encourages civilizational harmony. It promotes an atmosphere of tolerance and harmony among people with various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Despite this, further study and understanding are required to fully grasp how religious travel affects the coexistence of civilizations. While religious tourism may provide opportunities to promote interfaith understanding and dialogue, it also raises concerns about community involvement, the preservation of cultural heritage, and environmentally friendly travel strategies.

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The study used mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative. Data is collected through e-books, articles, and news reports. Moreover, it used a sample of natives of Gilgit to get insight into their perspectives on religious tourism and its significance in fostering cultural and civilizational harmony. It is beneficial for the community as they become aware of the potential of religious tourism in fostering harmony and pluralistic behavior. The study's findings contribute to developing strategies for enhancing the positive impact of religious tourism in Gilgit Baltistan, promoting meaningful connections between tourists and local communities, and contributing to a more harmonious and tolerant global society.

### **Literature Review**

Tourism is an essential practice for the economic development of a country. An industry like tourism has the potential to boost regional growth, provide money, and support cultural preservation. Thus, the tourism industry in general and religious tourism in particular that utilize cultural resources, like religious tourism, in particular, have been the center of interest for economic, political, and scientific agents in recent years.

### **Concept of religious tourism**

A unique type of tourism known as religious tourism is one that is wholly driven by religious motivations. It is one of the earliest forms of tourism. Another definition of religious tourism is "It is a special tourist activity oriented by religious culture, with the help of specific eco-cultural environment, and it refers to such special tourist activities as worship, research, sightseeing and culture carried out by religious followers and lay tourists.

Since people have always traveled to sacred locations as part of their religious rituals, the idea of religious tourism is deeply rooted in human civilization. Pilgrimage routes like the Kumbh Mela in India, the Hajj to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and the Camino de Santiago in Spain have drawn millions of pilgrims seeking spiritual gratification and a deeper connection to their faith throughout history. It helps to preserve and advance religious heritage and traditions, builds relationships between people and communities, and encourages tolerance and respect for religious differences. The most prominent world religions that perform this type of tourism across the globe include Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. 'Religious visits' carry a noteworthy status for believers in practically every faith. By visiting holy landmarks, one is regarded as making an inspirational journey and paying respect. This is typically accomplished by making a pilgrimage that lasts a specific number of days.

Pakistan is a country enriched with the various religious tourist sites of Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Historically The tourism department of Pakistan was not able to take steps that are good enough to promote religious tourism in the country. During the tenure of Imran Khan, the main focus was on the promotion of religious tourism. during this period government provides funds to renovate the religious sites of Sikhism. Hinduism and Buddhism welcome religious tourists from around the world.

### **Buddhist sites in Gilgit Baltistan**

There are many Buddhist archaeological sites in Pakistan. Pakistan has a strong prospect for tourism because of its unique geographic history and traditions. The Northern Areas of Pakistan are the most significant region in terms of tourism. In 1970, Northern Areas were given their governmental entity. On August 29, 2009, the Pakistani government granted Gilgit-Baltistan, the northern region's official name, the right to self-governance. Meanwhile, Gilgit Baltistan's stunning mountain ranges and captivating holy sites continue to draw tourists from all over the world, adding to the country's rich cultural and religious legacy.

Gilgit Baltistan is enriched with cultural and religious heritage. It attracts tourism from around the globe because of its beauty, captivating religious sites, and mountain ranges. The Buddhist site has considerable historical significance for Buddhists in Gilgit-Baltistan. The richness of historical religious traditions, however, is what dampens the attention of individuals from all areas of life. The location is fascinating not just because of its natural wonders but also because of the tales it holds about pilgrims, spiritual searchers, and travelers from long ago. delving into the historical background of the area, Gilgit becomes evident as a major Buddhist hub from the third to the eleventh century. The rich cultural legacy of the area was highlighted in 1931 by the discovery of Buddhist monasteries and stupas.

Gilgit was a Buddhist center from the third century to the eleventh century; in 1931, a Buddhist monastery and three stupas holding Sanskrit writings were found. There are numerous Buddhist sites in Gilgit, the most famous sites are namely: Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha Rock. The 7th-century Buddha statue at Kargah Buddha, also known as Yashani in the local tongue, is carved deep into the solid rock some 9 km outside of the main Gilgit city. It is not only the honor of Buddhist heritage rather it serves as a beacon of cultural heritage and historical preservation.

The centuries-old Buddhist ruins enhance the beauty of this region, which ranges from the untamed landscapes of Skardu to the tranquil valleys of Gilgit. These locations, which are scattered throughout the landscape, act as silent keepers of the past, providing glimpses into the period when Buddhist monks walked these steep routes in pursuit of enlightenment.

It shows a terrifying figure connected to evil that devours humans. A closer look reveals a broad, squarish face with enlarged ears, a flat nose, and a huge mouth, peering back bravely with a raised right hand. At first, the figure appears to be a naked girl. A set of holes that encircle the Yatchini are thought to be used as a barrier against the monster. According to legend, a saint declared that she would stay imprisoned if buried at the foothills of the rock and that she would not harm them as long as he lived. Located close to Gilgit city, Kargha Buddha is a well-known heritage monument that draws hundreds of Buddhists each year, many of whom are from Korea and Japan. Its distinct chambs style is noted by academics. The Yatchini story was recorded by former British political agent DLR Lorimer in his book "Gilgit, Chitral and Yasin." It is a symbol of cultural legacy and historical preservation as well as the honor of Buddhist ancestry.

The large Buddha relief sculpture known as Manthal Buddha Rock was created in the eighth century, Located about 14 km southeast of Skardu city, it provides an insight into the last phase of the "Golden Era" of Buddhism in the upper Indus Valley. This amazing structure, which dates to the 9th century, features a relief of a meditating Buddha surrounded by Bodhisattvas and Metriyas, signifying the great spiritual tradition of the area. Skardu was a major player in the Tibetan Empire during its flourishing period in the eighth and tenth centuries, and the Manthal Buddha Rock is a physical reminder of this momentous time. This finely carved Buddha statue radiates peace and spirituality, transcending time to connect the tourist with the contemporary era. By examining the elaborate engravings and reflecting on Buddhism's enduring legacy, tourists can establish a connection with the past and deepen their comprehension of human societies. In celebrating and protecting these cultural treasures, we pay tribute to the past and broaden our understanding of humanity's rich legacy.

The flow of tourists in Gilgit increased in recent years according to data provided by the Tourist Department Gilgit in 2020, the total arrival of domestic tourists was 634344, which shows an increase in the rate of tourists from the year 2015 to 2019. The flow of foreign tourists also reasonably varies per year. In 2020, the number of foreign tourists decreased as compared to 2015

to 2019 due to COVID-19. In short, the ratio of foreign tourists has stayed at around 1% as a result of the recent surge in local tourism.

For Gilgit, the rise in tourists presents both benefits and difficulties. In addition to stimulating the local economy, generating jobs, and fostering cultural exchange, tourism also puts strain on the region's natural resources, infrastructure, and customs. To control the number of visitors and protect Gilgit's distinctive cultural and environmental legacy for future generations, sustainable tourism practices, community involvement, and responsible tourism efforts are crucial. In addition to being significant historical and archaeological landmarks, Buddhist places in Gilgit-Baltistan draw travelers, academics, and pilgrims who are curious to learn more about the rich Buddhist legacy of the area. They draw attention to Gilgit-Baltistan's rich religious heritage and cultural variety, which enhances the region's allure for tourists.

### **The role of religious tourism in promoting harmony and cultural understanding.**

The teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Quran provide a strong foundation for the Islamic perspective on civilizational harmony. Islam as a religion places a strong emphasis on the importance of harmony, intolerance, and respect for everyone, regardless of their background in terms of religion or culture. Muslims are constantly urged by the Quran to live in harmony with one another and to show people respect and compassion. Allah Almighty says in Holy Quran:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَاهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

“Oh, humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.”

This verse focuses on the diversity of human civilizations and the need to embrace that variety to foster harmony and understanding. People from different cultural and religious backgrounds can engage and learn about one another's cultures, beliefs, and traditions through religious tourism. tourists can develop a deeper understanding and respect for the diversity of humanity by visiting places of worship and engaging with members of various faiths. The prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said:

وَكُنْ قَرِيحًا تَكُنْ أَشْكَرَ النَّاسِ وَأَحَبَّ لِلنَّاسِ

“Love for people what you love for yourself, and you will be a (true) believer...”

This Hadith emphasized that Muslims must appreciate the harmony and well-being of others as highly as they do their own. Islamic teachings, which support the notion that diversity enriches the world, and that unity may be gained through acknowledging shared humanity, hence emphasize the imperative of promoting civilizational harmony via respect, understanding, and compassion.

Religious travel goes beyond its function as a purely commercial endeavor by promoting intercultural understanding and respect. The exploration of the benefits of religious tourism results in its multifaceted advantages including economic, and socio-cultural harmony and fostering civilizational harmony. visiting religious sites exposes visitors to the customs, practices, and creative representations of a specific religion, fostering their cultural literacy and empathy.

The gathering of people from various religious origins at these locations fosters communication and respect for one another, establishing the foundation for coexistence. Discussions regarding common moral principles and spiritual beliefs frequently result in the dissolution of stereotypes and biases, which helps to create a more tolerant and peaceful society in general.

From a financial viewpoint, religious tourism fuels local economies. Tourists who visit religious places support expanding adjacent industries, including lodging, dining, and gift stores, creating job possibilities and infrastructure development. The socioeconomic situations of marginalized places can be improved by this economic infusion.

### **Relationship between religious tourism and civilizational harmony**

The connection between religious tourism and civilizational harmony is a compelling aspect of contemporary tourism dynamics. It is highlighted by the potential for tourism to promote greater understanding, respect, and unification among various cultures and civilizations.

At religious places, interactions between visitors and locals present chances for deep discussions and exchange of ideas. These discussions challenge stereotypes, eliminate prejudices, and enhance cross-cultural understanding. This leads to the fostering of civilizational harmony by encouraging an atmosphere of peace and respect for one another.

Moreover, religious tourism helps transcend cultural and religious barriers. Travelers who immerse themselves in cultures' religious traditions of many civilizations discover common values, ethical norms, and historical contexts. This recently acquired knowledge strengthens the underlying commonalities that exist among diverse civilizations and fosters a sense of connectivity.

The Buddhist sites of Kargha Budhha and Manthal, catalyze cross-cultural interaction and foster a sense of shared humanity. Due to the fact, that they offer a blend of historical, cultural, and spiritual values that foster harmony, peace, respect, and social cohesion among people, these landmarks of Gilgit have a significant influence on religious tourism and civilizational harmony.

These Buddhist sites have the potential to foster interaction among the locals and tourists that leads to cross-cultural understanding and a sense of harmony and respect. Visitors to these locations interact directly with the core of Buddhism, providing a forum for civil discourse and adding to the larger story of civilizational harmony. According to a study, 39% of tourists in Gilgit on these sites are domestic and 61% are foreign tourists. People belonging to different backgrounds gathered there leading to connections and exchanges that transcend cultural and socioeconomic borders. These encounters encourage mutual respect, cultural appreciation, and the breakdown of prejudices, contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Buddhist sites are important because they provide venues for real face-to-face communication. Travelers' closeness to local communities promotes direct participation, which fosters cultural exchange and deep friendships. Visitors connect with the history and essence of Buddhism as they examine the elaborate carvings and architecture, sparking conversations that cut beyond denominational boundaries and foster a feeling of our common humanity.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a mixed methodology, both Qualitative and quantitative. The data is collected from e-books, Articles, and data from government official websites. The literature review is generated through qualitative methods. For the investigation of the perception of natives of Gilgit on religious tourism and its potential to create harmony and social unity, a survey is designed.

### **Survey**

For the collection of quantitative data, a survey is designed based on closed-ended questionnaires. the questionnaire was created with the help of Google Forms and circulated among the natives of Gilgit. The sample of the population was random. People from different age groups and genders participated in this survey.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Socio-demographic data**

During the survey, people from various age groups and genders participated to get a diverse range of views from the natives of Gilgit about religious tourism and its possible potential for the promotion of a harmonious society.

In the survey, the participants were in the age range of, between 20-25 years of age 43% of participants had participated, 25-30 years of age 19% participants were there, participants between 30-35 years of age were 26% and above 40 years of age were only 12%.

In the survey, the percentage of male participants was 58% and female participants were only 42%. This was an online survey circulated via WhatsApp. 94% of the participants were from the Gilgit division and participants remaining 6% were from the Sakardu Division.

Data in tabular form:

Questions	Scale	
	Yes	No
1- Do you know that Yashani and Manthal Buddha are Buddhist religious sites?	73%	27%
2- Are there any initiatives or programs in place to encourage religious tourism at these sites?	56%	44%
3- Are you satisfied with the current situation of Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha Rock for attracting Buddhist tourists?	53%	47%
4- Do you think that religious tourism has the potential to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions about different faiths?	75%	25%
5- Do you think religious tourism fosters pluralistic attitudes among people?	73%	27%
6- Does religious tourism is a source to promote harmony among religious diversity?	79%	21%
7- Are you of the opinion that religious tourism contributes face to face interaction among people that leads to respect and social unity among people?	88%	12%
8- Do you think the presence of religious tourists influences the local culture and lifestyle of the community?	80%	20%
9- Do you think the government of Gilgit is paying attention to religious tourists for economic purposes?		
10- Do you believe that religious tourism should be actively promoted in Gilgit?	39%	
	76%	61%
	24%	
11- In your opinion, how can religious tourism at Buddhist sites in Gilgit contribute to enhancing social unity and harmony among diverse communities? facilitating interfaith dialogue ( 20%)		

fostering a sense of mutual respect (49%)

Promote cultural exchange (31%)

12-what can be the potential benefits of increased religious tourism in Gilgit for the local community? Preserving and promoting local cultural heritage (34%) Boosting local economic situation (41%) Instilling a sense of mutual respect and acceptance (25%)

Results:

1- The majority of the respondents know about the Yashani and Manthal Buddha are Buddhist religious sites.

2- A great number of respondents are of the opinion that there are initiatives designed to encourage religious tourism at these sites.

3- Maximum number of respondents are of the opinion that the current situation of Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha is satisfying for attracting Buddhist tourists.

4- The majority of the respondents are of the view that religious tourism has the potential to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions about different faiths.

5- A great number of people think that religious tourism has the potential to foster pluralistic attitudes among people.

6- The majority of the respondents are of the view that religious tourism is a source to promote harmony among religious diversity.

7- Maximum number of respondents are of the view that religious tourism contributes to face-to-face interaction among people that leads to respect and social unity among people.

8- The great number of respondents think that religious tourists influence the local culture and lifestyle of the community.

9- A great number of the participants are of the view that the government of Gilgit is not paying attention to religious tourists for economic purposes.

10- Maximum number of participants think that religious tourism should be actively promoted in Gilgit.

11- The majority of the participants think that religious tourism has the potential of fostering a sense of mutual respect which leads to enhancing social unity and harmony among diverse communities.

12- The majority of people think that boosting the local economic situation is the potential benefit of increased religious tourism in Gilgit for the local community.

Discussion

The results of the survey provide valuable insight into the relationship between religious tourism and the perspective of natives of Gilgit about the potential of the visiting Buddhist sites of Karga Buddha and Manthal Buddha Rock for fostering a sense of mutual respect and harmony among people. The survey highlights how visiting religious sites of Buddhism in Gilgit, can influence perceptions, attitudes, and interactions among the locals and the visitors.

According to study findings, religious travel has a significant positive influence on fostering social cohesion, respect for one another, and civilizational harmony among the many communities in the Gilgit region. The results show the function of Buddhist pilgrimage sites, especially Yashani, Manthal, and Kargha Buddha, in promoting interactions between pilgrims and locals.

The majority of the respondents are well-informed about the Yashni and Manthal Buddha rocks and recognize them as significant Buddhist religious sites. This indicates that these sites hold cultural and historical importance, which makes them desirable travel destinations for religious

and local tourists. A significant number of respondents hold the opinion that there are initiatives that promote religious tourism at these Buddhist sites. This shows that there is a deliberate attempt being made to use Gilgit's religious tradition to promote tourism, which could have positive economic and cultural effects on the residents.

The majority of responders think that the current situation of Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha is suitable to draw Buddhist visitors. This perception shows that the existing environment and infrastructure at these sites are suitable for creating a satisfying visitor experience. A significant number of the participants hold the opinion that religious tourism plays a pivotal role in dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions about different faiths. This highlights the potential of interfaith interactions to instill a sense of respect and foster greater understanding among people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds.

The majority of the respondents are of the viewpoint that religious tourism cultivates a pluralistic behavior among people and fosters harmony and diversity among different communities. This shows that exposure to many cultures and beliefs through travel can help create a society that is more accepting and inclusive.

A maximum number of respondents acknowledge that religious tourism encourages direct relationships between visitors and locals, increasing social cohesion and respect. This finding highlights the importance of face-to-face encounters in bridging disparate cultures. The vast majority of respondents are of the view that visiting Buddhist sites encourages more peace and tolerance in society at large. This acknowledgment highlights the wider influence of religious travel outside the local setting, perhaps fostering intercultural understanding and collaboration.

A significant portion of respondents believe that religious tourists have an impact on the local way of life. This implies that tourism can promote cultural exchange, resulting in lively interaction between tourists and locals. The majority of participants believe that Gilgit's government could do more to promote religious tourism as a source of revenue. This suggests a possible area for policy and infrastructure development enhancement. The majority of people think Gilgit should actively promote religious tourism. This is consistent with the widely held belief that religious tourism can benefit the area in terms of economic development and cross-cultural interaction.

The majority of respondents concur that religious tourism has the potential to promote Mutual respect, enhancing social cohesion and harmony between various cultures and civilizations. This emphasizes how tourism helps to establish a harmonious and socially unified society leading to pluralistic attitudes of the people. The majority of respondents agree that improving the local economy is one of the potential advantages of more religious travelers visiting Gilgit. This shows that the community is aware of the economic benefits that tourism may provide.

Conclusion:

The survey's findings highlight the critical part that religious tourism plays in fostering social cohesion, Mutual Respect, and civilizational harmony in the Gilgit region. According to the positive perspectives and insights expressed by respondents, religious tourism can promote meaningful contacts, dispel myths, and promote a more peaceful and inclusive society on a local as well as a worldwide scale. There is a need for the government of Gilgit to pay more attention to and actively promote religious tourism in the region to maximize the potential benefits from it.

The study emphasizes the importance of Buddhist temples in Gilgit Baltistan as sites that promote intercultural dialogue and foster respect and harmony between people of different cultures. Both the Manthal Buddha Rock and the Kargha Buddha serve as portals into common human experiences, igniting dialogue across religious and cultural divides. These interactions



provide a favorable environment for fostering comprehension and forging bonds that promote harmony among civilizations.

In conclusion, the study links religious travel to the fostering of civilizational harmony. Religious tourism can bridge gaps, eliminate prejudices, and promote a sense of harmony and unity among many communities through contacts, cultural exchange, and economic contributions. The Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Kargha Buddha and Manthal Buddha Rock serve as excellent examples of the ability of religious tourism to forge deep relationships and enlighten societies through a deeper appreciation of their common humanity. Fostering religious tourism could become a transforming force for fostering civilizational harmony both locally and on a larger global scale as Gilgit-Baltistan continues to embrace its cultural and religious legacy.

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