

# BUILDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR (AJ&K)



DR. SHAHEEN AKHTAR



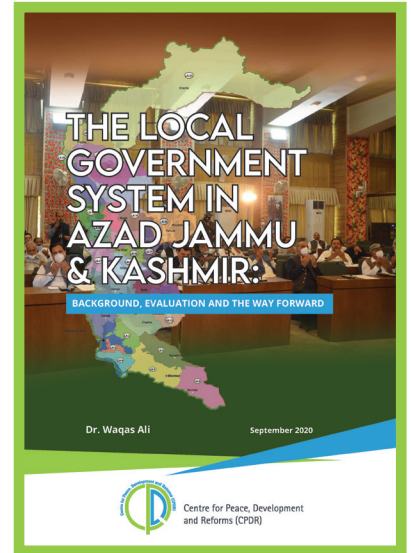
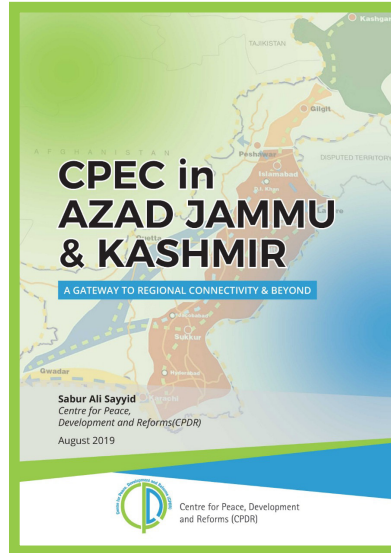
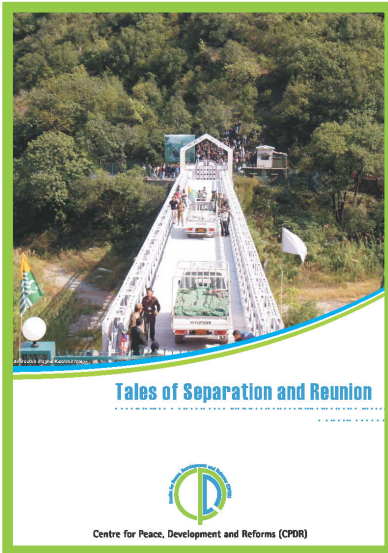
Centre for Peace, Development  
and Reforms (CPDR)



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**DR. SHAHEEN AKHTAR**

December, 2020



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# About CPDR

The Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR) is a nongovernmental, nonprofit and nonpartisan research, training and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting peace, development and reforms through dialogue and reconciliation.

Founded in 2010, the CDPR is registered with the Government under the Societies Act 1860 (Act XXI of 1860), having specified Memorandum of Association.



## Our Vision

Promoting and encouraging peace and development at all levels through dialogue, reconciliation and reforms.

## Our Mission

Strengthening civil society to ensure transparent and participatory governance through peaceful interaction between stakeholders and government and to propose necessary reforms for peace and development. Promoting accountability, cultivating civic culture, values of freedom, tolerance, economic development and democracy. Providing an effective platform for conflict resolution with special reference to the divided State of Jammu and Kashmir.

## Our Objectives

- ★ Empowering civil society; promoting peace, participatory governance, transparency and reforms through dialogue and reconciliation.
- ★ Supporting democratic values, accountability, and human rights while striving for economic development and social justice.
- ★ Promoting ethical values, civic culture, and tolerance and striving to ensure that due attention to the marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society.
- ★ Providing an effective platform for conflict resolution with special reference to the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) is endowed with tremendous natural beauty, archaeological/historical sites, religious places, and mountainous landscape; making it attractive for religious, cultural, archaeological, adventure and recreational tourism. Along with this AJ&K is a part of the larger conflict zone of Kashmir that has heavily shaped the development of the tourism sector in the region. The sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and poor connectivity, both physical and in communication, have deeply impacted the growth of tourism in the AJ&K region. Even when the region is at peace with itself, the continued tension on the Line of Control (LoC) does not only make tourist sites vulnerable but also endanger the life of the tourists.

After the 2005 earthquake, the region was exposed to the outside world and attention was paid to developing tourism infrastructure. The India-Pakistan peace process that began in 2004 and instituting of cross-LoC confidence building measures (CBMs) such as opening of cross-LoC travel (2005) and later trade (2008), provided a very positive context for building cross-LoC tourism connectivity. During the past decade and a half, efforts are underway to develop tourist infrastructure and destinations, but enough attention has not been paid to undertake geographic or thematic branding of destinations significant for cultural, archeological, heritage recreational and adventure tourism. Further, despite growing realization, not much has been done to integrate the element of sustainability in developing

tourist sites and conservation of heritage places. A Tourism Policy Framework that was put in place in 2019 has declared tourism an industry, emphasizing sustainable eco-tourism. Along with it, the development of a Tourism Corridor<sup>1</sup> and participation of the private sector in the tourism industry are encouraging developments, which require effective mechanisms and resources to materialise.

Tourism is a growing industry internationally and contributes about 10 percent to global GDP. According to the World Tourism Organization Report (2016), revenue from tourism worldwide reached US \$1.3 billion per day, generating \$852 billion in export earnings, amounting to 6 percent of global exports, and employing 235 million workers around the world. Pakistan's contribution to this industry is very low, only about 0.09 percent of its potential. Moreover, the contribution made by tourism sector to the AJ&K economy is minimal. The unemployment rate in AJ&K is 10.3 percent which is much higher than that of Pakistan which is 5.8 percent.<sup>2</sup> Given limited base for industrial development and huge tourism potential of AJ&K, there is an opportunity for tourism to become a hub of local economy generating income and creating employment opportunities for the local communities, resulting in poverty reduction, thereby mitigating direct and indirect impacts of Kashmir conflict on the region.

<sup>1</sup> It is a 190 km-long corridor proposed by the AJ&K government to connect tourism sites and facilitate tourists in four districts -Muzaffarabad, Jhelum Valley, Bagn and Rawalakot.

<sup>2</sup> AJ&K at a Glance 2019 planing & development, pndajk.gov.pk.



The study attempts to explore the region's potential for heritage, cultural, religious, adventure and recreational tourism; analyse the development of tourism infrastructure including the Tourism Corridor; evolve a policy framework; and identify policy gaps and challenges within the larger framework of responsible, sustainable and peace sensitive tourism. It underscores that a larger India-Pakistan peace process and political resolution of the Kashmir conflict will greatly help AJ&K to tap its full tourism potential.

## 1.1 Background

Before 1947, the Kashmir Valley was known as a tourists' attraction while Muzaffarabad served as a transit point and not as a tourist center in itself. Its poor communication infrastructure, i.e. lack of roads and suitable accommodation that made it unattractive as a destination in comparison to Srinagar. Even the last Maharaja of Kashmir hardly ever visited Muzaffarabad and reportedly (besides traveling by car) used bullock carts or horse carts while traveling to Muzaffarabad and inside the city. The Mughals used the Bhimber–Srinagar route to visit the Kashmir Valley. Bhimber has been mentioned by the Emperor Jahangir in his book *Tuzh-e-Jahangiri*. There is also some evidence that the British and other foreigners came for fishing in the Poonch and Jehlum Rivers, that business oriented tourists went to Srinagar; and that European tourists generally traveled to Ladakh or Gilgit-Baltistan for adventure tourism.<sup>3</sup>

After division of the State of J&K in 1948, the tourism industry in AJ&K remained underdeveloped due to poor infrastructure, lack of resources and uncertain security conditions. This was irrespective of the fact that the region offered rich natural landscape; historical, archaeological and religious sites as well as great intangible heritage that could have attracted visitors from home and abroad. It was only after the 2005 earthquake that AJ&K became more exposed to the outside world and officials realized the potential economic benefits lying in the region's natural and historical resources. In December 2005, then Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, during a visit to Rawalakot, announced that AJ&K would be opened for tourism to leverage on the area's full potential and to help generate economic opportunities for its people.<sup>4</sup> With little industrial development and due to the declining agricultural productivity which have been the mainstay of the AJ&K economy i.e., the tourism industry can play an important role in expanding livelihood opportunities, especially for the rural poor. The allied services supply chain and manpower connected with tourism industry, ranging from small restaurants/food supplies, tour guides, tour operators, transport sector as well as handicraft and cottage industry could be direct or indirect beneficiaries of the development of tourism in the area. This could in turn generate job opportunities and boost the economy.

<sup>3</sup> P. R. Chari, D. Suba Chandran, and Shaheen Akhtar, *Tourism and Peace building in Jammu and Kashmir*, Special Report, 281, July 2011. <sup>4</sup> Author interview with Dr. Mohsin Shakil, director general of the AJ&K Tourism and Archaeology Department, Muzaffarabad, January 2010.

<sup>4</sup> "Entire Kashmir to Be Opened for Tourism," *Nation* (Pakistan), December 13, 2005.



PHOTO: RUKHSANA KHAN. RATTI GALI LAKE, NEELUM VALLEY

## 2. MAPPING AJ&K TOURISM RESOURCES

The AJ&K region has ten administrative districts. The northern region comprises Neelum, Muzaffarabad, Hattian, Bagh, Haveli, Poonch and Sudhnoti districts while Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts fall in the southern region. Each region has its unique geography, climatic conditions, history, religious and archeological sites along with intangible heritage that is very attractive for the domestic, cross-regional/LoC and foreign tourists. Domestic tourists are more prominent in AJ&K compared to international tourists, due to security considerations whereby foreign tourists are not allowed to visit tourist areas closer to the LoC and might require a No-objection certificate (NoC) to visit AJ&K.

### 2.1. Cultural and Heritage Tourism Sites

AJ&K has a rich cultural heritage, tangible as well as intangible, evident in a number of archeological and cultural sites spread all over the region which could attract domestic tourists, from across the LoC as well as international tourists especially from the Buddhist countries. The Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations (TIAC), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad in its survey conducted in 2014 has documented 100 archeological sites and monuments in AJ&K which comprise temples, gurdawaras, forts, rock inscriptions, rock cut caves, sarai (inns), bowlies (water points) and human settlements from the stone age with monuments of megalithic culture and rock inscriptions. Many of these sites and monuments have been

professionally documented. Several newly discovered sites and monuments have been placed on the archaeological map of the world and particularly of AJ&K for the first time, ranging from prehistoric to the Dogra period.<sup>5</sup> These sites have unique "rational attributes"<sup>6</sup> and competitive identity that can form the basis of developing the essence of these destinations.

In addition, there are also numerous ancient forts and cultural heritage places having huge archaeological and historical importance and potential for tourism. Ancient forts depicting the history and architecture of the region include the Sharda fort in Neelum; Red fort, Black fort, Baradari, and three Hindu temples in Muzaffarabad; Bagh fort in Bagh; Baral fort and Rani Bowali in Sudhnoti; Throchi Fort, Bhrand Fort and Karjai fort (Khoiratta) in Kotli; Mangla fort, Ramkot fort and Barjund fort in Mirpur and Baghsar fort in Bhimber. All can hold a lot of attraction for the visitors. Baghsar fort in Samahni Valley in Bhimber was built by the Mughals and is located on the LoC and thereby closed for visitors. Ramkot located on the hilltop in Mirpur was built by the local Ghakhar rulers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is located at the confluence of the River Jhelum and Poonch River. The Red fort in Muzaffarabad was originally built by Chack Rulers, the second line of defense was completed by Sultan Muzaffar Khan, a local Bomba chieftain and founder of the Muzaffarabad city in 1646.

AJ&K is home to rich cultural heritage and traditions that encompass beautiful wood

<sup>5</sup> Prof. M. Ashraf Khan & Rukhsana Khan, *Archaeological survey and documentation of Monuments in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, 2013-14*, Phase II by Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad. Report published in 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The rational attributes as identified in *Brand Pyramid* are the location's main tourism assets – the things people like to see and do in the place. *Handbook on Tourism Destination Branding*, World Tourism Organization, April 9, 2015. 91. [http://www.imagian.com/kuvat/etc\\_unwto\\_handbook\\_tourism\\_destination\\_branding.pdf](http://www.imagian.com/kuvat/etc_unwto_handbook_tourism_destination_branding.pdf)

work, the famous Kashmiri handicrafts - Papier mache, namda and gabba rugs, shawls, special dresses and jewelry; traditional Kashmiri foods and traditional music. Pahari folk music in Pahari Raga is the melodious tradition of Bannah Valley in Kotli. There are traditional games like Polo played at Ghora Maidan in Neelum and Gatka in the Muzaffarabad division. The horse and cattle show at Lehri Ground in Mirpur and Khoiratta, as well as the cultural and musical programmes, and traditional festivals can be used for branding the cultural heritage of the area. The most colourful of all the cultures is Bakarwal, the nomad tribes that travel between the Kahndi of Jammu and Deosai plains, chasing the weather with their herds. It's fascinating to watch their caravans travelling from place to place.

## 2.2. Religious Tourism Sites/Destinations

Azad Kashmir has a large number of religious sites that are very attractive for people of different faiths. These include shrines of Muslim *sufi* saints, Hindu temples and Gurdwaras belonging to the Sikh community. These sites have their own distinct competitive identities which makes them attractive for thematic as well as geographic branding.

**Shrines of Muslim Sufi Saints:** An area known as the land of mystics and shrines of *sufi* saints is spread over Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, Bhimber and the Neelum Valley. This region includes shrines such as Sain Saheli Sarkar and Darbar Pirchinassi in Muzaffarabad, Darbar Khari Sharif housing the

shrines of Pir Shah Ghazi and Mian Muhammad Buksh in Mirpur, Mai Toti Sahiba and Aghar Sharif in Kotli, Baba Shadi Shaheed in Bhimber, Nerian Sharif in Sudhnoti, and Kaiyan Sharif of Hazrat Mian Nizamud-Din in the Neelum Valley. These saints were revered by all communities. Panjni in Kotli can be branded as a land of mysticism where *sufi* poet Mian Muhammad Baksh wrote his famous *Saif-ul-Maulook* (sword of kings). Similarly, the shrine of Shadi Shaheed is considered an icon of love. A ritual associated with the shrine was that couples used to visit it for blessings and to get their wishes fulfilled while starting a new life.<sup>7</sup>

Khari Sharif has two major annual festivals – Urs Pir Shah Ghazi on 14<sup>th</sup> of Shaaban which draws about one million people annually and Urs of Mian Muhammad Baksh, celebrated 10 days before EidulUzha, attracting thousands of visitors from all across AJ&K and Pakistan. In the Neelum Valley, the Shrines of Three Sufi Syeds straddle the eastern slopes facing the LoC across the river. It is said that in 1398 ACE; these Sufi Syeds beheaded by King Timur Lang; their bodies were taken to this place and buried. People flock here and seek blessings; the graves are mud plastered every year by the womenfolk in a ritualistic manner.<sup>8</sup> A couple of kilometers away there exists a shrine of Sufi saint Qalandar Baba, revered on both sides of the LoC by all communities. Prior to the division of the Indian subcontinent people belonging to all communities of Kashmir visited this shrine but after the divide a similar shrine of Qalandar Baba was built east of the LoC, which is also visible from Nagdar village.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The story of the ritual was narrated by the people of the area to Rukhsana Khan during her field survey in 2013-14.

<sup>8</sup> Rukhsana Khan, "Exploring Heritage Tourism in NeelumKishen Ganga Valley and its potential for peace building", an unpublished Discussion Paper in *Building Tourism across LoC*.

<sup>9</sup> Rukhsana Khan, Archaeological survey *NeelumKishen Ganga Valley*. She discovered and documented shrines of three sufis, Qalander Baba's, recorded oral history, ritual and myths associated with these places. October, 2016.

**Heritage Sites of the Sikhs:** There are sacred heritage sites belonging to the Sikh community that are found in Bhimber, Rawalkot and Mirpur. These include Gurdawara Ali Beg in Bhimber, Gurdwara Dehri Sahib in Rawalkot, Gurdwara Ker Bawa Sahib in Mirpur and Gurdwara Chota Nanakiana where Sat Guru stayed while he was on his way back from China. It is also called "Asthan Nanak Pir" by the local people. These sites are revered by the Sikh community living across the LoC and are expected to attract Sikh tourists.

**Sharda, the Seat of Learning and other Archaeological Sites:** The archeological sites in AJ&K include remains of a Buddhist University at Sharda in the Neelum Valley. Besides being a seat of learning, it has a great religious significance as the rock formation here indicates three forms of a Hindu *devi* i.e., Sharda Lakshmi, Saraswati and Wag Devi. Besides, there are mountains that are considered sacred by the Hindus i.e., Hari Parbat, Kishan Ghati in Neelum Valley and Ganga Choti in Bagh. Similarly, there are some lakes in the region with religious associations such as Saraswati Lake at Narda Peak considered the abode of goddess Narda. The Chitta Katha lake in Shouner Valley is located at Hari Parbat. These sites have a lot of spiritual value for the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims as well as archaeologists.

### 2.3. Adventure & Recreational Tourism Sites

AJ&K is immensely rich in pristine beauty manifested in snow covered peaks, dense forests, winding rivers, streams, and green plateaus and valleys. There are a large number of places available that can be developed into adventure and recreational tourism. Neelum Valley, Jehlum Valley and Leepa

Valley have their own geographic niche and competitive identity that can attract tourists from across the LoC as well as rest of the world. In fact, the domestic tourist inflow especially to the Neelum Valley has grown manifestly in the past decade or so.

**Neelum Valley: A Heaven for Mountain Tourism:** The lush green Neelum Valley running parallel to the Kaghan Valley and the LoC, along the gushing Neelum River and winding streams is ideal for mountain tourism. The Sarwali peak of Nanga Parbat Complex (elevation of 6,326 meters above sea level) in Shouner Valley is the highest point in AJ&K. Kel is also a base camp for mountaineering activities up to "Sarwali Peak" at "Sarwali Glacier" which is the highest peak on the biggest glacier in Azad Kashmir. Jagran Valley, Ratti Galli Lake and Noori' Nar Galli have great potential for soft to medium grade adventure tourism, especially climbing. Further, the heavily forested slopes of the mountains in the Neelum Valley in the west and north provide good stretches for moderate to hard trekking. Besides, the high hills of Kafir-Khan (3000-3508m), in Muzaffarabad and Ganga Choti (3045 m) in Bagh in the Southern sector are good trekking peaks. The area provides excellent opportunities for rock climbing, trekking, mountaineering, summer camping and hiking. Jagran Valley, Ratti Gali and Noori Nar are very attractive destinations for the climbers. Moreover, blessed with large number of river and streams, AJ&K offers great potential for white water sports, especially rafting, canoeing and kayaking. Both the Neelum and Jhelum rivers are ideal for white-water rafting all year round. In March 2017, the first ever white water rafting event over a 20-km stretch from Ghari Dupatta to Muzaffarabad took place with 24 rafters riding in four boats. In addition, mountain range from Nizapura to Pirchinas-

si and Lohargali to Khori Syedan in Muzafarabad and Shaeed Gala area in Rawalakot respectively are suitable for paragliding and since 2005 paragliding events have been taking place in these areas.

The Shonthar Valley located in upper Neelum Valley possesses a distinct competitive identity for adventurers, religious tourists and nature lovers as it is endowed with Shonthar fall as well as seven high altitude lakes - Chita Katha, Lunda Sar lake, Shountar/Spoon lake, Sarawali Peak base Camp lake, Asman BaikSar lake, Baboon lake and Parrian Sar Lake. The Valley can be branded as Shounter - the valley of heavenly lakes; the highaltitude meadows as 'horse meadow' (where horses were domesticated) and Hari Parbat as *The Abode of Shiva*.

**Viewing LoC in the Neelum Valley:** Neelum Valley is one of the few places where the road runs a long way along the river in close proximity to the LoC with a spectacular view of the area on the other side. Karen and upper Neelum, about 9 and 11 km away from Athmuqam respectively are two villages that are located on the right bank of the Neelum River where the river forms LoC between two parts of Kashmir. Both villages with captivating landscapes are tourist resorts but are inhabited by people, many of whom have relatives residing on the other side of divide, who cannot meet them freely. In times of peace the relatives from both sides come to the river at Chilyana to see glimpses of each other but in times of high tension on the LoC, they cannot even step out of their homes. Those with entry permits can go across the LoC to visit their relatives.

In the past decade or so the domestic tourists flocked to Neelum Valley in summer and the tourism season got extended to

winter till December. People are greatly attracted by the LoC and this can become an attraction point for tourists from J&K as well as the international tourists. The Valley experienced years of shelling and firing in the 1990s which has left its marks on the buildings i.e., houses and shops along the Neelum road and on the local population also. This road is highly vulnerable to the Indian firing/shelling. Stone walls were built along the road to protect and hide vehicles from the fire. After the 2003 ceasefire, the people rebuilt their homes and invested in tourism services and activities to make their living. Peace and stability ensures growth in their livelihood. It has already been referred to as a line of peace and commerce. The Neelum section of the LoC could be branded as the *Line of Communication or Line of Connectivity*. Currently, locals refer to it as "*Khoni Line*" or "*Line of Blood*".

**Chilyana Riverside Meeting Point for Divided Families:** After the 2003 ceasefire, Chilyana (LoC West) and Teetwal (LoC East) villages located on the right and left bank of the Neelum River respectively emerged as a unique meeting point for the families divided by the Kashmir conflict for the last several decades.

In February 2004, hundreds of families, separated for decades, gathered along the Neelum River for hours in the rain and cold looking for and trying to communicate with their separated family members. This was the first time in more than 20 years that they were allowed to come so close across the river to exchange greetings and to throw across their letters wrapped around small stones with thread. The exchange of greetings between locals on both sides mostly occurs in the harsh winters when the temperature drops below freezing point and the whole area is covered with heavy

snow. During the summer, high water pressure and noise of the river prevents people's voices from crossing over. Sometimes people also exchange small gifts on special occasions like marriage or during *Eids*. The escalation of tension on the LoC however, disrupts these riverside meetings.

After the 2005 earthquake, the Chillyana-Teetwal crossing point was opened for relief goods for the quake-hit people of Kashmir. A foot bridge connects Neelum Valley's Chilyana Village to Teetwal Village on the other side. Until recently, every 15 days people of the divided families possessing travel permits could go across and those without permits used to come to the river side to see a glimpse of their relatives on the other side. The point became an attraction for domestic tourists. The Chilyana-Teetwal crossing point is a conflict site having great peace building value that can be converted and branded as *Chilyana-Teetwal Peace Trail* or *Kishen Ganga Peace Trail*.

### **Gurez Valley: Gateway to the Silk Route across Asia:**

Gurez Valley<sup>10</sup> is contiguous to the Neelum Valley. It starts at a distance of about 35 km from Kel and is located deep in the Himalayas at an altitude of about 8,000 ft, bounded by snowcapped mountains and divided by the LoC. It is about 86 km away from Bandipore and 123 km from Srinagar in LoC East. The Valley is located very close to the Burzil Pass which leads into Astore district of Gilgit Baltistan. The Valley falls along the ancient Silk Route, which connected the Kashmir Valley to Gilgit, before continuing further to Kashgar and to the Tibetan plateau along the Indus River.

### **Leepa Valley - the Mini Kashmir**

Leepa Valley located, at a distance of 105 kilometers from Muzaffarabad is known as the heart of Kashmir or the mini Kashmir. It is adjacent to Kupwara District of the Kashmir Valley. The Valley is surrounded by high mountains that are covered with lush green pine trees. The Valley is shadowed by "Shams Bari" - the highest peak in the north which remains snowbound the whole year and "Kafar Khun" range in the south. The snow water from these mountain ranges feed the Qazi Nag stream which emerges from LoC East and runs through the whole of the Leepa Valley. This water source remained pivotal for sustainability of the Valley for centuries and is used to irrigate paddy fields and crops. The red rice is produced on terraces; it is similar to Japanese sticky rice which is considered much tastier and purely organic.

Leepa, Reshian, Dao' Khun and Channian are the villages located at an altitude ranging from 1921 meters to 2490 meters holding great rational attributes in natural beauty and biodiversity. Dao' Khun offers serenity, tranquility and an untouched natural environment. The apple, walnut and cherry trees present a stunning view to tourists during summer. Leepa is also famous for its distinctive Kashmiri style architecture, mostly in the form of multi-storied wooden houses. It has retained the Kashmiri cultural heritage depicted in its art and crafts, language, cuisines and traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Several villages of the Leepa Valley are divided by the LoC. These settlements can draw visitors interested in both scenic attri-

<sup>10</sup> Gurez is divided into three regions. The area from Taobat to Sharda village is in Neelum district, AJ&K; that between Kamri and Minimarg is part of the Astore district in Gilgit-Baltistan, and from Taobat to Tulail is Tehsil Gurez which is part of Bandipore district in LoC East. <http://www.jktourism.org/destinations/kashmir/gurez-valley.html>

<sup>11</sup> Rukhsana Khan, "Leepa Valley: The mini Kashmir", *Rising Kashmir*, Srinagar, August 28, 2016. <http://www.risingkashmir.com/news/leepa-valley-the-mini-kashmir>

butes and foot prints of the conflict. There are divided families living a stone's throw from each other yet they cannot meet. The majority of people living in these villages are the Kashmiri speaking people. Leepa Valley has been adversely affected by the Kashmir conflict. Chananian village surrounded by thick Cedar forests is located at the LoC and Qazi Nag stream flows nearby it. The Channian bazar was completely destroyed during the conflict in the 1990s and almost all the residents left the village. When peace returned along LoC, this bazar and houses in the vicinity were rebuilt and people returned to their native place.<sup>12</sup>

**Treda Sharif Ziarat on the LoC:** Ziarat or the shrine known as *Treda Sharif* consists of the tomb of a renowned *sufi* or saint and is located right on the LoC. Half of this shrine is situated on the LoC in AJ&K while the back wall is in LoC East. This gives the shrine a unique competitive identity that can draw visitors from both sides. Before the escalation of conflict, prior to 1987, people could cross the LoC to attend the annual congregation of *Treda Sharif*. People from LoC East applied for a 'Cross-LoC Permit' to travel via the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service and other crossing points to visit *Treda Sharif* and many other shrines and took a cumbersome and long journey though if allowed they could just cross over, visit the sacred places and return home in a few hours.<sup>13</sup>

The Leepa Valley has great potential as a tourist destination but the lack of road infrastructure and limited access jeopardizes the possibility of a flourishing tourism industry.

Bagh district falling in the lesser Himalayas zone is a mountainous area located at the confluence of two streams, Mahlwani and Mahl. The competitive identity of the main range in the district is the Pir-Panjal Range and Haji-Pir Pass which is situated at the height of 3421 meters. The Hajipir Pass connects Uri to Poonch or the Jammu and Kashmir regions. It is a strategic area and many battles were fought over Haji Pir in 1965 and 1971. The Pass is a conflict site that could potentially however be turned into a peace trail. Other famous destinations in Bagh district are Dheerkot, Lasdanna, Sudhan Galli and Ganga Choti.

### **Jhelum Valley: Gate Way to Srinagar**

Jhelum Valley has rational attributes that give it a distinct competitive geographic identity. The valley is a mainly hilly and mountainous region with stretching to plains along the river Jhelum which enters AJ&K at the village Chakothi located at the LoC flowing east to northwest. Muzaffarabad, the capital of AJ&K is located at the confluence of the river Jhelum and Neelum in the foreground of the mighty mount Makra. Hattian Bala, which was given the status of a district in 2009, comprising the tehsil Hattian Bala, is also the gateway to Srinagar.<sup>14</sup> The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus and truck service that began in 2005 and 2008 respectively through the Chakothi-Uri crossing point revived the historic Jhelum Valley Cart Road (JVCR) for cross-LoC connectivity. The proximity with the LoC however exposes Chakothi to bear the brunt of the escalation of tensions across the border.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The district was part of the Baramula district, tehsil Uri (now in LoC East). After ceasefire in 1948, Hattian Bala became part of Muzaffarabad district.



Neela Dandi, Peer Chanasi, Chinari, Chumm fall, Loon Bagla, Dungian, and Zalzaal (earthquake) lake give a unique competitive identity to the Valley for cultural, recreational and soft adventure tourism. Mount Peer Chanasi that looms over Muzaffarabad city is a haven for paragliders and houses the ruins of a Buddhist monastery. Chinari, situated some 64 km away from Muzaffarabad is a scenic place surrounded by high hills. Chumm fall is one of the highest falls in the Valley. The landslide due to the 2005 earthquake that blocked the Chakar stream created a lake that it created is a point of attraction. Loon Bagla, 10 km from Chikar town, situated at an altitude of 2011 meters ASL is a hill station in the middle of dense Blue Pine forests and is linked by road. Dungian, located about 5 km away from Loon Bagla is surrounded by thick silver Fir forests. Located at an altitude of 2071 meters with beautiful landscape, it has a special attraction for tourists. Zalzaal lake and Neela Dandi created by the 2005 earthquake have a special attraction for visitors as a manifestation of tragic beauty created by disaster. Barsala tourist lodge, on the way to Muzaffarabad from Islamabad has historical value as Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah stayed here in 1944 when he was returning from Srinagar.

### **Tourism Resources of the Jammu Region**

The Jammu region has an array of tourism destinations having distinct rational characteristics of heritage, culture and natural beauty spread over Poonch, Kotli, Mirpur, and Bhimber districts. Rawalakot Valley, more famous as the Pearl Valley in the Poonch region is located at an elevation of 1615 meters and has its own distinct competitive identity as a lush green valley. Hajira, Gohri Mar, ToliPir Meadow, Banjosa, Chota Galla, Trar Khal and Rawalakot city are the popular tourist destinations in the

region. Banjosa lake surrounded by dense blue pine forests is a quite popular destination among domestic tourists and the number of arrivals is growing every year. Tatta Pani (hot springs) -situated on the right bank of the river Poonch, at a distance of 29 km from Hajira- is famous for hot water springs and has been a favourite destination for health tourism for a long time. During winter, a large number of people visit the place to have hot water bath for the cure of skin diseases and rheumatic ailments.

In Mirpur, the construction of Mangla dam in the 1960s converted the old Mirpur town and valley into a big artificial lake which draws a lot of tourists. It is ideal for water sports. In winters, when water recedes in the lake, the remnants of old Mirpur city emerge as a lush green meadow suitable for a multitude of activities. *Kharri Shareef* is one of the most visited shrines in AJ&K, the biannual congregations especially attract over a million devotees. It is also associated with the legendary epic story, *Saiful Maluk* and a theme park could be developed in the area. The Stone Age Megalithic culture of Mirpur with rock inscriptions stakes a claim to be a world heritage site, and deserve further development. Ramkot is one of the well preserved forts on the Southern line of defense and is attractive for people interested in military history and the Dogra heritage of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to the engineering marvel of the 20th century, Upper Jhelum Canal, especially its old head at the River Jhelum is quite an interesting place.

Bhimber has a historical value that gives it a distinct competitive identity. It lies on the route that was followed by the Mughal Emperors for their frequent visits to the Kashmir Valley. It is also known as '*Baab-e-Kashmir*' (Door to Kashmir) because of the importance of its geographical location as

the best place to enter Kashmir. Mughal Emperor Jahangir has also given a detailed account of Bhimber in his book *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*. Bhimber is rich in Mughal heritage, having important places like the Mughal Mosque, Bavly (Water Point), Mughal Graveyard and Mughal Inn of the Saadabad in Samahni. The branding of Bhimber as a site of Mughal Heritage with preservation of the Inn and Mughal theme park can draw a lot of tourists. Baba Shadi Shaheed, a sufi saint from the area was a unique symbol of shared cultural heritage. He was the first Chib Rajput to convert to Islam during the reign of Babur. It's an important shrine

for the Dogra Rajput tribe, revered by both Muslims and Hindus across the LoC and it can be developed as a symbol of shared heritage.

Further, Samahni Valley in Bhimber surrounded by mountains offers breathtaking natural scenes with waterfalls coming down the hills, streams flowing and the crystal clear Baghsar Lake. Bhimber also borders the LoC and has experienced the impact of the Kashmir conflict which can be factored into developing peace sensitive tourism in the area.



PHOTO: SAOOD HAMEED (BANJOSA LAKE, RAWALAKOT)

## 3. DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM SECTOR IN AJ&K

Tourism as a major economic activity in the AJ&K region can be described as a post-independence phenomenon. Although tourism existed during the British rule, the numbers of tourists was limited due to the region's prevailing political climate and poor infrastructure in the region. The important routes existing before 1947 were primarily used for economic activity and the movement of people. For example, the famous Silk Route from China to Central Asia via Ladakh was primarily a trade route and not meant for tourists. The road from Gilgit to Srinagar via Astore was used for administrative, educational, and trade purposes, and not for tourism. The same can be said about the Srinagar–Rawalpindi and Jammu–Sialkot routes.<sup>15</sup>

However, the border districts—for example, Rajouri and Poonch on the Indian side and Mirpur, Kotli, and Bhimber on the Pakistani side—saw more tourist activity, especially in terms of visits to Sufi shrines, which were dotted all along the LoC and still exist today. Both in the Kashmir Valley and in Rajouri and Poonch districts, there are numerous shrines of Sufi saints who cut across regional and religious divides. For example, Shahdra Sharif, near Rajouri, is an important shrine where Baba Ghulam Shah is revered by Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs from all over the region.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of older pre-1947 routes, there was the famous (South) Silk Route linking Ladakh to Gilgit and Baltistan. Other important routes were the Gilgit–Astore–Srinagar route, the Anantnag–Srinagar–

Muzaffarabad–Rawalpindi route, and the Jammu–Sialkot–Lahore–New Delhi route, besides numerous smaller axes within the erstwhile Poonch kingdom. The primary movement on these major routes was for economic and political purposes, not for touristic ones.

### 3.1. Tourism Infrastructure Development

The region's potential for tourism remained untapped largely due to official apathy, lack of resources and inadequate basic infrastructure—road and communication links, transport facilities and inadequate accommodation. The absence of a tourism policy, inadequate technical know how, absence of public-private partnership and frequent man-made and natural disasters<sup>17</sup> further marred the development of tourism in the region. The 2005 earthquake damaged road infrastructure as well as 22 of the 30 Rest houses that were used for tourism purposes.<sup>18</sup> After the earthquake, however, as part of the reconstruction process taking place in the area, efforts were made to develop tourism infrastructure and basic amenities for tourists coming to AJ&K.

Initially, the AJ&K Tourism Department restricted its development activities to the areas which were connected with good roads and where some other basic infrastructure was available. However, with the gradual improvement of general infrastructure and in view of the growing requirements the scope of the tourist activities was expanded.

<sup>15</sup> P. R. Chari, D. Suba Chandran, and Shaheen Akhtar, *Tourism and Peacebuilding in Jammu and Kashmir*, Special Report, 281, July 2011. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> AJ&K Tourism Policy 2019, AJ&Ktourism.gov.pk. p.2

<sup>18</sup> Azad Jammu & Kashmir at a Glance 2014. 98.

Through the Mid Term Development Framework (MTDF) 2005-10, the Tourism Department implemented various development projects with the main objective of developing reasonable accommodation and providing other necessary facilities at places of tourist interest. As a result, a network of 38 Tourist Lodges was established throughout AJ&K was established. The financial allocation made in this period stood at Rs. 227.00 million, out of which only Rs. 140.456 million was utilized largely due to capacity issues of the Tourism Department.<sup>19</sup>

**The region's potential for tourism remained untapped largely due to inadequate basic infrastructure—road and communication links, and reasonable accommodation. The absence of a tourism policy, public-private partnership; lack of resources and frequent natural disasters further marred the development of tourism in the region.**

**Table 1**  
**Tourism Sector Financial Performance MTDF 2005-10 (Million Rs.)**

Allocation	Utilization	%age Utilization
227.00	140.456	62%

*Source: A Comprehensive Plan for Development of Tourism in AJ&K, AJ&K Tourism and Archaeology Department*

In the past one decade or so, the government of AJ&K started allocating more development budget than before for the construction of roads and building other infrastructure, especially in those areas which have major places of tourist attractions. As a result, the tourism outlay in Annual Development Plan (ADP) grew gradually from a meager amount of Rs. 16.900 million in 2001-02<sup>20</sup> to Rs. 200 million in 2019-20; though it is still less than one percent of the total ADP. The government also launched the Piyara Kashmir (Beautiful Kashmir) program in 2009 in the areas that fall within

a half-kilometer belt along the LoC. Under this program, Rs. 275 million were set aside for tourism-related infrastructure development. Ninety percent of the tourism budget was for infrastructure development, such as tourist rest houses, huts, lodges, motels, and related facilities.

A large number of hotels and guest houses have been built by both public and private sectors' actors to cater to the fast-growing accommodation and catering needs of tourism. By the year 2018 the number of public sector tourist resorts, lodges, and huts had

<sup>19</sup> A Comprehensive Plan for Development of Tourism in AJ&K, Azad Jammu Kashmir Tourism & Archaeology Department, NEC June 01, 2009) Approach Paper Strategies.

<sup>20</sup> AJ&K at a Glance 2001-02. Statistical Year Book, AJ&K 2019.

**Table 2**  
**Tourism Sector ADP Allocation, Share and Utilization (2009-10 to 2019-20) (Rs. in million)**

Year	Allocation	Utilization	% utilization on Allocation
2009-10	103.000	-	-
2010-11	65.336	57.273	88%
2012-13	68.708	66.599	99.5%
2013-14	116.508	115.863	99%
2014-15	115.000	115.184	100%
2015-16	140.000	-	-
2016-17	160.000	65.316	40.82%
2017-18	164.431	153.364	93.26%
2018-19	161.000	160.854	99.90%
2019-20	200.000/	-	-
2020-21	200.000	-	-

*Source: AJ&K BoS Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad.*

increased from 30 to 83<sup>21</sup> which provide decent accommodation to the tourists. During the last eight years, a great number of guest houses have been built by the private sector. Over 500 guest houses have been constructed in the Neelum Valley which, just a decade ago, was considered a remote and underdeveloped region;<sup>22</sup> whilst over 225 guest houses with reasonable facilities and modest rates have been built in Rawalakot.

Besides, a large number of hotels, guest houses, and small picnic points are being established by the local community in various regions of AJ&K to cater to the requirements of tourists. A large number of resi-

dential houses have also been turned into guest houses to get the benefits of large number of tourist arrivals in the region. The local businessmen and those working in the Gulf States are also investing in the tourism sector. A number of new tourism operators have set up companies in the recent years for groups in the area. They use websites, blogs, and social media to attract customers.

The communication links have also been improved since AJ&K opened up to multinational cellular companies after the 2005 earthquake. Special Communication Organization (SCO), a subsidiary of the Pakistan

<sup>21</sup> Statistical Year Book, AJ&K 2019. 178.

<sup>22</sup> The data maintained by the Tourism Department shows that there were only 114 guesthouses in the valley till 2014, the number shot to 312 in just two years. Currently, the number of guesthouses in the valley stands at 500.

Army, and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) provide telephone services in the region. However, due to security reasons and difficult terrain, Neelum and Leepa Valleys in the Muzaffarabad division and Haveli District in the Poonch division, that straddle the heavily militarized Line of Control (LoC), were having only fixed lines phone service in general and mobile phone facility, SCOM, in particular which were not very effective. The communication links in these areas have gradually improved and in 2016, cellular services were upgraded in the Neelum Valley. According to AJ&K Sector Commander of SCO, the telecom company had not only improved its fixed line phone services and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) internet services but also upgraded its mobile telephone service (GSM) across the State, particularly in the areas popular with tourists. In this context, 11 DSL BTS were installed in the Neelum Valley and another 4 were to be installed soon to boost services. Mobile services were also extended to Kel, in the upper part of the valley, and DSL facilities have also been made available in almost all towns.<sup>23</sup> SCO has also introduced tourist SIM cards in the Neelum Valley. DSL and mobile phone services had also been introduced in Leepa Valley, though on a limited scale in the beginning. In 2016, the federal government also decided to extend the 3G and 4G internet facility to Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and AJ&K. In 2017, PTCL, Pakistan's leading ICT and Broadband service provider, launched the Charji 4G LTE service in AJ&K. PTCL is the first operator offering

next-generation wireless 4G LTE service in AJ&K.<sup>24</sup> According to PTA Jazz, Telenor, Zong, Ufone and the SCO companies have installed around 1,100 cell sites in AJ&K. Out of these, four mobile operators except for Ufone are already providing 3G/4G services in AJ&K.<sup>25</sup> Due to improved and better telecommunication conditions, there was an increase in the number of tourists visiting the Neelum Valley. According to Secretary Tourism AJ&K, the Department is developing Tourism App to facilitate incoming tourists especially those going to the Neelum Valley.

### 3.2. Growth in Domestic Tourists inflow

Domestic tourism is more predominant in AJ&K compared to international tourism. Due to security considerations foreigners are not allowed to visit tourist areas close to the LoC. In AJ&K, the domestic tourist inflow increased after 2005 despite limited accommodation available at various tourist destinations. According to some estimates provided by the AJ&K Department of Tourism and Archaeology, the domestic tourist traffic moving into AJ&K assessed in terms of inbound vehicular movement at nine entry points was about 1.84 million in 2008.<sup>26</sup> It went up to 1.93 million in 2009.<sup>27</sup>

The increased inflow of domestic tourists is due to improvement in infrastructure, exposure of AJ&K as a tourist destination in the wake of the 2005 earthquake, a shift of at-

<sup>23</sup> Tariq Naqash, "Cellular services upgraded in AJ&K's Neelum Valley", *Dawn*, February 22, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> AJ&K Prime Minister inaugurates PTCL Char Ji 4G LTE service in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, June 14, 2017. <https://ptcl.com.pk/Home/PressReleaseDetail/?ItemId=544&LinkId=130>

<sup>25</sup> Kalbe Ali, "IT ministry briefed on connectivity in AJ&K, GB", *Dawn*, April 12, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> The data is based on the World Tourism Organization's definition of "tourist": "people who travel to and staying places outside their usual environment for more than twenty-four hours and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited."

<sup>27</sup> Since, there is no proper documentation of tourist data in this period, the vehicular movement only provides rough estimates as many locals from AJ&K travel to and from Islamabad for different purposes on regular basis.

tention away from conflict-ridden Swat<sup>28</sup> to AJ&K as a tourist destination, and the secure and hospitable environment of the AJ&K. In addition, a large number of visitors come as religious tourists. Nearly one million tourists visit famous shrines such as Khari Sharif, Narian Sharif, Baba Shadi Shaeed, Mai Toti Sahiba, and Saheli Sarkar each year. AJ&K has a rich Kashmiri diaspora living across the world that visits their homeland quite regularly. Thus, the majority of international visitors to AJ&K belong mostly to this group. A conservative figure provided by the AJ&K Department of Tourism and Archaeology states that about one hundred thousand diaspora Kashmiris visit AJ&K each year.

In the past decade, domestic tourism in AJ&K has flourished phenomenally. The domestic tourists during 2010-15 were numbered

about 5.6 million. They came for social, cultural, heritage, religious and recreational tourism. In 2010 the number of tourists visiting the region stood at 0.5 million which registered a steady increase in the next few years, hitting 1.56 million in 2016. It was a remarkable increase in year on year basis.

**The main point of the tourist influx has remained Neelum Valley which attracts tourists on account of its scenic beauty. The tourist activities are however, dependent upon the tension on the LoC with India and a number of times, the Neelum Valley road has been closed due to security reasons.**

**Table 3**  
**Tourist inflow in AJ&K 2010-18 in millions**

Year	No of visitors
2010	0.500
2011	0.650
2012	0.750
2013	0.654
2014	0.898
2015	1.143
2016	1.562
2017	0.752
2018	1.252
2019	1.500

*Source: AJ&K BoS Planning & Development Department, Muzaffarabad.*

<sup>28</sup> Swat faced Taliban militancy led by Maulana Sufi Muhammad from 2007 to 2009 which affected flow of tourism in the area.

The main point of the tourist influx has remained Neelum Valley which attracts tourists on account of its scenic beauty. The number of tourists travelling to the Neelum Valley also increased in the past few years due to the construction of the 76km long Neelum Road. Around 8.4m tourists visit-

ed all parts of AJ&K during 2010-2017.<sup>29</sup> The tourist activities are however, dependent upon the tension on the LoC with India and a number of times, the Neelum Valley road has been closed on account of security reasons. The following table also shows the district wise inflow of tourists in AJ&K during 2016 and 2018.

**Table 4**  
**District wise number of Tourists/Visitors Entered/Visited**  
**AJ&K 2016-18 (in Millions)**

District	2016		2017		2018	
	Nos. in mil	%	Nos. in mil	%	Nos. in mil	%
Muzaffarabad	0.101	06	0.102	10	0.100	08
Neelum	0.725	46	0.215	28	0.525	42
Jhelum Valley	0.043	03	0.040	06	0.075	06
Bagh	0.101	06	0.080	06	0.113	09
Haveli	0.043	03	0.030	04	0.038	03
Poonch	0.290	18	0.035	11	0.200	16
Sudhnoti	0.072	05	0.065	09	0.050	04
Kotli	0.073	05	0.070	10	0.075	06
Mirpur	0.042	03	0.040	06	0.038	03
Bhimber	0.072	05	0.075	10	0.038	03
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.562</b>	100	<b>0.752</b>	100	<b>1.252</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: AJ&K Tourism Department and Statistical Year Book, 2019.



## 4. THE TOURISM POLICY FRAMEWORK 2019

AJ&K's first ever Tourism Policy was launched in 2019. The Tourism Policy envisages a broader vision of sustainable tourism with key targeted partners in the public sector, tourists, private sector and local community. It has twelve broader objectives encompassing standardization, branding, marketing, private investment with infrastructural improvement and heritage conservation, diversification of tourist destination and effective coordination of all stakeholders.<sup>30</sup> Over the next five years, the policy aimed to achieve its vision through an institutional framework, coordinated public private involvement and adequate resource mobilization. The master plan of the AJ&K Tourism in the form of a "Tourism Corridor" is guided by the new Tourism policy. The major features of the policy are given below.

- **Tourism declared an Industry:** The policy declared 'Tourism as Industry' and stressed the need for a practical approach to tap its potential job creation capacity. It identified creation of allied industries like hotels, resorts, food beverages, sports, handicrafts and other value chains. In this regard, the Tourism Department, AJ&K TEVTA, technical Educational Institutes, Universities and other such organizations would impart relevant trainings as per assessment of the needs of the local community.
- **Standardization and Regulations of tourism:** The policy emphasized the provision of quality service delivery along with standardization of services so as to ensure customer's satisfaction. The steps include up-

grading the obsolete laws governing the tourism sector; setting up of standard and benchmarks for the tourism sector; enforcement of standards and the certification and training and development of human resources in the Hospitality sector. New regulatory mechanism for Hotels, tour operators, guide & service providers have been instituted for defining roles and responsibilities of public and private sectors, and the conservation of environment have been instituted. The construction of buildings by following the laws specific to an area would be adhered by in letter and spirit.

- **Public-private partnerships:** The policy identified government as a facilitator and regulator that will encourage private sector investment by removing bottlenecks and skepticism regarding the certification of investment. Incentives as well as one window operation should be available for maximum investment by the private sector. The government has developed the Tourism Promotion Act, 2018 containing incentives for tourism.
- **Branding of tourist destinations:** The policy plans to work on the branding and marketing of tourism destinations and products. The department, in consultation with public and private experts would develop national as well as regional slogans for AJ&K Tourism along with specific product development of particular area.

- **Diversification of Tourists destinations:** Destination and product diversification is direly needed to harmonize all areas of AJ&K, provide them with equal opportunities to flourish and manage the tourist influx amicably.
- **Promoting eco-tourism and health tourism:** The policy stresses the need of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to be part of all types of private incentives to ensure promotion of eco-friendly tourism. Health and thermal tourism<sup>31</sup> potential of southern region such as hot water spring Tatta Pani; faith, cultural and natural heritage of the neighboring areas of Mirpur, and Poonch and the master plan for winter tourism of the northern region will be developed.
- **Identification and Conservation of heritage assets and religious sites:** The policy stresses making faith, historical and cultural tourism an integral part of tourism initiatives in AJ&K. Towards that end, it lays emphasis on the identification, protection and rehabilitation of the archaeological assets of AJ&K, mapping of archaeological and historical religious sites; channelizing the expertise of private organization for conservation of heritage sites and establishment of cultural historical and environmental museum.
- **Effective coordination with other departments for tourism promotion and development:** The policy underscores the urgent need for raising awareness and promoting effective coordination among all the key stakeholders linked with the tourism industry. For safety and risk management; Police, Army and Disaster Management related departments would be included. Similarly, a closer coordination with the Environment Protection Agency, Forest, Agriculture & livestock Departments, local administration and NGOs will promote tourism effectively. A Tourism police with special features of unique uniform, motor bikes and vehicles for patrolling was envisaged.
- **'Tourism police':** A trained and well-equipped 'tourism police' force was formed in 2019 in AJ&K to facilitate tourists during their visit to the region. According to the AJ&K Police Department, initially, 120 tourism police personnel have been deployed at Kohala, Bararkot and Azad Pattan, the three points linking AJ&K with Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Eventually, the tourism police's presence will be extended to all districts of AJ&K. Besides extended patrolling, a helpline has also been established to enable tourists to directly access the tourism police in case of any emergency.
- **Institutional strengthening of AJ&K Tourism Department:** AJ&K Tourism Department is the government body responsible for the promotion of tourism in AJ&K. However being one of the 52 subjects of AJ&K Council, under the Interim Constitution of 1974, licensing of tourism activities in AJ&K was the authority of AJ&K Council whereas the AJ&K government had no authority to offer incentives and

<sup>31</sup> Thermal tourism is classified as part of health tourism. Thermal waters have been used since ancient times for health purposes. In ancient times, people would visit places that were believed to have healing powers. In AJ&K spa facilities built at hot spring in Kotli district can serve as health tourism spots.

concessions (tax holidays, markup free loan, duty free status on tourism related machinery & equipment etc.). Following the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in AJ&K act 1974, the registration and licensing authority being transferred to AJ&K, the AJ&K Tourism Department has modified:

- o AJ&K Tourism Promotion Act, 2018
- o AJ&K Hotel & Restaurants Act& Rules, 2018
- o AJ&K Travel Agencies Acts& Rules, 2018
- o AJ&K Tour Guides Act & Rules, 2018
- The Tourism Policy 2019 will be supplemented with laws prevailing in the jurisdiction of AJ&K including:
  - a. Foreign Investment Rules
  - b. Protection and Preservation of Cultural Heritage Regions Law 1998 (Amended by Law No. 1 of 2009)
  - c. Environment Conservation Law 2012
  - d. Environment Conservation Regulations 2014<sup>32</sup>
- **Tourism Regulatory Body:** A regulatory system will also be put in place for registration, certification, control, inspection, and application of punitive measures such as fines and cessation of operating in case of violations. TRB will establish Destination Management Organizations comprising of local community of the area to be develop the local area as tourist destination.

## 4.1. Tourism Corridor

In order to develop tourism potential in an effective way, the AJ&K Government has proposed a 190 km-long tourism corridor which will connect tourism sites and facilitate tourists in four districts-Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, Bagh and Rawalakot. The first corridor is in the Jhelum Valley and Poonch, the second in the Neelum Valley and the third in Kotli-Mirpur. The Corridor has following connecting destinations.

- a. Chikkar, Sudhangali, Ganga Choti, PirKanthi, Shero Dhaara, Haji Pir, Lasdanna Ghorri Maar, Tolipir, Jandali, Devi Gali
- b. Patikka, Bhairi, Baan, Chp Ser, Payya Top
- c. Kahori, Ghehna, Sangher Gali

The project will be developed under a Public-Private Partnership. The estimated cost is about Rs. 22 billion. The Government of Pakistan has provided a seed grant of Rs. 8 billion to kick off the project while the Prime Minister of AJ&K invited the private sector, particularly the overseas Kashmiris, to invest in the major road network improvement project to strengthen public-private partnership in the emerging business opportunities in the region. The President of AJ&K has stated that the project will be part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>33</sup> The initiative is a part of the mega project to construct 1,450 kilometre-long new roads in the Valley.

The AJ&K Tourism & Archaeology Department has conducted a detailed Survey and Feasibility Study of AJ&K Tourism Corridor through a private consultant firm during the

<sup>32</sup> AJ&K Tourism Policy 2019.

<sup>33</sup> AJ&K plans tourism corridor along CPEC, *Express Tribune*, April 7, 2017. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1376726/AJ&K-plans-tourism-corridor-along-cpec>

years 2017-18. The feasibility study of 14 sites estimates a cost of Rs. 10,530 million for the execution/ implementation of the proposed corridor. The study suggest construction of new roads (196 km) and upgrading of existing roads (95 km), development of 17 rest areas along tourism corridor, development of artificial lakes and hiking tracks, provision of electricity and water at tourist spots, development of documentaries on Tourism in AJ&K and development of clusters of handi-craft outlets /souvenir shops.<sup>34</sup>

## 4.2. Destination Development

Under the Tourism corridor project, feasibility studies of 14 sites have been completed. These include tourism facilities in Chikkar, Sudhan Gali, Ganga Choti, Pir Kanthi, Haji

Pir, Lasdanna, Ghori Mar and ToliPir. Most of the destinations fall in safer zones but there are some destinations vulnerable to LoC shelling. For instance, PirKanthi located in district Bagh in the mountains of Pir-Panjal Range is quite vulnerable to shelling from across LoC. In view of the prevailing situation, the Tourism Department team could not visit the area to identify locations for the development of tourist facilities. The upgradation of the road to Pir Kanthi that can facilitate development of tourist facilities is also waiting for peace between the two countries.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Haji Pir is located close to the LoC between India and Pakistan at a height of 7,828 feet. The area faces shelling across the border and is militarized. Being a vulnerable area on account of cross firing on Line of Control, no tourist facilities are proposed in this area.

### Tourism Corridor



Source: [AJ&Ktourism.gov.pk](http://AJ&Ktourism.gov.pk)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> PirKanthi is accessible by a 24 KM road from Qadeerabad. The 10 KM road is black topped and the remaining 14 KM is a jeepable track.

The Corridor will provide connectivity between the identified destinations on the entire routes and most of the destinations are away from the LoC. New facilities and points of attraction for tourists (access roads, sites development, tourist lodges/huts/accommodation, camping sites, restaurants, rest areas, children parks, tuck shops, food stalls, petrol pumps, and service stations) will be built along the Corridor while the existing sites will be improved /renovated with the new facilities. The Corridor will be built by the private sector with the support and regulatory supervision of the public sector/ Government of AJ&K.

The first of three tourism corridors was opened in December 2018. The new Azad

Pattan-Rawalakot Highway links Poonch, Haveli and Kotli and serves as a direct link between 10 districts of the State. According to Project Coordination Unit Director General Mohammad Bashir Khan, the travel time from Azad Pattan to Kahuta Haveli has now been reduced by more than two hours. Earlier, it was four and half hours. There has been a massive increase in the volume of traffic and a reduction in freight charges. The new road is facilitating tourists to travel easily to Banjosa, Tolipir, Lasdanna, Hajipir and Tatrinite crossing points.<sup>36</sup> The 34 km road has been built with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under the Flood Emergency Reconstruction and Resilience project.



**PHOTO: SAOOD HAMEED** (NEEL FAIRY LAKE, KAHUTA, DISTRICT HAVELI)

<sup>36</sup> Amin Ahmed, "First of 3 AJ&K tourism corridors opened", *Dawn*, December 31, 2018.

## 5. CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN AJ&K

### 5.1. The Impact of LoC Tensions:

A majority of the scenic places that tourists want to visit are situated close to the LoC. The destinations in the region most popular with tourists include the historic Sharda Town, Ratti Gali Lake, Chitta Khatta Lake, Patlain Lake, Keran, Upper Neelum, Kutton, Jagran, Baboon Valley, Arang Kel and Toabutt. After the 2003 ceasefire, the Neelum Valley Road was opened and the locals started rebuilding their lives and homes, as well as re-establishing their businesses. The tourists from across the country started flocking to the area. The boom in the tourism industry brought the locals multiple opportunities for earning a living, subsequently providing a major source of income for many families in the region. Further, government and private sector investors and locals set up small- and medium-scale guest houses where they hosted tourists and earned a livelihood for themselves. In 2014, only 114 guest houses were registered in the Neelum Valley. In 2016, the tally had risen to 314. By the end of 2018, a list compiled by the Tourism Department showed that the number of guest houses in the area had reached 520.<sup>37</sup> According to the Tourism Department, approximately 600,000 tourists visited Neelum Valley in 2014.

But after the killing of Burhan Wani in July 2016, the sporadic firing and shelling on the LoC became the new normal. The tourists' inflow dwindled dramatically due to the resumption of shelling on the LoC in the wake of fast deteriorating bilateral ties between

the two countries. According to the data provided by district police in the Neelum Valley, the number of tourists dropped to 365,500 in 2015 and declined further by 70 percent in the next two years owing to the uncertain situation. When the political situation showed signs of improvement in 2018, the number jumped once again to 215,760. However, after Balakot attack in February 2019, frequent exchange of fire at the LoC became the norm again. The number of tourists instantly showed a decline. In 2019, only 170,856 tourists visited the area till October 10.<sup>38</sup> According to the data provided by the State Disaster Management Authority 12 out of 59 civilians that were killed and 73 out of 263 injured at the LoC during 2019 belonged to the Neelum Valley; however no tourists were harmed. The shelling also damaged, partially or completely, a total of 309 houses, 79 shops, 18 vehicles, two schools, a hospital and a mosque. In addition in 2019, many of the guest houses owners' were unable to even pay the rent for the houses or salaries to their staff in 2019. As a result, many of the workers either remained unpaid or moved to work in other cities.<sup>39</sup>

While the AJ&K government declared 2019, the 'year of tourism', Indian shelling turned the Neelum Valley into a no-go area for many tourists. The Neelum Valley is a seasonal tourist destination. May-September is the peak season, while very few tourists visit during the winter due to the harsh weather and snowfall. Those affiliated with the tourism industry have only five months to earn enough money to sustain themselves and their families for the entire year. "But this season, hotels and guest houses stood

<sup>37</sup> Jalaluddin Mughal, "Travelling to the Valley of fear", *Dawn*, January 5, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

empty as people shied away from entering the area for their security and well-being,” said a tour operator Khawaja Riaz. Riaz works as a tour operator in the Neelum Valley. In previous years, he would host an average of 12 to 15 major group tours during the peak tourist season between May and September. But this year he brought only three group tours of 40 people each to the Valley.<sup>40</sup>

According to Khawaja Raeesuddin, an official at the Tourism Department, an estimated 20,000 people, most of them locals, directly or indirectly depend on tourism for their livelihood in the Neelum Valley. Investors have hired hundreds of locals as cleaners, cooks, waiters, drivers, porters and tour guides.<sup>41</sup> Shopkeepers, suppliers and taxi drivers also benefited from this sector of economy. A considerable number of villagers sell their fruits such as apples, grapes, cherries, apricots and plums to tourists. “But none of them consider tourism as a sustainable source of income due to the uncertainty,” said Raeesuddin. According to Abdul Razaq Mughal who runs Kashmir Sharda View Hotel, about 30,000 to 40,000 families were affected by drastic shortfall of tourists to the Neelum Valley in the summer 2019.<sup>42</sup> Tourism in the Muzaffarabad city that serves as a transit point to Neelum Valley suffered very badly. The hotel/ guest houses owners, tour operators asked the Government to provide them some relief package to cover the losses.

In 2019, the Tourism Department had planned many activities to celebrate the Tourism Year, including adventure sports competitions, family galas, cultural and food festivals, said Midhat Shahzad, Secretary Tourism, AJ&K, but nothing went according to plan and events were called off because of the security situation.<sup>43</sup> The first-ever International Paragliding tournament in Muzaffarabad was also cancelled after test flights. Besides, arrangements for the tournament activities were disrupted by the situation at the LoC in the wake of August 5 move by India abrogating Article 370 and 35-A giving special semi-autonomous status to India-Administered Kashmir. As firing and shelling on the LoC continued, tourism in Neelum Valley suffered in the year 2020 as well. Syed Asif Hussain Shah, additional chief secretary of AJ&K says: “Tourism is directly linked with peace. Tourists cannot travel in bombproof vehicles or stay in bunkers.”<sup>44</sup>

The security constraints also manifest in restrictions on the mobility of the foreign tourists closer to areas along the LoC. Further, foreigners earlier required a no-objection certificate (NoC) to visit AJ&K. On January 26, 2019, when the Federal Government updated its visa policy and started granting visas on arrival to tourists from 50 countries, it conditionally abrogated the requirement of a no-objection certificate (NoC) to visit AJ&K. It was expected that, gradually, the region would receive visitors from abroad also. But due to prevailing security situation between India and Pakistan and on the LoC it has not

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Abdul Razaq Mughal, Kashmir Sharda View Hotel, Chairman Tourism Association, Muzaffarabad Division. A Round table discussion with the hotel owners and tour operators organized by the author in collaboration with Department of Tourism and Archaeology and CPDR at Muzaffarabad, December 31, 2019 revealed that local tourism industry in AJ&K has suffered huge financial losses due to resumption of firing and shelling on the LoC.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Midhat Shahzad, Secretary Tourism, AJ&K, Muzaffarabad, December 31, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Jalaluddin Mughal, “Travelling to the Valley of fear”, *Dawn*, January 5, 2020.

happened and the number of foreigners visiting AJ&K could not cross triple digits. A tourism official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that an “unannounced ban” still remains imposed, as defense authorities do not allow foreign tourists to enter AJ&K through entry points and turn many of them back to Islamabad.<sup>45</sup>

## 5.2. The Impact of COVID-19

Global Tourism industry suffered the most due to the impact of COVID-19 which led to travel restrictions and quarantine rules enforced by all the states.<sup>46</sup> COVID-19 heavily impacted the tourism sector in Pakistan also.<sup>47</sup> Tourism in AJ&K already reeling under the LoC tension suffered huge losses due to COVID-19 during the summer 2020. In view of growing incidence of COVID-19, the AJ&K government imposed three-week lockdown in the region on March 23, 2020 which went on for another five months. Under the lockdown, all kinds of transport were suspended and in case of emergency people were required to obtain a travelling pass from the authorities concerned. As a corollary, all tourist spots including Neelum Valley, Jhelum Valley, Rawalakot, Banjosa lake etc were closed and the roads leading to these points were also closed on the entry points of AJ&K.

The COVID-19 lockdown badly affected the tourism industry in the region. The lack of business forced even the Pearl-Continental

Hotel, Muzaffarabad to shut down its operations indefinitely. According to Midhat Shahzad, the Tourism Secretary in the AJ&K government, around two million tourists were expected to visit the AJ&K in 2020. On July 23, hundreds of people associated with the tourism industry staged demonstrations in at least three famous tourist destinations Muzaffarabad, Rawalakot and Athmuqam (Neelum valley), calling upon the government to ease restrictions on the tourism sector enforced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to help them earn a living for their dependents. All Kashmir Tour Operators’ Association maintained that the lockdowns and restrictions had affected the livelihood of around 500,000 people affiliated with the tourism industry.<sup>48</sup> Adnan Awan, one of the participants, said those who owned small hotels and rest houses were not even able to pay utility bills, let alone salaries of their necessary staff. He asked the government to review its decision and allow tourists, with strict adherence to the SOPs, to help the tourism sector stand on its feet. He called upon the government to grant interest free loans to people affiliated with this sector and waive off their utility bills.<sup>49</sup>

According to Ershad Pirzada, DG Tourism AJ&K, due to COVID-19, estimated losses suffered by the tourism sector in just 3 months were Rs. 1 billion which by August 2020 rose to around Rs. 3 billion.<sup>50</sup> Officially, in 614 ho-

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> International tourist arrivals declined 70% in January-August 2020 over the same period of last year, this represents 700 million fewer international tourist arrivals compared to the same period in 2019, and translates into a loss of US\$ 730 billion in export revenues from international tourism. <https://www.unwto.org/impact-assessment-of-the-covid-19-outbreak-on-international-tourism>

<sup>47</sup> The closure of tourism industry incurred around Rs. 800 billion direct loss (March 2019 to July 2020) while rendering around 3 million people jobless. “Closure of tourism industry incurred around Rs. 800 b loss, renders 3 million jobless”, *The News*, July 15, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Tariq Naqash, “AJ&K tourism industry urges govt to ease restrictions”, *Dawn*, July 26, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with the author, at Rawalakot, August 31, 2020.



tels alone, 12500 workers were laid off while 300 tour operators were directly affected. In the Neelum Valley, a leading tourist destination in the region about 25,000 families, have been affected by the impact of COVID-19 on tourism. At a Roundtable discussion organized by the author at Rawalakot, the owners of small hotels/resorts and tour operators maintained that COVID-19 has badly damaged their livelihood, and that the workforce associated with the industry and their families has had to face severe hardships.<sup>51</sup> They demanded financial support from the government or waivers in utility bills and taxes. Tanveer Qureshi, who runs a wedding hall in Muzaffarabad, says that the Government needs to ensure that the AJ&K Bank grants interest-free loans to tour operators as well as guest house and marriage hall owners – otherwise, he fears, many locals may go out of business.

On August 21, the Government decided to reopen the region for tourism and put in place an elaborate set of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and safety measures to prevent any spread of the disease. Authorities also directed the owners of guest houses, hotels and restaurants to ensure that safety measures are strictly followed. The arrival of tourists increased phenomenally as pandemic-related restrictions were lifted. Tourist destinations in Rawalakot and Bagh are mostly located away from the LoC and any exchange of fire between the Indian forces and Pakistan Army do not affect tourist activities. The local press reported that since Eid-ul-Fitr holidays, over 100,000 tourists had flocked to Rawalakot. The Neelum

Valley and Muzaffarabad region also witnessed a large number of tourists 'arrivals. According to the Tourism Department, over 35,000 tourists visited the Neelum Valley and Muzaffarabad region in 10 days.

### 5.3. Capacity & Resource Constraint

The AJ&K Tourism & Archaeology Department set up in the 1970s has been neglected by successive governments, in terms of providing it with both trained staff and requisite resource allocation.<sup>52</sup> Since the 2005 earthquake the emphasis has been on the development of tourism infrastructure in AJ&K but capacity of the Tourism Department has remained limited. There are budgetary constraints as well. Despite the fact that tourism is a major sector of local economy, the budgetary allocation to this sector continues to be less than one percent which is inadequate to cater for the infrastructure building and maintenance demand of the sector.

The COVID-19 lockdown badly affected the tourism industry in AJ&K. All Kashmir Tour Operators' Association stated that the lockdowns and restrictions had affected the livelihood of around 500,000 people affiliated with the tourism industry.

<sup>51</sup> A Roundtable Discussion on "Impact of COVID-19 on AJ&K Tourism and way forward", was conducted by the author at Rawalakot, August 31, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> An archaeology wing has been created within the Department that has started working from January 2010 and the Department has been renamed as Department of Tourism and Archaeology.

# Recommendations

**Based on extensive research and consultations with the relevant stakeholders-government officials, political leaders, hospitality sector service providers and members of civil society over the past two years, the study makes following recommendations for the promotion of sustainable tourism in AJ&K.**

## **AJ&K Government / Department of Tourism and Archaeology, AJ&K**

- To make the tourism policy more inclusive based upon the broader framework of trade, travel and sustainable tourism. The local communities should be made part of the destination planning and management process as it is linked with their livelihood and also because they are the ones who can actually make it sustainable.
- To develop tourism as an industry in which destination development and branding should be given the utmost importance. Further evidence based research is needed for branding of all destinations of AJ&K so as to identify significant 'Rational attributes' to maximize the 'Emotional Benefits' and to identify more destinations of optimum brand personality and develop these destinations' "Brand Essence" accordingly.
- To develop and brand already recognized favorite destinations like the shrine of Khari Shareef by adding value through developing "Theme Park" based upon the core asset (epic 'saiful malook'). This would enhance the perception of the potential visitors regarding core asset of the destination.
- For the promotion of heritage tourism, the AJ&K government should identify potential sites, publicise these sites and preserve them. The restoration and sustainable development of places of unique identity and personality like Sharda as a destination of heritage tourism for Buddhists around the world especially from Korea and Japan and China, and Kashmiri Pandits' from LoC East should be accorded priority.
- To restore /preserve historical forts including the fort at Mangla, Ramkot, Throchi, Karjai, Baghsar, Sahnsa, Baral and Muzaffarabad is much needed. These are places of attraction for tourists interested in heritage tourism, potential visitors from across the LoC having interest in monuments of the Dogra heritage of Kashmir and students of military history in particular. Preservation of the Stone Age monuments at heritage sites also needs attention.
- To protect archaeological and natural heritage sites from encroachment, the AJ&K government must bring them under the AJ&K Preservation and Protection of Antiquities Act, 1986 which prohibits initiation or execution of a development plan or new construction on or within a distance of 200 feet of a protected immovable antiquity. Local community, government departments and individuals directly concerned with management of these sites should be trained and their capacity building be carried out.

- To integrate environmental standards in the building codes and solid waste management system installed in major tourist areas. The unregulated influx of tourists is damaging the environment especially in the Neelum Valley which should not be ignored by the authorities.
- To further develop and capacitate the Department of Tourism and Archaeology with required expertise to undertake the task of destination development and branding. There is a dire need to hone the professional capacity of the Department's staff by organising professional trainings locally and also facilitating such trainings abroad.
- To protect cultural and archeological history of the AJ&K region, the Government should establish Heritage museums on priority basis. Although, the AJ&K Government has announced to establish three international standard museums in the three divisions of AJ&K, yet there is a need to take practical steps to fast track work on it.
- **Public-Private Partnership/Civil Society/CBOs' Engagement**  
There should be a tangible development in reasonable accommodation and communication facilities at potential tourist spots through Public-Private Partnership. The involvement of local communities and local NGOs is essential for any such project to succeed.
- The government in collaboration with Private sector and Civil Society Organisations should improve facilities for education and training in the hospitality and tourism sectors by developing the Institute of Tourism & Hospitality (as PAITHOM<sup>53</sup> was developed in Swat in collaboration with Austria) in Muzaffarabad. The introduction of degree programs in Tourism & Archaeology at public sector universities in Rawalakot, Kotli, Mirpur and Muzaffarabad and the teaching of Tourism and Archaeology as study subjects at the secondary and higher levels would improve the capacity of the local people to appropriately brand the region's tourist attractions in the medium to long term.
- The government in collaboration with private sector and CSOs should undertake the capacity building of local youth as per tourism requirements and tourism specific syllabi according to the evolving tourist requirements and should be made a part of all vocational training institutes' Training of cooks, attendants and guides should be arranged in collaboration with renowned hotel management authorities and private institutes established all over the country, and should provide opportunity.
- **Governments of India and Pakistan**  
For the development and growth of tourism in AJ&K and the larger region of Kashmir, peaceful relations between India and Pakistan are very important which require drive towards peaceful political dialogue between the two countries.

<sup>53</sup> PAITHOM refers to the Pakistan Austrian Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management. It is an institute providing education and training on tourism and hotel management in Swat, a district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan.

- In 2012, India and Pakistan agreed to initiate religious tourism across the LoC. The stalled peace process has not only halted the progress of the opening up of religious sites on both sides of the LoC for tourism but has also endangered tourist activities in areas along the LoC in AJ&K, especially in the Neelum Valley. Both sides should strictly **observe ceasefire on the LoC**. A return to ceasefire on the LoC will not only open avenues for cross-LoC tourism, it will allow the marginalized communities living on both sides of the LoC to get rid of conflict induced poverty. It will strengthen peace infrastructure on both sides of the LoC that will help in political resolution of the conflict.
- Within this context, the governments of India and Pakistan need to revive Back Channel diplomacy so as to lower strain in bilateral relations. Further, both sides should ease cross-LoC connectivity that in fact has helped in humanizing the Kashmir conflict and stabling ceasefire on the LoC.
- **International Community/Actors**  
International key Actors can play a very positive role in encouraging India-Pakistan to stabilize ceasefire on the LoC. There is a need to strengthen the existing de-escalation measures, increasing their efficacy and finalize those under discussion; instituting credible and effective monitoring and verification mechanism for the management of ceasefire on the LoC and mechanism for investigating incidents of Ceasefire violations.
- International key UN bodies like UNESCO can play a crucial role in the promotion and protection of the cultural heritage of AJ&K. Such organizations can provide technical assistance and resources for assessing risks to the cultural heritage and investing in building resilient cultural heritage in disaster prone areas.



PHOTO: TOURISM DEPARTMENT, GOVT. AJ&K (A VIEW OF MUZAFFARABAD CITY)



**Ershad Mahmud,  
Executive Director Centre for Peace,  
Development and Reforms (CPDR)**

The vast tourism potential of Azad Jammu and Kashmir had remained largely untapped and unexplored till recent years. Of late, social media and e-commerce companies introduced the picturesque local tourism destinations to the nature-lovers across the country, causing a massive influx of tourists, finding solace in the lush green and snow-capped mountains of AJ&K. The growing tourism in the region opened up significant employment and investment opportunities in this nascent sector which has gradually become one of the most important sources of earning for the indigenous people. However, an in-depth study was long-awaited to present a holistic picture of the existing opportunities and major hurdles faced by this sector, with solid recommendations to make the required policy interventions in order to mitigate the problems and improve the quality of services, particularly for sustainable tourism which demands eco-tourism instead of creating a chain of concrete buildings. Dr. Shaheen has put together all scattered pieces of information in a report, offering a vivid analysis of the potentials and challenges of tourism development and its implications for the tourism industry of AJ&K. The author's beautiful portrayal and critical perspective provides useful information and exuberant vitality regarding this region's solid potential for further development of the tourism sector. The AJ&K Tourism Department has actively supported the research and provided the required data which is laudable. The report presents a useful perspective on the idea of public-private partnership which can open up new avenues of success and that is where the value of this enlightening research lies.



**Dr. Rukhsana Khan  
Assistant. Prof. University of AJ&K**

The research report explores the underlying potential of tourism as an industry in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The significance of the research is that it identifies tourism as a key resource which could create opportunities in AJ&K. Due to the long-standing conflict along LoC, the true potential of tourism in Kashmir could not be utilised since some of the important archaeological and natural heritage as well as tourist destinations remained inaccessible. It was after 2012 that some serious steps were taken towards developing the tourism sites, giving access to the domestic tourists. The paper also envisages integrating the cross-LoC trade and travel into tourism activities for the economic uplift of the region. Prior to the Indian unilateral action in Kashmir in 2018, the broader regional tourism map had created much optimism for utilising cross-LoC tourism as a peace building mechanism, along with providing economic opportunities for the communities in the conflict zone. The paper rightly identifies the important infrastructural, hospitality, accessibility gaps in development of a vibrant tourism industry in AJ&K. Though, in the recent past, the Government of AJ&K having an active support of stake holders, academia and local communities have embarked upon some ambitious plans to develop the tourism industry as a means to socio economic uplift of local communities which in a domino effect will empower the marginalised segments of the society and create a more tolerant society. The full potential of the tourism opportunities can only be utilized properly if the innovative ideas generated by this report and similar discourses are implemented. It is imperative that in the post COVID-19 world the new realities are considered so that local communities benefit from the resulting initiatives.



## About the Author

**Specializes in the field of regional stability, conflict resolution and peacebuilding in South Asia.**

Dr. Shaheen Akhtar has been extensively working on the traditional and non-traditional security issues in the region including tourism, gender, water, energy and climate change. She is recipient of several Fellowships including Commonwealth Professional Fellowship on Tourism and Peacebuilding (2014) and Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship by Beyond Border Scotland (2018).



Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) is endowed with great pristine beauty, mountainous landscape, religious places, cultural and archaeological heritage sites as well as historical memorials that can be employed to make this place a hub of tourism, providing livelihood opportunities to

thousands of young people in the region. For years, tourism sector remained underdeveloped and neglected. However, it is now attracting lot of attention at the higher policy echelon. The AJ&K Government launched its first ever Tourism Policy in 2019 that envisions sustainable tourism with the participation of some key targeted partners in the public sector, private sector tourists, and local community. Tourism has been declared as an industry and over the next five years, the policy aims to achieve its vision through an institutional framework, coordinated public private involvement and adequate resource mobilization. Attention has also been paid to the branding of tourism assets of AJ&K, development of heritage museums, and conservation and restoration of heritage sites in the region. The research conducted by Dr. Shaheen is a pioneer work containing a number of practical ideas that can be utilised in harnessing the tourism potential of AJ&K. It opens up conversations on development of sustainable tourism, conservation and branding of tourist destinations, and involvement of community and public-private partnership for evolving the tourism industry of AJ&K.

**Ms. Midhat Shahzad**  
**Secretary Tourism Information and**  
**Technology Government of AJ&K**



Tourism is one of the most promising sectors for the rapid economic development of Azad Jammu & Kashmir along with Water Resources, Hydro Power development, Mines & minerals, Poultry & Livestock, SMEs and Information Technology. Blessed with abundant

pristine beauty, spread over the entire AJ&K, the snowy mountains of the North from Muzaffarabad to Poonch and plain valleys of Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber surrounded all over by the hilly terrain with large water reservoir at Mangla offer variety of site seeing views. The rich land of AJ&K also offers great sports, hiking and paragliding opportunities to the incoming domestic & overseas visitors.

The report written by Dr. Shaheen is a great effort to highlight the Tourism potential of AJ&K, its present status and the future prospects of this potent sector. Having a glance at the report, one can assess that an appropriately planned Tourism Policy may bring a huge economic turnaround in an area having the highest unemployment rate of around 14 percent, which is almost double as compared to the other provinces of the Country. This report can lay a strong foundation to formulate a realistic Tourism Policy for AJ&K.

**Zulfiqar Abbasi - President CPDR**



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