

Unveiling the Spiritual Gem; Exploring Religious Tourism in District Buner



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Abstract: Religious tourism holds immense significance in the realm of travel and tourism, offering a unique opportunity for individuals to engage with their faith in diverse cultural and historical settings. This research article delves into the exploration of religious tourism in District Buner, a region rich in historical and religious significance. Through a comprehensive analysis of the religious sites, practices, and experiences in the district, this study aims to shed light on the impact of religious tourism on the local community and economy. By examining the motivations, behaviors, and perceptions of religious tourists visiting District Buner, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of faith, culture, and tourism in this captivating region.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, District Buner, Cultural Heritage, Pilgrimage, Community Impact, Travel

Introduction

Religious tourism is a significant aspect of cultural exploration and spiritual engagement, offering travelers the opportunity to immerse themselves in the sacred sites and traditions of various faiths. District Buner, located in the picturesque region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, is a hidden gem that boasts a rich tapestry of religious heritage and historical significance. From ancient shrines and mosques to revered pilgrimage sites, District Buner serves as a beacon for religious tourists seeking to deepen their spiritual connections and explore the cultural treasures of the region. This research article aims to unravel the intricate layers of religious tourism in District Buner, examining the impact of pilgrimages and religious practices on the local community and economy. By delving into the motivations, experiences, and perceptions of religious tourists visiting this enchanting district, this research seeks to illuminate the transformative power of faith-based travel and its implications for cultural

preservation and sustainable tourism development.

Importance of tourism

Increased income for the economy. Job creation in various sectors (tourism, agriculture, transport, health, education). Cultural exchange between foreigners and citizens. Opportunities for local entrepreneurs to introduce new products and services. Contribution to the local economy through tourist spending and investment. The multiplier effect, where a significant portion of tourism revenue is reinvested in the economy, generating additional revenue. (seyyed.H,n.d). Tourism has again been identified as a key driver of economic recovery and growth in a new report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With UNWTO data pointing to a return to 95% of pre-pandemic tourist numbers by the end of the year in the best case scenario, the IMF report outlines the positive impact the sector's rapid recovery will have on certain economies worldwide.

According to the World Economic Outlook (WEO) Report, the global economy will grow an estimated 3.0% in 2023 and 2.9% in 2024. While this is higher than previous forecasts, it is nevertheless below the 3.5% rate of growth recorded in 2022, pointing to the continued impacts of the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and from the cost-of-living crisis.(INWTO.10 November 2023). Importance of tourism arises from the numerous benefits and advantages it brings to any host country. But real importance of tourism comes from its nature and how it is defined & structured. And this is what we will explain-ere. Tourism contributes towards complete growth and development of a country: one, by bringing numerous economic value & benefits; and, second, helping in build country's brand value, image & identity. Tourism industry goes beyond attractive destinations, to being an important economic growth contributor. (Thaler.K.(n.d)).

Religious tourism in district Buner

Religious tourism in District Buner, located in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, offers a unique opportunity for visitors to explore the region's rich cultural and historical heritage. Buner is home to several religious sites that hold significance for both local residents and tourists. Buner is home to a number of mosques and shrines that are popular pilgrimage sites for local residents. These religious sites offer a peaceful and spiritual atmosphere for visitors looking to connect with their faith. The prominent religious sites in Buner a following.

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|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1) Rani Gat. | 2) Elum Ghar |
| 2) 3) Hindu kas | 4) Pirbaba. |
| 5) shalbandei baba | 6) Sar Malang Baba |
| 7) Dewana baba | 8) pira Abai |

Rani Gat

The term Ranigat is derived from the combination of two words: "Rani" and "gat" Rani; Rani is a Hindi and Urdu word that means "queen" or "princess" it is used to refer to a female Royal figure or someone of high status. Gat; gat is a Hindi and Urdu word that generally means "place" or "location" it is often used in

place names to indicate a specific area or site. Therefore the name Ranigat can be understood as the place of the queen or the location associated with a queen. The site might have been named in honor of a queen or a Royal female figure who was associated with the area or played a role in its history. Rani gat is an archaeological complex spread across a considerable area.(Ahmed , personal correspondence,16 April 2023).The Ranigat is located in Nogram village of District Buner and can be reached by a small road from Nogram where ample parking space for about 15 cars is available. From parking, there are 500 stairs to the site constructed by the Japanese government. It is approximately 20 kilometers northeast of the city of Swabi and around 160 kilometers northwest of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.(Zada,2020).It has been written that the 2000-year-old ruins of Pasadeh Ranigat can be reached by traveling about 4 hours from Mengora, the main city of Swat. The cause of Rani Gut is the large stone on which Rani Sirisham used sit and breathe. In historical books, the fresh water of the Indus River was the queen's drink. Although the river is far away from the Ranigat ruins, fresh water used to reach the Ranigat within minutes. A chain of human hands was formed by to carry out this process. The first servant would take water from the river in a special vessel and run and hand it to another servant standing at a certain distance, then the second would hand it over to the third, thus fresh water would be served to the queen. In 327 BC when Alexander the Great entered Odhiana and conquered various regions, he then entered Buner via Elam. The process of conquering this fort was like a big adventure for Alexander the Great, he conquered this palace.(Tareekh-e-buner,2023).

Elum Ghar

Elum Mountains are very popular among hikers due to the outstanding scenery it offers while hiking. The mesmerizing sight of streams and lakes while going up the mountain is surely an amazing experience. An archaeologisart have also discovered the ruins of the Indus Valley Civilization around the Elum Mountains. They believe that there may be some other ancient

remains under the mountain. The locals call the top of the mountain “Jogiano Sar”. The Elum Mountains have great significance importance for the Hindus. The mountain is home to snakes and cobras. A famous proverb associated with the Elam Mountain is “When a snake reaches its youth, it goes to Mount Elum”. (Tripako, 2021). In 1947 the Partition of the Subcontinent, however, altered the fate of Elum Mountain. For followers of either religion, Partition meant surrendering some of their beloved ancient and holy religious sites behind a new border, perhaps never to be seen again. This was seen in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) when almost every Hindu residing there migrated all together towards the newly amputated India, thus abandoning some of their most sacred and significant shrines forever. (Ahmed, 2018). Elum Mountain, located in the Buner district, has held great significance for the Hindu community for centuries. Revered as a divine site and a place of pilgrimage, it is known as Jogian Sar among the locals and Ram Takhat (God’s Throne) Hindus. According to Hindu believe Lord Ramchandra, the deity, spent time meditating on this mountain during his pilgrimage, known as binbas. As a religious practice, Hindus visit this sacred site every year in June, although the number of pilgrims has somewhat decreased in recent years. (Baig, 2019).

Hindu kas

Pai pana Sahib (Hindu Kas) in Buner has a historic significance and, it has 200 years old history, but this area is facing lack of attention by the government since long. Even in this area, there is no concrete road in the area to take the people to the holy religious site of the community. Pai Pana is situated in Hindu kas area of Buner. The Pai Pana site is situated 10 kilometres from the main Buner Bazaar. However, due to difficult landscape, it takes an hour or even more to cover this distance. This is the Holy place of the Hindu religion. (Correspondent TNN, 2019). Hindus celebrate Nau Asud after sighting the new moon and with the arrival of a new season. The men and women from the community offer special

prayers on this occasion. The Hindu community of Buner district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on celebrated can go to the religious spring festival ‘Nau Asud’ with religious zeal and fervor at Pai Pana Sahib (Hindu kas). Besides members of the Hindu community, the community members from different parts of the district also participated in the festival. (Ali, personal correspondence 19 Feb 2023).

Pirbaba (Syed Ali Tarmizi)

Pirbaba Original name as Syed Ali Tirmizi and his father name was Sayyid Qamar Ali. In 943 Hijri [The Islamic Calender Year] for learning and as well as preaching Islam along with his Respected Father who was in the Army of Babar and related to his son Humayun [as being his Brother-in-Law], then he moved from Delhi to Maankpur in Punjab to learn from Hazarat Sheikh Saloona and then moved to Ajmer Shareef and stayed with Hazarat Saalaar Roomi R.A. and became his disciple [Mureed] and was bestowed with Khilafat by him then after the death of Hazarat Saalaar Roomi R.A. again visited Ajmer Shareef and on instruction of Hazarat Sheikh Hussain R.A. son of Hazarat Saalaar Roomi R.A. to continue preaching of Islam moved to Buner to preach Islam and wipe out the anti- Islam teaching propogated by the Roshaniya sect their. Hazarat Pir Baba R.A. guided his favourite disciple and Khalifa “Hazarat Akhund Darweza R.A.”, Deewanana Baba R.A. and others and they took the special task of uprooting of the heretical anti-Islamic Roshaniya sect which flourished in buner and the sourounding areas Hazarat Pir Baba R.A. was married to Muryam Bibi” sister of Daulat Khan a respected person of Buner. Syed Mohammed Ibrahim Shah alias Hisar Baba was also one of the Khalifa of Hazarat Pir Baba R.A., Hazarat Pir Baba’s descendants wielded great influence among the Pathan tribesmen. (Bagi, personal correspondence 25 Dec 2022). they people visit Hazrat Pir Baba’s shrine all the time in devotion. But the number of devotees is particularly high in spring. Urs or Pilgrimage of Hazrat Pir Baba is celebrating from 24th to 26th RAJAB Islamic calender month every year in the Buner. (Gafor, personal correspondence, 27 Dec 2022). From every corner of the country i.e

Swat, Dir, Bajaur, Rustam, Mardan, Swabi, Charsadda, Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu Dera Ismail Khan, Abbottabad, Mansehra, Kohistan, and Hazara and Azad Kashmir, Rawalpindi Islam Abad, Lahore and Faisalabad etc. Punjab province, Hyderabad and Karachi, Sindh province and Balochistan province and pilgrims from Afghanistan in the form of groups and caravans riding in buses, trucks, motorbikes, rickshaws, motorcycles and tractor trolleys with red and green and colorful flags. They are seen moving towards Bonaire. These people reach the Mazar-e- Sharif of Pir Baba with great enthusiasm and present with devotion.

Shalbandei Baba

Shalbandi Baba's original name was Shah Mehmood Qureshi and he received his primary education from his uncle. And then he went to Ajmer Sharif. After a 13 years there, he returned from Ajmer Sharif in 1937 and wherever he went, he used to give knowledge to the poor people. He was a great person, especially when he told people how to pray and also about hadith. Shalabandi Baba's teacher had given him a task to tell people to recite Durood Sharif as much as possible. Because of this, even today, people celebrate the Urs of Shalabandi Baba, in which Durood Sharif was recited one hundred and twenty-five thousand times. The visited by thousands of Shalbandi Baba followers called (Masakeens) from allover the world to pay respect and to gain blessings from this holy site. Four occasions are celebrated here every year: 10th of Muharram-ul-Haram, 12th of Rabi-ul-Awal, 6th of Rajab-ul-Murajab. (Inzamam, personal correspondence 24 November 2022).

Sar Malang Baba

Sar Malang Baba's name was Mansoor Baba and he was basically from Chagharzai village. Masoom Baba came here to serve the people. Because in the earlier times, people were traveling dearly and used the place where Masoom Baba's mausoleum is today as a trade route. This place was a trade route between Buner and Mandri. In this way, the innocent sage used to take water from the village below and give it to the people there. Thus he served the people and died there, where he is buried

today. (Zada, S, 2021). Sar Malang is a tourist destination in Buner Which is located at a distance of 14 km from Daggar on Mardan Road. It is located on the top of a hill and a large number of local tourists visit this beautiful valley in summer. (Shah, personal correspondence, 11 May 2023).

Dewana baba

The real name of Dewana Baba was Muhammad Jan Khan and his father's name was Murad Khan. He came from Swat. The actual history and historical incidents are almost unknown but some miracles/marvels/karamaat stands him popular among the people. For example, It is said that he was a close friend of Pir Baba. Once they were on a journey, peer Baba told him to do ablution as it was a time of prayer. Dewana Baba asked him how to perform ablution, and Pir Baba briefed him about the process that is to clean our body. They approach a lake or river to do so, Unfortunately, Dewana Baba took more time than usual, Pir Baba went to him and sees that he has taken out all his internal parts from the chest heart, and the abdomen region to wash it. Pir Baba asked him what are you doing? He replied I am doing what you directed, to clean our body. Pirbaba said ok but this is not the way as common people would not be able to do so for ablution. The above miracle shows how attracted he was towards God and his rights. This could be the reason people call him Dewana(mentally disordered person). Another miracle that is very popular regarding his worth is that, once some younger were taunting and making fun of him in such a way that they brought a living man in bed to him to perform a funeral prayer. He did perform the funeral prayer and was astonished to see people laughing behind him. They thrilled him for performing the funeral prayer of a living body, he replied that I did it for a dead body rather living one. When the people checked and unveiled him he passed away. (Abbas, personal correspondence, 2020).

Pir Abai

Pir Abai (originally named as Bibi Maryam) was the wife of Pir Baba and sister of Daulat Khan, the then ruler of some parts of Buner from Yusafzai lineage. She was also known as a wise

woman of her time and a saint in the Islamic community of Buner. Pira abai was born to a very pious and influential family of Elai village in Buner. She was the beloved Wife of Pir Baba and he had a Lot of love and respect for her. Her place of burial has her name attached to it, namely the village of Pira Abai. Her tomb is right beside the main Pir Baba road. She was visiting her paternal home and as she was coming back to Pir Baba from Elai she breathed her last and locals of the area informed pir baba that his beloved wife had met her creator and declared a Martyr. Pir Baba came to the spot and decided to take her corpse to Pir Baba for her last rituals of burial. As the procession that was carrying her coffin reached near the current site of her tomb, they decided to rest there. Afterward having rested as they were to start their journey the coffin couldn't be moved even with so many people the coffin was immovable. Pir Baba took this as a sign from his creator and decided to offer her janaza a grave was dug in and his beloved wife was laid to rest there. Such was the Love between Pir Baba and pira abai that he ordered his followers that if you want to visit me and pay me respects you should first visit Pira Abai grave and make Dua for her. Later on pir baba's followers carried on the ritual of paying respects first to pira abai's tomb. (Qader, personal correspondence,2023).

Challenges and prospects

Challenges

Ranigat is an archaeological site located in Pakistan that attracts tourists due to its historical significance and stunning architecture. Some challenges that tourists may face when visiting Ranigat include: 1) Accessibility: Ranigat is located in a remote area, so reaching the site may be difficult for some tourists due to limited transportation options and infrastructure. 2.) Security concerns: Pakistan has faced security challenges in the past, so tourists may be concerned about safety when visiting Ranigat. It is important to stay informed about the current security situation and follow any travel advisories. 3.) Language barrier: English is not widely spoken in rural areas of Pakistan, so communication may be a challenge for tourists who do not speak the local language, which is

Urdu. 4) Lack of tourist facilities: Ranigat is not a heavily developed tourist destination, so visitors may find limited facilities such as accommodations, restaurants, and visitor centers in the area. It is important to plan ahead and be prepared for basic amenities.(Nawaz, personal correspondence,20 April 2023).Visiting Elum Ghar in the Buner district presents several challenges for tourists. The mountain, being the highest peak in the region at 2,800 meters, is snow-covered for most of the year, which can make hiking conditions difficult.(Trip Ako,2021). Infrastructure Capacity: Managing tourism in Buner can be challenging due to limited facilities and infrastructure. Balancing the number of visitors with available resources is crucial to avoid overburdening the local community and environment.(Fawad, personal correspondence 23 Neb 2022).By the way, there are no good facilities for the guests who come to Masoom Baba's shrine in Sir Malang, However there are road and hotel facilities, but they are not good, so, the roads there should be repaired and a good hotel be arranged because here. It is important for the visiting guests then is possible to be people come in more.(Arsalan, personal correspondence,12 May 2023).

Prospects

District Buner in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, offers a treasure trove of historical, cultural, and spiritual sites, making it an ideal destination for religious tourism. From ancient archaeological sites like Rani Gat and Elum Ghar to revered shrines like Pai Pana Sahib and Pir Baba, the district beckons travelers seeking a deeper connection with spirituality and heritage.

Rani Gat, dating back to the 2nd century CE, serves as a testament to the rich Gandhara civilization. Its sprawling Buddhist ruins and cultural significance as a center of Buddhist art and folklore make it a captivating destination for history enthusiasts and spiritual seekers alike. Accessible via well-connected highways, Rani Gat offers visitors a glimpse into the past with its meticulously designed structures and stunning vistas.(Zulkifal, personal correspondence,19Dec 2022).

Elum Ghar, the highest peak in Buner District,

holds not only natural beauty but also historical and religious significance. From being a pilgrimage site for Hindus to its connection with Buddhism and the Indus Valley Civilization, the mountain offers a spiritual journey amidst scenic hiking trails and tranquil streams. Festivals like Jashn-e-Elum add a vibrant touch to the cultural tapestry of the region, inviting tourists to partake in local traditions.(Salman, personal correspondence,21 Jun 2023).

Pai Pana Sahib, with its Hindu and Sikh heritage dating back over two centuries, offers a glimpse into the religious diversity of Buner District. The Nau Asud festival, celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs alike, symbolizes unity and harmony, fostering a sense of community among visitors. Despite accessibility challenges, the area's cultural richness and warm hospitality make it a worthwhile destination for religious pilgrims and history enthusiasts.(Saad, personal correspondence,18 March 2023).

Pir Baba, a revered Sufi saint, lends a spiritual aura to Buner District with his mausoleum and surrounding village. Nestled amidst the picturesque Elum Ghar Mountains, Pir Baba Village offers visitors a serene environment to connect with their spirituality. The cultural and spiritual significance of Pir Baba's shrine, coupled with the hospitality of the local community, makes it a must-visit destination for those seeking solace and enlightenment.(Kashaf, personal correspondence,11 April 2023).

The district's religious tourism potential lies not only in its historical and cultural landmarks but also in its natural beauty and warm hospitality. With proper infrastructure development and promotion, Buner District can emerge as a prominent hub for religious tourism in Pakistan. Investment in road connectivity, signage, and accommodation facilities can enhance the visitor experience and attract a diverse range of tourists from across the globe.(Zain, personal correspondence,9 Nov 2023).

Moreover, the district's rich tapestry of festivals and traditions, from Jashn-e-Elum to Nau Asud, presents opportunities for immersive cultural experiences. By showcasing these events to a

wider audience and facilitating cultural exchanges, Buner District can position itself as a vibrant destination for spiritual and cultural tourism.(Ismail, personal correspondence,28 June 2022).

Collaboration with local communities and stakeholders is key to unlocking the full potential of religious tourism in Buner District. Empowering local guides, artisans, and hospitality providers can ensure authentic experiences for visitors while fostering economic growth and sustainable development in the region.(Danish, personal correspondence,17 April 2022).

Buner District holds immense promise as a hub for religious tourism, offering a harmonious blend of history, culture, and spirituality. By leveraging its diverse heritage, natural beauty, and community spirit, the district can carve a niche for itself on the global tourism map, attracting travelers in search of spiritual enlightenment and cultural immersion.(Hisham, personal correspondence,15 Feb 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of religious tourism in District Buner has unveiled a spiritual gem that not only enriches the cultural tapestry of the region but also presents a unique opportunity for sustainable economic development. By understanding the significance of religious sites and their impact on tourism, stakeholders can work together to preserve these sacred spaces while enhancing the visitor experience. As we continue to delve into the spiritual allure of this region, we are reminded of the profound connections between faith, heritage, and tourism, and the potential for District Buner to emerge as a beacon for spiritual seekers worldwide."

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