
Sports Tourism In Post Conflict Peace Building: Evidence From Swat, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Taliban uprising in Swat followed by military operations and floods severely damaged the tourism industry of Swat. Skiing festival in Malamjabba and Aman Festival in Kalam were instrumental in bringing tourists back to Swat in post conflict scenario. The study focused on the contribution of Skiing at Malamjabba in revival of tourism and post conflict peace building. Mixed method approach was used to collect data from fifty respondents that included tourists, tourism service providers and representatives of relevant stake holders from government and private organizations. Questionnaires followed by in depth interviews were used to collect the data. Findings of the study indicated that skiing played a very important role in the revival of tourism. Most of the tourist whose primary motivation was skiing at Malamjabba also visited or had intentions to visit other areas of Swat. Local communities are engaged in the industry at different levels constituting about 91 percent of the total labor force. Winter sports and increasing range of tourism products means increasing tourist season in the area that provides sustainable source of livelihoods for local community. Engagement of youth in sports and income generating activities provides an important tool for the peace building in the area.

Keywords: *Tourism, conflict, skiing, sports tourism, youth in peace building.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Tourism in Swat and impact of conflict

Tourism is one of the main economic activity for Swat valley. Being third largest industry to valley's economy, tourism was a major source of livelihood before conflict (Arshad, 2010; Przedlacki, 2011; Ali et al., 2012). Hotels and guest houses acting as the fiscal 'anchor' that all other related business activities were based upon. The industry showed serious decline first due to the insurgency that started in 2007 and then counter insurgency by the armed forces. Hotels and guesthouses were impaired and robbed by Taliban or severely damaged during the conflict due to use of heavy armaments and ammunition, both by army and militia. Road infrastructure and bridges were severely damaged (Whitney, 2010). Taliban targeted the only ski resort in the valley at Malamjabba run by Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) at that time and whole facility was destroyed by an explosive attack. The incident that got massive coverage by electronic and print media had a symbolic effect to cease all tourism related activities in the valley. Unprecedented flood of July 2010 further affected the tourist spots, roads and tourist hotels that had devastating effect on already struggling tourism sector (Shaukat & Khalil, 2015).

The violent conflict in Swat, Pakistan, started in mid 1990s and took an ugly turn in 2007, where record violence was committed against the civil population by religious militia, claimed themselves as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. This conflict badly affected the inhabitants of Swat, where they experienced violence and displacement from 2007 to 2009 (Shah et al., 2020). The conflict is viewed as ideological and strongly rooted in socioeconomic deprivation (Abdullah, 2010). In February 2009, the Pakistan Army launched a military operation against the Swati Taliban who had reneged on their peace deal with the Pakistani Government (Cosgrave et al, 2010). The operation caused large-scale devastation of social and physical infrastructure in the district (Zahid, 2009). The damage to the important roads became one of the major impediments towards low traffic of tourists to the Swat valley (Fleischner, 2011). Total losses resulting from the conflict in Swat were estimated at USD 227.5 million (PDMA, 2010).

Tourism can play a positive role in the generation of employment opportunities for local communities, especially in conflict effected areas. It acts as a source of social change and economic development. The provision of equal employment opportunities in conflict effected areas ensures active participation of vulnerable people. To address the economic equality, tourism has the power to support, both, central and peripheral development in overall country. This allows the rural areas to benefit from profits of tourism. It has long term positive impact on the migration process as well because it provides opportunities at local level and stops out migration for employment (CPRPE, 1989; Nicolau, 2008).

Sports tourism has been the fastest growing sector in recent years (Jiménez-García et al., 2020) with an annual revenue of USD \$ 800 billion worldwide (WTO, 2019). Owing to its potential in bringing high profits, it can be used effectively for the development of the local area (Brunet and Xinwen, 2009). An effective and constant cooperation among all stakeholders is necessary as this cooperation will contribute in the improvement of the image of location (Tarfanelli, 2010; Di Palma et al., 2018). Snow-based sports are practiced in approximately 6,000 ski areas in around 70 countries (Vanat, 2018). Skiing activities are economically important and are being used as a tool for local and regional development, especially for tourism development (Edlund and Yttergren, 2016; Demiroglu et al., 2019).

1.2. Sports Tourism in Peace-Building

Sport has been increasingly recognized and used as an innovative low-cost and high-impact tool in peace-building efforts. Particularly in post-conflict situations, sports is systematically used as a “door opener” to, inter alia, bring together former opponents, rebuild trust and re-humanize negative perceptions and reduce stereotypes that have fuelled the conflict (Livros, 2012). Sports alone cannot prevent conflict or build peace. However, with careful design and implementation, sport for peace initiatives can play a valuable role in helping to prevent conflict and build peace around the world — a fundamental pre-condition for development (Krasniqi & Krasniqi, 2019). In conflict and post-conflict situations, sports can support building a beneficial outlet for people affected which is directed towards peaceful reduction of hostilities and tensions (Castro, 1973). Sport tourism means the travel experience to take part or attend to sport-related activities (Baade et al., 2005). Sports tourism is a kind of entertainment tourism and people are more interested in travelling to those destinations where sports events are organized (Baade et al., 2005; Todt and Dabija, 2008; Neacșu et al., 2011).

Peace building activities in Swat were initiated by the government soon after the defeat of militants. Revival of skiing at Malamjaba and organizing a festival entitled “*Aman Festival*” (Peace Festival) at Kalam were the flagship activities of this peace building drive jointly undertaken by Provincial Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Settlement Authority (PaRRSA) and Pakistan Army (Shah and Shahbaz, 2015; Khan, 2019; Shah et al. 2020). Since

January 2011, "*MalamJabba Skiing Peace Gala*" is organized by the Government regularly and promoted at international level to attract tourists from all around the world. The skiing facilities at MalamJabba resort were reconstructed by the Pakistan government with Austrian support. Skiing being the primary activity, the resort is providing lots of other activities as well and attracts sizeable number of tourists in winter as well as summer season. The increasing number of tourists each season meant new investments in the sector in the form of new hotels in the close vicinity and more employment opportunities for the local community (Bashir, 2012; Stricest et al., 2013). Tourism affects local, regional and state levels and its degree of influence is increasing (Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman & Scott, 2009), which allows tourism to continue growing internationally (González-García et al., 2018).

Despite of this increasing tourist arrivals that is on the rise each season, the doubts about the security situations in Swat are still valid for many. The presence of security forces in the region, frequent patrolling and installations of check posts on city entry and exit points add to an air of tension that not only reminds of the sever conflict but provides a potential threat of insecurity in the minds of tourists (Rana, 2011). With this back ground and current situation, skiing has been used as an effective tool for promotion of tourism and peace building. The study aims to investigate the role of skiing in promotion of tourism and post conflict peace building in Swat. Two dimensions were analyzed separately, first how and what role skiing played in revival of tourism and attracting tourists back to Swat. Was skiing primary attraction that lured tourists to the valley and lead to the promotion of other tourist sites as well? Secondly, how did skiing involved the community and youth in particular in tourist services and paved the way for peace building in the valley?

2. METHODOLOGY

Mixed method approach was used to collect the data from tourists, managers of tourist resorts and hotels, vendors of tuck shops and skiing assistants engaged in providing assistance and initial training to amateur skiers who often engage in discussion with the tourists. Questionnaire followed by in-depth interviews were conducted from the tourists. Considering the time constraints tourists may have, they were interviewed during the time they were relaxing after having completed the skiing at restaurants or coffee bars. Appointments were taken from them if they were in a hurry but available for the interviews later in the day or the next day. In majority of the cases, tourists were happy to respond and spare the time for interview that took about 20 minutes each and were informed about it prior to start of interview. The data, thus collected, was divided into themes and sub themes regarding the primary motivation to visit the area, how did the tourists overcome the fear of terrorism in the valley, what role skiing or sports tourism played in their final decision making and to what an extent this visit will motivate them to come again, with family if they were visiting alone this time. The in-depth interviews of different service providers (e.g. vendors at tuck shops, waiters at restaurants, personal trainers cum porters for amateur skier) were conducted after they had completed their work at the restaurants or at their work place when they were free. They were asked to recall their first interactions with the tourists immediately after reopening of the tourist resorts and the questions that were asked to them by tourist concerning security issues in the region. To address the second objective i.e. how skiing and other related activities helped them improve their livelihoods and engagement in productive activities, they were asked about their personal growth, their views about the skiing and their living conditions and life standards before and after their engagement in skiing. 28 tourists, 21 small vendors, waiters or ski helpers and 7 managers of resorts and hotels were interviewed during the study. The sampling was done through stratified random sampling and strata were made

on the basis of nature of tourists i.e. visiting alone, in male only groups or families, equal sample (7 each) from vendors, waiters and ski helpers and managers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Tourism after Conflict, Overcoming Fear of Terrorism

Visiting Swat especially Malamjabba could have been a difficult and to some extent brave decision considering the intensity of the conflict and huge internal displacements that it caused. Travel advisories issued by the foreign countries had an impact on international arrivals to the region. Tourism is very sensitive to conflict and it may take much longer time period than expected to win the trust of the visitors about the security in the region.

With this context, it seems important to understand how tourists overcame that fear propagated by media and what were the driving forces to help them take that decision? During the in-depth interviews, it was revealed that about 70 percent tourists visiting Malamjabba were those who had already visited the valley themselves or any of their visiting companions (from family or friends) before conflict. The peaceful memories of the past that they carried along themselves before the conflict was the major driving force that helped them overcome the fear of Taliban and conflict.

“I have been visiting Swat since 10th grade when I was in school. We have been visiting the valley for almost forty year now quite regularly. I have very pleasant memories of the kindness of people here and I knew it is not going to last for long. Once conflict was over I had to visit again”.

(42 years old visitor from Lahore visiting Malamjabba with family)

One common coping mechanism for those who wanted to visit immediately after the conflict was to avoid bringing families particularly female members of the households along with them. So most of the tourists in that time period were either groups of males friends coming together or the colleagues who were financed by corporate sector to visit the Swat valley. The data collected from the tourist revealed that 87 percent of the tourists did not bring the families during such early visits to avoid any unforeseen circumstances.

“It is obvious that we could not have visited with families in those early days immediately after conflict. Although reports coming from media were assuring that peace has been reinstated in the region but you never know especially considering the scale of the conflict and strong presence of Taliban in the region.”

(37 years old visitor from Abbottabad visiting with family)

The presence of army in the region worked both ways. Because of general trust of citizens on the capabilities of army who could deal with the militants in a much better way than police, on one hand it was a surety that as long as army is present, it is very hard for Taliban to come back or cause any unrest. On the other hand, presence of army check posts on key entry and exit points and constant patrolling meant fear of militants is not fully over.

“Although it looks very peaceful now and no one has heard of any presence of militants as it used to be before the military operation, but excessive checking by army personnel while entering the Swat valley in Chakdara is a reminder of the threat that is not fully over and causes an anxiety for the safety of the family”.

(45 years old female respondent visiting with her family)

Peace festival in Malamjabba that primarily focused on skiing was used as a flagship tourist attraction by the army and local administration to attract tourists back to Swat. Although a good number of tourist were those who had already visited Swat valley previously, but once they were satisfied with the security conditions, the second season of skiing attracted a lot

more number of tourists and people came back with families. The media coverage and effective marketing campaign that was used more vigorously in post conflict skiing festivals also played a major role in attracting lot more tourists to Malamjabba than before.

“We had never heard of skiing at MalamJabba before the conflict, I guess it is developed after the conflict, no?”

A 31 years old female visitor exclaimed in response to a question about did she ever visited this resort before conflict. Similar responses were received from at least 40 percent of the female respondents who did not know about the presence of skiing at the resort before conflict. The male respondents were very well aware of the skiing resort before conflict and even mentioned about Taliban attack to the sort. But nevertheless effective marketing campaign for ski resort was the primary motivator for the visit to Swat.

Skiing at Malamjabba not only attracted the tourists for skiing, it also promoted tourism for other destinations in the region. Swat valley has a rich cultural heritage that consists of primarily Gandhara sites, present Ushu forest, Mahudand Lake and the small towns of Kalam and Badeen among many others. For 76 percent of the tourists MalamJabba was the primary source of motivation and the primary destination to be visited in Swat valley but once they were in Swat, they visited or intended to visit other places as well. Of 28 tourists that were interviewed (individuals or group members of a larger tourist group), 92 percent of the tourists intended to visit other places in Swat as well.

“Although skiing was the primary objective and experience we wanted to enjoy but once we have travelled that far from Lahore, it seems only advisable to visit other places too, especially Ushu forest, we have heard so much about.”

(27 years old female tourist from Lahore)

Based on the data collected from the tourists, the average stay of the tourists in Swat was two and half nights. This included all the tourists interviewed including those who came only for skiing. Among the tourist who visited Malamjabba, 54 percent had plans for one night stay at the resort and rest of night at other destination in Swat valley. It is important to note that the MalamJabba Ski resort was built by the government only to promote skiing. The facility, which was destroyed by Taliban, was constructed and operated by Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC). The new facility that was constructed after the conflict is leased to a private company and the hotel is a four star accommodation that is considered pretty costly by the tourists. As it was mentioned by the tourist during the interviews that even if they get late, they prefer to go back to SaiduShareef to spend the night due to relatively higher room rent at the facility. Despite of this, the limited number of rooms were all reserved as foreign visitors prefer to stay at resort especially those who have to continue skiing the next day too.

Managing Director of Samson Group, the company that operates the affairs of the resort highlighted the gradual change in the perception of conflict and prevailing security situation.

“Although it is very peaceful area now but the fear has its legacy that takes time to be removed completely. People still have fear in their minds, the decision to visit the area is difficult but once they go through it, they realize what they have been missing and come in bigger groups the next season.”

Lack of data doesn't really indicate the extent to which tourism has been revived in terms of number of tourists visiting the valley before and after the conflict. But the recovery is on the rise with every passing season as more private investments in tourism are pouring in. Although most of the tourists are local, international arrivals are also encouraging.

“Ski slope here is really good, one of the best when I compare it with other parts of the world. The landscape is really marvelous in MalamJabba and hospitality of local people is heartwarming. I wish to come here again and again”.

(A skier from Germany)

3.2. Economic Impact of Tourism and Peace Building in the Region

Even before the conflict, winter season was considered as an off season by the local hotels and resort managers in Swat. This was particularly true for Malamjabba as the road leading to resort was not very good and the snow fall in winter would mean complete blockage. This is Since no winter activity was offered, most of the hotels and restaurants would lay off their workers for a complete shut down during the snow fall. Establishment of Ski Resort at Malamjabbawas meant to promote winter tourism but lack of supporting infrastructure and poor marketing could not attract considerable number of tourists even before conflict and winter tourism was limited.Re-establishing the ski resort was meant not only to reinstate the ski resort to its pre conflict condition but also provide the support infrastructure to attract tourists to the resort. The results of the survey showed that 64 percent of the respondents (resort managers, hotel owners, local vendors and tourism workers) considered that winters were an off season before conflict because of limited number of tourists visiting the ski resort. At present, 75 percent of the respondents considers skiing season as a peak tourism season.

Although ski resort is leased out to a foreign company that collects major chunk of revenue from skiing and related snow activities, restaurant and the tuck shops but majority of the work force (91 %) that includes the skiing experts, handlers, skiing helper that are attached with individual skiers, restaurant chefs and helpers, waiters, office boys and related staff at hotels and restaurants is locally hired. The number of local staff is increasing at a steady pace in every skiing season as new products e.g. skating, snowboarding, zip lining are being introduced to diversify the tourism products and cater the needs and liking of tourists visiting from across the country and abroad. According to the data, collected for the specific study,average estimated budgeted spentduring the visit was about 4000/person/day. This includes the amount spent on goods and services during the whole trip elsewhere in Swat. Considering the huge number of tourist visiting Swat and Malamjabba this is a huge direct injection into the local economy.

The tourist arrivals at the resort are increasing on a steady pace for both winter and summer season. This means more demand for services at the destination, resulting in more investment in hotels, restaurant, transport and related services. Although this provides local community with a great opportunity of economic revival, the tourism has a great potential of playing a major role in peace building in the region. The young boys from the nearby villages don't only work as helpers, amateur trainers and guides for the amateur and tourist skiers but are also few of the finest skiers who seem to have mastered the sports.

“We allowed the local boys to use the equipment, some of them got skis as gifts from foreign skiers whom these boys helped or got attached during their visit to the resort, yet some others bought second hand skis from Rawalpindi which they rent out outside the resort to skiers. The availability of the equipment meant these boys could indulge themselves in sports and they mastered the art in no time.”

(Managing Director, ski resort)

Out of school during or even before conflict, majority of these young boys were not engaged in any economic activity owing to lack of economic opportunities available in the region. Traditionally, such youth either moves to other cities in search or employment or end up in religious madrassas that could be a possible route to join terrorist organization. The significant contribution of youth in post conflict peace building is well documented in literature. Youth have the capability to ensure peace building independent of outside actors (kemper, 2005; Del Felice, 2011). Provision of sustainable livelihoods can be an effective

peace building process in its own way (Petersen and Mulindwa, 2019). Engagement of youth in skiing as ski helpers that also provides an opportunity to be able to do skiing helps building peace in multiple ways. It helps earn bread and butter for the family. Sustainable means of livelihoods engages greater population in perpetual peace and minimizes the possibility of reoccurring of conflict. Working together and engagement in sports helps build local networks among youth. Staying at the local stations instead of leaving the native towns in search of jobs further strengthens such networks not only among the youth engaged in the very activity but across different professions and geographical areas. Such networks further minimize the possibility of conflict by strengthening local informal institutions.

“Finding work near our home town helps us better engage with the affairs of immediate and distant family members. It is not only source of income but a source of satisfaction and happiness.”

(17 years old ski helper)

The contact with the tourists both from other parts of the country and abroad helped broaden the vision of the youth. It was revealed during the in depth interviews that skiing helped engaging the youth in positive activities a great deal.

“Interaction with tourists made me realize that education is very important. Although I can not go back to school as I provide the primary source of income for my family, I made my younger brother go back to school.”

(26 years old ski helper)

“I love this job, I talk to many people during the day, get handsome tip at times if the client is happy with my assistance and can ski myself if have spare time”

(14 years old ski helper)

It appeared that during a typical ski session, an amateur/tourist skier spends from 1-2 hours skiing. Since such amateur skiers don't use the chair lift to go on top, they rather walk back to a reasonable height and ski, the ski helpers do engage with them much frequently in helping the skiers walk back to reasonable height. Most of the ski helpers reported that skiers do like to indulge in discussion. The most frequently asked questions revolve around the job of these helpers before the conflict, the difficulties they had to face during the conflict and the security and economic conditions now. Such interactions are developing the social capital that is multifaceted and helping build sustainable peace in the region through engagement of the youth.

3.4. Role of Government in Tourism Promotion and Peace Building

The government has played an important role in supporting tourism at MalamJabba and adjacent destinations in Swat in post conflict scenario. This included the provision of infrastructure, the development of tourist attractions and experiences, support for festivals and events and the implementation of tourist promotion plans. Importantly, the sector organized a network of stakeholders including agencies, community groups and the private sector to invest in the sector. At Malamjabba, the skiing was promoted primarily by the Pakistan army and resort leasing company that collaborated in organizing the ski festival, promotion of the skiing, clearance of the road till Malamjabba and provision of security.

Considering the previous studies where role of government or the tourism companies is viewed negatively by the local community, the respondents (hotel and restaurant managers, local vendors and staff, ski helpers etc.) were asked about any such grievances they might have against these the role of army, government in general of the leasing company that is operating the resort. They were asked a direct question of “Do you think skiing has negatively affected the life of local people? Do you think the resort operating company earns all the profit from skiing and tourism and local community doesn't get due share? Majority of

the respondents (84 percent) had a positive view about the role of government and the resort operating company.

“Company has hired more local people at the resort and during festivals and events more local people are involved in the activities through which their economic conditions become better”.

(Driver at the resort)

Although tourism services were given much more importance in post conflict scenario, there were some criticism on limited active role of the government.

“Only army and resort operating company are putting in all the efforts in the revival of tourism. Government itself is contributing very less as they only lease out the resort. Neither they are involved in the marketing nor do they provide any supporting facilities.”

(Manager at local restaurant)

4. CONCLUSION

The revival of tourism in Swat primarily revolved around celebration of Ski festival that has contributed not only attracting great number of tourists at Malamjabba but also helped attract tourists at other destinations in Swat that include Kalam, Behrain, Mahudand lake and Ushu forest etc. The extraordinary efforts jointly carried by the government, military and the ski resort operating company attracted tourists both from within the country and abroad and the number is increasing every season.

Skiing provided great opportunity for the local communities to build their economic and social capital as most of the employees hired by the resort operating company, local hotels and restaurants and related tourism service providers belonged from the local community. The job opportunity provided by the skiing resort not only helped earn sustainable livelihoods but also engaged youth in positive activities. Most of these young boys especially those who work as ski trainers or helpers for amateur ski tourists are excellent skiers by themselves by local standards. Teaching basics of skiing to tourists brings lots of pride and confidence to them which increased their faith and connectivity with the sport. The exposure they gain from the discussion with tourist further strengthens the relationship between skiing and peace building. Such interactions minimize the chances of any negativity and perpetuate the positive peace through self belief. The social capital formed through social bonding helps develop the social networks that is very important for peace building in the region. The engagement of these workers in different activities related to tourism develops a strong social network among themselves as well. They depend upon each other for their livelihoods which translates into further stronger bonds at work and outside of work space.

Better infrastructure, new tourism products, better training of the youth and proper marketing would mean more tourists in the region, prolonged tourism season, better and sustainable income for the local communities that would translate into sustainable peace in the region.

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