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## Domestic Tourism in Iran

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*The present paper explores and assesses various dimensions of tourist activities, multiple meanings and uses of tourisms in Iran. The country being endowed with numerous historical and cultural attractions, heritages and sites, many Iranians, are interested to visit them. In this way, domestic tourism is improving more than ever before. In addition to other objectives, domestic tourism contributes to the integration within different communities in the country. Therefore, native people are drawn to a variety of national and local attractions such as historical regions, natural landscapes, museums, religious shrines etc. However, the government has been highly insistent in developing state schemes aiming at the expansion of tourism in the country in the past few years. Under the impact of industrialization, per capita income has increased, and thereby the people have started opting, more leisure, travel and tour.*

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**Keywords:** *industrialization. socio-economic change. leisure. cultural attractions. quality of life.*

### INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the present paper is to reflect the various concepts and dimensions of domestic tourism in Iran. In that, the author inevitably has to argue different backgrounds of tourism from a general perspective, and to some extent through the Western literature. In this section, various dimensions of tourist activities, multiple meanings and uses of heritage today, and emergence and development<sup>(1)</sup> of tourism will be assessed. We will also witness how new and changing frames of socio-economic life in modern time have motivated the development of tourism with special reference to Iran. The paper will explore how one of the world's biggest industries with more people than ever before travelling domestically, and experiencing new destinations abroad.



Geo-morphologically, Iran has a diversity of landscapes with the mountains, dry lands and deserts being the dominant types. All these scapes are visibly affected by the intense work of wind, that persistently depreciates, erodes, and alters the land features (Taghi Zadeh Ansari, 1970). Geographically, Iran, has an area of 1.6 million km sq. and a population of more than 70 million (Census, 2006), has a range of climatic conditions. The country is endowed with numerous historical and cultural attractions, heritages and sites of which many, including Iranians, are by and large unaware. Iran is connected to the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf in the entire belt of the south. However, more people use the northern resorts because of the availability of facilities and modest climatical conditions. Similarly, Southern tourist resorts in the Persian Gulf which are more of tropical climate, have been developing in the past few years. They are pleasing shopping centres for the Iranian tourists.

One of the main objectives of encouraging domestic tourism in Iran is the creation of integration and unity within different communities in the country. Such objectives could be applicable through the adoption of policies that encourage:

- investing in affordable lodging sector in favour of middle-class and low income tourists in the country.
- harmonizing domestic tourist policies, and other regional policies, and the development of harmonized sites for leisure spending.
- the organization and development of domestic travel and tour systems.
- organizing special tours for those physically debilitated by war (namely the handicapped).
- assistance to and supervision of tourist agencies.

Domestic tourism in Iran is undertaken as a secular, sacred and a combination thereof, activity. Native people are drawn to a variety of national and local attractions such as ancient and historical regions, natural landscapes, museums, religious shrines and holy sites, rituals and customs, indigenous arts and handicrafts, traditional foods and drinks, habitation instillations and entertainment, transportation facilities and the like (Zamani Farahani, 2003).

## **METHOD**

The research was performed as a qualitative library type in which the researcher had to refer to relevant and related sources. In the present

research, various books on tourism were thoroughly investigated, and the needful inferences were made. The data fed by the investigator in the present research is dependable and reliable. Though literature on Iranian tourism is very limited, yet the author has tried to investigate many foreign resources as well, in order to elicit the necessary information in order to build up the text.

## **STATE OF TOURISM IN IRAN**

Realizing the importance of tourism, from a multi-dimensional perspective, more particularly as an option for the development of the national economy by way of earning foreign exchange, creating of job opportunities and the like, the national government has been making consistent efforts to provide funds for various state schemes aiming at the expansion of tourism.

Tourism being a socio-economic phenomenon, has become the world's largest and fastest growing industry. It has been identified to highly contribute to economic development. Under the impact of industrialization, per capita income has increased, and people have started having more leisure due to mass production methods. Similarly, the mass media like T.V. networks, and newspapers have brought awareness about distant places of interest. This has generated many people to travel and visit these places. Such a process has highly contributed to the flourishing of tourism at national level. Other infrastructures such as hotels, communications, car-ownership and other facilities have got added up and improved tourism in Iran. The growth of tourism highly depends on the quality of tourism management<sup>(2)</sup> not only in Iran, but in every other country. Traditionally, many Iranians while going for holiday-making, they try to fix up with some relatives at the destination to stay with. That is for two reasons; one is to economize their holiday-making, and the other reason is because they cannot easily find accommodation at the destination during the touring season.

However, more existence of tourism potential does not lead to the development of the industry, but an integrated management approach towards development of tourism is necessary, as the latter is a multi-faceted industry. In recent years, Iran has come to adopt progressive policies in order to uplift tourism in the country.

Under the current socio-economic change in the country, the demand for tourism is ever increasing, yet the resources need to be expanded and applicable. The functionality of the system is one of the aims/objectives

of the government. Till recently, Iran did not realize the importance of fully tapping the tourism potential. The contribution of tourism in terms of foreign exchange accruals is shown under the item "invisibles" in the balance of payment data.

The need for planned development is of paramount importance in the field of tourism. Many countries in the world including Iran have lately realized the importance of tourism and the benefits which it brings out. As mentioned before, the increasing significance of tourism as a source of income, employment generation, regional development, and as a major factor in the balance of payments for many countries (Bhatia, 1996), has been attracting increasing attention with special reference to an interest in economic development. Thus, tourism development has become more and more a particular field of research in economic planning not only in Iran, but undertaken by many countries.

Overall, tourism expanded swiftly as world economy improved. That is why more and more travellers are increasingly seeking new places to visit. As also stressed by UN, a country should see a steady growth in the number of new tourist resorts developed, to the extent permitted by its economic resources.

So far as tourist activities in Iran are concerned, the existing possibilities of touristification<sup>(3)</sup> and tourist activities are ever being developed, protected and encouraged. So far as Iran is concerned, under the conditions of increasing high education within the young generation, improvement in the standard and quality of life, improvement in communication networks, improvement in economic cycle as a whole etc., tourist activities are increasing more domestically rather than internationally.

Domestic tourism is the best and foremost alternative for Iranians since they cannot easily afford to spend on international travel and tourism. (Sadr Khonsari, 2002). Attractions are a vital component of Iran's tourism scene. Indeed, this is often the single most important reason for tourists to visit a destination. Visitations, in turn stimulate for the growth of related sectors such as accommodation, transportation, and entertainment (Youell, 2000). Secondly, domestic tourism is highly encouraged in Iran in order to reduce the pressures and constraints of urban life.

## **ATTRACTIONS**

Socio-demographic factors tend to play a decisive role in determining what constitutes an "attraction" for Iranians. In that, persons of high-class

background may perceive a seaside resorts of the Caspian Sea as a major attraction, while a highly-educated citizen may be attracted to the "deserts" of central Iran, and yet others may be attracted to religious sites of Mashhad, or to historical places of Shiraz, Isfahan etc. There does not seem to be a national consensus on attractions among Iranian visitors.

The same is visible in the cultural attractions of the country which constitute the tangible and intangible elements of a nation's identity that may be observed, exhibited or conducted (A'arabi and Izadi 1999). Hence while historical sites, museums, religious sites, mosques, churches, temples possess physical attributes other cultural attractions such as music, arts, poetry & literature, painting, sculpture etc. need a certain level of learning and familiarity to be relished. In this context, it is important to remember that the majority of attractions throughout Iran, such as museums, craft galleries, shops, leisure facilities natural sites like lakes, waterfalls, caves, have local and or national appeal. A cluster of such miscellaneous cultural features in a locality/region may generate sufficient interest in the people to explore and perhaps stay for a few days.

At the national scale, some locations in Iran have a variety of cultural attractions that attract both Iranian as well as foreign visitors. Links with famous people, cultural diversity, associations with arts etc., are all used to build an image of a destination and attract tourists. Hafiz and Saa'di, the two great Iranian Poets in Shiraz, Abu Ali Sina's (Avicenna's) grave in Hamadan, Omar Khayyam in Neishabour, and many other cultural sites attract quite a large number of cultural visitors. Many other Iranian cities are enriched with such cultural attractions.

Natural tourist attractions in Iran indicate that the country is endowed with lots of intact natural attractions. For example, the existence of many caves in different parts of Iran such as "the Cave of Ali Sadr in Hamadan is a natural glamour which is annually visited by thousands of domestic tourists. That natural resource has highly added to the natural attractions of the country. Similarly, Uromiyeh Lake in the north-west of Iran is increasingly becoming famous for its medical mud and high satly water by thousands of both domestic and international medical tourists per annum. That is to say, many tourists choose it for "mud therapy".

Iran, being a predominantly tribal society in the past four-thousands years, could now be one of the most important tourist attractions domestically and internationally. Visiting the tribal people is important for the Iranian tourists because of the genuine Iranian culture and lifestyle still being prevalent within them. That reflects the ancient culture of Iran; not highly affected by the modern industrial life (Organization for Planning & Budget, 1991).

## **GOVERNMENT APPROACH**

In Iran, national tourist organization is known as Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization. The NTOs such as the one in Iran, are involved in planning, development, promotion, and administration of tourism. While for example, planning a beach or a mountain resort, an NTO tries to make sure that there is no overcrowding, pollution and destruction of historic or archaeological landmarks as a result of the new area development for tourism. To promote tourism, an NTO must open tourist offices in different parts of a country as well as outside the country so as to motivate and attract tourists.

However, Government are responsible for providing the domestic travellers with all the facilities and information necessary. In Iran, the Tourism Department has its offices in the 30 provincial cities of the country.

## **TOURISM AND QUALITY OF LIFE**

The basic questions of motivation and quality of life as applicable in different fields can similarly be applied to tourism. We know that the question of motivation is the question of why. Why do some people travel and not the others? Or, for that matter, why some members in a family travel, while others do not? Why in a particular region or a country, more people engage in tourism activity than in another? The answer to all these questions could be sought in quality of life. Several studies concerning psychology and motivation for tourism have shown that individuals normally travel for more than one reason. Tourism is the outcome of a combination of motivations and quality of life (Bhatia:1996).

## **LEISURE AND TOURISM**

Leisure has increased greatly since the early 1900s, mainly as a result of a shortened workweek, technological advances, and a greater life expectancy. However, it seems that many citizens in the industrial world desire more free time (Robinson, 1991), and that contributes to increasing tourism. In Iran too, the country moving towards industrialization, and modern standards(4), moving upwards on Human Development Index (HDI), the citizens are desiring more leisure, and as a result more tourism. For example, in the year 2007, between March 20th and April the 5th,

more than 54 (77%) million Iranian people (out of the total 70 million population) travelled in and around the country during Now Ruz, or Iranian New Year's holidays (Iran TV., 2007). Though till the mid 20th century the term leisure did not literally have a clear meaning in the Iranian culture, yet in the past few decades, it has extensively been used by different classes of people. Many people pursue it in various and possible ways.

According to Hunnicutt (2000) patterns of leisure activities have changed a lot in many societies including the US. In the past, and even up to the mid of the 20th century, family dinners and family links were the most important ways of leisure spending in both the developed and the developing world, but due to change in socio-economic structure of different societies including Iran, such means of leisure are down now considerably, and instead, people are more involved in tourism activities.

So far as the leisure participation patterns of women is concerned, unfortunately several factors restrict the freedom of women with respect to leisure. These factors may include the following (Leitner, 2004):

1- Lack of free time: According to Levine (2001), women have less leisure than men because they work two to three hours more than men, when work both inside and outside the home is considered. This strongly applies to women in Iran too. In countries where birthrates are higher and social norms require even less of men in terms of housework, women have correspondingly less free time.

2- Fear of violence: In many countries women are often afraid of being out at night time. For example, according to James and Embrey (2001), 70 percent of Australian women fear attack after dark, and this fear constrains their night time recreational and leisure activities. In the United States too, where violent crime rates are higher than most other developed nations, the fear of violence is the major factor; limiting women's leisure and recreation choices, both at night, and even during the day. So far as women in Iran are concerned, social norms do not allow them to be out at night for leisure, and not even very much during the day time. Hence, women travel and engage in leisure less than men due to social, cultural and economic reasons.

3- Stigmas inhibiting participation in physical activities: Surveys indicate that women are less likely to be physically active than men (Brownson et al., 2002). Yet, interestingly, women with more masculine and androgynous personalities are less constrained by psychological barriers to leisure (Kane, 1990). Therefore, some women do have the ability to take control of their own leisure and overcome the common constraints to leisure activity participation (Little).

However, leisure and tourism are extremely important aspects of not only the Iranian society, but all other societies. Both directly and indirectly have profound impacts on the physical, psychological, and economic well-being and potentiality of the people; whether men or women.

Theoretically speaking, tourism in Iran is very much different from those of many other parts of the world including for example Caribbean Islands. In Iran, so far as the international tourism is concerned, it is highly for example oriented to the cultural and historical sites and not the sea side resorts. But, for the domestic tourists it is genuinely different; they mostly prefer natural resources and attractions.

## **ISLAMIC TOURISM**

Exploring the world is highly emphasized by Islam. That is to say, Islam always urges its followers to acquire knowledge by exploring the world. Yet, despite such emphasis, many Muslims cannot afford it to travel.

So far as hoteling in domestic tourism in Iran is concerned, the country has much concentrated on building more luxury hotels which common people cannot easily use them. Therefore, the country must more invest in 4-star hotels and less above (Sadre-Khansari 2002).

There are many sites and cities in which Islamic tourism is reflected. Cities such as Isfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz, Qom, Hamadan, Kermanshah and many others, are highly active in receiving domestic and international tourists, They are a wonderland for tourists and pilgrims. The holy shrines of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Hazrat Masoomeh in Qom, and Shah Cheraq in Shiraz as Islamic tourist attractions, annually absorb millions of domestic and frequently foreign Muslim pilgrims and tourists. Similarly, shrines of great poets like Saa'di and Hafiz in Shiraz , Abu Ali Sina (Avecenna) in Hamadan, Omar Khayam in Neishaboor, and many others are regularly visited by domestic tourists and often foreign tourists. They have been the sites of cultural and economic significance over centuries, and more in recent decades because of the availability of transportation facilities. They constitute vital tourist regions in their landscapes, rich heritage in culture, arts and architecture. Such sites and regions speak of the history, civilization and the socio-cultural conditions of Iran.

So far as Iran's tourism development is concerned, the country started to restructure economy after the War with Iraq ceased in 1988, and for that purpose, fair utilization of resources and meaningful participation

in the production processes were accomplished, and tourism was given high priority. That is, a process which is still continuing. It is also worth mentioning that in the absence of peace, foreign political support, economic aid, and technical guidance would lag behind. Therefore, the more we learn about the operation of “peace”, the more we wish to learn about the outcomes, consequences, and finally the development reached as a result of (Macionis, 1997).

Increasing car production, and using cars in 1920s and 1930s contributes to the increase in the number of tourists worldwide. That eventually affected domestic tourist industry in Iran too. So far as car ownership in Iran is concerned, there are now (2007) about 8 million cars at the disposal of the people throughout the country. In addition to that, air and railway systems have developed too. All these have contributed to increase in travels, and eventually boosting of tourism in the country.

However, after the World War two, tourism had developed as a socio-economic activity due to the following factors (Taghi Zadeh Ansari 1970):

1. Access to higher income for touring.
2. Reduction in working hours.
3. General improvement in transportation system.
4. Rapid economic development leading to increase in commercial travels.

Theoretically speaking, modernization generates tourism. Similarly, development of tourism requires cultures to rethink and rebuild their unique identities. Though tourism was first a Western phenomenon in its modern form, yet, it has emerged as a Muslim phenomenon within the Muslim nations according to Islamic morals and standards. Muslim countries including Iran, need to build and maintain their tourism according to the Islamic codes and frames.

## **TOURISM AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING**

Tourism is a major force for mutual understanding of nations; it promotes international understanding and harmony among all nations regardless of social capital, nationality, wealth, caste or creed. It has a vital role in promoting unity in the world, and highly contributes to free movement of culture and commerce in favour of mankind. It corrects misunderstanding and promotes international understanding and cohesion.

Tourism plays as a vehicle for international understanding by way of bringing diverse people face to face through interactions. It has been cited

as a major contributor to international goodwill and as a prime means of developing social and cultural understanding among all people of the world. Iran too, has come to know enhance its international credit through promoting tourism. Promotion and enrichment of friendship and goodwill could highly be achieved through tourism. However, people belonging to different countries, practicing different lifestyles and speaking different languages come together to make friends via tourism. In this process, there is a mingling of cultures which has positive effects. Similarly, tourism helps in breaking down prejudices, barriers and suspicions that exist among nations. The very best way of getting to know another country or region is to go there, and when vast numbers travel, the narrow rigid boundaries that keep people in compartments tend to shrink, and a positive move towards better national or international understanding begins to operate.

Therefore, tourism is not only a means of economic activity for the countries through which foreign exchange is earned, but it is an important medium of social and cultural development for the nations. It also helps in the regional development of a country — acting as a means of social education, and better understanding among the peoples in different regions of a given country. In the long run, it conveys values from a corner of the world to another. It is therefore a vehicle of a globalized world. So far as Iran is concerned, the country is highly enhancing tourism, but it is more one-sided. In that more foreign tourists into Iran are encouraged.

Futuristically speaking, the rapid transition and the swift developments that are occurring not only in technology, but also in the social structures and relations, in customs and behavioural patterns, will have profound effects on travel and tourism in the years to come. Therefore, Governments need to project the increasing level of tourism domestically and internationally. Due to the profound transformations which societies are undergoing at present, there is bound to be qualitative and quantitative changes in travel and tourism scene. The forms of travel as a result of changes in transport and information technology, increased income resulting in more saving for travel, increased leisure time and ..., all these are going to have viable effects on tourism activities in the future.

All the aforementioned factors are going to have profound effects and influences on tourism market of the years to come. That is to say, tourist activities will tend to expand unprecedentedly within all nations in the years ahead. Socio-economically speaking, in many countries including Iran, new better-off strata are emerging who are highly inclined to travel,

but for the potential tourists of some countries like Iran, many people cannot easily get the tourist visas of the Western countries.

## **TOURISM PATHOLOGY**

Despite all the socio-economic and positive effects of tourism, residents of tourist destinations point out some negative impacts in this regard which differ from country to country. Similarly, the tourists themselves too, indicate some negative outcomes of the phenomenon as follows:

- Tourists' behaviour can distort local customs.
- Traditional activities, i.e. farming, may lose labour to the seemingly more attractive jobs in travel and tourism.
- Overcrowding may cause a reduction in the quality of life for the host community.
- In some cases drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution and ..., are likely too.
- Jet lag syndrome and upsetting physical metabolism.
- Idea shock syndrome and the appearance of pressure on culture construct of the tourists.
- Customs differences and unexpected encounter in the conventional code of manners.
- The appearance of likely security problems for the tourists.

## **CONCLUSION**

Tourism is considered to be a multi-dimensional activity essential to the life of not only Iranian people, but all the nations of the world. It contributes to the development of man in social, economic, cultural and educational aspects. Tourism being a socio-economic phenomenon, has found its priority within the managers and planners in Iran in the past few decades. Yet, integrated management is necessary so as to attain tourism development in Iran, which is often lacking. However, it is now known as a major factor/source of balance of payments. Though many tourists are attracted by the natural attractions, yet another group of tourists are inclined to visit those which are built. Domestic tourism in general promotes peace and integration within different communities not only in Iran, but in many other societies.

As tourism plays as an equalizer, it contributes to economic opportunities and justice in the country. As the cultural standards are always changing due to socio-economic change in the country, tourism training and retraining need to be carried out in order to bring about more adjustment. At present, quality of life is a good measure to see how the people of a country/region can travel and tour. Therefore, promotion of quality of life is counted as a prerequisite of tourism. Moreover, as a result of technological advances and increase in life expectancy, leisure and tourism have enhanced, and are projected to increase more. Many thinkers have come to know that tourism being a multi-disciplinary subject, must be studied and assessed by scholars of various humanitarian disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics etc.

Theoretically speaking, modernization generates tourism. Similarly, development of tourism requires cultures to rethink and rebuild their unique identities. Though tourism was first a Western phenomenon in its modern form, yet, it has emerged as a Muslim phenomenon within the Muslim nations according to Islamic morales and standards. Muslim countries including Iran, need to build and maintain their tourism according to the Islamic codes and frames.

Economic implications of tourism indicate that due to the positive economic returns, Governments and companies are interested in getting involved in the tourism development. That is to say, income and employment generation encourage and motivate Governments to further invest in the industry. Similarly, the two concepts of peace and tourism being very much interrelated, optimistically lead to prosperity and welfare. Similarly, in the course of the development of tourism and development, the gap between the rich and the poor is narrowed. Tourism eventually leads to international understanding and free movement of culture, commerce, promotion of friendship and goodwill between/among communities and nations in all corners of the world.

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## ENDNOTES

**1- Development of Tourism:** It applies to real- life situations to deliver the basics of planning, development and management of tourism destinations. It highly emphasizes on the reduction of tourism's negative impacts and the increase of positive contributions of tourism business and consumption activities in terms of local sustainable development. The ever - growing number of domestic and international tourists who are attracted to the emblematic destinations can also be a threat to their conservation.

**2- Tourism management:** In tourism management and planning, economic issues remain the major concern for the planners, developers and even the governments. In tourism management, decisions are no longer made on the ground of rationality alone, but on the basis of a set of socio-psychological beliefs and attitudes, and on the consideration of the value frames of the people concerned. Hence, keeping in view various challenges in the field of tourism industry, especially in the context of globalization process of the industry, there is a need to adopt a strategic approach to the management of tourism industry.

**3- Touristification:** The term is used to denote development, and activate tourist attractions in the destination. It may include art galleries, museums, restaurants, beaches, attractive tourist resorts, cultural centers, shopping centers etc. When we say "touristify", we refer to the process by which historical, social or cultural facts are transformed into valuable products within the travel market. The process creates the opportunity of making money. In this process, sometimes traditional houses/ centers are converted into restaurants, cafès and the like, to attract more tourists. To

touristify a place, it should be in accordance with the values, history and culture of the region. For example, many tourism experts criticize Singapore to be too Western though situated in Asia. Such characteristics discourage Western tourists to visit there, since it lacks oriental identities. Therefore, to touristify a place, adequate local identities of destination's uniqueness and attractiveness must be maintained.

**4- Modern standards:** It is more related to urban planning, architourism and investigations of such kind. However, to develop tourism, adequate modern, social and cultural standards should be maintained. Similarly, to develop tourism, modernity on certain grounds is required to facilitate interactions. Likewise, to develop tourism, a wise and practical balance between modern as well as traditional qualities of the indigenous culture should be constructed.

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