

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan

Interview with Mr Ejaz Karim, General Manager, Serena Khaplu Palace

Synopsis

In this interview, Dr Jawad Syed (Professor, LUMS) speaks with Mr Ejaz Karim, General Manager of Serena Khaplu Palace, about the future of sustainable and responsible tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Mr Karim discusses the environmental pressures created by rapid tourism growth, unplanned construction, weak enforcement of regulations, and the region's heavy dependence on tourism for livelihoods. He highlights the shared responsibilities of government, businesses, religious leaders, educational institutions, communities, families, and tourists in protecting the region's natural and cultural heritage. The interview also explores practical solutions, including stronger governance, responsible tourism policies, youth education, public awareness, and sustainable destination management.

Intended Learning Objectives (ILOs)

By the end of this session, participants should be able to:

- Analyse the key sustainability challenges facing tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Evaluate the roles of government, businesses, communities, and educational institutions in promoting responsible tourism.
- Assess policy and management strategies for balancing tourism development with environmental conservation.
- Recommend practical interventions to encourage sustainable tourism and long-term regional development.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. Why has tourism become both an economic opportunity and an environmental challenge for Gilgit-Baltistan?
2. Should the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan impose stricter regulations on construction, land use, and tourism development? Why or why not?
3. How can Gilgit-Baltistan diversify its economy beyond tourism while preserving local livelihoods?
4. What role should schools, universities, families, and religious institutions play in promoting responsible tourism and environmental awareness?
5. Should Gilgit-Baltistan prioritise fewer but more responsible tourists over increasing visitor numbers? Discuss.

6. What lessons from destinations such as the Lake District or Machu Picchu could be adapted to the context of Gilgit-Baltistan?

(English Translation of the Interview Transcript)

Dr Jawad Syed:

Assalamu Alaikum. Today I am with **Mr Ejaz Karim**, who is the General Manager of **Serena Khaplu Palace**.

The purpose of speaking with Mr Ejaz Karim is the same as the objective of my research project: how can we protect the natural beauty of this region, and God forbid, ensure that Hunza, Skardu and Khaplu do not suffer the same fate as many other tourist destinations in Pakistan, where, in the name of development, strange and unplanned structures have been built that have diminished the natural beauty of the mountains, lakes and rivers.

Mr Ejaz, based on your experience—and given that you are a native of Hunza and have around 25 to 30 years of experience in hospitality in senior leadership positions—what is your assessment of the current situation?

How can it be improved in the future, and what responsibilities should different stakeholders assume?

Mr Ejaz Karim:

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to discuss this important subject.

We have been associated with the tourism and hospitality industry for many years, and during that time we have experienced many challenges. As you mentioned, tourists come here, but they are often unfamiliar with the local culture, local norms and customs.

Even something as simple as waste disposal becomes an issue. People throw their rubbish into rivers and then leave. In my view, all stakeholders have a role to play. However, the most important responsibility lies with the government.

When you look around today, you can see unplanned and inappropriate buildings being constructed everywhere. Many of them have no proper sewerage system.

Therefore, the government should establish a proper regulatory system. Whenever someone wants to undertake commercial construction, they should first obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the government.

The government should carefully inspect every project. It should assess how wastewater will be managed, where sewage will go, where solid waste will be disposed of, and whether environmental standards are being followed.

Many countries already have such assessment systems, and we should adopt similar practices here. Religious scholars also have an important role. Through mosques and community gatherings, they should educate people about how to behave towards tourists, what information should be shared with visitors, and how to keep our surroundings clean.

Their role in creating public awareness is very important. If you look around our towns today, even local cleanliness standards are quite poor.

Sometimes we ourselves are surprised to see the amount of rubbish accumulated in residential areas. People continue living alongside it because they simply lack awareness.

Many people do not understand cleanliness or how to maintain their surroundings properly. When visitors arrive on top of these existing problems, the overall condition of the area naturally deteriorates further.

Likewise, our political leaders and community leaders also have an important responsibility. They should educate people within their towns and villages about cleanliness and civic responsibility.

There should be proper awareness campaigns. Although there is now a government-managed waste collection system operating in the town—similar to municipal waste collection services elsewhere—people still fail to transport their rubbish to the designated collection points.

There is negligence on the part of the public as well. That is another important issue.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Thank you very much for your valuable insights. There is one issue I would like to discuss further. People like us have been visiting Baltistan and other northern areas of Pakistan for many years.

In the past, we used to see magnificent mountains, crystal-clear lakes and unobstructed views.

Today, however, many of those views are disappearing because unplanned structures are being built everywhere. Hunza was once regarded as one of the most beautiful settlements in the world.

Khaplu, too, was known as such a pristine place that people would write that if someone wished to spend the last years of their life in peace, they should come to Khaplu.

Today, however, the situation has changed. When one enters Khaplu town, one almost feels like leaving immediately. How has the situation reached this point? More importantly, how can it be improved in the future?

Mr Ejaz Karim:

The biggest reason is quite simple. As you know, there is virtually no industry in this region.

Unlike large cities, where there are many commercial industries providing employment, here tourism is almost the only source of livelihood. When you speak about the earlier years, you are absolutely right.

At that time there was hardly any domestic tourism. I grew up here, so I know this very well. Only a few visitors came—people such as Mustansar Hussain Tarar, who introduced these beautiful places to Pakistan through their travel writing.

Most visitors in those days were foreign tourists. Foreign tourists generally brought with them a culture of responsible tourism. When they climbed mountains, they carried all of their rubbish back in their backpacks and disposed of it properly. They understood these responsibilities.

The situation began to change when domestic tourism started increasing rapidly. At the same time, there were no alternative industries here. People faced poverty.

Naturally they thought, "If I build two rooms... three rooms... perhaps I can earn a livelihood."

So they started building guest houses. That is where the problem began. Today almost everyone in this region depends on tourism. Many people sold their land in order to buy vehicles for tourists. Others sold land to construct two or three-room guest houses.

The government has found it very difficult to stop this process. People ask, "If I have no other source of income, what else should I do?"

"My land is beside a river." "My land is beside a lake."

"How can the government stop me from building on it?"

The government itself lacks the resources to compensate people by providing alternative land elsewhere.

That is why, in my opinion, controlling this situation has become extremely difficult. Whenever we discuss these issues with local people, they reply:

"We have no other livelihood."

"How will we support our families?"

"You have a salaried job, but you are asking us not to build."

"You have financial security."

"We also have the right to earn a living."

And they are not wrong to think that way.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Then what is the solution?

Mr Ejaz Karim:

In my opinion, this is where the government's role again becomes crucial. Only the government can make and enforce laws.

It can introduce by-laws stating where construction is permitted and where it is prohibited.

It can declare certain locations off-limits for new construction. People should also be encouraged to restore existing structures instead of constructing new ones. It is largely a matter of awareness. If someone wants to invest, they should renovate and improve the existing infrastructure rather than continuously building new structures.

The government can enact laws and make them binding. Otherwise, it becomes extremely difficult. Even in Hunza, our community institutions have existed for many decades.

Institutions such as the Aga Khan Cultural Service and the Aga Khan Planning and Building Service were established specifically to guide people on where buildings should be constructed, how they should be designed, and what architectural standards should be followed.

Many awareness sessions have been conducted. People have been informed. These institutions are ready to help people prepare building plans and provide technical guidance. However, the same problem arises again.

People say, "The design you are recommending is more expensive."

"The materials or colours you recommend are not available."

These become excuses. If you look at Hunza today, despite all these institutions having worked there since the 1970s and 1980s, you can still see the problems that exist today. That is the reality.

Dr Jawad Syed:

So your first recommendation is that unless the government introduces proper laws—particularly regarding construction and land sales—the situation will remain difficult.

At present, people from outside also come here, construct buildings, earn money for two or three years, and then leave. That creates additional problems.

Another point that has emerged in my discussions is that it is the responsibility of the Government of Pakistan, the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan, and local governments to create other industries that can provide employment.

At present, people do not see any opportunities other than tourism. Another suggestion is that some laws already exist, but they are not enforced because of negligence, corruption, or personal relationships.

Officials often hesitate to stop violations because they fear damaging family or social relationships. What are your thoughts? If alternative industries were developed in places such as Khaplu, people might not feel compelled to build guest houses everywhere or destroy mountainsides and riverbanks simply to earn a livelihood. What alternative employment opportunities do you think could be developed?

Mr Ejaz Karim:

This region is very rich in many ways. It is rich in fruit production.

It is rich in culture and traditional handicrafts. It is rich in precious stones and mineral resources. There are many sectors that the government could develop. Naturally, local people could then become engaged in those industries.

However, from what I observe, tourism continues to grow every year. Visitor numbers keep increasing. As tourism increases, these issues will also continue. Unfortunately, environmental degradation will continue unless something changes. At the same time, tourists need facilities.

If more tourists arrive, they require accommodation and infrastructure. Ultimately, more infrastructure has to be built. So these challenges will continue as tourism expands. Nowadays many tourists also arrive on motorcycles.

They bring their own tents and camp wherever they wish. They often have little connection with the local economy. They bring their own food and supplies. As a result, they make almost no economic contribution to local communities. Unfortunately, they often contribute more to littering and other environmental problems than to the local economy.

Perhaps tourism laws should be developed that encourage a different kind of tourism. We need tourists who contribute positively. Selective tourism may be a better approach. If that kind of tourism grows, both the tourism industry and the region can develop more sustainably.

However, if tourism continues in its present form, managing these problems will remain very difficult.

Dr Jawad Syed:

A few days ago, I was discussing this issue with one of my colleagues in Lahore. I told him that we do not necessarily need a very large number of tourists. What we need are **responsible tourists**.

Mr Ejaz Karim:

Exactly. But again, only the government can really address this issue. Ordinary citizens cannot control who comes here.

Most of these visitors are Pakistani tourists travelling within their own country. Foreign tourists also come, but, as I mentioned earlier, they generally arrive with a stronger sense of responsibility.

They usually respect local culture. They do not litter. They rarely behave irresponsibly in that regard.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Let me share two examples. You have travelled abroad as well. When I lived in England, I frequently visited the Lake District. When you go there, you can visit the places where William Wordsworth lived, along with many historic cottages and heritage sites.

All of them have been preserved exactly as they were. There is no unplanned development. Tourists visit these places in large numbers and willingly pay entrance fees.

Yet the area has retained its original character, and its natural beauty has not been destroyed.

Another example is Machu Picchu in Peru. It was the centre of an ancient civilisation.

I once planned to visit it. When I booked my flights, my colleagues advised me not to assume that I could simply arrive and enter. They explained that visitor numbers are strictly limited. One must book several months in advance because only around 500 to 1,000 visitors are permitted each day. Perhaps we also need this kind of government intervention.

Mr Ejaz Karim:

Absolutely. There is another issue as well. Tourism here is seasonal. If tourism continued throughout all twelve months of the year, people might not feel such pressure to maximise their earnings during a short period. Unfortunately, we still do not have a proper winter tourism system.

Although there is tremendous potential for winter tourism, there is currently no effective government support. We have skiing opportunities. Many other winter activities could also be developed. However, there are serious infrastructure problems. Electricity remains unreliable during winter.

Without a dependable power supply, hotels cannot operate properly. Road infrastructure is another issue. Although the roads exist, after snowfall there is often no proper machinery available to clear them. These are the challenges.

As a result, people try to earn as much as possible during the four or five months of the tourist season because they depend on those earnings for the entire year.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Finally, Mr Ejaz, what message would you like to give to professors at LUMS, as well as our friends at the University of Baltistan and Karakoram International University—including its Karimabad Campus?

What would you like our professors, PhD researchers, and research scholars to do that could help promote responsible tourism in this region?

Mr Ejaz Karim:

Absolutely. You are right. One of the most important factors in the development of any region is its youth.

If professors want to make a contribution, they certainly can. Universities can organise awareness programmes not only for their students but also for the general public.

They can arrange lectures, seminars and awareness sessions. At the very least, young people will begin to understand how they can preserve their own region.

In my opinion, you are absolutely right. The more workshops, lectures and educational programmes we organise—especially for young people—the greater the impact, God willing.

Even university curricula should include such topics. There is already a Tourism Department at Karakoram International University.

I do not know exactly what their syllabus contains, but the concept of responsible tourism should certainly be incorporated and strengthened because awareness in this region is extremely important.

Many years ago—I think around 2010—we hired a foreign consultant. She worked specifically on responsible tourism. She travelled from place to place, met local communities and explained how tourism should be managed responsibly. She visited many mountain areas, identified the problems that existed there, discussed them with local communities, and prepared a detailed report for us. She explained what practical measures should be adopted to promote responsible tourism.

For example, as hoteliers, we should minimise water consumption. Plastic use in hotels should be reduced as much as possible—ideally eliminated altogether. At that time, we implemented many of these recommendations. Even in our washrooms, we introduced measures to ensure that water was used efficiently and not wasted. Similarly, we have almost completely eliminated plastic from our hotel. Unfortunately, however, the same problem returned.

We even distributed reusable shopping bags to vegetable vendors. We visited schools and encouraged people to replace plastic bags with reusable cloth bags for shopping.

For some time the initiative worked well. But gradually, the old habits returned. That is why I believe public awareness remains absolutely essential. It should begin at school level so that children develop the right mindset from an early age and understand what is positive and what is harmful for the environment. I even observed this with my own children. Sometimes, while returning from school, they would throw wrappers out of the car window because no one had told them otherwise.

One day, when one of my son or daughter threw plastic outside, I immediately stopped the car. I asked them to get out, pick up the plastic, and bring it back. Then I asked them to put it inside the plastic bag that we kept in the car.

They asked me why. I explained that if we ourselves throw rubbish outside, we are contributing to pollution and damaging the environment.

After that day, they never repeated that behaviour. So awareness is absolutely essential. It must begin with children. It must begin in schools. It must begin within families.

Parents have an important responsibility. Similarly, our madrasas, mosques and Jamatkhanas should also educate people. Schools, colleges and universities all have a role to play.