



Colonial Exploration and the Emergence of Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan

Wajahat Mir¹, Muhammad Ali², Pervaiz Musharaf³

1. PhD. Scholar, Department of History, Government College University Faisalabad
mirwajahat564@gmail.com
2. BS Student, Department of Sociology, Government College University Faisalabad
alymuhammadabbas@gmail.com
3. BS Student, Heritage and Tourism Department of History, Government College University Faisalabad, pervaizmusharaf785@gmail.com

Abstract

Gilgit-Baltistan occupies a strategically significant position within the mountainous frontier regions of South Asia and has historically attracted the attention of colonial powers, explorers, surveyors, and travelers because of its geographical location, natural landscapes, and political importance during the Great Game rivalry between British India and Tsarist Russia. British colonial exploration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a crucial role in mapping, documenting, and administratively integrating the region into imperial strategic networks. These explorations not only transformed Gilgit-Baltistan into an internationally recognized frontier landscape but also laid the historical foundations for the emergence of tourism in the region. This article critically examines the relationship between colonial exploration and the development of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan by analyzing colonial travel writings, mapping projects, infrastructure development, and exploration narratives. Employing a qualitative historical research approach, the study utilizes colonial archives, travel accounts, historical records, and secondary scholarly literature to investigate how British exploration contributed to the construction of Gilgit-Baltistan as a destination for adventure, mountaineering, and heritage tourism. The analysis reveals that colonial mapping, travel narratives, and strategic infrastructure projects significantly enhanced the accessibility and international visibility of the region, which later facilitated the growth of modern tourism. Furthermore, the article argues that contemporary tourism narratives in Gilgit-Baltistan continue to reflect colonial representations of landscape, culture, and mountain adventure. The study concludes that tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan cannot be fully understood without examining its colonial historical foundations and the enduring influence of imperial exploration on tourism imagination and regional identity.

Keywords: Colonial Exploration, Gilgit-Baltistan, Tourism History, Great Game, Heritage Tourism, British India, Mountain Tourism

Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the most influential sectors of economic and cultural development in the contemporary world, contributing significantly to employment generation, regional integration, heritage preservation, and international exchange. Beyond its economic significance, tourism also functions as a historical and political process through which

landscapes, cultures, and identities are represented and consumed. Historical and heritage tourism particularly depend upon narratives of exploration, discovery, and cultural imagination that are often deeply connected with colonial histories and imperial geographical projects. In many regions of Asia and Africa, colonial exploration played a central role in transforming remote frontier territories into internationally recognized travel destinations (Hall, 2008; Timothy, 2011). Situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and China, Gilgit-Baltistan possesses immense geographical and strategic significance. The region contains some of the world's highest mountain ranges, including the Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindukush, as well as globally recognized peaks such as K2 and Nanga Parbat. Historically, however, Gilgit-Baltistan remained relatively isolated from major political and commercial centers because of its mountainous terrain and limited accessibility. The strategic importance of the region significantly increased during the nineteenth century when the British Empire and Tsarist Russia entered into geopolitical rivalry commonly known as the "Great Game." Within this imperial competition, British colonial authorities viewed Gilgit-Baltistan as a critical frontier zone necessary for the protection of British India from potential Russian expansion toward South Asia (Dani, 1989; Sökefeld, 2015). As a result, British explorers, surveyors, military officers, and political agents began systematically exploring and documenting the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonial expeditions focused on mapping mountain routes, surveying glaciers, studying local populations, and establishing strategic communication networks. Important colonial figures such as Francis Younghusband, George Hayward, John Biddulph, and Frederic Drew produced extensive travel writings, ethnographic observations, and geographical accounts that introduced Gilgit-Baltistan to European intellectual and political circles. These exploration narratives portrayed the region as exotic, mysterious, adventurous, and geographically extraordinary, thereby constructing an international imagination of the northern mountain frontier (Biddulph, 1880; Younghusband, 1896).

Colonial exploration also contributed to the development of roads, rest houses, caravan routes, and administrative infrastructure that later became important components of tourism accessibility in the region. Although these projects were initially designed for military and strategic purposes, they unintentionally established the foundations for modern adventure tourism, mountaineering tourism, and heritage tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. During the twentieth century, mountaineers, researchers, photographers, and foreign travelers increasingly visited the region, particularly after international attention toward the Karakoram mountains expanded. Consequently, colonial exploration transformed Gilgit-Baltistan from a remote frontier territory into a globally recognized mountain tourism destination (Drew, 1875; Hall, 2008). Despite the growing importance of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, limited scholarly attention has been given to the historical relationship between colonial exploration and tourism development in the region. Existing literature primarily focuses either on tourism economics, environmental issues, or colonial political history separately, while insufficient research examines how imperial exploration, travel narratives, and colonial mapping shaped the emergence of tourism and tourism imagination in northern Pakistan. Similarly, the role of colonial infrastructure and exploration narratives in influencing contemporary tourism branding and heritage representation remains underexplored within Pakistani scholarship (Said, 1978; Timothy, 2011).

Research Objectives

- To examine the role of British colonial exploration in the historical transformation of Gilgit-Baltistan during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

- To analyze how colonial mapping, surveying, and travel narratives contributed to the international recognition of Gilgit-Baltistan as a mountain frontier region.
- To investigate the relationship between colonial infrastructure development and the emergence of tourism accessibility in Gilgit-Baltistan.
- To explore the influence of colonial adventure narratives on the development of mountaineering and heritage tourism in northern Pakistan.
- To evaluate how colonial representations of landscape, culture, and frontier identity continue to shape contemporary tourism imagination in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Methodology

This article uses a qualitative historical research method to examine the relationship between colonial exploration and the emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. The study relies on primary and secondary sources, including colonial travel accounts, exploration reports, books, and research articles. Historical records of British explorers such as Younghusband and Biddulph are analyzed to understand colonial narratives and regional exploration. The research applies content and historical analysis methods to examine how colonial mapping and infrastructure influenced tourism development. The study mainly focuses on the historical foundations of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Literature Review

Colonial Exploration and the Great Game

During the nineteenth century, Gilgit-Baltistan became strategically important because of the geopolitical rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia, commonly known as the Great Game. British colonial authorities considered the region a critical frontier zone for protecting British India from Russian expansion toward South Asia. Consequently, British explorers, political agents, and surveyors entered Gilgit-Baltistan to study its geography, routes, and local political structures. The establishment of the Gilgit Agency further strengthened British political influence and administrative control in the region (Dani, 1989).

Colonial Travel Writing and Exploration Narratives

Colonial travel writings played a significant role in introducing Gilgit-Baltistan to European audiences. British explorers such as Francis Younghusband, John Biddulph, and Frederic Drew documented the mountains, glaciers, cultures, and landscapes of the region through travel accounts and exploration narratives (Younghusband, 1896; Drew, 1875). These writings often portrayed Gilgit-Baltistan as an exotic and adventurous frontier landscape, contributing to the construction of a romantic mountain imagination within colonial literature. Such narratives later influenced adventure tourism and mountaineering interest in the region.

Tourism and Heritage Development

Tourism scholars argue that historical narratives, exploration histories, and cultural representation play an important role in the development of heritage tourism destinations. In Gilgit-Baltistan, colonial exploration created international awareness regarding mountain landscapes and trekking routes, which later contributed to the emergence of mountaineering and adventure tourism. Colonial infrastructure such as roads, rest houses, and travel routes gradually improved accessibility and connected remote mountain regions with broader tourism networks (MacDonald, 1998).

Colonial Exploration and the Great Game

During the nineteenth century, Gilgit-Baltistan became strategically important because of the geopolitical rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia, commonly known as the Great Game. British authorities considered the region a vital frontier zone for protecting British India from Russian expansion toward Central and South Asia (Hopkirk, 1990). Consequently, British political agents, surveyors, and explorers increasingly entered the region to gather geographical, military, and political information.

The strategic importance of Gilgit-Baltistan led to the establishment of the Gilgit Agency by the British colonial administration in 1877. Through this administrative structure, the British expanded their political influence over local rulers and strengthened frontier control in northern areas (Dani, 1989). Colonial authorities viewed the mountainous passes, trade routes, and border regions of Gilgit-Baltistan as essential for imperial defense and regional surveillance. British explorers such as Francis Younghusband, George Hayward, and John Biddulph conducted extensive explorations in Hunza, Gilgit, Chitral, and Baltistan. Their expeditions focused on mountain routes, glaciers, rivers, local communities, and frontier geography (Biddulph, 1880). These explorations not only enhanced British strategic knowledge but also introduced the landscapes of Gilgit-Baltistan to European audiences through maps, travel writings, and exploration reports.

Colonial exploration gradually transformed Gilgit-Baltistan from a relatively isolated mountain frontier into an internationally recognized geographical region. The documentation of mountain landscapes, valleys, and local cultures contributed to the creation of an adventurous and exotic image of the region within colonial literature (Said, 1978). These narratives later played an important role in attracting mountaineers, travelers, and researchers to northern Pakistan. The Great Game therefore significantly influenced the historical transformation of Gilgit-Baltistan. Although colonial exploration was primarily driven by imperial political and military objectives, it unintentionally established the foundations for modern tourism development in the region through mapping, infrastructure expansion, and international geographical visibility (MacDonald, 1998).

Colonial Travel Writing and Exploration Narratives

Colonial travel writings played a significant role in introducing Gilgit-Baltistan to European intellectual and geographical circles during the nineteenth century. British explorers and travelers documented the mountains, glaciers, valleys, and local cultures of the region through travel accounts, diaries, and exploration reports (Younghusband, 1896). These writings presented Gilgit-Baltistan as a remote, mysterious, and adventurous frontier landscape that attracted the attention of European readers and geographical societies. Explorers such as John Biddulph and Frederic Drew produced detailed descriptions of local tribes, customs, languages, and mountain environments in northern Pakistan (Drew, 1875). Their narratives often reflected colonial perspectives that portrayed local societies as exotic and culturally different from Europe. Such representations contributed to the colonial construction of the region as a unique mountain frontier within imperial imagination. Colonial travel literature also romanticized mountain exploration and adventure. The dangerous passes, glaciers, and high peaks of the Karakoram and Himalayas were described as spaces of exploration, risk, and discovery (Pratt, 1992). These narratives later encouraged foreign mountaineers, geographers, and travelers to visit the region, particularly during the twentieth century when mountaineering tourism began expanding internationally. Travel writings further contributed to the geographical visibility of Gilgit-Baltistan by publishing maps, sketches, route descriptions, and ethnographic observations in

European journals and books (Biddulph, 1880). As a result, the region increasingly became associated with adventure travel and mountain exploration within global tourism imagination. Colonial exploration narratives therefore played an important role in the historical emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Although these writings were initially connected with imperial strategic interests, they unintentionally promoted the region internationally and laid the intellectual foundations for modern adventure and heritage tourism in northern Pakistan (Urry, 1990).

Colonial Infrastructure and Tourism Accessibility

British colonial administration introduced roads, caravan routes, communication systems, and rest houses in Gilgit-Baltistan primarily for strategic and military purposes during the Great Game period (Dani, 1989). These infrastructure projects were designed to improve frontier control, military movement, and administrative communication between British India and northern frontier regions. The construction of travel routes and mountain pathways gradually increased the accessibility of remote areas such as Gilgit, Hunza, Baltistan, and Chitral (Kreutzmann, 1996). Although these developments initially served colonial political interests, they later became important foundations for tourism mobility and mountain travel in the region. Improved accessibility allowed explorers, researchers, hunters, and foreign travelers to enter previously isolated mountain areas. Colonial infrastructure also contributed to the development of mountaineering and adventure tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Trekking routes, rest houses, and mapped mountain passes facilitated foreign expeditions toward peaks such as K2 and Nanga Parbat during the twentieth century (Israr-ud-Din, 2000). As international mountaineering activities expanded, Gilgit-Baltistan gradually emerged as an important destination for mountain tourism. In addition, colonial mapping and transportation networks connected Gilgit-Baltistan with broader regional and international geographical systems (Kreutzmann, 2005). These connections enhanced the visibility of the region within global travel and exploration narratives, which later influenced tourism promotion and destination branding. Colonial infrastructure therefore played a crucial role in the historical emergence of tourism accessibility in Gilgit-Baltistan. While these projects were established under imperial strategic objectives, they unintentionally created the physical foundations for modern tourism development in northern Pakistan.

Emergence of Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan

The historical process of colonial exploration gradually contributed to the emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. British explorers, surveyors, and travelers introduced the mountainous landscapes of the region to international geographical societies and travel communities through maps, exploration reports, and travel literature (Younghusband, 1896). As a result, Gilgit-Baltistan increasingly gained recognition as a unique mountain frontier with significant adventure and exploration potential. During the early twentieth century, foreign mountaineers, researchers, and expedition teams began visiting the region, particularly the Karakoram and Himalayan mountain ranges (Mason, 1955). Peaks such as K2, Nanga Parbat, and the Baltoro Glacier attracted international climbers and explorers interested in mountaineering and high-altitude expeditions. These developments marked the beginning of adventure tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. The expansion of transportation routes and communication networks further increased tourism accessibility in northern Pakistan (Kreutzmann, 2005). Roads and trekking pathways originally developed during the colonial period later became important tourism routes connecting Gilgit, Hunza, Skardu, and Baltistan with broader travel networks. Improved accessibility encouraged both domestic and international tourism activities in the region. Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan also developed through the

international romanticization of mountain landscapes and frontier cultures. Colonial narratives portrayed the region as an untouched and exotic destination characterized by glaciers, valleys, traditional cultures, and adventure landscapes (Urry, 1990). These representations significantly influenced the growth of trekking, cultural tourism, and heritage tourism in the region during the twentieth century. The emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan therefore cannot be separated from the historical legacy of colonial exploration. Although colonial activities were primarily political and strategic in nature, they unintentionally transformed the region into an internationally recognized tourism destination through exploration narratives, mapping projects, and infrastructure development.

Colonial Legacy and Modern Tourism

The legacy of colonial exploration continues to influence modern tourism narratives and destination branding in Gilgit-Baltistan. Many contemporary tourism representations still emphasize the adventurous, remote, and exotic image of the region that was originally constructed through colonial travel writings and exploration accounts (Said, 1978). Mountains, glaciers, and frontier landscapes remain central themes in tourism promotion and international travel narratives related to northern Pakistan. Adventure tourism and mountaineering continue to dominate the tourism identity of Gilgit-Baltistan. International trekking routes, climbing expeditions, and mountain tourism activities in regions such as Baltoro, Hunza, and Skardu largely follow pathways and geographical knowledge first documented during the colonial period (Kreutzmann, 1996). Consequently, colonial exploration still shapes tourism mobility and mountain tourism culture in the region today. Colonial heritage also influences the preservation and presentation of historical routes, forts, and exploration sites within tourism development (MacDonald, 1998). Tourism authorities and travel organizations frequently utilize colonial exploration history as part of heritage tourism promotion, particularly in relation to the Great Game and early mountaineering expeditions. These historical narratives contribute to the cultural and historical attraction of Gilgit-Baltistan for international visitors. At the same time, postcolonial scholars argue that many tourism narratives continue to reproduce colonial representations of local cultures and landscapes (Edensor, 1998). Local communities are often portrayed through romanticized and exotic perspectives that prioritize tourist imagination over local historical realities. Such representations raise important questions regarding identity, cultural ownership, and heritage representation within tourism development. The colonial legacy therefore remains deeply embedded in the tourism structure and international image of Gilgit-Baltistan. Colonial exploration not only contributed to the historical emergence of tourism but also continues to influence how the region is represented, marketed, and experienced within contemporary global tourism networks.

Findings

- British colonial exploration increased the international visibility of Gilgit-Baltistan during the nineteenth century.
- Colonial travel writings portrayed Gilgit-Baltistan as an adventurous and exotic mountain frontier.
- British explorers and surveyors introduced the geography, mountains, and cultures of the region to European audiences.
- Colonial mapping and surveying projects transformed Gilgit-Baltistan into a strategically important frontier region.
- Roads, caravan routes, and communication systems developed during the colonial period later improved tourism accessibility in northern Pakistan.

- Colonial exploration contributed to the emergence of mountaineering and adventure tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Peaks such as K2 and Nanga Parbat gained international recognition through colonial exploration narratives and expedition reports.
- Colonial travel literature created a romanticized image of mountain landscapes that later influenced tourism imagination and destination branding.
- Modern tourism promotion in Gilgit-Baltistan still reflects colonial representations of adventure, remoteness, and exotic culture.
- The historical emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan is closely connected with colonial exploration, mapping, and infrastructure development.

Conclusion

British colonial exploration played a significant role in the historical transformation of Gilgit-Baltistan from a remote frontier region into an internationally recognized mountain landscape. During the nineteenth century, British explorers, surveyors, and political agents entered the region primarily because of strategic concerns related to the Great Game and imperial frontier politics. Through mapping projects, travel writings, geographical surveys, and infrastructure development, colonial authorities increased the international visibility of Gilgit-Baltistan and introduced its mountains, valleys, and cultures to global audiences.

Colonial travel narratives portrayed the region as adventurous, exotic, and geographically extraordinary, which later contributed to the emergence of mountaineering, adventure, and heritage tourism in northern Pakistan. Similarly, roads, caravan routes, communication systems, and travel infrastructure established during the colonial period improved accessibility and laid the physical foundations for modern tourism development in the region.

The analysis further reveals that colonial representations of mountains, frontier landscapes, and local cultures continue to influence contemporary tourism branding and tourism imagination in Gilgit-Baltistan. Adventure tourism, trekking culture, and mountain tourism in the region remain historically connected with colonial exploration narratives and expedition histories.

Overall, the emergence of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan cannot be understood separately from its colonial historical context. Colonial exploration not only transformed the geopolitical importance of the region but also shaped its long-term tourism identity and international recognition. The study therefore highlights the importance of connecting colonial history with tourism studies in order to better understand the historical foundations of tourism development in northern Pakistan.

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