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Original Research Article

Capitalist Tourism: From an Opportunity for Development to a Threat

(An Analysis of the Relationship between Capitalist Tourism and Place/Local Community; Case Study: Gohar Park Tourist Village, Sirjan)*

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ABSTRACT

The Gohar Park Tourist and Recreational Village in Sirjan, the largest tourist village in the Middle East, is designed to include a variety of recreational, residential, sports, and service functions, with the vision of advancing Sirjan toward sustainable development. Gol Gohar, as a capitalist source in this project, should serve as a capacity and potential for development; the design of such a large-scale park with diverse functions ought to be an opportunity for improving the quality of life. However, an observation and analysis of the park's quality, beyond its sheer quantity, reveals contradictions between this project and the ideals of sustainable development, as well as a lack of compatibility with the working-class city of Sirjan. Consequently, the project poses a threat to the territory of Sirjan as a place. In this study, first, despite Gol Gohar's investment serving as an opportunity for the enhancement of tourism, Gohar Park is to be critically examined through an equitable lens. Second, with a holistic perspective, the reasons behind the adoption of such a design by the managers are to be analyzed. Subsequently, the impact of Gohar Park's decisions on the local community is to be investigated. Finally, the relationship between capitalist tourism and the place/local community is to be analyzed. This research is a descriptive-analytical study that investigates the subject based on field-observational and library research, adopting a walking approach (as a specific method for landscape research). The pathological analysis of Gohar Park across various dimensions (planning and managerial level, operational and executive level, and perceptual-semantic level) reveals that due to the absence of a multi-faceted perspective and an comprehending of Sirjan's characteristics as a territory (rather than merely a land for recreation), this development cannot be considered a place-based development. An examination of the reasons behind the managers' choice of Gohar Park indicates that, generally speaking, the decision to pursue tourism development with the goal of urban sustainable development serving an industry is a valuable initiative. However, the lack of a place-based perspective in the rationale for this decision, and the mere reliance on adopting a symbolic design, renders the pursuit of development objectives as non-place-based. The analysis of Gohar Park's relationship with the local community demonstrates that while Gohar Park may initially, through "superlative" attributes, enhance the local community's perceived prestige, its examination across economic, social, and spatial domains reveals the gradual intensification of pressures over the long term, and indeed, the neglect of local community presence within the project. Capitalist tourism, owing to its capitalist potentials, can serve as an opportunity for improving quality of life and as an engine of growth; however, it requires a comprehensive approach. The absence of such an approach will lead not to an enhancement of quality of life, but rather to place destruction and the weakening of the local community.

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Introduction

Gohar Park is a complex envisioned with the aim of promoting sustainable development in Sirjan and advancing tourism, or in the words of Gol Gohar, "a growth in the heart of the desert." However, the nature of this growth is open to debate. Spanning an area of 58,956,89 square meters, Gohar Park has been established as the largest recreational complex in the Middle East on the outskirts of Sirjan by the Gol Gohar Mining and Industrial Company. It employs a wide range of attractions -from a zoo to a Sacred Defense museum- to draw visitors. In effect, Gohar Park can be described as a recreational space developed by a private revenue source (Gol Gohar) to increase its own profits and income, thus exemplifying tourism under the shadow of capitalism. Gol Gohar served as a turning point for Sirjan, generating numerous transformations in the region; over time, the city and its surrounding villages gradually became instruments in the service of the mine.

As an investment company, Gol Gohar represents a potential for the region that could lead to an improvement in the city's quality of life, and it is expected to bring progress to the city. In the realm of tourism development as well, the emergence of Gohar Park, a recreational complex at the regional level, backed by Gol Gohar's investment, could have served as an opportunity for urban enhancement. However, analyses point to a different reality. Initial observation suggests that in Gohar Park, various globally recognized recreational elements have been employed to persuade visitors to remain within the space. Yet a preliminary pathological analysis based on observations reveals a range of imbalances. In effect, this research firstly seeks to pathologically examine Gohar Park with a holistic perspective, grounded in observation and the classification of these shortcomings. In the following section, the rationales behind the planning and design of Gohar Park are discussed, and subsequently, the impact of these decisions on the local community is investigated.

Research Questions

Main question: As an instance of tourism under the shadow of capitalism, what is the relationship of the Gohar Park Tourist Village with place and the local community?

Sub-questions:1. From a place-oriented perspective, what characteristics of Gohar Park cause it to be perceived as a problem? 2. What leads managers to decide on constructing Gohar Park?

Necessity of the Research

As a newly established project, Gohar Park has attracted considerable public attention today. It seems that this will lead large companies, competing in this market and seeking to enhance their public standing, to turn towards promoting themselves in the tourism sector, adopting Gohar Park, a pioneering project in this regard, renowned across the Middle East, as a model for themselves. Therefore, it is first necessary to examine and analyze Gohar Park through holistic and effective perspectives, to assess its relationship with urban development given the claims it makes, and, in effect, for developments of this kind that take shape under the shadow of capitalism to comprehend with what perspective they should approach tourism development under capitalism. Moreover, contemporary tourism studies require a paradigm shift, moving away from traditional, applied, and positivist research towards critical, reflexive, and emancipatory approaches (Ateljevic et al., 2012). Accordingly, this article seeks to critically analyze the relationship between tourism under the shadow of capitalism and the place/local community, with reference to the case study of Gohar Park in the city of Sirjan.

Research Methodology

This study seeks to conduct descriptive-analytical research with a qualitative approach on the subject matter, relying on field-observational and library studies, and adopting the walking method (as a specific method for landscape research).

Library data for this research are derived from the study of primary sources on the history of Sirjan (for analyzing the landscape of Sirjan), the upstream plans of Sirjan (for analyzing the nature of the local community yesterday and today), and studies related to the theoretical concepts of this research, particularly the topic of capitalist tourism.

Field observation data for this research were collected in autumn 2025, over a period of three days (half a day at Gohar Park, half a day at the Gol Gohar mine, and two days in the city of Sirjan). Walking, as one of the most revealing ways of discovering landscape, relies on experience. In this method, three fundamental aspects of the research were examined: the production of serendipitous knowledge; the identification of issues, research questions, and ideas; and reflection in action. (1) Production of serendipitous knowledge: Beyond library studies, through walking, the landscape of Sirjan (walking routes within the main urban structure and both new and old neighborhoods)

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and Gohar Park (walking paths and field experience along main routes and subspaces) was perceived as a dynamic and changing phenomenon, revealing more than the information conveyed by maps, (2) Identification of issues, research questions, and ideas: Through walking, intuitive and embodied strategies -beyond purely rational strategies- were employed to analyze issues and formulate research questions. (3) Reflection in action: In this research, based on field observation, the author shared their initial tacit knowledge (arising from spatial experience) with other researchers on the research trip (31 landscape and place specialists). In turn, the author drew upon the concepts they derived -expressed during prior meetings (two sessions), during the trip (collective and intra-group informal conversations), after the trip (one session), or during shared walks, either directly or indirectly- as a powerful form of social knowledge. Some data also come from informal, purposive interviews without a structured questionnaire: with members of the local community (to comprehend their lived experience) and with the public relations officer of the Gohar Park complex (to analyze how the complex is presented to the public).

Regarding the research design, the data for this study were collected in three stages. In the first stage, library data were studied during pre-trip meetings. In the second stage, the data obtained from field observation were acquired in three general modes: the exploratory mode (the author focuses on space and curious exploration without a specific objective, discovering and perceiving various landscapes); the fluid mode (the author experiences the field based on intuition and direct perception of the landscape); and the reflective mode (the author articulates their tacit knowledge -derived from spatial perception and comprehending- in the form of words, textual notes, or images, and shares it reciprocally with other researchers on the trip, in both direct and indirect relation to the subject). In the third stage, library studies were completed, and the relevant library and field data were analyzed to identify concepts and initial patterns, and ultimately to determine the main themes. In the walking method, an attempt was made to analyze the causes of inefficiency in tourism development and its voids by observing and experiencing Sirjan as a place and synthesizing this with library studies.

Among the limitations of this project are the temporal constraints of the research (the park visit was conducted over a single day, and the experience is confined to that period; however, the analysis of the complex's deficiencies and the examination of the aforementioned issues are adequately addressed within this timeframe, with additional information serving to complement these analyses). Although the primary method of this research is based on first-hand experience, due to time limitations, images and videos available on public Instagram and Aparat pages were examined as supplementary perceptual data, not as a substitute for walking. These data were used solely to confirm or challenge the field findings. Another limitation is internet disruption in Iran and the lack of access to global sources in completing the conceptual framework and reviewing similar research and case studies.

Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

• Development

Development is a necessity for human survival and an unavoidable matter. The word derives from the root "wasa'a" (وَسَعَ), meaning to expand or broaden (Qarib, 1977, 306), and refers to a change that brings about progress (Cambridge ALD, 2006). This implies that development inherently involves growth; however, in practice, it is a contested concept encompassing divergent dimensions, from development that leads to colonialism to development that results in progress and prosperity. Among the most recent approaches to development is sustainable development, which has been adopted to elevate the concept of development from colonialism toward progress. Yet its reduction to a single dimension (i.e., the environment) rather than the adoption of a multi-faceted perspective remains a weakness. Development can be effective only when a perspective superior to the individual parts is adopted, examining the subject as a whole.

• Tourism

The term "tourism" derives from "tour," meaning to wander and travel, signifying a concept intertwined with recreation and leisure (Papoli Yazdi & Saqal, 2006). In contemporary perspective, tourism is considered a tool for urban development. However, this concept, ranging from a museum-like view of the city to sustainable tourism, remains contested, and it is necessary to examine how this major urban development strategy (Akbari, 2018, 35) can enhance a city's capacity and extend the possibilities of living. In effect, tourism development must be adopted beyond being merely a luxury event for the city, embracing a holistic perspective that encompasses various dimensions of the city, including the characteristics of place and the local community.

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• Place and the place-based approach

Place is a whole, resulting from the attribution of meaning to physical elements (tangible and activity-related). As a whole, place constitutes the being of space (Heidegger, 1971/2015) and arises from the observer's interpretation of the environment -i.e., a dynamic phenomenon (Mansouri, 2023). According to Augé (2008), place emerges from the superimposition of three parameters: identity, relation, and history. According to Relph (1967), it results from the combination of three components: physical, activity, and meaning. Tuan (1977) also considers place as something beyond the physical substance and function of a space. Cocola-Gant (2023) regards place as a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by the interweaving of meaning, memory, daily dwelling, social relations, and power relations. The place-based approach is an approach that views the city as a whole and reads all its physical and metaphysical dimensions. In effect, the place-based approach sees the city as something beyond a piece of land, rather as a territory. In other words, development can be effective only when it looks at the context through a place-based lens.

• Place-based tourism development

Place is the pivotal point for the effectiveness of tourism development. Tourism development is invariably accompanied by unequal distribution of power, resources, and benefits, and possesses a political and contested nature (Bianchi, 2018). In his article adopting a place-based approach, Cocola-Gant (2023) emphasizes how a failure to comprehend place in tourism planning can lead to a rupture in place attachment, the alienation of the local community from their neighborhood, and the place being subsumed into external consumption. In effect, tourism that disregards place-specific characteristics -including social context, lived experience, and so on- becomes a harmful phenomenon. In place-based tourism development, the tourist destination is regarded as a dynamic space endowed with social relations, cultural values, lived history, and an active ecosystem; it cannot be viewed merely as a product for tourist consumption.

• Tourism under the shadow of capitalism

A review of previous articles and studies reveals two perspectives on the relationship between capitalism and tourism, which is considered both an opportunity and a problem. For the first time regarding the direct relationship between tourism and capitalism, Britton (1982) argued that tourism serves as a means for Third World societies to integrate with developed countries, adopted for rapid growth without regard for local capacities and long-term consequences. He emphasizes that although tourism can be a driver of development, if not re-examined within policies, it leads to the reproduction of poverty, dependency, and inequality. Britton (1991) maintains that tourism arising from private investment is inherently profitable and growth-oriented, but this requires an comprehending of the relationship between capital, place, and the tourist. On the other hand, he considers place-based capacities, within the logic of capitalism, to be reduced to a consumer commodity, seeing place as serving the tourist rather than the local community's habitation. He argues that in this perspective, tourism development is confined to selected spaces, and the reproduction of spatial inequality occurs within the city.

Sinclair and Stabler (1997) consider private capitalism in tourism as a necessary but insufficient condition for tourism. They argue that it is the main driver of initial investment (hotels, transport, and services), increasing productivity and economic efficiency. On the other hand, they maintain that capitalist tourism highlights profitable spaces and gradually marginalizes non-profitable urban spaces, including local neighborhoods, leading to the creation of a spatial duality (tourist space versus resident space). MacCannell (1999) views tourism as more than mere entertainment; he sees it as a mechanism for the reproduction of social structure and power relations in industrial and post-industrial societies. In his book "The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class", he argues that certain segments of society regard their form of tourism as a marker of superiority, distinction, and prestige.

That is, tourism is regarded as a tool for enhancing prestige, but on the other hand, he [MacCannell] considers tourism in the capitalist world as exploitative leisure which, like labor, falls under the logic of domination and serves as one of the arenas for the reproduction of capitalism. He views tourism under the shadow of capitalism as, ostensibly, an escape from work and an experience of quality life, but in essence, governed by the logic of price, tour packages, and destination branding. Bianchi (2003) considers tourism development a deeply political project in which place, society, and power are simultaneously redefined. In his book, he raises the necessity of analyzing the local community beyond a myth, the "integrated local community", a local community in

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which simplified approaches to local participation conceal internal inequalities and legitimize capital-driven projects.

Ashley & Mitchell (2009), with an analytically critical yet realistic perspective on private capitalism in tourism, argue that capitalism is necessary for the scalability of tourism and that it requires guidance and control. Mosedale (2011) regards capitalism as a driver of tourism growth, but simultaneously as a driver of growing inequality. He views tourism not as a commercial activity or a peace industry, but as a reflector and reproducer of power relations, global hierarchies, and the mechanisms of exploitation within the capitalist system. From a theoretical standpoint, this concept may in some respects resemble notions such as the commodification of tourism; however, the role of capital and its influence on tourism development constitute the distinguishing factor. The above cases indicate that tourism arising from capitalism can be both an opportunity and, without guidance and control, transform into a threat (Fig. 1).

• Summary

A systematic analysis of the concepts relevant to the research topic indicates that development, as a necessity for human survival, can be effective when it moves beyond one-dimensional perspectives and looks at the subject holistically. Tourism, as a tool for urban development, can be beneficial when it examines the various dimensions of the city and serves the city rather than merely serving the tourist. This is where the place-based approach represents the pivotal point: it sees the city as more than just land. In other words, place-based tourism development, owing to its multi-faceted view of the city's physical and metaphysical dimensions, can lead to an enhancement of urban quality of life. On the other hand, in today's world, the craving for reputation among private capitalists -even in the tourism sector- has given rise to a form of tourism under the shadow of capitalism, which can be both an opportunity and a threat for the city.

The term "capitalist tourism" is in fact the name adopted in this research as a substitute for "tourism under the shadow of capitalism." According to the discussion above, this refers to a type of tourism that is created by a capitalist and grows under its branding, of which Gohar Park is an example. This article seeks to analyze, based on a balanced and equitable analysis, the relationship of Gohar Park as an instance of capitalist tourism with place and the local community.

A Glimpse into the Essence of the City of Sirjan

Sirjan is a city with a distinctive landscape across the course of time in the land of Kerman and Iran. In general, the city of Sirjan can be characterized by four unique features (Halabian et al., 2017; Arseh Architecture and Urban Planning Consulting Engineers, 2016; Golabzadeh, 2006; Afzali, 2022): 1. Its location adjacent to the network of major communication routes in outheastern Iran; 2. A city with three historical nuclei from the Sassanid era to the present day, and consequently possessing distinctive cultural landscapes (the old city, Sang Castle, the historic fabric, Sirjan carpets/rugs, etc.) (Fig. 2); 3. A region with rich soil, leading to the construction and expansion of the Gol Gohar mine (Fig. 3); 4. A working-class city in the service of the Gol Gohar mine (Fig. 4).

Due to the above characteristics, a distinctive local community has taken shape in the city of Sirjan. Until the 2000s (1380s Persian calendar), Sirjan was considered a service-oriented and educational city. However, from the 2000s onward, with the boom of Gol Gohar, it has transformed into an industrial and mining hub. This has led to a population explosion in the city by 2006 (1385), though a balanced population growth occurred between 2006 and 2011 (1385–1390). In terms of gender ratio, men outnumber women; regarding age structure, most individuals fall within the 19–[64] age bracket; and in terms of household composition, nuclear households predominate over extended ones, indicating that the city is young and active (Sharmand Consulting Engineers, 1999; Arseh Architecture and Urban Planning Consulting Engineers, 2016). Furthermore, studies and observations suggest that Sirjan is a working-class city. The physical growth of the city, including the incorporation of villages into the urban area, has occurred to accommodate workers. This analysis indicates that, first and foremost, the city must be viewed as a space for addressing the needs

Fig. 1. The relationship between tourism and capitalism based on previous articles and studies. Source: Author.

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Fig. 2. Sirjan: a city with historical and cultural nodes but lacking integrated development. Photo: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2025.

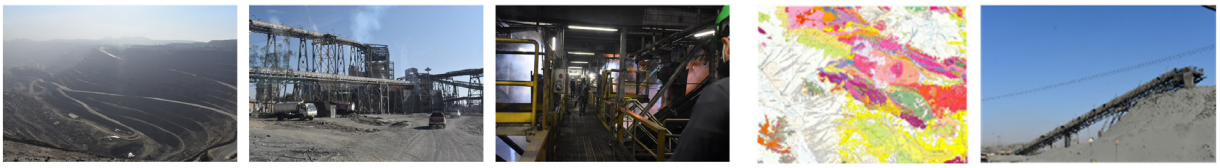

Fig. 3. Sirjan: a region with rich soil, followed by the construction and expansion of the Gol Gohar mine. Source: Author's archive.

Fig. 4. Sirjan: a working-class city in the service of the Gol Gohar mine, with low quality of life. Photo: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2025.

of the predominantly young population and as a space compatible with a working-class economy.

A Glimpse into the Essence of the Gohar Park Tourist Village

The Gohar Park Recreational and Tourist Village in Sirjan, the largest tourist village in the Middle East (About Gohar Park, n.d.), was inaugurated in 2023 (1402) through the efforts of the Gol Gohar region's companies. This complex comprises a variety of recreational, residential, sports, and service functions, including an open-air amphitheater, a virtual reality hall, a food court, several cafes (traditional and modern), several restaurants (traditional and modern), a slide park, go-karting, a lake, a water park, a Sacred Defense museum, a nomadic heritage complex, an escape room, outdoor and indoor amusement parks, science parks, a zoo, and so forth. It is designed with the vision of moving Sirjan toward sustainable development (ibid.).

In fact, it seems that despite the spatial and functional diversity and multiplicity of Gohar Park, as well as the features mentioned and the appeal of this space for visitors, observations and comparisons with the quality of the city reveal, on the one hand, contradictions between this project and the ideals of sustainable development, and on the other hand, its incompatibility with the working-class city of Sirjan (Fig. 5). First and foremost, this Iranian recreational park needs to be analyzed from a holistic perspective -rather than a visitor-pleasing, reductionist view- and subsequently, the rationale behind the selection of Gohar Park and its relationship with place and the local community should be examined.

Discussion

• Pathological analysis of Gohar Park, Sirjan, as an instance of tourism under the shadow of capitalism

Based on the analysis of data obtained from field observations and library research, the pathological analysis of Gohar Park can be examined at three levels: (planning and managerial level, operational and executive level, and perceptual-semantic level).

- **Planning and managerial level**

Gohar Park; An arena of "superlatives": According to observations, efforts have been made in Gohar Park to bring together the best, the tallest, and so on. For example, "Gohar Park has the tallest slide in Iran, the tallest flag in Iran" (Complex Guide, December 6, 2025). However, relying solely on these superlatives in objective and physical elements has resulted only in quantitative enhancement, whereas from a holistic perspective, beyond quantitative improvement, qualitative and semantic enhancement are also important. Development becomes effective, and operates at the transnational level expected by Gol Gohar's managers, only when it excels in all dimensions, not merely in quantitative superlatives in the Middle East (Fig. 6-1).

Sirjan's aspiration for sustainable development in words but not in practice: Despite Gohar Park being presented as a symbol of Sirjan's movement toward sustainable development, it cannot even be justified

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in terms of conventional forms of sustainability, such as environmental sustainability. The artificial lake, river, and waterfall serve as an example of this. The experience of walking alongside the lake in the midst of a dry desert and mountainous landscape indicates that these elements are not in harmony with the site's space and landscape; rather, they merely reflect policies of injecting imported spaces into this territory, policies that not only fail to protect the environment but are actively harmful to it (Figs. 6-2 & 6-4).

Possessing government support: The presence of the president at the inauguration of this park itself attests to the importance of this park at the national and even transnational level (Fig. 6-3). Moreover, in our walking experience, we encounter a park of vast dimensions with a great multiplicity of functions. The construction of a park of this scale and with such a diversity of activities indicates the governmental support behind the complex. Thus, from a support perspective, the park has benefited from a justifiable level of backing. Had it been approached holistically across various dimensions rather than merely

Fig. 5. Gohar Park: a recreational park combined with manifestations of Iranian cultural physical forms. Source: www.Gohar Park.ir.

The tallest slide in Iran (1)

The ideal of sustainable development with unsustainable elements (2)

Having government support: a potential for greater effectiveness (3)

Artificial river and water pumping (4)

Fig. 6. Examples of pathological analysis at the managerial and operational level of Gohar Park. Sources: 1, 2, and 4: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2025; 3: www.president.ir.

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reductionistically, it could have had more positive impacts at different scales, from local to transnational.

High-cost and high-risk investment: Gohar Park is a project that has incurred a cost of over 3,000 billion Iranian rials, which in itself can only be undertaken by a capitalist with substantial financial capacity willing to accept such high risk. The injection of measures not derived from the place and disproportionate to the capacities of the context has resulted in even more exorbitant costs for the project. Over time, their lack of sustainability will lead to their destruction, inefficiency, and eventually the elimination of these functions. For example, the injection of a waterfall and river, requiring high costs for water pumping on this scale, will impose not only a substantial initial capital outlay but also high maintenance costs on the project, which will exceed the revenue generated from demand.

- **Operational and executive level**

Creation of an isolated recreational space: According to the walking experience and access solely by car (private vehicle or tour, with no taxis or public transport from the city), the allocation of various functions within the complex -including even service facilities such as accommodation- coupled with a distance of 25 kilometers from the city, has caused it to become an isolated space that has no minimum connection with the city. This in itself might be considered positive, but when the aspiration is the sustainable development of Sirjan, such segregation does not result in comprehensive improvement for the city (Fig. 7-1).

Employment of physical manifestations of culture: Attention to culture and cultural manifestations is one of the principles of project sustainability. However, the absence of an ontological perspective towards it, and merely drawing upon the essence and physical form of culture, transforms it into a museum that has been injected into the space, without comprehending the rationale behind that culture. For instance, in the walking experience, the physical structures of nomadic tents are visible within the complex, but the being of nomadic life-which is based on seasonal dwelling and migration- is absent (Fig. 7-2).

Placelessness/ Universalization: Designs that disregard territorial capacities and designs from the center (core) lead to the repetition of patterns that are reproduced everywhere, catering to a marketable and user-friendly mental image. For example, according to field observations and the walking experience, for the Tāraq Valley, a design has been adopted featuring non-native planted vegetation in pots, along with an artificial river and waterfall -a design typical of ordinary, user-friendly valleys- yet it does not arise from the characteristics of the Tāraq Valley itself; a valley that is waterless, where stone plays the role of the mountain's adornment, not vegetation (Fig. 7-3).

Imitation of global projects: For Iran and Third World societies, modeling projects from First World countries is in itself a positive endeavor, but this is conditional upon attention to place-specific characteristics for adaptation to the imitated model. On the other hand, imitating projects whose expiration date has passed in developed cities -yet which Iran has only recently encountered- inflicts a fresh wound on the Third World. For example, in field observations of the complex, parametric domes are visible, reminiscent of global precedents. The "Eden Garden" (Bagh-e Behesht) is an imitation of the Eden Project in the United Kingdom, which was undertaken to rehabilitate an abandoned mining site. Despite its aspiration toward sustainable development, today it stands as an example of unsustainable development. Mobbs (2009) views the project as an instance of green capitalism, in which beautiful and safe nature is displayed without real crises, and nature is transformed into a selected commodity for the investor. Gohar Park's Eden Garden is likewise an imitation of this very mindset, without any regard for how costly and unsustainable controlling thermal comfort on such a scale and at this level is in the climate of Sirjan (Fig. 7-4).

Variety and multiplicity of functions: On the one hand, designing a variety of functions and their multiplicity to attract different segments of society is positive, but the manner of their organization is problematic. It seems that in Gohar Park, this organization has tended toward the commodification of space, landscape chaos, and functional interferences. For example, in the walking experience, in the background of the Sacred Defense Museum, a blue-colored sports building is visible. The placement of a sports center adjacent to the Sacred Defense Museum affects the atmosphere of a war zone and consequently compromises perception. Moreover, the accumulation of activities within this area has led to the marginalization of the city (Fig. 7-5).

Chaos in the architecture of space: In the walking experience and field observation, Gohar Park is a space full of various architectural forms. Diversity in architecture, appropriate to the character of the space, is positive, but the architectural diversity within the

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complex is so excessive that the space cannot be read as a single whole. Each space is one thing (Fig. 7-6).

Cinematic space and exaggerated architecture: Attention to architecture and architectural details is necessary for any design, but when the main subject is something else, excessive architecture compromises perception. For example, "the zoo here resembles a cinematic sequence" (S. A. Mansouri, December 6, 2025, personal interview). In the zoo, where the subject is watching animals, the architecture is on a massive scale and the colors are so intense that all attention is drawn to it, creating more of a cinematic space rather than a space that helps the animal to be seen. Another example is the color of the furniture: the use of orange and green hues overly influences the user's perception of the space and is more prominent than the intended nature (Fig. 7-7).

Reduction of industrial tourism to an industrial museum: According to field observations, the park features a simulated mine pit and elements such as discarded mining tools, which is generally a positive step for familiarizing visitors with mining and sustainability. However, although the mine itself could act as a tourism capacity within this city, merely relying on such museum-like gestures, while industrial tourism is an internationally recognized topic, will prove inefficient over time. Such elements will be seen, but they will not be Comprehended (Fig. 7-8).

Ignoring the natural features of the site: For example, Gohar Park is situated at the foot of a mountain. According to observations from the walking experience, on one hand it offers an excellent landscape view of the plain, and on the other hand it provides a view of the mountain. Both of these landscape characteristics of the site have been mistreated by the project's interventions. On the one hand, the view of the beautiful Sirjan plain with isolated mountains in the distance has been compromised by park equipment in sharp colors; on the other hand, the mountain has been exploited through the injection of an artificial river and waterfall, contrived vegetation, exaggerated lighting, and heavy play equipment (Fig. 7-9).

Ignoring the climatic features of the site: Innovation in architecture is positive, but it is effective only when it is proportionate to place-specific characteristics, including climatic features. For example, through the walking experience and field observations, it is perceived that the lake is beautiful, but it is disproportionate to such a desert context, especially on this scale. An artificial lake is attractive to desert-dwelling visitors, but even if it is intended for water storage (e.g., from the Persian Gulf for industrial use) which also serves recreational purposes, given the water surface area in the desert, with this level of humidity, a great deal of water will be lost. Ultimately, it will share the fate of Chitgar Lake -undergoing high evaporation rates, with maintenance costs that are unjustifiable, and it is regarded more as a nuisance than an asset to the city (Fig. 7-10).

- Perceptual-semantic level

Utilization of a marketable, user-pleasing image: Observations, the walking experience, studies of

Fig. 7. Examples of pathological analysis at the operational and executive level. Source: Author's arrchive.

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online resources, virtual space exploration, and analyses overall indicate that in designing Gohar Park, spaces have been created that prioritize a marketable image to attract visitors, rather than being based on place-specific characteristics. For example, from a holistic perspective, the lake and the dome are not appropriate proposals for this space; rather, they arise from an attractive image for the user. However, over time, for the reasons mentioned, they will prove to be inefficient.

Lack of sense of belonging: Solely focusing on the physical form of spaces and their visual beauty leads to the being of the space not being perceived by the user, the space lacking semantic value, and consequently, no sense of belonging to the space being formed on the part of the user.

Lack of legibility of the site as part of a system called the territory of Sirjan: The injection of ubiquitous spaces that are disproportionate to the characteristics of the place has rendered Gohar Park illegible as a component of the territory of Sirjan.

Summary: According to the above pathological analysis, derived from observations and the landscape walking method, Gohar Park -across various dimensions from planning to execution- is not regarded as a place-based development due to the absence of a multi-faceted perspective and an comprehending of Sirjan's characteristics as a territory (rather than merely a land for recreation). The following section seeks to analyze, in order to examine the relationship of this project with place and the local community, the reasons why the investor adopted such a this design.

• Analysis of why Gohar Park was chosen by Gol Gohar capitalists

Sustainable development of Sirjan: According to the project's claim (About Gohar Park, n.d.) and an informal conversation with the public relations officer (December 6, 2025), its main goal is the sustainable development of Sirjan. The attention of a region's industry to its sustainable development is highly valuable, especially when this is carried out in the field of tourism and improving the recreational opportunities of the people. Given that there are examples of cities adjacent to industry where the industry disregards the city's improvement -for instance, the petrochemical complex of Bandar Imam, which has effectively colonized the city of Bandar-e Shahpour (Sarbandar) without offering any benefit, even symbolically, in the form of tourism for the region- this attention is noteworthy. However, this requires an analysis of the concept of sustainability. This article attempts to demonstrate that although this goal is valuable, in practice and given the capacities of the context, Gohar Park is not a sustainable complex and exhibits contradictions with the concept of sustainability.

Promotion of tourism in the region: In a country such as Iran, where the economy is moving toward a tourism-based economy, and given the natural and cultural capacities that Sirjan possesses -including rich soil, the presence of natural landscapes, historical fragments, mining landscapes, and so on- the promotion of tourism can be an appropriate choice for the city's development. However, this is conditional upon all dimensions and benefits of the city being taken into account within the project.

Improvement of welfare facilities for Gol Gohar employees: The closed user group of Gohar Park consists of the mine workers, who can use the complex with their families through coupons and discounts. Attending to the provision of such welfare facilities for employees is valuable for a company. However, observations and interviews indicate that the site selection in relation to the city, given that a significant number of the employees are laborers and low-income, that the city lacks public transportation, and that the means of commuting for this group (a considerable proportion of Gol Gohar's workforce) to the complex has not been considered, is not a holistic decision.

Global scale of the Gol Gohar mine and the macro scale of Gol Gohar recreation: Due to its global distinction (the world's largest iron ore mine), Gol Gohar seeks to establish itself at a global level also in the field of tourism. For this reason, everything about it has been adopted on a large scale and with superlative attributes. This tendency has extended even to matters that are imperceptible, for example, the largest emblem visible from the sky, which is not actually perceived by the user, serves merely as a superlative physical attribute for the complex.

Vision of managers and authoritarian planning: In general, the ideal of managers is the growth and progress of the organization during their tenure. Gol Gohar's managers likewise pursue super-features in order to accomplish great and extraordinary deeds and to inscribe their names in the company's development history. However, if this pursuit is directed toward holistic improvement rather than mere superiority, it can prove effective for the people in the long term and even leave a positive legacy for the managers themselves.

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Building a luxury brand in the field of tourism: MacCannell (1999) considers contemporary tourism as a means of enhancing prestige. In luxury tourism, the destination brand seeks to position itself above competitors by emphasizing scarcity and inimitable characteristics. Gol Gohar Tourism Village aims to promote the Gol Gohar brand in the tourism sector through diverse and luxurious uses, as well as a collection of superlative features.

Ecological compensation: Industrial and mining complexes, as activities inherently harmful to nature, tend to adopt green projects to compensate for the damage inflicted, aiming to project an image of being nature-friendly and to justify their environmental performance. In the worst case, this becomes such a mere spectacle that the term greenwashing is applied. In greenwashing, companies and industries conceal and downplay negative impacts by showcasing the positive environmental effects of the enterprise (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This phenomenon arises from the interaction of three components: pressures, motivations, and facilitating conditions (ibid.): (1) pressures that require industries to appear green (competition in saturated markets, media pressure, increasing consumer environmental sensitivity, etc.); (2) internal motivations (gaining social legitimacy, accessing green capital, protecting brand reputation, etc.); and (3) facilitating conditions (weakness or ambiguity of environmental regulations, complexity of environmental information, etc.). Gohar Park is valuable insofar as it claims to attend to the ecosystem, yet because the diagnosis of this project indicates that it is not only unsustainable and inefficient but has in some cases even harmed the environment and the concept of place, it stands on the razor's edge of the accusation of greenwashing.

Compensation for urban void: MacCannell (1999) argues that capitalist tourism compensates for a void that the system itself produces. In compensating for the damages inflicted upon the city of Sirjan, including a functional city in service of the mine with no quality of life, the annexation of surrounding villages to the city, and the monopoly of the city's service to the mine itself, Gol Gohar has decided to construct a complex that would promote Sirjan in the field of tourism, offering minimal amenities that again benefit the mine itself (such as street paving). This is despite the fact that the historical part of the city already lacks an integrated tourism management system.

Profit maximization: Ashley & Mitchell (2009) argue that the logic governing tourism, derived from capitalism, is profit maximization, not poverty reduction. Although Gohar Park is an attempt to improve welfare facilities for employees, based on the aforementioned points, it is more of a scheme for profit generation than for poverty reduction in the region. The decisions made will even cause the city to become poorer.

Summary: In general, the decision to develop tourism with the aim of sustainable urban development in service of an industry is a valuable initiative. However, the lack of a place-based perspective in the reasoning behind this decision, and merely resorting to a symbolic project, is considered a non-place-based approach to achieving development goals. The following section attempts to analyze the impact of these non-place-based decisions on the local community of Sirjan.

• Analysis of the relationship between the decisions of Gol Gohar capitalists in the field of tourism and the local community

In this section, an attempt is made to analyze the relationship between the decisions of Gol Gohar capitalists and the local community across three domains: economic, social, and spatial.

- Spatial consequence

Marginalization of the city's historical heritage and native neighborhoods under the shadow of Gohar Park: Based on observations and walking experience, a significant portion of the city's historical heritage has already been destroyed, and the landscape of native neighborhoods is at risk of demolition -despite the fact that Gohar Park, through the employment of cultural manifestations, aspires to enhance the heritage landscape. In effect, the concentrated tourism of Gohar Park, along with the diversion of all activities and the distinctive quality of "Sirjan-ness" toward this park, will gradually consign the city's own heritage -discussed in previous sections- to oblivion. Consequently, a city that could have utilized tourism in service of the city itself to achieve an integrated enhancement of its historical fabric and native neighborhoods will, over time, only preserve isolated fragments.

Spatial dualization: With the formation of Gohar Park, the isolation of this space from the city, and the concentration of all activities within the complex itself -coupled with its lack of dependence on the city of Sirjan- the presence of tourists will gradually become limited, even in the historical fragments and urban spaces that serve as tourism service infrastructures (such as hotels, etc.), and will ultimately be eliminated. The city will then become merely a space for its residents.

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Limitation of tourism development to Gohar Park: Over time, following the marginalization of the historical heritage, native neighborhoods, and capacities of Sirjan, development will also be directed solely toward this same concentrated space that is independent from the city.

- **Economic consequence**

Neglect of the local community in the idealized plan of managers: The walking experience and field observations in the city of Sirjan reveal a working-class city with a working-class economy. An analysis of the actions and decisions of managers in constructing Gohar Park indicates the neglect of the local community within the project. Although the project was adopted to improve welfare facilities for employees, the disregard for the financial capacity and economic status of the local community regarding how to access and utilize these facilities further demonstrates this neglect. For instance, the lack of attention to public transportation from the city to the complex exemplifies this issue.

Lack of benefit for the local community from the financial revenues of tourism: The local community, despite bearing the social and environmental costs resulting from tourism, does not receive a proportional share of its financial benefits (Bianchi, 2018). The people of Sirjan, given that they will be subjected to the pressures arising from the promotion of concentrated tourism at Gohar Park, including the sheer concentration of tourism development on this complex, will not be allocated any share of the financial revenues.

- **Social consequence**

Manipulation of the local community's mind through the imposition of a staged place image: Capitalism seeks to sell place by constructing images and presenting appealing, consumption-oriented narratives (Ateljevic et al., 2012). "Gohar Park is the largest complex in the Middle East and very attractive" (local resident of Sirjan, December 6, 2025); "Gohar Park's lake is very beautiful" (local resident of Sirjan, December 6, 2025). By presenting a new spectacle of "Sirjan-ness" -for example, a city with a large lake and the injection of a symbolic sense of being the best- Gohar Park manipulates the local community's mind, encouraging them to think in terms of symbolic superiority and to refrain from expressing their legitimate demands, which in reality concern the improvement and sustainable development of the city as a whole, rather than a concentrated tourism complex.

Downplaying the deficiencies of the city and the local community: Tourism, by employing tourist attractions and the commodification of place, conceals the colonial history and social complexities of the city, presenting a beautiful package for consumption (Ateljevic et al., 2012). Based on observations, walking experience, and studies, Sirjan is a city in service of industry, and development has likewise been oriented in this direction. For example, villages were annexed to the city to serve as residential areas for workers; the villages took on the city's name, yet the quality of life there remains low, to the extent that human presence is felt minimally, even in the city's busiest streets. However, the construction of Gohar Park has led to the following statement: "People even come from Bandar Abbas to Sirjan for leisure now" (local resident of Sirjan, December 6, 2025). Sirjan is now recognized by Gohar Park, not as a city with annexed rural neighborhoods, nor as a city in service of the mine with all its deficiencies.

Summary: At first glance, Gohar Park may bring about an enhancement of the local community's subjective prestige through its "superlative" attributes. However, a closer analysis reveals that, in the long term, the community becomes subjected to pressures, and in fact, the presence of the local community is neglected within the project.

Conclusion

Based on the findings derived from the analysis of observations, walking experience, and documentary studies, Gohar Park is considered a non-place-based development as an instance of capitalist tourism. The absence of methodological limitations in this research regarding the collection of further data could have provided an opportunity to place greater emphasis on this conclusion. Although this project has been adopted as a symbol of Sirjan's movement toward sustainable development, it entails damages at various levels. These damages stem from a lack of comprehending of the site's inherent capacities, a failure to adopt a multi-dimensional and holistic approach to tourism, and the reduction of the manifestations of culture and nature to mere tools for tourism, rather than tourism as a means for the sustainable development of the region. On the other hand, the decisions that led to the selection of a project such as Gohar Park reflect an idealized vision on the part of managers regarding the development of other domains, characterized by superlative attributes. Due to the lack of a place-based and holistic perspective,

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and merely a partial approach to compensation or physical enhancement, such decisions have resulted in adopting a project that, although market-oriented and user-friendly, proves inefficient in the long term. Regarding the relationship between these decisions and the local community, such a project may initially create an image of pride in the minds of the community. However, the lack of a comprehensive approach to the interaction between Gohar Park's concentrated tourism and the local community of Sirjan ultimately undermines the quality of life of the local community.

In general, it can be said that capitalist tourism, due to its capitalist potentials, can serve as an opportunity for improving quality of life and as a motor for growth, yet it requires the adoption of a comprehensive approach. A place-based reading, with a holistic and ontological perspective, views the land as more than mere ground and the local community as more than mere inhabitants. The absence of a holistic perspective in capitalist tourism transforms this opportunity into threats such as the commodification of place (presenting a market-oriented, user-friendly place), placelessness (intervening in the place-specific characteristics of a space, leading to their erasure and the conversion of the space into a non-place), the staging of identity (injecting non-indigenous identities into the space), and taste-based selection of place (identity selection by the investor rather than based on a systemic reading) (Fig. 8). The potentials of capitalism can also be an opportunity to enhance the quality of life of the local community; however, the lack of a multi-faceted and holistic perspective leads to the weakening of the financial and economic status of the local community, the denial of suffering, the marginalization of the local community, and the monopolization of development for the desired entity rather than for the city (Fig. 9).

A tourism project can lead to efficient development at the policy and management levels, and be adopted beyond being a mere tool for capitalist branding, toward improving the quality of life of the city's residents, only when: (1) instead of focusing on placeless or generic projects, the territorial characteristics of a region are recognized and the project is defined accordingly; (2) beyond knowing the what and imitating tangible and intangible heritage, the being of territorial characteristics is Comprehended and employed; (3) the local community is recognized as one of the components of these territorial characteristics, and its needs are Comprehended in all dimensions; (4) the local community is regarded as a stakeholder in the project rather than a mere instrument for profit generation; (5) the project is used to address the city's deficiencies rather than to conceal them; and (6) the project encompasses the development of the city as a whole, rather than concentrating development on a single point and creating a dualization of space. In effect, attention to place and its spatial and territorial capacities is the key to the efficiency of capitalist tourism as an opportunity for development.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

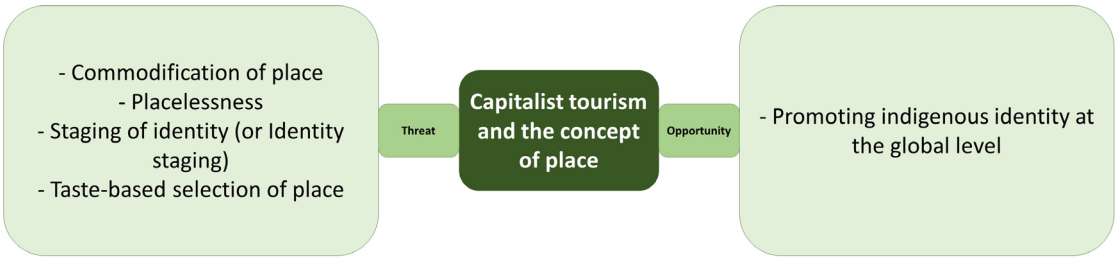

Fig. 8. The relationship between capitalist tourism and the concept of place. Source: Author.

Fig. 9. The relationship between capitalist tourism and the local community. Source: Author.

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