

EVERYDAY RELIGION IN PAKISTAN: SIKH PILGRIMAGE AND CREATING NEW RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT

Religion and pilgrimage have a deep and complex relationship that ties together historical context, spiritual quest, and cultural adventures. Pilgrims from across the globe travel to holy places, ancient temples, renowned shrines, and recognized landmarks in an effort to experience the architectural wonders and the spiritual essence of various belief systems. These pilgrimages and cultural voyages support regional economies while it also fosters interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and a greater awareness of the common human legacy that unites all religions and civilizations at one point. In case of Pakistan, its rich tapestry of religious tourism serves as a vivid example of the complex relationship between travel and religion in the country. A variety of reverent locations, each containing a tale of history and spirituality, are scattered across the country. The sacred lands of Kartarpur, draws Sikh devotees from many countries together on a profound spiritual experience. Simultaneously many of the Hindu temples scattered across Pakistan's different province like Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa attract a large number of Hindu pilgrims. This research looks into the pilgrims and travellers passing through and visiting these areas of religious importance engage in a conscious and an unconscious discourse that promotes understanding, harmony, making of identities, celebrating the variety, and bringing people together in search of a common pursuit of human knowledge and respect for each other within these religious encounters.

Keywords: *Religious Tourism, Sika pilgrimage, Religious harmony, Cultural exchange.*

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism and religion have a deep and complex relationship that ties together historical research, spiritual questing, and cultural adventure. Travellers from all over the world travel out on expeditions to holy places, ancient temples, renowned shrines, and recognized landmarks in an effort to experience, both the architectural wonders and the spiritual essence of various belief systems. These pilgrimages and cultural outings support regional economies while also fostering interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and a greater awareness of the common human legacy that unites all religions and civilizations.

In case of Pakistan, its rich tapestry of religious tourism serves as a vivid example of the complex relationship between travel and religion in the country. A variety of respected locations, each containing a tale of history and spirituality, are scattered throughout the nation's varied topography. The hallowed grounds of Nankana Sahib's Gurudwara Janam Asthan, where Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak Dev breathed his first breath, draw both pilgrims and wanderers. Gurudwara Panja Sahib in Hasan Abdal, where the imprint of Guru Nanak's hand is still visible carved in stone, is filled with the echoes of devotion. The sacred lands of Kartarpur, draws Sikh devotees from many countries together on a profoundly spiritual experience. These renowned locations not only exude architectural splendor but also provide an atmosphere for reflection, allowing visitors to connect their religion with Pakistan's rich historical history. Travelers passing through areas of religious importance not only support local businesses, but also engage in an unconscious discourse that promotes understanding, celebrates variety, and brings people together in search of a common human knowledge and respect.

Pakistan's economy has certainly benefited from the interweaving of religious tourism with the nation's cultural legacy. The rush of tourists to its respected holy monuments has generated a consistent flow of income, reviving the local economy in the areas, which host these attractions. The need for lodging, transportation, and services

has fueled infrastructure construction, creating jobs and boosting the economy. The development of religious tourism has also broadened Pakistan's tourist market by drawing a distinct group of visitors looking for spiritual enlightenment and cultural immersion.

Evacuee Trust and Property Board (ETPB) manages and maintains the Sikh historical sites under its jurisdiction. It makes sure that the cherished sites for Sikhs are still reachable, well-kept, and hospitable to pilgrims and visitors. Due to the ETPB's proactive efforts to preserve and promote Sikh sacred sites, a considerable rise in pilgrims and visitors has been observed at these locations. As a result of this influx, local companies, hospitality services, and other industries that serve the requirements of tourists grow, benefiting local communities and the overall economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite a growing body of literature on tourism and religion, there remains a noticeable absence of comprehensive examinations that relate tourism with religion especially in the context of Pakistan. A significant gap exists due to the fact that many scholars who write about the Sikh religious sites do not reside in Pakistan and therefore have no first-hand knowledge about these particular sites. However, certain notable contributions in the form of books and articles have emerged which are discussed below.

"The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders" is a remarkable work by Dalvir Singh Pannu (2021) who basically was a dentist but left his profession to pursue his love for travelling and exploring the Sikh historical sites. He explains the painstaking efforts behind the partition and how different Sikh shrines were lost to the Sikh community. The author seems to be a little anti-Islamic and blames the Muslims that these sites are not well maintained in Pakistan. The book is actually a narration of many historical sites that the author has gathered personally by visiting and meeting different people. The author leaves some space for the readers to make their own analytical judgments regarding some sites that are commonly misunderstood

by different groups within Sikhs. Dalvir Singh gather inscriptions of different languages that are present in Sikh monuments and write about them in his book. The writer goes back in history, compares the sites, writes about the history of each site, and cites some interesting facts about them. Nonetheless, the only shortcoming that remains in the book is that it completely negates how Pakistan has been taking care of these religious sites for the past decades.

“Pakistan: Its Ancient Hindu Temples and Shrines” is an extensive work on the monuments especially the Sikh and Hindu monuments by Shaikh Khurshid Hasan (2008). The author being an archaeologist and having his lifetime experience in the field of archaeology sees these monuments through a different perspective. He explains the importance of these monuments and sites and how they play an important role in religion. He explains the evolution about how the rituals and the worshipping has changed overtime and how it effects these sacred places one-way or the other. What distinguishes this book from others is the extensive survey that explains even some discovered temples and shrines in Pakistan. About 90% Sikh shrines are within Pakistan under the jurisdiction of ETPB and it is believed by different people during visits that they are not looked after the way they should have been. Certain controversies have also been addressed by Hassan in his book which remain quite interesting to go through.

“Religious Tourism and Peace Building: Kartarpur Corridor as a Peace Symbol in India-Pakistan Conflict and Inter-Faith Harmony” by Asma Hamid Awan and Professor Iram Khalid (2021) emphasizes on the importance of the Kartarpur Corridor and how it was need of the time to allow Sikhs from all over the world especially India to come and visit the sacred places within Pakistan, if Pakistan wanted to make its name in the world. The article emphasizes the implications that this decision had on the Government of Pakistan but nonetheless, this move was a well-considered move in order to create harmony between Pakistan and India.

Muhammad Manshoor Hussain Abbasi and Dr. Musa Khan (2022) in their research paper *“Nation Branding through Religious Tourism in Pakistan by Utilizing Social Media Tools”* try to seek out the problems that are faced by the tourism industry of Pakistan. There is a lot of religious tourism potential in Pakistan but certain factors like security, negligence of the government and lack of harmony are the reasons that this industry is not quite well established as compared to other countries with such potential. Another thing that the researchers indicate in this paper is the importance of social media to attract visitors from all over the world to come and visit the religious tourist sites but then again, people are reluctant to come to a developing country like Pakistan due to many understandable reasons. Apart from the role that the government should play, the authors also emphasize how individual roles have been played to promote tourism in the country and there has been a positive response from the tourists that come to explore the beauty of Pakistan.

“A leaf from history: The rise and fall of the Khalistan movement” by Sheikh Aziz (2015) highlights the problems that Pakistan has been facing for the last few decades. The article spotlights the problems that Pakistan and India have been facing due to the Khalistan movement by Sikhs. India keeps on blaming Pakistan due to the reasons that Sikh rulers keep on visiting their sacred shrines that are in Pakistan. Pakistan keeps on assuring that it does not have anything to do with the Sikh movement but nonetheless, there remains a tension between the two countries. The problem that persists is that most of the sacred places to Sikhs are in Pakistan and it is not possible for Pakistan to stop Sikh pilgrimage. Thus, a middle ground has to be found between India and Pakistan that can accommodate Sikh Pilgrimage without any hurdles.

Relation between Tourism, Culture and Religion

Tourism, a word that is broad and encompasses a number of activities. A commonly and simple description of a tourist is “someone who would travel at least 80 km from his or her home for at least 24 hours, for any reason; be it business or for leisure purposes”

(Westcott & Anderson, 2021). Tourism serves as a means to enhance comprehension and facilitate cross-cultural communication, emphasizing influence on our perceptions of other cultures and places, as well as on our own. Tourists continuously form and reform their opinions of other cultures and destinations through interactions with locals and other staff, as well as by exploring both; maintained and unmaintained locations. By experiencing diverse cultures directly, rather than just learning, it theoretically or from others, can lead to profound and constructive knowledge. Cultural tourism is undoubtedly one of the oldest phenomenon. People have been traveling since the ancient times for what we now call as the cultural tourism. The only difference is that they were not recognized as a distinct group of travellers. Visiting historical sites for the purposes like pilgrimage, sightseeing and to attend special events have always been the part and parcel of tourism. This fact cannot be negated that there is a cultural element in almost all aspects of tourism. Cultural tourism provides more as compared to simple tourism for the sake of leisure. It offers something, not only to the tourist but also to the specific community that hosts the tourist.

Initially, tourism was just an activity pursued by the educated and the bourgeoisie class who were in search of something more than just the sun, sand and the sea (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002). Later, by 1970's researchers and the marketers started to feel that tourism was something more than what people knew. People travelled specifically to gather deeper understanding of different cultures and heritages across the world (MacCannell, 2013). Gradually, cultural tourism started to become a market activity that would generate profit along with leisure, depending on the destination of the tourists. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNTWO), about 40% of international travellers are cultural tourists (UNESCO, 2012). Cultural tourism was noticed by heritage management sector and this provided them with a perfect opportunity to protect and conserve the assets as they called it a mixed blessing. On one hand, the growing demand from tourists offered a strong political and financial rationale for increasing conservation efforts while on the other hand, an actual

threat to the integrity, and in most extreme cases, the threat of survival of these assets was posed by growing attendance, overuse and inappropriate usage without consideration for their cultural values. Under these circumstances, the management decided that now it was a good time to initiate different policies to protect and conserve the tourism sites. This step was an important step because cultural heritage is as important as conserving natural environment. There are other reasons for which heritage needs to be preserved. For example, to counter the effects of modernization i.e. demolition of historical structures for building modern structures. While this may be a secondary purpose, the fact that cannot be negated is that economics is an important factor behind all this. Not only has the preservation of heritage and culture depended on it, but tourism also depends a lot on this factor. Cultural heritage is seen as an economic saviour upon which the tourism is based. Culture and tourism might have been seen as two different entities before but now these barriers are disappearing as a result of two different and parallel processes (Richards, 2003).

Sikh Tourism and Pilgrimage in Pakistan

Despite the hostile circumstances, this fact could not have been ignored that numerous Sikh sites were now in Pakistan and Sikhs, not only from India but also from the entire world would visit Pakistan for pilgrimage. Therefore, it was now necessary to make certain plans to accommodate these visits. Different mandates were passed, and different bodies were given the tasks to make religious visits easier for pilgrims. The religious travels between India and Pakistan were set to be controlled by "Protocol 1974" which established a joint agreement between India and Pakistan regarding the visitation of Holy sites (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). According to this protocol, a predetermined number of pilgrims are allowed to travel to particular locations. These pilgrims have to receive a special visa and then the host nation would facilitate and control their travel. Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) and Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC) facilitate the visit of *yatrees* in

Pakistan.

Currently, Pakistan annually welcomes approximately 50,000 Sikhs to come to fulfil their religious duties (Interview with Caretaker Gurdwara, 2023). Pakistan basically hosts significant reverence for Sikhs as it is recognized as the birthplace of Sikhism. Due to this very same reason, it has earned the title of “Cradle of Sikhism”. Pakistan holds the same importance for Sikhs as Medina holds for Muslims and Jerusalem holds for Jews. Pilgrims from various countries, including, but not limited to India, participate in various festivals that is commonly known as a “Mela” which can be classified into two main categories:

1. Gurpurabs (celebrations associated with the Gurus’)
2. Any other religious or non-religious festival

Major Sikh festivals that are celebrated in Pakistan are shown in the table below.

Table 1: Major Sikh Festivals

Sr.	DATE	NAME OF FESTIVAL	TYPE
1.	14 th April	Baisakhi (The Khalsa birthday)	Holy Festival
2.	16 th June	Martyrdom Day of Guru Arjan Dev	Gurpurab
3.	29 th June	Death Anniversary of Ranjit Singh	Commemoration
4.	16 th Sept.	Death Anniversary of Guru Ramdas	Gurpurab
5.	22 nd Sept.	Death Anniversary of Guru Nanak	Gurpurab
6.	9 th Oct.	Birthday of Guru Ramdas	Gurpurab
7.	15 th Nov.	Celebration of Birthday of Guru Nanak	Gurpurab

The most common and notable festivals among these are Baisakhi and the birthday of Guru Nanak, which draw a large number of pilgrims as compared to other festivals. These religious pilgrimages contribute a lot to the local economy by generating employment opportunities for both, skilled as well as unskilled labor and substantial revenue for the government (Khan, Raza, Ali, Ali & Ali, 2024). Various other factors like transportation, hospitality, airlines and handicrafts benefit greatly from religious tourism, fostering cultural expansion,

along with national integration.

Sikh Destinations

Different Gurdwaras are scattered across the cities of Pakistan, with notable significance attributed to the ones situated in Nankana Sahib, Lahore, Narowal and Hasan Abdal. Most of these Gurdwaras are open to the public while many of them have restricted their entry for the public due to multiple reasons. Festivals held in these places attract participants, especially the pilgrims from the entire world. It is important to note that not all festivals are allowed to be attended by the foreign visitors; visa limitations restrict them from some of these. Some important Sikh destinations with their historical importance are listed in the table below.

Table 2: Major Sikh Destinations in Pakistan

Sr.	DESTINATION	LOCATION	IMPORTANCE
1.	Gurdwara Dera Sahib	Lahore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samadhi of Ranjit Singh • Death Place of Guru Arjan
2.	Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj Singh Singhanian	Lahore	Martyrdom Place of 250,000 Sikhs
3.	Gurdwara Shaheed Bhai Taru Singh	Lahore	Martyrdom Place of Taru Singh
4.	Gurdwara Bebe Nanaki	Lahore	Birth Place of Bebe Nanaki
5.	Gurdwara Janam Asthan Guru Ramdas	Lahore	Birth Place of Guru Ramdas (4 th Guru)
6.	Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur	Narowal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Gurdwara Ever Built • Death Place of Guru Nanak
7.	Gurdwara Janam Asthan	Nankana Sahib	Death Place of Guru Nanak
8.	Gurdwara Patti Sahib	Nankana Sahib	Village School of Guru Nanak
9.	Gurdwara Mal Ji Sahib	Nankana Sahib	The Place where Guru Nanak's Buffaloes Used to Graze

10.	Gurdwara Sacha Sauda	Nankana Sahib	The Place where Guru Nanak Offered Food to Starving Mystics
11.	Gurdwara Panjvin & Chhevin Patshahi	Nankana Sahib	Shrines of 5 th Guru Arjan Dev and 6 th Guru Har Gobind
12.	Gurdwara Panja Sahib	Hasan Abdal	Hand Prints of Guru Nanak on Rock

Visitors not only visit these Gurdwaras', but beside that, they also like to go to different historical and tourist destinations. These may include markets, parks, and in case of Lahore; Badshahi Masjid, Lahore Museum and Lahore Fort top the list. They prefer to shop at historical markets like Anarkali Bazar, Liberty Market and Naulakha Bazar.

Government of Pakistan's Contribution

Sikh Pilgrimage is a very profitable matter in Pakistan. For this reason, the government of Pakistan pays close attention to it. It is managed by the coordinated efforts of the government institutions, i.e. Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) and Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC). Most of the preparations are done by these institutions.

Pilgrims are welcomed by the Chairman and other officials of ETPB and PSGPC and a warm welcome known as "Ji Aya Nu" is prepared in order to welcome the guests from India. Free food and drinks are offered to the pilgrims during their clearance and immigration process. Government tries to renovate Gurdwaras' before the festivities. However, the main concern of the government still remains security. The pilgrims are protected at all costs and a high level police force is deployed to take the matters into hands in case of any unfriendly situation.

Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB)

Evacuee Trust Property Board is a government department that was established in 1960, in Lahore. It is a subpart of the Auqaf Board that maintains and regulates prominent shrines, mosques and other

properties (Auqaf and Religious Affairs Department, 2024). It functions as a corporate body that has the authority to acquire, hold and dispose of both moveable and immovable assets. Currently, the board consists of 23 members, which include 7 official and 16 non-official members. Among the official members, there are senior members from various departments that include Board of Revenue, Federal Investigation Authority, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The main responsibilities of ETPB are listed below (Government of Pakistan, 2024).

- To act as the custodian of properties that are designated as trusts.
- To maintain a complete record of these properties.
- To ensure the maintenance and improvement of different temples, shrines and other religious sites that are recognized as trusts.
- To facilitate the visits of Hindus, Sikhs and other pilgrims from India and from around the world.
- To oversee the administration of pilgrim arrivals.
- To organize transportation arrangements for pilgrims.
- To provide overall care for pilgrims.
- To develop schedules and plans for pilgrim visits.

In addition to these responsibilities, ETPB undertakes certain other responsibilities that are not outlined in its mandate. These include, managing festivals and making necessary travel arrangements for Sikhs.

Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC)

The PSGPC, which was previously known as the Pakistan Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, serves as the authoritative custodian at the operational level. It was established by the Government of Pakistan in 1999. Just like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in

India, the PSGPC works to maintain Sikh religious institutions and sites across Pakistan. It acts as an intermediary between the government and Sikh pilgrims that visit Pakistan. Its headquarters are located in Lahore, managed by Sikhs themselves, the PSGPC operates as an autonomous body. The key functions of PSGPC include the following (ETPB 2024).

- i. Arrangement and management of Langar; the community kitchen, during the festivals.
- ii. Managing Gurdwaras and overseeing other properties that are designated as trusts.
- iii. Offering additional facilities to pilgrims within Gurdwaras.
- iv. Providing assistance to the pilgrims and addressing their concerns during their stay in Gurdwaras.
- v. Compiling complete records of Sikh pilgrims arriving from foreign countries.
- vi. Overseeing all construction, renovation and improvement projects at Gurdwaras.
- vii. Organizing pilgrim accommodations.

CONCLUSION

The partition of Punjab was not merely the division of land but rather a fracture of rich, shared cultural and religious heritage. For the Sikh community, this was rather painful as it resulted in the separation of their sacred sites from their homeland. This historical setting sets the context for understanding the complexities of Sikh pilgrimages in Pakistan. These are not only pilgrimages; they are the acts of resilience and devotion that demonstrate the unyielding connection of Sikh diaspora to their spiritual roots.

Different boards in Pakistan responsible for these pilgrimages play a very important role in facilitating this spiritual connection. But the fact that the efforts of these boards are often caught in the web of

political dynamics between Pakistan and India. However, these boards still strive to ensure access and preservation of these sites while navigating the balance between religious diplomacy and political interests.

In crux, this study highlights the intertwined relationship between history, faith and politics in the context of Sikh pilgrimage to Pakistan. The partition of 1947, although it created physical distances, the devotion of Sikh community still resonates even in these troubled times. The crucial and complex role of Pakistan is important while preserving this spiritual heritage while navigating the political changes.

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