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Religious Tourism and Sustainable Economic Development: Examining the Nexus through the Case of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Pakistan

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Abstract

Religious tourism has emerged as a vital driver of socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and sustainable growth in many regions. Among its diverse forms, Gurdwara Darbar Sahib at Kartarpur, one of Sikhs' holiest places globally, has evolved as a popular religious tourism destination in Pakistan. This study investigated the complex impact of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib-related religious tourism on the region's long-term economic prosperity. Using qualitative interviews with local stakeholders, such as business owners, community leaders, and pilgrims, as well as policy analysis, the study investigated how pilgrimage-driven tourism contributes to job creation, infrastructure development, and cross-border cultural exchange. The study also sought to identify challenges, such as seasonality, limited local capacity, and geopolitical constraints that impact long-term sustainability. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how well-managed religious heritage sites can serve as catalysts for inclusive development, cultural diplomacy, and regional economic revitalization, sustainable development, and cultural resilience in contemporary tourism landscapes.

Keywords: cross-border tourism, Gurdwara Darbar Sahab, infrastructure development, pilgrimage, religious tourism, sustainable economic growth,

Introduction

Religious tourism has become a dynamic force within the global travel industry, presenting remarkable opportunities for sustainable development in rural and economically-disadvantaged regions worldwide.¹ Each year, millions of individuals embark on spiritual journeys to sacred destinations, transforming religious tourism into a phenomenon of considerable global significance.²

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¹Jaeyeon Choe, "Religious Tourism," *Tourism Geographies* 27, nos. 3–4 (2025): 830–839, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2423168>.

²Neelam Bano, Humaira Ahmad, Afsheen Hassan, Muhammad Awais Shaukat, and Sajida Dilshad, "Unveiling the Journey Beyond: Understanding the Factors Influencing Pilgrimage

These faith-driven travels serve dual purposes: fulfilling spiritual needs while simultaneously driving substantial economic growth across both developed and developing nations, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and strengthening local economies.³

Travel motivation is considered as one of the key factors in travel decisions to international tourist destinations.⁴ Therefore, travel for religious purposes became a significant trigger in global tourism. Religious travel has consequently emerged as a powerful catalyst within the broader tourism landscape. Pakistan is home to a plethora of important religious sites that reflect various faith traditions, including Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist locations, such as the archaeological sites discovered in Taxila and the esteemed shrines devoted to Sufi saints.⁵ Among Pakistan's numerous holy sites, the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Punjab, holds exceptional prominence. The Gurdwara Darbar Sahib holds considerable significance in the realm of religious tourism within Pakistan, making a substantial contribution to sustainable economic growth. This location attracts Sikh pilgrims globally, facilitating cultural interchange and economic growth. The inauguration of the corridor has elevated Pakistan's reputation as a welcoming and safe destination, thereby fostering interfaith dialogue and contributing to regional stability.⁶ As the final resting place of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, this sacred complex carries profound meaning for the global Sikh community. Here, Guru Nanak spent his final eighteen years establishing the first Sikh community and developing the philosophical principles that continue guiding millions today. The site has naturally evolved into a primary pilgrimage destination, attracting not only devout Sikhs but also international visitors seeking a more profound understanding of Sikh teachings and heritage. The economic viability of religious tourism in Pakistan is considerable, with the Kartarpur Corridor exemplifying the capacity of religious landmarks to stimulate tourism and contribute to economic advancement.⁷

This study aimed to explore how religious tourism at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib (Kartarpur Corridor) contributes to local and national economic growth and sustainability. The study also identified the challenges and opportunities in managing religious tourism as a tool to foster interfaith harmony and regional economic resilience.

Tourists' Revisiting Intention to Mecca," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 101–114, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no2.7>.

³Aisha Iftikhar, Waqas Ali Haider, and Muhammad Siddique Ullah, "Sacred Seduction: Unveiling the Allure of Religious Activities as a Tourist Magnet," *The Islamic Culture (As-Saqafat-ul Islamia)* 48, no. 2 (2023): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.58352/tis.v48i2.926>.

⁴Mohammad Zain Mheidat, and Azizan Marzuki, "A Framework for Understanding Travel Intention Post-Pandemic to International Tourist Destinations," *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 71, no. 2 (2023): 388–397, <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.71.2.10>.

⁵Muhammad Waseem Bari, and Qurrahtulain Khan, "Pakistan as a Destination of Religious Tourism," in *Global Development of Religious Tourism*, ed. Emilia Alaverdov and Muhammad Waseem Bari (Hershey, PA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2021), 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-5792-1.ch001>.

⁶Rabia Bashir, and Khalil Ahmad, "Religious Tourism: Experiences of Sikh Yatris Visiting Kartarpur Corridor, Pakistan," *Journal of Social Sciences Review* 3, no. 2 (2023): 112–120, <https://doi.org/10.54183/jssr.v3i2.249>.

⁷Maseeh Ullah Bacha, Maaz Ud Din, and Amina Tariq, "Religious Tourism and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Development at Kartarpur Corridor, Punjab, Pakistan," *Journal of Business and Tourism* 9, no. 2 (2023): 56–75, <https://doi.org/10.34260/jbt.v9i02.279>.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic and Cultural Dimensions

The tourism industry within Pakistan, incorporating religious tourism, significantly contributes to economic progress by facilitating an increase in foreign trade, improving infrastructure, and attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).⁸ Religious tourism is an important segment of tourism industry, people keep traveling for faith even when other travel slows down (EHL Hospitality Insights, 2025). The corridor's opening has created a ripple effect throughout the local economy. Many studies highlight the role of international tourists in contributing positively to the gross domestic product (GDP) in the destination country, especially in developing countries.⁹ International tourists are significantly influenced by internal and external factors. Perception of attractions, travel experience, interaction with the local community, as well as feeling of safety and security are crucial in enhancing the image of international tourist destinations.¹⁰ Various sectors have experienced notable expansion: hospitality services, retail establishments, accommodation facilities, and transportation networks.¹¹ Local entrepreneurs have actively engaged in the establishment of a variety of business ventures. Whereas, the continual arrival of pilgrims has bolstered the economic activities of merchants who offer religious artifacts, traditional attire, and local culinary specialties, concurrently generating employment prospects, especially within the hospitality and service industries.¹²

In addition to the direct economic advantages, this manifestation of religious tourism possesses considerable cultural and social importance. The Gurdwara functions as a dynamic representation of Sikh spirituality, cultivating communal identity while safeguarding vital cultural heritage and facilitating interfaith discourse, thereby augmenting Pakistan's favorable international perception.¹³ Visitors experience firsthand the spiritual teachings emphasizing unity, selfless service, and divine devotion.¹⁴ Regular celebrations, including commemorations of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday, help maintain local traditions while sharing Sikh culture with international audiences. Recognition of growing tourist numbers has prompted the Pakistani government to invest in regional infrastructure improvements. Enhanced roads, upgraded utilities, and expanded public services have benefited both

⁸Muhammad Asif Amjad, Hafeez ur Rehman, and Irem Batool, "Nexus between Tourism and Economic Growth in Pakistan: Using Gregory Hansen and ARDL with Structural Break," *Review of Education, Administration & Law* 5, no. 3 (2022): 387–397, <https://doi.org/10.47067/real.v5i3.247>.

⁹Mohammad Zain Mheidat, "A Predictive Investigation of International Tourists' Travel Intention to Jordan," *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences* 52, no. 3 (2025): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v52i3.5332>.

¹⁰Mohammad Zain Mheidat, and Azizan Marzuki, "Key Factors Influencing Tourist's Destination Image: A Perspective from International Tourists in Jordan," *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences* 52, no. 1 (2025): 365–371, <https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v52i1.5169>.

¹¹Mark Anthony Camilleri, "The Tourism Industry: An Overview," in *Travel Marketing, Tourism Economics and the Airline Product: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, ed. Mark Anthony Camilleri (Cham: Springer, 2017), 3–27, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49849-2_1.

¹²Ahmad Bilal, and Iftikhar Hussain Adil, "Community Perspective for Sustainable Development at Tourism Destinations in Pakistan: The Case Study from Swat Valley," *Journal of Asian Development Studies* 13, no. 4 (2024): 607–623, <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.4.50>.

¹³Kalsoom BeBe Sumra, and Muhammad Mehtab Alam, "Promoting Religious Tourism Management for Creating a Soft Image of Pakistan," in *Global Development of Religious Tourism*, ed. Emilia Alaverdov and Muhammad Waseem Bari (Hershey, PA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2021), 149–174, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-5792-1.ch010>.

¹⁴Bashir and Ahmad, "Religious Tourism: Experiences of Sikh Yatris," 112–120.

visitors and residents, accelerating broader regional development.

Beyond economic dimension, the corridor has been “faith-based diplomacy” or a “peace bridge” which can improve the cross-cultural exchange and revitalize Sikh heritage in Pakistan, making it emotionally important.¹⁵ These cultural ties reinforce economic participation of the destination.

2.2. Sustainability Challenges and Considerations

The presence of diverse religious sites in Pakistan, including Sikh Gurdwaras, highlights the country's rich cultural heritage and attracts international visitors.¹⁶

The synthesis of spiritual tourism with sustainable tourism practices possesses the ability to enrich the overall travel experience while also cultivating enduring advantages.¹⁷ Despite the beneficial economic and cultural influences, the realm of religious tourism in Pakistan faces challenges related to sustainability and environmental stewardship. Addressing these concerns through thoughtful strategic planning and active community engagement is crucial to ensure that religious tourism continues to be a vibrant contributor to Pakistan's economic growth while preserving its rich cultural heritage and ecological balance.¹⁸ The influx of large crowds has the potential to exert pressure on local infrastructure and ecosystems if not adequately manage.¹⁹ The implementation of proficient management strategies and sustainable methodologies is imperative to reconcile the economic advantages with the concomitant environmental and social repercussions.²⁰

3. Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative design to gain deeper insights into local experiences and perceptions of tourism-led development.²¹ Maximum variation samples were employed to capture key nodes in the local tourism value chain. A total of 22 participants were selected based on their distinct roles and experiences in the local tourism and religious landscape mentioned as follows:

- Six small business owners operating near religious or heritage sites, contributing to the local economy by offering services, such as lodging, F&B, and tour-guiding.
- Four officials specializing in tourism and heritage management.

¹⁵Salman Yousaf, “Tourism and Reconciliation in an Enduring Rivalry: The Case of Kartarpur Corridor on India–Pakistan Border,” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 39 (2021): 100833, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100833>.

¹⁶Faiqa Khilat, Farah Jamil, and Beenish Mujahid, “SWOT Analysis of Religious Tourism: A Case of Sikh Gurdwaras in Pakistan,” *Global Regional Review* 7, no. 1 (2022): 253–268, [https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022\(VII-I\).23](https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022(VII-I).23)

¹⁷Lorenz Poggendorf, “New Paradigm of Spiritual Tourism: Adding an Important Layer to Sustainable Tourism,” *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment* 256 (2022): 65–76, <https://doi.org/10.2495/ST220061>.

¹⁸Munir Ahmad Khan Gasura, Muhammad Munir, and Kashif Zaheer, “A Qualitative Analysis of Religious Tourism and Economic Development: A Case Study of Kartarpur Corridor, Pakistan,” *International Journal of Governance and Sustainability* 3, no. 2 (2023): 22–31.

¹⁹Kiran A. Shinde, and Daniel H. Olsen, “Reframing the Intersections of Pilgrimage, Religious Tourism, and Sustainability,” *Sustainability* 15, no. 1 (2022): 461, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010461>.

²⁰Bilal and Adil, “Community Perspective for Sustainable Development,” 607–623.

²¹Rudi Santoso, “Tourism-Led Economic Growth in Coastal Areas: A Qualitative Study of Marine Economies,” *Jurnal Ilmu Ekonomi Terapan* 10, no. 2 (2025): 238–251, <https://doi.org/10.20473/jiet.v10i2.76620>.

- Five Sikh pilgrims, that is, domestic and cross-border visitors.
- Four informal vendors operating stalls or mobile enterprises in proximity to sacred places, and
- Three community leaders were consulted to explore the broader social, cultural, and religious dynamics within the area, including community responses to tourism initiatives and the nature of interfaith relationships.

This diverse yet focused selection facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interrelations between tourism, historical context, and community identity.

3.1. Data Collection

The study conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, facilitating a thorough evaluation²² of the implications of religious tourism at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes set across low season weekdays, regular weekend, and festival peak window. Furthermore, the study used pre-peak (8:30-11:00) and post-peak (16:30-19:00) to observe the differences in arrival and post-event surges.

Interview questions were open-ended encompassing inquiries regarding tourists' motivations for visiting the Gurdwara, their experiential narratives, as well as their reflections on the cultural and economic dimensions of the pilgrimage.²³ The formulated questions aimed to acquire insights into how the visitation altered their perceptions of the local culture, alongside the economic advantages that tourism affords for the regional economy. For officials, questions were emphasized pertaining to destination governance, facilities, and conservation issues. Similarly, interviews with local vendors emphasized questions regarding investigating the economic impact of tourism, such as demand patterns across seasons, product mix, leakage, and environmental practices. For community leaders, the questions were socio-cultural for cultural integrity and inclusive local economic linkage to balance tourist well-being.

Furthermore, policy document analyses were conducted to investigate government narratives and development strategies aimed at promoting religious tourism. This included reviewing government plans, tourism development strategies, heritage conservation documents, and community development reports.

The integration of these three data sources yielded a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religious tourism, policy, and community life, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness and depth of the research findings. Throughout the study, all participants' names and anonymity was protected, particularly those who interviewed.

4. Analysis

The study used thematic coding to analyze qualitative data,²⁴ resulting in the identification of four important themes: sustainable livelihoods, income diversification, infrastructure improvements,

²²Satish Prakash Chand, "Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations, and Document Analysis," *Advances in Educational Research and Evaluation* 6, no. 1 (2025): 303–317, <https://doi.org/10.25082/AERE.2025.01.001>

²³Kathryn Roulston, Brigitte A. Herron, and Caprial Farrington, "Learning How to Interview for Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 30, no. 8 (2025): 4129–4151, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7737>

²⁴Sirwan Khalid Ahmed, Ribwar Arsalan Mohammed, Abdulqadir J. Nashwan, Radhwan Hussein Ibrahim, Araz Qadir Abdalla, Barzan Mohammed M. Ameen, and Renas Mohammed Khdir, "Using Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health* 6 (2025): 100198, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>.

and vulnerabilities. Sustainable livelihoods demonstrated how tourism provided long-term economic prospects to residents. Income diversification demonstrated how families, particularly women and young people, engaged in a variety of small-scale businesses outside of traditional jobs. Tourism demand has driven infrastructure improvements, such as better roads, sanitation, and public services. The theme of vulnerabilities emphasized seasonal income insecurity, social disadvantages, and environmental concerns associated with overtourism.

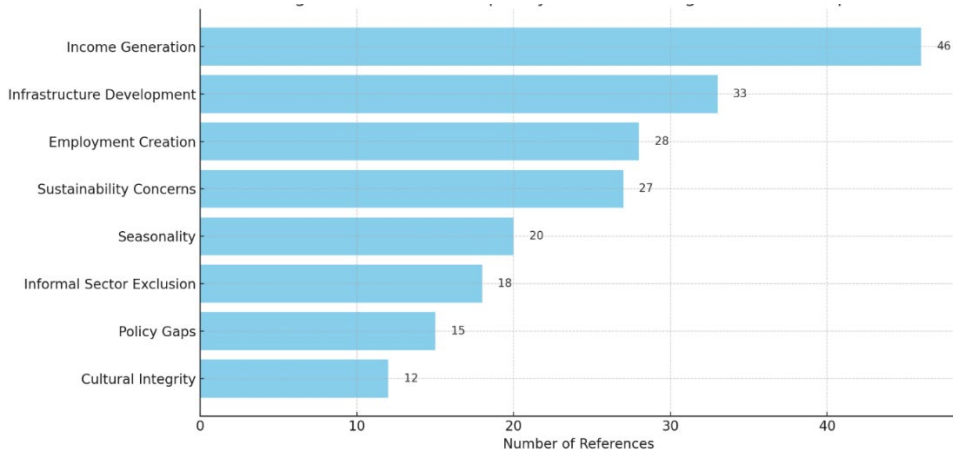


Figure 1. Thematic Frequency Related to Religious Tourism Impact

This diagram provides a clear visual summary of the key themes identified in the research, highlighting the varying significance of each factor related to the topic of religious tourism. The length of each bar represents the frequency or impact of the theme, with longer bars indicating greater importance or relevance. It effectively shows how certain themes, such as income generation and infrastructure development, are more prominent in the context of religious tourism, while others, for instance cultural integrity, are less emphasized. This chart serves as a foundational reference, guiding the reader through the central themes of the analysis and setting the stage for a deeper exploration of each factor in subsequent sections.

4.1. Local Economic Impact and Enterprise Development of Religious Tourism

4.1.1. Income Production

The Kartarpur Corridor has led to a significant increase in religious tourism in the region. This passage connects Sikhs, who are Indian citizens to the Gurdwara, without the need for a visa.²⁵ Consequently, a considerable number of pilgrims are now arriving, which is the leading financial source for Pakistan, supporting charity, entrance fees, and the necessities of accommodation, nutrition, and transportation. The Express Tribune reported that the government collects a US\$20 service fee from each pilgrim visiting the Kartarpur Corridor. The increasing number of pilgrims traveling through the corridor contributes to government revenue generation. Such revenue can potentially support the maintenance of corridor facilities, tourism infrastructure development, and local economic activities in the surrounding region.

Furthermore, small businesses and street vendors, as well as the nearby companies also benefit

²⁵Farzana Zaheer, Sultan Mubariz, and Asia Saif Alvi, "Religious tourism backing for economic salvation: A study of Kartarpur corridor between Pakistan and India," *Journal of Indian Studies* 6, no. 01 (2020): 139148.

from tourists. This economic effect is akin to a domino effect on a region's economy.

4.1.2. Entrepreneurship and Job Creation

With the rise of religious tourism in the neighborhood of the Gurdwara, locals have also gained job opportunities. The establishment of the corridor has led to the growth of jobs that were previously lacking in transportation, hospitality, security, and retail sectors.²⁶ Many entrepreneurs have opened various establishments catering to pilgrims, including restaurants, gift shops, and guided tours. According to researchers who presented their findings in the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, religious tourism in remote locations, such as Kartarpur has the potential to generate new business ideas. The move cannot only lower unemployment but is also instrumental in empowering local communities.

4.1.3. Sustainable Livelihoods and Social Inclusion

The current study found that religious tourism, particularly during pilgrimage seasons, has led to significant economic growth in the surrounding community, with many small businesses experiencing increased revenue. Local business owners, notably those in the hospitality and culinary industries, have reported increased consumer traffic and seasonal income spikes, which have gradually translated into year-round benefits.

- A restaurant owner underlined the transformation, stating, “We’ve added more staff and expanded our menu to accommodate Sikh dietary preferences. It has become a reliable source of income.” This reflects a larger trend in which businesses profit financially while also tailoring their offerings to meet the unique cultural and religious needs of pilgrims.
- A guesthouse manager explained, “We used to only operate during important festivals but we now have guests virtually every month. Pilgrims frequently return and suggest us to others.”
- A street vendor commented, “I used to sell fruits but now I sell religious things and refreshments designed for pilgrims. It has helped me send my kids to school.”
- Similarly, a local rickshaw driver said, “During pilgrimage season, I earn twice. I’ve even planned a unique path for travelers to visit local attractions.”
- A young woman selling a handicraft stall remarked, “Tourists enjoy handcrafted products. My mother taught me how to stitch, and now my cousins and I run a stall together. It’s empowering.”

By aligning with the beliefs and preferences of visiting communities, these businesses cultivate long-term customer relationships, enhance service quality, and ensure that economic benefits extend beyond short-term gains to sustainable, community-driven growth. This sustainable expansion also helps to provide jobs and improve skills among the local community.

4.1.4. Infrastructure, Services, and Capacity Management

Tourism-induced prosperity has led to significant improvements in infrastructure and basic services, particularly in areas near key religious sites, such as the Gurdwara. To meet the growing number of visitors, local governments and business owners have invested in road improvements, telecommunication upgrades, and water supply infrastructure.²⁷ These enhancements have benefited

²⁶Naila Masood Ahmad, Ramsha Sohail, and Muhammad Masood Ahmad, “Impact of religious tourism on the development of smokeless industry in Pakistan,” *Global Social Sciences Review* 7, no. 2 (2022): 77–89, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2022\(VII-II\).08](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2022(VII-II).08).

²⁷Peter Adey, and Debbie Lisle, “Tourism Infrastructures,” *Tourism Geographies* 27, no. 3–4 (2025): 756–766, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2412543>.

not only tourists but also local people by improving mobility, connectivity, and daily convenience.

- A local shopkeeper near the shrine stated, “The road outside my shop was full of potholes a few years ago. But it is smooth now, and we even have new streetlights. It seems safer and more welcoming.”
- Another homeowner said, “We finally have a reliable water connection, but just in the central market area. My cousins who live just a few blocks away continue to experience everyday shortages.”
- A schoolteacher residing further away from the Gurdwara stated, “Tourists bring development, but only to the locations they visit. Our street does not have sufficient drainage, and children walk to school on broken roadways.”
- A young person working in a local call center remarked, “Internet services are significantly faster now, but only in key regions. We still have issues with connectivity at home.”

These interviews emphasize the uneven distribution of tourism’s advantages, which raises questions about sustainability and equity. While infrastructure around religious sites has improved dramatically, the neglect of periphery areas emphasizes the importance of inclusive and community-wide development planning.

Nevertheless, these developments are primarily concentrated in the pilgrimage zone, ignoring other neighborhoods and rural areas. Residents living outside the Gurdwara's immediate vicinity complained about irregular water supply, poor road maintenance, and limited access to health and sanitation services. This lopsided distribution of rewards has raised concerns about the long-term durability of tourism-driven expansion and its capacity to meet the needs of the entire community. It also highlights the need for integrated planning to ensure equitable access to infrastructure and services outside tourist areas, thereby promoting inclusive growth and social well-being.

4.2. Vulnerabilities, Risks, and Long-term Resilience

While religious tourism has bolstered regional economies, interviews were marked by frustration over its uneven benefits and uncertain future. In the study, three recurring themes emerged: dependency, exclusion, and the pangs of seasonal hardship, which reflect the shortcomings of tourism-led development. Seasonality, over-reliance, and vulnerability to shocks (closures, changes in policies or fees, floods, and climate events) can result from religious tourism, necessitating governance controls for risk mitigation and recovery.

4.2.1. Dependency on Tourism

Some participants were growing concerned about the rising reliance of society on religious tourism as its primary means of income. One hotel manager observed, “Our entire survival now relies on pilgrims.” If something goes awry and interrupts their visits, such as a political upheaval or a natural catastrophe, we have nothing. One shopkeeper reflected this fear, commenting, “We used to have some small commerce and farming, but today everyone is in tourism. That is risky.” One ex-farmer now working as a guide reflected, “Tourism pays me better than farming, so I left the fields. But sometimes I fear because now I solely rely on tourism, and if it falls apart, then I will have nothing to earn from.” Interviews starkly highlight the key vulnerability in the local economy: most people solely rely on tourism, with few alternative ways to generate income. If fewer tourists arrive, the neighborhood becomes insecure. Without alternative income sources, people fear how they would survive during tough times or in months when tourists are scared.

4.2.2. Exclusion from Formal Development Benefits

Some participants, particularly non-formal vendors and gender-oriented companies, were

concerned about being excluded from formal tourism development projects. One woman selling handmade jewelry therefore noted, “Large shops and hotels receive all the support, but we never get any stalls in the central place or any training.” Similarly, an informal food vendor noted, “I sell without a license, so I am unable to benefit from official programs. We are not considered when decisions are taken.” Many small-scale workers operate without formal registration, thereby rendering themselves invisible to policy providers and ineligible for government support or developmental projects. This exclusion not only reduces their prospects for returns but also prevents them from contributing towards long-term economic development. Consequently, as the tourism industry grows, benefits accrue to the selected formal players, entrenching greater inequity and social marginalization in society.

4.2.3. Challenge of Seasonality

One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews conducted was the phenomenon of seasonality within the domain of religious tourism. Participants consistently underscored that while pilgrimage periods engender substantial economic activity and present opportunities for local communities, these advantages are confined to brief time intervals and experience a marked decline during the off-peak season. Consequently, local enterprises and service providers encounter economic volatility and face challenges related to income sustainability. This issue, highlighted by participants, closely resonates with the existing literature.²⁸ Seasonality is identified as a ubiquitous challenge within tourism economies and a significant impediment to achieving long-term sustainable development.

One rickshaw-pulling individual mused thus: “During festivities, I earn double or triple, but later there are days I spend eight hours waiting for customers and they do not turn up.”

Similarly, one souvenir seller had this to say: “They scramble and buy when pilgrims are coming, but for most days in the year, my stall is almost bare.” It is challenging to manage daily expenses.

One shopkeeper selling close to Gurdwara also mused thus: “We make substantial gains when pilgrims are coming, but during the off time, we can't afford shop rent payments.”

One street food vendor had this note: “I earn enough in one month's major religious festival, but the rest of the calendar is hard. There are days when I sell nothing.”

Similarly, one guesthouse worker mused thus: “During pilgrimages, there is full occupancy, but in the other months, we close the rooms or cut staff time. It is intermittent work.”

One handicraft vendor had this additional note: “When tourists come, business is great. But in quiet months, there is money borrowed to keep the stall running.”

This seasonal fluctuation in business highlights the unpredictability of the local vendors and service providers, whose livelihoods rely so heavily on the religious tourists. While religious tourism generates short-term income, the lack of annual stability presents significant challenges for residents seeking a regular income. Such volatility in demand also underscores the importance of sustainable economic policies that can mitigate the adverse effects of seasonality on local communities. By diversifying the economy and promoting off-peak tourism, there is greater potential for creating a stabilized local economy that benefits all concerned parties.

²⁸Francisco Sastre Alberti, Javier Rey-Maqueira, and Javier Lozano, “Tourism Seasonality and Public Policy: An Exploratory Analysis—Lessons from Mallorca, Spain,” *Tourism Research* 30, (2025): 74–91, <https://doi.org/10.14198/INTURI.27984>.

4.2.4. Policy Gaps and Structural Constraints

The institutional landscape governing Gurdwara Darbar Sahib is characterized by a "governance vacuum" where administrative control is split between the federal Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC), and the Project Management Unit (PMU) Kartarpur. This tripartite management structure lacks a unified Master Plan for Religious Tourism, resulting in ad-hoc development rather than a strategic, long-term economic roadmap. Research indicates that while the corridor serves as a significant tool for religious diplomacy, it lacks a cohesive national tourism policy that bridges the gap between security-centric federal management and provincial economic execution.²⁹

A critical policy gap is the "Day-Visitor Restricted Model." Current bilateral protocols and domestic security policies largely restrict Indian pilgrims to daytrips within the complex. This policy creates a "bottleneck" for sustainable economic growth; because pilgrims are not permitted to stay overnight or exit the designated corridor zone into the city of Narowal, the "economic multiplier effect" is essentially neutralized.³⁰ Without the ability for tourists to utilize local hotels, dine in community restaurants, or visit local markets, the revenue remains "locked" within the state-run complex, leading to significant economic leakage where the local community sees minimal benefit from the massive infrastructure investment.³¹

Furthermore, there is a visible absence of a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) integration policy. Current frameworks do not provide specific incentives, such as tax holidays or low-interest loans, for local entrepreneurs to develop high-quality souvenirs, traditional crafts, or specialized hospitality services tailored to the Sikh diaspora.³² This is exacerbated by the lack of a Sustainable Tourism Regulatory Framework; there are currently no enforced guidelines regarding the "carrying capacity" of the site or the environmental impact of large-scale tourism on the surrounding agricultural land of Narowal.³³ Without a legislative mandate for Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and environmental conservation, the site risks becoming a "prestige project," that is economically self-contained rather than a catalyst for regional prosperity and ecological preservation.

To further synthesize the findings, a cluster analysis was conducted to map the interrelated economic themes emerging from both the interviews and supporting literature.

²⁹Farooq Haq, and Anita Medhekar, "Evaluating the Religious Experience of Pilgrims at Kartarpur Corridor: A Qualitative Analysis," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 13, no. 3 (2025): 38, <https://doi.org/10.21427/wn9v-4z82..>

³⁰Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, *Guidelines and Policy for Kartarpur Corridor Management* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2025), 14.

³¹Maseeh Ullah Bacha, Maaz Ud Din, and Tariq, "Religious Tourism and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Development," 62.

³² Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, *National Tourism Strategy 2020-2030* (Islamabad: PTDC, 2020), 25–27.

³³Salman Sabir, Muhammad Amjad, and Rabia Khalid, "Sustainable Tourism Development in Pakistan: Challenges and Future Perspective," *Journal of Sustainability and Environmental Management* 2, no. 1 (2023): 45.

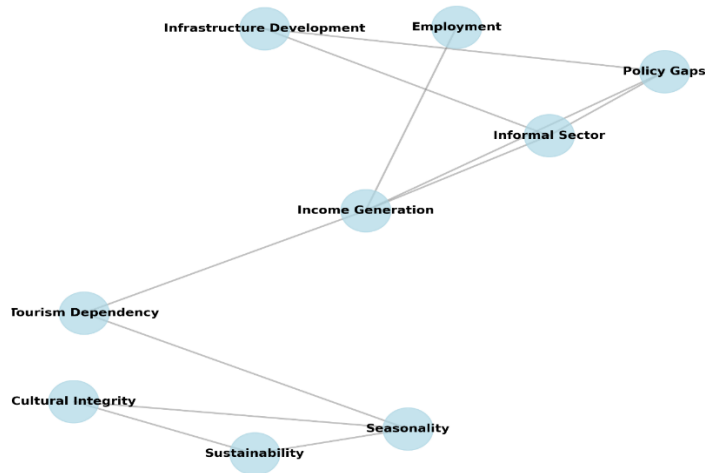


Figure 2. Cluster Map of Key Economic Themes Associated with Religious Tourism

This diagram represents a cluster analysis of economic themes related to the impact of tourism and economic sustainability. The nodes (circles) in the diagram represent key economic themes, including employment, informal sector, income generation, tourism dependency, policy gaps, infrastructure development, seasonality, sustainability, and cultural integrity.

The edges (lines connecting the nodes) illustrate the conceptual links between these themes, showing their interdependence and how they influence each other. For instance, income generation is strongly linked to tourism dependency, highlighting how tourism drives economic growth in local communities. As tourism increases, so does the income source for residents, creating a direct economic benefit.

Additionally, policy gaps are connected to the informal sector, suggesting that a lack of adequate regulation may push certain economic activities into informal channels. This can reduce transparency and make it more difficult for the government to monitor and support these sectors.

The relationship between sustainability, seasonality, and cultural integrity emphasizes the need for long-term planning in tourism economies. Sustainability is crucial in maintaining the long-term viability of tourism, while seasonality highlights the fluctuating demand that often affects local businesses. The preservation of cultural integrity is also essential to ensure that tourism does not erode local traditions and values over time.

Overall, the diagram illustrates the intricate relationships between various economic factors in tourism-driven economies. It underscores both the challenges and opportunities that arise from these interconnections, particularly the need for balanced policies that address economic growth while ensuring social and environmental sustainability.

4.3. The Kartarpur Corridor: A Multidimensional Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage Preservation

The Kartarpur Corridor serves as a quintessential illustration of the capacity of religious heritage to surpass political demarcations in order to facilitate cultural diplomacy, interfaith dialogue, and regional collaboration. This analysis investigates three interrelated aspects of the corridor's

importance: the conservation of heritage, the advancement of culture, and the process of diplomatic reconciliation.

4.3.1. Cultural Nexus and Global Sikh Identity

The Kartarpur Sahib initiative has emerged as a significant cultural hub, actively promoting Sikh traditions and historical narratives while fortifying a transnational Sikh identity. During the annual *Gurpurab* celebrations, the Gurdwara serves as the focal point for international pilgrimages and exchange initiatives, fostering connections among Sikh communities globally through their spiritual and historical legacies. This cultural positioning concurrently elevates Pakistan's international cultural prominence and reinforces its dedication to religious pluralism. Reports, including those from the Hindustan Times (2023), underscore that both Pakistan and India have contributed to the preservation of this shared heritage, exemplifying how cultural conservation can function as a vehicle for peace. By framing Kartarpur not merely as a religious site but also as a center for the promotion of Sikh heritage, Pakistan reiterates its commitment to cultural inclusivity and interfaith respect while establishing a paradigm for heritage-based cultural diplomacy.

4.3.2. Diplomatic Reconciliation and Interfaith Dialogue

Often designated as a 'Corridor of Peace,' the Kartarpur Corridor serves as a notable example of collaboration between India and Pakistan, two countries historically marked by political strife. By enabling visa-free access for Sikh pilgrims, both governments have acknowledged the intrinsic right to religious freedom and cultural expression. As elucidated by Al Jazeera (2023), this initiative signifies a substantial advancement in reconciliation, wherein faith acts as a medium for dialogue rather than an impediment to unity. Beyond the realm of diplomatic initiatives, the Gurdwara has transformed into a grassroots forum for interfaith dialogue. Pilgrims and residents, encompassing both Muslims and Sikhs, engage in discussions, acts of hospitality, and the sharing of cultural traditions, thereby fostering mutual understanding and diminishing stereotypes. This intercultural engagement embodies Guru Nanak's fundamental tenets of humility, compassion, and service, illustrating how religious sites can operate as venues for cross-cultural interaction and comprehension.

5. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that religious tourism at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib exerts a multifaceted impact on the socioeconomic and cultural landscape of Pakistan. The five principal themes, that is, economic empowerment of the local populace, enhancement of infrastructure and services, promotion of cultural coexistence and interfaith dialogue, challenges in tourism administration, and deficiencies in sustainability, underscore the dual role of religious tourism as both a stimulus for inclusive development and a source of systemic challenges.

The evidence supporting economic empowerment corroborates the assertions made by Timothy and Olsen (2006)³⁴ regarding the role of pilgrimage destinations as engines of economic growth in marginalized regions. Local entrepreneurs, street vendors, and service providers reported an increase in income and job opportunities, thereby affirming the contribution of religious tourism to community advancement.³⁵ Notably, the engagement of female entrepreneurs and youth in micro-businesses illustrates tourism's capacity to promote inclusive participation. Nevertheless, the significant reliance on pilgrimage seasons highlights the tenuous nature of this empowerment, echoing the findings of Omar and Nguyen (2018), which indicate that seasonal tourism often leads

³⁴Dallen J. Timothy, and Daniel H. Olsen, eds., *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (London: Routledge, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001073>.

³⁵Maseeh Ullah, Maaz Ud Din, and Tariq, "Religious Tourism and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Development," 64.

to precarious livelihoods.³⁶

Improvements in infrastructure and the service sector further demonstrate the spillover effects of tourism, with advancements in roads, telecommunications, and sanitation systems occurring in response to heightened demand. However, the narratives provided by participants also highlight a disproportionate distribution of benefits, wherein areas in proximity to the Gurdwara thrive, while peripheral neighborhoods languish in underdevelopment. This observation aligns with Sharpley and Telfer's (2014) critique that growth driven by tourism, in the absence of equitable planning, jeopardizes the mitigation of spatial and social inequalities.

The cultural implications of tourism are equally significant. The interfaith interactions and cultural harmony observed between Sikh pilgrims and local Muslim communities substantiate D'Amore's (1988) proposition of tourism serving as a form of "peaceful diplomacy." Such exchanges mitigate stereotypes, cultivate mutual respect, and enhance Pakistan's global standing as a guardian of minority religious heritage. These outcomes position Kartarpur not solely as a religious site but as a platform for soft diplomacy and cultural engagement within the South Asian context.

Nonetheless, ongoing issues related to tourism administration, including inadequately trained guides, challenges in crowd management, and bureaucratic delays, pose threats to visitor satisfaction and the sustainability of the tourism sector. These deficiencies emphasize the imperative for capacity-building initiatives and the professionalization of tourism services, particularly in providing multilingual training for service personnel.

The theme of sustainability and policy deficiencies reveals the most significant risk. Although the Gurdwara initiative has catalyzed growth, the lack of comprehensive policies addressing environmental protection, equitable reinvestment, and community involvement may jeopardize its long-term sustainability. The apprehension regarding over-commercialization, as noted by both respondents and scholars,³⁷ underscores the delicate equilibrium between economic benefits and spiritual integrity. In the absence of clearly defined frameworks, religious tourism faces the peril of undermining the very values and heritage that render it appealing.

5.1. Considerations and Challenges

The swift escalation in pilgrimage traffic has engendered both opportunities and challenges. While the introduction of new facilities, including enhanced roads, accommodation, and sanitation services, has improved accessibility, the long-term sustainability of these enhancements remains questionable. It is imperative to uphold facilities in accordance with environmentally sustainable standards to avert prolonged ecological degradation. Research published in the *Journal of Tourism Studies* (2023) emphasizes that religious sites, such as Kartarpur, can maintain their viability only when development strikes a balance between visitor satisfaction and ecological conservation. Although tourism yields economic advantages, excessive commercialization poses a risk of undermining the spiritual ambience of the Gurdwara. High fees, aggressive promotional strategies, or uncontrolled commercial activities might alienate pilgrims seeking sacred experience. Consequently, policymakers must adopt a judicious approach: ensuring affordability, safeguarding the sanctity of rituals, and regulating commercial operations in the vicinity of the site. Preserving authenticity is crucial for maintaining Gurdwara's spiritual and cultural significance.

³⁶Salamiah A. Omar, and Tuan-Vinh Nguyen, "The Impact of Seasonal Religious Tourism on Local Community Livelihoods," *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration* 19, no. 4 (2018): 412–15.

³⁷Scheyvens, Regina, and Heidi van der Watt, "Tourism, Empowerment and Sustainable Development: A New Framework for Analysis," *Sustainability* 13, no. 22 (2021): 12606, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212606>

5.2. Prospects for the Future

The success of the Kartarpur Corridor underscores the untapped potential of Pakistan's rich and diverse religious heritage. The nation is home to an array of Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim sites that remain vastly underutilized. Strategic marketing initiatives, enhanced infrastructure, and cross-border partnerships could rejuvenate these sites as dynamic centers of international religious tourism. By diversifying its offerings beyond Kartarpur, Pakistan can reduce its overreliance on a single destination and cultivate a more robust tourism industry. The Kartarpur Corridor further exemplifies how religious tourism can bridge political divides. As a shared heritage initiative, it possesses the capacity to foster more stable and peaceful relationships between India and Pakistan. Expanding such initiatives to encompass additional faith traditions and heritage sites would further reinforce regional collaboration. In this endeavor, Pakistan positions itself not merely as a custodian of sacred heritage but also as a frontrunner in cultural diplomacy and peacebuilding within South Asia.

5.3. Conclusion

The current research revealed that the religious tourism associated with Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, facilitated by the Kartarpur Corridor, serves as a significant catalyst for economic development, cultural preservation, and interfaith dialogue within Pakistan. It not only offers sustainable economic opportunities for local populations but also enhances regional infrastructure, thereby positioning Pakistan as a pivotal center for Sikh heritage and religious pluralism. From an economic perspective, religious tourism engenders revenue through entry fees, hospitality services, and supplementary enterprises, thereby creating novel avenues for entrepreneurship and job creation. Nevertheless, the dependency on intermittent pilgrimages highlights the imperative for economic diversification and the implementation of year-round tourism initiatives.

Culturally, the conservation and advocacy of Sikh heritage underscore Pakistan's dedication to preserving minority religious traditions. The Gurdwara serves as both a spiritual refuge and a cultural icon, thereby reinforcing the nation's identity as a protector of religious plurality. Concurrently, the risks posed by over-commercialization and insufficient local involvement could undermine the authenticity and sanctity of this heritage.

Diplomatically, the Kartarpur Corridor illustrates how religious tourism can function as a conduit for peace and collaboration between historically antagonistic nations. It fosters interfaith dialogue, mitigates distrust, and contributes to regional stability. However, persistent unresolved geopolitical conflicts remain a formidable challenge to the enduring realization of these advantages.

For Pakistan, the path forward necessitates a comprehensive strategy: implementing inclusive and equitable tourism policies, allocating resources toward sustainable infrastructure and environmental protections, empowering local communities through educational initiatives and participatory governance, and utilizing religious tourism for cultural diplomacy on both regional and global stages.

In summary, Gurdwara Darbar Sahib exemplifies the potential of sacred sites to transcend religious divisions, transforming them into engines of socioeconomic advancement and interfaith coexistence. With diligent management, the site can continue to enhance local livelihoods, safeguard Sikh heritage, and fortify Pakistan's role in fostering peace and cultural diversity across South Asia.

Authors' Contribution

Neelam Bano: conceptualization, critical revision, final approval. **Zubair Arshad:** literature review. **Maria Imtiaz:** methodology, data collection, formal/qualitative analysis. **Namra Amjad Ali:** editing, formatting, reference management

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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