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Religious Tourism: Experiences of Sikh Yatris Visting Kartarpur Corridor, Pakistan

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Abstract: Religious tourism is an important part of human culture and history. The Kartarpur Corridor in Pakistan has become a popular destination for Sikh pilgrims to attend the revered Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. This study investigated the experiences of Sikh Yatris traveling via the Kartarpur Corridor with respect to travel, logistics, living amenities, and performance of rituals. A total of 33 In-depth interviews were conducted during the period from June 2022 to July 2022 with purposively selected Sikh Yatris. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and NVIVO 11. Sikh Yatris, who visited Kartarpur, had wonderful experiences with logistics, living amenities, and the convenience of performing religious rituals. They reported feeling a strong spiritual connection to the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara and expressed appreciation for the facilitation of their religious pilgrimage by the Pakistani government. Participants also reported enjoying the friendly and hospitable atmosphere in Pakistan and feeling safe and secure during their visit. This study contributes to understanding the role of religious tourism in promoting cultural exchange, interfaith dialogue, and regional stability, with the potential to normalize relations between India and Pakistan.

Introduction

Religious tourism has been an integral part of human culture and history for centuries. It involves traveling to sacred sites and religious destinations to fulfill spiritual, religious, and cultural aspirations (Brouder & Teixeira, 2018). In recent years, the Kartarpur Corridor has gained significant attention from Sikh pilgrims who seek to visit the sacred site of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, located in Kartarpur, Pakistan (Gilani & Talib, 2020). The Corridor, which connects the Indian city of Dera Baba Nanak to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan, has provided an opportunity for Sikhs to visit the place where Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of the Sikh religion, spent the last years of his life. The Corridor has gained immense popularity since its opening in November 2019, as it allows visa-free access for

Sikh pilgrims to visit the Gurdwara, which was previously inaccessible to them (Singh, 2020).

Religious tourism is considered an important source of promoting cultural understanding and mutual respect among people of different faiths (Kaur, 2020). The Kartarpur Corridor is a unique example of this, as it has the potential to bridge the gap between India and Pakistan, which have been embroiled in political tensions for decades. The opening of the Corridor has been seen as a significant step toward promoting peace and harmony in the region (Mishra & Taneja, 2021). The Kartarpur Corridor has provided Sikhs with an opportunity to visit this sacred site and reconnect with their religious beliefs. Moreover, the Kartarpur Corridor has also brought economic benefits to the region, as it has

increased the number of tourists visiting the area. The Corridor has created employment opportunities and generated income for the local communities through the sale of goods and services to the pilgrims (Kaur, 2020). The study is significant, as it can provide insights into the religious beliefs and practices of Sikh Yatris and the impact of the pilgrimage on their spiritual and emotional well-being. Additionally, the study can contribute to the development of religious tourism in the region and promote interfaith understanding and cultural exchange between India and Pakistan.

Despite the potential benefits of the Kartarpur Corridor, there is limited research on the experiences of Sikh Yatris visiting the Corridor and the impact of this pilgrimage on their religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of Sikh Yatris visiting the Kartarpur Corridor in Pakistan. The findings of this research can contribute to the development of religious tourism and promote interfaith understanding between India and Pakistan.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger study of Ph.D. dissertation. A qualitative research method was used in this study. The methodology employed in this study provides a robust framework for exploring the experiences of Sikh Yatris visiting the Kartarpur Corridor, Pakistan. The in-depth interviews enabled the collection of rich and detailed data that can provide insights into the experiences of Sikh Yatris with respect to their religious beliefs and practices.

Population

The study's population consisted of all Sikh Yatris from India who came to Kartarpur (Gurunank) to perform religious rituals.

Sampling

As with many other qualitative studies, the

present study also used purposive sampling. The participants were not chosen at random or without regard for any principles or procedures. Rather, the study's participants were chosen based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. Male and female Sikh adults (aged 18+ years) visiting Kartarpur (Gurunank) for religious rituals were chosen as study participants. Visitors from Pakistan and people of other religions than Sikhism were excluded from selection. The President of a local Community-Based Organisation (CBO) of Sikhs and the Deputy Director of the Social Welfare Department in Narowal, Pakistan, was asked to help in recruiting participants. With the help of both gatekeepers, the researchers, with her two Research Assistants, got access to the premises and conducted interviews. Accordingly, 33 participants were recruited for in-depth interviews, which achieved the saturation point of data.

Interview guide

Since this study is part of a larger study of the Ph.D. dissertation, a detailed interview guide was prepared in both English and Urdu, which consisted of various sections including participants' demographic information, themes related to their perceptions, experiences of Sikh Yatris related to their visit to Kartarpur, peace-building, and pilgrims' confidence in rituals performance. The interview guide helped to collect the participants' opinions and points of view, providing a comprehensive understanding of the study. The present study has used data related to demographic information and experiences of Sikh Yatris from that larger set of themes and information.

Pilot testing

The researcher conducted a pilot test with the help of two research assistants to familiarise themselves with the study region and participants. Two in-depth interviews were conducted to improvise the interview guide,

including new thematic probes and rephrased questions. It was discovered that the interviews covered various topics before the interviewer asked a question, and the interviewer did not interrupt the conversation and revised the interview guide according to the feedback received in pilot testing.

Rapport Building

Building a strong rapport with the interviewees is essential for qualitative research, as it focuses on the in-depth opinions, views, and experiences of the participants. To do this, the interviewers conducted broad inquiries regarding the demography, family life, children, and daily tasks of Sikh Yatris prior to the interview. This conversation helped the interviewers to establish a high level of confidentiality and trust with the interviewees.

Interviews

This qualitative study sought information on Sikh Yatris' experiences of visiting Kartarpur, and accordingly, 33 in-depth interviews were conducted with them in Punjabi, the native language of the participants. The duration of each interview remained from 30 to 45 minutes. Audio recordings of each interview were made with the participants' consent, and notes were taken during the interviews. Facial expressions were also noted during the interviews.

Analysis

The data collected were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by taking into account the conversational tone, pauses, fluency, and quotations of the participants. The analysis involved several stages, including data familiarisation, coding, identification of themes, and interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were first coded by two independent coders and then reviewed by the researcher. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached.

The study observed the necessary ethical considerations. After taking the informed consent of participants, interviews were conducted. Moreover, the participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their information, and their identities were kept anonymous. The Institutional Review Board approved the study of the Ph.D. dissertation. However, the study was not without limitations. For instance, the use of small sample size and purposive sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize the findings to all tourists. However, to make the study scientific, steps were taken to mitigate these limitations, such as conducting member checking and involving multiple coders in the data analysis.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed several key themes, including Sikh Yatris' experiences with respect to logistics, accommodation, living amenities, food, and language, as well as their experience with regard to emotional experiences, social and cultural significance, and the significance of Kartarpur in promoting peace and harmony between India and Pakistan.

Demographic Information

The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 82, with a standard deviation of 16.62 years. The educational levels varied, with 33 percent having no formal education and 21 percent having completed 16 years. Almost half of the participants were from metropolitan areas, and just over half were from rural or a rural and urban combination. Female respondents were housewives, maids, private sector employees, and govt employees, while male respondents came from a wide range of professional backgrounds. Farmers outnumbered other occupations by a significant margin. The demographic information can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of participants (n=33)

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Age of Participants in Years		
18-30	5	15.15
31-40	6	18.18
41-50	9	27.27
51-60	4	12.12
61-70	5	15.15
71-80	3	9.09
81-90	1	3.03
Education		
No education	2	15.15
5 years	7	18.18
10 years	11	27.27
14 years	6	18.18
16 or more years	7	21.21
Gender		
Male	17	51.51
Female	16	48.48
Occupation		
Females' Occupation		
Housewife	8	24.24
Maid at college/clinic	1	3.03
House Maid	2	6.06
Teachers	2	6.06
Private work	2	6.06
Government Employee	1	3.03
Males' Occupation		
Businessman	2	6.06
Farmer / Agriculture	5	15.15
Shopkeeper	2	6.06
Factory worker	2	6.06
Gardner	1	3.03
Government Officer	2	6.06
Teacher	1	3.03
Gate Keeper/Security guard	1	3.03
Taxi Driver	1	3.03
Marital Status		
Married	24	72.72
Unmarried	9	27.27

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Residence Location		
Rural	16	48.48
Urban	9	27.27
Rural cum Urban	8	24.24

Standard Deviation: 16.62, Mean 47.42

Findings

Logistics

The findings of the study indicated that a vast majority (28 of 33) of participants reported that logistics in Pakistan were highly up to the mark. They reported that upon their arrival in Pakistan, the dealing staff gave them a welcoming note, and their behaviour was highly supportive. All relevant departments, such as transportation, bank staff, customs officers, and Federal Investigation Agency's staff, guided and helped them in their hassle-free entry into Pakistan. In this regard, a male Sikh Yatri, aged 41, said:

We were greeted with enthusiasm at every step of our journey into Pakistan [Kartarpur], and the staff was extremely helpful. We encountered no difficulties. All of the arrangements are fantastic.

In contrast to the majority, a small number of participants (05 of 33) experienced little difficulty with baggage clearance and currency conversion.

Accommodation

Almost all of the participants said they had the best facilities and accommodations for their arrival and day-long stay. However, participants reported that authorities had not permitted overnight stays. Following a probe, participants reported that the overnight stay was only available to pilgrims from countries other than India who had valid visas. This corridor is open to those arriving from India without a visa. When discussing lodging, a female pilgrim, 29 years old, with fourteen years of education, stated:

We came for a few hours. We have been very well accommodated at every stage. All of the arrangements are admirable.

Living amenities

Almost all of the participants praised the living conditions, including the lavatory, meals, utensils, and overall cleanliness. They were very impressed with the standard of living amenities provided there. They praised the Pakistani government and the site management for providing the best facilities to pilgrims. The restrooms have been found to be clean and sanitary, and the cleaning crew comes in on a regular basis. Utensils used to serve food are typical cultural plates that can hold two to three different types of meals. The *Langer Khana* [Dining Hall] is kept clean. While discussing the living accommodations, a male pilgrim aged 55 stated:

It gives me great pleasure to see how well you [referring to the Pakistani Government] look after our Gurdwaras. Everything is perfectly managed here. People, staff, food, eatables, and restrooms are all spotless. In India, our public spaces are not as clean.

Food and language

The participants stated that the *Langer* [meal] is provided free of charge here and is prepared with dietary necessities in mind. For example, a vegetarian meal is provided, and the ushers who serve the meal are dressed in Sikh cultural attire. Furthermore, the meal is not particularly spicy. These participants praised the food's quality. When questioned, they stated that even if there is some food deficiency, they do not mind because

they consider food to be sacred and attribute it to Baba Guru Nanak's giving. While discussing this, a 32-year-old female pilgrim stated:

This *Langer* [Meal] is from our Guru, and it is holy to us. The *Langer* is *Barhiya* [Delicious], especially the *Zarda* [Sweet Rice].

When asked about their language experiences, practically all of the participants stated that there is no difference in language and that they did not feel any inconvenience when interacting with the management personnel as well as the Pakistanis that visited this location. Additionally, they stated that language was not a barrier for them during their visit to this location. In discussing their language experiences, a 32-year-old female pilgrim with a sixteen-year education stated:

Our language [Punjabi] became blended with Hindi. But the Punjabi is still pure here. The language spoken here is pure and lovely Punjabi. It creates a sense of belonging and similarity. I felt extremely at ease speaking with the officials and the Pakistanis who were visiting this location.

Emotional experiences

Findings of the study highlighted that a vast majority (29 of 33) of Sikh Yatris reported feeling a deep sense of spiritual and emotional fulfillment upon visiting the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur. They described feeling a sense of closeness to God and experiencing inner peace and tranquility. The holy atmosphere of the Gurdwara and the shared experience with fellow Sikhs contributed to this emotional significance. While discussing their emotional experiences, a 55 years old, female Sikh Yatri said:

"I have traveled to many holy places around the world, but the emotional experience of visiting Kartarpur Sahib cannot be described in words. It is a feeling of fulfillment that can only be experienced by being there. The Kartarpur corridor has truly brought us closer to our faith and our history."

In contrast, very few pilgrims (04 of 33) did not find it to be a really rewarding experience in terms of their emotional fulfillment. They had been visiting the place for the sake of exploring the archeological aspect of the site.

Social and cultural significance

Almost all of the Sikh Yatris reported feeling a sense of connection with their cultural and religious heritage, as well as a sense of belonging to the global Sikh community. The pilgrimage provided an opportunity to connect with fellow Sikhs from different parts of their country [India], exchange ideas, and strengthen their social and cultural ties. In this connection, a male Sikh Yatri said:

Visiting the Kartarpur corridor was a life-changing experience for me. I felt an overwhelming sense of connection to my cultural and religious heritage, as well as a deep sense of belonging to the widespread Sikh community.

Finally, the study found that the pilgrimage had a significant impact on the perceptions of the participants toward Pakistan. Many Sikh Yatris reported feeling positive toward the country and its people, despite the historical tensions between India and Pakistan. The hospitality and warmth of the local people, as well as the shared religious heritage, contributed to this positive perception. The pilgrimage was seen as a symbol of the potential for peace and cooperation between the two countries, and the participants expressed hope for the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

A query for generating word frequency has been run in NVIVO 11 on the transcribed data of the findings. The output of word frequency revealed that the word "Sikh Yatri" has been most frequently used (10 counts), followed by "Pakistan" (08 counts), and 07 counts for each word, including "cultural," "emotional," "Kartarpur." The graphical presentation of the word frequency has been shown in Word Cloud generated by NVIVO 11 (Figure 1).

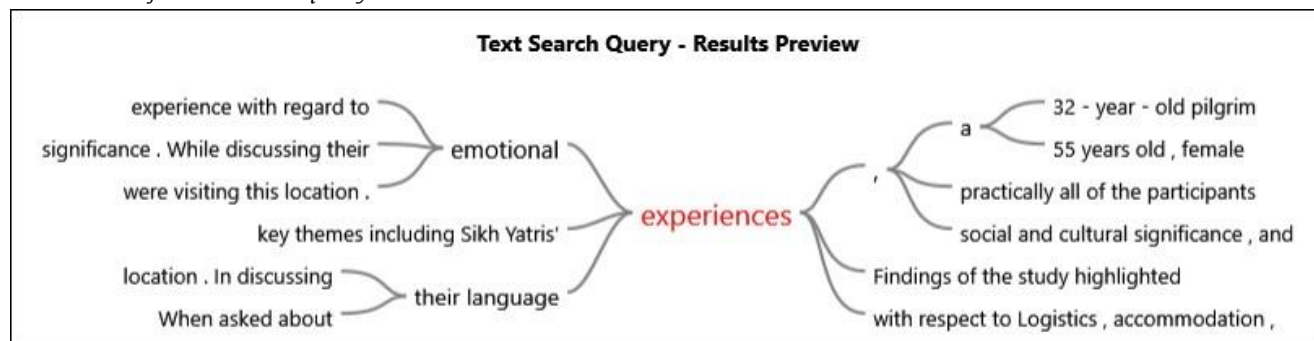
Figure 1
Word cloud of most frequently used words



Likewise, a text search query for the word “experiences” generated a word tree that indicated that this word is connected with the

words “emotional,” “language,” “social and cultural significance”, “Logistics and accommodation,” etc. (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Word tree of text search query



Discussion

The participants emphasized the religious significance of the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib and how the visit strengthened their faith (Kaur, 2020). They also described the emotional experiences they had while visiting the site, including feelings of peace, love, and gratitude (Ahmed, 2021). The participants also praised the hospitality they received from the Pakistani government and local community, highlighting the warm welcome they had received (Mishra & Taneja, 2021). However, some participants also

highlighted the need for better infrastructure, including facilities such as washrooms and water stations, to improve the overall experience (Ahmed, 2021).

Sikh Yatris, who visited Kartarpur, had positive experiences with logistics, accommodation, and living amenities. Similarly, Singh and Kaur (2020) found that the participants were impressed by the quality of living amenities provided in Kartarpur, including washrooms, meals, utensils, and overall

cleanliness. The Langer meal, for instance, was provided free of cost and was cooked keeping in mind essential dietary accessories. Participants appreciated the quality of the vegetarian meal provided and the ushers' traditional dress. They also believed the food sacred and referred it to the giving of Baba Guru Nanak. The finding of the study also highlighted that the Sarovar Sahib was unmatched in its cleanliness, and the Langer Khana (Dining Hall) was well-maintained (Singh & Kaur, 2020). Regarding logistics, the study reported that the participants had access to information about traveling, transportation, facilitation desk, dealing with staff behaviour, and clearance of baggage and currency. The accommodation was provided for arrival and day-long stay, but authorities did not allow night stay. Overall, the participants appreciated the government of Pakistan and the management of the place for providing the best facilities.

Regarding language, almost all of the participants found no difference in language and felt comfortable interacting with the authorities and people from Pakistan. This suggests that language barriers were not a significant concern for the Sikh Yatris in Kartarpur.

The findings of this study highlight the emotional, social, cultural, and religious significance of the pilgrimage to the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh Yatris. The emotional significance of the pilgrimage is consistent with previous studies on religious tourism, which have found that pilgrims often experience a sense of spiritual fulfillment and inner peace when visiting sacred sites (Buddhismus Stiftung Fo Guan Shan, 2016; Gannon & Baxter, 2017). The sense of connection with God and the shared experience with fellow believers reinforces the importance of the pilgrimage as a spiritual practice in the Sikh tradition.

The social and cultural significance of the pilgrimage is also consistent with previous studies, which have highlighted the role of religious tourism in promoting cultural exchange

and interfaith dialogue (Babakus & Yavas, 2008; Timothy & Olsen, 2017). The pilgrimage provides an opportunity for Sikhs from different parts of the world to connect and share their experiences, strengthening their social and cultural ties. This sense of belonging to a global community is an important aspect of religious identity, and the pilgrimage reinforces the importance of this identity in the lives of the participants (Chen & Geaves, 2021).

The impact of the pilgrimage on the religious beliefs and practices of the participants is also significant. The pilgrimage reinforces the core values of Sikhism, such as service, compassion, and equality, and provides an opportunity for the participants to deepen their understanding of their faith. The importance of the rituals and traditions associated with the pilgrimage, such as reciting prayers and offering food to the needy, reinforces the significance of these practices in the Sikh tradition.

The findings of the study also highlight the potential of the Kartarpur Corridor in promoting peace and harmony between India and Pakistan. The Corridor has the potential to facilitate greater interfaith understanding and cooperation between the two countries, and the participants expressed hope that it would contribute to the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan (Saxena & Singh, 2019). This is consistent with previous research on the role of religious tourism in promoting peace and reconciliation (Jafari, 2015; Timothy & Olsen, 2017) and emphasizes the potential of the Kartarpur Corridor to contribute to regional stability and cooperation.

Conclusions

This study has examined the experiences of Sikh Yatris visiting the Kartarpur Corridor in Pakistan for religious purposes. The findings suggest that the Kartarpur Corridor has significant cultural and religious value for Sikh Yatris and that their experiences were positive overall. The study has

also highlighted the importance of effective tourism infrastructure and management in promoting sustainable tourism development and the potential of religious tourism in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation. Kartarpur Corridor has the potential to promote peace and harmony in the region and contribute to the development of the local economy. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of religious tourism in promoting cultural exchange, interfaith dialogue, and regional stability. Future research could explore the impact of the Kartarpur Corridor on interfaith relations and the potential for promoting peace and understanding between India and Pakistan.

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