

Exploring Hassanabdal's Local Sikh Community Perspective on Religious Tourism

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Abstract

Sikh tourism in Pakistan is a rich tapestry of cultural, religious, and historical significance, drawing pilgrims and visitors from around the world to sacred sites and landmarks. One such focal point is Hasan Abdal, a town settled in the heart of Punjab, Pakistan, renowned for its significant Sikh heritage and home to several historic Gurdwaras. This research endeavors to unravel the complex dynamics of Sikh tourism in Hasan Abdal by focusing on the perspectives, experiences, and aspirations of the local Sikh community. Data was collected from 59 members of Hasan Abdal's Sikh community through survey forms and interviews. Data was analyzed using thematic and SPSS analysis. Sikh community of Hasan Abdal had been in view that Pakistan has a potential for religious tourism. By engaging in Sikh related tourism frequently, community seems a positive impact on social, cultural and economic wellbeing of members in particular. Data also revealed that local sikh community demands government to introduce new initiative to increase Sikh tourist's influx which could simultaneously help to improve Pakistan's status internationally. Additionally, data supported the role of concerned authorities in recent past to enhance tourism particularly Sikh tourism. However, Security concerns could overshadow the facilitative efforts.

Key Words: Sikh tourism, Panja Sahib, Sikh community, PTDC, socio-economic impact, Kartarpur Corridor, Soft power

1. Introduction

Pakistan, a nation with diverse cultural heritage is home to communities of different faiths and beliefs including Sikh community (Khilat, Jamil, & Mujahid, 2022). There are several historical and religious sites thus making it a favorite pilgrimage destination for Sikhs (Qudrat Ullah, 2023). The Sikh faith was founded in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent in the late 15th century. Its followers experienced a division between India and Pakistan during the 1947 Partition of India. While the majority of Sikhs settled in India, a portion of Sikhism's sacred sites and a small Sikh minority remained in Pakistan (Khalid, 2023). Nolan

and Nolan (1992) described the holy places and ceremonial events as one of the oldest religious travel destinations.

The spiritual journey of Sikhs to Pakistan takes them to places of immense historical significance, such as Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and Kartarpur Sahib, the site of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's final place (Saher, Tharwani and Zafar 2020). These sacred destinations, along with numerous other Gurdwaras and shrines, have made Pakistan an essential pilgrimage site for Sikhs worldwide. Abbasi and Khan (2022), asserted the significance of Nankana Sahib for Sikh community. Sikh related tourism has gained prominence in Pakistan for offering economic benefit and enhancing country's standing in the world (Qudrat ullah, 2023). Kartarpur inauguration in 2019 act as a visa-free corridor between India and Pakistan exclusively for Sikh devotees. This corridor allows them autonomous access to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib and the opportunity to explore other sacred sites, marking a significant pace in normalizing tourism in the country (Khilat, Jamil, & Mujahid, 2022). This initiative has also gained national and international attention. United Nations chief declared it to be "*a corridor of hope, connecting two key Sikh pilgrimage sites*" and a "*welcome symbol of interfaith harmony*". It initiated a series of tourist activities that would snowball its socio-economic benefits in the sector (Afraz & Shaikh, 2019, Ashraf et al., 2019).

Despite being the birthplace of the religious founder, Pakistan currently receives a relatively modest number of Sikh visitors, approximately 6,000, including both those arriving from neighboring country India and domestic travelers (Irfan & Ali, 2020). However, Vandalism, Social challenges, Depleted infrastructure, underdeveloped tourist routes, and a shortage of visitor services are some of the factors affecting the visitor's inflow (Haq & Medhekar, 2015). Studies have also identified that the biggest challenge faced by tourists arises from political conflicts. Visa unavailability hinders Indian population purpose to visit Pakistan for religious tourism (Irfan & Ali, 2020). Saher, Tharwani and Zafar (2020) states in their study about the willingness of number of Sikh tourists to visit Pakistan because of growth of Pakistan's tourism industry. Regardless of the tourists wish, a very small number finds their way to these religious sites in Pakistan.

Economic inflow related to religious tourism cannot be underrated. Government of Pakistan charges 20 dollars from each Sikh member who has planned to visit Kartarpur Corridor, the visa free gateway between Pakistan and India (Ahmed, 2019). Sikh tourism in Pakistan is not merely an exploration of historical relics, it is a profound and transformative journey that traverses the corridors of faith, culture, and heritage (Haq & Medhekar, 2015). Also Sikh tourism could contribute towards Pakistan's soft power as it refers to country's ability to attract for cooperation rather than coercion, typically through policies, values and culture (Claro et al. 2023). This attractiveness could generate interest in domestic as well as international

Sikh population to explore religion and culture (Qudrat Ullah, 2023). It could also foster diplomatic relationships and promote peace and harmony among diverse religious communities.

1.1. Significance of the Local Sikh Community

As per the data available at German based online platform, *Statista* Sikh population in Pakistan is 56769. However, in Census 2023, Sikh population is still part of section named “other religion” comprising 0.07% of total population. According to Toppa (2017) Hasan Abdal accommodates approximately 200 Sikh families, most of them relocated from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The majority of families belong to Pashtun Sikh community who fled their homes due to security issues in 2011. The local Sikh community in Hasan Abdal plays a pivotal role in the preservation and endurance of Sikh heritage. Their daily lives intersect with the flow of Sikh tourism, influencing the town's socio-economic dynamics, cultural identity, and community relations. Exploring their experiences provides a unique lens through which to understand the multifaceted impact of Sikh tourism on a micro-community level.

1.2. Significance of Gurdwara Panja Sahib Hasan Abdal

Hasan Abdal holds a special place in the hearts of Sikhs due to its profound significance. This destination was a frequent stop for successive Mughal Kings in route to Kashmir. Over the ages, various religious groups have made pilgrimages to the Sikh Gurdwara, also known as Panja Sahib, where a sacred rock bears the handprint of their spiritual leader, Guru Nanak. Opposite the eastern gate of Gurdwara Panja Sahib stands a small mosque and the 'Chilla Gah' (meditation cell) of Baba Wali Qandhari. Next to the pond lies a structure known as Maqbara Hakeeman. Panja Sahib stands as one of the holiest destinations in Sikhism, alongside Nankana Sahib in Sheikhpura, Pakistan, and the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India (Ahmed, 2018).

Every year, in April, Panja Sahib becomes a focal point for thousands of Sikh pilgrims from across the globe. They gather here to commemorate the birth of the Khalsa, which translates to "pure." This new identity was bestowed upon the Sikh community by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final temporal guru of Sikhism, in April 1699. Baisakhi is also one of the important festivals of Sikhism celebrated by Sikh community in Pakistan at Sikh religious sites. Hasan Abdal accommodates approximately 200 Sikh families, most of them relocated from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The majority of families belong to Pashtun Sikh community who fled their homes due to security issues in 2011 (Toppa, 2017).

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This research sets out to:

1. Capture the perspectives and experiences of the local Sikh community regarding religious tourism in particular focus on Sikh tourism in Pakistan.
2. Assess the socio-economic impact of tourism on the local Sikh population.

2. Methodology:

2.1. Research Approach

This study used mixed method approach because it allows concurrent collection, analysis and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data (Shorten & Smith, 2017; Bryman, 2012). The approach also permits investigation that enriches the results and enables research questions to be answered deeply by offsetting the limitations of the different methods. The phenomena were exploratory in sense that a little research is done on this particular dimension.

2.2. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Snowball Sampling: According to Toppa (2017) nearly 200 Sikh families reside in Hasan Abdal. But reaching each member of this community was quite challenging. Some of the local Sikh community members who were requested for interviews to participate however, due to the cultural sensitivity and researcher outgroup identity, the respondents were hesitant to participate and in majority cases declined the interview and thus referred to another potential respondent for data collection. However, the researcher frequent visits to the local community provide base for building social networking with local community that help in identification of potential respondents for participate voluntarily in the study. The total sample size for this study was 59 respondents from local Sikh community. The local Sikh community includes community influential, community representatives and *Granthi* of Gurdwara Panja Sahib.

2.3. Tools of data collection

An interview guide was designed for conducting interviews with respondents. The tool of data collection was pilot tested on five respondents from local community and modification was made to questionnaire and guide. However, Interviews provide access to the human perspective, allowing researchers to understand the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and motivations of participants. The understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals is valued for many research inquiries. Secondary data was collected from academic journals, government reports, and publications to gather information on the historical, socio-cultural and economic aspects of Sikh tourism.

2.4. Data Analysis

Both the qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed with the help of statistical software such as MS Excel and SPSS. Initially data was transferred to personal computer, descriptive statistics was conducted

for quantitative data while qualitative data was analyzed in themes under each objective for argumentation and strengthening of the quantitative data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Details of Respondents

Gender of Respondent	Frequency	Percent
Female	24	40.7
Male	35	59.3
Total	59	100.0
Age of the Respondent		
18-24	11	18.6
25-34	20	33.9
35-44	11	18.6
45-54	14	23.7
55 and above	3	5.2
Total	59	100.0
Employment Status of Respondent		
Private job	18	30.5
Unemployed	6	10.2
Self-Employed/Business	23	39
Other	12	20.3
Total	59	100

Table 3.1 Demographic details of the respondents

Table 3.1 shows the demographic details of the respondents. Male and female respondents were selected from different categories of respondents. Majority of (59.3%) were male while 40.7% respondents were female. Most of the respondents (33.9%) fall in the age group of 25-34. While 18.6% fall in age group 18-24. 18.6%, 23.7% and 5.2% respondents lie in age group 35-44, 45-54 and 55 or older respectively. Most of the respondents (39%) from Sikh community were self-employed being proprietor engaged in cosmetics and clothing business while some running general stores.

The finding of the study was analyzed by dividing research objectives into themes and subthemes. The qualitative primary data corroborated quantitative measurements. Themes and subthemes of the study are as follows:

3.2. Religious tourism

Tourism is blooming throughout the globe particularly the religious tourism but in Pakistan, the industry does not attract the attention at all levels. All the respondents have a common understanding that the country

has a great potential for religious tourism, not only for national tourism but can capitalize the international tourist at large scale. A large number of respondents (86.6%) were in view that Pakistan has a great potential for religious tourism because, the country is home to many religious and historical sites of different religions and faiths. Religious tourism is considered an important source of promoting cultural understanding and mutual respect among people of different faiths (Kaur, 2020). Majority of the respondents agreed on the fact that Pakistan hold a significant position in religious tourism. A religious leader from Community aged 48 stated:

Government should not only enhance Sikh tourism but it should also focus on promoting Buddhist and Hindu tourism. It will convey a good message to members belonging to these communities across the world.

3.3. Preservation of religious sites

The Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) in the province Punjab, acts a sole body to preserve Sikhs and Hindu's religious and historical sites. One of the main functions of this Board includes provision of facilities to the Hindus and Sikhs visiting Pakistan during their religious events and festivals. This board also deals with Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC). This committee suggests measures for the maintenance, preservation and renovation of the Gurdwara as well as it ensures the sanctity as per Sikh traditions and faith.

The primary data revealed that the majority of respondents (52.1%) appreciated that quality of Government's efforts in preservation of religious sites are of high quality. It also discovered that in Sikh belief system the Gurdwaras play a very crucial and instrumental role. Most of the respondents praised concerned authorities for preserving and protecting Gurdwaras but lamented that besides these Government's efforts many of the Gurdwaras are not operational and the overall conditions of these Gurdwaras are very poor. The respondents emphasized the renovations and rehabilitation of these religious sites and demanded from official authorities to take concrete steps. One of the representatives of Sikh community, 45 demanded that:

Government of Pakistan should increase its efforts to renovate closed Gurdwaras because all Gurdwaras carry religious and historical values for local as well as international Sikh visitors.

3.3.1. Services and facilities at Religious sites

The improvement and development of religious tourism depends on the performance of support system and facilities such as the availability of clean drinking water, washrooms and bathing facilities, powerhouse,

transport and telecommunication, hospitality at religious sites, required accommodation infrastructure, and visa policy. Table 3.3 illustrates the participant responses to availability of facilities and services for Sikh tourists at Pilgrimage sites.

Table 3.3 Facilities at Sikh Pilgrimage Sites

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	29	60.4
Good	14	29.2
Fair	4	8.3
Poor	1	2.1

Table has shown that a considerable number of respondents (60.4%) believed that the services and facilities available at religious sites of excellent nature. Majority of the respondents appreciated concerned authorities' efforts toward facilitating Sikh yatrees. Similar study conducted by Bashir and Ahmed (2023) conducted in Kartarpur based on visitor's experience also revealed that the authorities and management is playing significant role in facilitating yatrees. Respondents stated that special efforts are being made at Gurdwaras during summer season by installing Air conditioners. Observations also complement the primary data on quality measurements before the arrival of Sikh yatrees in November.

3.4. Impact on local Sikh community

On account of fostering sense of pride and identity, majority (70.8%) of respondents claimed that Sikh tourism has enhanced the sense of pride and identity among the local Sikh population. Sikh tourism overall reinforces the Sikh identity by allowing followers to connect with their roots, history, and spirituality. Tourism activities allows local Sikh community to visit places of religious and historical significance.

A substantial number of respondents (43.8%) strongly agreed on the fact that Sikh tourism is not only about attracting visitors but it also develops peace, harmony and intercultural understanding between different religious communities. Local Sikh community believed that Guru Nanak, challenged the conventional beliefs and therefore garnered followers from different faiths. His philosophical movement being spiritual attracted individuals from diverse sect, castes and religions to worship only one God. A renowned Anthropologist and Author, Khalid Haroon also acclaimed the devotion of Muslims with Baba Guru Nanak. Numerous local Muslims hold a reverence for him and thus consistently visit gurdwaras out of respect. Similar cases are being revealed by other anthropologists. A community member aged 32 elucidated:

Hasan Abdal is a city where people from different faiths and beliefs live. We never felt like we are different from one another. It feels like we are brother from another mother.

A majority portion of local Sikh community (56.3%) strongly agreed on Sikh tourism's role in enhancing social, cultural and economic wellbeing of local Sikh community. Community deemed that Sikh tourism

provides an opportunity to connect with fellow domestic and international Sikhs. This connection helps in exchanging ideas and solidifying social and cultural ties. It also helps in developing sense of belonging to the global Sikh community. The hospitality and warmth of the local people, as well as the shared religious heritage, contributed to the positive perception.

A considerable number of respondents (29.2%) asserted that they do not experience any disrespect or feel unwelcomed from tourism authorities and the local residents while visiting Sikh heritage sites. 25% of participants were in view that sometimes people hesitate to interact.

27.1% of respondents negate the experience of being discriminated during Sikh tourism activities while 17.8% of local Sikh community has encountered discriminatory circumstances at any time during visit to religious sites. Although majority of respondents from Sikh community contravene with the results but some did point out the instances of being ‘other’ in Muslim majority country. In recent years Sikh community has experienced social discrimination in public spheres (Bhattacharya, 2023).

3.4.1 Economic Opportunities

Although the actual data on economic impact of Sikh tourism on local community is lagging but it was cross checked through interview questions. A religious leader from Sikh community who owned a shop also believed that:

There is an economic impact of Sikh tourism in other areas of Pakistan however in Hasan Abdal this impact is difficult to assess as there is quite restricted movement of Sikh yatrees in this area.

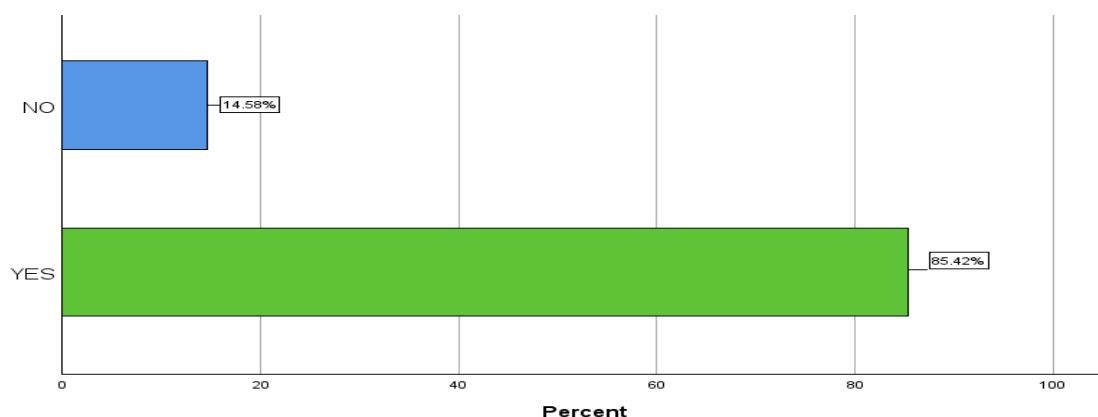


Figure 3.4 perception on economic impact

Figure 3.4 illustrates the community's perception on positive influence of Sikh tourism on local economy. A majority (85.4%) of local Sikh community believes that Sikh tourism positively impacted over the local

Sikh community. Primary data was limited in terms of estimated figure on economic impact of Sikh tourism on local Sikh community of Hasan Abdal. While a data available on a German digital forum *Statista* indicated the projection of overall Pakistan travel and tourism market to be US\$3,008.00m in 2023. PTDC also deemed to generate \$4 billion in coming years, through its initiatives “Salam Pakistan” that focus pilgrims visiting Shrine of Guru Nanak. However, its multiplier effect on local Sikh community is not determined from any relevant institution yet.

3.5. Future prospect of Sikh tourism

Government of Pakistan has taken initiatives in the recent past to enhance Sikh tourism in the country. One of the greatest milestones is the opening of Kartarpur corridor, which is a visa free entry gateway between Pakistan and India. Majority of respondents from local Sikh community were aware of the promotion and development of Sikh tourism and the role authorities play at each tier. An analysis of the primary data shows that majority (58.3%) of respondents demanded Government to take new initiatives like Kartarpur Corridor to enhance and promote Sikh tourism in the country.

While a substantial number of respondents (60.4%) were in view that any new initiative for Sikh community can result in surge in international Sikh tourists. Similar findings by study conducted in Kartarpur revealed that these efforts could enhance regional stability (Bashir & Ahmed, 2023; Qudrat Ullah, 2023, Akhtar et al., 2022). A respondent from Sikh community, 28 also revealed that:

We have an emotional attachment with all the Gurdwaras. Government should make the visit to Gurdwara free of any cost for domestic and Indian Sikh yatrees also. Religion should not be capitalized.

Tourism can be used as a public diplomatic tool using soft power, that aims to reinforce positive image of a particular place. On the one hand tourism attracts tourists while on the other hand it seeks to promote national interest at large by advancing foreign policy (Claro et al. 2023). After analyzing data, it was revealed that the security concerns of members from Sikh community could possibly overshadow the positive image of Pakistan.

3.6 Effective role of tourism authorities

Since the development of Pakistan Tourism Development Cooperation (PTDC), the institution aims at development and promotion of Tourism in Pakistan. Being a sole tourism promoting body at National level, it works in close collaboration with provisional government, District management, and other concerned bodies to enhance national tourism sector. The efforts of the concerned bodies helped in improving soft image of Pakistan. Table 3.6 Illustrates the way tourism authority engaged in development and advancement of Sikh tourism.

Table 3.6 Role of concerned Authorities

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
The tourism authority has been effective in promoting Sikh tourism in our country.	23 (39)	17 (29)	11 (18.6)	4 (6.7)	4 (6.7)
The tourism authority has provided valuable information and resources for Sikh tourists and pilgrims.	13 (22.0)	29 (49.1)	10 (16.9)	3 (5.1)	4 (6.7)
The tourism authority's online resources related to Sikh tourism are easily accessible and user-friendly.	3 (5.1)	29 (49.1)	18 (30.5)	9 (15.2)	0 (0)
The cleanliness and upkeep of Sikh pilgrimage sites maintained by the tourism authority are of high quality.	12 (20.3)	24 (40.6)	15 (25.4)	3 (5.1)	5 (8.5)
The tourism authority's work positively impacted the overall perception of our country as a Sikh tourism destination.	36 (61)	11 (18.6)	4 (6.7)	5 (8.4)	3 (5.1)

*% are shown in parenthesis; SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N= Neutral; D= Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree

As per the primary data collected from local Sikh community and concerned authorities, Pakistan has a potential for religious tourism, Sikh tourism particularly in the case of this study. Respondents believed that with this potential Pakistan will be able to display a soft image to the world. However, it can only be a result of participation and collaboration among all concerned departments and organizations.

Data elucidated that 39% respondents from local Sikh community and Tourism authority believed that Tourism authority has been affectively promoting Sikh tourism overall. The finding is corroborated by the initiatives taken to enhance Sikh tourism such as improved visa fasciation to Sikh heritage tourists, launch of “Sikh Yatra Booking portal”, launch of booklet named “Pakistan’s Sikh Heritage trial” etc.

Dissemination of information is also a key instrument to engage with tourists. 48.3% respondents agreed on the fact the authority has disbursed valuable resources to Sikh pilgrims and tourists. PTDC has two Tourist Information Centers to respond and resolve queries of Tourists. Online resources availability met with mixed responses having 49% respondent agreed while considerable number of respondent (30%) remained neutral in particular response. The reason for neutrality toward the question was explained by *Granthi* of Gurdwara Panja Sahib, Hassanabdal:

In other countries online resources helps in an easy access to Religious and historical sites while in Pakistan these kind of updated resources are not available at single medium.

3.6.1. Challenges

Pakistan has been through a rough time. It impacted nearly all sectors including tourism sector. The wave of Terrorism after 2000 has effected Pakistan very hardly. But Tourism sector through religious, archeological or destination has the potential to improve image of Pakistan. To promote such image Pakistan has to work on law and order, which directly and indirectly impacts tourists coming to Pakistan.

Since 2013, nearly 30 members of local Sikh community have been shot dead in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which raised the concerns of rising extremism against minorities in Pakistan (Hussain, 2023). Such incidents could hurdle the development measures of authorities. Moreover, the question regarding the security and safety received a mix response from the participants.

Data has shown that a substantial number of respondents (56.3%) felt that there is a safety and security concerns for Sikh tourists. While 41.7% seems Pakistan secure place for tourists especially Sikh tourist in this aspect A religious leader 45, representing Sikh community affirmed that:

Pakistan is a very safe country. When Sikh visitors/ Yatrees visit Pakistan they actually experience the safe and secure environment, so their perspective related to Security changes. I want that more Sikh members should visit Pakistan and overcome the fear of terrorism.

In addition to security, respondents have also identified congestion as the big issue which requires concerned authority to expand the infrastructure in order to accommodate large number of Yatrees at times of festivals.

Conclusion

With an increase in global religious tourism and its positive outcomes this study opted Sikh tourism as a case. Findings revealed that Pakistan does hold potential of religious tourism. There are multiple religious and historical sites that can be capitalized for micro and macroeconomic benefits. This assertion is based on the active engagement of Sikh community in Sikh tourism activities however, the engagement is influenced by certain factors. The study indicated that improvement in service and facilities would increase the tourist influx, and will positively impact social, cultural and economic wellbeing. While tourism sector is blooming due to efforts made by concerned authorities, but the room for improvement helps in further refining the efforts. The findings proposed improvement in certain areas to enhance this particular segment of tourism such as Infrastructure development, use of digital platforms and improve service provision etc. Additionally, study also appreciated facilitative measures of government providing quality services and

facilities to the Sikh yatrees. While the security concern prevailed in local Sikh community that could affect Pakistan's secure image as tourist destination.

Although study has highlighted the positive economic impact of Sikh tourism on local community but secondary source is limited to measure the extent. In order to assess economic impact further research could be dedicated in this aspect. To better understand Sikh community perspective, comparative study across Sikh majority areas can be conducted.

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