

The Shrines Economy: A Case Study of Religious Tourism in Pakistan

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Abstract

Religion is an essential aspect of the Pakistan culture, and this country has many shrines that millions of people hold sacred. This research will concentrate on the economic aspect of these holy places to analyse the aspect of religious tourism in the nation's economy. Based on relationships with key shrines and their surroundings, this work evaluates direct and indirect monetised impacts, such as donations and offerings, as well as other revenues, including businesses. It also looks at the jobs offered through shrines including shrine management, restaurants and transport companies. The study also shows that religious tourism has the potential of encouraging cross cultural and contact between the religious tourists. Besides the economical factor, this study explores the issues that have an impact in the shrines economy such as; facilities/accommodation, security and the effects on the environment. It provides guidelines on how to get the best of shrines economically without reducing their religious and cultural significance. For this purpose, the study's outcome may be beneficial for the policymakers, the players of the tourism industry as well as the shrine management to unleash the potential of Pakistan's shrines for tourism induced economic development and cultural preservation. It is therefore the aim of this research to contribute to religious tourism literature by evaluating the shrines economy of Pakistan. This paper gives an economic perspective of these sacred sites, their viability for development and the possibility of developing sustainable tourism. This research therefore has a potential of coming up with right policies that will be useful in promoting religious tourism with a view of enhancing economic growth and unity in Pakistan.

Keywords: Shrine, Economic Growth, Cross Cultural, Religious Funding, Religious Tourism.

Introduction

Religious tourism which is also known as faith or spiritual tourism is the travel to places with religious interests. Religious tourism also includes pilgrimage tourism, shrine tourism, and religious celebration tourism. Religious tourism is valuable since it enables people to have spiritual satisfaction, cultural interchange, and economic growth. Religious tourism is a chance for a person not only to pray and receive a blessing but also to feel the spirit of a religious site. In the world over, religious tourism has developed into a large industry that has boosted the economic development of nations that have historical sites of religious significance (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). This is evident in Pakistan, which as a country, boasts of a profound spiritual culture; religious tourism is, therefore, a vital aspect of the country's tourism industry mainly by the veneration of shrines.

It could be argued that shrine culture is an essential part of the Pakistan people's religion and traditions. The country boasts of many shrines some of which have been in existence for several centuries and receives millions of pilgrims and tourists. Sufi shrines like Data Darbar in Lahore, Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif are not only the places of religious significance but also the cultural sites. These are religious grounds for prayers, cultural assemblies and social interaction, something inseparable from the syncretic nature of the Pakistani religion (Schimmel 1975). At the same time, these shrines attract a lot of visitors; the use of these centers as the drivers of religious tourism is still in the experimental stage. The purpose of this research will be to analyse the economic impact of shrine tourism in Pakistan, evaluate the role of shrine tourism for local and national economy, and determine avenues for sustainable development in shrine tourism sector in the country.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to assess the contribution of shrine tourism to the economy of Pakistan and its future prospects. In regard to the socio-economic effects that this study will seek to establish, they include; employment generation, development of infrastructure and cultural enhancement. Also, the study will evaluate the issues that affect these areas including; infrastructure, security, and government policies. Thus, in line with these dynamics, the study aims to fill the gap in knowledge on how Pakistan as a shrine culture country can enhance religious tourism so as to foster the country's economic growth (Aziz & Ahmad, 2018). The research aims to focus on the major shrines in Pakistan regarding their historical background, people's attendance, and their impact on the economy.

The thesis of this research is based on the proposition that shrine tourism in Pakistan has great economic value if only the nation could do what is necessary to tap into it and make it one of the pillars of the country's economic development. The study assumes that through efficient planning, investments in infrastructure and marketing locally and globally, more tourists can be targeted to visit shrines in Pakistan and in the process help boost their revenue for the benefit of the local economy. Moreover, this research also contends that shrine tourism can be significant in marketing the culture of Pakistan internationally, in encouraging harmony between religious denominations and in causing the improvement of the economic status of communities inhabiting the shrine regions (Ahmad & Mustafa, 2020).

The Shrine Landscape of Pakistan

The shrines are numerous in Pakistan and are marked throughout the country to depict the cultural and religious history of the area. Of these, the most noticeable are the shrines of Sufi saints which are also spiritual sites and are quite rooted in the minds of the people. Data Darbar in Lahore, Mausoleum of Hazrat Bahauddin Zakariya Multan, and the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam etc are not only the religious places but also represent the Sufism which is a tradition of the society of South Asia for ages. These are centres of pilgrimage for millions each year for their spiritual needs, barakah and to fulfil their pledges and also maintain and propagate the history of Islam and Sufism (Khan, 2017).

Spatially, there are shrines in Pakistan but every area contains its important places of worship. Punjab is famous as the land of Saints and possesses the highest number of Sufi Dargahs, the most famous of which are the Dargahs of Sultan Bahu and Baba Farid. Sindh province has one of the largest Sufi shrines of the country Sehwan's Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also has its own sacred places like the shrine of Pir Baba in Buner which shows the religious cultural of the province. There is also a popular religious pilgrimage site in Balochistan known as Shrine of Hazrat Kacchi Shah. These shrines are normally situated in the villages or semi urban areas and presence of such shrines have considerable impact on the socio economic fabric of such areas (Ali & Rehman, 2018).

In Pakistan, therefore, shrines are not only Islamic or Sufi, but are also associated with a number of other beliefs and practices. Other Hindu temples like Shri Hinglaj Mata temple in Balochistan province of Pakistan are popular pilgrimage centers for the Hindus. Also, Sikhism's second most sacred shrine, Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nanakana Sahib is also located in Pakistan and many Sikh tourists from across the world visit the place. These different places of worship reflect the religious tolerance and the history of a multicultural Pakistan. Islamic, Sufi, Hindu, and Sikh shrines are an integral part of the culture of the country and provide a place where religion, history, and culture meet (Rizvi, 2015).

Religious and cultural importance of shrines in Pakistan is very much high. Some of these centers are not only religious but also the cultural sites of the people who preserve their customs, arts, music, and poetry and perform religious rituals. One of the most exciting aspects of the cultural life of these shrines is the annual Urs, or death anniversary, of saints that gets performed at the different shrines. Such events draw huge crowds, and in so doing, create a sense of unity with the past. In addition, shrines are significant in the society since they offer grounds for the suffering and oppressed groups to seek solace. As places of worship, shrines also help to maintain Intangible Cultural Heritage and strengthen the region's spiritual orientation given through its religious and cultural practice (Asif, 2016).

Religious Tourism in Pakistan

The culture of religious tourism in Pakistan is relatively new and could still be said to be in its infancy despite the fact that it can actually be considered as a very promising one. In the country there are many religious places that attract both domestic and international tourists. Some of the famous sites are Sufi saints' shrines such as Data Darbar at Lahore, Taxila which is ancient Buddhist site and Gurdwara Janam Asthan at Nankana Sahib which is the birthplace of Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak. Nevertheless, the religious heritage is rich and the sector has not exploited these resources effectively because of poor infrastructure, lack of marketing, and insecurity that has continued to chase away international visitors. However, in the past few years, there have been certain changes for the better such as the government launching the 'Religious Tourism' programme and enhancing infrastructure at religious places (Bano, 2020).

Religious tourism is one of the most significant segments in the Pakistani tourism industry; however, it has several prospects and issues. Some issues are the lack of proper infrastructure facilities around religious destinations like approach roads and facilities for stay and others. Crime is still a factor, especially for tourists coming from other countries, although it has been recorded to have reduced in the past few years. Also, there is a dearth of operational marketing to target and market itself to foreign pilgrims and tourists. On the other hand, the firm has vast potentialities, which could be exploited to the advantage of the business organization. Such a development as the Kartarpur Corridor in which Indian Sikh pilgrims

have an opportunity to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib without having a visa is a positive sign for religious tourism.

Moreover, Pakistan with a variety of religions like Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity provides a perfect place for Tourism for a different type of tourist (Rafiq, 2021). Religious tourists in Pakistan may be both domestic and international tourists, and therefore the tourists' profile differs significantly. Domestic religious tourism comprises of people performing pilgrimage to Islamic holy places, with millions of Pakistanis visiting Sehwan Sharif, home of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar or Bari Imam in Islamabad. Such pilgrims may move in groups, and their visits are not necessarily for leisure, although the term 'pilgrimage tourism' might suggest they are. Some of the examples of international religious tourists are the Sikhs, who travel to Gurdwaras around the world; Hindus visiting shrines such as Kates Raj and Buddhists visiting the sites in the Gandhara region. The demographic profile of such tourists is quite varied; the international visitors are mainly pilgrims, originating from neighbouring countries such as India, while domestic tourists can be from any part of Pakistan (Khan & Mahmood, 2019).

In this research, the economic importance of religious tourism in Pakistan is highlighted on the direct and indirect contribution to the local and national economy. It refers to the gross receipts from entrance fees, contributions to shrines, direct expenditures on transportation, accommodation and food by pilgrims and tourists. Other advantages include job creation in areas such as food and beverage, retail and transportation, and social and economic benefits of the preservation of historical and cultural artefacts. For example, the urs festivals held every year at the principal shrines have a very positive impact on the local economy as it creates the need for many people to acquire items such as food, clothes and shelter during the festivals. Nonetheless, religious tourism has not been optimally exploited for its potential contribution to economic growth, which need a more focused approach to the development and marketing (Hassan, 2022).

Case Study of Shrines

Sehwan Sharif in Sindh hosts one of the most important Sufi shrines of the country named Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, where millions of people visit annually. The Saint's death anniversary celebrated annually in the form of the Urs festival makes it a significant centre of religious tourism. In addition to being a place of worship, the shrine is involved in the religious, social and even economic activities in the region. It is a centre of cultural and religious attraction where people from different part of Pakistan and even from abroad come to pay their homage, which not only creates a vibrant people's place of worship but also a commercial hub. The effects of this shrine are not limited to the religious domain as it has great influence in different economic activities in the region (Shaikh, 2022).

The economic activities that are linked to the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine are numerous and enormous. Transportation, lodges, food, and clothing are some of the services needed by the visitors during the Urs festival which is a major source of income for the area. There is a general expansion in the service sector particularly in the hospitality industry where hotels, guest houses and restaurants are booked to capacity. Also, there is a market of local handmade souvenirs and other items such as beads, caps and small shrines. The locals effectively take advantage of the ever arriving tourists to buy items such as foods, drinks,

clothes, and other Lourdes souvenirs, as well as religious items. This colourful marketplace not only generates revenue for the people of the region but also helps in keeping the Sindhi culture alive (Khan & Zaidi, 2021).

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine generates plenty of employment opportunities – in the direct and indirect sense. Some of the local people are employed in the shrine itself and they serve as cleaners, guards, ushers among others. There are also positive effects on hospitality and retail industries as there is a need to employ more people in the hotel, restaurants, and shops. Secondly, the population increases during the Urs festival; many people are employed only during the festival time as many temporary jobs are provided to meet the requirements of the large number of pilgrims. The handicraft industry, in which women predominate, also becomes popular – people want to buy souvenirs from artisans who earn money on their creations. Such employment opportunities are important when other kinds of employment activities are not well developed in the region (Ahmed, 2020).

The income that is earned from the activities linked to the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine has far reaching effects on the economy of the region. This means that there is an increased spending in the region by the pilgrims and tourists hence increasing the demand for products and services in the region. This revenue also helps not only the individual businesses but also stabilizes the overall economy of Sehwan Sharif. Also, what is given at the shrine as offerings, which is often quite large, is for the support and expansion of the shrine and also support of other charitable causes in the community. The economic advantages accrued from the shrine do not end at Sehwan Sharif but also benefits Sindh province in terms of trade and business (Hussain, 2023).

Economic Impact Assessment

Since one of the objectives of the research is to analyse the economic implications of shrine tourism, both quantitative and qualitative data are utilised. Qualitative information is collected using questionnaires, accounting records and government documents whereby the main areas of interest are the revenue, employment, and GDP. Therefore it is collected through interviews with business people, shrine custodians and shrine visitors, gives information on the social economic impacts of shrine tourism. Such an approach enables one to have a clear vision of the direct, indirect and the generated impacts of shrine tourism to the local and the national economy. It also entails the analysis of certain economic impacts in certain regions using examples of famous shrines such as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (Chishti & Rahman, 2022).

The collection of quantitative data entails measurement of revenue that comes from different sources including, donation, sale of products, and expenditure on tourism. Statistical data on employment is used to establish the direct employment generated by shrine tourism, and the indirect employment that is associated with the establishment of related sectors such as hospitality and retail. Qualitative analysis strengthens this by looking at the experiences of the various people involved in shrine based economic activities, and the social cultural significance. For instance, interview with the artisans help in understanding how shrine tourism supports crafts while discussion with the hoteliers explain how tourism is seasonal (Malik & Hussain, 2021).

The following economic factors have been considered in this assessment: income receipts accruable from shrine related activities, employment, and the shrines' GDP impact.

Revenue sources consist of direct financial receipts from donations and the functions carried out in the shrine as well as indirect ones related to tourism and related businesses. Employment effects relating to the shrine cover both permanent and seasonal employment opportunities from cleaning services to the hotel industry. These income sources are accumulated and compared to national economic data with the contribution to GDP. From this analysis, we find out that shrine tourism is a crucial contributor to the development of the economy, especially for areas that may not have many economic activities (Ansari et al., 2020).

Multiplier impacts of shrine tourism are also a significant component of this analysis of the economic contribution made by this sub-sector. These effects relate to the multiplier impacts of expenditure by tourists that is the further rounds of expenditure that arise from initial expenditure. For instance, revenue generated by the local firms are used to purchase products and services in the region, thus promoting growth. This is more so when shrines are many and give people a reason to visit the region where they spend their money and others are employed leading to the multiplier effect. The example of the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine shows that shrine tourism has not only short-term economic benefits, but also serves as a source of sustainable economic development of the region (Rizvi & Sheikh, 2023).

Challenges and Opportunities

Tourism in the shrines of Pakistan has many problems that do not let it develop and become a stable industry. Among them, the one that has been considered critical is the unavailability of sound infrastructure to support many of the shrine offerings. This is because roads, transportation facilities and accommodation facilities are usually inadequate to contain the large numbers of people especially during the annual Urs festivals. This lack of infrastructure does not only pose inconvenience and insecurity to the visitors but also slows down the potential flow of income that can be generated from shrine tourism. Security issues also worsen these factors as shrines at times are targets of terrorism; thus, they discourage domestic and international tourists. Environmental implications include waste management and the pollution of ecosystems because of the many people who flock shrines (Naeem & Mahmood, 2022).

However, there are many aspects that provide the basis for the development of shrine tourism in the country of Pakistan. Sustainable tourism here is a good opportunity, where emphasis is on reducing the negative impact on the environment of tourism activities and at the same time increasing the economic returns. Adoption of environmentally sustainable practices like waste management for the shrine environment and its surroundings and use of sustainable resources. The other key benefit is that digital marketing and deployment of technology in the promotion of shrines as tourist destinations. Hosting history, description, images and information about the available facilities, and events can be posted on the internet and in applications that are created for use on the internet and on mobile devices to be able to capture the attention of the tourists from other countries. Virtual tours and digital storytelling can also improve visitor experience and create awareness about the relatively unknown shrines (Iqbal & Shah, 2023).

This paper has therefore revealed that government policies and initiatives are vital in managing the issues and tapping the potential in shrine tourism. The government of Pakistan has realized the importance of religious tourism and various projects have been launched for

development and security of the sites and for the development of sustainable religious tourism. PTDC has also launched the framework for the religious tourism that is one of the projects meant to incorporate the shrine tourism into the official agenda. Furthermore, the government has been keen on enhancing law and order especially in areas of interest such as those containing famous shrines and other historical sites crucial to the traffic of pilgrims and tourists. For the development of shrine tourism, the necessary investments in infrastructure like the road networks and hospitality facilities are also being made (Raza, 2022). Shrine tourism is therefore predominantly dependent on the support and participation of the local communities.

Their participation is crucial not only in maintaining cultural and religious importance of shrines but also in promoting the fairness of the distribution of the gains from tourism. In the case of shrine tourism, communities can participate through community-based tourism where the residents of the area offer services such as tourist guides, accommodation and sales of locally made artefacts. The training and development of local people through training and capacity building can improve the position of local people in the tourism economy. Moreover, the involvement of the community in the protection of shrine sites will aid in the promotion of the natural and cultural values of such areas so that they continue to be tourist attractions in the future (Hassan & Qureshi 2023).

Conclusion

The study of shrine tourism in Pakistan also unveils a number of prospects and threats that define the present and future of this area of tourism. Some of the major research insights highlight the significance of cultural and religious history represented in the shrine practices in Pakistan, and the enormous potential of religious tourism industry. But the economic impact that shrine tourism could bring is still untapped because of the inadequate infrastructure of shrines, insecurity, and climate change. Solving these problems is vital for the development of shrine tourism that can become a reliable source of income, new jobs, and culture protection. For the promotion of shrine tourism as one of the diverse sectors of the economy, the following recommendations may be made. First, promotion of investment in fixed capital, especially for transport and accommodation facilities is crucial to improving the quality of visitors' experience and availability of infrastructure. Second, going by the recent increased cases of insecurity, security measures and environmental conservation strategies will help enhance the safety of shrine tourism.

The government should also ensure that shrine tourism is marketed on social media platforms to bring in both domestic and international tourist by offering the necessary info and virtual exposure. Also, letting the local communities to be involved in and to gain from the income of the tourism sector may make sure that the economic benefits accrued from shrine tourism are well spread and improve the social and cultural life of the region. Possible future research can be oriented to the analysis of the consequences of shrine tourism on certain regional economies and the identification of ways in which the revenues obtained from tourism activities are spent in the communities. Also, research could explore how governments have launched policies and campaigns for shrine tourism, and to what extent they correspond to the sustainable development agenda. The knowledge of religious tourists' attitudes and behaviours, both domestic and international, would be useful in enhancing the

experience of tourist visiting religious sites and thereby increase the economic benefits associated with religious tourism. In conclusion, shrine tourism in the context of Pakistan has the potential to significant economic development and cultural conservation if the issues are addressed and the prospects are exploited to the full.

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