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<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>Print ISSN: [3006-1296](#) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**THE SHRINES ECONOMY: A CASE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
TOURISM IN PAKISTAN****Zafar Ali**

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zaffarsiyal@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This research explores the economic and cultural significance of religious tourism in Pakistan, particularly focusing on the role of shrines as key destinations for both spiritual and cultural engagement. Pakistan is home to nearly 5,000 shrines that attract millions of pilgrims and tourists annually, contributing significantly to local economies. Shrines, revered by both Sunni and Shia communities, are not just places of religious importance but also centers of vibrant cultural activities. These sacred sites play a pivotal role in community cohesion, social mobilization, and cultural preservation. The study also highlights the evolution of shrines in Pakistan from spiritual centers to economic assets, emphasizing their dual role in fostering both spiritual well-being and economic development. Religious tourism, including the visitation of shrines, has a profound economic impact, stimulating local economies through tourism-related activities such as accommodation, transport, food services, and artisan crafts. However, challenges like inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and commercialization threaten the sustainability of these religious tourism sites. The research proposes strategies for enhancing the infrastructure and marketing of religious tourism, ensuring its long-term viability while preserving the sanctity of these sacred spaces. The findings underscore the potential of religious tourism to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth, particularly in underdeveloped areas, while also promoting interfaith harmony and cultural understanding.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Shrines, Economic Impact, Sufism, Pakistan, Cultural Heritage, Pilgrimage, Infrastructure Development, Tourism Economy

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a vibrant and culturally rich nation that is home to nearly 5,000 spiritual shrines, which cater to the diverse spiritual and cultural needs of a religiously and ethnically varied population (Alam, 2022). These sacred sites are not only revered by local worshippers but also attract numerous visitors from different backgrounds. Many of these shrines enjoy the patronage of both Sunni and Shia devotees, illustrating the multifaceted nature of Islamic belief in this region. Some shrines hold significant trans-sectarian importance, acting as unifying symbols amidst a complex tapestry of faith and tradition (Hasta, 2021). The shrines themselves originate from multiple ethnic, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds, with each site telling its unique story rooted in local history and belief systems. The custodians of these shrines exercise varying degrees of control and authority, reflecting the deep-rooted connections between the caretakers and the spiritual

heritage they uphold. As a result of these differences, the affective nature of these contested spaces is often subject to dispute and debate. The recent closing of crucial sites, such as Taizoo at Bhit Shah, has led to widespread unrest and violent demonstrations across the country, highlighting the intense emotional and spiritual investment people have in these sacred places.

Shrines serve as exceptionally popular spots for seeking the blessings and intercession of revered saints. As observed and reported by various region-based informants, these saints act as esteemed representatives of Prophet Muhammad, guiding and leading pilgrims and devoted followers to beseech from them what they would earnestly have asked of the Prophet had he been physically present among them. In addition to the core religious activities and lucrative offerings made in their honor, these highly revered sites also house significant gatherings, particularly on the anniversaries of saints, where communities come together to celebrate (Ilyas & Ilyas, 2024). Furthermore, the gathering of both traditionally inauspicious days transforms these locations into lively hubs of vibrant cultural activity, drawing in large crowds. Shrines are increasingly being incorporated into the itineraries of tourists, scholars, and policymakers who recognize their importance and richness. The purview and significance of religious tourism have been diversifying and evolving, where it now serves not only as a significant tool for community mobilization, social cohesion, and the perpetuation of identity among individuals but also as a means of exploring deep-rooted cultural heritage. In addition to effectively serving the evolving religious and emotional needs of various communities, they provide essential space for multiple tiers of social self-recognition, allowing individuals to connect with their shared histories and collective experiences.

Historical Context of Shrines in Pakistan

Shrines are a distinct feature of Pakistani society, and they have passed through different phases of tremendous generational changes that have influenced the social and political life of the Pakistani people. There is no doubt that the shrines and saints do not confine themselves to the spiritual, symbolic, and ethical aspects. Shrines have a strong emotional, moral, and historical linkage with the cultural identity of the community and represent a symbolic system or set of beliefs. Pilgrimage is also practiced by almost all the religions of the world, and it is one of the ancient religious practices. The worship at the graves of departed friends was initially adopted in Iran, and over the centuries, it became a Central Asian and Mughal custom, which became a part of the Sufi belief. The historic platform for religious observance has become a religious commodity in modern times; hence, religious tourism and many shrines in Pakistan provide the best examples thereof (Nagim & Raouf, 2024).

Before partition, shrines and saints, nowadays called Wali Allah, had a greater social, religious, political, and economic role, and they were to be respected and valued throughout the generations (Shaheen, 2023). However, now in Pakistan, all the political and religious socio-cultural linkages are seen through different social, sectarian, and ideological

prisms. Muslims believe that the teaching of Sharia cannot be disregarded because nothing is forbidden, and seeking magical cures from the saint is a fundamental expression of Islamic values. According to Muslim Sufism, it is authentic and relates to the Muslim community (Remiswal et al.2021). Every Muslim believes in Sufism, but not all Sufism is accepted by Muslims. The sects like Sunni and Shafi have blessed their prayers and worship at the shrine according to the teachings of the holy Rasul Allah. Sufism provides a platform for followers to draw closer to Allah. Around these geographical and cultural specifications, a complex belief system survives, which involves the shrine and its saint and his miraculous decorations. Some of the founders of the Silsilah and their disciples, known as Syle-aliya, are buried there where they died, and where the disciples went to deliver their SALAM and seek peace and success, as well as to receive wealth from the Pole and Gaus. The opinions of the Sufis are highly respected since they believe in charity, friendship, and love for the Almighty.

Religious Tourism: Definition and Significance

In the literature on travel, religious tourism has been distinctly defined as a specific form of traveling that is consciously motivated by a person's acknowledged religious devotion. This type of travel is undertaken with the intention to visit particular locations that are regarded as sacred or special to a given religion. Much like various other leisure activities, religious tourism possesses significant economic implications, providing numerous socio-economic values that can benefit regions and communities alike (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Regarding the economic consequences, cultural tourism, along with religious tourism, serves as an abundant source for revenue generation for local economies. It not only facilitates the development of provincial areas but also fosters opportunities for engaging in household production activities that can be vital for families. Moreover, this specific form of tourism goes beyond merely creating job opportunities; it also plays a vital role in expanding the economic base of a region. It can provide a substantial short-run stimulus to the local economy by contributing to the addition of wages and salaries during the actual process of construction, which may include building and maintaining facilities that cater to tourists (Horaira & Devi, 2021). Hence, religious tourism plays a crucial role in the interplay between economic growth and cultural preservation.

In general, tourists at religious events and festivals, as well as at religious sites, travel both nationally and internationally. The development of religious events has contributed to transforming religious shrines and the towns and cities in which they are situated into large, self-contained insular communities in a world of increasing global communication and mobility. There are various reasons why people visit shrines. First, they visit for spiritual upliftment by getting the blessings of the saint; according to them, their prayers are heard at this site. Secondly, people visit the shrine to get cured, as many saints have the powers to cure all types of diseases. All types of sacrificed meat and biryani are given at the purest rate. The shrine attracts a large number of people from all over

Pakistan and abroad. Pilgrimages are made to these places for the fulfillment of their wishes. Thirdly, people visit the place as part of cultural tourism. Such a visit makes them more aware of their activities and the norms of their society. For tourists, especially those interested in rural indigenous products, the shrine offers a unique mosaic of activities, basing itself primarily upon tradition and heritage. In this way, the cultural environment becomes the activity of attraction. When the location offers distinctive natural features, such as a river or mountain setting, this might evolve with a natural focus. Once there, sellers of secondary images shift area fairs, but also involve processing and diet. The marriage between new activities, including crafts, and the traditional needs to be judiciously managed to shore up appeal to the tourists. The specific benefits of religious tourism have proven important for the areas in Pakistan where religious tourism is a regular feature.

Economic Impact of Religious Tourism

The economic impact of religious tourism is not only significant but also undeniably dramatic in nature. There are numerous channels through which the shrine economy contributes to overall income in the region. The primary way in which foreigners and affluent Pakistanis engage with religious tourism is fundamentally as active travelers. As these travelers, they spend considerable amounts of money on essential aspects such as transportation, hotels, food, and guides. In a notable example, when Ajmer Sharif attracts an estimated vast number of 4 to 5 million visitors each year, the city surrounding the shrine allocates nearly 15 percent of its available land specifically for hotels to accommodate these guests (Rathore et al.2021). Back in 1986, this city boasted twenty-two hotels with a total of 248 rooms to host the incoming travelers. During the time when Khwaja Khizr was recognized as the leading saint of the state, a Jath center employed around 250 individuals and spanned an impressive 1,750 acres, where as many as four to five thousand individuals within this village were actively engaged in various crafts. The economic benefits of shrine tourism extend beyond hotels, restaurants, and transportation services; the local artisans of the region also see notable profits as a result of the influx of visitors. For instance, travel guides, photographers, letter writers, local jewelry shops, bakers, and flower shops all enjoy a significant boom in business, attracting customers in ways that might not have been possible otherwise. The same beneficial impacts can indeed be observed in the local economy surrounding Jama Masjid. The approximately 8,000 visitors who pass through the doors of Jama Masjid each Friday create a necessity for the hard work of about 40 dedicated cleaners employed to sweep the expansive parking lot and maintain the area.

Not included in the study, the number of employees who manage the mosque itself requires detailed response. Utter poverty is more concerning than low incomes. In areas such as shrines where the majority of the population is very poor, all of the dollars spent in the village for a religious event have an effect. It has been stated that "handicraft programs, particularly those oriented in rural areas or towns

that depend heavily upon non-tourism income and resources, are of less economic consequence than tourism-based policies, as they do not take advantage of the tourism multiplier potential." Contrary to this statement, we propose that religious tourism, particularly in areas where tourism investment is significant, has a substantial portion of those "idle dollars" spent by the traveler in the remote area of the shrine city filter down to the very poor who provide care for the shrine. Within this political economy, the poverty-reducing potential of religious tourism is globally significant in Pakistan where more than sixty-eight million people, or 53 percent of the nation's population, lived below the poverty line in 2016 at 3.23 international dollars per day. Where such tourism investment occurs in areas less amenable to large-scale foreign travel, the trickle-down to petty providers is likely to greatly reduce poverty on a per rupee invested basis.

Challenges and Opportunities

The religious tourism industry typically encounters a variety of significant challenges that can hinder growth and development. In the case of Pakistan, the tourist industry is notably underdeveloped; the hotel industry is limited, meaning there are not enough accommodations to meet any considerable demand, and the necessary infrastructure is only adequate for the small number of domestic tourists it currently serves (Khan et al., 2022). Additionally, the regulatory environment within the country is quite unstable, and the visa facilities in place are quite restrictive, making it challenging for international visitors to enter the country easily. Furthermore, local communities generally do not possess the specific skills that are essential to cater to a high-end tourist market, which further limits opportunities for enhancement in this sector. Political and social factors, which can be both local and global in nature, heavily influence the experiences of pilgrims and can pose restrictions on the influx of foreign visitors seeking spiritual journeys. Infrastructure development should be actively pursued with the aim of preserving the religious essence of pilgrimage and enhancing the aspects of religious tourism in a way that honors its significance. Moreover, the growing commercialization of sacred places and pilgrimage sites poses challenges to traditional spiritual practices and beliefs. Pilgrimage stands out as a particularly unique form of tourism practice; however, when it becomes entirely commercialized, there is a real risk that the religious aspect of the journey may be diluted. In such cases, commercialization risks becoming the defining characteristic of the experience rather than the spiritual significance that these journeys are meant to embody.

However, a segmented approach treats the religious dimension as a joint with cultural tourism. This could open up door-market tourism. In Pakistan, community-based development could be a possibility. Government and private sectors, in partnership with local communities, should expand the pilgrimage sites and valleys into tourism destinations and attract adventure and recreational tourists. These initiatives should aim to promote sustainable social and economic development in marginalized and remote areas. Both old and new tourist destinations in

Pakistan, if developed according to the local culture, values, environments, and with stakeholder interest and participation, would enhance tourism and serve as a model for other potential areas in inclusively promoting religious tourism, religious pilgrimage, and religious paths (Baig et al., 2024). The use of technology and visual media for the promotion of religious tourism and pilgrimage is increasing rapidly. New and powerful visual and aural techniques are being used to persuade the audience or to construct favorable impressions, recovered through spiritual experiences or pilgrimages. Videos also have the potential to not only include religious practices, rituals, worship, and religious philosophies of communities but also to include their aspects. Going beyond, the transformative effect of religious tourism based on the oneness of different religions, in which visitors partake in communal prayers and congregational worship, could be effectively made part of documentaries and mini-myths in the form of visual material. Such new technology has enhanced the ability to attract a highly diverse audience towards understanding the smaller dimension of life from multiple perspectives. It also has the potential to more effectively and purposefully distribute such information and photographic material to niche markets compared to official sources. For many religious people in particular and for many people interested in pilgrimage, the image is very important and is something that needs to be controlled, visually produced, and reproduced. Digital marketing using videos and visuals is thus more effective and efficient in attracting a global audience, transforming perceptions about religious traditions, and promoting interfaith harmony.

Major Shrines in Pakistan

Baba Farid's dargah in Pakpattan is strategically located in South Punjab, near the railway line, which has long been a vital component of the historic and renowned Grand Trunk Road of antiquity. The region was originally settled in the 9th century when a devoted nephew of Rai Bhoi came here to dedicate himself to the practice of sainthood (Wescoat, 2024). Over the years, this sacred shrine took on significant importance, particularly when the revered Farid-ud-Din was laid to rest near the 'haveli'. Similarly, Baba Shah Bukhari's dargah in Multan occupies a unique position on top of a nail, which astonishingly forms an island within the river Ravi. This island is located in the eastern upper part of the old city, conveniently adjacent to the bustling lorry stand. While this spot has been venerated for centuries, the complex of buildings surrounding the dargah was constructed fairly recently. The cultural and spiritual atmosphere of Bhit Shah has its roots in the year 1438, when the outdoors Sufi dargah of "Shah," known as Sultan-ul-Arifeen, was founded by Haji Ishaq.

Today, it is noteworthy that numerous residents of Bhit Shah sustain their livelihoods as "Langar Khadims" at the dargah, contributing to the local economy and the spiritual community. In an intriguing twist, several Hindu households are also found living within the precincts of the shrine, highlighting a unique blend of religious coexistence. Not only

is the shrine cherished as a holy site for Muslims, but it also sees Hindu priests closely associated with the Shah Latif dargah, enriching its cultural tapestry. Recognized for producing great athletes and influential figures in society, Bhit Shah is often said to draw a sense of grandeur and strength from the blessings of 'Shah'. The villagers here have formed two close-knit, mutually interdependent communities that thrive on their shared traditions.

The vibrant seven-day Shah Latif Sá'een Urs Festival attracts Shah Jo Raag Fakirs from all across Sindh, who come to perform and sing, filling the air with music and devotion that extends late into the night. Additionally, devotees of Pir Pagara collaborate with the village Sháhbá'í, organizing to attend for just a single day of this grand festival. For many, the fair represents a vital social and religious gathering. Meanwhile, ghost fairs are held concurrently on the same nights – one at the revered shrine of Hattoo Mari, and the other located a bit further away, at Kanthero, nestled under the expansive pepper trees close to Kotdi, showcasing the rich cultural heritage that thrives in this region.

Infrastructure Development for Religious Tourism

This represents a highly significant and major component of the vast realm of religious tourism, where the quality of infrastructure development plays an absolutely vital and essential role in this regard. This comprehensive paper thoroughly investigated the overall quality, various types, and numerous related issues of infrastructure development specifically for religious tourism at the selected shrines. It was found through careful analysis that the key shrines of interest were predominantly located in urban centers, which provides both opportunities and challenges for effective management. We closely observed three critical aspects of infrastructure: namely, the availability of suitable visitor accommodation, efficient transportation options to the site, and the existence of a visitor center at the site to enhance the experience (Tolkinovich, 2023). Furthermore, it was observed with concern that there were no public-private partnership projects available for the important purpose of infrastructure development in this sector. The overall development of infrastructure catering to religious tourism in Pakistan has shown significant negligence, particularly in maintaining the rich heritage of the sites and attracting both international and domestic visitors who are genuinely interested in exploring the significance of these locations.

Despite its importance, there are some successful cases, but the condition of most shrines and neighboring areas is very poor, besides the fact that these have the potential to develop as religious tourism economic assets. The development of religious tourism infrastructure is not solely for the rich development of the private sector but can attract international and domestic visitors to these potential religious sites equally and can enhance their income to uplift their socio-economic conditions in a less time-consuming procedure. A lack of facilities for the visitors could bring a bad experience that could endanger their life or health. One of the barriers to the further spreading of religious tourism in the region is the

competitiveness that could be decreased because of the inadequacy of tourist infrastructure, especially in the surrounding areas of historical monuments and attractions. If the demand for religious pilgrimages were to lead to more large-scale tourist flows due to infrastructural incapacity, such as temporary inadequacy of transport and lodging facilities, or more severely in long-period deficiencies that reduce safety, the sustainability of the cultural and natural landscape areas that surround the shrines might be undermined. Accordingly, the diagnosis of infrastructure needs for religious tourism, taking into account the considerations and the recognition of the critical role of the industry in inclusive and sustainable rural development, should be given more attention and needed investment and policy support for making a comprehensive strategic plan of action for religious tourism development through the national context. The accessibility and last-mile concerns in terms of the shrines located in a rural surrounding should be given particular importance concerning sustainable development for the good of the religious environment and natural sites that enhance the sanctum of the site. Such infrastructure can be more attractive to a larger number of tourists, including smaller groups and individuals who tend to be more interested in cultural heritage and who often take the opportunity to visit other locations close to the places of religious interest. Shrines are a vital part of the many religious users who travel from one religious site to another, either by car, bus, or other vehicle, or even on foot in the case of religious tourism. As a significant part of the religious tourist shrine infrastructure, such facilities should be improved; not only because of their importance in terms of tourism potential and the benefits that can be derived from developing such facilities, but also because improved roads and traffic regulation will assist in avoiding road accidents and help reduce fatalities in rural areas.

Community Involvement and Benefits

The role of local communities in religious tourism is recognized as a major contributor to hospitality services at a tea stall, guiding the pilgrims, taking good care of historical and religious items, and preserving their cultural heritage, which is embodied in the shrines. It is widely believed that investment in the heritage sector can bring socio-economic benefits to the communities through the inheritance of cultural and religious values and the identity of society (Tišma et al.2022). Local contacts are important for the traveling public when they need advice for selecting a destination, services, and the right people for other requirements. The shrine communities can present the status of their business in the same way. By getting actively involved, the local community members would be empowered and would not think of doing anything other than seeking new opportunities. Thus, policy planning should focus on enabling the local community to make better decisions when faced with new challenges. Since these communities have been involved for centuries, the best way to benefit them and share success stories of their involvement is through presenting their narratives

and attractions. The trail of these narratives would guide new travelers and visitors around these destinations.

In the context of religious tourism, these communities are significant and can play a very positive role, provided the policies respond to ensure that even conflicts result in shared benefits for all. An element of trust is key for the sustained success of these destinations, which means the need for creating sacred places for sharing and coexistence. The local communities, who have been sharing certain narratives of choosing destinations with their ancestors in the past, are the true carriers of narratives of image-making. This, on the one hand, involves the development of community-based tourism, and on the other hand, participation models range from simply contributing a versatile narrative about the local culture of performing artistic or social performances to fabricating a whole performance so that the cultural performer often acts as the person or group from the visitor similar to themselves. In the case of shrines and sacred places, such items have interplayed together for millions of years of folklore, mythology, history, superstitions, rituals, traditions, and so forth. Proper planning and consideration of the potential for the narrative would create a very strong experience for visitors that, in turn, would become a major source of economic benefits for the local religious community, contributing to the destination economy, image-making of these destinations, creating a real top-class religious exploration, and a strong source of empowerment for any minority (Leask, 2022).

Marketing and Promotion Strategies

Since the reason for holy spots is their religious and spiritual significance, the management of the shrines should ensure basic tourist facilities; branding is the key to selling Pakistan as a religious tourism destination. Almost all religions and faiths uphold great respect for pious architecture, and possibly being a second or third-tier tourist destination, shrines may attract a significant number of religious and spiritual tourists. Moreover, proponents of interfaith dialogue, religious harmony, and spiritual seekers should not be excluded from the commemoration of their spiritual and religious leaders. Therefore, it would be a good idea to encourage cooperation with relevant authorities of other countries or faiths to invigorate the trend. Since believers would like to visit all shrines, Pakistan may also import religious tourism from overseas to locals. It is essential for promoting religious tourism to host a few seminars or street festivals (Rahman & Anwar, 2022).

Islamabad must decisively communicate an important message that highlights the significance of Sufism and the rich cultural heritage embodied in Sufi shrines through well-structured promotional and publicity strategies. To achieve this, it is essential to engage not only international tourism boards but also local travel agencies that have established connections with the Muslim diaspora clientele, as well as those that specifically cater to the religious and spiritual market segments. It is crucial that these Pakistani shrines are marketed effectively, promoting the unique cultural narratives and experiences

they offer. Promotional campaigns could benefit from adopting relatable local examples and presenting them with the catchy slogan 'This is Pakistan,' which resonates deeply, helping to showcase real stories and authentic experiences. These campaigns should aim to distinguish themselves from typical portrayals targeting a more mature demographic, particularly those aged thirty to fifty (Khan). In order to engage and attract the Pakistani youth population, it becomes increasingly vital to involve the advertising industry and media, encouraging them to actively participate in reshaping and breaking existing stereotypes associated with Sufism and its practices. Compelling stories that reflect the deeply emotional connections many individuals feel towards Sufism can serve as an effective tool for this purpose, as they tap into the essence of both storytelling and branding. Incorporating architectural connections and secular saints from various religions at revered sites such as Multan, Sehwan, and others can ultimately contribute to a broader narrative of peace, inclusivity, and shared spiritual heritage (Arshaad et al.2024). However, it is equally important to maintain the sanctity and respectful representation of these sacred spaces. To achieve this balance, care must be taken in determining a commercial approach that does not undermine the spiritual significance of the shrines while advertising through local travel agencies. Ultimately, the goal is to promote Sufism and its shrines not just as tourist attractions, but as vital cultural and spiritual landmarks that embody a message of love, brotherhood, and coexistence among diverse communities.

Conclusion

In the bureaucratic state of Pakistan, the spiritual and the mundane are often seen as separate and in conflict. However, it is clear that the two are inextricable, as we have shown that the religious tourism economy in the country is large, commercial, visible, and important in the context of identity, culture, and economics. Although exemplified in the case of shrines, similar statements can also be made with reference to other religious products and services to be found in the country. However unwieldy and difficult to control, religious tourism as an economic practice has connections that stretch throughout society and deserve real attention. Connecting the different aspects gives us the following ideas. The people who make the religious economy work at the local, almost household level are key to its fruitful development, and these participants should be supported and acknowledged in some way.

Growing the religious tourism economy is not easy and takes more than just investment in terms of infrastructure, marketing, and safety. Indeed, the development of the religious economy requires a policy that is holistic and interconnected between the prominent ideas that have emerged as relevant in the above analysis. It cannot be done one step at a time; rather, infrastructure, community-based local development, and promotional activities are necessary to go together and need to be constructed carefully in a collaborative way. Some of the issues that particularly need to be addressed are taken by developing societies

everywhere. However, some of the factors that seem most important in the development of the religious economy are issues of national discretion, especially those that concern and shape a cultural approach. To appeal to the tourist niche that admires the cultural heritage of Pakistan and is interested in the local and small, care and development offer obvious subsidies and opportunities. Treaties have so far been created maintaining this delicate balance.

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