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SUFI SHRINES AS DUAL SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC ASSETS: RELIGIOUS TOURISM, LOCAL LIVELIHOODS, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTAN

Zafar Ali
M.Phil. in Pakistan Studies University of Karachi, Pakistan.
zaffarsiyal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This study is a comprehensive analysis of the diverse nature of Sufi shrines in Pakistan today, while they are places of spiritual worship, they are also great contributors to the local and regional economy through religious tourism. Based on a detailed analysis of the scholarly literature, institutional reports, ethnographic observation, and recent studies of policy, the article presents the data that nearly four thousand shrines throughout the country draw millions of pilgrims every year, especially during Urs festivals, which generate demand for lodging, transportation, food services, ritual commodities, and artisan products. The analysis places these dynamics in a theoretical context of religious tourism and pilgrimage economies and points to certain empirical patterns at major sites like Data Darbar in Lahore, Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Multan complex etc. and major Sindhi pilgrimage sites like Sehwan Sharif and Bhit Shah. Insufficient infrastructure, uneven distribution of economic opportunities, commercialization pressures which could potentially compromise the spiritual purity of the practice, governance issues regarding revenue collection and security concerns which linger from the past are all examined. The study suggests that by investing in the tourism infrastructure, ensuring transparency in the process of public-community partnership, training local entrepreneurs, and developing a culturally appropriate marketing, the whole potential of shrine tourism to alleviate poverty could be strengthened and the sacred character of the shrine protected. Finally, the results indicate that caring for spiritual integrity and economic inclusion, religious tourism around Sufi shrines is a promising avenue for inclusive development in the under-served areas of Pakistan.

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

Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human travel and is a phenomenon that combines spiritual questing and economic transaction in many different cultural settings (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). This phenomenon is vividly expressed in the Sufi shrines that have occupied the religious, social and economic lives of the region for centuries in Pakistan (Ali, 2025). Each of these is dedicated to a venerated saint of a particular Sufi order, and millions of pilgrims come each year to pray for intercession, to be healed, to engage in group activities, and to celebrate culture. Costs of this ongoing population flow are significant as pilgrims stimulate demand for transportation costs, temporary accommodation, food, flowers, ritual cloth, sweets, and many

other associated items and services that provide livelihoods for thousands of families in neighbouring communities (Rasool et al., 2016; WE News English, 2025). The number of shrines in Pakistan is estimated to be around 3,398, but a small number of around ninety-nine are visited regularly and are under the formal management of the provincial Auqaf departments with the remaining ones being managed by hereditary custodians called gaddi nashins (WE News English, 2025). Crowds of several hundred to a million pilgrims or more typically attend the major urban and regional centres like Data Darbar in Lahore, Baba Farid shrine in Pakpattan, Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam complex in Multan, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Bhit Shah, with peak numbers on the days of the Urs (WE News English, 2025, Mansoor et al., 2025).

The dual role of these institutions as a place of great spirituality and at the same time an engine of localized economic activity, is the central theme of the current analysis (Ali, 2025; Lashari et al., 2024). The spiritual aspects of shrines have been well studied, but the study of their economic effects, distribution consequences, and possibilities of inclusive development is comparatively underdeveloped (Irfan & Ali, 2021). This article aims to fill that gap by drawing together what is known from secondary sources, based on academic studies, government and institutional reports and observations in recent years. It situates the Pakistani case in a larger international literature on religious tourism and pilgrimage economies, maps the historical development of shrine institutions, documents key pathways of economic transmission, offers detailed illustrations of key shrines, assesses structural constraints and offers a policy-oriented set of recommendations (Shinde & Olsen, 2022; Khan et al., 2022). The analysis takes a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the need for a balance between economic benefits and maintaining spiritual authenticity, as aspects that make pilgrimages attractive can be diluted by commercialization and by poorly planned interventions (Ali, 2025). The study makes a unique scholarly contribution to the knowledge of hybrid sacred-secular spaces and it also provides significant practical inputs for the debate on tourism development in fragile and low-income settings.

This analytical approach deliberately takes an interdisciplinary approach, including the contributions of development economics, religious studies, cultural geography and public policy, to capture the multi-layered nature of shrine-based economies (Delage, 2022). The selected synthesis methods illustrate not only the lack of integrated information on the subject, but also the need to inform policy in the context of the fact that shrine tourism is already operating at scale, albeit informally (Irfan & Ali, 2021). The distributional issue of who benefits from the expenditure of pilgrims on the shrine and who is disadvantaged is given special consideration, and it is argued that the current distribution is not equitable because it benefits the shrine custodians, formal contractors, and better-off traders in the urban markets, while not benefiting the other vendors, women, or people living in neighbouring rural markets that are

not as favoured (Ahmad, 2022; Rasool et al., 2016). The study also highlights the governance issues, such as the division of power between the Auqaf departments and the hereditary gaddi nashins, which impacts revenue collection, service provision and accountability (Ali, 2025). The study addresses two other objectives: first, to transcend celebratory narratives about religious tourism and provide a more realistic assessment of its developmental potential and risks, and second, to provide a clear picture for the various stakeholders policymakers, shrine administration, community groups, and scholars of the opportunities and threats of treating Sufi shrines as dual spiritual and economic resources..

Literature Review

Over the last two decades, the international literature on religious tourism has advanced significantly beyond the descriptive accounts of pilgrimage movements towards more in-depth analyses of the complex interplay between spirituality, culture, sustainability and economic development (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Some scholars, like Shinde and Olsen, have proposed to view pilgrimage and religious tourism in a different perspective that takes sustainability as the primary consideration, and that these practices create material and non-material values to be carefully managed to ensure long-term sustainability. Religious tourism, especially visiting Islamic shrines, Sikh yatra, Hindu pilgrimage and Buddhist heritage tours, has increasingly been realised as an underutilised component of the South Asian tourism industry with the potential to drive employment, foreign exchange and regional equity (Irfan & Ali, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Specifically in the context of Pakistan, Irfan and Ali (2021) carried out a multi-criteria analysis on scope, constraints, and strategic opportunities and found that infrastructure challenges, regulatory constraints, and lack of international marketing were the key constraints in the sector, and highlighted its latent economic potential. Rasool, Fatima and Sohail (2016) used primary surveys at Data Darbar to establish a statistically significant relationship between the perceptions of the shrine visitors about the site facilities and intensity of local entrepreneurial activity, thereby providing micro-level evidence of the shrine-tourism-livelihood linkage.

Further empirical research has grown the insights to other geographic and institutional contexts. The ethnographic study of the Shrines of Multan, namely the Shrine of Bahauddin Zakariya and the Shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, has shed light on the rituals that serve devotees, local economy and trade, and the merchants and artisans of the city (Mansoor et al., 2025). High levels of dependency of both households and individuals on shrine related jobs have been documented in catering, retail, transportation and guiding roles at seasonally active sites in rural Sindh and southern Punjab like Mitthan Kot, Jhok Sharif, and during peaks of seasonal Urs (Ahmad, 2022; Zil-e-Huma, 2024). The religious tourism potential has always been considered to be a unique strength of Pakistan's tourism sector that can significantly add to GDP, employment, and poverty alleviation, if the infrastructure, the security perceptions, and the governance structures are enhanced (Khan et al.,

2022; Alam, 2022). In recent years, analyses of transport supply chains have also shed light on how transport investments have impacted service specialization, overnight stays and inter-city economic linkages, for instance, in the context of the Sukkur-Multan motorway and its influence on religious tourism between Sindh and southern Punjab (Dossani et al., 2025). As a whole, this literature helps to envision Sufi shrines as entangled and mutually contingent bodies of power, social relationships, and economy, not incompatible (Delage, 2022; Ali, 2025).

Objectives

1. To examine the dual role of Sufi shrines in Pakistan as centers of spiritual devotion and generators of local and regional economic activity through religious tourism.
2. To identify and analyze the channels, distributional patterns, and structural constraints that shape the economic impact of shrine-based pilgrimage on surrounding communities.
3. To propose evidence-based, culturally sensitive policy recommendations that enhance the developmental potential of shrine tourism while preserving the spiritual integrity of the sites.

Research Questions

1. How do Sufi shrines in Pakistan function simultaneously as sacred spaces and as engines of localized economic activity through pilgrim expenditure and Urs-related demand?
2. What structural, governance, and distributional factors currently limit the poverty-reducing and inclusive development potential of shrine-based religious tourism?
3. What policy measures and institutional arrangements can expand the economic benefits of shrine tourism without compromising the spiritual authenticity and cultural integrity of these sites?

Research Methodology

The method used in this study is qualitative based on a desk side synthesis methodology which is based on the systematic review and thematic analysis of secondary sources such as peer-reviewed academic literature, government and institutional reports, policy analyses, and recent empirical observations from various major shrine sites throughout Pakistan. The evidence is interpreted using an analytical approach that combines development economics, religious studies, cultural geography and public policy, allowing this study to reflect the multi-layered nature of shrine-based economies. Data were extracted and were themed in the following main analytical categories: Historical and institutional development of shrines, channels and mechanisms of economic impact, case-specific evidence of major complexes like Data Darbar, Pakpattan, Multan, Sehwan Sharif and Bhit Shah, structural constraints and policy pathways. Special focus was given on distributional issues about the distribution in amongst who benefits from pilgrimage and the division of governance between the departments of Auqaf and gaddi hereditary leader, the nashin. The synthesis approach was selected because available information on the economies of the shrines is sparse and somewhat informal, and primary data collection was beyond the scope

of this review. Findings are presented descriptively and critically, making recommendations through comparative interpretation of documented experiences and best practices abroad, applicable to the context of Pakistan.

Historical Evolution and Institutional Context

Institutionalization of shrine visitation in the areas that make up the present-day Pakistan can be attributed to the spread of major Sufi orders during the medieval period, specifically the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi silsilas (Ali, 2025; Remiswal et al., 2021). In the 14th century and beyond, there were some famous saints who founded khanqahs and, on their death, mausolea that eventually collected endowments, land grants and social prestige. Mughal emperors often granted farmans that guaranteed privileges and revenue to important shrines, thus placing them in the wider political economy of the Mughal empire (Wescoat, 2024). During British colonial rule, some hereditary custodians were identified as local intermediaries whose power can be controlled and exercised for administration, which further strengthened the material foundation of some institutions. After independence in 1947, the progressive establishment of the Auqaf departments changed the administrative and fiscal management of many properties to state control and a significant number of shrines were under the jurisdiction of gaddi nashins (Ali, 2025), who still hold them as private property. The dual institutional structure continues to exist today, with provincial Auqaf departments, particularly in Punjab, running several hundred major shrines and related mosques, and collecting funds from cash boxes, langar, and Urs-related operations while offering some welfare facilities like langar and limited medical care (WE News English, 2025).

The ritual forms used in these places are still in use today, but they fit the modern context. Devotees offer chadars, flowers and monetary donations; join in the qawwali and in some shrines in ecstasy, dhamal; pray and intercede for blessings; and share in communal meals (Mansoor et al., 2025; Ilyas & Ilyas, 2024). Along with these spiritual activities are commercial transactions which vary from the sale of ritual commodities to the provision of paid services (Ali, 2025). This hybrid nature of shrine spaces has been recorded in various observations: they serve as a place of worship, social gathering point, a venue for cultural performance, and a marketplace (Delage, 2022; Zil-e-Huma, 2024). Importantly, many of the big shrines draw people from all faith communities, helping, at least locally, to bring people together and creating a sense of social cohesion (Arshaad et al., 2024). The dynamics of institutionalization of the system of auqaf have not ceased to include negotiations regarding transparency of revenues, between state and traditional authority, and between maintaining and providing welfare and development. The administration and monitoring systems at key sites like Data Darbar have also been strengthened in recent years, with a focus on enhancing the accountability of these facilities and providing more amenities for visitors (WE News English, 2025).

Channels and Mechanisms of Economic Impact

Pilgrim expenditure is the main factor leading from the act of visiting the shrines to the local economy (Rasool et al., 2016; Ali, 2025). The travel expenses include spending on inter-city and intra-city transportation, temporary housing (from formal hotel to informal guest houses to private lodging), food, buying flowers, sweets, ritual cloth, amulets, and souvenirs. In normal times these costs maintain the level of business activity, and in periods of Urs, demand surges significantly, leading to sudden jumps in the income of vendors, transporters, hoteliers and others, who provide services (Ahmad 2022, Mansoor et al., 2025). The multiplier effects are not only a result of the direct transactions, but also include construction and maintenance activities, waste management services, security services, and the production of ritual and handicraft items (Dossani et al., 2025). Large scale langar operations with a capacity of feeding tens of thousands of people daily at major sites like Data Darbar generate further employment opportunities and also provide additional resources to the fiscal capacity of the Auqaf departments that includes cash-box collections etc (WE News English, 2025; Rasool et al., 2016). There are historically and contemporary reports that a single shrine can earn hundreds of millions of rupees annually from which parts can go towards site maintenance, salaries of the staff, and related welfare institutions such as hospitals and educational institutions etc.

The impacts of these can be enhanced with infrastructure investment, which can help to lessen travel friction and increase catchment areas (Dossani et al., 2025). The opening of the Sukkur-Multan motorway, for instance, has coincided with a rise in the overnight stay of tourists, more specialization among service providers and better economic performance of cities with key shrines compared to national averages. The better the road connectivity, the more likely people are from farther away to visit more regularly, and/or for longer periods, thus increasing the average spending per visit (Khan et al., 2022). Shrine activity can offer low barrier income opportunities at household level in guiding, shoe keeping, parking management, and small scale vending and catering (Ahmad, 2022). These activities can be a meaningful livelihood buffer, especially for poorer households, in districts where the formal employment is limited. However, the distribution of the gains is typically lopsided. Large market shares are typically enjoyed by established vendors with prime positioning and older business relationships, while the other vendors who are located on the outskirts of the market, or newer to the game, which also include many women, are often marginalized (Ahmad, 2022; Rasool et al., 2016). Seasonality also gives rise to volatility, with higher incomes during the Urs periods and then quiet for the rest of the year. Knowing these patterns of distribution and time matters is crucial to designing interventions to expand participation without breaking apart existing livelihood systems (Hassan & Qureshi, 2023).

The formal and informal institutional mechanisms cited above are implemented via different channels, and each site has different portions of each channel (Delage, 2022; Ali, 2025). In areas where Auqaf

departments directly manage, there are more systematic ways of collecting revenue, such as cash-box receipts, contracted services and allocated fees for stalls, which go into the provincial exchequers and site maintenance funds. In areas where hereditary gaddi nashins still exist the arrangements are often more individualized and customary levies, donations and informal contracts determine access to commercial space. Such variations in governance can impact on the amount of revenue collected, the way in which it is redistributed, and the likelihood that it will be reinvested in public goods like sanitation, safety, and visitor facilities (Lashari et al., 2024). Flexibility and cultural legitimacy can be provided in informal arrangements, but they might also lead to the legitimation of patronage relations and to a lack of accountability. Understanding the institutional diversity is crucial for any policy framework aimed at maximizing the economic value of shrines while maintaining their spiritual values and legitimacy.

Case Studies of Major Shrine Complexes

The shrine-economy nexus is best illustrated in Data Darbar, Lahore, home to the eleventh-century saint Ali Hujwiri, which is the largest Sufi shrine complex and most well documented of the shrine-economy nexus in South Asia (Rasool et al., 2016; WE News English, 2025). It receives almost a million visitors at an annual Urs and has a significant year round daily attendance. Economic activity includes large langar, wide distribution of ritual and souvenir articles, transportation, and other welfare institutions like the Data Darbar Hospital. Revenue generation is not only for site maintenance but also for the wider activities of the Auqaf, and monitoring changes have been introduced in the recent years, which has been linked with a considerable rise in cash-box collections recorded (WE News English, 2025). Current expansion and renovation efforts focus on enhancing the amenities for visitors, such as parking, sanitation facilities, circulation areas and other improvements that will help maintain the spiritual atmosphere that is the major draw of the site. Positive links have been established between the personal perception of the quality of facilities and the size of the micro-enterprise activities around the shrine in empirical survey research conducted at the shrine, which shows that there are the mechanisms at the micro-level which translate pilgrimage into the creation of micro-enterprises and jobs around the shrine (Rasool et al., 2016).

The shrine of Baba Fariduddin Ganj Shakar Pakpattan has been an important pilgrimage center in the region from the ancient period up until now, and when the Bahishti Darwaza is opened in these shrines, the number of visitors is quite high, especially during Urs (Ali, 2025). Seasonal boom in the accommodation, food, transportation and ritual goods is providing benefits to the local economy of the surrounding town and rural hinterland. It is also a testament to how economic resources have been built up over centuries of economic endowments from past rulers, which continue to influence the financial resources of the shrine and its surrounding communities. The same can be seen at the Multan complex of the shrines of Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam,

the latter of which is also on the UNESCO's tentative World Heritage list (Mansoor et al., 2025; WE News English, 2025). Enhanced access from other regions through the M5 motorway has boosted tourism, particularly in the hospitality and service industry, but has also raised concerns over the impact of this increase on the heritage value of the area (Dossani et al., 2025). The shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar at Sehwan Sharif and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai at Bhit Shah are popular with devotees, and have unique musical and performative traditions which offer economic opportunities for performers, vendors and service providers (Zil-e-Huma, 2024). Overall, across these locations there are livelihood benefits and cultural vitality, though to varying extents in terms of their institutional formalization and benefit distribution (Ahmad, 2022).

Structural Challenges and Constraints

Although the economic benefits of religious tourism associated with the shrines are evident, the developmental potential of religious tourism can currently be hindered by several interrelated structural constraints (Irfan & Ali, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Many sites lack adequate infrastructure: the quality of the accommodation is limited; access roads are often congested; sanitation and water facilities are often inadequate for peak demand; and visitor information systems are weak. These are drawbacks that lower the likelihood of extending their stay for higher spending tourists or international tourists and can pose health and safety hazards at group events (Ali, 2025). Added to this are governance and management concerns. Transparency is needed in cash-box collections and property revenues, and there are some documented cases of misappropriation that have led to high profile administrative interventions and recovery actions (WE News English, 2025). The commercialization pressures, such as production of low-quality ritual commodities, rampant solicitation, and the intrusion of commercial activity in sacred precincts are likely to corrode the spiritual ambiance that draws pilgrims to the site in the first place (Ali, 2025; Shinde & Olsen, 2022). If the commercial aspect takes over as the main component of the visitor experience, the religious motivation that fuelled continued demand could be lost.

Other challenges include the longstanding security perceptions that impact both domestic and international decisions of travel, visa and regulatory challenges that hinder foreign pilgrimage, and the limited skills of the local service providers to meet the needs of more diverse or higher-value visitor segments (Irfan & Ali, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). The benefits are still highly concentrated, but many of the smaller and more remote shrines have relatively low local levels of activity (Ahmad, 2022). The tourism system, which includes coordinated marketing, product development, inter-site circuits, and quality, is not developed enough compared to the already existing pilgrimage activities (Abbasi & Khan, 2022). Systematic concerns need to be addressed regarding the environmental pressures issues that come along with large gatherings, such as waste generation and stress on local resources, to guarantee the

sustainability (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). This requires a multi-jurisdictional approach between and within the various tiers of government, shrine administration, private operators and local communities, while care needs to be taken to avoid unintended displacement of existing informal livelihoods or undermining the sacred nature of the sites (Hassan & Qureshi, 2023).

These constraints collectively result in the low value, high volume nature of shrine tourism, where the returns are scattered and small in value (Irfan & Ali 2021). To escape this vicious circle, more than mere infrastructure improvements are needed, and it will take an integrated strategy to combine physical upgrades, governance reform, skills development and cultural stewardship. If such integration is missing, investment in roads or facilities will just make it easier to drive through urban areas or make them more attractive to visitors, but will not produce equitable increases in household income. In contrast, governance improvements that happen in isolation without concrete site improvements and livelihood enhancement are not likely to be successful unless they foster trust among site custodians, traders and communities. This challenge is institutional and coordinative in nature, not just monetary and requires ongoing efforts, not just projects (Khan et al., 2022; Dossani et al., 2025).

Opportunities, Policy Pathways, and Recommendations

Considering above constraints, a coordinated and context sensitive approach can help mitigate these constraints while ensuring the religious nature of the sites is respected and broadening their role in inclusive development (Irfan & Ali, 2021; Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Access roads, basic visitor facilities, waste management facilities, and designated zones for commerce should be the focus of priority investments in infrastructure (Dossani et al., 2025), while avoiding encroachment on core sacred precincts. Public-private and community partnerships for service delivery, with clear mechanisms of revenue sharing that ensure that part of the revenue is channeled to local welfare and site maintenance, can enhance efficiency and equity, (Hassan & Qureshi, 2023; Rahman & Anwar, 2022). Digital and visual marketing strategies that highlight the cultural and spiritual stories of Sufism, and interfaith elements as appropriate, and practical visitor information can be targeted to both the domestic market and the broader Muslim community around the world, thus keeping guests on-site longer and increasing the average per visit spend (Abbasi & Khan, 2022). Capacity-building programmes for local entrepreneurs in the hospitality, guiding and craft industries, coupled with a conscious effort by those programmes to incorporate women and youth, can help to expand opportunities for economic benefits and diminish the inequalities that exist (Ahmad, 2022; Ilyas & Ilyas, 2024).

Creating thematic circuits, which not only connect various shrines but also connect visits to the shrines with various cultural and natural attractions, is another way to extend mean durations and spread economic benefits throughout regions (Khan et al., 2022). Better

wayfinding, quality standards and a common marketing can support such circuits. The institutional level, further strengthening of monitoring and accountability systems in the departments of Auqaf and a positive approach to non-state managed sites by engaging with hereditary custodians can also improve resource management and strengthen traditional authority structures where they are still legitimate (Ali, 2025). International best practices in religious tourism development, suitable for Pakistan, can be drawing lessons for designing these interventions (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Finally, the goal is not just to attract tourists or generate income, but to distribute the economic advantages of religious tourism in a sustainable and spiritually appropriate manner, embracing the religious purpose that continues to give the sites their significance. (Ali, 2025; Lashari et al., 2024) Under these circumstances, the development of shrine-based tourism is able to play some positive roles in reducing poverty, diversifying livelihoods, and building social cohesion of the regions with limited alternatives of economic opportunities.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, Sufi shrines are already playing a significant role in fostering economic activity, albeit in an informal capacity, and are also important places of spiritual life and social interaction. Regular visitation, coupled with high intensity Urs periods creates employment and income opportunities that trickle down to low income groups through a variety of channels such as the retail, transport, food service and guiding sectors, and informal vending. To maximize poverty alleviation and development outcomes, infrastructure-related issues must be addressed regularly, governance transparency enhanced, commercial pressures managed and culturally appropriate marketing and community capacity built. Enhanced religious tourism can make a contribution both in terms of material livelihoods and in terms of social cohesion, which has been associated with these sacred places, if it takes place in a way which respects the sanctals and cultural integrity of these places.

More primary research on the impact of interventions on the household level, gender considerations, environmental sustainability, and the impacts of specific infrastructure and governance interventions would complement the evidence base for informing the design of policy. Meanwhile, the current evidence base is adequate to warrant a measured but forward-thinking strategy to regard Sufi shrines as spiritual and economic resources, and manage them with prudence to foster both spiritual and development goals. This should be centered on the lived realities of people and communities, and involve those who suffer from the costs and consequences of higher visitation, namely congestion, environmental impacts, and culture disruption, in the decision-making and benefits-share processes. Ultimately, the sustainability of shrine-based development hinges on the careful management and protection of these ancient structures, ensuring they remain a source of inspiration and hope for generations to come.

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