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The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Tourism to the Kartarpur Corridor

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tourism in the Kartarpur Gurdwara Corridor between the Punjab States of Pakistan and India. The corridor was opened as a peace building initiative 72 years after the partition of India-Pakistan. In November 2019, thousands of Sikh pilgrims visited Kartarpur and Nankana Sahib in Punjab to celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of the founder of the Sikh religion Guru Nanakji, where he spent last 19 years of his life. The Government of Pakistan invested heavily to build the infrastructure facilities for connecting both borders for religious tourism. The two phases of development of Kartarpur created economic opportunities for the growth of bilateral trade, religious tourism, diplomacy, and peaceful relationships. However, the COVID-19 based travel lockdown caused devastating economic impacts on the Kartarpur religious tourism site and related businesses just four months after its opening. This paper highlights the importance of Kartarpur religious tourism and the devastating economic impact from COVID-19 on the niche spiritual tourism-based economy, employment, marketing, and peace associated with Kartarpur. Qualitative content analysis was adopted using quotes from internet sources to reach findings. Some opportunities are highlighted for a better understanding of global health issues, unified efforts to fight the pandemic and mutual support for spiritual tourism development among Indians and Pakistanis. Policy implications suggest that post-COVID-19, public-private partnership is needed to cooperatively plan, develop, and promote religious tourism, build awareness, and cooperate for common resource management for economic benefits. COVID-19 could be a cooperative stimulus for peaceful change through bilateral trade, travel, and tourism plans, based on responsible cross-border tourism for India and Pakistan; to create a mutually beneficial South-Asian economic success story.

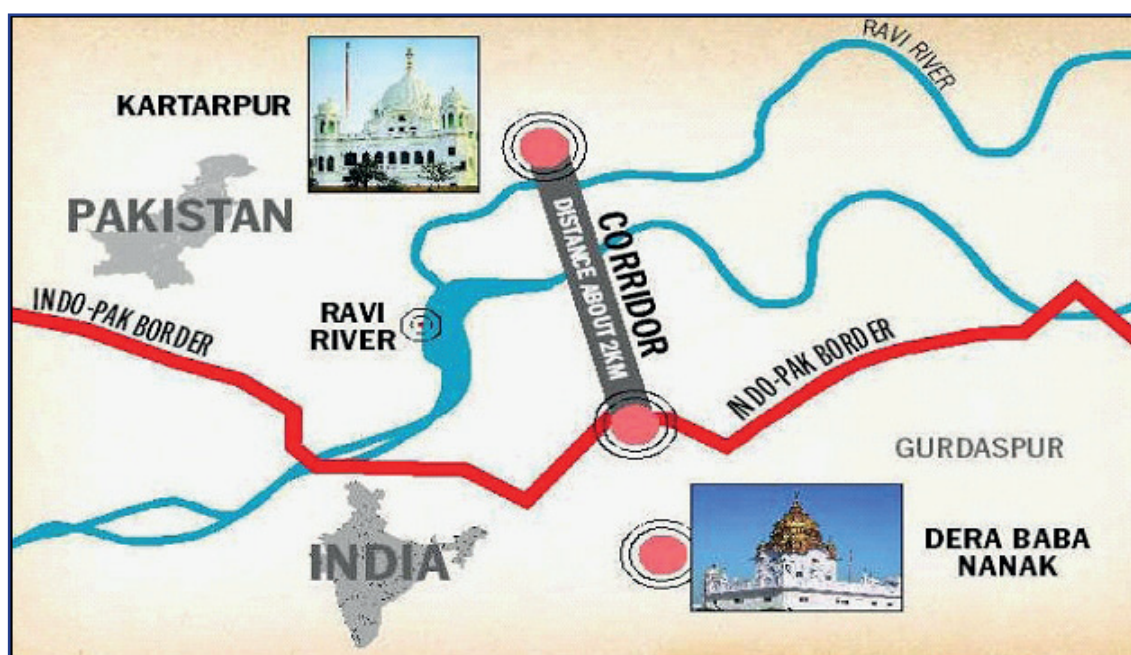
Key Words: COVID-19, India, Pakistan, Kartarpur, religious tourism, economic impact, responsible tourism

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every sector of the micro and macro economy related to tourism, such as souvenir retail, transport, accommodation and hospitality, including niche religious tourism sites such as Kartarpur, Hajj, and Karbala (Faris & Griffin, 2020; Raj & Bozonelos, 2020; Yasin *et al.*, 2020). Places of worship for regular daily visits by locals have also been closed by concerned governments, resulting in a 'socio-economic disaster for businesses who survive due to religious visitors' (Raj & Griffin, 2020:3). This unprecedented scenario has resulted in the closing of tourism related businesses, disrupted supply chains, the shutdown of attractions and international travel restrictions (Yasin *et al.*, 2020).

Religious tourism and pilgrimage sites around the world were identified as hot-spots of transmission of COVID-19, which were closed in 2020 for religious tourists and pilgrims, having revenue implications for host regions and countries (Ahmed & Memish, 2020; Raj & Bozonelos, 2020; Yezli & Khan, 2020). The later outbreak of a new variant (omicron) also caused havoc among tourism businesses around the world. Annual religious gatherings around the world such as Hajj (Saudi Arabia), Karbala (Iraq), Raiwind Tableeghi (Pakistan), Ajmer Sharif and Kumbh Mela (India) suffered from the impact of coronavirus on the local economy (Faris & Griffin, 2020; Mubarak & Zin, 2020; Olsen & Timothy, 2020).

Figure 1: Kartarpur Peace Corridor



Source: The Weekly Asian Connections Newspaper (2019)

In South-Asia intra-regional trade only accounts for four percent of the region's trade, while European intra-regional trade is 69 percent, and it is over 50 percent in the Pacific (Ahmed & Memish, 2020). It is estimated that as an element of intra-regional trade, interactions between India and Pakistan could be enhanced to 27 times its current value (Haq & Medhekar, 2019). Both countries enjoy many common factors including geographic location, shared language, customs, religious-diversity, food, and their colonial past (Ahmed & Memish, 2020). The opening on 9th November 2019, of the historic Kartarpur peace corridor¹, was a peace-making initiative, to build a foundation for lasting peace through Sikh religious tourism and establishing diplomatic bilateral cultural relationship between Indian and Pakistani Governments, business-to-business, and people-to-people contacts (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019; Bochkovskaya, 2021; Yousaf, 2021).

The opening of Kartarpur attracted 2,200 Sikh pilgrims via the Wagha border to Pakistan to visit Nanakji, birthplace of Nankana Sahib, and on 9th November 2020 to Kartarpur for the ceremony. Kartarpur has the capacity to welcome 5000 pilgrims from India daily (The Hindu, 2020). However, only four months after the opening,

the COVID-19 global health emergency was declared by the World Health Organization, hence the Kartarpur corridor was closed, which froze the related contribution to income, employment, tourism activity and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019).

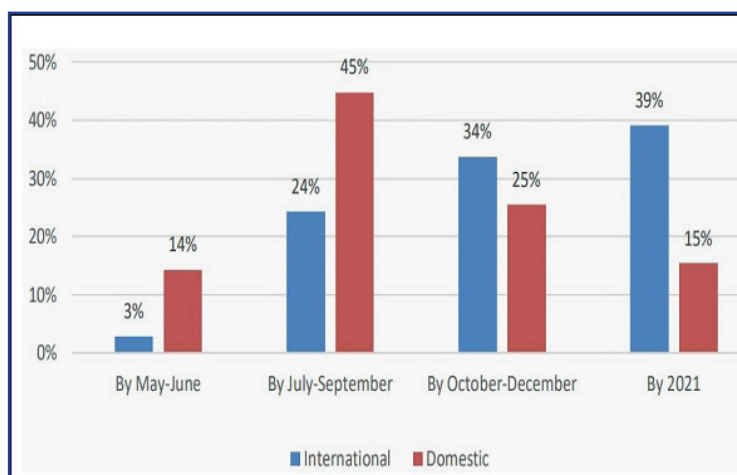
The literature around the Kartarpur corridor is largely focussed on the foundation for peace building initiative and interfaith harmony between the two countries (Hasan & Khalid, 2020), rather than socio-economic opportunities for bilateral travel, tourism, and trade for benefits of the two countries (Yousaf, 2021; Haq & Medhekar, 2019). The objective of this paper is to enhance the literature on religious tourism and explore the economic impact of COVID-19, and policy implications, for this newly opened Sikh pilgrimage to Kartarpur Religious Tourism peace corridor. The four kilometre corridor connects the Indian-Punjab with Pakistan-Punjab and provides a shortcut to the Kartarpur Shrine, as illustrated in Figure-1.

Literature Review

Tourism and COVID-19 Impact

The International Labour Organisation (2020) estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic caused economies to contract by 45-70% in the international tourism sector and job losses due to travel restrictions and governments mandating the closure of all non-essential businesses and airports affected 10 million civil aviation jobs. Mishra

¹ See Bochkovskaya, A.V. (2021) The Kartarpur Pilgrimage Corridor: Negotiating the 'Line of Mutual Hatred', *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 9(2) Article 5. (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol9/iss2/5>)

Figure 2: International v. Domestic Demand for Tourism Destinations 2020-21

Source: UNWTO, 2020

(2020) reported that in India the first case of COVID-19 was declared in Kerala on 30th January 2020. Meanwhile, the first case of COVID-19 in Pakistan was announced by the Pakistani Government on 26th February 2020 in Karachi. The economy of Pakistan quickly came to a standstill due to outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown (Waris *et al.*, 2020).

The COVID-19 related travel restrictions and lockdown of national borders negatively impacted on domestic and inbound tourism arrivals. Moreover, it also damaged inbound religious tourism to Kartarpur affecting tourism revenue and the loss of small-to-medium businesses related to the Kartarpur tourism supply-chains in Pakistan and India (Mubarak & Zin, 2020). Projections by UNWTO (2020) experts in Figure 2 show that domestic demand for travel and tourism was expected to recover earlier - by the second quarter of 2021, compared to international demand in fourth quarter of 2021.

The study from UNWTO (2020) suggested that if countries followed all safety and hygiene measures required, gradually lockdowns and border restrictions within a country and between countries could be removed. However, people would be hesitant to travel internationally, and slowly domestic tourism could give a push to this sector followed by tourists coming from neighbouring countries. As the Kartarpur Peace Corridor reopened on 17 November, 2021, several Sikh religious tourists began visiting Pakistan to celebrate the birthday of Guru Nanak (The Indian Express, 2021).

Religious Tourism

Travelling for religious commitments is one of the oldest forms of tourism that has been recently recognised as niche tourism where individuals travel to sacred and holy places for religious and spiritual experiences (Haq, 2021; Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016). The classic definition of religious tourism employed in this study was coined by Rinschede (1992:52):

[a] type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons ... [and] ... includes the visit of religious ceremonies and conferences, above all the visit of local, regional, national, and international religious centres.

This preceding definition accommodates tourists who travel to holy places, meet with sacred people, and attend religious events in order to fulfil rituals specified by their religion. Since the believers of Sikhism travel to Kartarpur as their most sacred centre, to fulfil their religious duties, this study recognises them as religious tourists. Since COVID-19 had a tremendous social, economic, and business impact on religious tourism stakeholders in Kartarpur Pakistan (Yezli & Khan, 2020), this research focuses on the economic impact of closing of pilgrimage, and religious events in the interest of public health.

Sikhism and Religious Tourism

The Kartarpur religious tourism corridor is the first step since 1947 towards building trust, cooperation, and peace between India and Pakistan (Bochkovskaya, 2021). The founder of the Sikh Religion, Guru Nanakji believed in one God and all-inclusiveness without any discrimination, hence Sikhism embraces good teachings from all

religions and spiritual traditions (Hasan & Khalid, 2020). The Punjab state, divided between India and Pakistan, accommodates a number of revered Sikh pilgrim sites, the birthplace Nankana Sahib, and Kartarpur, the resting place of Guru Nanakji, the founder of the Sikh religion (Baloch & Rehman, 2015; Bochkovskaya, 2021; Singh, 2019).

The Kartarpur Corridor is built across the Ravi River and was inaugurated in November 2019 to celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of the founder of the Sikh religion Guru-Nanakji, where he lived the last 19 years of his life, and passed away in 1539AD at the age of 70 (Bochkovskaya, 2021). Kartarpur corridor connects the Sikh Temple and shrine Dera-Baba Nanak Gurudwara on the Indian-Punjab side, with the Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara on the Pakistan-Punjab side (Singh, 2019). The building of the religious / spiritual tourism peace corridor from 2018 and its opening in November-2019, has many socio-economic, cultural, and peace-dividend benefits for both countries since it created many economic and diplomatic opportunities (Haq & Medhekar, 2019).

For Sikh pilgrims, a visit to Kartarpur Gurudwara (Figure 1) located in Pakistan is a pilgrimage to their holy-land, like the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah (Singh, 2019). Under the current Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, the country has liberalised visa-free travel for Sikh pilgrims from India, thus, facilitating their visit to Pakistan. Further, agreement was signed for reciprocal visits by Pakistani Sikhs to Dera-Baba Nanak Gurudwara, in Gurdaspur-India, or Pakistani Muslim and Hindu pilgrims to visit religious places on the Indian side of the border. However due to COVID-19, this cross-border religious tourism to Kartarpur was closed for more than 18 months.

Methodology

Due to COVID-19, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with the related government officials, the Kartarpur Religious Committee, pilgrims, or tourism operators. Moreover, since the authors of this paper also reside in different countries, the relevant and available qualitative secondary data had to be remotely analysed to study the impact of COVID-19 on Sikh religious tourism in Kartarpur. Credible data had to be collected from relevant literature, government tourism portals, online newspapers, and social media.

For this exploratory research, the qualitative method was adopted. Secondary information was collected from online / internet sources such as newspapers in India and Pakistan published between March and September 2020, on Kartarpur closing on 16th March 2020 due to COVID- 19, and re-opening on 29 June 2020. Internet database searches were undertaken using Web of Science, Emerald, Google Scholar, and other sources to identify relevant articles in journals. Key word searches were used looking for: Kartarpur corridor, Sikh Gurudwara, Pakistan, India, peace initiative, religious tourism, COVID-19, and economic impact. From the selected materials, the relevant content was examined by both authors separately, and applicable quotes were identified.

There was no direct information related to economic costs incurred by the closure of the Kartarpur Corridor due to the COVID-19 health threat. Thus relevant statements, information and quotes related to the Kartarpur religious tourism corridor were identified to determine the economic benefits, based on which COVID-19 related costs were calculated as discussed in findings.

Findings

There are no secondary statistical data available on any government websites regarding the economic impact of COVID-19 on Kartarpur religious tourism corridor; there is also a dearth of academic research on the topic. Primary data needs to be collected in the future by researchers to study the financial impact on tourism of such an event.

Therefore, newspaper comments / quotes from stakeholders / experts were collected to learn about the significance and impact of closing borders between India and Pakistan for Kartarpur pilgrims due to the coronavirus pandemic. Pakistan announced the re-opening of Kartarpur for pilgrims on 29th June 2020, for the anniversary of Maharajah Ranjit Singh of Lahore. However, the Indian government was cautious and did not open the official website for registration to visit Kartarpur in Pakistan. The corridor re-opened on both sides from 17th November 2021, when several Sikh pilgrims entered the visa-free corridor into Pakistan.

In wake of COVID-19 India outbreak, as a precautionary measure to contain and control spread of the disease, the travel and registration for Sri Kartarpur Sahib is temporarily suspended from 00:00 hours on March 16, 2020, till further orders,' a home ministry spokesperson said (Live-Mint, 2020).

The Indian Express (2020a, June) editorial expressed the following view on the importance of the Kartarpur corridor:

That is because however important it was for Pakistan, and whatever its reasons to push the Kartarpur corridor project, it has been as much in India's interests to be part of it. Accepting Pakistan's Kartarpur offer would help to keep one bridge with Pakistan intact, considering that most others have been steadily eroded or completely destroyed.

The Chief Minister of Indian Punjab declared to the Indian Express (2020b, June):

I want the Kartarpur Corridor to be open. There can be social distancing ... If they ask me, I will suggest that it can be reopened with social distancing'.

A Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbhandhik Committee spokesperson said that the Kartarpur Gurdwara would open on the death anniversary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. They commented:

Sangat from Pakistan can now visit Kartarpur Sahib Corridor. Sangat from Nankana Sahib and Lahore also went to Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib today...everything is ready here. Now we have been waiting for permission from the Indian government to open the Corridor. The Pakistan government has already announced its opening. All the safety arrangements have been made to entertain visitors from India (Indianexpress.com, 2020).

A spokesperson from Kartarpur Gurdwara Trust Property Board (KGTPB) told the media:

... pilgrims from India and Pakistan can visit, following social distancing rules. Further, public health and safety concerns are observed at the Kartarpur temple and special medical facilities arrangements made for safety of pilgrims.

Devotees wore masks, and they were made to wash hands with sanitisers. All the precautions related to COVID-19 were taken. There was proper arrangement of security (The Economic Times, 2020).

On the reopening of the Kartarpur corridor, a Global Sikh Council spokesperson commented:

... greater precautionary measures to be taken due to coronavirus ... use of food grade gloves for sewadars and volunteers performing sewa in langars [kitchen helpers] should be enforced. There is no hard and fast rule that pilgrims have to visit the gurdwara when such a disease is prevalent (The Indian Express, 2021).

The Pakistan Foreign Minister, in a Twitter post, commented:

As places of worship open up across the world, Pakistan prepares to reopen the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor for all Sikh pilgrims, conveying to the Indian side our readiness to reopen the corridor on 29 June 2020, the occasion of the death anniversary of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh (Twitter.com, 2020).

On 29th June 2020, the Prime Minister of Pakistan tweeted:

Pakistan today opened the Kartarpur Corridor. However, no Indian pilgrim visited it' due to fear of the pandemic (The Indian Express, 2020b).

A Pakistani Sikh pilgrim replied to the tweet saying:

Still there has been no green signal from India to allow Sikhs to visit the Gurdwara ... Pakistani Sikhs, however, are visiting it since June-29-2020 (The Economic Times, 2020).

In November 2019, on the Pakistan side, 76 immigration desks were set up with a capacity to cater for 10,000 pilgrims from India to travel visa free on special occasions and 5000 pilgrims daily. Based on reported estimates and exchange rates (Pakistani Rs. 185 = US\$ 1 - based on May 2022 exchange rates) Pakistan is expected to earn 1.56 crore Rupees² per-day and c.570 Crore Rupees³ (233 Crore Indian Rs.) per- annum from Kartarpur pilgrims (Press Trust of India, 2019).

[Based on a] US\$20 service fee, a spokesperson from Kartarpur reported: 'Since 5,000 pilgrims are allowed to visit Kartarpur, Pakistan, which will be charging USD 20 service fee per pilgrim, will earn USD 100,000 every day.'

2 1 crore = 10 million. Thus, c. US\$ 84,000 daily
3 c. US\$30 million

Economic Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Kartarpur Religious Tourism Corridor

Resulting from COVID-19, as a precautionary step, registration and pilgrimage to Kartarpur was temporarily suspended with the closure from 15th March 2020 of the international border between India and Pakistan (The Indian Express, 2020b). In the second week of March before this closure, nearly 4000 pilgrims travelled to Kartarpur Temple. The Punjab government data (Table 1), record a total of 3871 pilgrims visiting Kartarpur in that week.

From the data (The Indian Express 14 March 2000), the loss of revenue for Pakistan can be calculated by considering a US\$20 facilitation service fee for each pilgrim, to cover the costs for security and complementary coach return ride from the border to Kartarpur temple. Based on the 3871 pilgrims who visited during the week before the border closed due to coronavirus, there has been a revenue loss of US\$ 77,420 in facilitation service fees. Furthermore, approximately US\$100-200 was spent by the 3871 pilgrims, to buy religious souvenirs and other artefacts made in Pakistan such as shawls, traditional shoes, clothes, and sweets at the Kartarpur shopping arcade. Hence the aggregate revenue loss was between US\$ 3,87,100 and US\$ 7,74,002.

Similarly, on the Indian side of the border, the 3871 pilgrims would have paid for transport costs up to the immigration terminal, hotel accommodation, food, and shopping. This is estimated to represent a loss of approximately US\$ 500,000 in revenue to the transport sector and other services provided to pilgrims.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tourism related businesses servicing tourists and located along the Kartarpur corridor, the travel value supply chains, and job losses are very significant for India and Pakistan. COVID-19 has disrupted the tourism supply-chain that contributes nearly US\$5 million to the local economy (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic having grounded airlines and closed borders resulted in zero arrivals at Kartarpur and tourism operators had to release many employees (Tourism & Hospitality, 2020).

On 29 June 2020, during the death anniversary of Maharajah Ranjit Singh of Lahore, past Sikh Ruler of greater Punjab, the Pakistani Government announced the

March 2020	Number of Pilgrims
7 March	585
8	1,111
9	618
10	417
11	452
12	331
13	357
14	Border closed
Total	3871

Source: The Indian Express 14-March-2020

re-opening of the Kartarpur corridor, after three months of closure due to Coronavirus lockdown (The Economic Times, 2020). The Sikh Gurudwara Committee made special arrangements for the health and safety of the pilgrims. According to the Evacuee Trust Property Board Deputy Director in Pakistan, no Indian pilgrims crossed the border after reopening, to visit Gurudwara Darbar-sahib and Kartarpur- sahib in Pakistan due to fear of COVID-19. The Indian government did not reopen the pilgrim's online-registration desk, which remained closed temporarily (The Economic Times, 2020).

According to The Indian Express (2021), the Pakistani Government opened the Kartarpur Shrine and Corridor for Sikh pilgrims to celebrate the 482nd death anniversary of Guru Nanakji. All pilgrims had to be fully vaccinated with certificates, and in possession of Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test reports that were not more than 72 hours old. On arrival at the airport or immigration, a Rapid Antigen Test was taken, and those with positive results were not be allowed to enter the country. A maximum of 300 people were allowed to enter the shrine at one time, maintaining social distancing, wearing masks and following the public health hygiene and safety rules. The Ministry of National Health Services in Pakistan also identified three categories of travellers from countries to prevent the spread of COVID-19. (A) Tourists from category 'A' countries were exempt from mandatory COVID-19 tests. (B) Tourists from category 'B' countries were required to show a negative 72 hours old (RT-PCR) test report. (C) Tourists from category 'C' countries were restricted from entry and could travel only under (NCOC) guidelines.

Discussion

Globally, COVID-19 caused havoc at macro and micro economic levels, more so in the case of developing countries such as India and Pakistan (Mishra, 2020; Waris *et al.*, 2020). The fall in productivity impacted on exchange rate depreciation, caused hikes in food prices due to panic buying and shortages, import and export trade imbalances, increased unemployment and overall disruption in supply-chains for food, medicines and other commodities. As a risk management preventative strategy, it was important to have an integrated policy response and to also implement strategies post-recovery to help casual and vulnerable workers in the religious tourism sector.

Based on these learnings, all tourism businesses should make it a mandatory practice to follow all of the health and hygiene regulations of agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) at all times. Post-pandemic strategy in India and Pakistan shall be focussed towards promoting trade, travel, and tourism within the South-Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries trading block. The economic dividend reaped from a functional SAARC trading block will have a multiplier effects for the economies of the SAARC region, more so, because of the geographical proximity and shared history, culture and familial relationships across the borders. The most immediate challenge is to restart the grounded airlines, bus and train services in the domestic markets and gradually open them for bordering SAARC countries, with certified proof of COVID-19 vaccine.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

Solutions are suggested for two major stakeholders involved in religious tourism related to Kartarpur: government departments and private tourism agencies. Cross-border cooperation is vital for development projects that benefit both countries and in the case of natural disasters and health epidemics (Castanho, Loures, Fernández, & Pozo, 2018), it is essential to manage geopolitical risks to governments and religious institutions (Raj & Bozonelos, 2020). Peace time, cooperative economic development strategies should be put in place by India and Pakistan with common goals. In crises such as COVID-19, commitment is required by all public and private stakeholders to work together with all available resources to contain and stop the spread of the

virus. Lee *et al.* (2021) suggested that a collaborative role between religious communities, health departments, and the government is required to minimise transmission, and adaptation of COVID-19 strategies to contain the coronavirus in the early stages and in future health crisis.

Five levels of cooperative commitment by cross-border stakeholders are proposed for economic development by Castanho *et al.* (2018) as given in Table-2 and explained.

Awareness Raising Cooperation: The Governments of India and Pakistan should play key roles with the support and advice of medical experts to raise awareness amongst public and private stakeholders about the coronavirus and introduce regulatory measures. This is particularly important at religious places where close contacts and large gatherings under one roof or place of worship should be well managed. Each ministry of health should use media to spread awareness about health and safety measures to be taken and to continue thereafter post-pandemic.

Mutual Aid Cooperation: Cooperation is required from both countries to mutually help each other through sharing spare / surplus resources during and post-pandemic, to overcome the economic impact of the crisis for religious tourism at Kartarpur. It is important for the management to keep their buildings and grounds clean, provide hygienic washroom facilities, and regularly empty rubbish bins on both sides of the border.

Functional Cooperation: Functional cooperation is required between the ministries related to cross-border security, health, and travel. The related businesses and committees and places of worship, where prayers, events, weddings, and funeral related religious rituals are performed, need to implement pre-and post-pandemic public-health strategies.

Table 2: Cross-Border Cooperation Factors for Natural and COVID-19 Health Crisis

1. Awareness Raising Cooperation
2. Mutual Aid Cooperation
3. Functional Cooperation
4. Cooperation for Medical Staff and Equipment
5. Cooperation for Common Management of Public Resources

Source: Developed & adopted from Castanho *et al.* (2018)

Cooperation for Medical Staff and Equipment:

Cooperation is required to set-up medical clinics and medical tourism hospitals and isolation wards for all pilgrims for fever-testing, vaccine, and any health emergency, on both sides of the Kartarpur border and at the pilgrimage site. Further, care should also be taken for the disposal of bio-medical waste to prevent infections.

Cooperation for Common Management of Public Resources:

It is essential that any economic crisis that follows should be managed with cooperation from all government bodies in addition to public and private stakeholders involved with the corridor. For example, various measures can be taken from all players in keeping public places, places of worships, and parks clean. The role of health and hygiene regulatory and sanitary inspectors is essential to monitor safety and hygiene at the Kartarpur Complex.

Government Departments

Governments of India and Pakistan should allow tourists who have antibodies against the coronavirus to travel across countries. Likewise, transportation, accommodation, and food companies around Kartarpur corridor could offer special discounts to such tourists with antibodies and corona vaccination. Innovative solutions such as online religious / spiritual pilgrimage, prayer, and access to the Kartarpur Gurdwara inner religious sanctum, museum, grounds and surrounding can be provided to the devotees (Raj & Griffin, 2020). An online donation box could be available to help workers who are responsible for keeping the Gurudwara clean during these COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Special packages could be organised for the niche segment of religious tourists who have been cured and may require spiritual rehabilitation. Governments from both sides must cooperate to carefully monitor the selection and movement of such individuals, as some less deserving anti-peace individuals could use these packages to enter the place and cause havoc. Business loans for transportation, accommodation and food companies in Kartarpur Corridor could be frozen, free renewal of annual business licenses and one-year tax holiday could strengthen the financial positions of all involved (Mishra, 2020).

Tourism Agencies

Tourism agencies can design and implement a digital and social media marketing strategy to connect with potential religious tourists staying at home. This link will help to maintain communication lines with tourists and keep them updated about any developments in Kartarpur Corridor and build relationship-based branding.

The following strategies are suggested for survival and revival of Kartarpur religious tourism during and post-pandemic times:

Taking Responsible Steps in Returning to Tourism:

All levels of the government must take steps to increase domestic travel and tourism demand to ensure the sustainability of religious tourism. Post-COVID, religious tourism related events and visits to Kartarpur should be well organised making sure that visitors show vaccination proof, maintain social distance, continue hand-washing, wear masks, while also ensuring protection of the natural environment while maintaining infection control at places of worships and religious events.

WHO Health and Hygiene Standards: Post-pandemic, the ministry of tourism and the private travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors must come up with innovative models, for promoting hygiene and safety measures at Kartarpur. These measures will help to mitigate any future travel risks caused due to other mutated variants such as omicron. Similar to personal security at airports, tourists should be made to pass through health security in addition to checking for proof of vaccine - visa/pass, doctors' certificate and further, anyone with temperature / flu, should not be allowed to cross the border or enter the Holy place.

Religious tourism usually involves the gathering of pilgrims, resulting in very close proximity and no social distancing. Therefore, it is important that such health and hygiene practices as suggested and advised during the pandemic, should be always maintained in Holy places of worship such as Kartarpur, and at least a meter of distance to be maintained. Permanent health clinics must be established at both sides of the border.

Adopting Information Technology: Tourism related businesses, museums, heritage sites, and national parks could adopt technology, make videos, and arrange virtual tour bookings for online prayers and tours at Kartarpur

in case of future travel restrictions. This way, tourists can connect from their homes to the Holy places. Adopting wearable smart wristbands, showing corona vaccination evidence, social distancing in religious places, and wearing of masks are all ways to allow people to visit places of worship and sacred gatherings, such as at Kartarpur.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Post-pandemic tourism recovery strategic plans must be put in place with PPPs to deal with any future global and national emergency responses to health crisis and natural disasters. For example, along the Kartarpur corridor, travel agents, hotel, restaurants, homestays, and transport could be provided with financial support and training in public-health hygiene, first-aid, garbage disposal, recycling, traffic, and pollution management to be followed in the post-pandemic period, to raise standards and improve the regular practice of doing business.

Sustainable Development: Sustainable development of religious tourism sites in general and in Kartarpur religious tourism corridor in particular, will help to achieve a range of the interconnected United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) for developing countries like India and Pakistan. These goals include: no poverty, zero hunger, good health, education for all, job opportunities, social equality, responsible production and consumption, and global partnerships for economic development (UNSDG, 2020). All of these could be targeted in future developments at this site.

Conclusion

This paper explored the impact of COVID-19 on economy, trade, and religious tourism related businesses across the Kartarpur Gurudwara Religious Tourism corridor between Pakistan and India. This research has contributed to the knowledge of religious tourism and pilgrimage by enhancing the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on niche religious tourism by examining the holiest Sikh temple site at Kartarpur. The paper presented managerial and policy implications outlining the adherence to WHO and government regulatory measures necessary to minimise and contain the spread of the virus in religious gatherings.

Travel lockdowns negatively impacted not only by cutting the number of pilgrims but also by impacting all small-to-medium businesses catering to religious tourists in the area. The estimated economic loss of revenue from c. 4000 pilgrims each day to Kartarpur who each pay a US\$20 visitation fee is significant. Kartarpur religious tourism reopened on 17 November, 2021, and the authorities 'smartly' observed all safety measures for responsible tourism by following vaccination, social distancing, health, hygiene, and fever-clinic check requirements/regulations for religious tourists/pilgrims. Governments cannot be complacent, as subsequent waves of coronavirus caused serious damage, as seen with the 2021 'Kumbh Mela' mass-gathering and other devastating impacts on India and Nepal.

The significant role played by secular spiritual tourism as a healing power for peace, interfaith-harmony, job-creation, economic development, growth, and building bilateral relations between India and Pakistan cannot be under-estimated. The success of opening the Kartarpur peace corridor is important for Pakistan and India, as it gives a message of spiritual freedom, peace, trust and developing trade and tourism links between the two nations with significant economic benefits. Furthermore, two years of COVID-19 have taught peoples to co-work and co-exist. India could build on this model by opening many other religious and spiritual sites including heritage mosques for visits from Pakistani religious tourists such as Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah and Jumma Masjid, in Delhi, and Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti Dargah in Ajmer. Such a step would promote peace, trade, tourism and economic development which would be mutually beneficial to both countries with a significant multiplier effect.

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