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RELIGIOUS TOURISM; A REFERENCE TO SAIDPUR VILLAGE, ISLAMABAD

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ABSTRACT

Religious tourism consists of two major kinds, i.e. "Pilgrim tourism" and "Tourism of a sight-seeing informative orientation". In Asian region, tourism by Muslims is a prominent activity when seen specifically for Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan. The study focuses on locating and exploring the religious tourism in Saidpur model village, Islamabad. It studies the certain practices performed by the religious tourists to the religious sites in the study locale. The main themes derived are: 1. Location and Information about the religious sites for tourists and 2. Rituals and Practices of the visitors. In the case of Saidpur village, a proper trust to regulate religious tours can be established to assist and facilitate the tourists, as well as to provide the locals with sufficient resources to serve the visitors and maintain their religious heritage, leading to an efficient effort to promote religious tourism in the Saidpur Village.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has been identified as a distinct form of tourism by various scholars. It has been mentioned as a pathway for the religious tourists to satisfy and quench the spiritual and religious thirst of the travellers or tourists. The religious tourists acquire the opportunity to observe,

experience life in a religious cult, perform rituals and ceremonies, and earn religious attributes. It usually involves visits to a religious site, and such trips are usually planned due to holidays, festivals, and activities in a cult. Thus, it can be said that religious tourism is irrespectively defined of other forms of tourism. It is defined by

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Aleksandrova A. U. as "a set of relations and phenomena which emerge during people's moving and staying in places, other than their constant place of residence and work" (Kurmanaliyeva, et al., 2014). In certain domains, it is also referred to as Spiritual or faith tourism. But most of the times, Religious tourism comes in a larger perspective, where the travellers travel to satisfy both their spiritual and religious needs. Whereas, spiritual tourism may or may not always be a part of religious tourism (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2017).

Religious tourism consists of two major kinds, i.e. "Pilgrim tourism" and "Tourism of a sight-seeing informative orientation" (Kurmanaliyeva, et al., 2014). Religious tourism can be elaborated by giving the statement that "it may be referred to as the travel that takes place outside the usual environment for religious purposes". Travelling to attend wedding ceremonies or funerals usually comes under the category of visiting family or friends, but when these events carry a religious significance, and priests, religious leaders, or any other traveller travel to such events with a religious affiliation, it falls under the category of religious tourism. Most often, religious tourism can also be linked with pilgrimage and spiritual tourism, and cultural and heritage tourism as the religious tourists often get connected with certain cultural sites, carry out spiritual activities, and perform pilgrimages during their religious tours. Some of the main characteristics of religious tourism include pilgrimage for the sake of worship, gratifying, confessing sins or taking vows, searching for spiritual salvation, attending certain religious events such as religious holiday/festival, gaining religious knowledge, communicating with religious leaders as well as fellow religious tourists for a common cause, regulating the

marketing of tourism products, maintaining peace amongst the locals and tourists, and portraying the originality of the religious site (Kapur, 2018).

According to the UN World Tourist Organization (UNWTO), about 300-330 million tourists travel to experience the world's major religious sites annually. The Secretary General UNWTO, Taleb Rifai, positively acclaims that "religious tourism can be among the most important tools to nourish inclusive and sustainable development" (Griffin & Raj, 2017). Religious tourism has been found the most beneficial in the following three domains:

- Highlights humanity's common heritage and community's resources to be utilized and preserved efficiently
- Development and capacity-building of the local community
- Enhances cultural importance

Along with these benefits, religious tourism faces some of the following challenges as well, according to the UNWTO:

- Maintenance and preservation of religious memorials and places
- Sustaining respect for the religious traditions
- And the inclusive development of the local community and avoiding any damage to the local community's economic and social opportunities

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study focuses on locating and exploring the religious tourism in Saidpur model village, Islamabad. It studies the certain practices performed by the religious tourists to the religious sites in the study locale.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are:

- To locate the possible religious sites for religious tourism in Saidpur Model Village
- To explore the practices and rituals performed by these tourists

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious tourism has been one of the main forms of tourism while talking about tourist activities in India. India has long been a host to a number of religions, such as Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity, despite being a Hindu majority. In India, two main forms of tourism has been noted to be found. Domestic tourist, who already lives there and has a deep spiritual connection with the worshipped one and the religious site itself through their religious lineage. The other form is the "Foreign Tourist", who comes from another place and religion and experiences the same ethical response as the destination has to offer, but for the sake of their own spiritual experiences. Where religious tourism talks about the religious tourists, an important aspect of it is the domestic market where it is existing. The religious sites have become tangible assets in the present socio-economic structures. They act as infrastructures whereby a number of people receive their employment. On the basis of these religious products and the region of travelling, religious tourism is divided into the categories as Pilgrimages, Missionary travel, leisure vacations, monastery visits, religious tourist attractions, and faith-based tours (Team, 2012).

According to the literature, some of the main reasons of religious tourism and why many travelers travel on the basis of religious ambitions include: association with various cultures and religions, building social capital by socializing and making networks with people of other religions and cultures which allows them to blend their

socio-cultural experiences, available resources for religious groups to travel, and enabling people to make their own life decisions and experience new conditions of living by assessing their usual environment objectively (Kurmanaliyeva, et al., 2014).

In Asian region, the tourism by Muslims is a prominent activity when seen especially for Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan. Every Muslim has to perform the Hajj annually, if they acquire the means and possess the capability to. Other than the Hajj, they also have to perform the Umrah throughout the year. Another concept of "Ziyarat" has enabled the Muslims to perform religious tourism which holds immense significance in domestic as well as foreign tourism in Islam. The preservation and maintenance of the religious sites is equally important in determining the basis of religious tourism, not only for the sake of commoditization and generating revenues, but also to provide services and care to the visitors and participants. Some of the international initiatives to maintain the sacred sites sustainably include "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC Partnership), and Copenhagen Agreement from the Gothenburg Symposium on Tourism and Travel in the Green Economy" (Organization, 2011).

Recently, the initiative to establish the Kartarpur Corridor is an example of promoting religious tourism across borders. The signing of the border agreement between India and Pakistan has provided the Sikh communities of India, Pakistan and Europe an opportunity to visit the birthplace of their religion and the most sacred site of Sikhism, i.e. the centre of activities carried out by the founder of Sikhism Baba Guru Nanak Devji (Pakistan, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was qualitative in its nature. The study was exploratory, as little research has previously been conducted on the religious aspects of Saidpur village. It aims to explore and document the practices by the tourists who visit the religious sites in this village. The obtained data was analyzed by thematic analysis, extracting main themes out of the acquired information and delineating the important facts according to the objectives.

METHODS

The methods of collecting relevant data were observations and conduction of interviews. Much information was gathered by observing the locale and the activities of the tourists. 5 respondents were interviewed, among whom one was the key informant.

TOOLS

The tools for gathering information and required data were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and key informant. Interview guide was pre-sketched so as to have an idea about the nature of the questions to be asked from the few respondents.

Participant Observation:

The researcher conducted participant observation by performing some of the rituals with the tourists, such as lighting up the candles or *diyas*, praying at the shrine, and following the elements of respect.

Semi-structured Interviews:

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared according to the objectives of the research, and probing questions were asked as per each respondent's answers. One of the respondents was interviewed with unstructured questions.

Key Informant:

A key informant was used as a tool to gather relevant information, who was the guard at the gate of the main shrine in Saidpur Village.

SAMPLING

The sampling was done based on Random sampling technique, where the respondents were selected randomly. 4 respondents were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews, while 1 respondent was interviewed with unstructured questions.

Study locale

The study was conducted at Saidpur Village, Islamabad, which is located at the foot of Margalla Hills to the East of Daman e Koh. It was named after Sultan Said Khan, son of Sultan Sarang Khan. Later, a Hindu commander Raja Man Singh added a flavor of Hinduism by establishing Hindu temples and ponds for worshipping in the village. Saidpur Village is popular due to the amalgam of heritage and civilizations that are found here in traces. The Village has been turned into a Model Village and a mix of cultural and historical attraction sites by the Capital Development Authority in 2008. Mainly, the data was collected from the shrine which is located in the beginning of Saidpur village, which is the shrine of a Sufi saint Hazrat Munawar Hussain Shah Chisti Sabri (a.r).

Limitations of the study

The boundaries of the research were limited by time constraints as well as hesitance by the locals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the data collected by observations and the interviews of 5 respondents, the main themes which were derived according to the research objectives were:

1. Location and Information about the religious sites for tourists

The sites which were found during the research in Saidpur village were two Sufi shrines, a Hindu temple, and a sitting area of a Sufi saint which was made into a memorial for the visitors. According to one respondent, who was also the key informant and the guard at the Shrine's main gate, the Sufi Saint Hazrat Munawwar Hussain Shah Chishti Sabri (a.r) departed from the world on 4th Jamadi us Sani 1410 Hijri, and 13th of January 1989 as per the Gregorian Calendar. According to him, the Saint was born in Attock on 12th of January. The Sufi saint belongs to the spiritual lineage of Chishtia and Sabria. The key informant also told that the Sufi saint's "khilafat" came from Hazrat Rehm-ud-din (a.r) Khawaja Nagar Hassan Abdal. The respondent told the researcher that many visitors visit the shrine who have their desires. Visitors include newly married couple, old men, women, and sometimes children with them. As per the key informant, the Sufi Saint used to sit under a mango tree in the Japanese park, due to which he is famously known as "*Aam Wali Sarkar*". The saint was requested to move from that place when the Japanese park began to construct. The saint used his stick to mark the territory of the current area of the shrine. On the very back of the shrine, i.e. the area between the shrine and the park territory, there used to be a stream of clean water where devotees used to perform "*Wuzu*". The key informant told the researcher that any person who was not properly cleansed was not allowed towards the place where the Saint used to sit. Even now after Maghrib, people are not allowed to go towards that place. The place of the shrine was natural and serene, where goats and even horses were left free to roam around. There was a mosque just beside the shrine, known as Al-Khizar mosque.

Another religious site found was a Banyan tree where a stone was laid mentioning it as the place where another Sufi saint, Hazrat Bari Imam Sarkar (a.r) used to sit and meditate. The shrine of Hazrat Bari Imam (a.r) is in Nurpur Shahan village. The Banyan tree is located just on the side of the main Margalla road, and has lots of colorful threads knotted around, which made it evident that visitors come around to pray and pay regards at the site.

Another religious site known to be there in Saidpur Village is the *baithak* or the sitting place of Sakhi Zinda Pir, or "the living saint" located in the Margalla hills. Some steps have to be climbed upwards from Des Pardes restaurant to reach the site. There are many Banyan trees there, and wild monkeys freely play and move around the site. One of the respondents was selected who used to look after that place. He was there cleaning the place. According to him, it was the *baithak* of Khwaja Khizar, who is known to be a living saint, helping people. There was another grave beside the sitting place, the respondent told that it was the grave of a devotee who used to spend her time there. At the site, goats were moving and grazing freely. The respondent told that there is also a village at that height, a few feet away from the religious site.

2. Rituals and Practices of the visitors

According to the observational data and the interviews of the respondents and the key informant, there were many visitors who visited the shrine at the entrance of Saidpur village. A woman who came to the shrine was observed. Both men and women were allowed to enter the shrine. As she entered the shrine, she took her shoes off and went inside. After kissing the grave, she began to cry while praying and saying out a bit louder how she had come from a faraway place to visit and ask for her son to get better who

was ill. After getting to know from her about her miseries, I asked her where she had come from and what beliefs she had while coming here. The woman responded that she was here from all the way from Jhelum with her brother to pray for the fast recovery of her son. She had brought her son here to Islamabad for his treatment and here to pray. She told how she had sworn a *mannat* that she would distribute food among the poor if her son would recover from epilepsy. She told she had religious affiliation with the shrine as her family was a devotee to the saint. Another respondent, who was a male visitor told that he experienced peace there, as the environment was quiet and so he would just sit there for hours and pray. Visitors would light up the candles and *diyas* as their devotional activities. There was another respondent who was selected because he used to serve tea to anyone who would come there, and sometimes he would offer food as well. He told the researcher that a number of visitors come to the shrine, some are locals of Saidpur village while a few come from far distances. According to him, the Urs, or the annual commemoration of the death anniversary of the Saint was celebrated on 13th, 14th and 15th of January every year. Every year the Urs is celebrated in a differently, except the Qawwali sessions, mostly local from the Potowari belt. A whole night is dedicated to this event. Before the Urs starts, whole of the Shrine is decorated with lights. Then "*Daalis*" arrive at the shrine and show their love by singing various spiritual songs and offering regards to the saint. "*Chaddar*" or the sheets on the grave are given by the devotees. These *chaddars* have Green, Red and Black colour with names of Allah and "*Ehl e Bait*" written on them. On the Second day of the Urs the dance of the horses is performed, and whole night Qawwali is performed at the shrine. The third day, same

events happen and visitor including males, females and transgenders visit the shrines paying their regards to the pious. During the Urs there is a complete arrangement of "*Langar*" everyday, which includes Rice, Halwa and tea. Langar is offered to the visitors throughout the day and night. The finances are through the Mujawir who is a wealthy man. The Urs is celebrated with full passion and rich belief of people according to the respondent. The key informant also showed an Oak tree on the right side of the shrine, cemented sitting area was made on one side of which. There was a small tiled hut which had small lamps filled with oil, sacred to the devotees for all the diseases. They used them for the cure of their diseases and skin related issues.

According to the respondent from the *baithak*, visitors come and pray at the sitting area of Sakhi Zinda Pir, and tie the knots with green and red threads on the barks of the tree to pledge on a *mannat*. Another concept used by the visitors is of *waseela*. According to the visitors, they believe that there is a faster way for prayers to get accepted by Allah, which is through the pious saints who are near to Him in terms of sanctity and deeds. Fortunately, one of the days for data collection was Thursday, which revealed that it was the day in the week when the visitors would specially come to pray and pay their regards to Sakhi Zinda Pir. Thursday was the most packed day at the *baithak* of Zinda Pir in Saidpur Village. There are many people who come for the first time and pray at the site even if they are not regular visitors. One of the respondents who was there on Thursday afternoon told that she was not a regular visitor to the place, but that she had heard about the place from her friend, and secondly because she was there at one of the eateries in Saidpur village. So she decided to make a tour to the site as well.

As per the data collected by the participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, it is clear that Saidpur Village is a prominent site for religious tourism and tourists who are not even regular devotees, come to visit the sites. This is partly due to the natural scenic beauty of the village, and also due to the religious affiliations they carry with these religious sites and the sacred saints. According to the literature cited, the local visitors from within Islamabad were the domestic tourists who had a developed spiritual connection with their purpose of tours. They were the "domestic tourists". While those who were there to enhance their own spiritual experiences but did not have any affiliation of their own were the "foreign tourists", such as one of the respondents at the *baithak* of Sakhi Zinda Pir. The reasons of religious tourism, as highlighted by literature, are evident in the data collected. For example, pilgrimage for the sake of worship, gratifying, confessing sins or taking vows, searching for spiritual salvation, attending certain religious events such as religious holiday/festival, gaining religious knowledge, regulating the marketing of tourism products, maintaining peace amongst the locals and tourists, and portraying the originality of the religious site, can be found in the tourists and visitors of Saidpur village. The shrine of Hazrat Munawwar Hussain Shah Chishti Sabri (a.r) was reconstructed and many new objects were added to the building. Moreover, the Al-Khizar Mosque was also built with the shrine. This portrayed the commoditization of the shrine. Most of the respondents interviewed were "Pilgrim tourists". Talking about the sub-categories of religious tourism based on the region of travelling according to literature, the visitors who come to attend the Urs fall in the category of tourism of "Pilgrimage". Those who come

to visit the religious site for their own religious purpose fall under the category to "faith-based tour", while those who had only heard of the site and came to observe it were "religious tourist attraction" tourists.

As per the advantages of religious tourism according to the UNWTO, this study highlights how the religious tourism in Saidpur village has made these sites a common heritage for different people of different backgrounds and life stories, how these sites have led to the development of the local community either in terms of commodification or social skills when they interact with a diversity of people, and how their local culture is preserved and promoted when people from various backgrounds come at the sites to visit. Along with these benefits, religious tourism faces some of the following challenges as well, according to the UNWTO and which need to be focused in Saidpur as well, which are:

- Maintenance and preservation of religious memorials and places
- The inclusive development of the local community and avoiding any damage to the local community's economic and social opportunities

CONCLUSION

Religious tourism consists of two major kinds i.e. Pilgrim tourism and Tourism for sight-seeing orientation, according to literature. It also consists of various categories depending upon the region of travelling, i.e. Pilgrimage, Missionary travel, leisure vacations, monastery visits, religious tourist attractions, and faith-based tours (Team, 2012). Among many reasons of religious tourism, some of the main reasons include pilgrimage for the sake of worship, gratifying, confessing sins or taking vows, searching for spiritual salvation, attending certain religious events such as religious holiday/festival, gaining religious

knowledge, communicating with religious leaders as well as fellow religious tourists for a common cause, regulating the marketing of tourism products, maintaining peace amongst the locals and tourists, and portraying the originality of the religious site. Religious tourism has benefits as well. However, it is facing threats and challenges according to the UNWTO, which needs to be looked after. In the case of Saidpur village, a proper trust to regulate religious tours can be established to assist and facilitate the tourists, as well as to provide the locals with sufficient resources to serve the visitors and maintain their religious heritage, leading to an efficient effort to promote religious tourism in the Saidpur Village.

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