

Religious Tourism and Peace Building: Kartarpur Corridor as a Peace Symbol in India-Pakistan Conflict and Inter-Faith Harmony

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ABSTRACT

Sri Kartarpur Sahib is one of the most sacred religious sites for over twenty-seven million followers of Sikh religion around the world. This religious site known as gurdwara became a part of the premises of the state of Pakistan according to the partition plan in 1947. Sikh pilgrims desiring to visit this sacred place have always found it difficult due to the tensions between the two states of India and Pakistan. Finally, in August 2018, the newly elected Pakistani government under premiership of Mr. Imran Khan announced its intention to build a connecting corridor from Dera Baba Nanak in India to Kartarpur Sahib for the Sikh pilgrims. While it was generally considered a highly positive gesture towards building peace in the region, there was some negative response from the Indian side in particular. This paper discusses brief history of Kartarpur Sahib, the implications of the decision of constructing corridor by the Pakistan government and its importance in building peace between the two states and creating inter-faith harmony within Pakistan. An exploratory, historical and descriptive method has been applied. Besides consulting books and newspaper reports on this issue, two interviews were conducted to analyze contemporary situation. The results show that the move by the Pakistani government can very well be considered a way forward in peace building process and hurdles in implementation of a peace-oriented gesture need to be removed to promote inter-faith and inter-state harmony.

Key Words: Sri Kartarpur Sahib, Sikh religion, gurdwara, Pakistan, Inter-fairharmony

Methodology

An exploratory, descriptive and historical method has been applied. Historical data have been collected from books and recent developments have been analyzed with help of the newspapers. To support the historical data, two interviews have been conducted. Interviewees included Mr. Ramesh Singh Arora, a legislator from Punjab Assembly and Mr. Rai Aziz Ullah Khan. Sikh population according to Pakistan National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) is approximately 50,000. Mr. Arora was the first Sikh legislator elected to Punjab Assembly in 2013. He is currently Patron-in Chief of the Pakistan Sikh Council

and a member of the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Mr. Rai Aziz Ullah Khan is a former Pakistani parliamentarian who was elected from his ancestral constituency in Sahiwal, Punjab as a member of National Assembly in 2002. He has joined Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf and has been appointed as a member of party's core committee and deputy organizer of its Punjab unit since 2018. He is an active Sikh-Muslim harmony activist, whose family is the custodian of holy "Ganga Sagar" held sacred by Sikh community. The consent of both the interviewees was duly taken for their views to be made a part of this research paper.

Historical background

In intense conflict situations there always remain certain symbolic factors that can reduce the intensity of violent sentiments and can be used as harbingers of peace by peace builders. Existence of religious communities across borders can be such a factor. India and Pakistan are two neighbor states who have been through a consistent phase of multiple conflicts since their very inception as sovereign states with a difference of one day in 1947. There have been numerous attempts at peace building at different levels, but they have often been hurled by certain political expediencies or events jeopardizing the environment of trust. One of such attempts was the offer made by the newly elected Pakistan government in August 2018 of opening the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh pilgrims.

The historical Sikh religious sanctuary (gurdwara) popularly known as Sri Kartarpur Sahib is situated in a village Kothe Pind of district Shakargarh in division Narowal of Punjab, Pakistan. It is believed that the founder of the Sikh religion Baba Guru Nanak spent his last days at this place and is buried here. He is the most respected religious figure for the Sikh community around the world and being his burial place Kartarpur is one of the most sacred religious sites for them. Its old building was destroyed due to floods and was rebuilt by Sardar Bhopinder Singh, the then ruler of the princely state of Patiala during 1920-29. Pakistan government started its reconstruction process in 1995 which was completed in 2004 and the gurdwara was fully opened for the visitors. It's a spacious building standing on the river Ravi's bank and surrounded by forest trees. Guru Nanak Sahib the founder of the Sikh religion, was born in Nankana Sahib, Pakistan in 1499 and came to Kartarpur in 1521. He founded a village that he named Kartarpur and lived here till his death in 1539 (Duggal, p29). He was considered a Guru by the Sikhs and a spiritual figure by the Muslim population of the region. There was a controversy created after his death regarding his burial. The myth says that his body turned into flowers and his last proceedings were conducted according to both the faiths, hence there's both a *samadh* and a grave of Baba Guru Nanak in Kartarpur Sahib making it religiously equally important for both the Sikhs and the Muslims. (Iqbal, 2009)

The Multi-faith importance of Kartarpur Sahib and year 2019

Baba Guru Nanak's message is a universal humanist message. He is considered a sacred figure by the Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and the Christian communities of the region and worldwide in general. They all visit the shrines associated with him as an expression of their respect. Kartarpur Sahib being his burial place is a sacred shrine and Sikhs and other people who appreciate his vision of humanism around the globe have an earnest desire to visit and pay their tribute in their own way. His writings are equally applicable to believers of diverse faiths. "Our deeds are the books the mind writes in the ink (of desire). And the writing is of two kinds; good and bad, and, then, as drives us the writ of habit, so are we driven. But God has infinite virtues", said Nanak as quoted in his national biography (Singh, Gopal 1967). Baba Guru Nanak had taken up the title for himself of guru which means teacher. He perceived his role as a teacher who was supposed to guide people on the true path and enlighten them that our deeds define our destiny, the concept of Karma. (Scott, 1930) Though he was born in a Khashtri Hindu family, but he took the task of reforming the religious thought of Hinduism and presented the concept of a monolithic religion. Tauheed (Oneness of God) is a concept close to the Muslim theology and therefore Baba Nanak's message has a strong appeal in Muslim community also. (Kamran, 2006). "Guru Nanak preached through his poetry, and his works have a didacticism explaining his philosophy of life and exhorting others to a particular way of living. Most didactic poetry suffers from a comparing narrowness imposed by the purpose for which it is written, but Guru Nanak's poetry displays a remarkable freedom of expression. The beauty of pastoral Punjab aroused him to religious and poetic frenzy" (Singh, 2016).

Guru Nanak's message continues to be the symbol of peaceful traditions of rural Punjab.

"We assume that because Nanak's teachings were later seen to be successful among the rural people of the Punjab, it follows that they were successful from the very beginning, and that consequently he attracted many rural people to his center in Kartarpur during his lifetime. This would be natural enough. A teacher earns a reputation for his piety and for communicating the message of divine liberation. The word spreads around the neighboring villages and even those further away, and soon the people are coming for darshan. They come expecting blessing and having received it they depart. It is all quite natural and believable, and doubtless it is true". (McLeod, 2010)

He had offered a homage to the message of Islam by visiting Mecca along with his friend Mardana. A famous story associated with his visit is narrated that

while he was sleeping in Ka'ba, a Muslim priest Kazi Rukn-ud Din angrily said," Infidel, how dare you dishonor God's house by turning your feet towards it!" . Nanak's reply was," Turn them if you can, in a direction where the house of God is not". (Latif,1997) He is a spiritual figure respected by the majority Muslim community of the region and worldwide also and his anniversary is expected to be attended by people of diverse faiths.

Year 2019 is the 550th Birth Anniversary of the great Guru Nanak and a huge number of visitors is expected to visit all Sikh shrines including Nankana Sahib, Panja Sahib and Kartarpur Sahib. Kartarpur is the easiest accessible shrine from India if the corridor is built before November when the ceremonies are going to take place.

For visiting Pakistan, the Indian citizens have to go through a tedious process of visa acquisition. The Kartarpur Sahib is actually situated only about four kilometers from the Indian border. Due to the complications of visa process and consistent political and military tensions between the two states, there's an arrangement made at the Indian border by their government for the Sikh pilgrims, to have a look at the sacred monument through a telescope. This is called "darshan asthal".

Pakistan Government's initiative

In order to facilitate the Sikh pilgrims desiring to visit Kartarpur Sahib, the newly elected government of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf took a bold initiative on 18th August 2018 when it announced the opening of Kartarpur Corridor. An attempt was previously made in 1998 during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Pakistan during Mian Nawaz Sharif's tenure but no further steps could be taken in this regard after laying down a stone mark near the river. Some efforts were made during Pervaiz Musharraf regime and approval for construction of a corridor was approved in 2000 but the project kept on being delayed due to tensions between the two states. The real breakthrough came when Mr. Navjot Singh Sidhu, former cricketer and Minister of Local Government, Tourism, Cultural Affairs and Museums of Indian Punjab, attended the oath taking ceremony of PM Imran Khan and was given an informal assurance by the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa of opening the Kartarpur Corridor. This public meeting became the highlight of the ceremony and a new window towards peace between the two states was considered open.

Pakistan government started working on the implementation of the project immediately and on 28th November 2018, the stone foundation of the Kartarpur Corridor was laid down by the PM Imran Khan. (Web Desk, 2018) Rs.100 crores were allocated for the project. (Press Trust of India, 2019) General Qamar Javed Bajwa was present on the occasion. Indian government was represented by the Union Ministers Harsimrat Kaur Badal (also a member of Shiromani Akali Dal), Pardeep Singh Puri and Mr. Navjot Singh Sidhu besides many journalists from the Indian media. It was considered a historic moment for both the followers of Sikh

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faith and the Pakistani government. It was announced that there will be no visa or passport needed for the pilgrims attending/visiting Kartarpur Sahib from India. A permit will be issued, and they will be able to perform their religious rituals in the gurdwara hosted by the Pakistani government and will be able to return through the corridor peacefully. The foreign minister of Pakistan, Mr. Shah Mehmood Qureshi announced the plan to be enhanced to the construction of a market, library, cafeteria and flower shop for the facility of the pilgrims. (www.thenews.com.pk)

Negotiations between India and Pakistan: points of difference

A highly positive indication towards peace building is that this proposal of building Kartarpur Corridor brought India and Pakistan to the table talks as the process of negotiations between these two states is often halted due to some political or military tensions. Talks were held in March, April and May 2019 attended by the representatives of both the governments to discuss technological and infra structure issues.

Technical issues: Pakistan government while trying its best to complete the project before November 2019's celebrations of Guru Nanak ji's anniversary, is restricted by the budget restraints. India has allocated five times more budget to the project than Pakistan. On the Indian side there is four lane highway being built while on the Pakistani side two lane road is under construction. This is bound to result in traffic complications as pointed out by the Indian representatives. Another technical issue is that Indians want the Pakistani government to build a bridge on the river Ravi while Pakistani government has the time and budget to build a causeway road which Indian experts think is going to be affected by annual flood situation. One issue is the number of visitors. Indian government is asking for 5000 pilgrims to be accommodated daily and 10000 on special occasions while Pakistan side is prepared to facilitate 700 visitors due to infrastructural issues. (Press Trust of India, 2019)

Political points of difference: Besides points of difference on technical details of the project, the Indian side showed their critical views of some of the gestures shown by the Pakistani side. The very first objections were raised when in a public ceremony of oath taking by the Pakistani PM, Mr. Sidhu received a public show of cordial welcome by the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff who was in uniform since he was attending a formal ceremony. There were serious allegations by the Indian media and rightist circles who accused Mr. Sidhu of even treason. There was severe criticism of the Kartarpur Corridor proposal coming from a Pakistani general. The peace gesture by the Pakistan government was alleged to be an attempt at instigating separatist movement in Indian Punjab and an intrusion into India's internal affairs. Later on, the Pakistani PM's speech at the inaugural

ceremony was also criticized for the mention of Kashmir issue. This was considered yet another attempt by Pakistan to intervene in internal affairs of India as the state stance of India has been considering disputed territory of Kashmir an integral part of its federation. PM Imran Khan was accused of politicizing an event of religious connotation. Another objection raised was on presence of Mr. Gopal Singh Chawla who is an influential member of Khalistan movement considered a disintegration movement against its national unity by India. Mr. Singh was photographed shaking hands with the COAS Pakistan and also hugging Mr. Sidhu. These pictures ensued a lot of criticism from BJP members and other circles in India. Mr. Amarinder Singh, Chief Minister of Indian Punjab had turned down the invitation to participate in the inauguration ceremony and criticized Mr. Sidhu for his “pro-Pakistan” gestures.

Besides these criticism-based views, there have been supportive voices for the corridor from India. All India Sikh Students Federation, Dal Khalsa and many other groups hailed the opening of the corridor as a peace gesture. Congress leader Shashi Tharoor also voiced his opinion in favor of the corridor and Mr. Sidhu’s efforts for peace.

Beneficial implications for India & Pakistan

The project is going to bring a lot of socio-political and economic benefits for both India and Pakistan. India has faced a lot of criticism for its treatment of the religious minorities. In particular the BJP government under Mr. Modi that took power for its second tenure in 2019 has been under criticism for its connections with the right-wing politics. Opening the Kartarpur Corridor with an open-minded policy and facilitating the Sikh pilgrims can help it mend the wounds and improve its record with reference to the treatment of religious minorities. On the other hand, Pakistan also has been struggling with improvement of its international image with reference to religious tolerance. Such a positive move of entertaining the Sikh pilgrims without visa and passport regulations and facilitating them further can help it appear as a moderate society. There are numerous economic opportunities including provision of employment opportunities for people of the area as this project includes building of a shopping area and some guest houses. Religious tourism has manifold advantages that it brings along. Further normalization of relations can open venues of trade between the two states at a later stage.

Mr. Rai Aziz Ullah Khan’s family holds the proud heritage of being custodians of a holy utensil of Sikh faith named “Ganga Sagar”. The history says that in 1705 Guru Gobind Singh, the leader of Sikh community had escaped the Mughal King Aurangzeb’s threats and was given shelter by Rai Kahla, the Muslim ruler of Raikoat. He was taken good care of as a friend and was protected with utmost sincerity. As a reward for this he left this utensil with the Rai clan who have since then protected it. It is now safely kept in a bank vault in United Kingdom. Rai Aziz Ullah Khan is its current custodian since 1975 and is a

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champion of Sikh-Muslim harmony globally and in particular in Pakistan. He declared the decision of opening the Kartarpur Corridor as an event of huge importance. In his opinion attending the inauguration ceremony as a guest of PM Imran Khan, who happens to be his school class fellow, is a great honor for him. It was a matter of great pride for the PTI government to have initiated a long-awaited peace move. The significance of the Medina for Muslims around the world can be compared to the importance of Kartarpur for the Sikhs. The Kartarpur Sahib is the Medina of the Sikhs. It's a milestone in the peace process in South Asia. It wasn't just a matter of importance for the Sikh community in fact people of all religions must relate to this for opening a religious site for believers is something which anyone would welcome wholeheartedly. The historical friendship between Mian Mir Sahib, a Muslim Sufi and Guru Arjun Singh and later on between Rai Kahla and Guru Gobind Singh ji can be referred to in this regard. These examples are a clear illustration of peace traditions of subcontinent beyond any religious differences. The importance of negotiations and the need to carry them on in any circumstances is important. The opportunity to create peace between the two states created by the Kartarpur Corridor proposal must not be wasted. This move by Pakistan government is to be welcomed beyond any political considerations. Baba Guru Nanak is not a religious figure respected by Sikh community alone, his message transcends all differences. He was a humanist. It's a significant factor that this corridor is to be built on the footsteps of Baba Guru Nanak, right on the path that he travelled. This is truly a golden opportunity history has provided to governments of both the states. Many people on both sides of the border in Punjab are closely linked to each other with many historical references. PM Imran Khan himself has a personal association with the city of Jalandhar from where his maternal family belonged. His mother studied in Madrasa tul Banat, a girls' school in Jalandhar. His personal friendship with Mr. Navjot Sidhu is yet another illustration of how personal references can help chalk out a strategy for peace between the two states. There's definitely a strong hope in future of peace in the region. With the possession of nuclear weapons by both the states, peace becomes even more inevitable (Khan, 2019).

Mr. Ramesh Singh Arora's family has been closely associated with the Kartarpur Sahib. His father is the caretaker of the gurdwara. In an interview regarding the project of Kartarpur Corridor, he hailed it as a positive step towards the peace building process in the region. The Sikh diaspora scattered over Canada, North America, Europe and other parts of the world have shown their enthusiasm towards this project. They are hopeful that the Indian Sikh pilgrims will be facilitated to pay their homage to the sacred site. The proceedings of the project are satisfactory, and it is hoped that the project will be completed before November 2019 when the ceremonies of the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak are to take place. There's a dire need of enhancing harmony between different religious communities in Pakistan in particular Sikhs and Muslims. The Indian

side's suggestion of exchanging territory with Pakistan in lieu of Kartarpur region, has perturbed the Sikh community of Pakistan in particular the residents of Kartarpur region. The Sikh community in Pakistan is definitely against any such arrangement, they consider themselves patriot Pakistanis. The process of construction is underway in full force and Kartarpur Sahib when completed, will be the biggest gurdwara of the world. There is enough space to cater around twenty-five thousand pilgrims in the gurdwara complex already and it will be enhanced with the completion of project. The November 2019 ceremonies are expected to be a huge success and an opportunity for creating an environment of acceptance within Pakistan and improving its image on a global level. The Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Pakistan is planning for this big event with full fervor and the government of Pakistan is making its best efforts for the completion of project well before November. There's a need to prepare curriculum in Pakistan in a way that it promotes tolerance and acceptance of diversity. All signs of hate material need to be removed. Guru Nanak's message has a universal appeal and if inculcated in the curriculum and propagated by the media, it could be used as a text for peace building and promotion of tolerance (Arora, 2019).

Conclusion and recommendations

The inter-faith harmony between the Muslims and Sikhs is a tradition of Subcontinent deep rooted in history. There have been numerous stories of Sikhs or Muslims caring for each other and seeing their friends off with a heavy heart at the time of partition in 1947. There are historic tales of selfless friendships between Rai Kahla and Guru Gobind Singh, Mian Mir and Guru Arjun Singh and a legendary friendship between Guru Nanak ji and Mardana (Singh, 1967). Before the last days of Baba Guru Nanak approached, Pir Bahauddin, a Muslim Sufi from Multan is reported to have visited him and sought blessings. (Duggal,1980) There definitely are many bitter phases of history associated with the Sikh-Muslim relationship. Bitter memories of 1947's partition and events dating back to the plunder of the city of Lahore by some Sikh invaders in 1760s (Chughtai, 2002) are an integral part of history but they are history of the past. Guru Nanak's message is of non-materialism and focus on spirituality that is undoubtedly a universal message. "Life he says is the shadow of the passing bird, but the soul of the man, as the potter's wheel, ever circling on its pivot. He makes the same uses of the current language or notions of the time on other subjects, and thus says, he who remains bright amid darkness (Urjun), unmoved amid deceit (Maya), that is, perfect amid temptation, should attain happiness" (Cunningham,2002). The tradition of "langar" (community lunch) is going to be a distinguishing feature of the pilgrimage at Kartarpur as it had been made an integral part of the Sikh faith by Guru Nanak. This is a practice of preparing and distributing food to all people sitting in rows irrespective of any distinctions. "Guru Nanak Dev enjoined upon all those who came to his residence or religious place at Kartarpur to give away something for the Langar and partake the Langar" (Sabharwal). Considering this

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popular appeal of Guru Nanak's message, a project initiated in his name can be a symbol of peace and inter-faith harmony in the region. Infrastructure has to be developed to welcome and facilitate the pilgrims who are expected to attend the November ceremonies in a huge number. There needs to be an extension of project to include a shopping area, more guest rooms, transport facilities, flower shops, facilities for women and children, play areas for children, facilities for senior citizens and people with special needs, expanded langar arrangements and cafeteria and provision of medical help when needed.

Religious tourism has its multiple benefits for the economy of the host state. Moreover, social environment gets improved by interaction of people believing in diverse faiths. Muslims in Pakistan can very well understand the affiliation of Sikhs with the Kartarpur Sahib as PM Imran Khan referred to it as the Medina of the Sikhs. The way many Muslims around the world are debarred from visiting the Aqsa Mosque and other sacred sites in Jerusalem, they can relate to the agony of Sikh pilgrims who cannot visit their sacred sites in Pakistan due to the tensions between India and Pakistan. This corridor can prove to be a monumental symbol bringing the two states to the negotiations table and a step towards long term peace in the region.

- Let compassion be your mosque,
- Let faith be your prayer mat,
- Let honest living be your Koran,
- Let modesty be the rules of observance,
- Let piety be the fasts you keep;
- In such wisdom try to become a Muslim:
- Right conduct the Ka'ba; Truth the Prophet;
- Good deeds your prayer;
- Submission to the Lord's will your rosary;
- Nanak, if this you do, the Lord will be your Protector.
- (Guru Granth Sahib quoted in Singh,)

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