

Kartarpur Corridor and Its Socio-Economic Impact on Indo-Pak Relations

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pak relations have confronted abundant ebb and flow of politics and propaganda. The prolonged enmity between both the states has always abrogated peace and normalization process. Amidst this incessant episode of hostility, both the State's government decided to open the Kartarpur Corridor, is certainly a baby step but can potentially do wonders if policymakers from both sides use it effectually. Both nations share a long history of togetherness and strikingly similar cultural traits, so it is hoped that this appropriate and off-beat framework can work for both the states. This new-fangled settlement of opening the Kartarpur border for Sikhs which permits them to visit Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan is an indication of a positive sign and can work as a soft power between these states. In this paper, the authors attempt to analyze the significance and possibilities of co-operation between India and Pakistan through this corridor.

Key Words: **Kartarpur Corridor, Soft Power, People to People Contact, Religious Diplomacy**

Introduction

7.594 billion people of the world validate an array of various structured assortment of beliefs, cultural systems, and opinions concerning humanity to an order of existence i.e. religions. Out of roughly 4300 existing religions, Islam is the second most following religion in the world (Hackett & Mcclendon, 2017). There is a whole string of countries that follow Islam officially and Pakistan is one such state where the laws have been made to ensure the implementation of Islamic religion and a large portion of the total population is predominantly Muslim. However, Pakistan is also home to numerous different minorities to whom Pakistan's constitution grants equal citizenship rights. Islam is the biggest proponent of

religious freedom and emphasizes on revering and accommodating other religions, as well (Nor, Khan, & Elius, 2018). Kartarpur Corridor has exclusively been opened for those Indian Sikhs who were incapable to visit this pious place due to the antagonistic relations between these states. Kartarpur corridor has connected Indian Punjab with the Pakistani Punjab. Both the Punjab share similar values, language, and to some degree civilization too, and all of which have created a different frame of mind in the society. Several prominent Sikh tombs, such as Nankana Sahib, Sacha Soda, Hassan Abdal, and Kartarpur Sahib in Punjab are located on Pakistani soil since they came under Pakistan's rule after the partition of the subcontinent (India Today, 2019).

As an emblem of global harmony, Kartarpur is a place where Baba Guru Nanak took his last breath in 1539 (Islam, 2016). In 1994, the government of late Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan identified the significance of Kartarpur for international relations and eventually allowed Indian pilgrims visa-free entry through Kartarpur corridor to visit the shrine and since then, Sikhs had been persistently striving hard to persuade the Indian government to give its consent to the Pakistan proposal and grant them access to this "holiest of the holy shrine". To Sikhs, this place holds high esteem because over here Baba Nanak exemplified his philosophy and later took his last breath at the age of 70 (Khalid, 2019). The Guru Nanak Sahib, whose tomb is situated in Pakistan, just three kilometers away from the Indian border, spent the last eighteen years of his life in that part of Punjab which is now under Pakistan's rule. Before Kartarpur Corridor, the Sikh public used to catch a glimpse of this tomb by using a telescope from across the border as this place is of huge religious value for them. Above all, they needed a visa to Pakistan to go to see Kartarpur and other Shrines (BBC News, 2019).

The government of Pakistan resolved this pressing issue of the Sikh community by opening the Kartarpur corridor which enables them to come to their Holy Shrine of Kartarpur and now getting a visa, is also not a prerequisite for this visit. The Sikh community appreciates this decision of opening the Kartarpur corridor which proves Pakistan a peace-loving country which is, even though a Muslim country, yet it also ensures that other religions are also secure here (Saher, Ahmed, Burney, & Faizan, 2019). Kartarpur is located in the district of Narowal, in Pakistan. This corridor is 2.5 miles long and serves as a link for the pilgrims coming from India to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan. Gurdwara Darbar Sahib is regarded as Sikh religion's second holiest place and the Sikh people possess a deep emotional attachment and religious value to this place. Earlier the opening of this corridor, the visa regulations were stringent and the travelers had no other option but to take on a strenuous 78-mile excursion (Saha, 2019).

This paper comprises of four parts; where first part describes the role of religious diplomacy as a soft power tool; second part overviews India's internal Politics regarding Kartarpur corridor; third part explores the significance and areas of co-operation between India and Pakistan through this corridor, lastly fourth part

encompasses the Recommendation, on how this corridor can be used more effectively to generate better and positive outcomes from it.

Religious Diplomacy as Soft Power

The critical role of religion in establishing different civilizations in the world cannot be disregarded. Religion is also a vital ingredient in formulating the foreign policies of countries. At the domestic front, countries need to utilize religion to spread the message of peace and imbue the people with the sense to acknowledge religious differences. In international relations, religion was not considered important even though, it should not have been ignored and it can play a very vital role if used sensibly (Keiswetter & Chane , 2013). Religion is spreading fast in the world and according to various reports by the United Nations, over 85% of the people in the world associate themselves with some religion, hence, the significance of religious diplomacy cannot be ignored as it will determine the future of humanity. People belonging to different religions tend to believe their religious leaders, therefore, these religious leaders can play a significant part in spreading the message of respecting and giving religious freedom to others(Berger, 2018). In July 2014, the World Council of Religious Leaders' Secretary-General, Dr. Bawa has also advocated the idea of religious diplomacy stating that religious leaders should be invited to play their role in religious diplomacy when the issue on hand is religion. For that reason, it is often admitted that the use of religious diplomacy, as the soft power tool, in the foreign policy can be apposite and invaluable for countries. Furthermore, considering the situation of regional and international politics in today's world, and the way the religion is being politicized, it indicates that the role of religion in the diplomacy for engaging and motivating actors cannot be neglected (Ritto, 2019).

Religious Diplomacy can also be a useful tool in bringing the states together. Kartarpur Corridor can also be a reason for promoting religious diplomacy. As the founder of Sikhism, Baba Guru Nanik always gave the lesson of Peace and Prosperity. Apart from that, those Sikh religious leaders who are living in the Kartarpur can promote the peaceful lessons of Baba Guru Nanik, to the Public who goes to Kartarpur for Visit (Khalid, 2019). The word Islam in Arabic means Peace, While Guru Nanik preached Peace and brotherhood all his life also, thus the essence of both religions is Harmony and Peace among Peoples. If the religious leaders of Sikhism responsibly proclaim the message of peace as taught by Guru Nanik himself in Kartarpur, this Kartarpur corridor initiative can become a torchbearer and pave way for Ultimate peace for coming generations.

India's Internal Politics on Kartarpur Corridor

According to Javed Ashraf Qazi, the former head of intelligence agency of Pakistan, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi decided to construct the corridor inside India on account of the approaching elections, because, in the case

of refusing a passage through this corridor, the Sikh community would have become infuriated with him. He also said that the reason behind taking this step by Pakistan was to build a positive image of Pakistan in the whole world and that it will indeed be in favor of Pakistan and Imran Khan (Maini,2019).It was a good step by India and Pakistan to open that corridor as well as the door for hope and a better future. Although the Indian foreign minister did not himself attend the inauguration ceremony, however, two other ministers were sent which reflects that India does not intend to overlook a rising bloc supporting a friendly environment (Hadid, 2018).

The Kartarpur Corridor not only impinge on the ties between India and Pakistan but also the politics and social tendencies in India, particularly in Punjab, are affected by it. India's history of elections reveals that India's reigning political party constantly deploys "anti-Pakistan propaganda" to secure victory in elections. This time also the sources pointed out that during the election campaign, Modi and BJP assured anti-Muslim extreme right-wing Rashtriya Savic Sangh (RSS) to follow anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim agenda (Zaafir, 2019). However, this strategy was affected in the election campaign in India due to the step taken regarding the Kartarpur Corridor. The confusion of BJP is evident as at times, they are speaking against Pakistan while on occasions, they want to receive the recognition for the Kartarpur Corridor.

Navjot Singh Sidhu is a Jatt Minister in Punjab and due to his audacious politics, Congress has successfully gained the admiration of many people. Meanwhile, the Sikhs hold the opinion that Sidhu was inundated with respect and warmth in Pakistan because of his friendship with Imran Khan which they developed while playing cricket. Being players, both of them are courageous and never afraid of taking up challenges and doing something bold, hence both of them demonstrated similar ardour and succeeded in achieving their target. Moreover, Sidhu's greatest accomplishment is Kartarpur Langha which is held in high esteem by the Akali Dal circles due to religious zeal. The News stated, after studying India's internal politics, that Congress and BJP, both want to take credit of the Kartarpur Corridor (Sandhu, 2019).

Kartarpur Gurdwara was the last place where Guru Nanak had lived till his death and for more than 50 years, this place was locked and abandoned and neither India nor Pakistan paid any heed to it even though it was situated on the distance of just some miles near the Indo-Pakistan border. However, the situation is different at present and the Kartarpur Gurdwara is now serving as a bond that is now connecting the East and West Punjab and it may result in a new chapter in the relationship between India and Pakistan. They may also start the negotiations and the two countries may decide to cooperate which will be the right choice for both countries (Maini, 2019).

Kartarpur Corridor as a Confidence Building Measure in Indo-Pak Relations

Kartarpur Corridor has all the elements of a successful CBM, both Indian and Pakistani Punjab have the same history, language, values, and customs, hence it can be valuable in turning the hostile relationship between India and Pakistan into a friendly one (Bangash, 2019).

People to People Contact and Change in Mindset

Pakistanis are hospitable people and welcome all pilgrims coming for the visit of Kartarpur as their guests. The foreign visitors will remember the hospitality after reaching home back and the others who will hear about it will develop positive feelings about Pakistan. This is the power of interpersonal social interaction. It creates the soft image of Pakistan among those who even never visited Pakistan. Saddam Hussain, a bus driver, admired and praised Pakistan before the media on 9 November 2019. He drove the bus from the Kartarpur to Gurdwara. Though cultures or religions can be different yet people can stand united (Singh, 2019). Hussain (Bus driver) further said that he was happier than others. His eyes were filled with tears as the pilgrims reached their holiest place. Being Muslim we can relate and comprehend his elation as it is the same as we feel while going for Haj. He was glad and his positive gesture showed the unity of both Punjabs. He wished long-lasting happiness to them and invited them again to Pakistan (Tarar, 2019). The Kartarpur Agreement permits all Indians whether Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians to visit Pakistan and Gurdwara. Even the Indians, living abroad can come to see Gurdwara. This special permission will promote benevolent feelings among different nations and communities especially Sikhs and Hindus and this area can become the most attractive place for foreign visitors (Bangash, 2019).

To enhance the peace and reconciliation process, interpersonal and intercultural interaction plays a significant role. In 2004, Pakistan and India started peace talks and bilateral relations to reduce hostility. After this, they have improved their mutual ties considerably by off and on visits of artists, advocates, authors, poets, pupils, anchors, media persons, politicians, judges, and merchants. This bilateral communication and contacts have augmented economic progress and trade along with visa relaxation. Nevertheless, both states need to increase cooperation in every field to build trust and dispel enmity and feelings of hatred. These measures will not only increase mutual collaboration but can also resolve defense and security issues. This peace process can consolidate peace and progress in the sub-continent and South Asia (Khan, n.d). In 2019, a Sikh pilgrim stated that the leadership of both sides view each other as enemies but the people are on good terms with each other. Davinder Singh Waddah said that life is not long and every soul has to depart. So, both should enjoy and make this world a paradise and this is the first step towards it (France24.com, 2019). Imran Khan has utilized the

opportunity by making Kartarpur Corridor and initiate cross-border coordination to advance the peace process with India, which can generate people to people contact and will help change the mindsets of the general public.

Kartarpur Corridor as an Economy Booster

At present, India and Pakistan have mutually decided to open Kartarpur as this project can thaw the ice and contribute to the enhancement of mutual understanding and cooperation in the economic sphere. According to the agreement, five thousand Sikhs can visit Kartarpur every day. With reference to Pakistan's policy, the Sikh community, living in America and Canada as the citizens of the respective states can visit Pakistan, and even at airports, visas can be issued to them (Ali, 2019). In this way, this holy land can become an attractive religious destination like many other sacred places in the world.

Pakistan's Economic Benefit through Kartarpur Corridor

This project is beneficial for Pakistan as well as the pilgrims around the globe will come to Pakistan which will economically benefit the country. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq get substantial amounts through these holy tours. Moreover, it creates a soft corner in the hearts of the visitors and enhances intercultural interaction. Such policies play a major role in determining the foreign policy of the states (Sandhu, 2019). There are almost 27 million Sikhs in the world making it the fifth largest religion of the world, comprising 0.38 percent of the population (Jodhka, 2010). According to the Indian census, held in 2011, there are nearly 28 million Sikhs in India. In Indian Punjab, almost 16 million or 76 percent are Sikh living, constituting 58 percent of the population. The populated provinces of Sikhs, comprising 200,000 Sikhs, are Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, etc (Sikhnet, n.d). More than 200,000 Sikhs live in British Columbia, a Canadian province. If these Sikhs can visit Pakistan, they can bring with them several economic benefits. Some representatives of the Sikh community including Bhai Sahib Bhai and Dr. Mohindar Singh Ahluwalia (Chairman Nishkam group of Charitable Organizations) expressed their wish to carry out mutual projects particularly the construction of guests houses in Kartarpur and Nankana Sahib. He is willing to give 500 million pounds' funds to assist the Sikhs living in Pakistan (Abbtakk, 2019). The start of this mega project can bring more financial benefits for Pakistan. World Bank reported that this project if commenced properly with sagacious planning, will give years more than 300 million dollars' financial benefit as around 300,000 people will come on a religious tour to Pakistan. It will create a soft image of Pakistan internationally if Pakistan provides more visas at airports to Sikhs, coming from the other countries (Ahmed, 2019).

The new peace effort regarding the opening of the Kartarpur border can escalate business and commerce activities between both countries but the Pulwama

attacks in February 2019 again aggravated the situation. Moreover, article 370 was nullified and abolished all aspirations. It is a significant project as before this there was no direct link between both Punjab and even with India. Punjab administration and business groups could restore commerce activities. Previously, leaders of both countries played their part in this regard. Captain Amarinder Singh, who is the current chief minister of Punjab, first spoke against Pakistan and called the project, an intelligence plan by Pakistani secret service (NDTV, 2019). But after visiting Nankana Sahib, he changed his views due to the Sikh Population backlash and admired this project to enhance social interaction between both Punjab.

Possibilities of India's Economic Benefit

If the normalcy prevails between India and Pakistan, the key recipient of this warm-up will be not only West Punjab but also East Punjab. In the past few years, Indian Punjab's economy has lost its vigour, primarily on account of sluggish agricultural productivity. From 2004-05 to 2013-14, a mere 1% GDP growth was recorded in agriculture per annum. The state has failed in introducing poverty reduction programs (Bhandari & Chakraborty, 2015). Kartarpur corridor is highly anticipated to boost the economy and advance relations between the enemy states by promoting trade between East and West Punjab. Punjab is an agriculturally rich and the mutual trade of agricultural products between both the countries can facilitate the well-timed provision of indispensable products like sugar, wheat, vegetables, and fruits at affordable prices, thus triggering the economy of both the states. India can also earn foreign exchange and augment economic growth by mutual trade and tourism. With an influx of pilgrims desirous of travelling to Pakistan for Kartarpur, India needs to upgrade its infrastructure in Dera Baba Nanak and its vicinity. Given the increasing number of the Sikh pilgrims travelling from all corners of Punjab and India, the Indian side of the border can transform into a hub of tourism and hence economic growth (Ajaypal Singh Brar, Personal Communication).

Recommendations on Kartarpur Corridor

1. Many people cannot afford a 20-dollar fee. Parminder Singh, an Indian Sikh, himself witnessed many Indian Sikh who comes near the Indian border to cross it for the darshan of Kartarpur when they heard the news of the opening of this corridor but due to lack of resources and no money, they had to return without darshan (Personal Communication). Two necessary measures can be taken in this regard to curb the situation. One, either the Pakistan Government should grant relaxation to the people who can't afford, or second, the Indian government should pay the fee on behalf of those Indian citizens, who are unable to pay the charges. Peoples love to meet each other, the propaganda and the negative image which media and the government portray can be diminished by people to people interactions. Punjabi people always wanted to

see the villages of their ancestors which are located in Pakistan. This is the need of the hour to devise better and more soft power strategies by both states.

2. There is a need not to politicize the holy places. The politicization of religion is a process where religion becomes openly involved in political debates. It is generally said that what happens to be religious conflict is in fact “politics, not religion. Religion is believed to be an epiphenomenon, something that can be caused but that cannot cause something else. India and Pakistan share a long history of betrayal. 1947 partition drew a line between the Peoples of both nations and deprived them of the right to visit their holy places. Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs have a strong urge to visit the neighboring country and pay homage to their sacred shrines. Political debacles have intensified the urge. It is the need of the hour not to politicize the religious places because peoples’ sentiments are associated with those holy places. Recently opening of Kartarpur has been amiably welcomed by the Sikh community. By not politicizing holy places, Pakistan promotes religious tourism more effectively.
3. There should be no strict visa policies so that people from both states can visit each other easily. Allowing people to visit their religious places can instill in them a sense of confidence and peace. A pilgrim does not visit his holy place/monument with ill intention since pilgrimage is purely a matter of having a spiritual connection with that place and a pilgrim is only desirous of worshipping his form of God. Religious freedom across the border can help abundantly in creating harmony and peace. Kartarpur Corridor is a recent example where there is no requirement for Visa, but People want to visit other religious and Historical Places too, therefore, the Government of India and Pakistan need to relax the visa policies.
4. Indian infrastructure on their side of the corridor needs to be revised and upgraded. Kartarpur is easily in reach of the Sikhs residing in Dera Baba Nanik or the vicinity. But for the Sikhs dwelling in far-flung areas, traveling to Kartarpur Indian Border is time-consuming. Furthermore, there are no hotels or any means of accommodation in the area where they can spend the night and perform the pilgrimage the next day (Ajaypal Singh Brar, Personal Communication). Indian government must foresee the instant need of providing the staying facilities to the Sikh pilgrim and upgrade the infrastructure of Dera Baba Nanik and vicinity.
5. Passport should not be compulsory for the Sikhs who are coming from India for the Kartarpur Corridor. One of the eligibility criteria established by the Pakistani administration for obtaining permission to visit Kartarpur is to own an Indian passport. For a layman, undergoing the tiring process of applying and obtaining a passport is vexing. A lot of Sikh community living in and outside Punjab is less privileged and less educated. Any sort of official documentation involves a great amount of effort and money which most of the Sikhs cannot afford. Thus the government of Pakistan must relax this clause and grant the pilgrims permission against their ‘Adhar card’ or CNIC. It was

expected while inaugurating the Corridor that at least 5000 pilgrims will come from the Indian side for Kartarpur, but the figure is just in few hundred as most of the pilgrims who want to come, do not have passports. By eradicating this Passport compulsion, more devotees can come for the Darshan, which will be beneficial for both the states.

Conclusion

Sikh and Muslims have lived in Harmony in the pre-partition era, several sob stories at the time of partition are narrated when Sikh and Muslim bid farewell to each other with heavy hearts and teary eyes. Though plenty of gruesome tails of Sikh and Muslim brutalities have been passed down by ancestors; still past is past and that must be left behind for a better future. Kartarpur Corridor is a positive sign that India acceded to as well (Shukla, 2019). India may have acquiesced due to many reasons such as political strategy for elections or domestic pressure etc. Declining Pakistan's offer on Kartarpur was not an option for India since the Indian government cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the religious values of the Sikh community. Whatever the reason is or if this step is taken due to compulsion or without any pressure, still it is a Confidence Building Measure and is effective in numerous different aspects(Nazar, 2018). One cannot associate colossal hopes with CBMs, and it must be viewed as a mere positive initiative to trust and confidence-building between two long-time rival nations. Pakistan is struggling to maintain peace and order in the region while contending with internal violence and terrorist attack issues at the same time, and approximately 70,000 soldiers and people have laid their lives in this combat. Pakistan has uprooted terrorism from many parts of the country but still struggling hard for it. Pakistan is also taking measures to ensure peace and stability in the region and promote goodwill. That's why Pakistan is taking initiatives such as the Kartarpur project to establish pleasant relations with the neighboring country, India (Hanif, 2019). Both states should realize the socio-political requirements and grasp all opportunities to minimize rigidities and build trust. For this purpose, they can encourage person-to-person contact, holy tours organized by Sikhs in this regard. Muslims, Hindus, or the people from other religions can also pay visits across the borders as Kartarpur can be a tourist place too.

The opening of the Kartarpur corridor is a sane decision by India and Pakistan, although, similar efforts of CBMs have been made in the past but none of them could leave its mark on the strained ties between India and Pakistan. The way India and Pakistan have now created communication channels for talks, such as about the procedures of religious travels, etc. shows the commitment that they both are willing to make this project fruitful. Before this Corridor was built, various supporters of the Indian government denounced the notion of establishing a link between India and Pakistan via Kartapur and facilitating the Sikh community owing to the strained ties between both. On the other hand, India is eager to get access to Kailash Temple situated in Tibet Himalayas but the Indian

officials remain tight-lipped when questions regarding the rough terms with China are raised by the Sikh community who are justified in probing into the security risks involved in Indian travelling to China. Sikhs also present the argument that the mutual relationship between two countries does and should not affect the pilgrimage of people from country to another and in this connection, Saudi Arabia is stated as an exemplary state who does not bar the people from its opponent countries such as Iran and Iraq to perform Hajj and lets people from all Muslim countries travel to KSA and venerate their right to perform Hajj. There are various other similar examples presented by Sikhs where boundaries do not restrict people from performing their religious rituals (Goraya, 2017). The proposal to open the Kartarpur Corridor was first presented in 1999 during the Delhi-Lahore bus diplomacy tour. At that time, BJP was in government and Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister of India while Nawaz Sharif led Muslim League was the ruling party in Pakistan. But they both were failed in convincing each other for opening the corridor at that time. but now the dream of the Sikh community of opening Karatapur Corridor has come true and if visualize optimistically, it can be a successful venture in drawing the nuclear power adversaries closer.

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