ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
Volume 13 Issue 03 March 2026

Understanding Soft Power in India-Pakistan Relations: A Case Study of The Kartarpur Corridor

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Abstract*— One of the most important characteristics of the India-Pakistan relationship besides conflict is the presence of soft power mechanisms. Amongst numerous mediums of co-optive power such as sports cuisine, language, religion that exist between the two nations, a recent bilateral initiative is the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor. Research has shown that the corridor promotes cultural harmony and provides socio-economic advantages to both countries. However, an aspect of the Corridor which current studies do not address is that it also harnesses significant religious sentiments which can boost soft power cooperation between New Delhi and Islamabad. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this paper to understand how the corridor elevates soft power dynamics between India and Pakistan by acting as a platform for Sikhs and others. The study has been conducted through a qualitative methodology and data was analysed through content analysis. The findings from this study point out that the Corridor's historical legacy, presence of sacred relics, its association with the life of Guru Nanak when coupled with the modern visa-free access system, the corridor transcends into from a religious site into a cross-border hub which can be benevolent for both India and Pakistan, especially to the researchers.

***Index Terms*— Soft Power, Kartarpur Corridor, India-Pakistan Relations, Sikhism**

I. INTRODUCTION

Since their respective inceptions in August 1947, the trajectory of India-Pakistan relationship has been characterised as frictional and tumultuous. Marred by seven decades of hostility involving four wars, low-intensity conflicts, terrorist incidents and a high degree of misperception, there has been dearth of soft power cooperation between the two countries. Amidst such tensions, a new initiative emerged at the forefront of Indo-Pak relations in 2019, called the Kartarpur Corridor.

Formalised in 2018 and established by Indian and Pakistan governments on the 550th birth anniversary of the founder of Sikh religion, Shri Guru Nanak Dev, the 4.1 km long Corridor is a landmark project which connects two sacred Sikh shrines, Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur, India to Gurudwara Darbar Sahib near Shakargarh, Narowal, Pakistan. It is a visa free corridor which is open from 8 am to 5pm daily and allows pilgrims from India and Pakistan to access each shrine and return the same day. There is a consensus on point of crossings, identity documents, security procedures and bilateral guarantees by both sides **(Singh, 2022)**

On November 28, 2018, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan Niazi and Navjot Singh Sidhu, a renowned political figure and cricketer from India attended the groundbreaking ceremony of the Kartarpur Corridor. Each Indian pilgrim has to pay $20 USD (Rs 1400-Indian Rupee). At least 5000 pilgrims are allowed to visit the shrines. The Indian side of the corridor is manned by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI) and the Pakistani side is managed by the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) and the Project Management Unit (PMU), Kartarpur under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony (MRAIH).

Existing literature on the Corridor and its role in projecting soft power between India and Pakistan explicitly focuses on economic benefits generated from the initiative, security dimension, media narratives, peace and background politics involved **(Sandhu, 2020; Ullah Sarwar and Daraz, 2022; Shahzad, Ullah and Khan, 2022; Singh, 2021; Akhtar, Ahmed and Ahmed; 2022).** Limited studies in the current body of knowledge exist which thoroughly address and encompass the religious value of the initiative and its contribution to soft power in Indo-Pak relations.

The paper is structured in three parts: Part I is devoted to explaining what soft power is and how it works in international relations, followed by a review of literature on the topic. Part II of the study consists of the methodology and data analysis/ results, Part III of the paper deals with the discussion of the results and conclusion section.

Motivation

This primary objective/ motivation behind conducting this study is to comprehensively enlighten the readers about the religious sentiments associated with the Kartarpur Corridor including its history, legacy and importance which will help people understand how the corridor promotes soft power in the context of India-Pakistan relations. This research is also important because since 2016, India-Pakistan relations have deteoriated to a large extent following terrorist incidents like Uri, Pathankot and Pulwama and Abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir. Not only the bilateral relations are close to being ruptured, soft power mechanisms between the two countries have also been severely affected, Cricket tournaments with Pakistan have been cancelled and Pakistani actors and singers working in Indian cinema have been boycotted. Trade between the two countries has also suffered. A better understanding of the Kartarpur initiative including its

ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304
International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
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religious sentiments will definitely boost and foster soft power growth between India and Pakistan.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Power in International Relations

In contemporary global politics, soft power has emerged as an effective alternative for states to pursue their foreign policy objectives in contrast to hard power (command power) measures such as military might, economic sanctions, boycotts, embargoes etc. American political scientist Joseph Nye conceptualised soft power as the ability to achieve desired goals through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power, also called co-optive power, enables a change in behaviour of others using persuasion and attraction as opposed to conflict and competition. **(Gomichon, 2013; Bilonga, 2014; Lai, 2019).**

As per Nye, persuasive power is based on attraction and emulation and associated with intangible resources such as culture ideology and institutions. It is more effective than its coercive counterpart or hard power because of its endurance and sustainability. Additionally, smaller states which lack strong national income and resources to wield hard power instruments turn to soft power to achieve their foreign policy goals. **(Wagner, 2014).**

Three core factors form the core of soft power which are benignity, brilliance and beauty. Benignity produces gratitude, sympathy and moreover reassures others of one side's peaceful or benevolent intentions, thereby inviting cooperation. Brilliance leads to admiration, which in turn leads to imitation, emulation, reverence and respect. In international relations other nations may adopt a part or complete of the capable nations practices, policies, ideology, values, institutions, visions and practices. The third component or beauty, in world politics is about the resonance that pulls actors closer to each other via shared ideals, values, causes etc. Opposite values and causes provide a breeding ground for countries or actors to see one another as hostile, whereas in contrast, shared values and causes provide a boost to the perception that the other entity is beautiful, which in turn will increase confidence, friendship and cooperation.

Cultural events, exchange programs, broadcasting, propagation of a state's national language, study of a nations culture and society are visualised as tools of soft power. In practice, these do not generate soft power directly. Instead, they promote understanding, develop positive images and spearhead myths favourable to the source nation. Vuving states that myths are a powerful tool in shaping the views and desires of others. They can be created and utilised to spread benignity, brilliance and beauty. The author also mentions diverse instruments through soft power is projected and these include diplomacy, economic assistance through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) or through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), humanitarian aid, and conduct of foreign policies through international organisations and institutions **(Vuving, 2009)**

The foundations of soft power also come from international as well as domestic sources. International sources include: respect for global laws, treaties, alliance commitments, norms and institutions, reliance on multilateralism rather than excessive unilateralism, liberal foreign economic policies. Domestic sources are bifurcated into two categories, firstly culture that encompasses pronounced social cohesion, elevated quality of life, freedom, sufficient opportunities, tolerance and an alluring lifestyle. Secondly, strong political institutions such as democracy, constitutionalism, liberalism or pluralism, well-functioning government bureaucracy form an integral part of soft power foundations. **(Gallarotti, 2011)**

Soft Power in India-Pakistan Relations

For the past seven decades, India and Pakistan have had scarce scope for cooperation and constructive engagement. Despite this, certain mediums of soft power still exist in India-Pakistan relations.

The first medium is common culture and language. While Hindi is spoken in India, Urdu is the dominant lingua franca of Pakistan. Hindi is derived from Sanskrit while Urdu is an amalgamation of Turkish, Persian and Arabic languages. The script of both languages is totally different but sound the same and this enables people from India and Pakistan to easily communicate with each other. Certain provinces of Pakistan and India also have common languages such as Punjabi (Punjab) and Sindhi (Sindh) This makes soft power more effective. Secondly, Indian cinema (Bollywood) and music are very popular in Pakistan and Pakistan based dramas and music (Coke Studio) are equally appreciated by the people of India. Many Pakistani singers and actors work in Indian film and music industry.

Sports constitute the third medium of soft power between India and Pakistan. Cricket, hockey, wrestling are notable examples. Festivals such as Eid, Diwali, Holi, Vaisakhi are widely celebrated in India as well as Pakistan. Cuisine, food and fashion constitute the fifth, sixth and seventh soft power mechanisms for India and Pakistan. Art, Architecture (Hindu, Sikh, Islamic-Mughal, Persian), shared historical heritage are noteworthy elements of soft power cooperation between India and Pakistan. A final component of soft power common for both nations is religion. There are three dominant religions in India as well as in Pakistan and they include Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Inter-Religious pilgrimages exist such as Hindu pilgrims go to Hinglaj Shakti Peeth, Katas Raj Temples, Muslims from Pakistan visit the Nizamuddin Auliya and Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti Dargahs in New Delhi and Ajmer, India, Sikhs from India and Pakistan visit Gurudwaras in each other's countries. **(Abbasi, 2022)**

Kartarpur Corridor and Soft Power in Indo-Pak Relations

Despite being a place of sanctity, the Kartarpur Corridor has brought forth significant soft power benefits to India and Pakistan. The Corridor has all elements of a successful

Confidence Building Measure (CBM) as both Indian and Pakistan Punjab share the same history, language values and customs which can be valuable to transform the hostile India-Pakistan relationship between India and Pakistan into a friendly one. It also promotes people to people contact and enables change in mindset of people in the following ways. The authors assert that Pakistani's are hospitable people and warmly welcome guests to the Corridor. This translates into power of interpersonal social interaction and creates a positive image of Pakistan to those who have not even visited it. The foreign visitors, pilgrims who visit and hear about it develop positive feelings about Pakistan. The Kartarpur Agreement permits all Indians-Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains and Christians to visit Pakistan and the Darbar Sahib Gurudwara. Indians living abroad can also come to see the Gurudwara. Secondly the Corridor will also act as an economy booster for both India and Pakistan. The project will economically be beneficial for not only Pakistan but also for Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran through these tours.

The corridor project has introduced tourism, marketing, hoteling and a great economic boost in lieu of Islamabad's mega investment of over 15 billion Pakistani rupees by the end of 2019. It has also built a hope to open other corridors like Amritsar-Lahore and Sharda Peeth Temple Corridor in Jammu and Kashmir. Consequently, such people-to-people relations and visits play an important role in bringing peace and harmony to the two South Asian nuclear powers. The project has strengthened the probability of consensus development among the masses and governments of India and Pakistan to break the deadlock in bilateral talks for the solutions of core conflicts. A large number of visitors from Australia, Canada, England and the US have welcomed and appreciated the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor as a gateway to peace in South Asia.

As per the Indian census held in 2011, there are about 28 million Sikhs in India. In Punjab alone, there are 16 million Sikhs. Other populated states in India which have around 2 million Sikhs are Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh etc. More than 200,000 Sikhs live in British Columbia (Canada). If they visit the Corridor, they can bring with them several economic benefits. It will facilitate trade between West and East Punjab which are agrarian areas and mutual trade of agricultural products between countries in goods such as sugar, wheat, vegetables and fruits at affordable prices. India can also earn foreign exchange and augment growth by mutual trade and tourism. **(Kalim, Malik and Syed, 2022; Roy and Shaukat, 2020; Zaheer, Mubariz and Alvi, 2020; Hasan and Khalid, 2020)**

Saeed Muzaffar and Yaseen (2023) highlight the multifaceted impacts of the Kartarpur Initiative on Pakistan as follows: Pakistan charges a modest USD 20 to every Sikh member who wants to visit the Gurudwara, allowing 5000 visits annually and 10,000 on special occasions. This gives an opportunity to investors to invest in Pakistan and they can contribute to the development of infrastructure projects, specially constructing rest homes along the Kartarpur Corridor and Nankana Sahib. The Corridor also improves bilateral relations with India. By working with individuals, it can create understanding and empathy which is crucial for cohesion building. Additionally, it will contribute to socio-economic well-being of both nations- local economies benefit from the influx of pilgrims and provide opportunities for tourism related businesses and small businesses. The achievements of the corridor can also inspire other initiatives that encourage cross border trade and collaboration and other fields.

The authors also mention some challenges: First, they mention geopolitical limitations, the Kartarpur Initiative despite being a symbol of peace and trust, fundamental pressures over long standing bilateral Kashmir Issue will continue to simmer. Second, security issues also exist. India and Pakistan suffer from the scourge of insurgency and terrorism, therefore ensuring safety and well-being of pilgrims and prevention of passage abuse are necessary mitigatory steps. Rapidly changing political developments and domestic tensions, unrest and external influences can also affect the significance of the corridor. Similarly, positive and negative media perceptions can sabotage the corridors true capacity.

Additionally, **Mehmood, Sandhu and Nazeer (2020)** believe that the Kartarpur Corridor Initiative has also brought interfaith harmony amongst the people of India and Pakistan. It paved the way for Punjabi nationalism and rapprochement between Muslim-Sikh communities after a long time. The soft power benefits the Corridor brings is the revival of the Punjabi brotherhood in Indian as well as Pakistan Punjab. Many of them met after 72 years and shared the hilarious memories of joint living in the pre-partitioned Punjab and the painful stories of partition. The Sikhs visited the paternal and maternal villages located in different areas of the Punjab and met old residents still living there. The Muslims gave them an enthusiastic welcome. Many of them brought the water or the soil of the houses as sacred relics back to their homes. This brotherly affection set a new era of Punjabi brotherhood. The sharing of the traditions, values, past stories and joint living created a sense of unity between the Sikhs and Muslim young generations which promotes regional harmony and brotherhood.

Research Gap Identified

Much of the existing literature related to the Kartarpur Corridor and its benefits to India-Pakistan relations extensively focus on economic benefits, interfaith-communal harmony and socio-economic advantages. The religious sentiments and significance of the corridor and its contribution to soft power growth in India-Pakistan relations is an aspect which is under-researched in current studies. This is the primary issue this study will aim to address.

ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304
International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
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III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study, a qualitative research methodology has been adopted. Data has been collected mostly from secondary sources such as academic papers. It is a case study design specifically centred on Kartarpur Corridor and fundamental Sikh principles. For analysing the data collected data, qualitative content analysis techniques have been used. Concerning limitations, this research paper has not used any statistical techniques for analysis not has it employed any primary sources such as interviews or surveys for gathering data during the entire period of study.

IV. RESULTS

Textual data from research papers were subjected to a qualitative content analysis process and based on the analysis conducted, the following findings, themes were generated.

Final Themes Generated After Analysis

1. Guru Nanak's Association with Kartarpur

After completing his odysseys (religious tours), Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, met Duni Chand, also called Karori Mal, the Governor of the province who gave him 100 acres of land on the banks of the river Ravi. The Guru brought his family from Talwandi and settled at this place and named it Kartarpur (abode of God). With the passage of time many families joined him and settled at Kartarpur, building their homes north and northwest of the Guru's residence. They began farming the fields allocated to them by the Guru.

2. Devotional Activities at Kartarpur

At Kartarpur, the Guru's residence became the locus of devotional life. New entrants to his faith went through the Charan Pahul Ceremony (Nectar to the Feet Initiation). Guru Nanak's house was replicated in the form of a dharmshala at which local Sikhs met for congregational prayers, recited compositions and then partook in the langar. People from all castes, backgrounds, religions and creed became his ardent followers. During Guru Nanak's period, his disciples performed three activities on a daily basis in Kartarpur which were: Devotion (Individual as well as Communal), Instruction by Guru Nanak himself and regular labour- constituting three ideal qualities of a man- "Nam, Dan and Ishnan" Along with this Guru Nanak also advocated for the following principles while he was at Kartarpur- Daya (compassion), Duty (Dharam), Contentment (Santokh), Humility (Khima), Dignity (Pati), Hard Work (Udam), Seva (Service) and helping the needy (dan). **(McLeod, 2017)**

3. Foundation of Initial Sikh Institutions

The first Gurudwara was built at Kartarpur in 1521. The concept of community kitchen or Langar was formally established by the Guru at this place. The Langar was also started with belief in equality of every man and woman since the society had been divided on the basis of caste, creed and wealth. The food for the Langar was grown, prepared and served by the Sangat with members taking turns as volunteers. Men, women and children gathered there for daily prayers. Offering water fanning the people and helping with the langar (community meal) were the three key acts of service that established a Sikh as an active member of the community. Sikhs met for congregational prayers, recited compositions and then partook in the langar. The first Sikh Sangat was also established by Guru Nanak in Kartarpur. The first Sikh community or Baradari was formed at this place.

4. Foundation of Sikh Scriptures

At Kartarpur, Guru Nanak also composed several hymns that can be found in the Guru Granth Sahib. These include the Japji Sahib, Sodar Rahiras (Supplication), Kirtan Sohila (Praise) to be recited at sunrise, sunset and just before going to sleep. The Japji Sahib contains the Mul Mantar. Other texts composed by him include Asa di Vaar. The three foundational principles which form the bedrock of the Sikh faith namely Worship (Naam Japo-through chanting, kirtan and recitation of the Holy Name), Kirat Karo (Honest and Dignified Work) and Vand Chakhho (sharing, generosity and charity) were advocated by Guru Nanak Dev at Kartarpur. The philosophy of Ik Onkar or One God were preached by Guru Nanak at Kartarpur. **(Bainiwal, 2020)**

5. Coronation of the Second Sikh Guru

A few months before his demise, Guru Nanak appointed Bhai Lehna (a Trehan Khatri) his successor, the second Guru of the Sikh faith and named him Guru Angad (meaning a part of one's own body). The first disciple succession in Sikhism also called "Gurgaddi" also took place in Kartarpur.

6. Demise and Shrine of Guru Nanak

After living and teaching in Kartarpur for eighteen years, Guru Nanak ascended to the heavenly abode. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's final resting place at Kartarpur Sahib holds both a samadhi and a grave—an extraordinary symbol of harmony. Legend has it that his Hindu and Muslim followers debated whether to cremate or bury him after his passing. His followers, including Hindus and Muslims argued with each other regarding cremation or burial of his body. After tugging at the sheet of cloth covering his body, it miraculously turned into a heap or pile of flowers. These flowers were equally divided among the followers who cremated and buried them as per their respective traditions. That place is known as Gurudwara Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur, Pakistan. **(Mazhar and Goraya, 2020)**

7. Significance of Dera Baba Nanak

Similarly, on the Indian side or the Corridor lies Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak. There are three Gurudwaras in Dera Baba Nanak namely Gurudwara Chola Sahib, Gurudwara, Tahli Sahib and Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. The original garments of Guru Nanak and the Gurudwara of the eldest son of Guru Nanak, Sri Chand are present here. Gurudwara Sri Darbar Sahib was built to commemorate Guru Nanak's return to his

family after completing his first divine journey or religious tour (Udasis or Odysseys) in 1515 AD. The town also houses a large number of Guru Nanak's descendants -Bedi Khatris. The ashes of Guru Nanak, kept by his son Sri Chand were kept at Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak.

8. Experiences of Pilgrims at Kartarpur Corridor

Bashir and Ahmed (2023) conducted a survey study in which many pilgrims were interviewed and a vast majority of them reported feeling a deep sense of spiritual and emotional fulfilment upon visiting the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur and Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur. They described feeling a sense of closeness to God and experienced inner peace and tranquillity. The holy atmosphere of the Gurdwara and the shared experience with fellow Sikhs contributed to this emotional significance. Almost all of the pilgrims reported a sense of connection with their cultural and religious heritage, as well as a sense of belongingness with the Sikh community. The pilgrimage provided an opportunity to connect with fellow Sikhs from different parts of their country, India, exchange ideas, and strengthen their social and cultural ties. When devotees entered the Gurudwara complex, they not only began a life-changing spiritual journey but also freed themselves from the bonds of fanaticism and organised religion to bow themselves before "Ik Onkar." The meditative ambience of the Gurudwara complex's central courtyard accompanied by the melodic and comforting sounds of traditional instruments when devotees recited "Gurbani."

V. DISCUSSION

The findings generated from the analysis indicate that first, as Guru Nanak himself laid the foundation, settled, preached and created the first Sikh institutions and scriptures in Kartarpur, and Dera Baba Nanak which houses sacred relics of Guru Nanak, and his place of meditation along with his descendants the corridor transforms into a place of tremendous religious significance of Sikhs across both sides of the Indo-Pak border. The importance of the corridor is further magnified by the fact that the first successor and second Guru of Sikhism was also chosen at this place.

Second, as Guru Nanak embraced, accepted, taught people irrespective of their origin, castes and backgrounds and his teachings were an amalgamation of various religions as well as his own personal divine contemplation, people from other faiths will also be drawn to his teachings and shall visit the corridor to learn more about his philosophy.

Third, Guru Nanak had numerous Hindus and Muslims as his followers who held him in high esteem and his since his final rites were committed by them at his resting place in Kartarpur, a significant number of Hindus and Muslims will visit the Gurudwaras to pray and pay their respects to his shrine. Moreover, hearing the accounts about the ambience and sanctity of the site and experiences of those who visited the place, people all around the world will flock to the corridor. All of this will directly and indirectly embolden the principle of attraction, which forms the basis of soft power.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the corridor's association with the life, teachings and legacy of Guru Nanak strengthen attraction and persuasion, the core constituents of the concept of soft power. The degree of soft power generated from the corridor garners substantial potential to improve the turbulent relationship between India and Pakistan to a certain extent. This study will be highly beneficial for the students specialising in soft power, India-Pakistan relations, religious studies and history.

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