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Negotiating Memory Regimes: The Pakistani State, the Sikh Diaspora, and the Kartarpur Corridor

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Abstract

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This article examines how transnational actors—particularly the global Sikh diaspora and international heritage organisations—reshape state-centred narratives of cultural heritage in Pakistan. Using the Kartarpur Corridor, inaugurated in 2019 to facilitate visa-free Sikh pilgrimage, as its principal case study, the article investigates how competing memory regimes are negotiated among the Pakistani state, diasporic communities, and international heritage actors. Drawing on theories of collective, antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory, it argues that the Pakistani state continues to privilege an antagonistic order of recollection centred on national identity and territorial sovereignty, while diasporic actors have fostered increasingly cosmopolitan forms of remembrance through transnational religious networks and cross-border pilgrimage. The study employs a qualitative design combining field observations (2019–2024), interviews with officials and pilgrims, and analysis of Pakistani print media. It argues that the Corridor functions as a negotiated space in which competing memory regimes coexist rather than replace one another. Although these negotiations have expanded cross-border engagement and recognition of plural histories, they have not yet produced an institutionalised agonistic politics of heritage. The article contributes to heritage, memory, and diaspora scholarship by showing that Pakistani heritage is increasingly shaped through negotiation between state authority and transnational actors rather than through exclusive state control.

Keywords: collective memory; Kartarpur Corridor; Sikh diaspora; heritage politics; agonistic memory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of global heritage discourse has challenged state-centred narratives of cultural memory (Smith, 2006; Lowenthal, 1998). International organisations, religious tourism, and increasingly influential diasporic communities have introduced alternative understandings of cultural heritage that transcend the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Heritage has consequently become an arena in which governments, international organisations, religious communities, museums, and diasporic populations compete to define the meaning of the past and the identities derived from it (Macdonald, 2013). One of the most significant examples of this transformation is the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor in 2019. By allowing visa-free access for Sikh pilgrims from India to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan, the Corridor represents more than a diplomatic initiative or religious-tourism project. It illustrates how heritage can simultaneously function as an instrument of state diplomacy, religious reconciliation, and transnational identity formation, while also reflecting the growing influence of the Sikh diaspora on Pakistan's heritage policies (Mann, 2001; Cohen, 2008). Long before the Corridor's inauguration, Sikh diaspora organisations had advanced proposals for a "Peace Corridor" linking Dera Baba Nanak and Kartarpur Sahib, demonstrating that the initiative emerged through sustained transnational advocacy as well as interstate diplomacy (United Sikh Mission, 2022).

This article examines how memory regimes are negotiated through interactions among the Pakistani state, the Sikh diaspora, and transnational heritage institutions, using the Kartarpur Corridor as its principal case study. It conceptualises heritage as a political field in which competing memory regimes produce an evolving order of recollection through contests over political authority, religious identity, and historical legitimacy (Nora, 1989; Smith, 2006). While the Pakistani state continues to privilege antagonistic narratives centred on national sovereignty, Muslim political achievement, and territorial continuity, diasporic actors have fostered increasingly cosmopolitan forms of remembrance through transnational religious networks, heritage diplomacy, and cross-border pilgrimage (Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016; Cohen, 2008; Levy & Sznaider, 2002). Rather than representing successive stages of historical development, these forms of remembrance coexist and interact, producing negotiated memory regimes through which the past is continually interpreted and reinterpreted in contemporary Pakistan (Erll, 2011).

The analysis draws on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), together with subsequent developments in memory studies that distinguish among antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic modes of remembrance (Levy & Sznaider, 2002; Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016). Combined with insights from heritage and diaspora studies, these perspectives provide the analytical framework for examining how transnational actors increasingly participate in the production, negotiation, and transformation of cultural heritage beyond the territorial authority of the nation-state (Erll, 2011).

1.1. Objectives of the Present Research

The present study pursues three interconnected objectives:

1. To examine how the Pakistani state constructs and maintains antagonistic heritage narratives emphasising territorial continuity, Muslim political achievement, and national sacrifice.
2. To analyse how diasporic actors—particularly the global Sikh diaspora—have introduced cosmopolitan forms of commemoration that complicate state-centred narratives through transnational religious networks and heritage diplomacy.

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3. To assess whether the interaction between state and diasporic memory practices creates conditions for an agonistic politics of heritage capable of accommodating multiple historical perspectives without dissolving political disagreement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective memory provides the principal theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between heritage and identity in contemporary societies. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is not merely an individual psychological faculty but a socially organised process through which communities construct shared understandings of the past. Historical events acquire meaning through continual interpretation within social frameworks that determine what should be remembered, forgotten, or commemorated. Pierre Nora (1989) subsequently demonstrated that modern societies increasingly institutionalize these memories through *lieux de mémoire*—sites such as monuments, museums, archives, memorials, and sacred landscapes that preserve collective identities when lived traditions become fragmented. Rather than functioning as passive repositories of history, these sites actively shape public understandings of the past by privileging particular narratives while marginalising others. Heritage, therefore, may be understood as the institutional expression of collective memory, transforming historical experience into publicly recognized forms of cultural and political identity (Nora, 1989; Smith, 2006).

While collective memory explains how societies remember the past, heritage studies examine how those memories are institutionalised, interpreted, and contested. Rather than treating heritage as a fixed collection of monuments or historical artefacts, Laurajane Smith (2006) conceptualises it as a cultural process through which communities continually negotiate the meanings and values attached to the past. Sharon Macdonald (2013) similarly argues that heritage constitutes a political arena in which governments, museums, international organisations, religious communities, and civil society compete to authorise historical narratives. Heritage institutions therefore do not simply preserve history; they actively produce public memory by privileging particular interpretations while marginalising others (Bennett, 1995; Erll, 2011). Heritage should thus be understood as a negotiated political process rather than an inherited legacy (Macdonald, 2013; Smith, 2006).

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised that heritage is no longer confined within national borders (Cohen, 2008). Processes of globalisation and increased human mobility have transformed heritage from an exclusively national project into a transnational field of cultural negotiation. Erll (2011) argues that memories increasingly circulate across borders through migration, media, tourism, and digital communication, challenging the nation-state's monopoly over historical narratives. Diasporic communities consequently emerge as influential memory actors who reinterpret, preserve, and institutionalise heritage across national borders (Cohen, 2008; Clifford, 1997). Religious pilgrimage, transnational philanthropy, heritage conservation, and digital commemorative practices enable diasporas to reshape public understandings of the past while maintaining enduring emotional and political ties with ancestral homelands (Levitt, 2007).

Religious heritage provides one of the clearest examples of this transnational process. Pilgrimage routes, sacred landscapes, religious festivals, and restoration projects increasingly depend upon international religious networks rather than state institutions alone (Levitt, 2007). The Kartarpur Corridor illustrates this transformation by demonstrating how Sikh religious heritage became the object of collaboration among diaspora organisations, international actors, and two rival nation-states (Mann, 2001).

The growing participation of transnational actors in heritage practices has encouraged scholars to reconsider memory beyond nationally bounded narratives. Levy and Sznaider (2002)

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argue that globalisation has fostered cosmopolitan memory, in which historical experiences increasingly transcend national borders and become shared moral reference points. While cosmopolitan memory encourages dialogue and mutual recognition, critics argue that it may overlook enduring political inequalities and unresolved historical conflicts. In response, Cento Bull and Hansen (2016) propose the concept of agonistic memory, which does not seek historical consensus but instead promotes democratic engagement through the recognition of competing and often irreconcilable interpretations of the past. Rather than resolving historical disagreement, agonistic memory encourages institutions to accommodate conflicting narratives within shared public spaces.

Applied to postcolonial and divided societies, these perspectives illuminate how heritage becomes an arena in which state authority, religious communities, and transnational actors negotiate competing historical narratives (Rothberg, 2019; Talbot & Singh, 2009). They provide a valuable framework for examining the Kartarpur Corridor as a site where antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic forms of remembrance coexist without necessarily producing historical consensus.

2.1. Research Gap

Scholarship on Pakistani heritage has examined museums, archaeology, religious tourism, shrine administration, and the politics of nationalism from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (Talbot, 2006; Khan, 2017). Studies of Sikh heritage have primarily focused on Partition, pilgrimage, religious diplomacy, and the restoration of gurdwaras (McLeod, 1989; Fenech, 2000), while research on diaspora has emphasized migration, identity, and transnational nationalism (Kalra et al., 2005).

Despite these important contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Museum studies rarely engage with diaspora studies; scholarship on Sikh heritage often treats pilgrimage independently of memory studies; and research on Pakistani nationalism generally examines state ideology without considering how transnational actors reshape official memory. Similarly, analyses of the Kartarpur Corridor frequently emphasize diplomacy or religious tourism without situating the Corridor within broader debates on heritage politics and memory regimes.

This article addresses these gaps by integrating memory studies, heritage studies, diaspora studies, and transnational politics within a single analytical framework centred on the negotiation of memory regimes. Rather than examining museums, pilgrimage, diasporic engagement, and commemorative practices separately, it conceptualises the Kartarpur Corridor as a negotiated heritage space in which antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic forms of memory interact through continuing engagement among the Pakistani state, the global Sikh diaspora, and transnational heritage institutions (Smith, 2006; Macdonald, 2013; Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016). In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on heritage politics and collective memory while offering a framework for understanding how transnational religious heritage is produced, contested, and governed in contemporary Pakistan.

2.2. Research Questions

Drawing on the literature review and the identified research gap, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- How does the Pakistani state construct and maintain antagonistic heritage narratives, and what functions do these narratives serve in legitimizing political authority?
- In what ways have diasporic actors—particularly the global Sikh diaspora—introduced cosmopolitan forms of commemoration that challenge or complement state-centred heritage narratives?

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- To what extent does the Kartarpur Corridor represent a shift toward cosmopolitan memory, and what are the limitations of this shift?
- What structural constraints limit the emergence of agonistic memory in Pakistan's heritage institutions, and what prospects exist for its future development?

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study employs **collective memory** as its principal theoretical lens for examining the relationship between transnational cultural heritage and national identity in Pakistan (Halbwachs, 1992). Rather than treating memory as a passive record of historical events, it understands collective memory as a socially constructed process through which institutions, political actors, and communities continually interpret and organise the past (Erll, 2011). Heritage sites, museums, memorials, religious landscapes, and diasporic networks therefore function as institutional mechanisms through which historical experience is transformed into publicly recognized narratives that shape political authority, belonging, and cultural identity (Macdonald, 2013).

In this article, **memory regime** refers to the institutional configuration through which particular understandings of the past are produced, authorised, and reproduced by states, museums, religious communities, educational institutions, and transnational actors. Memory regimes determine not only what is publicly remembered but also whose memories acquire political legitimacy and whose remain marginalised. Rather than assuming a single dominant narrative, this study treats memory regimes as dynamic, overlapping, and continually negotiated formations operating across local, national, and transnational scales (Erll, 2011; Macdonald, 2013).

Building upon this concept, the **order of recollection** refers to the broader commemorative landscape that emerges through interactions among competing memory regimes. Rather than representing a separate theoretical model, it describes the evolving configuration of public memory produced as state institutions, religious organisations, media, museums, educational systems, and transnational communities negotiate the meanings attached to the past. The concept therefore provides the analytical basis for examining how the Pakistani state, the Sikh diaspora, and international heritage actors collectively shape the Kartarpur Corridor as a negotiated heritage space (Assmann, 2011; Smith, 2006).

Within this framework, diasporic communities are understood as **transnational memory actors** whose religious, historical, and emotional attachments enable them to participate in producing and transforming heritage beyond the territorial authority of the nation-state (Cohen, 2008; Erll, 2011).

To analyse competing forms of remembrance, the study employs **antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory** as analytical ideal types (Weber, 1978). These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor historically sequential but frequently coexist within the same commemorative landscape.

Antagonistic memory constructs the past through distinctions between insiders and outsiders, emphasising sacrifice, national survival, and political legitimacy. In postcolonial contexts, it often reinforces state authority by presenting national history as a shared struggle for sovereignty (Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016; Rothberg, 2019; Anderson, 2006).

Cosmopolitan memory extends historical understanding beyond national boundaries by emphasising shared ethical responsibility, religious dialogue, migration, and transnational heritage initiatives that encourage broader forms of remembrance (Levy & Sznaider, 2002; Macdonald, 2013).

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Agonistic memory recognises that historical conflict cannot be resolved through either patriotic celebration or universal reconciliation. Instead, it encourages democratic engagement with competing interpretations of the past without requiring historical consensus or closure (Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016; Colom-González, 2021).

3.2. Type and Nature of Research

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how transnational actors reshape the politics of cultural heritage and collective memory in Pakistan (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It is primarily informed by an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that meanings attached to heritage are socially and politically constructed rather than objectively given (Crotty, 1998).

Methodologically, the research employs multiple qualitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

- *Historical analysis* of state policies, diplomatic agreements, official publications, and heritage legislation relating to transnational heritage management in Pakistan (Tosh, 2015).
- *Case study analysis* focused on the Kartarpur Corridor (Yin, 2018). The Corridor represents an exceptional example because it simultaneously involves state institutions, international diplomacy, religious pilgrimage, heritage conservation, and transnational Sikh communities.
- *Sustained observational engagement* with heritage institutions and the Kartarpur Corridor, based on repeated visits over a period of approximately five years (2019–2024). During these visits, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with officials of the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), Pakistani diplomats involved in corridor negotiations, Sikh pilgrims from India and the diaspora, and representatives of the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC). These interviews were conducted in English, Punjabi, and Urdu, and were recorded with informed consent. The research protocol was reviewed and approved in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Forman Christian College, Lahore.
- *Analysis of diasporic institutions and networks*, including Sikh diaspora organisations, Pakistani community associations, religious institutions, and digital platforms.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study uses methodological triangulation by comparing evidence from documentary sources, sustained field observation, semi-structured interviews, institutional publications, diasporic media, and secondary scholarship (Denzin, 1978). **Between 2019 and 2024, the study conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, including 4 ETPB officials, 2 diplomats, 10 Sikh pilgrims, and 4 PSGPC representatives. Interviewees were selected purposively because of their direct involvement with the Kartarpur Corridor and Sikh heritage management. Media analysis included 10 editorials/news reports published in *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune, The Hindu, and UN News websites* between 2018 and 2024.**

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data are organised and analysed in relation to the four research questions, moving from state-centric antagonistic memory, through cosmopolitan diasporic interventions, to the prospects and limitations of agonistic memory.

4.1. RQ1: Antagonistic Memory and State Authority

Pakistan's heritage institutions continue to reproduce an antagonistic memory regime centred on the Pakistan Movement, Islamic civilisation, military sacrifice, and national security. These narratives reinforce state legitimacy by presenting the creation and preservation of Pakistan

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as the culmination of a long struggle for Muslim political identity and sovereignty (Talbot, 2006; Khan, 2017). While such narratives contribute to national cohesion in a postcolonial state confronting internal diversity and external security challenges, they also privilege particular historical experiences while marginalising alternative perspectives (Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016).

These narratives are reinforced through several parallel channels. School textbooks and national curricula frame the country's founding as the culmination of a long struggle for Muslim political identity (Jalal, 1995; Mohammad-Arif, 2007), while military museums reproduce commemorative narratives of sacrifice, territorial defence, and national legitimacy (Nowakowska & Ibad, 2025). The administration of Sikh heritage sites has historically reflected a similar security-oriented approach to minority sacred spaces since Partition (Singh, 2019). Interactions with transnational religious communities, diasporic organisations, and international heritage actors increasingly complicate this commemorative landscape, yet heritage institutions continue to sustain an antagonistic memory regime in which state narratives remain dominant.

4.2. RQ2: Cosmopolitan Memory and Diasporic Intervention

The Sikh diaspora represents one of the most influential transnational actors in Pakistan's contemporary heritage politics. Although the overwhelming majority of Sikhs reside outside Pakistan, sacred sites associated with Guru Nanak and subsequent Sikh Gurus remain concentrated in Pakistani Punjab. This geographical separation between community and sacred landscape has encouraged the development of an extensive transnational heritage network committed to preserving religious memory across national borders.

Unlike territorial nationalism, Sikh commemorative practices are centred on sacred geography rather than political sovereignty (Tatla, 1999). Gurdwaras, pilgrimage routes, historical manuscripts, museums, and religious commemorations collectively sustain a transnational identity linking Sikh communities in South Asia, Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Memory is therefore maintained through mobility, pilgrimage, and ritual participation rather than continuous territorial residence.

The globalisation of heritage has significantly altered Pakistan's commemorative landscape. International organisations, including UNESCO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), have encouraged Pakistan to interpret heritage within broader frameworks of cultural diversity, sustainable tourism, and international cooperation.

The practical consequences of these transnational interventions become most visible in the Kartarpur Corridor, where state institutions, diasporic actors, and international heritage discourses converge to produce a negotiated commemorative space. The following section examines this interaction in greater detail.

4.3. RQ3: The Kartarpur Corridor as Cosmopolitan Heritage

The Kartarpur Corridor represents the clearest expression of cosmopolitan heritage in contemporary Pakistan. Opened in 2019, the Corridor allows Sikh pilgrims from India to visit Gurdwara Darbar Sahib without a conventional visa, transforming a historically inaccessible sacred landscape into a space of regulated cross-border religious mobility.

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Table 1
Timeline of Kartarpur Corridor Development

Period	Key Development
1996–1999	Initial diplomatic discussions; inclusion in the 1999 Delhi-Lahore Bus Diplomacy; shelving after the Kargil War
2000–2005	United Sikh Mission begins systematic advocacy; dual-track strategy engages international bodies and bilateral stakeholders
2005	Punjab provincial administration under Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi initiates local infrastructure; foundation stone for Baba Guru Nanak Road laid with Indian Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh
2008–2018	Diplomatic freeze following Mumbai attacks; project stalled at federal level
Aug-18	Revival at Imran Khan's inauguration; General Bajwa commits to opening the Corridor for Guru Nanak's 550th birth anniversary
Nov-18	Simultaneous groundbreaking ceremonies on both sides
November 9, 2019	Official inauguration; more than 500 Indian pilgrims, including former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, attend
2020–2021	Twenty-month closure due to COVID-19 pandemic
Late 2021	Operations resume
2024	Agreement extended through October 2029; capacity up to 5,000 pilgrims daily

Kartarpur's spiritual significance derives from Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who spent the final eighteen years of his life there. Partition in 1947 placed Gurdwara Darbar Sahib inside Pakistan, approximately four kilometres from the Indian border, separating millions of Sikh devotees from one of their holiest shrines. For decades, pilgrims were limited to viewing the shrine from Dera Baba Nanak across the border (Mazhar & Goraya, 2020).

Following the breakdown of bilateral dialogue after the Kargil conflict, sustained advocacy shifted towards transnational civil society, particularly the United Sikh Mission. Through engagement with international organisations and policymakers in both India and Pakistan, the Mission framed the Corridor as a matter of religious access and cultural heritage rather than solely as an issue of bilateral diplomacy, helping to keep the proposal alive during a prolonged political deadlock (United Sikh Mission, 2019, 2022).

Provincial initiatives briefly revived the proposal in 2005, when Chief Minister Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi and Indian Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh supported infrastructure improvements around Sikh heritage sites, including the Baba Guru Nanak Road and the restoration of Kartarpur. Momentum, however, stalled following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which froze bilateral dialogue.

The Corridor was unexpectedly revived in August 2018 during Imran Khan's prime ministerial inauguration in Islamabad. Indian politician Navjot Singh Sidhu attended the ceremony and engaged in a widely reported exchange with Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. During this interaction, Bajwa gave a verbal commitment that Pakistan would open a dedicated, secure passage to mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).

On November 9, 2019, the Kartarpur Corridor was officially inaugurated. The inaugural ceremony enabled a delegation of more than 500 prominent Indian pilgrims—including former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh—to cross the international boundary without a visa and perform religious rituals at the shrine (The Hindu Net Desk, 2019). Three months later, in February 2020,

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UN Secretary-General António Guterres visited the Corridor and publicly described it as a "Corridor of Hope," citing it as a symbol of interfaith harmony (UN News, 2020).

After a subsequent twenty-month closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the passage fully resumed operations in late 2021. Despite broader geopolitical volatility, the governments of India and Pakistan formally extended the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor Agreement for a further five years, ensuring visa-free transit for up to 5,000 pilgrims daily through October 2029 (Syed, 2024).

4.4. Field Observations and Interview Data

During field visits to the Kartarpur Corridor in November 2019, March 2022, and November 2023, the author observed differing interpretations of the site among state officials and Sikh pilgrims. Interviews with ETPB officials in 2022 described the Corridor as "a new face of Pakistan," linking heritage conservation to the country's international image. As one senior official remarked: *"We are not just opening a border crossing; we are showing the world that Pakistan protects all religions, not just Islam."* Although framed in cosmopolitan terms, this narrative also also served state objectives of image management.

Interviews with Indian Sikh pilgrims revealed a different perspective. Several elderly pilgrims described the experience as "returning home," invoking memories of pre-Partition Punjab rather than the diplomatic framework of the Corridor. One pilgrim from Amritsar, born in 1945, commented: *"My grandfather farmed these lands. For me, this is not Pakistan's gift—it is my right to be here."* These responses indicate a diasporic attachment to sacred geography that extended beyond post-1947 national boundaries.

Analysis of *Dawn* and *The Express Tribune* editorials (2018–2024) similarly reflected the state's cosmopolitan framing while situating it within developmental and nationalist narratives. *Dawn* described the Corridor as "a rare moment of South Asian harmony," whereas *The Express Tribune* highlighted infrastructure development and tourism potential (The Express Tribune, 2019).

Participant observation during academic visits to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib (2024) and Gurdwara Panja Sahib revealed a recurring distinction between institutional security practices and the inclusive ethos expressed by members of the Sikh community. Although security personnel restricted access to prayer spaces, Sikh worshippers generally welcomed respectful educational visits. Because these observations derive from two specific sites, they should not be generalised; nevertheless, they illustrate how state security frameworks and religious hospitality coexist in shaping visitors' experiences of Sikh heritage.

Together, these findings demonstrate that the Kartarpur Corridor expands opportunities for cross-border dialogue without displacing state-centred narratives. They also raise the broader question of whether such negotiated interactions can ultimately support an agonistic politics of heritage.

4.5. RQ4: Constraints on Agonistic Memory

Despite these encouraging developments, significant structural constraints continue to limit the emergence of agonistic memory. Heritage institutions remain embedded within political systems that seek national cohesion and social stability. Governments often regard museums, memorials, and commemorative ceremonies as instruments of public education and national integration, making them cautious about presenting interpretations that may appear politically contentious.

Regional geopolitics presents an additional constraint. Relations between Pakistan and India continue to shape interpretations of religious heritage, cross-border pilgrimage, and historical commemoration. Periods of diplomatic tension can quickly reduce opportunities for collaborative

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heritage initiatives, demonstrating that cosmopolitan memory remains dependent on broader political conditions beyond the control of heritage professionals.

Furthermore, the Pakistani state's management of the Kartarpur Corridor reveals the persistence of antagonistic frameworks even within cosmopolitan projects. During interviews, ETPB officials consistently framed the Corridor as evidence of Pakistan's "tolerance" compared to India's alleged "intolerance," a rhetorical move that reproduced the very binary logic (Muslim Pakistan vs. Hindu India) that cosmopolitan memory ostensibly transcends. Similarly, Pakistani media coverage frequently contrasted the Corridor with India's revocation of Kashmir's special status in August 2019, using the former to deflect criticism of the latter rather than engaging with the complexities of either issue (Mazhar & Goraya, 2020).

Indian media coverage, conversely, exhibited its own antagonistic tendencies. As Ahmed et al. (2022) demonstrated through a computational analysis of Indian and Pakistani print media, Indian newspapers framed the Corridor primarily in terms of security concerns, procedural modalities, and Pakistani "duplicity," with keywords such as "terror," "attack," and "apprehensions" dominating the coverage. This framing limited the space for cosmopolitan engagement by reducing the Corridor to a security problem rather than a heritage opportunity.

5. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Findings

The findings are organised in relation to the four research questions and synthesised below:

5.1.1. Finding 1

The Pakistani state continues to rely primarily on antagonistic memory narratives. State museums, military memorials, and official commemorative practices emphasise territorial continuity, Muslim political achievement, national sacrifice, and military guardianship. While these narratives perform important functions of national cohesion, they systematically marginalise the historical experiences of religious minorities, women, and regional communities. The state's framing of the Kartarpur Corridor as evidence of Pakistani "tolerance" vis-à-vis Indian "intolerance" reproduces the very binary logic that cosmopolitan memory ostensibly transcends.

5.1.2. Finding 2

The Sikh diaspora has successfully introduced cosmopolitan forms of commemoration that complicate state-centred narratives. Through sustained advocacy spanning nearly two decades, the United Sikh Mission and related diaspora organisations transformed the Kartarpur Corridor from a stalled diplomatic proposal into a realised transnational heritage project. The Corridor now functions simultaneously as a religious pilgrimage route, an instrument of cultural diplomacy, and a site of diasporic identity formation. However, this cosmopolitan achievement remains embedded within state regulatory frameworks and geopolitical constraints.

5.1.3. Finding 3

The Kartarpur Corridor exemplifies both the possibilities and limitations of cosmopolitan memory. While the Corridor enables unprecedented cross-border religious mobility, it does so through heavily regulated state mechanisms that preserve sovereign control. Pakistani officials frame the project in terms of national image management; Indian media frame it through security anxieties; and Sikh pilgrims themselves often resist both framings by asserting diasporic claims to sacred geography that transcend post-1947 sovereignty.

5.1.4. Finding 4

Agonistic memory remains institutionally underdeveloped in Pakistan's heritage landscape. Although individual museums and civil society organisations have the capacity to present more plural historical narratives, structural constraints—including political caution, geopolitical

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volatility, and the instrumentalisation of heritage for tourism—limit the emergence of genuinely agonistic commemoration. The interaction between antagonistic state narratives and cosmopolitan diasporic interventions has not yet produced institutional spaces in which competing historical perspectives can coexist without requiring the triumph of one narrative over another.

This study has several limitations. It is based on purposive qualitative sampling and therefore does not seek statistical generalisation. Access to participants varied across institutional settings, and the analysis emphasises interpretive understanding rather than representative measurement. The participant observations derive from repeated visits to selected Sikh heritage sites and should therefore be understood as illustrative of broader dynamics rather than exhaustive of all heritage experiences in Pakistan.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. *For Heritage Policy*

Pakistani heritage institutions should expand interpretive frameworks to present multiple historical experiences alongside each other. Exhibitions on the Pakistan Movement could acknowledge both the aspirations that motivated the demand for Pakistan and the human costs of Partition, including displacement, communal violence, and the experiences of religious minorities.

5.2.2. For Museum Practice

Museums should be reconceptualised as civic institutions in which historical disagreement is treated as a legitimate component of democratic society rather than a threat to national cohesion. This requires curatorial training in agonistic memory practices and institutional support for critical historical reflection.

5.2.3. For the Kartarpur Corridor

Heritage conservation should be accompanied by interpretive programmes that encourage dialogue about shared pre-Partition histories, including the coexistence of different religious communities, the cultural exchanges that shaped Punjab, and the difficult memories associated with displacement and violence.

5.2.4. For Future Research

Comparative investigations of transnational heritage corridors across South Asia, further ethnographic research on pilgrims and local populations, and analysis of digital heritage and social media commemorations would deepen our understanding of how official narratives are interpreted, accepted, or resisted by different audiences.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the transnational politics of commemoration in Pakistan by investigating how diasporic communities and international actors reshape state-managed cultural heritage and collective memory. Rather than approaching heritage as a neutral collection of monuments or historical artefacts, the study demonstrates that heritage constitutes a dynamic political process through which competing actors negotiate authority over the meaning of the past. The Kartarpur Corridor, Sikh diaspora networks, international heritage organisations, and Pakistani diaspora communities emerge not merely as supplementary to state heritage but as active participants in producing, contesting, and transforming collective memory.

Drawing on the concepts of antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory, the article argues that Pakistan's commemorative landscape is shaped by the interaction of multiple memory regimes rather than by a single, coherent narrative. The state's museums, military memorials, and religious heritage institutions continue to rely primarily on antagonistic modes of remembrance, emphasising territorial continuity, Muslim political achievement, and national sacrifice. Yet this state-centred narrative is increasingly complemented—and occasionally challenged—by

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cosmopolitan forms of heritage introduced through globalisation, diasporic engagement, and religious tourism. The Kartarpur Corridor illustrates this most clearly, functioning simultaneously as a form of religious diplomacy, cultural preservation, and transnational reconciliation, while Pakistani and Sikh diasporic communities have more broadly become influential participants in preserving and reinterpreting sacred landscapes.

Neither mode alone adequately explains the contemporary politics of heritage in Pakistan. Antagonistic memory provides national cohesion but often marginalises alternative historical experiences, while cosmopolitan memory encourages dialogue yet can overlook enduring political inequalities and competing political claims. Agonistic memory offers a more productive analytical framework by recognising that plural societies require institutions capable of accommodating competing interpretations of the past—not as a replacement for national identity, but as an enrichment of democratic life through the inclusion of multiple historical voices. The field observations further demonstrate that negotiations over heritage unfold not only through diplomacy, heritage policy, and institutional discourse but also through everyday encounters in which state security practices and the inclusive traditions of religious communities shape visitors' experiences of shared heritage. Together with the interview evidence, these observations show that the politics of memory operates not only at the level of official narratives but also through routine interactions that reveal the coexistence—and occasional tension—between state authority and religious hospitality.

The principal contribution of this study lies in integrating memory studies, heritage studies, diaspora studies, and transnational politics within a single analytical framework for understanding Pakistan's evolving commemorative landscape. While previous scholarship has examined museums, nationalism, Sikh heritage, religious tourism, and diaspora largely as separate fields of inquiry, this article demonstrates that these phenomena are interconnected through competing memory regimes whose interaction produces an evolving order of recollection. By examining interactions among state institutions, international organisations, religious communities, and diasporic networks, the article provides a more comprehensive interpretation of how collective memory is produced, institutionalised, and contested within a postcolonial state increasingly shaped by transnational forces.

More broadly, the findings contribute to international debates on heritage and memory by illustrating how postcolonial societies negotiate multiple and often competing historical inheritances in an era of globalisation. Pakistan's experience demonstrates that national heritage is neither static nor exclusively controlled by the state. Instead, it is continuously reconstructed through interactions among domestic institutions, transnational actors, and global heritage regimes. These interactions reveal that heritage is not simply about preserving the past; it is equally concerned with shaping political legitimacy, cultural citizenship, and collective futures across national boundaries.

Ultimately, the transnational politics of commemoration in Pakistan should be understood as an evolving process rather than a completed national project. Heritage remains a contested arena in which historical narratives are continually negotiated among state institutions, religious communities, museums, international organisations, and diasporic actors. The future of Pakistan's commemorative landscape will therefore depend not only on preserving monuments or restoring sacred sites but also on cultivating institutions capable of engaging critically with historical diversity while sustaining a shared commitment to democratic dialogue, cultural plurality, and responsible stewardship of the past across national boundaries.

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