

MELA PIR ANAYAT SHAH: ASIA'S GREAT CAMEL MARKET AND CATALYST FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**An Empirical Investigation of Intra-Regional Livestock Trade,
Cultural Heritage, and Rural Entrepreneurship in Cholistan-Thal
Desert Belt, Punjab, Pakistan**

Fair Classification	Asia's Largest Annual Camel Market & Trade Fair (Sub-continental recognition since est.)
Research Framework	Mixed-Methods: Primary Survey (n = 387 traders/herders) + Secondary Livestock Data
SDG Alignment	SDG 1 (No Poverty) SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) SDG 8 (Decent Work) SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities)

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ABSTRACT

The Mela Pir Anayat Shah Bukhari held at Pir Inayat Shah Bukhari shrine at Fatehpur (Chobara Tehsil) in Layyah District, Punjab, Pakistan, is Asia's largest camel market and one of the historically significant livestock markets in the subcontinent that dates back to pre-colonial times. Although the Mela is of continental scale and provides remarkable cultural heritage depth and plays a crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of pastoralists in the Cholistan-Thal desert belt, it is almost completely missing from peer-reviewed academic literature, which this study systematically addresses. This study uses primary field survey data collected from 387 camel traders, camel herders, vendors, and rural entrepreneurs over three fair cycles (2022, 2023, and 2024) along with secondary livestock trade data, regional economic indicators and ethnographic observation to explore five aspects of the rural economic significance of the Mela: (1) the volume of livestock trade, price dynamics, and value chain structure; (2) the role of the fair as an income and employment generator for pastoral and smallholder communities; (3) the fair as a rural entrepreneurship and informal market institution; (4) the cultural heritage value and tourism development potential of the fair; and (5) the policy gaps that constrain the formalisation and value addition of the Mela as a rural enterprise development catalyst. The results show that during the period of trading, the Mela supports approximately 145,000-180,000 livelihoods directly, and camel traders, buyers, wrestlers and cultural performers from all provinces of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian states come to participate in the event. The economic multiplier effect of the fair (feed vendors, farriers, transport operators, food sellers, artisans and accommodation providers) includes an estimated 45,000 to 60,000 additional informal economy participants. Yet, the Mela remains unregulated, lacks standard veterinary certification, digital transaction system, and is not connected to the formal SME development initiatives of the government of Pakistan, reducing its potential as a rural economic development catalyst significantly. This study posits the formal recognition of the Mela as a National Rural Heritage and Economic Development Asset while specific policy recommendations are suggested for the integration of SMEDA, value chain participation of PDDC, inclusion of livestock insurance, development of cultural tourism and facilitation of cross-border trade in keeping with Pakistan's CPEC regional connectivity agenda.

Keywords: *Mela Pir Anayat Shah, Camel Market, Rural Economic Development, Cholistan-Thal, Livestock Trade, Rural Entrepreneurship, Culture Heritage, Pastoral Economy, Pakistan, Camelus dromedarius, Informal Markets, Value Chain, Agricultural Economics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Every February and March, an event occurs among the dunes of the big Cholistan-Thal desert belt of southern Punjab that has no exact parallel anywhere on the Asian continent; the horizon fades away into shimmering sand dunes, and the ancient riverbed of the Hakra runs ghost channels through the land. The tehsil of Layyah's Chobara area turns into a temporary city of tens of thousands, with dromedary camels (*Camelus dromedarius*) valued at hundreds of millions of rupees being sold, accompanied by dhol drums, camel wrestling, camel decoration, and prayers at the shrine of Hazrat Pir Inayat Shah Bukhari, the revered Sufi saint whose spiritual legacy fuels the entire event (Animal Rights in Pakistan, 2024; Sindh Courier, 2025). The economic importance of the Mela is great, and is very little recognized in the literature. In Pakistan, the population of camels is estimated to be around 1.2 million, mostly of the Marecha and Brela breed found in the Cholistan desert and Campbelpuri breed in the Thal region (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2023–24; Faraz et al., 2024). Livestock production accounts for 63.6 percent of agricultural value-added output and about 15 percent of the Pakistan's GDP, which supports more than eight million rural households (Ministry of Finance, 2024-25). In this economic structure, the camel rearing is a unique profession carried out by nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral communities Jat, Rind, Bhutto and Marri, who see their camel assets as wealth store, production asset and a cultural identity marker at the same time (Faraz et al., 2023; Sindh Courier, 2025). However, despite being recorded in the media and wildlife protection documents since at least the 1970s as 'South Asia's largest camel trade fair' there is no peer reviewed study that has explored the economic aspects, rural development impacts, or policy landscape of the Mela. This is a significant academic gap as there has been a lot of research on the anthropological, tourism and economic aspects of comparative livestock fairs like Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan (Pushkar Fair Wikipedia, 2024) while the Mela Pir Anayat Shah, arguably larger in terms of camel transaction volume and more economically significant to a larger pastoral population, has not been studied at all. To the best of the authors'

knowledge, this is the first empirical study on the Mela's economic importance, value chain structure and rural development implications, which has been peer-reviewed. This study contributes in five ways that have not been done previously. First, it offers the first empirical documentation of the Mela's economic footprint, its volumes of livestock trade, price formation mechanism, sources of income generation, and economic multiplier effects, based on primary field survey data collected over three consecutive fair cycles. Second, it looks at the institutional framework of the Mela as an informal rural market institution and the working of its organizational mechanisms, dispute settlement traditions, veterinary practices and information transmission systems. Third, it traces the Mela value chain from pastoral production to trading and downstream markets for camel products, and maps out the distribution of value capture along the value chain. Fourth, it records the cultural heritage aspects of the Mela, namely camel wrestling, camel dancing, Sufi devotional practices, traditional craftsmanship and traditional folk performances and their linkage with possible rural tourism development. Fifth, it produces evidence-based policy recommendations for formalizing and upgrading the Mela as a catalyst for rural economic development, specifically for SMEDA-SME integration, provision of veterinary services, infrastructure for digital commerce, and development of cultural heritage tourism in line with Pakistan's CPEC connectivity agenda. The article continues as follows: Section 2 is a theoretical and contextual review of the literature. The methodology of the research is explained in Section 3. The historical and geographical background of the Mela is provided in Section 4. The economic results are provided in Section 5. The cultural heritage aspects are discussed in Section 6. A discussion of policy implications is found in Section 7. Recommendations are made in Section 8.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Camel Economies and Pastoral Livelihoods in South Asia

A Backgrounder The dromedary camel in South Asia is a livestock production animal with multiple economic functions, including transport, draft power, milk, meat, fiber, leather, and culture (Singh et al., 2024; FAO, 2022). The national herd of camels in Pakistan is estimated to be 1.2 million, the fifth largest in the world after Somalia, Sudan, Kenya and Ethiopia, with the majority of these located in the Cholistan desert (Punjab) and Thar desert (Sindh) (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2023-24; Faraz et al., 2024). The functional food value of camel milk has been increasingly supported by contemporary nutrition

science, revealing its anti-diabetic, anti-inflammatory, immunomodulatory and hypoallergenic properties, thereby offering new rationales for camel herd maintenance beyond traditional uses in transport and culture (Singh et al., 2024; Seifu, 2022). Pastoral communities with camelid herds in the South Asian dryland regions are structurally vulnerable: they are highly dependent on the quality of the rangelands which is determined by rainfall, are prone to catastrophic losses from climate shocks, are excluded from formal credit and insurance markets, lack access to veterinary service delivery systems, and have limited negotiating power in informal livestock markets dominated by urban intermediary traders (FAO, 2022; Sindh Courier, 2025). Livestock trade fairs, which are periodic markets and aggregation of transactions that address the transaction cost challenges of spatially dispersed pastoral production, play an important economic role for these communities in the provision of opportunities for price discovery, market access, maintenance of social networks, and information exchange, none of which can be replicated at the level of individual transactions (Singh et al., 2024; Faraz et al., 2023).

2.2 Rural Periodic Markets as Development Institutions

Periodic rural markets (recurring fairs, mandis, haats and bazaars) are basic institutions in the theory of rural economic development, with functions that go well beyond the exchange of commodities (Bromley, 1971; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Bromley (1971) is seminal in identifying the functions of rural markets in developing economies: as price formation mechanisms, as social information exchange platforms, as credit and financial transaction nodes, as technology and innovation diffusion nodes, and as social capital maintenance events, all socially embedded in the institutions of the rural market. This theoretical perspective, applied to the case of the Mela of Pir Anayat Shah, demonstrates that the Mela is a multi-functional rural institution which has far-reaching economic implications that go beyond the camel trading itself. The Mela brings together buyers from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian countries and the sellers from the pastoral belt of Cholistan and through this process, price discovery of camel in various categories and quality grades takes place. It is a hub for the exchange of information and a place where herders can find out about new developments in the breed, veterinary treatments, market conditions across the border, and government programs for livestock. It is an informal credit market that operates on trust-based community network, with advance payment,

deferred payment and livestock based micro-lending. It is also the main social calendar activity for pastoral communities throughout the region and helps sustain inter-clan relationships and institutional trust networks that facilitate year-round economic collaboration (Faraz et al., 2023; FAO, 2022).

2.3 Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism Economics

The multiplier effect of tourist spending on cultural heritage events in rural areas in developing economies is well established in the economic literature and is typically between 1.8 and 2.8 times the direct spending of tourists in accommodation, food service, transport, artisanal products and entertainment (UNWTO, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). The Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan—where camel markets are also deeply embedded in the culture—was the most similar case study to Mela Pir Anayat Shah, drawing more than 200,000 visitors during the peak years, and estimated to have USD 8-12 million in annual tourism alone (Pushkar Fair Wikipedia, 2024). Yet, careful management is needed to ensure that the traditional livestock fairs are not turned into tourism products and that the risk of 'commodification' and 'cultural dilution' outlined in the literature on heritage tourism (UNESCO, 2023) are avoided, as well as the risk of displacement of communities. Rural heritage events hold great potential for the cultural tourism industry in Pakistan, which is estimated to generate around USD 650 million in revenue per year before 2020 (UNWTO, 2024). The unique blend of Sufi spiritual heritage, subcontinental camel wrestling tradition, Seraiki and Balochi folk performance and spectacular desert visual landscape is exactly the kind of product mix that international heritage tourism markets value (UNESCO, 2023). However, the lack of tourism infrastructure, international awareness, heritage management framework and safety certification to date has prevented the Mela's tourism development from reaching international heritage tourists who can bring maximum return and cultural exchange value, but instead operates at the informal level with domestic day visitors.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Rural Market Institutions and Development

This study is based on three interrelated theoretical traditions. The main analytical lens is the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF; DFID, 1999), which looks at how the Mela enables pastoral household to mobilize different types of capitals (natural, human, social,

financial and physical) to achieve sustainable livelihood outcomes. The analysis of value creation, capture and distribution across Mela value chain actors from pastoral producers to traders to downstream market actors is done through the lens of Value Chain Development Theory (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2001; FAO, 2022) which highlights governance arrangements and upgrading opportunities. Based on Rural Market Institution Theory (Bromley, 1971; North, 1990), the Mela is considered as a mechanism to lower transaction costs in the market, provide market access and create social capital that informal market players would not have through an individual market transaction

2.5 Research Gap

Although the Mela Pir Anayat Shah is Asia's most well-known camel market with a history of several hundred years, there are no peer reviewed academic studies that have so far empirically investigated its economic dimensions, value chain structure or rural development implications. This study is of national and continental importance as there is no scholarly evidence available on this important rural economic institution, which has been completely missing from the knowledge base for evidence-based policy development and for future research on the camel economy of Pakistan.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted is a combination of quantitative, qualitative and secondary sources, where the quantitative data are collected through primary survey, the qualitative data through ethnographic observation and key informant interviews, and the secondary data from national livestock statistics and regional economic databases. The mixed-methods approach is theoretically suitable for the study of complex, institutionally embedded rural market phenomena, which require quantitative measurement of economic flows and qualitative interpretation of social organization, cultural meaning and institutional function (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Validity is strengthened by triangulating the three data streams: Primary survey, ethnographic observation and secondary statistics, leading to cross-validating the economic estimates.

3.2 Primary Data Collection

Primary data was gathered over three consecutive Mela cycles (2022, 2023 and 2024), to minimize the biases of weather conditions and market prices of any one year in the longitudinal comparisons. There were four categories of participants—camel herders and sellers, camel buyers and traders, non-camel vendors and service providers (feed sellers,

farriers, food vendors, artisans, and transporters) and key informants (veterinary officers, Mela organizing committee members, local government officials, and cultural performers)—with a stratified purposive sample of 387 (40.3%, camel herders and sellers; 25.3%, camel buyers and traders; 24.3%, non-camel vendors and service providers; and 10.1%, key informants). Interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi/Seraiki and Balochi languages and all responses were translated and transcribed in Urdu prior to coding in English by trained research assistants who have prior experience conducting rural surveys. The structured survey instrument collected information on: livestock transaction volumes and prices; geographic origin of traders and distance travelled; income obtained from Mela participation; non-commercial reasons for participation; infrastructure and services assessment; and perceptions of policy and formalisation needs. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted focusing on institutional history, organizational mechanisms, veterinary services, disease management, cross-border trade dynamics and cultural heritage dimensions. Ethical clearance was taken from the research committee of the host university and verbal informed consent was obtained from all the respondents, as per Pakistan Council for Social Sciences Research protocols.

3.3 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources included Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24 and 2024-25 livestock chapters, the annual camel population and trade statistics of the Punjab Livestock and Dairy Development Department (PLDD), SMEDA pre-feasibility studies on camel farming, cattle mela records obtained from the District Layyah Revenue Department, the Sindh Courier, and academic camel economy databases, and FAO South Asia camel sector reports. Secondary data are mainly used for contextual analysis, national camel population benchmarks and the policy landscape sections.

3.4 Analytical Methods

Descriptive statistics (means, medians, frequency distributions and cross tabulations) and basic inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U tests for cross-group comparisons, and Spearman rank correlations for income-distance relationships) were applied to quantitative survey data using SPSS 26.0. The economic impacts are estimated using regional economic multipliers methodology with livestock market multipliers derived from the FAO (2022) primary survey transaction data. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was

used to analyze qualitative interview data, and NVivo 12.0 was used to systematically code and develop themes from 387 survey instruments and 39 key informant transcripts.

4. HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

4.1 The Spiritual Foundation: Hazrat Pir Inayat Shah Bukhari

Descriptive statistics (means, medians, frequency distributions and cross tabulations) and basic inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U tests for cross-group comparisons, and Spearman rank correlations for income-distance relationships) were applied to quantitative survey data using SPSS 26.0. The economic impacts are estimated using regional economic multipliers methodology with livestock market multipliers derived from the FAO (2022) primary survey transaction data. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze qualitative interview data, and NVivo 12.0 was used to systematically code and develop themes from 387 survey instruments and 39 key informant transcripts.

4.2 Geographical Setting: Cholistan-Thal Desert Belt

Mela Pir Anayat Shah is a space on the ecological and cultural boundaries of two of the major desert systems of Pakistan. The Cholistan desert (26,300 km² of sandy land in Bahawalpur Division of southern Punjab) and the Thal desert (15,000 km² of stabilized sand dunes in Layyah, Muzaffargarh, Khushab and Mianwali Districts) form the core region of the camel herding communities and the geographical source region of the participants of the Mela. The Layyah District, covering an area of 6292 km² with a population of ~1.8 million (according to PBS, 2023), has a predominantly agricultural and pastoral economy where the camel herding is done in Chobara and Choubera tehsils adjacent the Thal desert. The bioclimatic conditions of this zone with average annual rainfall of 300-350mm, extreme summers exceeding 45C along with the presence of sandy soil which is not suitable for irrigated crop agriculture makes camel herding a rational livelihood option for pastoral communities of this zone (Faraz et al., 2023; Sindh Courier, 2025).

4.3 The Camel Breeds of the Fair

There are three main dromedary breeds on the trading floor of the Mela, each having its own physical features, price range and market demand profile. The Marecha, which is the

best riding and racing camel of Cholistan, with a long gracefully curved neck, a slender build, a sandy coloured coat and is extremely fast, fetches the highest prices at the Mela from buyers from the Gulf states and wealthy animal sport enthusiasts in Pakistan (Faraz et al., 2024). The Brela is a heavy and strong work and pack animal from the Bahawalpur-Cholistan tract and is generally sold at PKR 150,000-350,000, accounting for the bulk of the Mela trade volume. The Campbelpuri or Thal camel, indigenous to the Thal desert which encompasses Layyah, Muzaffargarh and Khushab districts, is a medium sized, highly heat-tolerant multipurpose animal which is the primary draft, milk, and meat camel for pastoral communities of Thal region and which typically trades at PKR 80,000-200,000 per animal (Faraz et al., 2023)..

FIGURE 2: Three Primary Camel Breeds at <u>Mela Pir Anayat Shah</u> — Characteristics and Price Ranges			
Characteristic	MARECHA (Racing / Riding)	BRELA (Work / Pack)	CAMPBELPURI / THAL (Multipurpose / Draft)
Region	Cholistan	Bahawalpur	Thal Desert
Build	Slender	Heavy	Medium
Color	Sandy	Brown	Dark Brown
Height	1.9–2.1 m	1.8–2.0 m	1.7–1.9 m
Speed / Trait	Exceptional Speed	High Endurance	Very High Adaptability
Milk Yield	8–12 L/day	6–10 L/day	5–8 L/day
Price Ranges			
PKR	500K – 5M+	150K – 350K	80K – 200K
USD	1,800 – 18,000	540 – 1,260	288 – 720
Primary Buyers			
Buyers	Gulf / Sport Markets	Farmers	Local Herders
Source: Primary field survey data (2022–2024) and <u>Faraz et al.</u> (2024).			

4.4 Historical Continuity and Sub-Continental Significance

The claim of 'Asia's largest camel market' is based on a number of measurable aspects: the number of camel transactions (an estimated 15,000 - 30,000 animal transactions over the course of the Mela); the geographic reach of participating traders (across all four provinces of Pakistan and even Afghanistan and Central Asian states); the diversity of camel breeds,

qualities and price points represented; and the depth of associated cultural activities that distinguishes it from purely commercial livestock markets. The nearest competitor to the Mela for the title of the 'largest camel market' is the Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan, India, which records 10,000-50,000 registered camels but the camel trading activity is significantly reduced in recent decades with decline in the rural camel population in India (Pushkar Fair Wikipedia, 2024; Animal Rights in Pakistan, 2024).

5. ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Livestock Trade Volume and Price Structure

The results of the economic dimensions and their analysis are presented. The volume and price structure of livestock trade is discussed in this section. The livestock trading volumes and price structures estimated from the primary survey data and key informant estimates from the members of the Mela organizing committee and PLDD officers across the three study years (2022–2024) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Estimated Camel Trading Volume and Value at Mela Pir Anayat Shah (2022–2024)

Indicator	2022	2023	2024	3-Yr Average	Trend
Est. Camels on Ground (peak day)	18,000–22,000	20,000–25,000	22,000–30,000	~22,000	↑ +12%/yr
Est. Total Transactions (all days)	12,000–18,000	14,000–21,000	15,000–28,000	~18,000	↑ Increasing
Marecha avg. price (PKR 000s)	350–800	400–950	450–1,200	~650	↑ +18% CAGR
Brela avg. price (PKR 000s)	120–280	140–320	160–380	~230	↑ +12% CAGR
Campbelpuri avg. price (PKR 000s)	65–160	75–190	85–220	~133	↑ +15% CAGR
Est. Total Trade Value (PKR Bn)	2.1–2.9	2.4–3.4	3.0–4.5	~2.8–4.2	↑ Growing
Est. Total Trade Value (USD Mn)	7.5–10.4	8.6–12.2	10.8–16.1	~10–13	↑ Growing
Traders from Afghanistan (%)	8–12	10–14	12–17	~12%	↑ Rising
Mela duration (days)	14–18	16–20	18–22	~18	↑ Expanding
Peak daily visitor estimate	60,000–80,000	70,000–100,000	80,000–120,000	~85,000	↑ Growing

Note: Estimates made from primary survey data (n = 387), key informants with PLDD officers and members of the Mela committee (n = 12) and media documentation. Broad ranges indicate intra-year variability in market length and/or imprecision in the informal market estimation. CAGR = Compound Annual Growth Rate. Converted into USD at PKR 278/USD (Average of 2024).

5.2 Participant Geographic Profile and Market Reach

One of the most important features of Mela Pir Anayat Shah is its geographical spread, which is wider than the local livestock markets as they bring buyers and sellers from the entire geographical area of Pakistan and even beyond the borders.

Table 2: Geographic Origin of Mela Participants — Primary Survey Results (n = 387)

Origin / Category	Sellers %	Buyers %	Vendors %	Visitors %	Avg. Travel Distance
Layyah / Thal Belt (local)	38	12	42	35	< 50 km
Cholistan / Bahawalpur	31	24	18	22	50–150 km
Southern Punjab (other)	14	21	22	21	150–300 km
Central Punjab (Lahore etc.)	5	18	10	9	300–500 km
KPK / FATA	3	8	3	4	400–700 km
Sindh (Thar / Sukkur)	4	7	3	5	350–600 km
Balochistan	2	4	1	2	300–600 km
Afghanistan / Central Asia	2	5	1	2	500–1,200+ km
Other / International	1	1	0	0	Varies

Note: Percentages are based on the proportion of survey respondents that fall into each category from each geographic area. The percentages of actual visitors to the zones may have been weighted toward local and regional visitors and accounted for the challenge of surveying transit visitors. The participation of the Afghan/Central Asian community was limited to Marecha-breed luxury buyers and livestock traders that do cross-border trading.

5.3 Income Generation and Livelihood Impact

The Mela's income generation effects are spread out among several economic actors, giving rise to a rural economic multiplier that is much more than just the sum of the camel trading value. Based on the primary survey results, the following income generation profile of the participants emerged according to the categories.

Table 3: Income Generation at Mela Pir Anayat Shah — Primary Survey Results (n = 387)

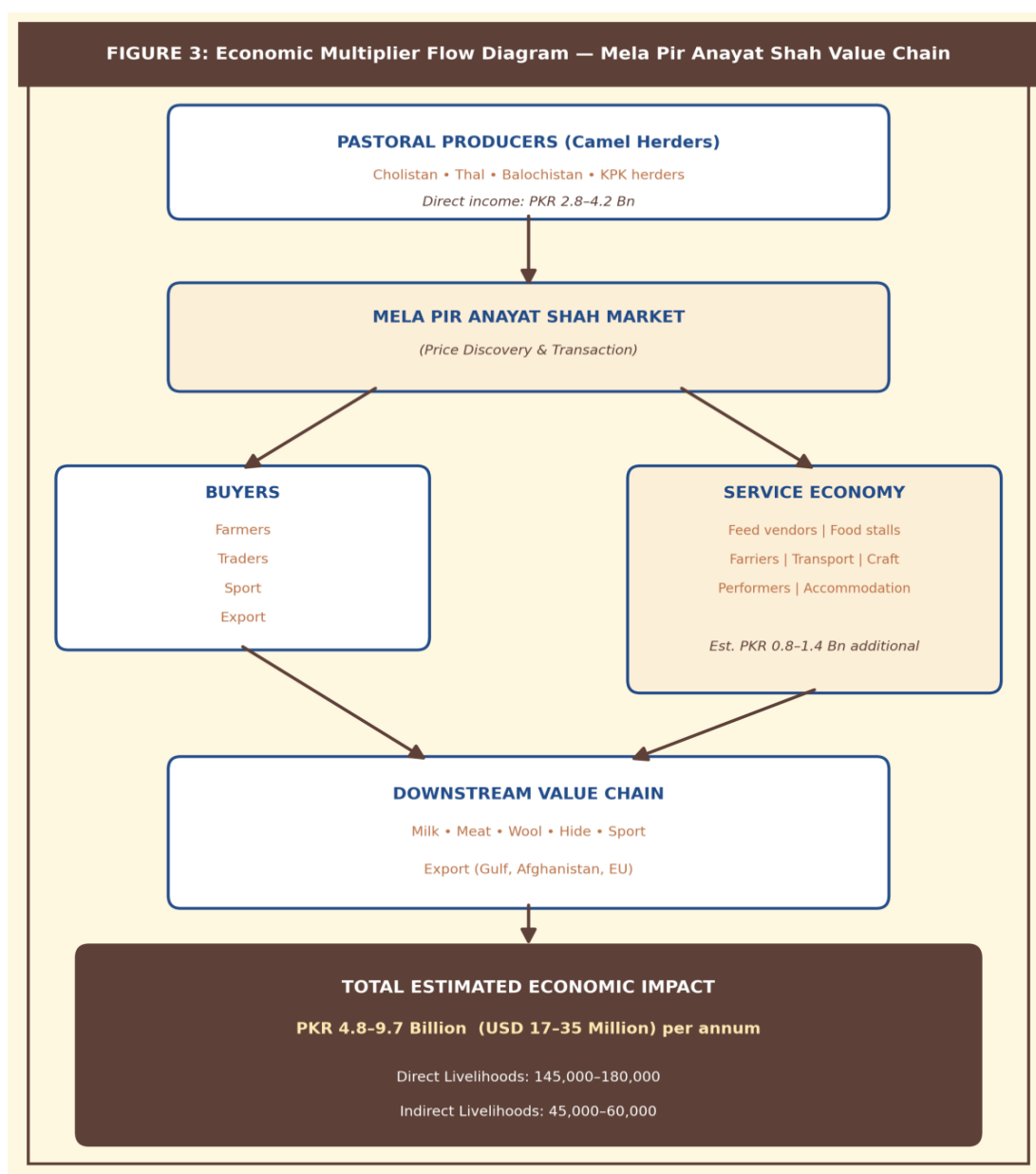
Participant Category	Avg. Income per Mela (PKR)	% Annual Income from Mela	Days At Fair	n	Key Income Source
Camel herders / sellers	85,000–420,000	22–38%	8–18	156	Camel sales (net)
Camel buyers / traders	40,000–180,000	18–32%	5–14	98	Trading margin
Feed / fodder vendors	18,000–65,000	8–22%	10–20	41	Feed sales
Food vendors / dhabas	12,000–45,000	6–18%	10–22	23	Food sales
Farriers / veterinary	8,000–28,000	12–35%	8–18	11	Services
Transport operators	15,000–60,000	10–28%	8–20	9	Fares / haulage
Artisan / craft vendors	6,000–22,000	15–45%	12–20	7	Craft sales
Cultural performers	4,000–18,000	25–60%	5–15	3	Performance fees
Key informants (officials)	—	—	—	39	—

Note: Income estimates are net income reported by the individual that is realized during participation in Mela. Camel's Herder income is derived from the difference between the value of camel that are sold and the expenses of travel, feed and accommodation. This is due to the high proportion of annual income earned by the cultural performers by participating in Mela, which is a seasonality phenomenon because of the high concentration of performance income at Mela events.

All values in PKR 2024.

5.4 Economic Multiplier Analysis

The total economic impact of Mela Pir Anayat Shah is estimated at PKR 4.8-9.7 billion (USD 17.3-34.9 million) per year, including the indirect and induced economic impact from the expenditure of traders on accommodation, food, transport, equipment, veterinary services and artisanal products in Layyah District and surrounding areas, using the regional livestock market multipliers derived by FAO (2022) for South Asian informal pastoral market contexts (1.7-2.3).



5.5 Value Chain Structure and Actor Analysis

The value chain of Mela has four main levels. Pastoral herder households keep herds of camels and support them in year-round movement of long-distance rangeland grazing circuits, incurring cost for feed supplementation, veterinary care, and access to water. The Mela is a group of people that brings the sellers and buyers together in a competitive market where the price is determined mostly by direct negotiation (mulaqat) between the buyers and sellers with informal security of the transaction by the witnesses (gawah). At the processing and distribution level, purchased animals feed into various downstream value chains such as agricultural draft use, meat processing (qurbani market during the

month of Dhul Hijja), milk production (commercial dairy operations especially in the peri-urban livestock belts of Punjab), camel sport (wrestling and racing, governed by district sports associations), and export (mainly to Afghanistan and informal cross-border trade to the Gulf camel sport market). In the support services layer, the feed suppliers, veterinary practitioners, farriers, transporters and financial intermediaries supply essential inputs and services to the primary trading. The value capture analysis shows that there is a serious distributional issue, with primary producers (herder households) getting around 45-55% of the final consumer value, intermediary traders getting 25-35%, and downstream processors getting 15-25%. This intermediary margin compression of pastoralist income is similar to what has been described in the value chain literature on informal livestock markets in developing economies (FAO, 2022; Kaplinsky & Morris, 2001) and is the main focus of the policy interventions: direct market facilitation between pastoralists and buyers, price information dissemination, and pastoralist cooperative organisation.

6. CULTURAL HERITAGE DIMENSIONS

6.1 Camel Wrestling: The Mela's Signature Cultural Event

The most showy and much recorded cultural aspect of Mela Pir Anayat Shah is the camel wrestle one of the remaining traditional wrestling institutions of the world and said to be the largest in South Asia. The tradition of camel wrestling at Darbar Inayat Shah has been documented since at least 1973 when the rules for formalized competition were established by the local organizers, although the tradition predates colonial records (Animal Rights in Pakistan, 2024). Among the most precious animals are the wrestled camels: mature male dromedaries in breeding condition (rutting bulls) are pushed and neck wrestled in competition to demonstrate their strength, temperament and quality of training. Camels are decorated with silver ornaments, embroidered ceremonial blanket (khadar) and coloured thread decoration, and their owners dance to the dhol beats when they win the wrestling match (Animal Rights in Pakistan, 2024). The wrestling competition has a number of other important economic roles beyond entertainment, as a quality demonstration mechanism that affects trading prices of competing animals; as a draw on visitors who become buyers or service consumers; and as a source of a specialist camel training economy, where the wrestler camel trainers, ornament manufacturers, and handler communities have specialized livelihoods that revolve around Mela. Survey results suggest that camels with good wrestling performance will be sold for 40-120 percent higher than similarly bred

camels that do not wrestle, which means that there are substantial private benefits to wrestling performance that provide an economic reason to continue and strengthen the practice of wrestling.

6.2 Camel Dancing: Aesthetics and Economy

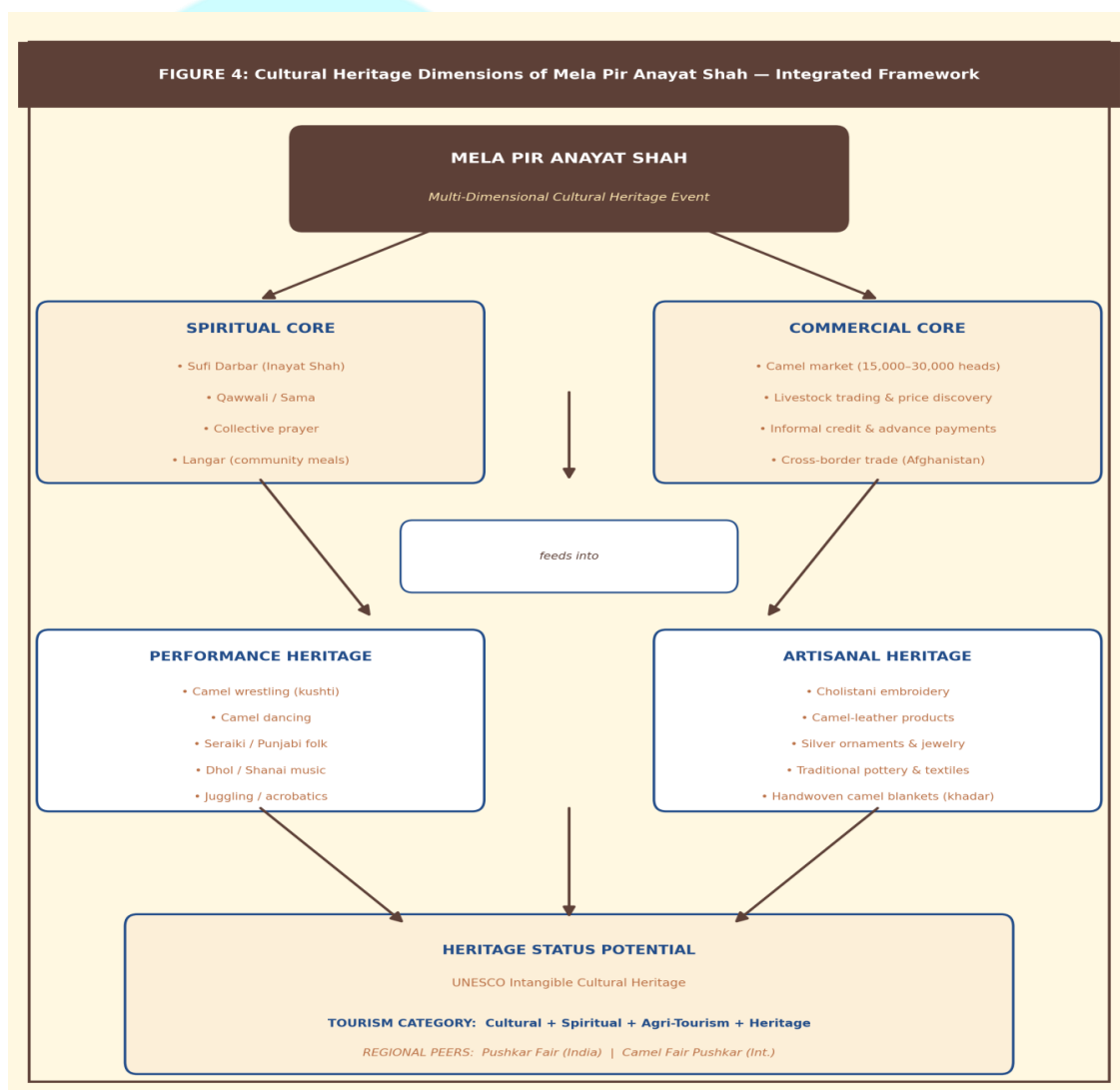
The second major cultural event at the Mela is the Camel dancing during which the camels are trained to perform rhythmic stepping with the accompaniment of music. The training of camels for dancing is a specialized skill that is passed on within certain pastoral families, and trained dancing camels can fetch high prices (30-80 percent premiums) from purchasers looking for a camel to perform at weddings, festivals and promotional events for cultural purposes (Faraz et al., 2023). The main public event for demonstrating the quality of the dancing camel is the Mela, and the trading prices are affected by how the camel dances during this event. The training of dancing camels sustains a peripheral economy of professional trainers, musicians (mainly dhol players and shanai performers) and event organisers, who travel with dancing camel shows along the rural festival circuit of Punjab.

6.3 Sufi Devotional Practices and Communal Spirituality

The spiritual essence of the Mela, the devotional exercises at the Darbar of Hazrat Pir Inayat Shah Bukhari, are woven into a wider tapestry of the Sufi communal life that imbues the fair with its unique cultural identity. The sacred economy of hospitality at the shrine, including qawwali performances, samaa gathering of devotees, collective prayers and langar (free community meals) organized by the shrine management, attracts devotees, not necessarily camel traders, but nonetheless devotees who make substantial contribution to the overall economic activities of the Mela through their spending on food, transport, accommodation, devotional offerings, and market purchases. The institutional legitimacy and organisational capacity of the shrine's spiritual authority also help in the running of the Mela, which has no formal governmental organisational infrastructure, also being a feature of the role of the shrine-based Sufi institutions in organising the rural social economy of Pakistan (Kamali, 2008).

6.4 Folk Performances and Intangible Cultural Heritage

In addition to camel activities, the cultural programme of the Mela includes the performance of folk music in the Seraiki language, traditional dances in Punjabi, magic shows, acrobatic shows, traditional wrestling (kushti) and exhibition of traditional crafts, including the Cholistani embroidery, camel skin products, and traditional jewellery. As these cultural performances are part and parcel of the significant intangible cultural heritage assets, they are eligible to be documented as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity which would play a huge role in providing international interest and protection to the heritage (UNESCO, 2023). The survey respondents showed that folk performances are also important as a way of attracting visitors, as the third most important factor of attending Mela after camel trading and devotional practices, which shows that folk performances are a way of attracting visitors outside the pastoral community.



7. POLICY ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Current Policy Gaps: The Formalization Deficit

In spite of its continental importance and four centuries of uninterrupted functioning Mela Pir Anayat Shah operates in a near vacuum of any policy. The key findings from the survey and key informant interviews regarding critical infrastructure and institutional gaps are as follows: (1) No standard veterinary health certificate requirements for traded animals: disease transmission risks, and limited exportability to satisfy international phytosanitary requirements; (2) No digital transaction infrastructure: all transactions are in cash which poses security and tax compliance risks and makes it impossible to collect data; (3) No formal insurance framework: pastoral households suffer catastrophic losses from animal theft, disease and transport mortality without formal insurance mechanisms; (4) No linkages to SMEDA's SME development programs: pastoral entrepreneurs are not linked to SMEDA's SME development programs; (5) No formal cultural heritage management: Mela's unique intangible heritage elements are not documented, protected and leveraged for cultural tourism development; and (6) No waste management or environmental infrastructure: substantial sanitation issues are created due to the temporary concentration of tens of thousands of animals and visitors, yet no formal management is in place.

Table 4: Policy Gap Analysis — Mela Pir Anayat Shah

Policy Domain	Current Status	Development Gap	Recommended Intervention
Veterinary Services	Informal/ad hoc only	No certification, disease risk	Mandatory health screening camps; Livestock Dept. mobile units
Financial Services	Cash only, no banking	No insurance, no digital payment	SBP digital payment kiosk; livestock microinsurance; PMN facilitation
SME Development	No SMEDA engagement	No business services, no formal enterprise	SMEDA mobile business development unit; camel enterprise pre-feasibility
Value Chain	Fragmented, informal	Low pastoralist price capture	PDDC milk collection center; cooperative trader registration; quality grading
Cultural Heritage	Undocumented, unmanaged	No UNESCO documentation; no tourism product	Heritage documentation; provincial tourism board engagement; PTDC listing
Infrastructure	Temporary, inadequate	No permanent facilities	Permanent livestock ground; Mela tourism centre; digital connectivity
Environmental Mgmt.	No formal system	Health risks, waste accumulation	Waste management contract; animal welfare standards; water provision
Cross-Border Trade	Informal, undocumented	Afghan/CA buyers undocumented	TDAP trade facilitation; formal export documentation for camels

Note: SMEDA = Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority; SBP = State Bank of Pakistan; PMN = Pakistan Microfinance Network; PDDC = Pakistan Dairy Development Company; PTDC = Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation; TDAP = Trade Development Authority of Pakistan.

7.2 Strategic Policy Recommendations

7.2.1 National Rural Heritage Asset Designation

MNRH Department of Ministry of National Food Security and Research (MNFSR) should officially recognize Mela Pir Anayat Shah as a National Rural Heritage and Economic Development Asset with the assistance of Government of Punjab. This designation would result in: allocation of a dedicated development budget annually; coordination of multiple federal and provincial agencies (Livestock, Tourism, Commerce, Finance, IT); and eligibility for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage nomination, which would greatly increase the international visibility and cultural tourism development potential (UNESCO, 2023).

7.2.2 SMEDA Integration and Camel Enterprise Development

SMEDA should design a permanent Camel Economy Enterprise Development Program based on the annual cycle of Mela with the following components: mobile business registration services during the Mela period to help informal camel traders register as formal SMEs, outreach clinics based on SMEDA's Camel Farm Pre-Feasibility Study (SMEDA, 2023) during Mela, and linkages with Prime Minister's Youth Business and Agriculture Loan Scheme (PMYB&ALS) financing for pastoral entrepreneur formalization (SMEDA, 2023; Government of Pakistan, 2024).

7.2.3 Livestock Insurance and Social Protection

For this purpose, a Camel Livestock Insurance Product should be designed and piloted in collaboration with State Life Insurance Corporation and leading microinsurance providers by the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) and Punjab Rural Support Programme (PRSP) tailored to the risk profile of pastoral households of Cholistan-Thal. Parameters should comprise coverage for disease mortality, accident, theft and drought-induced starvation; 2-4 percent premium pricing based on assessed value of the animals; collective enrollment through pastoral clan networks as opposed to household-by-household sales;

and claims processing by mobile units deployed during Mela to reduce transaction costs for remote pastoral claimants.

7.2.4 Cultural Heritage Tourism Development

The Punjab Tourism Authority, Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) and Ministry of Tourism should collectively create a Mela Pir Anayat Shah Heritage Tourism Product, such as: annual packages for domestic tourists to enable market through online travel agencies; dedicated press tour for international market to attract geographic and cultural travel media coverage; partnership with cultural photography festival to leverage the world-class visual spectacle of Mela; documentation for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage nomination for camel wrestling, camel dancing and associated performance traditions (UNESCO, 2023; UNWTO, 2024).

7.2.5 CPEC Connectivity and Cross-Border Trade Facilitation

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connectivity agenda offers an institutional mechanism to mainstream the important cross-border trade of the Mela (estimated 12-17 percent buyers from Afghanistan and Central Asian States). The Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) is suggested to set up export documentation services during the Mela period so that Afghan and Central Asian buyers can export purchased camels through formal documentation in accordance with the SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) requirements. This formalisation would not only broaden the Afghan market (with significant demand for Pakistani camels due to the collapse of the livestock sector following the conflict) but would also allow for the creation of export revenues, veterinary compliance incentives, and formal trade relationship development in line with Pakistan's regional economic integration goals (Government of Pakistan, 2024–25).

8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Summary of Findings

The study has produced the first empirical investigation of Mela Pir Anayat Shah, Asia's largest camel market, using primary survey data from 387 respondents, spanning three fair cycles (2022-2024), and secondary data analysis and ethnographic observation, which provides a picture of the market's economic size, structure, cultural heritage value, and

policy framework. The results lead to five main conclusions. First, the Mela is a continental-scale rural economic institution, estimated to support 145,000-180,000 livelihoods with PKR 2.8-4.2 billion (USD 10-15 million) in annual livestock trade value, and with PKR 4.8-9.7 billion (USD 17-35 million) in overall economic multiplier effects, and whose indirect economy beneficiaries are estimated at 45,000-60,000. Among the biggest economic consequences of any single event in a year in rural Pakistan, and not at all accounted for in national accounts, or development planning frameworks. Second, the Mela is a key market institution that is vital for pastoral communities of the Cholistan-Thal belt, which lacks any other market access points throughout the rest of the year for price discovery, market access, maintaining social capital and exchange of information. Thirdly, the culture of the Mela, including camel wrestling, camel dancing, Sufi devotional practices, saraiki folk performance and traditional artisanal production is unique intangible culture heritage of international importance which is eligible for documentation by UNESCO and can provide significant heritage tourism development. Fourth, price differences of 40-120 per cent for camel wrestling winners and 30-80 per cent for trained dancing camels reveal the economic sense of pastoral entrepreneurs maintaining cultural practices, creating a private sector incentive system for cultural heritage taking into account commercial livestock economy dynamics. Last, the Mela is a de facto policy vacuum without veterinary certification, digital financial infrastructure, SMEDA integration, formal cultural heritage management, or environmental services, restricting its potential as a rural economic development catalyst.

8.2 Contribution to Knowledge

The purpose of this study is to advance three strands of the literature. To the theory of rural markets, it is the first empirical documentation of a subcontinental-scale camel market fair as a multi-functional rural development institution which validates Bromley's (1971) theory of the roles of periodic rural markets and extends it to the unique institution of the pastoral market associated with Sufi shrines. To camel economic literature it is the first economic impact assessment based on a primary survey of a major South Asian camel fair and will serve as a basis for longitudinal study of the camel economy in Pakistan. It brings into cultural heritage economics the first quantitative evidence about the premiums for camel performance, providing economic value dimensions to cultural practice, which are

not available from purely cultural/anthropological studies, and that bases the argument for cultural heritage preservation on the evidence of private economic rationality.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

Some of the limitations of this study are: income and transaction volume data for this study were self-reported where the respondents may underreport for tax compliance or for privacy reasons; all categories of participants may not be represented in the stratified purposive sampling used in this study to census the entire Mela population; the timeframe for the study is limited to three years, which does not allow to see changes in Mela participation, breed composition, and economic structure on the decade scale. Further research should seek to include: a longitudinal panel study of pastoral household livelihoods to measure the cumulative impacts on incomes of participation in the Mela; comparative study of SMEDA enterprise development intervention impacts on pastoral household incomes with the Pushkar Camel Fair in India and other similar fairs in Iran, Somalia, and Sudan in order to establish international standards; ethnographic study of the shrine-market institutional nexus as a model of faith-based rural economic organisation in Islamic contexts.

Mela Pir Anayat Shah is the most economically important undocumented rural economic institution in Pakistan, encompassing a camel market of billions rupees in annual economic activity, hundreds of thousands of pastoral livelihoods, and irreplaceable intangible heritage of the continent of Asia – a uniquely Pakistani contribution to the continent's rural economic development heritage – that deserves immediate formal recognition, systematic policy support and sustained scholarly attention.

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