



## ***Educational Rights of Religious Minorities in Pakistan: The Sikh Community's Perspective***

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### ***Abstract***

*Educational rights constitute one of the most fundamental dimensions of human dignity and social inclusion in modern pluralistic societies. In countries characterized by religious diversity, the educational experiences of minority communities often become a critical indicator of broader patterns of social justice and institutional inclusivity. Pakistan, while constitutionally committed to safeguarding the religious freedom of minority communities, continues to navigate complex questions regarding the educational representation of minority religious traditions within its national curriculum. This study examines the educational rights of religious minorities in Pakistan through the specific perspective of the Sikh community. The Sikh population in Pakistan, although numerically small, occupies a historically and spiritually significant position due to the presence of major Sikh sacred sites such as Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur Sahib. Despite this historical presence, Sikh students in Pakistan frequently encounter educational environments where their religious identity receives limited representation within formal educational curricula. The article explores the philosophical foundations of education within Sikhism, particularly the teachings contained in the Guru Granth Sahib and the ethical principles associated with the Sikh Khalsa tradition. It further investigates contemporary debates surrounding compulsory Islamic Studies within Pakistani educational institutions and the implications of such curricular structures for Sikh students. Through doctrinal analysis and qualitative insights, the study highlights the need for inclusive educational frameworks that recognize the religious and cultural identity of minority communities.*

**Keywords:** *Educational Rights, Religious Minorities, Pakistan, Sikh Community's Perspective*

### **1. Introduction: Education, Identity and Religious Pluralism**

Education serves not only as a mechanism for intellectual development but also as a crucial instrument for the transmission of cultural values, religious beliefs, and collective identity. In multicultural societies, the structure of educational curricula plays a decisive role in shaping how different communities perceive themselves and how they relate to the broader national framework. The protection of minority educational rights has therefore become a central concern within international human rights discourse.



International instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasize that education must respect the religious and cultural identity of minority communities (United Nations, 1948). In Pakistan, the question of minority educational rights assumes particular importance due to the country's religious diversity and complex historical background. The presence of Sikh religious heritage sites in Pakistan has created a unique socio-religious landscape in which Sikh identity continues to hold historical significance despite the relatively small size of the contemporary Sikh population. Consequently, understanding the educational concerns of the Sikh community requires a broader examination of how educational systems interact with religious identity and minority cultural preservation.

## **2. Constitutional Protection of Minority Educational Rights in Pakistan**

The Constitution of Pakistan provides several legal provisions intended to safeguard the religious and educational rights of minority communities. Article 20 guarantees the freedom of religion and allows every citizen to profess, practice, and propagate his or her religion. This provision establishes the foundational legal framework within which minority communities are permitted to maintain their religious institutions and educational traditions (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). More specifically, Article 22 addresses the issue of religious instruction in educational institutions. According to this provision, no individual attending an educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction belonging to a faith other than his or her own. This constitutional protection reflects Pakistan's formal commitment to respecting religious diversity within its educational system. However, practical implementation of these constitutional guarantees has often been subject to administrative challenges and curricular limitations. For minority communities such as the Sikhs, the absence of structured religious curriculum within mainstream educational institutions remains a significant concern.

## **3. Sikhism as a Knowledge Tradition**

Sikhism founded in the fifteenth century by Baba Guru Nanak, places profound emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge, ethical awareness, and spiritual discipline. Unlike many purely ritualistic religious traditions, Sikh teachings consistently emphasize the importance of intellectual reflection and moral development. The early Sikh Gurus frequently highlighted the significance of education as a means of spiritual enlightenment and social transformation. Baba Guru Nanak himself rejected rigid religious formalism and instead advocated a path centered on knowledge, humility, and ethical living. Within Sikh theology, learning is not limited to formal schooling but encompasses a broader process of moral and spiritual cultivation. The concept of Gurmat (the wisdom of the Guru) represents a comprehensive educational philosophy that guides believers toward self-discipline, compassion, and social responsibility (Singh, 2018). Consequently, Sikh religious tradition places considerable importance on educational institutions, scriptural study, and moral instruction as essential components of religious life.



#### 4. Guru Granth Sahib as a Source of Ethical Education

The Guru Granth Sahib, the central scripture of Sikhism, serves not only as a sacred religious text but also as a comprehensive source of ethical and philosophical instruction. Compiled by the Sikh Gurus and later canonized as the eternal Guru of the Sikh faith, the Guru Granth Sahib contains spiritual teachings that emphasize humility, compassion, social equality, and devotion to divine truth. One of the distinctive features of the Guru Granth Sahib is its inclusion of spiritual poetry from saints belonging to different religious traditions. Among these contributors is the renowned Muslim Sufi saint Baba Farid, whose verses form an integral part of Sikh scripture (Nesbitt, 2016). This inclusion reflects the universalistic ethos of Sikh spirituality and highlights the tradition's openness to interfaith knowledge. From an educational perspective, the Guru Granth Sahib functions as a moral guide that encourages intellectual inquiry, ethical conduct, and spiritual awareness.

#### 5. The Five K's and the Formation of Sikh Religious Identity

An important aspect of Sikh religious education is the symbolic and ethical system known as the Five K's, which form a central component of the Khalsa identity established by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The Five K's include: "**Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (wooden comb), Kara (steel bracelet), Kachera (special undergarment), Kirpan (ceremonial sword)**". These symbols function not merely as external identifiers but as instruments of moral discipline and spiritual awareness. Within Sikh educational traditions, young Sikhs are taught the significance of these symbols as expressions of courage, self-control, and devotion to justice (McLeod, 2005). Through the observance of the Five K's, Sikh youth internalize the ethical values of the Khalsa tradition, including bravery, humility, and commitment to defending the oppressed. Thus, religious education within Sikhism is closely connected with identity formation and moral responsibility.

#### 6. Historical Development of Sikh Educational Institutions

Historically, Sikh educational traditions developed within religious institutions associated with gurdwaras and community learning centers. During the early periods of Sikh history, gurdwaras functioned as spaces not only for worship but also for communal learning and ethical instruction. Religious scholars and community leaders often conducted scriptural teaching sessions in which Sikh youth were educated about the teachings of the Gurus. In the colonial period, the Sikh community established formal educational institutions aimed at preserving religious identity and promoting literacy among Sikh populations. Organizations such as the Singh Sabha movement played a significant role in reforming Sikh educational structures and promoting the study of Sikh scriptures. These developments contributed to the emergence of a strong intellectual tradition within Sikhism that continues to influence Sikh educational philosophy today (Singh, 2018).



## **7. Sikh Students in Contemporary Pakistan**

In contemporary Pakistan, the Sikh population remains relatively small but historically significant. Sikh families are primarily concentrated in regions such as Nankana Sahib, Peshawar, and parts of Punjab. Sikh children generally attend public schools where the national curriculum forms the basis of formal education. While these institutions provide general education in subjects such as science, mathematics, and languages, the representation of Sikh religious teachings within the curriculum remains limited. Consequently, Sikh families often rely on community institutions and gurdwaras to provide religious instruction to younger generations. This parallel educational structure reflects the community's effort to preserve its religious identity within an educational system that primarily reflects the religious traditions of the Muslim majority.

## **8. Curriculum Challenges: Islamic Studies and Sikh Students**

One of the most frequently discussed issues within minority education in Pakistan relates to the structure of religious instruction within the national curriculum. Islamic Studies is a compulsory subject for Muslim students, and in many educational institutions Sikh students are required to study alternative ethics courses or, in some cases, are exposed to elements of Islamic curriculum. Some Sikh community representatives have expressed concern that the absence of a formal Sikh religious studies curriculum limits the ability of Sikh students to develop a structured understanding of their own religious traditions. Importantly, many Sikh families do not oppose learning about Islamic teachings as part of broader cultural education. Rather, they advocate for the inclusion of minority religious studies within the national curriculum so that Sikh students can study their own religious heritage alongside the study of other traditions. Such curricular inclusion would enable minority students to maintain a balanced educational identity.

## **9. Educational Inclusion and the Need for Curriculum Reform**

Educational inclusion requires that national curricula reflect the cultural and religious diversity of the societies they serve. In Pakistan, the development of minority religious studies modules could represent an important step toward strengthening educational equity. Such initiatives could involve the preparation of textbooks introducing the basic teachings of Sikhism, including the lives of the Sikh Gurus, the ethical teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the cultural traditions of the Sikh community. Educational reforms of this nature would not only benefit Sikh students but also contribute to broader social understanding by introducing students from different religious backgrounds to the diversity of religious traditions present within Pakistan. Ultimately, an inclusive educational framework can function as an important foundation for interfaith harmony and social cohesion.

## **10. Minority Religious Education in Comparative Perspective**

The debate concerning minority religious education is not unique to Pakistan; it constitutes a broader challenge encountered by many multicultural societies across the



world. Countries with significant religious diversity frequently struggle to balance the educational requirements of majority populations with the cultural and spiritual needs of minority communities. Comparative studies demonstrate that educational systems in pluralistic societies often adopt one of three approaches toward minority religious education: assimilation, accommodation, or pluralistic inclusion (Jackson, 2014). Assimilationist models prioritize a uniform national curriculum that reflects the majority religious or cultural tradition, while accommodation models provide alternative religious instruction for minority communities. Pluralistic systems, on the other hand, integrate knowledge about multiple religious traditions within the broader educational curriculum. For minority communities such as the Sikhs in Pakistan, the question of educational representation remains closely connected to issues of identity preservation and cultural continuity.

### **11. Educational Identity and Sikh Youth in Pakistan**

The experiences of Sikh students within Pakistan's educational institutions illustrate the complex relationship between national educational policies and minority identity formation. While Sikh children participate fully in the national education system, many families emphasize the importance of maintaining religious awareness alongside formal schooling. In several Sikh communities, religious instruction is often provided informally through gurdwaras where children learn about the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the recitation of sacred hymns, and the ethical values associated with Sikh identity. Such parallel educational arrangements reflect the community's determination to ensure that younger generations remain connected to their spiritual heritage. However, reliance on informal religious education alone may limit the systematic transmission of Sikh theological knowledge among students.

### **12. The Debate on Religious Curriculum in Pakistan**

The question of religious curriculum has been widely discussed within Pakistan's academic and policy circles. Education experts have increasingly recognized the importance of designing curricula that reflect the cultural diversity of Pakistani society. In recent years, discussions surrounding the Single National Curriculum have raised important questions about how minority religious traditions should be represented within educational institutions. Scholars have argued that minority religious education can play a constructive role in promoting social cohesion by enabling students to understand the beliefs and traditions of different communities (Rahman, 2017). Within this context, Sikh community representatives have suggested that the inclusion of Sikh religious studies modules could help Sikh students develop a stronger understanding of their own faith while simultaneously promoting interfaith awareness among other students.

### **13. Field Interview: Sikh Parent Perspective**

Interview Location: Nankana Sahib,

Interview Date: August 2024,



Interviewee: Harjit Singh (Parent),

During a field interview conducted in Nankana Sahib, a Sikh parent highlighted the importance of religious education for Sikh children living in Pakistan.

**Question:** What challenges do Sikh students face in the current educational system?

**Response:** “Our children study in Pakistani schools and they learn many useful subjects, but they rarely receive formal education about Sikh history and teachings. We believe that if a proper curriculum about Sikhism were available, our children would better understand their religious heritage.” The interview illustrates a broader concern within the Sikh community regarding the limited representation of Sikh religious teachings within mainstream educational curricula.

#### **14. Field Interview: Sikh Student Experience**

Interview Location: Nankana Sahib,

Interview Date: September 2024,

Interviewee: Manpreet Kaur (Student),

**Question:** How do Sikh students feel about studying Islamic Studies in school?

**Response:** “We respect Islamic teachings and we study them because they are part of the curriculum. However, it would also be helpful if Sikh students had the opportunity to learn about the teachings of our Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib in school.” This perspective reflects the moderate and cooperative attitude adopted by many Sikh families toward the national curriculum while simultaneously expressing a desire for greater educational representation of Sikh religious traditions.

#### **15. The Role of Gurdwaras in Religious Education**

In the absence of formal Sikh religious curriculum in many schools, gurdwaras continue to play a vital role as centers of religious education for Sikh youth. Religious leaders and community elders often conduct educational sessions in which children learn about the lives of the Sikh Gurus, the recitation of sacred hymns (Gurbani), and the ethical teachings of Sikh scripture. These sessions also introduce children to the symbolic and spiritual meaning of the Five K's, emphasizing the moral responsibilities associated with Sikh identity. Through such community-based educational initiatives, Sikh families attempt to ensure that younger generations remain connected with their religious heritage despite the limitations of formal educational structures.

#### **16. State Responsibility toward Minority Educational Rights**

The responsibility for protecting the educational rights of minority communities ultimately rests with the state. Governments are expected to develop policies that enable minority students to maintain their cultural and religious identity within the broader national framework. In Pakistan, educational policy reforms have increasingly emphasized the importance of promoting tolerance and inclusivity within the



curriculum. Educational scholars argue that the development of minority religious studies modules could contribute significantly to strengthening social harmony by fostering mutual understanding among students from different religious backgrounds (Ahmed, 2020). For Sikh students, the introduction of structured educational material related to Sikh history and theology could provide an important platform for identity preservation and intellectual development.

### **17. Interfaith Education as a Tool for Social Harmony**

Educational institutions have long been recognized as powerful platforms for cultivating interfaith understanding. By introducing students to diverse religious traditions, schools can help reduce prejudice and encourage mutual respect among communities. Interfaith education programs implemented in various parts of the world demonstrate that students who learn about multiple religious traditions often develop greater tolerance toward cultural diversity (Jackson, 2014). In the Pakistani context, the inclusion of Sikh religious studies within educational curricula could help students understand the historical significance of Sikh heritage sites such as Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur Sahib. Such initiatives would not only benefit Sikh students but would also enrich the broader educational experience of all students.

### **18. Policy Recommendations for Inclusive Minority Education**

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations can be proposed for strengthening minority educational rights in Pakistan. First, educational authorities should consider developing optional religious studies curricula for minority communities, including Sikhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. Second, teacher training programs should include modules on religious diversity to enable educators to address minority issues with sensitivity and awareness. Third, educational textbooks should incorporate balanced historical narratives that acknowledge the contributions of minority communities to Pakistan's cultural heritage. Finally, collaboration between government institutions and minority community organizations could facilitate the development of culturally appropriate educational materials.

### **Conclusion**

The educational experiences of the Sikh community in Pakistan highlight important questions regarding the relationship between national educational policy and minority cultural identity. While Sikh students actively participate in Pakistan's educational system and demonstrate respect toward the national curriculum, the absence of structured Sikh religious studies within schools presents challenges for the preservation of Sikh religious knowledge among younger generations. Addressing these challenges requires a thoughtful approach that balances national educational objectives with the cultural and spiritual needs of minority communities. The development of inclusive educational frameworks that recognize the religious traditions of minority groups could significantly strengthen social cohesion and interfaith harmony in Pakistan. Ultimately,



ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all communities remains an essential component of a democratic and pluralistic society.

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