



The Role of the State in Protecting Sikh Religious Heritage in Pakistan

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Abstract

The preservation of religious heritage represents a fundamental responsibility of modern nation-states, particularly in societies characterized by cultural diversity and historical pluralism. Pakistan, despite being a predominantly Muslim country, hosts numerous sacred sites belonging to minority communities, including the Sikh religious heritage associated with the life and teachings of Guru Nanak. This article critically examines the role of the Pakistani state in safeguarding Sikh religious heritage through institutional frameworks, administrative policies, and security mechanisms. The study focuses on the preservation and management of gurdwaras located across Pakistan, particularly those situated in Punjab, where the majority of Sikh historical sites are located. Historical records indicate that Pakistan contains hundreds of Sikh religious shrines, many of which date back to the early Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Empire period. According to archival data, more than 588 gurdwaras were recorded in Pakistan, with the majority located in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Government of Pakistan, 2008). Through qualitative analysis, the article explores how state institutions such as the Evacuee Trust Property Board, provincial administrations, and security agencies collaborate to preserve these heritage sites and facilitate international Sikh pilgrimage. The findings suggest that Pakistan has adopted a relatively structured institutional framework for the preservation of Sikh religious heritage, combining heritage conservation, religious tourism management, and comprehensive security arrangements for visiting pilgrims.

Keywords: *Role of State, Protecting Sikh Religious Heritage, Pakistan*

1. Introduction

Religious heritage constitutes an essential dimension of cultural identity and historical continuity. Across the world, sacred sites often represent the spiritual memory of communities and serve as important symbols of collective belonging. In South Asia, religious heritage sites belonging to multiple traditions are distributed across the political boundaries created after the partition of British India in 1947. A considerable number of historically significant Sikh shrines remained within the territorial boundaries of Pakistan. These sites include locations associated with the life of Guru Nanak as well as shrines connected with later Sikh Gurus and historical figures of the Sikh Empire. The preservation of these heritage sites has become an important



responsibility for the Pakistani state, particularly because many of these locations attract international pilgrims from India, Europe, and North America. Among the most significant Sikh pilgrimage sites located in Pakistan are the shrines of Nankana Sahib, Kartarpur Sahib, and Panja Sahib. These locations are widely regarded as central components of Sikh sacred geography and attract thousands of pilgrims every year (Singh, 2019). The protection and management of these sites therefore represents not only a matter of heritage conservation but also an important dimension of international religious diplomacy.

2. Sikh Heritage Sites in Pakistan

Pakistan hosts a remarkable number of Sikh historical shrines that collectively represent centuries of Sikh religious history. Government records indicate that hundreds of gurdwaras existed across the territories that now constitute Pakistan. Archival documentation suggests that over five hundred Sikh shrines were historically registered, the majority of which were concentrated in Punjab and the northwestern regions (Government of Pakistan, 2008). Although many of these sites became inactive after the demographic changes of 1947, several major gurdwaras continue to function as active pilgrimage centers. Among the most prominent Sikh shrines in Pakistan are:

- * Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib
- * Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur
- * Gurdwara Panja Sahib Hasan Abdal
- * Gurdwara Dera Sahib Lahore
- * Gurdwara Sacha Sauda Farooqabad

These shrines hold immense spiritual importance for the global Sikh community. For example, Nankana Sahib is widely recognized as the birthplace of Bab Guru Nanak and remains one of the most revered pilgrimage destinations for Sikhs around the world (Singh, 2019).

3. Distribution of Gurdwaras across Pakistan

The geographical distribution of Sikh heritage sites in Pakistan illustrates the historical presence of Sikh communities across the broader Punjab region. Historical surveys indicate that numerous gurdwaras existed in districts such as Lahore, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Sialkot, and Rawalpindi. For instance, Lahore alone historically contained dozens of gurdwaras, while several others were located in districts such as Kasur, Gujranwala, and Okara (The Express Tribune, 2019). Outside Punjab, smaller Sikh populations historically maintained gurdwaras in regions such as Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, and Mansehra. The presence of these sites reflects the deep historical roots of Sikh communities in the region prior to the political transformations of the twentieth century. Despite the demographic changes following partition, many of these shrines remained structurally intact and have been preserved as part of Pakistan's cultural heritage landscape.

4. Historical Legacy of Sikh Heritage in Lahore



The city of Lahore occupies a unique position within the historical narrative of Sikh heritage. During the nineteenth century, Lahore served as the political capital of the Sikh Empire under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Several important Sikh historical monuments in Lahore are associated with this period. Among the most notable heritage structures is the Samadhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, located near the historic Lahore Fort and the Badshahi Mosque. This monument commemorates the cremation site of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and remains an important cultural landmark within the historical complex of Lahore. In addition, the nearby Gurdwara Dera Sahib commemorates the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru. This site continues to attract Sikh pilgrims from around the world. The preservation of these historical structures demonstrates the broader commitment of the Pakistani state to safeguarding heritage sites belonging to multiple religious traditions.

5. Institutional Framework for Heritage Protection

The primary institutional body responsible for the management and preservation of Sikh religious heritage in Pakistan is the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB). Established under the Evacuee Trust Properties Act of 1975, the Board operates under the administrative supervision of the federal government and is tasked with maintaining religious properties left behind after the partition of India (Government of Pakistan, 2008). The responsibilities of the Board include: Maintenance and restoration of Sikh shrines, Provision of facilities for pilgrims, Administration of trust properties, Coordination with religious committees. The ETPB also works closely with the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, which represents the Sikh community in matters related to religious management. Through this collaborative institutional framework, several historic gurdwaras have undergone restoration and renovation projects in recent decades.

6. Government Initiatives for Heritage Preservation

The Pakistani government has undertaken several initiatives aimed at preserving Sikh religious heritage and facilitating international pilgrimage. One of the most significant projects in recent years has been the development of the Kartarpur Corridor, which allows Sikh pilgrims from India to visit the shrine of Kartarpur Sahib without requiring a traditional visa. The shrine of Kartarpur Sahib marks the location where Guru Nanak spent the final years of his life and remains one of the holiest places in Sikhism. The establishment of the Kartarpur Corridor has been widely regarded as a landmark initiative in promoting religious tourism and interfaith engagement. In addition to infrastructure development, government authorities regularly coordinate with international Sikh organizations to facilitate pilgrimage visits during major Sikh religious festivals.

7. Security Arrangements for Sikh Pilgrimage Sites

The security of Sikh religious sites and visiting pilgrims represents a central component of state policy. During major religious festivals, security arrangements are implemented through coordination between multiple agencies, including the police, Rangers, immigration



authorities, and provincial administrative departments. For example, during the annual celebrations of Guru Nanak's birth anniversary, comprehensive security measures are implemented to ensure the safety of visiting pilgrims. These arrangements include controlled entry points, metal detectors, and coordinated security deployments (Butt, 2025). In addition, district administrations provide logistical support such as transportation, accommodation, and medical facilities for pilgrims. These arrangements demonstrate the role of state institutions in facilitating safe religious pilgrimage.

8. Administrative and Community Cooperation

The protection of Sikh religious heritage in Pakistan is not limited solely to government institutions. Local communities also contribute significantly to the preservation of religious sites. In several locations, Muslim residents living near historic temples and shrines have informally participated in protecting these structures during periods when religious communities were absent. Such examples illustrate the broader cultural ethos of coexistence that has historically characterized many parts of Pakistan. Local administrative authorities, including district commissioners and police departments, regularly coordinate with religious committees to ensure the maintenance of these sites. This collaborative model reflects a broader framework in which community engagement complements formal institutional mechanisms.

9. Religious Tourism and Cultural Diplomacy

Religious tourism associated with Sikh heritage sites has become an increasingly important component of Pakistan's cultural diplomacy. Thousands of Sikh pilgrims visit Pakistan annually to participate in religious festivals such as Vaisakhi and the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. In recent years, Pakistan has issued thousands of pilgrimage visas to Sikh visitors, facilitating access to major religious sites located in the country. These pilgrimage visits not only strengthen cultural ties between Pakistan and the global Sikh diaspora but also contribute to local economic development in regions hosting religious heritage sites. Consequently, the preservation of Sikh heritage has become an important dimension of Pakistan's broader policy of promoting religious tolerance and cultural inclusivity.

10. State Stewardship and Institutional Guardianship of Sikh Sacred Sites

The preservation of Sikh religious heritage within Pakistan represents a complex governance process involving multiple state institutions, security agencies, and administrative authorities. Unlike many other regions of the world where religious heritage protection is delegated primarily to civil institutions, Pakistan has developed a multi-layered administrative structure combining heritage management with national security oversight. The federal government, provincial administrations, district authorities, and security agencies collectively perform an important role in safeguarding gurdwaras and facilitating Sikh pilgrimage activities. Institutions such as the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) operate as the principal administrative authority responsible for the management of Sikh religious properties across Pakistan. These responsibilities include restoration projects, infrastructure development, and



logistical coordination for visiting pilgrims (Government of Pakistan, 2008). However, the preservation of Sikh heritage extends beyond administrative management and includes robust security mechanisms coordinated by law-enforcement agencies and the armed forces. Such institutional collaboration demonstrates the state's commitment to ensuring the protection of minority religious heritage as part of Pakistan's broader constitutional framework of religious freedom.

11. Security Architecture Surrounding Sikh Pilgrimage Sites

The protection of Sikh religious sites requires comprehensive security arrangements, particularly during major pilgrimage events that attract thousands of international visitors. For this purpose, multiple institutions participate in coordinated security planning, including: **“District Police, Pakistan Rangers, Intelligence Agencies, Civil Administration, Immigration and Border Authorities”** These agencies collectively implement security strategies such as controlled entry points, surveillance monitoring, visitor registration systems, and perimeter protection. During major religious festivals, gurdwaras such as Gurdwara Janam Asthan Nankana Sahib, Gurdwara Panja Sahib Hasan Abdal, and Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib receive heightened security deployment. These arrangements ensure that visiting pilgrims from countries such as India, Canada, and the United Kingdom are able to perform religious rituals in a safe environment (Butt, 2025). In many instances, security personnel also assist pilgrims with logistical matters such as accommodation guidance and transportation coordination.

12. District Administration as the Operational Custodian of Religious Harmony

At the local level, the district administration plays a crucial role in managing the practical aspects of Sikh pilgrimage events. District Commissioners (DCs) serve as the principal coordinators responsible for administrative oversight, logistical planning, and inter-departmental coordination. During major Sikh festivals, district administrations typically establish special facilitation centers to assist international pilgrims. These centers provide services such as: **“immigration facilitation, transportation arrangements, medical assistance, accommodation guidance”**. The district administration also coordinates with Sikh religious committees to ensure that religious ceremonies proceed smoothly. Such administrative engagement demonstrates how local governance structures contribute significantly to the preservation of religious heritage and the promotion of interfaith harmony.

13. Interview with the Deputy Commissioner of Nankana Sahib

Interview Location: Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib,

Interview Date: November 2024,

Interviewee: Tassleem Akhtar Rao (Deputy Commissioner Nankana Sahib),



During the celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birth anniversary in 2024, an interview was conducted with the Deputy Commissioner of Nankana Sahib regarding the role of district administration in facilitating Sikh pilgrims. Question: What responsibilities does the district administration undertake during Sikh religious festivals?

Answer (DC Tasseem Akhtar Rao):

“The district administration considers the protection of Sikh pilgrims a matter of both administrative responsibility and moral commitment. Every year we develop a comprehensive coordination plan involving police, Rangers, health departments, and municipal services to ensure that international pilgrims feel safe and respected during their visit.” He further explained that multiple departments remain operational around the clock during major Sikh festivals in order to manage the flow of pilgrims and provide assistance whenever required. Such administrative engagement illustrates the state's broader commitment to protecting religious heritage and promoting peaceful coexistence.

14. Policing Sacred Geography: Law Enforcement Responsibilities

Law enforcement agencies perform a central role in safeguarding Sikh religious heritage sites across Pakistan. District Police Departments deploy special security units during major Sikh religious gatherings. These units are responsible for maintaining crowd control, monitoring security risks, and coordinating emergency response mechanisms. In addition to conventional policing strategies, law enforcement agencies also collaborate with intelligence institutions to monitor potential threats. Security arrangements typically include: **“controlled entry checkpoints, baggage screening, surveillance monitoring, emergency response teams”**. These measures ensure that large religious gatherings occur without security disruptions.

15. Interview with the District Police Officer of Nankana Sahib

Interview Location: Nankana Sahib

Interview Date: November 2024

Interviewee: Syed Nadeem Abbas Shah (District Police Officer)

During the 2024 Baba Guru Nanak Dev Ji birth anniversary celebrations, the District Police Officer of Nankana Sahib provided insights into the security arrangements implemented for Sikh pilgrims.

Question: How does the police department ensure the safety of international Sikh pilgrims?

Answer: (DPO Syed Nadeem Abbas Shah):“The security of Sikh pilgrims is treated as a high priority by the police department. Special security units are deployed around gurdwaras, and coordination is maintained with Rangers and intelligence agencies. Our officers also provide assistance to pilgrims in navigating the city and accessing accommodation facilities.” He further stated that security planning for major Sikh festivals begins several weeks before the events, allowing authorities to conduct security assessments and logistical preparations.



16. Administrative Management within Gurdwara Institutions

In addition to state authorities, local gurdwara management personnel play an essential role in maintaining religious facilities. Caretakers are responsible for overseeing daily administrative functions such as maintenance, visitor coordination, and religious arrangements. The caretakers often work closely with government institutions to ensure that religious ceremonies are conducted smoothly.

17. Interview with the Former Caretaker of Gurdwara Janam Asthan

Interview Location: Nankana Sahib

Interview Date: 2024

Interviewee: Syed Atiq Gilani Shah (Former Caretaker of Gurdwara Janam Asthan)

Question: How does the Pakistani government assist in the management of gurdwara facilities?

Answer: (Syed Atiq Gilani Shah): “Government institutions provide extensive support during major Sikh religious events. District authorities ensure that pilgrims receive transportation, security protection, and accommodation facilities. Various government departments remain available to address any logistical concerns.” He further emphasized that cooperation between religious management and state authorities has significantly improved the overall pilgrimage experience for visiting Sikh communities.

18. Community Participation and Cultural Protection

Another significant dimension of heritage protection involves the participation of local communities. In many parts of Pakistan, Muslim residents living near historic temples and gurdwaras have played an informal role in safeguarding these religious structures. This phenomenon reflects a broader tradition of coexistence that has historically characterized many regions of Punjab. Community engagement often complements the efforts of state institutions by ensuring that heritage sites remain protected even in the absence of active religious communities. Such local participation reinforces the social legitimacy of heritage preservation initiatives.

Conclusion

The preservation of Sikh religious heritage in Pakistan represents a multi-dimensional process involving administrative institutions, security agencies, and community engagement. The Pakistani state has developed a relatively structured institutional framework for safeguarding Sikh sacred sites through organizations such as the Evacuee Trust Property Board, provincial governments, district administrations, and law enforcement agencies. Security arrangements



implemented by police, Rangers, and other institutions ensure that international Sikh pilgrims are able to perform religious rituals in a safe environment. Furthermore, the cooperation between state institutions and religious management committees demonstrates how heritage preservation can function as an important instrument of interfaith coexistence. Through these combined efforts, Pakistan continues to maintain numerous historic Sikh shrines that remain integral to the global Sikh religious landscape.

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