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Socio-Economic Conditions of the Sikh Community in Nankana Sahib: Challenges and Policy Solutions

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Abstract

The socio-economic conditions of religious minorities often serve as a critical indicator of social inclusion and institutional justice within pluralistic societies. In Pakistan, the Sikh community represents a historically significant religious minority, particularly in the district of Nankana Sahib, which holds profound spiritual importance as the birthplace of Guru Nanak. This study investigates the socio-economic conditions of the Sikh community residing in Nankana Sahib through a qualitative and analytical approach. It explores dimensions such as education, employment opportunities, economic participation, and social integration within the broader socio-political framework of Pakistan. The research also evaluates the role of governmental institutions, civil society initiatives, and religious tourism in shaping the economic prospects of the Sikh population in the region. Particular attention is given to the institutional responsibilities of organizations such as the "Evacuee Trust Property Board" which administers Sikh religious properties and pilgrimage sites in Pakistan. Findings indicate that while the Sikh community benefits from religious tourism and cultural heritage linked to "Gurdwara Janam Asthan" several structural challenges continue to affect socio-economic mobility. These challenges include limited access to higher education, underrepresentation in formal employment sectors, and restricted participation in policy-making institutions. The article concludes by proposing policy recommendations aimed at strengthening minority welfare mechanisms, expanding educational opportunities, and enhancing economic participation for the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib.

Keywords: *Socio-Economic Conditions, Sikh Community, Nankana Sahib, Challenges and Policy Solutions*

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1. Introduction

Socio-economic development is widely recognized as an essential element of social stability and minority empowerment in multicultural societies. The economic participation of minority communities not only contributes to national development but also reflects the degree of inclusivity within a country's institutional framework. Pakistan's constitutional structure formally recognizes the rights of religious minorities and guarantees freedom of religion, equality before law, and participation in national life. Nevertheless, socio-economic disparities between majority and minority populations remain an important subject of academic inquiry (Malik, 2002). The Sikh community in Pakistan represents a relatively small but historically significant minority group. Their presence in the Punjab region predates the creation of Pakistan and is deeply intertwined with the religious and cultural heritage of South Asia. Nankana Sahib occupies a particularly significant position in Sikh history because it is the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Consequently, the district attracts thousands of Sikh pilgrims annually from countries such as India, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These pilgrimage activities have contributed to the emergence of a localized religious tourism economy that indirectly benefits members of the local Sikh community. However, despite these opportunities, the socio-economic landscape of the community continues to exhibit certain structural limitations (Singh, 2019).

2. Historical Presence of the Sikh Community in Nankana Sahib

The historical presence of the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib is intrinsically connected with the spiritual legacy of Guru Nanak. Over centuries, the region evolved into one of the most revered pilgrimage destinations within Sikh religious geography. During the colonial period, Sikh religious institutions and educational centers flourished in various parts of Punjab. However, the political upheavals associated with the Partition of India in 1947 dramatically altered the demographic composition of the region. A significant proportion of the Sikh population migrated to India, while a smaller number remained in Pakistan. Those who continued to reside in Nankana Sahib maintained their connection to local religious institutions and gradually re-established community networks. In subsequent decades, the Pakistani government introduced administrative structures to protect Sikh religious heritage sites. The responsibility for managing many of these historical properties was assigned to the "Evacuee Trust Property Board" These developments contributed to the preservation

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of important Sikh religious landmarks while simultaneously enabling the continuation of pilgrimage traditions. Nevertheless, the demographic contraction of the Sikh population inevitably influenced the socio-economic structure of the community.

3. Demographic and Economic Profile

Understanding the socio-economic conditions of the Sikh community requires a careful examination of demographic patterns and economic participation. Although precise population statistics remain limited, estimates suggest that a modest number of Sikh families currently reside in the district of Nankana Sahib. Many of these families maintain close associations with local gurdwaras and religious institutions. Economically, members of the Sikh community often participate in small-scale commercial activities. These include retail businesses, handicraft production, and services associated with pilgrimage tourism. Local markets surrounding "Gurdwara Janam Asthan" frequently include shops operated by Sikh traders who provide religious artifacts, souvenirs, and essential goods for visiting pilgrims. While such economic activities provide livelihood opportunities, they are often concentrated within limited sectors and may not offer substantial prospects for long-term economic mobility. Scholars examining minority economies frequently observe that small communities often remain confined to localized commercial niches due to historical and structural factors (Esposito, 2011).

4. Education and Human Capital Development

Education represents one of the most critical determinants of socio-economic advancement. For minority communities, access to quality education plays a particularly important role in facilitating upward social mobility. Within Nankana Sahib, members of the Sikh community have increasingly recognized the importance of educational attainment for younger generations. Many families encourage their children to pursue higher education in nearby urban centers such as Lahore. However, several socio-economic constraints continue to affect educational opportunities. Financial limitations, limited scholarship programs, and geographic barriers sometimes restrict access to advanced academic institutions. National educational statistics compiled by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics indicate that minority communities in Pakistan often face disparities in educational access when compared to national averages. Despite these challenges, community leaders and civil society organizations have attempted to promote educational awareness through scholarship initiatives and

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community support programs. Such initiatives demonstrate the growing recognition that human capital development remains essential for long-term socio-economic stability.

5. Employment Patterns and Economic Participation

Employment opportunities represent another important dimension of socio-economic integration for minority communities. Members of the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib frequently engage in entrepreneurial activities rather than formal salaried employment. Small businesses, retail shops, and service-oriented enterprises constitute the primary sources of income for many families. These economic activities often revolve around the religious tourism sector associated with Sikh pilgrimage events. During major religious festivals, commercial activity in the city experiences a noticeable increase as thousands of pilgrims visit local shrines. However, reliance on seasonal tourism also introduces economic uncertainty. Income levels may fluctuate depending on the frequency of pilgrimage visits and broader political conditions affecting cross-border travel. Research conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan suggests that minority communities in Pakistan frequently encounter structural obstacles when seeking employment in formal public sector institutions. Consequently, many individuals rely on private entrepreneurship as a practical alternative for economic survival.

6. Role of Religious Tourism in Economic Sustainability

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the most influential economic drivers in Nankana Sahib. The annual arrival of Sikh pilgrims from different parts of the world contributes significantly to the local economy. Hotels, transportation services, handicraft markets, and food establishments benefit from increased commercial activity during pilgrimage seasons. For members of the Sikh community residing in the district, these events often provide temporary employment opportunities and facilitate interaction with the global Sikh diaspora. The presence of international visitors also contributes to cultural exchange and the development of transnational community networks. However, reliance on pilgrimage tourism as a primary economic resource may create vulnerabilities if political or logistical factors disrupt travel arrangements. Therefore, economic diversification remains an important policy objective for strengthening the long-term financial stability of the local Sikh community.

7. Socio-Economic Challenges Facing the Community

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Despite positive developments in religious tourism and community engagement, several socio-economic challenges continue to affect the Sikh population in Nankana Sahib. One of the primary concerns involves limited access to professional employment sectors. Because the community represents a relatively small demographic group, opportunities for representation within government institutions remain constrained. Another challenge relates to access to higher education and professional training. Without sustained educational advancement, economic mobility remains difficult to achieve. Social researchers have frequently noted that minority communities in developing societies often encounter institutional barriers that restrict participation in economic decision-making processes (Nasr, 2007). Additionally, small minority populations may experience limited political representation, which can affect their ability to advocate effectively for community development initiatives.

8. Governmental Support and Institutional Mechanisms

In recent years, governmental institutions in Pakistan have initiated several programs aimed at improving minority welfare and protecting religious heritage sites. Administrative bodies such as the Evacuee Trust Property Board play a central role in maintaining Sikh religious properties and facilitating pilgrimage activities. Furthermore, provincial authorities have invested in infrastructure development projects designed to accommodate international pilgrims visiting Nankana Sahib. Such initiatives have contributed to the modernization of transportation networks, accommodation facilities, and security arrangements around major religious sites. These measures not only benefit visiting pilgrims but also generate economic opportunities for local residents, including members of the Sikh community. Nevertheless, continued policy engagement remains necessary to ensure that economic benefits derived from religious tourism are distributed equitably among local communities.

9. Policy Recommendations for Socio-Economic Empowerment

In order to enhance the socio-economic conditions of the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib, several policy measures can be considered. First, targeted educational scholarship programs should be expanded to facilitate access to higher education for minority students. Such initiatives could significantly improve professional prospects for younger generations. Second, vocational training centers focusing on tourism management, language skills, and entrepreneurship could strengthen the economic participation of community members in the expanding religious tourism

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sector. Third, government agencies should encourage inclusive economic development policies that promote minority representation in local decision-making processes. Finally, collaboration between governmental institutions, civil society organizations, and community leaders may help create sustainable development programs tailored specifically to the needs of minority populations. Through such initiatives, it may be possible to transform Nankana Sahib into a model of inclusive socio-economic development where religious heritage and minority empowerment coexist harmoniously.

10. Field Interviews with Members of the Sikh Community

In order to obtain an empirical understanding of the socio-economic realities of the Sikh population in Nankana Sahib, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the local community as well as with Sikh pilgrims connected to the regional diaspora. These interviews aimed to capture lived experiences related to employment opportunities, educational access, and social integration within the broader socio-economic framework of Pakistan.

Interview 1

Name: Ranjit Singh (pseudonym), Residence: Nankana Sahib

Ranjit Singh, a local shopkeeper operating near the historic shrine of Gurdwara Janam Asthan, explained that many Sikh families in the area depend heavily upon small commercial enterprises associated with religious tourism. According to him, the arrival of Sikh pilgrims during major religious events generates significant commercial activity that benefits local traders. However, he also emphasized that business opportunities remain largely seasonal and fluctuate depending on the frequency of pilgrimage visits. He further noted that younger members of the community increasingly aspire to pursue higher education and professional careers outside the district.

Interview 2

Name: Gurmeet Kaur (pseudonym), Residence: Nankana Sahib

Gurmeet Kaur highlighted the importance of education for improving the socio-economic prospects of minority communities. She observed that Sikh families increasingly encourage their children to seek educational opportunities in larger cities such as Lahore. However, she also pointed out that financial constraints and limited scholarship opportunities sometimes restrict access to higher education. Her perspective reflects broader academic findings suggesting that minority populations frequently

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encounter structural obstacles in educational advancement (Malik, 2002). Nevertheless, she expressed optimism that improved educational opportunities could enable future generations of the Sikh community to achieve greater economic stability.

Interview 3

Name: Amritpal Singh (pseudonym), Residence: Amritsar, Punjab, India

Amritpal Singh, a Sikh pilgrim visiting Nankana Sahib from India, described the city as a spiritually transformative place for Sikhs worldwide. During the interview, he observed that the local administration and security institutions had made substantial efforts to facilitate the pilgrimage experience. He noted that the infrastructure surrounding Sikh heritage sites had improved significantly in recent years and expressed appreciation for the hospitality extended by local residents. According to him, such initiatives contribute to strengthening transnational connections between Sikh diaspora communities and their historical religious centers. Academic scholars have frequently argued that pilgrimage networks play an important role in reinforcing cultural identity and economic interaction between diaspora communities and heritage regions (Singh, 2019).

Interview 4

Name: Jasleen Kaur (pseudonym), Residence: Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

Jasleen Kaur emphasized the importance of preserving Sikh heritage sites located in Pakistan. She stated that the preservation and management of these historical sites contribute not only to religious continuity but also to the economic vitality of the surrounding communities. During her visit to Nankana Sahib, she observed that local businesses, transportation providers, and hospitality services had expanded in response to increasing numbers of international pilgrims. According to her assessment, such economic developments create opportunities for local residents while simultaneously strengthening cultural connections between Pakistan and Sikh diaspora communities abroad. Her observations align with broader sociological studies demonstrating that religious tourism can function as a catalyst for local economic development in historically significant regions (Esposito, 2011).

11. Conclusion

The socio-economic conditions of the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib present a complex yet evolving landscape shaped by historical legacy, demographic transformation, and contemporary economic dynamics. While

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the community remains relatively small in demographic terms, its cultural and religious significance within global Sikh heritage continues to attract international attention. Religious tourism associated with Sikh pilgrimage has created localized economic opportunities that benefit both the Sikh community and the broader population of the district. However, the research findings presented in this study indicate that several structural challenges continue to influence socio-economic mobility. Limited access to higher education, restricted representation in formal employment sectors, and economic dependence on seasonal tourism represent significant constraints affecting long-term community development. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted policy approach involving governmental institutions, civil society organizations, and community leadership. Expanded educational opportunities, vocational training programs, and inclusive economic policies could contribute significantly to enhancing socio-economic stability for minority communities. Ultimately, the experience of the Sikh community in Nankana Sahib demonstrates that the preservation of religious heritage, when combined with inclusive development strategies, can create pathways toward sustainable socio-economic empowerment.

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