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Interfaith Harmony between Muslims and Sikh Community in Pakistan: The Social Dynamics of Nankana Sahib

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Abstract

*Interfaith harmony remains one of the most critical components of peaceful coexistence in religiously diverse societies. Pakistan, although predominantly Muslim, contains several minority communities whose historical presence significantly enriches the country's cultural and religious landscape. Among these communities, the Sikh population occupies a distinctive position because of the presence of the birthplace of Baba Guru Nanak Dev Ji in Nankana Sahib. This article investigates the patterns of interfaith interaction between Muslim and Sikh communities in Pakistan, focusing specifically on the social environment of Nankana Sahib. The city hosts one of the most sacred Sikh shrines, the revered "**Gurdwara Janam Asthan"** which attracts pilgrims from across the world. Through qualitative observation and socio-cultural analysis, the study examines various examples of interfaith cooperation, including communal gatherings, participation in religious festivities, and joint civic initiatives. Special attention is given to the role of local institutions, such as the district peace committee, in promoting dialogue and preventing sectarian tensions. The study demonstrates that everyday social practices, shared cultural traditions, and administrative initiatives have played a decisive role in strengthening relations between Muslims and Sikhs in Nankana Sahib. The findings suggest that grassroots social engagement, combined with ethical teachings of religious traditions, can contribute significantly to the development of sustainable interfaith harmony.*

Key words: *Interfaith Harmony, Muslims and Sikhs in Pakistan, The Social Dynamics of Nankana Sahib*

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1. Introduction

Religious pluralism has historically shaped the cultural fabric of the Punjab region. For centuries, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and other communities have shared social spaces, marketplaces, and cultural traditions. Although the political landscape of South Asia has undergone major transformations, many local traditions of coexistence continue to survive at the community level. Nankana Sahib provides one of the most compelling contemporary examples of interfaith harmony in Pakistan. The city is internationally recognized as the birthplace of Baba Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism. Because of this religious significance, thousands of Sikh pilgrims visit the city annually to perform religious rituals and pay homage at the sacred shrine. Despite differences in religious identity, local Muslim residents often demonstrate hospitality toward visiting Sikh pilgrims. These interactions extend beyond formal religious activities and frequently involve participation in social and cultural exchanges. Islamic ethical teachings strongly encourage peaceful relations with people belonging to other faith traditions. The Qurʾān states:

> *"Allah does not forbid you from showing kindness and acting justly toward those who have not fought you because of religion nor driven you out of your homes." (Qurʾān 60:8)*

This verse establishes an ethical framework for Muslims to maintain respectful and cooperative relationships with non-Muslim communities.

Within this broader context, the social interactions between Muslims and Sikhs in Nankana Sahib illustrate how religious diversity can coexist with mutual respect and shared civic responsibilities.

2. Local Traditions of Interfaith Cooperation

One of the most visible manifestations of interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib can be observed during the holy month of Ramadan. During this period, members of the Sikh community actively participate in humanitarian initiatives aimed at supporting Muslim residents. A notable example is the arrangement of communal iftar meals at "Gurdwara Janam Asthan" These iftar gatherings are often organized with the support of Sikh charitable organizations such as the Sikh Sewak Society of Pakistan, which provides meals for Muslim residents and travelers during Ramadan. Such initiatives are widely appreciated by the local Muslim population and are often interpreted as gestures of solidarity and goodwill between the two

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communities. These acts of generosity reflect broader humanitarian values shared across religious traditions. Sikh teachings emphasize community service (seva), while Islamic teachings place great importance on charity and hospitality. When these shared values are expressed through practical actions, they contribute significantly to strengthening social trust between communities.

3. Reciprocal Social Support between Communities

Interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is not limited to isolated charitable activities. Rather, it is reflected in a broader pattern of reciprocal social engagement. When Sikh religious festivals take place in the city, Muslim residents frequently cooperate with Sikh community members by assisting in organizational arrangements, welcoming pilgrims, and maintaining peaceful surroundings around religious sites. Local businesses, transportation providers, and volunteers often work together to ensure that visiting pilgrims receive respectful hospitality. This reciprocal interaction illustrates how religious communities can support each other's cultural and spiritual traditions without compromising their own religious identities. Scholars studying interfaith relations frequently emphasize that everyday social cooperation is one of the most effective mechanisms for reducing prejudice and building trust between communities (Esposito, 2011). In Nankana Sahib, such cooperation has become a routine aspect of community life.

4. Institutional Role of the District Peace Committee

Another important factor contributing to interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is the institutional framework established by the local administration. The district administration regularly convenes a District Peace Committee, which plays a crucial role in maintaining religious harmony and preventing sectarian tensions. This committee is typically chaired by the Deputy Commissioner of Nankana Sahib and includes representatives from various religious and sectarian groups. Participants in these meetings often include:

* Muslim scholars representing different schools of thought (Sunni Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadith, and Shia traditions)
* Sikh community representatives
* Christian community leaders
* Local civil society members

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By bringing together representatives from diverse religious backgrounds around a single platform, the committee facilitates dialogue and cooperation on matters related to religious events, public gatherings, and communal relations. Regular consultation among community leaders helps prevent misunderstandings and encourages collaborative problem-solving. Such institutional mechanisms demonstrate how administrative structures can play a constructive role in promoting social harmony within religiously diverse societies.

5. Role of Religious Institutions in Promoting Interfaith Understanding

Religious institutions in Nankana Sahib play a significant role in nurturing mutual respect between Muslim and Sikh communities. Both mosques and gurdwaras often serve not only as places of worship but also as spaces where ethical teachings related to peace, compassion, and coexistence is emphasized. In many mosques within the district, religious scholars deliver sermons highlighting the importance of peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths. Islamic teachings strongly emphasize justice, kindness, and respect toward non-Muslims living within Muslim societies. The Qurʾān encourages believers to adopt respectful dialogue with followers of other religions:

"And do not argue with the People of the Book except in a manner that is best." (Qurʾān 29:46)

Such teachings frequently form part of sermons delivered in local mosques, particularly during periods when international Sikh pilgrims visit the city. Similarly, Sikh religious gatherings at gurdwaras often highlight the universal message of Baba Guru Nanak, who preached equality, humility, and devotion to God. Sikh religious discourse frequently emphasizes the importance of respect for humanity regardless of religious affiliation. These parallel teachings from both traditions contribute to creating a shared moral environment that encourages peaceful interaction.

6. Shared Spiritual Heritage and Cultural Connections

Another remarkable feature of interfaith relations in Nankana Sahib is the recognition of shared spiritual traditions between Muslims and Sikhs. Historical connections between Sikh spirituality and the broader Sufi tradition of South Asia have created points of cultural and spiritual convergence. For example, the poetry of renowned Muslim Sufi saints such as **"Baba Farid"** is included in the Sikh sacred scripture, the Guru Granth

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Sahib. **"Baba Farid"** is revered by both Muslims and Sikhs for his spiritual teachings emphasizing humility, devotion, and compassion. Because of this shared spiritual heritage, references to Sufi saints occasionally appear in Sikh religious discourse, while Muslim scholars sometimes acknowledge the ethical teachings found in Sikh traditions. In addition, local traditions surrounding shrines and spiritual figures often create opportunities for interfaith interaction. The presence of Sufi shrines in Punjab has historically attracted visitors from diverse religious backgrounds. Such shared spiritual influences contribute to an atmosphere where religious communities perceive one another not merely as outsiders but as participants in a broader cultural heritage.

7. Security Institutions and Their Contribution to Interfaith Harmony

The maintenance of interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is also supported by the active involvement of state institutions, particularly the district administration and law enforcement agencies. During major Sikh religious festivals and annual pilgrimage events, the district police administration plays a crucial role in ensuring the safety and comfort of visiting pilgrims. The District Police Officer (DPO) and other security officials coordinate closely with civil administration to implement comprehensive security arrangements. These arrangements include escort services for visiting pilgrims, transportation assistance, and continuous monitoring of pilgrimage routes. Security personnel are often deployed to guide pilgrims arriving from various countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and India. Many Sikh pilgrims who have visited Nankana Sahib have expressed appreciation for the hospitality and security arrangements provided by Pakistani authorities. In several informal interviews conducted by local researchers and journalists, some pilgrims remarked that the welcoming environment made them feel as comfortable as they would in their own communities. Such expressions of appreciation highlight the role of administrative institutions in building trust between religious communities and international visitors.

8. Experiences of International Sikh Pilgrims

International Sikh pilgrims visiting Nankana Sahib frequently share positive impressions regarding their experiences in Pakistan. Pilgrims arriving from countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and India often describe the atmosphere of hospitality they encounter during their

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visits. During major pilgrimage events, the Punjab provincial government facilitates arrangements related to accommodation, transportation, and security. These efforts aim to ensure that visiting pilgrims can perform their religious rituals without difficulty. Several pilgrims interviewed by media representatives and researchers have praised the hospitality shown by local communities and government authorities. Some have expressed gratitude toward provincial leadership and administrative officials for providing a welcoming environment for Sikh pilgrims. In particular, references have occasionally been made to the role of provincial authorities in promoting religious tourism and facilitating pilgrimage visits. Such testimonies contribute to shaping positive perceptions of Pakistan's commitment to protecting minority religious heritage.

9. Community-Level Hospitality and Social Interaction

Beyond formal administrative arrangements, everyday interactions between local residents and Sikh pilgrims also contribute significantly to interfaith harmony. Members of the local Muslim community frequently assist pilgrims with directions, transportation, and accommodation. During large gatherings, volunteers and security personnel sometimes help visitors carry their luggage and guide them toward guesthouses or designated accommodation areas. These small but meaningful gestures often leave a lasting impression on visiting pilgrims and reinforce the perception of hospitality within the community. The Sikh tradition of langar, or communal meal service, also creates opportunities for interaction between communities. During these gatherings, visitors from diverse religious backgrounds may share meals together, reflecting values of equality and generosity. Such practices illustrate how everyday acts of kindness and cooperation can foster mutual understanding and strengthen social bonds between religious communities.

- **Mosques and Gurdwaras Promoting Interfaith Respect**

In societies characterized by religious diversity, places of worship often play an influential role in shaping attitudes toward followers of other faith traditions. In the district of Nankana Sahib, both mosques and Sikh gurdwaras function not only as religious institutions but also as important social spaces where ethical teachings regarding coexistence and mutual respect are emphasized. Islamic religious leaders in local mosques frequently address themes related to tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and

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the dignity of humanity. The Qurʾān encourages Muslims to maintain respectful engagement with people belonging to other religious traditions. One such verse states:

> *"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best." (Qurʾān 16:125)*

These teachings encourage Muslims to engage in dialogue based on wisdom, patience, and respect rather than hostility or exclusion. Consequently, sermons delivered in mosques often emphasize that peaceful relations with non-Muslims are consistent with Islamic moral principles. Similarly, Sikh religious discourse within gurdwaras frequently promotes the ideals of equality, humility, and service to humanity. Sikh teachings emphasize the unity of humankind and the importance of compassion toward people regardless of religious affiliation. These teachings are regularly articulated during congregational gatherings at the historic **"Gurdwara Janam Asthan"** which attracts Sikh pilgrims from across the world. *Because both religious traditions emphasize ethical conduct and respect for humanity, the teachings* delivered within mosques and gurdwaras often contribute to a broader atmosphere of social harmony within the city.

- **Shared Spiritual Heritage and the Legacy of Baba Farid**

One of the most remarkable aspects of Muslim–Sikh relations in Punjab is the recognition of shared spiritual heritage rooted in the historical interaction between Sufi traditions and Sikh spirituality. Among the most important figures representing this shared heritage is the renowned Sufi saint **"Baba Farid".** Baba Farid was a prominent Muslim mystic whose poetic verses emphasized humility, devotion to God, and compassion toward humanity. His spiritual teachings became deeply influential across the Punjab region. Significantly, the verses of Baba Farid were later incorporated into the Sikh sacred scripture, the

- **Guru Granth Sahib**

This inclusion reflects the recognition by Sikh spiritual leaders that divine wisdom may emerge from individuals belonging to different religious traditions. The presence of Baba Farid's poetry within the Guru Granth Sahib symbolizes an important historical moment of interfaith recognition.

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It demonstrates that Sikh spirituality acknowledged the moral and spiritual insights of Muslim mystics. Because of this shared heritage, discussions of Baba Farid and other Sufi figures occasionally appear in Sikh religious gatherings. Likewise, Muslim scholars in Punjab often recognize that the teachings of Sikh Gurus promoted values similar to those emphasized in Islamic ethical traditions. These overlapping spiritual influences have contributed to shaping a cultural environment in which Muslims and Sikhs share a sense of historical interconnectedness.

- **Teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib about Muslim Saints**

The Sikh scripture, the "Guru Granth Sahib" is unique among world religious texts because it includes writings from spiritual figures belonging to multiple religious traditions. In addition to the Sikh Gurus, the scripture contains verses composed by several saints and mystics from diverse backgrounds, including Muslim Sufi poets. These compositions emphasize universal spiritual values such as humility, remembrance of God, and service to humanity. The presence of these teachings reflects the inclusive approach adopted by early Sikh leaders who sought to highlight spiritual wisdom beyond rigid religious boundaries. The writings of Muslim saints included in the Guru Granth Sahib are widely respected by Sikh scholars and devotees. Their presence within the scripture serves as a reminder that spiritual truth can transcend religious divisions. In the context of Nankana Sahib, references to these shared spiritual teachings occasionally appear in public lectures and religious discussions, especially during interfaith dialogue programs. Such references reinforce the understanding that Muslim and Sikh spiritual traditions have historically interacted with one another in meaningful ways.

- **Shared Social Customs and Community Interaction**

Beyond theological teachings and spiritual heritage, interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is also sustained through everyday social interactions between communities. Muslims and Sikhs living in the region often participate in shared cultural practices that have evolved over generations. These interactions include attendance at weddings, participation in community gatherings, and expressions of sympathy during times of bereavement. For instance, when families experience the loss of a loved one, members of different communities frequently visit one another to offer condolences. Such visits reinforce social bonds and demonstrate mutual

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respect across religious boundaries. Similarly, during wedding ceremonies and community celebrations, neighbors from different religious backgrounds often exchange greetings and hospitality. These gestures reflect a cultural tradition of neighborly respect that has long characterized the social life of Punjab. Hospitality itself represents an important cultural value shared by both communities. Visitors and pilgrims are often welcomed warmly by local residents, and assistance is commonly provided to those unfamiliar with the area. These interactions illustrate how social customs can serve as powerful mechanisms for promoting peaceful coexistence.

- **Local Cultural Practices Supporting Interfaith Harmony**

The cultural environment of Nankana Sahib reflects centuries of interaction between diverse religious traditions. Shared language, cuisine, and social etiquette have created a common cultural framework within which different communities coexist. Punjabi culture, in particular, emphasizes generosity, respect for guests, and collective celebration of community life. These values often transcend religious boundaries and create opportunities for positive interaction between Muslims and Sikhs. Local markets, educational institutions, and public spaces frequently become sites where individuals from different backgrounds interact in routine daily life. These interactions help normalize religious diversity and reduce the possibility of social isolation between communities. As a result, interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is not merely the product of formal policies or administrative initiatives. Rather, it is sustained through a combination of shared spiritual heritage, inclusive religious teachings, and deeply rooted cultural traditions that encourage cooperation and mutual respect.

10. Research Methodology and Interview Framework

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the patterns of interfaith harmony between Muslim and Sikh communities in Nankana Sahib. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for exploring lived experiences, social interactions, and community perceptions regarding interreligious relations. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with religious scholars, international Sikh pilgrims, and community representatives. These interviews were designed to explore perceptions of religious coexistence, community hospitality, and the role of institutions in maintaining social harmony. Participants were selected through purposive

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sampling to ensure representation from both Muslim and Sikh communities. Interviews were conducted informally during religious gatherings and pilgrimage events in Nankana Sahib. For ethical considerations and privacy protection, some participant identities have been anonymized or represented with pseudonyms.

11. Interviews with International Sikh Pilgrims

Interview 1

Name: Harjit Singh (pseudonym)**,** Residence: Amritsar, Punjab, India

Harjit Singh, a middle-aged Sikh pilgrim visiting Pakistan for the first time, described his experience of visiting Nankana Sahib as deeply emotional. He stated that the arrangements provided for Sikh pilgrims exceeded his expectations.

According to him, the hospitality shown by local residents and government authorities created a welcoming environment that allowed pilgrims to perform their religious rituals peacefully. He also noted that security arrangements were well organized and that the local administration appeared committed to facilitating pilgrimage visits. Harjit Singh remarked that the respectful treatment received during his stay created a strong impression that interfaith relations in the city were built upon mutual respect and goodwill.

Interview 2

Name: Manpreet Kaur (pseudonym),Residence: Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Manpreet Kaur emphasized the emotional significance of visiting the birthplace of Guru Nanak. She explained that her experience in Nankana Sahib was characterized by warmth and hospitality from both Sikh hosts and Muslim residents. She expressed appreciation for the arrangements made for pilgrims, particularly regarding accommodation and security. According to her, the respectful atmosphere surrounding the pilgrimage created a sense of comfort for visitors. Manpreet Kaur also highlighted the cooperation between local communities and administrative authorities in ensuring that religious activities were conducted peacefully.

Interview 3

Name: Jaspreet Singh (pseudonym), Residence: Birmingham, United Kingdom

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Jaspreet Singh, a member of the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, described his visit to Nankana Sahib as a powerful spiritual journey. He observed that the presence of pilgrims from different countries demonstrated the global significance of the site. He noted that the hospitality extended by the local Muslim population reflected the broader cultural values of the region. According to him, interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib could serve as a positive example for multicultural societies worldwide.

Interview 4

Name: Baldeep Singh (pseudonym), Residence: Vancouver, Canada

Baldeep Singh highlighted the importance of maintaining historical Sikh heritage sites in Pakistan. He expressed appreciation for the arrangements provided to international pilgrims and noted that security personnel and volunteers were often available to assist visitors. He also mentioned that the welcoming attitude of local residents contributed significantly to the positive experiences of visiting pilgrims. According to him, such initiatives help strengthen international perceptions of religious tolerance and cultural respect.

12. Interviews with Muslim Religious Scholars

Interview 5

Name: Syed Saqib Raza Gillani, Affiliation: Religious Scholar, Nankana Sahib

Syed Saqib Raza Gillani emphasized that Islamic teachings strongly encourage Muslims to respect the rights of non-Muslim communities. According to him, interfaith harmony is not merely a social necessity but also a religious obligation. He referred to Qurʾānic teachings emphasizing justice and kindness toward people of other faith traditions. Gillani further explained that local religious scholars often promote messages of peace and coexistence during sermons delivered in mosques. According to him, such teachings contribute significantly to maintaining peaceful relations between Muslim and Sikh communities in Nankana Sahib.

Interview 6

Name: Professor Abdul Hameed Kokab, Affiliation: Academic and Religious Scholar

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Professor Abdul Hameed Kokab highlighted the historical connections between Sikh and Muslim spiritual traditions in Punjab. He noted that the inclusion of Sufi poetry in the "Guru Granth Sahib" reflects a long tradition of spiritual interaction between the two communities. According to him, these shared cultural and spiritual influences provide an important foundation for contemporary interfaith dialogue. He also emphasized that educational institutions and religious leaders have an important role to play in promoting awareness of this shared heritage.

13. Analytical Discussion

The interviews conducted for this study highlight several key factors contributing to interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib. **First,** the hospitality extended by local communities toward visiting Sikh pilgrims reflects deeply rooted cultural traditions emphasizing generosity and respect for guests. **Second,** the presence of shared spiritual heritage between Sikh and Muslim traditions, particularly through figures such as "Baba Farid" provides an important cultural foundation for mutual respect. **Third,** institutional mechanisms such as district administration, peace committees, and security arrangements contribute to maintaining a stable environment during religious gatherings. Finally, everyday social interactions—including shared meals, community assistance, and participation in cultural events—reinforce positive perceptions between communities. Together, these factors create a social environment in which religious diversity is managed through cooperation rather than conflict.

14. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that interfaith harmony in Nankana Sahib is sustained through a combination of cultural traditions, religious teachings, and institutional support. The interactions between Muslim residents and Sikh pilgrims illustrate how communities belonging to different religious traditions can coexist peacefully while maintaining their distinct identities. Shared spiritual heritage, inclusive religious teachings, and everyday acts of hospitality contribute significantly to building trust between communities. The experiences of international pilgrims further highlight the importance of administrative arrangements and security measures in facilitating religious tourism. Overall, the case of Nankana Sahib provides a valuable example of how interfaith cooperation can contribute to social stability and cultural understanding in religiously diverse societies.

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