

Pilgrimage Networks and the Dissemination of Sikh Culture in India

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Abstract

This study explores how Sikh pilgrimage routes helped spread Sikh culture across India. It begins by looking at the historical background of Sikhism, including The Guru period, the post-Guru period, and the colonial period. These stages show how Sikh teachings and traditions continued to grow over time. The research then explains how pilgrimage routes functioned cultural highways. Punjab remained the main cultural center, but important routes expanded Sikh culture in many directions. The eastern route, especially Patna Sahib, carried Sikh tradition to Bihar. The Southern route, with Hazur Sahib in Nanded, spread Sikh ideas to Maharashtra. The central region became connected through Damdama Sahib, while western connections further strengthened cultural links. These pilgrimage paths helped in the spread of Sikh culture by promoting religious unity, cultural exchange, and social bonding among people from different regions. They also laid the early foundations for the Sikh diaspora, helping Sikh identity reach places far beyond Punjab.

Keywords: diaspora, indigenous, facilitated, commemoration, mediator, gradually, feudalism, enlightenment, discriminatory, accessible, reunification, standardization, strengthened, institutionalized, distinctions, unification, discriminatory, codified, philosophical, discriminatory, prominence, monotheism

Introduction

Pilgrimage had historically played a significant role in the spread of indigenous cultures and religious tradition. The expansion of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam was strongly supported by pilgrimage traditions. Similarly, it also contributed to the unification of the Sikh religious community and the development of its culture. Guru Nanak Dev, during the 15th century, credited with spreading Sikh religious ideas and social values to various regions. His Udasis contributed significantly to the spread of Sikh traditions, historical values, Sikh identity, customs, speeches and moral values such as *langar* and *seva*. Among the diaspora, these contributed to the spread of Sikh identity throughout India. These Udasis laid the foundation for the Sikh community's rich memory sites and heritage, establishing links with the Ganges, Yamuna plains, South India and the border regions of Bengal and Bihar. Guru Nanak's path served as a mediator not only for the exchange of religious ideas but also for teachings. He attracted new followers and gradually established Gurudwara and Takhts, which created many pilgrimage sites for the Sikh community, forming an emotional bond among the people. The construction of the five Takhts established a unified Sikh culture across India. These five Takhts are not only centers of religious authority but also of community decision-making, commemoration, and rituals.

Historical Background

Pilgrimage has been an important aspect of Sikhism, reflecting the dual principles of the Sikh Path - unity and collective identity. Sikhism does not emphasize pilgrimage as a mean of attaining spiritual salvation, yet Sikh pilgrimage sites hold immense spiritual, cultural and historical importance. These sacred locations including five Takhts, the birth places of the Gurus, and historical battlefields. The routes connecting these sites served not only as religious path but also as cultural and historic highways, a feature of the Sikh tradition of travel during that time.

Guru Period

Between the 15th -18th centuries, the Sikh Gurus themselves travelled extensively and established many of the sacred routes that later became major pilgrimage paths. The first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak, travelled to the East, South, Tibet and Arabia, across the Indian subcontinent, creating the earliest sacred geography of Sikhism and its major destinations. These travels created a sacred geography for the Sikhs and transformed Guru Nanak's path into early pilgrimage destinations. The second Guru, Guru Angad Dev, introduced the *Gurmukhi* script and strengthened Sikh culture by institutionalizing schools. Guru Amar Das established Goindwal Sahib as a pilgrimage center by building the Baoli Sahib. Guru Ram Das founded Ramdaspur in 1574CE, and after the completion of *Adi Granth Sahib* in 1604 CE and the construction of Sri Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar became the main pilgrimage center for devotees. Due to this, the place developed into a spiritual pilgrimage center for all religions. The primary forms of community pilgrimage began to evolve around this time.

The establishment of Akal Takht 1606 by Hargobind Sahib expanded the Sikh pilgrimage tradition, making it a part of both religious and political life. The construction of Kartarpur Sahib with the contribution of Guru Har Rai extended pilgrimages to areas such as Himachal Pradesh. Gradually, with the establishment of Bangla Sahib, the route extended to Delhi. Guru Tegh Bahadur expanded it widely to eastern India - Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The birth of Guru Gobind in Patna linked Eastern India to the Sikh sacred geography. Anandpur Sahib is the main Khalsa shrine, which was established in 1699 CE as the birthplace of Khalsa. Guru Gobind spent the last years of his life in Nanded (Maharashtra), where Hazur Sahib was established. The final shrine was built in 1708, after the Guru declared the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru.

Post - Guru Period

In the 18th and 19th centuries, pilgrimage sites and holy places not only served as spiritual guides but also as administrative and political centers. Gradually, these centers developed into central institutions. In spite of external pressures and other circumstances, Sikh identity and unity were strengthened throughout India. Many of the places of pilgrimage to Sikh religious figures- such as the Golden Temple, Fatehgarh Sahib, Chamkaur Sahib and battlefield memorials- along various Gurdwaras, gained prominence. These places of pilgrimage preserved many memories which commemorating martyrdoms, sacrifices, deeds and promoting a common culture among the Sikhs. When Sikh pilgrimages visit these different places, they develop a sense of unity and shared culture. Spiritual unity and cultural identity, institutional development and political strength play an important role in strengthening the mutual unity of the Sikh and have long-term effects.

Colonial Period

During the British rule, these pilgrimages were used to express resistance and reform movements. Regular pilgrimages helped preserve many traditions such as the Punjabi language, Kirtan and *Rahat Maryada* which were prevalent outside Punjab and helped maintain cultural identity. These shrines and Takht played an important role as platform to unite the Sikh community under this identity. The Singh Sabha Movement and the Gurdwara reform movements of the 19th century gave Sikhs a well-defined, codified identity. This laid the foundation for the modern administrative network, including the SGPC in the 20th century. The Sikh community faced a number of challenges, including political instability, Mughal oppressions, military persecution and later Afghan invasions. In that environment, the five Takhts, Gurdwara shrines and numerous other sacred sites became a source of religious identity. The five Takhts and other Sikh pilgrimage site emerged as a focal point for political cohesion and community resilience. Keshgarh Anandpur Sahib is a symbol of Khalsa identity and ambiance, where Sikh heritage is remembered through ceremonies and military traditions. Damdama emerged as an intellectual center with strong emphasis on scriptural study and theological authority. Patna Sahib integrated the Eastern Sikh community into the Panth to preserve the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh. Hazur Sahib also holds great significance. It strengthened ties with the South and marked the site where Guru declared the Granth Sahib to be the eternal Guru. By the 18th and 19th centuries, these Takhts had been officially recognized as secular and spiritual pillars. Patna is associated with the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh's. Devoted to Guru Gobind Singh's teachings, pilgrims particularly emphasized martial spirit, discipline and community of unity. Pilgrimage here served as a medium for spreading Sikh traditions to Eastern regions such as Bihar, Bengal, Assam and Orrisa. Many Sikhs soldiers, traders and missionaries from those lands settled there, establishing numerous small Gurdwaras as cultural outposts. Pilgrims brought Sikh practices to Nepal and even the Himalayan regions and integrated them into Sikh culture. Nepalese devotees consider Patna Sahib a part of their heritage with which they feel a deep cultural connections.

Sacred Routes As Vessels Of Sikh Cultural Transmission

Punjab: Cultural Core- Punjab is a significant cultural hub of India, filled with the spirit of devotion and humanity. The cultural exchange also symbolizes social unity. Punjab's culture serves as a cultural highway connecting folk traditions and human values. Punjab is historically known as a religious and historical center. Its pilgrimage sites include the Harmandir Sahib, Goindwal Sahib and Dera Baba Nanak. These pilgrimage routes embody the spirit of devotional service and brotherhood of the people of Punjab. The history of Punjab is linked to the Indus valley civilization. From this region, various cultural and religious traditions originated- Vedic, Buddhist and Sikh traditions also flourished here over time. The Sikh Guru chose pilgrimage sites to convey the message of social equality, service and love. Guru Nanak pilgrimage routes, including Nanakana Sahib, Sultanpur Lodhi and Amritsar, still connect millions of devotees on a spiritual journey. The pilgrimage sites-deeply rooted in the Ganga region- along with the economic impact on humanity, have earned Punjab a reputation as a "cultural highways" not only in India but also globally. In the context modernity, the Digital Archive of culture and the Gurudwara guidance Scheme are commendable steps in this direction. India's culture is unique in its vast diversity.

Eastern Expansion: Patna Sahib- The prominence of the Patna shrine stems from its association with Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh who was born here. Pilgrims visited the shrine in reverence to Guru Sahib teaching- particularly his emphasis on martial spirit, discipline and community unity-visited the shrine. Pilgrimage to the shrine served as a conduit for the spread of Sikh traditions to eastern regions such as Bihar, Bengal, Assam and

Odhisa. A stream of Sikhs, soldiers, traders and missionaries migrated from those lands, establishing numerous Gurdwaras as cultural outposts. Pilgrims and traders brought Sikh traditions to Nepal and even connecting the Himalayan region with Sikh culture. Napalese Sikh associated a part of heritage with Patna Sahib. The arrival of the railway in the 19th century increased the flow of pilgrims to the Patna Sahib. Sikhs working in the Bengal presidency, the tea gardens of Assam and Calcutta frequently returned to Patna Sahib, further strengthening cultural ties. Devotees to Patna Sahib promoted *kirtan* and the recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib in eastern languages. This attracted non-Sikh communities encouraged Sikh practices such as *seva*. These developments enabled Sikh culture to expand trade to grow and reach wider across India.

Southern Route: Hazur Sahib Nanded- Hazur Sahib Nanded is a major center of Sikh tradition and culture in the Eastern and southern region of India. This sacred place is also associated with the life of Guru Gobind Singh. Here Guru Sahib gave up his life and carried forward the immortal tradition of Sikhism in the form of Guru Granth Sahib, which became the central identity of Sikhism. It is not just a shrine; it is a witness to the final chapter of Sikh history. Here Guru Sahib guided his followers. The southern route to Hazur Sahib carries pilgrims from central India (especially Maharashtra, Telgana Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh) and the western side (Mumbai, Maharashtra) to Hazur Sahib. Historically, this route has been connected by road, river and rail. Gradually, as the frequency of pilgrims increased, it became a commercial pilgrimage route. Most households flock here in large numbers during the commemoration of Guru Gobind Singh, bringing not only religious but also social and economic development. A major attraction of this route is its multicultural presence. Sikhs from Punjab blend their Punjabi traditions with the local Marathi saints of the region through mutual language, food habits, folk festivals and handicrafts. Hazur Sahib is also known for its symbols of world class harmony throughout India. Its *Aarti Kirtan* and *Akhand Path* are performed in Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi and Telugu. This pilgrimage is not only a journey of devotion but they also carries of humanity and culture. According to recent studies, historical sources, official tourism data and media reports, Hazur Sahib is considered a 'Culture Mahatmanar'. This place has also marked by historic records confirming its religious basis.

Central Node: Damdama Sahib – Damdama Sahib stands as a central hub of pilgrimage for the Sikhs. The site's greatest significance is associated with the revelation of Guru Gobind Singh, the innermost essence of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the subsequent reorganization of the Khalsa. The *Bani* of the Guru Sahib was rewritten here, the compilation of the teachings was completed, and the teachings were standardized. The composition of the *Zafarnama* and the message of reunification were delivered here. The pilgrimage site serves as a central hub connecting the planned pilgrimage routes to the northern Malwa region of Doaba and the southern route to Hazur Sahib. It is not only a center of faith; it is also a center of social harmony and human unity. Damdama is a place where both knowledge and religion flourished, earning it the name 'Khalsa University'. Inspired by this tradition, many sacred schools and religious preaching centers have been established. Millions of devotees visit the place every year for Maghi Mela and Vaisakhi. The folk music and heroic tales of Damdama Sahib, along with the tradition of *Kawishri*, were developed here. The local people attire themselves with symbols such as blue turban, sword and the *Nihang* tradition of life spread to other parts of the state. This historical step has given Damdama Sahib a lasting religious and philosophical reputation.

Western connections: Keshgarh Sahib- The location and history of Keshgarh Sahib connect it with pilgrims from the western regions. Keshgarh Sahib in Anandpur is not just a Gurdwara; it was a fort built by Guru Gobind Singh. It is known as the birth place of the Khalsa. Considering the turbulent times, Guru Sahib had five forts constructed around Keshgarh. These forts were connected by underground tunnels making it a defensive center

against the attacks of the Mughals. Historically, Anandpur Sahib was fortified and linked to the surrounding mountain passes. These roads enabled trade with the western region and the Himalayan countries. The festivals and celebrations of Takht Keshgarh Sahib also attract a large number of pilgrims. During festivals like Holla Mahalla and Vaisakhi people from far and wide come to see music, handcrafts and local cultural performances and share their heritage. Apart from this, pilgrims also take food items and souvenirs from the markets related to their journeys. This is also increases their economic interaction. Since ancient times, people of Vanjara community have used routes like Ambala - Anandpur the most.

Role Of Sacred Sites In Expanding Sikh Traditions

All religious pilgrimages around the world serve to connect people, their beliefs, and the local culture. While the Sikh tradition did not originally incorporate the concept of pilgrimage a comprehensive pilgrimage map developed over time, centered on Sikh devotees' devotion to the virtues of the Gurus through the construction of shrines associated with their moral history, martyrdoms and crucially *Takhts*. This expansion has made these routes central to Sikh identity and community institutions. The establishments of thousands of Gurdwaras and numerous religious sites in Punjab and outside contributed to the interaction between pilgrims and migrants. The spread of these pilgrims had numerous impacts on Sikh culture. Within Sikhism, various sects played a significant role in pilgrimage and religious propagation of tradition. The Gurdwaras, *Langar* (collective feasts), and *seva* spread the living culture of pilgrimage and religious community service. The community kitchen (*langar*) served food collectively, cutting across all distinctions of caste, and gender and social status. This zeal and religious practice unites people. The *langar* system has played a significant role in reducing inter-religious barriers and promoting coexistence. The *Sangat* and *Pangat* system fostered mutual respect among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and other sects, leading to a greater understanding of Sikh values across diverse religious groups. The practice of serving community meals, regardless of language, race or region, has made Sikhism accessible and popular. The practice of selfless social service, which continues even today, is open to anyone belonging to any religious community at Gurdwaras. This spirit fosters trust and cooperation among the communities, contributing significantly to community relief and social work during time of disaster. Social service also has a significant impact on reducing religious bias in the local community. Gurdwaras are not only places of worship but also community service relief and support centers. The regular participating of devotees in local multi- religious cultural events at Gurdwara has also had a positive impact on unity. The recitation of *Gurbani*, the use of *Ragas*, the Punjabi language and the accompaniment of devotees during the pilgrimage have greatly spread the devotional style. As a result, non-Punjabi communities have also opted and maintained the tradition of *Gurbani Kirtan*. The main principles of Sikh culture given by Gurus-unity, monotheism and harmony among people of different religions and communities-continue to guide devotees. Pilgrims have linked the 'Sacred Heritage Path' to the spread of Sikh culture, it symbolizes devotion, courage and spiritual discipline.

Conclusion

Sikhism has grown and spread over many years, from the time of the Gurus to the modern period. One of the main reasons for this spread is the network of pilgrimage routes. These routes acted like cultural highways, connecting people from different parts of India to the main Sikh center in Punjab. Important pilgrimage places like Patna Sahib, Hazur Sahib (Nanded), Damdama Sahib and other helped carry Sikh teachings and tradition to the east, south, center

and west of the country. When people travelled on those routes they shared ideas beliefs, and customs, which helped Sikh culture reach new regions. These pilgrimage sites brought people together, created religious unity, encouraged cultural exchange, and strengthened social bonds. They also helped from early connections with Sikh communities living outside Punjab, which later supported the Sikh diaspora. Overall pilgrimage routes played a very important role in spreading Sikh culture across India and keeping the community connected.

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