



Negotiating Sikh Identity in Pakistan: State Policies, Minority Citizenship, and Religious Recognition (1947–2025)

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Abstract

This article explores the Sikh identity in Pakistan from the partition in 1947 to the present. It looks at institutional practices, governmental policies, and constitutional requirements and their impact on the Sikh minority as citizens. The article argues that the Sikhs of Pakistan are placed in a paradoxical situation as institutionally and officially recognised citizens of Pakistan. Yet, they continue to be marginalised by institutional neglect, forced conversions, and the decay of religious heritage. It does this by relying on the analysis of the constitution, demographic data, and information from human rights groups. Sikhs have now declined from a few hundred thousand in 1947 to around 16,000 due to migration and ongoing persecution. The Evacuee Trust Property Board, set up to manage minority religious properties, has not been able to reverse the slide of Sikh history, with only 37 out of 1817 gurdwaras remaining. Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution of Pakistan, but its reality shows how little freedom there is for the religious minorities in a state whose identity is bound to Islam. The paper argues that there is a need for meaningful political representation in addition to reserved seats, institutional changes, and the retention of religious monuments to be able to acknowledge Sikh identity over the long term.

Keywords: Sikh identity, Pakistan, minority rights, citizenship, religious freedom, forced conversion, Evacuee Trust Property Board, constitutionalism

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1. Introduction and Background

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was created in 1947 as the homeland of the Muslims of the Indian Sub-continent. Since its inception, however, Pakistan has had sizeable communities of religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and Sikhs. At the time of Partition, non-Muslims made up around 15 to 20 percent of Pakistan's population (The Shillong Times, 2026). In the past, the number of Sikhs residing in the Punjab region was in the hundreds of thousands. This has now dropped to just 15,998, that is 0.01 per cent of the total population (Lokmat Times, 2026). This population catastrophe is not the result of the huge migrations alone that led to partition. In the 2023 census, a mere 15,998 Sikhs were found in Pakistan, and human rights activists have described this minority as an "endangered" minority (Lokmat Times, 2026). This Sikh presence has been eroded from the nation by a long history of fear, institutional neglect, and selective violence that has been evident in the drop (Lokmat Times, 2026).

Formal safeguards of religious freedom are provided by Pakistan's constitution. All citizens have the right to declare, practice, and share their beliefs (Article 20 of the Constitution of 1973 – European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d.). The constitutional rights of minorities are mentioned in Article 36, which clearly provides for due representation in Federal and Provincial Services, while Article 25 guarantees citizens equality (Pakistan Observer, 2023). Despite the constitutional protections that religious minorities enjoy in Pakistan, "they face significant challenges to their safety, legal rights and social integration" (European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d.). In the case of the Sikhs, it is very enlightening. Unlike the other minorities, Sikhs are a special minority group where geography, religion, and the India-Pakistan conflict converge (IPANewspack, 2026). The Sikhism founder, Guru Nanak, was born in the Nankana Sahib area, known in Pakistan today as the province of the Punjab. The nation is home to many revered Sikh sites, such as Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur, which welcomes thousands of pilgrims every year. This hallowed geography makes Sikhs more important than their numbers. But their rights and traditions are not being properly protected despite their importance.

The article discussed the evolution of Sikh identity in Pakistan from 1947 to 2025. The Article explored the constitutional and legal framework that governs the rights of the minority, as well as the institutional structures (or lack thereof) to protect the religious history of the Sikh community, state policies towards the Sikh minority, and issues that are currently facing the community. It is the primary argument that while Pakistan officially recognizes the Sikhs as citizens enjoying constitutional rights, they are still being marginalized and discriminated against through institutional neglect, forced conversions, and the eroding of religious tradition. The constitutional guarantee of citizenship to minorities is a contradiction to the reality, as the state's identity is officially based on Islam.

2. Research Questions

1. Which are the factors responsible for the demographic change of Pakistan's Sikhs from 1947 to 2025?
2. What kind of an understanding of the state's attitude towards minority recognition can we get from the management of the Sikh religious legacy by the state institutions, particularly the Evacuee Trust Property Board?
3. How do issues of the modern world such as forced conversions, political marginalization and violence affect Sikhs' experience as citizens of Pakistan?
4. In this regard, how is Pakistan fulfilling its obligation as a nation towards its minority Sikhs under International Human Rights law and constitutional obligations?

3. Literature Review

The study of religious minorities in Pakistan has grown manifold in the past few decades, though the Sikh minority has not been studied as much as Christians or Hindus. Research now is broken up into several themes. There is also ample literature dealing with the constitutional provisions on minority rights in Pakistan. The 1973 Constitution still governs and ensures religious freedom and equality before the law. But academics have noted these assurances are undermined by the state's Islamic nature, which results in intrinsic conflicts between substantive recognition and formal equality (Malji, n.d.). The constitution of Pakistan is founded on the concept of "sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah Almighty alone" (1949 Objectives Resolution). Subsequent constitutional development has been influenced by this Islamic approach, and it has posed problems for minority citizenship.

There have been several studies on the gap between the experiences of minorities and what is guaranteed in the constitution. A study on the experiences of Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan (Sikh and Hindu Religious Minorities in Pakistan, 2021) has found that the state discourse has a significant influence on the creation and development of minority identities and belonging. The study looked into the way minorities create identities to acknowledge their differences in religion and their Pakistani citizenship through negotiations with the Pakistani government. Research on citizenship education shows that minority adolescents' experience of citizenship is a formal but denied access to citizenship and that educational curricula often exclude people based on religion (Taylor & Francis, 2022). One study indicates that minority children feel that they are not equal citizens in any way (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

Increasingly, there is literature documenting the systemic violence faced by religious minorities in Pakistan. Hundreds of girls of the Sikh, Christian, and Hindu faith are reportedly kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and sold to Muslim males every year (The Friday Times, 2025). The lack of action by authorities regarding forced conversions and mob violence "continues to foster a climate of fear and religious discrimination" (USCIRF, 2026). Forced marriages and conversions carried out by minorities, particularly in the south of Punjab and Sindh, are also reported in large numbers by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (OHCHR, n.d.).

In 1960, the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) was established (Ministry of Religious Affairs, n.d.) to handle religious property left behind by the immigrants who were Sikh or Hindu and moved to India during Partition. In the academic and journalistic literature, shortcomings of ETPB, such as massive encroachment on minority assets, corruption, and lack of cooperation between the federal and provincial governments, are documented (The Express Tribune, 2024). According to a report to the Parliamentary Committee on Minority Caucus (Outlook India, 2025), only 37 out of 1,817 Hindu temples and Sikh Gurdwaras are still operational in Pakistan.

Some of the research analyzes the geopolitical dimension of the relationship between Pakistan and the Sikh community. Sikhs offer Pakistan an "emotionally relevant minority constituency within India, a religiously relevant one around the world and a sacred geography within Pakistan," said IPA Newstack (2026). In consequence, it has been alleged that Pakistan is unable to ensure the security of the Sikhs within its territory and is also exploiting Sikh issues for political advantage (News18, 2026).

4. Research Methodology

This study investigates the evolution of Sikh identity, minority citizenship and religious recognition in Pakistan since 1947 to 2025 with a qualitative research approach that is based on historical analysis, a review of documents and doctrinal legal analysis. The doctrinal approach

to the study of the law on minority rights "in practice" means the analysis of relevant court decisions, laws and constitutional provisions. The study of the Sikh community through the lens of history examines the community's institutional, demographic and political development amidst profound political and constitutional transformations. Secondary sources include books that have been peer-reviewed, journal articles and credible newspapers, government publications, Parliamentary records, the reports of the Evacuee Trust Property Board and publications by national and international human rights organizations including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The data collected is analysed from a historical and a legal perspective to assess the link between the state actions and the acceptance of Sikh identity in Pakistan.

5. Discussion

5.1 Demographic Decline: From Majority to Marginality

The marginalization of the Sikhs in Pakistan has been reflected in the trend of their numbers. In the early days of the Partition in 1947, the Sikh community, with its numbers in several hundred thousand, was a significant presence in West Punjab. Following the Partition, there was a significant population loss of Sikhs, following their move to India, as well as Hindus, who moved to Pakistan, leaving the Sikh population in India drastically reduced (Northeast Herald, 2024). Today, Lahore, which was once a well-known city of the Sikhs, has only 500 to 600 Sikh people. This is quite different from the several thousands of Sikhs who resided there in the early 20th century (Northeast Herald, 2024).

In the 2023 census, less than 0.01 per cent of Pakistan's population (15,998) were Sikhs (Lokmat Times, 2026). This drop is not just due to migration, but also "deeply rooted in a climate of fear where the forced conversion of young Sikh women is a persistent and harrowing threat" (Lokmat Times, 2026). The group has been named the "endangered minority" of Pakistan by human rights activists (Lokmat Times, 2026). Several factors could account for this drop in the demography. First, following Partition, a pattern of departure emerged which continued in the decades to come. Secondly, to escape the violence and persecution, which includes targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and forced conversions, Sikhs have taken shelter in other parts of Pakistan or abroad (The Friday Times, 2025). Third, the community's cultural and religious infrastructure has been weakened as a result of institutional neglect of the Sikh religious sites, making it more difficult to be present. Thirdly, lack of enough State protection has created an atmosphere of insecurity and encouraged emigration.

5.2 Constitutional Promises and Practical Denial

The Constitution of 1973 of Pakistan has laid a strong base for the rights of minorities. Article 36 guarantees that the rights of minorities shall be respected, Article 20 gives freedom to religion, and Article 25 guarantees equality before the law (Pakistan Observer, 2023). The Constitution also provides for the establishment of minority seats in the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies. The Election Commission of Pakistan allocates ten seats for the minority groups, which include Christians (4 seats), Hindus and scheduled castes (4 seats), Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and other non-Muslims (Election Commission of Pakistan, n.d.).

But there is a huge gap between reality and the promises in the constitution. Despite the constitutional protection, religious minorities in Pakistan face significant restrictions which compromise their security, legal status, and integration into society (European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d.). In fact, now it is the lack of effective use of legal protection that is the problem. One study (Ahss.org.pk, 2022) states that the constitution guarantees equal rights for every citizen, but many marginalized groups are being ignored by society. Despite its

historic nature, the Sikh Marriage Act, designed to protect the rights of minorities, is yet to be implemented several years after its enactment (Pakistan Observer, 2023). The Pakistani legislation on minority rights is largely symbolic, and there is a dearth of enforcement mechanisms and political commitment to ensure implementation. This is just one of the many examples of laws that have not been implemented.

5.3 Evacuee Trust Property Board & Management of Sikh Heritage

To oversee the properties left behind by Sikhs and Hindus who immigrated to India during Partition, the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) was founded in 1960 (Ministry of Religious Affairs, n.d.). The Board has the responsibility of managing the religious sites of Sikhs and Hindus, and supporting pilgrims who go to Pakistan to celebrate religious festivals (Evacuee Trust Property Board, n.d.). ETPB's track record is very poor. According to a report submitted to the Parliamentary Committee on Minority Caucus (Outlook India, 2025), there are only 37 Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras remaining out of 1,817 in Pakistan. After the Partition in 1947, most of the temples and gurdwaras were left behind by the Sikh and Hindu communities after they migrated to India (Outlook India, 2025). The ETPB system has several problems such as "outdated" practices, "lack of coordination between the federal and provincial governments", public sector corruption, and the use of the judicial system for personal gain" (The Express Tribune, 2024). The evidence of prejudicial treatment towards the disadvantaged communities, illegal encroachments on religious premises, and demolition of old gurdwaras is found abundantly in both News18 and Tribune India (News18, 2026; Tribune India, 2026).

From time to time, the government has been proactive in addressing these deficiencies. The government had to take back the land of Gurdwara Babey Di Beri, Sialkot, in 2025. In 2025, the number of Sikhs in the city had grown to more than 100, even though there were only ten Sikhs after 1947, due to supporting policies, officials said. Additionally, the ETPB has started projects to renovate old gurdwaras in Sialkot and Peshawar (Global Times, 2025).

5.4 Forced Conversions and Violence

Forced conversions are one of the major problems faced by the Pakistani community of Sikhs. There are hundreds of Sikh, Christian, and Hindu girls who are kidnapped, coerced to convert to Islam, and sold to Muslim men every year (The Friday Times, 2025). Lokmat Times reports that "Sikh and Hindu girls often are abducted and coerced into conversion to Islam, particularly in the province of Sindh in Pakistan. The forced conversion to Islam of those from religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, and the authorities' inability to respond to incidents of mob violence related to blasphemy accusations, has maintained a climate of fear and religious discrimination, USCIRF (2026) said.

Forced marriages and conversions are prevalent among minority groups, as per the Human Rights Commission Pakistan (OHCHR, n.d.). The phenomenon is not limited to a particular region. There have been cases reported in Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. There is a case of women being detained or pressurised by family members at times (Lokmat Times, 2026). Sikh communities have "repeatedly sounded the alarm on targeted harassment and 'conversion' of Sikhs," reports the Lokmat Times (2026). Especially damaging have been the anti-blasphemy laws. These laws have allegedly "very often targeted the Sikhs," leading to persecution and mob violence (The Shillong Times 2026). As a result of these regulations and the weakness in enforcement of protection from forced conversion, Sikhs find themselves in a constant state of insecurity.

5.5 Political Representation: Symbolism Without Substance

The motto for the children was "love and peace. The catch phrase for the kids was "love and peace. The minority representation issue with Pakistan's reserved seats provides formal

political representation. The National Assembly has ten reserved seats for minority groups such as Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and others as outlined by the Election Commission of Pakistan (n.d.). In 2025, an important milestone was achieved with the election of the Sikh religious leader, Gurpal Singh, to a minority seat in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Assembly without any opposition (The Week, 2025).

But there are large limitations on the number of seats that can be reserved. The selection of minority members is through proportional representation, which is done by political parties rather than the minority people choosing them (The News, 2024). Genuine minority representation may be undermined by this arrangement, which gives political power. All parties have control over who represents minority communities. Minority representation is not directly related to party politics because the seats are allocated among the parties based on their performance in general elections. Discarding reserved seats cannot be done with all seriousness. They provide a platform for minorities in the national and local legislature. The structural issues faced by the Sikh community, however, suggest that political participation is inadequate to resolve these issues, and the marginalization patterns outlined above indicate that this is true for the system's weaknesses in particular.

6. Analysis and Recommendations

6.1 Analysis

In Pakistan, Sikhs and other religious minorities have very strong formal safeguards as guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan. But in reality, the lives of the Sikhs of Pakistan are rejected; people get killed, forcibly converted, and the population is lost due to institutional indifference and the presence of violence. In this contrast between the promise of the constitution and the practice of denying minority citizens, deeper structural issues with Pakistan's minority citizenship policy are revealed.

6.1.1 The Recognition Paradox

In Pakistan, the Sikh community is officially recognized as citizens, and their rights are guaranteed by the constitution. The state provides reserved seats in the legislatures, allows pilgrimages to the holy places for Sikhs and Sikh sacred places (though not adequately). But along with this recognition, there are systemic failures to protect Sikhs from violence, to protect their sacred history, and to ensure their equal participation in national life. This sort of acceptance is not as strong as taking action; it's recognition without protection.

6.1.2 Islamic Constitutionalism's Boundaries

The essence of Pakistan's constitution is Islamic in nature. Allah alone, and there is no one like him" is the main lesson of the basic document, the Objectives Resolution. This is the Islamic view, which conflicts with the concept of minorities' rights. Unlike the rights of the majority, religious freedom has always been subject to interpretation and limitation by the state because of its Islamic identity, with minority rights always subject to interpretation and limitation. The best example of this is the blasphemy law that has been used against the Sikhs and other minorities.

6.1.3 A failure of the Institution

The fact that the Evacuee Trust Property Board has not been able to ensure that the Sikh sacred heritage is protected is just a symptom of the larger problems of institutional dysfunction. There is a lack of coordination with provincial governments, poor funding, and the Board is corrupt. Consequently, gradually, the religious infrastructure of Sikhs gets eroded; thus, the cultural and theological issues that hold them together as a community fall apart and eventually lead to the demographic decline.

6.1.4 Security Failures

Kidnappings, forced conversions, and targeted attacks against Sikhs continue to be a serious concern due to a failure in state protection. The Government's investigation and prosecution of criminals has not been successful. The climate of impunity breeds more violence and makes Sikhs migrate.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 The Evacuee Trust Property Board's institutional change

There should be a comprehensive reform of the ETPB. This should involve greater funding, improved federal-provincial relations, greater openness in administering minority property, and much greater engagement with representatives of the Sikh community. Sikhs should be in the top posts within the ETPB, such as chairman (Times of India, 2026).

6.2.2 Ensuring the protection of places of worship. Protecting Places of Worship

The government has to take prompt action against encroachment, demolition and neglect of other gurdwaras so as to prevent them from being destroyed. The sacred sites of the Sikhs need to be carefully examined and a programme to provide care and restoration implemented.

6.2.3 Anti-Conversion Law Enforcement

There is a need to continue the existing legislation which bans forced conversion and kidnapping by the government. But cases should be considered promptly, offenders sent to prison, and victims should be supported and protected. One thing is important—this atmosphere of impunity which allows forced conversions to continue must be ended.

6.2.4 Significant Political Representation

The reserved seat system should be replaced with giving the minority communities the power to elect representatives directly. This will enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of the representation of minorities in politics.

6.2.5 Common good practice in implementing Minority Law

There should be a set of rules and mechanisms to enforce the Sikh Marriage Act and other minority Acts. Political laws that do not take effect should be abolished.

6.2.6 Involve students in interfaith communication and civic education:

The curriculum should be modified to promote respect for religious diversity and for inclusive citizenship. Efforts for interfaith communication should be expanded to develop an understanding of each other.

6.2.7 Global Involvement

Pakistan must join international human rights institutions like the UN Human Rights Council and Universal Periodic Review to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the rights of the minorities. The government should invite international observers to assess the situation of religious minorities, and implement their recommendations.

7. Conclusion

This article outlines the evolution of the identity of the Sikhs in Pakistan since the inception of Pakistan in 1947 till 2025. The numbers at Partition were around 16,000, and now they are around 16,000, indicating a population disaster. Apart from the initial loss after Partition, persecution, institutional neglect, and forced conversion have been the consistent trend in Pakistan that has resulted in the consistent decline in the population of Sikhs. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the rights of minorities as well as religious freedom. But the reality and the promise in the constitution are far from equal. In Pakistan, Sikhs find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they are accepted as citizens, they have constitutional rights, but they are still being ostracized, at risk of violence, and lack adequate protection from

the government. The Evacuee Trust Property Board, established to look after the minority religious heritage, has not been able to reverse the tide of deterioration of Sikh places.

Besides legal and administrative problems, there are structural problems too that Sikhs in Pakistan are facing. They reflect the conflicts between the principles of minority rights and the Islamic character of Pakistan. They have been a symptom of institutional dysfunction that has never protected communities of color. Furthermore, they show an attitude towards a political culture that respects minorities' rights in theory but not in practice. Sikh identity needs to be recognised sustainably beyond mere constitutional protection in Pakistan. It requires strong political representation, proper protection of places of worship, the proper enforcement of laws that ban forced conversion, institutional reform, and a basic shift in the orientations of the state with regard to and the implementation of its commitment to minority citizenship. These changes will otherwise not happen, and Pakistan's constitutional system will fail to fulfill its promise without these changes; if anything, Pakistan's Sikh community will become a minority, and the constitution will not prove to be as successful as it is intended to be.

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