

Minorities in social and state structures: reflections on the Sikh community of Swat, Pakistan

Altaf Qadir*

Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author Emails: altafqadir@uop.edu.pk

Abstract

The Sikh community of Swat has been living in the area since their migration from Hazara in the 19th century. They lived peacefully though dealt with as clients of the Pukhtuns of Swat till 1969 when it was merged with Pakistan. Under the 1973 Constitution, they are equal citizens of Pakistan, however, the practice may not be as prescribed by the State. There are citizens and social forces too, that work alongside state institutions. The post-9/11 militancy has affected the entire region and Swat remained a hotbed of militancy for more than a decade. The paper looks into the status of the Sikhs living in Swat, their economic and social opportunities, the threats that they have faced as well as their perception of their status. The Sikh community of Swat was approached, and a few questions were put before them which were frankly responded. Despite serious threats to the state and society at large, the Sikhs of Swat were not tortured by the militants which indicate that militancy was not an indigenous move. Though a few families migrated from the area but returned to Swat after a couple of years because they were not happy in the 'other' social structure.

Article History

Received:
October 28, 2021

Revised:
January 28, 2022

Re-revised:
June 18, 2022

Accepted:
June 22, 2021

Published:
June 28, 2022

Keywords: Taliban, Pukhtuns, Sikhs, militancy, minorities, fundamental rights, social status, social status of minorities, economic opportunities, threats to minorities.

How to Cite:

Qadir, A. (2022). Minorities in social and state structures: reflections on the Sikh community of Swat, Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 6(1), 31-41. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/6.1.3>

Publisher's Note:

IDEA PUBLISHERS (IDEA Publications Group) stands neutral with regard to the jurisdictional claims in the published maps and the institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s), published by IDEA PUBLISHERS (IDEA Publications Group).

Licensing: This is an Open Access article published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

The Sikh community of Swat and elsewhere in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been living in the area since their migration from Hazara to Swat in the 19th century. Historically, the Sikhs and Pukhtuns/Afghans were mostly at loggerhead during 18th and 19th centuries. However, the community once settled among the Pukhtuns, was accepted and equal opportunities of business were available to them. The situation though remained peaceful for most of the time but political tension in the area and rise of militancy and Hindutva have disturbed their mutual coexistence. The serious threat to their existence was first faced by the Sikhs of Swat in 1992 when the Babari mosque was demolished by the radicals in India. The Gurdwara in Mingora and their residences were assaulted. The local Pukhtuns, however, took arms to protect them against their fellow Pukhtuns. The second serious threat was felt by them during the post 9/11 when militancy took over the entire Pukhtun belt from Waziristan to Swat. The current study was designed to evaluate whether the Sikhs of Swat faced any serious threat to their existence during the crisis as some of them migrated either to other parts of the country or even India. However, most of them returned after some time and settled in their own houses in Swat. The present study considers that entire militancy as part of an international project with rare indigenous routes otherwise the first victims could be the local Sikhs who are ‘infidels’ in the Taliban discourse and thus be taxed with *Jizya*. The questions for the current inquiry were whether the Sikhs of Swat felt any threat from the people living in their surroundings or if their perception of threats was different? Whether their relations with their neighbours worsen during this period or it remained cordial like past? The current paper is an attempt to evaluate their social status, economic opportunities; threats that are posed to their existence and the suggestions they put forward for a peaceful coexistence in Pakistan.

During the course of the study, it was found that despite common belief majority of people of Swat turned to religious ideologues and joined the ranks of militants; a good segment of society believe that this militancy was an ‘engineered’ phenomenon and majority were still following their indigenous way of living. The empirical data suggests that despite their emotional attachment to religion, they not only respect the Sikhs but have also joined them during most occasion of sorrows and happiness. The current study brings into the limelight that despite certain weaknesses, Pukhtun code of conduct believes in inclusiveness for the minorities.

2. Literature review and theoretical approach

The current paper is on a theme which is hardly brought into the academic or journalistic discussion, no proper literature is available on the issue. However, for historical background, a few sources were consulted. These sources include Khan’s *Tarikh Riyasat-e-Swat*, a brief history of Swat and a detailed account of the life of Mian Gul Abdul Wadud, founder of Swat State. Sultan-i-Rome’s *Mughuls and Swat* deals with Mughals’ interactions with Swat. Rome’s *Swat: A Critical Analysis* is an insider understanding of the militancy in Swat. Babar’s autobiography briefly deals with his relation with people Swat and his marriage with Bibi

Mubarak, daughter of Malak Shah Mansur. Roshan Khan's *Yusafzai Qaum ki Sarguzasht* is also an important source of historical description of Swat and its tribes. Plowden's report is an important colonial version of the leading people and groups of Swat. Rome's *Forestry in the Princely State of Swat and Kalam* deals with the issues related to forestry. Rome's *Swat State* is perhaps the most comprehensive academic work on the history and structure of Swat state.

Though a good number of anthropological theories could fit the current study, the author was not convenient with the application of any theory due to his academic training. The whole paper is based on fewer published works for the historical background of the Sikhs and Swat. The major portion is drawn from empirical data, collected during the field survey. The entire data was collected in semi-formal and informal sittings and discussions. The identity of the interviewees is concealed where required while a few names of the respondents are provided. The paper is broadly divided into an introduction, literature review, methodology, main body further divided into a few sections and conclusion.

3. Methodology

In the present paper, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was utilized for the assessment of the lifestyle and practices of the Sikh Community of Swat. The total population of the Sikh community in Swat is around 2500 individuals. Initially, it was planned to collect data through close-end questionnaires. For that matter, 250 questionnaires with 12 close-end questions were distributed but only 11% were returned due to certain constraints including fear of the local administration. Later, the survey was conducted through in-depth interviews with inhabitants of Swat including Sikhs and Muslims. In the second phase, households were targeted for assessment and the researcher was able to acquire data from 24 out of 70 households that makes 35%. The majority of respondents were aged between 14 and 60. The interviews were arranged at the residence of the respective individuals. The researcher faced extensive non-compliance from individuals as except for four people, none agreed to be mentioned in this paper due to its political sensitivity. Moreover, the researcher was also not allowed to visit the *gurdawara* due to an order from the district administration.

4. Brief historical sketch of Swat

Swat lies in a strategic region north of the Peshawar Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. In recent years, its strategic importance has increased for becoming a conflict zone between USA, China and other states as well as non-state actors. It is foreseen that for the few decades to come, Swat along with the Northern Areas would be a bone of contention between many state and non-state actors.

For most of known history, it was a witness to the fusion of many civilizations. It was one of the major centres of learning and mysticism of Buddhists. After the decline and disintegration of the Gandhara civilization, it retained its independent status until 1969 (Sultan-i-Rome, 2002).

Zahiruddin Babar has mentioned his meeting with Sultan Ala-ud-Din and Sultan Awais of Swat; and with Shah Mansur, a leading man of the Yusufzi tribe (Babar, 2007, pp. 192-93). The Mughals emperors, except Akbar, neither attempted to occupy Swat nor sought its submission (Rome, 2002, pp. 41-42).

After leaving Kabul in the 15th Century (Khan, 1986, pp. 39-40), the Yusufzi, came to Peshawar, moved forward to Mardan and later occupied Swat (Plowden, 1932, p. 01; Sultan-i-Rome, 2007, p. 06).¹ Shortly afterwards, Buner, the Chamlala valley, the Khudukhel area and Swabi were occupied and different clans of the Yusufzi and Mandanr settled there. Malak Ahmad, chief of the Yusufzi and his trusted friend Sheikh Malli introduced a *wesh* system among the Yusufzi. Instead of founding a centralized structure of government, they lived in a tribal system that was divided into two opposite blocks (Sultan-i-Rome., p.02). Each clan was independent in running their affairs. Disputes were settled by the chiefs of the clan and referred to a grand council or *Jargah* only in case of a serious emergency or danger (Khan, 1986, pp. 42-44). After living for centuries in tribal structure, due to internal conflicts and probably the emerging English threat which occupied Peshawar valley in 1849; the tribes of Swat decided to form a government of their own in 1850 and Sayyid Akbar Shah was installed as their king. He died in 1857 and the Swatian did not accept his son as their king. After living under Pukhtu for around 58 years, due to the mutual fights and threat from the Nawab of Dir, the tribes of Swat invited Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah and installed him as king of Swat. He, however, reigned for 3 years only after which he was banished from the region. Mian Gul Abdul Wadud was the new ruler, and the Swat State remained an independent entity till its merger in Pakistan in 1969 (Sultan-i-Rome, 2008).

4.1. Sikhs of Swat their social status and rituals

It is commonly believed that the Sikhs, living in Swat migrated from Hazara in the second half of 19th century. They are around 2500 individuals, living in Mingora, Bari Kot and Khwaza Khela. Since the minorities in many South Asian countries prefer to live in collective communities, the average size of their household is large i.e., 20 or above individuals per household. Majority of them are Mone Sikhs—they opt to cut their hairs, shave beard and do not use *pug*—turban, though they share the rest of their rituals and beliefs with other rest of the majority of Sikhs. Mones have lived in Swat like clients of the Pukhtun tribesmen for about a century. Socially they were considered inferior to the Pukhtuns but in most parts were treated politely.

Since their earlier settlement in Swat till its merger in Pakistan (1969), the Sikhs lived in different villages and were associated with the respective Khan. They were, however, not a part of the Pukhtun entity. They could not own agricultural lands and homes. The Khan allotted a space designated for their settlements. They used to serve the Khan, although due to smart business skills, they also owned and successfully ran shops (Prakash, 2014). It is worth mentioning here that the Pukhtuns did not consider business as an honourable profession.

After the merger of Swat in Pakistan and especially after adopting 1973 constitution, the Sikhs got right to own real estate like other citizens of Pakistan. They constructed their homes, mainly in three towns of Swat, i.e., Mingora, Khwaza Khela and Bari Kot (Lal, 2014). The Sikhs of Swat have adopted Pukhtu—Pukhtun code of conduct, in their social structure. They speak Hindku in their homes but use Pukhtu for interaction outside. They speak Pukhtu in the style and accent of Yusafzi and also follow their cuisine and attire. It is pertinent to mention here two instances: firstly, the Sikhs of Swat and Buner, who migrated to India after the partition in 1947 still avoid making matrimonial relations with the Indian Sikhs, though some males marry the indigenous Indian Sikh girls; secondly during the tide of militancy a family from Swat migrated and settled in Delhi but returned after a few years due to difficulties in adjusting to Indian culture (Vikram, 2014).

The traditional dinner of Swat typically offers rice along with chicken, milk, yogurt and *deesi ghee*—locally prepared from cow or buffalo's butter. Apparently, there are no differences between dinner conventions of Sikh or Muslims of Swat (Khurshid, 2014). Similarly, during interviews, it was observed that Sikhs served lunch with *sag*—spinach which is a key component of traditional lunch in Swat. It is important to mention here an event when the researcher arrived at a residence of a Sikh. It was almost *zuhur*—midday prayer time and the interviewee Sikh suggested that he would not be able to catch congregational prayer at mosque and so he better offers it at his residence. He provided with a *jay namaz*—prayer mat and later informed that he had purchased a few *jay namaz* as his wife insisted. She did not like her neighbours or guests leaving their homes for prayer due to the unavailability of this facility (Prakash, 2014). However, we cannot assuredly say that each household practiced this as it was not part of our questionnaire.

Customarily, the people of Swat offer *fateha*—prays, for the departed soul in their local mosque. During the field survey, it was observed that the Sikhs visited the Muslims on such occasions to offer their condolences and offer *fateha* in mosques.² In rural areas especially construction, renovation and other usual fixings in religious institutions are jointly contributed by the entire community to earn *sawab*—reward from Almighty Allah. It was revealed that the Sikhs community also stepped forward to participate construction and renovation of their wards' mosque on such occasions (Singh, 2014).

We recorded that 78% of Sikh respondents answered that the rights of the Sikh community in Pakistan are protected, while 20% replied that it was to some extent. Remaining 2%, considered the protection to a minimum extent. It was argued that the reserved 5% quota for minorities in government jobs is not usually followed as hardly any department advertise 20 posts of the same position at once (Lal, 2014).

In response to a question, 16% of Sikh respondents replied that the rights of Sikh community are protected to some extent in Swat while 9% of respondents suggested that these rights are

protected to a lesser extent. However, 75% of respondents understand that the rights of the Sikh community in Swat are protected to a major extent.

Sikhs were asked whether locals of Swat (many outsiders have settled in Swat) are considerate of the rights of Sikh community? 89% of respondents suggested that the locals took care of the rights of the Sikhs to a greater extent. When asked about the same question for Swat state era, 30% of respondents answered that it was good to some extent while 70% suggested that it was good to a major extent. The slight difference of opinions might exist since in the previous era, the Sikhs were clients and could not own real estate.

During the field survey, it was also observed that the Muslims accompanied the Sikhs to *shamshan ghat*—designated place of last rituals of the dead, with the Sikhs and stood at a certain distance to observe the religious rituals. It is pertinent to note here that except for the religious rituals, none of the funeral customs was different from Muslims (Prakash, 2014). When Sikhs were asked whether Muslims in the community joined them in social occasions like funerals, weddings etc, 20% of respondents asserted that they are accompanied by Muslims to some extent. Around 70% responded that they are joined by the local Muslims on all such occasions.

Bhansri Lal, a paramedic by profession and religious leader of the Swat Sikhs asserted that Sikhs living in Pukhtun region are socially Pukhtuns. He stated that Swat had been the centre of Buddhism and commended the tolerance of the locals of Swat compared to other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (FGD, 2014).

4.2. Performance of religious rituals

Majority of Sikhs in Swat recognize no religious intolerance in Swat if the State institutions and non-state actors do not use religion for their vested interests. A few narrated that after the Babari Mosque incident in India, their Gurdawara was attacked resulting in the death of a local Muslim. Maulana Mahbub Subhani³ (2013) announced that the funeral of victim may not be offered as he died in an un-Islamic deed that was against Pukhtu—Pukhtuns code of conduct. Alarmed at the attack on Gurdawara, the notables of Swat came to their houses with firearms for the protection of the Sikh community (Prakash, 2014).

When the question of liberty about their religious rituals was put before them, 78% of respondents replied: “to a greater extent”. While 18% said that it is to some extent. However, 4% of respondents understand that they have no liberty at all or to a lesser extent.

In an isolated interview, a few people, on condition to anonymity declared that the people of Swat had no issues with them performing their religious rituals. They understand that the Pukhtuns of Swat are not threat but the outsiders, for political gains and economic competition use religion for vested interest which ultimately endangers their very existence. They disclosed

that during the last few years and especially after the military operation in Swat, the wall chalking by the Punjab based religious-cum-militant organizations has increased. This posed extreme risks to their lives since they did not look like other traditional Sikhs due to shaving and cutting hair and are confused for Hindus.

4.3. Economic opportunities for Sikhs

Since the merger of Swat in Pakistan (1969), there are no restrictions on Sikhs of Swat to own real estate. They have constructed their own homes and have mainly concentrated in major towns instead of being clients to the Pukhtuns. They live side by side with the Muslims at different places in Mingora though majority prefer to live in specific neighbourhoods. It has also been observed that the Sikh community own business ventures in prime locations. Suraj Prakash, a paramedic by profession, narrated that there are around 70 Sikhs household in Swat but only 2 Sikh families visit the clinic of the Sikh while the rest go to the Muslim doctors' clinics. He told that his clinic was run due to his Muslim patients. Prominent *ulama*—Muslim religious scholars, visited his clinic and had cordial relations with him. A local Muslim teacher reported an incident that once he was advised by a Muslim shopkeeper to purchase commodities from his shop instead of the Sikh's. He instead rebuked the shopkeeper to not blackmail him in the name of Islam. Around 63% of individuals confirmed that they find good business opportunities in Swat and 61% responded that they have greater business opportunities in Pakistan.

4.4. Militancy in Swat and Sikhs

The militancy has created manifold problems not only for the minorities but across the board. However, Sikhs are migrating to other countries since 1947 and their number has decreased from 6 million to 4 million now. It seems that during the recent crisis many have migrated from Punjab, Sindh and Peshawar. Swat, being the major ground for the militants and military operations, was worst affected and the Sikhs were forced to leave their homes. However, when the question of threat to the Sikh community due to the present crisis was put forward to them, only 7%, declared it a serious threat, while 80% consider it 'to some extent'. A question was asked whether or not Sikh community should migrate to other countries due to militancy, 5% of respondents agreed while 90% of respondents disagreed and 5% did not respond. They were also asked whether or not Sikh community had migrated due to the tide of militancy? 18% of respondents replied in the negative, 82% of respondents replied, 'to a lesser extent'. Factors responsible for the religious extremism in the area were agreed to be due to economic factors by 32% of our respondents while 25% of respondents blamed the political influence. Around 7% of respondents understand that religion is responsible for it while around 11% consider social hatred responsible for the tide of militancy. While 14% of the respondents did not reply to the question while 11% considered it to be due to 'something else'.

A Sikh disclosed that during the present crisis, the Taliban imposed *Jizya* on Sikhs in Tirah but

it was due to efforts of Swatis on different forums and state curtailed the activities of its non-state actors and Sikhs of Swat did not end up facing the situation (Anonymous, 2014). During interviews, Bhansri Lal discussed that during the phase of militancy, they were ready to meet the same fates as the fellow Muslim citizens since they had been living in the area for generations and they owned the land and people of this region. To a question about migration to India, he responded that they are citizens of Pakistan, not India. His brother had moved to Delhi but returned due to the social un-adjustability there (Lal, 2014).

4.5. State and minorities

Theoretically, the rights of minorities are protected by state laws and are ensured through state institutions. The situation on ground is however alarming. The decline of all state institutions is more than visible to a layman. The state institutions are focused on security issues and collection of taxes, least interested to ensure the fundamental rights of their citizens. Despite some big claims, social security including public health and education have no place on the government priority list and the only improvement in education is to 'ideologize syllabus'. Police, the institution for public service has been transformed into a paramilitary force to fight terrorism and militancy. This has resulted in a sense of alienation among the citizens and public service institutions of the Police. Judiciary has emerged as a major political actor and instead of focusing on civil cases of common, it is more interested to resolve the cases that make a flash point to bring it on to the spotlight. In this state of affairs, the majority and minorities equally suffer.

The minorities of Pakistan including Sikhs have serious reservations over the syllabus taught in schools and colleges across the country and are worried about the indoctrination of the syllabus. Sikhs understand that the indoctrination of youth through education squeezes space for minorities. The majority also are of the view that it creates problems for minorities when the state declares a certain official religion. It is observed that entire state resources are used to propagate the spread state religion. They shared that indoctrination of syllabi and official religion can and would be used by any state or non-state actors for vested interests (FGD, 2014). The indoctrination of syllabus and official religion has always been criticized by many human rights activists and a segment of the educated class of society. During interviews, a Sikh was asked a question which was answered by an accompanying Muslim who said Pakistan has to reconsider its relationship with the gulf countries in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. He emphasized that there is no room for any other ideology in Wahabism. He further stated that Pakistan state managers should realize their responsibilities, confess any wrongs done in the past and have to convict and punish all officials involved in spread of such ideologies in any capacity.⁴

5. Conclusion

Swat has been a witness to the fusion of civilizations. The merger of Swat state in Pakistan and

especially after adopting 1973 constitution secured equal rights for all minorities including Sikhs, at least theoretically. They own real estate, business ventures and joined public departments but they are mostly functional in the medical field. However, the rise of militancy has created problems for all citizens of the state but the position of minorities and especially Sikhs are threatened to a greater extent as neither their numerical strength is enough to protect themselves from all odds nor they have any state of their own. It is pertinent to note that they were not threatened by the indigenous population of Swat. They feel insecure due to the failure of State institutions to protect them. The Sikhs understand that the outsiders and at times State institutions are responsible in quashing their allotted space. However, it is pertinent to note that certain state and non-state actors have threatened the very existence of not only minorities but also followers of certain ideologies among Muslims.

To secure the religious minorities including Sikhs, the state institutions need to focus on governance. The State needs to work for a viable and tolerant society through all means including tolerant and inclusive curricula. The case of ensuring fundamental rights in theory and practice should be taken on priority bases. The issue of all minorities is extremely essential, but Hindus and Sikhs in particular need to be dealt with extreme care. Any mistreatment of the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan gives a chance to Hindu extremists to get voters' support and squeeze the space for dissident voices in South Asia. De-radicalization of service institutions, a constitutional framework for every state institution, judicial reforms, administrative efficiency, infrastructure development and providing basic needs to the citizens will help to curtail extremism in either shape.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

- Babar, Z. M. (2007). *Waqai Babar*. Shahar Bano Publishers.
- Khan, M. A. (1958). *Tarikh Riyasat-e-Swat wa Sawanih-e-Hayat Bani-e-Riyasat-e-Swat Hazrat Miangul Shahzada Abdul Wadud Khan Bacha Sahib*. Feroz Sons.
- Khan, R. (1986). *Yusafzai Qaumki Sarguzasht*. Roshan Khan and Co.
- Plowden, T. J. C. (1932). Report on the leading persons and state of factions in Swat. *Simla: Government Press of India. Tribal Research Cell, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar*.
- Sultan-i-Rome. (2007). Forestry in the princely State of Swat and Kalam (North-West Pakistan): A historical perspective on norms and practices. *IP6 Working Paper, No. 6*. <https://www.nccr-north-south.ch/Pages/Forestry-in-the-Princely-State-of-Swat-and-Kalam.aspx>
- Sultan-i-Rome. (2002). Mughuls and Swat. *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 50(4), 39-50.
- Sultan-i-Rome. (2009). Swat: a critical analysis. *IPCS Research Papers*, No. 18. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/95598/RP18-Rome-Swat.pdf>
- Sultan-i-Rome. (2008). *Swat State (1915-1969): from genesis to merger; an analysis of political, administrative, socio-political, and economic developments*. Oxford University.

Interviews

- Personal interview with Bhansri Lal at his residence in Mingora, Swat on 24.08.2014.
- Personal interview with Dayal Singh at his residence at Bari Kot, Swat on 27.08.2014.
- Personal interview with Prof. Khursheed at the Department of History, Government Postgraduate Jahanzeb College Saidu Sharif, Swat on 25.08.2014.
- Personal interview with Suraj Prakash at his residence in Mingora, Swat on 23.08.2014.
- Personal interview with Vikram at his shop in Mingora, Swat on 23.08.2014.
- A Sikh of Swat on the condition of anonymity at Bari Kot, Swat on 09.09.2014.
- Focus Group Discussion with Sikhs of Barikot, Swat, 22.08.2014.
- Focus Group Discussion with Sikhs of Mingora, Swat on 28.08.2014.
- Informal discussion with Sikhs of Barikot during a social gathering on 22.08.2014.
- Interview with different Sikhs on the condition of anonymity at Mingora, Swat on 28.08.2014.

Notes:

¹ The Swat valley includes Abazi, Baizi, Ranizi, Khadakzi and Adinzi, Nikpi Khel, Shamozi, Babuzi, Maturizi, Sebjuni, Shamizi, Aba Khel, Musa Khel, Azi Khel and Jinki Khel.

² I want to draw the attention of readers to another interesting fact. The Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, initiated by Abdul Ghaffar Khan and many Muslims as well as Sikhs and Hindus joined his movement. The oath was the same for all without any discrimination of religion which contained that he/she keeps belief in the Oneness of Allah and that Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him) is the last Prophet of Allah.

³ Maulana Mahbub Subhani was a Jama'at-i-Islami activist who had been expelled from Swat by the Wali during his era. He was *khateeb*—orator of the grand mosque in Mingora.

⁴ The person did not want to conceal his identity, but I consider it unethical to mention his name for my research due to the sensitivity the issue.