

## **SOCIO-RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF FATEHGARH SAHIB IN THE SIKH RELIGIOUS TRADITION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the Sikh religious tradition, there are several historical sites and places that are linked to the important events that remain to be the source of spiritual reverence and ethical values of the followers. Fatehgarh Sahib is a very important place situated in Punjab. The historical significance of this site is basically tied to the martyrdom of the younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh, namely Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh. Their martyrdom shows their strong and unquenchable determination to religious freedom and their religion. They are the nobler models of the daring, moral perseverance, and braveness that the Sikh history did not desire. The role that the martyrdom of the Sahibzada's plays in the definition of values and identity of the Sikh community is discussed in this article. It also explains the need for sacred places and pilgrimage sites in maintaining these memories and making spiritual teachings and inspiration between one generation and the other. This research applies both the historical and sociological approaches to understand the meaning of Fatehgarh Sahib as a cultural heritage, remembrance, and pilgrimage site.*

*KEYWORDS: Shri Fatehgarh Sahib Ji, Sahibzade, Sikhism, Sociology of religion, Sikh Community, Gurdwara, Sirhand, Pilgrimage*

### **Introduction**

Among the earliest sociological statements about religion was given by Émile Durkheim in his classic work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim argued that religion is one of the major social institutions that help to build a collective consciousness

amongst society members. To him, rituals and sacred symbols bring people together in the moral order.

This leads to the creation of sacred spaces where groups of people assemble to affirm their faith and reinforce group identity. Likewise, another German sociologist, Max Weber, in his famous work *The Sociology of Religion* (1922), shed some light on the influence of religious ideas and beliefs on the practice of social action and the values of a culture. Weber theorized that religious traditions often had a role in the ethics and society of the day and the advancement of social institutions.

The incidents that concerned Fatehgarh Sahib occurred in the first half of the eighteenth century, at the time when political struggle and religious persecution were characteristic of the northern part of India. In the year 1705, the Sikh family of Guru Gobind Singh was scattered as they were evacuating the place of Anandpur Sahib. The younger Sahibzadas, accompanied by his grandmother Mata Gujri, were finally arrested by Mughal officials at Sirhind. The children were very young, but they demonstrated great bravery and did not give up their faith despite all the safety and privileges that they could have had in case they converted. The heartbreaking story of Guru Gobind Singh Ji's two sons, Sahibzada Zorawar Singh Ji (9 years) and Sahibzada Fateh Singh Ji (6 years), is an important part of the city's history.

The Mughal military captured them and brought them to Sirhind. Even though they were young and going through hard times, they stuck to their Sikh faith and refused to convert to Islam. In a sad turn of events, Wazir Khan, the Nawab of Sirhind, ordered both of them to be killed without mercy. He first ordered them to be bricked alive, and when they were found alive, he killed them by cutting their throats. The Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib, built at the site of their deaths, has become a significant destination for Sikh pilgrims.

Thousands of religious followers travel to the city each year to attend the religious day called Shaheedi Jor Mela, and they pay tribute to the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas. The event is used as an annual prayer and remembrance as well as a cultural gathering to strengthen the historical awareness and cultural identity of the Sikhs. Several Sikh history and religion scholars have also discussed the importance of sacred places in the Sikh religion. In his book, *Sikhism (1997)*, the historian W. H. McLeod made it clear that Sikh pilgrimage centers play an important role in the maintenance of historical traditions and passing of religious doctrines. Similarly, the historian Pashaura Singh, in his book on Sikh identity and religion, *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies (2014)*, emphasized the role of historical memory in Sikh identity and the religious practices. These researchers claim that sacred places, which are related to Sikh gurus and their disciples, are core to constituting the continuity of Sikh tradition. Besides being of religious importance, Fatehgarh Sahib is a necessary site in the maintenance of cultural and educational tradition. The story of the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas forms the major part of the Sikh historical awareness and ethical teaching. It emphasizes such values as courage, faith, justice, and defence of religious freedom. The values have remained inspirational to people and groups and helped in the moral and cultural growth of the society. The history of the Sahibzadas is passed to the younger generations through religious meetings, schools, and remembrance rituals and is a part of the Sikh heritage. Although the role of Fatehgarh Sahib in the history of Sikhism and its religious life is extremely significant, the number of academic studies that explore its socio-religious role on the sociological level is rather small. Despite many historical accounts of the Sahibzadas' martyrdom, research on the wider social and cultural effects of sacred spaces in Sikhism remains limited

## Review of Literature

Researchers have explored the role of sacred lands related to past events and religious personalities who become significant sources of cultural reminiscence and religious veneration. These researches point out that pilgrimage places play a significant role not only in religious purposes, but also in forming the identity of the community, cultural heritage, and socializing. Alan Morinis (1984) is the author of one of the influential works in pilgrimage studies, which is *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal*. Morinis discussed the role of pilgrimage centers in being the points of intersection of religious beliefs and cultural traditions as well as social relations. His study established that pilgrimage places offer the people of various social statuses a chance to engage in common religious activities that make collective identity stronger. Even though Morinis concentrated more on Hindu pilgrimage cultures, his theorizations are largely used in other religions, such as Sikh pilgrimage practices. In their edited book *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (1991 John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow). According to the authors, sacred places tend to be multifaceted social spaces whereby several religious meanings exist simultaneously. Based on their analysis, pilgrimage sites are not merely devotional sites, but they are also the sites where historical memory, cultural identity, and social relationships are negotiated. Their work emphasizes the fact that sacred places are centralized to engage the community and maintain culture. In their book *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* (1995), Simon Coleman and John Elsner. The authors discuss how pilgrimage traditions were formed in the past within various religious cultures, and they underline the fact that pilgrimage travels are commonly driven by the urge to be attached to the sacred past.

According to them, believers should visit places that are related to such deeds as sacrifice or spiritual renewal so that they can have a better sense of their religious legacy. In the Sikh studies, various other scholars have explored the historical background of Sikh religious traditions and institutions. Among the remarkable examples is *The Sikhs (2004)* by Patwant Singh, which gives a detailed account of the historical insights of the Sikh religion and the significance of the major historical events in determining the Sikh identity. Singh underlines that the history of martyrdom and sacrifice in Sikh history remains to give inspirational power of religious devotion and moral principles to the believers of the religion. In a similar way, Khushwant Singh, in his two-volume book, *A History of the Sikhs (1963; revised editions later)*, has given a comprehensive history of the Sikh people and their struggle. Singh talks about the circumstances of the life of Guru Gobind Singh and the sacrifices, which his members of the family, the martyrdom of the younger Sahibzada, made.

These historical events, according to Singh, were at the center of the formation of the Sikh collective memory and the religious consciousness. J. S. Grewal has also made another significant contribution to the Sikh historical studies through his book *The Sikhs of the Punjab (1990)*. Grewal looks at the socio-political and cultural development of the Sikh community from its inception up to contemporary times. His writing emphasizes how historical accounts, religious institutions, and holy places have helped to retain the Sikh heritage. According to Grewal, locations that hold important historical events in Sikh history tend to expand and become major pilgrimage centers to be visited by devotees in various regions. Gurinder Singh Mann has also covered the role of martyrdom in the Sikh religious identity in *Sikhism (2017)*. Mann claims that the memory of martyrdom would take a pre-eminent position in Sikh

religious traditions and is usually celebrated in the form of religious congregations, historical accounts, and pilgrimages.

These commemoration activities help in keeping the collective memory alive and also strengthening the moral ethics of courage, faith, and justice among the Sikhs. Moreover, the correlation between religion and cultural heritage has been studied by some scholars besides historical studies. A good example is provided by Timothy Insoll in *The Archaeology of Islam (1999)* and his explanation of how holy places and religious monuments are turned into significant markers of cultural identity and historical continuity. Despite the fact that in his work Insoll dwells upon the Islamic heritage mostly, his generalized statements concerning sacred landscapes and the memory of cultures are also applicable to the discussion of the importance of religious sites of various traditions. Although there is a vast amount of literature on pilgrimage studies and the Sikh historical background, little work has been done on the socio-religious geography of Fatehgarh Sahib as a religious landscape of the Sikh religious tradition. The martyrdom of Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh is the main subject of most historical accounts, but less literature examines the sociological impacts of this location as a pilgrimage site, memory site, and heritage site in general. Thus, the purpose of the current research is to fill the gaps in the existing literature with the analysis of the historical, social, and religious meaning of Fatehgarh Sahib in the context of pilgrimage research and sociology of religion.

### **Research Design**

The current study assumes a descriptive and analytical study. The descriptive element attempts to provide a detailed account of the historical events that surround Fatehgarh Sahib, including how the site came to be a place of religious importance. The descriptive research

designs are widely used in the social sciences to explain the social phenomena through systematic recording and interpretative analysis of available knowledge. In the framework of the current investigation, this design will allow analysing the historical processes, religious traditions, and sociological interpretations of the site without any distortion and manipulation of the object of study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Since the study is based on secondary references, its results depend on the conclusions made by the previous researchers and historians. Differences between what authors highlight and what they do not highlight in certain aspects of historical events may, as a result, affect how people perceive and comprehend these historical events. Moreover, the lack of primary fieldwork research does not allow for the inclusion of firsthand opinions of pilgrims, locals, or spiritual leaders related to the place. Nevertheless, the principal disadvantages do not imply that the use of a wide range of academic materials and historical documents would provide a complete and unbiased picture of the topic.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Being limited to secondary literature released by publishing companies, the study is written in strict academic norms in terms of referencing and recognition of the authors in question. The study is an attempt to describe historical events and religious traditions with respect and objectivity, and as such, it respects the integrity of scholarly work.

### **Socio-Religious Significance of Fatehgarh Sahib**

Historical events of Fatehgarh Sahib gave the place a special status in the Sikh religious practice and memory. The city is most known because of the martyrdom of the younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh, Sahibzada Zorawar Singh, aged about nine, and Sahibzada Fateh Singh, aged about six, in the Mughal administrative center of Sirhind in 1705. The historical

record, as documented in the Sikh literature and the modern historians, reveals that the two children were hanged at the order of the governor, Wazir Khan. Their resistance to changing their Sikhism to Islam after they were pressed on many occasions has emerged as one of the strongest symbols of faith and courage symbols in the history of the Sikhs. Gradually, the location of these incidences developed to the contemporary city of Fatehgarh Sahib that currently forms a significant pilgrimage destination among the Sikhs.

The socio-religious interest of Fatehgarh Sahib in relation to the Sikh martyrdom tradition can also be regarded as one of the most important. The history of Sikhs talks of the various cases of sacrifice to defend the religious freedom and justice, starting with Guru Arjan in 1606 and Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675. The martyrdom of the younger Sahibzada is seen as being part of this broader tradition of resistance to the oppression of religion. Their account has been greatly recited in the Sikh religious meetings and schools as an example of strong faith. This has made Fatehgarh Sahib symbolic in the sense that it remains a reminder of those moral values that are reinforced in the Sikh teachings, particularly the values of courage, justice, and unswerving devotion.

Another significant aspect of the socio-religious meaning of Fatehgarh Sahib is the maintenance of the collective memory. The historic places tend to be localized, and such places are slowly given the sacred status through constant remembrance. Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib is a Sikh place of worship that was founded on the land where the younger Sahibzadas were executed. This is a gurdwara that can be used as a memorial of their sacrifice and receives huge crowds of believers throughout the year. The other structure of historical importance in the region is Thanda Burj, which was the tower where their grandmother, Mata Gujri spent the last days before she died. The purpose of these monuments is not only to hold

a religious significance but also to be the place where the historical memory is stored and passed to the new generations.

The socio-religious significance of Fatehgarh Sahib is also further boosted by the pilgrimage dimension. Religious sites that are related to historical occurrences usually develop into pilgrimage sites where faithful members are able to showcase their dedication and consider the lessons of their religion. Within the example of Fatehgarh Sahib, pilgrims, both local and international of Sikh background, come to the city to honour the memory of the Sahibzadas.

The greatest religious event regarding this location is the yearly commemoration called the Shaheedi Jor Mela, held yearly in December, mostly between the 25th and 28th, to remember the martyrdom of the Sahibzada's and Mata Gujri. The population of the district swells during the Shaheedi Jor Mela, where hundreds of thousands of pilgrims pay tribute at the gurdwaras of Fatehgarh Sahib. Religion attendants, follow some religious processions (Nagar Kirtan), hear some devotional hymns (Kirtan), and hear some historical lectures in which the sacrifices related to the place are recounted. Langar community kitchens are free meals provided to all visitors, which is based on the Sikh belief in equality and the service back to the community. These events make the city a dynamic religious center and make the members of the Sikh community feel a strong sense of unity.

The other significant feature regarding the socio-religious significance of Fatehgarh Sahib is its impact on the moral and educatory traditions of Sikhs. Historical events that accompanied Fatehgarh Sahib have still been shaping the moral strength and social orientation of the society. The cultural heritage of the Sikhs is also furthered by the site. Various religious institutions, memorials, and school organizations have been found in the area in the course of

the centuries in order to spread the teachings of Sikhism and preserve the historic character of the location.

These groups hold religious services and cultural shows as well as historical displays that assist in keeping the memory of the past alive, in addition to informing the visitors about the history of Sikhism. Moreover, emotional and spiritual attachment that devotees have at Fatehgarh Sahib surfaces as a major factor in keeping the site relevant. Religious sites tend to create strong emotions of sanctity due to the fact that they symbolize the point of extreme spiritual significance within the history of a religious group. To most pilgrims, the tours of Fatehgarh Sahib are not only historical but also spiritual experiences, as they can also help them to remember the sacrifices that were made in the name of religious freedom. Today, Fatehgarh Sahib is a reminder of Sikh identity and the strength of their spirit. The stories that surround the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas are frequently observed with the help of religious meetings, educational campaigns, and cultural events. The martyrdom of the younger Sahibzadas turned the place into a holy land that still brings faith and ethical issues. The legacy behind Fatehgarh Sahib is one that is still entrenched in the minds of the Sikhs, through aspects of pilgrimage, commemorative events, and educational programs.

### **Role of Pilgrimage and Religious Gatherings**

Pilgrimage has traditionally been a major element of religious activities in many traditions, Sikhism being one of them. Sacred places associated with the life of the Gurus and the key historical events often develop to become a focus where the followers gather to express their devotional feelings and celebrate the events in the history of religion. As a result, Fatehgarh Sahib has become one of the popular pilgrimage sites among the Sikh community.

The city has a huge number of visitors every year to worship the memory of Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh, the younger children of Guru Gobind Singh. In this context, the Shaheedi Jor Mela, which is an annual religious gathering, is one of the most significant religious gatherings that have been linked with the site. It is a well-organized event that takes place in every December to remember the martyrdom of the junior Sahibzadas and their grandmother, Mata Gujri. Fatehgarh Sahib records high attendance of pilgrims from different parts of India and the Sikh diaspora in foreign countries in this season

### **Fatehgarh Sahib as a Center of Collective Memory**

The most important elements of the historical memory of a community are often holy sites. In the sociological terminology, the term "collective memory" refers to the common understanding of the past that is perpetuated by traditions, practices, and culture.

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

The analysis in the above sections reveals that events associated with Fatehgarh Sahib have moved beyond the historical time in which they occurred and thus have taken an important place in the socio-religious structure of the Sikh community. The metropolis has over time been turned into a sacred landscape where history, faith, and collective memory meet. The martyrdom of Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh, the younger two sons of Guru Gobind Singh, is therefore not only considered to be a historical occurrence but also a turning point in moral and spiritual terms in the Sikh tradition. Historically, the historical narratives are a key tool in the development of the communal consciousness and the sociological understanding. Societies often build their identity on collective memory of prominent and significant events, specifically the ones that symbolize sacrifice, opposition, or the group struggle.

In the Sikh historiography, one of the most emotionally striking accounts of heroism and devotion is the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas in Fatehgarh Sahib in 1705. Modern documents indicate that the two young Sahibzadas, who were just nine and six years old, did not yield to the intense pressure by the Mughal authorities attempting to integrate the faith of the Sahibs, despite having the governorship of Sirhind, Wazir. The firm commitment of their beliefs in their convictions led to their execution, which, however, had a significant impact on Sikh historical awareness. This sacrifice is remembered by way of rituals, historical accounts, and communal meetings.

The main celebration is the Shaheedi Jor Mela that is held at Fatehgarh Sahib every December. In this event, the city is the location of a phenomenal gathering of pilgrims. Historical documents and recent news indicate that during the mela season hundreds of thousands of followers come to visit the location, thus making the town one of the largest congregation places of religion in Punjab during the winter season. It also includes devotional singing (kirtan), theological lectures, historical exhibitions, and community service activities that highlight the importance of the sacrifice of the Sahibzadas in terms of their moral value.

Another detail is also interesting, the main shrine: this Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib is said to be located on the very place where the younger Sahibzadas were killed. The gurdwara complex is currently not only a place of worship but also a historical site, which draws pilgrims not only in India but also in the Sikh diaspora community all over the world. Gurdwara is another proximate shrine, which is supposed to be the site of the cremation of Sahibzadas and Mata Gujri. All of these connected sacred spaces together form a pilgrimage circuit, which maintains the memory of the historical event. This meaning of Fatehgarh Sahib can also be

comprehended in the geography of sacredness. Religious groups of people regularly convert locations of significant incidents into symbolic places of spirituality.

In Sikhism, certain places associated with the Gurus have come to gain such holiness, such as Amritsar, the home of Harmandir Sahib, and Anandpur Sahib, where Guru Gobind Sahib launched the Khalsa in 1699. Fatehgarh Sahib also takes a similar place in the Sikh sacred geography due to its connection with the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas. The other aspect of concern is the magnitude of the collective involvement when religious meetings are held at the location. Temporary langar kitchens erected by various voluntary groups and religious outfits are present on the occasion of Shaheedi Jor Mela and feed thousands of pilgrims every day. The Sikh culture of langar reflects the ideals of equal treatment and service to the community, and the mela-scale organization of community kitchens testifies to the transfer of religious dogma to practical practices of social collaboration. The didactic function of Fatehgarh Sahib is also important. Visits to students in schools, colleges, and religious places are regularly planned by them, giving them a chance to gain knowledge about the history of the Sikhs at places where these events are happening. There are historical museums and exhibitions located close to the gurdwara complex that show documents, paintings, and artifacts of the life of Guru Gobind Singh and the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas. Considering Fatehgarh Sahib as a holy city would help to recognize its role in the history of Sikhism and strengthen the preservation of the religious heritage and the creation of cultural awareness among the pilgrims and visitors.

## Conclusion

Religion fosters social cohesion and upholds culture. The other significant conclusion of the research is the cultural and educational impact of Fatehgarh Sahib. The gurdwaras, historical places, and schools located on the site are also important in preserving the Sikh heritage as well as transferring the information about the past to the new generations. The spiritual lessons which follow this sacrifice of Sahibzada's by relating the story of the Sahibzada's are of use in preserving the ethical principles that are emphasized in Sikh doctrine. The community and its past are even more enhanced during the educational visits, religious discourses, and historical exhibitions. Sociologically, Fatehgarh Sahib may be considered as an important place of shared memory. There are historical places of worship where individuals are able to associate themselves with their culture. The believers get a chance to revert to an important moment in the Sikh history and remember the eternal values of the courage, belief, and justice, which it symbolizes. In a nutshell, Fatehgarh Sahib is among the most significant socio-religious hubs amongst the Sikhs that have managed to dominate over the spiritual and cultural life of the Sikhs. The historical significance, the active pilgrimage practice and the role it fulfills in the maintenance of the group memory testify to the sociological significance of the sacred spaces in the process of the preservation of the cultural identity in general.

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