

Religious Beliefs and Practices and Social Cohesion in Rural Punjab:

A Case Study of Village Dhaliwal Bet

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the religious beliefs and practices of Dhaliwal Bet, a village in Kapurthala district, Punjab. It examines how faith shapes social structure, cultural traditions, and daily life. Sikhism functions as the main religious framework, while folk traditions and minority religious practices also create a syncretic spiritual environment. Using interviews, participant observation, and secondary data analysis, the study demonstrates that religion drives social cohesion, moral values, and cultural continuity. The findings broaden understanding of rural religiosity in Punjab and highlight how traditional beliefs withstand modernization.

Keywords: Sikhism, Rural Religion, Punjab, Folk Traditions, Religious Practices, Social Cohesion, Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion in rural Punjab is not merely a personal belief system. It is a fundamental organizing principle of social and cultural life. Villages like Dhaliwal Bet reflect a deeply embedded religious ethos. Here, faith shapes everyday practices, community relationships, and moral values. Sikhism, the predominant religion, provides a structured spiritual framework. Folklore and localized beliefs add further layers of cultural meaning.

Scholars have argued that religion in Punjab operates as both a spiritual and social institution. It influences identity formation and collective belonging (Oberoi, 1994). This study aims to explore how these dynamics function in Dhaliwal Bet. It examines how religious practices evolve in a changing socio-economic environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on religion in Punjab highlights its complex and pluralistic nature:

1. *Oberoi (1994)* emphasizes that Sikh identity historically evolved alongside local traditions, resulting in a fluid and inclusive religious culture.
2. Similarly, *McLeod (2004)* notes that Sikh practices in rural areas often incorporate elements of folk belief, reflecting localized adaptations of religious doctrine.
3. *Durkheim's (1912)* functionalist perspective suggests that religion reinforces social solidarity, a concept highly relevant in the context of Punjabi villages, where communal rituals and festivals strengthen collective identity.
4. *Kaur, H. (2018)* further argues that rural festivals serve as key mechanisms for preserving cultural heritage and intergenerational continuity.
5. *Lorenzen's (1995)* studies on Bhakti traditions highlight the role of saints such as Bhagat Dhanna in promoting egalitarian spiritual values. These values continue to influence rural communities. Together, these studies provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the layered religious landscape of Dhaliwal Bet.
6. Recent studies further highlight the ongoing relevance of socio-cultural beliefs in rural Punjab. A qualitative study in rural Mohali shows that traditional beliefs and community practices continue to influence everyday life. This is particularly apparent in health, rituals, and social behavior (*Ahuja et al., 2023*).
7. Recent research on rural Punjab communities emphasizes that social and cultural practices are deeply embedded in local ecological and community relationships. These practices reinforce identity and a sense of belonging (*Journal of Rural Studies, 2024*).
8. Contemporary sociological studies indicate that rural Punjab continues to be shaped by strong religious and cultural frameworks. This persists despite modernization and socio-economic transitions (*Pathak et al., 2025*).

While existing studies tend to examine Sikh religious identity at a macro level, there is a lack of research exploring the specific religious practices within individual villages such as Dhaliwal Bet. This study addresses this understudied area by focusing on these micro-level religious practices.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Functionalism: According to Durkheim (1912), religion functions as a means of social integration. In Dhaliwal Bet, collective rituals such as langar, Akhand Path, and festival celebrations foster unity and reinforce shared norms.

3.2 Symbolic Interactionism: From a symbolic interactionist perspective, religious symbols—such as gurdwaras, shrines, and rituals—carry shared meanings. These meanings shape both individual and collective identities. The symbols provide the community with a sense of belonging and continuity.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design:

Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews with villagers, religious leaders, and elders

Observation: Participation in religious ceremonies and festivals

Secondary Data: Census reports, local records, and academic literature

Tools: Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), group discussions

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in religious beliefs and practices. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout. All respondents gave informed consent and were kept confidential.

5. RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS

The religious life of Dhaliwal Bet centers primarily on Sikhism. Daily practices like Nitnem (daily prayers), Simran (meditation), and participation in gurdwara activities are integral to village life. These practices emphasize values such as equality, service (seva), and devotion.

At the same time, folk traditions coexist with mainstream Sikh practices. The veneration of Baba Sidh Bhoi is a significant aspect of local spirituality, especially in rituals related to marriage and family integration. Observing Gugga Pir rituals reflects a belief in protective folk deities.

This coexistence illustrates what scholars call "religious syncretism." Multiple belief systems interact and merge (Oberoi, 1994). Respondents strongly emphasized continued belief in local spiritual figures (Personal Interview, Village Elder, 2025-26).

6. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN DHALIWAL BET

Religious institutions in Dhaliwal Bet form the backbone of village spiritual and social life. They serve as places of worship and as centers of community interaction, cultural preservation, and moral guidance. The village has a pluralistic religious structure. Gurdwaras, temples, shrines, and a mosque coexist within shared social space.

6.1 Gurdwaras

The village has about ten gurdwaras. Each is associated with different pattis (local divisions) and community groups. Gurdwara Sant Baba Mool Singh is especially significant. Established in 1920 in memory of Sant Baba Mool Singh—a deeply religious figure known for his devotion and simplicity—it is the oldest gurdwara in the village. It continues to function as a central place of worship, organizing daily prayers, kirtan, and langar.

Another important religious site is the Kutia of Sant Baba Sadhu Singh, a revered saint born in Dhaliwal Bet in 1832. He was known for spiritual discipline and devotion to Gurbani. His legacy continues through annual commemorative gatherings held on 8th May. The site draws devotees from both within and outside the village.

Gurdwara Bauli Sahib was established in 1989 by Bibi Jaswinder Kaur. It is a prominent institution that regularly hosts Akhand Path ceremonies and Kirtan Darbars. These events draw participants from nearby villages and reinforce regional religious networks.

Multiple gurdwaras in different pattis show the decentralized yet cohesive nature of Sikh religious life in the village. Each locality maintains its own place of worship, but all remain connected to the broader community.

6.2 Hindu Temples

Dhaliwal Bet also has Hindu religious institutions. This reflects the village's cultural diversity. The main temple, called the Thakurdwara, was founded by Baba Manohar Dass and maintained by later caretakers. It houses idols of Lord Krishna, Goddess Durga, and Lord Shiva. Festivals like Janmashtami and Durga Ashtami are celebrated at the temple. Women, in particular, observe fasting rituals with devotion. These practices show the ongoing relevance of Hindu traditions within a mostly Sikh society.

The village has two Balmiki temples, important for the Scheduled Caste community. These serve as places of worship and cultural centers. Fairs, processions, and religious performances are organized there, especially during Balmiki Jayanti and post-Dussehra celebrations.

6.3 Shrines, Tombs, and Folk Religious Spaces

A distinctive feature of Dhaliwal Bet is its many shrines and tombs. These are dedicated to local saints and folk figures, such as Baba Mohabat Shah, Baba Khiali Shah, Baba Shankar Shah, Baba Thaman Shah, and Baba Piran Wali.

These sites are deeply embedded in local belief systems. Devotees visit them to seek blessings, offer prayers, and fulfill vows. Ritual practices such as lighting oil lamps on Thursdays and offering food items like cooked rice and milk are commonly observed.

Annual fairs (melas) at these shrines blend religious devotion with cultural activities. These include wrestling competitions, folk music, and communal feasts. Such events reinforce community bonds and help preserve local traditions. The existence of these shrines reflects the persistence of folk religiosity, which coexists alongside formal religious institutions and contributes to the village's spiritual diversity.

6.4 Mosque and Islamic Presence

The village also contains a mosque, Waddi Masit, located in Balo Ki Patti. Although it remained unused for several decades after the Partition of India, it regained religious significance when a Muslim family resettled in the village in 1995.

Since then, the mosque has been maintained and used for offering namaz and organizing religious gatherings. Occasional community events, including free kitchens, are also organized, reflecting the village's inclusive and harmonious social structure.

6.5 Role of Educational and Religious Institutions

The Akal Academy Dhaliwal Bet plays an important role in promoting religious education and cultural values among the younger generation. The institution actively organizes Gurburab celebrations, kirtan programs, and cultural performances, encouraging students to engage with Sikh teachings and traditions.

Through activities such as Gatka demonstrations, Kavishri, and religious discourses, the academy contributes to the preservation and transmission of spiritual values, while also strengthening community participation.

6.6 Institutional Role in Social Cohesion

The coexistence of multiple religious institutions in Dhaliwal Bet highlights a high degree of religious tolerance and social harmony. Gurdwaras, temples, shrines, and mosques collectively contribute to a shared cultural space where diverse beliefs are respected.

These institutions not only fulfill spiritual needs but also act as platforms for social service, conflict resolution, and community development. Practices such as langar, collective festivals, and shared participation in rituals reinforce values of equality, cooperation, and mutual respect. As noted by Singh (2010), religious institutions in rural Punjab often function as key agents of social integration—a pattern clearly evident in Dhaliwal Bet.

These institutions function beyond religious spaces; they act as hubs of social interaction and community organization (Singh, 2010). Community participation in festivals reflects collective identity and shared values (Personal Interview, Female Respondent, 2024).

7. RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Dhaliwal Bet village reflects the broader religious landscape of rural Punjab, where Sikhism is the predominant faith. The majority of villagers are Sikhs, and the local gurdwara serves as the spiritual and social center for the community. Sikh festivals such as Gurburab, Vaisakhi, and Maghi are celebrated with devotion and bring the community together for prayers, processions, and communal meals.

However, the village also demonstrates elements of religious diversity. There are families belonging to Scheduled Castes, making up about 35% of the population. While Sikhism remains central, some villagers may observe Hindu traditions and festivals like Diwali and Holi, reflecting the syncretic culture of Punjab. Folk traditions, such as the celebration of Gugga Pir, also highlight the blending of spiritual beliefs and practices across communities.

This mix of Sikh, Hindu, and folk practices fosters a spirit of tolerance and communal harmony in Dhaliwal Bet. The village's religious diversity is further enriched by shared participation in festivals, rituals, and community gatherings, which strengthen social bonds and preserve the area's cultural heritage.

8. RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

Rituals in Dhaliwal Bet are deeply embedded in both religious and social life. Daily rituals include prayers, kirtan, and langar, which promote equality and collective participation. Life-cycle ceremonies—such as birth rituals, Anand Karaj (marriage), and funeral rites—are conducted with strong community involvement.

Agricultural rituals, particularly Akhand Path, organized for crop prosperity, highlight the connection between religion and livelihood. Folk rituals, including visits to shrines for

blessings, further demonstrate the integration of spirituality into everyday life. These practices align with Durkheim's (1912) view that rituals reinforce collective consciousness.

9. FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Festivals in Dhaliwal Bet serve as important expressions of religious and cultural identity.

“Gurpurab celebrations in the village illustrate Special diwans and samagams are held for Gurpurabs like Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, often with sehaj path, kirtan, katha, and langar. This is one of the most significant Sikh festivals, and it is observed with great joy and devotion in the village. The celebrations include Bhog, Shabad Kirtan, distribution of Prasad, langar, and various cultural activities by students and villagers. Nagar Kirtan processions are also organized around Gurpurab, bringing the community together in spiritual celebration.

Maghi commemorates historical sacrifice and promotes spiritual reflection. Maghi is celebrated by the villagers of Dhaliwal Bet with deep cultural and religious significance. The festival, which follows Lohri and marks the beginning of the month of Magh in the Punjabi calendar, is observed as a day of remembrance and spiritual renewal. On Maghi, villagers gather at the local gurdwara early in the morning for special prayers and kirtan, paying homage to the forty Sikh martyrs (Chali Mukte) who sacrificed their lives in the Battle of Muktsar. The Guru Granth Sahib is recited, and the community participates in collective ardas (prayer) for peace and prosperity. After the religious ceremonies, langar (community meal) is organized, where everyone, regardless of background, is served food, reflecting the Sikh values of equality and service. Some villagers may take ritual baths in the nearby Beas River and in the holy pond at Gurdwara Baba Bakala Sahib (Village Baba Bakala) and Gurdwara Baba Sahib Ditta Ji (Village Padde Bet), as it is believed to purify the soul and bring blessings for the coming year.

Maghi, along with **Lohri**, is considered a harvest festival that celebrates nature's bounty and expresses gratitude for the crops. The festival brings the whole village together, fostering unity and reinforcing the spiritual and cultural heritage of Dhaliwal Bet.

Vaisakhi is one of the most important festivals celebrated by the villagers of Dhaliwal Bet. This festival marks the Sikh New Year and commemorates the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. On Vaisakhi, the local gurdwara becomes the center of celebration, where villagers gather for special prayers, Shabad Kirtan (devotional singing), and the recitation of Sikh scriptures.

A key highlight is the organization of Nagar Kirtan—a religious procession in which the Guru Granth Sahib is carried through the village streets, accompanied by hymn singing, children and youth performing Gatka (Sikh martial arts), and the community participating in seva (voluntary service). After the religious ceremonies, langar (community meal) is served to all, reflecting the Sikh values of equality and sharing.

The festival is also a time for cultural activities, including Bhangra and Gidha performances, and marks the start of the harvest season. The entire village participates, making Vaisakhi a vibrant and unifying event that strengthens community bonds and preserves the spiritual and cultural heritage of Dhaliwal Bet. At the same time, festivals like **Diwali** and **Holi** are celebrated across communities, reflecting inter-religious harmony.

In Dhaliwal Bet village, both Masya (the new moon day) and Sangrand (the first day of the new month in the Punjabi calendar) are observed with spiritual significance and community participation. In Sangrand, villagers gather at the local gurdwara early in the morning for special prayers and kirtan. The Guru Granth Sahib is recited, especially the Barah Maha hymns, which reflect on the cycles of nature and spiritual renewal. Sangrand is seen as a time for reflection, gratitude, and setting positive intentions for the month ahead. After prayers, langar (community meal) is served, reinforcing the values of equality and unity within the community.

Masya, marking the no-moon day, is also considered spiritually important. Many families observe this day by performing extra prayers at home or in the gurdwara, seeking blessings for peace and prosperity. Some may choose to fast or donate to charity, as it is believed to bring positive energy and cleanse past misdeeds. Both Masya and Sangrand provide opportunities for villagers to come together, strengthen social bonds, and renew their commitment to Sikh teachings and community values. These traditions continue to play a vital role in the cultural and spiritual life of Dhaliwal Bet.

The villagers of Dhaliwal Bet celebrate **Gugga Pir** (also known as Gugga Naumi) with devotion and traditional rituals, reflecting the rich folk culture of Punjab. Gugga Pir is revered as a folk deity and protector against snake bites, and his festival usually falls in August or September, during the lunar month of Bhadon. On this day, villagers visit local shrines (Gugga Marhi) dedicated to Gugga Pir, offering prayers, incense, milk, sweets, and flowers to seek his blessings for safety and prosperity.

Snake worship is a central element, with devotees sometimes offering milk and turmeric to snake images or symbols, believing this will protect their families from harm. Homes and shrines are decorated with flowers and lights, and community feasts are organized, fostering unity and collective spirit.

During the festivities, villagers may also share stories and legends about Gugga Pir's miraculous powers and his role as a guardian of the people. The Gugga Pir celebration in Dhaliwal Bet not only preserves ancient traditions but also strengthens social bonds and communal harmony within the village. Kaur (2018) argues that such festivals play a vital role in preserving cultural continuity and strengthening social bonds. Village Elder. (2024). Personal Interview. Dhaliwal Bet, Punjab.

9. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that religion in Dhaliwal Bet operates at multiple levels:

Spiritual Level: Providing moral guidance and meaning

Social Level: Strengthening community relationships

Cultural Level: Preserving traditions and identity

The coexistence of Sikhism, folk beliefs, and minority religious practices demonstrates the adaptability and inclusiveness of rural spirituality. Despite modernization, religious practices remain relevant. These findings are consistent with recent research indicating that rural communities in Punjab continue to negotiate between tradition and modernity, where religious and cultural practices remain central to identity formation and social organization (Ahuja et al., 2023; Pathak et al., 2025).

10. CONCLUSION

Dhaliwal Bet exemplifies the dynamic and pluralistic nature of rural religious life in Punjab. Sikhism provides a strong institutional and spiritual foundation, while folk traditions enrich the cultural landscape. Religion continues to shape identity, reinforce social cohesion, and preserve cultural heritage. The study highlights that, even amid modernization, traditional belief systems remain resilient and deeply embedded in community life.

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