

Historical Evolution of Religious Communities in Chakwal: An Interfaith Perspective

التطور التاريخي للجماعات الدينية في چکوال: منظور حواري بين الأديان

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Historical Evolution of Religious Communities in Chakwal: An Interfaith Perspective

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☆ Memoona Munir ☆ Dr. Yasir Arfat

Abstract

The rich religious heritage of Chakwal District, Punjab, Pakistan, presents a unique landscape of diverse faith communities interacting across centuries. This study explores Chakwal's religious history, focusing on how different faiths have coexisted. It uses archaeological discoveries, historical records, oral stories, literary narratives, news article and population data to trace the presence of Jain, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Ahmadi, and Bahá'í communities. Key sites like the Buddhist stupas of Gandhala Valley, Katas Raj Hindu temples, Sufi shrines, Sikh historical landmarks, and Christian schools highlight this diversity. Before the 1947 Partition, these communities often worked together on shared projects like schools and civic efforts. However, the Partition displaced many Hindus and Sikhs, leading to the decline of their sacred sites. Despite challenges, minority groups continue to maintain their traditions. By examining abandoned temples, gurdwaras, and other heritage sites, as well as memories of coexistence, this study shows Chakwal as a model of South Asia's religious diversity. It stresses the need to protect these cultural treasures and promote interfaith understanding to heal past wounds and foster peace.

Keywords: Chakwal, Religious Pluralism, Interfaith Relations, Sacred Heritage, Partition 1947

Introduction

Religion has long shaped the cultural, political, and social fabric of South Asia, where multiple faith traditions have coexisted, interacted, and evolved over centuries. Situated in the northern Punjab region on the Pothohar Plateau, the District of Chakwal represents a distinctive case in the broader discourse of interfaith coexistence and religious plurality. Its historical trajectory—characterized by the presence of diverse religious communities, including Jains, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and later, Ahmadis and Bahá'ís—offers valuable insight into how shared sacred and social spaces were negotiated, transformed, and occasionally contested through time. Though officially designated as a separate district in 1985 after its separation from Jhelum, Chakwal's history traces back to ancient civilizations¹. The region is considered part of the Soan Valley, one of the earliest cradles of human settlement in South Asia. Archaeological remains, such as stone tools and fossils, point to human activity dating back thousands of years. The area's historical connections to the Mahabharata period and its mention in narratives related to Alexander the Great's contact with Raja Ambhi further emphasize its antiquity. Under the rule of Rajput

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¹ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl* (Chakwal: Anjuman Taqreer-e-Adab, 1991), 34

clans such as the Khokhars and Dogras, Chakwal developed strong martial traditions that continue to echo in the region's military service culture.

As of the 2023 Census, Chakwal District spans an area of 6,525 square kilometers and is administratively divided into five tehsils: Chakwal, Choa Saidan Shah, Kallar Kahar, Lawa, and Talagang. With a population exceeding 1.73 million, the district remains predominantly rural and ethnically Punjabi². Tribal affiliations such as Awans, Rajputs, Jats, Gujjars, and Arains remain prominent and socially influential. Pothwari is the most widely spoken dialect, while Urdu and Hindko are also used in formal and inter-community settings. The relatively high literacy rate compared to other rural regions of Punjab reflects the community's growing investment in education.

Muslims constitute the vast majority in the region, and minority groups such as Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Bahá'ís still maintain an active presence in Chakwal. While the 1947 Partition led to the large-scale migration of Hindus and Sikhs from the region³, their historical imprint survives through old temples, gurdwaras, missionary schools, and collective memory. These remnants, both tangible and intangible, serve as vital threads in understanding the district's interreligious history. In this context, Chakwal emerges not just as a geographic space, but as a living narrative of interfaith coexistence, transformation, and resilience.

Early Civilizations and Religions

Archaeological findings from the Soan Valley and Gandhala Valley near Choa Saidan Shah suggest human presence in the region as early as the Lower Paleolithic era. Tools, fossils, and stone implements—some dating back over 500,000 years—indicate continuous habitation. Over time, the area fell within the cultural orbit of the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2300–1800 BCE), and later absorbed waves of Vedic influence with the migration of Aryans, who introduced early Hindu traditions rooted in Rigvedic thought⁴. During the first millennium BCE, the region came under the influence of the Achaemenid Empire and later the Mauryan Empire. These empires brought diverse philosophical and religious ideologies into the region, particularly Buddhism, with traces of Jainism also found in historical memory. Sites like Katas Raj further reflect the layered religious landscape that evolved over time⁵.

Buddhist Religious Heritage in Chakwal

The presence of Buddhism in the region of Chakwal is believed to date back to the 3rd century BCE, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire, who promoted Buddhism as a state religion. It is traditionally held that during this period, a significant stupa was constructed in the Gandhala Valley (present-day Rukh Gandhala/Murti), remnants of which still partially exist today. Later, during the rule of the Kushan king Kanishka in the 2nd century BCE, this architectural legacy saw further expansion⁶.

² Government of Pakistan, Census 2023: Punjab District Profiles. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Punjab.pdf>.

³ Farooq, Rana Mohammad, and Tahir Mahmood. *Socio-Economic & Demographic Baseline Study of Parerah, Diljabba and Ara Forest Communities — Chakwal Forest Division* (Islamabad: Sustainable Forest Management Project, n.d.), 13.

⁴ Anwar Baig Awan, *Dhanī Adab o Saqāfat: Ilāqah Dhanī kī Adabī o Saqāfatī Tārīkh* (Chakwal: Kashmir Book Depot, 2003).

⁵ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl* (Chakwal: Anjuman Taqreer-e-Adab, 1991), 84.

⁶ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 40

The British archaeologist General Alexander Cunningham, during his survey of the Salt Range, observed that Buddhist remains were found "at almost every step," especially in locations such as Kallar Kahar, Malot, Sub Ganga, Dhalwal, and Katas Raj⁷.

In a similar context, the Chinese monk and traveler Xuanzang visited the region in 631 CE and mentioned a city named *Singhapura*, which scholars identify as near present-day Choa Saidan Shah. He described two great stupas (each nearly 200 feet tall), ten sacred ponds, and stone railings—marking the area as a prominent religious center of Buddhism.

Archaeologists such as Sir Aurel Stein and Samuel Beal correlated Xuanzang's accounts with multiple archaeological sites extending from Rukh Gandhala to Katas Raj, affirming their significance as part of a broader spiritual and cultural Buddhist center.

Additionally, the Gazetteer of District Jhelum references ancient square-mouthed wells in Chakwal villages such as Mir Asar Chak and Qadirpur. One of these wells reportedly bore an inscription in Kharosthi script, though such structures have since vanished. Their documentation, however, reflects the cultural depth of the region in antiquity⁸.

Building upon these historical traces and findings, Dr. Muhammad Hameed has presented a scholarly synthesis of archaeological and textual evidence, positioning Chakwal as a significant spiritual, cultural, and geographical center of Buddhism. His research also underscores the presence of inter-religious coexistence in the area during the Buddhist era⁹.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1: Signs of Buddhist heritage in Chakwal: (a) Stupa remains at Katas Raj; (b) Ancient well at Mir Athar Chak¹⁰.

Ancient Hindu Period in Chakwal

With the gradual decline of Buddhism in the region, Chakwal entered a new historical phase marked by the emergence and consolidation of Hindu civilization. Prior to the advent of Islam, this region evolved into a prominent center of Hindu religious and cultural life. Archaeological remains, sacred sites, and oral traditions suggest that Hindu teachings, rituals, and symbolic practices became deeply rooted in the local societal fabric, leaving behind a legacy that remains visible to this day.

One of the most historically and spiritually significant Hindu sites in Chakwal is Katas Raj, located approximately 18 miles south of Chakwal city¹¹. The complex, centered around the

⁷ Cunningham, Alexander. *The Ancient Geography of India*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, reprint 2006. 105–106.

⁸ *Punjab District Gazetteers: Jhelum District, with Maps*, Vol. XXVII-A (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1907), 61.

⁹ Saifur Rehman Dar and Muhammad Hameed, *In Search of the Buddhist City of Singhapura: The Capital of the Salt Range in the 7th Century – An Old Problem Reinvestigated* (Lahore: Department of Archaeology, University of the Punjab, 2018), 58.

¹⁰ Dar and Hameed, *In Search of the Buddhist City*, 58.

famed Katas Raj Pond, is steeped in ancient lore and holds considerable importance in Hindu scripture. Referenced repeatedly in the *Mahabharata*, this site is believed to be the place where the Pandava brothers spent a portion of their twelve-year exile. According to the epic, it was here that Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, engaged in the renowned philosophical dialogue with Yaksha, a divine being, a story widely studied for its moral and spiritual lessons.

Tradition attributes the construction of the Satghara (Seven Temples) at Katas Raj to the Pandavas themselves. Another prominent legend suggests that the pond was originally known as Dupatyā Vana, which evolved into Katak Sheel, a Sanskrit phrase meaning “chain of tears.” This etymology is linked to the mythological account of Lord Shiva, who is said to have shed tears of grief at this location following the death of his consort, Sati. One of these divine tears formed the pond at Pushkar (Ajmer), and the other became the sacred Katas Pond. Over time, “Katak Sheel” linguistically transformed into the present-day name, Katas¹². An alternate tradition claims the site was once known as Takshan Raj, or “King of Serpents.” This interpretation reflects another association with Lord Shiva, who is symbolically linked to serpents in Hindu belief. It is said that Shiva manifested himself at Katas, and from this sacred space emerged a spring that flowed with Amrit, the nectar of immortality. The frequent sighting of snakes near the pond—regarded as spiritually linked to Shiva—adds to the site’s mystique. Devotees believe these serpents are harmless due to their sacred nature¹³.



FIGURE 2: KATAS RAJ TEMPLES – AN ANCIENT HINDU TEMPLE COMPLEX IN CHAKWAL.

While Katas Raj is perhaps the most well-preserved and well-known, it is not the sole testament to Hindu heritage in Chakwal. Sites such as Nandana Fort, Malot Fort, and the Shu Ganga Spring were also vibrant centers of religious activity during the Hindu Shahi period. These locations were primarily dedicated to Shaivism, and their architectural remains point to a flourishing era of temple construction, ritual worship, and administrative sophistication¹⁴. The material culture and structural layout of these sites collectively demonstrate that ancient Chakwal functioned as a significant religious and cultural landscape for Hinduism prior to Islamic influence.

¹¹ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 57

¹² N. A. Gondal and S. Arif, “The Dying Temples of Hindus and Sikhs in Potohar Plateau: A Case Study of Katas Raj Temples,” *Global Political Review* 6, no. 1 (2021): 241–250, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021\(VI-I\).23](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021(VI-I).23).

¹³ Sahibzada Sultan Ali, *Salt Range mein Asaar-e-Qadema* (Chakwal: Asad Muhammad Publishers, 1998).

¹⁴ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 65-67

Islamic Influence and Sufi Legacy in Chakwal

The arrival of Islam in the Chakwal region during the 11th century brought significant changes to its religious and cultural identity. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni's expeditions to the north and the presence of the renowned scholar Al-Biruni at Nandna Fort (near present-day Choa Saidan Shah) marked the early signs of this transformation. During his stay, Al-Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Hind*, in which he aimed to present Hindu beliefs with integrity and objectivity. As he stated:

*“My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are...”*¹⁵

In the centuries that followed, the spread of Islam continued under the rule of the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Mughals. However, it was the Sufi movements that played a more enduring role in shaping the region's spiritual and social environment. Through the influence of Sufi saints, Chakwal developed a unique atmosphere where mosques, shrines, and temples often stood together—especially in rural areas—symbolizing a shared spiritual space.

Prominent among the Sufi figures were Hazrat Syed Jalaluddin Bukhari (Jahangusht), Maulana Ahmaduddin Karsalvi, Hazrat Shah Muhammad Ghaus, and Maulana Qazi Muhammad Sanaullah Panjaini¹⁶. Their efforts were not limited to spreading Islamic teachings; they also promoted moral refinement, mutual respect, and social harmony.

This spiritual legacy continues to shape Chakwal's religious and cultural character, where diverse communities strive to coexist with respect and tolerance.

Sikh and Colonial Rule

The expansion of Sikh power in the Chakwal region began in the late 1760s, well before the rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. During this period, autonomous Sikh misls—particularly those led by Charat Singh and Gujjar Singh Bhangi—initiated military activity across the northwestern Punjab. A significant milestone came in 1767 when they captured the strategically located Rohtas Fort¹⁷. Though located in present-day Jhelum, the fort's proximity to Chakwal made its fall a critical development, signaling the start of deeper Sikh incursions into the Dhani tract, including the valleys and settlements now within Chakwal District. From the 1770s onward, Sikh forces increased their presence in Chakwal's rugged terrain—especially in the regions of Jhangar and Kahoon¹⁸. Scattered raids, watch posts, and patrol movements were reported around Talagang and its neighboring areas, reflecting early patterns of control and surveillance. The rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799, marked by his capture of Lahore, transformed these fragmented efforts into a centralized expansion. By 1801, he formally established the Sikh Empire and led military campaigns to consolidate authority in outlying regions¹⁹. Although Christians were part of his central administration, there is no historical evidence of a Christian community in Chakwal during his rule. However, his inclusive governance is noteworthy, he appointed Muslims and Hindus to civil and military posts based on merit and loyalty, a policy that shaped local structures even in

¹⁵ Al-Biruni, *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*, trans. Edward C. Sachau (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1910), vol. 1, 7.

¹⁶ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 372

¹⁷ Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs: The Sikh Commonwealth or Rise and Fall of Sikh Misls*, vol. IV (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2007), 102.

¹⁸ Ibid, 103.

¹⁹ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 46

distant areas like Chakwal. A decisive moment came in 1810 when Kusak Fort then under the control of the Janjua Rajput chieftains of Chakwal—was besieged for six months and brought under Sikh control. This marked the full integration of the Chakwal region into the Sikh dominion²⁰. Before the Partition of 1947, the Sikh community formed an integral part of Chakwal's social fabric, particularly in rural areas. Historical estimates suggest that Sikhs comprised approximately 15–20% of the population in certain tehsils, with significant concentrations in villages such as Bhoun, Dhadial, Gah, Hasola, Kariala, Maingan, Munday, and Neela.

Christian Presence in Chakwal

During the British colonial period, the presence of foreign Christians in Chakwal was a documented historical reality. Wherever British officers were stationed, they often facilitated the construction of churches and other places of worship to meet their religious needs. However, Chakwal presents a unique case: the United Presbyterian Church, located near the central police station, was not built by any British official. Instead, it was established in 1939 through the generosity and religious devotion of a local God-fearing woman a remarkable and uncommon instance for that era²¹.



(a)



(b)

Figure 3: (a) United Presbyterian Church; (b) 1939 donor plaque²².

This period also marked the arrival and settlement of indigenous Christians in Chakwal. The first among them was Elder Gulab, who migrated to the town with his family. A notable figure from his lineage, Mr. Sadiq Masih, was still residing in Chakwal with his family at the time this account was recorded.

In the early years, to provide spiritual and social guidance to the growing Christian community, Rev. Boota Mal was appointed as the first in-charge of the United Presbyterian Church. He was succeeded by Rev. Abdul Qayyum, Rev. Aslam Khan, and Rev. Sarwar Umaruddin. Rev. Sarwar later gained distinction as the head of the First Asian Church in Canada and was widely respected in Chakwal for his religious, social, and political influence. Following his tenure, Rev. Aziz Umaruddin was appointed as the church leader and continued to serve the community with dedication. Alongside the UP Church, a Roman

²⁰ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "The Remains of Kusak Fort Cry for Attention," *Dawn*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/766617/the-remains-of-kusak-fort-cry-for-attention>.

²¹ Dr. Liaqat Ali Khan Niazi, *Tārīkh-e-Chakwāl*, 170

²² Source: Field visit documentation, 2025.

Catholic church was also functioning in Chakwal's Christian Colony, reportedly under the leadership of Bishop Simon at that time.

Christian community leadership likewise played an important role in both church affairs and civic representation. Mr. Babu Emmanuel served as a local councillor, actively managing religious and community matters. Before him, Mr. Tariq Francis had also held this position with equal commitment and dedication²³.

Today, the Christian community remains an active part of Chakwal's religious landscape. According to recent estimates, approximately 7,000 Christians reside in Chakwal District. A significant portion of the community lives in Chakwal city, particularly in areas near the railway station and colonial-era quarters, while others are settled in localities such as Balkasar, Dhadial, Kallar Kahar, Talagang, Dalowal, and Gharibwal. Several churches across the district continue to serve as centers of worship, community engagement, and religious identity. These include St. Anthony Catholic Church (Christian Colony, Rawalpindi Road), St. Luke Catholic Church (Chak Noorang, Bishop Arshad Town), the historic United Presbyterian Church (Talagang Road, near City Police Station), as well as Pentecostal congregations such as Philadelphia Pentecostal Church and Living Branch Pentecostal Church, both located in Christian Colony on Rawalpindi Road. This continued presence and institutional vitality reflect the district's enduring religious diversity and the lasting legacy of interfaith coexistence.

Ahmadiyya Thought in Chakwal

The ideological influence of the Ahmadiyya Movement (Mirzai school of thought) reached Chakwal during the lifetime of its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian. Historical records indicate that nearly twenty of his early followers originated from areas that now fall within the boundaries of present-day District Chakwal. These areas included Buchal Kalan, Phupar, Dohman region, Chakwal city, Daultala, Dandot, Sarkar Kasar, Khewal, Malkwal, Talagang, Minarah, Hasola, Bhoon, Pichnand, Chakral, Chak Noorang, Chohan, Dharkanah, Dalowal, Dheri Syedan, Rattoccha, Kallar Kahar, Kot Rajgan (near Chhambi Malot), and Waria Mal (near Karyala). In several of these localities, Ahmadiyya centers and places of worship still function, such as in Chakwal city, Bhoon, Pichnand, and Dhulmial²⁴.

Dhulmial, situated approximately 10 kilometers west of Choa Saidan Shah, emerged as a significant hub for the propagation of Ahmadiyya teachings. Notable early figures from this area included Maulvi Hakeem Karam Dad²⁵, Bahadur Captain Ghulam Muhammad, and Subedar Fateh Muhammad Malik—companions of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and active missionaries. Beyond religious efforts, the region also made noteworthy contributions to Pakistan's military and civil services.

In contemporary Chakwal city, some members of the Ahmadiyya community continue to operate businesses, including clothing shops. In Dhulmial, two institutions—Salt Range Archaeological and Heritage Society and Farhan Educational Society—under the leadership of Riaz Ahmad Malik, remain actively involved in historical research and publishing. Malik has authored a detailed, though yet unpublished, manuscript titled *The History of Ahmadiyyat in Chakwal*.

²³ Ibid, 172

²⁴ Abid Hussain Shah Pirzada, *Ahl-e-Chakwal aur Mirzā iyyat* (Lahore: Muslim Kitabvi, 2016), 35.

²⁵ Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Gift for the Queen (Tuhfah-yi Qaisariyyah)* (UK: Islam International Publications, 2012), 56.

Following the constitutional amendment of 1974, the Ahmadiyya community was officially declared a non-Muslim minority in Pakistan—a decision that profoundly altered their religious, legal, and social standing. Despite these challenges, the Ahmadiyya presence in Chakwal persists through various forms of civic, economic, and educational engagement.

The Bahá'í Community in Chakwal

The Bahá'í Faith found its way to Chakwal in the mid-20th century, marking the beginning of a modest yet resilient community that continues to exist to this day. Currently, Chakwal is home to approximately six Bahá'í families, totaling around 50 individuals. Though numerically small compared to the pre-Partition Sikh and Hindu populations, the Bahá'ís maintain a quiet but active presence, primarily residing in Chakwal city and surrounding areas like Mureed, Tarpal, and Sarkal Maer.²⁶ Unlike the gurdwaras and temples that remain as physical symbols of past communities, the Bahá'ís have no formal House of Worship in the region. Instead, they hold gatherings in private homes, emphasizing prayer, unity, and community development.

The roots of the Bahá'í community in Chakwal can be traced to the dedicated efforts of early pioneers such as Kaalaa Khan “Sábit” (1915–2006), Tikkadaar Noor Muhammad (1909–1999), Chaudhry Muzzafar Abbas Naajez (1932–2008), Ghulam Haider Alavi (1935–2000), and Iqbal Hussain Hashmi (1937–2022). These individuals embraced the Bahá'í teachings during the mid-20th century and played key roles in introducing and sustaining the Faith in the district. In subsequent decades, figures like Syed Shakeel Abbas Kazmi (1975–2021), Hakim Sufi Gul Muhammad, Dr. Akhtar Hamdani, and Mushtaq Ali further strengthened the community through their contributions to spiritual education and interfaith engagement.²⁷

Although the Baha'i community is small in number, they have made a valuable contribution to the social and cultural landscape of Chakwal through peaceful coexistence. According to Kamran Karimian, 24 free medical camps were organized in Chakwal and surrounding villages to assess local health needs. Women were trained in personal and environmental hygiene. The voluntary services of Baha'i doctors who came from different cities were especially appreciated.

In addition, a food center called “LOQMEH” was established in front of the Kent Police Station on Main Talagang Road, which was dedicated to the social sector and provided food to low-income people²⁸.

Further, A Bahá'í community member in Chakwal designed a unique history wall monument for DHQ Hospital—the first of its kind in any Pakistani hospital. Made from pure Chakwal stone, the monument creatively symbolizes the hospital's history. The engineer personally supervised its construction until completion, showcasing the Bahá'í community's dedication to preserving local heritage.

While no official census captures their exact figures, their continued presence affirms the religious diversity that still characterizes smaller districts like Chakwal. The nearest formal Bahá'í administrative structures are likely based in Rawalpindi or Islamabad, where larger communities exist.

²⁶ Kamran Karimian, *District Chakwal & a Brief Account of Some Early Bahá'í Believers*, unpublished manuscript, n.d. 26-32

²⁷ Sabir Afifi, *Nojūm-i Hidāyat*, vol. 2, 68–71.

²⁸ Kamran Karimian, *District Chakwal & a Brief Account of Some Early Bahá'í Believers*, unpublished manuscript, n.d. 7-14

Interfaith Educational Endeavours in Pre-Partition Chakwal

Before the Partition, various communities Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians played a vital role in public welfare, particularly through initiatives in education and social service across pre-Partition Chakwal. Among the Hindu community, families hailing from Chakwal, Chawli, and Wahali Zer took the initiative in the early 1930s to establish *Arya High School*²⁹. This institution became a symbol of inclusivity, where classrooms were respectfully named after departed family members(Figure). Generous benefactors like Lt. Kirpa Ram Jauhar and Kishan Chand Sabharwal were instrumental in ensuring that children of all faiths could access quality education, reflecting a collective vision of social upliftment.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4: (a) Arya High School, (b) Donor plaques — symbols of Hindu philanthropy in Chakwal³⁰. Sikh efforts were equally commendable, with several prominent schools founded during the early 20th century. In 1910, the disciples of Munshi Sant Singh set up *Sant Singh Khalsa High School* in Chakwal, an institution soon renowned for academic rigour and interfaith openness. It is now referred to as Government High School No. 1.³¹ In 1916, *Sardar Mota Singh Bhassan*, supported by local Muslim and Hindu notables, laid the foundation of *SS Mota Singh High School* in Neela, which provided modern education along with free books and scholarships. Its architectural style resembled a traditional haveli and welcomed students from every religious background. Building on this momentum, *Sardar Chet Singh* established *S. Hira Singh AV School* in Munday in 1918, which became well known for its residential facilities and physical infrastructure³².

²⁹ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "One of Chakwal's Oldest Schools Falls into Disrepair," *Dawn*, March 31, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1472898>.

³⁰ Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, "Arya High School Offers a Glimpse of Life in Pre-Partition Chakwal," *The Friday Times*, April 3, 2024, <https://thefridaytimes.com/03-Apr-2024/arya-high-school-offers-a-glimpse-of-life-in-pre-partition-chakwal>.

³¹ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "100 Years On: A School Searches for Its Identity," *Dawn*, January 25, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1159317>.

³² Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, *Memories, Mystics and Monuments of Pothohar* (Islamabad: Emel Publications, 2022), 51



(a)



(b)

Figure 5: (a) Government High School No. 1, Chakwal³³; (b) Government High School Munday, Sikh philanthropists³⁴.

The Christian community also played a pivotal part in Chakwal's educational development. In the late 19th century, Capuchin missionaries from Belgium founded Belgium Mission High School in Dalwal—the first formal high school of its kind in the region³⁵. The school was open to Muslim, Hindu, and Christian students alike. Local Muslim figures and Christian converts such as Raja Shakir Mehdi contributed to its success, making it a beacon of faith-driven philanthropy and peaceful coexistence.



FIGURE 6: BELGIUM MISSION HIGH SCHOOL DALWAL — SYMBOL OF INTERFAITH HARMONY³⁶.

The following examples illustrate the enduring impact of their efforts, reflecting a legacy of interfaith cooperation, civic engagement, and cultural enrichment.

Communal Civic and Healthcare Contributions

In addition to their pivotal role in education, individuals like Sardar Mota Singh and Sardar Chet Singh significantly contributed to civic and healthcare infrastructure in Chakwal. Mota Singh's involvement in setting up a police station in Neela reflects his commitment to public order, while Chet Singh's efforts in Munday village included the construction of wells,

³³ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "100 Years On, a School Searches for Its Identity," *Dawn*, January 25, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1159131>.

³⁴ Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, *Memories, Mystics and Monuments of Pothohar* (Islamabad: Emel Publications, 2022), 51

³⁵ Fidentian Van den Broucke and Daniel Suply, *Capuchins Missionaries in the Punjab (India and Pakistan) 1888–2011* (Mariam Siddeeqa Capuchin Vice Province Pakistan, 2011), 23.

³⁶ Diocesan Board of Education, "Mission High School," <https://dberwp.com/mission-high-school/>.

ponds, and a hospital in 1927. This hospital, bearing inscriptions in both Gurmukhi and English, also housed a women's ward established in memory of his wife, Sardarni Harsaran Kaur, illustrating his inclusive vision for communal well-being. Equally notable is Shrimati Jawala Devi of Vahali Zer, who, in 1940, funded a separate women's block in Civil Hospital Chakwal—an uncommon initiative for its time. Her name, still visible on a multilingual plaque in Urdu, Hindi, English, and Gurmukhi, stands as a testament to the era's legacy of interfaith solidarity and civic dedication.

Memories and Reflections of Interfaith Harmony

The interfaith harmony of pre-Partition Chakwal is not a nostalgic illusion—it lives on through heartfelt memories, literary works, and oral testimonies passed down across generations. These reflections open a window into a time when coexistence was not imposed, but instinctive; when cultural and spiritual diversity enriched everyday life.

Among the most evocative literary accounts are *Meri Yadein* by Talib Chakwali and *Katha Chaar Janmon Ki* by Satya Pal Anand. Talib depicts Chakwal as a town where Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs lived not as separate communities, but as neighbours whose lives intertwined—Muslims often served in the military or cultivated land, while Hindus excelled in law and trade. He fondly remembers the literary vibrancy of the town, especially after the arrival of Fazl Haq Nasir, who founded *Bazm-e-Adab Chakwal* in 1932³⁷. Literary gatherings welcomed both educated youth and unlettered villagers alike, where verses were shared, critiqued, and celebrated across communal lines. He recalls:

ادب خواراک اردو اور آدمی ہے،
ادب سامان اٹھی زندگی ہے،

طالب، ادب کیفیر موز سروردی ہے،
ادب مذہب سے بالاتر ہے،

Likewise, in *Katha Chaar Janmon Ki*, Dr. Satya Pal Anand offers a deeply personal and evocative account of his formative years in Kot Sarang, Chakwal—a time when interfaith harmony was not merely an ideal but a lived reality. His memoir serves as a powerful reflection on the everyday coexistence among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs before the Partition, where religious distinctions remained secondary to shared cultural and social bonds. One of the most poignant memories he shares is of Bakht Bibi, a Muslim woman he called *Phuphi*, who nurtured him like her own son, quoting the Qur'an in her gentle advice³⁹. Women of all faiths gathered by the village stream, spinning yarn and stories together, while spiritual spaces—be it mandirs, gurdwaras, or Sufi shrines—welcomed all visitors, regardless of belief. Anand's poetry reflects not just his Hindu heritage but a deep admiration for Islamic mysticism, with verses often dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Sufi themes of love and unity⁴⁰.

These literary portraits are not solitary tales—they mirror a larger lived reality of pre-Partition Chakwal. Religious lines blurred as people celebrated Baisakhi together, flocked to the Katas Raj fairs, and worked side-by-side in marketplaces like Kacheri and Talab Bazaars. Economic life was cooperative; social rituals, shared. Sikh philanthropists, Muslim landowners, and Hindu merchants together supported schools, dug wells, and even built mosques.

Oral testimonies further affirm this harmony. Haji Nazar Mohammad (95) nostalgically recalled: "In Vahali, Hindu trader Ramtar's donation of timber for a mosque's ceiling is still

³⁷ Talib Chakwali, *Meri Yadein* (Delhi: Jamal Printing Press, 1985), 63

³⁸ Ibid, 75.

³⁹ Satyapal Anand, *Katha Chār Janmon Kī* (Delhi: Arshia Publications, 2013), 10–12.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 25-26

remembered with gratitude”⁴¹. It was a time, he reflected, when compassion transcended religious lines and neighborly bonds were rooted in mutual respect. Khursheed Begum (94) from Dhakku fondly remembered her Hindu friend Vidya, who made laddoos to celebrate the birth of her daughter — a simple yet touching gesture of shared happiness. Similarly, Resham Bee (107), also from Vahali, recalled how Muslim and Hindu women worked side by side — washing clothes by the stream, spinning thread, and sharing the joys and sorrows of daily life. “My dearest friends were Hindu women. I can still recall the names of Parmeshri, Mono, and Kishwar, with whom I would walk to the wells to fetch water,” she recounted.⁴² These voices, echoing across nearly a century, preserve the essence of a communal past where faiths differed, but hearts connected.

Together, these memories preserve more than history—they carry a timeless message: that humanity thrives when faiths coexist not in fear or distance, but in understanding, trust, and shared life.

Partition and the Decline of Hindu and Sikh Religious Heritage in Chakwal

District Chakwal was once home to a vibrant mosaic of Hindu and Sikh communities, whose religious and social lives revolved around mandirs and gurdwaras. These sacred sites served not only as places of worship but also as centers for cultural and communal activities, fostering strong bonds among diverse groups. However, the Partition of 1947 brought significant upheaval. Following the creation of Pakistan, most of the Hindus and Sikhs population migrated to India. As a result, numerous temples and gurdwaras were abandoned, neglected, repurposed, or destroyed. Without proper maintenance or protection, these religious structures gradually fell into disrepair, marking the decline of a rich, pluralistic heritage in Chakwal.

Villages such as Kriala, Vahali, Bhoun, Dhakku, Dhudial, Malkana, Mangwal, Neelah, Roopwal, Talagang, Kot Chohdrian, and Chawalian stood as examples of interfaith coexistence for centuries, where Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims lived side by side. Today, only scattered remnants of this shared heritage remain. Some sites are preserved, but many others have deteriorated into crumbling ruins, reflecting a lost era of pluralism and cultural harmony.

Decline of Hindu Heritage

One of the most notable examples is the Nandana Temple near the Salt Range, a historic site of Shiva worship dating back to the Hindu Shahi period. The temple currently exists in a severely dilapidated condition, with only fragments of its original walls standing⁴³. Similarly, in Malkana, there were once two distinct Shiv Ganga temples—one traditionally for men and the other for women—both of which have now been destroyed and lie in ruins⁴⁴.

The village of Vahali, formerly an influential seat under Sardar Hari Singh and his family, is emblematic of this widespread decline. It retains only a few vestiges of its Hindu past, including a neglected temple in ruins⁴⁵. Partition-era violence engulfed Vahali in communal

⁴¹ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, “Vahali State — a Gem in the Salt Range,” *Dawn*, April 19, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1176843/vahali-state-a-gem-in-the-salt-range>.

⁴² Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, “They set them all on fire’: Chakwal recalls horrors of Partition,” *Dawn*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1353858>

⁴³ Farzand Masih, “The Hindu Śāhi Temple at Nandana,” *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture* 17, no. 1 (1996): 115.

⁴⁴ Umbreen Akhtar and Muhammad Shoaib Malik, “Anthropological and Archaeological Significance of the Salt Range of Pakistan,” *Migration Letters* 21, no. S11 (2024): 1147–1158.

⁴⁵ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, “Vahali State — a gem in the Salt Range,” *Dawn*, April 19, 2015,

conflict, leaving deep physical scars and emotional trauma that continue to haunt the collective memory of its inhabitants.

This pattern of destruction was not unique to Vahali. Across Chakwal, many temples and sacred sites have been abandoned or deliberately erased. For example, Bhoun—historically traced by Professor Anwar Baig Awan to one of Raja Dahir's sons—was established approximately seven centuries ago as a Hindu settlement. While many original structures have vanished, remnants of temples still mark the landscape, silent witnesses to a spiritual legacy now largely forgotten⁴⁶.

In the aftermath of Partition, grand havelis and residential buildings were often taken over and repurposed by Muslim migrants and remained occupied, but temples frequently fell into disuse. Some were converted into shelters or livestock enclosures, while others faced complete demolition. In neighborhoods such as Mohalla Kochar and Mohalla Pind, reports indicate that former temples are now used as residential spaces, with occupants paying nominal rent to local authorities⁴⁷.

Communal tensions persisted long after Partition. The 1992 Babri Mosque incident triggered further attacks on Hindu religious sites, underscoring the lasting and painful impact of sectarian conflict in the region⁴⁸.

The erosion of cultural heritage extends beyond buildings to include the loss of sacred water bodies associated with religious practices. Gurdas Ban, a pond once of great spiritual and communal importance, was filled with earth on the directive of a local union council representative⁴⁹. Such acts highlight the continued neglect and marginalization of minority religious heritage within rural Punjab.



(a)



(b)

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1176843/vahali-state-a-gem-in-the-salt-range>.

⁴⁶ Anwar Baig Awan, *Dhan Malooki* (Kashmir Book Depot, Chakwal, 2003), 63.

⁴⁷ Ibid,65

⁴⁸ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "Abandoned places of worship represent Neelah's religious history," *Dawn*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1341618>.

⁴⁹ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "Chakwal's Oldest Village Losing Its Historic Sites," *Dawn*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1200706>



(c)



(d)

Figure 7: Photos of religious heritage sites in Chakwal — (a) Abandoned Hindu temple in Vahali village⁵⁰, (b) Ancient temple in Neelah village, (c-d) Decaying temple and Samadhi in Malkana⁵¹.

Decline of Sikh Religious Heritage

Alongside the Hindu heritage, several Sikh gurdwaras were also abandoned and gradually fell into neglect. One prominent example is located in Dhakku village, about eight kilometers from Chakwal city. This gurdwara was frequented by local Sikhs, including Sardar Chattar Singh Kohli, who was the father-in-law of former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Today, the site is neglected, surrounded by overgrown weeds and animal waste, while its crumbling walls stand as a silent reminder of its past.

Another neglected gurdwara can be found in Gah village, the birthplace of Manmohan Singh. Similar to Dhakku, it too has suffered from years of neglect and now lies in a severely damaged state, reflecting the lack of preservation of non-Muslim religious sites in the area. In Neela village, an old gurdwara now lies in ruins with collapsed walls and a broken façade. At its entrance, debris is scattered, though a faded commemorative plaque remains, marking a donation of Rs. 150 made by Sardar Teja Singh in memory of his wife.

Further out, in Maingan village, roughly 15 kilometers from Chakwal, another gurdwara sits within the grounds of a government high school. Its architectural style reflects the colonial era, blending religious function with British design influences. The building is in poor condition, with parts of the roof collapsed and much of the structure deteriorated. This neglected site stands as a testament to Chakwal's once-thriving Sikh community.

Similarly, in Vahali village, a building once owned by Sikh and Hindu families was converted into a school after Partition but has since been abandoned. This white-veranda structure exemplifies the wider pattern of disregard faced by properties left behind by migrating communities.



(a)



(b)

⁵⁰ Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "Abandoned places of worship represent Neelah's religious history," *Dawn*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1341618>.

⁵¹ Dreamstime, "Malkana Village," <https://www.dreamstime.com/photos-images/malkana.html>.



(c)

Figure 8: (a) Ruins of Sikh Gurdwara, Neela; (b) Abandoned Gurdwara Sahib, Maingan; (c) Old building in Vahali, once Sikh & Hindu property⁵².

Together, these remains dilapidated temples and gurdwaras, dried-up sacred ponds, and fading memories tell the story of a diverse past overshadowed by conflict, neglect, and gradual disappearance. In Chakwal, as in many parts of Punjab, the Partition did more than change borders; it erased the visible and invisible signs of peaceful coexistence, leaving behind a lasting legacy of loss and silence.”

Conclusion

Chakwal's history shows a long and rich tradition of peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths. The influences of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism have together shaped the region's culture and spiritual life. The events of 1947 and later political changes greatly reduced the Hindu and Sikh heritage. Although many temples and gurdwaras are now in a state of decline, they along with other shared sacred sites remain strong symbols of the area's colorful and harmonious past. The continued presence of minority groups Christians, Ahmadis, Bahá'ís, and a small number of Hindus alongside the Muslim majority demonstrates the persistence of religious diversity in the region. Its legacy of collaborative educational and civic contributions stands as evidence of what interfaith harmony can achieve. At the same time, the fading condition of non-Muslim heritage sites highlights the urgent need for preservation. Chakwal's past is more than a record of events; it is a living testament to resilience, coexistence, and the unifying strength of shared memory. To honor Chakwal's legacy of harmony, concerted efforts are needed—documenting oral histories, restoring sacred sites as cultural landmarks, and promoting interfaith dialogue through education and community initiatives. By actively preserving this pluralistic heritage, Chakwal can remain a model of peaceful coexistence and understanding for future generations, standing as proof that unity in diversity is not just an ideal, but a living tradition.



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⁵² Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, "Abandoned since independence, gurdwaras, temples waste away," *Dawn*, August 21, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1278944>.

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