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## Role of Punjab Auqaf Department in Promoting Interfaith Harmony

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### Abstract

The promotion of interfaith harmony has become an essential aspect of social policy in religiously diverse countries like Pakistan. In this context, the Punjab Auqaf Department plays a unique and influential role, given its administrative control over religious endowments, mosques, and particularly Sufi shrines—centers historically known for fostering tolerance and inclusion. This article explores the initiatives, contributions, and limitations of the Punjab Auqaf Department in promoting interfaith harmony, with a specific focus on the socio-religious landscape of Pakistan. The study highlights how the department has utilized Sufi shrines such as Data Darbar and Bulleh Shah's shrine as platforms for disseminating messages of peace and coexistence. It further investigates the department's role in organizing interfaith conferences, seminars, and community engagement events that bring together leaders from various religious backgrounds. Efforts to preserve and maintain non-Muslim religious sites in collaboration with other governmental bodies also reflect a commitment to inclusivity. Despite these efforts, the department faces multiple challenges, including financial constraints, limited rural outreach, political interference, and societal resistance from extremist factions. The impact of these challenges on the effectiveness of the department's initiatives is critically analyzed. The article concludes that while the Punjab Auqaf Department has taken commendable steps toward interfaith engagement, its efforts remain insufficient without a coordinated national policy, increased autonomy, and broader civil society participation.

**Keywords:** Punjab Auqaf Department, Interfaith Harmony, Religious Tolerance, Sufi Shrines, Pakistan, Minorities, Religious Coexistence, Urs, Religious Institutions, Peace Building

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## Introduction

Interfaith harmony is a foundational element for peace, social cohesion, and national unity in any religiously diverse society. In Pakistan, where Muslims constitute the majority but religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others also form a significant part of the population, promoting peaceful coexistence among different religious communities is both a moral and constitutional obligation. Article 20 of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees every citizen the right to profess, practice, and propagate their religion freely. However, the ground reality reveals ongoing challenges, including religious intolerance, sectarian violence, and societal polarization, which underscore the urgent need for institutional frameworks to promote interfaith understanding.

Within this context, the Punjab Auqaf Department emerges as a significant governmental institution entrusted with the management of religious endowments, mosques, and shrines across the province.<sup>1</sup>

While traditionally associated with the administration of Islamic religious properties, especially Sufi shrines, the department's role has expanded in recent years to include activities that foster interfaith dialogue and communal harmony. Punjab, being the most populous and culturally diverse province of Pakistan, becomes a crucial arena where such initiatives can have substantial impact.

Sufi shrines under the department's administration have historically served as centers of inclusivity, attracting followers from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Recognizing this legacy, the department has initiated several programs aimed at reviving the inclusive spirit of Sufism, organizing interfaith events, and preserving religious heritage sites that belong to non-Muslim communities. These actions are indicative of a broader strategy to use religious

and cultural spaces as tools for peace building.

This article aims to critically examine the efforts of the Punjab Auqaf Department in promoting interfaith harmony. It assesses its policies, initiatives, successes, and limitations, offering recommendations for strengthening its role as a catalyst for religious coexistence and societal peace in contemporary Pakistan.

### **Overview of Punjab Auqaf Department**

The Punjab Auqaf Department is a provincial government body responsible for the administration, supervision, and development of religious endowments, including mosques, shrines, and other charitable institutions within the province of Punjab, Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Established following the Auqaf Act of 1976, the department initially operated under federal control but was later devolved to the provincial government in accordance with the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan. Since then, it has functioned as a key institution within the provincial government's Religious Affairs framework.

The department manages hundreds of religious sites, including some of the most revered Sufi shrines such as:

1. Hazrat Ali Hajveri (Data Ganj Bakhsh) in Lahore,
2. Hazrat Bahauddin Zakariya in Multan,
3. Hazrat Baba Farid Ganj Shakar in Pakpattan,
4. Hazrat Shah Rukn-e-Alam, and others.

These shrines attract millions of devotees annually, including individuals from various religious backgrounds, making them natural spaces for interfaith interaction and dialogue.

### **Key functions of the department include:**

Management of waqf properties and revenues generated from them.

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Organization of religious events such as Urs (annual commemorations at shrines).  
Maintenance of mosques and provision of salaries and training to religious staff (Imams, Khateeb, Muazzins).

Preservation of historical and cultural heritage.

Initiatives related to religious harmony, public welfare, and social services .In recent years,

the department has gradually shifted its focus from merely custodial duties to more proactive roles, including community engagement, interfaith outreach, and collaboration with NGOs and civil society organizations.<sup>3</sup>

This evolving mandate positions the Auqaf Department as not just an administrative body, but as a potential agent of peace building and religious coexistence in Punjab.

### **Interfaith Harmony in the Pakistani Context**

Pakistan is home to a variety of religious communities, with Muslims forming the overwhelming majority, alongside religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and others.<sup>4</sup>

While the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees freedom of religion under Article 20, practical challenges persist due to religious intolerance, sectarian divisions, and occasional instances of violence against minority communities. These realities have created an urgent need for structured and sustained efforts to promote interfaith harmony as a means of ensuring peace and social cohesion.

Historically, Pakistan's foundation was based on religious tolerance and respect for all communities, as envisioned by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his famous address of 11 August 1947. However, over time, a combination of political manipulation of religion, lack of educational reforms, weak enforcement

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of minority rights, and rising extremism has led to growing religious polarization in society. Misuse of blasphemy laws, forced conversions, hate speech, and discrimination have further strained interfaith relations.

Despite these challenges, various state and non-state actors have made efforts to restore trust among religious communities. Government bodies such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, National Commission for Minorities, and provincial departments including Auqaf and Religious Affairs, have introduced initiatives to bridge gaps and promote interfaith understanding. Civil society organizations and interfaith dialogue forums have also played an active role.

In this broader national context, the Punjab Auqaf Department stands out as a significant player due to its administrative control over spaces like Sufi shrines, which have historically served as hubs of spiritual inclusivity and cultural diversity. These shrines are often frequented by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, offering a unique opportunity for promoting shared values of peace, compassion, and respect.

Therefore, in the Pakistani context, where societal fragmentation along religious lines poses serious challenges, institutions like the Auqaf Department can play a vital strategic role in fostering interfaith harmony through cultural, religious, and social engagement.

### **Initiatives by Punjab Auqaf Department**

The Punjab Auqaf Department has undertaken several initiatives aimed at fostering interfaith harmony and promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities in the province.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing the significance of Sufi teachings and the inclusive legacy of shrines, the department has expanded its role beyond property management to embrace

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religious dialogue, public engagement, and cultural preservation.<sup>6</sup>

These initiatives can be categorized as follows:

### **Promotion of Sufi Thought and Inclusive Teachings**

Sufi shrines managed by the department have historically served as centers of spiritual wisdom, tolerance, and cultural harmony.<sup>7</sup>

The department organizes annual Urs celebrations at prominent shrines such as Data Ganj Bakhsh (Lahore), Baba Farid (Pakpattan), and Bulleh Shah (Kasur). These events are attended not only by Muslims but also by followers of other religions who are drawn to the inclusive message of Sufi saints. The department also supports the publication and distribution of Sufi literature, poetry, and research, highlighting the universal values of love, humility, and service to humanity.

### **Interfaith Conferences and Dialogues**

In collaboration with civil society organizations, academic institutions, and religious leaders, the Auqaf Department has hosted interfaith seminars, peace conferences, and religious harmony workshops.<sup>8</sup>

These platforms encourage dialogue between leaders of Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other communities. Discussions focus on mutual respect, shared societal challenges, and collective contributions to national progress.

### **Maintenance of Non-Muslim Religious Sites**

While the direct management of non-Muslim worship places falls under the Evacuee Trust Property Board and the Minorities Affairs Department, the Punjab Auqaf Department has taken symbolic and supportive steps toward preserving interfaith spaces. It promotes the message that protection and respect of all religious heritage—Muslim or non-Muslim—is part of Islamic ethical

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responsibility. On various occasions, the department has issued public statements of solidarity with minority communities.

### **Media and Public Outreach**

The department actively utilizes electronic, print, and social media to amplify messages of interfaith unity and social harmony.<sup>9</sup>

During religious events or national days, it runs public campaigns promoting mutual respect. Pamphlets, posters, and short video messages from Sufi scholars and interfaith leaders are distributed to reach wider audiences, especially the youth.

These initiatives reflect a growing recognition within the department of its role not only as a religious custodian but as a bridge-builder in a society challenged by religious divides. While these efforts are commendable, their scale and consistency need enhancement to meet the evolving needs of interfaith relations in Punjab.

### **Challenges Faced by the Department**

Despite its significant efforts and institutional potential, the Punjab Auqaf Department faces a number of critical challenges that limit the effectiveness and sustainability of its initiatives aimed at promoting interfaith harmony.<sup>10</sup>

These challenges can be categorized into administrative, societal, financial, and structural domains:

#### **Political Interference and Bureaucratic Constraints**

The department often functions under the influence of political decisions that may not align with its interfaith mission.<sup>11</sup>

Frequent changes in leadership and shifting priorities hinder long-term planning and the continuity of initiatives. Additionally, bureaucratic red tape affects the

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timely implementation of programs and the efficient utilization of resources.

### **Financial Limitations**

A significant barrier to expanding interfaith programs is the limited budget allocated to the Auqaf Department for non-infrastructure activities. While shrine revenues are collected, much of it is directed toward basic maintenance or administrative expenses, leaving little room for strategic community engagement or interfaith initiatives. As a result, many programs are small-scale and lack long-term sustainability.

### **Limited Grassroots Outreach**

Most of the department's events and interfaith programs are concentrated in urban centers like Lahore, Multan, and Faisalabad, with minimal presence in rural and underdeveloped areas.<sup>12</sup>

This creates a gap in outreach, especially in regions where religious intolerance and misinformation are more prevalent. Without effective engagement at the grassroots level, the impact of interfaith harmony efforts remains limited.

### **Resistance from Extremist Elements**

Efforts to promote interfaith harmony are sometimes met with ideological resistance from extremist or ultra-conservative segments of society. Public backlash, social media criticism, and even threats to religious leaders or event organizers can discourage the department from pursuing such initiatives vigorously.

### **Lack of Trained Human Resources**

There is a shortage of trained professionals and religious scholars within the department who possess both theological depth and interfaith communication skills.<sup>13</sup>

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Without specialized training, many staff members are unable to effectively engage in sensitive interfaith dialogue or manage inclusive programs.

### **Coordination Gaps with Other Institutions**

There is often a lack of coordination between the Auqaf Department and other relevant bodies such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Minorities Affairs Department, Evacuee Trust Property Board, and civil society organizations.<sup>14</sup>

This institutional disconnect weakens the overall impact of interfaith efforts and results in duplication or fragmentation of initiatives.

These challenges illustrate that while the Punjab Auqaf Department has a strong foundation and symbolic authority, it requires structural reforms, increased autonomy, financial support, and trained human resources to fully realize its role as a promoter of religious harmony in Pakistan.

### **Impact Assessment**

The Punjab Auqaf Department's initiatives to promote interfaith harmony have had a notable but limited impact across the province.<sup>15</sup>

While the department has made symbolic and practical efforts to foster interfaith engagement, the depth and reach of these initiatives vary significantly depending on region, resources, and public participation. This section critically evaluates the outcomes and effectiveness of the department's efforts.

### **Increased Public Engagement at Sufi Shrines**

The department's efforts to promote inclusive values through Sufi shrines have helped preserve these spaces as neutral, spiritual, and accessible platforms for people of different faiths.<sup>16</sup>

Annual Urs events at shrines like Data Darbar, Baba Farid, and Bulleh Shah have seen increasing participation from non-Muslims, indicating a revival of traditional

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spaces of harmony.

### **Interfaith Conferences as Dialogue Platforms**

The interfaith seminars and peace conferences organized by the department have created constructive forums where religious leaders, academics, and civil society representatives discuss mutual respect, religious tolerance, and community welfare.<sup>17</sup>

These gatherings have helped reduce stereotypes and build interpersonal relationships across faith lines, particularly in urban areas.

### **Positive Media Representation**

Through media campaigns, the department has successfully broadcasted messages of

peace, drawing attention to Islamic principles of tolerance and co-existence.<sup>18</sup>

This has helped improve the department's image and influenced public perception regarding the role of religion in promoting unity rather than division.

### **Limited Impact in Rural and Marginalized Areas**

Despite urban successes, the department's influence in rural areas remains weak. Many of these regions still face sectarian divisions, religious discrimination, and social exclusion of minorities.<sup>19</sup>

The absence of localized interfaith programs limits the transformative impact of the department's work on a province-wide scale.

### **Weak Institutional Integration**

The department's interfaith activities are often isolated and event-based, lacking integration into a comprehensive provincial or national strategy.<sup>20</sup>

Without follow-up, monitoring, or long-term programming, the outcomes of these efforts are difficult to sustain or scale up.

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### **Enhanced Visibility of Inclusive Religious Discourse**

Despite limitations, the department has amplified inclusive religious narratives within the public sphere.<sup>21</sup>

By highlighting Sufi teachings, supporting interfaith prayers, and acknowledging the religious significance of minorities, it has contributed to shifting discourse from religious confrontation to spiritual coexistence.

In summary, the Punjab Auqaf Department has had a moderately positive impact on interfaith harmony in Punjab, especially in symbolic, urban, and event-based contexts. However, to ensure deeper and more lasting change, a more strategic, inclusive, and grassroots-focused approach is necessary.

### **Recommendations are proposed:**

A specialized unit within the department should be formed, tasked exclusively with planning, executing, and monitoring interfaith programs.<sup>22</sup>

This unit should include experts in interfaith dialogue, religious scholars from diverse backgrounds, civil society representatives, and communication professionals.

### **Expand Outreach to Rural Areas**

To address the gap between urban and rural communities, mobile interfaith teams, regional workshops, and shrine-based community gatherings should be conducted in rural and semi-urban areas.<sup>23</sup>

These programs should focus on educating communities, countering religious misconceptions, and promoting peaceful coexistence.

### **Capacity Building and Training**

Personnel involved in interfaith initiatives should receive specialized training in religious pluralism, conflict resolution, and dialogue facilitation<sup>24</sup>.

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Training modules can be developed in collaboration with universities, think tanks, and interfaith organizations.

### **Strengthen Interdepartmental Coordination**

Effective coordination should be developed with the Minorities Affairs Department, Evacuee Trust Property Board, Ministry of Religious Affairs, and law enforcement agencies. Joint programs and information sharing can enhance the department's reach and impact.

### **Institutionalize Interfaith Events**

Rather than organizing occasional conferences, there should be regularly scheduled interfaith events at major shrines, public halls, and educational institutions. These should include dialogues, cultural exhibitions, shared community service days, and youth engagement activities.

### **Engage Religious Minorities in Decision-Making**

Include non-Muslim representatives in shrine management committees, advisory boards, and public events.<sup>25</sup>

This symbolic and practical inclusion fosters trust, representation, and community ownership.

### **Develop and Disseminate Educational Content**

Create pamphlets, booklets, documentaries, and social media content rooted in Islamic teachings that promote peace, respect for all religions, and civic unity.<sup>26</sup>

Special focus should be given to Sufi teachings that emphasize universal love and humanity.

### **Secure Dedicated Funding for Harmony Programs**

A separate budget should be allocated for interfaith projects. This funding should be transparent, monitored, and accessible for collaborative efforts with NGOs and

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religious organizations working toward the same goal.

### **Promote Youth Involvement**

Youth should be actively involved in harmony-building activities. Programs such as essay competitions, youth interfaith camps, and art projects can serve as platforms for developing empathy, mutual respect, and national identity.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism**

Introduce a proper monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to measure the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives. Regular feedback, performance reviews, and impact assessments can help improve future programming.

By implementing these recommendations, the Punjab Auqaf Department can move beyond symbolic gestures and become a model of inclusive religious governance, significantly contributing to peace, unity, and social stability in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

The Punjab Auqaf Department, by virtue of its historical, administrative, and spiritual influence, occupies a unique and strategic position in promoting interfaith harmony in Pakistan. Through the management of Sufi shrines, organization of interfaith conferences, and engagement in media outreach, the department has taken commendable steps to foster religious tolerance and social unity, particularly in urban centers. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is often constrained by limited resources, institutional fragmentation, lack of grassroots outreach, and resistance from extremist segments. While the symbolic value of the department's work is significant, its practical impact remains moderate and localized, rather than province-wide and transformational. To truly

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fulfill its potential as a bridge between religious communities, the department must undergo a shift from event-based interfaith gestures to a strategic, institutionalized, and inclusive model of engagement. This includes expanding programs to rural areas, empowering youth and minorities, improving coordination with other government bodies, and investing in human capital and infrastructure for interfaith activities. Pakistan's long-term peace and unity depend on institutions that can integrate religious diversity into the national fabric. With targeted reforms and sustained political will, the Punjab Auqaf Department can evolve from a custodian of religious property to a guardian of interreligious peace—reviving the spirit of tolerance that once flourished at the heart of its Sufi shrines.

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