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Shared Sacred Spaces: Negotiation of Cultural and Religious Identities in Malerkotla

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of *shared sacred spaces* through the lived realities of Malerkotla — a city that has historically symbolized peace and communal harmony in Punjab. Drawing from sociological and anthropological perspectives, the study examines how cultural and religious identities are negotiated, intertwined, and redefined within a common sacred context. The paper begins by exploring the concepts of identity, cultural identity, and religious identity, and then moves to the idea of sacred spaces, inclusion, and Victor Turner's model of anti-structuralism. Using the Haider Sheikh Shrine as the focal ethnographic site, it analyses how rituals, legends, and collective participation become sites of negotiation and shared belonging. The discussion highlights the resilience of Malerkotla's people in maintaining harmony amidst conflict-ridden surroundings and explores how shared practices around food, language, and festivals bridge religious boundaries. The study concludes that the sacred in Malerkotla is not confined to ritual spaces alone — it extends into everyday life, shaping a unique model of coexistence and inclusive identity formation.

Key Words : Sacres spaces, Cultural pluralism, Cultural identity, Identity negotiation

INTRODUCTION

Religion and culture in India are deeply intertwined, shaping the moral fabric and everyday life of its people. From the shrines of Sufi saints to the temples that dot every town, the sacred here is rarely confined to one community or doctrine. Sacred spaces often transcend religious demarcations, becoming shared grounds of faith, emotion, and belonging. In such spaces, prayer becomes a collective act, not limited by creed but bound by shared humanity. These intersections of faith and culture open a rich field for exploring how people perceive, express, and negotiate their identities.

The idea of shared sacred spaces is not new to India's civilizational ethos. Across centuries, Sufi *dargahs*, *mazars*, and saints' shrines have attracted followers of all faiths, serving as cultural meeting points rather than religious battlegrounds. Yet, in a world where religious differences often become flashpoints for division, these shared sacred sites represent an alternative imagination – one rooted in coexistence, empathy, and mutual respect.

Among these, the city of Malerkotla in Punjab stands out as a living embodiment of interfaith harmony and cultural fusion. Surrounded by areas that have historically witnessed episodes of communal tension, Malerkotla continues to maintain a distinct atmosphere of peace and solidarity. Its history is steeped in the memory of moral courage — particularly the act of Nawab Sher Mohammed Khan, who stood against the execution of Guru Gobind Singh's young sons during Mughal times. This gesture of righteousness became a moral cornerstone of the city's identity, remembered and revered across religious boundaries.

Malerkotla's social landscape is unique not because it lacks religious diversity, but because it transforms that diversity into a shared cultural experience. At the heart of this harmony lies a deep-rooted culture of shared sacred spaces – places where the divine is not the

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property of a single faith but a meeting ground of multiple spiritual traditions. Here, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus participate in each other's festivals, visit the same shrines, and contribute collectively to community welfare. Faith is expressed not in isolation but in interaction.

In India, where religion and culture are inseparable from social life, sacred spaces often reflect the larger patterns of coexistence and contestation. Understanding these spaces helps us grasp how people negotiate their cultural and religious identities in everyday practice. The Haider Sheikh Shrine in Malerkotla serves as an ideal example of such negotiation, where followers of Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism come together in devotion, sharing rituals, legends, and sacred narratives. The Haider Sheikh Shrine, dedicated to a 15th-century Sufi saint, epitomizes this spirit. It is a site where spiritual devotion merges with cultural expression — where *qawwalis* and Punjabi folk songs are sung in the same breath, and where the fragrance of attar and incense mingles with that of langar.

This paper seeks to understand how cultural and religious identities are negotiated and shared within such sacred settings, taking Malerkotla and the Haider Sheikh Shrine as the central focus. It draws upon sociological and anthropological perspectives to trace how individuals and communities construct their sense of belonging through participation in shared rituals, common symbols, and inclusive moral values. The analysis moves from theoretical foundations of identity and cultural formation to ethnographic insights into the practices and everyday life of Malerkotla's people.

Through this exploration, the paper aims to highlight how the sacred, when shared, becomes a powerful instrument of unity — transforming religious diversity from a potential site of conflict into a lived experience of peace.

Identity:

Identity, in its most fundamental sense, refers to how individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others. It is not a fixed condition but an evolving and negotiated process of '*becoming*.' It embodies how individuals and groups perceive themselves and how they are recognized by others. As Calhoun (1994) observes, self-knowledge is inseparable from social recognition; our understanding of who we are is always shaped by how others perceive and relate to us. Identity lies at the intersection of self-perception and social positioning, of personal consciousness and collective meaning. It is at once internal and external, personal and social. Thus, identity is relational and dynamic — shaped by interactions, social structures, and shared meanings.

Erik Erikson (1968) viewed identity as both individual and collective— a psychosocial phenomenon that occurs within the individual but also within the broader framework of community and culture. It includes emotional attachment, commitment, and the feeling of belonging to a group. According to him, identity development involves a constant interplay between what one thinks of oneself and what one believes others expect or accept. This duality creates both coherence and tension, as people strive for a consistent sense of self while adapting to shifting social roles and cultural expectations. Identities are often anchored in values, language, customs, and religious beliefs that people internalize as part of their social world.

In sociological terms, identity operates at multiple levels — individual, collective, and institutional. It is through this multi-layered dynamic that individuals come to belong to families, castes, nations, religions, and communities. The negotiation of identity thus reflects the fundamental human need to belong, to be recognized, and to differentiate oneself. Moreover, in a globalized and plural world, identity has become increasingly fluid; hybrid identities often emerge from the intersection of cultures, ideologies, and histories. Hence, identity is less about permanence and more about adaptability, resilience, and meaning-making in the context of social change.

Cultural Identity:

Cultural identity derives from one's connection to shared systems of meaning — the language, values, traditions, and symbolic practices that shape how a community perceives itself. It is the sense of belonging to a collective 'way of life,' as defined by Herskovits (1948), and is deeply rooted in the habits, customs, and collective consciousness of a people. Culture itself is dynamic; it evolves through exchange, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Thus, cultural identity is not inherited biologically but constructed socially and historically. It encompasses shared meanings, traditions, and values that guide human behaviour. Cultural identity, therefore, refers to one's sense of belonging to a particular cultural group and the emotional significance attached to it.

Scholars such as Clifford Geertz and David Schneider conceptualized culture as a web of meanings that individuals themselves have spun. Within this web, cultural identity becomes a mode of orientation — a way

of interpreting one's place in the world. Hofstede (1994) offers a useful metaphor by likening culture to an onion with multiple layers — symbols, heroes, rituals, and values— each representing a level of meaning. While symbols and rituals are the outward expressions and are visible, values form the innermost invisible core, that shapes the behaviour of a community and thereby defining what a community holds sacred or acceptable. These layers together sustain the moral and emotional texture of social life.

Stuart Hall (1990) provided a crucial insight by distinguishing between two ways of understanding cultural identity: as "being" and as "becoming." In the first sense, it refers to a shared culture, a collective "one true self" anchored in common historical experiences and cultural codes. In the second, it denotes a continuous process of transformation – identities that are shaped by history yet open to reinterpretation. This duality captures the paradox of cultural identity: it gives people a sense of stability, while simultaneously enabling change and diversity. It is, thus, rooted in the past yet continuously redefined by present experiences and historical transformations.

Cultural identity thus plays a vital role in mediating between continuity and innovation. It offers individuals a sense of rootedness while allowing them to engage with new influences. In contemporary societies marked by migration, media, and multicultural exchange, cultural identity becomes a dialogue rather than a fixed inheritance – an evolving conversation between the past and the present.

Religious Identity:

Religion provides moral and emotional frameworks that give meaning to existence. It has historically provided a powerful basis for identity formation, offering collective narratives that define what is sacred, ethical, and eternal. Religious identity refers to the sense of self derived from adherence to a faith tradition, its rituals, and its moral universe. It involves not merely belief in the divine but participation in a system of meanings that frames human purpose and social belonging. However, religious identity can both unite and divide. It fosters belonging to a larger community of faith, yet may draw symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' Erikson (1968) noted that religious identity, like cultural identity, emerges from the interplay between personal faith and communal norms. It provides emotional security, ethical guidance, and a sense of transcendence – yet it can also serve as a boundary marker distinguishing 'insiders' from 'outsiders.'

Manuel Castells (2004) identifies three modes of identity construction that are relevant to religion: legitimizing identity, which aligns with dominant social structures and institutions; resistance identity, which emerges in opposition to perceived domination; and project identity, which aspires to transform the existing social order through new values or visions. Religious identity can manifest through any of these forms — reinforcing authority, challenging oppression, or inspiring reform.

Religious identity often transcends geographical and linguistic boundaries, creating transnational solidarities. Yet it can also be a site of contestation when faith-based affiliations intersect with politics, ethnicity, or economics. In plural societies, this tension becomes acute: religion provides moral cohesion but may also generate exclusivist tendencies. Therefore, religious identity needs to be understood as a dynamic synthesis of devotion, doctrine, and dialogue – not as a monolithic or unchanging category.

In a sociological sense, religious identity functions both as a source of belonging and as a symbolic boundary. It unites people under shared beliefs while differentiating them from others. The challenge of modernity lies in reconciling these dual aspects — preserving faith-based meaning while fostering interfaith coexistence and mutual respect.

Sacred Spaces and the Principle of Inclusion:

Sacred spaces are not merely physical locations but symbolic representations of faith and belonging. They are imbued with ritual significance, cultural meanings and moral orders that regulate social behaviour. They provide believers with a tangible connection to the transcendent and often serve as the spiritual heart of a community. From temples and mosques to shrines, rivers, and trees, sacred spaces articulate a geography of belief — mapping spiritual meanings onto physical landscapes. However, their significance extends beyond ritual; they also embody social order, hierarchy, and collective memory.

Émile Durkheim (1912) viewed sacredness as a fundamental social category that distinguishes the sacred from the profane, enabling society to reaffirm its collective conscience. Yet, as scholars of religion and anthropology have emphasized, the boundary between sacred and profane is not always rigid. In plural societies, sacred spaces can become zones of inclusion, where people of different faiths participate in shared rituals and derive

spiritual solace without necessarily surrendering their distinct identities.

The principle of inclusion in sacred geography implies openness – an acknowledgment that divinity transcends human boundaries. When communities allow shared access to places of worship or spiritual merit, they enact a form of moral citizenship grounded in empathy and coexistence. Such inclusive sacred spaces embody the social ideals of tolerance, reciprocity, and mutual respect.

Anthropologically, these spaces challenge exclusivist interpretations of religion by foregrounding the lived experience of faith. The act of sharing a sacred space becomes a ritual of social integration, transforming spiritual participation into a practice of solidarity. In this sense, inclusion in sacred contexts is not merely theological but deeply sociological: it affirms the human capacity to connect across difference.

Victor Turner's theory of anti-structure offers a profound lens for understanding the transformative potential of ritual and sacred experience. Building on Arnold van Gennep's notion of *Rites of Passage*, Turner (1969) argued that ritual life often involves a liminal phase – a threshold period in which social hierarchies and distinctions are temporarily suspended. During liminality, participants experience *communitas*, a spontaneous sense of equality, fellowship, and unity that transcends institutional boundaries.

In Turner's framework, structure represents the organized and hierarchical order of society — the realm of roles, rules, and status. Anti-structure, by contrast, denotes the realm of pure human connection, where people relate as equals. Rituals, pilgrimages, and festivals become sites where this anti-structural energy is released, allowing participants to experience an egalitarian togetherness that reaffirms the moral basis of community life.

Turner's model suggests that the sacred has the power to dissolve and reconstitute social boundaries. It exposes the instability of rigid hierarchies by revealing moments of collective transcendence. Importantly, anti-structure does not abolish structure; rather, it renews it. After the liminal experience, individuals return to their ordinary roles, but often with a renewed sense of belonging and moral clarity.

The idea of anti-structure thus illuminates the human capacity for unity amidst diversity. In contexts of religious pluralism, such rituals or shared experiences can become vehicles for reconciliation, empathy, and mutual recognition. Turner's insights remind us that the sacred, when shared, is not merely a site of worship but also a social process that fosters the reimagining of community itself.

The Haider Sheikh Shrine: A Shared Sacred Space: *Legends and Symbolism:*

At the heart of Malerkotla's enduring peace stands the Haider Sheikh Shrine, a space that epitomizes the city's inclusive religious ethos. The story of the shrine is deeply woven into the origins of Malerkotla itself. *Sheikh Sadr-ud-din Sadr-e-Jahan*, popularly known as Haider Sheikh, was a Sherwani Sufi saint of Afghan descent. Legend holds that when Bahlul Lodi embarked on his quest to establish control over the Delhi Sultanate in the fifteenth century, he sought the blessings of the saint. Haider Sheikh is said to have blessed Lodi with success, and in return, the Sultan promised to marry his daughter to the holy man should he win the throne. When Bahlul Lodi indeed ascended to power, he honoured his word—his daughter was married to Haider Sheikh, and the saint was granted a jagir encompassing the area where the town of Malerkotla now stands.

The devotees believe that upon Haider Sheikh's death angels descended overnight to build his *mazaar*—the tomb that remains the spiritual heart of Malerkotla. Over time, his descendants were divided into two lineages: one continued as the spiritual custodians (*sajda-nashins*) of the shrine, while the other established the temporal authority of Malerkotla as an Afghan principality. Thus, from its inception, Malerkotla grew from a single act of spiritual grace into a composite polity that harmonized religious devotion and political stewardship. The shrine of Haider Sheikh became both a symbol of divine blessing and a moral compass for the evolving community.

The saint himself is revered not merely as a Muslim guide but as a universal moral figure. His blessings are invoked by people of many faiths—Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu alike—each seeking comfort, healing, or justice. The moral heritage of Haider Sheikh later found powerful affirmation during the Mughal period. When the governor of Sirhind ordered the execution of the young sons of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, the Nawab of Malerkotla, Sher Mohammed Khan, publicly protested against this act of cruelty. The Guru is believed to have blessed the Nawab and his principality for this moral courage, and many residents attribute the city's lasting harmony to that sacred benediction. The Gurudwara *Haa*

Da Naara (the cry of protest) stands in Malerkotla today as a memorial to that event, underscoring the enduring covenant of compassion between the Sikh Panth and the Malerkotla State. This act of moral courage earned his lineage the enduring respect of Sikhs. Since then, the city has remained untouched by communal violence — even during the Partition of 1947.

Through these intertwined legends, the Haider Sheikh Shrine becomes more than a religious site—it is a historical narrative of justice, compassion, and interfaith gratitude. Its symbolism unites spiritual grace with ethical resistance, forming the foundation upon which Malerkotla's pluralist ethos rests.

Rituals and Annual Calendar:

The Haider Sheikh Shrine continues to thrive as a living centre of devotion and collective memory. The Theh—the sacred complex that houses the saint's mausoleum—spans nearly four to five bighas of land, forming both a spiritual nucleus and a social gathering ground for the people of Malerkotla and beyond. The expansive compound accommodates the steady flow of devotees throughout the year and comes alive during the series of annual melas and the saint's Urs, which together form the heart of the shrine's ritual calendar.

The shrine's calendar is marked by a succession of vibrant observances that punctuate the year with sound, colour, and community gathering. Among these, seven principal melas hold special significance, each drawing pilgrims from across the city and adjoining districts. These fairs are held in the months of Assu, Poh, Magh, Jeth, and Namani, as well as during Dussehra and on the Friday (Jumma) preceding Eid-ul-Zuha (Bakra Eid).

Each mela carries its own local symbolism, blending the agricultural cycles of Punjab's soil with the spiritual cycles of faith. Families arrive with offerings—flowers, chadars, niyaz, and deg —while vendors line the roads leading to the shrine, selling sweets, prayer items, and colourful fabrics. The air fills with greetings of peace and the steady hum of recitation. The melas are not merely religious occasions; they are deeply social, spaces where neighbours meet, bonds are renewed, and cultural memories are reaffirmed through music, storytelling, and shared meals. In these gatherings, devotion and festivity coexist—the sacred and the everyday flow seamlessly into each other.

Offerings made at the shrine reflect the deep material and emotional investment of the devotees. These include ornaments made of gold and silver, and cloth of varied textures—cotton, terrycot, malmal, and khaddar. The niyaz offered to the saint is equally symbolic, comprising patase, laddus, gulgule, boiled rice, two chiraghs (earthen lamps), two cotton battis, a small tin of mustard oil, an earthen kundi sota, a chadar, incense sticks and a small bottle of attar (scented perfume). The Niyaz can range between modest sums of ¹ 11 to ¹ 11,000. Beyond these, animals such as goats, sheep, and horses are also offered, alongside cereals like wheat, jowar, maize, and chickpeas—signifying gratitude, continuity, and abundance.

During the melas, chowkis or night-long prayer gatherings are organised, where devotees engage in collective worship that continues till midnight. The atmosphere during these chowkis is suffused with spiritual warmth—hymns, invocations, and the rhythm of duas echo through the night. Local Muslim families living near the shrine open their homes to visiting pilgrims, offering them hospitality and shelter. This practice of voluntary accommodation reaffirms the ethos of service, humility, and kinship that defines Malerkotla's cultural fabric.

The most revered observance, however, is the Urs-e-Mubarak, held once every year to commemorate both the birth and death anniversaries of Haider Sheikh. This dual remembrance—marking his arrival into the world and his union with the Divine—captures the mystical essence of Sufi philosophy, where death is viewed not as an end but as eternal reunion. The Urs is celebrated on the evening of the 13th and the night of the 14th Ramzan, during the holy month of Ramadan. On these sacred nights, the shrine transforms into a luminous expanse of devotion. Earthen lamps (chiraghs) and strings of lights illuminate the Theh, earning the evening the local name Roshni di Shaam or Baba Ji di Roshni.

The fragrance of incense and attar mingles with the chants of praise, while Persian mystical poetry with Punjabi folk rhythms are performed. The fusion of sound and light creates a sacred atmosphere where distinctions of religion, caste, or class dissolve. Devotees—Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh alike—come together in reverence, embodying the city's longstanding legacy of interfaith harmony. The Urs is also marked by community feasts, where food becomes a symbol of spiritual equality. Volunteers from all faiths serve simple, nourishing dishes to anyone who visits, reaffirming the saint's teachings of humility and service.

Throughout the year, smaller observances—weekly

chadar offerings on Thursdays, seasonal melas, and nightly prayers—continue to sustain the spiritual life of the shrine. The five daily namaz—*Fazr*, *Zohar*, *Asar*, *Maghrib* and *Isha*—structure the rhythm of devotion for those who live and worship around the sacred precinct. In every season and ritual, the Haider Sheikh Shrine stands not only as a site of worship but as a living institution of cultural continuity, moral fraternity, and shared remembrance—an enduring symbol of Malerkotla's composite heritage.

Ritual participation at the shrine is fluid and inclusive. A Sikh woman tying a thread on the lattice of the tomb, a Hindu trader sponsoring a niyaz, or a Muslim youth singing qawwali—all form part of the same sacred continuum. These everyday enactments transform the shrine into what anthropologists describe as a contact zone of faiths, where ritual practice becomes a mode of social negotiation. The shrine thus preserves its medieval spirit of Sufism—rooted in love, humility, and service—while adapting seamlessly to the rhythms of modern life.

In these moments, distinctions of religion, class, and community fade into the collective pulse of devotion. The shrine, through its cycle of melas and Urs-e-Mubarak, sustains a sacred rhythm that transcends ritual boundaries—celebrating faith as a shared inheritance rather than a divided claim.

The Clientele:

The visitors to the Haider Sheikh Shrine represent an extraordinary social mosaic, reflecting both the demographic diversity and the inclusive spiritual temperament of Malerkotla. Each day, the shrine welcomes an array of devotees whose lives, occupations, and beliefs may differ widely, yet who find common ground within its sanctified precincts. Farmers and labourers arrive in groups from nearby villages, their visit often timed with agrarian cycles or post-harvest thanksgiving. Shopkeepers and traders from the city, civil servants and teachers from neighbouring districts, and students from local schools and colleges all mingle in the shrine's courtyard. Fakirs and mendicants, who travel across regions following the circuit of Punjab's peers and dargahs, add another dimension to this fluid spiritual landscape.

The shrine's clientele thus embodies a remarkable sense of democratic belonging—its sacred space is open to all, without discrimination of caste, creed, gender, or social standing. This inclusivity, deeply rooted in Sufi ethics, transforms the shrine into more than a site of worship; it becomes a social equalizer, a living arena where differences momentarily dissolve in the shared vocabulary of devotion. The atmosphere on any given day is one of mutual respect and quiet fellowship. Devotees exchange greetings of peace, offer niyaz, light chiraghs, or sit silently near the mazaar in contemplation. The act of participation itself—whether through prayer, offering, or voluntary service—creates a sense of collective piety that transcends sectarian identities.

Geographically, the catchment area of the shrine extends far beyond the boundaries of Malerkotla district. Pilgrims arrive not only from nearby regions of Punjab—such as Bathinda, Moga, Mansa, Fazilka, and Nawanshahr—but also from neighbouring states like Haryana and Rajasthan. The road leading to the shrine is particularly animated during the melas and Urs-e-Mubarak. The presence of such a diverse clientele reinforces the shrine's stature as a regional pilgrimage centre, a spiritual magnet whose influence radiates across political and cultural boundaries.

The visitors to the Haider Sheikh Shrine represent an extraordinary social mosaic. They come from rural and urban areas, from various castes, classes, and religious backgrounds. Farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, fakirs, civil servants, and students all find a place within its courtyard. The diversity of the clientele reinforces the shrine's identity as a democratic spiritual institution, accessible to all without discrimination.

At the centre of this inclusivity lies the Sufi doctrine of Sulh-e-Kul—peace with all. This universal principle, later articulated in Akbar's policy of tolerance, finds its everyday practice here. The shrine is not merely a site of worship but a moral commons, where differences of theology dissolve into shared humanity. People seek not only miracles but meaning, not only blessings but belonging. The act of sitting together, eating together, and praying side by side creates a lived experience of equality that extends beyond the shrine walls into the civic ethos of Malerkotla.

In this plural congregation, the Haider Sheikh Shrine sustains a model of coexistence that resonates deeply with the city's historical ethos of tolerance. Each visitor, irrespective of origin or social position, contributes to the living tradition of the place. Together, they animate the shrine not as a relic of the past but as a continuing embodiment of Malerkotla's composite spiritual heritage.

In this way, the Haider Sheikh Shrine functions as

both a spiritual and sociological nucleus. It embodies the living continuity of Malerkotla's history–linking myth, memory, and morality into one inclusive narrative of coexistence. Its walls, rituals, and devotees together testify that sacredness, when shared, becomes the strongest architecture of peace.

Shared Sacred Spaces and Identity Negotiation:

Malerkotla's Historical and Geographical Profile:

Malerkotla, situated in Punjab's Sangrur district, occupies a distinctive place in the region's historical geography. Once a princely state founded in the fifteenth century by Bayazid Khan, a descendant of Haider Sheikh, the city evolved as a cultural meeting ground for Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. Despite its Muslim-majority demography, Malerkotla has never witnessed major communal violence, even during the Partition of 1947 – a period that scarred much of Punjab.

Situated at approximately 30°512 N latitude and 75°882 E longitude in Punjab's Malwa region, Malerkotla functions as an administrative sub-division (tehsil) of Sangrur district. The sub-division covers an area of 684 sq. km and comprises of 183 villages (180 inhabited and 3 uninhabited). As per the Census of India 2011, Malerkotla has a population of 4,29,754 persons (2,26,722 males and 2,03,032 females), with 59.5 per cent residing in rural areas and 40.5 per cent in urban settlements. The population density is 629 persons per sq. km, the overall sex ratio stands at 874 females per 1,000 males, and the child sex ratio (0–6 years) is 881. The literacy rate is 72.62 per cent, marked by gender differentials. Scheduled Castes constitute about 9.4 per cent of the population, while there are no Scheduled Tribes reported to be residing in Punjab.

Malerkotla has a diverse religious composition of its population, with Sikhs forming the majority (50.89 %), followed by Muslims (33.26 %) and Hindus (15.19 %). In contrast, Malerkotla town, the principal urban centre, is widely recognised as Punjab's only Muslim-majority town, where Muslims constituted approximately 68.5 per cent of the population, followed by Hindus (20.71 %), Sikhs (9.5 %) and Jains (1.11 %).

Strategically located about 50 km from Ludhiana and 32 km from Sangrur, Malerkotla lies on the Sangrur–Ludhiana road and is served by a railway station on the Ludhiana–Jakhal line, ensuring strong regional connectivity.

Geographically, Malerkotla is surrounded by areas that experienced religious polarization, yet its internal social order remained balanced. The presence of multiple religious sites – mosques, gurudwaras, temples, and shrines – within close proximity has created a spiritual ecosystem of coexistence. This harmony cannot be understood merely as political tolerance; it is embedded in shared traditions, linguistic unity, and everyday acts of mutual respect.

Historically, the town traces its origins to 1466 AD, when it was founded by Pir Sadruddin, a disciple of Shaikh Rukn-ud-Din of Multan. The settlement gained prominence during the Lodhi period following Emperor Bahlol Lodhi's association with the area and subsequent endowment of villages. Over time, the components of Maler and Kotla merged into a unified urban entity, particularly after the development of Moti Bazaar (1901–02) by Nawab Ahmed Ali Khan. Malerkotla later became the headquarters of the Malerkotla Princely State, which was merged into PEPSU in 1948. The town occupies a distinctive place in Punjab's socio-religious history due to its ruler's protest against the execution of Guru Gobind Singh's younger sons, which contributed to communal harmony during Partition in 1947. It is also associated with the Kuka (Namdhari) movement, notably the execution of 66 Kukas in 1872, and retains important architectural and cultural landmarks.

Negotiating Identities:

In Malerkotla, identity is not a binary of religion or culture but an intricate web of coexistence. The people continually negotiate who they are through interaction, participation, and empathy. A Muslim shopkeeper may adorn his store with lights on Diwali, while a Sikh farmer may offer chadar at the shrine during urs. Such gestures are not token acts of secularism but expressions of an ingrained worldview that sees spirituality as collective rather than exclusive.

Identity negotiation here occurs through performance – through food, language, music, and ritual participation. The cultural sphere often mediates between the sacred and the social, allowing people to maintain religious distinctions while sharing a cultural continuum. The boundaries between "Muslim," "Sikh," and "Hindu" identities blur in the lived experiences of friendship, kinship, and local belonging.

Cultural Identities:

Cultural identity in Malerkotla manifests through

shared practices rather than shared theology. Punjabi is the common linguistic medium that carries not just communication but emotion, humour, and song. Folk music, especially qawwali and boliyan, embodies themes of love and devotion that resonate across communities. Festivals such as Basant Panchami, Eid, and Gurpurab are celebrated collectively, often featuring overlapping rituals of food, dress, and dance.

Food occupies a special symbolic space. Dishes like biryani, kheer, and seviyan are prepared and exchanged irrespective of religion. Even commercial food outlets during festive seasons become sites of cultural contact — places where the culinary language of Punjab reaffirms its unity in diversity. Dress patterns too display hybridity; men wear turbans of different styles but with shared pride, and women's attire reflects a blend of regional aesthetics rather than sectarian markers.

Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of identity as "a process of becoming" finds vivid expression here. Cultural identity in Malerkotla is never static – it evolves with each festival, each shared meal, and each act of neighbourly affection.

Religious Boundaries and Commonalities

While religion inherently draws boundaries of belief and ritual, in Malerkotla these boundaries coexist with porous cultural bridges. The act of sharing langar at a Gurudwara or niyaz at a dargah collapses hierarchies of faith and class alike. In such moments, the sacred kitchen becomes a theatre of equality – a physical and symbolic space where the divine is accessed through hospitality and togetherness.

Religious differences are not denied but managed through mutual respect and ritual participation. The same hands that offer namaz may also join in lighting lamps during Diwali; the same tongue that recites duas may sing boliyan at a wedding. This fluid negotiation of sacred boundaries exemplifies how pluralism is sustained — not by denying difference but by weaving it into the fabric of everyday life.

DISCUSSIONS:

The study reveals that shared sacred spaces in Malerkotla function as living laboratories of coexistence. The Haider Sheikh Shrine, in particular, emerges as both a spiritual and sociocultural centre that anchors the city's plural identity.

Sacred Spaces as Negotiated Arenas:

Victor Turner's concept of anti-structure provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding Malerkotla's shared sacred sites. According to Turner, rituals generate a temporary suspension of social hierarchies, allowing people to experience communitas – a spontaneous sense of equality and togetherness.

At the Haider Sheikh Shrine, distinctions of caste, class, and religion blur. The shrine operates as a negotiated arena where people reinterpret meanings of faith through their lived experience. People from different backgrounds participate as equals, bound by devotion rather than by institutional structures. For some, it is a place of devotion; for others, a symbol of moral justice and interfaith solidarity. These overlapping meanings allow the shrine to transcend denominational boundaries. The shared rituals and legends form a collective memory that binds people despite doctrinal differences. The shrine thus becomes a liminal space where ordinary social boundaries dissolve, allowing a deeper spiritual unity to emerge.

Cultural Identity as a Unifying Force:

Cultural identity – expressed through language, food, dress, and music – acts as the connective tissue between diverse religious affiliations. Food, particularly, emerges as a profound symbol of unity. Whether it is the communal langar during a Gurpurab or the *niyaz*, the act of eating together dissolves social distance. Commercialization of festivals, though visible, has not eroded the essence of collective celebration; rather, it has expanded participation across economic classes.

Music, too, plays a unifying role. The blending of *qawwali* and *shabad*, and *tabla*, demonstrates how cultural forms become vehicles of spiritual dialogue. Dress and ornamentation reflect this hybridity – blending Islamic modesty with Punjabi flamboyance, symbolizing both individuality and belonging.

Anti-Structural Dynamics and Communitas:

During the local fairs, Turner's (1969) concept of anti-structure becomes manifest. The usual social hierarchies of caste, class, and gender temporarily dissolve as everyone participates in shared rituals. The shrine's courtyard becomes a liminal space where social distinctions lose meaning, replaced by the egalitarian experience of communitas. Such moments renew the moral order of the city, reaffirming that equality is both a religious and cultural ideal.

Negotiation of Disparities:

Disparities in cultural practices – such as dietary preferences, dress codes, and ritual norms – are not sources of division but opportunities for dialogue. The residents of Malerkotla recognize difference without allowing it to become antagonism. The exchange of food during festivals, the mutual participation in processions, and the adaptive use of local language in religious discourse all reflect how identity negotiation takes form in the quotidian. The shrine, in this sense, becomes both a stage and a sanctuary for the reconciliation of difference.

Ultimately, Malerkotla's social fabric demonstrates how shared sacred spaces can transform the potential for conflict into opportunities for empathy. The Haider Sheikh Shrine continues to be the moral heartbeat of this pluralistic ethos.

Significance:

The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that harmony is not an abstract ideal but a lived cultural reality. Malerkotla's sacred spaces show how faith, when combined with cultural inclusiveness, can transcend boundaries. The shrine acts as a social institution of peace-building— where religion, culture, and ethics intersect to create a durable peace.

In contemporary India, where interreligious tensions often dominate public discourse, Malerkotla stands as a reminder that pluralism is deeply rooted in our soil. The city's ethos challenges rigid binaries of "self" and "other," proposing instead a vision of identity grounded in coexistence and mutual respect.

Conclusion:

Malerkotla's shared sacred spaces reveal that faith, when anchored in cultural empathy, becomes a unifying force rather than a divisive one. The Haider Sheikh Shrine, with its inclusive practices and open participation, stands as a symbol of this synthesis and embodies a vision of spirituality that is communal yet deeply personal.

Through the interplay of shared rituals, legends and sacred spaces, the devotees continuously negotiate their multiple identities without conflict, reaffirming that culture and religion need not be opposing forces. The sacred and the cultural intermingle, demonstrating that pluralism is not an external policy but an internalized way of life.

In essence, the story of Malerkotla thus becomes more than a local narrative — it is a symbolic reflection of India's enduring pluralism and the power of the sacred to unite rather than divide. The shrine of Haider Sheikh, with centuries of devotion and dialogue, continues to remind us that peace is not the absence of difference but the art of living gracefully with it.

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