

## **Research Proposal**

My research project here is a study of the socio-religious history of the walled city of Amritsar In India after Independence. The main focus of study is the history of everyday lives and work experiences of people inhabiting the walled city of Amritsar. The study is based on Oral history and ethnographic field work. These experiences are recovered from the voices of the people themselves through recording conversations, memories, and interviews with city communities of merchant, traders, petty retailers and shopkeepers, artisanal groups, street and roadside food sellers, craftsmen, owners of eateries, migrant labourers and religious preachers, members of religious institutions. The subjects of oral conversation and interviews include: religious festivals and traditions, practices and institutions (temples, gurdwaras, mosques and Sufi shrines), business practices and commercial systems, crafts, traditional food, family life, neighbourhood, specialties of arts, and forms of entertainments, popular music and sports and environment and ecological experiences, etc.

Also useful in capturing the lived lives of these people my ethnographic field survey along with descriptions in district gazetteers have been important for identifying the diversity of walled city communities, the nature of kinship networks, residential preferences of neighborhoods based on caste and kin, cultural and religious practices, and specialization in specific business and commercial enterprises. The study looks into the question of continuities and changes in social, religious and cultural forms and practices in everyday life of the city inhabitants during the past 70 years. This is important in the context of the contemporary Indian urban landscape which is experiencing huge changes and demographic expansions.

The study also explores and seeks answers to the questions how the walled city and its inhabitants recovered from traumas and adverse effects of political events: partition, the two Indo-Pak Wars on its borders in 1965 and 1971 and the political crises posed by Sikh militancy during 1980s and 1990s. For the first time in the history of the city the relationship between Hindu and Sikh religious communities was serious tested during the years of Sikh militancy.

### **Religious Geography of the City**

The Golden Temple has always been the center of attraction for pilgrims and tourists and this trend has grown even more rapidly during the past three decades. The management of the Golden Temple and other important Sikh gurdwaras in the city are in the hands of a representative and statutory body, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee (SGPC). SGPC management informs me that approximately 150,000 to 200,000 pilgrims visit it every day the Golden Temple. Another major place of worship in the city if the Durgiana Temple of Hindus which was set up in the 1920s in a similar architectural style as the Golden Temple. Here too the pilgrimage has been rapidly growing.

Amritsar city inhabitants, like people in other parts of India, are deeply religious. The city has a long history of diverse religious practices (Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism) and syncretic traditions despite the dominance of Golden Temple as the centre of Sikh religion. The city is dotted with a large number of Hindu temples, Sufi shrines and Sikh gurdwaras, which are visited by people regularly. The observance of festive rituals and beliefs in the curative and healing powers of the Golden Temple's sacred tank and various Sufi shrines are integral to the city folk lore and their celebrations are part of cultural, social and religious traditions of the walled city. I am particularly curious to find out the reasons for the continuous traditional belief in the healing powers and sacredness of Sufi shrines in the city with barely any significant presence of the Muslim community.

I am trying to understand how much of the syncretic traditions are still in practice among the walled city. The growing violence inflicted on the city's people, both by the Sikh militants and the state during the 1980s and 1990s, created a sense of insecurity and ghettoization among the Hindu and Sikh communities. How did the city cope with the insecurity and violence during this period?