

The Silent Genocide: Declining Population of Sikhs in Indian Administered Punjab

By Harjeet Singh

India has counted its people by religion in every census since 1951. Seven counts, sixty years, one column marked "Sikh." I spent the past weeks pulling all seven and asking a single question: what share of India is Sikh, and which way is it moving?

The answer is on the first chart, and it should stop every Sikh who sees it.

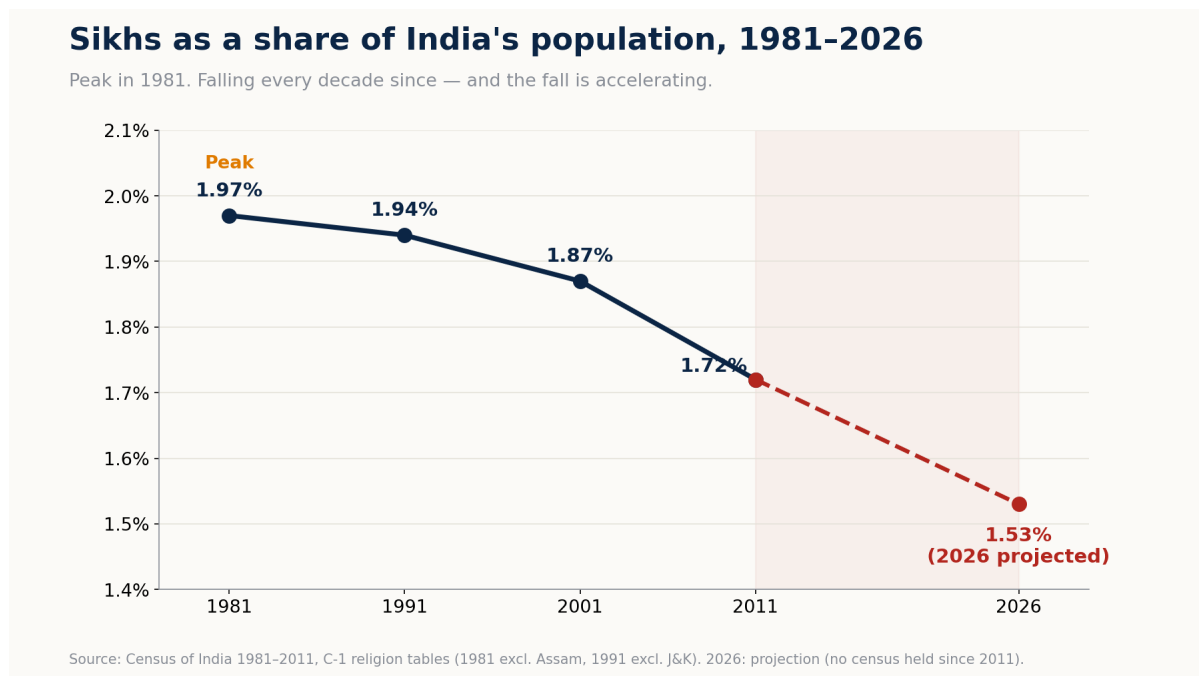


Figure 1. Sikhs as a share of India's population, 1981-2011 (census) and 2026 (projection).

In 1981, Sikhs were 1.97 percent of India, the highest share ever recorded. Every census since has been lower. By 2011, the last time India counted anyone, we were 1.72 percent, below where we stood in 1951. The decline did not just continue between censuses; it accelerated. Sikhs lost 0.07 points of share in the 1990s and 0.15 points in the 2000s, twice as fast. India has not held a census since 2011. Projecting the same trend forward, Sikhs today are around 1.5 percent of the country, and closer to 1.3 percent if the acceleration held.

Percentages hide people. So let me put it another way. In 2011, India counted 20.8 million Sikhs. Had our community simply grown at India's own pace since 1981, at no faster rate than the country as a whole, the census would have found 23.2 million. Roughly 2.4 million Sikhs who should have existed did not. Carry that forward to 2026 and the gap is about five million. Five million missing Sikhs, in one generation, in a country that added 400 million people over the same period.

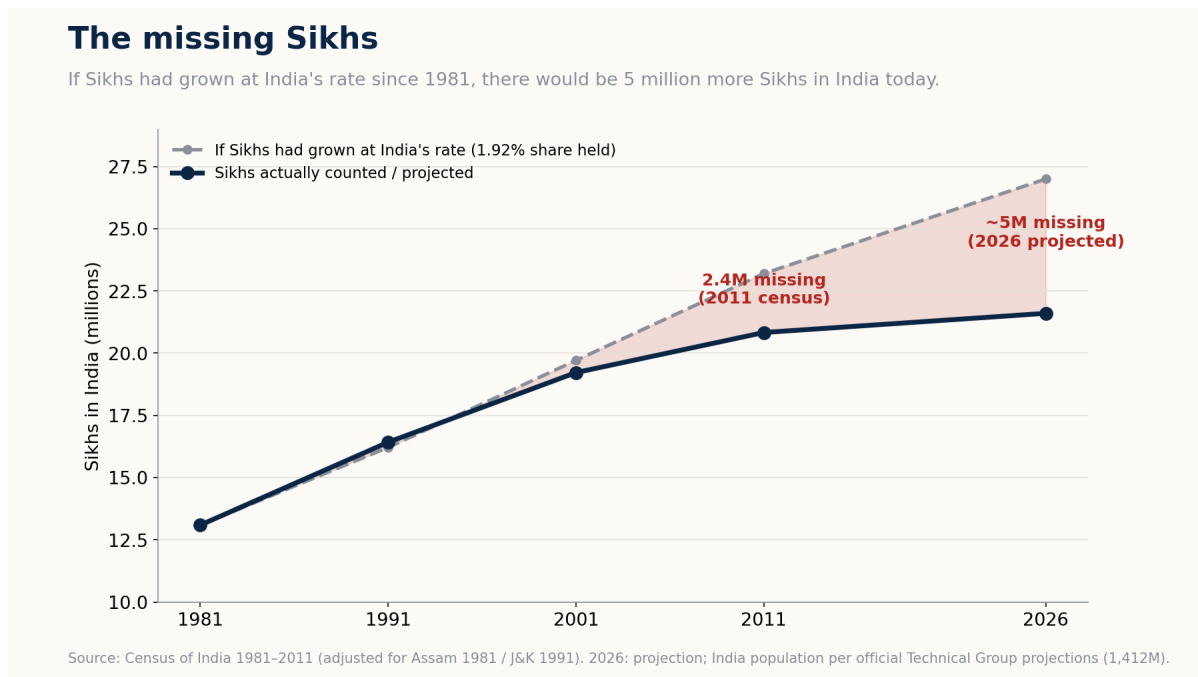


Figure 2. The missing Sikhs: actual count against the number if Sikhs had grown at India's rate since 1981.

The decade that broke the curve

The chart makes something clear that our community has felt but never quite measured. The turn came after 1981. That is not a coincidence of arithmetic. The decade that followed brought the assault on Darbar Sahib in June 1984, the pogroms of November 1984 in Delhi and across northern India, and a decade of counter-insurgency in Punjab in which thousands of young Sikh men were killed or disappeared and their bodies cremated as "unidentified."

I will not put a number on those deaths here. No honest person can. The state that carried them out has never counted them, and the figures it does offer are the figures of the accused. What I can say is that the demographic wound of those years cannot be measured by deaths alone. A generation of men was removed from a single region at the age when they would have married and raised families. Hundreds of thousands fled

abroad. Those who stayed learned that the state would not protect them. The census cannot see any of that directly. It can only show us the curve bending downward from that decade onward and never bending back.

Why this is not a story about birth rates

Whenever these numbers are raised, the reply from Delhi is ready: Sikhs are prosperous, prosperous people have fewer children, the decline is natural. It is a tidy answer, and the census disposes of it.

Look at growth in the last census decade, 2001 to 2011. India grew 17.7 percent. Hindus grew 16.8 percent. Muslims grew 24.7 percent. Christians grew 15.5 percent. Sikhs grew 8.4 percent, less than half the national rate and the slowest of any large community in the country.

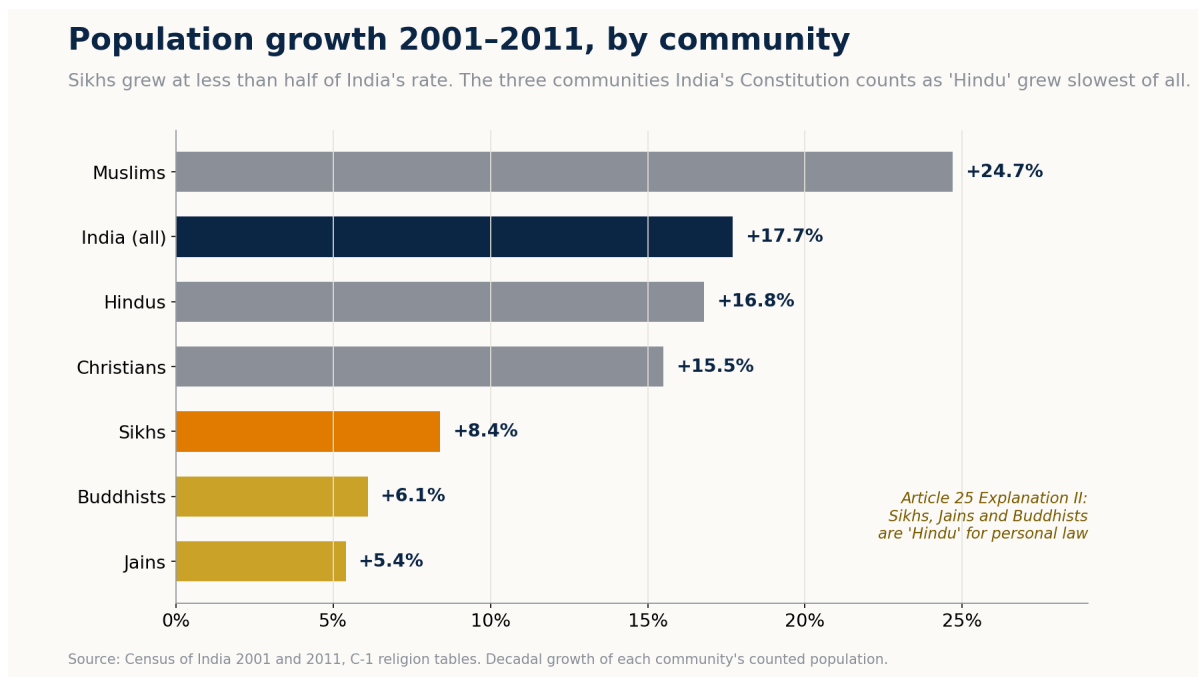


Figure 3. Decadal population growth by community, 2001–2011.

Now look at who else is at the bottom of that chart. Jains grew 5.4 percent. Buddhists grew 6.1 percent. Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists are the three faiths that India's Constitution, in Explanation II to Article 25, defines as "Hindu" for the purposes of law. Until 2012, Sikh marriages in India were registered under the Hindu Marriage Act. The three communities the state counts as Hindu are the three that are shrinking. The two it cannot count as Hindu, Muslims and Christians, are not. If prosperity explained

everything, Christians, who are more literate and more urban than Sikhs, would be shrinking too. They are growing at almost the national rate.

The birth-rate argument collapses entirely inside Punjab. India's own National Family Health Survey, in its 2019–21 Punjab report, puts the fertility rate of Sikh women and Hindu women in the state at exactly the same figure: 1.6 children each. Whatever is changing the face of Punjab, it is not that Sikh mothers are having fewer children than their Hindu neighbours. They are having precisely the same number.

Punjab: the majority is slipping away

Which brings us to the place that is supposed to be ours.

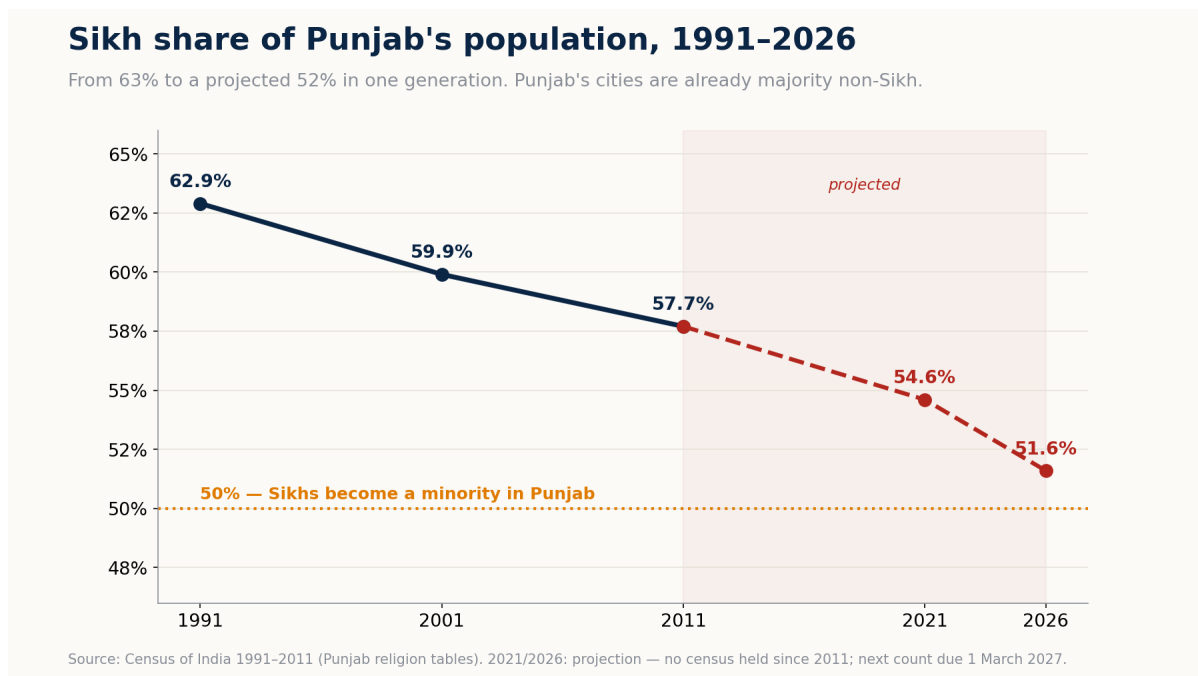


Figure 4. Sikh share of Punjab, 1991–2011 (census) and 2021–2026 (projection).

In 1991, Sikhs were 62.9 percent of Punjab. In 2001, 59.9 percent. In 2011, 57.7 percent. Project the trend through fifteen years without a census and Punjab is roughly 52 percent Sikh today. The 50 percent line, the point at which Sikhs become a minority in the one state in the world with a Sikh majority, sits within a decade on current trajectory. In Punjab's cities it has already been crossed. Urban Punjab was only 35 percent Sikh in 2011. Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Amritsar city, Mohali and Pathankot are majority non-Sikh now.

If fertility is identical, the shift has to come from movement. And it does, at both ends.

Young Sikhs are leaving. The counted Sikh diaspora grew from about one million in 2001 to 1.7 million in 2011 to 2.4 million in 2021. Canada alone went from 278,000 Sikhs to 772,000 in twenty years. Per head of home population, a Sikh in India is more than forty times as likely as a Hindu to have moved to Canada. No other community in India leaves at anything close to this rate, and the great majority leave from Punjab.

Into the vacated villages and factory towns come workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana. The census counted 822,000 inter-state migrants in Punjab in 1981, 1.1 million in 1991, 1.75 million in 2001, and something above 2.4 million by 2011. In the last census decade, migrant arrivals accounted for roughly a fifth of Punjab's entire population growth.

For most of Punjab's modern history that labour was seasonal: men who came for the harvest and went home. Between 2014 and 2019 that changed. A series of decisions in Delhi, the Jan Dhan accounts that need no address proof, Aadhaar-based banking that verifies against a central database rather than a local clerk, the 2019 amendment to the money-laundering rules allowing any Aadhaar holder to open an account on a self-declared local address, rebuilt India's identity system so that a migrant's paperwork no longer depends on where he came from. Punjab, alone among the border states, has no domicile law to slow any of it. Himachal restricts who may buy land. Kashmir did, until 2019. Punjab's own politicians ran camps to hand migrants ration cards and voter cards in exchange for votes. Seasonal became settled. Settled became counted.

Strip the migration out of the 2001–2011 numbers and Punjab's Sikhs and Hindus grew at almost the same natural rate, twelve to thirteen percent each, which is exactly what identical fertility predicts. Put the migration back and Sikhs lose two points of the state in a single decade. This is not a birth rate. It is a policy.

The district where Sikhs are already fewer

The census can take us one level lower, and at that level the pattern becomes unmistakable.

Punjab 2001-2011: where Sikh numbers fell while Hindu numbers rose

Decadal growth of each community by district. Sikh numbers fell in three Doaba districts — the NRI belt — while Hindus grew 13–20% there.

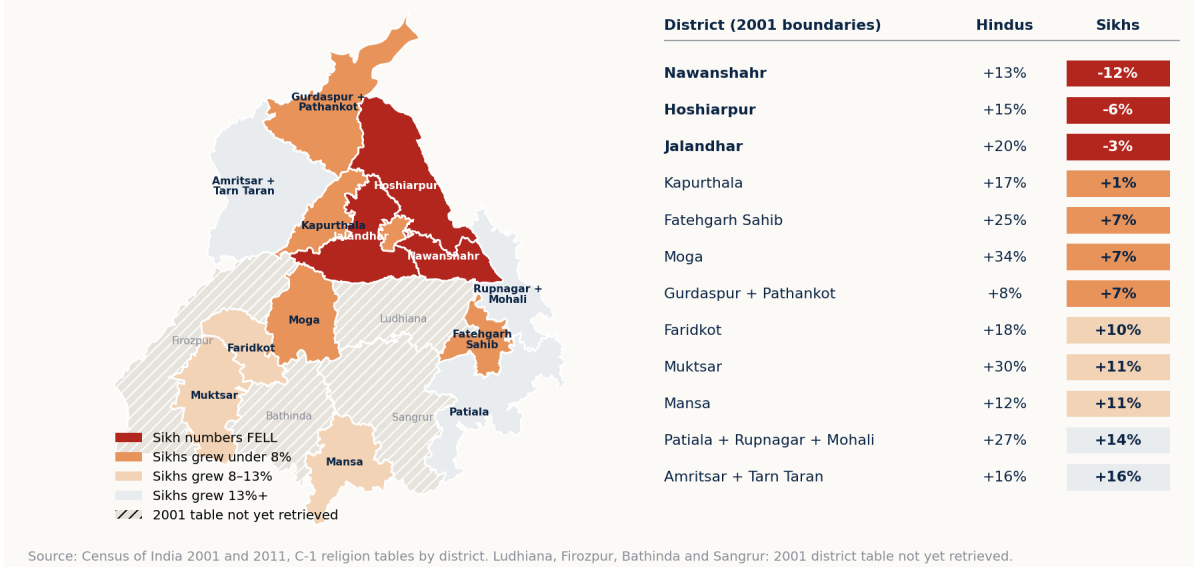


Figure 5. Growth of Hindus and Sikhs by district of Punjab, 2001–2011.

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of Sikhs actually fell in three districts of Punjab: Nawanshahr, down 12 percent; Hoshiarpur, down 6 percent; Jalandhar, down 3 percent. Hindus grew 13 to 20 percent in the same districts. In neighbouring Kapurthala Sikhs were flat while Hindus grew 17 percent.

These four districts are Doaba, the land between the Beas and the Sutlej. Doaba is the NRI belt, the region that has sent more of its sons to Canada, Britain and California than any comparable piece of ground on earth. It is also the region where, in 2010, the leadership of Dera Sachkhand Ballan declared Ravidassia a faith separate from Sikhism, after which tens of thousands of families who had been counted as Sikh began to be counted as something else. Emigration and absorption, the two ways a people disappears without anyone being killed, meeting in one place, in one decade, in the government's own tables.

Why the word is genocide

I know the weight of the word, and I use it deliberately, because the two definitions that matter both describe what these numbers show.

The 1948 Genocide Convention does not require mass killing. Article II lists five acts, and the third is deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part. Consider what the Indian state has

inflicted on Punjab's Sikhs as conditions of life: the diversion of Punjab's river water to other states under arrangements no riparian law in the world would recognise; an agricultural economy locked into wheat and paddy until the aquifer collapsed and the farmers began killing themselves; a deliberate absence of industry, so that the only future for a Punjabi villager's son is a visa; a flood of narcotics across a border the state alone controls; a decade of extrajudicial killing whose perpetrators were decorated rather than tried; and finally an identity regime that settles outsiders in the vacated space. None of that requires a soldier. It requires only a state that has decided a community's survival in its homeland is not its concern. The result, five million missing Sikhs and a homeland approaching minority status, is the destruction of the group in part. That is what the Convention names.

The second definition is older and, to my mind, more exact. Raphael Lemkin, who coined the word in 1944, wrote that genocide need not mean the immediate destruction of a nation. He described it as a coordinated plan aimed at the foundations of a group's life, its institutions, culture, language, religion and economic existence, so that the group ceases to exist as a group even if its members survive as individuals. That is assimilation by design, and it is precisely what India's law attempts when it defines Sikhs as Hindus, what its census records when Doaba's Sikhs reappear in the Hindu column, and what its economy accomplishes when it exports a people's youth and imports their replacements.

Our elders said that a people without a sovereign state, a state that controls its own borders and its own rivers, would in time be absorbed into the Hindu fold. They were called extremists for saying it. Sixty years of India's own census say they were describing arithmetic.

What comes next

India will conduct its next census with a reference date of 1 March 2027, the first count since 2011 and the first since the exodus of the last decade. Whatever the reasons for a sixteen-year gap, the longest in the country's history, the effect has been to keep the most important number in Punjab's modern history out of public view. When the religion tables are finally published, they will show either that these projections were too pessimistic or that they were not pessimistic enough. I have laid out every figure and every source so that anyone can check the work.

But I would ask the reader not to wait for 2027. The projections are conservative. The census is the last measurement, not the last word. Sikhs will not become a minority in Punjab on the day the government announces it. It will have happened years earlier, quietly, in a village where the last young man left for Brampton and the family in the servants' quarters registered their children at the school. That is what a silent genocide looks like. It is not a massacre. It is a census table that no one in power wants published, and a people who did not notice until it was almost too late.

Harjeet Singh hosts Finding Truth With Harjeet. The full dataset, projections and sources for this article are available on request.

Sources: Census of India 1951–2011, C-1 tables; Census of India 2001 and 2011 district religion tables, Punjab; Census of India migration tables (D-series), Punjab, 1981–2011; National Family Health Survey 5 (2019–21), Punjab report; Statistics Canada, ONS, ABS and Stats NZ census religion tables; Prevention of Money-laundering (Maintenance of Records) Amendment Rules, 2019; Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), Article II; Raphael Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe (1944). Figures for 2021 and 2026 are projections; no census has been held since 2011.