

# Synthesis and Evolution: Cultural Syncretism and the Historical Formation of the Contemporary Hindu Spiritual landscape

## Abstract

The study of the evolution and synthesis of religious traditions, sacredness, and ritual traditions requires an integrated and systematic academic approach. Incorporating perspectives from the past, ethnography, and anthropology is essential to gain a deeper understanding of this subject. The evolution of spiritual perspectives and cult practices in Southern Indian hamlets and among little communities can be traced back to early prehistoric times. Spirituality and religious frameworks have historically represented the most dominant societal discourse and cultural construct encompassing a variety of components such as cult practices, rites and rituals, and divinity that are common to many cultures. Anthropological and historical observations suggest that several factors, such as prevalent social memory, cultural and social stigmas, myths, culture of fear, and inherited dispositions, have fundamentally shaped the development patterns within the framework of contemporary Semitic religions. Many 'sub-religions' within the larger framework of Western-oriented 'religions' originate from 'cults' that are culturally and historically ancient compared to many prevailing Semitic religious frameworks. The theoretical perspective offered by 'cultural anthropology' suggests that spiritual evolutions and the influence of the community imagination of ancestral societies have played a role in the formation and advancement of cultural hallmarks.

**Keywords: Sacredness, Cult, Stigma, Ritual, Tradition, Sub-religion, Spirituality, Semitic. Framework. Community Imagination, Fear.**

## Introduction

Indian society is a multi-ethnic environment with a diverse and multifaceted cultural past, apparent in the various religious and ritual traditions that evolved and are prevalent within the social jurisdiction of the Indian subcontinent. One of the distinguishing

characteristics of the Indian spiritual past is the synthesis of numerous ethnic and cultural influences, including orthodox, heterodox, and tribal influences. This process of syncretism entails the existence of numerous distinctly regional, Pan-Indian, and blended forms of the diverse spiritual and ritual traditions that evolved and became prevalent within the social jurisdiction of the Indian subcontinent. This process of the intermingling of cultures and syncretism is one of the most influential contributors to the development of the contemporary framework of the Hindu religion. It has provided an instrumental impact in defining India's cultural and religious landscape.

The distinctive element of Indian culture is the infiltration of elements of assimilation of multi-layered diverse cultural traditions that, over time, became segmented into elite and non-elite traditions. The intellectual and philosophical dimensions of Indian spirituality that were later interpolated into Indian culture, the various monarchies that spread from the central Gangetic plains and then the Deccan to Peninsular India alongside the subsequent agrarian and non-agricultural economy, and the materialism that began with trade networks are the various determinants that created the earlier described upper and lower categories. Throughout Indian history, these two categories have played an increasingly prominent part in the structural and organisational evolution of Indian culture. They have contributed to reconstructing the spiritual structures of Indian culture based on diversity. These categories contributed within their limits to the cultural and social formation and the transition and evolution of ritual tradition, religion, deities and spiritual institutions. These interpolations have remained mainly components of the Indian Hindu spiritual framework that continues to this day. In response to the elite and non-elite dichotomy that emerged in Indian society as part of the proliferation of the Varna scheme as well as later emerged currency of the grand narratives of Sanskritic tradition, categorised them as Brahminic and non-Brahminic traditions of Indian society.

In Indian culture, there has developed an array of Brahminical and non-Brahminical rites, rituals, spiritual landscapes and temple institutions, narratives, and parables, many of which have been associated with the discourse of Hinduism, which has itself undergone very dynamic and philosophical changes. The Hindu framework needs to be revised to comprehend the origin, expansion, and evolution of these Brahmanical transformations. The generalisation of this mode of articulation is not feasible in contemporary Hindu religious practices in India due to the universal or parochial influence of both Brahminical and non-

Brahminical tribal Buddhist and Jain cultural traditions. Indian cultural traditions are based on integration and assimilation rather than rejection since their genesis. Despite the dominant Brahminical influences, ethnic traditions cannot be excluded entirely from such cultural combinations. Since the varna system and the caste and sub-castes that were incorporated later were all in the perspective of the hierarchical Brahminical framework, and the land grants, agrarian expansion, and political formations of the early medieval period in the Indian subcontinent were largely Brahmin-centric, this process of religious integration was dominated by the Brahmin community. The influence of Brahmanical tribal and heterodox elements on today's religious fabric has been demonstrated through ethnographic studies and ritual investigations of spiritual landscapes. However, the more crucial point is that this syncretic process continues today.

It has been asserted that long before the Vedic-Brahmanic-Hindu admixture entered Indian culture, rites and rituals were formulated to express devotion to God. The deities represented nature-inspired animistic patterns based on ethnic tradition or tribal gatherings in which ancestors were worshipped or later developed fertility deities associated with village-based agricultural practices. It is indisputable that such ethnic models can be historically identified in both Northern and Peninsular India. However, it is dynamically visible in South Indian village communities, even after the proliferation of the Brahminic scheme of worship, that these ethnic models are persistent. There were a multitude of ethnic tribal models that were either marginalised or under-recognised by the most potent and magnificent narratives of the Sanskritic tradition, which were based on hierarchical power structures and legitimised the Brahminic scheme within the context of emerging ritual purity and the expansion of agricultural tradition, which were based on hierarchical power structures and legitimised the Brahminic scheme within the context of emerging tendencies of ritual purity and the expansion of temple-centric settlements.

### **The Conceptual Understanding of Syncretism**

The syncretic model in religious tradition mostly refers to merging or combining diverse beliefs or ideologies and thereby assimilates them to comprehend their underlying unity. This approach, mostly connected with religion, provides a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the similarities between two seemingly distinct thought practices. Typically, Syncretism views religion, ethnicity, and culture as pure and distinct entities. It emphasizes the fluidity of these concepts by providing them to remain as unique while

balancing the integration of similar ideas. The theory of Syncretism finds practical applications in various fields, especially art, cultural studies, ethnography, and the study of traditions. Syncretism has been employed equally as theoretical framework and social process which illustrate the evolution of spiritual traditions in the religious context of South India. It occupies specific relevance in the domain of religion. Syncretism can serve as a bridge to end this never-ending discussion, particularly by adopting a historical and ethnographic approach. Moreover, it aims to demonstrate the similarities between two seemingly disparate ideals and uncover the commonalities, prevailing in various religious systems. Thus, Syncretism proves most useful in its application to the concepts of religion and culture. Syncretism is a viable approach in theory because it possesses cultural characteristics. An outstanding example to this is obscurity in determining the comparative significant influence of one from the rest of the cultures or religions, in varied situations. In other words, it will lead to divergent views. Another example relates to this using of Syncretic framework in the Indian context, having multiplicity of religious traditions and cult practices but significantly varies from region to region. Furthermore, it may not match with Syncretic tools and the understanding of religious traditions can be contextualised through other perspectives. The understanding of religion and culture usually differs from oriental and Occidental perspectives. Nevertheless, Syncretism provides a platform for studying various concepts in a unified way, including the analysis of various contexts of the conglomeration of traditions, particularly in religion.

### **The Evolution of Religious Studies: Insights into Ritual, Cult, Sect, and Religion**

The quintessential question concerning the most evolved contemporary version of Hinduism is metaphorically and popularly used to designate a religion rather than explaining and conceptualising the subcomponents within the larger framework. Generally, religion is a framework of prescribed conducts and customs, ethical principles, beliefs, perspectives, sacred scriptures, disciplines and taboos, spiritual settlements, sacred predictions, and congregations primarily relating communities to deific, metaphysics, and sacred elements. The larger framework of religion requires its members to adhere to non-textual and textual components in every culture. Sociological, anthropological, materialistic, and psychological explanations are given to explain the concept of religion during the past few centuries. The most problematic concern concerning these larger frameworks is their unsuitability for theorising them to explain Hinduism's historical expansion and evolution and many subcategories, such as non-brahminic, animistic, tribal, or ethnic traditions exhibiting ritualistic or cult-oriented belief practices. The four elements of religion, divinity, ritual

practices, and faith have historically been explained as the creation of community imaginations and segmented collective memories deeply embedded into human conscience as reflected in sociological theories of religion.<sup>1</sup> During the formative stages of each of these, the cultures will evolve through centuries of cultural beliefs, traditions, folktales, multiple cultural narratives, and predominantly cultural integrations and exchanges. The most visible and coherent example of this assimilation is the shift from ecological spirituality to iconographic institutional-centric spirituality. The evolution of these cultures can be understood better within the context of historical geography, where each represents different ecological terrains earlier in the form of a forest terrain to a more sustained and sophisticated institutional network often referred to as temple settlements.<sup>2</sup>

In explaining the intermingling of multiple religious compositions, anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural theorists use entwined concepts such as syncretism, Sanskritization, cultural hybridity, assimilation, and cultural exchanges as they relate to religious and cultural exchanges. In the geographic and ecological context of the intermingling of various sacred traditions, the historical antecedents were depicted as a multilinearly cultural evolution from a pre-urban band gathering to a lineage-based hybrid agro-urban social order with an evident shift from a densely vegetated terrain to a more organised social space. This multilinear theory of evolution also refers to the pattern of geographical shift and the absorption and intertwining of divinities, little narratives, and ritual practices. The Brahmanized cultures exhibit a dominant culture attributed to the Brahmanizers and counter influences that are present segments and were conceptualised as universal exchanges and parochial exchanges in the classical sociological framework. The problematic aspect concerning this interaction and assimilation of multiple cultures is the identity of the more significant subcategories, referring to them as territorial, religious, sectarian, or cultus categories. The expressions of Hinduism in contemporary contexts differ significantly according to their geographic, cultus, sectarian, and most widely acknowledged religious identifiers.

An integrated and systematic academic approach is vital to explore the evolution and

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1. Ronald Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*, Prentice Hal, Hoboken, 1996, p. 39.
  2. Gunther Dietz Sontheimer, *The Vana and the Shetra: The Tribal Background of Some Famous Cults. The Routledge Handbook of the State in Premodern India*, Routledge, New Delhi, p.122.

development of religious practices, sacredness, and ordination, and this subject can be explored by incorporating perspectives from the past, ethnography, and anthropology. Spirituality and religious frameworks are the most dominant societal discourses and cultural constructs throughout history, and they have historically encompassed components common to many cultures, such as cult practices, rituals, and divinity. Anthropological and historical observations have shown that several factors, such as the prevalent social memory, cultural stigmas, myths, and the culture of fear, fundamentally influence the development patterns of contemporary Semitic religions.<sup>3</sup> Within the larger framework of Western-oriented 'religions', several of these subcategories originate from 'cults' that are culturally and historically ancient compared to many prevailing Semitic religious frameworks.<sup>4</sup> The theoretical perspective offered by cultural anthropology holds the position that the prospect of the formation and advancement of the aforementioned cultural hallmarks has been employed by anthropomorphism in conjunction with the influence of the community image of ancestral societies.

The cult concept within contemporary culture inevitably evolves into more significant complexities and institutionalism over time by constituting an indispensable component of a broader social system. There is a centrifugal movement among the little communities. This ethnic and social group establishes the hierarchy of cults and sacredness among early societies. It then transforms from a parochial model of worship to a more expansive or Sanskritized pattern of worship.<sup>5</sup> Sacred cult points and worshipping models can be found in all societies. All of them are defined by a dominant, hierarchical social structure that has developed over time through continual intercultural collaboration. This has been recognised as a rational development through the reciprocal engagement of two distinct categories, enabling the constructive integration of universalisation and parochialization mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> There has been a gradual alteration in religious preferences due to adaptation, acculturation, and modification of existing spiritual paradigms of a locale through social development and political formations extending from institutionalisation to multicultural paradigms and

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3. Michael M. Horowitz, 'The Worship of South Indian Deities in Martinique', *Ethnology*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1963, pp.339–346.
  4. Martin E. Marty, 'Sects and Cults', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 332, No. 2, United Kingdom, 1960, pp. 125–134.
  5. McKim Marriott, 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization', in McKim Marriott (ed.) *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1955, pp.171-222.
  6. Martin E. Marty, 'Sects and Cults', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 332, issue.1, Sage, California, 1960, pp.125–34.

technological accessibilities. This alteration has originated primarily from a historical point where the interaction and assimilation process of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin cultures converged under a cultural jurisdiction, and the migrant category has influenced the original inhabitants. Migration of communities and the exchange of ideas are organic processes within a cultural jurisdiction; however, during the early stages of syncretism, offering land grants to Brahminic communities and legitimising ritual monopoly made this process more political than highlighting the cultural fabrics.

### **Syncretism in Indian Subcontinent: A Historical Perspective**

Historicizing the terminologies within the framework of modern cultural perceptions such as Hindu, Brahmin, and non-Brahmin deeply demands cultural evolution to these terms found in textual references stretching from early historical to contemporary times. In early Greek-Persian and Arabic accounts and Farci narratives, the term Hindu refers to a geographical landmark representing a community within a specific geographical area of the subcontinent. The social and culturally complex nineteenth-century colonial academic initiatives have primarily portrayed the term Hindu within a semantic framework described as the spiritual platform of upper caste strata. However, it is also interesting to note that the Brahminic intervention toward the multiple traditions and cult practices was previously a dominant constituent of the same pantheon and either eliminated or assimilated organically and politically. The colonial and Brahminic interventions in altering the term Hindu to Hinduism constituted historically parallel processes; however, the term gradually attained widespread currency throughout the subcontinent metaphorically to describe a counter-hegemony toward colonial dominance. The historical evolution of Hinduism to the framework of a Semitic religion needs to be revised, especially considering the particularities of parallel religions and internal ritual traditions. The undefined and complex nature of the contemporary perspective of 'The Hindu religion' is its plurality in textuality, divinity, centrality, and the exclusion of a singular soteriology.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Hindu religious corpus profoundly influenced the proto-type categories of ritual traditions and cult practices throughout the subcontinent.

Identifying the essential contemporary notion of the term Hindu indeed expresses the image of a well-codified religious structure adherently followed by the communities followed

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7. Gavin D. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, CUP, Cambridge, 1996, pp.5–6.

by the people around the globe, more precisely in the geographical regions of southeast Asia. However, Jonathan Smith(2004) has asserted an insightful perspective that contemporary religious frameworks, including Hinduism, are essentially a bi-product of scholarly engagements and imaginative thinking, which encompasses numerous fragmented elements such as rediscovered textual traditions, local narratives, ritual practices, monumental institutions, philosophies, and doctrines which codifies into a significant category.<sup>8</sup> Besides these academic engagements, the Western orientalist, on one side, devoted more attention to formulating a new category of spiritual practices to explore and publish the plurality of sacredness in India. Parallely, a category of Indian nationalists and reformers was also encouraged to employ within the same structure with various priorities, including rediscovering India and using religion to construct nationalism. A well-defined and well-structured academic model of Hinduism dates to the latter half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century; however, early streams of thought and culture are discernible as early as the cultivation of the Neolithic village settlements to the urban centres of the Indus civilisation.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, European archaeologists and historians attempted to correlate the features of the Harappan religion with the artefacts, which was problematic and historically unclear. Furthermore, the scholarly attempts to portray the 'Harappan religion' framework could be more problematic because many of these attempts describe the framework from the perspective of a subsequently evolved Hindu religious pantheon. By analysing the degree of interaction between the early and later traditions, we can find the process of syncretism, the adaptation of early cultures, and the cultural continuity in Harappan culture's later cultural periods. Asko Parpola (1976) has primarily proposed a model of an Archaeological-Linguistic framework by examining the interaction between early and later cultures mentioned earlier.

These two categories are mainly defined within the context of early ceramic cultures in the Indo-Gangetic valley.<sup>10</sup> Zvelebil (1965) has identified the early makers of red and black ware pottery with the Dravidian linguistic cultures in terms of their cultural continuity and

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8. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, p.14.

9. Asko Parpola, 'The Sky-Garment: A Study of the Harappan Religion and its Relation to the Mesopotamian and Later Indian Religions', *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, Vol.57, No. 1, Helsinki, Finland, 1985, p.216.

10. Asko Parpola, 'The pre-Vedic Indian background of the Śrauta rituals', *Agni. The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Vol.2, No. 1, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp.41-75.



similarity with the early urban settlers of the Indus Valley.<sup>11</sup> Considering the contentions made by such philologists and archaeologists, the possibilities are considerable given that a Pan-Indian Proto-Dravidian linguistic culture was widespread throughout the subcontinent even before the influx of Indo-European linguistic communities into early Indian social order. An early indication of syncretism of multiple cultural traditions in Indian religious frameworks may have been this interaction of the multilingual cultural tradition.

The early cultivating settlers of Neolithic revolution India, identified through artefacts and the religious relics and sculptures of mature Harappan civilizational sites, demonstrate the early signs of ethnic-animistic patterns of cult practices, which are often intertwined with nature worship. The sculptural remains found from the archaeological sites of the Indus civilization have offered a plethora of clay and steatite figures expressing the particularities of an ethnic pattern of religious tradition. In addition, their identity has been identified as an independent cult practice rather than equated with later religious traditions. The cultic representation of the female figurines in early Harappan cultural settlements primarily represented the 'Mother Goddess' due to its fertility and maternity manifestations. The early archaeological documentation of the Harappan religion suddenly after the early excavations mostly followed a tendency to connect the newly excavated unknown deities with the later developed spiritual framework. The nomenclature is given as *Pasupathi Shiva* to a male figure and *Sakambari* to a female fertility figure, suggesting the depiction of a solid South Indian Dravidian semblance in such sculptures. The divinities we are discussing within the historical context of South Indian non-brahmin spiritual tradition, the sculptural representations of *Naga*, *Yaksha*, and fertility goddesses, are sculpturally expressing certain degrees of affinities with the cultic figures excavated from Harappan sites. It is problematic to assert that Harappa originated such ethnic cult practices later found in south Indian village communities, mainly referred to as Dravidian deities. However, pre-origin elements or a striking cultural continuity is visible in the south Indian village deities suggesting the possibility of interaction, exchanges, and assimilations.

The cultural transition from the historical past documented by material findings of the Indus Valley to the period represented in early textual tradition in early India has specifically

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11. KamilZyelebil, 'Harappa and the Dravidians, an old mystery in a new light', *New Orient*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Orient Society, New York, 1965, pp. 65-69.

indicated the entry and the expansion of a new category of religious tradition in the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, due to the sacrificial framework affinity towards deities of later origin, the newly emerging traditions have been classified as orthodox and highly close to contemporary Hindu religious practices.

### **Temple-Centric Worship in South India: A New Turn in the Evolution of Religious Practices**

Temples in Southern India are not just places of worship; instead, they are centres of a social structure of their own. The temple centres around the deity worshipped there, and the procedures and rituals are all connected to that deity as per belief. In a way, the deity creates a sovereign of its own in the situation, becoming the nucleus of the whole process. Multiple poojas, festivals and all are celebrated in the name of the deity in the belief that the deity inhabits the worshipped stone idol.

Certain temples also function with a system of hierarchy, wherein certain rituals or functions are conducted, which provide a great of honour and superiority for the worshipper. Temples also follow a system of particularities, wherein certain roles are fixed for certain people of a specific class or gender, such as the role of the temple priest. There is also a system of decorum that should be followed within the temple, anchored by the belief that it will displease the deity if behaved otherwise. A system of endowments also forms a transactional relationship between the person and the temple. For the services provided to the welfare of the temple in the way of human resources or other resources, he/she will gain a superior position in certain rituals. This is a two- maintains the temple and the person's belief. This system is also applicable in that service to the temple/deity.<sup>12</sup>

The evolved Hindu temple system is structured such that in a single place, there may exist different temples for different deities. Though Hinduism has many deities, and each has its own, sometimes interconnecting mythos, there is no such profound difference in their worship. Therefore many, two or three temples can coexist in a single place. Even so, certain cults consist of worshippers of a single deity among the many. The Shaivites and the Vaishnavites are the two major branches influential in South Indian Temple Culture and

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12. Arjun Appadurai, and Carol Breckenridge, 'The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and Redistribution', Contributions to Indian Sociology, Vol. 10, No. 2, Sage, California, 1976, pp. 187-211.

Hinduism. So, the temple system focuses on an authoritative deity, worshipped in a calendrical fashion with the authoritative centre of the temple. However, more than just an institution of religion, temples have developed into social and cultural centres in the growing times. Faith has connected somewhere with the idea of benefit, and since then, they have coexisted.

### **Insights and Major Findings**

The central theme of the study is that the modern Hindu religious structure in Indian Subcontinent has emerged from a syncretic evolution—an amalgamation of diverse mixed traditions. This ongoing process indicates that the prevailing Brahmanic traditions have frequently surpassed or incorporated the region's initial ethnic and various nonconformist traditions. However, the research also suggests a mutual exchange, indicating the existence of "visible counter exchanges" or a "local influence" of ethnic customs on Brahmanic traditions. Ultimately, this syncretism is seen as a societal tool functioning alongside the caste structures of the Brahmanic tradition, enabling the flexible transformation of non-Brahmanic spiritual inclinations through the integration and embrace of Brahmanic methods.

A major emphasis is placed on Brahmanisation as a crucial factor in transforming the spiritual landscape. This is believed to have entailed a "greater transformation" in which ancient, crude, and basic animistic carvings were supplanted by finely-made stone sculptures featuring a tantric approach to spiritual purification. This change is perceived because of various gods and their worship systems being incorporated and enhanced through Brahmanic impact. Moreover, the "universalisation" of non-Brahmanic and heterodox traditions is depicted as a consequence of Brahmanic expansion, which involved substituting original figures, like non-Brahmanic priests, with Brahmanic priesthood at local ethnic worship sites.

The research also highlights a significant change in worship practices, particularly the move from a localized, nature-based approach to a more centralized and structured form. The ongoing process of syncretism is defined by nature-centered ecological spirituality—which historically emphasized sacred groves and nature—being integrated into a temple-focused and Neo-Brahminism framework. This temple-focused method is characterized as embracing a mixed style of corporate spirituality.

In conclusion, the rich religious and cultural past of India has produced the nation's Syncretic spiritual tradition. It has been shaped by many cultural influences, sociopolitical

shifts, and the development of ethnic and Brahminic traditions. The Syncretic movement has persevered in the face of difficulties and disputes, adjusting to the circumstances and providing a spiritual route that considers the variety of India's religious legacy. The Syncretic tradition, which remains a vital component of the rich cultural legacy of the subcontinent, is a great illustration of how several traditions may blend to produce something fresh and significant.

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