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Religion, Society and Civilization: Case of Hinduism

THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
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Rabi Narayan Subudhi¹* and Nayan Deep Singh Kanwal²♦

¹Adjunct Professor, CUTM Odisha, India (Former professor of VIT, KIIT and Berhampur University, India)
²An Independent Researcher, Austin, Texas, USA

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*Corresponding Author
Rabi Narayan Subudhi
E-mail: rabisubudhi@gmail.com

Author(s):
Author 2: Nayan Deep Singh Kanwal
E-mail: nayan.kanwal@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Several ancient religions are in practice today, in different parts of the world. Religions mirrored the values of the society very closely. In the present day's context of inter-faith and multicultural society in the borderless global village, various religions survive to coexist, despite sporadic incidences of conflict and intolerance. Amidst growing support for broader social fabric and peaceful coexistence, there is still strong communal feelings, guided by deep-rooted faith and belief of respective religion. While most of the modern youth give priority to economic empowerment and comfortable life in a forward looking modern society, religion based festivals and holy-congregations continue to attract millions of faithful devotees. In this context, the present paper starts with throwing light on the relevance of religions and then studies the evolution of different religions. This paper has a special focus on Hinduism, believed to be the oldest religion on this earth, going into the details of its evolution, struggle for survival and the modern day reforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has always been more than a private system of belief: it is a living cultural force that shapes societies, moral orders, and enduring civilizational patterns. Across human history, religious traditions have been both agents and mirrors of cultural continuity and transformation. In this light, Hinduism stands out as one of the world's oldest surviving religious-civilizational traditions, offering a rich case for examining how a religious system interacts with social structures, historical upheavals, and modern globalization.

This paper seeks to explore the question: **how has Hinduism sustained its influence and adapted to changing social, political, and intercultural contexts across millennia?** In pursuing this aim, the paper does not engage in primary empirical research, but rather undertakes a **conceptual-historical analysis**: synthesizing historical sources, theological texts, and secondary scholarship to trace patterns of resilience, reform, and adaptation in Hinduism.

The significance of this endeavour is threefold. First, understanding Hinduism's civilizational durability helps clarify how religious systems can interplay with society over long time spans. Second, by examining instances of internal reform, external challenges, and cultural assimilation, we may draw lessons for religious traditions

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♦Kanwal, N.D.S is currently an Independent Researcher, Cyberjaya, Malaysia.

encountering modern pluralism and globalization. Third, this analysis contributes to comparative religious and civilizational scholarship, offering a South Asia–rooted perspective on religion and societal change.

In the following sections, we situate this study within relevant literature, explain the methodological approach, present thematic findings, and conclude with reflections on future directions and implications for interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue.

2. **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE CONTEXT**

Religion and civilization have been inseparable across history. Every major civilization has evolved with a religious foundation that provided moral codes, ritual practices, and social cohesion. Scholarly literature underscores that ancient religions were not only expressions of spiritual belief but also mechanisms of cultural regulation and survival (Johnston, 2004; Samuel, 2008). In contemporary scholarship, religion is increasingly examined as a cultural system that adapts under the pressures of modernization and globalization (Adamo & Al-Ansari, 2020; Dung & Kanwal, 2024).

Hinduism, often regarded as the world's oldest living religion, offers a particularly rich case. Its origins are frequently traced to proto-religious practices of the **Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1900 BCE)**, where archaeological evidence reveals ritual objects, proto-deities, and water-bathing sites that resonate with later Hindu customs. The migration of Indo-Aryan groups into the north-western Indian subcontinent (c. 2000–1500 BCE) further contributed to the composition of the **Vedas** and the emergence of what is now called the **Vedic era of Hinduism** (Singh, 2021; Koul, 2024).

As comparative studies show, Hinduism coexisted and interacted with other ancient traditions, many of which later declined or transformed. The table below provides a concise overview of major world religions and their approximate origins:

Table 1: Pre-historic religions in the world

Religion	Start age/ year	Origin
Hinduism	2300-1500 BCE	South Asia, Indus Valley
Zoroastrianism	1500 BCE	Persia
Judaism	2000-1500 BCE	Southern Levant
Jainism	6th Century BCE	India
Buddhism	600-400 BCE	India
Confucianism	551-479 BCE	China
Taoism	500 BCE	China
Shintoism	400-300 BCE	Japan

Source: Authors, 2025

(Compilation from https://www.worldhistory.org/religion *and other sources)*

The resilience of Hinduism, in contrast to the extinction or transformation of many early religions, can be attributed to its **pluralist structure** and capacity for **internal reform**. Reform movements such as the **Bhakti tradition**, the **Brahmo Samaj**, and the **Arya Samaj** highlight how Hinduism repeatedly adapted to new social, political, and colonial contexts (Banahatti, 1995; Heehs, 2008).

In comparative civilizational research, Hinduism has been analyzed as both a deeply historical tradition and a flexible religious system capable of absorbing cultural influences without losing its philosophical core (Dung & Kanwal, 2024). Such studies help situate Hinduism not as an isolated phenomenon but as a participant in the broader dialogue of world civilizations.

3. **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a **conceptual-historical approach**, emphasizing the synthesis of secondary literature and historical evidence to examine the resilience of Hinduism across time. The methodological orientation is not empirical but analytical, aiming to integrate theological, sociological, and historical perspectives into a coherent framework for understanding Hinduism as both a religion and a civilizational force.

3.1 **Source Selection**

The paper relies primarily on **secondary sources**, including:

- Historical and archaeological studies on early civilizations and religions (Adamo & Al-Ansari, 2020; Johnston, 2004).
- Classical Hindu scriptures and philosophical texts (e.g., Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita).
- Scholarly works on reform movements and modern Hindu thinkers (Banahatti, 1995; Heehs, 2008).
- Contemporary analyses of Hinduism's interaction with globalization and interfaith dynamics (Dung & Kanwal, 2024; Dodson, 2021).

To maintain academic rigor, the study incorporates **peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritative books, and verified open-access references**. Where appropriate, grey literature (reports and public domain materials) is used to illustrate contemporary practices such as the **Kumbh Mela**.

3.2 **Analytical Lens**

The analytical lens is threefold:

1. **Historical-Civilizational** – tracing Hinduism's continuity from proto-religious practices of the Indus Valley to its present form.

2. **Theological-Philosophical** – examining core scriptures, reformist movements, and evolving interpretations of dharma, spirituality, and social order.

3. **Sociological-Comparative** – situating Hinduism alongside other world religions in terms of survival, reform, and global diffusion.

3.3 Scope and Limitations

The study is **not empirical** in the sense of field surveys or ethnographic research. Instead, it is **synthetic and comparative**, drawing from diverse historical and scholarly sources. The scope is necessarily broad, covering more than five millennia of religious and cultural development. This breadth enhances civilizational understanding but limits the possibility of deep micro-historical analysis.

3.4 Relevance to Scholarship

By positioning Hinduism as a case of religious resilience, this methodology contributes to the broader discourse on religion and society in the **Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (JHSSR)**. Similar conceptual analyses in JHSSR have highlighted religion's role in shaping cross-cultural understanding (Dung & Kanwal, 2024), supporting the relevance of this study within the journal's focus.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The resilience of Hinduism over more than five millennia can be analyzed through six interrelated themes: evolution and early spread, challenges and invasions, reform and revival, pilgrimage and religious congregation, globalization and diaspora, and issues of tolerance.

4.1 Evolution and Early Spread

The earliest evidence of Hinduism can be traced to proto-religious practices of the **Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1900 BCE)**. Excavations suggest rituals of fire, water purification, and proto-deities that resonate with later Vedic practices (Singh, 2021). The **Indo-Aryan migrations (c. 2000–1500 BCE)** introduced the Vedic hymns, recorded in the *Rigveda*, which formed the philosophical and ritual foundation of Hinduism.

The **Upanishads** (800–300 BCE) expanded this foundation, emphasizing metaphysics, spiritual inquiry, and the pursuit of moksha (liberation). This early period, often called the **Vedic era**, established a pluralist religious system that accommodated multiple deities, philosophical schools, and ritual forms (Koul, 2024).

4.2 Challenges and Invasions

Hinduism endured a series of profound challenges, including political upheavals, foreign invasions, and internal social tensions.

- The incursion of **Alexander's armies (4th century BCE)** and later Islamic conquests (8th–16th centuries CE) resulted in the destruction of temples, forced conversions, and cultural suppression (Dodson, 2021).
- The **caste system** created internal divisions, which sometimes weakened collective identity.
- During the **British colonial period (1757–1947)**, the rise of English education and Western rationalism challenged traditional beliefs.

Picture 1. Worshipping Sun as God, Konark temple, Odisha, India

Illustrates continuity of solar worship from Vedic times to later Hindu traditions
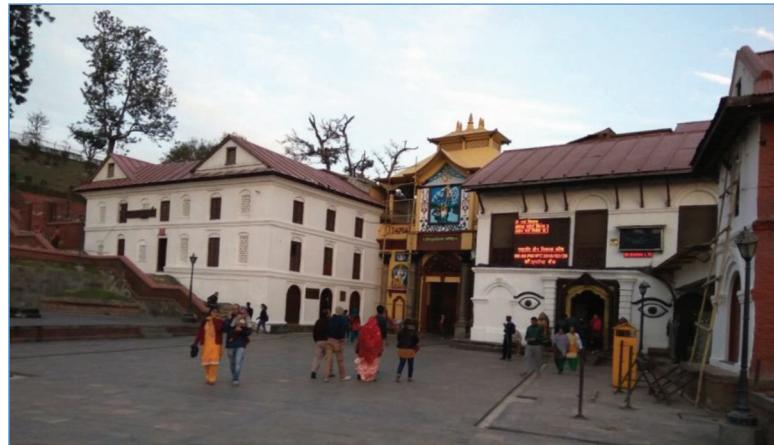
Picture 2. Ancient Pashupatinath temple, Kathmandu, Nepal

Highlights proto-animal symbolism in Hindu ritual continuity.

Picture 3. Old Hindu temple at Dhaka, Bangladesh

Symbolizes resilience of Hindu temples despite centuries of external pressures.

Despite these challenges, Hinduism persisted by localizing practices, sustaining oral traditions, and maintaining strong family and community rituals. This resilience reflects what Subudhi (2025) calls Hinduism's "civilizational adaptability."

4.3 Reform and Revival

The **19th and early 20th centuries** witnessed vigorous reform movements that revitalized Hinduism in response to colonial critique and modernization:

Raja Rammohan Roy founded the *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), emphasizing rational religion and monotheism.

Dayanand Saraswati launched the *Arya Samaj* (1875), advocating Vedic education and social reform (Garg, 1984).

The Bhakti Movement in South India democratized spirituality through vernacular devotional songs (Samuel, 2008).

Swami Vivekananda internationalized Hindu thought, presenting it as a universal philosophy of tolerance (Banahatti, 1995).

Sri Aurobindo emphasized integral yoga as a synthesis of spiritual and modern life (Heehs, 2008).

These reformers demonstrate Hinduism's **capacity for renewal**, ensuring its survival in an age of colonial domination and rising nationalism.

4.4 Pilgrimage and Religious Congregation

Pilgrimage has been central to Hindu identity, reinforcing collective spirituality and social solidarity. Ancient cities like **Varanasi (Kashi)** and **Prayagraj** continue to serve as sacred centers for cremation rituals and holy bathing in the Ganges (Dodson, 2021).

The **Maha Kumbh Mela**, held every twelve years, represents the largest religious gathering in the world. The **Mahakumbh-2025 at Prayagraj** attracted over **660 million pilgrims**, with massive infrastructural arrangements, making it the most significant religious congregation in recorded history (Kulkarni & Nath, 2025). Such events reaffirm Hinduism's vitality in the modern world.

4.5 Hinduism in a Globalized World

Global migration, diaspora communities, and digital technologies have expanded Hinduism beyond its South Asian heartlands.

Picture 4. Ashi Ghat, Varanasi (ancient Kashi), in UP, India

Illustrates how methodological focus links textual sources with enduring ritual practices (holy bathing, cremation, pilgrimage).

- Hindu communities thrive across North America, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia.
- **Virtual worship platforms** and **online discourse** make religious rituals accessible across borders.
- Practices like **Yoga** and festivals like **Diwali** have transcended religious boundaries, becoming global cultural assets (Dung & Kanwal, 2024).
- Institutions such as **ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness)** spread devotional traditions in a modern, globalized framework.

Hinduism's adaptability in the "borderless global village" demonstrates its continuing relevance as both a cultural identity and a universal spiritual system.

4.6 Issues of Tolerance and Intolerance

Despite the global spread, Hinduism—like all major religions—faces contemporary challenges of **fundamentalism, politicization, and intolerance**. While large-scale wars of religion are absent today, religious nationalism, interfaith tensions, and socio-political manipulation of faith continue to test Hinduism's pluralist ethos.

Scholars argue that genuine interfaith dialogue and education in the **"true spirit of religion"** are vital for sustaining peace in multicultural societies (Dung & Kanwal, 2024). Hinduism's emphasis on **pluralism, respect for nature, and spiritual harmony** remains a valuable resource for such engagement.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has traced the **evolution, resilience, and adaptability of Hinduism** across millennia, demonstrating how it has survived foreign invasions, colonial domination, internal tensions, and modern global transformations. The evidence suggests that Hinduism's durability lies in three interrelated qualities:

1. **Pluralism and Philosophical Depth** – Hinduism accommodates diverse schools of thought, deities, and practices, allowing it to absorb new influences without losing its spiritual core.
2. **Capacity for Reform** – From the Bhakti tradition to the Brahmo Samaj, reform movements have repeatedly reinterpreted Hindu philosophy in ways relevant to their historical moment.
3. **Integration of Ritual and Community** – Pilgrimages, festivals, and family-based rituals reinforce communal bonds, ensuring continuity of practice across generations.

Future Directions

In light of these findings, several future directions can be outlined:

- **Interfaith Engagement**: Hinduism's pluralist ethos can provide a framework for peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. Constructive dialogue across religions will be critical for reducing tensions and fostering global harmony (Dung & Kanwal, 2024).
- **Education and Awareness**: Greater emphasis is needed on disseminating the *true spirit* of Hindu philosophy—its focus on compassion, respect for nature, and spiritual balance—while combating superstition and fundamentalism.

Picture 5. Isha's Adiyogi bust of Lord Shiva, the tallest bust-structure in the world, Coimbatore, India

Symbolizing modern institutionalization of Hindu philosophy.

Picture 6-a. Mahakumbha, the biggest ever religious congregation

Visually documents the scale of contemporary pilgrimage gatherings.

Picture 6-b. Mahakumbh 2025

Picture 6-c. Mahakumbh 2025

Note: Photo Credit: *Rabi Narayan Subudhi*, 2025

- **Global Relevance**: As Hindu practices such as Yoga, Ayurveda, and Diwali festivals gain worldwide recognition, there is an opportunity to articulate Hinduism not just as a cultural heritage but also as a **global resource for sustainable living, ecological awareness, and spiritual wellbeing**.

- **Scholarly Inquiry**: Future academic work should deepen the analysis of Hinduism's interaction with modern issues such as gender equality, environmental ethics, and technological change. Empirical case studies of diaspora communities may also enrich comparative religion research.

Closing Reflection

The trajectory of Hinduism illustrates that **civilizational resilience is not rooted in rigidity but in adaptability**. Just as Hinduism has risen from periods of suppression to renewal, it offers lessons for global humanity: that spiritual traditions endure when they embrace diversity, reform, and coexistence. In this sense, Hinduism remains both an ancient tradition and a living resource for the challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Dr. Subudhi is presently an Adjunct Professor at Centurion University of Technology and Management (CUTM). Prior to this, he has been a senior professor at the KIIT School of Management, KIIT University, India. With over 38 years of teaching experience, he has published 18 books and over eighty research papers in the area of quantitative research methodology.

He is an active member of many reputed international academic societies, like, American Society of Engineering Management (ASEM), International Sociology Association (ISA-RC), ORSI, ICA and ICAS. He has supervised 16 scholars for their PhD degrees and received a senior research fellowship (SRF) award from CSIR, Govt. of India, for his doctoral research. He is chapter president of ORSI Bhubaneswar.

He was former Editor of KIIT Management Research Journal, Parikalpana (an Emerald Publication). He is also a reviewer for many international journals. He has published many articles in regional languages and takes interest in Children's literature.

Professor Dr. Rabi Narayan Subudhi
Adjunct Professor
Centurion University of Technology and Management (CUTM)
Odisha, India
E-mail: rabisubudhi@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9502-2098

Nayan Deep S. Kanwal, born in 1958, earned his B.Ag. and M.Sc. degrees from the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in 1982 and 1984, respectively. In 2005, he was awarded a French government scholarship to pursue his Ph.D. in France.

His academic career took root at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Malaysia in 1996, where he served a s a lecturer until 2018. During this period, he concurrently held the position of Chief Executive Editor for several esteemed academic journals, contributing significantly to scholarly publishing.

In 2016, Professor Kanwal was invited to serve as a Visiting Professor at BINUS University in Indonesia. He is currently based in the United States, working as a research publications consultant. In addition to his consultancy, he actively mentors and trains students on a freelance basis. His primary research interests lie in environmental studies and English language education.

Professor Kanwal is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), a Life Member of the British Institute of Management (BIM), an Associate Member of the Marketing Institute of Singapore (AMIS), and an Associate Member of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology (AIAST).

Professor Dr. Nayan Deep S. Kanwal
Independent Researcher
Austin, Texas
TX 78705
USA
E-mail: nayan.kanwal@gmail.com