

The Role of Śaraṇāgati (Surrender to God) in Psychological Well-Being and Anxiety: A Correlational Study Among Bhakti Devotees

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Abstract

The present study examined the role of Śaraṇāgati (surrender to God) in relation to **psychological well-being** and **anxiety** among Bhakti devotees. Rooted in Hindu spiritual traditions, Śaraṇāgati is considered a central tenet of Bhakti Yoga and involves ego renunciation, trust in divine will, and surrender of personal agency. A total of 40 adult participants (20 males and 20 females) who regularly engaged in devotional practices such as mantra chanting, scriptural study, and temple worship were surveyed using three standardized measures: a researcher-developed 20-item Śaraṇāgati Scale, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), and the 42-item Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale. Correlational analyses revealed a **significant positive relationship between Śaraṇāgati and psychological well-being** ($r = .92$, $p < .001$) and a **significant negative relationship with anxiety** ($r = -.78$, $p < .001$). Regression analyses further confirmed that Śaraṇāgati was a **strong predictor of well-being** ($\beta = 2.63$, $p < .001$) and **inversely predicted anxiety levels** ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < .001$). Additionally, subscale-level analyses indicated that **Self-Acceptance and Autonomy** were the most positively influenced dimensions of well-being. These findings suggest that spiritual surrender may function as a **protective psychological mechanism**, enhancing emotional resilience and lowering anxiety among spiritually committed individuals. The study highlights the relevance of indigenous spiritual constructs such as Śaraṇāgati in understanding mental health within culturally embedded contexts.

Keywords: Śaraṇāgati, Bhakti, psychological well-being, anxiety, surrender, Indian psychology

1. Introduction

• *Spirituality and Mental Health: A Growing Interface*

In recent decades, psychologists and mental health professionals have increasingly recognized the importance of spirituality in promoting psychological resilience, well-being, and coping. Particularly in collectivist and religious cultures like India, spiritual frameworks often form the core basis of personal identity, worldview, and emotional regulation (Sharma, 2006). Yet, empirical studies have often focused on generic dimensions of religiosity or Western models of spiritual coping, neglecting indigenous constructs such as Śaraṇāgati (complete surrender to God)—a foundational pillar of Indian Bhakti philosophy.

• *Understanding Śaraṇāgati: Surrender as Transformation*

The Sanskrit term Śaraṇāgati is derived from the root *śaraṇa* (refuge or protection) and *gati* (movement or path), denoting the act of taking refuge in the divine through complete, unconditional surrender. It is a central concept in Bhakti Yoga, particularly within Vishishtadvaita Vedanta as propounded by Śrī

Rāmānuja, who emphasized Prapatti (surrender) as a direct means to liberation, equal or even superior to Vedic ritualism (Ramanuja, trans. Mahadevan, 1970). The six limbs of surrender—acceptance of God as protector, humility, faith, renunciation of ego, complete submission to divine will, and belief in God's mercy—form the psycho-spiritual architecture of Śaraṇāgati.

In sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna urges Arjuna to surrender unconditionally: “*Sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekam śaraṇam vraja*” (18.66), meaning “Abandon all duties and surrender to Me alone” (Radhakrishnan, 1948). This surrender is neither escapism nor passivity; rather, it is ego transcendence, marked by an inner shift from doership to trust in the divine order (Sridharan, 2007).

• *Śaraṇāgati as a Psychological Construct*

Although primarily a theological concept, Śaraṇāgati can be understood as a psychological posture characterized by reduced cognitive rigidity, non-attachment, and emotional regulation through spiritual anchoring. It aligns with what Pargament (1997) called “positive religious coping,” which includes benevolent reappraisal, collaborative coping with God, and spiritual support-seeking. By contrast, negative religious coping (e.g., spiritual discontent, feelings of abandonment) has been linked to distress.

Śaraṇāgati embodies positive religious coping but goes further—it dissolves egoic struggle, creating acceptance, resilience, and existential clarity. In this sense, Śaraṇāgati is an Indian psychological equivalent of radical acceptance and surrender-based therapy, akin to spiritual detachment in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), but rooted in Bhakti and Vedantic tradition.

• *Psychological Well-Being and Surrender*

Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological well-being includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Surrender as a spiritual process may enhance well-being across all these domains. For example:

- Autonomy and mastery improve as devotees release external control needs, finding inner peace in divine will.
- Purpose and growth are enhanced through devotional commitment and alignment with cosmic purpose.
- Self-acceptance and relational harmony increase through the cultivation of humility and surrender of ego.

This aligns with Indian psychological models (Sharma, 2006; Rao, 2005) which posit that letting go of 'I-ness' (ahamkāra) and surrendering to a higher reality leads to lasting contentment (santosha) and liberation from mental afflictions.

• *Śaraṇāgati and Anxiety*

Anxiety is often rooted in uncertainty, fear of loss, or a perceived lack of control. Śaraṇāgati directly addresses these root causes by instilling a sense of divine control, spiritual acceptance, and ultimate trust. Devotees often reframe suffering as divine grace, which provides existential stability and lowers

anticipatory fear. Thus, while Western models emphasize problem-focused or emotion-focused coping, Śaraṇāgati introduces a transpersonal spiritual coping framework, where the locus of control is divinely anchored, reducing internal psychological tension (Pargament, 1997).

Existing studies on religious coping (Pargament, 1997), faith-based acceptance, and spiritual practices show that such constructs reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. This mirrors Śaraṇāgati in Indian Bhakti traditions, where surrender serves as both a spiritual and psychological release from ego and fear.

Rao (2005) highlighted how Indian spiritual practices, including mantra chanting and introspective surrender, foster transpersonal growth and emotional regulation, with Śaraṇāgati functioning as an indigenous coping resource. Similarly, Sharma (2006) found that surrender to a benevolent divine presence promotes emotional stability, self-acceptance, and purpose in life, aligning with Ryff's (1989) six dimensions of psychological well-being.

Ramanuja's Vedārthasaṅgraha (Mahadevan, 1970) further conceptualizes Śaraṇāgati as a transformative process, reducing existential fear through ego renunciation and divine trust. Despite this rich foundation, empirical studies exploring Śaraṇāgati as a measurable psychological construct remain limited in Indian psychology.

However, empirical studies on Śaraṇāgati as a measurable psychological construct remain virtually absent, despite its prominence in Indian thought.

• *The Present Study*

Given this background, the present study seeks to empirically explore the relationship between Śaraṇāgati, anxiety, and psychological well-being among adult practitioners of Bhakti-based spirituality. A researcher-developed scale of Śaraṇāgati was used alongside established psychological instruments to assess its correlational impact on anxiety (using GAD-7) and psychological well-being (using Ryff's scale). The study contributes to Indian Psychology, spiritual healing models, and culturally sensitive mental health frameworks.

• *Objectives of the Study*

- 1) To assess the relationship between Śaraṇāgati and psychological well-being
- 2) To examine the relationship between Śaraṇāgati and anxiety

• *Hypotheses*

- 1) **H1:** Śaraṇāgati will be positively correlated with psychological well-being.
- 2) **H2:** Śaraṇāgati will be negatively correlated with anxiety.

2. Method

• *Participants*

The study involved 40 adult Bhakti practitioners, consisting of 20 males and 20 females, aged between 18 and 65 years. All participants identified with the Hindu religion and were actively engaged in Bhakti-based devotional practices, such as mantra chanting, temple worship, scriptural reading (e.g., Bhagavad Gītā, Ramcharitmanas), and listening to pravachan (spiritual discourses) on devotional themes. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from temples, satsangs, spiritual gatherings, and Bhakti communities located in the Jaipur District of Rajasthan, India.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- i. Identified as followers of the Hindu Religion
- ii. Regular engagement in Bhakti-based devotional practices for at least one year
- iii. Age between 18 and 65 years
- iv. Basic literacy in Hindi or English

Exclusion criteria included:

- i. Individuals reporting any past or present clinical psychiatric diagnosis
- ii. Individuals currently undergoing psychological or psychiatric treatment

• Measures

1) Śaraṇāgati Scale (Researcher-Developed)

This 20-item Likert-type scale was developed to assess the intensity of spiritual surrender to God, rooted in Bhakti Yoga philosophy. The items reflect classical attributes of Śaraṇāgati such as trust in divine will, ego renunciation, acceptance of suffering, dependence on divine protection, and offering the fruits of action to God.

Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*), yielding total scores from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater spiritual surrender.

Note: The scale was used as a theoretical measure and has not undergone formal psychometric validation.

2) Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006)

The GAD-7 is a 7-item self-report scale used to measure the severity of generalized anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks. Items are rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*), with total scores ranging from 0 to 21. Interpretation is based on the following cutoffs: (a) 0–4: Minimal anxiety, (b) 5–9: Mild anxiety, (c) 10–14: Moderate anxiety, (d) 15–21: Severe anxiety.

The GAD-7 is widely used in community-based research and has excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.89$).

3) Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale – 42 Item Version (Ryff, 1989)

This scale measures six dimensions of psychological well-being: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. Each subscale

contains 7 items, and responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*). Several items are reverse-scored, following the original scoring instructions.

- i. Total score range: 42 to 252
- ii. Higher scores indicate greater psychological well-being. Subscale scores were also analyzed independently to gain insight into domain-specific strengths.

• **Procedure**

Participants were approached personally at local temples and Bhakti gatherings (satsangs) and invited to participate in a study on spiritual life and emotional health. After establishing eligibility based on inclusion criteria, participants were given a paper-based questionnaire packet containing:

- i. A brief demographic form (age, gender, years of spiritual practice)
- ii. The 20-item Śaraṇāgati Scale
- iii. The 7-item GAD-7 Scale
- iv. The 42-item Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale

Participants completed the forms in a quiet space within the premises of the temple or gathering location. The average completion time was approximately 25–30 minutes. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was provided in Hindi or English, depending on the participant's preference.

• **Data Analysis**

All responses were coded and entered into SPSS. The following statistical analyses were performed:

- i. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) were calculated for all key variables.
- ii. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to assess the relationships between Śaraṇāgati, anxiety (GAD-7), and psychological well-being (Ryff).
- iii. Simple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine whether Śaraṇāgati significantly predicted:
 - Anxiety levels (GAD-7)
 - Psychological well-being (total PWB score)

All analyses were conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$.

3. Results

• **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all study variables ($N = 40$). The mean Śaraṇāgati score was 73.33 ($SD = 7.66$), GAD-7 anxiety score was 6.95 ($SD = 3.02$), and Ryff's total Psychological Well-Being (PWB) score was 182.10 ($SD = 21.91$). Subscale means for PWB ranged from 29.53 (Environmental Mastery) to 31.25 (Self-Acceptance).

As illustrated in Figure 1, Self-Acceptance ($M = 31.25$) and Autonomy ($M = 30.85$) showed the highest mean scores among the psychological well-being dimensions, while Environmental Mastery ($M = 29.53$) reflected the lowest average Score.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Śaraṇāgati Score	73.33	7.66	59	90
GAD-7 Anxiety Score	6.95	3.02	0	12
PWB Total Score	182.10	21.91	133	230
Autonomy	30.85	4.71	21	42
Environmental Mastery	29.53	4.04	21	40
Personal Growth	30.63	4.59	21	39
Positive Relations	30.53	4.47	23	40
Purpose in Life	29.95	4.21	17	37
Self-Acceptance	31.25	4.80	19	40

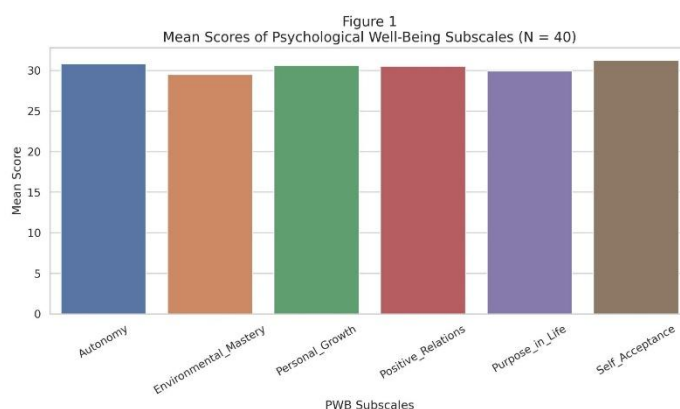


Figure 1

Bar chart displaying the mean scores of the six subscales of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (42-item version). Self-Acceptance and Autonomy showed the highest mean scores among Bhakti devotees ($N = 40$), while Environmental Mastery reflected the lowest.

• Correlation Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine associations among key variables (see Table 2). Śaraṇāgati was significantly:

1. **Negatively correlated** with anxiety ($r = -.78$, $p < .001$)
2. **Positively correlated** with total PWB ($r = .92$, $p < .001$)
3. Also significantly correlated with all six subscales of PWB (r range = .70–.83)

Figure 2 depicts the negative relationship between Śaraṇāgati and anxiety. This visual trend supports the significant inverse correlation ($r = -.78, p < .001$) observed in Table 2, indicating that greater surrender is associated with reduced anxiety levels.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables (N = 40)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Śaraṇāgati	—								
2. GAD-7	-.78***	—							
3. PWB Total	.92***	-.69***	—						
4. Autonomy	.83***	-.55***	.89***	—					
5. Environ. Mastery	.81***	-.69***	.87***	.80***	—				
6. Personal Growth	.82***	-.51***	.85***	.72***	.62***	—			
7. Positive Relations	.81***	-.65***	.87***	.72***	.78***	.71***	—		
8. Purpose in Life	.70***	-.53***	.81***	.70***	.68***	.72***	.67***	—	
9. Self-Acceptance	.71***	-.39*	.81***	.73***	.67***	.79***	.71***	.68***	—

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

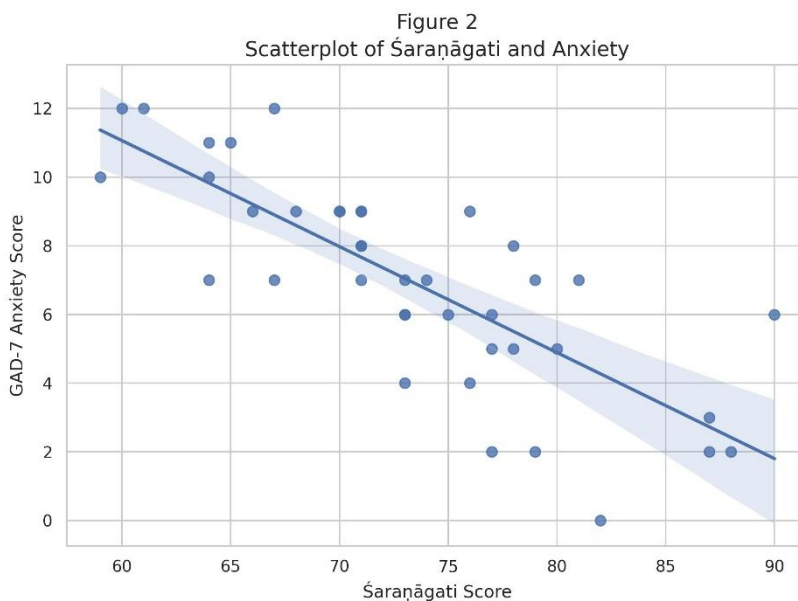


Figure 2

Scatterplot illustrating the negative relationship between Śaraṇāgati and GAD-7 Anxiety Scores among Bhakti devotees (N = 40). Higher surrender scores were associated with lower anxiety levels.

- **Regression Analyses**

Śaraṇāgati as a Predictor of Anxiety (GAD-7)

A simple linear regression was conducted with Śaraṇāgati as the independent variable and anxiety (GAD-7 score) as the dependent variable. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 38) = 60.07$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 61.3% of the variance in anxiety.

- $\beta = -0.31$, $p < .001$
- Higher levels of spiritual surrender were associated with significantly lower anxiety symptoms.

Śaraṇāgati as a Predictor of Psychological Well-Being (Total PWB)

Another linear regression was performed using Śaraṇāgati to predict overall psychological well-being, as measured by the total PWB score. The model was highly significant, $F(1, 38) = 207.50$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 value of .85.

- $\beta = 2.63$, $p < .001$
- Greater surrender to God strongly predicted higher psychological well-being.

As shown in Figure 3, the scatterplot clearly depicts a strong positive relationship between Śaraṇāgati and psychological well-being. The upward trend confirms that higher levels of surrender are consistently associated with greater well-being outcomes, supporting both the correlation findings (Table 2) and regression analysis results (Table 3).

Śaraṇāgati Predicting PWB Subscales

To explore domain-specific associations, six additional simple regressions were conducted with each PWB subscale as the outcome variable. The results are summarized in Table 3.

All six regression models were statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of surrender consistently predicted better outcomes across all dimensions of psychological well-being. The strongest effects were observed for **Autonomy** ($\beta = 0.51$, $R^2 = .69$) and **Personal Growth** ($\beta = 0.49$, $R^2 = .67$), suggesting a strong influence of surrender in these domains.

Table 3

Simple Linear Regression of Śaraṇāgati Predicting Anxiety and Psychological Well-Being Dimensions (N = 40)

Dependent Variable	β Coefficient	R^2	F	p-value
Anxiety (GAD-7)	-0.31	.613	60.07	< .001
Psychological Well-Being (Total)	2.63	.85	207.50	< .001
Autonomy	0.51	.69	83.70	< .001
Environmental Mastery	0.43	.65	70.55	< .001
Personal Growth	0.49	.67	77.39	< .001
Positive Relations	0.47	.65	70.56	< .001
Purpose in Life	0.38	.49	36.52	< .001
Self-Acceptance	0.45	.51	39.43	< .001

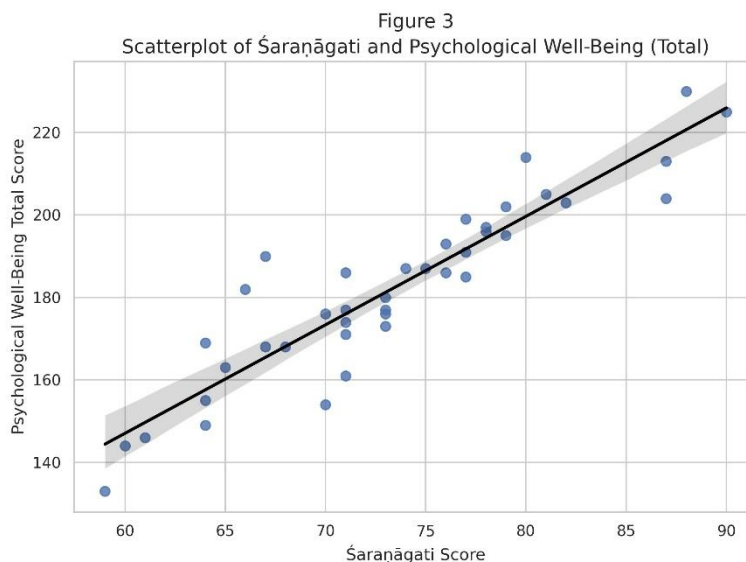


Figure 3

Scatterplot illustrating the strong positive relationship between Śaraṇāgati and total psychological well-being (PWB) scores among Bhakti devotees ($N = 40$). Higher levels of spiritual surrender were associated with significantly higher well-being, as confirmed by regression analysis.

Summary of Findings

The findings robustly support both hypotheses:

- H1: Higher levels of Śaraṇāgati were significantly associated with higher psychological well-being.
- H2: Higher Śaraṇāgati was significantly associated with lower anxiety.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between Śaraṇāgati (surrender to God) and two key psychological outcomes: anxiety and psychological well-being, among adult practitioners of Bhakti in Jaipur, India. Consistent with the hypotheses, the findings indicate that greater levels of Śaraṇāgati were significantly associated with lower anxiety and higher levels of psychological well-being, including its six sub-domains.

• Interpretation of Key Findings

The strong negative correlation between Śaraṇāgati and GAD-7 anxiety scores ($r = -.78, p < .001$) suggests that surrender to the divine may function as a psychospiritual coping mechanism, reducing psychological distress. This finding echoes earlier work by Pargament et al. (1998), who demonstrated that positive religious coping, particularly “deferring control to God,” was significantly related to lower psychological distress and enhanced emotional adaptation. Similarly, Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009) found that individuals engaged in devotional religiosity often report greater emotional stability and lower anxiety, supporting the role of spiritual surrender as a buffer against psychological turmoil.

Furthermore, Śaraṇāgati was strongly and positively associated with Ryff's six-factor model of psychological well-being ($r = .92$, $p < .001$). Each of the six subscales—autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance—was significantly predicted by higher levels of spiritual surrender. These results align with the view that Bhakti-based surrender is not passive, but rather fosters a sense of meaning, acceptance, emotional maturity, and existential coherence (Sharma, 2006; Rao, 2005). Emmons (2005) highlighted that surrender to the sacred allows personal striving to be reoriented toward meaningful spiritual goals, which enhances life satisfaction and psychological growth.

Regression analysis further revealed that Śaraṇāgati most strongly predicted autonomy and personal growth, suggesting that surrender in the Indian spiritual context may paradoxically enhance one's inner freedom and self-development. This interpretation resonates with Ramanuja's Vedārthasaṅgraha (Mahadevan, 1970), where surrender is conceptualized not as helplessness but as active alignment with divine truth. Likewise, Cornah (2006) emphasized that spirituality fosters resilience, meaning-making, and emotional healing, all of which were reflected in the well-being profiles of participants in this study.

Evidence from clinical settings also supports these conclusions. Targ and Levine (2002) demonstrated that surrender-oriented mind–body–spirit interventions were associated with reduced emotional distress and improved coping in women facing serious illness. Though in a different population, this provides further support for the therapeutic effects of spiritual surrender, similar to the Bhakti-based model investigated here.

• *Theoretical Implications*

These findings provide empirical support for indigenous constructs like Śaraṇāgati to be integrated into contemporary psychological discourse. Western models of well-being often emphasize individual autonomy and mastery, while Eastern approaches such as Bhakti emphasize transcendence, surrender, and relational spirituality. This study bridges that gap by showing that Śaraṇāgati contributes meaningfully to both emotional regulation (lower anxiety) and flourishing (higher well-being), confirming its value as a culturally grounded psychological resource.

Additionally, the study supports the transpersonal psychological perspective that spirituality can foster self-transcendence, resilience, and transformation (Rao, 2005), and that surrender may be developmentally adaptive, especially when rooted in a benevolent view of the divine. As Dalal (2006) asserted, Indian psychology must include such culturally resonant constructs to develop context-sensitive and spiritually integrative models of mental health.

• *Practical and Clinical Implications*

The results suggest that Bhakti-based surrender practices could be integrated into spiritually sensitive mental health interventions, especially for individuals who draw upon faith-based worldviews. For counselors, therapists, and spiritual care practitioners working in the Indian context, inviting clients to explore surrender not as helplessness, but as healing, may offer culturally congruent pathways to emotional regulation and life satisfaction.

Furthermore, for Bhakti communities and spiritual teachers, this study offers validation that regular devotional practices grounded in Śaraṇāgati may support not only spiritual growth but measurable psychological health.

• *Limitations and Future Directions*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 40$) and region-specific (Jaipur), which limits generalizability. Second, the Śaraṇāgati scale used was researcher-developed and not yet psychometrically validated, although it was rooted in classical and scriptural attributes. Future research should focus on scale validation and explore causal or longitudinal designs to assess the enduring impact of surrender practices.

It would also be beneficial to compare different forms of devotional surrender (e.g., Shaiva, Vaishnava, or Buddhist surrender traditions), and to assess whether gender, age, or years of spiritual practice moderate these psychological outcomes.

• *Summary*

In summary, this study contributes to a growing body of literature affirming that Bhakti-based surrender to God (Śaraṇāgati) is not merely a theological ideal, but a powerful psychospiritual mechanism for reducing anxiety and enhancing well-being. Rooted in Indian spiritual traditions and validated through psychological inquiry, Śaraṇāgati emerges as a construct worthy of further research and respectful inclusion in culturally relevant psychological theory and practice.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the role of **Śaraṇāgati (surrender to God)** in relation to **psychological well-being** and **anxiety** among adult Bhakti practitioners. Drawing upon both classical Indian spiritual philosophy and contemporary psychological theory, the study sought to empirically assess whether the internalized experience of spiritual surrender contributes to emotional regulation and mental health.

Using validated scales and a researcher-developed Śaraṇāgati measure, data from 40 participants revealed that higher levels of surrender were significantly associated with lower anxiety and greater psychological well-being, including all six dimensions of Ryff's model: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Regression analyses further demonstrated that Śaraṇāgati was a strong and consistent predictor of these mental health outcomes.

These findings affirm that Śaraṇāgati, far from being a merely theological ideal, functions as a culturally grounded psychological strength. It offers a framework for meaning-making, ego transcendence, and emotional acceptance (factors that support resilience and flourishing). The study adds to the growing literature on indigenous and spiritually integrative approaches to mental health, particularly in the Indian context.

Future research should further refine the measurement of Śaraṇāgati, expand to diverse spiritual traditions, and assess its role across different populations and psychological conditions. Overall, this research

encourages a rethinking of how spiritual surrender (often misunderstood as passivity) can instead be recognized as a profound inner resource for well-being and transformation.

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