

FAITH AND FITNESS: EXAMINING RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES TOWARDS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN KERALA

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Abstract

In Kerala, where Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are the dominant faiths, religious beliefs shape individual and collective approaches to physical exercise in unique ways. Religious institutions, including temples, mosques, and churches, serve as community hubs where health initiatives can be integrated to promote physical well-being. However, the religion imposes several limitations on clothes, prayer timing, and doctrine explanation. This becomes a constraint in performing daily exercises. Therefore, health workers have to formulate culture-sensitive intervention activities that help to engage the religious communities into regular physical exercise, respecting the value of the religions. The research article analyses religious beliefs of various religious traditions of physical exercise participation in India among students in Malabar district, Kerala. The sample consisted of 610 participants, aged between 14 and 19 years, comprising 353 Hindus, 143 Muslims, and 114 Christians. The Attitudes towards Physical Activity Scale (ATPAS) was used to assess attitudes, and data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. Statistical techniques, including descriptive analysis and one-way ANOVA, were employed to examine variations in attitudes towards physical activity across religious groups. Results indicated a difference between religious groups on attitudes towards Social Experience, Health and Fitness, Risks, Thrill and Excitement, Aesthetic Experience, Catharsis, and Ascetic Experience at $p < 0.01$. Hindus and Christians showed higher levels in attitudes towards physical activity than Muslims. These results point to the necessity of targeted strategies for promoting physical activity that take into account religious and cultural contexts to promote healthy practices in an inclusive manner.

Introduction

Physical activity is an important aspect of overall health, which contributes to improved cardiovascular fitness, mental well-being, and longevity (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). However, attitudes towards physical activity are deeply influenced by sociocultural factors, particularly religion. In India, where Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are the predominant faiths, religious beliefs shape individual and collective approaches to physical exercise in unique ways (Sharma & Sharma, 2020). Each of these religions has specific instructions or customs that either support or prohibit various physical activities.

Hinduism, the religion practiced by the majority in India, has a rich history of synthesizing physical activity with spirituality. Yoga, which began as an ancient Hindu practice, focuses on the connection of the mind-body and supports physical well-being through the use of postures called asanas and breathing techniques known as pranayama (Flood, 1996). The Bhagavad

Gita encourages physical fitness as part of one's practice of dharma towards living a balanced life (Dasgupta, 2005). On the contrary, certain Hindu ascetic streams argue for the sublime over the physical, which may result in their lesser engagement in exercise (Chakrabarti, 2017). Strict caste law and gender apparatus in Hindu societies impose limitations on participating in physical activity (Gupta & Reddy, 2016).

Islam, being the second-largest religion in India, also considers physical health. Prophet Muhammad had emphasized swimming, archery, and horse riding, among other activities in life, so as to maintain the level of fitness (Sajid, 2018). It is an important pillar for the muscular body in order to achieve salah and Sehri in Ramadan, which needs a great level of corporal strength (Ansari, 2012). However, cultural aspects of modesty and segregation could limit the participation of Muslim women in sports (Khan & Bukhari, 2020). Despite these limitations, Islamic teaching values physical activity if performed appropriately and ethically.

Christianity is a minor religion in India but has also had its impact on the attitude of physical activity. Missionary schools and Christian institutions have historically promoted organized sports and fitness programs, emphasizing the connection between physical health and spiritual well-being (D'Souza, 2008). Biblical teachings, such as 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, encourage believers to treat their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, advocating for a healthy lifestyle (Murray, 2015). However, variations in denominational beliefs and cultural adaptations influence how Christian communities in India engage in physical activity (Mathew, 2019).

Religious institutions play a significant role in influencing public attitudes towards physical activity in India. Temples, mosques, and churches are community centres where health initiatives can be introduced into the activities of its members (Idler, 2014). Some faith-based interventions that integrate religious values with physical exercise have shown great effectiveness in promoting health among religious communities (Reddy et al., 2013). Despite this, religious restrictions on attire and time constraints due to worship practices and theological interpretations sometimes act as barriers to regular exercises (McGuire, 2008).

Understanding the relationship between religion and attitudes towards physical activity in India is essential for developing inclusive health policies and community programs. Examining the unique perspectives of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities which can help health practitioners design culturally sensitive interventions that encourage active lifestyles while respecting religious values (Koenig et al., 2012). This study aims to explore the diverse religious perspectives on physical activity in India.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are to compare attitudes towards physical activity across religions in Kerala.

Participants

The sample comprised 610 (353 Hindus, 143 Muslims, 114 Christians) students from Malabar region of Kerala. Age between 14 and 19 years.

Measures

Attitudes Towards Physical Activity Scale (ATPAS): The scale consisted of six subscales, each designed to assess different dimensions of attitudes. Each subscale contained 9 to 10 statements, rated by respondents on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Positive statements were scored from 5 ("strongly agree") to 1 ("strongly disagree"), while negative statements were reverse-scored, from 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). The total attitude score for each subscale ranged from 9 to 45, with higher scores reflecting a more positive attitude.

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 26.0 software was used for data analysis in this study. The statistical analysis includes 1) Descriptive statistics; 2) one-way ANNOVA;

Result

Before calculating differences among religions, the researcher calculates the descriptive statistics of the data. The result is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the attitudes towards physical activity variables among religions.

		N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
SE	Hindu	353	32.96	4.166	.223	32.52	33.40
	Muslim	143	29.92	5.034	.418	29.09	30.74
	Christian	114	33.54	3.429	.320	32.91	34.17
	Total	610	32.34	4.475	.181	31.99	32.70
HF	Hindu	353	29.04	3.887	.208	28.63	29.45
	Muslim	143	26.40	4.358	.362	25.68	27.12
	Christian	114	29.48	3.652	.341	28.80	30.15
	Total	610	28.50	4.129	.167	28.17	28.83
RTE	Hindu	353	29.26	3.694	.197	28.87	29.65
	Muslim	143	26.97	4.717	.392	26.20	27.75
	Christian	114	29.90	3.177	.296	29.31	30.48
	Total	610	28.84	4.014	.163	28.52	29.16
AEE	Hindu	353	29.96	3.465	.185	29.60	30.32
	Muslim	143	27.87	4.129	.343	27.19	28.55
	Christian	114	30.70	2.656	.248	30.21	31.19
	Total	610	29.60	3.640	.147	29.31	29.89

C	Hindu	353	29.65	3.671	.196	29.26	30.03
	Muslim	143	27.62	4.419	.367	26.90	28.35
	Christian	114	29.94	3.193	.298	29.35	30.53
	Total	610	29.22	3.881	.157	28.91	29.53
ASE	Hindu	353	32.93	3.852	.206	32.52	33.33
	Muslim	143	30.59	4.949	.411	29.78	31.41
	Christian	114	33.57	3.564	.332	32.92	34.23
	Total	610	32.50	4.226	.171	32.16	32.83

SE- Social Experience, **HF-** Health and Fitness, **RTE-** Risks, thrill and excitement, **AAE -** Aesthetic Experience, **C-** Catharsis, **ASE-** Ascetic Experience.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation of Attitudes Towards Physical Activity variables. From the table, it can be explained that the Social Experience variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 32.96 ± 4.166 , Muslim religion 29.92 ± 5.034 , Christian religion 33.54 ± 3.429 and total mean score shows that 32.34 ± 4.475 . Health and Fitness variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 29.04 ± 3.887 , Muslim religion 26.40 ± 4.358 , Christian religion 3.652 and total mean score shows 28.50 ± 4.129 . Risks, thrill and excitement variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 29.26 ± 3.694 , Muslim religion 26.97 ± 4.717 , Christian religion 29.90 ± 3.177 and total mean score shows 28.84 ± 4.014 . Aesthetic Experience variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 29.96 ± 3.465 , Muslim religion 27.87 ± 4.129 , Christian religion 30.70 ± 2.656 and total mean score shows 29.60 ± 3.640 . Catharsis variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 29.65 ± 3.671 , Muslim religion 27.62 ± 4.419 , Christian religion 29.94 ± 3.193 and total mean score shows 29.22 ± 3.881 . Ascetic Experience variable obtained in Hindu religion a mean of 23.17 ± 3.389 , Muslim religion 22.52 ± 3.160 , Christian religion 22.92 ± 2.631 and total mean score shows 22.97 ± 3.213 .

Religious Differences

One-way ANNOVA to explore the religious differences in attitudes towards physical activity variables. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: One-way ANNOVA Differences among Religious on the attitudes towards physical activity variables.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
SE	Between Groups	1149.767	2	574.883	31.585	.00
	Within Groups	11.47.938	607	18.201		
	Total	12197.705	609			
HF	Between Groups	852.641	2	426.320	27.160	.00
	Within Groups	9527.853	607	15.697		
	Total	10380.493	609			
RTE	Between Groups	695.629	2	347.815	23.160	.00
	Within Groups	9115.977	607	15.018		

	Total	9811.607	609			
AEE	Between Groups	620.095	2	310.048	25.269	.00
	Within Groups	7447.898	607	12.270		
	Total	8067.933	609			
C	Between Groups	494.637	2	247.318	17.298	.00
	Within Groups	8678.486	607	14.297		
	Total	9179.123	609			
ASE	Between Groups	724.156	2	362.078	21.644	.00
	Within Groups	10154.329	607	16.729		
	Total	10878.485	609			

SE- Social Experience, **HF-** Health and Fitness, **RTE-** Risks, thrill and excitement, **AEE -** Aesthetic Experience, **C-** Catharsis, **ASE-** Ascetic Experience.

In Table 2, there is a significant difference among religions in Social Experience, Health and Fitness, Risks, thrill and excitement, Aesthetic Experience, Catharsis, Ascetic Experience at ($p < 0.01$). The findings show that there is a significant and high difference in religious Attitudes towards physical activity. Turkey's post hoc test was used to find the difference among religion. The result shows in the table 3.

Table 3: Turkey's Post hoc test result among religions

Variable name	Religion			Mean difference	Significance
	Hindu	Muslim	Christian		
Social Experience	32.96	29.92		3.04	.00
	32.96		33.54	-.58	.41
		29.92	33.54	-3.62	.00
Health and Fitness	29.04	26.40		2.64	.00
	29.04		29.48	-.44	.56
		26.40	29.48	-3.08	.00
Risks, thrill and excitement	29.26	26.97		2.29	.00
	29.26		28.84	.42	.28
		26.97	28.84	-2.92	.00
Aesthetic Experience	29.96	27.87		2.09	.00
	29.96		30.70	-.74	.12
		27.87	30.70	-2.83	.00
Catharsis	29.65	27.62		2.03	.00
	29.65		29.94	-.29	.75
		27.62	29.94	-2.32	.00

Ascetic Experience	32.93	30.59		2.33	.00
	32.93		33.57	-.64	.75
		30.59	33.57	2.98	.00

In Table 3 there is a significant in difference among Social Experience, Health and Fitness, Aesthetic Experience, Catharsis and Ascetic Experience in Hindu, Muslim and Christians the result shows that Christians are higher Physical Activity while comparing Hindu and Muslim. Muslims scored low score, the result indicates there is a significant difference in Hindu and Muslim and Christian and Muslim but there is no difference in Christians and Hindu. while comparing Risks, thrill and excitement the result shows that Hindus and Muslim, Christians and Muslim there is a significant difference between score Hindus and Christians score higher in compare than Muslim and no significant difference in Hindus and Christians. Hindus scored higher and Muslims scored lower scores.

Discussion

These significant differences observed between religions in their attitude towards physical activity indicate the significance of cultural and religious beliefs in shaping perception and participation in physical exercise. Doctrinal teachings, cultural traditions, and community norms have the power to influence lifestyle choices about physical activity among individuals influenced by religion (Koenig et al., 2012). In this research, both Hindus and Christians reported a great deal more engagement across these several dimensions of physical activity, to wit: Social Experience, Health and Fitness, Risks, Thrill and Excitement, Aesthetic Experience, Catharsis, and Ascetic Experience, compared to Muslims.

Hinduism has been seen as the tradition that emphasized integration of physical and spiritual well-being, where practices such as yoga and traditional forms of movement are included in religious and cultural life (Flood, 1996). It discourages an imbalanced lifestyle, which involves indulgence of the body and mind with equal amounts of exercise and rigidity, which can result in a positive attitude towards exercise (Dasgupta, 2005). Furthermore, Hindu festivals and rituals often require vigorous physical exertion, such as long pilgrimages or vibrant dance celebrations that emphasize the importance of physical activity during religious observances (Chakrabarti, 2017).

Christianity, particularly through missionary efforts in India, has historically promoted structured physical activities, including organized sports and fitness programs in schools and churches (D'Souza, 2008). Biblical teachings, such as the concept of the body being a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), encourage followers to maintain physical health as a form of honouring God (Murray, 2015). This perspective aligns with a more proactive approach to exercise and fitness among Christian communities in India.

Conversely, lesser engagement in sports and exercises may be a function of some specific cultural and religious factors for Muslims. The tenets of Islam promote modesty, which in some instances reduces participation in co-ed sports or activities requiring special dress codes (Khan & Bukhari, 2020). Religious activities, including regular prayers and Ramadan fasting,

might also interfere with exercise and energy levels, reducing the propensity to engage in energetic physical activities (Ansari, 2012).

These findings are consistent with earlier studies which reported that religious beliefs and community norms have an immense impact on health behaviours such as participation in physical activity (Koenig, 2012; Idler, 2014). The role of religious institutions in promoting or restricting exercise should be further explored to develop culturally sensitive interventions that encourage physical activity across all religious groups. Future research might look into how faith-based programs can effectively integrate exercise into religious life, respecting the diversity of beliefs while being inclusive and pushing for overall well-being.

Conclusion

- Significant differences were observed among religions in Attitudes Towards Physical Activity variables.
- According to Social Experience, Health and Fitness, Risks, Thrill and Excitement, Aesthetic Experience, Catharsis, and Ascetic Experience, Hindus and Christians showed a greater level as compared to Muslims.

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