

Embodied Pluralism: Religious Liberty and Cultural Identity in Urban South India

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Received: 24th October 2025

Accepted: 17th December 2025

Published: 5th February 2026

ABSTRACT

Hyderabad, one of India's most historically cosmopolitan cities, is a laboratory for practising religious liberty and cultural identity sustenance. Hyderabad, a cosmopolitan city since its inception, has characteristics that accommodate all communities in all regions without discrimination. Hyderabad has long been marked by a deep-rooted tradition of religious pluralism and the kingdoms that encouraged interfaith tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Freedom of religion is enacted through the interaction of historical traditions, constitutional safeguards, and the everyday practices of migrant communities. Drawing on ethnographic research with Bengali and Bihari groups, the study analyses Durga Puja and Chhath Puja as arenas of migrants who reproduce their traditional rituals and practices in a cosmopolitan city. The study shows that religious freedom in India is not a static right but a lived, place-based phenomenon. It highlights how migrants preserve their traditions and regional identities while participating in a shared civic culture, emphasizing the strength of pluralism in contemporary South Asia.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan, Durga Puja, Identity, Liberty, Pluralism, Culture, Region.

INTRODUCTION

Religious liberty and cultural identity remain central to understanding the sustenance of pluralism in contemporary South Asia. Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana and one of India's most historically cosmopolitan cities, offers a rich site for examining these dynamics. Since its founding in the late sixteenth century, the city has drawn migrants from across the subcontinent, including Marwadis, Gujaratis, Parsis, Bengalis, and Biharis. They came in search of opportunities in trade, administration, artisanal crafts, and professional services (Eaton, 2005; Luther, 2004). Over time, Hyderabad became an urban centre characterised by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. It developed a civic culture in which coexistence and negotiation of difference are embedded in everyday life. This article investigates the constitutional provisions, historical traditions, and migrant practices that intersect to shape religious liberty and cultural belonging in Hyderabad. Historically, South Indian history of pluralism exemplifies the inter-religious tolerance from the patronage of temples and sectarian accommodation under medieval regimes to the emergence of hybrid Indo-Persian cultures under the Bahmani, Qutb Shahi, and Asaf Jahi dynasties. The legal provision of the post-independence Constitution (Articles 25–28) institutionalised the right to freedom of religion, providing a normative foundation for pluralism in urban India.

Empirically, ethnographic observations were made on festivals and cultural practices among Bengali and Bihari migrants, focusing on Durga Puja and Chhath Puja, as well as language as identity markers. Emic and etic perspectives are used to understand the rituals, festivals, and linguistic practices that sustain community identity. The emic perspective provides the Bengali and Bihari migrant communities as insiders in understanding and interpreting cultural practices, particularly as participants in Durga Puja and Chhath Puja, respectively. By analysing these communities, they adapt their rituals to Hyderabad's urban milieu while sustaining trans-regional traditions and identities. The study shows how migrants contribute to a shared culture and form identities. Through this, Hyderabad emerges as a laboratory of 'everyday secularism' (Nandy, 1990), where constitutional ideals, economic interdependence, and cultural celebrations combine to produce a layered cosmopolitan identity.

The early political regimes of South India, such as the Cholas, Kakatiyas, and the Vijayanagara Empire, were renowned for their patronage of temples and their accommodation of diverse religious sects, including Saiva, Vaiṣṇava, Jain, and Buddhist traditions (Stein, 1980). This legacy established an enduring cultural precedent for religious inclusion. From the

sixteenth century onwards, the arrival of European colonial powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British, introduced new dynamics into this pluralistic landscape. Christian missionary activities, the construction of churches, and the founding of Western-style educational institutions reshaped the religious terrain of the region (Boxer, 1969). While the Portuguese and French often pursued overtly evangelical or interventionist policies, the British generally adopted a stance of religious neutrality, informed by utilitarian and liberal principles aimed at administering a multi-religious society without overt interference (Bayly, 1989).

Maritime exchanges between Arab merchants and the Malabar coast from the seventh century developed the earliest Muslim settlements, notably among the Mappila communities of Kerala (Bayly, 1989). From the fourteenth century, military and political incursions from the Delhi Sultanate culminated in the establishment of the Bahmani Sultanate (1347) and, later, the Deccan successor states, including the Qutb Shahi dynasty of Golconda, which made Hyderabad a centre of Islamic culture (Eaton, 2005; Stein, 1980). Islam entered South India gradually rather than in a single moment of conquest. Muslim dynasties left a significant architectural and cultural imprint in the form of mosques, madrasas, and Dargas. However, historical accounts also record episodes of coercive conversion and restrictions on certain forms of Hindu religious worship in parts of the Deccan, including present-day Telangana. Despite such tensions, colonial-era legal arrangements provided a normative foundation for the constitutional protection of religious freedom in independent India. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, practice, free profession, and propagation of religion. In South India, these constitutional safeguards have complemented older traditions of civic interdependence, sustaining a shared public culture in which communities participate in one another's festivals and ritual practices.

HYDERABAD AS A COSMOPOLITAN CITY

The Telangana region was part of the Hyderabad state, called the Nizam's State, till September 1948, that is, even after the 1947 Indian Independence from the British. This region's traditions of inclusivity and coexistence can be traced back to the rule of the Kakatiya Dynasty, the Qutb Shahi Dynasty, and the Asaf Jahi Nizams (Nilakanta Sastri, 1976). Each contributed to a structure that supports religious liberty and pluralism, and had a modern development framework. To begin with, the Kakatiya Dynasty, based in Warangal, were predominantly Hindu and exhibited a progressive approach that supported various religious practices, including Jainism and Buddhism. The multi-religious society helped the peaceful

sustenance of other religious and regional people in Telangana. This situation removed the difficulty of the coexistence of multiple identities in this region.

The historical formation of the Hyderabad state reflects a rich confluence of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. It comprised regions that today belong to Telangana, parts of Maharashtra (Marathwada), and parts of Karnataka (Hyderabad-Karnataka region). This geographic spread resulted in a culturally composite population, including Telugu, Marathi, Kannada, and Urdu-speaking communities, and followers of multiple faiths such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, and others, living in relative harmony. Prior to the formal establishment of the Hyderabad State by the Asaf Jahi dynasty in 1724, the region was ruled by the Qutb Shahi dynasty (1518–1687), which laid the foundation of Hyderabad city in 1591 under the rule of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. According to historical accounts, Quli Qutb Shah is believed to have been in love with a Hindu woman named Bhagmati. The narratives suggest that he named the new city Bhagyanagar in her honour, which later evolved into Hyderabad (Eaton, 2005). Under Quli Qutb Shah's rule, Hyderabad emerged as a centre of Indo-Persian culture, marked by the patronage of art, literature, and architecture that blended Islamic and regional Indian styles. Notably, the Qutb Shahi rulers maintained cordial relations with their Hindu subjects, appointed Hindus to administrative posts, and encouraged inter-community cooperation (Sherwani, 1974). These events made Hyderabad's identity as a cosmopolitan urban centre even in pre-colonial times.

The Qutb Shahi rulers encouraged the construction of Hindu temples alongside Islamic mosques, demonstrating their commitment to religious inclusivity. This deliberate policy supporting multiple faiths reflected an understanding of the diverse population under their rule. Thereby, integration of Persian, Telugu or the South Indian, and Urdu languages and cultures can be observed, which is known as Dakhani culture. Through the acceptance and tolerance of the religious habits of their Hindu subjects, the Qutb Shahi rulers managed to bring about an impression of unity and minimise the chances of communal tensions (Eaton, 2005; Bawa, 1998). Another interesting feature was appointing Hindu administrators; the rulers accepted the status and dignity of the Hindu community, acquiring a feeling of shared responsibility and cooperation. This openness was indispensable in maintaining social order and gaining loyalty among their varied subjects. This syncretism is apparent in the city's architecture, literature, cuisine, and festival celebrations. Lastly, the Nizams of Hyderabad, who governed from the early 18th century to the mid-20th century, were also famous for their rational rule and religious tolerance, which played a crucial role in establishing Hyderabad as a cosmopolitan and diverse

city. The diversity was not just tolerated but commemorated (Leonard, 2007) by the Hyderabad Hindus. This spirit of syncretic culture, referred to as Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb (Bawa, 1998; Sheshan, 1993). This ethos reflected a blending of religious customs and mutual respect for language, cuisine, attire, art forms, and public rituals. In Hyderabad, such blending was reflected in the widespread use of Urdu, the integration of Persianate aesthetics into local architecture, and the shared culinary culture.

Although there was a culture of harmony, Hyderabad was not spared communal tensions. The late 1940s were a decade of turbulence, especially with the emergence of the Razakar movement, a paramilitary body in favour of the Nizam and opposed to Hyderabad's joining the Indian Union. The Razakars, under the leadership of Qasim Razvi, indulged in indiscriminate atrocities, particularly against Hindu civilians in Telangana (Noorani, 2013). These violent outbursts, which colonial authorities and Indian nationalist leaders have both chronicled, enormously strained the social and cultural system and discredited the Nizam's image as a consolidating leader. The termination of these forces emanated from the military intervention of the Indian government to integrate Hyderabad into the Indian Union in the name of Operation Polo, also known as the Police Action of 1948.

Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana, has evolved into one of India's most cosmopolitan cities since historical times. Since its founding in 1591, the city has attracted a broad spectrum of communities such as Marwadis, Gujaratis, Parsis, Bengalis, and others for commerce, administration, artisanal crafts, and professional services (Eaton, 2005; Luther, 2004). Its association with the diamond and pearl trade, as well as its position as a hub of political and cultural exchange, created economic conditions that encouraged the migration of skilled workers and merchants from across India and beyond. Over time, Hyderabad evolved into a modern cosmopolitan centre with ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity amalgamating into its Dakhani culture.

In this regard, the urban studies and anthropology scholarship redefined cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is not confined to elite transnational actors but is "embedded in the everyday practices" of heterogeneous urban populations (Wardle, 2000, p. 101). It is a "mode of practice," visible in marketplaces, public spaces, religious festivals, and cultural sites where long-standing residents and new migrants negotiate boundaries of belonging. Similarly, Harvey (2001) describes cities as "contested spaces," shaped by global capital, labour, and information flows, which restructure economies and social relations.

Giddens (1999) argues that cosmopolitanism is both a consequence and a catalyst of global transformation, positioning cities as laboratories of social change and identity redefinition. Low (1996) emphasises that cosmopolitanism is not solely a global or elite phenomenon but also emerges from local interactions, cultural exchanges, and spatial practices. Hyderabad city illustrates these dynamics vividly through visible expressions of identity in public religious life. Hindu festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Bonalu, and Durga Puja are celebrated alongside Muslim observances like Muharram and Ramzan and Christian and Sikh festivities. Sacred spaces, processions, and street celebrations transform the cityscape into a cultural convergence and civic engagement theatre. These events depict inter-community understanding, mutual respect, and regional, linguistic, and religious identities that can integrate new migrants. Thus, urban pluralism is reproduced through social participation, economic interdependence, and the creative negotiation of cultural boundaries.

DURGA PUJA AMONG BENGALIS IN HYDERABAD

The term Durga Puja literally means ‘the worship of Goddess Durga,’ who is venerated as the divine embodiment of strength and the eternal triumph of good over evil. It is one of the most prominent festivals of Bengali Hindus, and has been adapted in Hyderabad, illustrating the preservation of cultural heritage by the Bengalis of Hyderabad. Although traditionally associated with West Bengal, the festival has gained a strong foothold in Telangana. The rituals intersect with the local Dassara and Batukamma celebrations. Over the past decade, Durga idol worship has gained significant prominence, symbolising the broader incorporation of northern ritual elements into southern cultural festivities. In Telangana, in most cases, the idols are placed and maintained by members of the same community, who collectively organise and participate in the rituals and celebrations associated with the deity. The celebration is completely different from that of the Bengali Durga festival. However, this convergence reflects the capacity to accommodate multiple ritual traditions without erasing their distinctiveness.

The festival penetrates the limits of ritual worship to become a powerful expression of identity, belonging, and emotion. Bengali associations and cultural organisations of Hyderabad city play a pivotal role in organising Durga Puja as per their tradition and culture. Durga Puja is observed for five days in Hyderabad, although traditionally, the celebration spans nine to ten days, culminating in the grand immersion procession. In Hyderabad, the final five days, Sashti

(Sixth Day), Saptami (Seventh), Ashtami (Eighth), Navami (Ninth), and Dashami (Tenth) are marked by elaborate rituals, vibrant celebrations, and a deep sense of communal devotion.

The Associations construct special pandals in the selected function halls or hire playgrounds. Funding is secured through donations from community members, corporate companies, local businesses, and many others. The rituals blend devotional and aesthetic elements. Artisans from Bengal craft finely detailed idols depicting Durga flanked by Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, and Ganesha. Ceremonies such as Chakshu Daan (the ritual of painting the goddess's eyes), Pushpanjali (flower offerings), and Aarti create an atmosphere of reverence, and in the evening, drumming by Dhakis and the Dhunuchi Naach (incense dance) transform the puja grounds into lively arenas of cultural expression. Dancers (whoever participates) wield a special vessel called a Dhunuchi (made of clay) filled with a blend of aromatic materials. As Amrita, a 34-year-old school teacher, hails from Kolkata said, "It is on Sashti that we welcome Maa Durga into our homes with colours, songs, and varieties of traditional food. This day is particularly sacred for Bengali Hindus, and we all gather with great enthusiasm and reverence to begin the rituals." For Mazumdar, a 39-year-old Bengali woman settled in Hyderabad, participating in Dhunuchi Naach is both a ritual of worship and a celebration of her cultural heritage. "It is a moment when, no matter where I am, I celebrate the same traditions that my ancestors passed, this is my identity", she remarks. This depicts the religious symbolism and historical significance of traditions that are both honoured and transmitted to future generations. It is the reassertion of their identity through cultural expression. Each day of the festival is characterised by a blend of spiritual practices and cultural expressions. Married women often attired in white sarees with red borders, participate in Sindoor Khela on the festival's final day, smearing vermilion on one another as a symbolic farewell to the goddess and an invocation of prosperity and familial well-being. Rohini, aged 41, describes that the ritual is replete with the belief that the goddess, in her benevolence, gives long life to their husbands, and it is a blend of joy and sorrow, as the goddess returns to her in-laws house. The celebration culminates with a grand immersion procession. Idols are paraded through city streets, adorned with flowers, lights, and music, before being immersed in lakes such as Tank Bund.

During the festival days, food and craft stalls surrounding the pandals create a micro-economy that benefits vendors and adds to the festive atmosphere. The cultural nights and live performances not only showcase the evolution of Bengali music but also demonstrate how

modern technology and contemporary performance styles can enhance traditional celebrations. These resemble, for the Bengali diaspora, Durga Puja functions as more than a religious ritual; it is a performative assertion of identity and belonging. The festival exemplifies that religious liberty operates not only as a constitutional guarantee but as an embodied practice negotiated through shared urban space.

CHHATH PUJA AMONG BIHARIS IN HYDERABAD

Chhath Puja, a festival dedicated to the Sun God (Surya Dev) and his consort Chhathi Maiya, is one of the most significant religious observances for communities from Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Its emergence in Hyderabad over the past two decades demonstrates how migrant groups adapt traditional practices to new urban environments while sustaining connections with their regional heritage. Chhath Puja is an expression of gratitude toward the Sun God for sustaining life on Earth. Devotees observe rigorous rituals that highlight purity, fasting, and water-based offerings. These practices are believed to not only seek blessings for health, prosperity, and well-being but also to confer protection, particularly over children. The four-day celebration is structured around distinct rituals. Hyderabad's diverse cultural landscape has provided an ideal setting for these traditional rituals. Major celebrations are held at artificial water bodies and lakes across the city, including prominent sites such as Hussain Sagar, Saroornagar Lake, Nallagandla Lake, and Safilguda Lake. Local Bihari associations organise the events, decorating lakeshores with flowers, lights, and temporary pavilions to create an atmosphere of sanctity and community. Priests conduct prayers, while volunteers manage logistics and distribute Prasadam. The festival has also emerged as a cultural hub that draws people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, such as migrant workers from nearby construction sites. A software employee aged 28 said, 'I am sharing the photos of the puja with my friends and family who live in Bihar. They feel happy that, though I am not at home, I had the opportunity to worship the deity.' This depicts the emotional attachment to the culture and traditions

Chhath Puja in Hyderabad is not only a religious occasion but also a public assertion of cultural presence. Migrant workers, professionals, and their families gather in large numbers, often joined by curious onlookers from other communities. These gatherings generate solidarity among Biharis, and for participants, the ability to perform Chhath puja in Hyderabad affirms both their right to religious expression and their sense of belonging in a multicultural

urban setting. The success of Chhath Puja adapting to urban culture in Hyderabad indicates the changing face of traditional culture, which is present but thrives elsewhere.

LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL IDENTITY

Language is a vital medium through which migrant communities in Hyderabad articulate identity and negotiate belonging. As sociolinguistic research shows, language is not merely a tool for communication but a carrier of cultural memory, values, and social networks (Edwards, 2009). According to Akintayo et al. (2024), when migrant communities gradually shift from their native language to the dominant language of the host society, it often leads to a significant transformation in both linguistic practices and identity formation. Migrants often adopt the dominant language to access better employment opportunities, education, and social mobility. Hyderabad is home to a multilingual environment where Telugu, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, and English coexist. This characteristic enriches Hyderabad's cultural life and plays a crucial role in easing the settlement of migrants, including those from North India. The ability of a city to accommodate multiple languages often correlates with its capacity to attract and integrate migrants by providing a space where linguistic diversity is normalised. For example, Marwadis and Bengalis involved in commerce often prioritise Telugu and Hindi in business interactions. Migrants balance dual or multiple identities by using their mother tongue and the host society's dominant language. This is to maintain the language as a form of resistance to assimilation, while also embracing Telugu for socio-economic advancement. These cases illustrate the different ways language and identity intersect in the lives of migrant communities. For instance, Meenakshi, a 37-year-old Bengali woman living in Hyderabad, speaks five languages: Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, English, and Bengali. She uses Telugu or Hindi in her peer group and neighbourhood interactions but continues to speak Bengali within her family and during community gatherings. This form of selective bilingualism reflects a balance between cultural pride and practical integration.

Language proficiency became a strategic asset for commercial success and social integration (Fishman, 1991). Although their linguistic assimilation into Telugu is advanced enough to render them indistinguishable, Bengalis maintain a distinct cultural identity by preserving their mother tongue in private spheres. Such selective bilingualism illustrates the coexistence of cultural continuity and pragmatic integration within the same community. The acquisition of Telugu by Bengalis and Marwadis is not merely a utilitarian response to the demands of daily life in Hyderabad; it is a deliberate, adaptive strategy that facilitates economic

participation and social acceptance. Scholars have observed that linguistic assimilation is likely to be based on socio-economic needs and cultural priorities, with migrants finding a balance between integration needs and a need to preserve different cultural identities (Fishman, 1991).

The case studies show that religious freedom is not a fixed right but an active practice shaped by space, ritual, and economic life. In Durga Puja, migrant communities recreate sacred spaces through processions and temporary pandals, turning city streets into ritual sites. Chhath Puja illustrates natural settings such as lakes and riverbanks becoming public spaces for expressing regional faith. The ethnographic material presented above demonstrates how religious liberty and cultural identity in Hyderabad are enacted through an intricate interplay of history, law, and everyday practice. Hence, religious liberty should be understood as a lived, place-based experience rather than an abstract legal principle.

CONCLUSION

Hyderabad shows that religious freedom in India also relies on the history of coexistence, strong legal protections, and the readiness of communities to meet each other through rituals, and language. The city's Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb welcome migrants to keep their traditions alive. The migrants actively create a sense of belonging through festivals and practices that turn the constitutional right to religious freedom into an everyday reality. It is true as Appadurai (1996) suggests, that global cultural flows create mixed identities, and the local contexts give stability and meaning to these identities. Hyderabad thus stands as a laboratory of pluralism in contemporary South Asia. Its example demonstrates that a robust culture of religious liberty requires both normative protection and social creativity. Theoretical works (Wardle, Harvey, Giddens and Nandy) on the idea of cosmopolitanism are visible in the shared spaces around Durga Puja and Chhath Puja. These are not exclusive events for elites but open spaces where vendors, worshippers, artists, and onlookers interact and build a sense of belonging and identity. The organisation of festivals involves small-scale politics that involves securing funds, dealing with municipal authorities, and choosing strategic public locations for cultural events. These processes show negotiation and maintenance of cultural rights in the city.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi; the Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad; and the respondents during fieldwork.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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