

Rituals, Space and Identity: A Study of Malayali Hindu Diaspora in Singapore

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INDIAN DIASPORA

by

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1. Presented a paper titled “Cultural Construct and Female Identity” at the One-Day National Seminar on Cultural Studies, organized by the Department of English,

Malankara Catholic College, Mariagiri, in association with the Association for Cultural and Scientific Research, on 5 January 2018.

2. Presented a paper titled “Gendered Understanding of Diaspora” at the Three-Day International Conference on “Transnationalism, Culture and Diaspora in the Era of Globalization”, held at the Central University of Gujarat, from 21 to 23 February 2018.
3. Presented a paper titled “Understanding the Importance and Omnipresence of Religious Processions in India” at the Two-Day International Conference on “Globalization, Literature and Culture”, organized by the Higher Education and Research Society, Navi Mumbai, on 7 to 8 September.

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I, Aswathi Babu Paleri Veetil, hereby declare that this thesis entitled **“Rituals, Space and Identity: A Study of Malayali Hindu Diaspora in Singapore”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Professor/Dr. Ajaya Kumar Sahoo is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET. A report on plagiarism statistics from the University Librarian is enclosed.

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The work presented in this thesis addresses SDG 11, SDG 10 and SDG16 among 17 goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

This study contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by highlighting how cultural and religious practices help build inclusive, resilient, and socially connected communities. It is particularly relevant to **SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities**, as religious processions and related cultural activities allow diaspora communities to maintain their heritage, foster participation, and strengthen social bonds within a multicultural urban environment like Singapore. These practices help ensure that cultural traditions continue to thrive even as communities adapt to new social settings.

The research also relates to **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**, by giving voice to a minority diaspora group and exploring how members negotiate visibility, identity, and belonging. Understanding these experiences provides insight into processes of inclusion and recognition, showing how cultural and religious practices support equality and representation in a diverse society.

In addition, the study indirectly supports **SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**. Everyday religious and community practices contribute to social harmony, mutual respect, and

cooperation, demonstrating that cultural life can strengthen peaceful coexistence and cohesive communities.

By focusing on the experiences of Malayali Hindus in Singapore, this research shows that even smaller diaspora communities play an important role in sustaining cultural diversity and social cohesion. It demonstrates that religious practices are not only expressions of faith but also practical tools for maintaining identity, nurturing community ties, and promoting inclusive participation, which aligns with broader goals of sustainable development. These insights provide a foundation for policymakers, scholars, and community leaders to recognize and support the social and cultural contributions of diasporic communities.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to those who keep cultural traditions alive across generations, and to my loved ones, whose encouragement made this journey meaningful.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic role of religion in shaping identity, community cohesion, and cultural continuity among the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore, with a particular focus on religious processions as both symbolic and practical mechanisms of belonging. Migration involves more than the physical relocation of individuals; it entails negotiating new social, cultural, and political landscapes while preserving connections to one's homeland. For diasporic communities, religion functions as a central resource, providing continuity, emotional support, and frameworks for adapting to unfamiliar environments. Drawing on theories of diaspora, transnationalism, and lived religion, this research examines how Malayali Hindus sustain their cultural and religious identities while simultaneously engaging with Singapore's multicultural urban context.

The study is guided by four primary objectives: first, to examine the influence of religious institutions and leaders in shaping community cohesion and collective identity among the Malayali Hindu diaspora; second, to explore how religion facilitates the adaptation of these migrants within Singaporean society; third, to investigate religious practices as cultural anchors in sustaining identity across generations; and fourth, to analyse the role of religious processions as spaces that resist cultural assimilation while affirming heritage and public visibility. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between faith, culture, and social life in a diasporic context.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, combining thematic analysis of secondary literature with primary data collected through telephonic and video interviews with

twenty-five participants from the Malayali Hindu community. The participants included temple authorities, community leaders, and household members representing multiple generations, providing diverse perspectives on religious engagement, procession organization, and cultural transmission. Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to access individuals actively involved in religious practices, ensuring that the study captured authentic and lived experiences. Additionally, virtual observations of religious events, photographs, and social media content supplemented participant narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of how religion operates across private, communal, and public spheres.

Findings reveal that religious institutions, rituals, and processions function as multi-dimensional resources that sustain identity, foster social cohesion, and enable adaptation to life in a multicultural setting. Temples emerge not only as sites of worship but also as social and cultural hubs that anchor the community, offering intergenerational engagement and emotional support. Religious practices, whether performed at home or in communal gatherings, preserve cultural memory while allowing flexibility for urban and civic realities. Public processions, meanwhile, transform shared spaces into arenas of visibility and cultural affirmation, reinforcing collective belonging and connecting diasporic identity with the broader social environment.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that religion among Malayali Hindus in Singapore is far from a static inheritance of homeland practices; it is a lived, adaptive, and reflective process. By emphasizing the roles of institutions, rituals, and public expressions, the research underscores how diasporic communities actively negotiate continuity, cultural identity, and belonging. This study contributes to broader discussions on diaspora, transnationalism, and identity by

highlighting the centrality of religion as a dynamic and holistic resource in migrant life, offering insights for understanding smaller, urban diasporic communities in globalized contexts.

Keywords: Malayali Hindu Diaspora, Religion and Migration, Religious Processions, Diaspora and Identity, Transnationalism, Lived Religion, Singapore, Cultural Continuity.

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INTRODUCTION

From early childhood, many of us become familiar with the concept of religion, witnessing its presence in various aspects of life. Religion plays a role in numerous personal and social events—from a child’s naming ceremony to weddings, housewarming celebrations, the start of a new business, festivals, and even death rituals. These occasions reflect different expressions and dimensions of religion, showcasing its pervasive influence. Broadly speaking, religion can be understood as a social phenomenon and a driving force for social change. It encompasses rituals, faith, beliefs, art, sacred stories, and traditions, all intertwined with social hierarchies, communities, and identities. In essence, the transmission of these customs and practices serves to preserve the past, while religion simultaneously provides platforms and organizations that unite people through shared cultural heritage. Although it may not exist as an isolated entity, religion fosters social unity and contributes to societal evolution, even playing a role in nation-building.

As sociologist James A. Beckford points out, “Regardless of whether religious beliefs and experiences relate to supernatural, super-empirical, or noumenal realities, religion is expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices, and organizations. These expressions are the products of social interactions, structures, and processes and, in turn, influence social life and cultural meanings to varying degrees” (Beckford, 2003, p. 13). In other words, religion is produced through human relationships and social structures, shaping—and being shaped by—the society around it. Although religion depends on society for its existence, it remains a crucial element in sustaining social life. It operates on multiple levels: as a deeply personal matter, a tool for community development, a source of political cohesion, and a mechanism for social harmony.

For individuals who migrate, religion often becomes a vital marker of cultural identity. In unfamiliar environments, separated from family and social networks, migrants carry their faith and beliefs with them, using religion to navigate challenges such as identity crises, cultural dislocation, and feelings of alienation (Levitt, 2007). Religion thus acts as a stabilizing force, offering belonging, continuity, and emotional support in everyday life.

Religion is therefore a pervasive element of human experience, intertwined with both personal and collective life from birth to death. It influences every stage of social and cultural existence—from naming ceremonies to funeral rites—encompassing a broad spectrum of beliefs, values, and practices that span the personal, communal, and political realms. At its core, religion functions as a social phenomenon, a catalyst for change, and a repository of cultural memory (Geertz, 1973). It is expressed through rituals, faith, art, sacred narratives, and institutional structures that preserve tradition, build communities, and foster social cohesion. Beckford's analysis reinforces the sociological understanding that religion is manifested through human ideas, symbols, and practices shaped by social interactions. Likewise, Émile Durkheim's definition of religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one single moral community” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 44) emphasizes that religion extends beyond places of worship to include all institutions that connect individuals and communities. For diasporic populations, this unifying function becomes especially important. Religion operates as a mechanism of socialization and identity formation, helping migrants adapt to new cultural contexts and establish a sense of home in foreign societies.

Beyond being a set of beliefs, religion becomes a lens through which to examine the socio-cultural and economic outcomes within diasporic communities. As this study explores the relationship between religion and diaspora, it raises key questions about the impact of migration on identity formation, community development, and cultural transformation. How do

the lives and cultures of diasporic individuals influence change within their communities? How do young migrants perceive religion? In what ways do socio-economic factors and transnational ties—such as remittances—shape diasporic experiences? These questions highlight the complex interplay of religion, diaspora, and transnationalism in a globalized world. Before engaging with these themes in depth, it is important to examine how travel and migration intersect with religion, and how mobility has historically functioned as a powerful tool for the spread, adaptation, and renewal of religious traditions.

Building on this foundation, the introduction further explores how travel has historically acted as a key medium for the spread of religion, the importance of religion within diaspora communities, and the broader context in which these processes occur. It also outlines the statement of the problem, presents the objectives of the study, explains the methodology adopted, highlights the importance of the research, and concludes with an overview of the chapterization. Together, these components provide a comprehensive framework for understanding religion as both a rooted cultural tradition and a dynamic force shaped by movement, migration, and global interaction.

IS TRAVEL A TOOL IN SPREADING RELIGION?

Religion cannot be classified as strictly open or closed, nor can it be confined to a particular geographic region. For example, Hinduism is not limited to India, despite most of its followers residing there; similarly, Christianity is not exclusive to the West, nor Islam to the East. Religions are not bound by national borders and can be transplanted to other parts of the world, regardless of the dominant faith or cultural context. When religions move, they do not lose their traditions, beliefs, or customs; instead, they develop new expressions and adaptations. Migrants carry their religious beliefs with them, introducing and integrating their faith into new environments. As Kim Knott (2005) notes, religious populations are globally dispersed, and

migration plays a central role in bringing diverse cultures and religions into contact, producing blends of old and new practices. Historically, migrants have been among the primary carriers of religion, spreading their faith across regions and continents.

During the early periods of globalization, migrants from China, India, and Indonesia introduced Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity to Malaysia, demonstrating how travel has long been a key factor in the global spread of religion (Eaton, 2013). Religious movements and associations thus not only keep people spiritually connected to their home communities but also help them adapt to new social and cultural environments.

In the Indian context, understanding religion is both complex and essential due to the country's diverse histories, cultures, and traditions. The development of religion in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, regarded as the subcontinent's first major urban civilization. Its decline around the second millennium BCE paved the way for the arrival of Indo-Aryans around 1500 BCE, who introduced early Hindu concepts and Vedic oral traditions that formed the basis of Hinduism and the caste system (Thapar, 2002). Over time, religions evolved and spread through processes of travel, movement, and migration.

Jainism and Buddhism emerged in the 6th century BCE as reform movements, with Buddhism becoming the dominant religion in northern and eastern India before spreading to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and East Asia (Gombrich, 2006). Islam arrived in India in the 8th century CE with Arab traders and seafarers who established Muslim communities in Sindh, Punjab, and along the Malabar coast (Eaton, 2013). The spread of Islam was further shaped by Sufi mystics, whose ideas blended Islamic and Indian traditions, giving rise to new cultural and spiritual forms. Sikhism later emerged from this syncretic interaction between Hindu and Sufi traditions. Other religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, also reached India through travel and migration: St. Thomas reportedly introduced Christianity to southern India in the 1st

century CE; Jewish communities arrived after 70 CE; and Zoroastrians (Parsis) fled from Iran to settle in Gujarat and later Bombay (Payne, 2011). These developments clearly demonstrate how migration and mobility have carried religions across borders, allowing them to flourish both within and beyond India.

Travel—whether for trade, war, exploration, or migration—has historically played a central role in spreading religion and facilitating social change. Even today, travel remains an important means of cultural exchange and representation, particularly for diasporic communities. Migrants bring their religious practices with them, using faith to maintain identity and belonging in foreign environments. As James Clifford (1992) argues in “*Traveling Cultures*,” the acts of dwelling and traveling reshape conventional notions of culture and place, revealing both the positive and negative dimensions of mobility. While travel may create feelings of rootlessness or exile, it can also enable exploration, learning, and transformation.

Religion travels in much the same way—moving with people as they migrate, adapting to new contexts while maintaining ties to its origins. It becomes a source of brotherhood, cultural continuity, and emotional stability, helping migrants “create home” in unfamiliar surroundings. Religion, then, is not a static system but a dynamic and mobile one, reflecting the human experience through both subjective and institutional expressions. It remains a crucial aspect of identity for those who carry it across borders. The next section will examine more closely the significance of religion for people on the move and explore how travel has facilitated its spread and transformation over time

WHY RELIGION BECOMES IMPORTANT FOR THE DIASPORA?

It is no surprise that people have long been key carriers of religion across the globe, with migration and travel serving as crucial channels for religious transmission and outreach. Within

their homeland, individuals often experience religion as an important force shaping everyday life. However, once they migrate, they become immigrants in unfamiliar landscapes where they must navigate new social, cultural, and political dynamics. Migration involves not only the physical relocation of people but also the emotional and social attachments they carry, including memories of home, cultural values, religious beliefs, and customary practices. In response to these new surroundings, immigrants frequently reconstruct their traditional religious practices, which often leads to the formation of home-based gatherings. Such gatherings bring together members of the same community, encourage interaction among co-ethnics, and eventually contribute to the establishment of religious institutions. These institutions become vital for maintaining the beliefs and values of immigrant groups. Even individuals who were not particularly religious before migrating often find themselves participating in these institutions as a way of belonging to their community in a foreign society (Kurien, 2012).

Assimilation into a new culture is typically a gradual process. In multicultural societies, where acculturation takes time, immigrants seek out elements that help them feel connected to their new environment while preserving ties to their past. Religion and religious institutions serve as powerful avenues for self-identification, complementing language, geographic origin, and cultural traditions. Religious gatherings provide a sense of continuity and belonging, offering a social structure that supports shared customs and values. Hirschman (2004) describes the emotional and spiritual dilemmas faced by many immigrants, such as Korean Americans, who grapple with the deeper meaning of their immigrant experience. He cites Sang Hyun Lee's reflection: "We came here, of course, for our own personal and very human reasons—for better education, for financial well-being, for greater career opportunities and the like. But we now find that we do not wholly control our circumstances and selves. We find ourselves in a wilderness, living as aliens and strangers. And the inescapable question arises from the depth of

our being: What is the real meaning of our immigrant existence in America? What is the spiritual meaning of our alien status?" (Lee, 1980, as quoted in Hurh & Kim, 1984, p. 134).

Religion helps alleviate many of the diasporic challenges immigrants face, including feelings of alienation, identity conflicts, language barriers, and the difficulties of raising children in multicultural contexts. Over time, these struggles are often mediated through religious participation, which enables immigrants to construct new identities while maintaining connections to their cultural roots. Institutions such as churches, temples, and other faith-based organizations provide not only spiritual support but also communal spaces where individuals can share their experiences, ultimately forming a sense of home in the diaspora.

Beyond its personal and social significance, religion also plays an important role in sustaining the economic and social stability of immigrants' homelands. Economic motivations are among the primary reasons for migration. For example, many people from Kerala—particularly the Malabar region—migrated to Gulf countries in search of better opportunities during the oil boom periods. Similarly, women from South Kerala migrated to countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia to work as caregivers and nurses in hopes of improving their economic conditions, despite potential challenges related to identity conflict or gender inequality. For many others, migration became a necessity when financial stability at home was limited. Diaspora communities contribute substantially to both host and home economies through remittances. Religion, being integral to diaspora life, also participates in this economic engagement: transnational religious institutions often create networks of financial and social support that extend across borders. Levitt (2001) argues that transnational religion not only adapts within host societies but also influences religious practices and developments in the country of origin. Religious organizations help immigrants maintain cultural continuity by offering platforms for younger generations to learn their native languages, traditions, and

customs. These organizations—whether churches, Hindu Samajams, or other community groups—provide both spiritual and economic support, reinforcing the idea that religion is not static but rather a dynamic system of shared meanings that adapts to varying contexts (Gardner, 1995).

Ultimately, the role of religion in the diaspora is multifaceted, extending far beyond spiritual practice to encompass identity formation, community building, and economic engagement. Migration and travel have historically facilitated the spread of religions, enabling them to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. For immigrants, religion acts as a powerful anchor for navigating the challenges of displacement, offering continuity with their homeland while providing a framework for adapting to new societies. Religious institutions become crucial spaces for preserving cultural heritage, fostering belonging, and reshaping communal identities. Additionally, the influence of religion extends into economic and transnational spheres, with religious networks contributing to development in both host societies and homelands. This dynamic interplay between religion, migration, and cultural identity underscores that religion is not merely a collection of beliefs but an evolving, adaptive force that continues to shape the lives and experiences of diaspora communities worldwide.

THE CONTEXT:

The rich tapestry of India's cultural heritage is woven from a complex interplay of diverse races, traditions, and customs. Historically, the Indian subcontinent functioned as a mosaic of cultures that flourished within fortified settlements where arts, crafts, trade, education, and religious life thrived around temples and learning centres. Although various conquests introduced new cultural elements, India's cultural landscape remained remarkably resilient, evolving into a federation of distinct yet interconnected social groups. This blending of ideas,

customs, religious practices, and economic structures shaped India into one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse nations in the world.

The relationship between India and its diaspora has deep historical roots, tracing back to ancient trade networks that linked India with Africa, Central Asia, and West Asia. A major shift occurred in the nineteenth century following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, which led to large-scale recruitment of Indians as indentured labourers—often under misleading contracts—on plantations across the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific. Systems such as the *kangani* in Southeast Asia prolonged contracts and intensified migration flows. By the mid-twentieth century, new patterns of voluntary migration emerged, driven by aspirations for education, employment, and mobility, contributing to the formation of a modern Indian diaspora. Owing to its diverse origins, varied migration trajectories, and differing levels of integration into host societies, the Indian diaspora has become a central subject of academic interest, especially in studies of socio-cultural adaptation, transnationalism, economic contributions, and political engagement.

- Religion and Diaspora

In recent decades, diaspora studies have become a prominent academic field that provides multiple perspectives for understanding migration and its impact on social life. The term *diaspora*, derived from the Greek *diaspeiro* (“to sow or scatter”), originally referred to Jewish communities living outside their ancestral homeland after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Over time, the term expanded to describe other dispersed communities such as Greeks, Armenians, and, significantly, Indians. Judith M. Brown (2007) defines diaspora as a population sharing a common ethnicity that resides away from its homeland for extended periods while maintaining cultural identity, kinship ties, and communal bonds. Migration—whether small-scale or large-

scale—thus facilitated the creation of “homes abroad,” enabling migrants to preserve and transmit their customs, beliefs, and traditions.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, large numbers of Indians migrated to East Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, the United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, and North America primarily for labour. As migrants settled and built livelihoods, they developed networks that sustained religious, social, cultural, and commercial practices, thereby reinforcing community cohesion and preserving links to their ancestral origins. Religion played a central role in shaping identity and community formation in these diasporic spaces.

From the earliest days of migration, Indians showed a strong commitment to preserving religious practices. Rituals, pilgrimages, and beliefs brought from the homeland offered solidarity within indenture camps and fostered connections among dispersed communities. Religious institutions—temples, gurdwaras, churches, and mosques—became key spaces for maintaining cultural and spiritual continuity. Ninian Smart (1999) notes that complex aspects of Hindu tradition—such as caste norms, *bhakti* (devotion), pilgrimage, and temple rituals—do not transfer seamlessly into new environments. Yet Hindu communities in Fiji, Guyana, and Mauritius drew strength from the narrative of the *Ramayana*, identifying with themes of exile and the triumph of good over evil, which helped them cope with the hardships of indenture.

Organizations such as Arya Samaj played an important role in promoting religious and cultural education among the diaspora. They provided instruction in scripture, established schools for migrant children, and helped younger generations maintain ties to their heritage. The desire to remain connected to India made travel and communication essential elements of diaspora life. In the contemporary world, religious

beliefs and practices continue to travel alongside migrants, shaping connections between diaspora communities and their homelands.

Despite significant academic interest in diaspora, scholars have often overlooked its religious dimensions. Baumann (1998) argues that discussions on diaspora typically foreground ethnicity or nationality while marginalizing religion. As Cohen (1997) observes, although religion is not the sole defining feature of diaspora, it functions as a powerful binding force that fosters diasporic consciousness. Religions such as Judaism and Sikhism exhibit pronounced ethnic characteristics, while Hinduism sustains a symbolic spiritual attachment to India as a homeland.

- Religion and Transnationalism

Transnationalism, though closely related to diaspora, highlights different aspects of the migratory experience. Vertovec (2000) explains that while diasporas often emerge from migration, not all migrations lead to diasporic identities; similarly, although all transnational communities are connected to diasporas, not every diaspora engages in transnational practices. Transnationalism has become vital for understanding contemporary global migration, especially as migrants increasingly maintain ties with both their host and home countries. Grant (1981) describes such migrants as “shuttle migrants” or “cultural commuters” who move repeatedly across borders without intending to settle permanently.

In the shift from colonial migration to modern global mobility, transnational flows of people, ideas, goods, and capital have expanded dramatically. Cohen (1997) notes that diasporas often live simultaneously in two realms: physically grounded in a nation-state yet spiritually or symbolically connected to a homeland that transcends geopolitical boundaries. Transnationalism’s significance lies in its multifaceted impact on the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of migrants. Socially and culturally,

transnational networks enable migrants to maintain shared values, relationships, and support systems across borders. Economically, transnationalism is reflected in remittances that support households and communities. Politically, transnational ties influence both homeland and host-country politics, shaping civic engagement and cross-border activism.

As globalization intensifies, transnational mobility has become a defining feature of the modern era (Tambiah, 2000). Migrants carry not only skills and economic resources but also cultural and religious traditions. Religion thus becomes an important dimension of transnationalism, even though it has not always been emphasized in academic discussions. Transnational religious practices help migrants maintain a sense of continuity, identity, and belonging across national boundaries. Religious organizations provide essential support, uniting migrants and helping them navigate new environments while preserving ties to their homeland. Studies such as Cohen (1997) and Vertovec (1999) demonstrate how religious networks contribute to cultural diversity in host societies and sustain connections with home countries. Peggy Levitt has made significant contributions to the understanding of transnational religious life. Levitt argues that religious beliefs and practices brought by immigrants are dynamic, adapting to host-country contexts while simultaneously reshaping religious customs in the homeland. This mutual influence highlights the fluid nature of transnational religious ties. Religious institutions help migrants reconcile differences between their traditions and the host culture, offering stability and continuity. They also create social networks that aid integration while fostering enduring connections to the homeland. Historically, transnational religious life is not new. During the indenture era, movements such as Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission played crucial roles in supporting Indian migrants by offering religious education, resisting conversion

pressures, and promoting cultural continuity. Today, the concept of diaspora has evolved to encompass more complex forms of belonging shaped by unseen cultural and religious elements. While religion alone does not constitute diaspora, it remains an essential element of diasporic identity and a key force that binds communities across borders.

Together, diaspora and transnationalism offer a rich analytical framework for understanding global migration and the ways in which migrants sustain social, economic, cultural, and religious ties across nations. As globalization advances, these concepts remain central to understanding how religion shapes—and is shaped by—the evolving experiences of migrant communities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Religion is not merely a matter of personal belief; it functions as a powerful platform for socialization, cultural reproduction, and community formation within diasporic contexts. Understanding the experiences of migrants who relocate to foreign lands—spaces they may not yet fully consider home—requires engaging with the complex interplay between displacement, adaptation, and continued attachment to their homeland. Migrants construct new homes through physical, emotional, and social practices, and the transnational networks they build enable them to sustain cultural continuity while navigating unfamiliar environments (Vertovec, 2000).

Despite being dispersed across different geopolitical contexts, migrants are often united by shared histories of uprooting, common cultural heritages, and attachments to ancestral homelands. Yet, as they encounter new social and political landscapes, they develop varied cultural and historical identities. Religion becomes a crucial resource for negotiating these

changes. Migrants frequently establish new religious congregations based on shared values, which generate a sense of belonging, reinforce identity, and facilitate community building in the diaspora (Levitt, 2007). In this way, religion contributes significantly to cultural identity formation, the maintenance of socio-economic networks, and the preservation of symbolic and emotional ties to their homelands.

The Hindu diaspora presents a distinctive case within global migration history. Traditional prohibitions against crossing the *Kala Pani* (“black water”), rooted in Vedic and caste-based norms, once discouraged overseas travel by Hindus, as it was believed to result in ritual impurity and social exclusion (Van der Veer, 1988). Over time, these restrictions weakened, allowing Hindus to participate in global migration streams. As they settled abroad, they transported with them their rituals, beliefs, and cultural practices, creating new religious landscapes in host societies.

Although academic interest in the Hindu diaspora has grown, significant gaps remain. As T. S. Rukmani (2005) notes, while scholars such as Burghart, Vertovec, and Maxwell have examined various dimensions of the Hindu diaspora, there is a striking lack of detailed studies on how early Hindu migrants negotiated identity in foreign lands through specific practices—such as temple construction, dietary customs, ritual performance, and community gatherings. These embodied practices reveal how migrants adapted Hindu traditions to alien environments, yet they remain insufficiently documented in current scholarship.

Recent research has begun to explore how Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and other Indian religious communities rebuild cultural life abroad through festivals, arranged marriages, ritual observances, food cultures, music, and cinema (Baumann, 1998; Vertovec, 2004). Evidence suggests that migrants often become more intensely attached to their religious and cultural traditions after migration, using them as anchors of identity and belonging in multicultural

settings. Religious practices thus become binding forces that provide meaning, cohesion, and continuity in diaspora.

Drawing on frameworks of transnationalism and everyday multiculturalism, this study examines how religious gatherings, rituals, and institutions create spaces through which diasporic Hindus construct identities that are simultaneously rooted in tradition and shaped by migration. As Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) argues, religious space is not merely physical; it is socially produced, lived, and imbued with meaning. In diasporic contexts, temples, festivals, and communal rituals serve as symbolic and material spaces where cultural memory is reproduced and identity is negotiated.

The central problem addressed by this study is the lack of detailed, ethnographically grounded research on how Hindu migrants construct identity and community in diaspora through religious practices, institutions, and spatial formations. Despite the growing academic interest in diaspora studies, the specific mechanisms through which Hindu migrants maintain cultural identity—particularly through temple construction, ritual practices, religious processions, and everyday religious gatherings—remain underexplored.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how religion functions as a key element in identity formation and community building among Kerala Hindu migrants. It examines the religious, cultural, and social spaces created by diasporic Hindus and analyses how these spaces shape migrant experiences, facilitate transnational connections, and anchor cultural identity in foreign lands. By focusing on religious institutions, festivals, and community practices, this research aims to deepen scholarly understanding of the complex intersections between religion, migration, and identity in the contemporary Hindu diaspora.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The evolution of the Indian diaspora provides extensive evidence of the resilience and sustainability of Indian languages, religions, values, and cultural norms. Despite having distinct socio-cultural histories and facing varied economic and political circumstances, Indian communities abroad have developed unique diasporic identities. Jayaram (2004) highlights that the social structure of Indians overseas is characterized by a diversity of communities, often divided along regional, linguistic, religious, or even caste lines. Integration into the host society frequently occurs through active participation in religious and community activities, positioning religion as a central factor in shaping the diasporic identities of migrants.

This study focuses on the Malayalee community in Singapore, particularly Hindus from Kerala. Historically, migration of Indian Hindus during the colonial period was limited; however, in the post-colonial era, a significant number of Hindus began to establish themselves within the global diaspora, including in Singapore. Rather than concentrating on the traumas and challenges faced by these migrants, this thesis explores how they forged distinct identities in foreign lands and navigated multicultural and cross-cultural environments through religious processions and practices. The primary objectives of the study are therefore:

- To examine the influence of religious institutions and leaders in shaping community cohesion and identity among Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.
- To explore the role of religion in facilitating the adaptation of the Malayali Hindu diaspora within Singaporean society.
- To investigate religious practices as cultural anchors in sustaining and shaping the identity of the Malayali Hindu diaspora.
- To analyse how religious processions function as spaces for resisting cultural assimilation while preserving heritage within diaspora.

In conclusion, this study underscores the centrality of religion in the cultural, social, and identity formation of the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore. By examining religious institutions, practices, and processions, the research highlights how diaspora communities actively negotiate their cultural heritage, creating spaces of belonging and continuity while engaging with the broader multicultural environment (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007).

METHODOLOGY:

This study is primarily grounded in secondary sources, drawing extensively on existing scholarly literature to examine the role of religious processions in shaping community cohesion, identity, and cultural continuity among the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore. Academic works on diaspora studies, religion, ritual practices, and cultural identity form the central framework through which the subject is analysed. However, recognising that lived experiences often reveal nuances that may not be fully captured in textual sources alone, primary data were incorporated to support, contextualise, and lend greater relevance to the arguments developed from secondary research.

A qualitative research approach was therefore adopted to complement the literature-based analysis. Primary data were collected through telephonic conversations, video calls, and FaceTime interactions with 25 participants, selected using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which initial participants identify or refer other potential respondents from within their social or community networks. This method is particularly effective when researching close-knit or culturally specific communities, as it enables the researcher to build trust and gain access to participants who are actively engaged in shared religious and cultural practices.

Of the 25 participants, 15 were male and 10 were female, including individuals from temple authorities and administrative roles, as well as housewives. The participants represented a diverse range of age groups, from senior community members to the younger generation, reflecting both experience and contemporary perspectives. This diversity allowed the study to capture multiple viewpoints on religious processions, community engagement, and cultural identity, highlighting how practices are sustained, adapted, and experienced across different roles and life stages within the diaspora. While the sample does not aim to statistically represent the entire Malayali population in Singapore—estimated at approximately 20,000 individuals—the perspectives gathered are significant for exploring dimensions of religious identity, community participation, and cultural continuity. Several respondents hold leadership roles within religious or cultural organisations or are actively involved in organising and sustaining religious processions. Their experiences therefore provide informed and reflective insights into the collective life of the community.

These conversational interactions allowed participants to share personal narratives, reflections, and interpretations of religious processions in an open and informal manner. The use of remote communication methods ensured accessibility while also allowing participants to speak from their everyday contexts, adding a human and experiential dimension to the study.

Due to practical and geographical constraints, data were collected through flexible and remote methods. Most interviews were conducted via video calls and telephone conversations, allowing participants to speak comfortably from familiar settings while also accommodating time differences and busy schedules. In some cases, participants shared photographs and short video clips of temple activities and religious processions, which helped provide visual context to their narratives. In addition, the study drew on virtual observations of religious events through recorded videos, online platforms, and social media posts. Together, these mediated

forms of engagement offered valuable insights into ritual practices, community participation, and everyday expressions of faith, while also highlighting how digital spaces support connection, visibility, and cultural continuity within the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, followed by a cross-theme analysis to explore interconnections between themes. This analytical process highlights how religious processions function simultaneously as expressions of faith, markers of cultural identity, and adaptive practices within Singapore's multicultural environment. By integrating secondary literature with selectively employed primary data, the study offers a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of how religious processions function as both cultural anchors and mechanisms of adaptation for the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY:

Although significant advancements have been made in understanding religion's role within social sciences, challenges remain, providing opportunities for scholars to explore new perspectives on its dynamic role in individual lives and society (Beckford, 2003). Religion continues to shape social structures, cultural identity, and community cohesion across generations, resisting assumptions that its influence will diminish over time. In diasporic settings, religion often serves as a communal anchor, sustaining cultural preservation, identity, and social networks (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000).

Building on this theoretical understanding, migration to Southeast Asia, particularly to Singapore, has been part of the region's historical fabric for centuries, highlighting its significance as a cultural melting pot. Singapore, an economically vibrant city-state, has historically attracted Indian migrants alongside other Asian communities. In addition to Indians who migrated to Mauritius, East Africa, Trinidad, Fiji, and Suriname, a sizable population

moved to Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore) between 1844 and 1910 (Jayaram, 2004). Early migration laid the foundation for Indian diasporic communities, particularly in Singapore. Since 1819, Indian migrants settled on the island, initially drawn by the booming trade industry. While many viewed Singapore as a temporary abode, the country's independence in 1965 marked a turning point, as Indian migrants established permanent roots. The term "Indian Singaporeans" emerged as the community's ties strengthened through social integration and cultural adaptation (Rajah, 2011).

Despite the growing body of literature on Indian migration globally, most research has focused on larger diasporic hubs, such as the Gulf or Europe, leaving smaller but socially active communities, like the Malayali diaspora in Singapore, relatively understudied. This represents a key research gap: little is known about how Malayali Hindus in Singapore use religion not only to maintain cultural continuity, but also to navigate identity and belonging in a multicultural urban setting. Addressing this gap allows the study to contribute both to the sociology of religion and to diaspora studies by examining how religion functions as a living, adaptable, and socially embedded practice in transnational communities.

Singapore was chosen as the field site for this study for both scholarly and practical reasons. While the Malayali diaspora is numerically larger in regions such as the Gulf and parts of Europe, Singapore offers a distinctive socio-cultural context that allows for a closer examination of religion as a public and cultural practice. Unlike the Gulf, where religious expression is shaped by legal and institutional constraints, or Europe, where migration histories are often tied to experiences of marginalization and integration challenges, Singapore's state-supported multicultural framework provides relatively greater space for the public performance of religious and cultural identities. This makes Singapore a particularly valuable site for

studying religious processions, festivals, and community-based practices among Malayali Hindus.

In addition to these academic considerations, the choice of Singapore was influenced by practical fieldwork realities. Initial contacts established through family and friends within the Malayali community in Singapore made access to participants and religious spaces more feasible. Given financial constraints, conducting fieldwork in Singapore was more viable compared to regions such as Europe or the Gulf, where longer stays and higher costs would have posed significant challenges. These existing social networks also facilitated trust-building, which is crucial for ethnographic research involving religious practices and community life.

By focusing on Singapore, this study highlights how a relatively smaller, yet socially active Malayali Hindu population asserts identity through language, religion, arts, and festivals within a highly regulated yet multicultural urban setting. The findings offer insights into how diasporic communities adapt religious practices to new environments, maintain connections with their homeland, and negotiate belonging in transnational contexts. In doing so, the study provides a broader framework for understanding how religion continues to function as a vital cultural resource in migrant lives across different global settings, filling an important gap in the literature on smaller diasporic communities.

In short, this study is important because it shows how Malayali Hindus in Singapore use religion to keep their culture alive, stay connected to each other, and pass traditions to the next generation. It also helps us understand how smaller diasporic communities navigate life in a multicultural city, offering insights into migration, identity, and belonging.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout this study. As the research involved qualitative interactions with members of the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore, participation was entirely voluntary. Before interviews and informal conversations, participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided verbal consent.

Participants were clearly informed that the research was being conducted for academic purposes and that they were free to choose whether to participate. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Particular attention was given to ensuring that individuals contacted through snowball sampling did not feel any pressure or obligation to participate.

To protect privacy, all participants used pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and field notes. Any interview excerpts used in the thesis are presented using these pseudonyms. All data collected during the study were stored securely and were accessed only by the researcher.

The fieldwork was conducted with careful attention to participants' beliefs, practices, and community norms, particularly while engaging with religious spaces, rituals, and community events. Respect for participants' beliefs and personal boundaries guided all interactions during the research process.

CHAPTERIZATION:

Chapterization serves as a roadmap for the thesis, outlining the logical flow and organization of the research. The thesis is organized into four main chapters, alongside an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter is thoughtfully structured to provide a solid foundation for the chapters that follow, creating a clear and coherent progression of ideas. This sequential chapterization not only enhances the clarity of the research but also facilitates a systematic exploration of complex themes, ensuring each concept is thoroughly examined before

advancing to the next. Through this organized approach, the research builds a comprehensive understanding of the topic, allowing each chapter to add depth and insight, culminating in a well-rounded analysis by the study's conclusion.

- Chapter 1 '**Exploring the Diaspora: The Dynamics of Kerala Migration**' provides a critical overview of the concept of diaspora, beginning with key theoretical frameworks that define and shape diasporic experiences. It then examines the broader Malayali diaspora, highlighting historical migration patterns and transnational connections. The focus subsequently narrows to the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore, tracing their migration from the colonial period to the present. The chapter analyses the push and pull factors driving migration, settlement patterns, and the community's socio-cultural adaptations. Through this analysis, it establishes a foundation for understanding how identity, tradition, and belonging are negotiated within a multicultural and transnational urban context.
- Chapter 2 '**Faith in Motion: The Cultural and Social Significance of Religious Processions in India**' examines the diverse forms and functions of religious processions across India's multifaceted religious landscape. It analyses these events as expressions of ritual devotion that also serve as arenas for social hierarchy, communal celebration, and symbolic competition. The chapter highlights the roles played by different communities in organizing and participating in these processions, emphasizing their capacity to foster cultural identity, social cohesion, and transformation. Furthermore, it explores the contrasts between homeland and diasporic celebrations, showing how these differences inform realistic expectations and promote respectful engagement with ritual practices in multicultural and transnational contexts.
- Chapter 3 '**Diasporic Processions: Space, Visibility and Refashioning of Hindu Culture**' provides an overview of the primary site of the study, examining the historical

emergence, organizational structure, and religious activities of the institution, with a focus on its role in organizing Malayali Hindu processions in Singapore. It highlights the temple's significance within the Malayali community, tracing its evolution as both a religious and cultural center. The chapter explores how these rituals assert spatial presence, construct community identity, and adapt tradition within a new urban context, as well as how the institution operates within Singapore's multicultural framework. This background establishes a foundation for the analysis of ritual practices and identity formation presented in the following chapter.

- Chapter 4 '**Religion and Identity in the Malayali Hindu Diaspora: Findings and Analysis**' presents the findings and analysis of the study, highlighting the multifaceted role of religious processions among Malayali Hindus in Singapore. First, it examines how these processions function as a central medium for identity construction, enabling migrants to preserve and publicly perform their cultural and religious heritage. The analysis underscores the intricate relationship between religious practices and community cohesion, showing how processions foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among migrants. Second, it explores the socio-economic dimensions of these practices. Findings reveal that religious processions not only promote symbolic unity but also generate significant economic engagement. Community fundraising, voluntary labour, and financial contributions associated with these events support local temple activities and development initiatives in Kerala, reflecting a form of transnational economic agency. Through these findings, the chapter demonstrates how ritual participation simultaneously strengthens social capital within the diaspora and contributes to homeland welfare. Collectively, the analysis illuminates the intersection of faith, identity, and economic engagement, providing a nuanced understanding of how

Malayali Hindus negotiate and sustain their cultural and religious world in a globalized, multicultural setting.

SUMMARY:

Religion often serves as a foundational pillar for diasporic communities, offering both a sense of identity and a mechanism for social cohesion amidst the challenges of migration (Levitt, 2001; Kurien, 2012). The diasporic experience is deeply intertwined with the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate their faith within new cultural landscapes, making religion a critical lens for understanding the dynamics of diaspora (Vertovec, 2000; Cohen, 1997). As migrants adapt to their host societies, religious practices frequently evolve, reflecting a balance between continuity and change, and shaping both individual and collective cultural identities (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 1999). This study, therefore, seeks to explore how religious practices not only construct and sustain communal and personal identities but also foster resilience, solidarity, and a sense of belonging within the diasporic experience (Kurien, 2002; Levitt, 2001).

CHAPTER ONE

Exploring the Diaspora: The Dynamics of Kerala Migration

As the title suggests, this chapter offers an overview of the Kerala diaspora across the globe. Malayalees have established a significant presence not only in the Middle Eastern countries but also in various parts of the world. Migration from Kerala began during a transformative era, driven by the search for better opportunities and economic stability (Kannan & Hari, 2002; Zachariah & Rajan, 2004).

The Malayalees, the ethnic group associated with Kerala—often referred to as “God’s Own Country”—embody a rich tapestry of cultural traditions, languages, beliefs, rituals, customs, festivals, cuisines, and archaeological heritage. Kerala is steeped in history, with legends speaking of the birth of Lord Vishnu, who instilled the values of justice, truth, and righteousness in the hearts of its people, nurturing their aspirations and faith. While this is part of local mythology, the state’s cultural diversity is well documented (Abraham, 2017; Indian Express, 2022).

Kerala’s vibrant cultural landscape reflects the influences of Dravidian traditions, ancient trade-linked civilizations, Aryan contributions, and the arrival of Jews, Portuguese, French, Latin Christians, and Arabian Muslims. Each of these groups has left an indelible mark on the cultural and developmental trajectory of modern Kerala (Abraham, 2017; Indian Express, 2022). Politically, the state was long governed by the Nair’s and Namboodiri’s, even as the rest of India began to experience imperial rule and the push for democratic rights. Following India’s independence in 1947, the former kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin merged to join the

Union of India, embarking on a journey to strengthen the state by combating poverty and advancing education (Wikipedia, 2023).

In its pursuit of progress, the Kerala government recognized that fostering migration could be a vital strategy for achieving economic stability, thereby alleviating poverty and enhancing development (Kannan & Hari, 2020). Known as the “Garden of Spices,” Kerala’s coasts have historically served as trade ports, facilitating connections with foreign lands. Over time, these trade routes evolved into avenues for cultural exchange, allowing the distinct traditions and practices of Kerala to permeate various parts of the world (Abraham, 2017; Wikipedia, 2023).

Reflecting this expansion, the poem by Pala Narayanan Nair and A.J. Thomas (2008) notes: ‘*Kerala is growing, Crossing the Western Ghats, and thriving, reaching alien lands*’. The surge in demand for labour in the Middle Eastern countries created a remarkable opportunity for many Indians, particularly Malayalees. This migration not only supplied receiving countries with a pool of affordable labour but also enabled migrants to earn wages, fostering economic growth in their home state (Kannan & Hari, 2002; Zachariah & Rajan, 2004). Beyond individual achievements, these migrants successfully formed communities, establishing a new paradigm known as the diaspora, enriching the global landscape with their cultural heritage (Kannan & Hari, 2020; Zachariah & Rajan, 2004).

UNDERSTANDING DIASPORA:

The concept of travel and settlement is ancient, with human movement and cultural exchange leaving significant developmental marks long before modern documentation. Over time, “travel” has evolved into organized processes of migration and displacement — phenomena now studied under the concept of diaspora. In scholarship, diaspora is understood not simply as

movement, but as a complex social and historical process encompassing dispersion, memory, identity, and long-term bonds with a homeland (Britannica, 2023).

According to Tölölyan (1996), the term originally referred to classical dispersed communities, such as Jewish, Greek, and Armenian populations, but has since expanded to include immigrants, expatriates, refugees, guest workers, and ethnic communities. This broadened understanding reflects changes in global migration patterns, transnational networks, and evolving modes of belonging.

One of the earliest theoretical frameworks for diaspora was offered by Safran (1991). He identified six core characteristics common to diasporic communities: (a) dispersion from an original homeland to multiple host societies; (b) a collective memory, vision, or myth about the homeland; (c) a sense of alienation or lack of full acceptance in host societies; (d) orientation toward the ancestral homeland as the “real” or ideal home; (e) commitment to maintaining or restoring the homeland; and (f) a continuing ethno-communal relationship with the homeland.

While early diaspora studies often considered communities like the Jewish diaspora as the “ideal type,” contemporary scholars recognize that diaspora is a broader, more dynamic category, reflecting hybrid identities, multi-local attachments, and transnational connections (Clifford, 1994; Boyarin & Boyarin, 1993). Cultural theorist Hall (1990) argued that diaspora identity is both a shared ancestry and a continuously evolving construct shaped by historical change, cultural interaction, and social adaptation. Similarly, Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) emphasized that identity in diasporic communities is inherited yet flexible, manifesting in varying forms and intensities across generations.

The diasporic experience is shaped not only by nostalgia and historical traumas but also by the influences of colonialism, migration processes, technological advances, and transnationalism.

Factors such as assimilation, acculturation, socio-economic challenges, and political boundaries significantly impact how migrants navigate their identities in host societies. These processes underscore the resilience and adaptability of diasporic communities as they maintain cultural continuity while engaging with new social, political, and economic environments.

In sum, diaspora represents an intricate interplay of dispersion, memory, identity, and adaptation. It highlights how communities preserve cultural essence while navigating complex transnational realities, shaping global identity and community in an interconnected world.

INDIAN DIASPORA:

The Indian diaspora is among the largest and most widely dispersed globally, reflecting a rich history of migration, cultural exchange, and adaptation. Over centuries, Indians have crossed borders influenced by historical events, economic prospects, and political factors. From early trade networks to colonial-era indentured labour and contemporary globalization, this diaspora has evolved into a blend of diverse experiences and identities. While their journeys often involved hardships such as displacement, trauma, and identity struggles, they also fostered resilient communities. These communities preserve their cultural heritage while embracing new identities in the nations where they now reside (Jayaram, 2004).

The narrative of diaspora is one of movement, adaptation, and cultural negotiation, encapsulating tales of displacement, emotional struggles, identity crises, and social challenges. It also highlights the formation of home-like communities within host societies over time. Across different periods, diasporas, both classical and modern, have included major and minor groups that left their ancestral lands to navigate new social, cultural, and political landscapes. The Indian diaspora has been a notable example. Rooted in histories of forced migration and indentured labour during colonial times, Indian communities emerged as fragmented groups

dispersed across various parts of the world. Over time, these groups have played a key role in reshaping the discourse of diaspora, with significant contributions to socio-political development and cultural integration (Jayaram, 2004).

The foundation of India's diaspora can be traced back to early trade relations, particularly with regions like Central Asia. These trade networks not only facilitated the exchange of goods and commodities but also served as a platform for sharing cultural values and practices. This early form of migration went beyond the physical movement of people, encompassing the transfer of socio-cultural elements, which Jayaram (2004) describes as a "socio-cultural baggage." This included social identity, religious beliefs, norms governing kinship and family structures, food habits, and language. When Indian migrants encountered new cultural environments, these features played a crucial role in shaping hybrid communities and new identities. These interactions led to the development of diasporic groups that retained elements of their original culture while adapting to the contexts of their host societies (Vertovec, 2000).

The Indian diaspora's journey can be categorized into three major phases of migration: the Age of Merchants, the Age of Colonial Capital, and the Age of Globalization. These phases reflect the evolving motivations, challenges, and outcomes of Indian migration across different historical contexts. The first phase, the Age of Merchants, was marked by voluntary migration driven by trade. Indian merchants, artisans, and labourers moved across regions to establish commercial networks. While economic interests were the primary motivator, these movements also fostered cultural exchanges that shaped the identities of Indian communities abroad (Jayaram, 2004).

The second phase, the Age of Colonial Capital, was characterized by forced migration under British colonial rule. The indentured labour system, established in the 19th century, transported large numbers of Indians to work in plantations across the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia,

and the Pacific. Migrants, primarily from Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha, were subjected to harsh conditions, including inadequate food, healthcare, clothing, and financial support. Many plantations also witnessed widespread gender-based exploitation, further intensifying the migrants' suffering. This phase of migration was largely involuntary, and migrants often struggled to preserve their cultural practices and identities while adapting to the demands of plantation life. Despite these adversities, many Indian labourers began to see their host countries as permanent homes over time (Tinker, 1974).

The third phase, the Age of Globalization, marked a significant shift in Indian migration patterns. Advancements in transportation, technology, and communication facilitated the movement of skilled professionals, students, and entrepreneurs. Unlike the indentured labourers of the colonial era, these migrants were better positioned to integrate into host societies while maintaining strong cultural and economic ties to India. This phase of migration reflected a new era of interconnectedness, where Indian communities contributed to global economies and cultures while continuing to uphold their heritage. The Indian diaspora of this period was no longer defined by hardship alone but also by resilience and the ability to thrive in new environments (Jayaram, 2004; Vertovec, 2000).

Throughout its history, the Indian diaspora has faced numerous challenges, including displacement, cultural alienation, and identity conflicts. However, these adversities have been counterbalanced by migrants' resilience and their ability to preserve their cultural heritage. The socio-cultural "baggage" carried by Indian migrants—including social norms, religious practices, and linguistic traditions—has served as a foundation for community-building in foreign lands. As these elements interacted with host cultures, they gave rise to new social and cultural forms, blending traditional values with local influences. This cultural synthesis has

been instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging among diasporic communities while allowing them to maintain their ties to India (Vertovec, 2000).

The Indian diaspora's contributions extend beyond cultural integration. Economically, these communities have played a significant role in both their host countries and India. Remittances from the diaspora have been a vital source of income for India, while Indian professionals and entrepreneurs have driven innovation and development in their adopted nations. This dual contribution underscores the interconnected nature of the Indian diaspora and its importance in shaping global socio-economic dynamics (Jayaram, 2004).

The story of the Indian diaspora is one of resilience, adaptation, and transformation. Spanning centuries and encompassing diverse experiences, it illustrates the complexities of migration and the enduring strength of cultural heritage. From early trade networks to modern globalization, Indian migrants have navigated challenging socio-political landscapes to establish vibrant communities abroad. As Jayaram (2004) highlights, the Indian diaspora reflects the unique socio-cultural histories and economic realities of its communities. Through their ability to adapt and integrate, Indian diasporic groups have enriched their host societies while preserving connections to their ancestral roots. Their journey serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of migration and the power of cultural resilience in shaping identities across borders.

TRANSNATIONAL TIES AND INDIAN DIASPORA:

The Indian diaspora, one of the largest and most dynamic transnational communities globally, has evolved through centuries of migration, adaptation, and integration. From ancient trade networks to colonial labour systems and contemporary globalization, the diaspora's transnational ties—encompassing economic, cultural, and political connections between Indian-origin individuals and their homeland—have been a defining feature of its identity.

These connections have been shaped and sustained by historical migration patterns and modern globalization, enabling the Indian diaspora to maintain and strengthen its linkages over time (Jayaram, 2004; Vertovec, 1999).

The origins of the Indian diaspora's transnational connections can be traced back to the Age of Merchants, when Indian traders established extensive networks with regions such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, fostering exchanges of goods, religious practices, and cultural traditions (Ray, 2003). These early movements laid the groundwork for long-lasting transnational ties and cultural diffusion. During the colonial period, referred to as the Age of Colonial Capital, the diaspora expanded significantly due to the indentured labour system, which transported Indians to British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific to work on plantations (Tinker, 1974). Despite harsh conditions, these communities preserved their connections with India through language, religion, familial bonds, and the exchange of letters and remittances, serving as precursors to modern transnational networks (Jayaram, 2004).

The end of indentured migration in the late 19th century marked the beginning of voluntary migration. Indians sought opportunities in North America, Europe, and Gulf countries, further diversifying the diaspora's profile (Lal, 2006). This period saw the establishment of formal transnational networks, allowing communities to extend their influence in host nations while staying connected to India. The late 20th century, often referred to as the Age of Globalization, brought transformative changes. Advances in communication and transportation technology, such as the internet and affordable air travel, enabled migrants to maintain closer ties with their homeland. Skilled migration, particularly to countries like the United States and Canada, elevated the diaspora's global visibility and facilitated contributions to India's economic and cultural growth (Khadria, 2009; Vertovec, 1999).

Today, the Indian diaspora exemplifies robust transnationalism through economic remittances, cultural exchanges, political advocacy, and philanthropic activities. India is among the largest recipients of remittances globally, benefiting from both blue-collar workers in the Gulf and professionals in Western nations (World Bank, 2021). Cultural contributions by the diaspora have amplified India's soft power. Festivals, cuisine, and art are promoted worldwide, creating a cultural bridge between India and host countries (Jayaram, 2004). Events such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and numerous cultural organizations foster stronger ties between India and its diaspora communities. Politically, the diaspora plays a significant role in shaping bilateral relations. Prominent Indian-origin politicians and business leaders have emerged as influential figures in host nations, while lobbying groups advocate for policies favourable to India, enhancing its global stature (Lal, 2006).

The Indian diaspora has evolved from ancient trade routes to modern interconnected networks, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. These ties not only sustain cultural and economic connections but also reinforce India's global influence. Migration over different historical periods has produced diverse diasporic communities, marked by varying degrees of homogeneity and heterogeneity in language, religion, caste, region, gender, and class. Jayaram (2004) categorizes the Indian diaspora into three main types based on historical phases:

1. Colonialism-Induced Diaspora

- 1.1. *Competing Community*: Migrants competing with dominant ethnic groups for survival.
- 1.2. *Subjected Community*: Oppressed groups enduring socio-political marginalization.
- 1.3. *Marginalized Community*: Nominally present groups often overlooked.

2. Colonialism-Facilitated Diaspora

- 2.1. *Original Immigrant Community*: Groups assimilating into host societies while preserving cultural identities (e.g., Punjabis in Canada, Gujaratis in the UK).

2.2. *Twice-Removed Community*: Migrants displaced multiple times, such as East African Indians relocating to Western countries.

2.3. *Suppressed Community*: Groups maintaining safety while struggling with socio-political suppression.

3. **Post-Independence Diaspora**

3.1. *People of Indian Origin (PIOs)*: Descendants of early migrants maintaining ancestral connections.

3.2. *Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)*: Indian citizens living abroad.

3.3. *Transient Diasporic*: Temporary migrants, including professionals and students.

These categories reflect the diaspora's varied responses to host countries' racial and ethnic compositions. While some communities faced oppression, others integrated successfully, influencing local cultures and economies (Jayaram, 2004).

The Indian diaspora has maintained profound cultural and emotional ties with its homeland, a phenomenon explored by scholars such as Safran (1991), who emphasized "ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity." These ties underscore how diasporic communities sustain their relationship with the homeland, mitigating the impact of physical distance and fostering active cultural exchange. By preserving traditions, values, and identities, Indian communities abroad contribute significantly not only to host nations but also to India's global cultural influence. Festivals such as Diwali and Holi, celebrated worldwide, serve as markers of cultural continuity and communal solidarity, illustrating how the diaspora preserves its heritage while adapting to diverse sociocultural environments.

EARLY GOVERNMENTAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DIASPORA:

India's governmental response to its diaspora has undergone significant transformation over the decades, reflecting broader changes in global migration patterns and India's socio-political priorities. In the early phases of migration, the Indian government maintained a relatively passive stance, often leaving diaspora communities to navigate challenges independently. A notable example of this passive approach was the expulsion of Indian traders from Burma in 1964 and from Uganda in 1972. In both instances, the Indian government provided minimal support to its displaced citizens, forcing them to seek refuge in countries such as the United Kingdom without substantial assistance (Lal, 2006). These incidents highlighted the absence of a cohesive diasporic policy during the mid-20th century, exacerbating the struggles faced by displaced populations.

This lack of engagement was partly due to India's focus on internal development during its early post-independence years. The government prioritized economic stability and nation-building over addressing the needs of its overseas population. As a result, many diasporic communities felt disconnected from their homeland, relying instead on their own networks and resources to adapt and thrive in host societies (Jayaram, 2004).

The late 20th century marked a turning point in India's engagement with its diaspora. Recognizing the growing economic and cultural influence of overseas Indians, the Indian government adopted a more proactive approach. A major milestone in this shift was the introduction of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day) in 2000 by the Ministry of External Affairs. This annual event celebrates the contributions of the overseas Indian community to India's development, honors exceptional individuals and organizations, and provides a platform for dialogue on issues of mutual concern. Since its inception, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas has played a crucial role in fostering stronger connections between India and

its diaspora, emphasizing shared cultural heritage and cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2017; World Bank, 2021).

This initiative signalled a broader acknowledgment of the diaspora's potential as a strategic asset. By facilitating dialogue and engagement, the program has helped bridge the gap between India and its global communities, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose. The establishment of this platform reflects the government's recognition of the diaspora as a key partner in India's global ambitions (MEA, 2017).

In summary, India's engagement with its diaspora has evolved from minimal involvement in the mid-20th century to a structured and strategic approach in recent decades. Initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) scheme demonstrate the government's recognition of the diaspora as a vital economic, cultural, and strategic partner (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2017; World Bank, 2021). This proactive engagement not only strengthens India's global presence but also fosters a sense of shared identity and belonging among its overseas communities (Jayaram, 2004; Kurien, 2002).

THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA:

By 2016, the Indian diaspora had grown to approximately 31 million individuals, comprising 17 million People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and 13 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), spread across 146 countries (World Bank, 2021). This demographic represents one of the largest and most diverse diasporic communities globally, with significant economic, cultural, and political influence. Among them, the Kerala diaspora has played a vital role in shaping the economic, cultural, and social landscapes of host nations (Kurien, 2002).

Economically, the Indian diaspora contributes substantially to India's development through remittances, investments, and business ventures. India remains one of the largest recipients of

remittances globally, with the diaspora playing a critical role in supporting local economies and infrastructure development (World Bank, 2021). Culturally, the diaspora serves as a bridge between India and the world, promoting Indian traditions, cuisine, and art while fostering cross-cultural understanding in host nations (Jayaram, 2004). Politically, the Indian diaspora has emerged as a significant force, influencing bilateral relations and advocating for policies favourable to India. Indian-origin politicians and business leaders have achieved prominence in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, leveraging their positions to strengthen India's global standing (Lal, 2006). This growing influence underscores the diaspora's potential as a strategic partner in India's international endeavours.

The proactive engagement with the diaspora was further reinforced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure. At the 2017 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas held in Bangalore, Modi articulated a vision of transforming "brain drain into brain gain," emphasizing the diaspora's role as a vital resource for India's development. He highlighted the shared aspiration of *Bharatiyata* (Indian identity) as a unifying force, underscoring the diaspora's potential to contribute economically, culturally, and strategically to India's growth (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2017).

Under Modi's leadership, initiatives such as the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) scheme and the simplification of visa processes have strengthened diaspora ties with India. These measures have facilitated greater mobility and engagement, enabling the diaspora to maintain active connections with their homeland while contributing to India's global aspirations (MEA, 2017).

The cultural, emotional, and governmental connections between India and its diaspora illustrate a dynamic interplay of shared heritage, mutual benefit, and global influence. From an early passive stance to the proactive engagement of recent decades, India's approach to its diaspora has evolved to reflect changing priorities and global aspirations. Through initiatives such as

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and policies aimed at fostering greater engagement, the Indian government has successfully strengthened its ties with the diaspora, recognizing it as an asset in its international strategy. As the diaspora continues to grow and adapt to changing global dynamics, these connections remain a cornerstone of India's identity and influence on the world stage (Kurien, 2002).

The Indian government's approach to its diaspora has evolved over time, shifting from passive responses in the early phases of migration—such as during the expulsion of Indians from Burma (1964) and Uganda (1972)—to a more engaged and structured policy. The establishment of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2000 marked a significant effort to recognize and strengthen the contributions of the Indian diaspora. With approximately 31 million people of Indian origin across 146 countries as of 2016, India has increasingly fostered connections with its global community. At the 2017 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Bangalore, Prime Minister Modi emphasized this shift, declaring that India is moving from “brain drain to brain gain” with a shared vision of *Bharatiyata* (MEA, 2017).

BEGINNING OF THE KERALA MIGRATION:

The ancient history of Kerala has unveiled many stories about the formation of the state as a cohesive social community, often based on historical myths and local traditions. One such myth revolves around Lord Parasurama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who, for his past misdeeds, is said to have performed penance at Gokarna. It is believed that after receiving blessings from Lord Varuna (God of Oceans) and Bhoomidevi (Goddess of Soil), he converted a portion of the sea into land by throwing his battle axe, creating the land now known as Kerala—the “land of Parasurama” (Menon, 2007).

Kerala's heritage was further enriched by the presence of European missionaries and administrations. Its strategic location, edged by the Arabian Sea, Western Ghats, and an extensive network of canals, made the region a hub for trade and early migration (Manmadhan, 2009). Indian historians have highlighted Kerala's trade relations with the West, particularly following Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498, which marked the beginning of large-scale spice trade and the integration of the Malabar Coast into global commerce (Manmadhan, 2009). The trade of spices, silk, and other commodities attracted traders from Babylonia, China, Jewish communities, Arabs, Greeks, and Romans, fostering cultural exchange, economic development, and social transformation. Kerala's maritime connections also facilitated the cultivation of high-demand crops, supported labour markets, and catalysed cultural synthesis (Kurien, 2002).

- Early Trade Era

Until the early 19th century, outward migration from Kerala was minimal, with limited internal movement within India. The social and economic conditions of the time reflected simple lifestyles, with few incentives for migration. As KV Joseph notes, "although the desires and wants of people are still more limited than those of other natives and with very few exceptions, they supply themselves from their own sources, they have but little inclination to intimate our manners nor a taste agreeable to our productions" (Ward & Conner, 1863, p. 87).

However, colonial labour systems, such as indentured migration and the Kangani system, prompted some Keralites to seek opportunities abroad, particularly from coastal regions engaged in maritime trade. Exposure to these trade networks familiarized the local population with migration patterns, preparing them for future movements (Kurien, 2002).

With industrialization and changes in agricultural practices in the mid-20th century, voluntary migration became increasingly attractive. Regions such as the Persian Gulf emerged as major destinations for labour due to their growing oil industries and limited local workforce, offering employment opportunities in construction, clerical work, and supervisory roles (Abdul & Mustiary, 2009).

- Modern Gulf Migration Phase

Migration to the Gulf is often perceived as a primarily Malayali phenomenon, with approximately 1.4–1.5 million Keralites residing in Gulf countries, contributing an estimated 22% of the state's income through remittances (Abdul & Mustiary, 2009). These remittances have played a crucial role in Kerala's economic and infrastructural development, reducing poverty and facilitating asset accumulation.

Labor demand in Gulf countries also led to the establishment of local agencies in Kerala, offering vocational training, skill development, visa services, and job placements. Migrants found employment in sectors ranging from construction and catering to retail and healthcare, illustrating a shift from contract-based to choice-driven migration.

The inflow of remittances, while beneficial, has also raised the cost of living, including land, construction, food, and healthcare, affecting non-migrant households (Prakash, 2009). Migration has also reduced the local semi-skilled labour pool, with younger generations pursuing education for better employment opportunities. External factors, such as the Gulf War of 1991 and fluctuations in oil prices, have intermittently impacted migrant flows and remittances, requiring adaptation by the migrant community (Abdul & Mustiary, 2009).

- Non-Gulf and Global Malayali Migration

Kerala's diaspora is not limited to the Gulf. Historical migration to Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, began during the British colonial period, primarily for trade purposes. Malayalis contributed significantly to Malaysian society, establishing well-integrated communities and engaging in socio-economic development (Samuel, 2016). Migration to African countries also has roots in trade and British colonial expansion. Malayalis in Africa primarily worked as teachers and professionals, although numbers declined between 2003–2007 due to financial instability and personal security concerns (Samuel, 2016).

Modern migration to advanced economies such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia has largely been driven by educational and professional opportunities. The Canadian points-based immigration system, for instance, enabled Kerala's disproportionately educated workforce to enter with professional qualifications, particularly in healthcare and caregiving sectors (Samuel, 2016). First-generation migrants faced challenges of geographic dislocation and cultural adjustment, while second- and third-generation communities have leveraged technology to maintain transnational linkages.

In summary, Kerala's migration history reflects a dynamic interplay of geography, trade, and socio-economic transformation. From ancient maritime trade and the spice routes to modern Gulf and global migration, Kerala's people have engaged with diverse regions while maintaining strong cultural and economic linkages with their homeland (Manmadhan, 2009; Kurien, 2002). Gulf migration has been a defining feature of Kerala's modern diaspora, providing substantial remittances that have contributed to state development, household prosperity, and social mobility (Abdul & Mustiary, 2009; Prakash, 2009). Simultaneously, migration to non-Gulf regions—including Southeast Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe—has enabled Malayalis to establish transnational communities, integrating local opportunities

with cultural continuity (Samuel, 2016). Collectively, these historical and contemporary patterns of migration set the stage for understanding the Malayali diaspora, highlighting both the socio-economic impact of remittances and the formation of culturally connected global communities.

MALAYALI DIASPORA:

The Malayali diaspora is present across the globe, largely shaped by the lack of economic opportunities and persistent poverty in Kerala since India's independence. Migration has been a key mechanism for alleviating poverty and driving socio-economic transformation through remittances. The contributions of migrants have not only assisted the government in state-building but also improved the living standards of people in rural areas. Beyond government initiatives, several Malayali associations in diaspora maintain branches in Kerala, directly supporting socially disadvantaged communities through educational assistance, arranging marriages, and providing employment for families of deceased or incapacitated members. Diaspora communities have also assisted government agencies dealing with overseas affairs, reflecting a strong sense of collective responsibility. For Malayalis, migration is often viewed as a life-changing phenomenon rather than a simple movement (Zachariah & Irudaya Rajan, 2012).

Life in the diaspora, however, is not without challenges. Malayalis, like other migrant groups, face identity issues, cultural differences, separation from family, child-rearing challenges, and difficulties in adapting to host societies. Despite these hardships, Malayalis often take pride in showcasing their achievements upon returning to Kerala, reflecting the transformative impact of migration. Migration decisions are influenced by family expectations, poverty, or the desire for self-settlement and improved living standards (Rajan, 2019).

Over time, Malayalis have successfully established strong communities both within India and abroad, displaying cohesion and distinctiveness in host societies. However, demographic data on Malayali migrants remain limited. The Kerala Migration Survey (KMS), conducted by the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, provides some of the most comprehensive data on this population. According to KMS 2018, approximately 2.1 million Kerala emigrants reside worldwide, with women comprising around 15.8% of the total. The survey highlights trends in settlement, demographic composition, remittances, and socio-economic impact, noting a recent decline in emigration and an increase in return migration (Zachariah & Irudaya Rajan, 2012).

Historically, Malayali migration began during periods of Middle Eastern and European trade and has evolved to include educational and professional migration. Kerala's educational system has been a key driver, enabling migrants to pursue opportunities in urbanized and industrialized regions. While Gulf countries once dominated as the primary destination during the "Gulf Boom," modern migration patterns show a shift toward non-Gulf destinations, including Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and several European countries. These shifts reflect changes in socio-economic aspirations, professional opportunities, and political environments, as well as the adaptability of Malayali migrants to diverse host societies (Samuel, 2016).

Malayali migration to non-Gulf countries has historically been influenced by colonial connections, educational opportunities, and professional demand. While migration to the Gulf has been well documented, historical records of migration to non-Gulf countries remain limited. Research has highlighted trends in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Southeast Asia, but systematic archival data are scarce, impeding a comprehensive understanding of migration patterns beyond the Gulf (Rajan, 2019; Thompson, 2017; Zachariah & Rajan, 2012).

Nonetheless, modern Malayali diaspora communities have leveraged these migrations to establish strong social networks, cultural organizations, and economic linkages.

The Gulf region remains the primary destination for Malayali migrants, with estimates suggesting that over 85% of the diaspora resides there, primarily driven by labour demand and employment opportunities (Rajan, 2019). Other portions of the diaspora are distributed across countries such as Japan, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, South Korea, the United States, Finland, Austria, Germany, New Zealand, and Pakistan, albeit in smaller numbers (Zachariah & Irudaya Rajan, 2012). The migration of Keralites to these diverse locations reflects a combination of socio-economic, political, and personal factors, producing varied migration patterns and experiences.

In summary, the Malayali diaspora has profoundly influenced Kerala's socio-economic and cultural development while establishing strong transnational networks. Migration has enabled financial stability, skill acquisition, and cultural exchange, allowing communities to thrive abroad while maintaining deep ties with their homeland. Despite challenges related to identity, adaptation, and social integration, Malayalis have demonstrated resilience and cohesion, contributing to both host countries and Kerala's development. The Gulf region remains the primary destination, but non-Gulf migration reflects the community's evolving aspirations and global presence. Overall, the Malayali diaspora exemplifies the enduring impact of migration on economic growth, cultural continuity, and social transformation (Rajan, 2019; Zachariah & Irudaya Rajan, 2012).

MALAYALI DIASPORA IN SINGAPORE:

Singapore, often referred to as the "Port City," has attracted migrants from across the world due to its advanced technological infrastructure, high standard of living, and status as a center for

innovation and commerce. Studies have highlighted Singapore's remarkable economic and political development, which has drawn skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, and labourers seeking better opportunities (Rajan, 2019). Migrants arriving in Singapore include those who came as students or professionals ("brain drain"), colonial-era labourers, and refugees from politically or economically unstable regions. Post-independence demographic data indicate that while Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities form the bulk of Singapore's population, smaller groups from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal are also present (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010).

Defining the Indian community in Singapore is complex due to its diverse composition. The Singapore Census of 2010 classified "Indians" as persons of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan origin, encompassing Tamils, Malayalees, Punjabis, Bengalis, and Sinhalese (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010). This broad classification reflects the colonial legacy, when the British grouped all South Asians under the collective identity of "Indians." Early Indian migration to Southeast Asia was not entirely voluntary; it consisted of traders, priests, and Indian princes who settled and contributed culturally and economically to the region (Thomas, 1993). Indian temples, religious institutions, and trade networks became integral to Singapore's multi-ethnic identity.

During the colonial era, Indians were often temporary migrants, maintaining ties with India while contributing to Singapore's social, political, and economic structures (Sandhu, 1969). The British facilitated the migration of labourers, professionals, and traders to meet the demands of a growing economy. While some eventually settled permanently, many initially intended to return home after earning wealth. The establishment of Singapore as a British trading post in 1819 created opportunities for soldiers, labourers, and traders. The British

recruited Indians to maintain demographic balance amid a rapidly growing Chinese population and to support agricultural and infrastructural expansion (Arasaratnam, 1979; Rajan, 2018).

A significant number of Indian migrants, particularly from Tamil Nadu, were recruited for their skills, adaptability, and perceived non-confrontational nature (Thomas, 1993). Despite their contributions, many faced exploitation and harsh working conditions. To address this, the Government of India introduced regulations to protect workers and ensure voluntary migration. Restrictions were temporarily imposed in 1870–71, which slowed Singapore's labour market growth, but later lifted as demand increased (Arasaratnam, 1979; Rajan, 2018).

Malayali migration to Singapore began during the colonial period when the British actively recruited skilled South Indians to support port and administrative development. The Indian Immigration Department encouraged migration from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Malayali migrants, particularly from Malabar and Travancore, became integral to labour and professional sectors, shaping the socio-economic structure of colonial Singapore (Arasaratnam, 1979). Narayana Pillai, a Tamil entrepreneur, played a pivotal role in establishing the Indian community in Penang and Singapore through his association with Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. He contributed significantly to the textile and construction industries, paving the way for South Indian migrants, including Tamilians and Malayalis, to work in Singapore (Sandhu, 1969).

The introduction of English education by Lord Thomas Macaulay in 1835 influenced migration patterns, especially for Kerala, the most literate region in India. Educated Malayalis, primarily upper-caste Hindus, Syrian Christians, and Catholics, migrated to Singapore and Malaysia for administrative, technical, medical, and teaching professions. Alongside them, Tamil Brahmins, Christians from Madras, Bengalis, and Punjabis entered government and administrative positions (Rai, 2014; Arasaratnam, 1979). While Punjabis and Bengalis were largely recruited

into military and police forces, South Indians were often excluded based on colonial stereotypes. Malayalees, however, became key administrators in the British Naval Base, acting as intermediaries between Tamil labourers and colonial authorities (Rai, 2014, p. 99).

The growth of commerce further increased the presence of Tamilians and Malayalis in business, trade, and retail. Over time, these communities contributed to the establishment of settlements and fostered economic, socio-cultural, and political transformations in Singapore (Sandhu, 1969). Social networks, technological development, and a well-established Malayali community enabled continued migration and settlement, allowing the community to thrive while maintaining cultural identity. The flourishing of Hindu temples, mosques, and churches reflects the strong communal presence of Malayalis in Singapore.

Despite being classified as a broad ethnic category, Indians in Singapore have made distinctive contributions to governance, business, education, and cultural life, shaping the city-state's global identity.

SUMMARY:

This chapter has traced the historical, conceptual, and regional frameworks necessary to understand Kerala migration, emphasizing the evolution of the Indian and Malayali diasporas through trade, colonial encounters, and modern globalization. The discussion highlighted how transnational ties, economic opportunities, and social networks shaped Malayali migration patterns, particularly in Singapore, where the community contributed to commerce, administration, and cultural life while maintaining strong connections with their homeland (Rajan, 2018; Rai, 2014; Sandhu, 1969). The analysis underscored the dual role of migration as both an agent of socio-economic transformation for Kerala and a vehicle for sustaining cultural identity across borders. Moreover, the chapter demonstrated that diaspora communities do not

merely relocate physically; they actively negotiate, preserve, and transform cultural practices in host societies. The Malayali diaspora exemplifies the dynamic interplay between migration, social adaptation, and cultural continuity, reflecting broader patterns of Indian migration globally (Rajan, 2019).

Building on this understanding of diasporic mobility and cultural negotiation, the next chapter, 'Faith in Motion: The Cultural and Social Significance of Religious Processions in India', will examine how religious rituals and processions function as both communal and performative expressions of cultural identity.

CHAPTER TWO

Faith in Motion: The Cultural and Social Significance of Religious Processions in India

Building upon the previous chapter, which examined the concept of diaspora and traced the historical trajectory of Kerala's global connections, this chapter, "*Faith in Motion: The Cultural and Social Significance of Religious Processions in India*," explores the dynamic role of processions as living embodiments of faith in the Indian context. Religious processions occupy a central place in India's spiritual and cultural life, functioning as collective performances through which communities' express devotion, identity, and belonging in the public sphere. Far more than ritual spectacles, these processions represent the intersection of religion, culture, and social order. They transform ordinary spaces into sacred arenas, reinforce communal bonds, and visually articulate the moral and spiritual foundations of Indian society. By examining their historical evolution, ritual forms, and social implications, this chapter highlights how processions serve as both religious observances and social narratives—sites where faith becomes visible and shared (Thapar, 2002).

Religious processions are among the many facets of India's cultural diversity, representing a unique dimension through which the country has carved a distinct place in global culture. India, renowned for its rich cultural and traditional heritage, serves as a dynamic platform where various aspects of society—such as geography, politics, ethnicity, language, religion, and festivals—intersect to shape its history and civilization (Thapar, 2002). Its vast geographical expanse contributes to regional diversity, while political structures influence social organization and governance. Ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, India is home to numerous communities, each with distinct traditions that enrich the country's cultural tapestry.

Religious processions and festivals play a crucial role in expressing faith and community identity, reinforcing deep-rooted traditions across generations (Thapar, 2002).

India's diversity is further reflected in its administrative and geographical structure, comprising 29 states, 7 union territories, and two island territories—Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep—each inhabited by people with unique cultural practices. Historically, Indian society has adopted various strategies to foster social harmony and equality among diverse communities, promoting cross-cultural understanding and mitigating communal tensions (Thapar, 2002). The thread of unity shared by people across regions and communities has facilitated a culturally rich society marked by collective cohesion and diversity.

India is widely recognized for its extensive religious diversity, being the birthplace of major faith traditions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Additionally, the subcontinent has long served as a meeting ground for religions introduced by Greeks, Persians, Zoroastrians, Jews, Muslims, and Arabs, all of whom contributed enduring cultural and religious legacies (Thapar, 2002). Through centuries of trade, migration, and conquest, these communities profoundly shaped India's spiritual and cultural landscape, influencing architecture, social customs, ritual practices, and philosophical thought. Although some of these religions originated outside India, many integrated with indigenous traditions, resulting in diverse manifestations of devotional practices and ethical worldviews. Over time, these faiths intertwined with local beliefs, creating a distinctive spiritual synergy that emphasized multiple pathways to the divine (Thapar, 2002).

India, as the home to most of the world's Hindu population, has nonetheless maintained a strong tradition of secularism, accepting and promoting diverse religious beliefs, rituals, processions, customs, and cultural traditions. Religious processions exemplify this diversity, reflecting the cultural and social values embedded within various communities (Government of

India, 1950). Foreign-influenced religions introduced new customs, festivals, and social practices, further enriching the multicultural fabric of Indian society. This multiculturalism has historically encouraged racial and ethnic harmony, cross-cultural understanding, and religious tolerance, discouraging discrimination, exclusion, and violence (Thapar, 2002). Legal frameworks in India, particularly the Right to Freedom of Religion enshrined in the Constitution, institutionalize and safeguard these principles of religious diversity and tolerance (Government of India, 1950).

The following sections explore the foundational aspects of religion in India, its cultural influence, and the diverse expressions of processional traditions across the country. By analysing their historical significance, ritual practices, and societal impact, this discussion illustrates how religious traditions shape public life and contribute to the formation of community identities within the Indian context (Thapar, 2002)

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION

Religion is widely recognized as a major social institution and has been extensively examined by sociologists for its influence on culture, identity, traditions, social structures, and its role in shaping human behaviour and societal interactions (Durkheim, 1995; Weber, 1922/2002). Scholars have long been interested in understanding religious experiences and identifying the fundamental elements that constitute religion. Throughout history, researchers have attempted to analyse core aspects of religion—especially beliefs, rituals, and supernatural forces—because religion has been central to all known human societies (Bell, 1992).

Religion is not only concerned with the sacred or the profane; rather, it often lies at the intersection of these domains. The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane forms the foundation of many religious beliefs and customs (Durkheim, 1995). Due to its complexity and

cultural variation, formulating a single, universally accepted definition of religion has proven challenging. Sociologists and anthropologists have been particularly intrigued by the mystical, experiential, and symbolic dimensions of religion. Karl Marx, for instance, approached religion from a materialist standpoint, famously asserting that “religion is the opium of the people,” thereby arguing that religious ideas reflect underlying social and economic conditions rather than functioning as independent moral or spiritual forces (Marx, 1844/1978). In contrast, Max Weber (1922/2002) analysed religion in relation to economic, political, moral, and administrative behaviour, emphasizing the broader cultural consequences of religious systems rather than focusing solely on individual spiritual practices.

Sociologists commonly describe religion as a social institution grounded in beliefs, rituals, and practices that are considered sacred and that transcend empirical or scientific verification (Durkheim, 1995). Individuals typically engage with religion as a system of beliefs shaped by personal experience, social institutions, and cultural context. Religion is often conceptualized as a Platonic ideal associated with supernatural powers or a higher transcendent reality. The Oxford English Dictionary defines religion as “recognition on the part of a man of some unseen higher power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship” (Oxford University Press, 2020).

John Dewey (1934) provided a nuanced interpretation in which he argued that religion should be understood as a quality of experience rather than an independent, external entity. He distinguished between religion as a noun—suggesting a fixed institutional system—and religious as an adjective—indicating attitudes, behaviours, or experiences oriented toward ideals or higher powers. Dewey (1934) explained, “There is a difference between religion, a religion, and the religious; between anything that may be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective... The adjective ‘religious’ denotes

nothing in the way of a specifiable entity... It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (p. 21).

Rather than relying on rigid definitions, researchers have frequently identified the distinctive characteristics of religion through empirical observation and comparative study. Jane E. Harrison (1908) emphasized the importance of collecting religious facts without first attempting to construct a strict definition, acknowledging that religious expressions vary widely across cultures. J. Paul Williams (2008) conceptualized religiousness as a “mental act” expressed intellectually, emotionally, or volitionally, illustrating how belief, feeling, and deliberate action all contribute to human religiosity. Earlier thinkers, including Taylor, Spencer, and Hegel, approached religion as a form of belief, hypothesis, or knowledge, whereas Schleiermacher, Wieman, and Otto emphasized experience, devotion, and emotional depth as central to understanding religion (Williams, 2008).

For many scholars, the essence of religion lies in an individual’s belief in a higher power or supernatural force that shapes existence and destiny. Lester F. Ward (1912) argued that religion is a human construction shaped by human understanding and societal needs, rather than an autonomous force existing independently of social life. He suggested that belief in a supreme power—whether natural or supernatural—forms the foundation of religious systems, and religion serves as a means through which humans seek to relate to this power. Ward (1912) stated, “If you analyse religion—not my religion, but religion itself—you will find that the essential idea which is its very soul, inheres in the relation which exists between man and the infinite power manifested in the universe above him... The object of their religion consisted in getting into right relations with this power. And this getting into right relations with the god has been the one object and aim of religion in every age of the world” (p. 45).

Early nomadic societies often lacked formalized religious structures or explicit awareness of supernatural forces. Harold E. Driver (1963), for example, observed that some nomadic groups in Mexico displayed little interest in organized religious practices, such as idols, altars, or sacrificial rituals. Edward B. Tylor (1871) broadly defined religion as “belief in supernatural beings,” emphasizing humanity’s efforts to explain and interpret life experiences. Ward (1912) later refined this perspective, proposing that belief in spiritual beings is an outcome of religion rather than its defining essence.

Historically, religion evolved alongside human civilization, influencing social norms, cultural patterns, and moral frameworks. Concepts of spirits, ancestors, and supernatural forces varied across societies, giving rise to diverse religious practices and traditions. According to Ward (1912), the primary emphasis of religion lies in structure and social function rather than individual emotion: “In the great dualism of life, religion is the champion of function against feeling, of the race against the individual” (p. 67).

Thus, religion operates as a stabilizing social force, ensuring the continuity of collective norms and values even when they conflict with personal desires or emotional impulses.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS:

Scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and religious studies have long examined the internal politics and cultural expressions of religious traditions around the world. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that the study of religion must shift from viewing the ‘self in the other’ to examining ‘the self itself’. This means analysing a country’s religious traditions through its own conceptual categories and indigenous theoretical frameworks. The term *religion*, for example, is itself problematic when applied to the Indian context, as it derives from Western intellectual history and does not map neatly onto the diverse and plural forms of

religiosity found in the Indian subcontinent (Clothey, 2006). Nevertheless, Indian ritual practices and cultural systems have been theorized in ways that highlight their internal logic and evolutionary development.

India's religious heritage is both ancient and remarkably rich. Over centuries, communities have expressed religious identities, transmitted traditions, and preserved belief systems through elaborate rituals and customs handed down through generations. Because these practices have evolved organically over millennia, tracing the precise origins of Indian religious culture remains a complex endeavour. Archaeologists and historians often struggle to determine the meanings of ancient artifacts and to locate the historical roots of religious expressions. Clothey (2006) discusses Indo-European migrations as one interpretive lens through which early cultural and religious formations in the subcontinent have been examined. He notes that European fascination with India was partly driven by Europe's search for its own origins, whereas Indian inquiry into origins was tied to self-definition and claims of civilizational antiquity.

According to Clothey (2006), each historical era—from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods to the Indo-European and Vedic periods—has contributed layers of meaning to Indian religious life. Early worship of nature deities, the emergence of folk traditions, and the development of agricultural communities helped establish enduring ritual practices. The social classification system that later evolved into the fourfold *varna* order also introduced complex ritual hierarchies, mythic narratives, and notions of cosmic order—elements that would shape what later came to be identified with Hinduism.

Clothey (2006) emphasizes that Hindu understandings of religion differ significantly from Western conceptions. For many Hindus, the core of religious life is *dharma*, a concept that encompasses duty, virtue, moral order, and the sustaining power of the cosmos. As Besant (as

cited in Clothey, 2006) explains, *dharma* includes law, morality, purity, beauty, and spiritual obligation. It is not simply ritual correctness or belief in deities; rather, *dharma* is the principle that sustains and protects life. The *Mahabharata* describes *dharma* as that which ‘maintains’ and ‘protects’ the universe, underscoring its cosmic significance. Thus, many Indians believe that the nation’s achievements and resilience are rooted in adherence to *dharma*, whereas neglect of *dharma*—*adharma*—can lead to social and moral decline.

T. N. Madan (1987) argues that the foundational paradigm of India’s major indigenous traditions is this cosmic–moral order of *dharma*. Importantly, *dharma* is not static; it varies across time, social groups, and historical conditions. For example, the *dharma* of a Shudra differs from that of a Brahmin, and the obligations of individuals shift across the cosmic ages (*yugas*). *Dharma* also manifests differently depending on context: it is a cosmic law in the natural world, ensuring harmony and stability, while in human society it becomes an ethical framework that supports justice, charity, and right conduct. Due to its adaptability, *dharma* remains a foundational concept across regions, communities, and religious systems.

Indian civilization is often understood as a dharmic civilization—a worldview in which human beings seek meaning through engagement with the diversity of nature and adherence to a moral order. Yet *dharma* is not the only value guiding life; economic well-being (*artha*) and pleasure (*kāma*) also constitute essential goals within the classical Indian worldview. As Badrinath (1993) argues, the identity of Indian civilization is fundamentally dharmic rather than exclusively “Hindu.” The term *Hindu* gained prominence from the eighth century onward through foreign usage and later became associated with religious identity, but *dharma* predates these labels and forms a shared conceptual foundation across Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

In Indian traditions, *dharma* is upheld not merely through divine intervention but primarily through human action. Ethical, legal, and social norms enable *dharma* to function effectively within society. Central to this framework is *svadharma*, or one's personal moral responsibility. Actions that harm others—such as violence, theft, exploitation, or deceit—are considered violations of *dharma*. While different traditions articulate *dharma* in unique ways, parallels remain. In Buddhism, *dhamma* serves as the moral and cosmic law, though without reference to a creator deity. In Jainism, *dharma* is grounded in *ahimsa*, or non-violence. In Sikhism, *dharam* signifies a life shaped by moral duty, spiritual discipline, and divine grace. Meanwhile, within Hindu thought, the notion of *dharmayuddha*, or righteous war, appears in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where divine incarnation restores moral order (Madan, 1987).

Complementing *dharma* is the concept of *karma*, which refers to action and its consequences. If *dharma* provides the framework for ethical life, *karma* represents the enactment of that framework. As Madan (1987) notes, *karma* is the means by which individuals strive to live in accordance with the shared moral order. Because actions produce effects that carry into future lives, individuals regard human birth as a precious opportunity for spiritual progress.

The practical nature of *karma* has shaped ritual traditions across India. For many Hindus, ritual actions are essential to maintaining moral and cosmic order. Thinkers such as the Buddha, Śaṅkarācārya, and Guru Nanak critiqued excessive ritualism, emphasizing instead moral discipline, knowledge, and spiritual intention. Yet rituals continue to function as rites of passage and vehicles for spiritual merit across caste and community boundaries.

Across Indian traditions, wrongful or harmful actions (*akarma*) are believed to generate negative consequences, prompting individuals to perform rituals or undertake pilgrimages to seek purification. Pilgrimages—such as the Kumbh Mela for Hindus, the Hajj for Muslims, Bodh Gaya for Buddhists, or Nankana Sahib for Sikhs—are viewed as opportunities for

spiritual renewal and liberation from karmic burdens. The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that one is entitled to action alone, not to the fruits of action, highlighting the need for detachment while performing one's duties.

Ultimately, the interconnected principles of ritual, *dharma*, and *karma* serve as pathways to self-realization within Indian thought. These values are transmitted not only through scriptures and family traditions but also through religious organizations and community movements that act as intermediaries between the sacred and ordinary life. Such institutions have historically contributed to social welfare, education, and the preservation of cultural heritage. In this way, the intertwined concepts of *dharma* and *karma* continue to shape India's religious, social, and cultural fabric, affirming its enduring identity as a truly dharmic civilization.

RIGHTS, CUSTOMS, AND THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN INDIA:

India is a multi-religious country where every religious community is expected to receive equality and respect under the law. The Constitution of India explicitly guarantees religious freedom and secularism, ensuring that all religions are treated with equal dignity and harmony (Government of India, 1950). As discussed earlier, India is the birthplace of four major world religions—Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism—each of which has established a significant global presence. In addition to these indigenous traditions, several other religions reached India in earlier historical periods, contributing to the immense pluralism that characterizes Indian society today (Thapar, 2002). Because of this extensive diversity in religious practices, beliefs, and cultural forms, the Constitution assumes a critical role in protecting the right of every individual to practice, profess, and propagate the religion of their choice. Articles 25, 26, 27, and 28 explicitly safeguard these freedoms, and importantly, these rights extend not only to citizens but to any individual residing in India, irrespective of nationality (Government of India, 1950).

While constitutional provisions intend to uphold harmony, history reveals moments when minority rights were challenged, resulting in tension and violence. A notable example is the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, where contestation over a religious site escalated into the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. For many Hindus, the site was believed to mark the birthplace of Lord Rama, which led to repeated demands for reclaiming the land. The conflict intensified into communal violence, prompting the central government to intervene when state authorities failed to restore order (Engineer, 2004). This case raises broader questions about the extent to which constitutional rights to religious freedom are upheld in practice. If the Constitution guarantees equal freedom for all religions, how do religious intolerance, communal riots, and acts of violence continue to occur? Similarly, large religious festivals, fairs, melas, processions, and pilgrimages—despite their cultural importance—sometimes lead to disorder, conflict over public space, and disruptions to everyday life. Flags, banners, temporary structures, and competing processional routes often become sources of friction among religious communities or caste groups, occasionally resulting in political or communal clashes (Nandy, 1998). Such incidents prompt a deeper inquiry: *Are constitutional rights being exercised responsibly, or are they being misused under the pressures of social, political, and religious mobilization?*

The right to freedom of religion is intended to support both individual and collective spiritual well-being. It allows individuals to hold, practice, and express their beliefs without fear of discrimination or repression, promoting the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious traditions (Bilimoria, 2018). Although the Constitution does not explicitly define the term *religion*, it places significant emphasis on the notion of *freedom*, recognizing religion as a belief system grounded in faith rather than empirical certainty. Thus, the right to freedom of religion encompasses far more than worship alone; it includes religious expression, education, propagation, and ritual practice, all of which are essential for maintaining communal harmony

and preventing unnecessary conflicts. The Preamble reinforces this commitment by securing “liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship” (Government of India, 1950). Given that religion can be a volatile subject with the potential to provoke unrest, the State retains the authority to regulate religious practices when necessary to maintain public order, morality, and health (Austin, 1966).

India’s commitment to secularism is widely acknowledged. However, the Indian model differs significantly from Western conceptions. In Western Europe, secularism typically involves a strict separation between Church and State. By contrast, Indian secularism signifies equal respect for all religions and the State’s ability to engage with religious institutions when required for social reform, while refraining from interference in matters of internal doctrine (Bhargava, 1998). Within this framework, the issue of religious conversion has remained contentious. While the Constitution allows individuals the freedom to propagate their religion, coercive or fraudulent conversions are prohibited. Several states have enacted anti-conversion laws, such as the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (1967) and the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam (1968), which impose penalties—including imprisonment and fines—on those who engage in forced or manipulative conversions. These laws have faced criticism, and constitutional expert H. M. Seervai argued that conversion is a legitimate exercise of freedom of conscience, as religious knowledge must inspire personal conviction rather than coercion. According to Seervai (1984), “conversion does not in any way interfere with freedom of conscience but is a fulfilment of it and gives meaning to it.” In a broader global framework, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) upholds the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to change one’s religion and to manifest it publicly or privately through teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

Despite these constitutional rights, an area often overlooked is the role of religious processions as public expressions of faith. Processions occupy a unique place within religious traditions, enabling communities to celebrate shared beliefs and cultural identities. As earlier sections of this chapter indicate, processions have long served as significant ritual practices across multiple Indian religions. When discussing processions—religious, cultural, political, or national—the immediate image is that of large crowds. These crowds define the aesthetic, social, and emotional force of processions, yet they also pose challenges. At times, such gatherings become difficult to control, leading to property damage, confrontations, or even communal clashes. Private devotional practices rarely trigger such conflicts, but when religious activities extend into public spaces, the potential for disorder increases, necessitating regulatory intervention (Fuller, 2004). To prevent escalation, the government deploys police personnel to manage crowds, maintain peace, ensure the uninterrupted functioning of public life, and oversee the orderly progression of parades and celebrations. Furthermore, any organization wishing to conduct a public procession must obtain permission from local or state authorities. Failure to secure such authorization can result in restrictions or cancellation. In contrast, processions conducted within the confines of temple premises or religious institutions generally require only institutional approval, making them easier to manage and less prone to conflict.

RITUALS AND PROCESSIONS: SACRED PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC

Processions have always captivated people with their striking visual display of ritualistic power, national strength, political authority, social cohesion, and cultural traditions. They create moments of spectacle that attract and engage millions of participants and onlookers. In India, processions are incredibly diverse, reflecting the country's pluralistic regions, religions, and social backgrounds (Jacobsen, 2008). While most processions are characterized by

celebration, joy, and communal solidarity, some also express grief, sorrow, or incite conflict, as observed in funeral processions or politically charged rallies that may lead to protests and riots. Processions can be religious, political, or military in nature, each demonstrating varying forms of hierarchical order, authority, and power. Public displays of these acts not only highlight religious devotion, political ideology, and national strength, but also create arenas for social competition, prestige, and the assertion of dominance (Fuller, 2004; Jacobsen, 2008).

According to Knut A. Jacobsen (2008), processions are often religious events that unite communities in collective celebration. The frequency of procession reports in daily newspapers indicates how central they are to Indian life. Beyond celebration, processions act as platforms for mobilization, allowing political, religious, or military groups to display social power and reinforce public order. Such public gatherings can convey authority while also expressing community identity and solidarity.

Religious processions are the most prominent and widely celebrated in India, forming a crucial component of South Asian religious culture. Unlike strictly annual festivals, these processions occur throughout the year in different forms and styles. In line with the principles of *karma* and *dharma*, processions are considered ritual acts that fulfil moral duties and contribute to spiritual merit. Indian mythology emphasizes that performing rituals, offerings, chants, or sacrifices in one's religious context is essential for attaining *moksha* or spiritual liberation (Michaels, 2004). Consequently, people participate in chariot processions, temple or church festivals, and pilgrimage events as expressions of devotion and fulfilment of religious duties.

Importantly, processions are not limited to Hindu traditions. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists also perform religious processions in diverse forms throughout India. These celebrations occur across all four cardinal directions—North, South, East, and West—and at various points in the year, highlighting the geographic and temporal diversity of Indian

religious practice (Jacobsen, 2008). Among the most celebrated examples are the Kumbh Mela processions, South Indian temple chariot festivals, Vinayaka Chaturthi processions, Muharram processions, Guru Granth Sahib processions, church processions, and numerous regional festivities. These events not only convey religious significance but also illuminate the multiple dimensions of faith, communal identity, and cultural expression. The following sections will provide an overview of these processions, emphasizing their similarities and differences in ritual practice, ideology, and social impact.

RELIGIOUS PROCESSIONS ACROSS MAJOR FAITHS:

- Hindu Processions: Devotion and Community identity

Hindu processions are vibrant public displays of religious devotion that play a central role in expressing and reinforcing community identity. Rooted in ancient cultural traditions and rituals yet evolving with contemporary practices, processions exemplify the living nature of faith and belief. As Friedrich (1996) notes, “Processions are deeply embedded in Hinduism’s religious and cultural fabric, often accompanied by temple fairs, festive occasions, and annual rituals dedicated to deities such as Lord Ganesha, Goddess Durga, and Lord Shiva.” These processions involve devotional songs, rhythmic drumming, and chanting of mantras, bringing the divine into the public realm. Scholars such as Kinsley (1993) emphasize that these processions are not merely ritualistic events but dynamic forums where mythological narratives are reenacted, and communal bonds are reinforced. Chakravarti (2000) further argues that Hindu processions function as vital social gatherings, facilitating the negotiation of cultural values and social order.

In Hindu society, processions are more than festive displays; they serve as public embodiments of religious devotion and social hierarchy, shaped in part by the caste system (Kinsley, 1993). Different caste groups perform distinct roles, reflecting their ritual responsibilities and traditional social positions. Brahmins, the upper caste, lead ceremonies by performing rites, reciting sacred texts, and carrying religious idols, invoking divine blessings for the community. Kshatriyas, traditionally the warrior class, contribute a martial dimension through ceremonial weapons, ornate costumes, and symbols of authority, highlighting their historical role as protectors of dharma (Chakravarti, 2000). Vaishyas, associated with trade and commerce, support the processions logistically and financially, ensuring smooth organization and execution. Their involvement underscores the integration of economic prosperity with spiritual observance (Fuller, 2008).

The Kumbh Mela exemplifies the intersection of faith, culture, and social life in Hindu processions. Recognized as the largest religious gathering globally, this centuries-old pilgrimage centers on ritual bathing, symbolizing spiritual cleansing and renewal. Occurring every twelve years, millions of Hindus converge along the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers to participate in this sacred act, which transcends caste, creed, and social hierarchy (Lochtefeld, 2002). Beyond its festive appearance, the Kumbh Mela carries profound religious significance. Devotees undertake significant personal sacrifice, forgoing comfort and material wealth in pursuit of spiritual liberation and charitable deeds. Rooted in Hindu mythology, particularly the churning of the cosmic ocean for the nectar of immortality, the festival emphasizes self-sacrifice and divine grace. Politically, the event has become a highly organized occasion, with the government leveraging it to promote social initiatives such as literacy, family planning, and AIDS awareness, as well as to boost religious tourism (Lochtefeld, 2002, p. 30). In

December 2017, UNESCO recognized the Kumbh Mela as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its global cultural importance (UNESCO, 2017).

Beyond spiritual purposes, Hindu processions affirm social belonging and cultural continuity. They provide opportunities for communities to collectively engage in acts of devotion, reinforcing shared values and social hierarchies. Participation in organizing, financing, or performing in these events fosters interdependence and unity among caste and kinship groups (Fuller, 2008). Processions serve as platforms for negotiating social status, visibility, and local prestige, where each group asserts its role within the broader religious and social order (Chakravarti, 2000). Scholars note that public displays of devotion not only express faith but also function as mechanisms of cultural cohesion and social integration, sustaining Hindu collective identity across generations (Kinsley, 1993; Menon, 2013).

Processions also cultivate a strong sense of bonding among participants. As Turner (1969) explains, such rituals bring people from diverse backgrounds into shared spiritual experiences that temporarily suspend social distinctions. Music, drumming, chanting, and movement transform ordinary streets into sacred spaces, making religion publicly visible (Menon, 2013). Men and women play complementary roles: men often lead the procession or carry idols, while women contribute as singers, sponsors, and organizers, particularly during festivals like Navaratri and Durga Puja that honor feminine power (Chakravarti, 2000). Regional variations illustrate this diversity: Rath Yatras in the North emphasize the grandeur of divine movement, whereas Ezhunnallathu processions in the South feature music, dance, and colourful decorations (Lochtefeld, 2002). Contemporary processions also stimulate local economies through

tourism and trade, demonstrating the interplay between faith and everyday life (Fuller, 2008).

In conclusion, Hindu processions are vibrant expressions of faith that celebrate religious devotion, build community identity, and strengthen social cohesion. The Kumbh Mela, with millions participating in ritual bathing, exemplifies how processions can transcend social divisions and unite people in shared acts of purification and renewal (Lochtefeld, 2002). Other festivals, such as Meenakshi Kalyanam, combine myth, regional identity, and tradition, reinforcing cultural heritage and empowering communities. These processions preserve Hindu spiritual and cultural legacies, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society.

- Muslim Processions: Ritual, Memory and Solidarity

Processions in India are not confined to Hindu communities; they are also an integral part of other religious traditions and practices. Among the country's largest minority groups, Muslim processions hold significant religious and social importance, comparable in reverence to those of other faiths. During the medieval period, the Muslim community experienced fragmentation and dispersion, but by the 19th century, the community witnessed a revival through religious movements and the establishment of educational and cultural institutions (Freitag, 1989). Exposure to Western learning, coupled with the adoption of modern technologies, contributed to reducing tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities. Consequently, Muslim processions can be understood both as religious rituals promoting spiritual life and communal bonds, and as spaces for political expression and cultural celebration.

Although public processions in the Muslim community are fewer in number compared to Hindu processions, they have achieved considerable visibility and influence. Among these, Muharram is the most widely observed procession. It commemorates Husayn ibn Ali, regarded as the “Prince of Martyrs,” whose life and sacrifice played a pivotal role in shaping religious and national consciousness among Muslims (Akbar, 2003). Observed by both Shia and Sunni communities, the nature of mourning differs between these groups. The procession lasts ten days, paralleling Hindu festivals like Durga Puja in its temporal span. On the tenth day, participants cast taziehs into rivers or seas, a ritual believed to have protective and healing powers. Children often pass under the tazieh as an act of seeking intercession. Remarkably, Hindu participants were historically allowed to join the procession, although they were prohibited from chest beating and self-flagellation, illustrating the interreligious exchange that shaped cultural practices prior to India’s partition (Freitag, 1989).

Beyond Muharram, other Muslim processions such as Eid ul-Fitr, Eid ul-Adha, and Milad-un-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) emphasize celebration and communal joy. During Eid processions, congregants gather for collective prayers, exchange greetings, and share food, reinforcing values of gratitude, charity, and togetherness. Similarly, during Milad-un-Nabi, communities celebrate the Prophet’s life and teachings through public sermons, devotional songs, and communal gatherings, fostering social cohesion and cultural continuity (Malik, 2010). These events exemplify how bodily performances, ritual enactments, and public participation serve to transmit faith, preserve historical memory, and reinforce communal identity.

Scholars emphasize that Muslim processions play a crucial role in transmitting religious traditions across generations while strengthening community bonds. Events such as

Muharram, Eid ul-Fitr, and Eid ul-Adha provide spaces for expressing devotion, celebrating cultural identity, and uniting diverse social groups (Akbar, 2003; Malik, 2010). Through these processions, faith is made visible in public life, communal solidarity is reinforced, and India's pluralistic culture is enriched.

- Christian Processions: Faith and Cultural Adaptation

The Christian community, the second largest religious minority in India, has a rich history of faith and devotion. Christianity was introduced to India by Thomas the Apostle, and over centuries, it has become an integral part of India's diverse religious landscape (Tharoor, 2011). Like other religious communities, Christian processions in India are public displays of spiritual devotion, social identity, and historical memory. These processions serve as acts of worship while also reinforcing group cohesion, commemorating significant milestones, and fostering interfaith understanding within India's multicultural society.

Christian processions in India go beyond mere expressions of faith; they also act as platforms for preserving historical memory and celebrating the longstanding presence of Christianity in the subcontinent. For instance, the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, who is believed to have brought Christianity to India in the first century, is widely celebrated in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. During this event, devotees participate in processions featuring regional music, floral decorations, and the carrying of relics or icons through streets. These practices not only highlight the historical roots of Christianity in India but also underscore the resilience and enduring faith of the Christian community (Tharoor, 2011).

Furthermore, Christian processions in India demonstrate the blending of religious belief with local cultural practices. Christianity has adapted to India's social and cultural environment rather than strictly following Western traditions. For example, in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa, processions incorporate Indian musical instruments, regional art forms, and traditional attire. This cultural integration both honours religious traditions and contributes to communal harmony, fostering a distinct Indian Christian identity. According to Babu (2017), the public and participatory nature of these celebrations bridges communal divides, promoting coexistence, social service, and the principles of peace central to Christian teachings.

Overall, Christian processions in India illustrate how faith and culture interact to maintain religious identity while engaging with the wider society. These processions reinforce community solidarity, celebrate historical continuity, and showcase the capacity of religious traditions to harmonize with local cultural contexts, reflecting India's pluralistic and diverse social fabric (Babu, 2017; Tharoor, 2011).

- Sikh Processions: Reverence, Justice and Equality

Sikhism, one of the youngest religions in the world, originated in Punjab, India, at the end of the 15th century. The fundamental teachings of Sikhism are enshrined in the central scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which emphasizes divine unity, equality, faith in one Creator, selfless service, social justice, and honest conduct (Singh, 2008). Sikh processions serve as dynamic expressions of these spiritual values, reflecting the community's deep commitment to justice, equality, and collective well-being.

Major Sikh processional events include Nagar Kirtan, Maghi, Baisakhi, Holla Mohalla, Gurpurabs, Diwali, and commemorations of the martyrdom of the ten Gurus. Each

procession celebrates the lives and accomplishments of the Gurus, marking significant historical moments such as birth anniversaries, battles, struggles for equality, and acts of liberation. For example, Baisakhi commemorates the founding of the Khalsa Panth in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh, symbolizing a community devoted to courage, equality, and service. Similarly, Holla Mohalla, also established by Guru Gobind Singh, features mock battles and martial art demonstrations to signify the community's readiness to defend justice and righteousness. Other processions mark pivotal events such as the liberation of the Gurus from imprisonment and their death anniversaries, reinforcing the enduring legacy and core values of Sikhism (Mandair, 2012; Singh, 2008).

Among all Sikh rituals, Nagar Kirtan holds special significance. This involves carrying the *Guru Granth Sahib* through the streets in a decorated palanquin, accompanied by hymns (*kirtan*) and active participation of the entire community. The procession symbolizes public reverence for the living Guru—the scripture itself—and spreads messages of peace, humility, and service. Participants also engage in langar (community kitchen), where free meals are provided to all, regardless of religion, caste, or social background, highlighting Sikhism's inclusive ethos (Myrvold, 2013).

For practicing Sikhs, processions serve to honour the Gurus and community members responsible for promoting social justice and equality. The *Guru Granth Sahib* functions as the central text of reverence, compiling the teachings and poetic compositions of the Gurus in a musical framework rooted in North Indian classical traditions. Myrvold (2013) notes that the scripture is personified during processions, stating, "Within the framework of an enduring social relationship to the Guru-scripture, disciples personify the text and treat it as a social being who is present in and interacting with the world" (p. 45). This personification enriches the procession experience and reinforces its

significance in uniting the Sikh community while preserving its spiritual and social legacy.

Unlike other religious processions, Sikh processions emphasize profound respect for the Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*, translating spiritual teachings into collective action. Through these events, the Sikh community maintains its identity, promotes social harmony, and embodies the principles of justice, equality, and compassionate service that form the core of the faith, contributing to India's rich cultural and religious landscape.

The study of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and other minor religious processions in India illustrates the deep interconnection between faith, culture, and social life. These processions function as public expressions of devotion, identity, and community solidarity, reflecting the values and beliefs central to each religion. Hindu processions honor the divine presence of gods, celebrate festivals, and mark the cycles of life, emphasizing dharma and karma as guiding principles (Fuller, 2008; Lochtefeld, 2002). Muslim processions, such as Muharram, center on remembrance, solidarity, and the reaffirmation of communal bonds, fostering collective memory and moral reflection (Freitag, 1989; Malik, 2010). Christian processions blend faith with local cultural traditions, integrating music, regional art forms, and historical commemoration to reinforce group identity and social cohesion (Tharoor, 2011; Babu, 2017). Sikh processions, including Nagar Kirtan and Baisakhi, emphasize respect for the Gurus, justice, equality, and the collective practice of spiritual and social values (Mandair, 2012; Myrvold, 2013).

Together, these processions serve as platforms for cultural expression, social integration, and the reinforcement of moral and ethical values. They transform ordinary spaces into sacred and communal arenas, allowing individuals to experience shared devotion and participate in rituals

that transcend social divisions such as caste, class, or ethnicity. Moreover, processions contribute to intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge, ensuring that traditions, stories, and values are preserved over time (Kinsley, 1993; Menon, 2013). Beyond their religious significance, these events foster mutual respect, cultural understanding, and peaceful coexistence among diverse communities, highlighting India's pluralistic ethos. In this way, religious processions not only celebrate faith but also reinforce the social and cultural fabric of the nation, acting as unifying forces that bridge differences and cultivate collective identity across beliefs and generations.

OTHER REGIONAL PROCESSIONS IN INDIA:

Beyond the major religious processions contributed by Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, a myriad of other processions enriches India's social and cultural fabric. These processions often emerge from local and indigenous traditions, secular celebrations, and political or civic events. For instance, many tribal communities across India hold processions to mark harvest festivals or honor local deities and ancestral spirits, reflecting their unique cultural narratives and relationships with the environment (Chopra, 2005). Similarly, regional fairs (melas) and cultural festivals, celebrating arts, literature, or historical events, frequently feature processions that blend ritualistic elements with community entertainment, showcasing folk music, dance, and traditional crafts.

One notable feature of these processions is their dynamic and evolving nature. Rituals observed today may differ tomorrow, demonstrating that processions are not static but adapt according to context and purpose. Large-scale temple or festival processions typically involve thousands of participants and serve as grand communal celebrations, while marriage or funeral processions generally include smaller, more intimate gatherings. Even funeral processions have evolved over time. Traditionally, the 'antyesti' or 'last sacrifice' was performed on the day of death, with

the body wrapped in white or red and taken to a riverside cremation ground for burning in the presence of family and friends. In contemporary practice, bamboo pyres or electric crematoriums are often used, and the resulting ashes are immersed in water to complete the final rites.

Prabhu (2018), in her article "Grandeur in Gait" published in *The Hindu*, illustrates how temple processions in South India have adapted to modern times while maintaining core ritualistic traditions. For example, in many Vaishnava temples, deities are carried on the shoulders of devoted individuals known as Sri Padham Thangigal, who undertake long journeys with these sacred icons as an act of devotion and as a blessing from the divine. In notable examples such as the Srirangam Temple and the Sri Parthasarathy Swami Temple in Triplicane, Chennai, deities are now transported on wheels during festivals, a modern adaptation that has become a distinctive and regular feature of these celebrations.

Across India, region-specific processions highlight the nation's cultural diversity. Celebrations such as Assam's Bihu, Gujarat's Navratri Garba, or West Bengal's Poila Boishakh parades demonstrate how regional traditions integrate art, faith, and festivity. Some processions incorporate contemporary or secular elements, while others preserve age-old customs and beliefs, exemplifying the coexistence of continuity and change within India's ritual landscape. Similarly, processions across various Indian states may include secular elements without overt religious significance, while others maintain traditional religious practices unchanged. Together, they illustrate the dynamic interplay between heritage and modernity in India's ritualistic life.

Since this study focuses on the Kerala diaspora and its processions, it is essential to examine Kerala's cultural heritage and the distinctive ways in which Malayalis from diverse religious backgrounds conduct their processions. The following section therefore explores Malayali

culture and its processional practices, highlighting how Kerala's unique traditions, values, and collective beliefs are expressed and celebrated in the diaspora.

MALAYALI CULTURE AND PROCESSIONAL CELEBRATIONS:

Kerala, often referred to as "God's Own Country," is distinguished by its unique cultural landscape, shaped by diverse religious traditions, festivals, spirituality, artistic heritage, dance forms, and natural harmony (Menon, 2012). As the home to major world religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and minor religions like Buddhism and Jainism, Kerala exemplifies peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and a strong sense of communal belonging (Varma, 2015). Over time, the interactions among these communities have influenced each other's social and ritual practices, contributing to Kerala's distinctive pluralistic identity (Nair, 2018).

- Cultural Landscape and Festivals of Kerala

Kerala's cultural identity is a rich tapestry woven from its traditions, ritual performances, performing arts, festivals, traditional attire, and diverse culinary heritage (Menon, 2012). Family and communal gatherings during festivals or religious processions demonstrate that people are deeply attuned to spirituality, aesthetics, and social cohesion (Varma, 2015). Processions, locally known as *ezhunnallippu*, epitomize this synthesis, functioning both as sacred observances and as vibrant cultural spectacles (Nair, 2018). These events serve as visual and auditory celebrations of devotion, often featuring elaborate ornaments, rhythmic drumming, colourful attire, and collective participation, highlighting Kerala's intricate performative culture.

Importantly, processions in Kerala transcend religious boundaries, occurring in Hindu temples, Christian churches (*perunnals*), and Muslim mosques (*nerchas*), symbolizing

the state's inclusivity and pluralism (Chopra, 2005). Beyond their ritualistic significance, they also foster social integration, provide a platform for communal expression, and strengthen collective identity. The cultural ethos underlying these events—rooted in balance, mutual respect, and artistic expression—ensures the continuity of Kerala's processional traditions, reflecting the harmony between devotion, artistry, and community life (Prabhu, 2010). Furthermore, these processions act as spaces where historical memory, local identity, and intergenerational values are performed, maintained, and transmitted, reinforcing the region's unique cultural landscape.

- History and Development of Processions

Processions in Kerala have a long and prosperous history that evolved from rituals and imperial ceremonies. Kerala's processional traditions trace their origins to early agrarian festivals and Dravidian nature-worship rituals, which centered on communal expressions of gratitude to both natural forces and local deities. Communities assembled not only to carry out temple rituals and deity worship but also to strengthen social bonds through shared values and a sense of belonging. It was believed that such cohesion would result in a healthier and more prosperous society characterized by social inclusion and collective capital (Namboodiri, 2017).

From the 8th to the 12th centuries CE, a shift occurred with the emergence of temple culture, which merged agrarian and Dravidian practices with Brahmanical traditions, giving rise to temple festivals and processions (*utsavams*). These events brought the wider community together to witness the movement of deities beyond the sanctum, reinforcing shared devotion. Temples functioned not only as spiritual centers but also as spaces for art, music, and community gatherings, reflecting the close link between ritual

practice and regional culture. Royal patronage further enhanced their scale and sophistication, as rulers recognized the social and political potential of such festivals. Support included temple funding, lavish offerings to deities, and participation in ceremonial displays, demonstrating how rulers strengthened their authority and safeguarded faith and social order.

Over time, the modes of processions changed and expanded, influenced by regional, colonial, and modern developments (Varghese, 2019). As communities interacted and cultures blended, new forms of processions became part of Kerala's festival culture, such as *perunnal* for Christians and *nercha* for Muslims. These processions illustrate how people from different religious and social backgrounds found a common means to express faith, devotion, and joy. After India's independence, processions came to represent not only religion but also Kerala's cultural identity and pride (Rahman, 2021). Today, these traditions continue to unite communities, preserving ancient rituals while adapting to contemporary social and cultural contexts, thereby sustaining Kerala's unique pluralistic heritage.

- Temple Festivals and Community Participation

When it comes to temple festivals and community participation, the involvement demonstrated by the people of Kerala deserves special appreciation. Rather than focusing solely on individual spiritual needs, people express their devotion through collective cultural, ritual, and organizational activities (Menon, 2018). During festival preparations, every section of society—regardless of class, gender, or occupation—plays a meaningful role, from decorating temple premises and organizing processions to preparing food for devotees (Varghese, 2020). This cooperation and togetherness reflect social unity and strengthen communal identity.

As Freeman (1999) observes, the communal participation seen in Kerala's temple festivals reflects a deep-rooted sense of belonging, where religion, art, and social life are closely intertwined. For example, a typical temple procession involves moving the deity's idol (*utsava murti*) on a caparisoned elephant or ceremonial chariot, accompanied by *chenda melam* (drum orchestras), *panchavadyam* (five-instrument ensembles), and blazing lamps that portray rich symbolism, artistry, and collective energy (Menon, 2018). Moreover, this active involvement has helped preserve traditional art forms such as *chenda melam*, *panchavadyam*, and *theyyam*, ensuring that they remain vibrant even in a modernizing society (Panikkar, 2015).

Importantly, participation is not limited to Hindu devotees. This inclusive character extends across faiths: Christian *perunnals* and Muslim *nerchas* follow similar patterns of music, movement, and devotion (Namboodiri, 2017). Such shared participation fosters unity and reflects the Malayali worldview, which celebrates diversity through cultural harmony (Panikkar, 2015). Thus, community involvement in Kerala's festivals is not only an expression of religious faith but also a vital manifestation of the state's living cultural heritage.

- Evolution and Modern Adaptation

Over the years, processional celebrations in Kerala have undergone significant changes. What began as small, local rituals in temples and villages has now become large and colorful public events that attract thousands of people from within the region and beyond. These celebrations have grown alongside Kerala's progress in education, tourism, and technology (Menon, 2018). Today, processions are not only religious events but also cultural, artistic, and social spectacles (Varghese, 2020). They incorporate dance, music, traditional instruments, decorations, and performances that

reflect the region's cultural identity. In this way, processions create social spaces where friends and family gather to celebrate, transforming ritual observance into a combination of faith, culture, and community life (Freeman, 1999; Government of Kerala, Department of Tourism, 2021).

As processions in Kerala have progressed with technological advancements, they have steadily evolved to meet the needs of a modern environment (Panikkar, 1995). With increasing attendance at festivals and temple processions, the organization and experience of these events have also changed. Loudspeakers, LED lighting, and advanced sound systems now enhance the visual and auditory appeal of processions for large crowds (Radhakrishnan, 2019). Major festivals are often broadcast live on television and social media, allowing Malayalis living abroad to participate virtually and stay connected to their cultural roots (Varghese, 2020). Digital media has transformed local rituals into global cultural expressions, helping younger generations appreciate traditions even from afar.

Tourism has also played a crucial role in this transformation. Festivals such as Thrissur Pooram, Attukal Pongala, Chettikulangara Bharani, and Arattupuzha Pooram attract visitors from across India and the world, drawn by decorated elephants, traditional music, fireworks, and ritual performances (Menon, 2018). These events create opportunities for local communities to earn income while showcasing their cultural heritage to a global audience. Recognizing this, the Kerala government and Department of Tourism promote these festivals as part of "cultural tourism," demonstrating how tradition and modern development can coexist and strengthen one another (Government of Kerala, Department of Tourism, 2021).

Despite changes in scale and style, the core meaning of Kerala's processions remains unchanged. People still gather to pray, celebrate, and work together for a common purpose. Each festival fosters a sense of belonging, joy, and devotion. Preparation is a community effort, involving cleaning streets, decorating temples, making flower garlands, and cooking food for devotees. This collaboration highlights the strength of social unity in Malayali culture.

However, modern challenges have emerged. Urbanization and busy lifestyles reduce the time people can dedicate to festival preparations. There are also concerns about noise, waste, and the welfare of temple animals, particularly elephants. In response, many organizations have implemented measures to make processions safer and more environmentally sustainable, including reusable decorations and improved crowd management systems.

Despite these challenges, the love for tradition remains strong. Malayalis continue to take pride in their festivals as living links to their history and faith. Each generation learns from the previous one — how to drum, dance, organize, and celebrate collectively. These processions demonstrate that culture is not static but grows and evolves with the people.

In this way, Kerala's processional celebrations exemplify the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modern life. While the lights may be brighter and the crowds larger, the devotion, music, and sense of togetherness remain unchanged. These festivals continue to remind people of their shared cultural heritage, faith, and community bonds (Menon, 2018; Varghese, 2020).

SUMMARY:

Processions form a fundamental part of prayer and worship, requiring the performance of rituals and customs both in private and in public to express faith and sustain cultural practices within the community and beyond (Panikkar, 1995). In Kerala, these processions, together with their associated religious beliefs and traditions, have played a significant role in shaping the region's art, culture, and devotional practices, and their influence has extended to other parts of the world through migration and cultural exchange (Menon, 2008). While the forms, scale, and patterns of processions have evolved over time, the underlying commitment and devotion in carrying out these events have remained constant (Freeman, 2003).

These enduring practices underscore the central role of religion and ritual in fostering social cohesion and collective identity. Through processions, communities negotiate social relations, preserve cultural heritage, and celebrate shared values, transcending differences of caste, religion, and social status. The participatory nature of these events not only reinforces spiritual devotion but also strengthens bonds among community members, contributing to a sense of unity and belonging (Menon, 1967). Moreover, processions serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, adapting to technological, social, and cultural changes while maintaining their symbolic and devotional significance.

Building on this understanding, the next chapter will explore how processions and rituals have been institutionalized in diasporic spaces, examining the ways in which Malayalis living outside Kerala continue to celebrate their faith and cultural heritage. This will highlight the factors that make religious processions a vital part of communal life and cultural identity, even in contexts far removed from their place of origin.

CHAPTER THREE

Diasporic Processions: Space Visibility and Refashioning of Hindu Culture

“Religion takes place in space. Religious people are distributed globally and locally in different patterns at different times... Religious groups occupy social spaces, gatherings in mosques, churches, temples and community centers... Families and individuals practice their religion at home ... [The] location of religion in secular spaces is important too... Religion and spaces are mutually influential”.

[Knott 2010, p.476]

We have seen in the previous chapter that human civilizations have continuously moved to meet their basic needs and to strive for a better future (Brah, 1996; Castles & Miller, 2009). Migration—leaving ancestral homes, friends, family, and familiar surroundings—has brought about significant changes in living standards as well as socio-economic conditions (Faist, 2000). Although crossing borders and settling in culturally different countries often results in people being labelled as “diasporic,” this designation has not prevented them from adapting, seeking opportunities, and rebuilding their lives (Vertovec, 2000). Instead, many migrants have formed communities to recreate a “home away from home” (Bhabha, 1994). Such lived spaces enable people to reconstruct identities, experience belonging, and maintain socio-cultural existence (Clifford, 1994). Hence, these spaces become central to diasporic life.

It is undeniable that diasporic individuals frequently find themselves caught between two worlds—homeland and hostland (Safran, 1991). However, the spaces they construct and maintain often act as bridges between these interconnected worlds, facilitating identity formation and the revival or continuation of cultural practices (Brah, 1996).

This chapter provides an overview of the primary site of the research study and is divided into two sections. The first section offers a conceptual exploration of “space,” drawing on theoretical perspectives from various disciplines, and then discusses the notion of diasporic spaces (Soja, 1996). The second section examines the religious and cultural life of the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore, focusing on its historical emergence, organizational structure, and religious and cultural activities (National Heritage Board, 2023; Singapore Malayalee Association, 2023). This section also describes key spaces of worship and communal culture, considers the visibility and invisibility of processions and public rituals in and around these spaces, and analyses how Malayali culture has been refashioned in the diaspora—including adaptations, continuities, and changes (Singapore Malayalee Association, 2023). This background lays the foundation for analysing ritual practices and identity formation in the subsequent chapter.

CONCEPTUALIZING SPACE AND DIASPORIC SPATIALITY:

Space is more than a physical setting; it is shaped by social relations, cultural meanings, and everyday practices (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). For diasporic communities, space becomes especially important because it helps people maintain connections to their heritage while adapting to new environmental settings. Religious and cultural spaces often serve as anchors that support identity, belonging, and community life in the diaspora (Brah, 1996; Vertovec, 2000), about which we will discuss in the next chapter. These spaces also reflect broader spatial politics, where certain practices become visible in public settings while others remain restricted or invisible due to social and institutional boundaries (Soja, 1996).

This section introduces key ideas about space, examines how religious and diasporic spaces are created and used, and discusses how visibility and invisibility shape the experiences of diasporic communities.

- Understanding Space: Theoretical Perspectives

Space is an important concept in understanding physical settings, and it has therefore been defined, discerned, and expounded in various traditional concepts and academic disciplines by various thinkers and theorists. From these studies, it becomes clear that understanding different aspects of space is essential for analysing, constructing, and maintaining human relations and behaviours in societies (Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, space possesses relational properties that not only help recognize geographical territories but also facilitate the understanding and mapping of everyday social, cultural, and political life across these territories, which is crucial for social sustainability and existence (Massey, 1994). The interaction between space and society brings together dispersed elements, transforming a place into a lived-in space for people from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Lefebvre, 1991).

Henri Lefebvre (1991) notes in the opening argument of 'The Production of Space' that people often use the term "space" in academic and everyday discourse without fully understanding its meaning, as the definition of space varies across disciplines. The understanding of space for a physics scholar differs from that of a sociology, philosophy, or anthropology scholar because the assumptions and implications of space differ in each field. For example, in physics, space often refers to outer space, the universe, and its properties, which include celestial bodies and regions beyond Earth's atmosphere, essentially considered "empty" in contrast to social space (Rynasiewicz, 1996). Rynasiewicz (1996) explains that Newton considered space and time in relation to the motion of bodies, emphasizing that space and time are not substances, such as bodies or minds, but real entities whose existence is necessitated by God's omnipresence and eternity (p. 154). Tuan (1977) also discusses space and place,

stating, “Space and place are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space. Place is security, space is freedom. We are attached to one and long for the other” (p. 3).

From the sociological and humanitarian perspectives, space is a social phenomenon that contains relational, symbolic, and culturally produced events. Scholars examine the social and material constitution of space to understand phenomena such as social sustainability, institutional practices, and cultural pluralism (Massey, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991). Sociologically, space is socially constructed and never empty, it is produced through historical, cultural, economic, and power relations (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre (1991) argued that “(Social) space is a (social) product... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (p. 26). According to Lefebvre, space does not exist independently; it is created by society, where people are divided into different communities and positioned according to social status, cultural identity, and economic roles. These spaces then function as regulatory environments, enforced through rules, laws, and policies administered by governments and powerful institutions.

For example, during British colonial rule, New Delhi, India, was divided into two zones. The new imperial capital featured spaces and avenues built for British elites, including monumental architecture, government buildings, wide and clean streets, and access to resources, whereas the old city was crowded with the majority Indian population, poorly serviced, and underdeveloped (King, 1976). The spatial division was not neutral; the colonizers were provided with better arrangements, security, comfort, and resources, while the colonized population was marginalized and confined to

neglected areas. Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power further suggests that regulation of space functions as a means of controlling movement, visibility, and behaviour. Space is therefore influenced by power and supremacy, not only through force but also through everyday environmental design.

Space is an essential component of human life which, together with time and culture, shapes human behaviour. Space influences and determines how people organize, interact, and identify themselves (Tuan, 1977). Over time, changes in space reflect shifts in culture, human behaviour, boundary settings, and social relations. Tuan (1977) emphasizes that space and place are understood through experiences, with space implying openness and freedom, and place denoting meaningful spaces that provide attachment, lived experiences, and security (p. 3). This concept can relate to Lefebvre's notion of lived space: "the dominated — and hence passively experienced — space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Most spaces are governed by institutions and authorities, but they become lived spaces when people adapt, reshape, and give new meaning to them. A detail understanding of this can be explained in the coming chapter.

Lived space is particularly important for diasporic communities. When people leave their homeland, they enter unfamiliar environments that often only meet basic needs, such as shelter and sustenance. Over time, these spaces are transformed into places with felt value, satisfying biological needs, including food, water, rest, and procreation, while also serving social and cultural functions (Tuan, 1977, p. 4). Diasporic communities face challenges in adjusting to unfamiliar environments and diverse cultural practices and lifestyles. They often establish spaces such as places of worship for rituals and pujas, marketplaces for familiar foods, and community centers for

meetings, support, and emotional connection. Through these community gatherings and activities, physical space becomes lived space, enriched with social interactions, cultural expression, and symbolic attachments (Lefebvre, 1991; Tuan, 1977).

According to Foucault (1977), space is never neutral; it is organized through power relations and visibility. Lefebvre (1991) identifies three dimensions of space: conceived space (urban planning, policies, and institutional control), perceived space (everyday interactions and constructions), and lived space (cultural and symbolic meanings attached to the space). Tuan (1977) similarly emphasizes space as a site of felt value, imbued with emotions, culture, and identity. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that space is not merely physical; it is socially, culturally, and emotionally constructed through human behavior. The control of space through movement, regulations, and design asserts power, shaping possibilities for inclusion, social sustainability, institutional practices, and cultural pluralism. Within diasporic contexts, ritual spaces act as platforms that bring immigrants together, creating a “home away from home” and fostering a sense of belonging and identity (Lefebvre, 1991; Tuan, 1977).

- Religious and Diasporic Spaces

Religious and diasporic spaces are deeply connected with migrant communities, as both involve the continual negotiation of identity, belonging, and spatial practice. The production of space, as Lefebvre (1991) argued, is never neutral; it is socially constructed through human activity, meaning making, and power relations. Building on this, Knott (2005) conceptualizes religious space not as a fixed physical location but as something produced through practice—a “mapping of the sacred onto the secular.” Religious communities, especially those in diaspora, continuously create and re-create

sacredness through ritual enactment, community gatherings, and symbolic displays. That is, when it comes to diaspora, communities keep their belief and faith alive through rituals, gatherings and symbols. Thus, turning the ordinary places to meaningful spaces. These spaces become lived geographies where memory, migration, and faith intersect. In Singapore, Malayali Hindu temples and community halls are not merely buildings; they are sites where people come together, irrespective of age, class, or caste, to remember traditions and perform rituals. Thus, through these shared practices, ordinary city spaces become meaningful and sacred, helping the community stay connected to their religious and cultural roots.

Brah's (1996) notion of diaspora space expands this discussion by emphasizing that diaspora is not only about dispersion but also about the intersections of identity, power, and belonging in localities. Diaspora space is a dynamic arena where the native and the migrant, the past and the present, coexist and reconfigure meanings of home and identity. That is, diaspora space is where people live with memories of their homeland and at the same time adapting the local culture. It brings together past and present to reshape the home and identity. For diasporic religious communities, space highlights their cultural identity while also becoming a place where traditions are adjusted to fit the social rules and multicultural setting of the host country. Through this negotiation, communities balance preserving inherited practices with adapting to their new environment (Vertovec, 2000).

Jacobsen (2008) provides a compelling framework for understanding how religion operates visibly in diaspora. He observes that religious processions are significant dimensions of religion in South Asia and its diaspora, functioning as "religious display events" that involve "competition about public space" and contribute to the "revival of

religious identities” (pp. 7–8). Through processions, rituals, and festivals, diasporic communities transform urban landscapes into temporary sacred zones. These performances not only sustain religious continuity but also render the community visible within the plural social fabric of host societies. Jacobsen’s analysis highlights how visibility itself becomes a form of negotiation—between faith, civic order, and multicultural belonging.

Hall’s (1990) influential work on cultural identity complements this spatial understanding. He argues that diasporic identity is “a matter of becoming as well as of being,” constantly formed through cultural translation and transformation. For diasporic Hindus, religious space thus serves as an expressive medium through which identity is articulated and refashioned. The re-creation of temples, processions, and festivals in a foreign landscape is not mere reproduction but an act of reinterpretation—a process Hall (1990) describes as “a positioning” rather than an essence.

These theoretical perspectives resonate with the experiences of the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore. Their temples, Onam celebrations, and ritual processions exemplify how diasporic religious space is constructed through both continuity and adaptation. The streets and temple compounds become what Knott (2005) would call “religion-in-space,” while the community’s careful negotiation with Singapore’s multicultural policies illustrates Jacobsen’s (2008) insight into the politics of visibility. At the same time, the blending of Kerala traditions with Singaporean civic norms reflects Hall’s (1990) view of identity as an evolving narrative. The Malayali Hindu religious landscape in Singapore, therefore, embodies the complex intersections of faith, migration, and spatial practice, revealing how diasporic spaces are simultaneously sacred, social, and political.

- Visibility, Invisibility and Spatial Politics

Visibility and invisibility are central to understanding how diasporic communities negotiate religious space within the urban environment. Visibility refers to the public display of religion—through temples, festivals, processions, or ritual performances, while invisibility refers to practices confined to private or controlled spaces, such as homes or temple interiors (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000). These forms are not opposite but rather work together to shape and construct about how communities inhabit space and assert identity. As Kim Knott (2005) notes, religious space is produced through practice, and its visibility depends on “who can see, what can be seen, and under what conditions” (p. 33). In diasporic contexts, visibility is inherently linked to spatial politics, as communities negotiate with urban authorities, multicultural regulations, and civic norms to occupy and use space (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000). That is, when people display their procession in public space, they must work within the rules and regulations of the city and its government. They should keep a balance between respecting their traditions and laws in the multicultural norms so that the migrants can occupy a space and express identity in the new land.

Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of the “production of space” emphasizes that space is socially constructed and politically mediated. Public religious activities, such as processions or temple festivals, temporarily transform secular urban spaces into sacred ones. Knut Jacobsen (2008) refers to these moments as “religion on display,” where public space becomes a site of sacred performance and communal identity (pp. 7–8). However, these visible practices are always shaped by spatial politics—who have the right to use streets for rituals, where processions may move, and how urban regulations shape the form and timing of religious events (Knott, 2010; Levitt, 2007). As explained earlier, processions or festivals cannot happen anywhere or at any time. The organizers

or the authorities should follow city rules and limits, negotiate with the administrators and legal representatives deciding on where and when they can perform rituals.

In Singapore, spatial politics strongly influences the visibility of diasporic religious practices. The city-state emphasizes multicultural harmony and regulates public space to maintain social order (Kong, 2010). For Malayali Hindus, this means that processions and festivals are often confined to temple compounds or community centers, rather than freely moving through streets as they might in Kerala. Public visibility is therefore carefully managed, allowing the community to celebrate its traditions while respecting the civic framework. Temple grounds, decorated streets near temples, and community halls become temporary sacred spaces, demonstrating how religious communities negotiate urban spatial politics to assert their presence (Levitt, 2007; Knott, 2010).

Invisibility, on the other hand, allows the community to maintain religious and cultural continuity in spaces that are not publicly visible (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007). Private rituals, household pujas, and closed temple ceremonies exemplify this form of hidden practice. This means that communities carrying out religious practices can preserve traditions and cultural identity even when public expression is limited. Jacobsen (2008) calls this “selective visibility,” where the community strategically decides which aspects of religion to display publicly and which to preserve privately. In Singapore, this ensures that sensitive or intimate rituals continue in private spaces without challenging civic regulations or drawing undue attention, allowing the community to sustain spiritual life and intergenerational tradition. Stuart Hall’s (1990) notion of identity as “becoming as well as being” helps to understand this dynamic. Visible practices such as temple festivals, religious ceremonies and regional celebrations, such as Onam, Vishu, Ayyappa Vilakku, keep changing as people adapt to the new environment, balancing their cultural roots with the rules and influences of the place

they live in. Invisible practices — private worship and domestic rituals — represent being, the preservation of inherited cultural and religious traditions. Both are intertwined in the community's spatial practices, reflecting a negotiation between sacredness, adaptation, and urban regulation.

Thomas Tweed's (2006) idea of "crossing and dwelling" also illuminates the spatial politics of diaspora. Malayali Hindus cross boundaries when they bring Kerala rituals into Singapore's urban landscape, and dwell when they create temples and associations as rooted sacred spaces. Visibility and invisibility operate together in these processes: public festivals mark communal presence, while private rituals ensure continuity and intimacy. These practices demonstrate how spatial politics—including access, regulation, and adaptation—shapes religious life in diaspora (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000; Knott, 2010). That is, public religious events and private ritual practices keep traditions alive in their own ways and thus show how rules, access and adaptation influence religion to be practiced in new city.

In sum, visibility and invisibility are not merely about presence or absence but are closely tied to spatial politics. They reveal how religious communities claim, negotiate, and adapt urban space in response to regulatory, cultural, and social frameworks (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007; Knott, 2010). The Malayali Hindu community in Singapore illustrates this balance: public festivals and temple events make their presence known, while private rituals sustain cultural depth and continuity. Together, these practices show how sacred space is produced, negotiated, and experienced in the diasporic city.

In sum, the discussion in this chapter has shown that space is not merely a physical location but a socially produced field shaped by everyday practices and power relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). For diasporic communities, such spaces are essential for assimilating,

understanding, and negotiating cultural identities in new environments (Brah, 1996). Religious and communal spaces, in particular, help migrants sustain continuity while adapting to their host society (Vertovec, 2000). That is, places like temples, community halls and gathering places allow people to fit in the new country and keep the traditions alive. These insights build on the ideas introduced in the previous chapter and prepare the ground for examining the Malayali Hindu community's religious and cultural life in Singapore. The themes of continuity, assimilation, and negotiation will be analyzed in greater depth in the next chapter, which presents the study's findings and analysis.

MALAYALI HINDU RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LIFE IN SINGAPORE:

Malayali Hindu religious and cultural life in Singapore have developed through a long history of migration and community-building. Early Malayali migration to Singapore began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with many arriving as clerks, teachers, and professionals under British colonial administration. As Rajesh Rai (2014) notes, Malayalis formed part of the broader South Indian migration stream, but they maintained distinct linguistic and cultural practices that shaped their associational life in Singapore (p. 58). These early migrants brought with them their Hindu traditions, rituals, and festivals, which gradually took root in the local context through temples, community associations, and family-based practices.

Over time, Malayali Hindus in Singapore have sustained their religious identity through both institutional and household forms of worship (Rajan, 2018; Rai, 2014). Based on the participant observations, temples such as Sri Krishna, Sri Sivan, and Sri Thendayuthapani became important spaces where Malayalis participated in traditional rituals and festivals, even though these temples served wider South Indian communities. As Rai (2014) observes, South Indian temples in Singapore often became "hubs of cultural preservation" where linguistic, ritual, and regional identities could be expressed (p. 102). For Malayalis, temple visits for Vishu,

Navaratri, or Bhagavati worship, along with regular pujas at home, help maintain continuity with Kerala traditions despite the diasporic setting. More about this is explained in the next chapter along with participant observations.

Cultural life is equally significant for the community. Onam remains the most important Malayali cultural festival in Singapore, celebrated annually with pookkalam designs, singing traditional songs and performing dance, and organizing community feasts. Anitha Devi Pillai (2017) explains that Onam events organized by Malayalee associations serve as key moments of cultural cohesion, providing spaces where language, food, dress, and performance come together to “recreate a sense of Kerala in Singapore” (p. 142). These events are often hosted in community centers, schools, and cultural halls, highlighting how the Malayali community adapts to the spatial and cultural frameworks of Singapore’s multicultural environment. Pillai also notes that Malayali cultural organizations play a major role in children’s education, language classes, and performing arts training, ensuring intergenerational transmission of heritage (2017, p. 145).

Together, these practices illustrate how Malayali Hindu life in Singapore blends tradition with adaptation. While temples and festivals preserve familiar religious rhythms, the community also reinterprets these practices within Singapore’s structured multicultural space. As Rai (2014) argues, Singapore’s Indian communities have always balanced cultural preservation with civic integration (p. 210), and Malayali Hindus demonstrate this through their selective visibility — public forms of celebration like Onam and temple festivals, alongside private pujas and family rituals. Their religious and cultural landscape is therefore both rooted in Kerala heritage and shaped by the practical, spatial, and social conditions of Singapore.

- Historical Emergence and Institutional Landscape

The Malayali Hindu presence in Singapore has a long and layered history that traces back to the late nineteenth century, when Singapore functioned as a key node in the British Empire's Indian Ocean network. Malayalis were part of the broader South Indian migration stream, but they occupied a distinctive position due to their higher literacy rates and professional training. Rajesh Rai (2014) notes that early Malayali men arrived primarily as clerks, teachers, hospital assistants, military personnel, and civil servants, forming a segment of migrants who were significantly embedded in the colonial administrative infrastructure. Their relatively stable employment and English education enabled them to build early forms of community life and cultural organization, even though their numbers were smaller compared to Tamil migrants.

The institutional foundations of Malayali life in Singapore grew alongside this migration. As diasporic communities settled, they often formed language-based and regional associations that provided social support, cultural continuity, and mutual assistance. Rai (2014) highlights that these associations played a crucial role in helping migrants navigate the challenges of displacement, work, housing, and cultural adjustment. For Malayalis, such associations became important hubs for maintaining Malayalam language, expressing regional identity, and organizing social and cultural activities. Early Malayali groups met informally in homes and workplaces, gradually evolving into more structured organizations by the mid-twentieth century.

The emergence of Hindu temple institutions also influenced the Malayali community's religious life. Although most Hindu temples in Singapore were founded by Tamil, Telegu, or Chettiar communities, they functioned as shared South Indian religious spaces. Vineeta Sinha (2016) argues that Hindu temples in Singapore historically operated as multi-ethnic institutions, where modes of worship, iconography, and ritual

specialists were shaped by a mix of South Indian practices. For Malayalis, these temples provided access to familiar styles of worship, priestly traditions, and ritual events—even when rituals were not specifically “Kerala-style.” Over time, Malayali devotees formed their own networks within temples such as the Sri Sivan Temple, Sri Krishna Temple, Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, and Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple, bringing Kerala practices like Bhagavati worship and Navaratri observances into the shared ritual environment.

Institutional life expanded further as Malayalis established formal organizations after independence. Anitha Devi Pillai (2017) documents how Malayali cultural associations in Singapore grew significantly in the post-1965 period, particularly as education levels rose and the community diversified through professional and family migration. These organizations often served multiple functions: cultural preservation, language teaching, arts training, festival organization, community welfare, and youth engagement. They also acted as bridges between diasporic Malayalis and state-run cultural or community frameworks, helping the community align with Singapore’s multicultural policies. Pillai (2015) notes that these associations remain vital in building intergenerational continuity, especially through initiatives like Malayalam language classes, children’s dance and music workshops, and literary events.

At the same time, the institutional landscape of Malayali Hindus was shaped by broader patterns of Indian Ocean mobility. Sunil Amrith (2011) emphasizes that the circulation of ideas, people, and religious practices across the Bay of Bengal created a shared cultural world, where Malayalis were not isolated migrants but part of a long-standing exchange network. Malayalis were able to stay connected to their homeland through trips, letters, religious books, and, more recently, digital communication. These

ongoing connections helped shape a transnational religious identity that continued to grow and adapt as new generations were born and raised in Singapore (Levitt, 2007; Rajan, 2018).

From the late twentieth century onward, new waves of Malayali migration—particularly professional and student migration—reshaped the community further. The arrival of engineers, IT professionals, nurses, and tertiary-level students added linguistic and cultural complexity, while also revitalizing institutional life. Levitt's (2007) concept of “transnational religious circulation” helps explain how Malayalis in Singapore maintained their religious identity by bringing religious images, ritual practices, priestly guidance, and cultural traditions from Kerala, reinforcing community ties while adapting to the local social and cultural context.

Overall, the history and institutions of Malayali Hindus in Singapore show how the community has steadily adapted and grown over time. Early migrants laid the groundwork by creating social and religious structures, which were expanded and reinforced by later arrivals and community organizations. Today, Malayali Hindus maintain a rich and interconnected community life through temple activities, cultural events, associations, and ongoing ties with Kerala, all of which continue to shape their identity and presence in Singapore (Rajan, 2018; Rai, 2014).

- Religious Practices, Spatial Expressions and Cultural Adaptations

Religious practices among Malayali Hindus in Singapore combine continuity with Kerala traditions and adaptation to the spatial and regulatory framework of the city-state (Rajan, 2018; Rai, 2014). Many Malayali families continue to make household rituals a central part of their spiritual life. Daily prayers and devotion to deities like Krishna,

Shiva, Ayyappa, and Bhagavati, along with celebrations of Kerala festivals such as Vishu and Navaratri, remain important traditions. These home-based practices help families recreate the familiar sacred rhythms of Kerala, turning their everyday spaces into intimate centers of devotion and cultural continuity. This reflects Kim Knott's (2005) idea that religious space is not limited to formal temples but is produced through everyday practices.

Public religious expressions also play a significant role. Temples in Singapore act as major ritual and cultural sites for Malayali Hindus, even though ritual styles may not always match Kerala's exact traditions or not always carried out on the same day as the festival should be carried out and celebrated. According to Sinha (2016), Hindu temples in Singapore have adapted their rituals to accommodate the city's diverse Hindu population, blending different traditions and creating hybrid forms of worship that reflect both Kerala customs and the multicultural setting. Malayali devotees participate in Kerala-style bhajans, Chenda melam performances, Thiruvathira dance, and special poojas when opportunities arise. The integration of Malayali rituals within a broader South Indian temple environment illustrates the community's capacity for flexible participation and adaptation. This has led to a mix of different worship styles and practices, creating a hybrid form of religious expression that reflects both tradition and the local context.

One of the most significant spatial expressions of Malayali Hindu identity in Singapore is the celebration of Onam. Anitha Devi Pillai (2017) describes Onam as the principal cultural festival that unites Malayalis across linguistic, caste, and professional backgrounds. Organized in community halls, schools, or cultural centers, Onam celebrations include pookkalam competitions, traditional dance performances,

children's music recitals, and the iconic Onam sadhya. These events transform ordinary urban spaces into temporary cultural environments, creating what Avtar Brah (1996) calls "diaspora space"—a site where histories, identities, and memories converge. That is, migrants who carry their histories and memories with them, create a home even while living far from their ancestral land.

Spatial adaptation is a central element of Malayali Hindu practice in Singapore. The city-state's regulations on public processions, use of space, and sound levels restrict the types of ritual practices that can be performed outdoors (Rajan, 2018; Rai, 2014). Thomas Blom Hansen (2018) argues that the visibility of public religion is closely tied to negotiations with state policy and civic norms. For Malayalis in Singapore, traditional Kerala-style processions—like utsavams with elephants, melams, and street parades—are usually not allowed. Instead, these rituals are adapted to take place within temple grounds, community halls, or other controlled spaces. This adjustment reflects what Jacobsen (2008) calls the careful balance between keeping rituals visible and respecting the rules and spatial limitations of the host society.

These limitations do not weaken religious expression; instead, they transform it. Malayali Hindu practices blend public visibility with private observance. Some rituals are quietly celebrated at home, while others—like Onam, temple festivals, or Ayyappa pujas—are performed in carefully structured and regulated spaces. This layered approach aligns with Rai's (2014) observation that Indian communities in Singapore often balance showing their culture with respecting local rules and sensitivities.

Cultural adaptation happens across generations as well. Younger Malayalis, growing up in Singapore's multicultural environment, often engage with religious life differently than older migrants. Pillai (2017) observes that youth participation tends to focus on

performing arts, language classes, and community cultural programs rather than traditional temple rituals. More about this has been discussed in the next chapter. This shift highlights a broader trend in diasporic Hindu communities, where cultural activities become important ways to express identity alongside, rather than in place of, religious practices.

In sum, Malayali Hindu religious practices in Singapore are dynamic and adaptive. They maintain connections to Kerala while responding to the spatial, political, and cultural structure of Singapore. Through household rituals, temple participation, cultural festivals, and strategic forms of visibility, Malayali Hindus create a distinct religious and cultural landscape that is both deeply rooted and continuously evolving.

SPATIAL CONTEXTS AND CULTURAL REFASHIONING:

Diasporic communities do not simply occupy space; they actively engage with it, constantly negotiating the physical environment, institutional rules, and social expectations of their host society (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). For Malayali Hindus in Singapore, these spatial dynamics play a key role in shaping how religious and cultural practices are expressed, preserved, and adapted. Traditions brought from Kerala often undergo cultural refashioning to align with Singapore's strict urban regulations and multicultural policies (Jacobsen, 2008; Rai, 2014). To fully understand this process, it is important to consider the diverse spaces where Malayali Hindus practice their faith and culture—including temples, community halls, homes, and occasionally public venues—each providing unique opportunities for continuity and adaptation.

Temples remain the most prominent spatial anchor for Malayali Hindus in Singapore, serving as centers for ritual, social, and cultural activity. Unlike Kerala, where temple forms, festival

styles, and deity traditions are region-specific, Singaporean temples have historically been influenced by Tamil, Telegu, and Chettiar practices (Sinha, 2016). Within these multi-ethnic institutions, Malayalis adapt their Kerala-derived rituals to the existing spatial and ritual frameworks. For instance, Vishu celebrations—such as the preparation of the *kani*—are organized within temple halls rather than in open spaces, reflecting both the limitations and creative adaptations necessitated by the shared temple environment. Navaratri celebrations may incorporate Malayali-style devotional singing or *Golu* displays while conforming to Tamil Agamic procedures. Similarly, the worship of Ayyappa, traditionally associated with the Sabarimala pilgrimage, is recreated through bhajan sessions, group prayers, and symbolic pilgrimages to Batu Caves, reflecting transnational religious circulation as discussed by Levitt (2007). These modifications demonstrate how Malayali Hindus selectively preserve Kerala rituals while negotiating the structural and spatial realities of Singaporean temple life.

Public visibility of Malayali religious practices is also shaped by regulatory and urban constraints. In Kerala, festivals often involve elaborate street processions, elephants, chenda melam ensembles, and open-air performances (Jacobsen, 2008). In Singapore, these elements are restricted due to sound regulations, public assembly requirements, and urban planning policies. Consequently, musical performances are typically confined to temple compounds, fire rituals are conducted under controlled conditions, and processions are symbolic rather than extensive. Hansen (2018) characterizes such controlled public ritual as a form of “managed visibility,” where religious expression is deliberately shaped to fit civic expectations. Rather than diminishing tradition, these spatial limitations encourage adaptive strategies and innovation in ritual performance.

Beyond temples, secular spaces such as community halls, schools, and auditoriums play a vital role in Malayali cultural life. These venues are frequently rented and temporarily transformed into environments evocative of Kerala. Pillai (2017) emphasizes that events like Onam provide

opportunities to recreate Kerala's cultural atmosphere within these multipurpose spaces. Halls are adorned with *pookkalams*, traditional lamps, and stage backdrops replicating Kerala landscapes or temple motifs, while musical and dance performances are adapted to fit the available stage and seating arrangements. Although these venues lack permanent Kerala-style architectural features, they are creatively refashioned to host rituals, performances, and communal gatherings, illustrating Knott's (2005) idea that sacred and cultural space is produced through human practice.

Domestic spaces are equally significant for maintaining continuity of tradition. The typical Singaporean apartment necessitates compact arrangements for household shrines and puja rooms. Despite spatial constraints, families maintain Kerala ritual rhythms through daily lamp-lighting, household pujas, preparation of Vishu kani, and family bhajan sessions. Levitt (2007) notes that domestic religious practice is central to diasporic cultural continuity, and for Malayali Hindus in Singapore, it provides a private sphere for transmitting ritual knowledge and cultural memory to younger generations. Domestic worship allows Malayalis to exercise greater freedom in ritual expression, unmediated by public regulations or institutional norms, and ensures the ongoing intergenerational transmission of cultural identity.

Singapore's urban and regulatory context also shapes the temporal and spatial organization of cultural events. Festivals that traditionally last several days in Kerala are often condensed into a single weekend, while venue availability and building codes dictate the timing, sequence, and format of rituals. Sinha (2016) observes that temples and community organizations in Singapore have historically negotiated with urban authorities to ensure compliance with city planning regulations, building safety standards, and sound limits. These conditions necessitate creative approaches to ritual performance, such as using digital projections to simulate Kerala scenery, abbreviating musical and ceremonial sequences, or scheduling rituals in modular

formats that accommodate restricted time slots. Such adaptations exemplify how diasporic communities actively refashion their cultural expressions in response to spatial constraints.

The selective visibility of Malayali religious and cultural practices also serves to navigate Singapore's multicultural framework. Public events such as Onam celebrations, children's cultural programs, and temple festivals are made highly visible to both affirm Malayali identity and align with the nation's broader cultural harmony agenda. More intimate or intense rituals, particularly those that are loud, extended, or involve complex ceremonial elements, are typically retained within temple compounds or domestic spaces. This balance between visibility and containment reflects the strategic negotiation of identity within a diasporic context, where Malayalis assert their regional distinctiveness while participating in broader Indian ethnic categorizations (Rai, 2014).

Cultural refashioning, therefore, is not a loss of tradition but a creative and adaptive process. Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space emphasizes that diasporic identities emerge at the intersection of memory, place, and host society conditions. In Singapore, Malayali Hindus refashion rituals by blending Kerala-derived forms with the realities of shared temple practices, temporally constrained festivals, and rented cultural venues. This refashioning involves hybridized festival formats, symbolic processions, modified musical ensembles, and innovative performance arrangements. It also extends to youth engagement, digital coordination, and the integration of contemporary practices that allow younger generations to participate meaningfully in maintaining cultural continuity.

As an end note, the spatial contexts of Singapore play a formative role in shaping Malayali Hindu religious and cultural life. Through negotiations in temples, adaptations in community halls, intimate domestic rituals, and the strategic calibration of public visibility, the community continuously refashions its traditions (Brah, 1996; Vertovec, 2000). These practices

demonstrate resilience, creativity, and agency, reflecting how diasporic groups actively produce and reproduce sacred and cultural spaces within urban, regulatory, and multicultural environments (Soja, 1996; Safran, 1991). Rather than remaining static, Malayali cultural and religious expressions in Singapore illustrate the ongoing co-production of space, identity, and tradition in a diasporic setting—a process that is further explored in the next chapter through an analysis of continuity, assimilation, and negotiation.

Overall, the spatial dimensions and cultural refashioning of Malayali Hindu life in Singapore reveal how diasporic communities actively negotiate, adapt, and produce sacred and cultural spaces (Brah, 1996; Vertovec, 2000). By examining temples, community halls, domestic settings, and public venues, it becomes clear that religious and cultural practices are neither static nor directly transplanted from Kerala. Instead, they are continuously reshaped in response to urban planning policies, regulatory frameworks, multi-ethnic institutional environments, and the everyday lived experiences of the diaspora (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991). These practices demonstrate the community's resilience and creativity, reflecting a careful balance between preserving cultural continuity and responding to the local context.

Visibility, selective public display, and strategic spatial containment further illustrate how space operates both as a constraint and as a medium for cultural expression. The creative refashioning of traditions, memories, and transnational influences results in rituals and festivals that are simultaneously familiar and contextually adapted. In this sense, space is inseparable from identity: it is through spatial practices that Malayali Hindus in Singapore assert their religio-cultural identity, negotiate their presence in a multicultural society, and maintain continuity across generations (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996).

SUMMARY:

Diasporic spaces are not merely physical locations; they are socially constructed, lived, and constantly reinterpreted through ritual, festival, and domestic practices. Understanding these dynamics lays the groundwork for the next chapter, which moves beyond spatial negotiation to explore belief systems, ritual performances, devotional practices, and the moral and symbolic frameworks that sustain Malayali Hindu identity in the diaspora. This continuation will highlight how the processes of continuity, assimilation, and negotiation—already visible in spatial practices—extend into religious and cultural life, providing a more holistic understanding of diasporic experience.

CHAPTER 4

Religion and Identity in the Malayali Hindu Diaspora: Findings and Analysis

The Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore, being the second largest South Indian ethnic community forms a significant part of Singapore's Indian population. They represent a community that has migrated to a multicultural and secular society while maintaining its cultural and religious uniqueness. Migration, whether for employment, education, or family reasons, often entails navigating challenges related to cultural preservation, social integration, and intergenerational continuity (Vertovec, 2000; Kurien, 2007). Within this context, religion becomes a crucial anchor that supports personal wellbeing as well as the unity of the whole community. That is, religion helps people to feel connected with their roots, find comfort, guidance and sense of belongingness.

Religious institutions, leaders, and practices serve as cultural anchors that connect diaspora members to their homeland traditions, offer spaces for social interaction, and mediate adaptation in a multicultural environment. Temples, religious processions, and daily devotional practices function not only as expressions of spiritual devotion but also as platforms for identity assertion, community cohesion, and resistance to cultural assimilation (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Hall, 1990; Werbner, 2002). So basically, religion operates as a multidimensional resource that sustains cultural memory while facilitating integration in the host society.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the key findings of the study and show how religion shapes the lives of Malayali Hindus in Singapore. It also discusses how religious spaces, leaders, and events helps the community to stay connected to their culture and at the same time how they adapt to the new environment. To achieve this, the primary objectives to be looked upon are:

1. Examine the influence of religious institutions and leaders in shaping community cohesion and collective identity among the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.
2. Explore the role of religion in facilitating adaptation within Singaporean society.
3. Investigate religious practices as cultural anchors that sustain and shape identity across generations.
4. Analyse how religious processions function as public spaces of heritage preservation and resistance to cultural assimilation.

To address these objectives, a thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data collected from community participants, temple leaders, and observation of ritual practices and festivals. The analysis revealed four major themes; each includes three subthemes that illustrate specific dimensions of religious life in diaspora and help us understand a bit more of diasporic life. These themes capture both the private and public roles of religion, highlighting how the community negotiates tradition, identity, and adaptation in Singapore. And hence the chapter is structured around the following themes:

- **Religious Institutions and Leadership in Community Cohesion**
- **Religion as a Mechanism for Adaptation in Singaporean Society**
- **Religious Practices as Cultural Anchors for Identity Preservation**
- **Religious Processions as Spaces of Cultural Expression and Resistance**

This chapter examines each theme in detail, combining participant perspectives and observations, and analytical interpretation to explore how religion functions as both a personal and collective resource, sustaining identity, social cohesion, and cultural heritage in the diaspora. The subsequent sections present findings under each theme and subtheme, illustrating the lived experiences of the Malayali Hindu community and their negotiation of tradition, adaptation, and identity in Singapore.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS:

Thematic analysis is a way of understanding people's experiences by closely reading what they say and identifying common ideas and patterns in their responses. Instead of focusing on individual answers and experiences, the researcher looks for shared meanings from the interviews, while still respecting each participant's unique story. This process involves accumulating similar thoughts, feelings, emotions or experiences and bring them together and organise them into themes that reflect what matters most to the participants. By doing this, thematic analysis helps turn personal narratives into meaningful insights that explain how people understand and make sense of their lived experiences in different situations.

1. Religious Institutions and Leadership in Community Cohesion

When people arrive in a new place, they often look for reasons and occasions to come together, share experiences, and express their emotions. Religion often provides such an opportunity, offering a space where migrants can connect with others, maintain cultural traditions, and feel a sense of belonging (Vertovec, 2000; Kurien, 2002). For Malayali Hindu Diaspora in Singapore, temple is not only a place where people come to worship but is also a podium where the community brings and share the social and cultural aspects of their origin. In addition, these religious institutions play a crucial role in the lives of migrants by not only providing a place for worship but also strengthening social networks, fostering community ties, and shaping patterns of assimilation. It becomes a comforting and joyful space for those who continue to struggle with adjusting to an environment that, although it has provided financial stability for years, still feels culturally distant. Scholars note that religious and community gatherings often function as emotional anchors for migrants, offering familiarity, belonging, and relief from the pressures of adaptation (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007). Reflecting this sentiment, one participant shared, "*I have been here for years—earning well, life is not too bad, and I am able to support my family*

back in Kerala. But there is always a feeling of wanting to return to my roots, of missing my people. So, for people like us, this gathering is a real gem. We meet many others, share the same stories repeatedly, and it still makes us feel happy” (Ramakrishnan, Age 62, Male).

Even participants said that participating in temple processions and witnessing the festivities made them feel connected to their homeland and its cultural heritage. Similarly, beyond organizing temple processions, religious leaders play a key role in strengthening community cohesion. Priests and temple administrators guide members in performing rituals, teach cultural values, and encourage participation across generations (Levitt, 2007; Sahoo, 2011). When people move into a new environment, they often feel unsure about how to continue their rituals because the cultural expectations differ greatly from those in Kerala. This is where priests or religious leaders become especially important. For example, they guide community members on how to conduct rituals within smaller spaces and advise on how certain celebrations can be shortened or reorganized while still preserving their spiritual and cultural significance. Therefore, religious institutions and leadership work together to maintain cultural continuity and social cohesion in the diaspora. Hence, the participants’ experiences pointed to several recurring patterns that shaped their understanding of religion and community life in Singapore. The participants’ experiences highlight several recurring patterns, which have been organized into the following subthemes, each reflecting a distinct dimension of community cohesion and diasporic life:

- Temples as Centers of Social and Cultural Gathering

For Malayali Hindus in Singapore, temples are not just the sacred spaces but rather they are the community hub where people can promote social interactions and cultural transmission. For many participants, it is place where they connect with their traditions, languages, build friendships, participate in cultural events and cope up with the emotional differences. As one of the participants shared, “*When I hear the bhajans and*

smell the flowers, with the lamp glowing and everything so serene, it feels as though I am back in Kerala. For that moment, the reality of being a migrant completely fades” (**Lakshmi, Age 58, Female**). Another participant expressed that *“the temple is where I let go of my worries, and its peaceful atmosphere helps me momentarily forget the challenges of being a migrant”* (**Reshma, Age 45, female**). This aligns with studies showing that diasporic temples often evolve into multipurpose institutions that address both spiritual and social needs (Kurien, 2002; Vertovec, 2000). For many migrants, who came to Singapore alone, visiting temples and participating in temple activities, these spaces helped to reduce the emotional pressures, stability and sense of belongingness. One of the participants said, *“even stepping into the temple premises, changes my mood instantly”* (**Nandakumar, Age 60, Male**). Another one shared, *“I feel very happy during festivals, as they give people a chance to visit temples and meet the fellow community members from our homeland”* (**Ramakrishnan, Age 62, Male**). These experiences show that temples provide more than spiritual support—they help reinforce social connections and contribute to a shared sense of identity and community among Malayali Hindus in Singapore.

- Influence of Religious Leaders in Shaping Collective Identity

When it comes to diaspora, religious leaders and priests’ marks a significant place in maintaining and understanding the continuity between the homeland and hostland. That is, they ensure that the rituals, cultural practices, traditions and values that are brought from homeland are practiced in the hostland. They not only perform the temple rituals but also guide the community to stay connected with their roots even if they are far from their homeland. Though the rituals carried out may not be in the same way as one does in their ancestral land (due to space, time constraints, or circumstances) but

these priests or leaders still adjust and manage to keep the rituals authentic and meaningful. One of the participants shared *“I had my baby after moving to Singapore and couldn’t travel to Kerala because of the COVID-related restrictions. The priest came to our home and performed the naming ceremony, following all the rituals and customs. We prepared everything he needed. It was a blessed moment for us, even though we missed being with our family”* (**Gauri, Age 33, Female**).

Temple administrators and priests are not just people who offers spiritual guidance and organize the rituals, rather they are people who also give advice, explains the rituals and customs, and act as cultural mediators who practices rituals under the given circumstances including spatial constraints. This mirrors Levitt’s (2007) argument that religious leaders in transnational settings help migrants negotiate continuity and change. If temple space provides physical settings for gatherings, then it is the priests and administrators who make sure that these spaces get its meanings, cohesion and emotional reassurance. Because of this, the temple becomes a warm, familiar place where people feel connected to their culture, their religion, and each other, even while living far from Kerala (Raj, 2015; Vertovec, 2000). One of the participants said *“During my initial days in Singapore, I felt very homesick. I couldn’t find happiness and constantly thought about returning to my roots. At that time, the temple space played an important role. Talking to the temple priest gave me a sense of inner peace and felt like talking to someone from my village. That connection meant a lot, and it helped me realize how important it is to maintain such bonds here”* (**Lakshmi, Age 58, Female**). Furthermore, these temple administrators and priests’ helps in the transmission of traditional values and cultural aspects of Hindus to the younger generation. One of the participants shared a memory of her about her neighbor *“Her children were born and brought up here. They understand Malayalam but speaking it*

is very difficult for them. Similarly, they were unfamiliar with many of the rituals and practices, but the temple priests and leaders slowly taught them and helped them become accustomed to their culture and its meanings. I remember how happy she was when she said that her children are now learning the things we learned at home” (Sreeshna, Age 37, Female). This shows that the religious leaders go far beyond conducting rituals and maintaining a meaningful connection with their heritage. By offering emotional support, ritual knowledge, and a sense of continuity, these leaders help create a familiar cultural atmosphere that reduces uncertainty and fosters belonging among Malayali Hindus in the diaspora (Levitt, 2007; Sahoo, 2011).

- Community Events and Ritual Activities as Cohesion-Building Practices

For Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore, community events and ritual activities play an important role. Community events include national day celebrations, cultural festivals, and traditional gatherings followed by good food, dance and music, and community specific sessions such as workshops on various art forms, and teen clubs. These gatherings reflect on the community solidarity, emotional and cultural connections, among the migrants and their experiences. According to Vertovec (2000), such collective practices create “social formations” that help dispersed communities sustain cohesion despite geographical separation from their homeland. Festivals such as Onam, Vishu, Satsang and bhajans help the migrants to reconnect with their familiar traditions and interact with the people gathered. *“Everyone is busy with work, and we hardly get time to meet or spend time together. But during festivals like Onam or Vishu, the organization arranges programs where all the Malayalees can come together and enjoy our traditions and cultural background. Even though we may celebrate on a*

different day than the actual festival, it still creates an opportunity for the community to be together” (Madhav, Age 40, Male).

One of the important aspects of these ritual activities is that they create intergenerational cohesion by involving youths and children to participate in various programs such as devotional singing, and cultural programs. Stuart Hall (1990) explains that cultural identity in diaspora is not something fixed, but something that is constantly formed and reshaped through everyday cultural practices. That is, when parents bring their children to these festivals and ritualistic processions, the youths not only get a chance to meet their community members and participate in the programs but also, they get chance to meet people, observe, learn, interpret and reinterpret these practices in their own ways to understand the culture in a land which is not theirs. One of the participants shared *“Even though our children cannot fully experience the cultural traditions the way we did in Kerala, these gatherings and celebrations help them become familiar with the practices we grew up with and the culture we come from” (Janaki, Age 58, Female).* Scholars note that ritual events in diaspora communities often help strengthen shared identity and maintain cultural continuity over time (Cohen, 1997). That is, such religious based community gatherings help the migrants not only helps in reducing the isolation and loneliness of being away from their homeland but also constructs a supportive environment for social cohesion and identity formation. Also, through these celebrations, a transmission happens where the older generations bring their memories about festivals, rituals and cultures to the new land, the younger generations recreate, reinterpret and adapt in their own way in Singapore. The next theme will help in understanding how religion and religious institutions helps the Malayalee community in adapting the new social norms and lifestyles while still holding to their roots back in Kerala.

2. Religion as a Mechanism for Adaptation in Singaporean Society

Adaptation is a very important concept in diaspora as it is necessary for a migrant for his/her survival and personal wellbeing in the hostland. It is essential for adjusting, negotiating and transforming the social and cultural life in the new environment while maintaining connections with their homeland. Also, adaptation opens new opportunities, including access to education and professional mobility, which benefits migrants personally and enables them to contribute to their homeland.

Religious or spiritual adaptation is one dimension of the overall adaptation process that helps migrants cope with relocation and cultural adjustment. By keeping themselves engaged with celebrations and festivities, they keep their connections with their homeland alive. Scholars such as Kong and Woods (2019) have documented how Christian migrants in Singapore use the church not just as a place of worship, but as a social anchor that mediates the tensions of belonging and difference. That is, religion creates podium for the migrants to get a familiar community and emotional support. Scholars note that religion often becomes a primary resource for migrants to maintain continuity with their past while adjusting to the demands of their new surroundings (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000). Hence, through these rituals, traditions, shared beliefs, and community support, migrants negotiate the change, that is, religion gives the strength to face and manage the new changes and let them stay connected to their cultural roots.

- Religious Participation as a Pathway to Social Integration

Adjusting to a new environment is very difficult and challenging. For a person, who migrates to new place without any familiar circumstances or established networks or even family members, faces hardships with the local systems. Scholars note that religious communities often function as informal support systems, helping migrants

gain guidance, social connections, and confidence as they settle into their host country (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007). In order to feel more confident, less lost and to manage everyday life in less complicated way in the new settings, people look for support groups where people can communicate, share, advice and take practical help. One of the participants shared *“My husband came to Singapore first, and I joined him later. After he left for work each day, it was difficult for me to cope with the internal chaos that ran through my mind. Visiting the temple became a great relief. During one of my visits, I received support from established community members regarding schooling and workplace norms. These interactions help newcomers like me learn about housing, job opportunities, transportation, children’s education, and, above all, connect through shared memories”* (**Sheena, Age 32, Female**). Hence showing how the temple act as a practical resource for newcomers. Furthermore, meeting and interacting with people who once faced similar conditions, builds confidence in newly migrated people to face the situation and helps to reduce the loneliness and acculturation. *“Places like temples take us back to our origins, and the people we meet during festivals and celebrations become like family in an unfamiliar land. Their guidance and encouragement help us understand and manage life more easily in Singapore”* (**Ashok, Age 48, Male**).

It won't be wrong if one says that religious participation helps Malayali Hindu diaspora to get adjusted with life and culture in Singapore. Participating in temple events, processions, and festivities has given Malayalees an opportunity to interact with people from diverse backgrounds, helping them understand more about the local surroundings while also sharing their own cultural practices and expressing their identities. One participant shared *“I was never a temple-going person back home. But after coming to Singapore, I began isolating myself from everything, as the thought ‘this is not the*

place where I belong' struck me every day. During one of the Ayyappa processions, I visited the temple. There, I met people who had been living in Singapore for many years, and they explained the customs, rules, and even the small day-to-day things that helped me understand how life works here" (Madhav, Age 40, Male). This is what Cohen (1997) meant when he argued that diasporic communities often rely on shared religious participation to balance their sense of belonging between their homeland and the host society. Thus, for Singapore Malayalees, religious participation is not only about the cultural awareness and competence, but it is also about how people easily adapt the social environments.

- Negotiating Tradition within a Multicultural Environment

When migrants arrive in a multicultural country like Singapore, they try to find a balance between the culture they inherit from their homeland and the culture they adapt to in the new place. The realities of the new cultural settings do not remain static for the migrants; instead, they become adjusted and reshaped to fit the social, cultural and political structures of the host society. The diasporic communities often reformulate their traditions to make them meaningful and workable in the host society (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 2000). That is, for Malayali Hindus in Singapore, they may not practice or follow the exact rituals and traditions as they used to do back in Kerala. But instead, they reorganize and adjust the practices as the host country have a different way of carrying out the rituals, different patterns and rules, different schedules and different cultural expectations. Though they keep the core meaning of the rituals and traditions, they modify and adjust the way it is practiced in the new settings. Negotiating a tradition allows migrants to keep and practice their original cultural identity by adapting to the multicultural settings.

Anitha Devi Pillai (2017) in her work on Singapore Malayalees describes how the community reinterpret and reorganize the cultural patterns to suit the local social life. She highlights examples such as celebrating festivals at community halls rather than celebrating at homes, also ritual timings and modifying certain norms to adjust with Singapore's multicultural norms. This form of adaptation reflects what Levitt (2007) describes as the "reworking" of cultural practices across borders, where migrants retain the emotional core of a tradition but reshape its expression to fit new social conditions. Even participants mentioned that most of the times festivals and rituals had to be adjusted to suit the local regulations. "*We celebrate Onam only after the celebrations in Kerala are over. The date of the celebration varies because external factors—such as reserving the community hall, work schedules, and the multicultural sensibilities of the host society—need to be considered*" (Sheena, Age 32, Female). Participants also expressed that by celebrating festivals in such a way doesn't mean that these adjustments are seen as loss of authenticity but rather to keep the traditions alive under new circumstances. One of the participants expressed that "*Here we celebrate the festivals in a smaller way, but the meaning stays the same for us. We just change how we do things to fit the place*" (Sidharth, Age 58, Male). Another participant shared, "*When we are away from our homeland, we cannot celebrate festivals in exactly the same way, but we still observe the most important parts. By doing so, we can teach younger generations about our culture and help them understand our traditions, even if the way or the time we celebrate them is different*" (Satheesh, Age 53, Male). This shows that how these migrants keep their identity and traditions as well as how they learn the new ways of living in the host country. That is, they maintain continuity and adaptability at the same time.

Malayalee Hindus in Singapore not only celebrate their own festivals and rituals but also participate in programmes and events that include different ethnic communities, demonstrating how cultural sharing and adaptation takes place. By joining the inter-ethnic festivities and multicultural programmes, the way Malayalee Hindu traditions are practiced, celebrated and presented may change to fit the Singapore's multi-cultural environment. This process reflects Cohen's (1997) argument that diasporic identities are formed through a dynamic process of balancing attachment to the homeland with participation in the host society. In line with this, Bhabha (1994) describes how such cultural negotiation produces a "hybrid space," where elements of old and new cultures blend, showing how migrant communities can maintain continuity with their heritage while simultaneously adapting to new social contexts. *"After coming to Singapore, not all festivals and traditions are celebrated. Onam and the Ayyappa Vilakku are the main events observed by Malayali Hindus. We try to preserve the essence of our traditions, but sometimes we adapt and incorporate new ways of celebrating them"* (**Lakshmi, Age 58, Female**). Hence, it can be said that traditions are changed while keeping the core of the tradition so that it can fit the new environment.

In summary, the Malayali Hindu diaspora negotiates their traditions to remain part of Singapore's multicultural context. While adapting to local norms and practical realities, they continue to uphold the core of their beliefs, ensuring cultural continuity, adaptability, and integrity within the society (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007). This balance allows them to preserve their heritage while actively participating in the broader social environment.

- Intergenerational Adaptation of Religious Practices

Intergenerational adaptation is a key feature of diaspora life. As people settle in the new social and cultural environments, the challenge of understanding and passing of the traditions to the younger children becomes more visible. Even though the older generations adjust and follow their traditions, keeping the younger children connected to their beliefs often becomes difficult. Intergenerational adaption of religious practices thus refers to the ways religious beliefs, rituals, and values are reshaped as they pass from older to younger generations (Smith & Denton, 2005). In the context of Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore, it is very relevant that religious rituals and beliefs, festival celebrations, temple gatherings play a crucial role in connecting themselves as well as the younger generations with the roots. Scholars argue that diasporic religious practices are frequently adapted to accommodate the needs of multiple generations, balancing tradition with the realities of life in the host society (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000).

In diaspora contexts, migrants encounter a social environment that differs significantly from the religious landscape of their homeland, especially children who grow up in an environment which is different from those experienced by their parents. For instance, Malayali Hindus raise their children in a social environment completely different from highly community-based life of Kerala. That is, in Kerala where religion is part of everyday life where temples, devotional songs and shlokas, festivals and rituals are seen everywhere. Whereas in Singapore, religion is more private and is not easily visible. As one participant explained, *“In Kerala, religion is everywhere. Devotional songs in the early morning and evening are part of daily life. If I were back in Kerala, I wouldn’t need to explain everything about religion; the children would have learned naturally. They would have known we have festivals and rituals beyond Onam and Vishu and would have been part of every celebration. But here in Singapore, it has*

become something I have to actively keep alive to make sure they stay connected with our roots” (Ashok, Age 48, Male). Scholars note that migrants often encounter new religious landscapes where faith becomes more individualised and shaped by the multicultural setting of the host country (Vertovec, 2000; Levitt, 2007). Thus, showing that how these migrants, living in a diverse society, blend, adapt and even negotiate their religious practices to relate to their heritage.

Unlike the first generation—who often migrated from relatively homogeneous cultural or religious settings—second-generation children are raised within societies marked by secularism, cultural diversity, and new social pressures (Casanova, 2011; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2002). It is of no doubt that religious practices in diaspora is an important factor in passing of cultural values and beliefs from one generation to the next. In families, rituals and festivals provide planned events and cultural moments for children and young people so that they get a chance to know the spiritual and ethical values of their community. *“Because we are away from home, my children rarely get the chance to learn about their rituals and practices. Since not every festival is celebrated here, we make sure to attend temple rituals and events whenever possible, as this helps bring our children a little closer to their traditions” (Gauri, Age 33, Female).* Another participant shared, *“Since we are living away from our homeland, it becomes very important to bring our children to temple gatherings and processions whenever possible, so they can stay involved in our celebrations even if we need to adjust them. Sometimes we shorten or modify the processions so the children can follow what is happening and understand the meaning behind it” (Sheena, Age 32, Female).* These reflections don’t mean that one is disrespecting or abandoning one’s religion or traditions. Instead, they bring small changes so that the tradition stays meaningful and sensible in the new environment.

Thus, these adaptations do not reflect a rejection of tradition, instead, they represent thoughtful adjustments that help ensure religious practices remain meaningful, practical, and accessible within the diaspora setting. By reshaping rituals in small but intentional ways, families maintain a living connection to their heritage while supporting the younger generation's ability to understand and appreciate it.

3. Religious Practices as Cultural Anchors for Identity Preservation

Religious practices often function as cultural anchors to provide stability, to maintain community identity and to add meaning to the values, rituals and practices that one follows. For diasporic, minority, or culturally transitioning populations, religion can become an especially significant site for negotiating belonging and continuity across generations (Vertovec, 2020; Levitt, 2007). Temples, churches, mosques, and other religious centers often act as cultural meeting places, helping community members support each other and pass down traditions to younger generations. At the same time, the home becomes a private space where families continue rituals, tell stories, and practice customs that remind them of their roots. Religious traditions either practiced in public spaces or in more intimate settings, helps in the transmission of cultural values, symbols, languages and family customs. Peek (2018) shares that these practices do more than preserve heritage; they create an affective landscape through which individuals navigate their sense of self, establish moral legitimacy, and articulate their place within both ancestral and contemporary societies.

As discussed earlier, these practices differ when performed in a multicultural landscape. Families may adapt them to fit their new surroundings or busy lifestyles. Still, even when they change slightly, these practices continue to help people feel connected to their culture. Yet, even when the practices are modified, they continue to offer a sense of cultural

continuity and belonging (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 2000). Many participants in this study described religion as something that helps them feel grounded, gives them comfort, and teaches their children who they are.

- Everyday Rituals and Home-Based Devotional Practices

Scholars note that “routine religious acts naturalize cultural memory by embedding it in the rhythms of everyday life” (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p. 125). In diasporic households, home-based rituals often take on heightened significance, as maintaining cultural identity becomes a central motivation for everyday religious practice. Daily activities such as morning prayers, chanting mantras, lighting lamps or candles, participating in weekly services, or observing ritual calendars within the private sphere acquire a symbolic weight. These practices function as continual reminders of ancestral roots and sustain a sense of connection to inherited traditions.

For people living in the diaspora, memories are carried not only through memories but also through learned routines and behaviours. That is, when people move away from the homeland, they don’t only remember home through photos, talking to them over phone or reading their texts, but they also remember through their bodily activities. For example, folding hands during prayers, cooking traditional food, listening to the songs, or the way festivals are celebrated. These gestures are not done on purpose, but these actions are either learned or carried out while growing up, so they become automatic. That is why migrants often describes these rituals as emotional and embodied practices that linked them to their families and traditions. One of the participants shared “*I always remember my mother when I light the lamp. It takes me back to those days when lighting the lamp always began with a little fight — ‘Don’t you know you should light the lamp at 6 in the evening?’ — followed by her showing me how to pray and saying,*

‘When will you understand its importance? God is the only one who will stay with you when no one else does.’ (She smiles.) Even though I live thousands of miles away now, that small moment still feels like home” (Sreeshna, Age 37, Female). Such practices, even when adapted to new environments, help individuals maintain a coherent sense of self amid cultural displacement. They generate a sense of ‘continuity-in-change,’ allowing traditions to evolve while remaining anchored in recognizable forms (Brah, 1996; Hervieu-Léger, 2000).

In addition, an important aspect of preserving cultural identity is the creation of devotional corners or home shrines. These spaces serve as a spatial manifestation of cultural identity, providing a dedicated area where rituals, prayers, and ancestral memories are practiced and maintained within the home (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Brah, 1996). These devotional corners represent the intimate spaces for cultural memory containing images, idols, incense, sandalwood powder, lamps, textiles that evoke culturally enriched aesthetics. Another participant added *“My kids may not speak Malayalam, but I made it very sure that they know the stories behind the festivals we celebrate, which deities we pray and which deities form our temple space. The little corner is not just part of our home but rather is a space where we learn about our heritage and traditions and keeps a piece of our homeland alive” (Nandhini, Age 39, Female).* Hence, the prayer corner functions as a space where values, stories, and elements of communal heritage are passed down across generations, alongside the regular worship of deities and the chanting of mantras (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Brah, 1996). At the same time participants also described how they navigate modern lifestyles alongside these traditional practices, often adjusting or modifying rituals to fit busy schedules or to accommodate secular influences.

- Festival Celebrations as Expressions of Cultural Continuity

Festival celebrations or festivities hold a central place in how Malayali Hindus in Singapore sustain cultural continuity and preserve a sense of belonging across generations. In the diaspora, festivals such as Onam, Vishu, Navaratri, Ayyappa Vilakku and Diwali become more than yearly celebrations. They act as cultural anchors that reconnect families to the rhythms, values, and emotions of their homeland. Scholars note that festivals serve as powerful sites where cultural memory becomes publicly and collectively reinforced through shared ritual, sensory experiences, and symbolic performance (Hall, 2019). For many Malayali Hindu families, these celebrations help maintain a regular connection to Kerala despite the distance and everyday pressures of living in a multicultural, fast-paced context like Singapore.

Participants described how festival practices inside the home intentionally recreate elements of their homeland. Preparing traditional dishes, arranging flower carpets, lighting oil lamps, wearing Kerala attire, and reciting prayers together allow families to revive memories of earlier celebrations in India. One participant shared, *“I rarely attend the Onam celebrations conducted by the organisation, so the celebration at home matters a lot to me. We wear traditional attire, decorate the house with flowers, and I make sure the children do the same or at least participate in what I am doing. During Onam, we cook the same dishes my mother used to make back home. It’s the one day my kids really feel connected to where we come from”* (Seema. Age 45, Female). These embodied and sensory practices help children build emotional familiarity with traditions they have never experienced in Kerala, making the festival not just a ritual event but a meaningful cultural lesson.

At the community level, temples and Malayali associations in Singapore further strengthen cultural continuity by organizing large-scale celebrations that bring people together. These gatherings offer a collective space where the community can express pride in language, customs, and regional identity. A participant involved in coordinating a Vishu programme explained, *“It’s not just about the prayers—it’s about seeing our community come together, decorating the temple, singing in Malayalam, sharing food. It keeps our traditions alive for the younger generation”* (**Ramakrishnan, Age 62, Male**). Such shared celebrations create a sense of solidarity, especially for families who may feel disconnected from their cultural community in their everyday urban routines.

Public celebrations also play a symbolic role in asserting cultural presence and visibility in Singapore’s multicultural landscape. Several younger participants expressed that festival events especially temple processions, cultural performances, and public rituals allow them to feel seen and acknowledged. As one participant noted, *“When our temple does the big procession, it reminds me that we’re not invisible. Our culture has a place here too. It’s during these processions that we feel like ourselves again. Wearing traditional attire is my favourite part”* (**Reshma, Age 45, Female**). Scholars note that public ritual performances allow diasporic communities to assert visibility and claim belonging within multicultural societies (Vertovec, 2000; Werbner, 2002). Participating in the processions, festival parades and celebrations evoke a feeling in migrants that they are represented. And this visibility strengthens their cultural identity and evokes a feeling that being minority in Singapore doesn’t diminish their traditions or marks unseen.

Overall, festival celebrations among Malayali Hindus in Singapore become dynamic expressions of cultural continuity. They blend memory, ritual, and community participation, enabling families to pass down values, narratives, and emotional connections to their heritage. Through these celebrations, traditions adapt to the new environment while remaining firmly rooted in recognizable cultural forms, allowing continuity to be sustained across generations (Hall, 2019).

- Transmission of Cultural Knowledge through Religious Pedagogy

Religious teaching plays a central role in how Malayali Hindus in Singapore pass cultural knowledge, values, and identity to their children. Growing up in an English-dominant, multicultural environment, younger generations often have limited exposure to Malayalam, Hindu stories, or Kerala traditions in their everyday lives. Because of this, many parents view religious education as an essential way to sustain cultural roots in the diaspora. Scholars note that religious pedagogy often becomes a key strategy through which migrant communities preserve heritage, transmit memory, and maintain continuity across generations (Levitt, 2007; Menon, 2021).

For many families, Hindu temples in Singapore act as important cultural classrooms. Temples such as Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple and Sri Sivan Temple run classes that teach children Malayalam bhajans, basic prayers, mythological stories, and the meanings behind rituals. These structured environments help bridge the generational gap created when children grow up outside Kerala. As one participant explained, *“My son speaks mostly English, though he understands Malayalam. In such situations, temple classes are our way of making sure he knows, understands and learns Malayalam along with the Malayalam prayers, Kerala culture and mythological stories I grew up with in Kerala”* (Prema. Age 53, Female). Such programmes offer

children consistent access to cultural vocabulary, shared memories, and moral teachings. Researchers argue that these institutional spaces help stabilise cultural learning within diasporic settings where home-based knowledge may be fragmented (Ramakrishnan, 2019).

Religious practice is also closely tied to language preservation. For many Malayali Hindu families, prayers and slokas are among the few contexts in which children regularly use Malayalam or Sanskrit. One parent shared, *“At home we mix English and Malayalam while communicating, but during prayers the kids learn or recite the exact Malayalam words. It keeps the language alive for them”* (**Gauri, Age 33, Female**). Studies show that heritage languages are often best maintained through religious contexts, where vocabulary and pronunciation are passed down in ritualised and meaningful ways (Raj, 2015).

At home, informal religious teaching remains equally important. Parents and grandparents often narrate stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, or Puranas during bedtime or during festival preparations. These stories help children understand the moral values and cultural meanings behind practices observed in the household. One participant said, *“My daughter loves listening to stories from the Ramayana before bedtime. During festivals, I also make sure she watches animated mythological shows. That’s how she learns about our traditions and where they come from”* (**Sithara, Age 35, Female**). This reflection shows how parents use storytelling and media to pass on cultural and religious knowledge to their children in everyday life. Bedtime stories and animated mythological shows make traditions easier for children to understand and enjoy. These informal learning moments help children connect with their heritage in a meaningful way. It won’t be wrong if said that rather than formal instruction, culture is

shared through routine family practices. This approach allows traditions to remain relevant and engaging for the younger generation. Storytelling, as scholars suggest, operates as a form of transmitted cultural memory that connects children emotionally to heritage and family history (Hervieu-Léger, 2000).

Parents also described the need to adapt traditional teaching to modern life. Busy school schedules and digital habits make it difficult for children to participate in long or complex rituals. Instead of abandoning these practices, families simplify them using children's books, short prayers, or small rituals that fit daily routines. As one participant explained, *"We don't force long practices. Never burdened them with religious cultures and traditional concepts. But we make sure the kids know why we celebrate Vishu or why we light the lamp every evening. They should know the basic idea about where we come from and what culture we belong to"* (**Reshma, Age 45, Female**). This flexible approach reflects what scholars call "adaptive religiosity," where traditions evolve to remain meaningful within new social contexts (Vertovec, 2020).

Together, temple classes, daily rituals, language learning, and storytelling form what Hervieu-Léger (2000) describes as a "chain of memory" that allows Malayali Hindu children in Singapore to stay connected to their cultural roots. Through both structured and informal forms of teaching, religious practice becomes a living pathway for sustaining identity, belonging, and cultural pride across generations in the diaspora.

4. Religious Processions as Spaces of Cultural Expression and Resistance

Religious processions play an important role in helping Malayali Hindu migrants in Singapore express and protect their cultural identity. In the same way, they also serve as

powerful public arenas where migrants can actively perform and safeguard their traditions, reflecting how diasporic communities use public rituals to assert identity in new environments (Cohen, 1997). Unlike rituals conducted at home or inside temple premises, processions are performed in public spaces, making the Malayali Hindu community and its culture more visible and allowing them to share their traditions with others. Such public expressions help diasporic groups assert their presence in the wider society, turning shared urban spaces into cultural stages where identity is actively performed (Vertovec, 2000). That is, these events and performances transform an ordinary urban landscape into a podium where cultures, traditions, belongings and memories are enacted showing their diasporic presence. Though within Singapore's multicultural context, government allows and supports the cultural celebrations, there are rules for sound, safety and public orders. By following these guidelines, the Malayali Hindu community can celebrate openly, make their presence known and express their identity without conflict, by balancing cultural pride and social responsibility (Vertovec, 2000; Bhabha, 1994). Therefore, this theme explores three sub-themes showing how procession is displayed, protected and acknowledged in a new environment.

- Processions as Public Assertions of Diasporic Identity

Religious processions emerged as important occasions for Malayali Hindus in Singapore as they help the community publicly express their cultural identity. These processions become moments when the community steps into the public eye, and public spaces become the podium for enacting traditions and memories. These events not only allow the community to display its cultural and religious heritage but also make it visible to members of the diaspora as well as the wider Singaporean society. One participant explained, "*When large processions are held by temple authorities or Malayali organizations, crowds gather to witness and participate in them. The very*

presence of people allows each Malayali to realize that they are seen and not invisible, and that their culture has a place here too” (Narayanan, Age 60, Male). This statement reflects the way processions function as visible demonstrations of communal presence in a multicultural urban environment (Vertovec, 2000; Cohen, 1997). This means that processions allow the community to be seen and recognized in public spaces. By gathering publicly as a community, people show that their culture and traditions are still alive in the city. That is, in a multicultural setting, these moments or these kinds of shared public events help the community to feel acknowledged and connected. These processions include rituals, music, traditional attire, and sacred objects, which become a source of strength and support for the cultural identity shared by the community, demonstrating the vibrancy of Malayali Hindu traditions in an urban context (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 2000; Bhabha, 1994).

For the Malayali Hindu diaspora, these public processions carry a sense of pride and recognition. For example, during Ayyappa Vilakku festival one of the participants noted, *“Watching the chariot being carried and the drums played makes me feel part of something bigger than just our family or temple—it shows our culture to the whole city and many Malayali experienced strong emotions – first because they are witnessing the rituals and second they feel proud of their culture” (Ashok, Age 48, Male).* The visibility of processions allows participants to assert their identity not only within the Malayali Hindu community but also in the broader Singaporean society. Many described the act of moving sacred objects through public streets, accompanied by music, chanting, and traditional attire, as an expression of collective cultural presence that reinforces both personal and group identity.

Processions are seen as occasions that strengthen community cohesion. While conversing with participants, it became clear that the preparation, coordination, and

participation in these events require collaboration across age groups and roles within the temple community. One participant shared, “*During public rituals, everyone helps and cooperate, that is, from organizing the offerings to carrying the chariot—it brings the whole temple together. You feel the support and energy of the community and that hits different*” (Satheesh, Age 53, Male). These shared responsibilities and collective actions highlight how public rituals serve not only as expressions of identity but also as mechanisms for fostering solidarity and belonging within the diaspora.

Many participants highlighted that processions provide a way to communicate their cultural presence to the wider public. One participant remarked, “*People see us on the streets with our music, our colors, our rituals. It makes me feel that our culture is alive and not forgotten, even here in Singapore. And I am very proud when I share this with you*” (Aravind, Age 30, Male). In this way, the procession becomes a statement of existence and pride, offering the community and opportunity to showcase their heritage and resist cultural invisibility.

Overall, participants spoke about religious processions as important occasions where Malayalee Hindu identity is openly expressed and shared. Through public participation, shared rituals, and collective involvement, community members are able to celebrate and affirm their cultural heritage together. These accounts show that processions are not only religious events, but also meaningful ways through which the diaspora makes its presence visible and sustains its identity in Singapore.

- Negotiating Visibility within Singapore’s Multicultural Framework

Participants noted that although processions help the community express and affirm their identity, they must be carefully organized to fit within Singapore’s multicultural setting and public regulations. They also explained that processions had to be carefully planned and prosecuted, so that the rules about public space, noise, and safety must be

followed. These guidelines influenced how long the processions lasted, the routes they took, and how rituals were performed. One participant noted, “*We choose our route and time carefully so that it doesn’t disrupt traffic or disturb residents but still allows everyone to see and join in the celebration*” (**Ramakrishnan, Age 62, Male**). This shows how the community carefully manages being seen in public while also respecting the rules and norms of the wider society. It highlights the way tradition and social responsibility are practiced together.

Several participants shared that they had to make changes to traditional practices to suit life in Singapore. For instance, ceremonies that would normally take several hours in Kerala were often shortened or done in smaller parts so they could follow local rules and still celebrate their traditions. One participant explained, “*Back home, the procession goes on all day, but here we split it into smaller segments so we can celebrate fully without causing problems for the city and disrupting the public life*” (**Seema, Age 45, Female**). These adaptations show that visibility is not only about being seen but also about performing cultural identity in a way that is acceptable and harmonious within Singapore’s public spaces.

Participants also described a strategic approach to ensuring both community participation and public acknowledgment. Many mentioned organizing volunteers to manage crowds, set up signs, and guide the route, ensuring that the procession could be safely and smoothly conducted. A participant shared, “*We plan everything carefully—from who carries what, to where people stand—so that everyone can take part safely and the community is respected by those around us*” (**Ramakrishnan, Age 62, Male**). This shows that making the traditions visible in public requires more than just planning a procession. It involves thinking carefully about practical details and how the community is perceived. Participants explained that they had to consider timing,

routes, noise levels, and safety measures to make sure the events ran smoothly. At the same time, they wanted to preserve the meaning and spirit of their rituals. By balancing these practical concerns with respect to local rules and multicultural norms, the community is able to celebrate its heritage openly. This careful negotiation allows them to express their identity proudly without causing conflict. In this way, visibility becomes a thoughtful act of both cultural expression and social responsibility.

Importantly, participants emphasized that these negotiations do not diminish the cultural or religious significance of the procession. Instead, they saw adaptation as part of sustaining their traditions in a new environment. One participant said, *“Even if we have to shorten the rituals or adjust the route, it still feels like our culture is alive. People still see us, and we still feel connected to our roots”* (Sidharth, Age 58, Male). This highlights how careful planning and negotiation enable the community to maintain both cultural authenticity and public presence.

Overall, participants’ accounts reveal that negotiating visibility is a central aspect of organizing processions in Singapore. It involves balancing cultural expression, community participation, and respect for public regulations. These findings show that while the Malayali Hindu diaspora actively asserts its identity through public rituals, doing so in a multicultural urban context requires careful consideration and adaptation to ensure that their traditions are both visible and respected.

- Processions as Acts of Heritage Preservation Against Assimilation

Religious processions serve as key practices through which the Malayali Hindu diaspora preserves their cultural heritage in Singapore. Participants described these processions as important chances to keep their traditions, rituals, and cultural symbols alive, and things that might otherwise be forgotten in a multicultural city like Singapore. Participants explained that these events let them perform rituals much as

they are done in Kerala, helping children and community members experience the practices directly and through their own eyes. In doing so, the processions strengthen cultural continuity and make sure that their heritage remains visible and meaningful, even far from home. These gatherings are more than just celebrations as they are ways for the community to stay connected to their roots and pass them on to the next generation.

Many participants emphasized the role of festivals such as Ayyappa Vilakku, Kavadi offerings, and annual temple chariot festivals in preserving their traditions. Observing the procession, one participant shared, *“Seeing the traditional rituals, decorations, and music being performed exactly as in Kerala makes me feel that our culture is alive here and will continue for the next generation”* (**Nandakumar, Age 60, Male**). The presence of these festivals in public spaces provides a living connection to the homeland, reinforcing both personal and collective cultural memory.

Processions also help pass traditions from one generation to the next. Children and young people take part in the rituals alongside elders, learning the songs, chants, and ceremonial practices as they go. In this way, these events become living lessons in cultural heritage, connecting the younger generation to their roots. One participant explained, *“Even our children, when they see the chariot or take part in small ways, learn about our traditions. Constant asking questions about it, feeling excited to see the events and enjoying the gatherings keeps the knowledge alive”* (**Gauri, Age 33, Female**). This involvement helps children not just observe but truly understand and absorb their cultural practices. By taking part, asking questions, and experiencing the excitement of the events, the younger generation connects with their heritage in a

meaningful way. These experiences keep traditions alive and help protect the community from losing touch with its cultural roots.

Additionally, participants highlighted the emotional significance of these processions. Watching the rituals, many community members experienced a mix of pride and nostalgia. Sometimes such experiences often bring happy tears and a kind of proud moment. One participant noted, *“During the Kavadi procession, many Malayalis shed happy tears—first, because they are witnessing the rituals, and second, because they feel proud of our culture”* (Suvarnan. Age 58, Male). Such emotional responses underline the deep connection between heritage, identity, and communal belonging within the diaspora.

Overall, religious processions act as powerful ways for the Malayalee Hindu community to resist cultural assimilation in Singapore. By performing rituals openly in public spaces, the community makes its traditions visible to both participants and the wider society. Traditional music, ceremonial attire, and ritual practices are carefully preserved, giving events a strong sense of authenticity. Involving multiple generations ensures that children learn, experience, and fully understand and accept these practices alongside elders. Participants described how witnessing and taking part in these processions helps young people connect emotionally with their heritage. These gatherings also create moments of pride, where the community comes together to celebrate shared identity and belonging. At the same time, the processions are carefully adapted to fit Singapore’s multicultural regulations, showing a balance between cultural expression and respect for the broader society. In this way, processions are not just religious events, they are living expressions of identity, heritage, and community

resilience. They provide a meaningful space where culture, faith, and belonging are experienced collectively, even far from the homeland.

After examining each theme and subthemes individually, it is important to explore the connections, similarities and patterns that emerge across them. Cross-theme analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how religion shapes identity, community cohesion, and cultural continuity among the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.

CROSS-THEME ANALYSIS:

Cross-theme analysis involves examining the connections, overlaps, and patterns across different themes identified in qualitative research. Rather than considering each theme in isolation, this approach allows researchers to explore how themes relate to one another, highlighting similarities, differences, and broader processes that may not be visible when themes are studied separately. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, this method deepens interpretive understanding, moving beyond a simple thematic description to reveal underlying patterns and relationships. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that synthesizing themes can illuminate the contextual and social processes shaping participants' experiences, enhancing the richness and credibility of qualitative findings. In this study, cross-theme analysis enables a more nuanced understanding of how religion functions in multiple dimensions—cultural, social, and emotional—for the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore.

Before presenting a detailed discussion of each theme, it is useful to clarify the analytical approach. Each theme reflects both shared and individual experiences of participants, highlighting how they navigate diasporic life. While examining themes individually provides insight into specific practices, beliefs, and coping strategies, cross-theme analysis illuminates the broader dynamics connecting these dimensions. The four themes—religious institutions as community anchors, religion as a mechanism for adaptation, religious practices as cultural

foundations, and religious processions as public expressions—together demonstrate how religion shapes identity, supports adaptation, and sustains continuity in diaspora contexts. This approach aligns with Hall's (1990) perspective that diasporic identity is continuously negotiated and recreated through selective cultural practices that affirm belonging.

1. Religious Institutions as Anchors of Community Cohesion:

Based on the findings, participants consistently emphasized that temples and religious leadership are central to maintaining community cohesion. Temples were described not merely as places of worship but also as spaces that provide cultural, social, and emotional support and strength and help migrants to navigate the uncertainties of life in a new country. Many noted that temple gatherings, festivals, and collective rituals offered a sense of continuity, grounding them in familiar practices despite the challenges and hardships of diasporic life. These findings show how religious institutions function as recreated cultural worlds, supporting both individual and collective identity. This aligns with Vertovec's (2000) concept of transnational social formations, which suggests that diaspora communities rely on such institutions to sustain homeland-like practices and social bonds. By connecting participants and their experiences across different rituals and events, it becomes clear that temples serve as anchors that integrate spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions, reinforcing the community's resilience and shared identity.

Temple visits often combined devotional activity with social interaction, creating opportunities to reinforce cultural values, rituals, and a sense of belonging. Levitt (2007) highlights that religious institutions act as key resources through which migrants sustain moral, emotional, and symbolic ties to their past while adjusting to new environments. For Malayali Hindus in Singapore, temples also preserved core traditions such as Onam, Vishu and Ayyappa Vilakku, while providing opportunities for social

support and interaction. Temple leaders, including priests and committee members—played an influential role in organizing festivals, mediating disputes, and encouraging intergenerational participation, reflecting Warner and Wittner’s (1998) observation that religious leaders often act as cultural brokers in diasporic settings. Collectively, these institutions reduce social isolation and foster both individual and collective identity within the community.

2. Religion as a Mechanism for Adaptation in Singaporean Society:

Religion also emerged as an important mechanism for adaptation to the Singaporean context. Participants described how temple activities, rituals, and community involvement helped them manage daily stress, understand new social norms, and maintain familiar routines in an unfamiliar environment. Engaging in religious practices helped participants maintain a connection to their homeland while also supporting their adaptation to life in a multicultural society. This reflects Levitt’s (2007) idea that religious involvement can provide stability and structure for migrants as they navigate new environments.

Many participants explained that celebrating traditions in Singapore often requires adjustments so that migrants can fit urban life while taking care of work schedules, school timetables, and community commitments. As a result, festivals and rituals were sometimes shortened, simplified, or combined with other community events. Participants emphasized that these changes did not lessen the meaning or significance of the practices but reflected a practical way to balance tradition with daily realities and urban lifestyles. As one participant shared, “*We change the rituals slightly to fit life here, but the meaning stays the same*” (**Satheesh, Age 53, Male**) These adaptations illustrate Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the “hybrid space,” where cultural forms are reshaped through interaction with the host society. In this way, migrants are able to

preserve their heritage while integrating into Singapore's multicultural environment, keeping their traditions alive and relevant for both themselves and the younger generation.

Temples also functioned as informal support networks, providing advice, companionship, and a sense of belonging. Engagement in communal religious life helped migrants feel "at home" despite being far from Kerala. Overall, this theme demonstrates that religion facilitates adaptation by offering emotional support, creating spaces for social interaction, and enabling migrants to construct a hybrid identity that connects their heritage with life in Singapore.

3. Religious Practices as Cultural Anchors for Identity Preservation:

Religious practices functioned as vital cultural anchors, helping Malayali Hindus maintain their identity in diaspora. Rituals such as Onam Sadya, Ayyappa Vilakku, Vishu Kani, and daily prayers were not performed solely for devotional purposes but acted as symbolic markers of belonging, heritage, and continuity. Participants shared that these practices fostered a sense of connection to Kerala, reinforcing cultural values, memories, and customs.

Scholars such as Safran (1991) argue that diasporic communities sustain identity through symbolic and ritual practices, while Hall (1996) emphasizes that cultural identity is continuously reshaped through lived engagement. The participants' daily routines such as lighting lamps, reciting prayers, maintaining prayer spaces, and playing devotional songs, illustrate how ordinary, repeated practices preserve a sense of familiarity and emotional connection. Festivals and festivities further strengthen identity by creating communal spaces where traditions can be celebrated collectively, even when migrants know that these are adjusted to fit Singapore's urban context.

Intergenerational transmission is central to identity preservation. Through participant observation it became clear that Intergenerational transmission plays a vital role in preserving cultural and religious identity. By involving children in rituals, festivals, and everyday practices, families ensure that traditions are understood, experienced, and are carried forward. This shared participation helps younger generations connect with their heritage, making cultural knowledge a living part of their identity rather than just something observed from afar. Parents and elders actively involve children in rituals, storytelling, and festival preparations, guiding them not just on how to perform the practices but also on their meaning and significance. By participating in these activities, children gain a deeper understanding of their cultural and religious heritage. This hands-on engagement ensures that traditions are experienced and remembered, helping the younger generation connect emotionally with their roots and reinforcing the continuity of the community's identity across generations. Such engagement ensures that cultural knowledge, moral values, and a sense of belonging are passed down, preventing detachment from heritage (Hall, 1996). Through these practices, the Malayali Hindu community sustains its cultural identity across generations while adapting to life in a new social environment.

4. Religious Processions as Spaces of Cultural Expression and Resistance:

Public religious processions give Malayalee Hindus a way to celebrate their identity, a way to be represented as a community, and a way to keep their traditions alive. Unlike private or temple-based rituals, processions brought cultural identity into public spaces, combining devotion with communal and symbolic expression. Participants highlighted that events such as Ayyappa Vilakku, annual temple chariots, and kavadi offerings brought recognition, pride, and a sense of collective belonging. Cohen (1997) notes that

diaspora communities use public and symbolic activities to reinforce identity, a finding strongly reflected in participants' accounts.

Processions also required negotiating visibility within Singapore's multicultural regulatory framework. Participants adjusted the routes, music, and ways of celebrating festivals to follow safety rules and civic regulations, while still keeping the core meaning and spirit of the rituals intact and alive. This exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) "third space," as the community reshapes traditions in dialogue with host-country norms. Moreover, processions serve an intergenerational function, as children experience culture more vividly through public performance than through home rituals alone, reinforcing continuity and preventing cultural erosion (Safran, 1991). Overall, religious processions operate as public arenas where identity, heritage, and communal pride converge, allowing Malayali Hindus to maintain cultural visibility in Singapore's multicultural society (Vertovec, 2000).

The cross-theme analysis offers important insights into the ways religion shapes the lives of the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore. In the discussion that follows, these findings are examined alongside existing research and theoretical perspectives, showing how cultural, social, and religious practices help sustain identity, foster adaptation, and strengthen community connections.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

The findings of this study indicate that religion among Malayali Hindus in Singapore extends well beyond the realm of private belief or personal spirituality. Instead, religion functions as a multifaceted and adaptive social institution that supports community cohesion, sustains cultural continuity, identity construct and strengthens resilience within a diasporic context. Viewed through the frameworks of transnationalism, diaspora theory, and postcolonial identity

formation, the four key themes identified in this study—temples as community anchors, adaptive religious practices, intergenerational transmission, and public religious processions—come together as connected elements shaping the dynamic religious experiences of the community.

- **Religious Institutions as Community Anchors and Transnational Social Infrastructure:** Participants consistently described temples and religious leadership as central points of stability in their diasporic lives. For many, temples provided forms of emotional, social, and moral support similar to those available in the homeland. This recreation of familiar religious spaces within a new national setting resonates strongly with Vertovec's (1999/2000) conceptualization of transnational social formations. As Vertovec (2001) suggests, diasporic communities often develop durable networks that link homeland memories with hostland realities, allowing collective identities and social capital to be sustained across borders.

Within this framework, temples in Singapore function not just as sites of worship but as community hubs embedded in a wider transnational network. Participants highlighted how temples facilitate mentorship, leadership development, intergenerational interaction, and a shared sense of belonging. These findings align with Jacobsen and Pratap Kumar's (2002) work on Hindu diasporas, which emphasizes the role of temples and religious organizations as foundational social infrastructure in migrant communities. In this sense, religion operates simultaneously as a spiritual practice and a collective institution, reinforcing social bonds and reducing experiences of isolation commonly associated with diasporic life.

- **Religion as a Mechanism for Adaptation: Negotiating the "Third Space":**

A significant insight from the study is the extent to which religious practice among Malayali Hindus in Singapore is characterized by flexibility and adaptation. Participants described adjusting ritual duration, modifying schedules, and engaging selectively in religious activities to accommodate work demands, urban routines, and the multicultural environment of Singapore. These patterns indicate that diasporic religiosity is not a rigid reproduction of homeland traditions but a negotiated and context-sensitive practice. This finding closely reflects Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," a hybrid cultural arena in which identities and practices are reshaped through ongoing negotiation. By adapting rituals while retaining their symbolic meaning, the community demonstrates cultural hybridity—religious expressions that exist in between tradition and transformation. From a transnational perspective, such practices also echo Vertovec's (2001) notion of cultural reproduction, whereby diasporic groups reinterpret and reinvent cultural forms to make them meaningful within new social contexts. These adaptive strategies enable Malayali Hindus to affirm their identity while navigating the practical constraints and pluralism of life in Singapore.

➤ **Religious Practices as Cultural Foundations: Intergenerational Transmission and Identity Continuity**

Another important finding concerns the role of everyday religious practices in sustaining cultural identity across generations. Participants emphasized daily rituals, household worship, storytelling, and children's participation in festivals as key means through which values, traditions, and a sense of belonging are transmitted. This supports Hall's (1990) argument that diasporic identity is not inherited unchanged but is continuously constructed through cultural practice.

Consistent with Pratap Kumar's (2002) analysis of Hinduism in diaspora, religion here emerges as a living and evolving system rather than a static preservation of tradition. Participants' accounts illustrate how cultural meaning is embedded in ordinary family life, allowing children to experience religion as part of their daily environment rather than as distant heritage. Through simplified rituals and active participation, families cultivate cultural memory and emotional attachment, creating what many described as a "home away from home." These practices play a crucial role in preventing cultural disconnection and fostering pride among younger generations growing up outside the homeland.

➤ **Religious Processions as Public Expressions: Cultural Visibility and Collective Pride**

The study also highlights the importance of religious processions and festivals as public expressions of identity. Participants viewed these events as moments of collective visibility that strengthened community solidarity and provided younger members with embodied experiences of belonging. Such public rituals transform everyday urban spaces into meaningful religious landscapes.

Theoretically, these practices can be understood as processes of sacralising hostland space, a phenomenon documented by Jacobsen and Pratap Kumar (2002) in their analysis of Hindu diasporas. By occupying public space through religious performance, the Malayali Hindu community challenges marginalization and affirms its presence within Singapore's multicultural society. These events function not only as celebrations but also as symbolic negotiations of belonging, communicating continuity, legitimacy, and cultural confidence to both insiders and the wider public.

➤ **Situating the Malayali Diaspora within Broader Global Patterns**

Taken together, the experiences of Malayali Hindus in Singapore reflect broader patterns observed in South Asian diasporas worldwide. Religion emerges as a key

resource for community building, identity maintenance, and social cohesion in contexts far removed from the homeland (Jacobsen & Pratap Kumar, 2002). At the same time, diaspora theory emphasizes that contemporary diasporas are shaped by ongoing transnational ties and cultural flows rather than by displacement alone (Vertovec, 2001).

In this light, the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore exemplifies diaspora as a process rather than a fixed condition. Their religious institutions, rituals, public celebrations, and family-based practices together form a lived transnational social field—neither fully rooted in Kerala nor entirely assimilated into Singaporean society. Instead, identity is continually reworked within a hybrid third space, where belonging is negotiated through religion, community, and everyday practice.

Building on these findings, the following section moves beyond interpretation to consider the broader theoretical contributions and implications of the study. By situating the lived religious experiences of Malayali Hindus in Singapore within existing debates on diaspora, transnationalism, and religious adaptation, the study highlights how everyday practices extend and refine current theoretical frameworks. In doing so, it demonstrates how empirical insights from a small, urban diaspora can contribute meaningfully to wider discussions on diasporic religion, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

This study makes several significant contributions to scholarships on diaspora and religion, particularly in understanding how small urban communities negotiate identity, culture, and belongings in a globalized context. Malayali Hindus in Singapore represents minority within minority. Indians constitute approximately 7–9% of Singapore's total population, most of this group are Tamils, making Malayalees a smaller subgroup within the Indian community

(Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020). And it is this dual minority status that underscores the importance of religious and cultural practices, community networks, and intergenerational transmission, as these mechanisms help the community preserve its heritage, maintain identity, and foster social cohesion despite their limited numbers (Levitt, 2007; Vertovec, 2000). The findings highlight the dynamic and multi-dimensional role of religion among Malayali Hindus in Singapore, demonstrating both theoretical and empirical implications.

First, the study provides empirical support for the idea that religious institutions function as essential social infrastructure in diasporic settings. Participants repeatedly referred to temples not only as places of worship but as spaces where social relationships are formed, guidance is offered, and a sense of belonging is cultivated. This supports arguments made by Jacobsen and Pratap Kumar (2002) that diasporic Hindu temples play a central role in sustaining community cohesion. What this study adds is evidence from a relatively small, urban diaspora, showing that even communities with limited numbers rely heavily on religious institutions to anchor social life and mitigate feelings of isolation.

Second, the findings demonstrate that religiosity in the diaspora is highly adaptive rather than rigid. Participants described modifying rituals, shortening ceremonies, and selectively engaging in religious activities in ways that fit the pace and constraints of life in Singapore. These everyday adjustments reflect what Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes as the “third space,” where cultural practices are negotiated between homeland traditions and host-society realities. Similarly, Hall’s (1990) view of identity as fluid and continuously reconstructed is evident in how participants maintained religious meaning while adapting external forms. The contribution here lies in showing how these theoretical ideas are enacted in routine religious practice, rather than only at the level of identity discourse.

Third, the study highlights intergenerational transmission as an embodied and relational process. Cultural and religious continuity was not maintained solely through formal instruction but through participation in daily rituals, festival preparations, storytelling, and shared family practices. Participants emphasized that such involvement allowed younger generations to develop an emotional connection to their heritage. This finding aligns with Kumar's (2002) assertion that diasporic Hinduism survives through lived engagement rather than strict preservation. By foregrounding everyday practices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diasporic identity is sustained across generations in practical, experiential ways.

Fourth, the role of public religious events such as festivals and processions emerges as a significant site of cultural visibility and social negotiation. Participants viewed these events as opportunities to express collective identity, strengthen solidarity, and affirm their presence within Singapore's multicultural environment. In line with Jacobsen and Pratap Kumar (2002), these practices can be understood as efforts to sacralize hostland space and assert belonging. The study adds nuance by showing that public rituals are not only symbolic displays but are also meaningful experiences that shape community confidence and collective pride.

Finally, by focusing on Malayali Hindus in Singapore, the study situates a small, urban diaspora within broader theoretical discussions of transnationalism and diaspora. Vertovec (1999/2000) emphasizes that diasporas are characterized by ongoing processes of cultural reproduction and network formation. The findings demonstrate that such processes are present even in smaller communities, challenging the assumption that complex diasporic dynamics are limited to large or long-established migrant populations. This reinforces the relevance of diaspora theory across different scales and contexts.

SUMMARY:

Overall, this study demonstrates that religion in diaspora operates on multiple levels at the same time. It functions as an institutional resource, a flexible cultural system, a means of intergenerational continuity, and a platform for expressing collective identity in public spaces. By situating these insights within participants lived experiences, the study contributes to broader theoretical discussions on how diasporic communities actively draw on religion to negotiate belonging, cultural continuity, and identity within multicultural societies.

In this respect, the findings reinforce perspectives advanced by scholars such as Vertovec, Kumar, Hall and Jacobsen, who argue that diasporic religions should not be understood as static extensions of homeland traditions. Instead, they are living and evolving systems that adapt to new environments, sacralise unfamiliar spaces, and sustain community life over time.

For Malayali Hindus in Singapore, religion emerges as a strategic and dynamic medium of diasporic belonging. It operates across private, communal, and public spheres, providing emotional support, reinforcing cultural continuity, and enabling the transmission of identity across generations. Temples, rituals, festivals, and community networks serve as key resources for social cohesion, cultural pride, and resilience in everyday life.

Rather than simply reproducing religious practices from Kerala, the community actively reinterprets and renegotiates traditions in response to the social and cultural context of Singapore. Temples function as central hubs where shared memories, leadership roles, and ritual participation strengthen community ties and foster intergenerational learning. At the same time, public and communal expressions such as festivals and processions allow the community to affirm its presence and engage meaningfully with the wider multicultural environment.

Taken together, these findings highlight the integrative and adaptive role of religion in diasporic life. Religion enables the preservation of heritage while allowing flexibility, supports resilience in a migrant context, and cultivates a sense of collective pride, illustrating how Malayali Hindus strategically use spiritual and cultural frameworks to navigate belonging in a new social setting.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's multicultural society provides a unique backdrop for understanding how diasporic communities maintain their cultural and religious identities. This thesis set out to explore how Malayali Hindus in Singapore negotiate their cultural and religious lives while balancing attachment to Kerala with the realities of life in a diverse city-state. Religion is more than just a set of beliefs or rituals; it shapes how people connect with one another and make sense of the world. It brings individuals together, offering shared meanings, values, and a sense of belonging (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Nair, 2018). This study examined how the Malayali Hindu diaspora engages with religious institutions, rituals, and processions as anchors of cultural memory, tools for adaptation, and ways to foster community cohesion (Thomas, 2020). The findings reveal that religion plays a central role in bridging the gap between their heritage and their present lives. As this thesis draws to the conclusion, the main insights are summarized, reflecting on the theoretical and methodological choices that guided the research. Overall, it becomes evident that religion is not merely a personal or spiritual practice but a powerful catalyst for social connection, dialogue, and community life.

Building on this understanding of religion as a source of connection and identity, this study then examined how rituals, spaces, and everyday practices shape the lived experiences of Malayali Hindus in Singapore. The analysis shows that religion in diaspora is not simply a reproduction of practices from the homeland; instead, it takes on a dynamic and adaptive character that is deeply woven into daily life. While temples, festivals, and processions continue to provide important communal frameworks, the most profound changes occur at the individual level, where faith is lived, felt, reflected upon, and intentionally practised. Many participants described "becoming more Hindu" after migrating to Singapore—not through an increase in

ritual obligations, but through a more deliberate engagement with tradition, values, and everyday moral conduct (Menon, 2019).

These individual experiences of faith invite a deeper understanding of diasporic religiosity. They suggest that being Hindu in Singapore is shaped by inner reflection, personal devotion, and ethical engagement, and that rituals, sacred spaces, and public expressions gain significance because they resonate with a faith already lived at a personal level. In this sense, diaspora is not only a matter of social or spatial displacement; it is a condition that deepens lived religious experience while also sustaining collective identity and a sense of belonging (McGuire, 2008).

WHY SINGAPORE AND THE MALAYALI HINDU DIASPORA?

Singapore was selected as the site of this study because of its distinctive multicultural, multi-religious, and highly regulated social environment, which offers a unique context for examining how diasporic communities negotiate cultural and religious identity. As a global city-state shaped by migration, Singapore provides both opportunities and constraints for the public expression of religion, making it a particularly meaningful setting for exploring how faith is practiced, adapted, and negotiated in everyday life (Kong, 2010; Chua, 2017). Studying religion within this context allows for an examination of diasporic identity formation not in conditions of marginalisation alone, but within a framework of state-managed multiculturalism and religious pluralism.

The focus on Malayali Hindus, rather than other religious or ethnic groups, was guided by both analytical and empirical considerations. Within Singapore's Indian population—already a numerical minority—the Malayali Hindu community represents a smaller and less visible subgroup, often overshadowed by more dominant linguistic and religious traditions. This dual

minority status makes the community especially relevant for understanding how cultural and religious practices are mobilised to sustain identity, cohesion, and belonging in diaspora (Vertovec, 2000; Jacobsen & Pratap Kumar, 2002). Hinduism, with its ritual diversity, temple-centred organisation, and public processions, also offers a rich lens through which to examine the interplay between private devotion, communal life, and public religious expression.

Focusing on Malayali Hindus further allows for an exploration of how a regionally rooted tradition is reworked outside its original social and cultural environment. Scholars such as Vineeta Sinha have shown that Hindu religiosity in diasporic contexts like Singapore is not only shaped by ritual and community life but also by evolving material and social practices that reflect everyday lived experience in new settings (Sinha, 2010) — pointing to the broader ways in which diasporic Hinduism adapts, persists, and transforms beyond its traditional heartlands. Unlike studies that examine religion in large or long-established diasporic populations, this research highlights how a smaller, urban community actively negotiates continuity and change through everyday practices, institutional participation, and public rituals. In doing so, the study contributes a nuanced case that deepens understanding of how religion functions as a strategic and adaptive resource for identity maintenance and belonging within contemporary diasporic settings.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:

This study set out to examine how religion shapes community cohesion, adaptation, identity preservation, and public expression among the Malayali Hindu diaspora in Singapore. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that religion operates as an interconnected system of institutional support, lived practice, and public visibility through which diasporic belonging is continuously negotiated. Rather than functioning as a static reproduction of homeland traditions, religion emerges as a dynamic and adaptive resource that enables individuals and

communities to navigate life in a multicultural urban setting while maintaining a meaningful connection to Kerala.

➤ Religious Institutions as Social Infrastructure for Community Cohesion

One of the central findings of this study is the pivotal role played by religious institutions in sustaining community cohesion and collective identity. Temples in Singapore function not only as sites of worship but also as social, cultural, and emotional hubs that anchor the Malayali Hindu community. Participants consistently described temples as spaces where relationships are formed, cultural values are reinforced, and a sense of belonging is cultivated. Religious leaders and temple committees play an influential role in organizing festivals, facilitating intergenerational participation, and mediating community concerns, thereby reinforcing shared norms and collective responsibility.

These findings highlight how religious institutions operate as forms of social infrastructure in diasporic contexts, providing continuity in the absence of familiar homeland environments (Jacobsen & Pratap Kumar, 2002; Vertovec, 2000). By integrating spiritual practice with social engagement, temples help reduce feelings of isolation and foster resilience among a numerically small diaspora. Across the findings, it becomes clear that institutional religious spaces serve as critical anchors through which community cohesion and diasporic identity are sustained.

➤ Religion as a Resource for Adaptation and Everyday Resilience

The study also reveals that religion plays a significant role in facilitating adaptation to life in Singapore. Participants described religious engagement as a source of emotional stability, routine, and moral guidance amid the pressures of migration, work, and urban life. Rather than adhering rigidly to traditional forms, religious practices are often adjusted to accommodate time constraints, civic regulations, and multicultural norms.

These adaptations—such as shortened rituals or rescheduled festivals—were viewed not as losses but as pragmatic strategies that preserve meaning while responding to everyday realities.

This adaptive religiosity reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as a “third space,” where cultural practices are reshaped through ongoing negotiation between homeland traditions and host-society contexts. Through participation in temple life and communal rituals, migrants are able to maintain a sense of familiarity while simultaneously integrating into Singapore’s diverse social environment. Religion thus functions as a practical and emotional resource that supports everyday resilience and enables the construction of hybrid forms of belonging (Levitt, 2007).

➤ Religious Practice as Cultural Memory and Identity Continuity

Another key finding concerns the role of religious practices as cultural anchors that sustain identity across generations. Everyday rituals, home-based worship, and festival celebrations were described as deeply meaningful practices through which cultural memory, values, and emotional connections to Kerala are preserved. Participants emphasized that these practices are not limited to formal religious observance but are embedded in ordinary family life, shaping moral conduct and reinforcing a sense of continuity.

Intergenerational transmission emerged as a deliberate and reflective process in which parents and elders actively involve children in rituals, storytelling, and festival preparations. This participatory approach allows younger generations to experience religion as a lived and embodied practice rather than as distant heritage. In line with Hall’s (1990, 1996) understanding of identity as continuously constructed, the findings show that diasporic Hindu identity is sustained through repeated engagement with meaningful practices that connect past, present, and future. Religion thus operates as a

living cultural system that enables continuity while allowing flexibility and reinterpretation.

➤ **Public Religious Processions as Sites of Visibility and Cultural Negotiation**

The findings further highlight the importance of public religious processions as spaces where collective identity is visibly expressed and negotiated. Events such as temple festivals, Ayyappa Vilakku, and chariot processions transform urban spaces into temporary sacred landscapes, allowing the community to assert presence and cultural pride within Singapore's multicultural setting. Participants viewed these public rituals as moments of collective affirmation that strengthened solidarity and provided younger generations with vivid, embodied experiences of belonging.

At the same time, processions are carefully negotiated within civic regulations and multicultural norms, reflecting an ongoing balance between visibility and accommodation. This negotiation illustrates how diasporic communities creatively reshape traditions while retaining their symbolic significance (Bhabha, 1994; Cohen, 1997). Public religious expressions therefore function not only as acts of devotion but also as strategic practices through which cultural heritage is preserved, collective confidence is reinforced, and belonging is asserted in shared public space (Vertovec, 2000).

➤ **Religion as an Integrated and Multi-Dimensional Resource**

Across all themes, the findings demonstrate that religion among Malayali Hindus in Singapore operates across multiple domains simultaneously private and public, personal and collective, institutional and experiential. Interiorized faith, adaptive practice, communal participation, and public performance are deeply interconnected, revealing religion as a holistic resource for negotiating diasporic life. Rather than being

confined to belief or ritual alone, religion shapes social relationships, emotional well-being, cultural continuity, and public identity.

Taken together, these findings show that diaspora is not merely a condition of displacement but a lived process through which identity, belonging, and heritage are actively constructed and sustained. Religion plays a central role in this process, enabling the Malayali Hindu community to maintain continuity with their past while engaging meaningfully with the social realities of contemporary Singapore. In doing so, the study offers broader insights into the ways in which faith, culture, and community intersect in diasporic contexts and contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on religion, migration, and transnational identity.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS/IMPLICATIONS:

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on diaspora, religion, and identity by offering a grounded and context-sensitive account of how religious life is lived and reshaped within a small, urban diasporic community. By focusing on Malayali Hindus in Singapore, the research moves beyond studies that concentrate on large or long-established migrant populations. Instead, it shows that even numerically smaller communities actively engage in complex processes of cultural negotiation, adaptation, and continuity through everyday religious practices, institutional involvement, and public expressions of faith and belief. In doing so, the study supports the view that diaspora should be understood not as a fixed condition, but as an ongoing and lived process that is continuously shaped through daily interactions and practices (Hall, 1990; Vertovec, 2000).

One of the key theoretical contributions of this research lies in its emphasis on religion as a form of social infrastructure in diasporic contexts. While existing scholarship has often highlighted the symbolic or ritual aspects of diasporic religion, this study demonstrates how

temples and religious leadership function as practical and emotional support systems for migrants. Temples serve not only as places of worship, but as spaces where social relationships are built, guidance is offered, and a sense of collective belonging and emotional support is nurtured. These findings extend the work of Jacobsen and Pratap Kumar (2002) by illustrating how Hindu temples in diaspora operate as community hubs that integrate spiritual practice with social organisation, emotional care, and intergenerational engagement. In this way, religion emerges as a key institutional resource that supports community cohesion and reduces feelings of disconnection commonly experienced in migrant life.

The study also contributes to the theoretical understandings of cultural hybridity and adaptation. From participants' observation and narration, it is revealed that religious practices are frequently modified to fit the demands of urban living, work schedules, and Singapore's multicultural regulatory environment. Rather than interpreting these changes as a loss of authenticity, the findings align with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural traditions are creatively reworked through interaction with the host society. Even though the external ways of practicing and performing religion may change, but the core meaning remains the same and the faith continues to feel meaningful in the same environment. This supports Levitt's (2007) argument that religion can offer stability while remaining adaptable, helping migrants navigate new social and cultural settings.

Another important insight of the study is its focus on lived and interior forms of religiosity. Drawing on McGuire's (2008) notion of lived religion, the findings show that for many participants, religious identity in diaspora becomes more reflective and consciously practised. That is, living away from their ancestral land makes people more aware of their faith and beliefs and hence practice it intentionally and reflect on its meanings. Several participants described "becoming more Hindu" after migration, not through increased ritual obligation, but through

deeper personal devotion, ethical awareness, and moral reflection. This shows that diasporic religion is not just about public ceremonies or formal institutions—everyday practices and personal reflection are just as important in keeping religious identity alive.

Another contribution the thesis add is on identity and cultural continuity. That is, passing traditions and beliefs and practices from one generation to the another is not automatic or one-way process instead it happens through participation, interaction with elder as well as younger generations so that both can learn and adapt. In line with Hall's (1996) understanding of identity as continuously produced, the findings demonstrate how cultural and religious knowledge is passed on through shared participation, storytelling, and family-based rituals. Rather than being rigidly preserved, traditions are adapted and reinterpreted in ways that remain meaningful for younger generations. This supports Pratap Kumar's (2002) argument that diasporic Hinduism survives through lived engagement rather than strict replication of homeland practices.

Finally, the study's analysis of public religious processions contributes to theoretical discussions on visibility, space, and belonging in diaspora. By examining how processions are carefully organised within Singapore's multicultural and regulatory framework, the research shows how diasporic communities assert cultural presence while remaining attentive to civic norms (Vertovec, 2000; Jacobsen & Pratap Kumar, 2002). These public rituals function not only as acts of devotion, but also as moments of collective expression and cultural affirmation, allowing the community to feel seen, recognised, and connected within shared urban spaces.

Overall, these findings show that religion serves as a flexible and meaningful resource in the lives of diasporic communities. It shapes life across private, communal, and public spaces, helping people stay connected to their traditions and heritage while adjusting to an entirely new social environment. By focusing on the experiences of Malayali Hindus in Singapore, this study

adds to existing theories and highlights the importance of looking at smaller diaspora communities can share valuable insights for the further discussions on diaspora, migration and transnational identity. Thus, making it clear that the findings lay importance on the fact that religions are not just worship or a set of beliefs but rather practical and intentional resource that supports community cohesion, identity and cultural continuity across generations.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY:

While conducting this study, I encountered some practical and contextual challenges. These limitations are important to acknowledge and are described below.

1. Firstly, due to logistical constraints, I was not able to conduct in-person visits to Singapore, which limited opportunities for direct observation and participation of religious practices and community interactions. While virtual interviews and participant accounts provided valuable insights, in-person engagement could have enriched the understanding of rituals, temple dynamics, and public celebrations. In addition, coordinating with participants proved challenging, as some were unable to cooperate fully or had limited availability due to busy schedules and the significant time difference between Singapore and my location, which further constrained opportunities for in-depth discussion.
2. Secondly, there is limited existing literature specifically on the Malayali Hindu community in Singapore, particularly regarding their religious and cultural practices. To address this, the study drew on broader works about Indian diasporas and Hindu communities, rather than focusing exclusively on the Malayali Hindu experience. While these sources provided useful context, they could not fully capture the unique dynamics of this smaller community. Consequently, both primary data from

participants and secondary sources were combined to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

3. Another limitation of this study is that it focuses on a small urban diaspora in Singapore, reflecting a specific social and cultural context. As a result, the findings may not be directly applicable to Malayali Hindus living in other countries or to other diaspora communities with different circumstances. Additionally, the experiences and perspectives captured here are shaped by the participants included in the study and may not represent all members of the community. Despite these limitations, the research provides a detailed and meaningful account of how Malayali Hindus in Singapore sustain their religious practices, adapt to a new environment, and negotiate their cultural identity, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of diasporic religious life.
4. Finally, the thesis also addresses the limited religious diversity within the study. This research focuses exclusively on Malayali Hindus, which means that the experiences and practices of Malayali Christians and Muslims in Singapore are not represented. While Hindus form the majority within the Malayali community, census data indicates that a notable minority of Indian Singaporeans — including Malayalis — identify as Muslim (around 23%) or Christian (around 13%) ([Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020](#)). As such, the study focusses on one group within diaspora and does not reflect the community's full religious diversity. Exploring more faiths and cultures could have provided more insights to how different people from different religious groups interact, adapt and construct identities in the multicultural environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

Although this study has certain limitations, it also suggests areas that future researchers could explore. These insights and findings can help upcoming scholars examine other aspects of the

Malayali diaspora and their religious practices. The following are the recommendation that I suggest and could be further examined and studied to deepen the understanding on religion and processions.

1. Comparative studies on Malayali Hindus in other parts of the world – like the Gulf, North America, or Europe -could reveal how religious practices and processions are adapted in based on different social, cultural, and urban contexts, and how these adaptations shape community life. Understanding these variations would provide a broader perspective on diasporic religiosity and cultural continuity.
2. Exploring the experiences of younger generations within the diaspora could shed light on how they maintain, reinterpret, and even transform religious and cultural traditions over time. In an increasingly globalized and digitally connected world, youth may negotiate identity and practice in innovative ways, blending heritage with contemporary influences.
3. The role of online spaces, social media, and virtual rituals deserves attention. As digital platforms become central to diasporic life, they offer new opportunities for sustaining religious engagement, connecting community members across distances, and creating hybrid forms of ritual participation.
4. Interdisciplinary approaches could be valuable in examining how urban environments, public spaces, and multicultural policies influence the visibility, practice, and evolution of religious traditions within diasporic communities. Combining perspectives and insights from urban studies, sociology, and cultural geography can provide a richer understanding of how diasporic communities maintains and adapt faith in new settings.
5. Finally, examining gendered dimensions of religious participation and visibility could enrich understanding of how men and women experience, sustain, and transmit

religious and cultural practices differently within diaspora communities. Investigating these dynamics would highlight diverse perspectives and reveal the intersection of tradition, identity, and social roles.

Taken together, these directions suggest that future research can continue to uncover the complex, adaptive, and evolving ways in which diasporic communities sustain religion, culture, and identity in contemporary, globalized settings.

Overall, this study demonstrates that religion plays a central and dynamic role in the lives of Malayali Hindus in Singapore, helping them maintain cultural identity, adapt to a new environment, and foster community connections. Through their everyday practices, rituals, and public expressions, the community negotiates continuity and change, creating a meaningful sense of belonging across generations. Ultimately, the research underscores that diasporic life is not just about migration, but about actively sustaining and reshaping identity, culture, and faith in new contexts.

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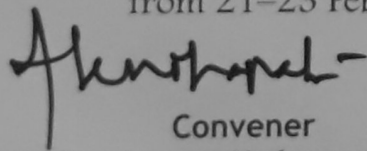
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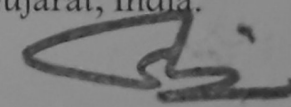
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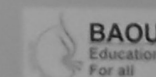


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