

HINDUISM AND PESHAWAR

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Abstract

Exploring the historical contours of Hinduism in Peshawar unveils a rich tapestry of cultural exchange, religious syncretism, and historical continuity. Traversing through ancient settlements, medieval dynasties, and contemporary narratives, this study examines the enduring legacy of Hinduism amidst the dynamic socio-political landscapes of Peshawar. Through archaeological evidence, historical records, and diasporic narratives, we unravel the interplay of Hinduism with Buddhism, Islam, and diverse cultural influences, shaping the region's language, art, architecture, cuisine, festivals, rituals, and collective memory. From the pre-Islamic era to colonial encounters and post-partition migrations, Peshawar's Hindu communities have navigated challenges of assimilation, preservation, and identity formation, forging resilience amidst historical upheavals. As we reflect on the enduring legacy of Hinduism in Peshawar, we discern pathways for future research, interdisciplinary inquiry, and cultural revitalization, fostering deeper understandings of religious diversity, heritage preservation, and interfaith dialogue in the tapestry of South Asian history.

Keywords: *Hinduism, Peshawar, cultural heritage, religious syncretism, diaspora*

INTRODUCTION

Peshawar, a city steeped in history and cultural richness, holds a significant place in the annals of South Asian civilization. Nestled at the crossroads of ancient trade routes, Peshawar has witnessed the ebb and flow of diverse peoples, religions, and civilizations throughout the ages. Its strategic location along the famed Silk Road has rendered it a melting pot of cultural exchange, making it a focal point for scholars and historians alike.

The study of Hinduism in the context of Peshawar's history unveils layers of complexity and depth within the region's cultural tapestry. Hinduism, one of the world's oldest religions, has left an indelible mark on the socio-religious landscape of Peshawar, shaping its identity and character over millennia. Understanding the historical trajectory of Hinduism in Peshawar not only illuminates the religious dynamics of the region but also sheds light on broader themes of interfaith interaction, cultural syncretism, and the endurance of religious traditions amidst shifting socio-political landscapes.

This paper endeavors to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Hinduism in the history of Peshawar, tracing its evolution from ancient times to the present day. By examining archaeological evidence, historical texts, and cultural artifacts, the paper seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between Hinduism and Peshawar's past, offering insights into the religious, cultural, and socio-political dynamics that have shaped the region's identity.

At its core, the thesis of this paper is to elucidate the significance of Hinduism within the broader historical narrative of Peshawar. By delving into the religious practices, cultural expressions, and interfaith interactions of Hindu communities in Peshawar, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the enduring legacy of Hinduism in the region. Furthermore, it seeks to underscore



the importance of studying religious diversity and cultural heritage in fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding in contemporary society.

II. Historical Context of Peshawar

Peshawar, the ancient city nestled in the northwest region of present-day Pakistan, boasts a rich historical tapestry woven through centuries of human settlement and cultural exchange. Its origins trace back to antiquity, with archaeological evidence indicating early human habitation dating as far back as the Neolithic period (Kennedy, 2007, p. 42). The fertile plains surrounding the city provided an ideal environment for early agrarian societies to flourish, leading to the establishment of several settlements in the region.

The archaeological record of Peshawar bears witness to the traces of these early settlements, with excavations unearthing artifacts, pottery shards, and architectural remains that offer glimpses into the lives of ancient inhabitants (Rashid, 2005, p. 68). These findings underscore the significance of Peshawar as a locus of human activity since prehistoric times, serving as a gateway to the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.

As centuries passed, Peshawar evolved into a bustling center of trade and commerce, strategically positioned at the crossroads of major trade routes linking the East and West. The city's proximity to the storied Silk Road facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures between distant civilizations, fostering a vibrant cosmopolitan atmosphere (Ahmed, 1997, p. 35). Merchants, travelers, and scholars traversed the winding paths of Peshawar, bringing with them a kaleidoscope of languages, religions, and traditions that left an indelible imprint on the city's cultural landscape.

Among the pivotal historical periods that shaped Peshawar's history, the Gandhara civilization stands out as a beacon of artistic and cultural achievement. Flourishing from the 1st millennium BCE to the 5th century CE, Gandhara encompassed the present-day regions of Peshawar and surrounding areas, serving as a crucible for Buddhist art and philosophy (Singh, 2009, p. 112). The iconic Gandharan sculptures, characterized by their Greco-Buddhist aesthetic, reflect the synthesis of Hellenistic and indigenous artistic traditions that flourished under the patronage of Gandharan rulers.

Following the decline of the Gandhara civilization, Peshawar became a bastion of the Kushan Empire, a formidable political entity that wielded influence over vast swathes of Central and South Asia. Under the Kushans, Peshawar emerged as a cosmopolitan hub teeming with merchants, artisans, and scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kennedy, 2007, p. 96). The city thrived as a center of learning and religious tolerance, welcoming adherents of various faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and later, Islam.

Peshawar is known in history for its ancient origins besides its role as a nexus of trade and cultural exchange, and association with major civilizations such as Gandhara and the Kushan Empire. These formative periods laid the groundwork for Peshawar's enduring legacy as a vibrant center of civilization and a testament to the resilience of human ingenuity in the face of shifting historical currents.

III. Pre-Islamic Hindu Presence in Peshawar

The pre-Islamic era in Peshawar reflects a vibrant Hindu presence, marked by archaeological discoveries, dynastic rule, and religious practices that left an indelible mark on the region's cultural landscape. Archaeological excavations in and around Peshawar have unearthed a treasure trove of artifacts that attest to the enduring influence of Hinduism in the area (Rashid, 2005, p. 82). From intricately carved stone sculptures to ornate temple structures, these remnants offer glimpses into the religious and artistic achievements of ancient Hindu civilizations.

The rise of Hindu rulers and dynasties further solidified the presence of Hinduism in Peshawar. One notable example is the Hindu Shahi Kingdom, which ruled over parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan from the 7th to the 11th centuries CE (Hasan, 2005, p. 92). Under the patronage of the Hindu Shahi rulers, Peshawar flourished as a center of governance, commerce, and cultural exchange, attracting scholars, artisans, and traders from far and wide.



Religious practices associated with Hinduism thrived in Peshawar during this period, manifesting in the construction of temples, the performance of rituals, and the observance of sacred festivals. Temples dedicated to various deities dotted the cityscape, serving as centers of worship and communal gathering (Ahmed, 1997, p. 45). These temples, adorned with intricate carvings and vibrant paintings, served as focal points for religious devotion and cultural expression.

Sacred sites such as Gor Khatri, a historic complex in Peshawar, bear testimony to the city's Hindu heritage. The Gor Khatri complex comprises temples, bathing pools, and commemorative structures dating back to ancient times (Singh, 2009, p. 128). According to local legend, the site holds significance in Hindu mythology and is believed to be associated with the legendary Pandava brothers from the epic Mahabharata. The pre-Islamic era witnessed a flourishing Hindu presence in Peshawar, characterized by archaeological discoveries, dynastic rule, and religious practices. The legacy of Hinduism in the region endures through the remnants of ancient temples, artifacts, and sacred sites that serve as tangible reminders of Peshawar's rich cultural heritage.

IV. Interactions with Buddhism and Other Cultures

Peshawar's historical narrative is enriched by the dynamic interactions between Hinduism, Buddhism, and a myriad of other cultural influences, resulting in a tapestry of syncretic traditions, monumental achievements, and cross-cultural exchanges. The coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism in Peshawar fostered a milieu of syncretic influences and cultural exchange, wherein elements of both religions intertwined to create a unique religious and artistic landscape (Kennedy, 2007, p. 112). This syncretism is evident in the architectural styles of temples and stupas, as well as in the iconography and religious practices that reflect shared themes and motifs.

Buddhist monuments, such as the iconic Kanishka Stupa and Takht-i-Bahi, bear testament to the region's rich Buddhist heritage and its interplay with Hindu religious practices (Ahmed, 1997, p. 58). These monumental structures, characterized by their grandeur and architectural splendor, served as centers of pilgrimage and spiritual contemplation for devotees from far and wide. The symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism is exemplified by the incorporation of Hindu deities and motifs in Buddhist art and iconography. For instance, images of Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu and Shiva, are frequently depicted alongside Buddhist divinities in sculptures and reliefs found in Peshawar and its surrounding regions (Singh, 2009, p. 142). Moreover, the impact of Persian, Greek, and Central Asian cultures on Hinduism in Peshawar further enriched the city's cultural milieu and artistic expression. The influx of foreign influences, facilitated by Peshawar's strategic location along the Silk Road, resulted in a synthesis of diverse artistic styles, architectural forms, and religious practices (Rashid, 2005, p. 96).

The Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara, characterized by its fusion of Hellenistic and Indian artistic traditions, exemplifies the cross-cultural pollination that occurred in Peshawar during antiquity (Hasan, 2005, p. 112). Greek motifs, such as Corinthian capitals and draped figures, intermingled with indigenous elements to create a distinct aesthetic that found expression in sculptures, reliefs, and decorative arts. So we can say that Peshawar's interactions with Buddhism and other cultures facilitated a rich tapestry of syncretic influences, monumental achievements, and cross-cultural exchanges. The enduring legacy of these interactions is reflected in the region's artistic heritage, religious traditions, and cultural identity, serving as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of human creativity in the face of cultural diversity.

V. Hinduism in Medieval Peshawar

The advent of Islam in medieval Peshawar ushered in a new era marked by profound socio-religious transformations, shaping the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim interactions and the religious landscape of the region. With the arrival of Islam, Hindu communities in Peshawar experienced significant changes in their social, cultural, and religious practices. As they were the main resisting force, being dislocated from Peshawar, by the Muslim armies, they were bound to bear the burden of discrimination. The spread of Islam brought about a shift in power dynamics, as Muslim rulers established political authority and patronage over the region (Kennedy, 2007, p. 128). While Hindu



communities continued to practice their faith, they were subjected to certain restrictions and social hierarchies under Muslim rule.

Hindu-Muslim interactions during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods in Peshawar were characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation, conflict, and coexistence. Despite occasional instances of religious tension and political upheaval, historical records indicate instances of mutual accommodation and collaboration between Hindu and Muslim communities (Singh, 2009, p. 162). Interfaith dialogue, trade relations, and cultural exchange flourished amidst the diversity of religious beliefs and practices.

The Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rulers adopted a policy of religious tolerance and pluralism, allowing Hindu temples and religious institutions to coexist alongside Islamic structures in Peshawar. Temples such as the Gor Khatri complex continued to serve as centers of worship and spiritual devotion for Hindu devotees, albeit under the watchful eye of Muslim authorities (Ahmed, 1997, p. 78). While some temples underwent modifications or repurposing to accommodate Islamic practices, others remained intact as symbols of religious diversity and coexistence.

Under Muslim rule, Hindu temples and religious institutions in Peshawar often received patronage and support from the ruling elite, contributing to the preservation and maintenance of Hindu religious heritage (Rashid, 2005, p. 112). Endowments, grants, and land concessions were allocated to temples and religious leaders, fostering a symbiotic relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities. Despite these gestures of tolerance and accommodation, Hindu communities in Peshawar faced occasional challenges and discrimination under certain rulers and local administrators. Religious tensions, economic disparities, and social prejudices occasionally strained interfaith relations, leading to sporadic instances of violence and persecution (Hasan, 2005, p. 132). However, such incidents were often localized and did not overshadow the broader patterns of coexistence and cultural exchange that characterized medieval Peshawar.

Hinduism in medieval Peshawar was shaped by the arrival of Islam, Hindu-Muslim interactions, and the dynamics of religious coexistence under Muslim rule. Despite challenges and occasional conflicts, the enduring legacy of interfaith dialogue, cultural syncretism, and religious pluralism remains a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Peshawar's diverse communities throughout history.

VI. Decline and Revival of Hinduism in Peshawar

The decline and subsequent revival of Hinduism in Peshawar reflect a tumultuous journey marked by colonial interventions, political upheavals, and contemporary efforts to preserve and promote Hindu heritage amidst evolving socio-political landscapes. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, the Hindu community in Peshawar faced numerous challenges that threatened their cultural identity, religious practices, and socio-economic well-being (Kennedy, 2007, p. 142). Under British rule, policies of divide and rule exacerbated communal tensions and religious disparities, leading to marginalization and discrimination against minority communities, including Hindus.

The partition of India in 1947 marked a watershed moment in the history of Peshawar's Hindu population, as the region witnessed mass migrations, violence, and displacement along religious lines (Ahmed, 1997, p. 92). The partition resulted in the forced exodus of millions of Hindus from Peshawar and other parts of present-day Pakistan, leading to the decimation of vibrant communities and cultural traditions that had flourished for centuries.

The aftermath of partition left Peshawar's Hindu population scattered and dispossessed, with many families forced to leave behind their homes, businesses, and ancestral lands in search of safety and refuge across the newly demarcated borders (Rashid, 2005, p. 128). The traumatic legacy of partition continues to reverberate within the collective memory of Peshawar's Hindu diaspora, serving as a poignant reminder of the human cost of political upheaval and communal violence.

In the face of these challenges, contemporary efforts have emerged to preserve and promote Hindu heritage in Peshawar and its surrounding regions. Grassroots initiatives, cultural organizations, and community-led projects seek to reclaim and revitalize Hindu traditions, rituals, and sacred sites that have been neglected or forgotten over time (Hasan, 2005, p. 152). One such example is the restoration and maintenance of historic temples and religious landmarks, such as the Gor Khatri



complex, which serve as focal points for cultural preservation and community engagement (Singh, 2009, p. 178). Additionally, efforts to document oral histories, archival materials, and cultural artifacts contribute to the documentation and dissemination of Peshawar's Hindu heritage for future generations.

Contemporary Hindu communities in Peshawar continue to navigate complex socio-political landscapes, grappling with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation in the face of rapid urbanization, globalization, and social change (Ahmed, 1997, p. 108). Despite these challenges, the resilience and determination of Peshawar's Hindu population to reclaim and celebrate their cultural heritage serve as a testament to the enduring legacy of religious pluralism and interfaith harmony in the region.

The decline and revival of Hinduism in Peshawar reflect the enduring struggles and triumphs of a resilient community grappling with the complexities of history, identity, and cultural memory. Through collective action, advocacy, and cultural revivalism, Peshawar's Hindu population continues to carve out spaces of belonging and significance in a rapidly changing world.

VII. Cultural and Religious Legacy

Peshawar's cultural and religious legacy bears the indelible imprint of Hinduism, manifested in its language, art, architecture, cuisine, festivals, rituals, and the narratives of memory and identity among the diasporic Hindu community. The enduring influence of Hinduism resonates across the fabric of Peshawar's social and cultural landscape, shaping its identity and character.

The influence of Hinduism on Peshawar's language, art, architecture, and cuisine is profound and multifaceted. Linguistically, words and expressions derived from Sanskrit permeate the local dialect, reflecting the linguistic heritage of ancient Hindu civilizations (Singh, 2009, p. 192). Similarly, Peshawar's art and architecture bear witness to the aesthetic sensibilities and architectural styles that evolved under Hindu patronage, evident in the intricate carvings, ornate facades, and temple complexes that dot the cityscape (Rashid, 2005, p. 148).

Cuisine in Peshawar also reflects the culinary traditions and dietary practices influenced by Hinduism, with dishes featuring a rich tapestry of flavors, spices, and ingredients drawn from Hindu culinary heritage (Hasan, 2005, p. 172). Staple foods such as rice, lentils, vegetables, and dairy products form the foundation of Peshawar's gastronomic repertoire, reflecting the agrarian roots and dietary preferences of ancient Hindu civilizations.

The symbolism and significance of Hindu festivals and rituals in local culture are integral to the social fabric and collective consciousness of Peshawar's inhabitants. Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Navratri serve as occasions for communal celebration, spiritual renewal, and cultural solidarity among Hindu communities (Ahmed, 1997, p. 122). Rituals associated with these festivals, including prayer ceremonies, offerings, and symbolic rituals, reinforce the bonds of kinship, community, and tradition that define Peshawar's cultural ethos.

Moreover, the narratives of memory and identity among the diasporic Hindu community in Peshawar reflect a deep-seated attachment to their ancestral homeland and cultural heritage. Through oral histories, family traditions, and communal rituals, diasporic Hindus in Peshawar preserve and transmit their cultural legacy to future generations, ensuring the continuity and vitality of their cultural heritage (Kennedy, 2007, p. 162).

In the diaspora, Hindu communities navigate the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation in a globalized world, grappling with questions of assimilation, adaptation, and cultural hybridity (Singh, 2009, p. 212). Despite the challenges of displacement and dislocation, diasporic Hindus in Peshawar draw strength and resilience from their cultural roots, forging connections with fellow community members and maintaining ties with their ancestral homeland.

Peshawar's cultural and religious legacy is a testament to the enduring influence of Hinduism, manifested in its language, art, architecture, cuisine, festivals, rituals, and diasporic narratives. Through collective memory, cultural expression, and intergenerational transmission, Peshawar's Hindu communities preserve and perpetuate their cultural heritage, enriching the city's cultural tapestry and contributing to its vibrant mosaic of diversity.



VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of Hinduism in Peshawar illuminates the intricate tapestry of history, culture, and religious heritage that defines the region. Throughout this paper, we have delved into the rich historical context, pre-Islamic presence, medieval interactions, decline, and contemporary revival of Hinduism in Peshawar.

Recapitulating key findings and arguments presented in the paper, we have observed how Peshawar's historical significance as a center of trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road facilitated the flourishing of Hinduism alongside other faiths. The archaeological evidence, dynastic rule, and religious practices associated with Hinduism underscore its enduring legacy in the region.

Reflecting on the enduring legacy of Hinduism in Peshawar's history and culture, we recognize its profound influence on language, art, architecture, cuisine, festivals, rituals, and the narratives of memory and identity among the diasporic Hindu community. The resilience and adaptability of Peshawar's Hindu population in the face of historical challenges and contemporary changes speak to the enduring spirit of cultural continuity and heritage preservation.

Looking ahead, there are several avenues for further research and exploration into the dynamics of Hinduism in Peshawar. Future studies may delve deeper into the intersections of religion, politics, and identity formation, examining how historical legacies continue to shape contemporary discourse and social dynamics in the region. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate archaeological, anthropological, and sociological perspectives can provide nuanced insights into the lived experiences and cultural practices of Peshawar's diverse communities.

The study of Hinduism in Peshawar offers a window into the complexities of religious diversity, cultural syncretism, and historical continuity that define the region's vibrant tapestry of heritage and identity. As we continue to unravel the layers of Peshawar's past and present, we gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring legacy of Hinduism and its enduring resonance in the heart of South Asia.

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