

## **Title**

Religious factors affecting death anxiety in older adults practicing Hinduism

## **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to examine the influence of religion on death anxiety in older adults (N = 105) practicing Hinduism and visiting the Kumbh pilgrimage. Standardized questionnaires and brief interviews were administered in participants' native language. Pilgrims with higher religiosity had lower death anxiety compared to pilgrims with lower religiosity. Greater belief in the cycle of rebirth, an increased presence of meaning in life, and less continued search of meaning in life, were significantly associated with lower death anxiety. The findings provide support for incorporating religious and spiritual awareness for older adults in community health settings.

## **Introduction**

Death poses an interesting paradox, wherein human beings simultaneously seek to avoid its existence, and yet their actions are motivated by its awareness. Death anxiety is generated by the awareness of finiteness of human life and encompasses a generalized fear, threat, uneasiness, or anxiety surrounding one's own death (Fortner et al., 2000). While it is often denied or repressed, its awareness may nudge adults towards symbolically overcoming death through finding greater creative expression, accumulating resources, or practicing religious beliefs (Lehto & Stein, 2009). The psychological underpinnings of death related thoughts, explained by Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986), suggest that thoughts about mortality can be avoided through a search of meaning and identity within one's cultural environments (Burke et

al., 2010). In particular, the awareness of one's mortality is at the center of several religious teachings, and religious and sociocultural practices offer psychological protection from death anxiety (Nia et al., 2016).

The link between religiosity and death anxiety has received considerable empirical attention, however, literature is not necessarily conclusive. Meta-analysis from the last two decades show that higher level of religiosity is associated with lower fear of death, particularly in religious populations (Jong et al., 2018), however, a few studies suggest that being more religious may increase death anxiety (Ellis & Wahab, 2013; Maschi et al., 2014). Alternatively, Wink & Scott (2005), found a curvilinear relationship between death anxiety and religiosity, indicating that individuals experienced least death anxiety if they were on either ends of the religiosity spectrum. It is possible that moderately religious individuals lack a sense of belongingness to either religious or secular institutions, and that this ambiguity may be indicative of death-related anxiety (Jong et al., 2018).

Some preliminary research suggests that relationship between death anxiety and strength of religious beliefs may differ across religions. In a cross-sectional study, Morris and McAdie (2009) reported higher death anxiety in followers of Islamic faith and non-religious individuals, compared to those practicing Christianity. Aging and imminent proximity to death is believed to be related to death anxiety, yet, the directionality and intensity of this effect is unclear (Cicirelli, 2002). Intuitively, most studies have found greater death anxiety in older populations (Nichols et al., 2018; Falkenhain & Handal, 2003), however findings have been somewhat inconsistent (Sinoff, 2017). Given that death anxiety in middle and old age can have detrimental consequences for mental health (Kiosses & Marino, 2019), it is imperative to understand the beliefs and practices that could potentially foster resilience during the aging process. While

contemporary literature is dominantly focused on Western narratives (Sharif Nia et al., 2019; Jong et al., 2018), the present study examines the impact of religion on death anxiety in the context of Hinduism.

### **Conceptualizations of Death in Hinduism**

Hinduism, a 4000-year old religion, is currently practiced by about 15-16% of the world's population (approximately 1.1 billion people), largely belonging to the Indian subcontinent (Lipner, 2012). While scholars have varied beliefs related to the theistic evolution of Hinduism, it is largely inspired from both monotheism and polytheism (Doniger, 2014). The teachings of Hindu religion are somewhat contradictory to the idea of death being an absolute end of existence, due to the belief in reincarnation and *samsara* – the cyclical transition of the spirit from one life form to another, as governed by *karma* – a cosmic or morality-based, cause and effect, affecting transition of the same soul from one life to another (Sharma et al., 2019; Thrane, 2010). In comparison to Abrahamic religions, instead of justice being carried out after death (in the afterlife) Hinduism suggests that, death is merely a pause in the cycle of reincarnation (Jong et al., 2018). Therefore, practicing Hindus may have a distinct conceptualization of life and death related to reincarnation. Regardless, belief in life after death may present itself as symbolic immortality (Cicirelli, 2002).

Of the many prominent pilgrimages, the Kumbh Mela has been recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage (Buzinde et al., 2014). Dates decided as per the lunar cycle of the Hindu calendar and with 120 million devotees in attendance in 2019 over 55 days (Ahmed & Memish, 2019), it is by far the largest congregation of pilgrims, with the second biggest pilgrimage hosting approximately 20 million followers (David & Roy 2016). While all Hindus do not visit Kumbh Mela in their lifetime, it is considered customary, and their attendance

represents being religious. Devout religious pilgrims stay at the Kumbh for at least a month, and are known as *kalpvasis* (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). They typically engage in activities such as attending spiritual discourses, daily prayers, bathing in the holy river to ‘wash sins’ (*Ganga snaan*) on auspicious dates, voluntary service (*seva*), ritualistic fasting, celebratory feasts, and a complete renouncement of pleasure while committing to simple living. These activities are believed to be associated with beliefs of purification and preparation for a ‘good death’ (Tyagi et al., 2013; Nordin, 2009). It has been suggested that belief in life after death may decrease death anxiety in Hindus (Harding et al., 2007) and that *moksh* – liberating the soul from the human body and breaking away from the cycle of re-birth – is the ultimate state of ‘complete release’ (Whitman, 2007).

Pilgrims take their own decision regarding the duration and frequency of these practices. The event also attracts many other devotees, constituting *non-kalpvasi* pilgrims who engage in similar activities but tend to stay for a much shorter duration (Maclean, 2009). In the midst of heightened religiosity, it is believed that pilgrims are religiously and spiritually inspired and pensive about transition to death and beyond (Deshpande et al., 2019).

A recent study on 150 elderly pilgrims (*kalpvasis*) suggested that Kumbh Mela is particularly lucrative to elderly pilgrims and that they use social detachment as a means of coping with death anxiety (Maheshwari & Mukherjee, 2019). So, despite the inherent risks associated with mass gatherings (spread of disease, crowd control, sustainable waste management etc.) (Abubakar et al., 2012), psychological research suggests that pilgrims largely experience positive health outcomes (Tewari et al., 2012; Maheshwari & Singh, 2009).

A key distinction can be made in the religious practices of Hinduism, based on whether they are carried out personally (daily prayers in a home temple) or in a community setting

(visiting temples and attending religious gatherings) (Fuller, 2004). It has been found that both private and communal religious activities provide elderly with a sense of purpose in life (Maheshwari & Singh, 2009) and institutional religious practices, in particular, contributes towards feelings of social support (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002). Kumbh Mela offers access to a large number of pilgrims with varying levels of religiosity, who are directly involved in religious practice – both at a communal and a personal level.

Interestingly, Steger and Frazier (2005) found that the relationship between daily religious behaviors and well-being is mediated by another key factor – having meaning in life. Steger (2013) theorizes meaningfulness as a dichotomous phenomenon – a blend of both *search* and *presence* of meaning in life. However, those who feel that they may have resolved life crises, experience greater presence of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2009). In fact, Meaning Management Theory (Wong, 2007) explains how searching and finding meaning makes it easier to accept death and face life with hope. In a research study conducted on 75 practicing Hindus, with a firm belief in reincarnation and a self-reported ability to recall past life events, participants showed reduced death anxiety and greater meaning in life (Meyersburg & McNally, 2011). Research has also shown that middle-aged and older people are often motivated to attend the Kumbh, by the need of seeking ‘meaning in life’ through *spiritual connectivity* and *spiritual knowledge attainment* (Buzinde et al., 2014). In many ways, cultural and religious practices provide a framework for meaning-making that aids in coping with existential anxiety and the gradual acceptance of aging and death (Emmons, 2005; Park, 2005).

Given that a significant amount of previous research (Cohen et al., 2005; Ellis & Wahab, 2013; Chow et al., 2017; Jong et al., 2018) has focused on western notions of religiosity, the current study aspires to explore conceptualizations of death in an Asian context. Therefore, the

aim of the current study is to identify religious factors which impact death anxiety in older population practicing Hinduism. Acknowledging the multidimensional nature of death anxiety (Harding et al., 2005), the objective is to explore how levels of religiosity, religious beliefs, and frequency of practice of religion relate to the experience of death anxiety. It is hypothesized that in a religious population 1) pilgrims with higher level of religiosity (*kalpvasis*) would have a significantly lower death anxiety than pilgrims with a lower level of religiosity (*non-kalpvasis*); 2) belief in *ganga snaan* (washing away of sins) and reincarnation would be associated with lower death anxiety; 3) greater frequency of institutional and home practice of religion would be associated with lower death anxiety; and that 4) both active presence and search of meaning in life would be associated with lower death anxiety. The Kumbh Mela makes for a unique social setting to study religiosity, and hence the study further provides a brief qualitative report of experiences of aged pilgrims (*kalpvasis*) who visit the Kumbh for about a month.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Design and Participants***

The study was based on quantitative survey data, complemented by a brief qualitative component. A-priori sample size calculations suggested that with 2 predictors in each model, a 0.8 power, 0.15 effect size, 0.05 p value, we required a minimum of 67 participants. Adding a brief qualitative component captured the complexity of context, feelings, and experiences (Sauro, 2015), of religious participation in the unique Kumbh setting. A sample of 105 participants (age range = 41-79 years; mean age = 61.03; SD = 9.77) were recruited, using convenience sampling, from the pilgrimage site of Ardh Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, India in February 2019. The average life expectancy in India is 69.4 years, which is much lower compared to that of most western

nations (US – 78.54 years, UK – 81.6 years), and so the authors' have adjusted the 'old age' bracket accordingly (Dhillon & Ladusingh, 2013).

Of these, 64.8% (N = 68) were male and 32.5% (N = 37) were female. The sample was balanced between *kalpvasis* (pilgrims who visit for at least a month, mean = 32 days) and *non-kalpvasis* (pilgrims who visit for less than a week, mean = 3 days). Most Kalpvasis were interviewed approximately at the middle of their pilgrimage. Attendance at Kumbh was considered as a proxy for level of religiosity for the purpose of this study as Kalpvasis are more likely to be religious and attend the Mela (Buzinde et al., 2014). Those participants who were in the age range of middle to older adults (less than 40 years), had visited and stayed at Kumbh Mela for minimum of 3 days were included. Forty-nine (46.7%) *kalpvasis* were compared to a matched sample of 56 (53.3%) *non-kalpvasis*. Of the participants who reported their education status (N = 98), some had received no education (9.5%), majority had received some schooling (47.5%), and some had studied till Bachelors (18.1%), Masters (14.3%), and PhD (6%). In terms of profession, participants were from all walks of life, such as lawyers (12.4%), teachers (11.5%), government sector employees (11.5%), and farmers (9.5%). A few reported that they had now retired from their professions (14.3%).

### ***Measures***

Standardized questionnaires and brief face-to-face interviews were administered to all participants in their native language – Hindi. As not all participants could read or write, questions were read out to participants. Due to challenges related to fieldwork at the Kumbh, such as loud microphone noises/announcements, lack of formal interview spaces and sufficient lighting during evenings, the researchers tried to keep the interview schedule brief.

*Death Anxiety:* The Death Anxiety Scale (DAS; Templer, 1970; Chow, 2017) is one of the most widely used questionnaires to assess death anxiety and has been adapted to different cultures (Cai et al., 2017; Soleimani et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2016). A recent short adaptation of Templar's Death Anxiety Scale (Chow, 2017) was administered in the present study. The internal reliability of the original questionnaire was .70. This 9-item questionnaire was primarily selected as (a) it is brief and (b) unlike most other questionnaires designed in the West, it excluded religion specific words or items such as 'coffin' and 'burials'. Example of a few items are, "*I fear dying a painful death*" & "*I often think about how short life really is*". The questionnaire had three reverse score items and a 5-point Likert-typed scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). Higher score represented higher level of death anxiety. The standardized questionnaire was first translated to Hindi and then translated back to English. Using item analysis recommendation, item 9 was deleted from the questionnaire, leading to a Cronbach alpha of .63. Considering the scale had fewer items and was adapted to a different culture, the internal consistency was considered acceptable (Taber, 2018).

*Interview questions:* Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information about participants' religious beliefs, institutional and private practice of religion, search and presence of meaning in life, and other experiences at Kumbh.

*Understanding religious beliefs of pilgrims:* During the interview, *kalpvasis* answered questions related to their motivations of visiting the Kumbh (*What made you visit the Kumbh?*) and origin of belief in '*Ganga snaan*' (*What significance does the bathing ritual hold for you*) and '*reincarnation*' (*What makes you believe in reincarnation?*).

*Religious beliefs:* Participants were asked about their belief in *Ganga snaan* (bathing ritual) and reincarnation: 1) "*Do you believe that ganga snaan helps in washing away one's*



sins?” and 2) “do you believe in cycle of rebirth or life after death?” Both questions also included a response set of ‘no’, ‘undecided’, and ‘yes’.

*Institutional and private religious practice:* Inspired from previous literature on religious practice (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002; Behere et al., 2013), following two questions were used to assess participants’ frequency of private and institutional practice of religion: 1) “*In your daily routine, back home, how frequently do you pray on your own; such as saying a personal prayer in a home temple*”? and (2) “*In your daily routine, back home, what is the frequency of your religious attendance; such as praying in a temple along with priests and fellow devotees?*”. The response set was from 0 (Never) to 5 (Everyday).

*Presence and search of meaning in life:* Two items representing search (“*I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful*”) and presence (“*My life has a clear sense of purpose*”) of meaning in life were taken from Meaning in Life questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) with a simplified response set of ‘no’, ‘maybe’, and ‘yes’. Single items with good factor loadings from MLQ were selected (Rose, Zask, & Burton, 2017). These items were then taken from the Hindi version of the MLQ, previously validated by Singh et al., (2016).

### ***Procedure***

Aged participants were approached near their temporary accommodations. Data was collected, by NL at Kumbh Mela. Participants were informed about the study and consent was obtained. Out of 145 participants who were approached, 40 participants refused to take part as they were either heading for a religious gathering or to take rest, leading to a response rate of 72%. Once the participant agreed to take part, interviews were administered near their accommodation. Each interview took approximately 15-20 minutes and the data collection was

conducted over a week. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Middlesex University Dubai.

### ***Data Analysis***

Independent t-test was administered to identify if death anxiety significantly differed between “*kalpvasi*” and “*non-kalpvasi*”. Based on theoretical clusters, three multiple regressions were administered to examine the impact of, (1) ‘religious beliefs’ (Ganga snaan and reincarnation), (2) ‘frequency of religious practices’(institutional and home practice of religion), and (3) ‘meaning in life’ (search and presence of meaning), on death anxiety. In order to further understand their religious beliefs, responses to open-ended question were analyzed using simple content analysis.

### **Results**

*Religiosity and death anxiety:* An independent t-test was administered to examine whether in a religious population, older adults with ‘higher level of religiosity’ (*kalpvasis*) experience lower death anxiety compared to older adults with ‘lower level of religiosity’ (*non-kalpvasis*). The model was highly significant,  $t(101) = 4.23, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.03, 6.31]$ , indicating that individuals with higher religiosity ( $M = 19.58, SD = 5.36$ ) experience significantly lower death anxiety as compared to people with lower religiosity ( $M = 23.76, SD = 5.43$ ).

*Religious beliefs and death anxiety:* A multiple regression was administered to assess if fundamental religious beliefs in Hinduism of ‘washing away sins’ (*ganga snaan*) and ‘reincarnation’ significantly decrease death anxiety in a religious population. The regression was found to be significant,  $F(2, 95) = 4.43, p = .01$  (see table 1), with independent variables jointly

explaining 9% of the variance in death anxiety. Greater belief in reincarnation was significant coefficient ( $\beta = -.29, p = .006, 95\% \text{ CI } [-3.53, -.60]$ ). Belief in washing away sins was not significant ( $\beta = .19, p = .06, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.07, 2.86]$ ), but displayed a considerable trend towards significance.

*Religious practice and death anxiety:* Institutional and home practice of religion were entered into a multiple regression analysis to examine if frequency of religious practices has an impact on death anxiety. The model was not significant,  $F(2, 93) = .57, p = .56$  (see table 2). Individual coefficients were also not significant, and the model explained only 1% of the variance in death anxiety.

*Meaning in life and death anxiety:* Another multiple regression was administered to examine whether search of meaning in life and presence of meaning in life have a significant impact on death anxiety in a religious population. The model was found to be significant,  $F(2, 96) = 3.49, p = .03$ , explaining 7% of variance in death anxiety in older adults. Both individual coefficients were found to be significant, with presence of meaning in life being a negative predictor ( $\beta = -.23, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-3.65, -.23]$ ) and search of meaning in life being a positive predictor ( $\beta = .20, p = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.00, 3.74]$ ) of death anxiety (see table 3).

### ***Experiences and religious beliefs of kalpvasis***

*Motivations of attending Kumbh:* While all participants reported visiting Kumbh due to a religious calling, they also expressed unique personal motivations. *Kalpvasis* used phrases like – desire to be closer to God and the sacred river Ganga (n = 11), love for a religious routine (n = 12), karmic cleansing and seeking forgiveness for sins (n = 5), preparation for end of life (n = 5), for knowledge and love for the Sanskrit language (4), and to find inspiration and peace (n = 10) –

to describe their religious calling. Several participants simply reported that they visit Kumbh as it is part of their culture (n = 6) or to support family members (n = 5).

*Belief in ganga snaan:* Most *kalpvasis* reported having faith in ‘ganga snaan’ (n = 30), some felt undecided (n = 11), and very few did not believe in it (n = 4). When asked about their origin of beliefs in ganga snaan, majority simply mentioned that ganga snaan feels good, helps in attaining purification, and/or feels peaceful (n = 28). A pilgrim, for example expressed that “*All the fatigue seems to go away; feels as if sitting in mother’s lap*”. Several other pilgrims described it as one step closer to moksh (liberation), an act of salvation or an act of spiritual cleansing (n = 21). For example, one participant said, ‘*Ganga flows directly from the feet of god and cleans physically and spiritually*’. A few specifically expressed the belief that dipping into ganga ‘*washes away their sins*’ (n = 3).

*Belief in reincarnation:* From participants who believed in reincarnation (n = 40), most reported that they believed in it because they had learnt about it from their religious texts (n = 14) or ancestors (n = 12). Several other pilgrims did not specify any reason and simply reported that they had indispensable faith (n = 17). They built different narratives related to rebirth. For example, one participant expressed that ‘*death is a junction from where soul takes a different route*’. Another pilgrim said, “*sorrows in this life are that of bad deeds in the past life*”, indicating that karma plays an important role in the cycle of rebirth. Unanswered questions of life also made some pilgrims believe in rebirth, for example one said, “*the soul must go somewhere*” and that makes him believe in life beyond death.

## **Discussion**

This is the first study to have empirically explored diverse religious factors (religiosity, religious beliefs and practices) that may have a significant impact on death anxiety in religious older adults, practicing Hinduism. The fieldwork was administered on a pilgrimage site. The findings of the study suggest that higher level of *religiosity*, greater belief in *reincarnation*, increased *presence* of meaning in life (and lower *search* for meaning) contribute to lower levels of death anxiety in older religious adults. However, belief in the practice of washing away sins (*ganga snaan*), frequency of institutional and private practice of religion, do not significantly influence anxiety related to death. The results have multiple implications for the well-being of older adults, who may be looking towards religion as a means of coping with the death anxiety.

Whilst most of the participants were locals, some travelled from different places in India to attend the pilgrimage. Most of the *kalpvasis* had been coming to Kumbh Mela regularly for several years and most were visiting with family members. They had a specific daily ritual of *Ganga snaan*, fasting, and attending religious discourses. The motivations to attend the pilgrimage reported by the participants were quite personal and spiritual in nature, such as wanting to be closer to God and have a religious routine.

The findings suggest that, even within a religious population, *kalpvasis* engaging in a strict religious routine felt less anxious and worried about death, as compared to *non-kalpvasis*, who were comparatively less strict in their religious routine. These findings are supported by Terror Management Theory as it shows that putting faith in one's religion and cultural worldview, shields religious followers from concerns related to the inevitability of death. It further provides them with a supportive psychological structure against death anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1986). Previous studies have also shown that intrinsic (and not extrinsic) belief in religion has stronger associations with lower death anxiety (Cohen et al., 2005; Jong et al., 2018). In the present study,

high intrinsic religiosity was evident from participants' motivations for attending the pilgrimage, such as need of feeling closer to God and finding inspiration and peace.

The findings are also in line with a large body of work conducted in the West suggesting that religiosity is negatively associated with death anxiety (Jong et al., 2018), especially in older adults (Cicirelli, 2002; Falkenhain & Handal, 2003) and religious populations (Ellis & Wahab, 2013; Jong et al., 2018). While to our knowledge this is the first study examining religious factors and death anxiety in the context of Hinduism, limited previous studies conducted on pilgrims attending the Kumbh have found positive factors as devotees felt a sense of shared identity (Maheshwari & Singh, 2009), improved in well-being during the pilgrimage (Tewari et al., 2012), and used social detachment to cope with fear of death (Maheshwari & Mukherjee, 2019). Such factors may indirectly contribute towards lowering death anxiety.

The results suggest that religious beliefs may also have an impact on death anxiety. In particular, it was found that belief in reincarnation - that the soul does not die and is carried over to the next life – significantly decreases death anxiety in a religious population of Hindus. Most pilgrims reported that they had indispensable faith in it and believed in rebirth because they had learnt about it from their ancestors and from their religious texts. Qualitative findings from the study also support this as most participants expressed unclear yet undisputed faith in reincarnation. In fact, their narratives also depict a sense of continuity between past, current, and future lives.

Past comparable studies in the West also found that belief in afterlife results in lowering anxiety related to death (Falkenhain & Handal, 2003; Jong et al. 2018). While 'afterlife' in Christianity and 'reincarnation' in Hinduism are different constructs (Novak, 2003), these findings largely suggest that, irrespective of religion, a feeling of hope through literal or

symbolic immortality helps build a coping mechanism against death anxiety, especially in middle-aged and older adults (Jong et al., 2018). In contrast, however, a study administered on 141 older adults practicing Buddhism in Hong Kong did not find a relationship between personal death anxiety and reincarnation beliefs (Hui & Coleman, 2012), suggesting that findings need to be generalized with caution.

Greater belief in *Ganga snaan* (dipping into the sacred river of Ganga to wash away sins and for liberation of the soul) was trending towards higher levels of death anxiety. It is important to note that in contrast to reincarnation which is a passive belief, *Ganga snaan* is an active, practice-oriented, religious belief. Perhaps the act itself brings awareness about one's own mortality, potentially leading to higher death anxiety. Another possibility is that pilgrims who were more occupied with thoughts related to death and negative karma, showed more faith in the practice of 'washing away sins'. These religious baths were perhaps conducted to neutralize 'bad karma' and to reduce feelings of guilt before death, as a form of atonement, to facilitate chances for a desirable next life. In contrast to quantitative findings, pilgrims' qualitative narratives suggest that *Ganga snaan* provided them with a sense of salvation, purification, peace, and that they felt closer to liberation. This is in line with previous research suggesting that pilgrims view it as a step towards preparation of death and next life (Tyagi et al., 2013; Nordin, 2009).

Frequency of practice of religion, both in the form of religious attendance or a public discourse in a temple (institutional practice) and as a personal prayer at home temple (private practice), were not related to death anxiety in older adults. This unexpected finding suggests that, while frequency and type of practice of religion may contribute towards personal inspiration and community support (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002), it does not significantly influence end of life thoughts in older devout Hindus.

The findings further showed that higher *presence* of meaning facilitates lower death anxiety, leading to greater acceptance of death. From a psychosocial perspective, the relationship between meaning and coping with mortality awareness, can potentially be attributed to elderly in Asia deriving meaning from social structures and holding important roles in families/society (Reker, 1997; Maheshwari & Mukherjee, 2019). Contrary to the hypothesis, participants with higher levels of continued *search* for meaning experienced greater death anxiety. This, however, is consistent with previous findings by Lyke (2013) and could be an indicator of a desire to delay death until meaning in life is successfully found (Latha et al., 2013). Finally, these findings are in line with Meaning Management Theory which suggests that finding meaning in life helps in accepting death.

The primary advantage of the study is its originality, in many respects. It is the first study to have assessed how a range of religious factors affect end of life thoughts in older religious population practicing Hinduism. A brief qualitative section in the study helped in deconstructing pilgrims' narratives around religious beliefs in relation to death anxiety. However, recruiting a larger sample and studying death acceptance in addition to death anxiety would have made the study stronger. While the researchers could not use the full MLQ questionnaire due to fieldwork constraints, the study would have benefited from it. However, our study methodology was streamlined to suit the unique challenges presented by the Kumbh setting, and can help future researchers interested in fieldwork and data collection during large gatherings or mass pilgrimages. Future studies could incorporate these factors. Given the role older generation plays in joint families in South Asian cultures and the cultural stigma attached to living in old age homes, researchers could examine religiosity and death anxiety in older adults who live with families versus who live in old age homes.



In India alone, the population of individuals above the age of 60 is about 104 million, and in line with global life-expectancy figures this number is likely to increase in coming years (Pilania et al., 2019). This could be accompanied by a higher prevalence of emotional difficulties and professional mental health services are often underutilized by the elderly (Sengar, 2019). Therefore, research that contributes to understanding and potentially improving the lives of older adults, is crucial. The findings provide further evidence for incorporating religious and spiritual awareness into psychotherapeutic work with older adults. Since religion is often viewed as the most ‘trustworthy’ source of solace in times of mental distress, especially for the elderly, these findings could be integrated in psychological support services (Hupkens et al., 2018).

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**Data availability statement:** For review, data is available on open science framework, [https://osf.io/9sjen/?view\\_only=c31208fcd3794d828bdefa1673f0452c](https://osf.io/9sjen/?view_only=c31208fcd3794d828bdefa1673f0452c)

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**Table 1***Multiple regression of religious beliefs associated with death anxiety*

Variable	Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>
Death anxiety					0.01**	.09
	Dipping in sacred river	1.39	.74	.19	0.06	
	Reincarnation	-2.07	.73	-.29	0.00***	

*Note: \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < .001***Table 2***Multiple regression of religious practices associated with death anxiety*

Variable	Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>
Death anxiety					.56	.01
	Institutional practice	0.19	.46	.05	.67	
	Personal practice	-.47	.45	-.13	.29	

**Table 3***Multiple regression of meaning in life associated with death anxiety*

Variable	Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>
Death anxiety					.03	.068
	Search of meaning	1.87	.94	.20	.05*	
	Presence of meaning	-1.94	.86	-.23	.02*	

*Note: \*p ≤ 0.05*