

Research Paper

## Spirituality or Professional Mental Health Services: Where Does Modern India Turn to in Crises?

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore whether contemporary India turns towards professional mental health services or spirituality in the face of crises. An operational definition of spirituality was constructed in context of the Indian culture, incorporating domains such as belief in a higher power or universal intelligence, the process of self-discovery, experiences within relationships and eco-awareness. This quantitative study followed a cross-sectional research design. Data was collected using purposive sampling via a survey questionnaire that measured people's attitude towards professional therapy as well as spirituality in times of crisis along with measuring the components of life satisfaction and well-being. The effect of variables such as gender, academic qualification, and political ideology were also studied. The sample consisted of 96 individuals which included 60 females and 36 males of various age groups in India. T-test and chi square measures were used to infer the data. Results indicate that a majority of participants practice spirituality rather than availing mental health services, when faced with a crises and for most people spirituality means getting in touch with their inner- selves. Amongst the specific spiritual practices, connecting to nature stands out as the most primary means of connecting to one's inner self and dealing with the crises of life. A significant difference in the levels of wellbeing amongst people who do or do not practice spirituality was also observed. The results also suggest a significant relationship between practicing spirituality with gender as well as with political ideology Findings may encourage mental health practitioners to leverage spirituality into practise to improve people's overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Well-being, Mental Health Services, Life Satisfaction, Crises, Political Ideology

The role of Spirituality and religion on mental health and wellbeing has been studied for many decades. Spirituality is defined as attitudes and practices aimed at discovering meaning, purpose, or connection with things outside of and larger than the self<sup>[9][13][18][19]</sup>. Religion, on the other hand, an intricately linked concept which is often used synonymously with spirituality, refers to both beliefs and practices of relating to an

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organized religious affiliation or a specified divine power <sup>[17][24]</sup>. Religion then is a more social and cultural aspect of one's life while spirituality is more personal.

Many research studies have attempted in drawing out the benefits of engaging spirituality to mental and physical health. An important aspect that can be considered as a psychological mechanism that contributes to the link between spirituality and wellbeing is meaning in life or purposefulness <sup>[12][27]</sup>. A sense of meaning in life can give people higher levels of psychological and physical wellbeing <sup>[22]</sup> and can be particularly important in preventing suicidal behaviour <sup>[3][4][5][6][15][21]</sup>. Furthermore, Spirituality can also help in developing a personal sense of Self which contributes to the overall wellbeing of the individual. Marsella<sup>[14]</sup> stated that the importance of spirituality is to provide a set of values and meanings to give order to the world, and to provide what Erikson<sup>[10]</sup> called “a sense of coherence.”

Research also suggests a link between people's political affiliation and attitude towards spirituality, life satisfaction, and wellbeing. Politically conservative people are found to be more optimistic and satisfied with life and have a positive attitude towards spirituality than their politically affiliated counterparts <sup>[16]</sup>.

In this study, we defined Spirituality as

*“a multidimensional phenomenon that is universally experienced, in part socially constructed, and individually developed throughout the life span. Spirituality encompasses a personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal context consisting of four interrelated domains: (a) higher power or universal intelligence—a belief in a higher power or universal intelligence that may or may not include formal religious practices; (b) self-discovery—the spiritual journey begins with inner reflection and a search for meaning and purpose. This process of self-discovery leads to growth, healing, and transformation; (c) relationships—an integral connection to others based on a deep respect and reverence for life and is known and experienced within relationships (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2005); and (d) eco-awareness—an integral connection to nature based on a deep respect and reverence for the environment and a belief that the Earth is sacred.”* <sup>[7]</sup>

However, to date spirituality has not found an authentic place in the psychological therapeutic practices. Many practitioners though ground themselves in forms of spiritual practices yet refrain from acknowledging its active role in the therapeutic process.

### ***The Position of Spirituality and Professional therapy in Indian Context***

Spirituality is inked in the very fabric of India. With the plethora of ancient texts delineating the relationship of the human with the universe along different planes of consciousness, the Spiritual systems of thought in India have been the building blocks of its cultural and societal foundations. While there prevails a deeper understanding of human psychology in the Vedas and the Upanishads, Modern Psychiatry and Psychology has been relatively newer additions to the Culture of India.

Modern Psychiatry and Psychology while are the scientific inquiry into the human thought and behavioral processes, are rooted in the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter. Wig <sup>[25]</sup> argues this as an essential point of difference between modern psychiatry and psychology with the spiritual knowledge systems of India which discard the mind-body dualism and rather view them in the same continuum of consciousness. However, with new knowledge addition in the scientific inquiry of mind and matter, the modern psychological sciences

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have also come to the position of acknowledging the interaction between the processes of mind and body.

In modern parlance, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity <sup>[28]</sup>. Furthermore, *Wellbeing* refers to a stable condition of coherence of personality that leads to a full range of positive emotions and no negative emotions regardless of external circumstances <sup>[2]</sup>.

While the concept of health in Indian traditions is close to the present definition, yet is more holistic in terms of its conceptualization of wellbeing. In the traditional Indian system of medicine, Ayurveda describes health as a state of delight that comes from spiritual, mental, and physical wellbeing. The emphasis is more on one's spiritual well-being where both physical and mental well-being plays a pivotal role. Further, Sinha <sup>[23]</sup> points that while in the west the key to well-being is exercising control over the environment and exploiting it for one's own benefit; according to Indian tradition, it is a matter of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment as well as within the different facets of one's own being.

However, in the present times, the growing number of cases of suicide in India is an indication of its deteriorating mental health. despite these increasing cases the number of reported mental health disorders it's only 7.3% of its 3000,000 youth. This trend has been attributed to the stigma attached to mental health as well as towards the negative attitude and lack of education amongst people <sup>[11]</sup>. One of the other reasons cited often by mental health practitioners is that most of the people in India turn to religious places and teachers in times of crisis.

The present study is an attempt to inquire about the attitudes of the Indian mind towards mental health and its relationship with spirituality, which is an inherent ingredient of Indian culture. We pose a simple question that whether in times of crisis, people are more comfortable in seeking professional guidance from mental health practitioners or do they find answers through their spiritual quest.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sample***

Data was collected by distributing an online survey form using social media platforms, from people of various age groups in India, using purposive sampling that measured their attitude towards professional therapy as well as spirituality in times of crisis along with measuring the components of life satisfaction and well-being.

### ***Instruments***

For the present study, a quantitative cross-sectional research design was used. Data was collected by online distribution of a survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was developed on Qualtrics using components from the spirituality scale <sup>[7]</sup> to measure the attitude towards spirituality as well as incorporated the life satisfaction <sup>[8]</sup> and the well-being scale <sup>[28]</sup>.

### ***Procedure***

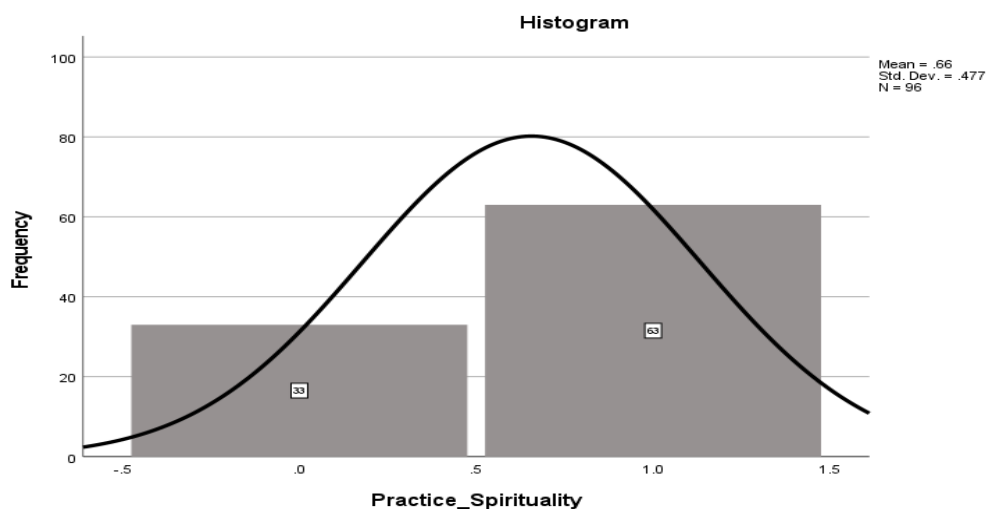
The data were analysed using SPSS. The practice of spirituality or seeking professional mental health services in times of crisis was taken as the independent variable and its effects were seen on the overall wellbeing and life satisfaction, whereby the effect of gender,

academic qualification, and political ideology were studied as moderating variables. We used t-test and chi square measures to identify the difference between the mean values. Participants were also asked what Spirituality to them is, which provided some interesting insights into the subjective interpretation as well the personal significance of the term.

**RESULTS**

This section presents the key findings of the study.

After eliminating the cases for missing data, the final sample for analysis consisted of 96 individuals which included 63% females (n= 60) and 37% males (n=36).



**Fig.1 Demographic characteristics of studied sample**

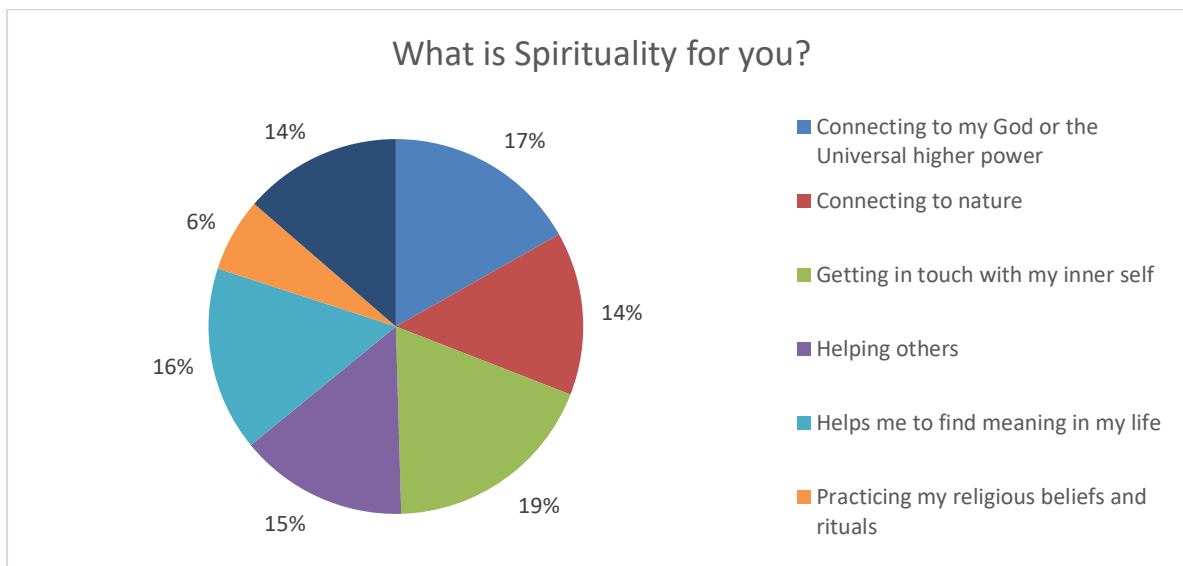
The percentage of sample who practice spirituality was 66% (n=63) where as those who do not practice spirituality was 34% (n=33) with a mean value of the distribution as  $x = .66$  and  $S.D = .477$ .

	N	%
No	33	34.4%
Yes	63	65.6%

**Fig.2 Descriptive statistics of respondents who practice spirituality versus those who don't.**

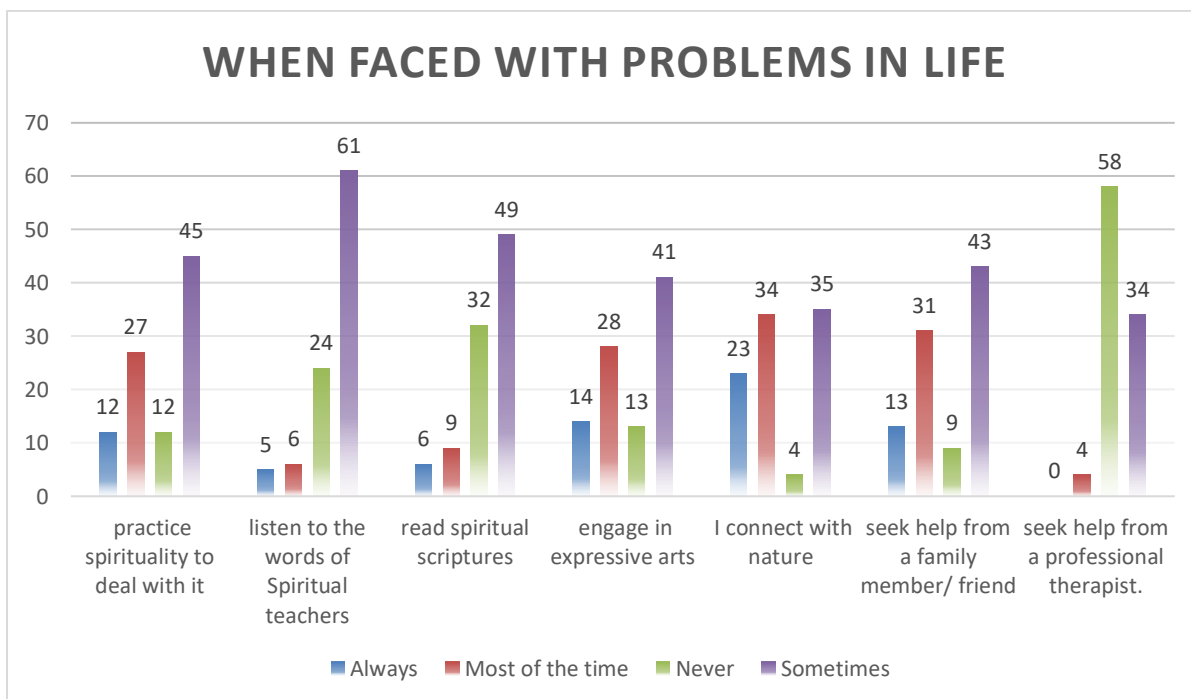
The respondents were asked about what Spirituality means to them and the percentage distribution was found to be - a) connecting to God or Universal Higher power (17%), b) connecting to nature (14%) , c) getting in touch with my inner self (19%) , d) Helping others (15%), e) helps to find meaning in life (16%) , f) practicing religious beliefs and rituals (6%) and g) striving for truth freedom, love and beauty (14%).

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**Fig.3 Percentage distribution of personal meaning of spirituality for people.**

The respondents were further asked when in times of crises what measures they use to deal with it. Majority of respondents reported connecting to nature as well as practicing spirituality to deal with crises always or most of the times, whereas majority of respondents agreed on never seeking professional therapy.



**Fig.4 Frequency distribution of measures used by people in times of crises**

The scores of Wellbeing and Life satisfaction of the respondents who follow spirituality and those who do not were compared to significant difference using independent sample t-test. The results indicate significant difference between groups for Wellbeing  $t= 2.02$  ( $df=94$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) whereas no significant difference in the scores of life satisfaction among the two groups,  $t= 1.017$  ( $df=94$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table. 1 Independent samples t-test for difference between means of wellbeing and life satisfaction between groups who practice spirituality or do not practice spirituality.**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Wellbeing	Equal variances assumed	.063	.802	-2.025	94	.046	-2.404	1.187	-4.762	-.047
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.018	64.502	.048	-2.404	1.191	-4.783	-.025
Life Satisfaction	Equal variances assumed	.015	.902	-1.017	94	.312	-1.160	1.141	-3.426	1.106
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.016	64.962	.313	-1.160	1.142	-3.441	1.120

The Chi- square test revealed the degree of association between practice of spirituality and other variables such as gender, political ideology, and level of educational qualification. The results for measuring the level of interaction between gender and spirituality show a significant level of association between the two variables ( $\chi^2 = 1.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, results also indicate significant association between spirituality and adhering to political ideology ( $\chi^2 = 1.07$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). However, no significant degree of association was reported between spirituality and level of educational qualification ( $\chi^2 = 1.89$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table. 2 Cross-tabulation of males and females with groups who practise or do not practise spirituality**

**Gender \* Practice Spirituality Crosstabulation**

		Practice Spirituality		Total	
		No	Yes		
Gender	Female	Count	23	37	60
		Expected Count	20.6	39.4	60.0
	Male	Count	10	26	36
		Expected Count	12.4	23.6	36.0
Total	Count	33	63	96	
	Expected Count	33.0	63.0	96.0	

**Table. 3 Chi-Square test for the degree of association between practice of spirituality and gender**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact (2-sided)	Sig.	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.111 a	1	.292			
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	.693	1	.405			
Likelihood Ratio	1.129	1	.288			
Fisher's Exact Test				.376		.203
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.100	1	.294			
N of Valid Cases	96					

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.38.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Table. 4** Cross-tabulation between people who adhere to a particular political ideology and those who do not with groups who practice spirituality or do not practice spirituality

**political ideology \* Practice\_Spirituality Crosstabulation**

		Practice_Spirituality		Total	
		No	Yes		
political ideology	No	Count	29	50	79
		Expected Count	27.2	51.8	79.0
	Yes	Count	4	13	17
		Expected Count	5.8	11.2	17.0
Total	Count	33	63	96	
	Expected Count	33.0	63.0	96.0	

**Table. 5** Chi-Square test for the degree of association between practice of spirituality and political ideology

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.077 <sup>a</sup>	1	.299		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	.572	1	.449		
Likelihood Ratio	1.133	1	.287		
Fisher's Exact Test				.403	.228
N of Valid Cases	96				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.84.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Table. 6** Cross-tabulation of the level of educational qualification with groups who practise or do not practise spirituality

**Highest Qualification \* Practice\_Spirituality Crosstabulation**

Count		Practice_Spirituality		Total
		No	Yes	
Highest Qualification	Doctorate/PhD	1	3	4
	Graduate	20	34	54
	High School	3	3	6
	Post Doctorate	0	1	1
	Post Graduate	9	22	31
Total		33	63	96

**Table. 7 Chi-Square test for the degree of association between practice of spirituality and level of educational qualification**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.891 <sup>a</sup>	4	.756
Likelihood Ratio	2.194	4	.700
N of Valid Cases	96		

a. 6 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .34.

## DISCUSSION

While Mental health practitioners around the globe have been effectively looking for measures to deal with the exponentially increasing mental health issues during these pandemic times, it is imperative to find out the existing mechanisms that individuals use to deal with crises. “Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.”<sup>[20]</sup> India, a land of age-old spiritual tradition is endowed with a culture that fosters this process of looking within. Though, since the last few centuries, it has witnessed amass discontent and disillusion with its own spiritual culture and struggled to place itself somewhere on the continuum of modern and traditional knowledge. The current research is an attempt to explore the mechanisms of psychological coping addressed by the age-old spiritual traditions as well as the inclination of the modern Indian to seek professional mental health services viz-a-viz practicing traditional spiritual practices in the times of crises.

The results indicate that around 66% of the participants agreed that they practiced spirituality whereas 34% disagreed. The participants who agreed were later presented follow-up questions regarding spirituality whereas those who disagreed were presented questions measuring their level of well-being and life satisfaction which will be discussed later.

In the survey, we explored the personal meaning of spirituality to each individual based on Delaney’s<sup>[7]</sup> construct of spirituality which includes- a) connecting to God or Universal Higher power (17%), b) connecting to nature (14%) , c) getting in touch with my inner self (19%) , d) Helping others (15%), e) helps to find meaning in life (16%) , f) practicing religious beliefs and rituals (6%) and g) striving for truth freedom, love and beauty (14%). The results indicate that for most people Spirituality means getting in touch with their inner-selves followed by connecting to God or the Universal Higher Power. The following extracts from the Isha Upanishad, one of the Indian Scripture, highlights the traditional knowledge of spirituality as connecting to one’s inner self in order to establish the full knowledge of reality and God itself, “īśā vāsyamidam sarvam” all that is here is the lord; “tadantarasya sarvasya tadu sarvasyāsyā bāhyataḥ” That is within all this and That also is outside all this. (Isha Upanishad, verse 1,4). The results also point out that Spirituality is independent of religious practices as only 6% of respondents ascribe the meaning of spirituality to religious and ritualistic practices. While religion is a personal set or



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institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; the service and worship of God or the supernatural; spirituality connotes an experience of connection to something larger than you; living everyday life in a reverent and sacred manner. <sup>[1]</sup>

Subsequently, when the respondents were asked that during the times of crises, what measures do they usually take to deal with the psychological/physical stress, majority of respondents agreed that they engage in spiritual practices, followed by seeking help from their friends or family members. Amongst the specific spiritual practices, connecting to nature stands out as the most primary means of connecting to one's inner self and dealing with the crises of life, followed by engaging in creative expressions and listening to the words of spiritual teachers. Interestingly, a whopping majority of respondents (60%) reported that they never seek help from any professional mental health services. While many interpret this as the resultant of the taboos attached to seeking therapy, we may interpret it as the unsuitability of the present mental health practices which majorly are situated in the western cultural contexts and fail to account and adapt to the traditional values system of India. As Verghese <sup>[25]</sup> points out that it is imperative to incorporate spirituality into the practice of modern psychiatry and psychology in India and world-wide, as it helps in situating the practitioner into the worldview of the client. As the data suggest that most of the people, today in India seek guidance either by listening to the worlds of spiritual teachers or through a communion with nature and their deeper selves, it would be beneficial for us as mental health practitioners to evolve strategies to develop and strengthen these capacities from the childhood itself and rejuvenate the culture of spirituality in its original sense. Spirituality entails not just the idea of connecting to one's inner self or the Higher power but is the active process of becoming conscious of one's inner reality, thus developing an understanding of our own psychological capacities and its curve of development.

Furthermore, when the levels of Wellbeing and Life Satisfaction were compared of those who practiced spirituality versus those who did not, the results indicate no significant difference between the levels of life satisfaction  $t=1.017$  ( $p > .05$ ), whereas there was a significant difference in the levels of wellbeing amongst the two groups  $t=2.025$  ( $p < .05$ ). These results can be explained by the fact that though subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with life are often used synonymously, yet the two concepts are different and are determined by various factors. While subjective wellbeing refers to one's affective evaluation of their life experiences, Satisfaction with life is the cognitive judgment through which individuals assess their quality of life, which is largely governed by the present circumstances. Since, the survey was taken during the times of Pandemic, when the world saw an unprecedented upheaval in all the domains of life be it personal or professional, the life satisfaction in general was reduced amongst the masses due to various reasons such as the inability to freely move out, job cuts and financial issues etc. The significant difference in the scores of Subjective wellbeing on the other hand reflects the role of spirituality in influencing the subjective assessment of one's life experiences. In these trying times, people engage in spiritual practices to derive meaning and purpose in life.

The final analysis of data which included finding if there is any significant relationship between practicing spirituality to an individual's gender, educational qualification, and political ideology. The results suggest that there is a significant relationship between practicing spirituality with gender ( $\chi^2 = 1.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) as well as with political ideology ( $\chi^2 = 1.07$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Earlier research found a significant relationship between political ideology with practice of spirituality where Republican adults reported higher levels of spirituality than their Democratic counterparts <sup>[16]</sup>. Furthermore, while few studies report no significant

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relationship between gender and practice of spirituality, others report a degree of association between these two variables. As a remark, we would like to highlight the skewed distribution of gender in the present sample with a greater number of females than males, the present result remains inconclusive.

The result however suggests no significant association between spirituality and educational qualification ( $\chi^2 = 1.89, p > 0.05$ ). Though there has been no previous research outlining any relationship between spirituality and educational qualification level, yet there remains as common hearsay that individuals with higher qualifications discard spirituality as unscientific. Though, the present result shows no such association and dismisses such beliefs.

### CONCLUSION

We would thus conclude from our study that Spirituality remains an integral part of life of most of the Indians which is not associated with either gender or educational qualification. Furthermore, most people use spirituality as a mechanism to deal with stress during the times of crises than seeking professional mental health services. This by no means attempt to disqualify the need or effectivity of mental health services but rather to highlight the need to incorporate spiritual knowledge into mainstream health care services as well as developing modalities through which we may accentuate the present practice of spirituality in a holistic way.

This study was subject to a few important limitations. First, time and financial constraints limited the investigation. A longitudinal investigation may have provided different or more robust findings regarding the well-being of people who practise spirituality. Findings may also vary among individuals in other countries and cultures where the concept and practise of spirituality are different. The literature provides several, at times, contradicting definitions of the construct of spirituality and its role in mental health practice. Until the profession adopts frameworks that provides clear definitions of this concept and tools to enable its application, practitioners will continue to experience difficulties incorporating spirituality into daily practice.

Findings of this study may encourage policymakers, and school/college/workplace mental health practitioners to leverage spirituality to improve people's overall well-being. Strategies for leveraging spirituality to foster well-being may include the development and implementation of mental health service programs designed to integrate spirituality to the practice of professional mental health services and acknowledging that spirituality empowers the general well-being of people and to discover what frameworks and activities are meaningful to them while incorporate these values into the entire therapy process.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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