

# Spiritual Well-being and Healthy Ageing among Salvation-Seeking Elderly Migrants in Varanasi, India: A Mixed-Methods Study

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## Abstract:

Varanasi, widely regarded as the holiest city in Hinduism, attracts elderly migrants who migrate later in life to pursue moksha and spiritual fulfilment. While spirituality is increasingly acknowledged as a determinant of healthy ageing, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the influence of spiritual well-being on the ageing experiences of salvation-seeking elderly migrants in sacred settings. This study investigated the relationship between spiritual well-being and healthy ageing among elderly migrants residing in selected ashrams in Varanasi, and examined how sacred environments, daily spiritual practices, and communal ashram life shape their lived experiences. A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 140 participants aged 60 years and above using a structured questionnaire informed by Fisher's Four Domains Model of spiritual well-being and the World Health Organization's Healthy Ageing Framework. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. To complement these findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The results indicated high levels of both spiritual well-being and healthy ageing among participants, with environmental and transcendental dimensions being most prominent. The sacred geography of Varanasi, strong religious faith, and consistent engagement in spiritual practices were found to significantly contribute to participants' well-being. Qualitative findings generated three interrelated themes: migration as a spiritual journey to Varanasi, the role of spiritual practices in fostering inner peace and resilience, and the importance of ashram life in creating social connectedness and belonging. Participants described ageing as a meaningful and accepted phase of life shaped by devotion, community living, and detachment from material concerns. The study concludes that healthy ageing in this context is deeply embedded

in spirituality and attachment to sacred places, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive ageing policies that integrate spiritual and social dimensions of well-being..

**Keywords:** Healthy ageing; Spiritual well-being; Sacred migration; Salvation, Varanasi

## INTRODUCTION

Population ageing represents a major demographic transformation of the twenty-first century. Improvements in healthcare, nutrition, and living conditions have increased life expectancy globally, resulting in rapid growth of the older population. The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that the global population aged 60 years and above will rise from one billion in 2020 to 2.1 billion by 2050, with nearly two-thirds residing in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2020). This demographic shift has redirected scholarly and policy focus from merely extending life expectancy to promoting healthy ageing. The WHO defines healthy ageing as the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age (World Health Organization, 2020). Healthy ageing is thus conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing not only the absence of disease but also physical health, psychological resilience, social participation, environmental support, and overall quality of life (Beard et al., 2016).

While extensive research has addressed the biological and social determinants of healthy ageing, recent scholarship increasingly highlights the significance of spirituality in promoting well-being in later life. Ageing is commonly associated with physical decline, grief, diminished social networks, chronic illness, and heightened awareness of death. Such experiences often prompt older adults to seek meaning, purpose, emotional stability, and hope through spiritual beliefs and practices (Koenig, 2012). Spiritual well-being is typically defined as a state in which individuals experience inner peace, a sense of meaning in life, harmonious relationships with others, and a connection with the sacred or supreme (Ellison, 1983; Fisher, 2011). In contrast to religious participation alone, spiritual well-being encompasses broader psychological and existential dimensions that shape individuals' understanding of ageing, their coping strategies in the face of adversity, and their preparation for the final stage of life.

Research shows that older adults with higher spiritual well-being tend to have better mental health, less depression and anxiety, greater life satisfaction, more resilience, and a higher quality of life among older adults (Koenig, 2012; Puchalski et al., 2009). Taking part in religious activities like prayer, meditation, reading scripture, worship, and community service is also linked to stronger social support and better psychological outcomes later in life (Idler et al., 2023). Most of this research comes from Western societies and healthcare settings, where spirituality is usually seen as a personal resource or part of palliative care. There has been less focus on how spirituality is shaped by place, culture, and daily life, especially in non-Western contexts where religion is closely tied to social life.

India is an important place to study how spirituality and ageing are connected, as these ideas are deeply rooted in its culture and religion. In Hindu philosophy, later life is seen as a time to step back from daily duties and focus more on spiritual practices that lead to self-realization and liberation (moksha). Traditions like Vanaprastha and Sannyasa highlight the importance of detachment, reflection, and devotion in old age. As a result, many older adults spend more time on pilgrimages, religious rituals, meditation, and reading scriptures (Eck, 2012). For some, this spiritual journey goes beyond short visits and leads to moving permanently or for a long time to sacred cities, which are thought to help achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Salvation migration is a unique type of later-life mobility that stands apart from moves for work, education, or family reasons. Older adults who move for spiritual fulfilment are mainly motivated by their religious beliefs, personal faith, and the hope of reaching moksha. In this case, migration is more than just moving to a new place; it is also a cultural and personal change that affects daily life, social ties, identity, and how people view ageing and death. Even though it is culturally important, salvation migration has not been widely studied in ageing research, especially in terms of its impact on spiritual well-being and healthy ageing.

Among India's sacred cities, Varanasi occupies a unique position within the Hindu sacred landscape. Revered as the city of Lord Shiva and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Varanasi is widely believed to be the most auspicious place for attaining liberation after death (Eck, 2012). This belief has encouraged thousands of elderly individuals from different regions of India to spend the final years of their lives in the city's ashrams, religious institutions, and salvation homes. These institutions provide accommodation, opportunities for daily worship, community living, participation in religious rituals, and

social support. For many elderly residents, living in Varanasi represents a deliberate spiritual choice through which everyday life becomes centred on religious practice, contemplation, and preparation for death.

Varanasi is not just a sacred destination from a human geography perspective. It is a cultural landscape where religious meanings, social interactions, and daily experiences come together. The idea of therapeutic landscapes shows that certain places can support health and well-being through their physical setting, social ties, and symbolic meanings (Gesler, 1992). Similarly, the sense of place highlights how emotional bonds and cultural meanings tied to a place shape identity, behavior, and well-being (Tuan, 1977). These ideas help explain how elderly migrants see Varanasi as more than just a place to live. For them, it is a sacred space that shapes their spiritual practices, emotional health, and views on healthy aging. Fisher's (2011) Four Domains Model of Spiritual Well-being also shows that spirituality includes personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental aspects. This model helps us understand how sacred places, ashram life, and religious devotion together support well-being in later life.

Research on spirituality, ageing, and pilgrimage has grown over the past twenty years, but three key gaps remain. First, most studies on healthy ageing focus on biomedical, behavioral, and psychosocial factors, while spiritual well-being has received less attention, especially in developing countries. Second, research on Varanasi often looks at pilgrimage, death rituals, sacred geography, and religious tourism, but there is little work on the daily lives and well-being of elderly migrants who live permanently in ashrams. Third, most previous studies use either quantitative surveys or qualitative narratives, and few combine both methods to see how measurable aspects of spiritual well-being connect to the lived experiences of ageing in a sacred setting. As a result, we still do not fully understand how sacred places, spiritual well-being, and healthy ageing interact.

Addressing these gaps matters for both academic progress and for shaping policies that support healthy ageing in diverse societies. As the world's older population grows, learning how culture, spirituality, and supportive environments affect well-being can help create more complete approaches to ageing, not just those focused on medicine. This is especially important in countries like India, where religion still plays a big role in daily life, social ties, and how people experience old age.

This study looks at how spiritual well-being relates to healthy ageing among elderly migrants seeking salvation who live in selected ashrams in Varanasi. It uses both surveys to measure spiritual well-being, healthy ageing, and related factors, and interviews to understand how these migrants view spirituality, live day-to-day in Varanasi, and deal with ageing. By combining data and personal stories, the study adds to the field in three ways. First, it brings spiritual well-being into research on healthy ageing as a key part of well-being in later life. Second, it shows how Varanasi's sacred setting shapes the ageing experience. Third, it offers new evidence from a unique group of elderly migrants, giving fresh insights into how spirituality, place, and healthy ageing are connected in India today.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Healthy ageing is now seen as a multidimensional process shaped by individual traits, social connections, and environmental factors, not just physical health (World Health Organization, 2020). According to the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework, healthy ageing means developing and maintaining the abilities that support well-being in older age, with supportive environments playing a key role in health outcomes (Beard et al., 2016). This perspective forms the basis of our study, which looks at how Varanasi's sacred environment affects the well-being of elderly migrants seeking salvation.

This study uses Fisher's Four Domains Model of Spiritual Well-being (Fisher, 2011) to explore the spiritual side of healthy ageing. The model describes four connected domains: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental. The personal domain is about finding meaning, purpose, inner peace, and accepting life. The communal domain focuses on supportive relationships, compassion, and feeling like you belong in the ashram community. The environmental domain looks at how people relate to their surroundings. The transcendental domain is about connecting with the Divine through prayer, meditation, rituals, and religious faith. These four domains together offer a broad view of spirituality that goes beyond just religious practice.

The environmental aspect of Fisher's model is especially important in Varanasi, where spirituality is deeply tied to sacred places. Therapeutic Landscape Theory helps explain this connection. It suggests that some places support health and well-being through their physical features, social atmosphere, and symbolic meanings (Gesler, 1992). Varanasi is more than just a city; it is a sacred landscape. Its temples, the River Ganga, ghats, religious rituals, and ashrams together create a setting that brings emotional comfort,

encourages spiritual reflection, and offers social support. Living in this environment can improve spiritual well-being by allowing for daily religious activities, meaningful social connections, and a sense of safety in old age.

The framework is further strengthened by the concept of Sense of Place, which emphasises that people develop emotional attachment and identity through meaningful experiences associated with particular places (Tuan, 1977). For salvation-seeking elderly migrants, Varanasi gradually becomes more than a destination of pilgrimage; it becomes a lived home where religious beliefs, everyday practices, and social relationships shape their understanding of ageing and death. This emotional attachment to the sacred city is expected to reinforce spiritual well-being and encourage positive adaptation to later life.

This study suggests that the sacred environment of Varanasi supports healthy ageing by promoting spiritual well-being. Regular spiritual practices, joining in community religious events, and feeling connected to the sacred landscape are expected to build personal meaning, emotional strength, social bonds, and faith, all of which help people age well. Using this idea as a guide, the study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to look at both the measurable relationship between spiritual well-being and healthy ageing, and the personal experiences of elderly migrants who describe these connections.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Area***

The study was conducted in three selected salvation-oriented ashrams in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and occupies a distinctive position within the Hindu sacred landscape. It is widely regarded as the city of Lord Shiva and is believed to be the most sacred place for attaining moksha (liberation) from the cycle of birth and death (Eck, 2012). This belief attracts elderly individuals from different parts of India who migrate to the city to spend the final stage of their lives in spiritual practice and religious devotion. The selected ashrams provide long-term residential facilities for elderly migrants seeking spiritual fulfilment. In addition to accommodation, they offer opportunities for daily worship, meditation, participation in religious rituals, communal living, and spiritual guidance.

### ***Research Design***

The study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase was conducted first to assess levels of spiritual well-being and healthy ageing among elderly migrants. The qualitative phase followed to explore participants lived experiences and to explain the quantitative findings in greater depth. Integrating both approaches enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how spirituality and the sacred environment of Varanasi shape the ageing experience.

### ***Participants and Sampling***

The study sample comprised elderly migrants aged 60 years and above residing in three salvation-oriented ashrams in Varanasi. Eligibility criteria required participants to have migrated to Varanasi primarily for spiritual purposes and to have resided in the ashrams. Purposive sampling was employed to target this specific population of salvation-seeking elderly migrants (Patton, 2015). The quantitative survey included 140 participants representing diverse social and geographical backgrounds, as well as varying durations of residence in Varanasi. Subsequently, 20 participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to explore a range of experiences related to spirituality, migration, and healthy ageing.

### ***Data Collection***

We collected primary data using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. To make sure elderly participants with different educational backgrounds could take part, we conducted the questionnaire through face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire had three parts: migration characteristics, spiritual well-being, and healthy ageing. For migration, we asked about place of origin, how long they had lived in Varanasi, their reasons for moving, previous living arrangements, and what motivated their migration for salvation. To assess spiritual well-being, we used questions based on Fisher's Four Domains Model of Spiritual Well-being (Fisher, 2011), which looks at personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental aspects. We measured healthy ageing using indicators from the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework (WHO, 2020), such as perceived physical health, psychological well-being, social connections, ability to function, and satisfaction with life. Participants answered attitudinal statements on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

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Following the survey, researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. The interviews focused on why people migrated, what it was like to live in Varanasi, daily spiritual practices, views on healthy ageing, and beliefs about moksha. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes, was conducted in Hindi, recorded with the participants' permission, and then translated into English for analysis. Researchers also made field observations to better understand daily life and the social environment in the ashrams.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the Stata trial version. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarised migration characteristics, the four domains of spiritual well-being, and healthy ageing indicators. Mean scores were calculated for each domain of spiritual well-being and each healthy ageing dimension. Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis in NVivo software. Interview transcripts were coded inductively, and similar codes were grouped into themes that reflected participants' experiences of spirituality, sacred places, and ageing. The quantitative and qualitative findings were combined during interpretation to give a fuller understanding of how spiritual well-being contributes to healthy ageing among salvation-seeking elderly migrants.

## Results

### Migration Characteristics

Table 1 presents the migration characteristics of 140 elderly migrants residing in three salvation-oriented ashrams in Varanasi. Respondents originated from various regions of India, underscoring the city's enduring role as a prominent destination for spiritual migration. Uttar Pradesh contributed the largest share of migrants (25.7%), followed by Bihar (15.0%) and Madhya Pradesh (13.6%). Additional participants migrated from southern and eastern states, such as Tamil Nadu (7.1%), Andhra Pradesh (6.4%), West Bengal (5.7%), Jharkhand (5.0%), and Chhattisgarh (3.6%), while 17.9% arrived from other states. This geographical diversity indicates that Varanasi draws elderly individuals seeking spiritual salvation from across India.

Prior to migration, 67.1% of respondents resided in rural areas, while 32.9% migrated from urban areas. The length of residence in Varanasi showed substantial variation. Specifically, 35.0% of participants had lived in the city for less than six months, and 17.9% had resided there for five years or more. The remaining respondents reported durations of six months to one year (16.4%), one to two years (13.6%), and three to five years (17.1%), reflecting a diverse composition of both recent and long-term migrants.

**Table 1. Migration Characteristics of Salvation-Seeking Elderly Migrants (n = 140)**

| Variables                           | Categories     | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
|                                     | Uttar Pradesh  | 36            | 25.7           |
| State of Origin                     | Bihar          | 21            | 15.0           |
|                                     | Madhya Pradesh | 19            | 13.6           |
|                                     | Tamil Nadu     | 10            | 7.1            |
|                                     | Andhra Pradesh | 9             | 6.4            |
|                                     | West Bengal    | 8             | 5.7            |
|                                     | Jharkhand      | 7             | 5.0            |
|                                     | Chhattisgarh   | 5             | 3.6            |
|                                     | Others         | 25            | 17.9           |
| Place of Residence Before Migration | Rural          | 94            | 67.1           |

|                                     |                        |     |      |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-----|------|
|                                     | Urban                  | 46  | 32.9 |
| Duration of Residence in Varanasi   | Less than 6 months     | 49  | 35.0 |
|                                     | 6 months-1 year        | 23  | 16.4 |
|                                     | 1-2 years              | 19  | 13.6 |
|                                     | 3-5 years              | 24  | 17.1 |
|                                     | 5 years or more        | 25  | 17.9 |
| Migration Decision                  | Self                   | 88  | 62.9 |
|                                     | Family                 | 22  | 15.7 |
|                                     | Guru/Religious leader  | 17  | 12.1 |
|                                     | Joint decision         | 13  | 9.3  |
| Previous Living Arrangement         | Alone                  | 18  | 12.9 |
|                                     | With spouse            | 39  | 27.9 |
|                                     | With children          | 61  | 43.6 |
|                                     | Joint family           | 22  | 15.7 |
| Motivations for Salvation Migration | Desire for Moksha      | 118 | 84.3 |
|                                     | Spiritual devotion     | 101 | 72.1 |
|                                     | Peaceful later life    | 76  | 54.3 |
|                                     | Influence of Guru      | 40  | 28.6 |
|                                     | Health-related reasons | 35  | 25.0 |
|                                     | Desire to die in Kashi | 39  | 27.9 |
|                                     | Domestic quarrel       | 17  | 12.1 |
|                                     | Family tradition       | 25  | 17.9 |

Note: Multiple responses were permitted for motivations for migration; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.

The majority of elderly respondents (62.9%) reported independently deciding to migrate to Varanasi. Family members influenced the migration decision for 15.7% of participants, while 12.1% migrated based on the guidance of a guru or religious leader. A smaller proportion (9.3%) indicated that the decision was made jointly with family members. Prior to migration, 43.6% of respondents had been living with their children, 27.9% with a spouse, 15.7% in joint families, and 12.9% had been living alone.

The motivations for salvation migration reveal the predominantly spiritual nature of migration. The desire to attain moksha was the most frequently reported reason, cited by 84.3% of the respondents, followed by spiritual devotion (72.1%) and the aspiration to spend later life in a peaceful spiritual environment (54.3%). Other motivations included the influence of a guru (28.6%), the desire to die in Kashi (27.9%), health-related reasons (25.0%), and family tradition (17.9%). A relatively small proportion of respondents (12.1%) reported domestic quarrels as a contributing factor.

### Spiritual Well-being

Table 2 presents the levels of spiritual well-being among respondents according to Fisher's four

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domains. The findings indicate a high overall level of spiritual well-being (Mean = 4.28, SD = 0.74), suggesting that spirituality constitutes a significant aspect of daily life following migration to Varanasi. Environmental well-being exhibited the highest mean score (Mean = 4.57, SD = 0.61), closely followed by transcendental well-being (Mean = 4.56, SD = 0.60). Respondents demonstrated strong agreement that proximity to the River Ganga enhanced their spiritual well-being (Mean = 4.78, SD = 0.43) and that residing in Varanasi would facilitate the attainment of moksha (Mean = 4.86, SD = 0.34). Daily prayer was also regarded as highly important for strengthening their relationship with God (Mean = 4.71, SD = 0.48).

The personal well-being domain demonstrated a moderately high mean score (Mean = 4.07, SD = 0.82). Most respondents indicated acceptance of ageing and death as natural aspects of life (Mean = 4.24, SD = 0.71) and reported that their spiritual life offered hope and emotional strength (Mean = 4.10, SD = 0.79). In contrast, lower scores for inner peace in the face of old age challenges (Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.96) indicate that some participants continued to experience emotional difficulties.

Among the four domains assessed, communal well-being exhibited the lowest mean score (Mean = 3.90, SD = 0.94), though it remained comparatively high. Participation in communal spiritual activities was associated with a stronger sense of belonging (Mean = 4.18, SD = 0.81), whereas emotional support from fellow residents had the lowest mean score (Mean = 3.63, SD = 1.07), reflecting greater variability in social experiences within the ashram community.

These findings indicate that the sacred environment of Varanasi and the relationship with the Divine contributed more substantially to spiritual well-being than interpersonal relationships within the ashram community. This underscores the central importance of sacred place and religious faith in the lives of elderly migrants seeking salvation.

**Table 2. Spiritual Well-being among Salvation-Seeking Elderly Migrants According to Fisher's Four Domains (n = 140)**

| Domain                          | Statement                                                                         | Mean        | SD          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Personal Well-being</b>      | I feel that my life has meaning and purpose.                                      | 4.06        | 0.82        |
|                                 | I have inner peace despite the challenges of old age.                             | 3.88        | 0.96        |
|                                 | I accept ageing and death as a natural part of life.                              | 4.24        | 0.71        |
|                                 | My spiritual life gives me hope and emotional strength.                           | 4.1         | 0.79        |
|                                 | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                                | <b>4.07</b> | <b>0.82</b> |
| <b>Communal Well-being</b>      | I feel respected by other residents in the ashram.                                | 3.82        | 0.98        |
|                                 | I receive emotional support from fellow residents.                                | 3.63        | 1.07        |
|                                 | Participating in communal spiritual activities strengthens my sense of belonging. | 4.18        | 0.81        |
|                                 | Living in the ashram helps me build meaningful relationships.                     | 3.95        | 0.89        |
|                                 | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                                | <b>3.9</b>  | <b>0.94</b> |
| <b>Environmental Well-being</b> | The sacred atmosphere of Varanasi gives me peace.                                 | 4.66        | 0.57        |
|                                 | Living near the River Ganga strengthens my                                        | 4.78        | 0.43        |

|                                     |                                                                                   |             |             |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                     | spiritual well-being.                                                             |             |             |
|                                     | Visiting temples and sacred places deepens my spiritual connection.               | 4.51        | 0.68        |
|                                     | The sacred environment of Varanasi makes me feel closer to nature and the Divine. | 4.34        | 0.74        |
|                                     | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                                | <b>4.57</b> | <b>0.61</b> |
| <b>Transcendental Well-being</b>    | Daily prayer strengthens my relationship with God.                                | 4.71        | 0.48        |
|                                     | Chanting or meditation brings me closer to God.                                   | 4.39        | 0.73        |
|                                     | I believe living in Varanasi will help me attain moksha.                          | 4.86        | 0.34        |
|                                     | My faith helps me overcome the fear of death.                                     | 4.27        | 0.83        |
|                                     | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                                | <b>4.56</b> | <b>0.6</b>  |
| <b>Overall Spiritual Well-being</b> |                                                                                   | <b>4.28</b> | <b>0.74</b> |

Note: Scores are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of spiritual well-being. The questionnaire items were adapted from Fisher's Four Domains Model of Spiritual Well-being and contextualised for salvation-seeking elderly migrants residing in Varanasi.

### Healthy Ageing

Table 3 presents the perceived healthy ageing of salvation-seeking elderly migrants across five dimensions adapted from the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework. Overall, the respondents reported a high level of healthy ageing (Mean = 4.11, SD = 0.84), suggesting that most participants perceived their overall health and well-being positively.

**Table 3. Healthy Ageing among Salvation-Seeking Elderly Migrants (n = 140)**

| Dimension                       | Statement                                                                            | Mean        | SD          |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Physical Health</b>          | I have enough physical energy to carry out my daily routine.                         | 3.54        | 1.14        |
|                                 | I feel My current health allows me to participate in religious activities regularly. | 4.18        | 0.82        |
|                                 | I can walk and move around without major difficulty.                                 | 3.88        | 0.97        |
|                                 | I consider my physical health to be satisfactory.                                    | 3.71        | 1.06        |
|                                 | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                                   | <b>3.55</b> | <b>1.08</b> |
| <b>Psychological Well-being</b> | I feel mentally peaceful most of the time.                                           | 4.42        | 0.73        |
|                                 | I have hope and a positive outlook on my remaining years.                            | 4.19        | 0.84        |
|                                 | My spiritual practices help me cope with stress and worries.                         | 4.58        | 0.61        |

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|                                  |                                                                    |      |      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
|                                  | I rarely feel lonely or emotionally distressed.                    | 3.61 | 1.09 |
|                                  | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                 | 4.2  | 0.82 |
| <b>Social<br/>Connectedness</b>  | I receive emotional support from other residents.                  | 3.67 | 1.12 |
|                                  | I feel respected within the ashram community.                      | 4.31 | 0.75 |
|                                  | I regularly participate in community religious activities.         | 3.91 | 0.89 |
|                                  | I feel socially connected with people around me.                   | 3.94 | 0.93 |
|                                  | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                 | 3.95 | 0.93 |
| <b>Functional<br/>Ability</b>    | I can manage my personal care without assistance.                  | 4.36 | 0.69 |
|                                  | I can independently visit nearby temples or the Ganga when needed. | 3.84 | 1.01 |
|                                  | I am able to perform my daily spiritual practices independently.   | 4.69 | 0.46 |
|                                  | I make decisions about my daily routine independently.             | 4.22 | 0.77 |
|                                  | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                 | 4.28 | 0.73 |
| <b>Subjective<br/>Well-being</b> | I am satisfied with my present life in Varanasi.                   | 4.47 | 0.66 |
|                                  | Living in Varanasi has improved my overall quality of life.        | 4.38 | 0.72 |
|                                  | I feel my life remains meaningful despite old age.                 | 4.61 | 0.54 |
|                                  | Overall, I am happy with my present life.                          | 4.11 | 0.86 |
|                                  | <b>Domain Mean</b>                                                 | 4.39 | 0.7  |
| <b>Overall Healthy Ageing</b>    |                                                                    | 4.11 | 0.84 |

Note: Scores are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher mean scores indicate better perceived healthy ageing. The items were developed based on the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework and adapted to the context of salvation-seeking elderly migrants residing in ashrams in Varanasi.

Among the five dimensions assessed, subjective well-being demonstrated the highest mean score (Mean = 4.39, SD = 0.70), followed by functional ability (Mean = 4.28, SD = 0.73) and psychological well-being (Mean = 4.20, SD = 0.82). Respondents reported strong agreement that their lives remained meaningful in old age (Mean = 4.61, SD = 0.54) and that they could independently perform daily spiritual practices (Mean = 4.69, SD = 0.46). Additionally, spiritual practices were perceived as effective in helping participants cope with stress and worries (Mean = 4.58, SD = 0.61), highlighting the positive influence of spirituality on psychological well-being.

Social connectedness (Mean = 3.95, SD = 0.93) and physical health (Mean = 3.55, SD = 1.08) exhibited comparatively lower mean scores. Although most respondents reported feeling respected within the ashram community (Mean = 4.31, SD = 0.75), lower scores for emotional support from fellow residents (Mean = 3.67, SD = 1.12) indicate variability in social relationships. Respondents also reported moderate levels of physical health, particularly in terms of energy for daily activities (Mean = 3.54, SD = 1.14) and satisfaction with physical health (Mean = 3.71, SD = 1.06). These findings suggest that, despite age-related physical limitations, participants sustained high levels of psychological well-being, functional independence, and life satisfaction within the sacred environment of Varanasi.

### **Lived Experiences of Spiritual Well-being and Healthy Ageing through Participants' Narratives: A Thematic Analysis**

The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into how salvation-seeking elderly migrants experience spiritual well-being and healthy ageing in the sacred city of Varanasi. Through inductive thematic analysis of participants' narratives, three major themes and nine subthemes were identified, reflecting their migration experiences, everyday spiritual practices, and life within the ashram community. Together, these themes illustrate how faith, sacred place, and social relationships shape participants' perceptions of well-being, ageing, and the meaning of later life.

#### **Theme 1: The Spiritual Journey to Varanasi**

The spiritual journey to Varanasi constituted a significant life transition for the participants. Their migration decisions were influenced by spiritual beliefs, personal experiences, and aspirations for a meaningful later life. Despite originating from diverse regions and social backgrounds, participants shared a collective desire to spend their remaining years in the sacred city of Kashi. For many, migration represented more than a change of residence; it was a deliberate spiritual choice that initiated a new phase of life focused on devotion, detachment, and preparation for the end of life.

##### ***Subtheme1.1: Motivation for Migration***

While all participants migrated to Varanasi with the shared belief that living in the sacred city brings spiritual fulfilment and the possibility of moksha, their personal journeys differed. Many explained that they chose to move after completing family responsibilities, while others described old age, declining health, or a lifelong desire to spend their final years in Kashi. For most participants, migration was a gradual and carefully considered decision rather than a sudden event.

*"I worked all my life and raised my children. After they settled, I felt there was nothing more I wanted from worldly life. For many years I had wished to stay in Kashi. Now I have the time, so I came."* Participant 08 (Male, 73 years)

*"I used to visit Varanasi every year during festivals. Whenever I returned home, I felt I should stay here one day. After my husband passed away, I decided not to postpone it anymore."* Participant 17 (Female, 70 years)

*"My health is not as good as before, and I know life is uncertain. Living in Kashi gives me peace because this is the place where I always wanted to spend my last years."* Participant 19 (Female, 69 years)

These stories reveal that the choice to migrate was closely tied to each participant's stage of life. Instead of being mainly about money, migration was shaped by finishing family duties, personal faith, changes in health, and a long-held wish to spend later years in Varanasi. Even though their journeys were different, all participants believed the sacred city was the right place for spiritual fulfilment in old age.

##### ***Subtheme1.2: Sacred Beliefs***

Participants often saw Varanasi as more than just a place to live. For them, it was a sacred city that gave deeper meaning to their spiritual lives. Their views were influenced by religious teachings, family traditions, pilgrimages, and personal faith. While they described their beliefs in different ways, they all felt that living in Kashi made their spiritual connection stronger and helped them get ready for the last stage of life.

*"I have read the Shiva Purana and Kashi Khanda for many years. They describe Kashi as a place where Lord Shiva blesses those who remember Him with devotion. Whether I attain moksha or not is in God's hands, but living*

*here helps me remain devoted every day.*" Participant 12 (Male, 75 years)

*"For me, Kashi is not just a city; it is a place where the mind becomes calm. I cannot explain it in words, but whenever I sit on the ghats or attend the evening Ganga Aarti, I feel a different kind of peace. That feeling is why I chose to stay here."* Participant 04 (Male, 68 years)

*"Since childhood, I have heard that Kashi is the city of Lord Shiva. My parents and elders always believed that living here in old age is a blessing. I came because I wanted to spend my remaining years in a place that has such spiritual importance."* Participant 16 (Female, 77 years)

These narratives reveal that participants' sacred beliefs went beyond just seeking moksha. They saw Varanasi as a spiritually important place where daily experiences like hearing temple bells, visiting the Ganga, taking part in rituals, and remembering God strengthened their faith and gave them peace. These strong beliefs were central to their choice to move and their ongoing connection to the sacred city.

## **Theme 2: Spiritual Practices and Well-being**

Spiritual practices were a key part of daily life for the participants and helped them maintain their spiritual well-being. Most people in the study had regular routines that included prayer, chanting, meditation, reading religious texts, visiting temples, and joining group religious activities. They saw these practices not just as duties, but as meaningful ways to find purpose, emotional balance, and fulfillment in old age. Many described spirituality as a source of inner strength that helped them handle the challenges of aging and deepened their faith in the special importance of Varanasi.

### **Subtheme 2.1: Spiritual Practices**

Spiritual practices were a regular part of the participants' daily lives. Most started their mornings before sunrise with bathing, prayer, chanting, or meditation, then visited local temples, the ghats, or joined satsang. While each person had their own routine, they all saw these activities as important for discipline, devotion, and peace of mind. Many said that retiring and living in the ashram allowed them more time for spiritual activities than they had before.

*"I wake up before sunrise, take a bath, and spend time chanting, meditation before going to the temple. This routine has become a part of my life. If I miss it, the whole day feels incomplete."* Participant 10 (Male, 66 years)

*"Earlier, household work kept me busy. Here, I finally have time to read the Bhagavad Gita, attend satsang, and sit quietly near the Ganga or other my favorite places. These small things give meaning to my day."* Participant 09 (Female, 71 years)

*"I do not spend the whole day in prayer or other spiritual practices but whatever I do, I try to remember God. Even sitting with other residents and chanting together gives me happiness."* Participant 03 (Male, 79 years)

These stories show that spiritual practices were not limited to formal rituals but became a regular part of daily life for participants. Following routines like prayer, meditation, reading scripture, visiting temples, and joining group worship gave them a sense of purpose and stability as they grew older. Many participants saw these practices as key sources of emotional balance and spiritual satisfaction, highlighting the strong link between daily religious activities and overall spiritual well-being.

### **Subtheme 2.2: Finding Inner Peace and Acceptance of Later Life**

Participants often said that spiritual life in Varanasi gave them inner peace and emotional comfort. Many shared that regular prayer, meditation, and time in sacred places helped them slowly let go of worries, anger, and attachment to worldly things. Even though aging brought health problems and personal losses, participants felt that spirituality helped them face these challenges with more patience and acceptance. Instead of looking for material comfort, they valued the peace of mind that came from living in a sacred place and staying close to God.

*"The greatest change is not outside but inside me. Earlier, I became upset over small things. Now I have learned to remain calm. That peace is more valuable than anything else."* Participant 16 (Female, 77 years)

*"I cannot say that all my problems have disappeared. I still have health issues, but I do not feel afraid as I used to. Living here has taught me to remain peaceful even during difficult times."* Participant 11 (Male, 81 years)

*"There are still days when I miss my family, but after sitting quietly in the temple or near the Ganga, my mind becomes calm. I feel that God gives me the strength to accept whatever comes in life."* Participant 02 (Female, 69 years)

*"Old age teaches us that nothing stays the same. My eyesight is weaker now, and I cannot walk as much as before. I accept these changes because they are part of life. My faith helps me remain content."* Participant 20 (Male, 78 years)

These stories show that spiritual well-being was mostly felt as inner peace, not just the lack of physical or emotional problems. Participants recognized the challenges of ageing, such as illness, loneliness, and uncertainty, but saw spirituality as a way to build emotional strength and find comfort. They shared that living in Varanasi and taking part in spiritual activities helped them become more peaceful and accepting as they grew older.

### **Theme 3: Ashram Life, Social Relationships and Sense of Belonging**

Living in the ashram played a big role in participants' daily lives and shaped their social and emotional well-being. Many saw the ashram as more than just a place to stay. It was a community where they connected with others who shared similar spiritual goals and backgrounds. Although it took time and patience to get used to living together, many formed close relationships through daily routines, religious events, and helping each other. Still, participants mentioned some challenges, like missing their families and getting used to a new lifestyle.

#### **Subtheme 3.1 A Shared Spiritual Life**

Participants described life in the ashram as a shared journey rather than an individual experience. Although they came from different states, languages, and social backgrounds, they were brought together by a common purpose of spending their later years in Varanasi. Daily routines, including morning prayers, meals, satsang, and temple visits, created opportunities for regular interaction and fostered a sense of companionship among residents.

*"Nobody asks about your caste or where you come from. Here people know each other through devotion, not through social status. That makes life simple."* Participant 14 (Female, 64 years)

*"We come from different parts of India, but everyone here has come with a similar purpose. During prayers and meals, we sit together, talk, and share our experiences. It feels like we understand each other without saying much."* Participant 07 (Male, 75 years)

*"Earlier, I knew only the people from my village. Here I have friends from Bihar, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and many other places. We pray together, celebrate festivals together, and that makes this place feel like home."* Participant 18 (Female, 71 years)

The narratives indicate that the ashram fostered a shared spiritual community where daily interactions and collective religious activities strengthened social bonds among residents.

#### **Subtheme 3.2 Care, Support, and Companionship**

Participants often said the ashram gave them emotional comfort, practical help, and friendship from both residents and staff. Many had left their families, but daily interactions in the ashram helped ease their loneliness. Simple acts of kindness, talking together, and helping each other during illness or daily routines made the environment supportive and increased their sense of security and belonging.

*"We celebrate festivals together, eat together, and sometimes even laugh about our old memories. These small moments bring happiness and make life more meaningful."* Participant 01 (Female, 71 years)

*"There are days when I miss my children, but I never feel completely alone. I spend time talking with other women in the ashram, and those conversations make my mind feel lighter."* Participant 13 (Female, 82 years)

*"When someone is not feeling well, others always ask if they need help. Sometimes we take them to the doctor or bring them food. We look after each other because everyone here is growing old."* Participant 06 (Male, 71 years)

The stories show that companionship and mutual support played a big role in ashram life. People appreciated both the help they received with daily tasks or when they were sick, and the comfort of belonging to a supportive community.

#### **Subtheme 3.3 Challenges of Ashram Life**

Most participants had a positive view of life in the ashram, but many said it was not always easy to adjust to communal living or to grow old away from their families. Some missed their children and grandchildren. Others struggled with shared living spaces, physical challenges, or losing some independence. Still, most said these difficulties became easier to handle over time, thanks to spiritual practice, daily routines, and support from other residents.

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*"Old age itself brings many changes. We become dependent on others for some things, and that is not always easy to accept. But staying here has taught me patience and acceptance."* Participant 05 (Male, 76 years)

*"Living with many people is different from living in your own home. Everyone has different habits, so sometimes small misunderstandings happen. We try to solve them peacefully and move on."* Participant 20 (Male, 78 years)

*"During festivals, I miss my family the most. Sometimes I wish I could see my grandchildren, but I remind myself why I came here. That thought gives me strength."* Participant 15 (female, 68 years)

The stories show that even though the ashram offered support, participants still dealt with emotional and physical difficulties as they aged. They often missed their families, had to adjust to living with others, and managed ongoing health problems.

### Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between spiritual well-being and healthy ageing among salvation-seeking elderly migrants residing in selected ashrams in Varanasi. The results indicate that participants exhibited high levels of spiritual well-being, particularly within the environmental and transcendental domains, as well as a high level of perceived healthy ageing. Qualitative data further revealed that migration to Varanasi constituted not only a geographical movement but also a spiritual transition shaped by faith, sacred beliefs, and the pursuit of a meaningful later life. These results support Fisher's (2011) Four Domains Model, which posits that spiritual well-being develops through harmonious relationships with oneself, others, the environment, and the transcendent. Within the context of Varanasi, the sacred landscape, regular spiritual practices, and communal living in ashrams collectively fostered emotional stability, a sense of purpose, and positive ageing. This finding is consistent with Rowe and Kahn's (1997) broader perspective that successful ageing encompasses psychosocial adaptation in addition to physical health.

A key finding of this study is that the environmental and transcendental domains of spiritual well-being achieved the highest scores. This outcome underscores the distinctive role of Varanasi as a sacred site where religious beliefs, rituals, and the physical environment are deeply interconnected. Participants consistently identified the River Ganga, temples, and the city's spiritual atmosphere as significant sources of peace and resilience. These results align with the concept of therapeutic landscapes, which posits that specific locations promote health and well-being through the interplay of physical, social, and symbolic environments (Gesler, 1992). The findings also corroborate Tuan's (1977) sense of place theory, which holds that emotional and spiritual attachment to a location develops through lived experience. Prior studies have similarly demonstrated that sacred places offer psychological comfort, hope, and meaning, particularly in later life (Eck, 2012; Williams, 2007). Consequently, this study advances current understanding by illustrating how the sacred geography of Varanasi supports both spiritual well-being and healthy ageing.

The qualitative findings indicated that daily spiritual practices, such as prayer, chanting, meditation, scripture reading, participation in satsang, and visits to the Ganga and temples, were integral to participants' everyday lives. These practices facilitated the development of inner peace, effective coping with stress, and acceptance of the realities of ageing. Participants characterized old age not as a period of decline but as an opportunity for spiritual growth and self-reflection. These results align with previous research demonstrating that spirituality is associated with enhanced psychological well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction among older adults (Koenig, 2012; MacKinlay, 2017). Similarly, Atchley's (1989) Continuity Theory posits that older adults maintain well-being by continuing values and activities that have been meaningful throughout their lives. In this study, migration to Varanasi enabled participants to reinforce lifelong religious beliefs through regular spiritual engagement, thereby supporting continuity in identity and purpose during old age.

A significant finding concerns the ashram's role in promoting social well-being. While some participants reported experiences of loneliness, declining health, or separation from family, the majority described the ashram as a supportive community in which shared routines, mutual care, and companionship mitigated social isolation. These results align with Fisher's (2011) communal domain, which underscores the importance of positive interpersonal relationships for spiritual well-being. The findings are also consistent with the WHO Healthy Ageing Framework, which identifies social connectedness, supportive environments, and functional ability as essential components of healthy ageing (World Health Organization, 2020). Comparable observations have been documented by Jeste et al. (2013), who found that social relationships, resilience, and emotional support are key determinants of well-being in later life. Therefore, the ashram serves not only as a religious institution but also as a socially supportive environment that enhances both

spiritual and psychological well-being.

This study advances the literature on ageing, spirituality, and sacred geography by demonstrating that healthy ageing among salvation-seeking elderly migrants is shaped by the interplay of spiritual beliefs, sacred places, and supportive social environments. In contrast to previous research that addresses spirituality or ageing in isolation, this study integrates both perspectives within the distinctive cultural context of Varanasi. The use of a mixed-methods design enhances the robustness of the findings by combining quantitative data with participants' lived experiences. From a policy standpoint, the results indicate that programmes for older adults should acknowledge spirituality and culturally significant locations as vital resources for promoting healthy ageing. Future research should consider longitudinal and comparative approaches across various pilgrimage centres in India to elucidate how sacred environments affect well-being over time.

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that spiritual well-being is a significant factor in promoting healthy ageing among salvation-seeking elderly migrants residing in the ashrams of Varanasi. The findings indicate that the sacred environment of Varanasi, regular engagement in spiritual practices, and supportive social relationships within ashrams contribute to enhanced emotional well-being, functional independence, life satisfaction, and acceptance of later life. These results suggest that healthy ageing should be conceptualised not only in terms of physical health but also through spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions, especially in contexts where religion and place are closely intertwined. From a policy perspective, programmes for older adults should acknowledge the importance of spirituality and sacred spaces by incorporating psychosocial support, age-friendly ashram facilities, accessible healthcare, and community-based spiritual activities into healthy ageing initiatives. Enhanced collaboration among government agencies, religious institutions, and civil society organisations may improve the quality of life and dignity of elderly migrants while advancing the objectives of the WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing.

### **Declaration**

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### **Ethical Statement**

This study used a survey and interview approach with non-clinical human participants; formal ethical clearance from an institutional review board was not required. However, all necessary precautions were taken to ensure that the data collection process respected the dignity, privacy, and rights of the participants.

### **Consent for Publication**

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants for the use and publication of their related information in this study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the potential use of data in academic publications. All data are used with the participants' permission, and care has been taken to respect their dignity and privacy during research conducted in the ashrams of Varanasi.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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