



Sanatana Culture and Hinduism: A Field-Based Inquiry into Public Understanding of its Genesis and Development

Dr. Vandana Pandey

Professor

Department of Commerce

Harishchandra PG College, Varanasi

Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith,

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221002, India

Email: vandana21076@gmail.com

Sonia Agarwal

Research Scholar

Department of Commerce

Harishchandra PG College, Varanasi

Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith,

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221002, India

Email ID – research.dr.sonia@gmail.com

Abstract

Sanatana Dharma, understood as the eternal foundation of Indian civilization, has historically shaped the philosophical, cultural, and social dimensions of Hinduism. While its scriptural and philosophical development has been widely studied, limited scholarly work has examined how ordinary people perceive its origin, meaning, and relevance. This study addresses this gap by conducting a field-based empirical inquiry into public awareness and opinions regarding Sanatana Dharma. Using a structured bilingual questionnaire, data were collected from 115 respondents representing youth, adults, and the elderly

across diverse educational and social backgrounds. A non-probability sampling approach combining convenience and snowball methods was employed. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and visualized using frequency tables and percentage-based charts. The analysis revealed that 98.3% of the respondents had heard of Sanatana Dharma, primarily through family/elders and religious gatherings. A significant majority (93.9%) believed it to be the foundation of Hinduism, with 67.0% regarding it as eternal and 24.3% situating its origins in the distant past. When asked about its essence, respondents highlighted spirituality and God-realization (40.9%), morality and values (28.7%), and culture and traditions (20.0%). An overwhelming 95.7% reported following Sanatana practices, mainly daily prayer, festivals and ethical living. Importantly, 83.5% affirmed its continued relevance to modern society. However, perceptions of youth awareness were mixed: only 47.0% believed that young people are aware, while 31.3% felt that awareness is partial, and 21.7% felt that youth lack awareness. A majority (68.7%) expressed concern that Sanatana Dharma was misrepresented in the media, and 79.1% supported its inclusion as a subject in schools. These findings highlight the widespread recognition of Sanatana Dharma's cultural and spiritual role, alongside concerns about generational awareness and public representation.

Keywords: Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism, Public Opinion, Empirical Study, India

Introduction

Sanatana Dharma literally meaning "eternal law" or "eternal way" is a foundational concept in Indian philosophical, ethical, and spiritual traditions, often regarded as the bedrock of what is commonly known today as Hinduism. Unlike religions with specific founders or doctrines, Sanatana Dharma

represents a timeless, cosmic code that transcends history and cultural boundaries (Wikipedia, 2025). It embodies universal duties such as truthfulness, non-harm, purity, compassion, generosity, and self-discipline, applicable to all individuals irrespective of caste, class, or religious affiliation (Wikipedia, 2025).

Philosophically, Sanatana Dharma is not limited to ritual observances but extends to moral responsibility, spiritual law, and cosmic order. It governs not only human conduct but also the functioning of the universe and personal spiritual evolution (Koul, 2025). In this sense, Dharma constitutes both a social and cosmic principle a guideline for righteous living and existential harmony across all layers of existence.

The term itself, though rooted in ancient Sanskrit texts, gained prominence in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a conscious choice by indigenous scholars and religious leaders to frame Hinduism in its own cultural and philosophical terms a counter to colonial-era nomenclature. Sanatana Dharma thus signified continuity and timelessness in contrast to the imposed identity of "Hinduism" (Heehs, 2024). It also connects to diverse scriptural traditions Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Itihasas, and the six classical darshanasm representing philosophical diversity under a unified worldview (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024).

In contemporary discourse, Sanatana Dharma remains relevant its ecological insights (e.g., Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, reverence for nature), social justice ethos, and inclusivity are being re-examined as potential frameworks for addressing modern global challenges such as environmental crises, cultural fragmentation, and ethical dilemmas (Heehs, 2024); (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024).

Despite extensive academic reflection on the philosophical depth and historical trajectory of Sanatana Dharma, there is limited empirical research on how laypersons across age groups perceive its origin, development, and relevance today. Capturing the public understanding of Sanatana Dharma is crucial to understand how cultural values are transmitted, lived, and appreciated in contemporary India.

Objective of the study: Therefore, this study conducts a field-based inquiry into how individuals understand Sanatana Dharma its genesis, development, and contemporary importance. Through a structured bilingual questionnaire administered online and offline, it gathers public perceptions across youth, adults, and elders to provide descriptive insights into their awareness, beliefs, and reflections.

Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to trace what scholars have written about Sanatana Dharma its origin, meaning, development, and public perception and what gaps remain that my research addresses.

1. Origins, Meaning, and Historical Roots of Sanatana Dharma

“Sanatana Dharma” literally means “eternal duty/law.” The term is ancient, though its usage has evolved over time. According to Adrija Roychowdhury (2023), the phrase emphasizes principles like morality, cosmic order, and continuous spiritual path; sometimes translated as “eternal religion.” It is not just a modern label but has roots in classical texts.

Zavos (2001) in *Defending Hindu Tradition: Sanatana Dharma as a Symbol of Orthodoxy in Colonial India* explains that during the colonial period, the idea of Sanatana Dharma was revived by traditionalist Hindu movements as a symbol of resistance an identity rooted in continuity with ancient practices, scriptures, and a pan-Indian moral order.

The Apastamba Dharmasutra Wikipedia (2025), an ancient Dharma text, shows from early centuries BCE that ideas of “dharma” (duty, righteous conduct) were already present as imperatives that shape human behavior and society; thus, even ancient sages considered dharma as something lived, not just an abstract rulebook. Thus, scholars agree that Sanatana Dharma is more than ritual: it is a philosophical, moral, communal, and cosmological framework that has existed through centuries in Indian civilization.

2. Development over Time: Reform, Revival, and Modern Interpretations

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, and others rearticulated Sanatana Dharma for the modern era making it accessible, ethical, and relevant in face of colonial rule, social reform, and encounters with Western ideas (this movement is sometimes called Neo-Hinduism). Mitra (2025) argues that in contemporary times, the term is used not just for spiritual ideas, but also often as an identity marker in politics, education, and public discourse.

Quest Journals Similarly, The Development of Sanatana Dharma in the Twentieth Century Dimitrova (2007) traces how new interpretations emphasized universality, moral values, and reform while sometimes simplifying or selectively presenting certain philosophical strands. This has helped Sanatana Dharma adapt to modern societal needs but also led to debates about which parts are kept, which are adapted, and which ignored. Another recent study Aithal and Srinivasan (2024) called Rediscovering the Relevance of Sanathana Dharma (2024) reflects on how its core ethical principles karma (action), dharma (duty), moksha (liberation) continue to guide people’s choices, even in mass media, environmental ethics, and social

justice movements. However, it notes a discrepancy between philosophical ideals and actual understanding in public consciousness.

3. *Philosophical & Ethical Dimensions*

Scholars often highlight certain key elements in Sanatana Dharma:

- Dharma (Righteousness, Duty): It is about doing what is right, not merely in religious ceremonies but in everyday conduct.
- Karma and Rebirth: Acts have consequences, in this life and possibly beyond, stressing personal responsibility.
- Spiritual liberation (Moksha): The goal of transcending suffering or ignorance.
- Cosmic order: Everything is interconnected; humans are part of a larger harmony.

For example, the article How Sanathana Dharma-the Concept and Philosophy of Indian Ancient Social System Aithal and Srinivasan (2024) emphasizes that Sanatana Dharma has supported systems that are “scientific, religionless, casteless” in ideal discourse showing aspirational values about equality, social justice, and sustainability.

4. *Sanatana Dharma in Public Discourse, Politics, & Identity*

A growing body of literature examines how Sanatana Dharma enters public conversation:

- In colonial times, as a way of defending traditional values against Western critiques (Zavos, 2001).
- More recently, as a marker of cultural identity, sometimes entangled with political or nationalist agendas. Mitra (2025) argues that Sanatana

Dharma is often invoked in political rhetoric to foster unity or to draw boundaries of “insiders” vs “outsiders.”

- The Times of India article “Sanatan Dharma: Its roots and historical context of its use” Adrija Roychowdhury (2023) mentions how the term has been used in recent years to evoke homogeneity or tradition, sometimes glossing over the diversity within Hindu practices.

5. Gaps: Perception, Awareness, and Lived Experience

Despite these many writings, there are relatively few empirical studies that ask ordinary people what they think or know about Sanatana Dharma how they define it, where they learn it, how relevant they feel it is.

- Many studies focus on texts, thinkers, institutions.
- Few studies focus on public opinion or cross-generational differences.
- There is often little clarity on how much of the philosophical complexity (karma, moksha, dharma) is known by public, versus common simplified understandings.

These gaps align exactly with what my survey seeks to address: capturing awareness, meaning, practice, modern relevance, and generational perceptions.

Objective of the Study

The present research was undertaken to understand how ordinary people in India perceive Sanatana Dharma in today’s context. While ancient texts and scholars have explained its origin and development in detail, there is less evidence about what the common public thinks and knows about it. Therefore, this study focuses on capturing voices from different age groups and educational backgrounds.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- ✓ To assess the level of public awareness about the term "Sanatana Dharma."
- ✓ To explore how people understand its origin and foundations, and whether they connect it with the roots of Hinduism.
- ✓ To identify which aspects of Sanatana Dharma (such as spirituality, morality, culture, or harmony) are considered most important by individuals.
- ✓ To examine whether people and their families follow practices that they relate to Sanatana Dharma in their daily lives.
- ✓ To understand how relevant people believe Sanatana Dharma is in modern society.
- ✓ To study perceptions about younger generation's awareness and the way Sanatana Dharma is represented in media and public debates.
- ✓ To explore opinions on whether Sanatana Dharma should be taught in schools as a subject for the coming generations.
- ✓ To record personal reflections and messages that respondents would like future generations to remember about Sanatana Dharma.

Research Methodology

The present study adopted a field-based descriptive approach to explore how people in contemporary India understand Sanatana Dharma its origin, development, and relevance in daily life. Unlike theoretical studies, this work is rooted in the direct voices of individuals gathered through a structured public opinion survey.

Research Design

This study is empirical in nature, meaning it is based on real data collected from people rather than relying only on literature or secondary sources. The

design was kept simple and descriptive so that the findings could clearly present the distribution of views and experiences of different individuals.

Population and Sample

The population for this study included general Indian citizens of different age groups youth, adults, and elders without limiting to any specific caste, gender, or occupation. A total of 115 valid responses were collected within the available timeframe of 20 days.

Since the study aimed to capture diverse opinions quickly, a non-probability sampling method was used:

Convenience Sampling: sharing the survey link with known contacts, friends, colleagues, and community members who were easily accessible.

Snowball Sampling: requesting those respondents to share the survey further with their own networks, so that participation could spread wider.

This approach made it possible to collect meaningful responses from different groups of society even in a limited time.

Tool of Data Collection

For data collection, a structured bilingual questionnaire (English and Hindi) was prepared. It included both close-ended questions (Yes/No, multiple choice, scale-based) and a few open-ended questions where respondents could write their personal views. The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

- 1) Demographics (age, gender, education, location)
- 2) Awareness of Sanatana Dharma
- 3) Understanding of its origin and foundations
- 4) Practices and relevance in modern society
- 5) Reflections and suggestions for the future

The form was created using Microsoft Forms and circulated online (via WhatsApp, email, and social media) as well as shared offline with individuals the researcher personally met.

Data Analysis

The collected data was exported into an Excel sheet and analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. For close-ended questions, frequencies and percentages were calculated. Results were then shown through bar graphs and pie charts for easy understanding. Open-ended answers were carefully read and common themes were identified, such as recurring mentions of “values,” “spirituality,” and “tradition.”

This straightforward method allowed the findings to remain close to the voices of the people, presenting their opinions without complicated statistical models.

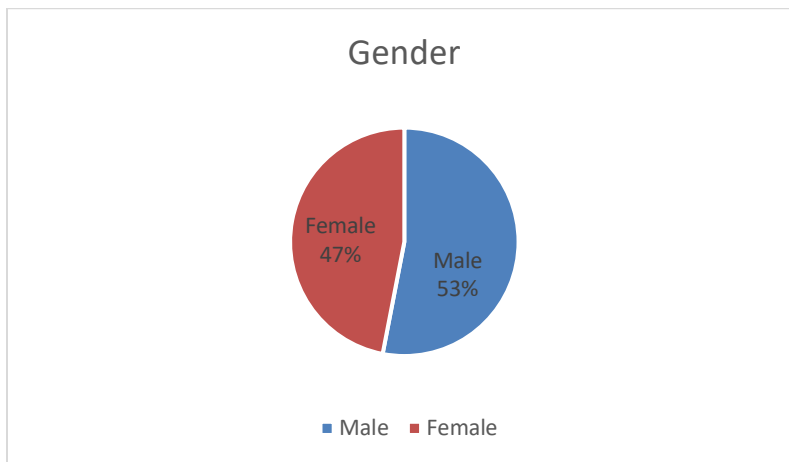
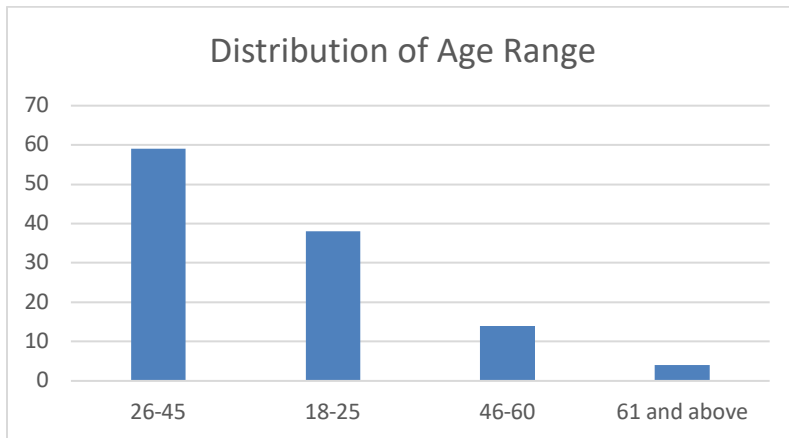
Result and Analysis

This section presents the findings from the 115 responses collected through the bilingual questionnaire. The analysis is based on simple descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, along with visual representations (bar and pie charts) for easier understanding.

A. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The survey included participants from different age groups, genders, educational levels, and locations. Among the total respondents, the largest share belonged to the 26–45 years group (51.3%), followed by 18–25 years (33.0%), while 12.2% were in the 46–60 years group and only 3.5% were above 60 years. Gender distribution was almost balanced, with 53.0% male and 47.0% female participants. In terms of education, more than half were graduates (55.7%), followed by postgraduates and above (33.0%), with only

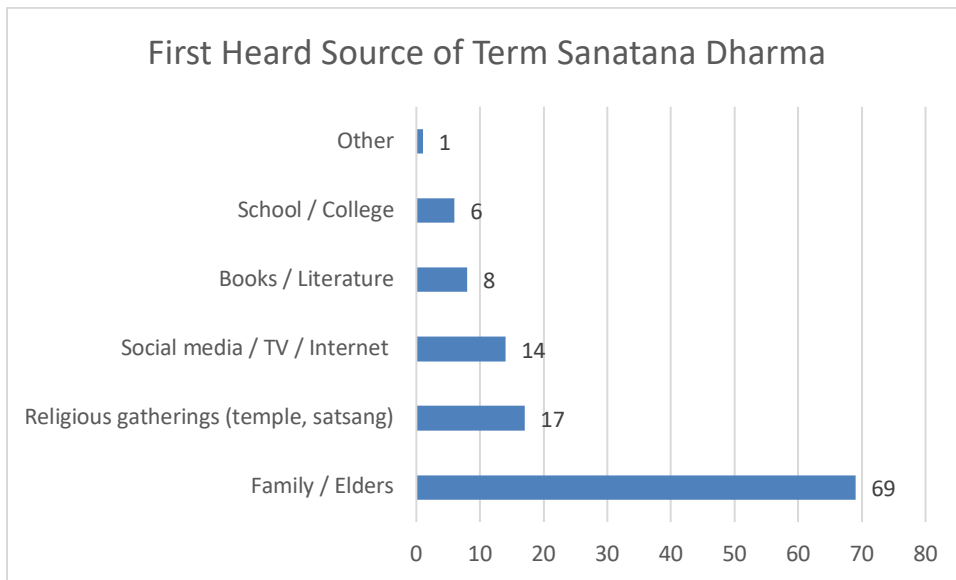
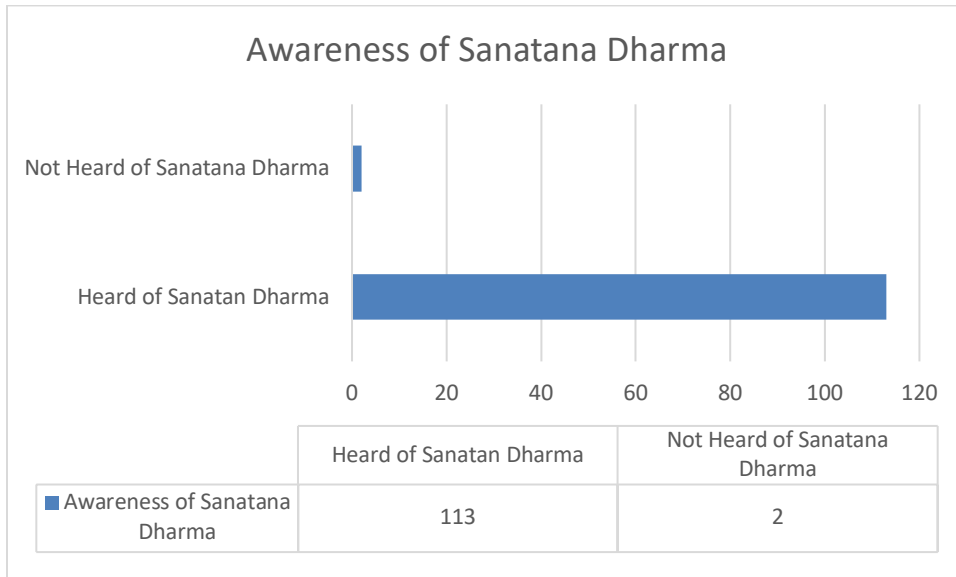
8.7% below 12th standard. A majority of respondents belonged to urban areas (73.0%), while 14.8% were semi-urban and 12.2% rural. These demographics show that the sample largely represents young and middle-aged, educated, and urban populations.



B. Awareness of Sanatana Dharma

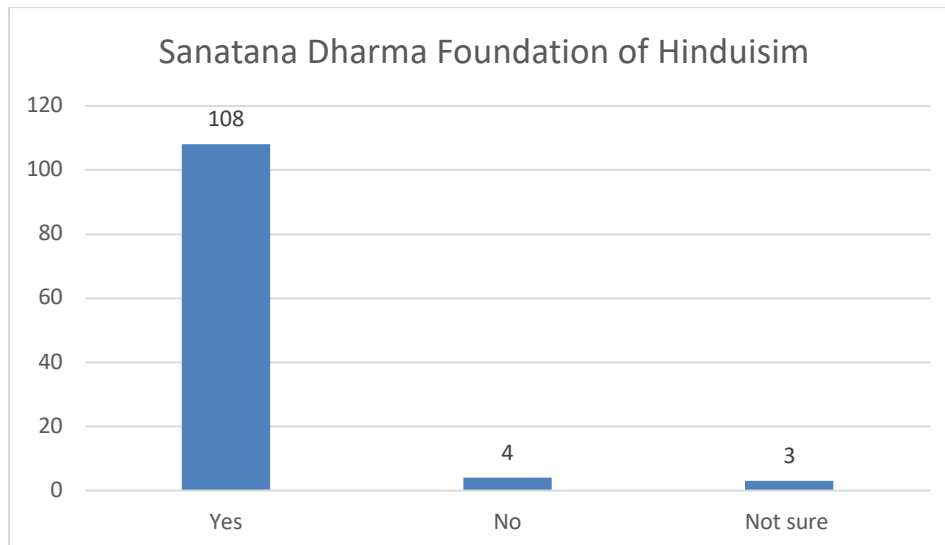
One of the first questions asked was whether respondents had ever heard the term "Sanatana Dharma." The results were overwhelmingly positive, as 98.3% answered 'Yes', showing that the term is widely known across society. Only 1.7% indicated that they had never heard of it. When asked about the source of first awareness, the majority credited their family and elders, followed by religious gatherings (temples, satsangs), and then social media,

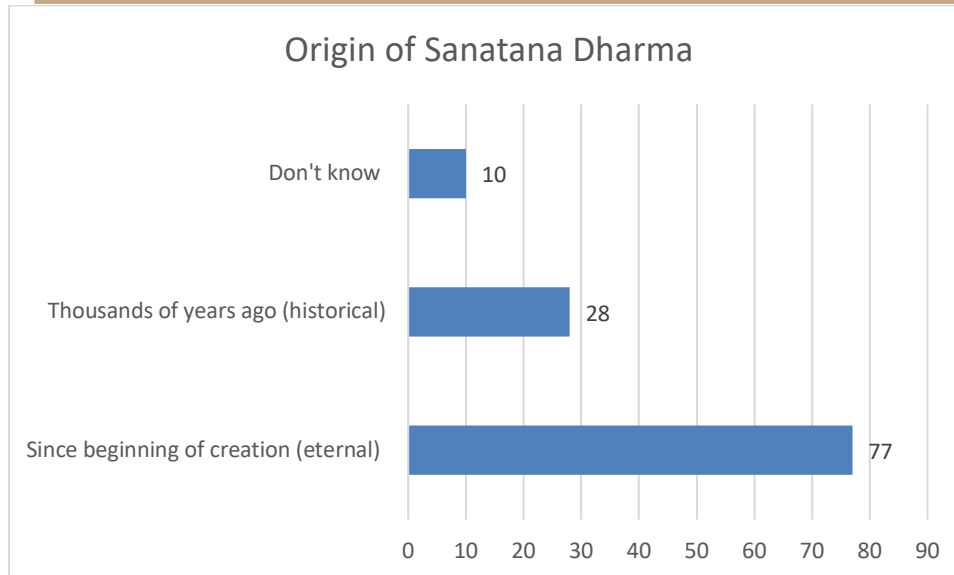
TV, and books. Very few recalled school or college as the first place of introduction. This suggests that Sanatana Dharma continues to be transmitted primarily through family and community traditions.



C. Understanding the Origin and Foundation

Respondents were asked if they believed Sanatana Dharma to be the foundation of Hinduism. A strong 93.9% agreed, while only 3.5% disagreed and 2.6% were unsure. This indicates a near-universal recognition of Sanatana Dharma as the root of Hinduism. Regarding its origin, about 67.0% described it as eternal—existing since the beginning of creation, while 24.3% believed it originated thousands of years ago, and only 8.7% admitted they did not know. These responses reflect a strong belief in the timelessness and continuity of Sanatana Dharma.



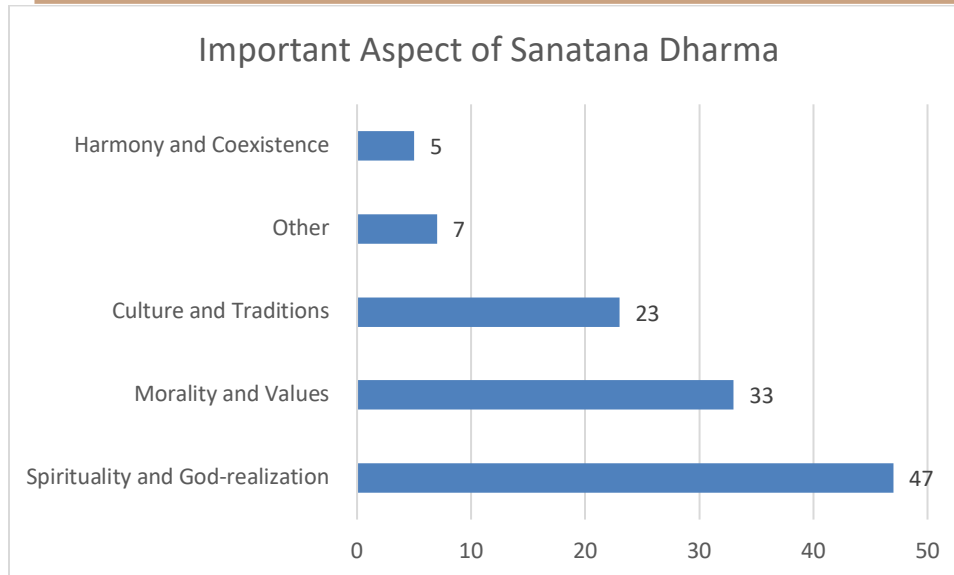


D. Important Aspects of Sanatana Dharma

When asked which aspect of Sanatana Dharma they considered most important, respondents highlighted:

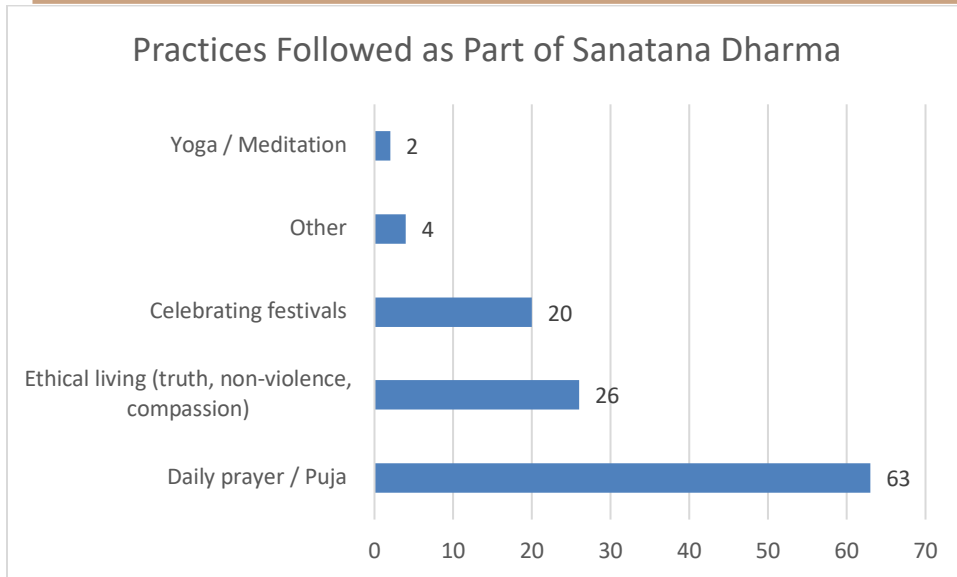
- Spirituality and God-realization (40.9%)
- Morality and values (28.7%)
- Culture and traditions (20.0%)
- Harmony and coexistence (4.3%)
- Other aspects (6.1%)

This indicates that for many, Sanatana Dharma is primarily understood as a spiritual path, followed closely by its role in promoting moral values and cultural practices.



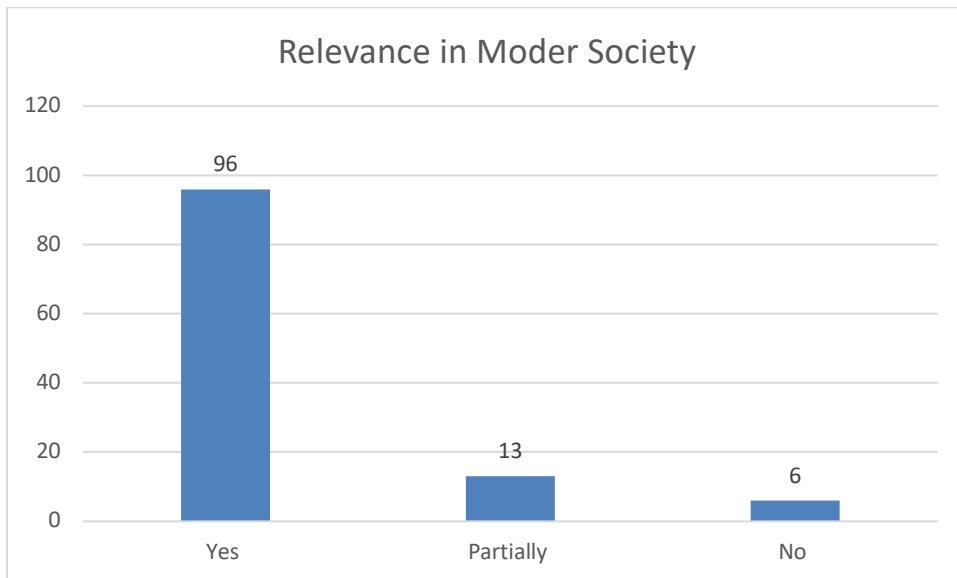
E. Practices Followed by Families

An overwhelming 95.7% of respondents said that they or their families follow practices that they consider part of Sanatana Dharma. The practices most commonly mentioned were daily prayers and puja, celebrating festivals, and ethical living (truth, non-violence, compassion). Yoga and meditation were also cited, though by a smaller proportion. This highlights the continuing integration of Sanatana Dharma into everyday life.



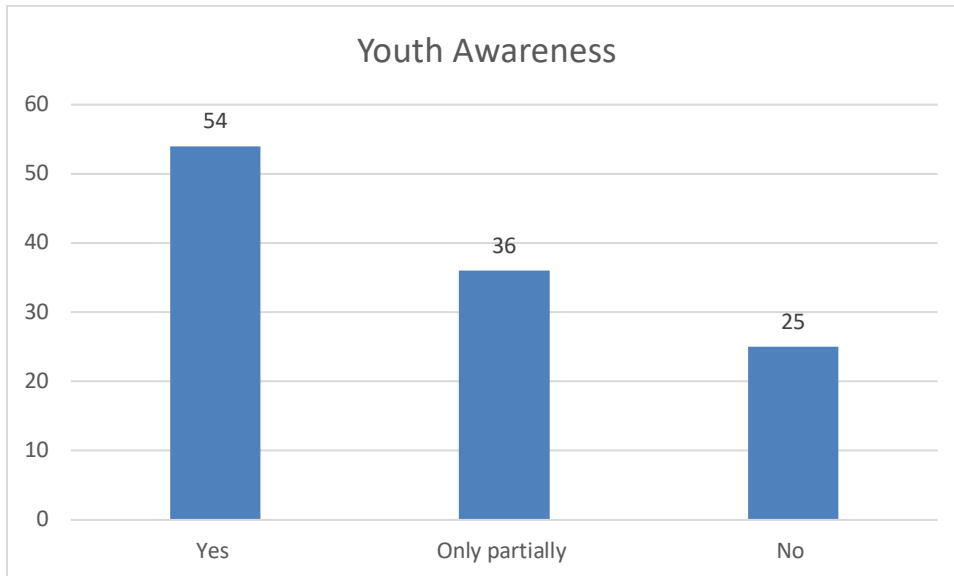
F. Relevance in Modern Society

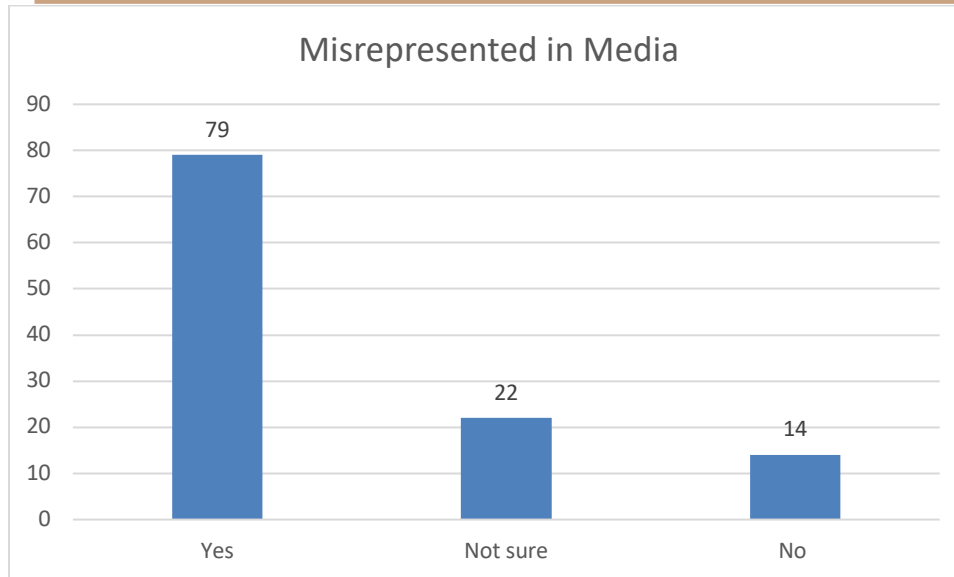
The majority of respondents (83.5%) believed that Sanatana Dharma is still relevant in today's modern world. Another 11.3% felt it is only partially relevant, while just 5.2% considered it not relevant. These results clearly demonstrate that most people see Sanatana Dharma as a living tradition that can guide contemporary society.



G. Youth Awareness and Media Representation

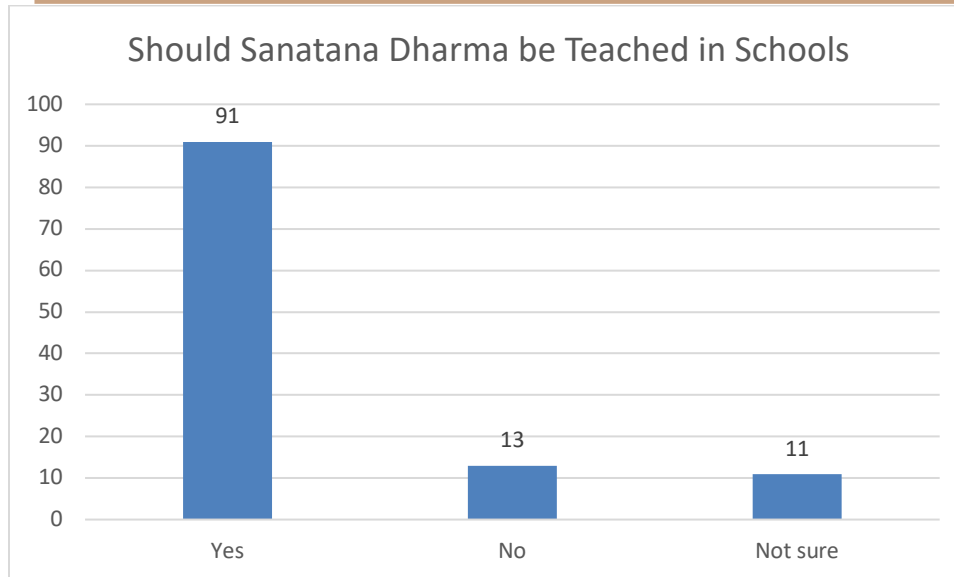
Opinions were more divided when it came to youth awareness. While 47.0% felt that young people are aware of Sanatana Dharma, 31.3% believed awareness is only partial, and 21.7% felt that the younger generation is not sufficiently aware. This shows a perceived gap in cultural transmission between generations. When asked about its portrayal in the media, 68.7% felt that Sanatana Dharma is misrepresented, 12.2% disagreed, and 19.1% were unsure. This highlights a concern among the public about how Sanatana Dharma is shown in public debates and mass communication.





H. Teaching Sanatana Dharma in Schools

Finally, respondents were asked whether Sanatana Dharma should be taught in schools as a subject. A strong 79.1% said 'Yes', while 11.3% said 'No' and 9.6% were unsure. This indicates broad support for including Sanatana Dharma in the education system as a way to strengthen cultural knowledge among future generations.



I. Reflections and Open-ended Responses

The open-ended questions provided personal insights. When asked to define Sanatana Dharma in their own words, many respondents associated it with truth, moral values, spirituality, and eternal traditions. In their final reflections, people emphasized messages such as “live with morality and compassion,” “respect all beings,” and “preserve culture and spirituality for future generations.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight how Sanatana Dharma is perceived and lived by ordinary people in contemporary India. Almost all respondents had heard of the term, and most associated it with their families and community life, confirming earlier studies that emphasized the role of traditional institutions in transmitting dharmic values (Adrija Roychowdhury, 2023); (Zavos, 2001). A large majority recognized Sanatana Dharma as the foundation of Hinduism and described it as eternal in origin. This aligns with classical writings that frame Sanatana Dharma not as a historical religion but as a timeless moral and spiritual path.

When asked about its essence, respondents placed spirituality and God-realization at the center, followed by morality, values, and cultural practices. These views resonate with philosophical interpretations that link Sanatana Dharma to the pursuit of liberation (moksha) and to everyday righteous conduct (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024). The high percentage of people reporting practices such as daily prayer, celebrating festivals, and ethical living shows that Sanatana Dharma is not only a belief but also an active part of social and family routines.

At the same time, concerns emerged around youth awareness. While nearly half of the participants felt the younger generation is aware, the rest either considered awareness partial or lacking. This points to a possible gap in cultural continuity, echoing calls in the literature for more structured education and awareness programs (Mitra, 2025). Strong support for introducing Sanatana Dharma as a subject in schools (79%) reflects a desire to formalize its teaching so that knowledge is not lost with modernization. Another striking result is that nearly 69% of respondents believe Sanatana Dharma is misrepresented in media. This mirrors scholarly debates about how public and political discourse often narrows or distorts its inclusive and universal character. Such findings show the need for balanced communication and responsible representation of cultural traditions.

Overall, the study confirms that Sanatana Dharma remains highly relevant in modern society. It continues to guide people spiritually and morally while also shaping cultural identity. Yet, challenges remain in ensuring accurate representation and transmitting this heritage to future generations. In conclusion, this research makes two important contributions. First, it documents how ordinary Indians not just scholars or religious leaders understand Sanatana Dharma, showing widespread recognition of its spiritual

and ethical foundations. Second, it highlights contemporary concerns, especially about generational awareness and media portrayal. By presenting public opinion in simple descriptive form, this study adds a valuable perspective to the academic literature, which has often focused more on scriptures and ideologies. The voices captured here underline both the resilience of Sanatana Dharma and the responsibility to preserve and communicate it faithfully for the future.

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