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"Hinglaj Mata and the Politics of Memory: Myth, Territory, and Cultural Continuity Beyond Borders"

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Abstract

This paper explores the enduring significance of Devi Hinglaj, one of the most revered Shakti Peethas, located in present-day Balochistan, Pakistan, and its role as a living testament to South Asia's interconnected civilizational heritage. Through analysis of oral traditions, ritual continuities, and cultural symbolism particularly as preserved by the Brahui people—this study demonstrates how Hinglaj functions as a trans-border civilizational marker that challenges contemporary territorial, political, and communal binaries. The research reveals how indigenous memory, ethnographic insights, and comparative sacred geography preserve pluralistic traditions despite systematic institutional erasure. Drawing from museological critique, the paper interrogates the omission of Hinglaj from official memory projects in both India and Pakistan, arguing that such exclusions reflect broader patterns of territorialized nationalism in cultural curation. The study contends that Hinglaj embodies a syncretic sacred ecology that has resisted both homogenization and obliteration, offering a living archive of South Asia's pluralistic and interconnected pasts that transcends modern political boundaries.

Keywords

Hinglaj Mata • Brahui tribe • Shakti Peeth • Balochistan • cultural preservation • myth and culture

Introduction

Balochistan, a region largely peripheral to the modern Indian historical imagination, stands as a land layered with civilizational transitions, a site where myth, memory, and history coexist in dynamic tension. Amidst its desert plains and the Makran coast lies the Hinglaj Mata temple, a rare and powerful testament to the pre-Islamic Indic consciousness still breathing in parts of today's Pakistan. This sacred site serves as a lens through which to examine broader questions of cultural continuity, memory preservation, and the politics of heritage in our fractured contemporary world.

This article situates Devi Hinglaj in the heart of cultural resilience, reflecting on how sacred memory survives violent transitions, from colonial disruptions to religious homogenization, and ultimately challenges the territorial nationalism that governs much of contemporary cultural discourse. It also considers how historical preservation and the narrative selection in

official histories often marginalize such sacred spaces, thereby creating a hierarchy of remembrance that privileges certain forms of cultural expression over others. The central argument of this paper is that Hinglaj Mata represents not merely a religious site, but a living epistemology that embodies South Asia's pluralistic heritage and offers a model for understanding how cultural memory transcends political boundaries. The land of Balochistan serves as testimony to the remnants of the earliest occupation by peoples who came to be acknowledged as the Brahui tribe, a Dravidian-speaking clan intricately related to the Dravidian-speaking peoples of south India. This linguistic anomaly, a Dravidian language spoken thousands of miles from its peninsular Indian cousins suggests deep historical connections that predate modern political formations. Archaeological investigation establishes that by the Bronze Age in 2500 BCE, Balochistan was the conclusive apex of congruous ancestry and substantial enterprise that linked this piece of territory to the Harappan civilization (Possehl, 2002). Recent archaeological evidence from sites like Mehrgarh and Nausharo supports this connection, revealing sophisticated urban planning and trade networks that extended from the Indus Valley to Central Asia (Kenoyer, 2006). This land of organic worshippers witnessed many rulers, some perhaps more merciful and accepting such as the Mauryan empire and the dharmic traditions (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010), unlike some other less considerate conquerors such as the Mongol invasions and later Islamic conquests which extended up to the 10th century, by which time the land of the Baloch was under Islamic rule and was predominantly Muslim in character (Eaton, 2000). However, on August 11th, 1947, Balochistan unquestionably entered Independent Pakistan after negotiations between Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Khan of Kalat, marking not just a political transition but a civilizational rupture that severed many cultural and religious connections with the broader Indian subcontinent. Routing back to the point where Balochistan was a part of our Indic cultural continuum, there is great wisdom in the notion of reassessing our ways of theorizing and dealing with cultural history and civility.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on South Asian sacred geographies most notably by Diana Eck, Romila Thapar, and Sheldon Pollock has established the critical importance of myth and memory in shaping both spatial imaginaries and civilizational consciousness. Eck's work on the concept of tirtha and Thapar's triadic framing of myth-memory-history provide a crucial foundation for examining sites like Hinglaj, which defy modern political boundaries yet retain enduring spiritual centrality. Recent scholarship in border studies by Willem van Schendel and postcolonial theory by Homi Bhabha further illuminates how sacred spaces operate as sites of cultural hybridity that resist state-imposed categorizations. Historians such as Gilmartin and Guha-Thakurta have also noted how postcolonial nation-states have selectively constructed heritage and memory, often effacing heterodox or trans-border sacred narratives in the process. Contemporary work by Naveeda Khan on religious boundaries and Anand Yang on pilgrimage networks demonstrates the continued relevance of transnational sacred geographies in South Asian contexts. Yet, specific studies that foreground Hinglaj's subaltern preservation through oral tradition, especially in the Brahui linguistic and cultural landscape, remain scarce. The existing museological literature similarly omits sacred sites located

outside present-day Indian territory, reinforcing a territorialized nationalism in curatorial practice that demands critical examination. This paper attempts to fill that lacuna by critically synthesizing insights from religious studies, memory studies, and museology, while also foregrounding oral narratives and ethnographic traditions as legitimate archives. While drawing from classical sources like the Puranas, this study diverges by emphasizing lived sacred geography as preserved through ritual, pilgrimage, and cultural praxis among both Hindu and Muslim communities, thereby contributing to emerging scholarship on transnational heritage preservation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and interpretative methodology, drawing from religious studies, oral history, comparative sacred geography, and museological critique. The core methodological approach treats myth and memory not simply as symbolic constructs, but as active epistemologies that preserve civilizational consciousness in the absence of formal archival recognition. Primary data sources include oral accounts collected through semi-structured interviews with pilgrims and local Brahui-speaking communities, field-based ethnographic observations conducted during pilgrimage seasons, and textual references from the Puranic corpus and regional devotional literature. While some narratives are drawn from published ethnographies and colonial-era travelogues, others stem from the author's reflexive engagement with museums and exhibitions, including systematic documentation of curatorial silences and exclusions in major institutions across India and Pakistan. To validate oral narratives, multiple sources were cross-referenced, and community elders were consulted to verify historical accounts and ritual practices. The methodology acknowledges several limitations: restricted access to certain areas due to geopolitical tensions, potential researcher bias in museum observations, and the challenge of translating oral traditions across linguistic boundaries. Ethical considerations include respecting community privacy and ensuring that documentation does not inadvertently expose vulnerable populations to unwanted attention. The study is also informed by critical museology, focusing on what is remembered, omitted, or curated in state-sponsored cultural institutions. Through comparative analysis both geographically (India, Pakistan, border zones) and discursively (sacred vs secular, memory vs archive), the paper seeks to understand how Devi Hinglaj's sacred memory persists across formal and informal domains of knowledge, especially when transmitted through non-elite, vernacular, and often non-literate traditions.

Dravidian Echoes in the Desert

Historical Background and Mythic Landscape The Brahui people of Balochistan speak a language that belongs to the Dravidian family, the same linguistic stock as Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam. This linguistic presence amidst predominantly Indo-Iranian speakers and at such a geographical remove from peninsular India has perplexed both linguists and historians (Krishnamurti, 2003). Recent comparative linguistic studies have identified approximately 15% vocabulary retention between Brahui and other Dravidian languages,

along with shared grammatical structures that suggest ancient connections rather than recent borrowings. The anomaly extends beyond linguistics, hinting at a deeper historical and cultural migration or continuity, possibly originating from the Indus Valley Civilization. Ethnographic observations reveal that Brahui communities maintain oral traditions that speak of ancestral connections to "the lands of the south," with migration stories that parallel similar narratives found among Tamil and Telugu communities. Elder Brahui speakers interviewed for this study consistently referenced cultural practices particularly those related to ancestor veneration and seasonal festivals that bear striking resemblances to Dravidian traditions documented in peninsular India. Archaeological findings suggest that by 2500 BCE, Balochistan had emerged as a culturally vibrant node, an extension of the Harappan economic and ritual system (Possehl, 2002). The inhabitants, likely tribal pastoralists, seem to have followed spiritual traditions deeply embedded in nature and proto-Shakta beliefs, which scholars often classify under the umbrella of "organic worship": a spiritually potent yet unorganized veneration of elemental forces like earth, fire, water, and divine feminine presence (Asher & Talbot, 2006). Recent excavations at Harappan sites in Balochistan have uncovered terracotta figurines and ritual objects that suggest continuities with later Hindu iconographic traditions. This terrain forms the sacred abode of Devi Hinglaj, a maternal figure who continues to embody the archetypal "Mata" in the regional consciousness. The Hinglaj temple is not merely an obscure pilgrimage site; it is a terrestrial sanctuary believed, according to Hindu lore, to hold the severed head of Devi Sati, who descended upon the Hingula region. Within the Shakta tradition, this desert shrine assumes immense importance as perhaps the most pivotal among the 51 Shakti Peethas (Eck, 1982), comparable in significance to Kamakhya in Assam or Vaishno Devi in Jammu. The lore recounts that Sati immolated herself following her father's rejection of her marriage to Lord Shiva. To quell Shiva's wrath, Lord Vishnu dismembered Sati's half-burnt body, scattering her organs across the subcontinent. One such fragment, her head, is believed to have landed at Hingula. The shrine, nestled near the Makran coastal mountains and nourished by the Hingol River, lends its name Hinglaj from this sacred geography. The theological enshrinement of this Shakti site represents not only devotional fervour but also an enduring sociocultural cornerstone for local survival. Known affectionately as "Nani Ka Mandir" among locals, the shrine reflects both indigenous and syncretic traditions, with Devi Hinglaj also embodying resonances of the Persian goddess Inanna, once venerated in the region's polytheistic folklore. This synthesis suggests a sophisticated process of cultural negotiation rather than simple religious replacement, offering insights into how sacred geographies adapt and persist across civilizational transitions.

A Landscape of Conquest and Conversion

Heritage, Memory, and Cultural Preservation Over the course of centuries, the Balochistan region has experienced a dynamic interplay of civilizational influences and ideological transitions, each leaving distinct imprints on the cultural landscape while simultaneously being transformed by local conditions. From the Mauryan Empire, which extended the dharmic order to the western frontiers of the subcontinent, to the incursions of the Mongols and later Islamic conquests, the

territory evolved into a cultural palimpsest where multiple religious and philosophical traditions coexisted, competed, and eventually synthesized. Figures like Emperor Ashoka envisioned a morally governed polity that could accommodate diverse religious practices within a broader ethical framework (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010), while later conquerors often imposed theological exclusivism that progressively culminated in the Islamization of Balochistan by the 10th century CE (Eaton, 2000). However, this process was neither uniform nor complete, as evidenced by the survival of pre-Islamic sacred sites and practices, often absorbed into Sufi traditions rather than entirely eliminated. The political consolidation of the region into the state of Pakistan, through the strategic negotiations between Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Khan of Kalat on 11 August 1947, signified a legal reconfiguration but also a civilizational rupture from its Indic continuum. This partition created new challenges for cultural preservation, as sacred sites that had served as unifying symbols for diverse communities now found themselves divided by international borders and subjected to different systems of heritage management and religious policy. Nonetheless, the persistent cultural memory embodied by Hinglaj Mata asserts that memory often transcends modern cartographic boundaries. Contemporary pilgrimage accounts describe devotees who travel from various parts of India and Pakistan, often facing significant bureaucratic and logistical challenges, to maintain their connection with this sacred site. These journeys represent more than religious obligation; they constitute acts of cultural resistance against the compartmentalization of shared heritage. The symbolism of Devi Hinglaj invokes a confrontation with the epistemological limitations of contemporary historical inquiry. In an era increasingly marked by scepticism toward traditional knowledge systems and cultural dilution through globalization, tradition retains the power to transcend historical ruptures and assert alternative ways of understanding identity and belonging. The marginalization of spiritual and cultural repositories raises critical concerns for scholars and cultural preservationists who may find themselves distanced both temporally and ideologically from the sites and sensibilities they seek to understand. Contemporary examples of heritage destruction from the Taliban's demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas to ISIS's destruction of Palmyra demonstrate how sacred sites become targets precisely because of their symbolic power to represent alternative forms of consciousness and community (Bennett, 1995). The passive role of modern states in protecting such sites, particularly when they challenge dominant religious or national narratives, only amplifies the precarious position of future academic engagement with civilizational legacies that transcend contemporary political boundaries. There exists a palpable disquiet among academics regarding the systematic neglect and, at times, destruction of historical artefacts and sites. The parallels between the desecration of Indic iconography and similar acts against other religious traditions in conflict-prone regions point to a global pattern of civilizational erasure. This erasure is not merely physical but also epistemic, severing communities from their historical consciousness and limiting the possibilities for cultural dialogue and understanding.To address this erosion of memory, it becomes imperative to advocate for institutional mechanisms that preserve and transmit civilizational knowledge across political boundaries. The

establishment of well-curated museums, digital archives, and collaborative research initiatives can serve not merely as sites of display but as loci of intergenerational dialogue and cross-cultural understanding (Bennett, 1995). Such spaces offer future scholars and citizens an avenue to engage with the architectural, spiritual, and artistic grandeur of the past amidst the existential flux of the present.

Hinglaj Mata

Cultural Syncretism and Theological Significance The Hinglaj Mata Temple, revered as one of the 51 Shakti Peethas in the Hindu religious tradition, is believed to enshrine the head of Goddess Sati, making it arguably the most important of all Shakti Peethas according to certain theological traditions. According to canonical Hindu mythology, Sati self-immolated in response to her father Daksha's denigration of Lord Shiva. In a state of profound grief, Shiva traversed the cosmos with Sati's corpse, threatening cosmic imbalance. To restore order, Lord Vishnu employed his Sudarshana Chakra to dismember her body, dispersing its fragments across the Indian subcontinent. Each site became a Shakti Peetha, with the head the most sacred part according to tantric traditions falling at Hingula, present-day Hinglaj located in the Makran range of Balochistan. Contemporary pilgrims describe the site's unique characteristics: uniquely devoid of a constructed roof or anthropomorphic idol, the Hinglaj shrine is nestled within the austere terrain of the Hingol River valley. Surrounded by rugged cliffs and windswept desolation, it remains a locus of syncretic devotion where the natural cave formation itself is considered the manifestation of the goddess. Recent geological surveys have identified the cave as a natural limestone formation, but for devotees, such scientific explanations pale before the site's spiritual significance. Locally known as Nani Maa, the goddess transcends formal religious boundaries, embodying a feminine divine archetype that resonates across Hindu and Sufi Muslim communities alike. Interviews with local Baloch communities reveal a complex religious landscape where Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions coexist without apparent contradiction. Among Baloch Hindus, the temple operates as a sacred nucleus of cultural identity; simultaneously, certain Sufi traditions have come to embrace her as a symbol of protective grace, some even drawing parallels between Hinglaj and the ancient Persian goddess Inanna. This interpretive syncretism reflects a deeper cultural continuum in the region, where mythologies, histories, and deities are coalesced rather than cleaved. Local Sufi poets have composed verses in honor of Hinglaj, describing her as a manifestation of divine mercy that transcends sectarian boundaries. Such poetry, often performed during regional festivals, demonstrates how sacred sites can serve as bridges between different religious communities rather than sources of division. To grasp the endurance of a Hindu shrine within the Islamic state of Pakistan, one must look beyond rigid religious frameworks imposed by modern nation-states. The temple of Devi Hinglaj serves as a mnemonic of pre-Islamic ancestry for indigenous communities in Balochistan, representing what anthropologists term "vernacular religion" spiritual practices that emerge from local needs and experiences rather than formal theological doctrine (Eaton, 2000). It

reflects a sacralized geography wherein ancestral veneration and spiritual continuity resist modern boundaries and bureaucratic classifications. The theological elasticity exhibited by local Sufism, often tolerant toward polytheistic expressions, reflects shared experiences of cultural marginalization and reverence for localized sacred sites. Sufi saints in the region historically adopted inclusive approaches that allowed for the preservation of pre-Islamic traditions within Islamic frameworks, creating a religious landscape characterized by accommodation rather than exclusion. Devi Hinglaj, considered a Kuldevi (family deity) and venerated even by Lord Rama in some regional retellings of the Ramayana, thus becomes more than a deity she emerges as an emblem of civilizational harmony, aesthetic inspiration, and sacred resilience that offers alternative models for understanding religious plurality in contemporary South Asia.

Syncretism Through the Sufi Lens and Sacred Geography

The syncretic fabric of Balochistan is deeply indebted to the mystical and devotional traditions of Sufism, which historically allowed for the veneration of saints, nature spirits, and even pre-Islamic or non-Islamic figures. Sufism in South Asia, particularly in the regions of Multan, Sindh, and Balochistan, evolved as a localised and culturally embedded form of Islam that prioritized spiritual experience over doctrinal orthodoxy. Rather than displacing indigenous belief systems through conquest or conversion, Sufi traditions often assimilated them, creating a pluralistic religious landscape that scholars now recognize as characteristic of South Asian Islam. Historical accounts from Sufi chronicles describe how early Sufi masters in Balochistan actively engaged with local religious traditions, learning from indigenous spiritual practices while simultaneously introducing Islamic concepts of monotheism and prophetic guidance. This process of mutual influence created hybrid forms of religious expression that combined Islamic theological frameworks with pre-Islamic ritual practices and sacred geographies. It is within this context that the continued existence of a Hindu pilgrimage site like Hinglaj can be understood not as an exception requiring special explanation, but as a testament to shared sacredness and communal memory preserved through centuries of cultural negotiation. The Sufi concept of wahdat al-wujud (unity of being) provided theological justification for recognizing divine presence in multiple forms and locations, allowing for the incorporation of sites like Hinglaj into broader Islamic spiritual landscapes. The spiritual resonance of Hinglaj is evident in the poetic oeuvre of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, one of Sindh's most revered Sufi poets, who immortalized the goddess in allegorical verses that captured her charisma and layered significance (Kalhoro, 2018). Through Bhittai's compositions, particularly in his epic "Risalo," Hinglaj is transformed from a specifically Hindu deity into a symbol of regional unity and spiritual aspiration that transcends narrow religious identity. His verses describe the arduous pilgrimage to Hinglaj as a metaphor for the soul's journey toward divine realization, using imagery that resonates with both Islamic and Hindu mystical traditions. Contemporary performances of Bhittai's poetry in Sindhi and Balochi communities demonstrate how such literary works continue to

serve as vehicles for cultural preservation and interfaith dialogue. Musicians and storytellers who perform these compositions often emphasize themes of universal spirituality and cultural harmony, using Hinglaj as a symbol of shared heritage rather than religious difference. Pilgrimage to Hinglaj, undertaken by devotees across faiths, is more than a ritual act; it is a civilizational journey of remembrance and reclamation that challenges contemporary understandings of religious boundaries. Traversing arid landscapes for days on foot, pilgrims reenact the yatra traditions of peninsular India while simultaneously participating in forms of devotional practice that resonate with Islamic concepts of hajj and ziyarat. These journeys often involve multi-religious groups where Hindu and Muslim pilgrims share resources, exchange stories, and participate in collective rituals that emphasize common spiritual goals over doctrinal differences. Yet these acts of devotion are not solely religious in character. The geography surrounding the temple, especially the Makran range, functions as a geopolitical palimpsest, bearing witness to both erasures and survivals of spiritual traditions predating modern state formations. The landscape becomes both literal and metaphorical: a mountain of resistance against homogenized historical narratives that seek to reduce complex cultural realities to simple categories of religious or national identity. Recent ethnographic work with pilgrimage groups reveals how participants often describe their journey to Hinglaj as a form of cultural activism—a way of asserting the continued relevance of pluralistic traditions in an era of increasing religious polarization. In its continued reverence, Hinglaj embodies a fluid, multi-religious, feminized past that endures through ritual, oral traditions, poetry, and embodied memory, offering alternative models for understanding how sacred sites can serve as bridges rather than barriers between different communities.

Selective Memory and Marginalised Histories

History, though often framed as a subject of the past, remains an active arena of contention constantly re-examined, reinterpreted, and reshaped by scholars who seek to assert one narrative over another. This seismic field of inquiry, where acquired knowledge is both studied and challenged, drives the evolution of a nation's self-perception and collective memory. In this dynamic process, history is not relegated to the margins; rather, it walks alongside the present, shaping identities, conflicts, and cultural understanding in profound ways. While we all study history during our formative school years, it's curious how selectively we elevate certain historical figures to the pedestal of heroism. Those who expanded empires or left behind grand political legacies often make it into textbooks, their stories immortalized in comics, cinema, and commemorations. Official curricula tend to privilege rulers and conquerors whose achievements can be easily quantified in terms of territorial expansion, military victories, or architectural monuments. Yet many others who perhaps did not reign over vast dominions but who fiercely defended their homelands, nurtured their communities, and resisted invasions at the frontiers remain unsung, forgotten in the national memory. Local chiefs, community leaders, cultural preservationists, and spiritual guides often played crucial roles in maintaining cultural

continuity during periods of upheaval, yet their contributions are systematically marginalized in dominant historical narratives. If we only dared to dig deeper beneath the official scripts and imperial glorifications, we would uncover countless figures whose courage, resilience, and regional leadership lit fires of resistance across landscapes now muted by the march of time. Their absence from popular history speaks not of their insignificance but of the silence imposed by centralized narratives that privilege certain forms of power and achievement over others. This selective remembering has particular implications for understanding sites like Hinglaj Mata, which exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized categories: they are religious rather than political, local rather than imperial, syncretic rather than orthodox, and transnational rather than nationally contained. Such sites challenge the neat categories that govern most historical discourse, requiring more nuanced approaches to cultural preservation and historical understanding. Contemporary scholarship in subaltern studies has begun to address these gaps by foregrounding voices and perspectives that have been systematically excluded from dominant narratives (Thapar, 2013). However, much work remains to be done in developing methodologies that can adequately capture and preserve forms of cultural knowledge that exist primarily in oral traditions, ritual practices, and embodied memory. To remember these marginalized figures and sites is not just to honor the past but to reclaim a fuller, more complex inheritance that can inform contemporary approaches to cultural diversity, interfaith dialogue, and transnational cooperation. The preservation of sites like Hinglaj thus becomes part of a broader project of historical recovery that seeks to democratize memory and create space for multiple forms of cultural expression.

Contemporary Challenges and Digital Preservation

In our current digital age, the preservation of sites like Hinglaj faces both new opportunities and unprecedented challenges. Recent geopolitical tensions between India and Pakistan have made physical access to the site increasingly difficult for many pilgrims, while climate change threatens the physical integrity of the natural cave formation that houses the shrine. Digital documentation projects, including 3D mapping, oral history archives, and virtual pilgrimage platforms, offer potential solutions for preserving and sharing access to Hinglaj's cultural significance. However, such initiatives require unprecedented levels of international cooperation and resource sharing that transcend current political divisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the vulnerability of pilgrimage traditions that depend on physical presence and communal gathering. Many religious communities have had to adapt their practices to digital formats, raising important questions about the relationship between physical and virtual sacred space.

8. Museology and the Preservation of History

History is not merely what is written; it is also what is seen, felt, and embodied. In this regard, museums serve as critical repositories of civilizational memory which

might be described as living graves preserving the tangible and intangible traces of cultures, communities, and belief systems. They allow for a sensory engagement with the past, enabling a collective remembering that extends beyond the textual and creates opportunities for immersive cultural education. However, across much of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in conflict-prone or geopolitically marginalized regions, the infrastructure for heritage preservation remains weak or altogether absent. This gap is particularly pronounced for sites that exist across international borders or that represent religious traditions not aligned with dominant national narratives. Prominent institutions such as the Indian National Museum in New Delhi, the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad, and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai stand as vital examples of conservation efforts, housing extensive collections that represent diverse aspects of South Asian cultural heritage. Yet, even these well-established institutions struggle to fully represent the vast, pluralistic, and often fragmented civilizational mosaic of the region, particularly when it comes to transnational heritage sites. A systematic survey of major museums in both India and Pakistan reveals significant gaps in the representation of shared cultural heritage (Bennett, 1995). Sacred sites and artefacts located in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan many of which hold profound religious and cultural significance for communities on both sides of the border remain largely absent from Indian museum collections, while Pakistani institutions similarly underrepresent the Hindu and Buddhist heritage of their territory. This mutual exclusion reflects broader patterns of cultural nationalism that prioritize heritage elements that support contemporary political narratives while marginalizing those that suggest historical complexity or shared identity. The result is a fragmented understanding of South Asian civilization that impoverishes cultural education and limits possibilities for regional cooperation. Sacred sites and artefacts located in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan many of which hold profound religious and cultural significance remain largely inaccessible to scholars and devotees from India, while facing constant threats of neglect or deliberate destruction. This reality underscores the urgency of institutionalizing preservation efforts through innovative and collaborative mechanisms that can transcend political boundaries. Transnational heritage partnerships offer promising avenues for conservation through digital archiving, oral history documentation, and cross-border cultural treaties designed to protect and share vulnerable sites such as Hinglaj. These frameworks could bridge national boundaries and ideological divides in the shared pursuit of safeguarding a collective past, creating models for cultural cooperation that could be applied to other contested heritage sites globally. Recent successful examples include the UNESCO-sponsored digitization of manuscripts from Timbuktu and collaborative archaeological projects in the Mediterranean that involve multiple nations. Such initiatives demonstrate that heritage preservation can serve as a foundation for diplomatic engagement and mutual understanding, even in contexts of political tension. Preservation, in essence, is a rigorous process of critical assessment and contextual interpretation, carried out by trained experts in archaeology, conservation, and cultural studies. It provides communities with a meaningful connection to their historical inheritance, transforming passive memory into active

knowledge and creating opportunities for intergenerational dialogue about cultural identity and values. Museums, in their totality, function not only as spaces of remembrance but also as arenas of ideological negotiation (Bennett, 1995). They become sites where history is interpreted, politicized, and mobilized, often informing contemporary debates around identity, governance, and international relations. Curatorial decisions about what to include, exclude, or emphasize carry profound implications for how communities understand themselves and their relationships with others. In this sense, the preservation of historical artefacts and sacred spaces is not just about the past; it is deeply embedded in the shaping of present and future discourses about cultural diversity, religious plurality, and regional cooperation. The way we choose to remember and represent sites like Hinglaj will influence how future generations understand the possibilities for peaceful coexistence and cultural dialogue in South Asia and beyond.

Rediscovering Forgotten Figures

The marginalization of sites like Hinglaj Mata parallels the historical neglect of numerous other figures and traditions that challenge dominant narratives of cultural and political development. Understanding these parallel cases helps illuminate the broader patterns of selective memory that shape contemporary historical consciousness. Rani Abbaka Chowta of Ullal was a formidable queen who resisted Portuguese colonial forces for four decades, demonstrating remarkable military strategy and political acumen. Her rule in the Tulunadu region of Karnataka stands as a feminist assertion of leadership in a patriarchal, colonial backdrop, yet her contributions find little space in national-level curricula despite her obvious relevance to discussions of resistance, gender, and regional autonomy. Similarly, Suhal Dev, the King of Shravasti, fiercely fought the Ghaznavid General Salar Masud in the Battle of Bahraich, leading a confederation of local rulers in one of the most significant early resistance movements against Turkic invasions. While his defiance holds deep regional importance and demonstrates sophisticated military cooperation among Indian rulers, his name is often absent from the grand national imagination that tends to focus on later, more centralized forms of resistance. In the same vein, the mythic memory of Devi Hinglaj, nestled deep within Balochistan's rugged terrain, has been pushed to the margins not by lack of reverence among devotees, but by dominant political and religious paradigms that find discomfort in acknowledging pre-Islamic sacred geographies that transcend contemporary borders and ideological categories. Like Abbaka Chowta and Suhal Dev, Hinglaj Mata survives not through institutional recognition or state sponsorship, but through oral memory, ritual practice, and cultural resilience maintained by communities who understand their significance regardless of official acknowledgment. These sacred and historical figures together form a subterranean archive of resistance, one that refuses to be fully erased despite violent attempts at homogenization and cultural simplification. The recovery of such figures and sites requires methodological innovations that can capture forms of historical significance that do not conform to conventional categories of political or military

achievement. It also demands institutional changes that can accommodate more pluralistic approaches to heritage preservation and cultural education.

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

Based on this analysis, several concrete steps emerge for better preserving and understanding transnational heritage sites like Hinglaj Mata:

Institutional Mechanisms:

- Establishment of Indo-Pakistani Heritage Preservation Committee with rotating leadership and shared funding
- Creation of digital archives accessible to researchers and communities on both sides of the border
- Development of virtual pilgrimage platforms that can maintain spiritual connections when physical access is restricted

Educational Initiatives:

- Integration of transnational heritage sites into history curricula in both countries
- Support for comparative religious studies programs that examine syncretic traditions
- Funding for ethnographic documentation of oral traditions before they are lost

Diplomatic Frameworks:

- Cultural exchange agreements that facilitate scholarly access to heritage sites
- Joint archaeological expeditions and conservation projects
- International heritage protection treaties that transcend bilateral political tensions

Community Engagement:

- Support for local communities who serve as custodians of heritage sites
- Documentation of indigenous knowledge systems related to site maintenance and ritual practice
- Training programs for local guides and cultural interpreters

Conclusion

Why Hinglaj Matters Today Devi Hinglaj is not merely a goddess from antiquity; she represents a living epistemology, a form of civilizational consciousness that interrogates our present assumptions about identity, belonging, and cultural boundaries. Her continued veneration in Balochistan defies dominant historiographies that seek to contain cultural phenomena within neat national or religious categories, and resists the homogenizing binaries of communal narratives that have come to dominate South Asian political discourse. She stands as a spectral witness to pluralism, asserting that India's civilizational arc extends far beyond its geopolitical borders, embracing cultural imprints in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and

Central Asia that remain vital components of a shared heritage despite contemporary political divisions. Her shrine demonstrates how sacred geographies can serve as bridges between different communities rather than sources of conflict, offering models for cultural cooperation that transcend the limitations of territorial nationalism. In an era increasingly fractured by religious polarization and revisionist histories that seek to simplify complex cultural realities, Hinglaj emerges as an enduring symbol of resilience, grace, and the quiet potency of memory that refuses to be contained by contemporary political categories. Her shrine does not merely mark a sacred geography; it articulates a philosophy that authentic identity must evolve from shared legacies and mutual recognition rather than exclusionary nationalism or religious fundamentalism. To honour her legacy is to defend the intangible heritage that undergirds civilization: to protect myths that encode collective wisdom, archive memory that preserves alternative ways of understanding community, and recognise that it is tradition not tyranny that gives civilizations their soul and their capacity for renewal (Thapar, 2013). The preservation of sites like Hinglaj thus becomes part of a broader commitment to cultural democracy and interfaith dialogue. The mythos surrounding Hinglaj is not a static relic to be preserved in museums, but a dynamic cultural archive that continues to evolve through contemporary engagement, a continuum carried across generations through oral traditions, ritual practices, and performative memory that adapts to new circumstances.

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