

8 Hindu worship online and offline

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At the heart of any consideration of religious ritual practice online is the extent to which a ritual in its online manifestation has undergone an alteration from the corresponding ritual carried out in its traditional context. Such an assessment is necessary in order to approach important sociological questions regarding whether and in what ways the Internet is affecting both religious practices and religious experiences. In addition, it is necessary to investigate issues concerning the validity or efficacy of rituals that are undertaken via the Internet. If a ritual appears to be transformed online but it is still deemed to be acceptable, then it suggests that the ritual itself has not changed significantly and that there are unlikely to be fundamental changes in the religious experience that it gives rise to.

In light of this, I adopt a comparative approach in the following discussion of Hindu worship online – an especially important topic since, as Christopher Helland notes, “many members of the Hindu tradition have embraced the Internet ... as a valuable (and viable) tool for doing their religion” (Helland 2010: 148). In my investigation, I will focus upon the *pūjā* ritual. *Pūjā* means worship and it involves making a number of offerings to a deity. These rites are variable but each sequence of procedures constitutes a ritual which is commonly referred to as a *pūjā*. Therefore, in my discussion, *pūjā* will refer to Hindu worship in general, while “a *pūjā*” or “the *pūjā*” will refer specifically to a ritual that consists of a number of acts. Details regarding such rituals will be introduced shortly.

Prior to this, a brief note regarding the nature of ritual is required. As Stephen Jacobs (2007) points out, defining ritual is extremely problematic, and consequently there is no agreement upon what constitutes ritual activity. However, Ronald Grimes’s observation that “All ritual ... is addressed to human participants and uses a technique which attempts to re-structure and integrate the minds and emotions of the actors” (Grimes 1990: 196 in O’Leary 2004: 56) is a useful benchmark that can be used in order to differentiate between ritual and non-ritual activity, albeit with an important caveat in the case of Hinduism. Unlike in other religious traditions, in Hindu worship the presence of others is important (see Gupta 2002: 37) and so there is no attempt to integrate the minds of the various individuals who are participating in the ritual.

There can be little doubt, however, that the performance of a *pūjā* is an attempt to restructure the mind and emotions of its practitioner and few, if any, would argue that a *pūjā* is not a ritual. Therefore, in my discussion, and in line

with other authorities (e.g. Eck 1985), a traditional *puja* carried out in the offline context will simply be accepted as being a ritual. Furthermore, for the purposes of comparison with an online *puja*, I will assume that a *puja* conducted in a physical environment is successful in bringing about the restructuring of the minds and emotions of devotees and that this restructuring constitutes a religious experience.

Case study: *puja* offline and online

Although it encompasses a diverse array of beliefs and practices, Hinduism has a number of “prototypical” features (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 301) – one of which is *puja*. A *puja* is a ritual performed regularly by millions of Hindus in which an image or *murti* believed to be the embodied form of a god or goddess is worshipped. During a traditional *puja*, which can be undertaken in temples and at shrines (including those within the home), a devotee is able to interact with the deity by way of the *murti*. Simple or elaborate offerings are made (sometimes mediated by *pujaris* or priests), which can include flowers and food. Consequently, depending upon the scale of the ritual, a worshipper’s senses are stimulated to different degrees.

In a complex *puja*, the clashing of cymbals, the beating of drums, and the blowing of conch shells can all be heard. Edible *prasad* or consecrated food satisfies the sense of taste, while incense stimulates a devotee’s sense of smell. Incense is likely to be used even in a simple form of the ritual, but the key feature that links the most elaborate temple ritual and the most basic one undertaken at a wayside shrine or in the home is that of *darshan*. A prototypical feature of Hinduism in its own right, *darshan* is an integral part of *puja*. It involves a devotee gazing into the eyes of the *murti* and, at the same time, being seen by the deity. As Gwilym Beckerlegge puts it: “an exchange takes place through the eyes, and devotees may feel that they have been granted a vision of the deity or have experienced the divine, favored glance” (Beckerlegge 2001: 62).

The facility to perform a *puja* via the Internet has been available for more than a decade. Various websites, whether associated with or unconnected to Hindu temples, offer an image of a deity, and typically, while devotees gaze at this image (often from the comfort of their own homes), they can use a mouse or other navigation device in order to set in motion animated versions of some of the processes that are carried out in a traditional *puja*. Thus, for example, clicking upon the relevant icon will result in the appearance of flowers, which settle in front of the deity’s image. In addition, the website may offer religious music or sacred chanting to accompany the image of the deity on the screen. An individual who conducts the ritual in this way is performing an online *puja*, a term not to be confused with the ordering of a *puja* online, which results in worship being carried out on a devotee’s behalf at a physical temple.

An example of an opportunity to conduct an online *puja* can be found on the official website of the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi, an important Indian pilgrimage city roughly halfway between Delhi and Kolkata. Vishwanath is a name used to refer to the god Shiva in Varanasi, and this temple is the preeminent

one to Shiva in this city, which is especially associated with the worship of this pan-Indian deity. It is also one of the most important Hindu temples in India. The image made available for online *puja* on the Vishwanath temple’s website (see www.shrikashivishwanath.org/en/online/epooja.aspx) is that of the *lingam*, the symbol of Shiva, which is housed in the temple’s inner sanctum and which is the focus of conventional offline devotional activity for Vishwanath. Although the *lingam* is a non-anthropomorphic symbol of the deity, which means that it does not feature human-like eyes, it can still facilitate the process of *darshan*. Indeed, according to the Temple Trust, *darshan* of the *lingam* “confers liberation from the bondages of *maya* [illusion] and the inexorable entanglements of the world. A simple glimpse of the [*lingam*] is a soul-cleansing experience that transforms life and puts it on the path of knowledge and *bhakti* [devotion]” (Shri Kashi Vishwanath Mandir n.d.).

A Hindu devotee, or even a curious non-Hindu – unlike in the case of worship directed toward the physical *lingam* situated within the temple, which is usually off limits to non-Hindus – can freely perform an online *puja* to Vishwanath. While gazing upon the image of the *lingam*, an individual can begin the online *puja* by clicking on the first button visible on the screen above this symbol of the god, which sets off the chanting of *Om Namah Shivaya* – a *mantra*, or sacred phrase, in praise of Shiva. Clicking on further buttons gives rise to a number of animated actions such as the pouring of milk over the *lingam* and the sprinkling of leaves associated with the worship of Shiva upon this deity’s symbol. In each case, hands appear on the screen which carry out these processes. The appearance on the screen of smoking incense, which sways from side to side in front of the *lingam*, completes the practical processes that constitute the online *puja* to Vishwanath.

Discussion

While during a *puja* to Vishwanath in the physical temple’s inner sanctum corresponding acts of worship to those that are simulated online will also occur, there is clearly a vast difference between the online *puja* and one carried out within the temple. For example, the former constitutes a solitary exercise with little sense stimulation, while bustle, noise and smells will accompany the latter. Some of the stark differences between online worship and Hindu worship performed in a traditional setting are mentioned by Brenda Brasher, who at the outset of *Give Me That Online Religion* (2004; first published in 2001) briefly compares *puja* undertaken at a physical temple with that carried out via the Internet. She points to the fact that in the latter case, there is no journey to or waiting time at the physical site, that there is no interaction with fellow devotees, and that online *puja* can be carried out at one’s own convenience (Brasher 2004: 4–5). She further highlights that, online, full stimulation of the human sensorium no longer occurs. For example, the odor of flowers and fruits is absent. Because of this, she concludes that undertaking online *puja* is a “profoundly different religious experience” (Brasher 2004: 4) to performing *puja* in the traditional offline context.

In coming to her conclusion, Brasher compares only the outward features of *puja* carried out at a temple with those of online *puja*. She is certainly correct to highlight the fact that the absence in online *puja* of many of the sensual aspects that are a part of traditional *puja* constitutes a major difference. However, she does not consider in detail fundamental aspects of *puja* that may lead to the conclusion that the difference between online worship and that carried out in the traditional manner is not as significant as she makes out. Furthermore, there are issues regarding the Hindu notion of purity that also need to be taken into account in a consideration of online *puja*.

The need for a more sophisticated analysis of online Hindu worship than that provided by Brasher has been alluded to by Joanne Waghorne (2004). In her book *Diaspora of the Gods*, Waghorne investigates issues surrounding the construction of Hindu temples in India and elsewhere by middle-class Hindus. Online *pujas* are not therefore her concern. However, in the final paragraph of the book, Waghorne unexpectedly mentions that she is "left wondering what kind of sacrality will accrue to the temples in cyberspace with their virtual *pujas*" (Waghorne 2004: 241). Recently, this issue has been explored by Nicole Karapanagiotis (2010), while in my own work I have attempted to provide detailed analyses of online Hindu worship that take into account the nature of *puja* and its central element of *darshan* (see Scheffinger 2008, 2010a). In the light of these developments, it is now possible to assess more fully the possible implications of *puja* conducted by way of the Internet.

The sacrality of the environment

Regardless of whether a *puja* is carried out in a temple or directed to a deity housed in a shrine in the home, the environment is necessarily kept clean and marked off as being pure and sacred. Therefore, questions regarding the ways in which the online *puja* environment differs from the essential sacred environment where the conventional form of the ritual is carried out are important. If sacrality cannot be achieved in the new venue, then the efficacy or capacity to produce the desired effect of the ritual in giving rise to a religious experience is threatened. In her study, which takes into account the views of devotees of the Hindu god Vishnu, Karapanagiotis (2010) explains that devotees assert that there is no reason why the deity cannot inhabit cyberspace, but that some are concerned with issues regarding purity. For example, the computer itself which facilitates online *puja* is associated with secular activities such as work, while the webpage which contains the image of the deity may also feature non-religious images such as advertisements.

Karapanagiotis refers only to devotees' reservations concerning non-religious images sharing the screen with an image of Vishnu and inappropriate material stored within the computer, but I suspect that at least some of her informants were actually voicing concerns regarding material considered impure (pornography is mentioned as being especially problematic) which is present in the shared environment of cyberspace (see Karapanagiotis 2010: 183–85). Otherwise,

simply accessing a webpage that offers the opportunity to undertake an online *puja* that does not feature non-religious images – as in the case of the online *puja* to Vishwanath described above – would overcome any threats to impurity accruing from Vishnu's presence in cyberspace. However, Karapanagiotis herself states that many devotees "believe that both cyberspace and the computer are problematic places for housing Vishnu" (2010: 180). Regardless, what is clear is that devotees have genuine concerns regarding the sacrality of the new environment in which *Vishnu* is housed. This also poses a danger to the mental purity required of devotees in order to conduct an efficacious *puja*. In contrast, the sacred environment associated with physical shrines and traditional temples specifically encourages such a state of mind.

Although some devotees express reservations regarding the purity of the online *puja* environment, there are a number of ways in which "Vishnu's cyber-altar can be spatially purified and his worship online made more easily generative of mental purity" (Karapanagiotis 2010: 189). Strategies employed by Karapanagiotis's informants in order to purify the cyber-altar include making sure that the computer and the immediate area around it is clean, playing devotional music, closing computer windows extraneous to the *puja*, restarting the computer prior to the commencement of the ritual, keeping the computer away from items associated with work, and placing the computer on an altar (Karapanagiotis 2010: 190–91). In addition, there is the popular idea, present in devotional literature and in oral traditions, that any problems concerning purity associated with the worship of Vishnu can be overcome if the devotee approaches this activity with a pure heart (Karapanagiotis 2010: 192–93).

Since there is a prevalent belief within Hinduism that Hindu gods and goddesses cannot themselves be affected by perceived impurity, and that instead it is the environment in which they dwell that becomes adversely affected if a person considered to be impure approaches the *murti* (Hamilton 1998: 72), any fears that devotees may have regarding the state of purity of the environment of cyberspace in general are also assuaged. In addition, the notion that gods and goddesses cannot be affected by impurity means that the location of an image of a deity in cyberspace can actually have a positive impact, in the view of some Hindus, when it comes to issues surrounding the notion of purity. For example, there is the belief that because they do not enter a shared physical space, those individuals who undertake an online *puja* without first undergoing the necessary purification rites do not have a negative impact on the sacred environment, which can subsequently affect the ability of other devotees to foster a pure attitude conducive to worship (see Scheffinger 2009: 284; 2010b: 336–38).

Core characteristics of puja

In addition to the concept of purity not being fatal to the efficacy of an online *puja*, it is important to note that while this form of the ceremony is indeed very different from one carried out in a traditional setting, the central aspect of the ritual remains. Because the replication of deities within Hinduism is unproblematic

(see Pocock 1973: 89–92), as is the mediation of sacred images via the screen (see Herman 2010: 158; Scheffinger 2010b: 333), the practice of *darshan* – the key feature of *pūjā* – can be successfully mediated via the Internet. While the other senses may not be stimulated in the way that they are when conducting a *pūjā* in the offline setting, the importance of the sense of sight remains in an online *pūjā*. In both cases, a devotee is able to see and be seen by the deity. Therefore, in this crucial respect, the *pūjā* is not altered radically in its online form.

Because the processes that are carried out in a traditional *pūjā* are symbolic, the fact that in the corresponding online ritual physical props are not used means that further fundamental aspects of *pūjā* are not abandoned online (see Scheffinger 2008: 246). Indeed, in Hinduism, the acceptance of the idea that a *pūjā* ritual is symbolic is made explicit through the existence of a type of *pūjā* in which “the physical form [of the deity] is carefully mentally reconstructed, with such rituals as libations and flower offerings being exactly performed in the virtual reality inside the head” (Smith 2003: 144). Any abbreviation associated with the practicing of an online *pūjā* is also unproblematic. It does not interfere with the ritual’s efficacy because “ritual abbreviation and simplification are ubiquitous procedures that are allowed by the [Hindu sacred] texts themselves” (Fuller 1992: 246).

Conclusion

I have shown that threats to the sacrality of the online *pūjā* environment can be overcome, that the ability to partake in the core practice of *darshan* remains in online worship, and that a *pūjā* is symbolic, which means that the omission of certain aspects of a *pūjā* in its online form is unproblematic. This suggests that an online *pūjā* is a valid and efficacious form of a ritual that is central to Hinduism, which in turn provides an explanation as to why many Hindus are using the Internet in order to conduct worship. It also indicates that performing an online *pūjā* does not constitute a fundamentally different experience from the carrying out of worship in a traditional setting. Of course, there are noteworthy differences between a *pūjā* carried out at a temple and one undertaken online, but the important point is that crucial aspects remain. Furthermore, if a comparison is made between an online *pūjā* and a basic one carried out at a shrine, then the contrast is less marked, while the differences between an online *pūjā* and a *pūjā* performed in the mind are minimal. In short, Hindu *pūjā* rituals that are performed online are not fundamentally different from traditional forms of the ritual and hence possess efficacy.

Discussion questions

- To what extent can computer space be considered sacred space, and acceptable for conducting religious rituals?
- In your opinion, can a deity inhabit or be connected with online? How might this perception impact the devotee’s practice of the ritual?
- Do you think the ability to practice religion online has the potential to radically affect various religious traditions? If so, in what ways?

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