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Ritualdynamik

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics

and the Dimensions
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(VIRTUALLY) BEEN THERE, (VIRTUALLY) DONE THAT:

EXAMINING THE ONLINE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF THE HINDU TRADITION – INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER HELLAND

At the 2009 American Academy of Religion, Phyllis K. Herman brought together a panel of experts to look specifically at online Hinduism. In a world that continues to become more "wired", India is a global powerhouse in computer development and the IT sector. The advancements the country has made in developing computer technology and supporting the rapid expansion of a global communications medium are now becoming assimilated into the spiritual and religious practices of the Hindu tradition. Despite a significant digital divide within the country, online religious activity within Hinduism is flourishing. Religious pundits and priests are working closely with computer scientists and developers, blending technology and spirituality in such a way as to push the very boundaries of "doing" religion and even "being" religious in the 21st century.

The assimilation of computer technology into the religious practices of Hinduism is a social and cultural progression that has long been at work in India, uniting modern media, technological practices, and lifestyles with an ancient religious tradition. India has often been characterized as a country of contradictions – and the blending of cutting edge online activity with a deeply embodied and ritualistic form of devotional practice is certainly a contradiction. Yet for more and more practitioners, online religious activity is becoming a significant component of their overall religious life. The goal of the AAR panel was to identify these emerging practices, explore these contradictions, and explain why so many members of the Hindu tradition have embraced the Internet and the WWW as a valuable (and viable) tool for doing their religion. Each of the following three papers addresses this issue from different perspectives and all of the authors did extensive fieldwork "off-line", conducting detailed ethnographies, interviewing practitioners, and engaging with the Hindu tradition in the "real" world as well as the virtual realm.

Herman's paper *"Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Darshan and Virtual Religious Experience"* examines the shifts and transitions that have occurred in darshan that now allow for the divine to be experienced online. Her work involved interviews and ongoing dialogue with the devotees, board members, webmaster, and sadhus of the ShreeSwaminarayan Mandal (Temple) in Downey, California. It is a rich exploration of how a website and online manifestation of darshan (e-darshan) has developed into a powerful connection between the temple, the devotee, and the god.

Through detailed fieldwork and interviews, **Nicole Karapanagiotis** *"Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual Sollutions"*, explores how the Vaishnava Hindu tradition conceptualize the secularness and sacredness of cyberspace. In order to worship Vishnu online, practitioners have had to overcome a powerful contradiction – the computer as a sacred and pure altar fit for the worship of the god despite the computer and cyberspace also being a mundane tool filled and overflowing with the secular. Her paper is a fascinating and detailed exploration of how a religious tradition and practice can socially shape Internet technology so that it can be used to meet the religious needs of the practitioners.

Heinz Scheifinger *"Hindu Embodiment and the Internet"* was not part of the AAR panel but certainly warrants being included in this collection as he addresses the contradiction of the embodied ritual practices of Hinduism and the perceived disembodiment of online activity. Through an examination of the "greater" traditions of Hinduism he provides an insightful view of how the various Hindu philosophical and religious traditions view the body, which on the surface do not appear to support online religious activities. However, at a popular and fairly widespread level, online Hindu activity is occurring. To explore how this contradiction is negated within online ritual he provides a detailed exploration of the puja practice and darshan, demonstrating how embodiment is still a very real aspect of worship for the practitioners even if they are online.

Ongoing research examining the new forms of interconnectedness between the Internet and Hinduism are beginning to demonstrate the complex relationship between religion, the Internet, and the community by examining it within a larger cultural matrix; highlighting issues of authority and power structures, community and belief (both online and off), digital divide and exclusion, and individual religiosity against institutionalized belief systems (e.g., Helland 2007, Jacobs 2007, Scheifinger 2008). Continued exploration of online Hinduism may provide the most complex unpacking of the relationship between new media and society by exploring the full impact of a "mediascape" (Appadurai 1990) on a society and its culture. A significant number of temples in diaspora have engaged the Internet and the World Wide Web as a valuable tool for maintaining and promoting their religious tradition. This group also utilizes the Internet for philanthropy, long-distanced ritual practice at wired temples in India, and they were the first group to develop and promote virtual pilgrimages. This constellation of factors means that Hinduism may be experiencing the greatest impact of this technology upon their religious tradition.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

CHRISTOPHER HELLAND is an Associate Professor in Sociology of Religion at Dalhousie University, Canada. His Ph.D. dissertation (2004) examined various forms of online religious participation patterns and activities. His current research is examining the impact of the use of the Internet for long-distanced ritual practice and the wiring of sacred sites for virtual pilgrimage activity. For more information go to: www.FarAwaySoClose.ca

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