

Networked Devotion: Hindu Adoption of Digital Media

by

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Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Digital media prevail, determine, and shape contemporary lives and experiences, serving as an all-encompassing cultural system. Shaping modes of production and reception, digital media's publics are networked to the media's content and to each other in unique ways. Contemporary religions writ large, and Hinduism in specific, cannot escape the dominant digital culture and must negotiate their participation in it. Hindu devotion utilizes and permeates digital networks in various forms, and the number of websites and mobile applications offering Hindu content and services is constantly increasing. This study tells the story of a growing population of Hindu devotees who live and work as part of global digital and cultural networks, adjusting their religious praxis to their larger lifestyle by incorporating digital technologies and networks into their devotion. Through the case studies discussed here, devotees can be in the presence of their chosen deity, visit temples digitally, order devotional items to be delivered globally, perform domestic rituals with priests they book online, and be in an intimate relationship with their guru. Vedic Vaani, Where's My Pandit, and iBhakti are Hindu startups led by young entrepreneurs who wish to facilitate Hindu devotion for a networked public, of which they are part. Shree Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai and Sri Nage Sai Temple in Coimbatore showcase Hindu temples' utilization of digitally networked media through two very different journeys. Lastly, Sadhguru and his Isha Foundation master various digital platforms, forming and maintaining an intimate guru-disciple relationship in digital means.

Focusing on the emerging landscape of digital Hinduism, the aim of this project is to explore how devotion is dispersed, re-situated, reinterpreted, and made public via digitally networked media, and to unveil the intricate web of disparate-but-interrelated actors, which promote the use and assimilation of digital media to Hindu devotion. In order to apprehend the

various apparatuses, histories, and cultures that are entangled in this process, this project draws together interdisciplinary theoretical tools and online and offline ethnographic experiences. Tracing digital Hindu networks, and considering Hinduism in itself as a network of networks, this project highlights the ways in which digital Hinduism is integrated into a Hindu Wide Web, which connects Hindu authorities, publics, commercial entities, new technologies, and the divine. Reflecting on the specificities of the digital cultural system in which we operate, this study examines how core notions of Hindu devotion shift with and through digital media, suggesting that digital networks do not stand in the way of devotion. There is no attempt to replace traditional devotional practice, but, nonetheless, contemporary technoculture generates new ways to fulfill Hindu devotion, shifting the core notions on which it is based. In that, this study emphasizes the need to rethink—in the digital age—fundamental ideas such as intimacy, agency, presence, authority, and authenticity as critical to understanding our contemporary networked mode of being in the world.

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Notes on Transliteration

As this project is addressed to readers from various disciplines and fields of expertise, I do not use diacritical marks for Indian languages' terms and phrases. Instead, I spell names of deities, objects, and devotional practices and terms in accordance with undiacritized standard usage in English. Thus, darshan, not darśan, arati, not ārāti, and puja, not pūjā. Each Indian language word is explained in parenthesis on first appearance and italicized throughout the text. When referring to names of places, especially temples, I maintained the form of transliteration of the places themselves use. Thus, Shree Siddhivinayak Temple versus Sri Naga Sai Temple.

1. Introduction: The Hindu Wide Web

Networks are becoming the nervous system of our society, and we can expect this infrastructure to have more influence on our entire social and personal lives than did the construction of roads for the transportation of goods and people in the past.¹

Contemporary Hindu devotional praxis is hardly identifiable any longer except as a phenomenon mediated—carried forward by commerce, dispersed by new technologies, and in the process re-situated, reinterpreted and *made public*.²

On December 18, 2016, I took a photograph of a tree in Mumbai during an Uber ride, then posted it to Facebook with this caption: “My dissertation. The tree version” (figure 1). Not until later did I realize how well it visually represented my dissertation—the tree itself and the image as a whole. I did, however, immediately share it with my social, digital network. The leafless tree branches grew new kinds of leaves in the form of digital media giants, connecting people, ideas, and the Indian locale in which the tree is nestled. The Wi-Fi signal on the trunk establishes the tree as a representation of the World Wide Web, its various meanings and perceptions in this specific place.³ From there, different branches contain the logos of Apple, YouTube, Twitter, Internet Explorer, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google, and words such as “freedom,” “conversation,” “youth,” “friendship,” “adventurous,” and “determination.” At the very bottom of the tree trunk is an image of a Hindu deity⁴ decorated with flowers and a bell, as if to say this web would not exist in India without the divine’s blessing and support. The cyber and religious narratives are part of one another in this representation. The image situates the global

¹ Jan Van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media* (London: SAGE, 2006), 2.

² Deepa S. Reddy, “Mediating Hinduisms: An Introduction,” in *Public Hinduisms*, eds. John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy, Maya Warrier, and Raymond Williams (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2012), 365-6. Italics in origin.

³ Although I did not find a definite answer to who created this tree, the concepts imply that it was made by some kind of youth group. On the left side of the wall behind the tree written ‘Vivekananda Yuva’ which can refer to a spiritual youth organization that is located there and might be related to the tree.

⁴ It is hard to recognize which deity is it but this fact is not crucial.

medium of the internet⁵ in its Indian setting—among auto-rickshaws waiting to pick up passengers, women walking in traditional Indian clothing, Indian and English scripts side by side, the Indian flag, and a banner with the flag colors running throughout. On the right side, we can see the beginning of a very famous quote of Vivekananda—which is based on a *shloka* (verse) from Katha Upanishad 1.3.14—“Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.” Peeking out from behind the tree, Vivekananda’s quote can be read as recruited for the goal of being awakened to the digital realm, which is imagined as young, liberated, and full of possibilities. Like this image, the Hindu digital web I explore in this study exposes the local and the global, the online and the offline, the digital and devotional as interwoven by an Indian public that sees the devotional potential and possibilities of digital networks.



Figure 1: The 'cyber-tree', Mumbai. Photo by author.

⁵ I do not capitalize the I of 'internet' in accordance with Chicago Manual of Style's guidelines. <https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/book/ed17/part2/ch07/psec080.html>.

Mobile networks, digital networks, social networks, and the World Wide Web are just a few examples of the conceptual, metaphorical, and physical networks surrounding us wherever we go. As I write this in a coffeeshop, I am surfing the Web to find relevant scholarship and scholars, sharing photos of the kids with my family in Israel through our WhatsApp group, texting a friend to schedule to meet later, and listening to music on Spotify. My only interaction with the person sitting at the table next to me was when he asked for the Wi-Fi password. While sitting in a coffeeshop in Durham, North Carolina, I am using various digital networks to take part in an academic discourse, share my life with my family, listen to music that a stranger curated, and organize my schedule. Digital and mobile networks, made of wired optical fibers and wireless connections, allow me to be in various places at the same time, participating in diverse networks. These networks are so ubiquitous, I need to employ strategies to focus on my writing task,⁶ which I also complete on my laptop. Scholars have argued we live in a society in which social and media networks are becoming a single reality through growing integration.⁷ In this “era of layered presence,”⁸ digitally networked media penetrate all spheres of life, reconfiguring our relation to place, time, culture, other people, and ourselves. Not for nothing, claims have also been made against this always-on, constantly networked mode of being in the world and its possible side effects.⁹ Similar to the process of writing it, my dissertation revolves around numerous conceptual and concrete networks. Located at an interdisciplinary node of the academic

⁶ And I am grateful for the person who came up with the Pomodoro writing technique, without which this dissertation would have been a cluster of all the things I attempt to multitask while writing.

⁷ Van Dijk, *The Network Society*; Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

⁸ Mizuko Ito, “Introduction,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 6.

⁹ For an example see Franco Berardi’s idea of the anthropological cognitive mutation produced by the acceleration of the Infosphere, to which I return in the conclusion. Franco Berardi, “The Paradox of Media Activism: The Net is Not a Tool, It’s an Environment,” *Ibraaz-Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*, November 2, 2012, <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/49#author173>.

grid at the intersection of religious, media, and cultural studies, it explores digital and mobile networks, addresses digital media's public as networked, considers religions—specifically, Hinduism—as networks themselves, follows the actors who weave the Hindu web, and attempts to track the links that connect and disconnect the global and local along those networks.

Cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito writes, “We look to the online world as a source of sociality and culture, and designers of new online systems recognize that they are engaged in social engineering as well as technical engineering. For many, computers and digital technologies have become intimate, indispensable, and pervasive in their lives.”¹⁰ For those people, media networks also reconfigure their relation to religious practice. Take my coffeeshop experience and think of a Hindu devotee who shares my status of digital connectivity. In addition to connecting her to family, friends, and strangers, digital networks allow her to maintain her relationship with the sacred and practice her devotion. Digital platforms offer information on Hinduism, various texts, virtual rituals, online shopping for religious artifacts and accessories, customized religious rituals, pilgrimage tour packages, and online streaming of temples, festivals, and funerals. I refer to this vast and diverse realm as digital Hinduism. Hindu devotion permeates digital media in various forms, and the number of websites and apps with Hindu content or services is constantly increasing. These websites and apps allow Hindu devotees to practice their religion in new ways, as they integrate Hindu devotion with the pervasive and indispensable digital networks. This study tells the story of a growing population of Hindu devotees who live and work as part of global digital and cultural networks, wishing to adjust their religious needs to their larger

¹⁰ Ito, “Introduction,” 4.

lifestyle. These devotees constitute a *networked public*,¹¹ receiving, using, producing, engaging, and participating in a Hindu web, as well as becoming linked to each other—and to various other networks—via the digital Hindu practices I sketch below.

Via illustrative case studies, I highlight the various forces at work in the process of adopting and utilizing new technologies for Hindu devotion and practice. I identify the different players—and their roles in embracing digital technologies—in an attempt to understand contemporary Hindu devotional networks in relation to their digital modifications, prospects, and publics. Each chapter focuses on a different player, each with a substantial role in digitizing Hindu devotion. In this introduction, I layout the scholarly ground my study emerges from, the digital Hindu map I am sketching, and the methodologies I am using to do so. Chapter Two discusses the emerging industry of Hindu startups, showcasing young entrepreneurs and their digital adaptations of Hindu devotion. This chapter establishes the nature of the networked public for and by which digital Hinduism is evolving. Chapter Three demonstrates religious institutions' involvement in the process through Hindu temples' websites and online services. Here, another major player enters the game when a big media corporation enables and, in part, controls temples' digitization. This chapter also traces the imprints of *bhakti* (Hindu devotional movements) on digital Hinduism and its publics. Chapter Four explores how independent authorities—such as the globally popular guru Jaggi Vasudev, also known as Sadhguru—shape digital Hinduism without even considering themselves Hindu. This chapter illuminates the various ways Sadhguru's foundation participates in digital networks, connecting globally dispersed strangers to one

¹¹ This term, which I elaborate on shortly, is borrowed from the eye-opening work of the Networked Publics Research Group, the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern Florida, as published in Kazys Varnelis, ed., *Networked Publics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008).

another. Mediated Hinduism is not a new phenomenon. These three chapters, taken together, explore what has changed in the Hindu devotional web with and through digital networks.

This study asks what happens in the entanglement of Hindu devotion with digital networks and the various other forces involved. How, and via which authorities, do devotional communities negotiate the adoption of new technology? How and to what degree do external forces contribute to this religious formation? How do core notions of Hindu devotion—such as presence, agency, authenticity, authority, and intimacy—migrate to the digital sphere? What happens to devotional publics when they are digitally networked? I argue that following digital Hinduism, as it exists now, unveils an intricate web of disparate but interrelated actors, which, in conscious and unconscious cooperation, promote the use and assimilation of digital media to Hindu devotion. As they come from separate social spheres, each actor brings its own strategies, motives, and behaviors to this convoluted web. These different networks—digital, corporate, and devotional—intersect to shape each other, and the Hindu Wide Web in which they are nestled. In contrast to some common conceptual understandings that oppose tradition and modernity, I show how the use of digitally networked media by Hindu institutions and communities creates both traditional ways to be modern and modern means to be traditional. Most importantly, this study emphasizes the need to rethink—in the digital age—fundamental ideas such as intimacy, agency, presence, authority, and authenticity as critical to understanding our contemporary networked mode of being in the world.

1.1 Hinduism, Media, and the Digital: Key Terms for Reading

Like other forms of sociability and culture, religion becomes part of the mediated grid, and those who are digitally engineering its practices shape the contemporary nature of religious practice. However, this networked structure is not foreign to religion as we can understand it as a

network in itself. Many scholars have contested the term ‘religion’ as a category, claiming it does not accurately depict what we consider to be the many manifestations of the term.¹² This approach reveals the term religion to be based on Christian theology, claiming the discipline operates on a protestant paradigm.¹³ Although there are many examples of the inadequacy of the term in depicting ‘religious’ phenomena,¹⁴ Hinduism can be seen as the epitome of this conceptual failure. Not only does Hinduism—as a whole—deviate from the prototype of religion (textually based, centered around notions of belief and faith, and operating under a single institutional hierarchy), it does not possess a systematic religious identity that encompasses all its variations. Following the critique of the term, I take a descriptive approach to religion,¹⁵ studying it as a network of relationships between humans, non-humans, sacred figures, objects, ideas, communities, and the media which are utilized to enable these relationships. This approach understands religion through the specific actors involved in its creation and preservation, and the connections between them.¹⁶ Bruno Latour’s actor network theory provides the analytical ground on which this approach to religion is based. Taking into account human and non-human actors, Latour invites us to study every social phenomenon by descriptively tracing its unique actors and the associations between them.¹⁷ This approach is particularly helpful when examining Hinduism.

As been much debated, the term Hinduism refers to a plethora of diverse communities,

¹² For more on the critique of the term religion see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (London: SPCK, 1978).

¹³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁴ Asad shows how this term cannot be even applied to pre-modern Christianity. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.

¹⁵ At times I am still using the term ‘religion’ for the lack of a better one.

¹⁶ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

practices, festivals, devotional activities, and philosophies — which, at times, contradict each other. Understanding Hinduism as a unified world religion does not properly address the various vernacular practices and sects.¹⁸ The origin of the term is debated by scholars. A common approach claims that Hinduism, as a single conceptual category, emerged around the nineteenth century from its encounter with the British regime. The opposing point of view refutes this constructionist argument by showing that an idea of a unitary religious system emerged organically from within the Indic culture.¹⁹ Whether a foreign or native category, the heterogeneity of the phenomena this term refers to challenges its theoretical validity. Although this classification is questionable, we cannot simply ignore it; rather we need to keep in mind its problematic nature. Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi determines that we do not need to abandon the term if we accept it as polythetic, lacking “common attributes and clear-cut boundaries.”²⁰ She utilizes Wittgenstein to explain Hinduism as demonstrating a family resemblance, being held together by “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing.”²¹ The family resemblance of Hindu communities and devotional practices manifests in features such as temple worship, popular deities, and concepts like *karma* (the sum of one’s actions) and *moksha* (liberation).²² Elain M. Fisher clarifies this idea, claiming “the unity of Hinduism must be

¹⁸ For the rich discussion on the contested idea of Hinduism as a religion and term see Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hegde, eds. *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. (London: Routledge, 2009); Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009); King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Sontheimer, Günther-Dietz and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997).

¹⁹ For more on these opposing arguments see Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); David N. Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 630–659; Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, “The Polythetic-Prototype Approach to Hinduism,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, eds. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 294.

²¹ Ferro-Luzzi, “The Polythetic-Prototype Approach to Hinduism,” 295.

²² Ferro-Luzzi, 301.

predicated upon its internal diversity.”²³ Thinking of devotional communities—like those that fall under the Hindu umbrella—as networks of relationships themselves, I consider Hinduism a *network of networks*. In such an understanding, Hinduism’s internal diversity manifests through the various links between the devotional networks that constitute its larger web. These connections come in the form of practices, deities, or philosophical ideas that devotional communities share, forming a Hindu Wide Web.

This conceptual framework is not arbitrary; it is borrowed directly from the topic of this study. Digital infrastructures are “networks or webs that enable locally controlled and maintained systems to interoperate.”²⁴ Companies and organizations operate on *local networks*, whereas these networks are connected to larger networks in *webs* (networks of networks).²⁵ I do not intend to delve too deeply into the technical explanations of how these networks operate. For the sake of the metaphor, I will add that the nodes of these digital infrastructures are connected via *bridges* and *gateways*—bridges are used to link between similar systems, while gateways convert information from one type of network to another. “[I]nfrastructures are consolidated by means of *gateways* that permit the linking of heterogeneous systems into networks.”²⁶ The internet—the World Wide Web—is the most popular digital web and serves as an illuminating parallel to Hinduism. “[I]ndividual networks can become part of the Internet as soon as they find an existing member of the Net that agrees to connect with them through a gateway exchange traffic.

²³ Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, 4.

²⁴ Paul N. Edwards, Steven J. Jackson, Geoffrey C. Bowker, and Cory P. Knobel, *Understanding Infrastructure: Dynamics, Tensions, and Design*, Report of a Workshop on “History & Theory of Infrastructure: Lessons for New Scientific Cyberinfrastructures,” January 2007, 12.

²⁵ These are also called *wide area networks* and *internetworks*.

²⁶ Edwards et al. *Understanding Infrastructure*, 7.

Connected to one node, they are connected to the entire Net.”²⁷ Thus, once a devotional community has a relationship to another community through what is considered a Hindu practice, deity, or concept—such as those mentioned by Ferro-Luzzi—they become part of the Hindu Wide Web. Exploring Hinduism as a web composed of heterogeneous devotional communities illuminates both the similarities linking various devotional communities and the places in which these connections are absent.

This study focuses on the ways digital media and its utilization become part of this Hindu web, whether as nodes, bridges, or gateways connecting the web’s internal diversity. Digital media’s participation in the Hindu web did not emerge in a vacuum. Media are definitely not foreign to Hindu devotional networks, nor to religion at large. Religion and media scholars have argued that religion is, and always has been, mediated.²⁸ Some will say religion is mediation in itself.²⁹ Indeed, Hindu communities and institutions have a rich history of embracing and utilizing new technologies for devotional needs. However, each kind of media brings its own cultural, imaginative, and technological apparatus, shaping and being shaped by the practices it mediates. Print media introduced wide social and geographical distribution to Hindu deities’ images and posters, democratizing Hindu devotion and inflating its appropriation by commercial companies.³⁰ Indian cinema employs devotional themes and content, both in a dedicated genre

²⁷ François Bar, Walter Baer, Shahram Ghandeharizadeh, and Fernando Ordonez, “Infrastructure: Network Neutrality and Network Futures,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 110.

²⁸ David Morgan, “Mediation or Mediatisation: The History of Media in the Study of Religion,” *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 137-52; Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and/as Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 119-45.

²⁹ Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer, 1-28 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁰ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

called mythologicals—recreating a devotional way of seeing through cinematic techniques,³¹—and as a backdrop or narrative template in many popular films.³² India’s national television channel remediated religious epics, which yielded devotional responses from viewers³³ and produced a strong sense of Hindu community.³⁴ Television is not the only medium recruited to Hindu nationalism and right-wing politics. Scholarship depicts the cultural politics of the Hindu right in India—Hindutva—manifesting not only in the televised epics, but also in right-wing uses of iconography, audio cassettes, film, and online media, producing mediated religious nationalism.³⁵ Mediated Hindu nationalism is so ingrained in the Indian cultural landscape, it exists in the background of all my case studies, at times coming to the front.

The examples above sketch only a portion of the way media were always part of the Hindu web, linking devotees with their communities, deities, new forms of devotion, and diverse social and cultural spheres. Following the idea that different technologies generate, or recreate, distinctive nodes and interactions within the Hindu web, I first clarify what I mean by digitally networked media, in order to explore their specific contribution to the grid. The most important thing to acknowledge is that media are not mere technologies; media are cultural systems, composed of the technology itself, modes of production and reception, and the larger social

³¹ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006); Ravi S. Vasudevan, “Aesthetics and Politics in Popular Cinema,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, eds. Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 226-46.

³² Stephen Jacobs, “Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context,” *Religion Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 140.

³³ Philip Lutgendorf, “Ramayan: The Video,” *The Drama Review* 34, no. 2 (1990): 127-76.

³⁴ Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

³⁵ For examples see Sudeep Dasgupta, “Gods in the Sacred Marketplace: Hindu Nationalism and the Return of The Aura in the Public Sphere,” in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, eds. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 251-72; Rachel Dwyer, “The Saffron Screen? Hindu Nationalism and the Hindi Film,” in *Religion, Media, And The Public Sphere*, eds. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 273-89; Julie L. Gittinger, *Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online* (London: Routledge, 2018); Pradip Thomas, “Contested Religion, Media, and Culture in India: Explorations, Old and New,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 18 (2015): 32-39.

practices and relationships in which they are nestled.³⁶ The technology itself matters, but its larger media culture—the ways people appropriate it, interact with it, and the meanings and experiences it generates—is what makes media fascinating and determines media’s imprints on our social lives and webs. Media historian Lisa Gitelman differentiates between technological forms and their associated protocols, which “express a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships”³⁷ that have grown around the technology and which shape its larger experience and meaning. Media scholar Henry Jenkins hones this idea by distinguishing between media and delivery technologies (Gitelman’s technological forms). Delivery technologies are the tools we use to access media content; they “become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve. Recorded sound is the medium. CDs, MP3 files, and 8-track cassettes are delivery technologies.”³⁸ If we apply this approach to the realm of mediated Hinduism, we can consider digital networks and devices as new delivery technologies, of which devotion (or the divine) is the medium. This outlook opens up an opportunity to explore how digital networks change the ways in which devotion is being mobilized, communicated, performed, and experienced.³⁹

I deliberately do not use the term *new media* to describe the content of my study. Not only do I deem the term irrelevant, as every medium was once new, I also do not think it holds any illustrative efficacy.⁴⁰ I instead use *digitally networked media* to describe the websites, social media, and mobile applications I discuss, as they all use digital technologies and are part of

³⁶ Larrissa Hjorth’s related notion of technoculture is discussed in chapter 4. For a discussion on the different aspects of media see Mark B. N. Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. Mark B. N. Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), vii–xxii.

³⁷ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 7.

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 13.

³⁹ Ito, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴⁰ For an argument for the anthropological value in using the term as one with an open referent see Charles Hirschkind, Maria José A. de Abreu, and Carlo Caduff, “New Media, New Publics?” *Current Anthropology*, vol 5, supplement 15 (2017): S3-S12.

digital networks. Scholarship defines digital media in many ways. I have chosen to highlight a few that are most relevant to my case studies and their participation in the Hindu web. Digital technologies operate on digital code and are construed as interactive, hypertextual multimedia.⁴¹ Digital platforms and devices integrate various forms of media, enabling media industries to converge.⁴² The shift from analogue technologies to digital coding marks the transformation from linear narratives to hypertextual ones.⁴³ If the content of cinema and TV was organized for the viewers, the content of digital media comes in fragmented units linked by multiple paths. “From linear temporal media we are shifting to non-linear spatial content. Hypertext becomes the grammar of the digital world.”⁴⁴ The hypertextual grammar generates an interactive interface that defines digital media. These technological features mean users not only have more control over the organization of the narrative; they also control the form of media (audio, video, textual, etc.) that will be part of the narrative.

This interactivity does not only characterize media consumption but typifies its production. Jenkins points to the participatory nature of contemporary media, contrasting it with the notion of passive media consumption. Producers and consumers do not occupy separate roles anymore; they are “participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules.”⁴⁵ Jenkins does not claim this to be an equally shared responsibility; however, the user’s role in the production of culture is constantly growing. Jenkins wrote this in the nascent years of social media. More than ten years later, the participatory element is now stronger and more evident than

⁴¹ José Luis Orihuela, “eCommunication: The 10 Paradigms of Media in the Digital Age,” in *Towards New Media Paradigms: Content, Producers, Organisations and Audiences*, eds. Ramon Salaverría and Charo Sádaba (Pamplona: Ediciones Eunat, 2004), 129-35; Van Dijk, *The Network Society*, 9.

⁴² More on Henry Jenkins’ idea of convergence culture in chapter 3.

⁴³ Van Dijk, *The Network Society*, 9.

⁴⁴ Orihuela, “eCommunication,” 134.

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

ever. Today, in order to be a media producer, one only needs a computer and internet connection. People record their own videos and upload them to YouTube, share the news of current events from their smartphone cameras, and influence public opinion through their Instagram stories and Twitter profiles. These ‘media producers’ shape the web by their ongoing curation of their digital presence—in the decision what to include in the web and what to keep in its outskirts. In the attempt to understand its larger cultural system, we should keep in mind people are not using digital networks passively. People use digital platforms through consuming and producing content—they participate in digital networks by organizing and creating their nodes and paths. This participation is immediate and global; it can occur at any place and time. Once we initiated a link by a simple ‘click,’ it immediately took us to the desired node, whether it is by creating that node, such as a Facebook post we write, or by visiting an existing one. All forms of communication are meant to overcome spatial boundaries (like the telephone and the telegraph); digitally networked media—such as the World Wide Web, smartphones, and video chat services—take this task of dissolving borders to a whole new level. Therefore, it allows for the creation and maintenance of social relationships and communities. Social media platforms serve as the epitome of this characteristic, underscoring the participatory element of digital media and its nature as a many-to-many form of communication and creating a sense of constant co-presence of people nearby and remote. We should wonder whether the availability and ease that characterize participation in these digital networks challenge the possibility of a digital hiatus—How is this constant media participation interrupted? How do we draw the lines on what we mediate when these networks are so pervasive and all encompassing? Does this constant self-mediation could turn digital networks’ emancipatory possibilities enchaining?

Termed in the mid-2000s, Web 2.0 marks the second stage of the World Wide Web—the stage in which we currently operate,⁴⁶ and which stands at the heart of this study. Though a contested term, as there is no clear transition point between stage one and two,⁴⁷ scholars and industry analysts have come to terms with Web 2.0's major characteristics. The defining features of Web 2.0 are social-networking sites (popularly called social media) and user-created content.⁴⁸ If the first stage of the World Wide Web was more of a passive consumption of information, Web 2.0 is all about interactivity, collaboration, and users' production of content. These aspects of digital networks' production, distribution, and reception stand at the base of the term *networked publics*. Digital networks push us to rethink concepts like audience, consumers, and users. The participatory nature of this delivery technology generates a more engaged stance, which is foregrounded in the notion of the *public*. Although Jurgen Habermas and Michael Warner—two of the most influential scholars of publics—present different understandings of the idea of a (or the) public, I identify traces of both approaches in today's digitally networked publics. Habermas identifies the rise of the public sphere in early eighteenth-century bourgeois spaces in which rational and critical debate had developed. These discursive sites became the public sphere—a cornerstone in constructing modern democracy. Warner is more interested in a heterogeneous and dynamic notion of publics. For him, a public “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.”⁴⁹ If Habermas' public—as a discursive site—is constituted through engaged participation, Warner's public—as a social imaginary—unites strangers through attention to a

⁴⁶ Internet analysts and scholars attest that we are on the verge of the third stage, web 3.0, but it is yet to come.

⁴⁷ Mary Madden and Susannah Fox, "Riding the Waves of 'Web 2.0'," *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (2006): 1-6.

⁴⁸ Larissa Hjorth, "Web U2: Emerging Online Communities and Gendered Intimacy in the Asia-Pacific Region," *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22, no. 2 (2009): 117-18.

⁴⁹ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 50.

specific discourse.⁵⁰ Networked publics—like the devotional ones I discuss shortly—are created both through engagement and participation in the production of a mediated discourse, as well as through reception of these discourses. The global, accessible, and open end-to-end and many-to-many characteristics of digital networks allow people to engage “in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange, as well as through acts of media reception.”⁵¹ This engaged and pervasive use of digital platforms and devices weaves its publics into a global network like no previous medium has managed to do.⁵² There is no more unilateral distribution of content, allowing digital networks to be catalyzers or facilitators of contemporary social movements and upheavals.⁵³ Mobile phones exemplify the accessibility of networking infrastructure. “[U]sers rely on handheld devices to maintain an always-on relation to information and personal networks, as well as utilizing them as ready-at-hand digital production devices for snapping photos and crafting text messages.”⁵⁴ Some of the most interesting characteristics of the networked public are the ways specific locales are linked to global internetworks, shaping our understanding of the global and the local, and “our sense of proximity and distance.”⁵⁵ Digital networks allow individuals to connect with those they are close to, or with complete strangers, while being disconnected to their physical locales. Global networks allow me to sit alone in a Durham café while being connected to my social networks at home through FaceTime, or listen to a playlist curated by a complete stranger. In this setting, who is in my proximity: the stranger

⁵⁰ For an elaborate discussion on the idea of publics according to these thinkers see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT press, 1991); Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics.”

⁵¹ Ito, “Introduction,” 3.

⁵² Although Marshal McLuhan already talked on the global village in 1964, I do not think he could have anticipated the levels and scope this phenomenon will reach.

⁵³ Negar Mottahedeh, *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ Ito, “Introduction,” 6.

⁵⁵ Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg, “Place: The Networking of Public Space,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 15.

sitting at the table next to me or the stranger I converse with on Facebook? Similarly, Hindu temples' WhatsApp groups and online streaming allow for a devotee to sit at her office while being linked to her devotion and community, disrupting the physical distance between them.⁵⁶

The global, immediate, interactive, and participatory nature of digitally networked media creates the culture of constant use and inseparability—on its gains and drawbacks—which generates the need for diverse organizations and communities to become part of the network. Digital media now permeates our social, commercial, political, professional, and cultural spheres and identities without escaping the religious realm. Religious communities and authorities cannot evade the need to address digital media, no matter if they are adopting or rejecting it. My project belongs to a growing academic interest in digital religious lives, acknowledging current and future magnitude of this phenomenon and its significance to religious studies. Scholars realize the need for exploring this emerging realm of religious performance and experience, producing numerous studies on various religious traditions and their digital lives.⁵⁷ Scholarship covers various aspects of the encounter between religion and digital media, such as how religious communities fashion technology to adhere to their lifestyle, the penetration of the everyday use of digital media to sacred spaces, the infiltration of religion into virtual-reality spaces, the formation of religious community and identity through online forums and blogs, the ways religious authority is being challenged in this encounter, and how we should theorize it all. Many of these scholarly frameworks do not take digital Hindu devotion into account. Like theorizing religion at large, the scholarly understanding of digital religion tends to be based on a narrow range of

⁵⁶ I further develop this idea in chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Such as Heidi A Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2012); Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess, eds., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2012.); Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2005).

religious communities—mainly the Abrahamic traditions—while claiming universal pertinence. In this study, I push against such universal claims, describing Hindu devotion’s exceptional digital networks and their processes of becoming.

In her seminal book *When Religion Meets New Media*,⁵⁸ Heidi Campbell—a leading scholar of digital religion—discusses religious groups’ appropriation of new technologies. Campbell sheds light on the vital role of media technology for many religious groups, refuting the common belief that technology and religion are, essentially, in conflict. Campbell argues that in order to understand religious groups’ approach to media, we need to explore how they define and relate to religious community, religious authority, and textual media. Although this approach is illuminating, it emphasizes the role of religious leaders’ and groups’ engagement with texts as indicators to the ways religious groups seek to tame technologies to the rhythms of their daily lives. However, in this study, I demonstrate that Hindu devotional adoption of digital media occurs differently. First, my case studies show that Hindu devotees do not seek to tame technologies to their daily devotional lives as much as they seek to understand how they can facilitate and enhance their devotion. Second, Hinduism—as a whole—is not a text-based religion, nor does it have a single authoritative hierarchy or center. If we consider Hinduism as a web of diverse devotional networks, there is no exclusive authority that determines how to utilize new technologies for the entire web, rather—as my case studies show—individuals, local institutions, and communities shape this adoption, linking devotional publics to the net. This study follows the links connecting the various locales and community negotiations with digital technologies with the objective of unveiling their unique appropriation of digitally networked

⁵⁸ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010).

media. Providing a broad outlook on this process, this project serves as an important contribution to the growing subfield of digital Hinduism.

That said, recent years witnessed a growing scholarly interest in the encounter between various Hindu devotional communities and digital media. In addition to numerous articles on the topic, a dedicated volume on digital Hinduism was published in 2018,⁵⁹ and another is forthcoming.⁶⁰ This scholarship covers a wide range of online services, websites, social media profiles, and smartphone applications that participate in Hindu devotional networks. So far, scholars have been focused on exploring themes such as the fit of Hindu devotion and cyberspace, with emphasis on Hindu iconography,⁶¹ the validity of online rituals and the ontological status of digitally mediated deities,⁶² diasporic communities' use of the internet to maintain connection to the homeland and the political weight of such usage,⁶³ the formation of Hindu religious identities online,⁶⁴ and the utilization of the internet for Hindu nationalist ends.⁶⁵ I wish to expand this scholarship by focusing on the process of adoption of digitally networked

⁵⁹ Murali Balaji, ed., *Digital Hinduism: Dharma and Discourse in the Age of New Media* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

⁶⁰ Xenia Zeiler, ed., *Digital Hinduism* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). To this volume I have contributed a chapter.

⁶¹ Heinz Scheifinger, "Hinduism and Cyberspace," *Religion* 38, no. 3 (2008): 233-49.

⁶² Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual Solutions," *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4.1 (2010): 179-195.; Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Cyber Forms, Worshipable Forms: Hindu Devotional Viewpoints on the Ontology of Cyber-Gods and-Goddesses," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (2013): 1- 26.; Madhavi Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities: Hindu Temples, Online Cultures and the Politics of Remediation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2010): 109-21.; Heinz Scheifinger, "Hindu Embodiment and the Internet," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* 4.1 (2010): 196-219.

⁶³ Christopher Helland, "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2007): 956-976.; Phyllis K. Herman, "Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual Religious Experience," *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4, no. 1 (2010): 151-78.

⁶⁴ Denzil Chetty, "The Formation of Online Religious Identities: A Case Study of the Internet-Hindu in India's Cyberspace," in *Digital Hinduism: Dharma and Discourse in the Age of New Media*, ed. Murali Balaji (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 25-46.

⁶⁵ Rohit Chopra, "Global Primordialities: Virtual Identity Politics in Online Hindutva and Online Dalit Discourse," *New Media & Society* 8, no.2 (2006): 187-206.; Ingrid Therwath, "Cyber-Hindutva: Hindu Nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web," *Social Science Information* 51, no. 4 (2012): 551-577.

media, the various players involved, the devotional publics that emerge from this adoption, and the larger web in which devotional, professional, local, and global networks converge.

1.2 Hindu Digital Adoption: Players, Trends, and Significance

I depict digital Hinduism as an intricate web of various players and networks, unveiling the conscious and unconscious interrelations between its various nodes. Acknowledging the width and depth of this web, I do not attempt to provide a complete picture of the networks it includes, nor all the bridges and gateways that link them. Rather, I focus on specific nodes that shed light on elements significant to the understanding of contemporary Hindu devotion and its future prospects. Moreover, taking Hindu devotion as a case study, this project investigates the effects of digitally networked media on their publics and on the various worlds and locales they interlace. Throughout the project, I examine how our notions and experience of intimacy, presence, agency, authority, authenticity, and the interplay of the global and the local shift with and through digital media.

The basis for this investigation is the people who participate in this creation and this web. Following the theoretical model of digital media's networked publics, I study the *networked devotional publics* of my case studies. First, I establish this public as constituted by India's middle classes—young, tech-savvy, professional, and urban Hindu devotees who participate in digital networks (chapter 2). As explained earlier, this public both consumes and produces the digital Hindu web I explore. I gain insight into the nature of this public through conversations with the young entrepreneurs and IT personnel behind the digital practices I explore, as well as via online survey with digital media's Indian public. Following anthropologist Jon W. Anderson, I term Hindu entrepreneurs “digital adepts,” exploring how they are both disrupting and organizing the Hindu market with various technological solutions (chapter 2). These digital

adepts illuminate both the limitations and possibilities the internet generates in relation to ideas of religious authority and authenticity. Moreover, Hindu startups begin to reveal the role commercial interests play in the process of religious innovation. Tracking the connections between my case studies led me to the contribution of major Indian communication companies to Hindu temples' digitization efforts, unveiling corporations as a prominent actor in this web (chapter 3). When we know a Hindu temple's digitization can be supported and almost controlled by the interests of an external force, such as a communication company, we begin to understand the power of digital networks' distribution mechanism and infrastructure.

This trend, however, is not new. Illuminating the continuity of the intersection of Hinduism and commerce, I approach Hindu startups as a Hindu digital bazaar (chapter 2). If the Hindu bazaar was formed in the colonial period as an intersection of official colonial economy and informal local networks,⁶⁶ the current Hindu digital bazaar converges the unorganized religious market with global capitalism's aesthetics, jargon, and norms. This hybrid challenges the distinction between the global and the local, revealing them as interrelated nodes of the web (chapter 2). This dichotomy is further undermined when I identify traces of *bhakti* movements' ideas and networks in temples' digitization efforts (chapter 3). *Bhakti* devotional publics and digitally networked publics emerge from an essential tension between the particular and the universal. *Bhakti* movements are formed around a particular deity, which is worshipped as universal, connecting devotees and sacred places in one devotional network. Similarly, networked publics emphasize the local nodes, which are then connected in one big, digital network. Therefore, I suggest understanding my case studies' publics as networked devotional publics. For example, when a Hindu temple's public comes together in a WhatsApp group chat, they are

⁶⁶ Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 79-80.

digitally connected around a very specific location, while each of its members has their own unique location. When Sadhguru produces an emotional connection with a global following via YouTube videos, social media profiles, and hashtags—what I define as Intimacy 2.0—they become a networked devotional public, linked to him and to each other while remaining in their respective locales (chapter 4). In these networks, the dynamics of the global and the local can be understood as a two-way street—the networked devotional publics localize global media culture, applying it to local devotional traditions, while also globalizing Hindu devotion itself. The globalization of Hinduism that is evident here occurs both practically and theoretically. Like every other electronic communication medium, digital networks overcome spatial barriers, allowing, for example, an Indian temple to transcend its locality while remaining in its place (chapter 3). The globalization of Hinduism also occurs on a conceptual level when digital networks are utilized to mediate Hindu devotional ideas and practices as universal. Sadhguru borrows notions and practices from the Hindu devotional web, rebranding them as technologies with universal appeal (chapter 4). Linking his foundation to Hindu devotional networks, Sadhguru becomes—even if unwillingly—a significant node in the digital Hindu web, exhibiting remarkable adoption of digitally networked media.

As an instance of digitally networked media's imprint on contemporary culture, digital Hinduism highlights the paradoxical nature of the internet as an open end-to-end network. Digital networks produce contradictory effects, dispersing means of knowledge and cultural production and inviting more participants to contribute, as well as aggregating information, data, and infrastructure in the hands of a powerful few. The same shift occurs with the introduction of networked digital technologies into the Hindu devotional web. This study shows how, on the one hand, the accessibility of digital means of production and the participatory nature of digital

networks allow for more players to join the web—such as young entrepreneurs who establish themselves as religious providers and authorities, and small, local temples that manage to independently produce and provide online services. On the other hand, this welcoming dynamic also allows for big media corporations to monopolize infrastructure, gaining control over the digital lives of Hindu temples and the larger realm of online devotion. Most importantly, this point emphasizes the altered ways people are networked and mobilized in the Hindu devotional web, with and through media. The participatory nature of digital networks accentuates Hinduism’s already-dynamic and open nature. Digital networks allow more players to negotiate Hindu utilization of new technology and contribute to its adoption. In this process, the distinction between religious providers and devotees—or producers and users—is blurred in favor of a larger understanding of networked devotional publics. As stated, these publics are currently composed mainly of young, educated, and urban Hindu devotees. In chapter two, I break down how many people this includes (roughly 300 million). What about the rest of the population? How significant are these figures in a country that is mostly unwired?

Indeed, the majority of India’s population does not have the infrastructure and resources that allow such use of digital Hindu services. The urban Hindu population might only make up 25 percent of India’s people, but—when considering the country’s population—it is still a substantial group. This population has access to the internet and digital devices, and their usage is rapidly growing. In recent years, India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, prioritized the country’s need to ‘go digital’ with a countrywide campaign called *Digital India*, aiming to “transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy.”⁶⁷ Although the road toward a

⁶⁷ ANI, “Smartphone Users To Touch 65cr in 2019,” *The Week*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.theweek.in/news/sci-tech/2018/03/12/smartphone-users-to-touch-65cr-in-2019.html>.

digitally empowered society is still long and bumpy (Modi's sweeping goals for India's digitization are far from being a reality⁶⁸), Digital India has made progress in its attempt to connect India's population to the net, provide digital services, and reduce India's acute digital divide.⁶⁹ Digital India campaign houses projects such as governmental e-services, a biometric-identity database, Wi-Fi in railway stations, digital education, connecting remote villages to the internet, and investments in research and startups on Artificial Intelligence and Internet of Things, among others. India is not only trying to catch the digital train most of the world is already riding; they aspire to be an engine of digital innovation. Under the imperative of Digital India, political and corporate forces—from within and outside India—work to expand India's networked publics. According to the latest report, India is home to approximately 480 million internet users.⁷⁰ The report verifies the acute rural–urban digital divide, with 65 percent internet penetration in urban areas compared to 20 percent in rural India.⁷¹ Mobile networks provide a major boost to this massive internet market, as mobile devices are more accessible, connecting Indians to the net. In fact, in 2015, India passed the U.S. as the second largest smartphone market in the world.⁷² In December 2017, the number of smartphone-users stood at 400 million, and is expected to rise to

⁶⁸ Some explain the unrealized potential of Digital India with the limited investment in a much needed infrastructure across the country. Amit Goel, "Seamless Digital Connectivity Still a Dream," *The Pioneer*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/page1/seamless-digital-connectivity-still-a-dream.html>

⁶⁹ The digital divide in India is not only a urban-rural one, but also a gender digital divide .

⁷⁰ Surabhi Agarwal, "Internet Users in India Expected to Reach 500 Million by June: IAMAI," *The Economic Times*, February 20, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/internet-users-in-india-expected-to-reach-500-million-by-june-iamai/articleshow/63000198.cms>.

⁷¹ Slightly different numbers come up in a Pew Research Center's study which determines that only one out of four Indians is an internet user, bringing the total number of internet users to approximately 330 million. Although still not a number we can disregard, this study situates India as the second to last country in internet penetration. Jacob Poushter, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe, "Social Media Use Continues To Rise in Developing Countries, but Plateaus Across Developed Ones," *Pew Research Center*, June 19, 2018, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/across-39-countries-three-quarters-say-they-use-the-internet/>.

⁷² Unesco Press, "China, India Now World's Largest Internet Markets," September 15, 2016. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/china_india_now_worlds_largest_internet_markets/.

650 million by 2019.⁷³ According to a UN report from 2016, India is the second largest Internet market after China, thus the world's biggest open-internet market.⁷⁴ Leading global media companies like Facebook and Google are looking to get their foot in the door to substantially expand their user base and, thus, conduct massive campaigns to bring 'connectivity' to India.⁷⁵ For example, Google supports Wi-Fi connection to 700 railway stations across India.⁷⁶ These attempts are not always received well, like in the case of Facebook's 'Free Basics' program, which aimed to provide free internet access to smartphone users but was banned for breaching India's net neutrality laws. Aiming to conquer India's digital market, U.S. companies have received backlash, considered by some critics to be "digital colonialists."⁷⁷ A good example of India's digital attempts, and the various entities that try to tap into their emerging market, can be found in the realm of online commerce. Modi's 2016 demonetization act, as questionable as it was, gave a boost to the nation's online commerce and, consequently, digital payments platforms. Since then, several local and global companies—with India's Paytm and the U.S.'s WhatsApp in the lead—are competing to provide Indians with digital and mobile payments services.⁷⁸ With this in mind, studying the implications of digital networks in the Indian context seems more crucial than ever. Hindu appropriation of digital media is a contemporary effort that belongs to a larger Indian trend toward the digital. With time, a certain level of digital access and literacy

⁷³ ANI, "Smartphone Users To Touch 65cr in 2019."

⁷⁴ Unesco Press, "China, India Now World's Largest Internet Markets."

⁷⁵ Hannah Kuchler, "Facebook, Google and the Race to Sign Up India," *Financial Times*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/91539fc4-ebc5-11e5-888e-2eadd5fbc4a4>.

⁷⁶ ET Online, "Railways Now Offers Free WiFi at Over 700 Stations, Covers 8 Million People a Month," *The Economic Times*, June 22, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/railways/railways-now-offers-free-wifi-at-over-700-stations-covers-8-million-people-a-month/articleshow/64693595.cms>.

⁷⁷ Kuchler, "Facebook, Google and the Race to Sign Up India."

⁷⁸ Suparna Dutt D'Cunha, "WhatsApp, Already India's Favorite Chat App, Wants To Be Its Leader In Digital Payments, Too," *Forbes*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suparnadutt/2018/02/09/whatsapp-already-indias-favorite-chat-app-wants-to-be-its-leader-in-digital-payment-too/#6b13dd85e4dd>.

would probably be available to most of India's population. Then, we would be able to examine what is the digital threshold for devotees to join their respective networked devotional publics.

1.3 My Digital Hindu Web: Scope and Methodology

After a long journey, I arrived in India with my family on December 13, 2016. It was midnight, and Mumbai's modern, 2-year-old terminal was very quiet and welcoming. Posters all over the terminal caught my eye—*Contemporary India, Layered Narratives*. This slogan—my first encounter with 2016's India—haunted me for the rest of our visit, as it adequately described our experience. These layered narratives of today's India were evident on every street corner. Though my project only revolves around a few of those narratives, it is intertwined with and dependent on all the others. It is not possible to examine one of the layers—in this case, digital Hinduism—without noticing and giving space to the others that make contemporary India what it is. We spent most of this 2016 visit in the urban centers of Mumbai and Coimbatore, experiencing many of these layers daily. For example, one narrow and unpaved Mumbai ally we visited frequently was home to newly constructed commercial skyscrapers, an open fish market, a street-side barber, a jazz café, an indoor playground, and a small temple. All of those narratives—modern, traditional, rich, poor, dirty, clean, religious, secular—were not particularly layered. They all existed side by side. There was no need to peel one layer away to discover the next. That is India—at the same time, what it was, is, and will be. This amalgamation of past, present, and future highlights India's unique manifestation of modernity, which refutes common understandings of this problematic term. With the airport slogan in mind, this study cements digital Hinduism as one of contemporary India's many *Coexisting Narratives*. This understanding is crucial, as it is important to realize the Hindu adoption of digital media I sketch below does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it attempt to portray contemporary India as a whole. This study

highlights one of these narratives, to understand both current and future developments in Hindu devotional networks. The vast adoption of digital technologies by Hindu institutions, publics, and individuals in India attests that tradition and modernity not only coexist; they support and reinforce each other.

This project is limited, excluding important related themes that should be further investigated. Attempting to sketch a massive web, my project tells only parts of the larger story that is digitally mediated Hinduism. Even among the main players, different case studies would have led to different areas of the digital grid. Nonetheless, I provide a review of some of the leading forces currently involved in Hindu digitization efforts, and the main trends they are creating. The contemporary nature of this adoption serves both as an opportunity and a constraint. On the one hand, this moment enables watching the Hindu response to digital technologies as it happens. I follow my case studies as they are created, contested, and reshaped—as they succeed and, sometimes, fail. Watching this process ‘live’ does not merely allow me to identify and understand the roles of the different nodes of this intricate web; it gives me the opportunity to watch how they interact with and influence each other. Digital media is still in its nascent stages as a venue for Hindu practice. However, the process identified here, with its local and global context taken into account, points to the enormous potential of cyberspace to occupy a considerable portion of Hindu practice and devotion. Such emphasis on the process, in this early stage, might not generate an understanding of the full effects of the assimilation of digitally networked media (which are easier to observe in retrospect), but it leads to a different set of insights. At this moment, I can only perform initial thinking on the implications of digital devotion on religious experience, sacred time and space, and the ways digitally networked media shape and are reshaped by the traditional practices they mediate. The potential growth and reach

of digital Hindu practices urges us to better understand how the devotional adoption of digital media occurs and who its publics are.

Among the nodes of the digital Hindu web my study is not able to fully trace, India's government and its larger political climate are undoubtedly major. My case studies are not detached from these nodes, and I attempt to point to these connections when they come up. Right-wing Hindu nationalism, and its use and control of media, constantly looms in the background. Work remains to be done on nationalist use of digital media and its contribution to digital Hinduism. Besides Modi's Digital India campaign, which serves as the backdrop for digital Hinduism, all of my chapters lead to the contribution of Indian politics to this adoption process: a Hindu startup that faces challenges due to red tape and political interests, state-run temples whose constantly changing boards of directors determine the current attitude towards media, and Sadhguru's close and publicized relations to Modi and his government. I do not ignore these connections, but the scope of this dissertation does not allow me to further develop this important theme. Another significant node in the digital Hindu web is Indian diaspora communities and their relationships with the homeland. Obviously, Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Hindus are a major chunk of digital Hinduism's networked publics. Although one may think these practices would mainly attract diasporic devotees, all the Hindu websites I study are accessed mostly from India. That said, Indian devotees' relationships to their diasporic families, as well as diaspora communities' need to maintain their devotion in faraway lands, dramatically affect the digital Hindu web. In fact, much of the existing scholarship on digital Hinduism is focused on the diaspora. In this study, I focus on India's networked devotional publics and their significance to the digital web, as I believe this major aspect is currently undertheorized. However, I do keep in mind the diasporic networks that belong to the digital Hindu web and the need for further study

that traces the various connections between devotees from India and the diaspora in a globally networked devotional public.

Lastly, this narrative of weaving the digital Hindu web depicts parts of a larger story and is formed out of the specific methods I utilize to trace it. This study combines various methodologies that are necessary to depict the various nodes, bridges, and links this web entails. My main research guideline was to follow the connections my case studies took me to, allowing them to lead me to other nodes on the web. Studying digital practices and sites requires a combination of online and offline research; studying the media itself, their content, their production, and their reception.⁷⁹ Through this methodology—taking into account the media’s specific participatory and open nature—production, reception, and technology are seen as one network. Via this approach we can point to the flows between these elements while not ignoring their different roles. As part of the attempt to challenge the notion of a unified Hinduism, I explore how the different nodes of the Hindu web define themselves in every fragment, in any given time and place. Through my fragments, I wish to reveal how the Hindu Wide Web looks from this specific angle, maintaining the tension between the particular junctures and the larger grid they create.

To the best of my ability, I tried to investigate my case studies both with a researcher’s eye and with a potential member of their public’s point of view. The latter is enabled by my participation in the same digital culture and networks (lacking the Hindu element). I had full access to these practices, like any other potential user. Finding information through news articles, social media profiles, relevant apps and websites, I could follow and passively take part in the

⁷⁹ In this I follow Purnima Mankekar’s conjunctural ethnography which points to the specific challenges the study of media phenomena presents to ethnographic research. See Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

constantly changing web of digital Hinduism, examining it as if I was part of its networked public. The next layer of my digital experience came in the form of vast online research. Thanks to various Google Alerts, I was constantly informed on how this web was taking shape—everything the internet had to offer on online *puja*, online *darshan*, live *darshan*, and Digital India arrived in my inbox daily. The amount of news articles published on these topics in the last few years is astonishing. Using these approaches to find my case studies and digitally experience them, I then added traditional and digital ethnographic methodologies. By the term *digital ethnography*, I mean conducting interviews, disseminating questionnaires, and performing participant-observation in digital spaces. My project entails all of the above: I conducted conversations with my interlocutors via emails, video chats, and WhatsApp, I designed an online survey, and I participated in Sadhguru’s online program and various social media platforms. However, some argue that every piece of current ethnographic research entails digital ethnography, such as finding scholarship online and taking fieldnotes on digital devices.⁸⁰ Through multiple conversations with the people behind the digital modifications, I gained initial insights on their motivations, aims, and the nature of their services. These networked conversations were followed by face-to-face interactions when I visited the Indian locales from which the digital sites emerged. Being in the physical sites added many layers to my online experiences, at times altering them completely. Additionally, my understanding of the digital Hindu web and its networked public was clarified through an online survey. Reaching a sample of 741 active and potential users of these services—young, educated, and tech-savvy Indians—I learned about this public’s perception of digital practices, and their potential growth (chapter 2).

⁸⁰ For the debate on the definition, meaning, and applications of digital ethnography see Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, eds., *Digital Anthropology* (London: Berg, 2012); Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016).

Interestingly, through these aforementioned investigations of digital Hinduism's public, I take an active role in this web. First, like in any other scholarship, the researcher's choices create the part of the web we eventually see or read about. No scholarship can exhaust all the participants and connections, and is thus forced to focus its lens on part of the larger picture, exploring it from one angle.⁸¹ Second, through my conversations with temples' IT personnel and startups' entrepreneurs, I discover the relationship between them (at times, even serving as a link myself). For example, my three main interlocuters for chapter 3—all related to the digitization of temples—were in some form of communication with each other, in part through my own intervention. Lastly, the online survey I conducted included respondents that were aware of various digital devotional practices, and those that did not know of this phenomenon until I asked them questions about it. Thus, it is important to remember the section of the digital Hindu web my study depicts is inflicted by my own vantage point.

My story of digital Hinduism is focused on the contribution of major forces shaping the digitization of Hindu devotion: Hindu temples, global gurus, communications companies, young entrepreneurs, and the devotional networked publics they belong to. Although each chapter is mostly dedicated to one of these forces, the various connections linking them to one another recur in almost every case study. Small Hindu startups attempt to cooperate with temples, which, in turn, join hand with huge communications company. Hindu startups' digital adepts, temples' IT personnel, and Isha's spiritual movement all belong to a networked public for an by whom digital Hinduism exist. Altered notions of presence, intimacy, and authenticity affect all my case studies, as well as refer to and reflect a larger media culture to which I also belong. Describing a part of

⁸¹ For more on the scholars' role in the religious networks they investigate see Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

this convoluted web is my small contribution to fathoming the fascinating networked society and culture we all operate in.

2. Startup Hinduism: The Hindu Digital Bazaar

On our way to Vedic Vaani's offices—an e-commerce company selling religious items and customized rituals—we could not have foreseen what was about to follow. Going to meet the company founders, as part of my December 2016 visit to Mumbai, I was prepared with questions and equipped with my spouse to entertain my two-and-a-half-year-old son while I conducted my interview. Once we arrived, I realized the interview was not the part the founders thought to be the most essential for my research. Rather, they generously organized a *puja* (worship) just for me, wishing me success in my Ph.D. pursuit. They thought if they merely explained the *pujas* they offer, I would not truly understand them, at least not like I would by experiencing it. And they were certainly right. First, watching my toddler son sit mesmerized for the full one-and-a-half hours of the *puja* almost made me believe in god. Second, and more importantly, the experience was unique not only because it was the first time I participated in a full-length *puja* of which I was the main benefactor, but also because of the exceptional setting.

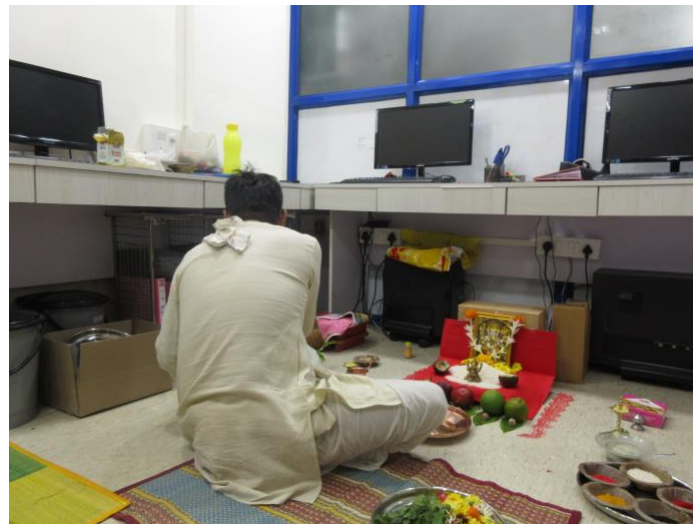


Figure 2: The priest preparing the puja held for us at Vedic Vaani's office. Photo by author.

The office was small but modern and well equipped. It had a main, open working space, in which six employees were working, each on her own computer. At the back end was a small office for the two owners. While I was sitting with them in their office, discussing the company and the services they offer, the central working space was converted into a worship area (figure 2). All the chairs were taken outside, as well as the employees. The office halted its activity for more than two hours to prepare and conduct a *puja* in which only my family participated. The *puja* altar was being arranged on the floor with a Ganesha image and all the needed accessories, and, once ready, my family and I joined the priest to begin the *puja*. Sitting in the company's working space and participating in a full-length *puja*, we were surrounded by computers and office supplies. Not only was this not the sacred space one would imagine, the *puja* was also interrupted at points by the ringing of the *pandit*'s (Hindu scholar and priest) smartphone. And yet, this surreal setup could not have been more appropriate for a *puja* conducted in honor of my Ph.D., which studies the integration of digital technologies and culture into Hindu spaces and practices. The office was induced with a sacred atmosphere while we followed the priest's instructions. As part of the *puja*, which attempts to create a direct communication with the deity¹, we offered Ganesha various offerings and services (*upacaras*): my husband repeated the priest's *mantras* when he was told;² bathed Ganesha with ghee (clarified butter), curd, and milk; circled the *arati* lamp around him; and adorned him with flowers, *kumkum* powder, fruits, and rice. Eventually, we all ate sweets (*prasad*), concluding the worship. Occasionally, the company's employees came to take pictures of the *puja*. In the meantime, a client came to the office to

¹ Paul B. Courtright, "On This Holy Day In My Humble Way: Aspects of *Pūjā*," in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, eds. Joanne P. Waghorne, Norman Cutler, and Vasudha Narayanan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 33.

² The priest only talked directly and guided my husband.

discuss a purchase with the owner, and nothing seemed bizarre to him—not that all the employees were sitting on the street outside the office, nor that the entire office was occupied by a religious ritual for a few Westerners. As a religious e-commerce enterprise, the sacred is not foreign to this space. But in our eyes, it was astonishing that an online retail company halted its activity as a hosting gesture, turning its face into a worship area. Of course, the uplifting and unforgettable visit ended in a picture-taking session, including all the employees, the owners, the *pandit*, the random customer, and us.

This fascinating experience in Vedic Vaani’s offices was exceptional to us, but in a way, also ordinary, considering contemporary India’s coexisting narratives. Vedic Vaani and the various Hindu startups I explore in this chapter strengthen my overall claim that, often in India, tradition and modernity do not only live in harmony, but also support and reinforce each other. It is not only temples and religious institutions that are responsible for maintaining this interplay. Numerous startups, led by young devotees, constantly emerge in the up-and-coming Hindu digital market. These entrepreneurs, which I term *digital adepts*, notice both the financial opportunity and the potential of technology to serve people like them in performing their religion. With their creative solutions, they become significant players in the adoption of digital media to Hindu devotional ends. This chapter sketches their role and specific contribution to this process.

Religion and commerce have always responded and engaged with each other,³ and the Indian religious market is no exception. In India, the religious and spiritual market is estimated at thirty⁴ to forty⁵ billion US dollars. Of course, this includes various Indian religions and spiritual

³ Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification: 'Merchandizing' Diasporic Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 2011), 190-1.

⁴ Ambika Behal, “India's \$30B Spiritual Market and the Woman That's Tapping into It,” *Forbes*, August 19, 2016,

movements, but, according to population, almost 80 percent of it probably falls under the larger Hindu Wide Web.⁶ The Hindu market includes temple donations and services, purchase of offerings and other *puja* items, religious tourism and pilgrimage, and so on. As an investor in this market puts it, Hindu devotees spend money on religion in good and bad times, making the market recession-proof and turning religion into “the most viral business in India.”⁷

The lucrative aspect of the religious market is obviously one of its primary appeals for young entrepreneurs and investors. But there are also other aspects that make this market an inviting opportunity. As I show below, young Hindu professionals identify the problems the existing religious market suffers from, which they can improve and fix with technological solutions. These issues are especially apparent to them, since they are usually fluent in and stem from global capitalist and media culture, as part of their networked publics. These entrepreneurs claim the Indian religious market is “highly disorganized”⁸ and “very fragmented.”⁹ As one investor puts it, “That’s a phenomenal market that startups can disrupt with technology, and in some ways bring God closer to people.”¹⁰ Attempting to bring people like them closer to religion, entrepreneurs wish to innovate and match Hindu practice to the way they perform other aspects of their life. In their view, religious practices should be accessible, standardized, and simplified

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/abehal/2016/08/19/indias-30b-spiritual-market-and-the-woman-thats-tapping-into-it/#4ae9c92d109e>.

⁵ Shephali Bhatt, “Is India Ready for a Branded Player in the \$40 Billion Religion & Spirituality Market?,” *The Economic Times*, July 27, 2016, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/brand-equity/is-india-ready-for-a-branded-player-in-the-40-billion-religion-spirituality-market/articleshow/53399047.cms>.

⁶ According to the 2011 official census. The Indian census’ data can be found at, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion_PCA.html

⁷ Neejra Pawha Jetley, “The Religious in India Take Leap of Faith, Tech Style,” *CNBC*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/08/03/the-religious-in-india-take-leap-of-faith-tech-style.html>.

⁸ Ranjani Ayyar, “Pujas to Pilgrimages — These Startups are Disrupting Spirituality,” *The Times of India*, November 26, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/trend-tracking/startups-disrupting-spirituality/articleshow/61798853.cms>.

⁹ Behal, “India’s \$30B Spiritual Market.”

¹⁰ Shilpa Phadnis, “India’s Spiritual and Religious Market is Estimated to be Over \$30 Billion,” *The Times of India*, February 23, 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indias-spiritual-and-religious-market-is-estimated-to-be-over-30-billion/articleshow/30881651.cms>.

through technology, forming the digital Hindu market as a hybrid of global and local cultures.

Describing the larger Hindu bazaar and its publics, this chapter sets the stage for the two chapters that follow, which depict how other forces—mainly, temples and global gurus—utilize digital technologies to bring the divine experience closer to people. Although the digital Hindu industry is only in its nascent stages, more and more startups are surfacing on Hindu regional, national, and international stages. These Hindu startups provide a range of online services, such as booking *pandits* to conduct *pujas* across India and, via video chats, around the world; astrology consultations; online shopping of religious artifacts; customized *puja* to be conducted in specific temples; *prasad* (food offered to the deity during worship and consumed by devotees after it) delivery from Indian temples; pilgrimage packages; organization of various religious rituals in their entirety; live-streaming of rituals and festivals; and online tutorials and information.

Naturally, with an industry as vast and diverse as this, I could find multiple entry points and case studies. After a vast online research on such companies—including myriad news articles which also serve as data in this chapter—I eventually visited and met the owners of three companies. I could not have known back then the future of these young startups. The large number of online services points to the companies' need to establish themselves as authentic. If it was hard for me to pick the companies that would be best as case studies, how would one know which service to trust and choose for her devotion? For my purposes, I selected case studies that were talked about in the news, had developed sophisticated online platforms, seemed part of the digital culture I am interested in,¹¹ and that—taken together—can provide a larger picture of the wide array of services this market includes. This is why I ended up working closely with Vedic

¹¹ The websites I chose to study reflect current trends in online aesthetics and features. These include social media presence, timely style and branding, interactive features, customer service, and so on.

Vaani, ibhakti, and Where's My Pandit. Vedic Vaani is an e-commerce company selling a wide array of spiritual products and organizing customized *pujas*. Vedic Vaani started as an offline business in 1998 by Kalpesh Gandhi and Vickram Shah. Their website was launched only in 2013, after a long experience in the religious and spiritual products business. They were already part of the religious bazaar and did not use technology to disrupt it, but rather to expand their business. Founded by Dino Morea—a Bollywood actor—and Malay Parekh, ibhakti was launched in 2015, offering exclusive services from temples. These services include videos of rituals, *prasad* delivery, and performance of temple *pujas* in one's name. Where's My Pandit is self-defined as “a one-stop solution for all your religious requirement [sic] to help one and all follow the rich culture and tradition of Hinduism.”¹² It was founded by three young professionals—Ronak Agarwal, Arun Poddar, and Yogesh Jadhav—to provide a range of services from selling *puja* kits to offering online and offline *pandit* services.

Vedic Vaani, ibhakti, and Where's My Pandit's stories are woven throughout this chapter in detail, as I met and talked with them all. However, since I try to sketch a map of this emerging market, I also use the massive amount of information available online on such startups—from news articles to social media accounts and the companies' websites themselves. I cannot recount all the stories, but I will briefly introduce Saumyaa Vardhan, the founder of ShubhPuja.com—a popular online platform for customized *pujas* and various Hindu-based consultations—and Goonjan Mall, who founded OnlinePrasad.com—another leading player in the field, providing *prasad* delivery from temples, spiritual items, *puja* services, and pilgrimage packages. As a young industry, this map is constantly changing. In the attempt to capture this dynamic, I

¹² “Homepage,” Where's My Pandit, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://wheresmypandit.com>.

followed these budding startups for two-and-a-half years, and I saw a glimpse of the constant changes and challenges they face. I also examine this evolving industry and its potential through an online survey I conducted with 741 tech-savvy Indians. This survey allows me to investigate what the publics of these startups think about these options, to what degree online practices have penetrated Hindu devotion so far, and their future potential to do so (appendix A displays the survey questions).

This depiction raises important questions regarding the larger adoption of digital media to Hindu ends and the role external entities play in it. How do Hindu startups situate themselves in this market, located at the intersection of Hinduism and global capitalism? What strategies do Hindu startups use to establish themselves as authoritative and authentic? Who uses these services and how do they choose which to use? What is the role and meaning of the digital technologies on which these services are based? How does globalization come into play? This chapter shows that, although this industry is still unstable, its potential to bloom and dramatically shape Hindu devotional networks in the future is undeniable. Highlighting this trend and its public unveils the intricate ways digital startups embody a hybrid of global and local cultures—if they could ever be differentiated to begin with.

Situating these contemporary efforts, I first review the perpetual relationship between Hinduism and commerce, as evident in the ethos of the Indian bazaar. Using my case studies, I define these digital startups as part of a contemporary Hindu bazaar, enfolding religion and commerce together. Then, I explore the public of this industry as India's new middle class, with an attempt to push beyond this sociological category. I delve deeper into the state of the digital market by examining the entrepreneurs behind those startups as Hindu digital adepts, their attempts to produce digital authenticity and authority, the public of these endeavors and their user

experience, and the potential of such usage. I argue that both digital adepts and their public—from which digital adepts also stem—seek authenticity in hybrid terms drawn from the two worlds they occupy—devotional Hinduism and global digital culture. In conclusion, I examine the unique role and meaning of digital technologies in these modified Hindu services. This chapter argues that technology is used to simplify Hindu practices for a young and busy devotional public, making it more attractive, manageable, standardized, and service-oriented. In other words, Hindu startups align devotional practices with digital media culture at large. In this process, digital media are used as bridges and gateways between the global and the local, the universal and the particular. Borrowed from the realm of technology, understanding digital media as gateways and bridges situates the local and the global as two systems that are linked into a wider network, at times requiring the conversion of information to the other system's lingua franca and at times effortlessly linked. Thereby, I challenge the assumed dichotomy of these terms, arguing for understanding them as connected, dialogical parts of one larger cultural web. In this attempt, I follow a similar scholarly approach that manifests in terms such as the glocal,¹³ particular universalism,¹⁴ and the larger-than-local¹⁵—all showing in different ways that the global and the local make each other possible and are not inevitably in tension with each other, as displayed in my case studies.

¹³ Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," In *Global Modernities*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, 25-45 (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

¹⁴ Michèle Lamont, Ann Morning, and Margarita Mooney, "Particular Universalisms: North African Immigrants Respond to French racism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 3 (2002): 390-414.

¹⁵ Amy Shuman, "Dismantling Local Culture," *Western Folklore* 52, no. 2/4 (1993): 345-364.

2.1 India's Spiritual and Religious Bazaar: Past and Present

Here is a market that is both recession-proof and price inelastic . . . nobody negotiates with God!"¹⁶

As my three main case studies are all based in Mumbai, I have spent a lot of time in Mumbai's Ubers, going from meeting to meeting. Riding around Mumbai, it seemed to me as if we were crossing various time periods and worlds, and I was always curious to see where I would end up. On my way to meet Ronak Agarwal, the vice president of Where's My Pandit (WMP hereafter), we passed by busy retail areas, slums, construction zones, highways, and narrow alleys, to eventually reach a modern and relatively new office building. Like an exclusive business site, the building had security stops both at the entrance to the parking lot and at the lobby of the building, where I had to check in for my meeting. However, as part of India's coexisting narratives, the religious startup, nestled in one of the building's floors, did not seem out of context. First, the building lobby itself had a separate prayer room, situating devotional practices as part of its existence. Second, by the look of the WMP offices themselves, one could never guess what kind of activity they handled. Situated in the building's seventh floor, the office had a modern look, with a big, open space at the center, divided by cubicles, overlooking the adjunct neighborhoods through big glass windows. Surrounding it were some private offices, separated by glass walls. The general feeling I got from this space, and from my conversation with Agarwal, is that Hindu devotion has officially entered the tech startup world.

Established in 2014, WMP's motto is "to assist everyone experience spiritual divinity."¹⁷ Indeed, the website offers information on *pujas* and various Hindu topics, as well as many

¹⁶ Jetley, "The Religious in India Take Leap of Faith."

¹⁷ "About Us," Where's My Pandit, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://wheresmypandit.com/about-us>.

services, of which the primary is *pandit* services. WMP works with more than 3,000 *pandits*—who have been screened and tested by them—to provide *pandit* services in several languages and in all major cities across the country. Two main factors contributing to the growing demand of such services are domestic migration and the decline of the joint family, especially in urban centers. These processes lead to the disappearance of the concept of a family *pandit*, who is “attached to a particular family for generations, meeting all of their religious needs.”¹⁸ Another service WMP offers, mainly for devotees living abroad, is *e-puja* through video conferencing:

Now, you can perform a virtual puja from the comfort of your room, even if you are miles away from your country or simply cannot make it to the puja ceremony. Participate in puja’s that are performed systematically with authentic customs and rituals. . . . Everything here is tailor made to suit your needs- all you need to have is an internet connection, laptop or phone with a camera, speaker and microphone.¹⁹

The *e-puja* can be performed in three different ways: by both the *pandit* and the devotee, only on the devotee side under the guidance of the *pandit*, or only by the *pandit* on the devotee’s behalf (figure 3).

Agarwal’s description of their company demonstrates the web of worlds from which Hindu startups, such as his, emerge. Coming from a Hindu background, combined with global tech world standards, WMP attempts to introduce a new level of professionalism and customer service to the realm of Hindu rituals. WMP’s *pandits* do not only come from respected universities, with the highest religious standards, they also go through detailed training in customer service. Agarwal claims that this level of professionalism was not met before the performance of religious practices became a trade of the private sector.²⁰

¹⁸ Kanika Sharma, “Death www.ishes: Puja e-Marts, Last-Rites Packages Replace Pundits,” *Hindustan Times*, July 26, 2015, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/death-www-ishes-puja-e-marts-last-rites-packages-replace-pundits/story-66gjOaR4axSkK7YkW5KqEL.html>.

¹⁹ “E-Puja,” Where’s My Pandit, accessed on January 15, 2018, <https://www.wheresmypandit.com/e-puja>.

²⁰ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.



Figure 3: Where's My Pandit's e-Puja page.²¹

This claim might be true in regard to the standards of customer service that the startup world brings to the devotional sphere. However, the Indian commercial sector was always involved, on some level, in Hindu practice. Vineeta Sinha, a sociologist working on South Asia and the Hindu diaspora, shows that, already in medieval India, Hindu temples' operations were integrated with trade and commerce. Worship in the temple was maintained by, and required, objects that were produced and distributed via a system of artisans, craftsmen, and traders. Sinha concludes that “commercial activity is not by any means alien to the functioning of temples and worship within Hinduism and it was certainly not introduced by an industrial capitalist system of production and consumption.”²² Hinduism is not unique in this regard. Many examples across religious traditions show that spirituality comes together with materiality and commerce, and that

²¹ Where's My Pandit, “E-Puja.”

²² Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*, 201.

these two have been historically tangled.²³ Media scholar Mara Einstein goes even further to say that the marketing of religion has been going on for centuries, as evident from the invention of the printing press, which originally served to advertise bibles.²⁴ This relationship between religion and commerce, however, takes different forms in different traditions, places, and times.

WMP trains their *pandits* to be courteous to devotees, to arrive on time, and provide all the logic and scientific reasoning behind the act they perform:

You need to explain the entire process, what it means and what is the benefit of doing this. The other *pandits* who are there in the local market they don't do all these things. They come there, perform the *puja*, and go away. You won't even understand why this is important. So that's how we differentiated ourselves from others.²⁵

Notice that Agarwal distinguishes their services through their use of science and logic as explanatory tools. The use of science as a form of justification reverberates several historical and religious trends. Understanding Hindu practices and their benefits as science is not a contemporary invention. The scientific element was always part of Hindu practices' grounding. In addition, an emphasis on empirical evidence and elevation of scientific objectivity and rationalism endures since the 19th century. This trend continues in the modern startup world in which Agarwal is situated, resonating with the emphasis he gives to reason in the devotee's experience of the *puja*. In this sense, establishing authenticity through logic is a strategy that echoes many realms—Hinduism, scientific research, and the professional tech world.

²³ For few of the many examples of various religions' entanglement with commerce and the marketplace see Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, 169-91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Joann D'Alisera, "I♥ Islam: Popular Religious Commodities, Sites of Inscription, and Transnational Sierra Leonean Identity." *Journal of Material Culture* 6, no. 1 (2001): 91-110; Pattana Kitiarsa, ed., *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (London: Routledge, 2007). Nurit Zaidman, "Commercialization of Religious Objects: A Comparison Between Traditional and New Age Religions," *Social Compass* 50, no. 3 (2003): 345-360.

²⁴ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

²⁵ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

This hybrid of local traditions with global capitalism, resulting from the merging of these respective networks into a bigger web, is not new to Indian markets, as Kajri Jain's phenomenal work on Hindu visual culture shows. Jain examines this hybrid through the concept of the Indian bazaar as a colonial formation.²⁶ Jain characterizes the colonial Indian bazaar as an informal space that enfolded religion and commerce together. The indigenous trading communities relied heavily on religious, family, and community networks.²⁷ However, the ethos of the bazaar continued to emerge out of the intersection of the 'official' colonial economy and the 'informal' existing networks.²⁸ Through an exploration of the calendar art industry—also called bazaar art—Jain shows how processes like globalization and colonialism create vernacular economies. “[W]hile these processes foster homogeneity in some respects . . . in others they necessitate the continued coexistence of the disjunct worlds that postcolonial, globalized subjects must negotiate.”²⁹ Bazaar art was used to capitalist ends, promoting businesses through the distribution of free branded prints, such as calendars. Interestingly, most of these promotional materials depict religious themes and deities. This phenomenon highlights the “epistemically disjunct yet performatively networked worlds”³⁰ that form the life of postcolonial subjects, negotiating vernacular discourse and practices with foreign ones. Out of this disjunction, postcolonial subjects do not have a choice but to create an operational network, linking these foreign mindsets.

²⁶ For a detailed exploration of the notion of Indian bazaar see C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Rajat Kanta Ray, “Introduction,” in *Entrepreneurship and Industry in India 1800-1947*, ed. Rajat Kanta Ray (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1-69; Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Bihar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

²⁷ Kajri Jain, “Mass Reproduction and the Art of the Bazaar,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, eds. Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 187.

²⁸ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 79-80.

²⁹ Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 21.

³⁰ Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 14.

Addressing young, professional devotees, Hindu startups operate in the same conceptual zone, negotiating the seemingly disjunct worlds of global digital culture and the vernacular devotional one. Thus, I adopt Jain's conceptual framework and term this market the Hindu digital bazaar. Hindu startups build on and emerge from the overlapping of religion and commerce,³¹ which have always been part of the Indian marketplace. In addition, they link both worlds in a digital, hybrid network. Nonetheless, the informality that marked the vernacular bazaar, distinguishing it from the rules of the European market,³² is what young entrepreneurs attempt to escape from, aligning their industry with global market standards. Jain shows that, in order to produce authentic Indian art, artists had to first master western aesthetic conventions of naturalism.³³ In a similar fashion, Hindu startups master global tech and customer service norms to move away from the informal unorganized bazaar, while maintaining its religious and vernacular ethos.

During our conversation, Agarwal emphasized this point repeatedly. In order to convince me of their professionalism—or so it seemed—he demonstrated that the standards they commit to have the expected results, and people are extremely satisfied with their service. “People told us, ‘My neighbor booked a *pandit* from a local temple, who committed to come at 7 a.m., but he was not there till 5 p.m., and you committed for a *pandit* at 7 a.m. and your *pandit* was here at 6:50 a.m.’”³⁴ WMP also used to sell religious products, but disabled this service because they had to

³¹ I do not suggest that the overlapping of religion and commerce is all encompassing. It is important to remember the moments in which this entanglement is suspended; the divide between these two realms occurs in the subjective devotional experience and the commercial elements remain on the outskirts.

³² Jain, “Mass Reproduction and the Art of the Bazaar,” 187.

³³ Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 100.

³⁴ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

rely on other, offline vendors. “The vendors are very small places. They don’t have inventory checks, they don’t know when the inventory will come, they don’t take proper photographs of their products, they don’t respond to you. You’ll end up giving bad service to your customers, so it’s better not to do it.” The small traditional vendors did not meet the demands of the quick, customer-oriented, modern e-commerce WMP is trying to establish. They still sell some *puja* accessories, as they managed to find trustworthy vendors, which they trained to be organized and meet their standards. Agarwal points to the ways Hindu startups attempt to disrupt the Hindu religious market by penetrating it through organizing it, which are not unique to WMP.

Kalpesh Gandhi and Vickram Shah, the founders of Vedic Vaani—the religious retail company mentioned in the beginning of this chapter—realized they should expand to the internet when clients were starting to ask for it. “We had customers who are followers of Krishna who had to travel at least 20 kilometers to reach a place where they can find what they need, and the quality was not so good.”³⁵ Thus, they wish to fill a gap of authentic products online. In the attempt to provide the highest-quality products, Vedic Vaani brings items from several South Asian countries, various Indian states, manufactures some themselves, and even takes customized orders. They establish their online business as both traditionally authentic and globally apt through their long experience in the field, quality checks of their products before and after the manufacturing process, certificates of authentication, users’ testimonials on their site, and a 24/7 chat services assisting customers. “Our services are also liked by our customers, and we try our best to make our customers happy by giving good quality, because quality matters! . . . It’s a spiritual product that really touches the human heart, so we don’t want to mess with it.”³⁶ Gandhi

³⁵ Vikram Shah, conversation with author, December 17, 2016.

³⁶ Kalpesh Gandhi, conversation with author, December 17, 2016.

and Shah even state that being on Amazon gives them an advantage.³⁷ “People get to know that Vedic Vaani is authentic . . . from seeing us on Amazon.”³⁸ Their website is available in nineteen languages, of which seven are Indian, and products’ prices can be shown in seven different currencies. Each product is shown with a detailed explanation and images. They also have a massive presence on social media—such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and YouTube, among others—as well as their own smartphone app.

At large, Hindu startups distinguish themselves from the offline bazaar through creating a hassle-free experience, with standardized and known-in-advance prices to align themselves with their networked public’s expectations and to remove themselves from the informality of the religious bazaar from which they emerge. Other factors in becoming part of global media culture are website aesthetics, branding, language, and marketing strategies—such as seasonal sales, rewards, and cash-back offers. Many of the companies have ‘How It Works’ videos, which are trendily animated, simplified, and very relatable to young, professional devotees. For instance, *ibhakti*’s animated video (figure 4) begins with introducing Puja (a Hindu female),

Who like every other individual today has a hectic lifestyle. She would love to visit her temple as often as possible. But, due to distance, time, and her other responsibilities she was unable to do so. Then, she came across *ibhakti.com* which gives her an opportunity to experience a visit to her temple. . . . Let the distance and circumstances no more keep you from visiting your temple. *ibhakti.com*—working to bring you closer to your god.³⁹

Devotees’ identification with the video’s subject and familiarization with its digital aesthetics promote their use of similar platforms.

³⁷ Vedic Vaani also sells its products on Flipkart—the India-based parallel and competitor of Amazon—but, interestingly, Gandhi and Shah did not mention that fact to me.

³⁸ Vikram Shah, conversation with author, December 17, 2016.

³⁹ *ibhakti*, “*ibhakti* - Fulfilling Religious Experience,” YouTube, video, 01:21, August 29, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxWR7wjvss0>.

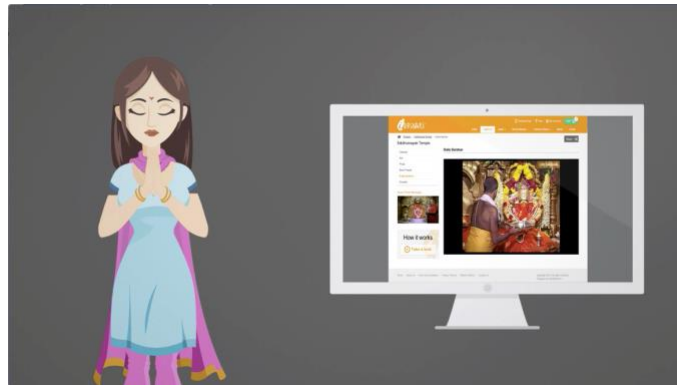


Figure 4: Image from ibhakti's How It Works video

Hindu e-commerce companies, such as Vedic Vaani, arise from the fact that Hindu rituals and devotion necessitate objects. This element of Hindu devotion is part of what created the robust commercial bazaar that has developed—and keeps developing—around Hindu practice. These objects circulate through global networks, which now partly migrate online and are being challenged by the new logic of e-commerce. Exploring the global networks of ‘*puja* items’ as they move between commercial and devotional spaces, Sinha shows that, traditionally, devotional objects and services were produced and provided by designated *jatis* (castes; religious communities that usually have a distinctive profession). Working in the devotional industry was “ideally imbued with spiritual overtones and not approached merely as ‘work.’”⁴⁰ However, with urbanization and migration, this sacred connection was challenged, opening up this lucrative business to entrepreneurs with no historical connection or traditional knowledge. These entrepreneurs serve as new players in the adoption of technology for devotional needs. Interestingly, as I show later, while not possessing ‘official’ traditional knowledge, entrepreneurs attempt to maintain spiritual overtones, emphasizing their motivation and mission as devotional service to other devotees.

⁴⁰ Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*, 2.

Sinha argues that, although Hindu objects are incorporated into global capitalism and its mechanism, and, thus, go through some sort of commercialization, this process does not lead to a desecration of the religious realm. On the contrary, religious commodities “enhance the spiritual domain as these objects are actively utilized in the sustenance of everyday religiosity.”⁴¹ To support this claim, Sinha utilizes Arjun Appadurai’s approach to the social life of things, as they move between the different roles they play, or in this case, as they travel between the marketplace and the devotional sphere, from being commodities to sacred items.⁴² Sinha does not ignore the fact that religious institutions and practitioners “respond to, and appropriate, the logic of the market,”⁴³ but argues that this process contributes to the persistence of enchantment in the capitalist world we live in, and I could not agree with her more.⁴⁴ The integration of digital culture—with its customer service, aesthetics, logic, and language—into Hindu practice described throughout this project does not only sustain Hindu devotion but also contributes to its rise, especially among young practitioners that might have otherwise given up.

Taking a different stance on the matter, South Asian diaspora scholar Semontee Mitra argues that the commodification of religion has definitely desecrated religion. Examining Hindu diaspora in the United States, she argues that their assimilation to North American culture and its consumerism made them materialize their religion, “converting the meaning of religion, rituals,

⁴¹ Sinha, 203.

⁴² For more on this perspective on ‘things’ see, Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴³ Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*, 204.

⁴⁴ Pattana Kitiarsa strengthens this claim, arguing that the process of commodification does not mean secularization, rather an effective means to maintain and reinvent religion. Pattana Kitiarsa, “Introduction: Asia’s Commodified Sacred Canopies,” in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. Pattana Kitiarsa (London: Routledge, 2007), 1-28.

festivals, and even the gods and the goddesses into objects and commodities.”⁴⁵ Not only do I disagree with her that this process of commodification is leading to the contamination of Hinduism, I also reject the assumption that this is something new—as if the commercial and the religious sphere are distinctly separated—as well as her focus on the Hindu diaspora as the only locale in which this process is taking place. My study shows that the alignment of religion with the demands of the market is not restricted to the diaspora, nor that the impact of capitalism is evident solely in North America. With digital networks and global developments at large, these processes cannot be attributed to one continent.⁴⁶ There is definitely a need to study how this process manifests differently in the diaspora as a unique existence in which people need to reconstruct the homeland in order to maintain it as part of their identity, as well as the bilateral effects of kinship relations between North American upper-class diaspora and their families in the homeland. However, we should recognize that consumerism and capitalism are spread globally, and thus, have multiple locations and manifestations. Among them, I focus on the way these global processes are taking shape in the local context of India.

In Sinha’s terms, the emergence of cyberspace as a new spiritual bazaar had created new global networks, “necessarily reconfigured in view of contemporary demands of the market.”⁴⁷ This necessity comes up as a recurring theme from both sides of the equation: from entrepreneurs, who identify a need to be answered, and from users, who wish their devotional duties could be met in a more accessible manner, which fits their new lifestyle. This issue is significant to all of

⁴⁵ Semontee Mitra, "Merchandizing the Sacred: Commodifying Hindu Religion, Gods/Goddesses, and Festivals in the United States," *Journal of Media and Religion* 15, no. 2 (2016): 115. DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2016.1177351.

⁴⁶ Hindu religious movements themselves have been diffused globally through the activities of modern gurus—as I describe in chapter 4—such as the well-known ISKCON movement, and via the devotional lives of diasporic communities, contributing to the transnational nature of this phenomenon. For example, see Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*, 189.

the digital mediations I describe in this study, as they share public and are shaped by the same global demands. In this section, I highlighted the historical continuity of this process, showing that “[j]ust as the vernacular culture industries of the late-colonial period adopted the formal idioms of the colonizer . . . the post-liberalization Indian culture industries have reformulated Indianness as lying within a global marketplace of consumption and production.”⁴⁸ Nonetheless, within this process each historical moment brings a difference; contemporary capitalism and digital culture change the ways people are mobilized in the Hindu devotional web. This shift will become clear as the chapter develops, but for now we can already notice two main imprints of digital capitalist culture. First, once devotees become networked publics via digital media, they can oscillate between production and consumption of devotional content more easily. Digital adepts create solutions to the devotional networked public they belong to. This public is depicted as India’s new middle classes, which I describe next. Second, the nature of devotion shifts once it is penetrated by global capitalist norms. Ideas of customer service, ease, and making devotees ‘happy’ do not appear in the traditional vernacular ethos. Devotees who go to a temple do not seek a convenient service that will make them happy, nor a simplified one; rather, they pursue mental peace which is achieved in whatever means needed. This point exemplifies the role of digital media as a gateway, rather than a bridge, between devotional practice and global capitalist networks. With these startups, entrepreneurs convert capitalist ideas into a foreign system of devotion, in a way forming new standards for the devotional experience.

⁴⁸ Jain, “Mass Reproduction and the Art of the Bazaar,” 202.

2.2 India's Networked 'Middle Classes'

I met Malai Parekh, who serves as *ibhakti* managing director, in a posh deli in Mumbai's luxurious Bandra neighborhood. Everything about this meeting—from the “western comfort food”⁴⁹ served at the deli to the valet services offered and the elite neighborhood that is the home of Bollywood actors, cricket players, and politicians—conveyed the same message as *ibhakti*'s initiatives: modern, hip, and exclusive. Parekh, a young businessman, was very interested in my research project and had great knowledge of the industry to which he belongs. He admitted that it is not necessarily easy to get people to perform Hindu practices online as it dictates a paradigm shift. However, he sees that this is slowly changing with young people who spend most of their time connected to their phone and have less interest in going to temples. “They would rather go to a temple more often in a digital way. They would go to the temple physically, but less often.”⁵⁰ Knowing their young and cosmopolitan audience, *ibhakti*'s brand is stylish and hip; its website, app, and promotional materials and videos share the same trendy aesthetic language (figure 5).

According to Parekh, the online religious market is not that big yet, as the number of people who are using the internet is small compared to the population, and even among that group, people are not yet aware of these kind of services. Nonetheless, Parekh does see the great prospect of the market, stating that they attempt to establish their business now in order to be there when this potential is realized. “India is moving forward, more and more digital and all of that is happening. . . . We've got everything ready, waiting for the market to explode.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, *ibhakti* did not survive to live through the realization of this potential. Although

⁴⁹ “Homepage,” Indigo Deli, accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.indigodeli.com>.

⁵⁰ Malay Parekh, conversation with author, December 20, 2016.

⁵¹ Parekh, December 20, 2016.

great efforts were made in building ibhakti's brand and intricate platform, in 2017, the site suspended operations. There is much to learn from ibhakti's short life span, and I elaborate on it shortly. For the purposes of this section, I want to focus on their public—of which Parekh is a part and is embodied by the setting of our meeting.

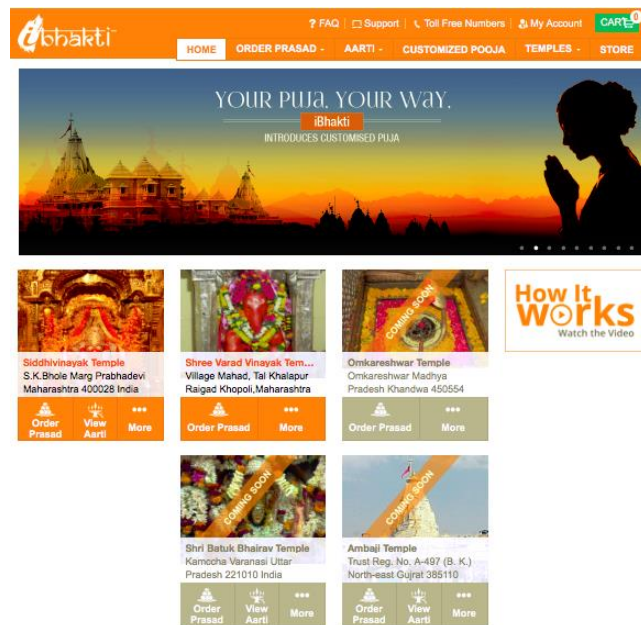


Figure 5: iBhakti's home page.⁵²

When I repeated what Parekh said about the current state of the industry to Agarwal from WMP, he was very eager to prove Parekh wrong, grabbing a piece of paper to sketch out the size of the Indian population that his website—and others like it—are targeting. Starting with India's population, Agarwal broke down the numbers for me. His numbers are not the most up to date, but they paint a pretty accurate picture. Agarwal estimates Hindu urban population as 250 million people.⁵³ According to the World Bank's data from 2016, India's population is 1.324 billion.⁵⁴

⁵² "Home," ibhakti, accessed May 2, 2016. <http://ibhakti.com/temple>.

⁵³ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

Out of the general population, around 80 percent are Hindus. As only 30 percent of the country's population lives in urban areas,⁵⁵ a more accurate estimation of the number of urban Hindus in India is 318 million. This Hindu urban population's use of internet and access to digital devices like tablets and smartphones, as well as 3G/4G mobile networks, is growing rapidly. Agarwal further calculates, "In the urban population, the average family size is four people. So there are more than five crore families [50 million]. One family spends not less than 2,000 rupees in a year on their religious requirements. So it becomes 10,000 crore [100 billion] in a year. Out of this, if I capture only five percent of the market, it comes to 50 crore rupees [500 million rupees = \$7.7 million].⁵⁶ That's the target for next five years."⁵⁷ Agarwal even states that this a very conservative number. As this market is still very young and not as stable, there is no way to know how this potential will unfold.

The posh setting of my interview with Parekh was not a rare one during my 2016 visit. The India I found in Mumbai—and later in Coimbatore—was strikingly different than the one I met in my previous visit on 2008. Beyond the massive technological progress that happened in India during these years (discussed in the introduction), another reason for this shift is that, in 2008, I was a backpacker, traveling alone and sleeping in cheap guesthouses, mostly in small villages and non-urban tourist destinations. In 2016, I came back as a researcher, with a family, staying in established hotels in the better parts of town and exploring the Hindu online scene. Spending most of our time in Mumbai and Coimbatore—two cosmopolitan, industrial centers on

⁵⁴ "India," The World Bank, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/India>.

⁵⁵ Press Trust of India, "70% Indian Live in Rural Areas: Census," *Business Standard*, January 20, 2013, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/70-indians-live-in-rural-areas-census-111071500171_1.html.

⁵⁶ Agarwal miscalculated the last part. Five percent of 10,000 is 500 crore rupees, which raise his expected profit to \$77 million.

⁵⁷ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

a different scale—and trying meanwhile to entertain a toddler, we found ourselves spending a lot of time among the cities’ middle classes. Mumbai is packed with hip, ‘Western-style’ cafes and restaurants, fancy shopping malls, business centers, modern cinema halls, and so on. While I was conducting interviews, my husband and son spent a lot of time in an indoor playground, located inside an office building, which could have been easily found in our American neighborhood, with the same games, menu offers, rewards card, and English playlist.

Writing about the same Mumbai environment, Indian cultures and cinema scholar Rachel Dwyer identifies the city’s ‘new middle classes’ as distinct from the old middle classes that are composed of the professional or service elite, and the lower-middle classes, or petite bourgeoisie.⁵⁸ The use of the term ‘middle class’ is problematic in the Indian context, as its evolution and composition are different, and, mainly, since the term by no means represents the statistical middle of the population. “They are instead . . . the top 20–30 percent of the population surrounded by a sea of utter poverty.”⁵⁹ For lack of a better term, I will use it, but I do not wish to delve into the Indian sociological and economic understandings of the concept, as it has already been discussed and complicated by scholars more knowledgeable than me on these matters.⁶⁰ For my purposes, it is sufficient to say that India’s middle class, as current scholarship discusses it, is considered to have emerged and come into prominence thanks to India’s economic reforms in the

⁵⁸ Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want is Money, All You Need is Love: Sex and Romance in Modern India* (Cassel: London, 2000), 4.

⁵⁹ Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 66.

⁶⁰ For more on India’s middle classes see Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want is Money, All You Need is Love*; Sara Dickey, *Living Class in Urban India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Pavan K. Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Books India, 1998); John Stratton Hawley, "Modern India and the Question of Middle-Class Religion," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 5, no. 3 (2001): 217-225.

1990s, playing a central role in the making of modern India.⁶¹ Many scholars have pointed to this class's consumption patterns, affected by their new exposure to "global economic and cultural influences,"⁶² as a result of their growing wealth, mobility, and access to global technology. Modern Hinduism scholar Brian Hatcher notes that Hindu diaspora affects this class, including its "spiritual truths and habits of consumption throughout a web of global trade, travel, and entertainment."⁶³ This global web is supported by the fact that the vast Hindu diaspora means families inhabit multiple worlds, reinforcing the exposure of those who are left in India to global consumerism. Anthropologist Sara Dickey emphasizes the use of consumer goods as the most visible characteristic of India's new middle class.⁶⁴ Hatcher also shows that Max Weber's definition of the middle class is partly applicable in the Indian case, as their labor is consumption. "[T]his middle class expresses and defines itself in the marketplace. We might say that one way it does so is by consuming Hinduism."⁶⁵

Out of the above understanding, I highlight the exposure to global cultural influences as the identifying feature of Hindu startups' public in specific, and of digital Hindu devotion at large. This exposure is possible thanks to the participation of this public in a global web, facilitated by digitally networked media. Thus, I term them India's networked middle classes, pointing again to the links between the local and the global. As this study shows, similarly to the understanding of India's 'new middle class,' such global access leads to the importance of this population in shaping Hindu practices and performance. However, devotional publics do not

⁶¹ Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class*, xi-xiii; Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*, 2.

⁶² Warrier guru choice 36

⁶³ Brian A. Hatcher, "Bourgeois Vedānta: The Colonial Roots of Middle-Class Hinduism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, No. 2 (2007): 301.

⁶⁴ Dickey, *Living Class in Urban India*, 5.

⁶⁵ Hatcher, "Bourgeois Vedanta," 301.

necessarily need a lot of wealth to participate in the Hindu digital web. They do need to be aligned with global trends and be fluent and comfortable with technology, including some sort of English language proficiency.⁶⁶ This alignment mostly comes with the access and exposure that middle-class wealth allows, but also with being a part of the younger generations and fluent in cutting-edge technology. It can also be achieved by owning a smartphone, which is a widespread phenomenon these days, as I showed in the introduction. A recent and beautiful digital humanities study shows how lower-income urban Indians use the internet. The study demonstrates that lower-income youth find ways to access the internet through their phones, even if they do not have the resources for big data packages or for spending time at fancy coffee shops that offer Wi-Fi. Preserving offline class differences, they use their wealthier friends' smartphones as a hotspot.⁶⁷ Albeit in different ways, they manage to get the same global access and exposure, becoming part of India's networked publics. Theoretically, the Digital India initiative wishes to allow such access to all Indian citizens, but the digital divide is still acute. Overall, the population I am discussing might be composed mainly of members of India's middle classes, but these boundaries are not that strict. What is more important about them is the way they embody the juxtaposition of local and global culture. Rooted in their specific culture and tradition, the young, tech-savvy, professional population participates in global networks, including its consumerism and technological progression.

My own set of data reflects this view. As noted before, during Summer 2017, I conducted an online survey through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, which is defined as an

⁶⁶ Most of the Hindu startups use English, probably as they attempt to address the largest markets possible, including the diasporic ones. For the sake of my research, all of the websites I have studied are in English. Although sites in various Indian languages exist, they are still a minority and current initiatives attempt to increase these numbers in order to connect more of India's population to the internet.

⁶⁷ "Life in a Metro," Rahul Advani, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://lifeinametro.in/story>.

online labor market. This platform has become popular among social scientists as a source of survey data.⁶⁸ Based on the internet's availability to people from all over the world and all walks of life, Amazon had created a way for companies, originally, to get an on-demand workforce or to perform market research.⁶⁹ On the other end, this platform allows workers to earn money from doing online tasks. In recent years, social scientists have found MTurk a useful solution to issues of recruiting and compensating participants in online surveys. Like any new tool, scholars have raised doubts on the platforms' reliability for academic needs. The main concern is whether MTurk workers are representative of world population as demographic surveys found "that MTurk is dominated by workers residing in the United States and India, with less than a quarter of workers residing elsewhere."⁷⁰ Also, being an online platform, it automatically differs from offline surveys, reflecting a population that is "younger (about 30 years old), overeducated, underemployed, less religious, and more liberal than the general population."⁷¹ For my ends, MTurk was a perfect solution, exactly for these reasons. Composing a survey on the ways people respond to and interact with digital Hindu services—whether they already use them or would potentially use them—MTurk allowed me to get data from 741 Indian participants, who have internet access and English and technological fluency and, thus, are exactly the public of these startups.⁷²

Out of 741 survey participants, around 80 percent defined themselves as Hindu, which is an accurate representation of the population they are drawn from. As indicated by scholarship on

⁶⁸ Gabriele Paolacci and Jesse Chandler, "Inside the Turk: Understanding Mechanical Turk as a Participant Pool," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 3, Vol. 23 (2014): 184.

⁶⁹ Google, among many others, has a similar platform called Google Surveys.

⁷⁰ Paolacci and Chandler, "Inside the Turk," 2.

⁷¹ Paolacci and Chandler, 2.

⁷² Another potential market is the Indian diaspora who is excluded from my survey, as it was open only to Indians. This choice was made in order to get the most relevant data out of the MTurk system, as well as because all my case studies declared that the majority of their users come from India.

MTurk demographics, 94 percent of my survey respondents are between 18–44 years of age, with 58 percent in the smaller group of 25–34 years old. Indeed, they are also educated, with 88 percent holding either a bachelor or a master’s degree.⁷³ However, my pool differs from the larger MTurk population, as most of them report to earn an average⁷⁴ or above average income (91 percent). Only one percent define themselves as unemployed, and, not surprisingly, the largest professional group come from the IT sector (16 percent). Also, and this is the most important fact for my purposes, they are definitely not ‘less religious.’ Eighty-six percent of the respondents reported they are either somewhat religious, very religious, or extremely religious, leaving around 14 percent on the ‘less religious’ side.⁷⁵ Out of the Hindus who took my survey, 59 percent said they know of various digital options to perform Hindu practices, and 91.5 percent of them use at least one of the digital options of which they are aware.⁷⁶ Moreover, about half of the Hindus who were not aware of this before were willing to consider it after they learned about it from the survey, implying that this phenomenon will only grow in magnitude. This data attests that the public of these Hindu startups are indeed part of India’s middle classes, with an emphasis on the young, educated, and globally networked Hindus.

2.3 The Digital Hindu Bazaar: Present and Potential Futures

Today’s India is undergoing momentous change. We Indians are progressing fast. But, the most amazing part of this progress is that we stay true to our roots and culture. And, at the heart of our culture lies faith and devotion. We aim to bring you closer to your faith using technology.⁷⁷

⁷³ When 51 percent hold a bachelor degree and 37 percent a master’s.

⁷⁴ The survey did not indicate what is an average income, allowing participants to reflect their own conceptions.

⁷⁵ To get more deeply into the details, 35 percent answered they are somewhat religious and another 35 percent said they are very religious, leaving only 16 percent extremely religious respondents.

⁷⁶ Out of 356 Hindu participants who were aware of these digital options before taking the survey, only 30 (8.5 percent) marked that they do not use any of the devotional digital practices they know of.

⁷⁷ “About Us,” OnlinePrasad.com, accessed March 22, 2018. <https://onlineprasad.com/pages/about-us>.

One of the most interesting facets of the digital Hindu bazaar arises from its novelty. On the one hand, the Indian religious and spiritual market—which attends to the various Indian religions, sometimes even by the same company and website—circulates massive amounts of money. Digital accessibility is growing at an incredible pace, pointing to the promising potential of the combination of the digital and the Hindu markets—especially since Hinduism has been successfully mediated through various new technologies and media throughout history. On the other hand, internet penetration in India is still in nascent stages, and the performance of Hindu practices digitally is not yet established in the devotional mind. Although startups wish to enter this market now to be established when this potential is realized, the current instability of the industry might prevent them from surviving long enough. As indicated before, this is what happened to *ibhakti*. The story of *ibhakti*'s rise and fall demonstrates the immaturity of the digital Hindu bazaar, and yet its great promise.

Agarwal, from WMP, explains that the online market began with services from big temples, as “people want temples, people want to get in touch with temples.”⁷⁸ However, there are many political interests involved in these temples' management, which leads to internal conflicts and continuous challenges for whoever tries to cooperate with them. Therefore, Agarwal and his partners at WMP came up with a service they can run independently of temples.⁷⁹ That was not the case for *ibhakti*. For a couple of years, *ibhakti* attempted to be India's leading online destination for devotees who wish to visit temples and do not have the ability to physically do so. They offered various services from temples through their website and smartphone app. Following *ibhakti* for a couple of years, I have noticed that the temples offered on the site kept changing.

⁷⁸ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

⁷⁹ Agarwal, December 21, 2016.

They started with Shree Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai (the star of my next chapter) and Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. With time, the Kashi Vishwanath temple was removed from the website, after a controversy regarding their willingness to participate in the project,⁸⁰ but six others joined, and the website stated more temples were “coming soon.”

Under the 1951 Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act (HRCE Act), “state governments have taken over thousands of temples, generally under the pretext of preventing ‘mismanagement’ by Hindus.”⁸¹ This takeover happens a lot with the large and wealthy temples, allowing governments to distribute temples’ riches—which usually come from devotees’ donations—as they see fit. Interestingly, governments do not get involved in management of other religions’ institutions, such as mosques and *gurdwaras* (a Sikh place of worship). This is not surprising, considering the deep and contentious relationship between Indian politics and Hinduism, especially as evident in Hindu-right movements and political parties. Management of temples by state-appointed executive officers and board of trustees is yet another example of the deep intermingling of state and religion in India. These government electives usually serve for a period of three years, which causes the entry of variegated and changing political interests to temples’ daily operations.

This is the reason that, for *ibhakti*, providing services from temples was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, working directly with and from temples allowed them to establish greater authenticity. On the other hand, temples’ administration and the various political parties involved created constant challenges for *ibhakti*, from the beginning to triggering the very end.

⁸⁰ India TV News Desk, “Dino Morea Owned Website Accused of Cheating Devotees of Baba Vishwanath,” *India TV*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/dino-morea-accused-of-cheating-devotees-of-baba-vishwanath-49140.html>.

⁸¹ Forum for Religious Freedom, “Government Control of Hindu Temples in India: A Blatant Violation of Secularism and Religious Freedom,” 2007, accessed June 8, 2018. <http://frfnet.org/SaveHinduTemples.pdf>.

One of the founders, Dino Morea, says in a news article from the early days of the project, “My challenge is to convince the temple authorities that it’s a great service to reach the *puja* all over the world.”⁸² One of my main questions to Parekh was why do devotees need *ibhakti* if they can go directly to temples’ websites, especially in the case of Shree Siddhivinayak temple, which I know is offering the same services on their own. And, in the same lines, why do temples need *ibhakti*. To this question, Parekh replied that most of the temples’ managements are temporary, so they do not have enough time to achieve the needed expertise and logistical setup. Also, *ibhakti*’s platform offers many services from multiple temples, so it is much easier: “Like Amazon, right? Each brand has their own website, but they also have Amazon, it just makes sense.”⁸³

Nevertheless, Morea and Parekh struggled to convince temples to join their project. If they managed to convince the trustees, which—in most cases—were initially reluctant, the contract had to also get permission from the state government. Even after they had a contract and started providing services from a specific temple, that was not set in stone. As temples’ executive boards and trustees change every few years, many of them decided they are not interested in cooperating with *ibhakti* any longer. The coupling of Indian politics and Hinduism is not at all a new affair, but it is interesting to see how it also affects the Hindu digital market with its new players and, supposedly, new or renewed logics. When I sat to write this chapter, a year after my meeting with Parekh, I could not access *ibhakti*’s website or app. Their Facebook and Twitter profiles were still available, but their latest update was more than a year old, which means they already had issues when we sat in that posh restaurant talking as if everything was business as usual. Back then, Parekh explained that we were not meeting in their offices—which I expressed

⁸² Sangeeta Yadav, “It’s a Story,” *The Pioneer*, November 8, 2015. <http://www.dailypioneer.com/sunday-edition/sunday-pioneer/backpack/its-a-story.html>.

⁸³ Malay Parekh, conversation with author, December 20, 2016.

a desire to see—because they were in the process of moving to a bigger space. Parekh did talk about their difficulties with temples and the politics involved, but throughout our conversation, he explicitly and implicitly situated his company as a leading player in this emerging market, like a shrewd businessman. When I contacted him in January 2018, after my failed attempts to access the website, he sounded very different. Parekh explained they had to suspend operations as they were facing too many political issues and red tape in the attempt to sign temples. He was still hopeful regarding the future of his company, mentioning their efforts to partner with strategic investors who will facilitate the complicated relations with temples. But he also stated that if they would not manage to bring *ibhakti* back to life, he would give up on this industry.⁸⁴

iBhakti's failed attempt to survive in the burgeoning digital Hindu bazaar exemplifies the current ambivalence of this industry—shifting between a great promise that attracts more and more digital adepts, to a lack of readiness or awareness of religious institutions and devotees. In this chapter, I argue that the lack of readiness is not necessarily due to the digital technologies themselves—these are more easily accepted when coming from traditional Hindu institutions as I show in the next chapters—but to the digital entrepreneurs and their startups, which attempt to establish themselves as some kind of new religious authorities, producing authentic devotional experiences. It, of course, does not help that the religious experience is mediated online, as a space in which authenticity is even harder to determine as it is sometime hard to know who really stands behind the web pages. For example, Facebook confirms authentic profiles of public figures, companies, and brands, marking them for users to be sure these are not imposture pages. Before I delve into the strategies Hindu startups employ to produce digital yet authentic Hindu

⁸⁴ Malay Parekh, WhatsApp conversation with author, January 8, 2018.

experience, I wish to better understand the current state of the market through its publics, who belong to the population I sketched in the previous section. I first explore the entrepreneurs behind those Hindu startups, following with the ways they situate themselves in the emerging industry, how Hindu publics respond and interact with digital devotional services, and the potential of devotees who do not participate yet to join this digital trend.

2.3.1 Hindu Entrepreneurs as Digital Adept

The many founding stories of Hindu startups share common threads. Like Parekh, Agarwal and his partners, Gandhi and Shah—who we have already met—these companies are usually led by young professionals with degrees in engineering, business, or other related fields. Either born and raised in India or part of the Indian diaspora, these entrepreneurs represent the new Indian, tech-savvy, professional ‘middle-class.’ They are immersed in a digitally networked world and bring its logic and principles into the Hindu realm. In this process, they turn into new kinds of religious authorities, shaping the ways Hindus can practice their devotion.

In his intriguing work on the online Islamic public sphere, Jon W. Anderson accredits the entry of Islam into cyberspace to what he terms technological adepts, “who had the access and skills to bring interests they had as Muslims into this new medium . . . [and] used the Internet to place their interests on-line and to engage others like themselves.”⁸⁵ These technological adepts share common characteristics, which are easily found in their Hindu counterparts: they are young, urban, educated, professional, belong to a transnational population, and include the internet as one of their work tools—if not the primary one—as well as their source of information and means of communication, consumption, and networking. They “are parts of a scattered, mobile

⁸⁵ Jon W. Anderson, “New Media, New Publics: Reconfiguring the Public Sphere of Islam,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2003): 894.

population that includes people very much like them at the consuming end and joined with them practically in a transnational space.”⁸⁶ The numerous newspaper articles on the burgeoning phenomenon of Hindu startups sketch a similar picture of the people behind it. I call them digital adepts, as I believe the expertise they bring with them is not only technical, but also very much cultural. These young professionals are linked to a global digital culture with its own aesthetics and standards, which both includes and surpasses the technical aspects of it. They embody Anderson’s depiction of ‘technological adepts,’ with a cultural emphasis, but they are also Hindu practitioners. To play a meaningful role in this arena, entrepreneurs need to embody and produce both aspects of it—the devotional Hindu and the globally digital. Many of them had some sort of a devotional experience, either direct or indirect, which led them to realize the need for new solutions for people like them. “Among the technicians of globalization as well as its participants, these professionals are both producers and consumers.”⁸⁷

Saumyaa Vardhan, the founder of Shubhpuja.com, which means “auspicious worship,” holds an MBA degree from Imperial College, United Kingdom. After working as a strategy consultant in London for several years, she returned to India for a funeral and realized how little she, and people her age, know about the rituals.⁸⁸ This experience initiated her journey to the Hindu spiritual world, founding Shubhpuja.com in 2013. In a similar path, Goonjan Mall from OnlinePrasad.com also comes from a consulting background. Mall launched his website in 2012 after experiencing “a frustration with the often crowded and mismanaged temple experience that

⁸⁶ Anderson, “New Media, New Publics,” 900.

⁸⁷ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, “Redefining Muslim Publics,” in *New media in the Muslim world: The emerging public sphere*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003), 10.

⁸⁸ Ranjani, “Pujas to Pilgrimages.”

persists through most of India.”⁸⁹ These stories are endless, and they all repeat the common theme of young professionals, who have come to realize their knowledge and experience can assist devotees like them who wish to practice Hindu devotion on their own terms.

Bringing market strategies and tech solutions they are familiar with, these digital adepts shape traditional Hindu practices and position themselves at the forefront of Hindu adoption of digital media. They want to set their foot in the door now, so when the online market booms, they will have a major share of it. But their success will not depend solely on when they entered the game, as there are already many of them and the industry is still young. Obviously, there are many factors involved in determining the success and life span of a new startup. In the case of the digital Hindu bazaar, a successful negotiation of global digital culture and the vernacular devotional one requires instituting and enacting authority and authenticity in both of these realms—the devotional and the digital. The story of *ibhakti* serves as an example of a company that, while being digitally authoritative, did not manage to establish itself as a religious authority in its own right.⁹⁰ Thus, in order to succeed, startups employ strategies from both worlds to which they belong, highlighting this market as a hybrid of global and local cultures. In this digital web, Hindu devotion and digital media culture cannot be clearly distinguished from one another any longer.

⁸⁹ Ajay Mehta, “Uber for God: Inside India’s Religious Tech Industry,” *New York Magazine*, December 10, 2015, <http://nymag.com/selectall/2015/12/uber-for-god.html>.

⁹⁰ Through a different case of *puja*-ordering websites, Heinz Scheifinger demonstrates the ways these websites pose a threat to temple officials and *pandits* in bypassing their authority. This might be another reason why temples do not wish to work with these private startups any longer. Heinz Scheifinger, “Internet Threats to Hindu Authority: *Puja*-ordering Websites and the *Kalighat* Temple,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010): 636–656.

2.3.2 Digital Production of Hindu Authenticity and Authority

Authenticity is a major issue for all the websites I have researched, but, ironically, I do not think I have heard or read this word as repeatedly as in the case of *ibhakti*. The first thing Parekh told me was that the idea behind *ibhakti* is “to give a *very authentic* online experience to devotees.”⁹¹ They tried to ensure it through joining up with temple authorities. To prove this authenticity, for each temple that they provided service from, *ibhakti* posted a video of the main priest vouching for their services and genuineness. The site’s company info section explains, “*ibhakti* is partnering with some of the biggest temples around India to provide an authentic and truly religious service to all devotees.”⁹² The website even had a dedicated section on authenticity, listing the reasons customers can be sure the *ibhakti* experience is genuine: *ibhakti* set up cameras in temples, allowing devotees to watch their *prasad* being offered, the priests themselves assure the website’s authenticity, and customers can check the courier invoice to make sure the pickup location is the temple, among other reasons.⁹³ These reasons demonstrate that *ibhakti* attempted to produce their authenticity through the authority of the temples. They did not try to position themselves as new religious authorities or use the medium’s ability to consolidate new authorities.⁹⁴ Other evidence for that is their Facebook page. In order to open a business profile on Facebook, users need to define the category of their business out of the given options; *ibhakti* marked themselves simply as ‘website,’ while other Hindu startups use this feature to support their attempt to situate themselves in the Hindu arena, defining themselves as ‘religious organizations.’ Vedic Vaani falls under the latter category (figure 6), situating

⁹¹ Malay Parekh, conversation with author, December 20, 2016. Italics mine.

⁹² “Company Info,” *ibhakti*, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://ibhakti.com/temple/company-info>.

⁹³ “How is it Authentic?” *ibhakti*, accessed October 14, 2016, <http://ibhakti.com/temple/authenticity>.

⁹⁴ Deepa S Reddy, “Mediating Hinduisms: An Introduction,” in *Public Hinduisms*, eds. John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy, Maya Warrier, and Raymond Williams (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2012), 366.

themselves as new religious authorities. Nonetheless, they do not abandon traditional authorities to back them up.

Vedic Vaani's founders see themselves as fulfilling a mission; their eyes lit up when they described how their website serves as a bridge between devotees and the *puja* items they need, spreading spirituality around the world. Their religious mission is also evident in their name. As the voice of the Vedas (the literal meaning of Vedic Vaani, and their slogan), they wish to let the Vedas be heard universally. "Vedic Vaani is a step towards making conscious living a possibility for every human being. We make the world listen and practice the voice of the Vedas."⁹⁵ Vedic Vaani utilizes the ancient texts to establish themselves as an authentic religious organization, rather than a mere e-commerce company. Along the same lines, their Facebook 'about us' section explains the importance and significance of the ancient truths of the Vedas as the basis of all present and future knowledge.⁹⁶ Taking the role of distributing this knowledge, Vedic Vaani derive their authority straight from the traditional texts. Their introduction video uses Hindu religious imagination to enhance their status as religious authorities. The video is composed of a narrator describing the company, their products and services, and lauding testimonials. The narrator's voice is synthesized to sound otherworldly, and in the background, there is a constant sound of a conch shell, which immediately induces a sense of Hindu sacredness.

⁹⁵ "Vedic Vanni's Seller Page," Amazon, accessed March 20, 2018, https://www.amazon.com/sp?_encoding=UTF8&asin=B000A1X7B4&isAmazonFulfilled=&isCBA=&marketplaceID=ATVPDKIKX0DER&orderID=&seller=A2ZOAIYAQO1S0X&tab=home&vasStoreID=

⁹⁶ VedicVaani's Facebook Page, "About."

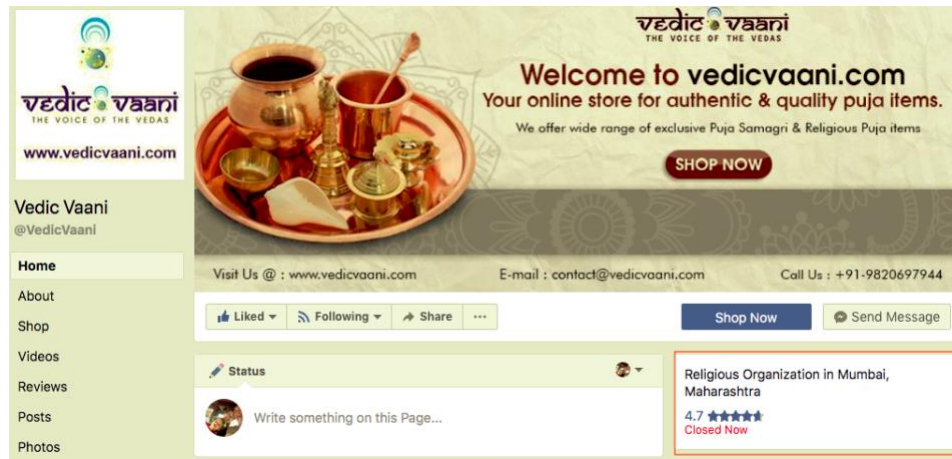


Figure 6: Vedic Vanni's Facebook profile.⁹⁷ Marked by author.

Similarly to Vedic Vaani, many Hindu startups back up their authenticity with traditional science. Philosopher of science Meera Nanda explains that Indian middle classes—who compose the networked publics of Hindu startups, as I discussed earlier—understand the idea of being modern as a rejection of blind faith. A “kind of Vedic/Hindu scientism seems to have a wide appeal for those who consider themselves to be educated and modern.”⁹⁸ Agarwal from WMP echoes this claim, saying “I’m not a traditional believer, I don’t believe in things blindly. I need a reason for it. That is why we understand everyone who is young needs a reason to believe something.”⁹⁹ Therefore, most websites that offer some sort of Hindu practice proclaim that they perform thorough background checks and interview their *pandits*, ensure *pandits* hold academic degrees, and insist on the science behind the practices. “There are so many scams and scandals with spirituality, we want to make people aware of the science and facts behind these rituals.”¹⁰⁰ Also, websites usually provide information on the specific practices, and in general on deities and

⁹⁷ “About,” VedicVaani’s Facebook Page, accessed March 2, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/pg/VedicVaani/about/?ref=page_internal

⁹⁸ Nanda, *The God Market*, 70.

⁹⁹ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Behal, “India’s \$30B Spiritual Market.”

temples to establish they are knowledgeable in the field. One website even went a step further, attempting to prove its authenticity by showing their rituals bring the intended outcomes—“It always rains when we do large scale *yagnas* [Vedic rituals], indicating the success of the *puja*.”¹⁰¹ Being based in India adds to websites’ authenticity. E-commerce companies take pride in their local sources and manufacturers as providing pure spiritual items. Sinha notes that India is viewed as Hinduism’s sacred center—as its sacred landscape and the source of what is genuinely Hindu—and entrepreneurs act on this belief.¹⁰² This idea also manifests in Hindu diasporic practices, which attempt to extend or recreate this sacred center in their new lands. For example, Hindu temples in the West replicate their homeland shrine and image to reinforce their sacredness, such as the replication of Tirupati’s Sri Venkateswara in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.¹⁰³ The Hindu pilgrimage site in Mauritius, Ganga Tala, reenacts sacred sites in India through spatial resemblance—“with *ghāts* [steps leading down to a body of water] on its shores, [Ganga Talao] is presented to Hindus as a direct extension of the sacred Ganges river in India.”¹⁰⁴

Authenticity can refer to several different things. The authenticity I examine here refers to being both digitally and devotionally authentic—to actually provide the services clients pay for and to have them be traditionally valid, i.e., extending or replicating traditional devotional practices and objects. The latter understanding of authenticity is more vague and open to interpretation than the former one. From my research, it seems that to be devotionally authentic means different things in different contexts: it can mean to provide services directly from

¹⁰¹ “About Us,” Eshwar Bhakti, accessed January 18, 2018, <https://pujayagna.com/pages/mayank-goyal>.

¹⁰² Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*, 11.

¹⁰³ Carolyn V. Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions in the Americas,” *Geographical Review* 93, no. 3 (2003): 291.

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 249.

temples, to execute rituals using educated and knowledgeable *pandits*, or to supply certified and high-quality religious items from India. No matter what services are offered, the people providing them should have devotional intentions and not only financial ones. Cultural studies scholar Russell Cobb explains that contemporary culture examines authenticity not only by the quality of mastery and authority over something, but also through a supposed “correspondence between what a person says and what he or she truly feels.”¹⁰⁵ These two understandings of what it means to be authentic correspond with Hindu startup attempts, as well as with the kind of authenticity their networked public is seeking.¹⁰⁶ Hindu entrepreneurs need to be both knowledgeable in the tradition and earnest in their own devotion. Sociologist of religion Lorne L. Dawson strengthens the significance of “the apparent authenticity of a religious activity or experience”¹⁰⁷ in determining whether cyberspace can be considered a site for core religious activities.¹⁰⁸ According to Cobb, we need to understand that authenticity is more of an affect than reality. Authenticity is “a *purely social construction*. Authenticity can never be set in stone by a religion, a nation, or a linguistic community, because our standards and expectations of the Real are constantly evolving, and the construction of the artifice of authenticity depends on the context.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, I explore what Hindu authenticity means in the digital realm, without the attempt to examine it by external terms. Interestingly, through this discussion authenticity is revealed as

¹⁰⁵ Russell Cobb, “Introduction: The Artifice of Authenticity in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World*, ed. Russell Cobb (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

¹⁰⁶ More on contemporary understandings of the concept of authenticity see Russell Cobb ed., *The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ Lorne L. Dawson, “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit. Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 28.

¹⁰⁸ More on authenticity in cyber religious sites see Christopher Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet,” *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no.1 (2005): 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11588/rel.2005.1.380>; Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Authenticity,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 88-103.

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, “Introduction,” 6. Italics in original.

many things; it is not only a social construction but also, in a way, an individual one. Although it is necessary for digital startups' existence, it seems that each digital adept understand and create their own authenticities.

One of the primary concerns of Hindu startups is to not be seen as if they are trying to sell a product. As Parekh puts it, "Marketing is a bit of a challenge as it's a religious service, so you don't want it to look like you're selling something."¹¹⁰ Some of the entrepreneurs are more direct about their financial goals than others, but all share the need to emphasize the devotional motives and benefits of their initiative. As I have shown, religion and commerce have always been entangled with one another, but it seems like the financial aspect of this industry should remain under the radar, or else it loses its magic. Interestingly, the traditional temple experience also involves a monetary element, in the form of donation or of the commerce happening in the temple complex. However, there is something different when these turn into online commerce handled by different players, as if the financial aspect of the temple experience is already ingrained in the devotional mind. Once it travels outside the temple to a new, relatively foreign medium, however, it turns suspicious.¹¹¹ Cobb also points to the paradoxical relationship between authenticity and the marketplace, as the process of commodification supposedly destroys the pretense of authenticity.¹¹² For the digital Hindu market, it is especially true. Technology can be perceived as even more suspicious than money, so when the two are joined together in a business arena that is only emerging, entrepreneurs should be extra careful. Thus, digital adepts strive for authenticity in a dual action—they situate their products and services as the most authentic, as

¹¹⁰ Malay Parekh, conversation with author, December 20, 2016

¹¹¹ This is not necessarily the case when we talk about temples' websites, as I show in the next chapter. In these sites the authority of the temple remains and, with it, the acceptance or normativity of its monetary demands.

¹¹² Cobb, "Introduction," 6.

well as proclaim their intentions meet the same standards. Their own devotion, commitment, and motivation to serve the divine, and his or her devotees, is being utilized to establish themselves as the new religious authorities they are trying to be.¹¹³ This can be also seen as the *bhakti seva* (service), which will be further explored in the next chapter.

All the above strategies are related in one way or another to Hindu tradition, but as a hybrid, Hindu startups also utilize digital culture's strategies to establish themselves as authentically part of it: most of the websites exhibit contemporary aesthetics and stylish branding, many of the sites display testimonials and reviews to vouch for their services, offer chat services as part as their sharp customer service, and some extend seasonal sales. The part I find especially intriguing is the sites' language and jargon, exemplifying the cultural grid they interlace. In a very timely fashion, Hindu startups seek to create experiences; they do not sell products or services but craft devotional experiences. When discussing the *e-puja* feature (*pandit* services through video chat), Agarwal explains that, albeit not as effective as the traditional face-to-face *puja*, *e-puja* is definitely not a waste of time. Both offline and online, they aim to create a devotional experience that gives mental peace.¹¹⁴ A travel company, called SOTC, has a holiday section on its website, but it does not provide pilgrimage packages. Instead, it provides "a selection of specially designed religious & spiritual experiences across 50 destinations in India. Reach out to us for a hassle-free religious experience and embark on a journey of self-discovery across the divine facet of India."¹¹⁵ Using this kind of discourse and strategies, combined with the science of the ancient

¹¹³ The idea of authenticity also implies the existence of the fake. Obviously there are also bogus websites and people that simply attempt to make money from people's religious sentiments. But I do believe—maybe naively—that the entrepreneurs I have met, do not see their service and profits as contrary and sincerely attempt to fulfill devotees' religious needs.

¹¹⁴ Ronak Agarwal, conversation with author, December 21, 2016.

¹¹⁵ "Darshans," SOTC, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://www.sotc.in/darshans>.

texts, traditional authorities, devotional knowledge, and their own devotion—Hindu digital adepts embody their definition and attract professional, young, and educated devotees like themselves.

2.3.3 Startups' Networked Public: Devotees' Experience and Activity

Devotees who seek and use such digital avenues to practice their devotion demonstrate that the attempt to produce authenticity and authority—in both the digital and devotional worlds—is both what they are looking for and what facilitates their connection to the tradition. In my online survey, I asked the respondents that use digital media for their devotional needs what qualities of the Hindu digital practices they use are important to them and determine their choice to use them. Their answers validate the claim that this public looks for both traditional and digital facets. The qualities that respondents ranked the highest in importance are: saves time, convenient (all in few clicks), provides an immediate satisfaction, temple-based sites, gives value for money, closest to the traditional way to do it, innovative, and authentic. Although some of these reasons seem contradictory—such as being closest to the traditional way and authentic but also innovative—I do not think that is the case. On the one hand, devotees look for a transparent digital mediation, producing a similar experience to the traditional practice. On the other hand, they want it to be innovative. WMP is a good example of a website that provides both qualities: an innovative way to find and book *pandits*, who, eventually, deliver the exact same traditional practice of a face-to-face *puja*. *ibhakti* is an example of a startup that tried to be the closest to a temple-based site, providing an immediate satisfaction with the live-streaming option, but failed. When temples themselves provide the same services on their own, it seems like devotees choose to go directly to the source. Survey respondents confirm Anderson's claim, in regard to a comparable Muslim population:

Pious middle classes are extending patterns of religious expression, seeking, and piety into new channels, whose production as well as consumption is accessible and increasingly developed around their specific needs and resources . . . all focused on how to lead a Muslim life in a modern, increasingly middle-class world not denominated primarily in Muslim terms.¹¹⁶

Similarly, Hindu devotees search to practice their devotion through accessible means, which align with their needs and resources. Although this world adds new terms to Hindu devotion—accessible, convenient, innovative, etc.—it is not entirely detached from traditional Hindu terms, as devotees seek options that are aligned with their contemporary lifestyle but that, at the same time, do not get too further away from the tradition they facilitate.

Devotees' testimonials attest to the appeal of startups that manage to mediate devotional knowledge and values through contemporary digital use culture. One devotee that used Shubhpuja.com says that, albeit not being very religious, the ease of the Skype *puja* allowed him to feel a new connection to the tradition. "It's way more convenient, to be honest. It fits with our lifestyle."¹¹⁷ Another devotee attests that, through Shubhpuja's Skype service, "I'd gotten my own prayer ceremony without needing to do much more than press a button and fill out a form—basically Uber, but for god."¹¹⁸ Although an undertheorized term, convenience has been considered as a primary value in modern lifestyle and "as the driving force behind modern attitudes toward technology."¹¹⁹ This statement cannot be any truer today, with a mobile and digital technoculture that is centered on its ability to provide convenient ways to perform and achieve users' daily needs, including—in this case—their devotional ones. Vedic Vaani's dedicated testimonials webpage indicates their public's satisfaction from the products' quality,

¹¹⁶ Anderson, "New Media, New Publics," 889.

¹¹⁷ "Boom in Firms."

¹¹⁸ Mehta, "Uber for God."

¹¹⁹ Thomas F. Tierney, *The Value of Convenience: A Genealogy of Technical Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 12.

the superb customer service, their knowledge, the careful packaging, and quick delivery. Along with meeting contemporary service standards, Vedic Vaani also meets devotional criteria. Alexandra D. from England writes, “the person that packed the items did it with a lot of *bhav* [emotion] and service to God and I could feel that while opening the box. All items were carefully packed and with devotion. I cried out of spiritual emotions when I saw the things in the package.”¹²⁰ Another devotee relates Vedic Vaani’s products with her improved health—“My Aura is enhanced and my severe arthritis has been cured within 3 weeks.”¹²¹

Following this pattern, survey participants used both Hindu and digital criteria when asked how they determine the authenticity of a specific website or service. The same trend was evident also when respondents specified what they want to see improved in these websites. Fluent in digital technologies, survey respondents who use digital media to perform their devotion embrace many technical tools to determine Hindu websites’ digital authenticity (as opposed to their devotional one). They search what they can find on them online, look at their reviews and ratings, check the domain name, examine the site’s presence on social media, and verify the website through reading the founders’ profile, calling or emailing the provided contact details and making sure the site practices basic internet safety, such as secure authentication and verified payment. In general, like in any digital experience, networked publics search for sophisticated and professional design, secure browsing experience, high technical quality, good customer service, and a user-friendly interface. As one respondent summarized it—“I determine the features and a website's authenticity by going through reviews by other users, checking the social

¹²⁰ Alexandra D., “Customer Testimonials,” Vedic Vaani, accessed March 9, 2018
<https://www.vedicvaani.com/testimonial?p=2>.

¹²¹ Ann Marie Dutriex, “Customer Testimonials,” Vedic Vaani, accessed March 9, 2018
<https://www.vedicvaani.com/testimonial?p=3>.

media and online presence of the particular app or website and also by how satisfying and convenient the interface, website design etc seem to me.”¹²²

However, the digital features are not enough for Hindu websites to give an authentic feel, as devotional authenticity is even more important. Websites should exhibit knowledge of the scripts and the relevant deities, temples, and rituals by providing clear, accurate, and comprehensive devotional content. The need of devotees explains why every website I studied offered free content—including blogs and posts on social media—on devotional items and rituals, whether they provide related service or not. Here we can notice how digital and devotional authenticities are enmeshed together; websites use blogs, which belong the realm of contemporary digital capitalism, to produce devotional authenticity. In the devotional realm nothing is supposed to come for free; rather, some sort of sacrifice is involved. Another main factor is websites’ affiliation to temples, gurus, and devotional movements. Understandably, Hindu ‘offline’ institutions validate the use of digital media, as the next two chapters argue. The overarching authority of traditional Hindu institutions and organizations illuminates both why *ibhakti* attempted to work together with temples and why Hindu startups wish to establish and position themselves as new kinds of religious organizations. In the same spirit, while devotees wish the digital elements of the websites be sophisticated and innovative, they look for the devotional practices themselves to remain similar to the traditional ones. As one respondent put it, “I want what exactly in Puranas and Vedas and it should be easily understandable.”¹²³ Several

¹²² Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 25, 2017.

¹²³ Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 25, 2017.

respondents mentioned that they look for sites that have spiritual effects. Sites should have divine knowledge and “be healing and spreading positive vibes among the devotees.”¹²⁴

In addition to the composite Hindu devotees seek to find in digital mediations of their tradition, my survey leads to a couple of more important observations.¹²⁵ In accordance with entrepreneurs’ sentiment that their public is not fully aware of the options they provide, out of 607 Hindu respondents, 59 percent said they know about these digital devotional options. Out of the 251 Hindus who learned about digital Hindu options from the survey itself, 37 percent said they might or might not try these options, 14 percent will not change their behavior, and 49 percent said they will try it now that they are aware of it. As about half of the people who were not aware of this before are willing to consider it now that they know of it, it is safe to predict that the phenomena will only grow in magnitude as people will get more exposed to it.

Another fascinating finding of the survey is that there is a positive relationship between the level of religiosity and online devotional activity. Devotees who describe themselves as more religious will also use more online practices.¹²⁶ Further study needs to be done to reach a conclusive claim in this regard, but, nonetheless, this result can indicate that these practices do not necessarily seem heretic to people who consider themselves very religious. The opposite might also be the case—the bigger place devotees give Hinduism in their lives, the more avenues they seek to practice it. This is not to say that devotees did not at all express objection to these channels. At the end of my survey, I asked if respondents have any comments they wish to add.

¹²⁴ Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 24, 2017.

¹²⁵ The massive amount of data I gathered via my online survey can and should be further analyzed to achieve more insights on digital Hindu practices and their users, and I plan to do it as part of future study.

¹²⁶ This finding assumes that a linear relationship between the two parameters is a close approximation. This statement is obviously weaker if we take into account a significant selection bias in my sample; if people who are more religious, have a lower probability of even answering this survey, then my claim is significantly weaker.

The comments were very diverse. Many of them thanked me for the survey and expressed how interesting and unique it was without adding their view on the matter. Some expressed their support of the idea of utilizing digital media to devotional ends, some were glad that they know about these options now, and others shared their firm dislike of the idea. The most common approach was mixed, demonstrating the view that these digital options are helpful in case of need, but nevertheless cannot produce the real feel and satisfaction of performing the practices physically at the sacred places themselves. As this respondent put it, “These services do make religion accessible to those live [sic] away from India or in remote places. Nothing can replace the real feel of personally visiting esteemed temples.”¹²⁷ Others said that these options do not make any sense and do not align with Hindu texts and traditions. Or, as this participant described it, “For pujas and rituals you have to be there, physically present then only you get the full effect. Simply put going to a doctor is much advisable/practical/effective than treating yourself using digital media.”¹²⁸ The most interesting comments were those that expressed some kind of religious satisfaction from the act of answering the survey: “This is the only survey that I have attended based on our Hindu religious [sic]. Now I am fully satisfied.”¹²⁹

While the numbers I have presented show inclination toward the use of digital media for Hindu purposes, it is important to remember that the survey’s population is not representative and is biased toward the young, urban, educated, and engaged online. Nonetheless, as this is the population that interests me the most and has been proven to be the one that Hindu startups are trying to appeal to, I trust that we can still learn a lot from their answers, even though they do not provide an accurate image of the larger population. The survey proves that the public of these

¹²⁷ Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 24, 2017.

¹²⁸ Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 24, 2017.

¹²⁹ Online survey respondent, Amazon Mechanical Turk, answered on May 25, 2017.

startups is mostly interested in the options they have to offer. Also, it reinforces the huge spectrum of what is called Hinduism and Hindu practices in the first place, and the varied opinions and tendencies this spectrum includes. Above all, the survey supports the claim that these startups and their public embody an amalgamation of global digital culture and local traditions and knowledge.

2.4 Conclusion: Digitally Weaving the Global and the Local

The platform was created *using technology as the intermediary* – providing ‘a puja one click away’ experience for users. Customers from anywhere in the world can schedule and participate in rituals customized for them, in India, through Skype or Facetime. The priests on-the-ground handle everything – bringing the offerings needed for the ceremony and informing a customer of when they need to log in - and what recitations, if any, they should participate with during the ceremonies, which are still conducted in the ancient Sanskrit language.¹³⁰

The various effects of digitally networked media on the devotional practices they mediate have been weaved throughout this discussion. Hindu startups use digital technologies to simplify religious practices, standardize their prices, produce peaceful and tranquil devotional experiences, and align Hindu devotion with contemporary digital media culture. All of these ends are aimed to generate versions of Hindu devotion, which will be more attractive and manageable to young, professional, and urban devotees, in India and abroad—‘a *puja* one click away.’ As the opening quote of this section emphasizes, technology acts as a mediator, linking local, traditional ideas and values with what is perceived as global ones. In this spirit, digital adepts frame their services as “a bridge between the temples and the devotees,”¹³¹ aiming to “transform the cultural heritage

¹³⁰ Behal, “India’s \$30B Spiritual Market.” Italics added.

¹³¹ Swati Goel Sharma, “Avoid Long Temple Queues, You Can Pray to God Online,” *Hindustan Times*, January 24, 2015, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai/avoid-long-temple-queues-you-can-pray-to-god-online/story-0LQrAAzh8hDsaYav6H37wM.html>.

and age-old traditions of Hinduism with modern delivery methods.”¹³² Mastering these modern delivery methods, Hindu digital adepts identify the possible solutions to issues people like them face with their devotion. As Goonjan Mall from OnlinePrasad.com puts it, “The idea that religion must be simplified and technology was the perfect tool came in a flash.”¹³³ Understanding the role of digital technologies in producing these devotional experiences linking between the local and the global illuminates the dialogical relations of these concepts. At times this link can be thought as a bridge, connecting similar systems, and at times as a gateway, translating ideas and practices to the jargon of the other system. The latter conversion is exemplified the most by capitalist customer service norms and the desire to make devotees happy that are transported to the devotional experience, for which they are traditionally foreign.

Scholarship has shown, in different ways, that the global and the local make each other possible and are not inevitably in tension with each other, challenging common theories of globalization that either see it as a process of homogenization, which “overrides locality,”¹³⁴ or necessarily as a manner of heterogenization. Sociologist Roland Robertson points to the inseparability of the global and local and their understandings, as what is called ‘local’ is usually determined externally, in global, trans-local terms. Instead of trying to determine how to define global and local relationships, we should better explore the ways in which these two currents flow in both directions simultaneously and are always interrelated.¹³⁵ Similarly, folklorist Amy Shuman argues that the local is a cultural construction and not a natural and authentic category—

¹³² “Harivara to Offer Online Hindu Puja Services Including Homams, Pariharams (Vedic-Remedies) and More [Press Release],” *Digital Journal*, accessed on March 20, 2018. <http://www.digitaljournal.com/pr/2496670>.

¹³³ Jetley, “The Religious in India Take Leap of Faith.”

¹³⁴ Robertson, “Glocalization,” 26.

¹³⁵ Robertson, “Glocalization,” 27.

“Local culture is always marked and always part of a larger-than-local context.”¹³⁶ Lamont et al. point to the way people perceive the idea of universalism is in fact determined by the cultural repertoires available to them, and there is no one single understanding of the universal.¹³⁷

Like my case studies themselves, all of the above understandings challenge the assumed dichotomy of these terms, arguing for understanding them as connected, dialogical parts of one wider web. Besides highlighting the simultaneity of global and local currents embodied in the digital mediations I am exploring, Robertson’s concept of glocalization is especially apt to this discussion, as Robertson draws it from the world of capitalism and marketing. According to Oxford Living Dictionaries, the term ‘glocalization’ refers to “[t]he practice of conducting business according to both global and local considerations.”¹³⁸ As this chapter showed, Hindu startups embody this definition by trying to establish themselves as authoritative and authentic in the emerging digital Hindu bazaar, negotiating practices and norms drawn from both worlds.

In this sense, Hindu startups produce local traditions, which at the same time participate and contribute to an existing global culture. Or, in the words of global studies scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse, these startups are involved in the process of hybridization—“the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices.”¹³⁹ In this case, the existing forms are traditional Hindu practices, which, combined with digital media forms, generate new, dialogical locales. Operating in a similar conceptual zone to Jain’s colonial bazaar, these forms negotiate the seemingly disjunct worlds of global digital

¹³⁶ Shuman, "Dismantling Local Culture," 345.

¹³⁷ Lamont et al., "Particular Universalisms," 399.

¹³⁸ "Glocalization," Oxford Living Dictionaries, accessed on March 23, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/glocalization>.

¹³⁹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Globalization as Hybridization," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 662.

culture and the vernacular Hindu one. The global and the local cannot be separated here as they are always already intertwined and belong to the same “larger-than-local” digital culture.

Anthropologists Jackie Assayag and C. J. Fuller also claim that the global and local are mutually constituted through social and cultural patterns. In this mutual process, electronic media play an important role, generating new forms of imagination which “continually convert global, cosmopolitan cultural forms into vernacular ones, and vice versa.”¹⁴⁰ In this chapter, I similarly argued that via digitally networked media, digital adepts convert devotional practices and digital media culture into one another, weaving them in a wider web in which they are not distinct.

Hindu startups stem from, maintain, and reinforce the harmony of tradition and modernity in India. As this phenomenon represents a paradigm shift in Hindu devotion and is currently in its nascent stages, it is impossible to know its future. By depicting the evident trend and particular Hindu audiences’ inclination to adopt it, I can only point to its growth potential. More importantly, I have explored the ways in which networked devotional publics use technology as a gateway between the local and the global in the attempt to craft and engage in authentic Hindu experiences—whatever that means to each of them—through a contemporary global medium. Seeing the particular and the universal, the local and the global, as part of one cultural web illuminates Hindu startups as the outcome of a two-way interaction, which occurs both conceptually and practically. The digitally networked media that allows this production is essential to the creation and understanding of such a relationship. Conceptually, the digital mediations I have explored in this chapter, the motivations of the people behind them, and the aspirations of people who wish to use them embody a hybrid of global and local values. Both

¹⁴⁰ Jackie Assayag and Christopher John Fuller, eds. *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below* (London: Anthem Press, 2005). 6.

spheres are equally felt and emphasized in the production and consumption of these services. Practically, digital media opens up Hindu devotion to a multi-directional flow of money, devotional items, services, and even sacred places themselves. Through live-streaming, video chats with *pandits*, *prasad* delivery, and online shopping, Hindu practices and devotional and sacred matter transcend their locality to the globe, while also, in a way, remain in their place. The local importance and essence remains, but the service, devotion, and religious satisfaction travel across oceans and continents. The next two chapters discuss more digital forms of Hindu devotion, which highlight the dialogical nature of the global and the local and share this dual essence of being conceptually and practically both.

3. Devotional Streaming: Hindu Temples' Digital Journeys

O Krishna, please come here quickly.
Please come quickly and show your face.
Beautiful tinkling bells upon your ankles,
blue jewels [on your arms].
O blue-colored one, please come here dancing.
with bells on your waist,
rings on your fingers,
and the garland of flowers called *Vaijayanti* around your neck,
dressed in yellow-Kashi-silk, flute in your hands,
your beautiful body anointed with sandalwood paste,
the one who showed his mother the three worlds in his mouth,
that one who uplifts the world is [our] Udupi Shri Krishna!

Kanakadasa's *Krishna Ni Begane Baro*¹

Not only digital adepts feel the need to align Hindu traditions to a contemporary, global lifestyle, validating and maintaining the harmony of tradition and modernity. Some of the best examples of Hindu locales' participation in a global digital culture and networks—through a conceptual and practical two-way interaction—are Hindu temples' websites. Many Hindu temples have their own website, where they provide information about the temple's history, mythology, services, and current affairs. These websites usually have a gallery with photos and videos of the temple's *murti* (god's image or material embodiment), the local community, festivals, and other special events. Beyond their informative elements, many of the websites also provide a wide array of online services. Some services facilitate visits to the temple, including advanced payments for temple amenities, online booking of *puja* (worship), and so on. Other online services provide alternative ways to do things usually done at the temple, such as donating to the temple, booking a worship to be performed on one's behalf, purchasing religious artifacts,

¹ Deepak Sarma, "Madhva Vedanta and Krishna," in *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 370.

and even watching a live-stream of the *murti* called Live *Darshan*. These websites attempt to answer the religious needs of devotees who are too busy to visit the temple, those who are remote due to domestic or international migration, as well as the elderly and the physically disabled. In one way or another, temples' websites enable divine essence and devotional services to cross oceans while staying in their locale, providing alternative and additional ways to visit the temple and be part of its public.

By reaching out to the temple's devotional public via digitally networked media, Hindu temples expand their public to be networked, which changes the ways in which the divine—and his or her devotion—is being mobilized, communicated, and experienced. Interestingly, temples' contemporary digital adoption reveals traces of Hindu *bhakti* (devotional movements). In observing temples' digital initiatives in general—and the Live *Darshan*, specifically—this chapter unveils the route religious institutions take to connect to digital networks. Through conversations with temple IT consultants, trustees, and administrators—and through vast online research—I investigate the motives of temples in adopting this new technology, the various players involved, and the role the private sector plays in these efforts. In what ways does the adoption of digital media by temples reveal undercurrents of *bhakti* literature? What happens when devotional publics turn networked? How do mega-temples affect other temples in their attempts to utilize digital media? How do these initiatives influence the role of external players in this process? And among the many forces involved, who is acting as the agent of the divine?

To answer these questions, I first examine the popular Shree Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai. Since technological implementation requires resources, temples that are larger, wealthier, and more popular—such as Shree Siddhivinayak—tend to adopt new technologies before others. I refer to such temples as *mega-temples*. The wealth and popularity of mega-

temples leads not only to grandiose physical structures but a parallel digital presence, strong connections with the state and the private sector, overall organization and operations like that of a large corporation, and a vast influence on the larger Hindu web. Shree Siddhivinayak temple is a pioneer in all aspects of Indian internet. The temple's official website offers various digital services, including online donations, online booking of *pujas*, and Live *Darshan*. Presenting the very different challenges local temples face in the attempt to establish their websites and online services, I then look at the case of Sri Naga Sai temple in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Sri Naga Sai is a smaller, less-wealthy temple. Although it maintains a wide-ranging online presence, the temple faces different struggles and a bumpier road toward technological progression.

Taken together, these case studies provide a fuller picture of Hindu temples' adoption of digital media. They also shed light on an influential factor in the process: both temples have a different relationship to a large Indian communications company, and the different nature of these relations dramatically affects their digital presence and reach. This corporate-religious interaction is only one example of the myriad ways in which powerful yet external entities refashion religion. This chapter suggests that, by entering Hindu temples' networks and influencing their digital lives, the communications company plays a major role in shaping digital Hinduism, specifically, and future Hindu devotional networks more broadly. Through an examination of two different case studies—a mega-temple and a local, smaller one—this chapter depicts the different digital journeys temples navigate, the networks that connect them, and the manner in which external forces shape these paths. I argue that mega-temples play a major role in the utilization of digital media to meet Hindu needs. These temples serve as pioneers, setting an example for other Hindu temples and communities. By giving the divine stamp of approval on this kind of use, these temples also welcome other players, like the private sector, to join the digitization of Hindu

practices. However, at times, these roles switch, and the external forces take the lead in the inclusion of temples into the digital realm, as well as the exclusion of others. Attempting to identify the motives and impact of temples' digital adoption, this discussion reiterates the pervasive and complex crossovers between the corporate and religious spheres.

This is not novel. What becomes the known landscape of any religious tradition is almost always determined by financial, corporate, political, and other power-rooted factors. An example of this interplay can be found in what is known among scholars as the orientalist creation of Hinduism as a world religion. Max Müller and the Oxford University Press's publication of *The Sacred Books of the East* established the known landscape of Hindu texts.² The East India Company and the Brahmanic elite had their own interests in commissioning specific texts for translations, establishing Hinduism as unified, mystical, and philosophical.³ To this day, these texts are widely recognized as the building blocks of Hinduism, but they are not necessarily the most popular. This example strengthens my argument that the digital visibility of temples has the potential to shape what will be known as Hinduism to its outsiders in a few years or decades, as external interests tend to determine which Hindu locales will get exposure through the dominant media of the time. Hinduism and media scholar Stephan Jacobs explains this as the centrifugal power of media, facilitating the communication of a specific religion to its others.⁴

This chapter shows that temples' digitization echoes *bhakti's* configurations of networks and publics, its emphasis on democratization, divine encounter, and *seva* (disinterested service), and its inherent tension between the universal and the particular. Although, from the early

² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 259-63.

³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 101-8.

⁴ Stephen Jacobs, "Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 144.

seventeenth century, the opening poem, and the poet's personal story and devotion, highlight many *bhakti* undercurrents that can be found in the contemporary narrative this chapter sketches. In its common, formulaic definition, *bhakti* stands for a devotional movement originated in Tamil regional communities that flourished between the fifth and the ninth centuries⁵ and is "characterized by the singing of devotional songs composed in vernacular languages by poets who have attained the status of saints."⁶ These communities prioritized emotional and direct devotion, which is open to all castes and sexes, challenging the hegemony of Brahmanical Vedic religion. Although *bhakti* began with regional communities, its ideas and practices now permeate the Hindu Wide Web. There is a strong connection between *bhakti* and temple worship,⁷ evident in *bhakti* poets' emphasis on particular shrines and *murtis*, and in their insistence on the divine presence as literally embodied in these places.⁸

Kanakadasa was one of Karnataka's most significant Vaishnava poets. Singing in Kannada, he was an ardent devotee of Krishna and belonged to the low shepherd caste. He tried to promote social reform and equal rights for devotion, and he believed in the egalitarian power of *bhakti*. As a so-called lower caste himself, Kanakadasa embodied this idea and provided a personal example. Singing in the vernacular, he communicated theistic ideas and beliefs to the people in their own language, in contrast to Brahmanical Sanskrit.⁹ The legend says that Kanakadasa used to sit outside the Krishna temple in Udupi, as entry was not allowed for all castes. The poet watched the worship of the *murti* from a back window while singing to Krishna,

⁵ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4.

⁶ John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

⁷ Christian Lee Novetzke, "Bhakti and its Public," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no.3 (2007): 259.

⁸ Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 112-3.

⁹ Rama R. Rao, "Six Poems by Kanakadasa," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 26, no. 1/2 (1991): 1-3.

pleading him to “show his face.” His intense devotion made the temple *murti* turn toward the back window, so the poet could see his face and have his *darshan*. Today, the *murti* is still turned to that window, which is called *Kanakana Kindi* (Kanaka's window), where devotees can take *darshan* of Krishna.¹⁰ In the poem, Krishna is depicted as the one carrying the responsibility of showing himself to his devotees, of reaching out to them. This chapter describes the ways the divine is shown to his or her devotees through digital means and various agents.

I now turn to examine my first case study, the Shree Siddhivinayak temple and its extensive digital presence. One of the temple’s innovative contributions to the realm of digital Hinduism is the Live *Darshan*. As the Live *Darshan* feature is central to this discussion, I present the traditional practice of *darshan* (divine sight, in short), the ways it is understood by existing scholarship, and my own working definition. I then focus on the Live *Darshan*’s meaning and history, introducing the communications company’s involvement and impact on the digitization of Hindu temples. Contextualizing temples’ utilization of digital media within contemporary media culture, I use media scholar Henry Jenkins’ convergence culture theory.¹¹ Next, I present the case of Sri Naga Sai temple and its different location in this intricate web. I explore the powerful role of infrastructure and distribution on Hinduism’s digital transition through cultural critic Walter Benjamin’s discussion of sound cinema,¹² among others. In conclusion, I examine the many forces involved in Hindu temples’ adoption of digital media and the ways divine agency and authority are being used and reappropriated in this process.

¹⁰ M.A. Vasudeva Rao, "Gastrosemantics of the Udupi Krishna Matha," *Sociological bulletin* 43, no. 2 (1994): 225.; M. V. Nadkarni, "Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism? Demolishing a Myth," *Economic and political weekly* (2003): 4788.

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin; trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55.

3.1 @SiddhivinayakOnline: Shree Siddhivinayak’s Digital Novelty



Figure 7: Shree Siddhivinayak Temple, Mumbai. Photo by author.

Siddhivinayak is a form of Ganesh that is known to give *siddhi*—prosperity, success, skills, and good luck¹³—to his worshippers.¹⁴ Shree Siddhivinayak temple began its life in 1801. Built by the childless Mrs. Patel, its purpose was to allow other childless women to come to Ganesh for help. The deity’s *murti* is two-and-a-half feet wide and was carved out of a single black stone.¹⁵ In general, the *murti* follows the popular iconography of Ganesh, except for its trunk, which is tilted to the right side and not to the left as usual, a fact the temple trust emphasizes to establish the *murti* as unique. Through the years, the number of visitors grew,

¹³ Among the many other meanings of the word. For the full list see, “Siddhi,” Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/monier/webtc5/index.php>.

¹⁴ Rachel Dwyer, “Vighnaharta Shree Siddhivinayak: Ganesh, Remover of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings, in Mumbai,” *Comparative Study of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 2 (2015): 263.

¹⁵ “Temple History,” Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, accessed October 17, 2017. http://www.siddhivinayak.org/temple_history.asp

leading to such long queues that most visitors were unable to reach the deity.¹⁶ Eventually, the temple was rebuilt in 1990, “restored into a magnificent, multistoried and palace like temple”¹⁷ (figure 7). The temple has around 300 staff members and 500 volunteers. Its annual income, almost entirely from donations, is about 11 million dollars (80 crore rupees),¹⁸ which makes the temple one of the 10 wealthiest temples in India.¹⁹ Half of the temple’s funds go to charitable activities such as an on-campus dialysis center and library, financial aid, and textbook bank. The temple is one of Mumbai’s most popular temples, with 100,000 visitors daily and twice as many on Tuesdays, which is the most auspicious day to visit the temple.²⁰ The temple is known to attract politicians, Bollywood actors, and cricket players from the Indian team, who come to get blessings from Siddhivinayak. The temple is also a regular destination for official visits of foreign politicians and businessmen, such as Thailand’s prime minister and Apple CEO Tim Cook.

The temple is not restricted to a specific religious or ethnic group, hosting people from different castes, religions, and countries. “We get Buddhists, we get Muslims—people of all communities visit the temple . . . when we launched the YouTube channel for the temple in 2013, we monitored closely and we got visitors from around 55 countries!”²¹ The largest number of online visitors comes from India, the second largest from the United States, and third from Japan. The temple’s utilization of media did not start with the digital era. A kind of a remote *darshan* is built into the temple’s architecture; the temple’s golden roof (figure 7) serves as a representation

¹⁶ Markha Valenta, “Divining Siddhivinayak: The Temple and the City,” in *Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Oskar Verkaaik (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 101.

¹⁷ “Temple Architecture,” Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, accessed October 17, 2017. http://www.siddhivinayak.org/temple_architecture.asp

¹⁸ Mangesh Shinde, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

¹⁹ Vivek Surendran, “If These Temples Give Away Their Wealth, India’s Poverty will be Solved,” *India Today*, November 16, 2016. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/siddhivinayak-hundi-rich-temple-india-demonetisation/1/812163.html>.

²⁰ Valenta, “Divining Siddhivinayak,” 100.

²¹ Ashok Nadkarni, conversation with author, July 22, 2016.

of the deity's "magnificence, power and presence,"²² enabling devotees to take *darshan* of the dome when they are unable to get to the main *murti*. Film and television also take part in the mobilization of the temple and its deity. In 2009, the temple trust produced a devotional film, and some of the morning rituals are broadcasted live on religious TV channels.²³ These examples show the resourcefulness of the Siddhivinayak temple in finding creative ways to circulate the deity, as well as their acculturation to the contemporary convergence culture I discuss shortly.

This temple's creativity aligns with anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas's study of Bangalore temples. She argues that Hindu priests act as religious entrepreneurs in contemporary urban settings in India, adjusting Hindu ritual to the needs of modern devotees. In the attempt to market their temples and expand their devotee base, the priests employ different strategies, one of which is the incorporation of technology into the worship. This way, they invent a "new cultural grammar" that has enabled them to reinterpret and contextualise the language of traditional Hindu ritual to suit the problems of devotees thrown up by an 'era of capitalism.'²⁴ Srinivas conveys an important claim regarding rituals, which is fundamental to this discussion. By highlighting the creativity of the priests she studies, Srinivas goes against a common understanding of ritual as something fixed, a tool for social order in which any change marks a disruption,²⁵ and the particular view of Hindu temples' rituals as rigid and static. Srinivas, on the other hand, examines the changes in rituals as creative moments, exposing "deliberately radical innovation."²⁶

²² "Temple Architecture," Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust.

²³ Valenta, "Divining Siddhivinayak," 106.

²⁴ Tulasi Srinivas, "Divine Enterprise: Hindu Priests and Ritual Change in Neighbourhood Hindu Temples in Bangalore," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (2006): 324. While I was writing this Srinivas published a book in which she elaborates and expands these arguments. See, Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

²⁵ To expand on this understanding of ritual see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Max Gluckman, *Essays on the Rituals of Social Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962); and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969).

²⁶ Catherine M. Bell, "Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals," *Worship* 63, no. 1 (1989): 35.



Figure 8: Shree Siddhivinayak Temple's website landing page.²⁷

One of the most prominent sites of Siddhivinayak temple's creativity, inventing a 'new devotional grammar,' is the internet. The temple's website (figure 8) offers multiple services, including information about the temple and its deity, photo gallery, merchandise, announcements, and online donations portal. The website facilitates the practice of *darshan* both at the temple—by a paid service that allows devotees to book *darshan* for an appointed time and avoid the queues—and remotely through the Live *Darshan* feature. Furthermore, devotees can book a *pooja* to be performed at the temple in their presence or in their absence. In the latter option, the *prasad* (food offered to the deity during worship and consumed by devotees after it) is sent to the benefactor by mail, along with a picture of the *murti* and *vibhuti* (holy ash) from the sanctum. The temple also issued a prepaid card to enable cashless purchases around the temple campus. The temple has a strong presence on Facebook and Instagram, as well as three WhatsApp groups. Its

²⁷ "Landing Page," Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, accessed September 27, 2018, <http://www.siddhivinayak.org>.

Instagram handle, @SiddhivinayakOnline, shows images and videos of the *murti*, devotees, and events at the temple. The temple has dedicated staff who upload photos to Facebook and Instagram and broadcast live footage from the temple. The emphasis on social media presence is a relatively new one, which can be seen as the result of the political interest of the new board and chairman in publicity media over technological advancement.²⁸ These platforms help people to be in touch both with the temple and with each other, building a networked devotional public.

In February 1998, the outset of Indian internet, Shree Siddhivinayak temple launched its website and became one of the first Indian religious institutions to go online. Ashok Nadkarni, an independent IT consultant, created the temple's website and has been maintaining and updating it since. He also offers temple management solutions to other temples, assisting in establishing e-services and developing their online presence. Nadkarni is an ardent devotee of Shree Siddhivinayak and considers the work he does for the temple his service to the lord. Through our conversations, it became clear that the IT services he provides, mostly free of charge, are part of his devotion. "The real service to the lord is the one you do to his devotees. So anything that will take the lord closer to his devotees is service to the lord."²⁹ Nadkarni's dedication and involvement has a significant impact on the temple's digital initiatives.³⁰

As I mentioned earlier, *bhakti* is centered around a direct and emotional experience of a personal god. It is the expression of a mutual relationship of love and grace between the deity and his or her devotee.³¹ This relationship is bound to be very intimate, as it "connotes sharing in,

²⁸ Ashok Nadkarni, WhatsApp conversation with author, April 6, 2018

²⁹ Ashok Nadkarni, conversation with author, July 22, 2016.

³⁰ I have been in touch with Nadkarni for several years and I am grateful for his enormous help. He was always available to my inquiries, organized my visit to the temple during December 2016, and introduced me to all the people who shared with me most of the information I use here.

³¹ Cutler, *Songs of Experience*, 1.

partaking of, and participating in the deity as Other.”³² One way of achieving this union with the deity is by disinterested service (*seva*) as the expression of love to the deity. Nadkarni embodies this idea of *seva* by facilitating the deity’s quest to reach his devotees, and vice versa.

Interestingly, although *bhakti* is grounded in personal and intimate relationships, several scholars have pointed to a triangle of communication embedded in *bhakti* poems, linking the poet both with the deity and an audience.³³ Following that, Indologist Christian Novetzke argues that *bhakti* needs an audience, as it seeks to form publics of reception and participation through the agency of both the poet and the deity.³⁴ This model of communication becomes interesting when considering temples’ websites, especially the Live *Darshan* feature. If the audience turns into a networked public via digital mediation, who acts as the poet? Who carries the agency of reaching out and establishing these devotional publics?

In its first month, the website recorded over 650,000 hits, and the responses were enthusiastic from the beginning. In a newspaper article, the chair of the temple’s trust at the time, Vasudha Wagh, explained that the decision to create a website came from the feeling that “all believers of Lord Siddhivinayak, who are not able to visit the temple, need to be given a better opportunity to feel close to the god.”³⁵ But not everyone at the temple board shared this sentiment. Nadkarni said that, when the chair first brought the idea, there was a conflict among the board of trustees. The trustees on the opposing side thought the website might harm the temple, causing people to stop coming physically. But the chair was a woman with a vision.

³² Barbara A. Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Krsna Bhakti* (London: Routledge, 2015), 21.

³³ Cutler, *Songs of Experience*, 19; Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 5.

³⁴ Novetzke, “Bhakti and its Public,” 256; Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

³⁵ Shashi Bhagnari, “Listen to Lord Siddhivinayak’s Aarti, Shlokas on the Net,” *Computerworld*, April 16-30, 1998, 68.

Along with few other trustees, she was resolute that the internet is here to stay, and the temple must adopt it to reach as many devotees as possible. Pradeep Bhide, one of the trustees siding with the chair at the time, explained that other trustees felt this was a waste of money. The medium was totally new for everyone, so they did not know what its consequences would be. He, on the other hand, was working in a big global company and had already seen the positive effects of the internet. According to Bhide, time eventually convinced the board.³⁶ Post factum, everybody celebrated the decision; the website serves as a publicity avenue for the temple, as it increases visitors, popularity, and contributes to the temple's reputation as innovative and progressive. Now, the website gets around 80,000–200,000 visitors daily. On Tuesdays, the auspicious day, the number goes up to 300,000 hits. During festivals, this number can reach half a million. Nadkarni even said the temple's footfalls have increased since they launched the website, especially with the younger generation. Previously, the elderly visited the temple, mainly, but nowadays, more than 50% of the visitors are 20–35 years old.³⁷

The board's motivation in creating the website—that all believers should have direct access to the divine—resonates with *bhakti*'s mission to democratize Hindu practice and devotion. By singing poems in languages lay people can understand, *bhakti* poets—though there were important exceptions—rejected or modified Brahmanical hegemony and democratized Hindu religiosity. One no longer needed to know Sanskrit in order to understand Hindu devotion. Poets' teachings were not the only thing these movements made accessible to all classes and sexes, but also the right for devotion itself. Bhakti poet-saints came from all castes, sexes, and

³⁶ Pradeep Bhide, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

³⁷ Mangesh Shinde, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

trades, “touchable and untouchable.”³⁸ With this new egalitarianism, *bhakti* poet–saints denied and defied the Brahmanical orthodoxy. However, Indian poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujan argues that they also developed a new kind of religious establishment:

[I]n course of time, the heretics are canonized; temples are erected to them, Sanskrit hagiographies are composed about them. Not only local legend and ritual, but an elaborate theology assimilating various ‘great tradition’ elements may grow around them. They become, in retrospect, founders of a new caste and are defied in turn by new egalitarian movements.³⁹

Interestingly, this ironic process is also true for temples’ digitization. Temple websites produce a new kind of egalitarianism, but also new limitations. Devotees who cannot reach a specific temple—from reasons of distance, disability, or even caste restrictions—can now visit it online. However, in order to do that, they need digital literacy and access, which, as I showed in the previous chapter, is for now restricted mostly to urban and diasporic Hindus. In this way, Hindu temples’ digitization both extends their accessibility and restricts it to a new kind of ‘tech-savvy caste.’

According to Nadkarni, the divine is the driving force of the entire project; they executed it, but it was god’s wish. As *bhakti* literature states, the divine seeks to form his or her publics of reception and participation. This is the reason the temple managed to overcome the initial difficulties and get it done. Thus, the temple embraces new technologies, because the divine himself is believed to be in favor of this adoption. It is Shree Siddhivinayak’s wish to show his face to devotees by whatever means available. This point is crucial to the vast adoption of media by both Hindu individuals and institutions. The fact that the deity is portrayed as supportive—and even more than that, as the driving force of the adoption of digitally networked media as a way to

³⁸ A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Siva* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1973), 35; Cutler, *Songs of Experience*, 111.

³⁹ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 36.

achieve the deity's goals—is illuminating. It indicates that, in the minds of devotees, the deity validates and encourages the performance of such practices. Moreover, by depicting these digital initiatives as the divine's wish, the temple can be seen as issuing a divine stamp of approval on the medium, leading other players to offer digital Hindu services. Additionally, Nadkarni attributed the temple's technological novelty to the nature of its lord: “Hindus believe that everything starts with Ganesha. Anything new people want to do, they first worship Lord Ganesha, Lord Shree Siddhivinayak.”⁴⁰ The temple was the first to employ several technologies, such as the online donation portal and the *Live Darshan*, thanks to its deity's characteristics.

Temple officials also justify their use of technology by referencing the Hindu epics. One of the temple's trustees, Nitin Vishnu Kadam, explained to me that technology already existed in the epic period; it is merely being rediscovered now. For example, Sita's protective circle, in which Rama secured her in the famous scene from the *Ramayana*, was what we now call a sensor. Sanjay's narration of the *Mahabharata* battle to the king was possible thanks to a sort of closed-circuit TV camera. If not the technology per se, at least the concept was there “that a person could sit in his house and watch what is happening around the world.”⁴¹ The temple's digital initiatives are not seen as innovative at all; they are not bringing something new but are drawing from the past. From this point of view, the rationale behind the *Live Darshan*, for example, is based on the Hindu tradition, and does not at all present a deviation from it. Since the initial conflict over the website, the trust is unanimous regarding the use of technology. Following the trust's wish, Nadkarni always explores new technologies to implement at the temple.⁴² Mangesh Shinde, who

⁴⁰ Nadkarni, July 22, 2016.

⁴¹ Nitin Vishnu Kadam, conversation with author, December 14, 2016.

⁴² Ashok Nadkarni, conversation with author, December 14, 2016.

was the temple's executive officer from 2010 to 2015, summed it by saying that the temple needs to provide devotees with all the advantages technology has to offer.⁴³

3.2 Live Darshan: Weaving Religion, Media, and Commerce



Figure 9: Shree Siddhivinayak's Live *Darshan*.⁴⁴

3.2.1 What is *Darshan*?

The Live *Darshan* feature of temple websites can be seen as a case study for the ways the digital Hindu web annexes technology, the private sector, and religion, exhibiting the aforementioned power of infrastructure and distribution mechanisms. To enable this examination, it is important to first understand what *darshan* is. *Darshan* is commonly understood by scholarship as a central element of Hindu worship, in which the devotee stands in front of the divine in order to see it and be seen by it. In fact, the believer's gaze creates and affirms the god's

⁴³ Mangesh Shinde, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

⁴⁴ "Live Darshan," Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, accessed April 16, 2014, http://www.siddhivinayak.org/virtual_darshan.asp.

image as god itself. The god in return bestows blessings and powers on the devotee. In her elaborated work on *darshan*, religious studies and Hinduism scholar Diana Eck established the canon for understanding this element as an auspicious exchange of sights.⁴⁵ Almost every scholar who has dealt with *darshan* since has relied on her definition. For instance, many scholars have shown how modern media such as print, television, cinema, and cyberspace exercise *darshan* as this timeless concept.⁴⁶ However, by exploring the various ways people refer to and experience *darshan*, it becomes evident that there is much more to the practice.⁴⁷ Indologist John E. Cort points to scholarship's need to "revisit this central category and to begin to see it as a highly variable rather than singular super-category."⁴⁸ *Darshan* is a widespread practice in many South Asian traditions, and, as such, it has different applications and understandings. An examination of the practice through its different settings reveals that there is no one traditional and fixed *darshan*. We are in need of a wider definition, which can encompass the complexities of the practice in its various settings.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ For examples see Christopher Pinney, "The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on a New Terrain*, eds. F. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod, and B. Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 355-69; Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: The Video," *The Drama Review* 34, no. 2 (1990): 127-76; Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006); Phyllis K. Herman, "Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual Religious Experience," *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4, no. 1 (2010): 151-78.

⁴⁷ *Darshan* is most often translated as seeing, but it has many more meanings that refer to its broader and multi sensorial nature. According to Monier-Williams dictionary, *darshan* refers to acts of seeing, knowing, showing, visiting, experiencing, meeting, contemplating, as well as to nouns like audience, perception, intention, appearance, and sacrifice, among many others. Even through a quick look on the dictionary translations we realize that *darshan* is not simply a visual act, or that vision is culturally understood as more than mere eyesight.

⁴⁸ John E. Cort, "Situating Darśan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century North India," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 2

⁴⁹ For more notable attempts to re-theorize the concept of *darshan*, revisiting it through various indigenous theories, see Sophie Hawkins, "Bordering Realism: The Aesthetics of Sai Baba's Mediated Universe," in *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India*, eds. Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999), 139-62; Amanda J. Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); James McHugh, "Seeing Scents: Methodological Reflections on the Intersensory Perception of Aromatics in South Asian Religions," *History of Religions* 51, no. 2 (2011): 156-77; Cynthia Packert, *The Art of Loving Krishna: Ornamentation and Devotion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); and Andy Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Can we say it is a visual intermingling, even when blind people take *darshan*, when one imagines *darshan*, or when devotees practice it without entering the temple? Thinking about the Hindu temple, how can we isolate the visual element of the practice as its basic component when it is always accompanied by multisensorial input? *Darshan* at a temple is never only seeing. It is touching, smelling, singing, hearing, giving offerings, or a combination of these elements depending on the specific sect, temple, and event. No one can stand at the temple and only see; it is not an isolated activity. Moreover, while taking *darshan*, the devotee does not simply stand still and watch, but her body is recruited as well, performing the appropriate gestures, singing, smelling, and, most likely, walking to allow the flow of devotees. Sight is not what the temple experience is all about; rather, as Nadkarni described, “it is the vibration; it is the ambience that actually charges you and empowers you.”⁵⁰ Even in domestic settings, *darshan* is usually accompanied by bodily gestures, bells ringing, incense sticks burning, etc. I do not wish to eliminate the visual element from the understanding of *darshan*, as it is certainly a significant part of it, but I also do not think it can be considered the first and foremost part of *darshan*.

Various thinkers refer to the multidimensional nature of *darshan*, understanding vision itself to be mutual and tactile,⁵¹ or claiming that the gaze is a means of making contact with the deity.⁵² Social anthropologist Lawrence A. Babb conceptualizes *darshan* as a flow of seeing, in which vision is the devotee’s means to acquire something of the deity’s inner virtue and power of seeing, as well as to achieve special intimacy with the deity.⁵³ Although these scholars add a tactile and embodied dimension to the understanding of *darshan*, they uphold vision as the main

⁵⁰ Ashok Nadkarni, conversation with author, July 22, 2016.

⁵¹ Christopher Pinney, “The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

⁵² Jan Gonda, *Eye and Gaze in the Veda* (North-Holland Publishing Company, 1969).

⁵³ Lawrence A. Babb, “Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, no. 4 (1981): 387-401.

element. Situating *darshan* in specific contexts of practice, other scholars have shown it is also an emotional and aesthetic experience,⁵⁴ an interior one,⁵⁵ and a physical circulation of energy.⁵⁶ The common thread throughout the varied ways *darshan* is being thought of and performed is its essence as a devotional encounter with the divine that results in an intimate and emotional experience, exemplifying *bhakti*'s essence. To practice *darshan* means to visit the divine, know it, and experience it. This encounter charges the devotee; it rewards her with divine blessings. I suggest understanding *darshan* as an experience of *being in the presence of the divine*.⁵⁷

Indologist Peter Bennett comes the closest to what I am proposing, defining *darshan* in the Vaishnava *bhakti* community he studies as “a state of mind in which the worshiper feels himself or herself in the immediate presence of Krishna.”⁵⁸ I argue that this categorization encompasses the different manifestations of the practice, while maintaining a core that is common to them all. As an intimate encounter between the divine and its devotee, both should be present. The devotee's presence can be actualized in different ways but must include pure mind and heart toward her devotion. The divine and its presence⁵⁹ emerge from this devotion, as well as from the

⁵⁴ Cynthia Packert, *The Art of Loving Krishna: Ornamentation and Devotion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 13; Donna M. Wulff, "Religion in a New Mode: The Convergence of the Aesthetic and the Religious in Medieval India." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no. 4 (1986): 674.

⁵⁵ Cort, "Situating Darśan," 31.

⁵⁶ Amanda J Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 42-7.

⁵⁷ By this definition I wish to rephrase Eck's book title, which refers to *darshan* as 'seeing the divine'.

⁵⁸ Peter Bennett, "In Nanda Baba's House: The Devotional Experience in Pushti Marg Temples," in *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, ed. Owen M. Lynch (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990), 200.

⁵⁹ In a recent study Robert Orsi provides an elaborate review of the notion of divine presence. Distinguishing between presence and real presence, Orsi argues that the presence of the gods is real in every form of Christianity, not only Catholicism, and religion more broadly. Through history it was submerged by the modern temperament but we should bring it back to the surface and discuss its realness as this is what happens between humans and their gods. I do not think that in Hinduism there is a reason to make such a distinction, or that it was ever really denied. Among various Hindu sects there are different understandings of divine embodiments and what they come to refer, but I believe that none of them questions the 'real' presence of these divine manifestations. What does remain very relevant to our discussion is Orsi's claim that presence demands a relationship between humans and their gods, and this relationship must be an intimate one. Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

multisensory ecology that creates it as sacred in the practice's specific setting.⁶⁰

3.2.2 The Live *Darshan*

Situating this understanding back in the context of the Live *Darshan*, the meaning of 'being present' undoubtedly shifts. The idea of presence in a live stream is challenged given that embodiment stands as *bhakti*'s very epicenter,⁶¹ emphasizing both divine and human bodies. Temple officials, devotees, and *bhakti* scholars provide explanations to the ways a sort of presence remains and an intimate experience of the divine can still occur online. Tamil religion scholar Norman Cutler claims that, in *bhakti*, the most significant element is ultimately "the quality of the worshiper's feeling."⁶² Religious studies scholar Barbara Holdrege shows the *bhakti* embodiment is understood as a continuum of body and mind, clarifying the possibility to perform an embodied practice while being physically absent from the sacred space, as long as the devotee's mind is fully present.⁶³ Kadam explained it through the concept of faith. "What we see at the temple is also stone, but my faith makes him god. So when I look there I say 'I am looking at my god' and the god says 'yes you are looking at me.' Similarly when we see that on screen, it is in the waves."⁶⁴ As this project shows, devotees who use this feature are most likely well situated in contemporary digital culture, and this kind of online presence is part of their everyday lives in many aspects: as the way they keep contact with friends on social media or communicate with family via video chat. As cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito writes, "[P]ervasive digital networks are reconfiguring our relation to place by enabling simultaneous presence in both

⁶⁰ More on the construction of the sacred through an ecology of human and non-human actors see David Morgan, "The Ecology of Images: Seeing and the Study of Religion." *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (2014): 83–105.

⁶¹ Novetzke, "Bhakti and its Public," 261-2.

⁶² Cutler, *Songs of Experience*, 10

⁶³ Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, 12.

⁶⁴ Nitin Vishnu Kadam, conversation with author, December 14, 2016.

physical and networked place.”⁶⁵ Once connected to the Live *Darshan*, devotees are present at the temple, even if they are also present at different—physical or networked—places. Live *Darshan* from the temple does not suppose to replace the one performed at the temple. Although it includes the visual input, as well as the aural one, the digital version does not attempt to imitate the vibrations Nadkarni mentioned earlier. However, this does not mean it is not valid or that it does not produce an intimate encounter with the deity when one cannot physically reach the temple.

Shinde provided an illuminating explanation of the difference between the temple experience and the online one:

Whenever they go to the website the live *darshan* is there but there is a desire to also take the real *darshan* . . . Live *Darshan* is real also but the satisfaction that we get from actually visiting the center sanctum of the temple is different. [The same as] listening to any audio on CD and seeing the live orchestra is different.⁶⁶

Like the difference between listening to a CD and a live concert, the listener is present and experiences the music, but not in the same way. Summit Singh, who is actively involved in distributing temples’ streaming on the internet,⁶⁷ described it as different from being in the temple the same way a Skype call is different from sitting with a friend in the same room, but, for him, it provides the closest *darshan* experience that one can get without physically being there. “Live *Darshan* allows us to feel that we are in the temple . . . or we are really there, in that place.”⁶⁸ Singh sees Live *Darshan* as creating new ways to visit the temple. In both analogies—as listening to music at home or talking on Skype with a friend—a sense of presence remains. It is a different

⁶⁵ Mizuko Ito, “Introduction,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 6.

⁶⁶ Mangesh Shinde, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

⁶⁷ Summit Singh Thakur is currently a computer science student at Drexel University. Originally from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh he moved to Philadelphia, PA to peruse undergraduate studies. Summit developed the website Livedarshan.net by himself in 2009 when he was only 13 years old. Livedarshan.net serves as a portal providing free live broadcasts from 12 different temples.

⁶⁸ Summit Singh, conversation with author, December 1, 2013.

kind of presence, but the potential to establish emotional connection and an intimate encounter with the deity persists.

Scholarship strengthens the assertion that Live *Darshan* does not come to replace the temple experience. Jenkins argues that new media forms do not annihilate older ones; rather, each “old medium was forced to coexist with the emerging media.”⁶⁹ Live *Darshan* is not supposed to recreate the temple experience; they coexist, interacting and supporting each other in complex ways. English and literature scholar Srinivas Aravamudan argues that “media should never be understood as functioning only at the level of mimetic reproduction.”⁷⁰ We should not address mediated versions of traditional practices as attempting to imitate the practice as is, but as reconfiguring it. Albeit a modification, I contend that Live *Darshan* enables a sense of intimate encounter with the deity at times when a temple visit is out of reach.⁷¹ Similar to Krishna showing his face to Kanakadasa when he was prevented from reaching the sanctum, the Live *Darshan* feature allows deities to appear to people who cannot reach them for various reasons.

And indeed, people are emotionally attached to the Live *Darshan* feature. Sanjay Bhagwat, the executive officer of Shree Siddhivinayak temple at the time they started this feature, said they received many emails from people saying “they have put it as permanent icon on their desktop. Whenever they have time they click the icon.”⁷² I was also told a story about a man who experienced technical problems with the Live *Darshan* and was furious: “My mom is like 70–80 years old, and every morning at 4:30 she wants to see *darshan*, for the early morning *arati* . . . she is so crazy that she climbs up and she changes the angles of the antenna—‘why it’s not coming,

⁶⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 14.

⁷⁰ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 227.

⁷¹ I elaborate on the production of intimacy by means of digitally networked media in the next chapter.

⁷² Sanjay Bhagwat, conversation with author, December 19, 2016.

why it's not coming.”⁷³ Temple officials say that many people write or call when they face technical issues with the streaming. The next section discusses how this emotional connection turns into a marketing strategy.

3.2.3 Marketing Deities

The Siddhivinayak Live *Darshan* feature was launched in 2004. The idea came from an unexpected source—cameras for traffic surveillance that were positioned outside the temple. Bhagwat explains that the traffic camera infrastructure made him realize the possibility to provide *darshan* 24/7 to people across the world.⁷⁴ To execute his idea, he joined forces with a big Indian communications company (as I was asked to call it by their project manager, who shared with me a lot of the information I am about to discuss). Since then, this company has played a significant role in the temple's digital initiatives, and the Hindu digital web writ large. The company did the complete installation necessary for the Live *Darshan*. They also installed screens that broadcast the Live *Darshan* throughout the temple complex. These screens give devotees a preview of the inner sanctum they are waiting to enter. The act of waiting and anticipating the intimate encounter with the deity is modified with the possibility to see it during the wait. This, however, does not necessarily mean the excitement weakens once the desired moment arrives. The opposite might be true, as the expectation increases when devotees see a glimpse of the divine they are about to meet. Along the way, they get to know what company provided them with this option, as the screens also serve as billboards with the slogan in Hindi: ‘take Shri Siddhivinayak’s Live *Darshan* through us.’⁷⁵

⁷³ Communications company project manager, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

⁷⁴ Sanjay Bhagwat, conversation with author, December 19, 2016.

⁷⁵ The billboards actually say the company's name where I translated it as ‘us.’

Since the beginning, the communications company made the service available to their subscribers, and—in order to avoid being seen as making a profit—they agreed to pay royalties to the temple. Now, they power and monitor the temple’s website and the Live *Darshan* mobile app. After the successful collaboration with Siddhivinayak, they offered the same service to Shirdi Sai Baba Temple. Nadkarni worked closely with the communications company and the Shirdi temple to execute it. Having the biggest temples in Maharashtra on board, the company continued to partner with temples, supplying the infrastructure and technical support to eighteen temples across India to date. Their project manager explains their interest in this project as a way to give back to society,⁷⁶ but it also serves their own objectives.

The communications company has the exclusive DTH (direct-to-home TV) rights for the temples’ live feed in India, enabling their sister company—a direct broadcast satellite television provider—to offer eighteen different *darshan* channels to their subscribers for free. As the main sponsor of this project, the DTH company decides which temples to support. The project manager approaches temples in which the company is interested. In fact, the Live *Darshan* serves as a marketing tool for the DTH company; according to company records, over 41% of their 7.5 million subscribers watch these channels, which “build a high emotional cost to switch and [are a] key differentiator in the already crowded DTH market.”⁷⁷ As media scholar Richard Paterson describes it, “The telecommunications companies . . . derive their revenues through carrying services provided by other companies. . . . The key to future profitability for the telecommunications companies will then become ownership or participation in value added

⁷⁶ Communications company project manager, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

⁷⁷ Communications company project manager.

services.”⁷⁸ Temples’ broadcasts serve as a ‘value added service,’ building an emotional connection to the company. Therefore, the company wants to have the most popular temples available on their channels. Moreover, if they want to add subscribers from specific regions, they try to provide them with local content, i.e., live feeds of local temples. For example, the company’s project manager tirelessly attempts to get south Indian temples to join the project. These temples are reluctant due to religious reasons; the belief in south India is that nothing should touch the *murti*, including the camera’s focus. “For the last 1–2 years, we had been visiting south temples to get something in South . . . If we will be able to get that, we will also be able to get consumers from those regions.”⁷⁹

Nadkarni states that, currently, the Live *Darshan* page receives 10,000–12,000 unique views daily. This number actually presents a decrease in viewership on the temple website itself, as, currently, the temple’s live feed is offered through many other platforms. In 2014, the temple launched a mobile app for the Live *Darshan* in collaboration with the communications company, and made it occasionally available on Facebook and Instagram through live videos. In addition, the communications company does not only provide this service on their websites and through their DTH sister company, but also joins forces with various mobile content providers. Their mobile partners are leading media companies’ mobile platforms, such as Videocon’s Connect Broadband, Spice Digital, NDTV Convergence, Viacom’s Colors, and HP’s Dream Screen. As discussed in the introduction, mobile devices and networks in India are widespread and increasingly affordable, more than personal computers and proper internet connections. The fact that the Siddhivinayak live stream is available to users of various mobile platforms, thanks to the

⁷⁸ Richard Paterson, “Policy Implications of Economic and Cultural Value Chains,” in *Exploring the Limits: Europe’s Changing Communication Environment*, ed. European Communication Council (ECC) (Berlin: Springer, 2012), 176.

⁷⁹ Communications company project manager, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

partnership with the communications company, significantly boosts the temple's reach and networked public.

In conclusion, the communications company and its sister company offer these services for free to both expand their viewership and prevent existing subscribers from switching to a different provider. The emotional connection generated by the practice of *darshan* serves the companies' interests. By providing this possibility, they situate themselves as an agent of the divine, bringing devotees their favorite deities to their living room. In this way, they also preserve and expand the deity's devotional public. In the following sections, I expound on the influential role these companies play in the digitization of Hindu practice through their control of the supporting infrastructure and distribution mechanism. Their involvement in this process raises the question: who is the driving force of temples' digitization, forming new publics of reception and participation in contemporary Hindu devotion?

3.3 Religious Convergence Culture

The introduction of external media companies to the religious sphere sheds light on the various ways Hindu temples, such as Shree Siddhivinayak, operate similarly to media companies in the ways they situate themselves as part of contemporary media culture. Especially helpful to this discussion is Jenkins' description of media culture as convergence culture. Although Jenkins mainly deals with American popular culture and does not aim his theory at the religious sphere or non-American locales, I claim his approach contextualizes Hindu temples' embrace of digital media, as well as the larger realm of digital Hinduism.

Jenkins describes convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they

want.”⁸⁰ Convergence is a cultural shift taking place both in the production and consumption of media. These days one media company produces various media forms, like film, magazines, and websites. Likewise, media is consumed in multiples. People can listen to music and talk on the phone, while simultaneously working on their laptops. This trend is especially evident in the use culture of smartphones; watching a movie will not necessarily stop people from browsing their Facebook page or sending a text message to a friend, remaining constantly networked.

Jenkins shows how media institutions are forced to reinvent themselves for an era of media convergence. In this sense, the various mediated lives of temples and their *murtis*, discussed here, answer the need of devotees to get “content” in various forms, and situate temples as producing different mediated forms to deliver this “content.” Jenkins demonstrates that one of the strategies to embrace convergence is “to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems.”⁸¹ While I do not claim that temples’ publics are markets in the same way, it is easy to identify this logic in temples’ utilization of different delivery technologies. As this chapter demonstrates, temples share images and videos of the deity on their websites and smartphone apps, through WhatsApp groups, and via live-streaming, expanding their reach. The motivation behind it is explained as bringing the divine closer to his or her devotees. However, some will argue that this is also a good technique to get more donation money flowing in.⁸²

As discussed in the introduction, a central element of convergence culture is its participatory nature. The participatory element of today’s media culture is particularly important to the digital paths of small Hindu temples, such as my next case study. Now, simple digital

⁸⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

⁸¹ Jenkins, 19.

⁸² Kalpana Desai, director of the Prince of Wales Museum in 1998, described temples’ website as directed to wealthy NRIs. “It is an attempt to cash in on the religious sentiments of non-residents Indians.” Quoted in Saloni Meghani, “Cyber-Seekers Now Approach the Gods on the Internet,” *The Times of India, Mumbai*, March 2, 1998.

technologies are affordable and accessible. This is also true of India, especially to its new, networked middle classes. For this population, computers and digital devices are ordinary belongings and IT professions are widespread. This participatory potential explains how local and not-so-wealthy temples can also have an online presence and services. Creating a website and installing a camera is not necessarily out of reach to many local institutions. Technical support and maintenance might be more cumbersome but are still possible if temples have knowledgeable people on board. However, technological skills are not necessarily sufficient to build the infrastructure and distribute the content. These capacities are still restricted to the big communications companies like those discussed above. The next section illuminates this through an elaborate discussion of the small Sri Naga Sai temple and its digital efforts.

3.4 Sri Naga Sai's Pursuit of the Digital



Figure 10: Sri Naga Sai Temple's website home page.⁸³

⁸³ "Home," Sri Naga Sai Trust, accessed September 27, 2018, <http://www.srinagasai.com>.

The Live *Darshan* feature demonstrates that the growth of temples' digital presence is partly dependent on corporate marketing needs. When one corporation monopolizes the resources and infrastructure, the small temples that the company does not want to pursue are left aside. The small Naga Sai temple in Coimbatore serves as a perfect example to this distorted interplay. Sri Naga Sai temple was established in 1939 and was the first Shirdi Sai Baba temple in Tamil Nadu. The details regarding Sai Baba's birth and early life are vague, but what is known is that at some point in the mid-19th century, he appeared and settled in Shirdi, Maharashtra. Hagiographies tell his life story in many different ways,⁸⁴ but agree that through performing miracles, he established himself not only as a saint, but also as a guru, ascetic, and an avatar. According to one of the stories about his arrival to Shirdi, he was not allowed in the Hindu temple, because he was dressed as a Muslim, and was directed toward the local mosque. This mosque became his permanent abode until his death in 1918. This story points to Sai Baba's compound character and teachings. During his lifetime, he gathered a small circle of devotees from various religious backgrounds around him, but by the early 1970s, he acquired a pan-Indian status, crossing sectarian borders. His ability to attract followers from different Indian religions can be attributed both to the fact that his practices combined Hindu and Muslim elements and to his teachings that called for a united Indian community that values all religions as equal.⁸⁵

In 1943, the Coimbatore shrine got its unique name and meaning after a cobra had appeared during an evening worship and stayed immobile next to a Sai Baba picture for 48 hours.

⁸⁴ See Nagesh Vasudev Gunaji, *Shri Sai Satcharita* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust, 1986); M. V Kamath and V. B. Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Bombay: Jaico, 1991); B. V. Narasimha Swami, *Life of Sai Baba*. 3 Vols (Madras: Shri Shirdi Sai Baba Spiritual and Charitable Trust, 1994).

⁸⁵ Karlina McLain, "Be United, Be Virtuous: Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 2 (2011): 21-26.; Charles S. J. White, "The Sāi Bābā Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1972): 868-70.

This event is considered “the day baba gave *darshan* to his devotees in the form of a snake.”⁸⁶ In Indian religions, Naga means a divine entity taking the form of a great snake, so from that day forward, Shirdi Sai Baba in Coimbatore is worshipped as ‘Sri Naga Sai,’ situating its particular embodiment of Baba as unique. Another factor of its particularity is the installment of the marble statue of the deity by Sathya Sai Baba in 1961. Sathya Sai Baba was a very popular Indian guru and saint, living between the years 1926–2011, who self-declared and is believed by many to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba. He also established his status by performing miracles.⁸⁷ The Coimbatore *murti* was the only one installed and consecrated by Sathya Sai Baba.⁸⁸ The guru himself is recorded saying it is rare for an avatar to install the *murti* of another.⁸⁹

Indicating the size differences between the two temples this chapter discusses, Sri Naga Sai temple gets 1,000–2,000 visitors daily and around 14,000 on Thursdays, when they hold the golden chariot procession. Similar to Shree Siddhivinayak temple, though on a smaller scale, the Naga Sai trust operates several philanthropic programs, including a middle school in which 900 students study and eat for free, financial assistance for medical procedures, and a homoeopathic clinic. “Our shrine is not a big, massive trust. We don’t get that much funding, but we make sure that what we get from the people will reach back to the people and somehow help them.”⁹⁰

The temple’s trust indicates that they follow the model of the Shirdi Sai Baba temple in every aspect of running the temple. “We run it the same as they do in Shirdi. All the *pujas*,

⁸⁶ S. Balasubramanian, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

⁸⁷ McLain, “Be United, Be Virtuous,” 21.; White, “The Sāi Bābā Movement,” 873.

⁸⁸ “Advent of Sri Naga Sai,” Sri Naga Sai Trust, accessed December 5, 2017. <http://www.srinagasai.com/srinagasai>

⁸⁹ *Sathya Sai With Students*; “Swami Visits Coimbatore and Inaugurates the Naga Sai Mandir – February 1961,” accessed April 9, 2018. <https://sathyasaiwithstudents.blogspot.com/2013/02/swami-visits-coimbatore-and-inaugurates.html#.WsqBpWaZP-Y>.

⁹⁰ Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, August 8, 2016.

everything happening there is the same as here.”⁹¹ The Shirdi mega-temple also serves as the inspiration to their online presence and services. Earlier, I showed how the digital adoption of Shree Siddhivinayak temple impacted a similar innovation in the Shirdi temple, which now serves as a model to this local Sai Baba Shrine. This network of Hindu temples, as well as the dynamics of mega- and local Sai Baba temples, also resonates with the *bhakti* movement. *Bhakti* poets emphasize the divine as both universal and embodied in a particular location. For example, this song by seventh-century Shaiva Tamil poet-saint Appar depicts the omnipresent Shiva, who is, at the same time, his manifestation in Pukalur:

As water, as fire, as earth, as sky,
as the glorious rays of the sun and moon,
as the lord whom the Himalayan gods supplicate, as the deity hard to comprehend,
the Lord of holy Pukalūr,
who dances in many places,
is the highest god among the gods.⁹²

Many scholars pointed to this duality of *bhakti* as both general and particular,⁹³ universal and local,⁹⁴ omnipresent and embodied,⁹⁵ and drawing from both Brahmanical Hinduism—which they supposedly reject—and their specific regional cultures.⁹⁶ By personifying these opposites, *bhakti* poets managed to create various connections and networks. They traveled around the country, spreading their love and devotion, while singing in their own vernaculars. “As they traveled, we are told, they shaped a history that made India’s many regions connect at a grassroots level.”⁹⁷ Making connections among India’s regions, sects, and beliefs, *bhakti* poets weaved a network of Hindu devotion, which is both regional and pan-Indian, particular and universal.

⁹¹ S. Balasubramanian, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

⁹² Peterson, *Poems to Śiva*, 112.

⁹³ Novetzke, “Bhakti and its Public,” 268.

⁹⁴ Anne Feldhaus, “Maharashtra as a Holy Land: A Sectarian Tradition,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African studies* 49, no. 3 (1986): 533-5.; Peterson, *Poems to Śiva*, 4.

⁹⁵ Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, 22-23.

⁹⁶ Peterson, *Poems to Śiva*, 5.; Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 35.

⁹⁷ Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 3.

Similar to the Shirdi model, Sri Naga Sai trust has a well-designed website with various online services, such as online donations, online booking of *darshan* for specific times and front-row seating, and Live *Darshan* (figure 10). The temple also has an Android app, which provides the same information and services as the website. Vadivel Kumar is the person in charge of all Naga Sai Temple's IT and communications, from developing and designing the website in 2009 to handling the temple's email communication, live broadcast, and technology more broadly. Similarly to Nadkarni, he does it free of charge as his service (*seva*) to the lord, and many of the temple's technological initiatives can be attributed to his vision and execution. Kumar's hometown is Coimbatore, but he currently lives in Bangalore working for an IT company. Kumar is the knowledgeable person the temple needs to execute their participatory potential, himself part of the temple's networked devotional public.⁹⁸

Kumar launched the temple's website in 2010. For the first few months after its launch, the website had very few visitors. Slowly, more people came to know about the website. At some point, he also added audio and video archives, which brought more people to listen and watch the temple's happenings. Toward the end of 2011, the temple opened a Facebook page, spreading the word of their e-services. The Facebook page has proven to be a good publicity avenue, which draws more people to the website itself. The temple also has Twitter and SoundCloud profiles. Currently, the website gets around 6,000–7,000 visitors per month. According to Kumar, users mostly enjoy the information available on the website and the Live *Darshan*.⁹⁹

The temple started the Live *Darshan* service in 2012 to allow more people to get Baba's blessings. Kumar's own life experience had led him to seek ways to take *darshan* from his local

⁹⁸ My conversations with him and the temple's secretary, S. Balasubramanian, along with my visit to the temple during December 2016, have informed most of the data shared here.

⁹⁹ Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, August 8, 2016.

temple. Also, Kumar had the example of the Shirdi temple that, as mentioned earlier, was the second to collaborate with the big communications company and provide this service. As Kumar put it, “I moved from Coimbatore to Bangalore, and I thought how to have *darshan* of Baba. So that’s how I thought we should fix a camera and broadcast, like Shirdi.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly to previous chapters’ digital adepts, Kumar’s devotional innovation attempts to facilitate devotion for people like himself, who belong to the temple’s devotional public. Note that Kumar could watch the Shirdi Live *Darshan*, but it is important to him to take his local Baba’s *darshan*, his personal god. Similarly to Siddhivinayak, initially the temple’s board opposed Kumar’s idea, but eventually they came through. The temple’s secretary, S. Balasubramanian, explained the rationale as the need to keep the tradition alive in a digitized world. “Nowadays, it is very much necessary. We have to go according to technology.”¹⁰¹ However, as a south Indian temple, the decision to install cameras has further implications. According to Kumar, Sri Naga Sai is the first temple in south India to have this service and, to this day, also the only one. The secretary clarified their ability to put cameras in the temple given the non-sectarian nature of Sai Baba. Like Baba himself, the temple welcomes everyone, and each visitor can perform her own kind of worship at the temple.¹⁰² Also, Sai Baba is different from other Hindu deities, as he was a human being who allowed pictures of him to be taken while he was alive.¹⁰³ These pictures are central to his devotion as his followers still use them to take his *darshan*.

¹⁰⁰ Vadivel Kumar, August 8, 2016.

¹⁰¹ S. Balasubramanian, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

¹⁰² The temple also adjusts itself according to various traditions’ ways of worship. For example, Christians approached the trust with the request to offer Sai Baba candles like they worship Jesus, so the trust installed a candle stand, so devotees who wish to will be able to offer a candle.

¹⁰³ S. Balasubramanian, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

Most of the people using the Live *Darshan* feature are from India, and the second largest population is from the United States. Seventy percent of Indian users are from Tamil Nadu.¹⁰⁴ This fact points to the local significance of the temple. Moreover, it shows that being far away from the temple is definitely not the only or main reason to use its e-services. According to Kumar, people from Coimbatore also use it. Going to the temple becomes a matter of preference. “People who work full time don’t have time to come to the temple. Sometimes they just don’t want to crush into the crowd. They will come to the temple not on *arati* times to take *darshan* but will watch *puja* from the Live.”¹⁰⁵

Kumar and the secretary agree that visiting the shrine is something else than taking *darshan* online. There is a specific energy in the shrine that you feel the minute you enter, which makes a physical *darshan* at the temple somewhat better. According to the secretary, once you have been to the shrine, the impression of it will enter your mind when accessing the Live *Darshan*. “You will go as if you are sitting in front of Baba.”¹⁰⁶ This explanation relates both to the fact that people can take *darshan* in many ways, even mentally, and to the devotional premise that the divine is both everywhere and specifically in his particular embodiment. “Shirdi Sai Baba is not limited to a single place or time; he is all-pervasive, and with the proper devotional mindset he is accessible to his followers anytime, anywhere.”¹⁰⁷ This premise supports the argument that the Live *Darshan* allows devotees to be in the presence of the divine, even if this presence is partly imagined. Describing his own experience, Kumar shared, “When I see the Live itself, I feel

¹⁰⁴ Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Fascinatingly, Kumar refers to the Live *Darshan* feature as The Live, almost as if it is an entity on its own right or brings the Baba back to life. Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, August 8, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ S. Balasubramanian, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ McLain, “Be United, Be Virtuous,” 28.

something in my heart. It feels like I'm there . . . Whenever I have free time I just watch it.”¹⁰⁸ In addition to the feeling of presence generated by the Live *Darshan*, Kumar reveals how the ability to watch the temple from everywhere can turn it to a kind of leisure activity. People do not have to go to the website, take *darshan*, and leave; they can have it in the background as well. For instance, my first conversation with Kumar was held over the phone when he visited Boston as part of his day job. Through the hour we talked, the sounds of the Coimbatore temple were in the background. Kumar sat in his hotel room with the Live *Darshan* open on his computer screen. While both of us were situated in different locations in the United States, talking about the temple and its technological features, it was there with us. Or rather, we were there, at the temple.

Kumar is also the one to maintain the feature and its smooth operation, unlike full in-house IT departments in temples such as Siddhivinayak and Shirdi, which can also rationalize why he is constantly logged in. Beyond being alone in this effort, he is also doing it from Bangalore. Not only the temple transcends its physical location, but the work involved can also be done from anywhere. All the servers are located in the shrine, but they can be accessed remotely. “I’ll go there once a week or every couple of weeks and fix all the issues and then come back. This work is such that if you have email access, you can do all the stuff.”¹⁰⁹ What helps Kumar is that the Live *Darshan* is fully automated; once the priests turn on the temple’s lights, the camera is activated and the live-streaming begins. Thus, the temple’s participation in digital networks becomes almost like another one of the temples daily activities; it simply starts when the temple opens its gates.

¹⁰⁸ Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, August 8, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Vadivel Kumar, August 8, 2016.

During our conversations, Kumar repeatedly mentioned the challenges they are facing, because they do not have sponsorship. They started Live *Darshan* with the only camera they could afford, and the quality of their broadcast was poor. Luckily, in 2013, they received new equipment from an American video company that allowed for a better quality. However, in July 2016, this camera did not work for a few days, and the Live *Darshan* feature streamed only audio. “The camera was gone, so it was fully miserable. People started to call the temple asking what happened.”¹¹⁰ Even before it went down, the temple was looking to raise money to buy a new camera that would allow for higher-quality streaming. After continuous efforts, Kumar managed to raise enough money to buy a camera that can turn around and zoom in, providing more views of the Baba and of the happenings in the temple.¹¹¹ Kumar said many people were asking for that, especially when there is a function and devotees want to follow it and listen to the songs people sing. In the effort to get better technology and support, Kumar has been chasing the aforesaid communications company for help, with no success. According to him, this company is in charge of most, if not all, of the live broadcasts from Indian temples available at the moment.¹¹² When I asked the company’s project manager about Kumar’s attempts, he said they already have Shirdi, which is the main Sai Baba shrine, “so it doesn’t make sense to us to go and tie up to another [Sai Baba] shrine.”¹¹³ Or, in other words, they do not need the Naga Sai temple.

Beyond the equipment and technical support the communications company could have provided to Naga Sai temple, they also could have enhanced its reach. Kumar mentioned that one local cable provider, King TV Coimbatore, broadcasts specific functions but not the daily Live

¹¹⁰ Vadivel Kumar, August 8, 2016.

¹¹¹ Vadivel Kumar, WhatsApp conversation with author, April 6, 2018.

¹¹² Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, August 8, 2016.

¹¹³ Communications company project manager, conversation with author, December 15, 2016.

Darshan.¹¹⁴ The local channel does not help them increase their reach, as the shrine is already very popular in Coimbatore. In August 2016, Kumar switched the Live *Darshan* servers to YouTube to have greater exposure and let more people know of this service. In addition to being easier to maintain, Kumar explained that the motivation for the switch was that, at YouTube, “everybody who search for Sai Baba will find us.”¹¹⁵ Although this move was indeed helpful—bringing more traffic to the Live *Darshan*—they are still not where they could have been with the distribution mechanism of the communications and DTH companies. The YouTube live stream mentions how many people are watching the broadcast simultaneously. Every time I plugged in to the stream in the last year, there were around three other people watching. Comparing this to the Siddhivinayak temple’s numbers is illuminating. Of course, Siddhivinayak is also much more popular and well known on a national level, but the impacts of their collaboration with the private sector are undeniable. Kumar is still searching for a DTH operator to take on their Live *Darshan* feed exactly for this reason.¹¹⁶ The next section argues for the major effect of the private sector on temples’ reach and networked publics, as well as on what will become the known landscape of Hindu devotion via digital media.

3.5 The Power of Infrastructure

The result of this religious–corporate interaction is that the digital services and exposure of temples are not necessarily determined by religious reasons (although sometimes they are, as in the case of South Indian temples), or lack of motivation, or even the temple resources, but rather by marketing considerations of external yet very influential forces. The implications of this interaction are not only restricted to the realm of the digital; temples’ online presence affects

¹¹⁴ Vadivel Kumar, WhatsApp conversation with author, April 6, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Vadivel Kumar, conversation with author, December 29, 2016.

¹¹⁶ Vadivel Kumar, WhatsApp conversation with author, April 6, 2018.

which temples will be perceived as sophisticated and relevant to modern lifestyle, which will become more famous with time, and which will get more footfalls as a result. Moreover, ownership over digital infrastructure that allows religious innovation and distribution has the potential to shape not only digital Hinduism, but the Hindu devotional web writ large. As stated earlier, history had shown that this complex interplay of religion with power-rooted forces is long established. This discussion examines the specific way it plays out when it comes to digitally networked media.

In a footnote to his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin briefly discusses the relationship between the introduction of sound to film and the electrical companies that were involved in the process:

It was calculated in 1927 that, in order to make a profit, a major film needed to reach an audience of nine million. Of course, the advent of sound film [in that year] initially caused a movement in the opposite direction: its audience was restricted by language boundaries. . . . Its introduction brought temporary relief, not only because sound film attracted the masses back into the cinema but also because it consolidated new capital from the electricity industry with that of film. Thus, considered from the outside, sound film promoted national interests; but seen from the inside, it helped internationalize film production even more than before.¹¹⁷

Benjamin points to the gains made by the collaboration of film production companies with electrical companies in the transition to sound film. The capital and technology of the electrical companies allowed films to achieve the reach they needed in order to be profitable. The electrical companies thus had an important function in the massification and internationalization of films. Beyond increasing audiences—aligning cinema with other mass-media forms—these companies facilitated cinema’s ability to transcend geographical boundaries. In computing, internationalization means adapting software to be later localized for different languages and regional settings. The addition of language that came with the sound film initially limited its

¹¹⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version),” 44.

audiences, but also opened up the possibility to be localized to specific languages by dubbing or subtitles. Film theorist Laura Mulvey, follows Benjamin in identifying the role played by electrical companies. She states that the main inspiration for the introduction of sound was the motivation to keep up with popular music and mass entertainment industries, and the capital of the electrical companies made it possible. “[T]he transition was achieved by the research, manufacturing and marketing of the huge corporations represented by AT&T and General Electric.”¹¹⁸ Mulvey explains that the electrical companies’ institutional power was essential to both develop the recording technology and finance the needed conversion of cinema halls.

Mulvey and Benjamin elucidate the meaning and impact of the Indian communications company’s involvement in the digitization of temples. I suggest that this company has a similar role in the Hindu digital web, transitioning and adapting temples to the digital culture in which they now operate. Like the electrical companies in the case of the sound film, the communications company both provides the necessary technology and is able to wire the temples for this transition to the digital. Also, the DTH company and its various collaborations with mobile providers significantly extend the reach of temples beyond their local, or even national, community, connecting them to networked devotional publics. This kind of expansion is not available to those temples that are not supported by the companies. The technological wiring and the distribution mechanism open up temples to the contemporary global and digital world in which they feel obliged to participate. In an effort to bring the deities closer to their devotees, Hindu temples hand over ownership of the one thing that will determine their positioning in a future and global world: infrastructure. Although temples could establish online services such as

¹¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, “Cinema, Sync Sound and Europe 1929: Reflections on Coincidence,” in *Soundscape: the School of Sound lectures, 1998-2001*, eds. Larry Sider, Jerry Sider, and Diane Freeman (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 21-22.

the Live *Darshan* on their own—like in the case of Sri Naga Sai temple—they realize that, in order to become a substantial node on digital networks, they need to join hands with those who control these networks, giving away the reins to their own digital transition. Here we see how the participatory and open nature of digital networks ends up, paradoxically, in an aggregated control over information, data, and infrastructure. “With connection there is always disconnection, and networks can consolidate power in the very act of dispersing it.”¹¹⁹

In discussing the effects of digitization, Paterson explains how the infrastructure of telecommunications companies has the potential to shape other spheres. “Rather than simply acting as utilities, and with the control of distribution, they could gain the power to define content. . . . Culture is about content and its production and dissemination, whether it is music, film or any other form.”¹²⁰ Paterson argues that control over distribution may lead to a redefinition of the content itself. Thinking of the content of books, television, and films, Paterson’s claim is already common sense: in most cases, publishing houses, television networks, and big production companies control the content they produce and distribute, usually having the last word over the individual authors or directors signed on the works. The content Paterson is discussing is cultural—i.e., produced by media and art creators. The question is how this logic translates to the religious sphere, which is definitely also cultural but in a different way. What does it mean for Hindu institutions to give external forces control of infrastructure and distribution? If this interaction follows the same logic, how does it create potential for companies to control the Hindu content they distribute? What do massification and internationalization mean in this religious context?

¹¹⁹ Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg, “Place: The Networking of Public Space,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 15.

¹²⁰ Paterson, “Policy Implications of Economic and Cultural Value Chains,” 183.

3.6 Conclusion: The Divine's Networked Agents and Publics

Exploring two very different Hindu temples' digital journeys, and the birth and growth of the Live *Darshan* feature, this chapter discussed the various players entangled in the adoption of digital media by Hindu institutions, inventing a new devotional grammar (to go off Srinivas claim): the temples' administration, the individuals that drive their IT operations, corporations that use the mediated practices to their own ends, and the new networked publics who participate in a global technologized lifestyle and expect their religious lives to fit it. Through an examination of the practice of *darshan*, I argued that understanding *darshan* as being in the presence of the divine—resulting in an intimate and emotional experience of it—does more justice to its various manifestations and affirms Live *Darshan* as a part of the canon. This digitally mediated *darshan* does not aim to generate the same devotional effect. Nonetheless, inducing a contemporary mode of layered presence, it serves as a devotional encounter that produces an intimate and emotional experience of the divine, and, therefore, is included in the digital Hindu web.

I also contextualized the temples' digital creativity and efforts in contemporary convergence and participatory culture, showing how Hindu temples imitate the work of media companies, providing devotees with content in various mediated forms. Following media scholarship, this chapter demonstrated the impacts of the communications companies on the Hindu digital transition, providing the capital, technology, infrastructure, and distribution mechanism. The companies' involvement undoubtedly adds to the massification of temples, in the sense of getting their name and “content” to the masses through various media platforms on which they distribute the live stream. Whether this can lead also to an internationalization of the temples is a more complex question to answer. What does it mean to enable Hindu content to

transcend geographical boundaries? In a religious context, it might mean opening up Hindu temples to other devotional communities. This might be the case with specific temples. However, the Shree Siddhivinayak and the Naga Sai temples already serve various communities. Can internationalization mean a process of secularization? Does this idea align with Paterson's suggestion that telecommunications companies will eventually control the content they distribute? At the moment, I do not think this is the case. The sister companies mentioned here have no interest in secularizing the content as the devotional and intimate connection temple broadcasts produce is exactly what makes them marketable to the companies; it serves their interests.

While a prospective study on the matter will be essential in order to answer this question more thoroughly and explore the long-term effects of this interplay, I believe contemporary internet studies and digital networks' protocols already suggest where this aggregated control could lead. Big internet companies, such as Google and Facebook, are not the only ones who gather information and data directly from their users; computer algorithms can also infer information from online activities and patterns that users were never asked about. Then, these platforms shape users' online experience and the content they see, according to the data inferred about their interests, dislikes, state in life, or even sexual orientation. Techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci explains,

The power of the Internet comes from our relationships on it. And these relationships are increasingly mediated by the platforms that collect data about us; make judgments about what is relevant, important, and visible; and seek to shape our experiences for commercial or political gain.¹²¹

Projecting this dynamic on the interplay of religion and commerce I sketched in this chapter, we can imagine a scenario in which devotees' online activities—or rather, their relationship with the divine as it is maintained online—powered by big telecommunications companies could shape

¹²¹ Zeynep Tufekci, "As the Pirates Become CEOs: The Closing of the Open Internet," *Daedalus* 145, no. 1 (2016): 68.

their larger online experience, as well as the digital lives of temples. First, giving away free service, the company providing temple broadcasts to their subscribers—and to various other digital providers and their subscribers—could gather user information and expose them to relevant ads and content. This information would not necessarily be confined to their religious activities, as they could gain insights on users’ demographic details, other online deeds, and physical locations. Second, the phenomenon of network effects, in which people tend to value services the more other people use them,¹²² explains how digital distribution of temples’ services could affect their overall popularity. When temples’ reach and networked devotional publics extend thanks to the telecommunications company—or the other way around, are limited due to the absence of such cooperation—devotees could value their devotional services and status more as they get more ‘traffic.’ Although these are still in the realm of assumptions at this point of temples’ digital lives, I do not think many years would pass before we could further investigate how these dynamics unfold.

This chapter showed how Shree Siddhivinayak temple’s innovative spirit draws more players into their own effort to bring the temple closer to its devotees. I do not think anyone involved back then knew how much their decisions and actions would influence the dissemination of Live *Darshan* across Hindu temples, the motivations that would become involved in the process, and the digital inclusion and exclusion they would determine. An interesting element in this process is the diverse ways divine authority and agency are being utilized and reappropriated. First, we saw how the Siddhivinayak temple’s administration endows the divine with the credit for their technological progression and novelty; as the lord of beginnings, it is only natural for this Ganesh temple to be at the front of technological

¹²² Tufekci, "As the Pirates Become CEOs," 73.

progression. In addition, the deity receives the credit for this digital embracement as it fulfills his wish to be closer to devotees by any means possible. Temples officials recruit Hindu epics to explain how this embracement is also rooted in the Hindu tradition more broadly. Likewise, the Naga Sai temple's management explains their ability to install cameras—although being part of a south Indian tradition—through the cosmopolitan nature and human origin of Sai Baba. Both temples use the divine authority to explain and justify their use of technology, and Live *Darshan*, specifically. I argue that, as a mega-temple and the first temple to employ this technology, Shree Siddhivinayak temple provided a stamp of approval for such use, opening up digital options for other temples and players. They are also the ones who added the external communications company as a major player in this adoption. The outcome of this addition is that this company—and its sister DTH company—became another focal node of agency in the network of Hindu temples, deciding who will be part of the digital transition they are leading.

Interestingly, this agency is produced not only through their marketing wish list that determines who will be included in their digital project—and who will not—but also through the way they position themselves to their subscribers. An ad from 2014 to the DTH company's Live *Darshan* channels—called Active *Darshan*—shows two kids, probably brothers, discussing an act one of them does that is considered a sin (in this case, playing with his food).¹²³ The doer of the sin explains to his brother that it is all right, because he will sit with his grandmother later and ask all the gods for forgiveness. Then the ad shows the child sitting with his grandmother in front of the TV when the prompter says, “Now get Live *Darshan* from temples nationwide from the comforts of your home. With the grace of [the company's name] Active *Darshan*. Once

¹²³ A similar ad from the same year shows almost the same plot, only with two girls, of which one is stealing fruits from someone else's tree. The rest of the ad follows the exact narrative described above.

connected with this [our channels], then life is pleasurable!”¹²⁴ This ad indicates that the company attempts to serve as an agent of the divine in creating and maintaining its devotional publics. “With the grace” of the company, devotees are able to host the gods in their living room and become or remain part of their networked devotional publics. This role of the company, and of technology more broadly, raises the question: how does *bhakti*’s devotional triangle of communication manifest in this contemporary expression? In the absence of the traditional poet, who carries the agency of reaching out and establishing publics of reception and participation—the temples, the companies who mediate them, or the technology itself? Can the communications companies use this new agency to justify their potential data gathering?

This chapter shows that the role of the poet and the deity in forming devotional publics is now split up between the temples’ administration and IT visionaries, the technology itself as a new kind of vernacular, and the external companies. All of these players take part in the attempt to allow devotees to participate in the devotion and presence of their particular deities. Echoing Ramanujan depiction of *bhakti*, in this process, Hindu devotion becomes both more accessible, expanding its devotional publics, but also more limited to a specific—currently, small—section of India’s population. While temples’ reach crosses boundaries via digitally networked media, it also remains confined to those who are already linked to these networks. In this way, temples’ digitization continues the *bhakti* egalitarian tradition while creating a new kind of class attached to it, which can also be seen as continuous with these movements. In a way, it also resonates with the initial effect of the sound film, that while limiting audiences according to languages at first, eventually opened it up to international audiences. That might be how internationalization

¹²⁴ TataSky, “Tata Sky Actve Darshan – Khaana,” August 11, 2014, video, 00:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=md7YUU0LnFs>.

manifests in this context in its future developments. Already, we can see that the involvement of the communications companies does open up the access a bit more broadly than the networked middle classes, with their free *darshan* channels on DTH (a more affordable and widespread service).

This chapter offered only one example to the myriad ways in which mega-temples shape the digital web of Hindu devotion by setting new standards. Another example that is important to mention is the advanced online booking of *darshan* tickets launched in 2014 by the famous Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams temple, in the attempt to end to the delayed *darshan* and massive queues.¹²⁵ In 2016, more than 6.7 million (67 lakh) devotees bought *darshan* tickets to Tirumala online, adding around 31 million dollars (201 crore rupees) to the temple's wealth.¹²⁶ Following Tirumala, online booking of *darshan* is one of the most common services offered on Hindu temples' websites. In the Tirumala case, the government was deeply involved in this digitization process. As the case with many temples, the Tirumala temple is controlled by the state of Andhra Pradesh. This chapter discussed the complex interactions between the corporate and the religious worlds and its significant impact on digital Hinduism, and on Hindu devotional webs writ large. Further investigation on state–temple interactions is out of the scope of this chapter but very much needed to complete the picture of the intricate network of actors shaping digital Hinduism, as the previous chapter already implied. For instance, an article on *India.com*, discussing the recent campaign in Himachal Pradesh by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), mentions that one of their promises was to telecast morning rituals from various temples on the

¹²⁵ “Book Tirumala Special Darshan Tickets Online,” *Deccan Herald*, August 19, 2014, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/426497/book-tirumala-special-darshan-tickets.html>

¹²⁶ Kritika Dua, “In last 3 Years, there is a Significant Rise in Chamundeshwari Temple's Income,” *Newsgram*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.newsgram.com/three-years-significant-rise-chamundeshwari-temples-income>.

governmentally funded TV channel Doordarshan.¹²⁷ This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Hindu nationalism and their use and collaborations with Hindu institutions and mediated forms.¹²⁸ How this interaction plays out in the digital age is a topic for a separate study. What is now certain is that once mega-temples, such as Shree Siddhivinayak, authorize digital practices to be added to the traditional archive—with the aid and support of the private sector and the state—the digital road is open and the opportunities are endless. Who will end up joining this journey, and in what manner, depends on a complex set of internal and external considerations.

¹²⁷ “Himachal Elections: BJP Promises Free 'Chardham' Yatra, Live Telecast of Morning 'Arti,’” *India.com*, October 31, 2017, <http://www.india.com/news/india/himachal-pradesh-assembly-election-2017-bjp-promises-free-chardham-yatra-live-telecast-of-morning-arti-2584388/>.

¹²⁸ For further reading on Hindu nationalism and its relation to religious institutions and media see Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

4. Online Guru: Rebranding Hinduism Through and As Technology

More than one hour before Sadhguru's scheduled Guru *Darshan*, people already started gathering. I felt the anticipation in every corner of the temple complex of Isha's Yoga Center (one of the two main centers of Sadhguru's Isha Foundation). Volunteers were installing screens, speakers, lights, benches, and huge canvases to sit on in preparation for the expected crowd. As hundreds of people filled the complex, a feeling of awe saturated the space. Some meditated while they waited, some did breathing exercises, and some sat quietly in expectation. I had never seen that many people so quiet for so long, especially in India. Cameras and microphones were set up to document the event. All four cameras were placed right in front of the seat waiting for Sadhguru, properly situated for *darshan*. The Isha production house was ready.

Suddenly, everyone started singing one of the Isha chants, Nirvana Shatakam. This chant, sang repeatedly by so many people at once, felt as powerful as it was beautiful. It prepared the temple complex, which was now full of people, for the arrival of the guru. The singing continued as he walked in. People raised their hands in *namaskar* (traditional Indian hand gesture) to greet him, and the elation was heard in their vibrating voices. Sadhguru took his seat, and the singing stopped. Musicians started playing a different song. Sadhguru was not happy with the sound that he was getting, and, like an experienced performer, he asked to adjust it with tiny, barely perceptible hand signs. As the music stopped and he sat there facing the crowd with his eyes almost closed, something happened for which I was completely unprepared. People were having intense, bodily and mental responses to that quiet moment of *darshan*. The air was suddenly filled with ecstatic howls and cries coming from the audience. People shouted, yelled, moved in ecstasy, shook uncontrollably, hit themselves, and so on. It felt like a divine figure had just

entered a space occupied by a huge number of its ardent devotees who experienced some kind of divine revelation. These responses caught me by surprise; until this event, I only experienced Sadhguru through his numerous digitally mediated locales, which portray Isha as a spiritual movement but definitely not religious. Interestingly, Sadhguru and his talk were familiar from my online experiences, but the overall ambience and the ways he was received illuminated him in a whole different light.

After people calmed down and this moment of beholding ended, Sadhguru addressed the crowd. His talk was uplifting, even for a skeptic outsider like me. Sadhguru is one of the most charismatic speakers I have ever heard. He managed to be revered and down to earth, spiritual and practical at the same time. Addressing the audience as peers, his talk was witty, easily relatable, and intriguing. The *Guru Darshan* concluded with a long Q&A, after which Sadhguru urged the audience that we should be done, as dinnertime already passed. During this hour and a half, the Isha production house was constantly working. The four cameras that were set ahead of time were on: one camera took stills, one was fixed on a close-up of Sadhguru, the other shot a wider frame—including some of the background—and the fourth was tilted toward the crowd when their turn came to ask questions. At the end, up-tempo music started and the crowd stood up and began to sing, clap, and dance. It seemed like everyone there knew exactly what they needed to do at every part of the *darshan*. From chanting at the beginning to repeating the mantra after Sadhguru to dancing when it all ended, the event felt like a religious ritual. Nobody had to tell people what to do; they were bonded through these shared embodied practices, which—following

religion and media scholar Birgit Meyer—are the building blocks of religious communities, or in her words, aesthetic formations.¹

On December 24, 2016, I attended the event described above at the Isha Yoga Center in Coimbatore, India. My second offline encounter with Sadhguru was during a program he held in Tampa, Florida. In Tampa, I was surprised again to find a totally different climate, a more distinctly spiritual one, with a flair of adoration usually reserved for rock stars. This event had the framework of a spiritual empowerment workshop, but this time, one did not need to know the structure ahead of time but was guided through every step. Taken together, these experiences exemplify many of the fascinating elements that drew me to this movement in the first place. Lofty and practical, local and global, modern and traditional, hyper-mediated and immediate, Sadhguru attracts diverse and globally networked publics. Although connected to the Hindu web via the various ideas and practices he utilizes, Sadhguru and the Isha foundation promote a non-affiliated, non-religious movement with a universal appeal. With the look of an Indian scholar, charisma of a rock star, online output of a millennial media influencer, and a strong sense of his audience, Sadhguru masterfully entwines diverse online and offline networks. While it seems he and his teachings stay the same on every node of the Isha network, something in the overall experience of Sadhguru changes, fluctuating between a divine figure and a spiritual rock star.

From the Indian ashram to the Tampa Convention Center, and via multiple digital technologies and platforms, this chapter tracks the manifold nodes and connections of the Isha web, from which a networked public emerges. I argue that this public is not only assembled by virtue of the web, but also has a major role in producing it and the multifaceted experiences of

¹ Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-28.

Sadhguru. Nonetheless, this public includes various degrees of participation, for which the experience and production of Sadhguru differs. For a major part of Isha's networked public, participation comes in the form of attention to the foundation's discourse, echoing Michael Warner's idea of a public.² Some also participate in its programs and digitally mediated networks. For a lot of them, it ends there; However, many others embody a more Habermasian sense of the public, becoming part of the organization by volunteering. I suggest that these volunteers manifest the idea of a networked devotional public as Isha declares to be an almost entirely volunteer-run organization;³ In fact, Isha's networked publics are responsible for the production of the foundation's discourse and Sadhguru's image online and offline, in general and at every node of the web. As they bring skills from other networks and cultures into the reception and production of the Isha web—termed by Isha as skill-based volunteering⁴—they facilitate Sadhguru mastery of the various cultures and networks he navigates. This segment of the Isha public is clearly devotional, as they break through a digitally mediated guru-disciple relationship, finding their way to surrender to it. Nonetheless, this chapter argues that also the rest of Isha's public maintains a sense of relationship with the guru, albeit through digitally mediated networks.

Under the scholarly radar, Sadhguru has emerged as a global leader with millions of followers around the world. Although he is one of many contemporary gurus, Sadhguru stands out due to his exceptional online presence, global appearances, and the different positions of influence he inhabits. In addition to his many spiritual programs, Sadhguru leads various environmental and social initiatives, participates in global leadership forums like the World Economic Forum and United Nations, speaks at the world's top business schools, writes regularly

² Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 60-2.

³ "Volunteer at Isha," Isha Foundation, accessed September 30, 2018, <https://isha.sadhguru.org/us/en/volunteer>.

⁴ "Skill Based Volunteering," Isha Foundation, accessed September 30, 2018, <https://isha.sadhguru.org/us/en/volunteer/skill-based-volunteering>.

for the Huffington Post, has strong ties with the Indian government, and one of his numerous books is a New York Times Best Seller. In accordance with their global reach and universal teachings, Sadhguru and his foundation have a massive online presence, with various well-designed websites, smartphone apps, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, YouTube videos, SoundCloud profiles, and TED Talks, among others. In all his endeavors, Sadhguru exhibits a profound grasp of his public: their daily lives, needs, difficulties, and, especially, their networked culture. Through his media utilization, technologized rhetoric, and teachings, Sadhguru situates and immerses himself in his followers' global and local environments. Through this immersion, he successfully migrates the ancient tradition of gurus, and especially its core guru–disciple relationship, to the digital realm.

Sadhguru is one of several living modern gurus who operate globally and have a massive following around the world. This phenomenon—whether we choose to call it Global Gurus,⁵ The New Gurus,⁶ Mahagurus,⁷ Hyper Gurus,⁸ or New Age Gurus⁹—is widely debated and analyzed by scholars. Although Sadhguru meets all of these definitions, he and his foundation are completely absent from scholarship on this topic. Religious studies scholar Joanne Waghorne is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has written about them in this context. This chapter fills this literary gap, arguing for the importance of taking Isha's global movement into account when thinking of Hindu adoption of digital media, although—or maybe because—they exhibit an interesting relation to the tradition from which they emerge.

⁵ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Global Gurus in Motion: Challenges for the Academic Study of Religion," *Religion and Culture* 15 (2008): 42.

⁶ Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 92.

⁷ Daniel Gold, "Elevated Gurus, Concrete Traditions, and the Problems of Western Devotees," in *Gurus in America*, eds. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 220.

⁸ Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, "Guru logics," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1 (2012): 293.

⁹ Angela Rudert, "Research on Contemporary Indian Gurus: What's New about New Age Gurus?," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 10 (2010): 629-642, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2010.00245>.

After exploring the private sector and Hindu temples' involvement in this adoption, this chapter examines Sadhguru and Isha as a case study for the involvement and contribution of independent authorities—such as gurus—to this process. This case study is different than its formers in several ways, which shape this chapter's methodology and aim. First, Sadhguru and Isha are not identifying themselves as Hindu or religious in any sense. In contrast to both the temples and Hindu entrepreneurs we have already met, Isha Foundation does not share the motivation to facilitate Hindu devotion or services for those who cannot access them differently. This distinction raises the question of whether Isha belongs in a study of digital Hinduism, an issue which I discuss throughout the chapter. Second, in contrast to my previous interlocutors, who enthusiastically shared with me their point of view, Isha Foundation was not interested in cooperating. It took numerous attempts to have a conversation with someone from the foundation—over emails, phone calls, and in person—for me to realize that, although it would have been helpful and significant to get the foundation's perspective, there is also a distinct value in discovering Isha and Sadhguru as if I were a potential follower. My exploration started, naturally, online. Browsing the foundation's numerous sites allowed me to gather a large amount of information on the foundation's agenda and offerings, as well as on Sadhguru's character and teachings. Slowly, I started to follow more and more of Sadhguru's digital content, sharing a form of mere attention with many of his global followers. For the last two-and-a-half years, I have been watching Sadhguru's YouTube videos (which I later discovered to be the entry point to his teachings for many of his followers), hosted several of Isha's apps on my smartphone, followed their Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts, listened to Isha Music on their SoundCloud profile, and received Sadhguru's daily Mystic Quotes via email. Thus, not only do my efforts align with existing forms of being part of Sadhguru's public, they also follow the one and only

official response I received from the foundation: “Go to our website. It has all the information about us. Do research there.”¹⁰

However, I did not stop there. One of my main interests in Sadhguru is the way he translates the act of learning from a guru to digitally networked spaces. Thus, in December 2016, I took the Inner Engineering program online. After purchasing the program during a special Black Friday sale, I had seven online classes available on my personal computer. Taking the program, I understood Isha’s claim that the content imparted on the program can speak to anyone who wishes to live more joyfully, and, I would add, have some inclination towards spirituality. Right after the completion of the online program, I visited the Isha Yoga center in Coimbatore, during which I participated in the Guru *Darshan* described above. This visit gave me a different impression of the foundation; The religious ambience of the center, its temple complex, the devotional gestures and offerings in its consecrated spaces, and the embodied practices I did not share—made me feel foreign to the center’s public. My form of participation, mainly passive, was not enough to make me belong, and the universal appeal of the foundation’s spirituality suddenly collapsed. This sense of foreignness shifted again when I arrived at the Inner Engineering Completion program with Sadhguru in Tampa, Florida in April 2017, which felt to attract a diverse audience. Hosted at a convention center in Florida, it seemed that participants were from different backgrounds, ages, experience in similar programs, and levels of familiarity with Sadhguru and Isha. Interestingly, most of the people I talked to came there after stumbling upon Sadhguru’s videos on YouTube, and, as a result, saw the ads for this event (though this is not a representative sample of any sort). Everything about this program was addressed to a modern, western, and professional audience that could use some spirituality in their life. The 3-

¹⁰ Isha’s Yoga Center’s Overseas Coordination Office, December 23, 2016.

star hotel adjunct to the convention center in which most of the participants stayed, the part-lecture, part-concert staging of the main hall, and that we were told what to do—acknowledging that participants do not (yet) share embodied forms that bind them together—produced a sense that this event belongs to a contemporary genre of spiritual workshops, with which the participants were familiar. Thanks to my attendance in this completion program, during which I was initiated as a member, I was contacted by Erin Shown, a volunteer in the local Raleigh-Durham Isha community. As an alumni of Duke University, Shown had sincere interest in helping me with my study, leading to several illuminating conversations.¹¹

What stands behind Isha’s refusal to talk with me? This issue could also be one of the explanations to the surprising absence of Sadhguru from scholarship on contemporary gurus and their movements. The reasons, or at least my few educated guesses, illuminate both the foundation’s operation mechanism and the teachings themselves. First, it can be explained by Sadhguru’s disapproval of scholarship, which distances one from the truth. For Sadhguru, knowledge and experience are contradictory, and experience is preferred.¹² “Your ability to experience something is inversely proportional to the amount of knowledge that you have gathered about it.”¹³ In this light, we can infer that Isha did not appreciate my scholarly attempts. The first person from the foundation I managed to contact expressed her concern that I was pursuing their marketing strategies, which could be the second reason. This concern, and even the mere acknowledgment that they have such strategies, exposes the fine balance the foundation attempts to maintain between being a spiritual, nonprofit movement and an entity selling spiritual

¹¹ It is important to remember that Shown, although a volunteer of the foundation, shared with me her personal experience and path with Sadhguru and his foundation and is not a spokesperson for Isha.

¹² Joanne Waghorne notes the irony in Sadhguru’s constant critique of education and universities considering the academic style he often uses in his programs, talks, and jargon. See Waghorne, “Global Gurus in Motion,” 53-54.

¹³ Sadhguru, “Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote,” January 24, 2017.

products and experiences. Third, Isha's public image, visual and conceptual, is so carefully curated that I imagine they do not appreciate other perspectives generating a different image. This might be the reason why they are not allowing pictures to be taken by visitors; at their Coimbatore center, the signs prohibiting cameras are as prevalent as the "No Smoking" signs.

As mentioned, Isha's lack of cooperation did not decrease my motivation to research the movement; rather, I reckoned the merits of the modes of investigation available to me. I accessed Sadhguru and Isha through means offered to any potential follower, though I came to its programs and spaces—online and offline—as a researcher, carrying a notebook and my innate rationalism and skepticism. According to Isha, my impetus to understand the movement and its core ideas through participation in its network enacted a paradox. As a scholar studying the movement to impart its core ideas in an academic study, I had to utilize my analytical ways of knowing, which, in Isha terms, makes me a bad disciple. Although taking the Inner Engineering program like any other participant, Sadhguru's disapproval of knowledge, in favor of experience, rendered my scholarly note-taking practice inappropriate.

And yet, despite my academic motivation for engaging in Isha's programs and spaces, I cannot deny the resonance Sadhguru's teachings had on my personal life. First, although I felt foreign to the space, the mesmerizing tranquility and beauty of the Isha Yoga Center was in itself powerful, a peaceful pause from my daily hectic routine (even my visit in India, which mainly included the bustling hubs of Mumbai and Coimbatore). Second, and more important, the content of the Inner Engineering program—which served as my most intensive and active participation—urged me to reflect on my own life, beyond my scholarly pursuit. After all, I can also use more joy and well-being in my life, and spirituality is not entirely foreign to me. During the week in which I took the online program, I consumed the invigorating food for thought Sadhguru offered

me, attempting to apply it to my own life and experiences. Although I took notes while listening, as I should not have, his suggestions for improved well-being made me contemplate my ways of thinking and being in the world. Even if it was a fleeting reflection, I believe I internalized some of its insights in ways I might not be aware of. Taking the completion program in Tampa strengthened this belief, as I was again compelled to pause and reflect on the four months that have passed since I took the online program. And indeed, I felt that, in some ways, even if minor, I was positively affected by the tools I acquired from Sadhguru. In this sense, I do not think I completely transgressed Isha's objectives. Sadhguru addresses his techniques to modern, busy people who wish to improve their well-being. Maybe I did not fully commit to the spiritual path Sadhguru paves for his followers, but, in that way, I am not different from many other members of his networked public, who mainly participate through attention. For the time being, I was part of Isha's networked public, in spite of my academic agenda.

Using my online and offline journey through Sadhguru and Isha's teaching, programs, and various locales, this chapter argues that Sadhguru successfully translates Hindu devotional practices and concepts to the contemporary global and digital culture, rebranding them as technologies for well-being. This effort aligns with Sadhguru's understanding of Hinduism not as a religion but as a geographical identity, and with his goal to promote seeking rather than belief. In what follows, I first review Isha Foundation's structure, initiatives, and their production of Sadhguru's multifaceted image. Next, I provide an analysis of the Indian guru tradition, its global export, and the ways Sadhguru's teaching and activities echo it. This section explores the reasons for Sadhguru's refusal to be termed Hindu and the ways in which this objective also resonates with the tradition from which he emerges. Here I also make the case for the inclusion of Sadhguru as a node in the digital Hindu web this project studies. Following, I drill deeper into the core

program of the foundation, Inner Engineering, in which I have participated and which also exemplifies the various networks Sadhguru navigates. Understanding the ways in which these locales shape the traditional ways of learning from a guru, and especially the intimate guru–disciple relationship, I explore the ways digitally networked media allow the formation of intimacy. Next, I examine Isha’s mediated web, its media utilization, and technologized rhetoric, arguing for their successful production of intimacy via these means. In conclusion, I highlight the significant role digital technologies play in Sadhguru’s movement, both as his end product and as the means by which he gets there.

4.1 Isha Foundation and Sadhguru: A Non-Affiliated Global Movement and Its Visionary

The Isha Foundation is a volunteer-based, nonprofit organization founded in 1992 by Jaggi Vasudev, also known as Sadhguru. Isha defines itself as a non-affiliated, global public service movement. “Isha activities are designed to create an inclusive culture that is the basis for global harmony and progress.”¹⁴ Isha has two main headquarters: the Isha Yoga Center in Coimbatore in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, and the Isha Institute of Inner Sciences in McMinnville, Tennessee. According to Isha, it has more than 200 centers and seven million volunteers worldwide.¹⁵ It is harder to establish the exact number of members (or meditators, as Isha refers to them) of this movement. Modern Hinduism scholar Maya Warrier shows that following a guru “means different things to different individuals,”¹⁶ and each follower selects the practices or advice she wishes to adopt. As mentioned earlier, in Isha’s case, participation and

¹⁴ “Press Kit.” Isha Foundation, accessed September 10, 2017, <http://isha.sadhguru.org/wp-content/themes/enfold-child/images/Press%20Release.pdf>.

¹⁵ Isha Foundation, “Volunteer at Isha.”

¹⁶ Maya Warrier, “Guru Choice and Spiritual Seeking in Contemporary India,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1 (2003): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-003-0002-7>.

commitment in the movement's networked public runs on a very big spectrum—from members who mainly follow the guru online to volunteers who run the foundation.

Promoting technologies for well-being, Isha offers various programs worldwide, including yoga and meditation programs, rejuvenation facilities, and Sacred Walks in the Himalayas led by Sadhguru,¹⁷ among others. Isha's flagship program is Inner Engineering. The program serves as an introductory course to the guru's teachings and is a prerequisite for all of Isha's advanced programs. Isha Foundation also houses a lot of brands under its name, producing 524 products,¹⁸ such as books, music, crafts, Ayurvedic medicine, cosmetics, clothing, yoga and meditation gear, food, and even furniture. Sadhguru justifies the commercial component of his foundation as existing only to support its volunteers and philanthropic initiatives.¹⁹ Isha is involved in many social and environmental projects: Project Green Hands aspires to plant 114 million trees in Tamil Nadu, India.²⁰ The Action for Rural Rejuvenation operates twelve mobile health clinics. Isha Vidya builds affordable and high-quality schools around rural Tamil Nadu.²¹ Rally for Rivers, Isha's recent initiative, is a widely promoted environmental campaign to revive India's rivers. For its main event, Sadhguru drove through the country, stopping in prime locations to host events, raising awareness of the deteriorating shape of India's rivers, and offer his solution, which was submitted to India's prime minister. These events hosted celebrities and policy makers and were accompanied by live web streams and constant updates on various social

¹⁷ The foundation also offers Sacred Walks to other "places of divine connection" but these are usually less heavily promoted. For more information on Isha's Sacred Walks and the different destinations see the website - <http://www.sacredwalks.org>.

¹⁸ Baba Gnanakumar P., "Social-Marketing Activities to Augment Brands of Faith in Diversified Marketing in India," in *Selected Papers from the Asia-Pacific Conference on Economics & Finance (APEF 2016)*, eds. Evan Lau, Lee Ming Tan, and Jing Hee Tan (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 41.

¹⁹ Mystic of India, "Sadhguru Owns The Provoked Law Students Who Try To Belittle His Work And Isha," September 28, 2018, YouTube video, 24:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e4ltxBZZCA&t=845s>.

²⁰ In 2008 the project set a Guinness World Record for the highest number of trees planted in a single day. For more information on this project see the website - <http://www.projectgreenhands.org/home>.

²¹ For more information on this project see the website - <http://ishavidhya.org>.

media outlets.²² Reaffirming the idea of a networked public, this initiative included constant online engagement of the guru's followers through posting images with the Rally for Rivers poster or selfies with rivers, and using its various related hashtags on their social media profiles (figure 16).

Many nodes in Isha's mediated web are dedicated to describing the multifaceted figure of their founder. This structure correlates with the image of Sadhguru they portray. Isha describes Sadhguru as a "realized yogi and a mystic ... An author, poet, visionary and internationally renowned thought leader."²³ In addition to his spiritual characteristics, Sadhguru is constantly presented as a colorful personality, "a man of many facets,"²⁴ which complements his overall uplifting character. Sadhguru relishes mountain trekking, loves nature and animals, and enjoys sports. He is a world traveler who loves adventure. He is a master chef, an architect, an innovator, and a family man.²⁵ Ironically, this multifaceted depiction does not tell us much about the guru; besides being a yogi and a mystic, the guru's description reads as culturally generic. Sadhguru's portrayal accentuates a cultural common ground he shares with his potential public as part of his universal appeal. His social media profiles highlight this common ground by showing him engaged in activities his public can relate to, such as watching the World Cup, playing different sports, and riding on his bike, as well as by emphasizing his playful and witty character. The reasons *India Today* provides for selecting him to the magazine's "High and Mighty" list²⁶ illuminate this image of Sadhguru:

²² For more information on this impressive campaign see - <http://isha.sadhguru.org/rally-for-rivers/>.

²³ "Isha: An Introduction," Isha Foundation, accessed September 10, 2017, 31. <https://isha.sadhguru.org/wp-content/themes/enfold-child/images/Isha%20an%20Introduction.pdf>.

²⁴ "Sadhguru: Man," Isha Foundation, accessed October 30, 2017, <http://isha.sadhguru.org/man/>.

²⁵ "Sadhguru: Man."

²⁶ Sadhguru was selected to this list for three years in a row. 2009–2011. In 2009 Sadhguru was in the 44th rank and since then moved one up to 43rd, and then down a few to be 46th in 2011. Among the other gurus who appeared on this

Because he is the intelligentsia's favourite guru with doctors, lawyers, architects and musicians from across the world wanting to serve as part of the voluntary army at his Isha Foundation in Coimbatore. Because he moves easily from a loincloth in the Himalayas to speaking at Davos, four years in a row. Because he has captured the imagination of the world with his ideas for a better future. Because with his love for racing dirt bikes and driving Volvos, he is a rock star among gurus.²⁷

Similarly to many of his counterparts,²⁸ Sadhguru embodies the best of both worlds: he provides an option that embraces modern lifestyle while maintaining the spiritual values that modernity, supposedly, crushed. Or, as Swami Muktananda, an influential modern guru, explains—“On the one hand, he [the guru] is adept in spiritual matters, and, on the other, he is exceedingly shrewd in his worldly dealing.”²⁹ Sadhguru embodies this duality in almost every respect, enabling his successful immersion in diverse locales and facilitating his acceptance by a large global following. This duality also explains the two distinct experiences I had of him. Nonetheless, it is hard to know what in this multifaceted personality is innate and what is the outcome of the constant and careful curation of the Isha production house. Isha utilizes the experience and skills its volunteers bring from their day jobs—which they quit to volunteer or continue to work in alongside their new commitment. In its Volunteer Interest Form, Isha specifies the skills its networked public can offer to the organization, at its centers or from home, including public relations, marketing, digital promotions, IT, graphic design, audio and video, business development, and so on.³⁰ These external sets of skills shape and impact the foundation’s structure and strategies, as well as the public image of its visionary.

list are Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. “A Guide to the High and Mighty,” *India Today*, April 8, 2011. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/a-guide-to-the-high-and-mighty/1/134071.html>.

²⁷ “Jaggi Vasudev: Spirited Master,” *India Today*, March 22, 2010, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/198668530?accountid=10598>.

²⁸ Maya Warrior, “Modernity and its Imbalances: Constructing Modern Selfhood in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission,” *Religion* 36, no. 4 (2006): 184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2006.09.001>

²⁹ Joel D Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” *Numen* 29, no. 1 (1982): 54.

³⁰ “Skill Based Volunteering,” Isha Foundation.

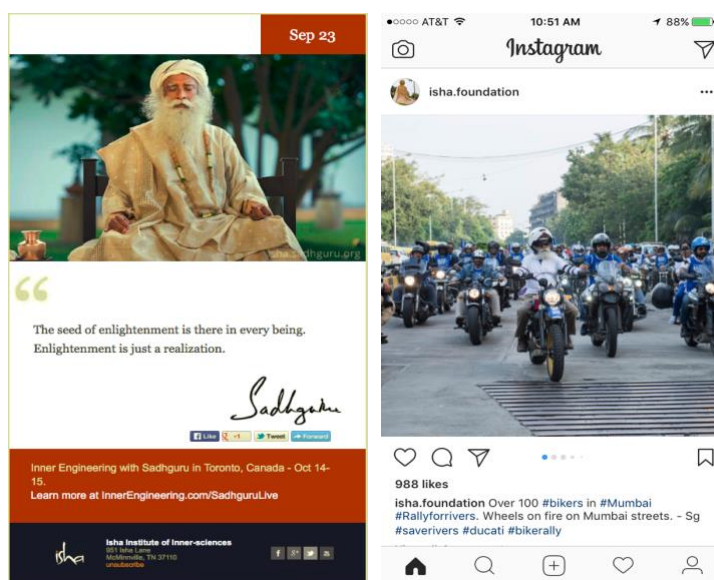


Figure 11: The spiritual and the worldly Sadhguru.³¹

Social anthropologists Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame’s “Guru Logics” is helpful in thinking of the inability of Sadhguru to fit “any narrow description,” as his website describes him. Copeman and Ikegame argue that a guru is a “vector between domains,” participating, encompassing, and moving between “diverse social sites and conceptual domains.”³² They claim that these political, economic, and social spheres that gurus occupy indicate they possess a quality of “uncontainability.” This idea resonates with the ways Isha is creating and framing the figure of Sadhguru, and how this image serves them in their various endeavors. Sadhguru does not attempt to situate himself as a divine figure; his uncontainability manifests in the various social and spiritual roles he occupies and the different characteristics he embodies (figure 11). Interestingly, one of the many highlighted qualities of the guru is that he lacks a traditional lineage and training.

³¹ Left - Sadhguru, “Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote,” September 33, 2017; Right - Isha Foundation (@isha.foundation), “Over 100 #bikers in #Mumbai #Rallyforrivers. Wheels on fire on Mumbai streets. - Sg,” Instagram photo, September 17, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZla5o-IXq9>.

³² Copeman and Ikegame, “Guru logics,” 289.

Sadhguru refers to the name he took upon himself not as a title but as a description: ‘Sadhguru’ means uneducated guru. Sadhguru emphasizes it as it resonates with his prioritization of experience over knowledge or education. “I am almost hundred percent spiritually uneducated. I don’t know any scriptures, I have not read the Vedas and I didn’t bother to read the Bhagavad Gita.”³³ This statement also exemplifies the distance Sadhguru creates between himself and a popular notion of Hinduism. Instead, what he offers is a *method* drawn from his own inner experience. Nonetheless, this statement is not as bold as it might seem. Many Hindu gurus do not have a lineage or traditional education, and, rather, gain their religious authority through intuitive experiences or mystical powers.³⁴

Sadhguru attempts to establish a bridge between traditional spiritual knowledge and modern ways of life. Sadhguru pushes his followers to realize that one does not come in lieu of the other. Rather, both are encouraged, and modern individuals can only benefit from applying ancient knowledge and practices to their everyday life. “Sadhguru has a unique ability to make the ancient yogic sciences relevant to contemporary minds. . . . His life and work are constant reminders that the inner sciences are not outdated philosophies, but rather, vitally relevant to our times.”³⁵ Although he prefers accessing knowledge through experience, Sadhguru admits it is difficult to achieve. He first approaches his networked public in the manner they understand best—scientific rationality. Sadhguru’s multifaceted personality and his non-affiliated community play a major role in the bridge he attempts to construct between past and present, local and global. This effort is not foreign to the larger tradition of Hindu gurus from which Sadhguru

³³ “The Meaning of Sadhguru,” Isha Foundation, October 25, 2016 . <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/sadhguru/masters-words/the-meaning-of-sadhguru/>.

³⁴ Daniel Gold, *Provincial Hinduism: Religion and Community in Gwalior City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 191.

³⁵ “Isha: An Introduction,” 7.

emerges. Through a review of this tradition and its core characteristics, I examine the Hindu roots of Sadhguru's teachings and community, as well as his distance from it.

4.2 The Guru Tradition in Hinduism, India, and Beyond

He converts darkness into light
and he makes the invisible God visible.³⁶

A Guru is someone who dispels the darkness in you. You can call him a light bulb if you want.³⁷

After I was initiated as an Isha meditator at the Inner Engineering completion program in Tampa, I received an email from Isha with a handwritten note from Sadhguru, blessing me on being initiated into his movement and into a close relationship with him (figure 12). "*I am with you in all that you are. May you know bliss. Much love and blessings. Sadhguru.*"³⁸ Personally, this email embarrassed me, making me feel I breached a sacred connection by coming into this relationship as a researcher, lacking a pure motivation to devote myself and surrender to it. This kind of relationship with a guru—of love, compassion, and intimacy—is one of the cornerstones of the Indian guru tradition. By being with me in all that I am, Sadhguru declares an existential intimacy that attempts to survive our means of communication (email) and the fact that we never really met, at least not online or in a forum of less than hundreds of people.

³⁶ Kalidasa. Cited in M. K. Raina, "Guru-Shishya Relationship in Indian Culture: The Possibility of a Creative Resilient Framework," *Psychology and Developing Societies* 14, no. 1 (2002): 169.

³⁷ Sadhguru, "Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote," October 19, 2015.

³⁸ Isha USA, "Blessings from Sadhguru," email to author, May 2, 2017. Italics added.

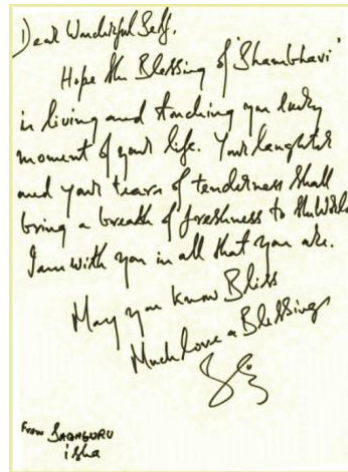


Figure 12: Blessings from Sadhguru.³⁹

The intimate nature of the guru–disciple relationship has been described in many different ways, upholding its essential role in the act of learning from a guru. In the Vedic period, the guru and his disciples had to live together to study the Vedas.⁴⁰ In the Upanishads—literally the act of sitting down near a guru—the relationship was imagined as a “complete harmony.”⁴¹ Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar compares the guru and the disciple to parent and child. Disciples should accept gurus’ teachings with a pure, unquestioning heart. Gurus, respectively, should love their disciples like children. Kakar cites Muktananda, who explains that when you surrender to a guru, “The guru begins to manifest in you; his energy begins to flow into you.”⁴² This bond is so intimate that the two entities become one. Through all its articulations, a sense of an existential intimacy remains, one which affirms, maintains, and relates to one’s existence—through living together, devotion and surrender, or the parental and psychoanalytic functions of the guru. There

³⁹ Isha USA, “Blessings from Sadhguru.”

⁴⁰ Raina, “Guru-Shishya Relationship in Indian Culture,” 173.

⁴¹ Raina, 181-182.

⁴² Sudhir Kakar, “The Irresistible Charm of Godmen,” *India Today*, April 29, 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/sathya-sai-baba-the-irresistible-charm-of-godmen/1/136653.html>

is nothing physical about this union; it is a union of spiritual selves. This merger is also not transient. Like any other, it can be broken, but, if the original terms are kept, this new existence can last forever. As a spiritual matter, physical presence can seem redundant. But what happens to this existentially intimate relationship when it has to be maintained with millions of followers who are globally spread? How does Sadhguru achieve being with all of them in all that *they are*? And what does it mean to surrender to a guru when the relationship with him mainly occurs through digitally networked media?

Guru traditions span historical and mythological periods, communities, and religions in India and, in more recent history, around the globe.⁴³ This phenomenon is understood as central to shaping contemporary India and the Hindu devotional web. Scholars argue that a Hindu sect is defined as a tradition founded by a guru, who holds the freedom to shape the teachings of their lineage, create a new interpretation, or start something totally new as a result of personal enlightenment experience.⁴⁴ “It is the *sampradaya* [tradition, sect], with the guru at its center, that is the core of living, ever-changing, and ever-evolving Hinduism.”⁴⁵ As this study highlights digital Hinduism as a current development in the “ever-evolving Hinduism,” the need to investigate what role contemporary gurus take in this development becomes evident. Gurus’ centrality to the formation of Hindu networks, and their freedom in forming them, calls the non-affiliated nature of Sadhguru and his foundation into question. If the Hindu sectarian system allows such flexibility of spiritual teachings, why is Isha not considered a *sampradaya*?

⁴³ Although I focus on the meaning and figure of the guru in Hinduism, as this is the topic of my study, it is important to note that this is not a mere Hindu phenomenon. Other Indian sects and religious groups, such as Islam and Sikhism, have vast and rich guru traditions. For further discussion on this traditions see Raina, “Guru-Shishya Relationship in Indian Culture,” 167-198.

⁴⁴ David Miller, “The Guru as the Centre of Sacredness,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 6, no. 5 (1977): 527-33; Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

⁴⁵ Miller, “The Guru as the Center of Sacredness,” 530.

The Sanskrit term ‘guru’ has various meanings, of which scholars tend to highlight two: the guru as a dispeller of ignorance and “weighty,”⁴⁶ in the sense of “a person who commands uncommon prestige.”⁴⁷ The manifestations of the term vary from gurus who are perceived as miraculous divine embodiments, such as Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba, who we have already met; educated teachers from an existing traditional lineage, like Vivekananda; or self-realized visionaries, like Sadhguru, who are not linked to any tradition. The idea of Hindu gurus has evolved throughout the tradition’s history. In the Vedas and Upanishads, gurus were mainly in charge of transmitting knowledge and serving as the tool to attain it. In the Tantric and *bhakti* traditions, the emphasis shifted toward the guru as an object of devotion.⁴⁸ Academic knowledge or hereditary status were no longer the reasons for a guru to be revered. The guru stimulated devotion via “his individual, inspirational qualities, rooted in his own personal devotion to and realization of the Lord.”⁴⁹ Note that scholarship usually refers to the idea of the guru as masculine, since—as scholar of Hinduism Karen Pechilis shows—the tradition excluded females from the public role of gurus. Pechilis emphasizes the role of female gurus in this tradition, pointing to the diversity of methods and techniques in which gurus attempt to inspire the experience of the real in their disciples “for the purposes of spiritual advancement, total self-realization, or evolution as a human being.”⁵⁰

One of the most significant transitions in Hindu guruhood, especially in light of this

⁴⁶ Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” 33-34; Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, 82; Raina, “Guru-Shishya Relationship in Indian Culture,” 169; David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 170; Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7-8.

⁴⁷ Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, 82.

⁴⁸ Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” 33-61.

⁴⁹ Mlecko, 46.

⁵⁰ Karen Pechilis, “Introduction: Hindu Female Gurus in Historical and Philosophical Context,” in *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus In India And The United States*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

discussion, came with Swami Vivekananda's breaking through the Indian border in the late-nineteenth century. Founding *Vedanta* societies in the West, Vivekananda opened the tradition of spiritual guidance from gurus to non-Indian seekers. According to Waghorne, he refashioned yoga as a universal spirituality and Hinduism as "*practical, accessible, and accommodating a worldwide following.*"⁵¹ Vivekananda marks the outset of the globalization of Hinduism in both aspects this study considers the term—he not only disseminated its core ideas and practices across the globe; he also communicated it as a universal religion. Vivekananda saw Hinduism as shared eclectic religious sensibilities, which could relate not only to Hindus but to a universal public.⁵²

This shift marks a turning point both in the modern, rational, and westernized packaging of gurus' spiritual teachings and in the traditional intimacy of the guru–disciple relationship, as gurus began to have mass of followers. English and literature scholar Srinivas Aravamudan terms this packaging "Guru English" as the most recognizable form of Asian cosmopolitanism, which responded to the universalized disposition of European enlightenment. A theolinguistic register, Guru English is "one of the primary modes of communicating Indian religion to outsiders."⁵³ In addition, Aravamudan identifies this phenomenon as a literary discourse made of "multilingual puns, parody, and syncretism,"⁵⁴ and a commodifiable cosmopolitanism mixing science, spirituality, modernity, and ancient doctrine.⁵⁵ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi serves as a prominent example to the production of such a mixture as alternative rationality. Maharishi, who was originally trained as an engineer, moved to the United States in 1958 and quickly established a

⁵¹ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Global Gurus and the Third Stream of American Religiosity: Between Hindu Nationalism and Liberal Pluralism," in *Political Hinduism: The Religious Imagination in Public Spheres*, ed. Vinay Lal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140.

⁵² Waghorne, "Global Gurus and the Third Stream of American Religiosity," 132.

⁵³ Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 16.

⁵⁴ Aravamudan, 6.

⁵⁵ Aravamudan, 243.

network of centers for his Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. Using a particular arrangement of Guru English, Maharishi brought science and religion together by effectively replacing Hindu vocabularies with modern terminology.⁵⁶ TM gained traction thanks to a host of celebrity followers, including The Beatles and Mia Farrow, who also visited him in his Indian center in Rishikesh. Religious studies scholar Jane Naomi Iwamura argues that these celebrity spiritual seekers brought Maharishi massive media attention, which offered an American audience a sense of a direct encounter with the guru. Maharishi's images on western media highlighted the contrasts he embodied, situating him both in a mystical aura and in a mundane light,⁵⁷ a tension which is also emphasized in Sadhguru's public image. Similar to Maharishi's highly mediated image, which "provided a new arsenal for imaginative construction,"⁵⁸ many contemporary gurus utilize media technologies to strengthen their universal appeal. Noticing the effectiveness of gurus in employing new technologies to reach audiences and maintain their authority, Copeman and Ikegame ask whether this extension of presence transforms the intention and meaning of the message. In response, I argue below that, in Sadhguru and Isha's case, the various digitally networked media employed correlate with, and intensify, the message; the message is not transformed but enhanced.

Pechilis shows that the American attraction to the mystic East in the 1960s and 1970s led Indian gurus to embrace mass-marketing techniques to promote their movements. "Their emphasis on mass appeal represented a new, and conflicted, direction for the guru tradition."⁵⁹ In the attempt to draw followers, gurus used varied strategies to universalize Hindu ideas. Maharishi

⁵⁶ Aravamudan, 197.

⁵⁷ Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68.

⁵⁸ Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 108.

⁵⁹ Pechilis, "Introduction," 34.

covered his Indian roots with modern rationality, while others chose to emphasize them instead. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada arrived in the United States with a missionary purpose to promote Krishna devotion. Globalizing Hindu *bhakti* by opening it to other ethnicities, he established the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in 1966, also known as Hare Krishna. The movement emphasized temple worship, devotional lifestyle, and “Indianized” diet and general appearance.⁶⁰ The Sathya Sai Baba movement provides a middle-way example, opening itself to diverse interpretations. Anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas demonstrates the movement’s cosmopolitanism through its ability to produce a “matrix of possible meanings,” which is ambiguous enough to allow various readings that, taken together, form a “grammar of diversity.”⁶¹ Although Sadhguru embodies Aravamudan’s Guru English in his use of modern science and rationality to distance himself from any notion of religion, the various locales he inhabits, and the ways he navigates between devotional and professional settings produce a similar grammar of diversity, allowing as many people as possible to feel included.

As is already evident, Sadhguru is not alone in his attempt to engage with modernity to bridge past and present. Many of the gurus operating today share and attempt to win over the same urban, professional, and middle-class audience, using varied strategies.⁶² Mata Amritanandamayi’s⁶³ movement serves as a good case study for the adaptation of Hindu values and practices to contemporary India, rephrasing ancient truths in modern terminology. Amma opens up a way for Hindu selfhood to reimagine itself in terms compatible with modernity. Her

⁶⁰ David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn, eds., *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 14-5.

⁶¹ Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6.

⁶² When referring to this middle class audience I mean both in India and abroad. I do not distinguish between the two as both are addressed similarly in this context.

⁶³ Mata Amritanandamayi is also known by the shorter version Mata, or simply Amma (mother). Scholars refer to her differently, thus the inconsistency of her name when mentioned through other scholars.

terminology is “the language of democracy, individualism, and gender equality.”⁶⁴ Addressing the specific needs of devotees with modern lifestyles and worldviews, Amma attracts affluent, middle-class devotees from India and abroad. Warriar argues that these devotees follow Amma in the attempt to come to terms with the new consumerist, global world of which they are part, and the particular local place they are coming from.⁶⁵ Sadhguru uses a slightly different modern terminology—the language of the corporate and technological world with an emphasis on current environmental issues. Attracting the same publics, Sadhguru uses the local tradition not in order to accommodate and negotiate the new modern condition but to create a whole new framework dedicated to these conditions. His technologies for well-being are directed specifically to ease the modern lives of urban and professional followers. Sadhguru adjusts the ancient knowledge to fit in a modern package suitable for this public. He also directly engages with the business world through dedicated programs and talks. Inner Engineering promotional materials highlight its benefits for the modern businessperson, including testimonials from high-level business people and celebrities, such as fashion designer Donna Karan, the actor Ed Begley, and the former chairman of Microsoft India, Ravi Venkatesan. Adjusting to and by its public, Isha borrows jargon and strategies from the corporate world, including promotional sales, advertisements, social media presence, an official press release, and various online resources for media.

Considering the numerous possibilities the spiritual market has to offer, scholarship depicts devotees as consumers in a saturated religious market, with the option to choose the guru and type of following that fit them best. Srinivas depicts Sathya Sai Baba’s religious culture as an example of an intersection between a global consumer culture and faith. “The growing cultural

⁶⁴ Amanda J. Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 19.

⁶⁵ Maya Warriar, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (London: Routledge, 2005), 11.

and religious self-awareness of Sai devotees as consumers of religious objects transforms their markets, distribution strategies, and their consumer behavior.”⁶⁶ When seekers become consumers who consider their spiritual options with the same apparatus they use to consider which new smartphone to buy, it is hard not to agree with the anthropologist and folklorist Kirin Narayan that “spirituality becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold.”⁶⁷ In the Indian case, the new networked middle classes depicted in Chapter 2 are the ones that can afford these spiritual commodities and feel most at home with the global consumerist world as it becomes their own. Thinking of global publics, the spiritual ‘east’ becomes more digestible when aligned with their own consumerist and mediated culture. In both cases, Isha foundation presents an interesting combination of consumption and production of its content, embodied by their networked public.

It is interesting to explore the different ways gurus apply modern terminologies in relation to their stance on Hinduism and their position on the spectrum between religion and spirituality.⁶⁸ For some—such as Mata Amritanandamayi and Swami Prabhupada—it allows reinterpretation of Hindu concepts and practices, while for others—such as Maharishi and Sadhguru—it provides an avenue for a complete detachment from a notion of Hindu religiosity. The latter, however, can be seen as aligned with specific Hindu strands, such as Neo-Hinduism (referred to also as Neo-Vedanta). Scholars have identified this strand as the bedrock from which contemporary gurus have burgeoned. Formulated by Hindu intellectuals during the Bengal Renaissance, Neo-Hinduism highlights philosophical ideas from the Upanishads, especially those

⁶⁶ Srinivas, *Winged Faith*, 20.

⁶⁷ Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, 157.

⁶⁸ More on the shift from religion to spirituality, the creation of what we contemporary understand as spirituality, and the capitalist influences on this transition see Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 12-14; Jeremy R Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London: Routledge, 2014).

that deal with the shared essence of the ultimate reality and the self. One of the most prominent examples of this strand is the same Vivekananda who started the journey of Indian gurus to the west. Thus, there is an irony in gurus' resistance to being related to Hinduism, considering the shared aim of the Bengali reformers and modern gurus to create "a natural and universal. . . . 'philosophy' that cuts through geographic and ideological boundaries."⁶⁹ In an elaborated discussion on this issue, scholar of religion Amanda Huffer asks whether guru movements see this distance from traditional Hindu devotion as necessary to become marketable to a universal audience?⁷⁰ Although gurus' marketability is most likely part of the reason, I argue that Sadhguru's teachings and programs reveal more philosophical complexity in his refusal to use the term Hindu or be identified as a religious organization more broadly.

Isha Foundation claims to not promote any particular religion, while nevertheless showcasing a strong relationship with Hindu devotional practices, propagating yoga, meditation, and image worship, among others. Sadhguru integrates many Hindu concepts into his teaching, among which we can find *darshan*, *moksha* (liberation), and various deities, with a focus on *Shiva* as the Adiyogi.⁷¹ Isha's Yoga center in Coimbatore accommodates a temple complex with various consecrated spaces, including the Dhyanalinga as its focal point and the Linga Bhairavi temple. Those are not the popular temple structures and deities across India. Isha has its own vernacular expression and explanation of those sacred spaces. The Dhyanalinga, for example, is described as a meditative space, "an icon of singularity, bearing a message of universal welcome."⁷² However,

⁶⁹ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 20.

⁷⁰ Amanda J. Huffer, "Hinduism Without Religion: Amma's Movement in America," *CrossCurrents* 61, no. 3 (2011): 374-398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2011.00188.x>.

⁷¹ According to Sadhguru, Adiyogi is the way Shiva is known in the yogic culture; he is the first yogi, the originator of yoga, who brought its sciences to the world.

⁷² "Dhyanalinga Meditative Space," Isha Foundation, accessed on February 7, 2017, <http://www.ishafoundation.org/Isha-Yoga-Center/Dhyanalinga.isa>

it houses what looks like, and also termed as, a *lingam* (a symbol of Shiva). The space itself does not align with popular Hindu aesthetics, but people’s behavior inside feels very Hindu, from their movement inside to their offerings, the *diyas* (lamps) and flowers surrounding the image, and the *vibhūti* (ash) people put on their forehead at the end. Figure 13, taken from Sadguru’s blog post on how to create a domestic shrine, speaks for itself in demonstrating Isha’s relation to Hinduism. Why, then, is Isha not included as part of the Hindu web if their rituals, symbols, deities, and practices at large connect them to various networks in the web, sharing its ‘family resemblance’?



Figure 13: Creating Your Own Shrine at Home.⁷³

As discussed in the introduction, scholarship criticizes the idea of Hinduism as referring to a unified world religion, as well as the ability of the term to encompass the heterogenous communities it supposedly describes. In this study, I address Hinduism as wide web of diverse devotional networks, which are connected to each other through shared practices and ideas. Fascinatingly, Sadhguru’s issues with the idea of Hinduism resonate with this scholarly critique.

⁷³ Isha Foundation, “Creating Your Own Shrine at Home,” September 2, 2017, <https://isha.sadhguru.org/us/en/wisdom/article/creating-shrine-home>.

Sadhguru argues that Hindu is a geographical identity and, to some extent, a cultural one—not a religion. Only when other religions arrived at the sub-continent did Hindus try to organize themselves as a religion, but they did not succeed, since they could not be united under one belief system. The Hindu way of life is not a religion but a science of salvation, and god is only another device to attain liberation.⁷⁴ Sadhguru does not agree with the foreign imposition of the term religion on India’s cultural and devotional diversity. For that reason, he resists to use the term Hindu. It is not the term that he finds problematic, but what it came to mean. As a science of salvation, of which god is a mere device, he might have been willing to consider himself Hindu. But as it currently presumes to refer to a religious identity, he refuses.

This refusal comes from his essential rejection of the idea of religion. In his teachings, he often uses religion and the belief in god as counter examples to what he offers, sometimes to the degree of ridiculing both concepts. For him, the ultimate goal is raising human consciousness, guiding people to find higher dimensions of experience. The means to get there, and to walk on any spiritual path, is seeking. The idea of seeking is central to Hinduism as a science of salvation. When religion gets in the way, the process loses its potency. “One can seek only when one does not know. If he assumes that the end is God . . . there is no seeking.”⁷⁵ Religion gives readymade answers, clouding the whole idea of not knowing where the seeking will lead you. Thus, knowing through experience, through seeking, cannot be accomplished under a religious structure. Sadhguru does not want to give answers; he wants to make his followers look for them, to seek them and know them through their own experience. That is for him the difference between knowing and believing. I argue that through rebranding Hindu-based practices as a technology,

⁷⁴ Isha Foundation, “Is Isha a Hindu Religion? Sadhguru,” May 13, 2010, YouTube video, 6:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG2SRxKW3ko>.

⁷⁵ “Seeking,” Isha Foundation, accessed May 5, 2018. <http://isha.sadhguru.org/seeking/>.

Sadhguru makes the concept of religious belief redundant. One does not have to believe in technology; it simply works. This idea allows him to utilize devotional practices and concepts in what he sees as their original meaning—as devices for salvation, as means to facilitate seeking and truly know. The next section elaborates on his signature program, which attempts to achieve this aim. But to what degree does he succeed in distancing himself from the idea of Hinduism as a religion? Does he manage to convince people to not believe in him or treat him devotionally? Moreover, although Sadhguru does not want to be considered as Hindu, I argue that his adoption of digital and social media is still a part of the digital Hindu web this project sketches, as he manages to digitally translate practices and concepts that are inherently part of this grid. Also, a significant part of his public are Hindu, especially the visitors of Isha’s temple complex in Coimbatore, bringing with them devotional behavior with which they respond to him, also connecting him to these networks. As an authority, Sadhguru validates digital technologies for devotional use, situating himself—even if unwittingly—in digital Hinduism’s web.

4.3 Inner Engineering

Inner Engineering is designed as an intensive introductory program, offering yogic tools for inner well-being.⁷⁶ This program is intended for anyone who wishes to live a more joyful, blissful, and stress-free life. The program is described by the foundation as “a comprehensive system addressing every aspect of human well-being, from body, mind and emotion to the fundamental life energy within us.”⁷⁷ It promotes mental clarity and emotional balance, increases energy levels, reduces stress, generates inner peace, enhances focus, raises productivity, and

⁷⁶ Sadhguru posits yoga as a complete science. This form of yoga is not about physical postures, as the Western gym-goer understands it. It is about breathing, meditation, perception, experience, and the divine. More on yoga as science see Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, eds., *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷⁷ “Isha: An Introduction,” 15

improves social relationships.⁷⁸ According to the foundation, “[o]ver two million people have completed the Inner Engineering program worldwide and have reported remarkable results.”⁷⁹ In addition to its advertised benefits and success, the program’s popularity can also be explained through the various forms and locations in which it is imparted. Inner Engineering is offered in three versions: online, in person completion, and in person total. The online version is structured as seven 90-minute sessions that mostly show videos of Sadhguru—probably from in-person programs he previously conducted—including guided meditations. The online program is available in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian. Anyone can participate in this program, no prerequisite is required, and one can take it in her own space, on her own time, and at her own pace. The only component left out of the online version is the Shambhavi Mahamudra Kriya, which is a 21-minute practice that can only be imparted in person. With the prerequisite of completing the online program, one can learn the Shambhavi Mahamudra through one of the many two-days-long Inner Engineering Completion programs offered by the foundation in multiple cities across the world. The third option is to take the Inner Engineering Total, which is a four-day in-person residential program. This option includes all aspects of Inner Engineering and is being offered in cities worldwide and at the Isha centers in Tamil Nadu and Tennessee. The online version, therefore, is not the only one to be offered globally, explaining the phenomenal amount of people who have taken the program in one way or another.

As a newcomer to the movement, the Inner Engineering program was the perfect entry for me to explore Sadhguru’s message. Having taken the online version, I attended the completion program in Tampa. Excitement and anxiety accompanied me the entire morning

⁷⁸ “Isha: An Introduction,” 33.

⁷⁹ “Isha: An Introduction,” 15. However, this number might be outdated as it does not match Sadhguru’s more recent statement that the foundation has over 7 million volunteers, and in order to volunteer, one must complete the program.

before the program started. I was nervous that my skeptic researcher tendencies would block my ability to understand the ways of knowing Sadhguru promotes—to be a seeker who knows through experience. The program is designed for self-transformation; it is a journey that participants should take on their own. Trying to reconcile my role as a researcher with the reality of being part of Sadhguru’s public—at least at that moment—I attempt to convey the program’s core ideas how I experienced them. I know that this sounds obvious; the only way I can convey something is through my experience. Nonetheless, as experience is crucial to Sadhguru’s teachings, being conscious of this obvious fact is important. Thus, I do not impart the entire technology here. Understanding the main aspects of the teaching is enough to examine the ways the medium through which it is being communicated relates to and supports it.

Although the program’s teachings risk sounding cliché, there was nothing cliché in its experience. Sadhguru managed to communicate these spiritual ideas in a very casual manner, full of humor and charisma. His witty personality shines in every node—whether it is a YouTube video or a Guru *Darshan*. In both the online and in-person programs, he created an intriguing mix of relatable daily life anecdotes, stories and jokes, cultural and religious Indian references, history, and a lot of modern science. Throughout the program, Sadhguru emphasized that this is not his ideology or ideas; it is simply how life works. The rhetoric of scientific justifications supports this argument. He even said it himself, explaining his use of science as an attempt to remain logical in order for his audience to accept what he is saying. “I am speaking logically to you because right now, that is the only thing you can understand.”⁸⁰ Besides making it easier for me to digest, his use of science also justifies his main idea—we need to engineer our inner selves

⁸⁰ “The Joy of Action – Sadhguru on Why He Does What He Does,” Isha Foundation, January 10, 2017, <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/sadhguru/masters-words/joy-of-action-sadhguru/>.

like we learned how to engineer the external world. Although we engineered the world to be materially very comfortable, we only experience more distress. In order to reengineer ourselves, we need to understand the material with which we work: our mind, bodies, and perception. Yoga and meditation are the tools to enhance our perception, aligning the mind with the way body and life function to allow us to realize our divine potential. When speaking of our divine potential, Sadhguru is not speaking of the supernatural. The opposite is true. He asserts that our divine potential is our nature that we have yet to realize. Our divine potential manifests in our ability to become limitless, to be one with creation. His goal is to help raise human consciousness, clearing the space for the divine that is waiting within human beings to allow them to live up to their true nature. The physical will always come with boundaries, and we will be divided by nation and religions. Our energetic spiritual life though is one; we are not separate but are part of the same thing. Here he exhibits a connection to Neo-Vedantic ideas that would be hard to deny.

These core ideas begin to explain the manner in which digitally networked media correlates with and intensifies Sadhguru's message. Digital networks are essentially global and limitless, connecting us to each other; the various digital platforms Sadhguru and Isha utilize are globally accessible (to people with internet connection and/or smartphone), enhancing the idea that our energetic life is limitless and is not divided by any identification mechanism. Moreover, these platforms—such as social media accounts and smartphone apps—are, in essence, meant for individual use. Contrary to other forms of media like television or cinema, which are meant to be consumed en masse, digital media is mostly designed for personal use. Similar to the tools Sadhguru offers, the technology is the same, but each user utilizes it in their own way. Thus, I argue that Sadhguru's message is not transformed but accentuated with the extension of his presence on digitally networked media. But how does this extension affect the guru-disciple

relationship? Does the digital presence of Sadhguru in followers' digital devices and platforms facilitate the creation of an existentially intimate bond with him or change it to something else?

4.3.1 Virtual Satsang:⁸¹ When Guruship Migrates Online

In June 12, 2011, an announcement of the new online program was circulated among Isha volunteers in Singapore, declaring the newest way to experience Sadhguru and his technologies. Waghorne reports that Isha volunteers were split in their response to this announcement: some expressed concerns about this new manifestation of the program and some said they tried it and “had felt no difference.”⁸² Waghorne questions this shift in regard to Isha's concern with secrecy, the potential loss of community, and the transformation of the nature of the program. “Gone are the many rules about not eating three hours before the course, sitting without a break for over three hours or asking questions and having group discussions. Instead, as one online participant told me, ‘It's like hosting Sadhguru in your own home. He is right there talking to you.’”⁸³

The migration of the program to the internet transforms the level and means of supervision Isha has over participants. In Isha's residential programs, the foundation controls the environment and structure of the program: they determine what and when people eat, the manner in which people sit through the sessions, when they get breaks and for how long, etc. When practiced on the internet, the learning turns into a private event and its terms of execution are mostly under the control of the participant. Isha can only guide the participants on the preferable way to experience the program, but they cannot enforce it. The power relations inherent in the

⁸¹ Community of followers sitting together to listen to a guru or a teaching. Literally means company of the wise.

⁸² Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Engineering an Artful Practice: On Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Yoga and Sri Sri Ravishankar's Art of Living," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, eds. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University Press: 2013), 299.

⁸³ Waghorne, "Engineering an Artful Practice," 300.

guru–disciple relationship shift drastically in the online version. Nonetheless, they do exercise some technological and traditional means to enact a certain level of authority.

Each class starts with guidelines for watching the video that will set optimal conditions to take the program: participants should take a cold shower before they sit for the class, be on an empty stomach, dedicate the time of the class only to this purpose, find a quiet place with no distractions, sit on the floor in a yogic seating posture, and avoid taking breaks. Isha asserts that one should keep these conditions in order to be in an ideal state of receptivity and make the most out of the program. Also, these conditions attempt to imitate the environment and guidelines Isha sets for the in-person versions of the program. Although they cannot control the ways people will take the program de facto, they use their authority to encourage people to act as similarly as possible to the way they would have in Isha’s centers. The only means they have to accomplish it is the technology itself. For example, to encourage participants’ utmost alertness, the video does not include a time bar. One cannot know how much time has passed and cannot fast forward or rewind. The only option available to control the video is a 30-second rewind button in case one missed the last sentence. Also, after every class, participants should answer an awareness exercise. This exercise is made up of two to three questions—with a set minimum of characters or sentences—about the class’s content and its application in the participant’s daily life. Only after answering them does the next class become available to watch.

The online program also attempts to imitate the in-person version by technologically producing a sense of community. As the videos are taken from programs Sadhguru had previously conducted, we can see and hear some of the participants in the videos. Each class begins with an invocation, which appears on a slide. The slide is accompanied by the voices of people repeating the invocation after Sadhguru, recreating the original experience of *satsang* as a

community of followers sitting together to listen to a guru or a teaching. This imitation of an experience of *satsang* can be understood as remediating the movement's embodied practices, like those I witnessed at Isha's center in Coimbatore. Singing the invocation 'together' with other followers invokes Isha's shared aesthetic formation, of which the online participant can imagine herself as an equal member. Nonetheless, hosting the guru in the participants' private space and on their personal devices creates a unique experience of and relationship to him. As I show below, some participants even prefer the online experience of the guru to the in-person one thanks to the greater freedom it allows and the feeling of a one-on-one encounter it produces.

4.3.2 From the Computer Screen to Tampa Conventions Center

Arriving at the Tampa hotel, I immediately felt as if I was there for a professional conference. The hotel was adjunct and connected by a bridge to the huge conventions center, where the program took place. Isha got a discounted rate at the hotel for the program participants. As I usually do at conferences, I kept looking around for conference swag to recognize potential participants. Yoga mats and meditation pillows were the main identifying feature in this case. While checking into the program, each participant had to fill in and sign a registration form. This document also included a statement that I would not communicate the *content* of the program to anyone, directly or indirectly. I realized I could not write about the details of the content, which is the Shambhavi Mahamudra Kriya, more than what is available online. On Isha's website, the practice is described as "a simple 21-minute practice . . . a powerful and purifying energy process. This practice incorporates the breath, giving access to your deepest life energies and making them vibrantly alive!"⁸⁴ This is in fact the initiation ceremony of the disciple. This short description is

⁸⁴ "Inner Engineering Completion," Isha Foundation, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.innerengineering.com/ieo-new/completion/>.

enough to support the discussion below. However, the structure of the event, general atmosphere, and my informal conversations with participants, are very relevant, all of which are not included in what the agreement prohibits.

This confidentiality agreement provides insight into Isha's complex nature. Waghorne correlates this kind of agreement with the business model of trade secrets. She identifies the prevalence of similar agreements in various guru-led movements, especially in regard to the unique *kriya* (practice) they impart to their followers. "Such nondisclosure agreements are common in business where processes for the production of products are kept as trade secrets rather than as patents, which would protect the product or processes from replication but nonetheless render them public information."⁸⁵ For spiritual movements, this model allows for global exposure while maintaining the requirement to come to the guru to be initiated into the practice. However, this is not entirely drawn from the professional realm. Waghorne maintains that world traditions are always composed of both the revealed and the hidden. Traditionally, the hidden esoteric truths are only available to those with special access. Hinduism Scholar Douglas R. Brooks emphasizes that it is common for Hindu traditions to include secret and initiated knowledge to the degree that their materials "are near unintelligible without the input of oral traditionalists,"⁸⁶ or in our case, the guru. These days, gurus negotiate this segregation of knowledge, offering traditional esoteric knowledge to the masses. Reframing traditional secrecy in the trade-secret paradigm, Isha and other guru-led movements massify their teachings with strategies once used to maintain an aura of exclusivity.

⁸⁵ Waghorne, "Engineering an Artful Practice," 290.

⁸⁶ Douglas R. Brooks, "Taking Sides and Opening Doors: Authority and Integrity in the Academy's Hinduism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2000): 819.

Conducted by Sadhguru himself as part of his 2017 North American tour⁸⁷—and heavily promoted in all Isha channels—the in-person completion program in Tampa drew around 1,500 participants. Besides the natural continuation of my Isha journey, my main objective attending this program was to understand the differences between experiencing the guru digitally and in-person. After I had arrived, however, I realized that the comparative element of this experience has more levels. Everything about it felt strikingly different from the event I attended in Coimbatore. The image of Sadhguru that emerged from the format, context, and audience had shifted from a sort of local divine to a spiritual celebrity, from a religious ritual to a spiritual empowerment workshop. The striking difference in the way the audience welcomed Sadhguru’s entrance exemplifies this point. In Coimbatore, everybody sang devotional songs in preparation for Sadhguru, responding emotionally and physically once he arrived. In Tampa, nothing really preceded the guru’s entrance or indicated that it was about to happen. Once Sadhguru appeared on the stage, the entire crowd stood up, as if a judge just entered a courtroom. There was something formal about it. In contrast to the reverence and devotional love exemplified by the audience in Coimbatore, the response in Tampa felt impassive. As far as I could tell, around 60–70 percent of the audience were from Indian origin. I would expect them to regard the guru with a reverence similar to what I witnessed in Coimbatore. However, demographics were only one fraction of the total apparatus determining the experience of the event. This solemn reaction changed throughout the duration of the program in specific, well-staged moments, but it never got to the same burst of devotional fervor I witnessed in the Indian center. When the Guru *Darshan* in Coimbatore ended, the crowd accompanied the guru’s exit with singing and dancing, while hurrying up to get some of the sacred ash from the stage. In a sharp contrast, the first day of the

⁸⁷ Sadhguru also conducted programs in California and Vancouver as part of this tour.

Tampa program ended with people exiting while the guru was still talking. Sadhguru had to ask people to wait for him to finish his explanations of the next day.

With plenty of volunteers facilitating the Tampa program, the Isha mechanism was at its best; everything worked smoothly, and the huge amount of people managed to move between sessions and spaces in a smooth and timely manner. The main hall switched its look between sessions: rows of chairs for a lecture-style session and only carpets for a practical session. At the back end of the hall was the merchandise area. Similar to a rock concert or a Disney show, Isha offered various kinds of branded accessories for sale, such as clothes, yoga and meditation accessories, books, and Sadhguru images. On the opposite side of the hall, a black stage was set with two big screens on each side. These were necessary due to the amount of people; it was very hard to see Sadhguru directly, even if you managed to find a good place in the middle.⁸⁸ The hall was divided in two by a heightened runway that extended from the center of the stage. At specific times during the program, this runway served to allow Sadhguru to come toward the audience to give flowers, blessings, and even dance with the crowd (figure 14 shows a similar setting).

⁸⁸ The front rows were reserved to Premier and Preferred tickets that were more expensive. Premier sitting also received meditation sits and pillows, similar to the perks at the VIP area in rock concerts.



Figure 14: Inner Engineering program with Sadhguru.⁸⁹

Material religion scholar David Morgan's discussion of focal objects and their role in sacred ecologies can illuminate the differences between my experiences in Coimbatore and Tampa. Morgan suggests studying religious images within the ecologies that endow them with agency. As the focal objects of these networks, they participate in the creation of the assemblages that construct and maintain them as sacred. To understand the production of sacrality, one should study the intricate relations of human and nonhuman actors under specific social forces and historical nuances. This understanding emphasizes the sacred as a category of experience.⁹⁰ Although Morgan mainly refers to material objects, I argue that his theoretical guidelines apply also to the network taking shape around Sadhguru. For Morgan, objects hold agency; objects exert power and respond. Focal objects are even more potent and their centrality in the ecology is crucial in understanding their power.⁹¹ Exploring the Isha web from Morgan's point of view,

⁸⁹ "Inner Engineering with Sadhguru," Isha Foundation, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.innerengineering.com/SadhguruLive/>.

⁹⁰ David Morgan, "The Ecology of Images: Seeing and the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (2014): 83–105.

⁹¹ Morgan, "The Ecology of Images," 95.

Sadhguru clearly manifests as its focal node although obviously not an object. His teachings, quotes, actions, voice, videos, and images stand at the center of it all. At times, the guru appears as flesh and blood, but mostly he manifests in mediated forms. Embodying various distinct nodes, Sadhguru has various ways of regarding and responding to the nodes surrounding him. The Isha web is dynamic; at every part of it, a different apparatus manifests, shaping the image of its focal node. While Sadhguru as the focal node remains the same—with his wit, lofty pragmatism, and engaging charisma—the specific links and nodes at every fragment of the web generate a distinct aura around him. What Sadhguru is at any given moment for a specific person is determined greatly by the participant, the location, and nature of the event, as well as the way it is orchestrated by Isha, among many other factors. Looking at the Guru *Darshan* and the Tampa completion program as two different apparatuses of a larger web, we can better understand the two distinct ways of experiencing the guru that each of them generated in me.

The other dimension of comparison was between experiencing Sadhguru online and in-person. Seeing Sadhguru on the Tampa stage, it was as if he just stepped out of the various screens he previously inhabited. For most people in the crowd, this was probably the first time encountering the guru outside the digital realm; besides watching the online program, participants must have seen some of the many videos of the guru on YouTube or Isha's websites, his images on the many ads and reminders leading up to this program, and so forth. Acknowledging this transition from online to in-person experience, Sadhguru opened the program by clarifying the different rules for the next two days. These are not the rules of the online program, which each participant could have set for herself. And, indeed, there were clear dissimilarities, for example, in the practice, level of commitment, and the sources of discipline. The differences were mostly expected, but the similarities were what struck me most. Regardless of the difference in content—

teaching the physical practice—the in-person version required more commitment and less self-discipline, as Sadhguru himself stated. Participants were committed to eat, listen, and sit as and for how long as they were told. Not only the commitment was greater; it was also being enforced. During the program, Isha had dedicated volunteers overseeing the participants' discipline. Ushers were spread out around the hall and their main visible responsibility was to keep people alert and focused, including preventing people from going outside in the middle of the program, waking up people who had fallen asleep, and making sure people sat how they were instructed. In a way, the ushers did the work of the playback limitations of the online version.

As discussed earlier, when taking the program online, one could follow the instructions to various levels or not at all. The internet gives the participant the freedom to receive the program as she wishes, as it is a private affair between her and the screen. As I expected from my own experience, all the participants I talked to did not follow the online instructions. This does not mean they were not committed to their spiritual journey, or else they would probably not end in the completion program. Most people practiced it at their own pace. People reported sitting comfortably on their sofa or bed, taking breaks, eating while watching, and one couple even told me they were listening to the last few lessons in the car on their way to Tampa. To my surprise, some people expressed a greater satisfaction from the online version as a result of the freedom it allowed, as this participant articulated in an informal conversation: "I cannot sit like this for so long, I feel it was better online, one on one, sitting how I want, I was way less restless." Second, the in-person setting established greater accountability to and a sense of the community. Being part of such a huge group allowed people to experience the program and the guru through other people's eyes and reactions. Besides casual conversations during breaks, the simple act of listening and practicing together enabled an experience that is absent in the online version. As I

showed, the online version also attempted to create Meyer's aesthetic formations. Nonetheless, the notion of the group is enhanced when following the same practices with another 1,500 people.

The third difference is the most surprising. My expectation was that an in-person experience of Sadhguru, being in his direct presence, would be much more powerful than watching a video of him. And indeed that was true to some degree, especially during the parts when Sadhguru walked out on the runway to bless, give flowers, and dance with the participants. The dancing parts were especially uplifting, as there is something unique about watching this charismatic figure enact his declared playfulness and dance beside 1,500 members of his public. Even though I am not a particularly engaged member of this public—which, until this event, was mostly digitally networked to one another and to the guru—dancing together was powerful. Nevertheless, while teaching from his seat on the stage, most participants could see him only through the big screens on the side, creating an experience akin to watching his videos. Parts of the program were even imparted by videos of the guru, although he was in the vicinity. As one participant remarked, “I still feel like I'm online, watching a screen. I know he is there but he is so small.” Sadhguru's presence there makes a big difference in the overall experience, similar to the way *darshan* in the temple creates a different encounter than online *darshan*, even though they are both efficient. The element of being part of a huge audience, embodying a public which was previously mainly networked, strengthens the difference in experiencing the guru. Also, It is easier to understand how an in-person encounter with the guru strengthens his ability to be with his followers in *all that they are*. However, it seems that, for participants, this massive program contested this existential intimacy even more than the online setting. Although being in the presence of the guru in Tampa, many participants felt that hosting the guru in their private space, through their personal devices, was more effective in producing an intimate relationship with

him. The online program, imitating a one-on-one encounter, is one example of the many digital strategies Isha employs to produce a sense of intimacy with the guru, recreating the intimate guru–disciple relationship. In the next two sections, I illuminate these strategies and their dependence on contemporary digital culture.

4.4 Intimacy 2.0

Contemporary media culture is characterized by the massive penetration and almost inescapability of digital platforms and devices. No one can deny that, nowadays, digital media plays an integral role in their users' lives. This is especially true for Sadhguru's urban and professional audience. Marshall McLuhan argued long ago that media function as prostheses.⁹² This statement could not be truer today, when we are constantly in arm's reach of our smartphones—or even wear smartwatches around our wrist—creating an intimate bodily connection with the digital. But this intimate connection goes way beyond our bodily engagement; it is the content, activities, and time that we spend on digital platforms and devices that matters for the creation of close relationships with and through digitally networked media. Digital media scholar Larissa Hjorth explains that, in the participatory culture of Web 2.0, social media is a common and prevalent method for self-representation. The important thing to understand about social media is that it “is less about technologies and more about contemporary engagement with technocultures—that is, localized notions of community, agency, engagement, expression, and identity.”⁹³ Her notion of technocultures is of utmost importance, echoing what I refer to as media culture or media protocols. Users' digital engagement, identity, and intimacies should be understood through what they do with these technologies and the role they take in their

⁹² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁹³ Hjorth, “Web U2,” 118.

lives. One of the examples Hjorth uses is the metamorphosis of the ‘personal.’ Originally referring to a space between people, the term is now used to describe technologies.⁹⁴

Web 2.0’s technoculture strengthen the now prevalent view that these virtual settings are in no way less real, but are part of users’ everyday existence, and that offline and online spaces are simply different aspects of it. Digital networks part of our existence such that they are perceived by scholarship to be our immediate surroundings; their encompassing nature shapes the way we know and interact with our social circles, as we share and conduct our most intimate relationships and moments over social media. Through social media, users develop a feeling of knowing others through ‘ambient awareness.’ These ways of knowing are ambient as they are produced by the “background presence of ubiquitous media environments”⁹⁵ and our peripheral awareness of them. This awareness also results in a unique kind of co-presence. Though all communication technologies strive to create a sense of co-presence from a distance—like letters and telephones—contemporary digitally networked media create an ‘ambient co-presence’ as “the peripheral, yet intense awareness of distant others made possible through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments.”⁹⁶ Digital Media scholars Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe focus on ‘visual co-presence’ produced by sharing photos from handheld devices between couples. This kind of co-presence is “keyed to the personal, pervasive, and intimate nature of social connections via handheld devices,”⁹⁷ which today is greatly enhanced by image-sharing platforms like Instagram and the pervasiveness of smartphones. Media sociologist Ichiyo Habuchi expands this co-presence with the idea of the telecocoon as a “zone of intimacy in which people can

⁹⁴ Larissa Hjorth, "Photo Shopping: A Snapshot on Camera Phone Practices in an Age of Web 2.0." *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22, no. 3 (2009): 158.

⁹⁵ Mirca Madianou, "Ambient Co-Presence: Transnational Family Practices in Polymedia Environments." *Global Networks* 16, no. 2 (2016): 183.

⁹⁶ Madianou, "Ambient Co-Presence."

⁹⁷ Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe, "Intimate Visual Co-Presence," in *2005 Ubiquitous Computing Conference*. 2005.

continuously maintain their relationships with others who they have already encountered without being restricted by geography and time.”⁹⁸

By the term Intimacy 2.0⁹⁹, I attempt to describe the ways Web 2.0 and its ambient qualities brings new ways of forming intimate relationships. I then use it to illuminate the spiritual and existential intimacy of the guru–disciple relationship as produced by Sadhguru’s mediated networks. I do not attempt to portray a different kind of intimacy but new methods of its production and maintenance, which are determined by contemporary circumstances. Media scholar Shaka McGlotten refers to screen-mediated intimacies as “virtual intimacies,” but their virtual aspect does not make them less real.¹⁰⁰ Instead of looking at these intimacies as of lower quality, they allow us to question the nature of intimacy itself. Although there is not one definition of the term, intimacy is commonly understood to be founded on self-disclosure and “familiarity resulting from close association.”¹⁰¹ The question is whether this close association can be produced in our current networked technocultures, and if this is at all what intimacy is about in these spaces. As social media profiles revolve around self-disclosure of both public and personal aspects of life, its encompassing nature can lead to a feeling of closeness that is referred to as “ambient intimacy.” This kind of intimacy can occur in mediated relationships with a stranger or a celebrity, but it can also assist in maintaining existing relationships,¹⁰² like in the case of the telecocoon. Although based on the notion of “ambient intimacy,” intimacy 2.0 is

⁹⁸ Ichiyo Habuchi, “Accelerating Reflexivity,” in *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese life*, eds. Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsud (Cambridge: MIT press, 2005), 167.

⁹⁹ Computer scientist Kieron O’Hara uses this term slightly different, referring to the loss of privacy that comes with contemporary social media use culture. Kieron O’Hara, “Intimacy 2.0: Privacy Rights and Privacy Responsibilities on the World Wide Web,” *Web Science Conference 2010*.

¹⁰⁰ Shaka McGlotten, “Virtual Intimacies: Love, Addiction, and Identity @The Matrix,” in *Queer Online: Media Technology & Sexuality*, eds. Kate O’Riordan and David J. Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 125-26.

¹⁰¹ Lynn Jamieson, “Intimacy,” In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, G. Ritzer, ed., 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosi071>.

¹⁰² Ruoyun Lin, Ana Levordashka, and Sonja Utz, “Ambient Intimacy on Twitter,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 10, no. 1 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2016-1-6>

slightly different as it takes into account the interactive and participatory elements of the medium and its culture—in other words, as it is based on networked publics’ engagement, expression, and identity formed through Web 2.0. The feeling of ambient co-presence can lead to that sense of closeness that is seen as the basis of intimacy. Nonetheless, in the guru–disciple relationship, the intimacy is not necessarily based on co-presence or on self-disclosure, at least not in the informative way. By entering into a relationship with a guru, the disciple does not necessarily disclose much about herself, but she does agree to surrender the self. With no need of informative disclosure, the disciple is willing to give herself to the hands of the guru and his teachings, at least in a sense of spiritual openness to the process. This openness is what allows the guru to eventually be with her in all that she is, to form this existential intimacy with her. So the sense of closeness in this kind of intimacy is established through an agreement to be open to the process, to give oneself to it. It is easier to detect this kind of surrender in Isha’s volunteering structure, as well as through daily practice of the initiating *kriya*. The question is whether this spiritual surrender can be established via attention to the various Web 2.0 platforms Isha utilizes and in what manner Sadhguru accesses it.

By showing the digital ways in which Isha generates ambient co-presence and awareness of Sadhguru, producing the intimate sphere of the telecocoon, I argue that Isha manages to establish a sense of closeness and intimacy with the guru even in the segments of its public that mostly participate through attention via digital networks. The guru’s videos in social media and in Isha’s programs assume a special role in this attempt, producing the sense of a one-on-one relationship with the guru. The guru’s massive digital presence in his public’s lives positions him in a new mode of intimacy with his followers, which is very different from the tradition but not necessarily less intimate or real in the context of digitally networked media technoculture.

4.5 Isha's Mediated Web

On February 24, 2017, the night of *Mahashivaratri* (Hindu festival in honor of lord Shiva), Isha organized a mega event for the consecration of a 112-foot face of Adiyogi in their Coimbatore center. The nightlong festival included many performances and esteemed guests, including India's prime minister Narendra Modi, who unveiled the statue. Isha offered live streaming of the festival, as they usually do during special events and programs, enabling their entire networked public to be digitally co-present. In addition, they utilized their public as social media promoters. On the official page of the event, Isha encouraged members to sign up to an application called Thunderclap through their Facebook or Twitter accounts, with this prompt: "Once you sign up, Thunderclap will automatically post a message on your Facebook wall or tweet on Feb 24. This simultaneous posting from thousands of users will create a wave of attention, helping Adiyogi and Sadhguru trend on social media."¹⁰³ In addition to the technological ability to be digitally present at the celebrations, Isha's networked public also took part in promoting them. This event points to another kind of participation available to Isha's networked publics; In between mere attention and full-time volunteering, Isha's public engages with the public image of the movement through its Web 2.0 participatory capabilities. Isha's networked public post about and share the foundation's activities and discourse on their social media, using Isha's many active hashtags to participate in "Isha's trend" on social networks. This kind of engagement implies a new version of surrender Sadhguru's disciples embody. In the case of *Mahashivaratri*, followers submit their social media profiles to the Thunderclap application,

¹⁰³ "Thunderclap," Isha Foundation, accessed October 2, 2017, <http://isha.sadhguru.org/mahashivaratri/celebrations-2017/social-media/thunderclap/>.

which will post in their name. Surrendering one's social media profiles can be seen as a contemporary version of the guru–disciple relationship's required surrender of the self.

The *Mahashivaratri* is only one example of a highly mediated node in Isha's web, depicting both Isha's mastery of the technoculture in which they operate and the participatory possibilities of Isha's networked public. Isha's mediated web can be difficult to track and accurately depict; it is remarkably rich, constantly updated, and the digital sphere in which it is nestled is infinite. Isha has numerous websites, ranging from sites devoted to the guru or particular programs to online shopping sites, blogs, regional sites for specific countries, and so on. The same goes for smartphone apps; Isha has several apps on both Android and iOS markets, including a general app on Sadhguru, yoga and meditation apps, Isha chants, and a dedicated app for Sadhguru's mystic quotes. These apps provide smartphone users interminable access to the guru's wisdom and technologies on their own personal devices. Isha even recently released an official Alexa (a virtual assistant developed by Amazon) skill, with which one can use voice command to access Sadhguru's talks and practices (figure 15). From guided meditation and yoga to videos of the guru, Sadhguru's technologies are easily accessible to his networked public, on their most intimate and personal devices.

Isha's mailing lists and many social media profiles also play a major part in establishing this new kind of connection to the guru. Once registered at one of Isha's websites or to a specific program, followers start receiving daily mails with quotes of the guru, called "Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote." These emails are sent every day at the same time and include a Sadhguru quote, image, and at times promotion for one of Isha's programs. The quotes cover every aspect of the guru's teachings, connecting his wisdom to current events, holidays, Isha's initiatives, and everyday life. In lieu of the traditional cohabitation with the guru, Isha meditators

wake up to his image and teachings in their digital habitat—their personal inbox—fostering a digital co-presence with him. One can get these quotes also through other platforms like text messages, voice mail, or the different WhatsApp groups. Sadhguru makes himself available to his followers by various means: logical, mystical, experiential, and digital.

“Receive a daily message from Sadhguru by sms, voice mail or email. Deeply insightful, devastatingly logical and unfailingly witty, you can make use of a free subscription today. ‘For all who are willing, I am available to you in ways beyond your logical understanding.’ — Sadhguru.”¹⁰⁴

This digital availability can be seen as one of the ways in which the guru becomes part of his disciples’ existence, which is constantly surrounded by digitally networked media, in the new intimate space of the telecocoon.



Figure 15: Ish'a Instagram post, promoting their new Alexa skill.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ “Subscribe to Sadhguru’s Daily Message,” Isha Foundation, September 11, 2012, <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/inside-isha/announcements/sadhgurus-message-on-your-mobile/>.

¹⁰⁵ Isha Foundation (@isha.foundation), “We are happy to announce the launch of Sadhguru’s official Alexa Skill,” Instagram photo, June 16, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BkHEoOzlOU2/>.

As Copeman and Ikegame suggest, “Cautious manipulation of media forms makes it possible to have an intimate one-on-one relationship with a guru who might otherwise seem distant and inaccessible.”¹⁰⁶ Making himself available to his followers, Sadhguru masters the various social media platforms. Whether it is Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, SoundCloud, Pinterest, or YouTube, Sadhguru and Isha are there and posting, always utilizing the most current features of the networks. For example, in their latest highly mediated initiative, Rally for Rivers, Sadhguru’s Instagram account posted around 20 images a day, and the related hashtags were used massively by the Isha networked public (figure 16), connecting them to Isha and to one another. In this way, Isha generates the same ambient awareness and co-presence its followers are familiar with from their other social relationships, as well as extending the understanding of self-surrender to the guru. Members can be in constant connection with the guru, his activities, teachings, and whereabouts as part of the background presence of these media environments in their lives. Members can choose the preferred social network on which to be in constant touch with the guru.¹⁰⁷ They do not necessarily need to actively look for it, since it is already there in their peripheral awareness. Through this constant sharing, as well as the various web streams, Isha’s networked public participates in the events. As media scholar Negar Mottahedeh explains, social media connects the corporeal senses with a communal sensorium which is shared by globally dispersed participants.¹⁰⁸ Although this utilization of social media does not exactly count for self-disclosure, it is possible to say that Sadhguru puts himself and his ideas out there for his followers to devour as part of their online existence.

¹⁰⁶ Copeman and Ikegame, “Guru Logics,” 311.

¹⁰⁷ As each follower regularly uses different platforms, the number of followers Sadhguru and Isha have in each platform varies. For illustration, on October 1, 2018 Sadhguru had 4 million followers on Facebook, almost 2 million on Twitter, and a bit more than half a million on Instagram.

¹⁰⁸ Negar Mottahedeh, *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Namaste @SadhguruJV
#RallyForRivers #StandWithRivers
#saverivers #selfiewithriver
#Tungabhadra



Figure 16: Sadhguru's repost of followers' #selfiewithriver.¹⁰⁹

Another way to think of Isha's maintenance of these traditional bindings is through Walter Benjamin's discussion of the mechanical reproduction of aura and the idea of 'close distance.' In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin argues that our modes of perception change with technological progress. Reading Benjamin's second version of his famous essay (as opposed to the common reading of the third version as published in *Illuminations*¹¹⁰), I deviate from the popular understanding of his argument. While many take Benjamin to be saying that the artwork's aura declines with mechanical reproduction, I believe the second version clarifies his emphasis on the shifts in the aura's modes of production. Mechanical reproduction brought the work of art closer

¹⁰⁹ Sadhguru (@sadhguru), "#StandWithRivers #selfiewithrivers #selfie #saveRivers #savefarmers," Instagram photo, September 30, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZsJvfSnk5T>.

¹¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 217–51.

to the audience through the copy, changing the ways art's aura is produced according to the shift in our ways of perception. The aura emerges now from a different experience, which is based on the copy and not on the distance from the original. This experience of the aura is enabled by the dominant media that shapes our sensorium.¹¹¹ Following Benjamin, cultural studies scholar Sudeep Dasgupta argues that mechanical reproduction does not wither the aura but changes its character "given its displacement from the time and space of tradition in ritual and religion to the mobile and fragmented temporality and spatiality of modern experience."¹¹² In relation to guru's aura, Copeman and Ikegame contend that globalized movements succeed in maintaining the guru's singularity while making his or her teachings and messages reproducible and easily available for consumption.¹¹³ They provide a fascinating example of Amma's dolls, containing a piece of cloth previously worn by Amma, which her followers regard as enabling them to carry Amma's sacred presence wherever they go:

The Amma doll, which is simultaneously unique and one of thousands, connects each devotee to Amma's body and ensures the presence of the singular body of Amma even at a distance. The Amma doll seems not to dilute her aura but to reactivate it at home. . . . Technologies of mechanical reproduction thus seem less to have undermined the authority of gurus than to have successfully amplified it while creating *scattered but connected spaces* of the faithful.¹¹⁴

Copeman and Ikegame utilize anthropologist William Mazzarella's notion of "close distance" as the carefully curated tension between an approachable, tactile presence and awe-inspiring auratic distance, which produces the authority of modern public figures.¹¹⁵ This is easily applicable to Sadhguru's online presence. Similarly to Amma's dolls, the numerous digital

¹¹¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)."

¹¹² Sudeep Dasgupta, "Gods in the Sacred Marketplace: Hindu Nationalism and the Return of The Aura in the Public Sphere," in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, eds. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 256.

¹¹³ Copeman and Ikegame, "Guru Logics," 313.

¹¹⁴ Copeman and Ikegame, "Guru Logics," 314. Italics added.

¹¹⁵ William Mazzarella, "Internet X-ray: E-governance, Transparency, and the Politics of Immediation in India." *Public Culture* 18, no. 3 (2006): 495-6.

manifestations of the guru reactivate Sadhguru's aura in the meditator's digital habitats, ensuring the co-presence of Sadhguru in one's everyday life, even at a distance. However, digitally networked media enables this reactivation of the aura in a different manner than the dolls. The meditator does not have to carry a dedicated object with her with the sole purpose of keeping the guru at a close distance. Rather, she is already constantly connected to the digital networks through which the guru remains at close distance, with his familiar wit and engaging charisma. Moreover, Isha takes upon itself a major share of the responsibility of creating this digital proximity, penetrating disciples' digital existence and situating the guru as approachable yet awe-inspiring. The guru remains close at all times even if the follower does not actively seek his aura around her; it surrounds her the same as digital media does in *scattered but connected spaces*. This way, Sadhguru's aura is created and experienced in the same manner digital media trained our sensorium to perceive reality more broadly.

As discussed in regard to the Inner Engineering program, Sadhguru's videos play a major part in the creation of intimacy. Waghorne refers to the videos and web streams used in meetings and programs as creating "a mediated sense of intimacy between the guru and the students that defies space and even time."¹¹⁶ Most people I talked to at the completion program came there after stumbling upon Sadhguru's videos on YouTube. Shown, the Isha volunteer mentioned earlier, reiterates this impression through her conversations with other volunteers, who found Sadhguru randomly on YouTube, and through her own experience.

For me starting out, the videos were foundational to establish that relationship with him and feel comfortable with who he is and to develop that trust in someone, to figure out who someone is . . . I think that without the videos I may have never even been willing to try it, unless I met him in person.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Waghorne, "Engineering an Artful Practice," 294.

¹¹⁷ Erin Shown, conversation with author, October 22, 2017.

Shown points to the crucial role of the videos in her involvement with Isha and the ways they replaced an in-person encounter, binding her to the guru. Now, she does not need the videos to feel this sense of intimacy. She feels it when she is doing her practices or volunteers for Isha — her form of surrender. Nevertheless, she still watches a video of Sadhguru at least once a day. Both in the online program and on YouTube, Sadhguru’s videos cultivate a personal bond with the guru through simulating a one-on-one encounter. Imitating the traditional guru setting, the videos allow for an intimate relationship to emerge, afterward maintained by an ambient co-presence of the guru.

Another significant node in Isha’s mediated web sketched here comes in the form of discourse. As mentioned earlier, gurus utilize various vocabularies to communicate their ideas to a modern audience, working with the culture and language of their time. For example, Maharishi used the 1960s vocabulary of counterculture to bring science and religion together. Sadhguru uses the language of the corporate and technological world in order to create a whole new framework dedicated to these conditions. His discourse is rich with technology-related metaphors and rhetoric explaining his teachings. For example, he equates the work of the guru to that of a GPS: “The inner dimension is uncharted terrain; it’s sensible to take directions. A guru is a live road map. GPS: Guru Pathfinding System!”¹¹⁸ Our body is understood as our most important device,¹¹⁹ a TV antenna that we should learn to position correctly,¹²⁰ or even a barometer—“If you know how to read it, it can tell you everything about you and the world around you.”¹²¹ This use of metaphors does not serve as a mere linguistic device. Metaphors are conceptual systems that

¹¹⁸ Sadhguru, “Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote,” January 3, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Sadhguru, “Wake up to Wisdom: Mystic Quote,” October 21, 2015.

¹²⁰ Jaggi Vasudev, *Inner Engineering: A Yogi’s Guide to Joy* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016), 103.

¹²¹ Vasudev, *Inner Engineering*, 103.

govern our thought and experience.¹²² Gurus utilize them to facilitate understanding and frame their teaching in terms inherent to the culture they addressing. Sadhguru provides a metaphorical framework that understands people in terms of devices that require an upgrade through his technologies. The Inner Engineering program, and its name, serves as the epitome of this phenomenon, trying to answer the question, “How does one upgrade one’s inner technology?”¹²³ His technologized metaphors are not anecdotal or a gimmick; rather, they encompass his entire teachings. The overarching metaphor is that we are machines in need of new (or rather old) technologies to engineer ourselves for a better life. The program aims is to align the mind with the way body and life function; our body knows what to do, but over time, our mind took over the operating system, and it is time to reformat it. In this kind of conceptual system, it is easier to understand how an ‘upgraded’ version of intimacy formation, i.e., Intimacy 2.0, bases the experience of learning from Sadhguru.

As with other technologies, these are tools with manuals to follow. It is not about belief or faith; it is a technology the user should operate according to the manual. This technology-saturated discourse does not only help his teachings be more relatable to a contemporary audience, but also play a major role in his attempt to produce technologies for well-being. Thus, Isha’s mediated web and metaphorical framework enable Hindu devotional practices and ideas to return to what Sadhguru understands to be their original meaning as devices for salvation.

¹²² For more on metaphors as conceptual systems see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1980).

¹²³ Vasudev, *Inner Engineering*, 66.

4.6 Conclusion — Hinduism Rebranded Through and As Technology

Although initiated into a close relationship with Sadhguru, I eventually broke the terms of that spiritual contract. However, I did maintain my passive consumption of the guru through his various digital manifestations. Moreover, as digital advertising works according to your browser history, Sadhguru images and ads popped up in places I did not expect them to, enhancing the passive element of my journey with Isha. Although being ambiently aware of Sadhguru, which strengthened my relationship with him, I am certain this is not what Sadhguru means by spiritual seeking. But I am not a good example, as my intentions were not spiritual to begin with. Isha's production of intimacy in Web 2.0 is relevant to those who are committed to this spiritual journey, even if digitally.

In the case of contemporary gurus, the majority of their networked devotional public cannot foster personal ties with the guru through spending most of their time by the guru's side. Warriar argues that, today, these ties are created "through constructions of myths and narratives which idealize the guru's 'omnipresence' and 'omniscience,' thus creating an imagined sense of the guru's presence in the everyday lives of devotees."¹²⁴ In this chapter, I have shown how Sadhguru and Isha differ from this understanding. The guru is, in fact, elevated to a different level of experience and presence—however, he is not imagined as omnipresent in a divine or miraculous sense, and his presence in the everyday lives of his followers is not at all imagined; it is carefully produced by digital means, and, in the terms of the media culture in which it is nestled, it is as real as it can be. Isha manages to successfully position Sadhguru in a mediated, one-on-one encounter with his public, correlating with their larger digital existence. This

¹²⁴ Warriar, "Guru Choice," 35.

existential intimacy is cultivated by ambient awareness of the guru, his teachings, and activities, producing a sense of co-presence. This co-presence is created not only by Isha's activities on social media, but also by Sadhguru's discourse, teachings, and unique programs. Sadhguru rhetorically situates himself as part of the same culture as his public, directs his teachings to their lifestyle and its hardships, participates in the social media his followers and potential followers use regularly, and visits their personal devices and spaces through videos, emails, and so on. Immersing himself in digital technoculture, Sadhguru manages to recreate the intimacy that is so ingrained in the tradition. Moreover, this immersion also happens thanks to his networked public, which, in fact, produces this networked discourse through various levels of surrender. Ranging from volunteer work in the Isha production house to posting and sharing on social media, Isha's networked devotional publics produce, participate, and promote Sadhguru digital trends.

Sadhguru's relationship with his followers through the production of intimacy 2.0 serves as the best example of Isha's successful digitization of traditional Hindu practices. This form of mediation situates them as a significant node in the intricate Hindu devotional web, even if they do not see themselves as part of it. As Copeman and Ikegame aptly contend, the study of gurus "can illuminate important features of new media in the subcontinent."¹²⁵ Thus, I would add, it also elucidates digital Hinduism. Although Sadhguru refuses to be considered as religious or Hindu, he uses practices and concepts that are popularly known as Hindu. Although the Hindu sectarian system and its various devotional networks could consider Isha as another *sampradaya*, this categorization would not agree with the core of Sadhguru's teachings. In his understanding, these Hindu concepts are not meant to be utilized in a religious way; rather, they are seen as devices intended to facilitate the rise of human consciousness. Repackaged as technologies, these

¹²⁵ Copeman and Ikegame, "Guru Logics," 293.

Hindu-based ideas are communicated via technology. As we have seen, this modern repackaging and metaphorical conceptualization are not alien to contemporary gurus, especially to those who are oriented to the west.

This chapter argued that Sadhguru's use of digitally networked media resonates not only with his conceptualization of his teachings as technologies, but also with more of his core ideas: like our true nature, digital networks are limitless and accessible to everyone (with internet connection, of course); although the technology is the same, each user interacts with it in her own way, creating a personal journey and connection; and lastly, the technology can manifest differently under specific circumstances and local understandings like the guru himself. As Isha's focal node, I showed how the different ways Sadhguru is mediated and experienced depend on the specific apparatus. Between the secular and the religious, spiritual and corporate, hyper mediated and immediate, Sadhguru embodies different cultures, logics, and vernaculars. In my own experiences with Isha, Sadhguru was a spiritual teacher, a divine figure, and a rock star. But this image, as I have shown, is determined by many factors, of which a major one is the recipient—the viewer of the focal node. While I experienced the guru as a spiritual rock star in Tampa, he was experienced differently by other participants. Before one of his walks on the Tampa runway to dance with the participants, he asked the Indians in the crowd to not molest his feet. Besides being a common Indian practice of showing respect, the feet of the guru are considered a locus of worship.¹²⁶ However, the guru's request did not manage to prevent the amount of hands reaching for the guru's feet. Although not necessarily a sign of attributed sacredness, it is clear that people perceive and experience the guru in various ways, which he cannot necessarily control. Similarly, Sadhguru cannot exclude his perception as a Hindu

¹²⁶ Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, 82.

religious leader. In that sense, this is also a position he inhabits. But if it is all about a personal journey, in which the seeker learns through experience and can find anything in that path, it should be also acceptable to find the guru as a divine figure (as long you did not have that idea to begin with). Through the follower's perception, the guru's uncontainability, Isha's careful curation, or the digital media through which it is imparted and devoured, Sadhguru manages to immerse himself in and masterfully navigate diverse spaces and networks.

5. Conclusion: Networked Devotion

VR Devotee is bringing something exciting to the spirituality & religion vertical — A unique immersive and interactive experience for devotees to engage deeper with their faith . . . Imagine you being transported to venues, locales and events from the confines of your home and office.¹

“God’s next best move.”² This is how the mobile application, VR Devotee, is described by the media. VR Devotee does not only mark the most recent development in the Hindu digital web; it weaves together all the major forces this study identified as leading Hindu adoption of digitally network media, as well as some of the case studies. Part of the Hindu digital bazaar, VR Devotee is a virtual reality application that allows devotees to visit devotional locales and figures from their mobile phones. Similarly to temples’ Live *Darshan* or Isha foundation’s live-streaming of major events, VR Devotee broadcasts spaces or events to one’s smartphone. In fact, the VR Devotee app includes both Shree Siddhivinayak temple and Sadhguru in its available options. Devotees can experience these either in two dimensions, three dimensions via 360-degrees broadcasting, or in a full virtual reality experience using virtual reality headsets, which devotees can buy from the company. In the 360-degree and virtual-reality options, devotees find themselves not only in the presence of the divine, but also in the presence of other devotees and with a larger grasp of the space itself. Devotees can navigate in the sacred space as they wish. Deciding how and what she sees, the networked devotee controls the experience. This control and interactivity accentuate in the virtual reality possibility. Through the use of an appropriate headset, devotees can interact with virtual objects and offer flowers, fire, incense, and water to the deity or spiritual guru.³

¹ “Home,” Kalpnik Technologies, accessed October 2, 2018, <http://kalpnik.com/index.html>.

² Vishal Krishna, “VR Devotee Gets Your Gods Closer to You with Image Processing and VR,” *Your Story*, May 28, 2018, <https://yourstory.com/2018/05/vr-devotee-gets-gods-closer-image-processing-vr/>.

³ Krishna, “VR Devotee Gets Your Gods Closer.”

By concluding this study with the VR Devotee application, I am not arguing Hindu devotion's next big thing is virtual reality. Thinking of this application in light of the historical mediation of Hindu devotion and practices, virtual reality might be a new technology that will be added to the Hindu Wide Web. Or, as one reporter puts it, "[I]n the modern age, Gods have to use the cloud to distribute their message. It was books, radio, cinema, TV and websites that religion used in the past to find the faithful. There is no escaping virtual reality (VR) as a distribution channel in the future."⁴ Whether this statement will become the reality of future Hindu networks or not is not relevant at the moment. Rather, as an example of the innovative realm of digital Hinduism, this app is illustrative in unveiling the intricate web of disparate-but-interrelated actors, which, in conscious and unconscious cooperation, promote the use and assimilation of digital media to Hindu devotion. Though marking a next step in the adoption of digitally networked media to Hindu devotional needs, VR Devotee resonates with many of the themes discussed in this study. According to the entrepreneurs behind this startup, they came with this idea when parents of one of them could not reach a specific temple due to the amount of stairs leading to it.⁵ In the attempt to facilitate devotion for people like them—who cannot reach their preferred devotional destination for various reasons—these digital adepts tried to find a solution that would provide the closest experience to physically going to the temple, and would be innovative enough to penetrate the already-saturated market. They found virtual reality to be the key that would allow devotees to be, literally, immersed in devotion, while maintaining the interactive elements of the worship. According to their website, the only hindrance that could occur in the way of this immersive experience is one's imagination. If devotees are able to

⁴ Krishna, "VR Devotee Gets Your Gods Closer."

⁵ J. Vignesh, "Virtual Darshan: Startup Kalpnik Help People 'Go' to Any Place of Worship," *The Economic Times*, February 15, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/newsbuzz/virtual-darshan-startup-kalpnik-help-people-go-to-any-place-of-worship/articleshow/62938159.cms>.

“imagine being here,”⁶ the app will take them there. In this sense, the app facilitates the *puja* which could occur also merely through one’s imagination.

As a node in the digital Hindu web, VR Devotee offers to connect the devotee with her preferred devotional locale, altering the ways in which devotion is being experienced. In this node, many of the actors we already met come together: Hindu startups, digital adepts, temples’ Live *Darshan*, gurus, and networked devotional publics that seek new venues to fulfill their devotion. The entrepreneurs behind the app embody the idea of digital adepts; all three of them come from previous jobs in the technology industry, bringing their experience and skills as tech professionals to contemporary Hindu devotion. Belonging to the same networked public, these digital adepts understand what stands between their fellow devotees and their deities — “with devotees significantly outnumbering available shrines, the crowded complexes at popular places of worship and the sheer physical distance between the devotee’s city of residence and the location of the shrine can often be a deterrent to a fulfilling spiritual experience.”⁷ Drawing from digital culture’s strategies and norms, the app has Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, on which they promote their services with images and live broadcasts. As discussed in the second chapter, Hindu temples and authoritative figures’ affiliation improves the chances of VR Devotee to be considered authentic by networked devotional publics, increasing its potential to succeed, but also limiting it, as they are dependent on the whims of the temples’ directors. Echoing the dynamics this study sketched, VR Devotee takes the globalization of Hindu spaces to the next stage. Using technology as a gateway between the local and the global, the app both disseminates devotional Indian spaces globally—migrating them to mobile devices—and, conversely, virtually

⁶ Kalpnik Technologies, “Home.”

⁷ “About Kalpnik,” Kalpnik Technologies, accessed October 2, 2018, <http://kalpnik.com/about.html>.

transports networked devotees to these spaces. Moreover, as the app includes the option to experience events that happens in the past, it recreates the event and, in a way, extends the sacred time in which it was held.

Among its current offerings, VR Devotee hosts the live broadcast from Shree Siddhivinayak Temple and Sadhguru's discussed Mahashivaratri event. Enabling a multidimensional experience of Shree Siddhivinayak's sanctum, VR Devotee participates in the massive dissemination of the temple and its deity to global digital networks, extending the temple's networked devotional public and the possibilities to visit the temple digitally. Again, the startup and its unique technology fill the place of the traditional *bhakti* poet in the creation and maintenance of the temples' networked publics, serving as additional agents of the divine. The understanding of *darshan* as being in the presence of the divine gets a new twist when devotees can be virtually present in the sanctum. The app offers devotees to not only watch the deity, but also to be immersed in its presence and perform more elements of the *pūja*, albeit virtually.

The app's participation in Isha's mediated web—as sketched in the previous chapter—widens the guru's co-presence in his followers' networked lives and their ambient awareness of him. By addressing their specific hardships and lifestyles, he immerses himself in his public's culture. Through his technologized rhetoric and the various digital networks he inhabits, Sadhguru recreates the intimacy that is so ingrained in the traditional guru-disciple relationship. In partnering with the startup, Sadhguru annexes the VR Devotee app to his mediated web, creating the possibility for his public to be virtually present at his space. This option expands our understanding of the co-presence of the guru and the Intimacy 2.0 it allows. The guru does not only appear in his networked public's ambient digital networks; he opens his own space for his public to virtually visit. Yet again, Sadhguru's wit and engaging charisma manifest in a whole

new ambience, opening up his experience as the web's focal node to the various factors weaving the web around him in this specific virtual reality node.

Figure 17 serves as a good visualization of the node VR Devotee inhabits and the ways it bridges between other nodes and trends in this web, with which we are already familiar. A few days before Mahashivaratri 2018, VR Devotee posted this image on their Instagram profile, promoting the option to watch the previous year's Mahashivaratri event at the Isha center (discussed in Chapter 4). The image shows Sadhguru and India's prime minister standing in *namaskar* in front of the revealed Adiyogi. Linking itself to both Sadhguru and Narendra Modi, VR Devotee is constructed as authentic and authoritative. As the caption explains, through the app, devotees can reexperience the once-in-a-lifetime event, "like you are there again." The app brings devotees directly to the source — to the divine's habitat. Interestingly, the caption continues, "Get ready to immerse yourself in devotion to God," but in this case, the specific "God" does not consider himself as such. In this Instagram post, Sadhguru is again produced as something of which he might not approve.

The hashtags used in the above post are telling. Besides pointing to the digital culture to which this post belongs, and from which it draws, the post's hashtags show how VR Devotee positions Sadhguru at the intersection of various other networks. On social networks, hashtags are used to mark patterns and connections. In addition to joining Isha's digital trend on Instagram, VR Devotee uses various hashtags to connect Sadhguru and themselves to various online trends in the attempt to draw the attention of what they conceive as similar networked publics. Through hashtags, they link this specific node in the digital Hindu web to various other networks; hashtags like #sadhguru, #shiva, #osho, and #yoga refer to Sadhguru's digital trend and ground the event in its Hindu context, reaffirming it as part of the Hindu Wide Web. However, hashtags like

#lowofattraction, #selfhelp, #jackcanfield, and #rhondabyrne connect Sadhguru to spiritual movements and motivational coaches he does not organically link to (although he could remind them, like in my own experience). In this way, Sadhguru and the Hindu startup are annexed to various local and global networks, to which the app, its technology, and its social media presence serve as gateways. This Instagram post exemplifies the various networks that come together in the hybrid web of digital Hinduism: the commercial, technological, devotional, political, and spiritual.



Figure 17: VR Devotee’s Instagram promotion of Isha's *Mahashivaratri* event on their app.⁸

⁸ VR Devotee (@vrdevotee), “Use Virtual Reality and Re-experience the unveiling of the tall Adiyogi Lord Shiva bust at Isha yoga center on last Mahashivratri, like you are there again!” Instagram photo, February 10, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BfAS-uvINIj/>.

5.1 Devotion 2.0

This project attempted to sketch an ongoing adoption of digitally networked media to Hindu devotional ends. As the nodes of this web continued to develop while I was writing this dissertation, it was, at times, hard to portray an up-to-date picture of the digital Hindu realms I followed. In the years I have been researching the topic, many temples developed websites, the board of directors of the temples I have studied changed, new startups were established and some shut down, and Isha foundation kept utilizing new technologies. If not always an accurate picture of the current state of affairs, I hope I did manage to communicate the ever-changing nature of this field, and its potential growth. The VR Devotee app points to yet another direction to which the digital Hindu bazaar could turn—in collaboration with the other leading forces in Hindu digital embracement—though the possible directions are endless, and it is hard to know what will gain traction in the future.

Going back to the quote with which I opened this study, cultural anthropologist Deepa S. Reddy emphasizes the overarching presence of media in the Hindu devotional realm. Reddy points to the effects of mediation, stating that, in this constant process, Hindu devotion is “carried forward by commerce, dispersed by new technologies, and in the process re-situated, reinterpreted and *made public*.”⁹ Following Reddy, the aim of this study was to explore how devotion is carried forward, dispersed, re-situated, reinterpreted, and made public via digitally networked media. In order to apprehend the various apparatuses, histories, and cultures that are entangled in this process, I drew together interdisciplinary theoretical tools and online and offline ethnographic experiences. Understanding the digital networks in which my case studies are

⁹ Reddy, Deepa S. “Mediating Hinduisms: An Introduction,” in *Public Hinduisms*, eds. John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy, Maya Warriar, and Raymond Williams (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2012), 365-6. Italics in origin.

nestled as a unique form of media that prevails and determines so much of contemporary lifestyle, I could think through the effects of belonging to this web, whether as the networked devotional publics of digital Hindu practices, the digital adepts that arise from these publics, and the devotional spaces and practices that are transported and translated to become part of these networks. Considering the specificities of the current version of the web in which we operate—Web 2.0—I was able to revisit the idea of the Live *Darshan* as being in the presence of the divine, the intimate guru-disciple relationship as formed through digitally networked media, the ways commerce enters and shapes a religious process through the major role of infrastructure and distribution mechanisms, and, vice versa, the ways religious institutions join the dominant media convergence culture. Belonging to the same networked culture, I had ethnographic access to these practices, and was able to be immersed in a devotional realm, to which I am a complete stranger. This insider-outsider ethnographic position opened up the specific view I had on the digital network I presented, allowing me to keep it in a “close distance.” The computer science’s idea of networks—on their bridges, gateways, and larger webs—also helped me think through the meaning of religion at large, and Hinduism in particular. Following the idea of religion as a network, together with the problematic nature of the term Hinduism, I suggested to see Hinduism as a network of networks, i.e. a web which includes diverse communities that are linked through common practices, core ideas, and deities, among other things. This understanding enabled the inclusion of Sadhguru and the Isha foundation as part of the Hindu Wide Web, as well as the various digital Hindu practices and services my study depicted. The hybrid culture that my case studies exhibited—from which they draw strategies and norms—unveiled the connections between the digital Hindu network and traditional practices and histories, of which I highlighted the notion of the bazaar, the practice of *darshan*, the guru tradition, and *bhakti* publics, networks,

and agency. As a pioneering field, I trust that scholarship on digital Hinduism could benefit from further utilizing these theoretical tools.

Tracing digital Hindu networks with these tools, I highlighted the ways in which the utilization of digitally networked media get incorporated to the Hindu Wide Web, connecting new technologies, publics, commerce, Hindu authorities, and the divine. Digitally networked media, and their utilization, become part of this Hindu web, whether as nodes, bridges, or gateways, linking the web's internal diversity. Being resituated at the intersection of various internal and external, as well as local and global, networks, Hindu devotional praxis is made available to its networked publics. My study highlighted the dual nature of these publics as located in both ends of the digital modifications; on the one hand, digital networks allow Hindu devotional practices, figures, and spaces to reach their publics, while on the other hand, this mediation is enabled by these publics. The question lingering throughout this study is this: how do digital networks change the ways in which devotion is being mobilized, communicated, performed, and experienced?¹⁰ What does it mean to perform your devotion via digital platforms? What is the nature of one's relationship with the divine, or with a guru, when this relationship is maintained—and, sometimes, formed—on and through digital networks? Can we think of the kind of devotion produced via this digitally networked mediation as devotion 2.0?

The in-depth ethnographic study required to answer these questions would be possible when India's digital transition reach some of its enormous potential and digital networks are further internalized into the Hindu devotional web. If I am certain of something, it is that the following will occur: India will continue its digital revolution, and Hindu devotional publics will keep embracing digital networks and platforms, or newer technologies, of which we are not yet

¹⁰ Mizuko Ito, "Introduction," in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 2.

aware. It is just a matter of time until these processes reach a level of fruition sufficient for such a study. Meanwhile, I suggest that digital networks do not stand in the way of devotion. This study showed how notions of intimacy, presence, agency, authenticity, and authority shift once experienced through digitally networked media. The same goes for devotion. Whether we call it devotion 2.0 or networked devotion, we talk about an ‘updated’ version of Hindu devotion for a new, networked public. Through the digital mediations I presented here, devotees can be in the presence of their chosen deity, visit temples, get *prasad* delivered to them wherever they are, perform domestic *pujas* with *pandits* they book online, and be in an intimate relationship with their guru. Similarly to intimacy 2.0, devotion 2.0 is controlled and stipulated by the participatory and open nature of the digital networks which mediate it. In other words, Web 2.0’s technoculture generates new ways to fulfill one’s devotional needs. Work remains to be done examining whether these new avenues for devotion present continuation or interruption to the tradition they mediate. Needless to say that devotion is being modified here, but throughout this study, I pointed to the ways these networked devotional practices are linked to the tradition they attempt to facilitate. Hindu startups’ penetration to the religious realm echoes the ethos of the colonial bazaar. Temples’ digitization unveils traces of *bhakti* networks, and the *Live Darshan* remains part of the traditional canon by producing a sense of being in the presence of the divine. Lastly, Sadhguru and Isha foundation’s production of ambient co-presence and intimacy with the guru can be seen as a successful translation of the traditional guru–disciple relationship to a digitally networked culture. We have seen that individuals and institutions support this devotional transition, backing it up with the divine’s characteristics, its innate desire to reach its publics, and the Hindu epics.

Nevertheless, contrary to the transition represented in the idea of web 2.0, devotion 2.0 does not intend to entirely replace the original version. I cannot see a future in which Hindu devotees would only watch online streaming of the deity in lieu of going to their preferred temple. Devotees desire to be at the temple, conduct their own domestic *puja*, or attend a guru *darshan* when they can. But I do expect it to happen less frequently. For the remote, disabled, and busy devotees—the daily experience and fulfillment of their devotion can be more networked. “Devotion 1.0” would be preserved for special occasions, or whenever they could reach it without the aid of digital networks. I plan to continue watching the developments of digital Hinduism, exploring the fascinating ways in which it will unfold.

5.2 Unfinished Business

In this dissertation, I drew various lines of thought, which I deem pressing in today’s networked devotional culture and beyond. The more prevalent digital networks become, the more crucial it is for us to understand their impact on our lives. Conducting so many of our social, cultural, and professional relationships and engagements via digital networks, we need to continue studying how core notions of our experience shift with and through digitally networked media. Discussing the digital transformation of authenticity, authority, agency, presence, and intimacy in light of Hindu devotion, this study emphasizes the importance of taking into account these new forms of devotion, as well as their current and future impact on the larger Hindu web. This also applies to the field of religion and media more broadly, as the networked transformation of these core ideas is relevant to various other religious traditions. The shift in ideas of intimacy, authenticity, and presence—among others—affect our understandings of religious experience at large, as well as the meaning and construction of sacred time and space. Obviously, the digital

shift sketched here should be further studied and developed outside the religious realm, as digital networks encompass and influence every aspect of their networked public's life.

There are many elements of our experience yet to be explored in relation to contemporary networked devotional publics. Expanding the discussion on presence, digitally networked media also challenge notions of proximity. How is proximity measured when I have a more intimate encounter with someone I am connected to online than with the person sitting at a table next to me? How proximate is an Isha meditator to Sadhguru when she continually experiences the guru's ambient co-presence but never met him in person? Once we are always connected to various nodes on various networks, near and far, we need to rethink the terms in which we measure proximity and distance. This also relates to the idea of time. Digital networks have the ability to recreate events and prolong their time of occurrence. Through the VR Devotee app—and various other virtual reality applications—devotees can reexperience an event and virtually participate in it by offering various virtual objects to the deity, which undermines our ability to establish when the event actually happened. Although we can know the date in which it occurred, in the devotee's experience, it also occurs when she wears her headset, transports to a space, and acts in that space. In this scenario, speed plays a significant role as well. Digital networks not only accelerate the amount of information and spaces we are easily linked to; they also accelerate the speed in which we get there. Media theorist Franco Berardi argues that the amount of information and speed characterizing Web 2.0 leads to an anthropological mutation. “The psychopathology of speed information is not to be considered as a marginal side-effect of the

process, as it is essential in the shaping of social attention and finally of the social mind.”¹¹

Berardi echoes Walter Benjamin’s claim, mentioned earlier, that our modes of perception change with technological progress. In this light, we should ask how today’s altered perception, or cognitive mutation, modifies the devotional feelings and experiences, both those that occur through digital networks and those outside them.

Exemplifying India’s coexisting narratives, this study argued that, in India, tradition and modernity do not only live in harmony, but also support and reinforce each other. It is not only temples and religious institutions that are responsible for maintaining this interplay, but a series of forces and actors that are networked to one another. Examining Hinduism as a web of diverse devotional networks, this study depicted a section of this web, in which digitally networked media become a significant part, connecting the divine to its publics in various innovative ways. In this process, global digital media culture and local Hindu devotion are enmeshed with one another as two dialogical systems in a larger cultural web. This study showed how digitally networked media is used to globalize Hindu devotion in two understandings of the term; Practically, digital networks carry devotional matter, spaces, and practices around the globe. Conceptually, digital devotional practices and services embody global values and norms. Also, technology is at times utilized to rebrand Hindu ideas and practices as universally appealing, like in the case of Sadhguru. We should continue thinking whether this digital globalization contributes to a conceptualization of Hinduism as one unified belief system, or whether we are, in fact, witnessing the emergence of a new kind of vernacularism. Elevating specific nodes in the Hindu Wide Web to be globally exposed via digital networks, this process can either lead to a

¹¹ Franco Berardi, “The Paradox of Media Activism: The Net is Not a Tool, It’s an Environment,” *Ibraaz-Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*, November 2, 2012, <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/49#author173>.

remediated idea of a cohesive, universalized Hinduism, or, rather, to the promotion of the vernacular and its locality. In connecting the web's internal diversity, what does the digitally networked media bring to the fore — the diversity of the web or the overall product of its amalgamation?

In conclusion, this study discussed various kinds of networks and their dynamics. Whether we speak of religious webs, social networks, or digital ones, I aimed to depict the ways publics are created in the many intersections of these networks. Networked devotional publics unveil a contemporary form of belonging, which is affirmed and produced by the networks in which they participate. As Kazys Varnelis puts it, “In network theory, a node relationship to other networks is more important than its own uniqueness. Similarly, today we situate ourselves less as individuals and more as the product of multiple networks composed of both humans and things.”¹² Likewise, the networked Hindu publics we met in this project affirm their identity by incorporating the networks that define who they are in various innovative and intriguing ways.

¹² Kazys Varnelis, ed., *Networked Publics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 153.

Appendix A

The next pages present the online survey I distributed through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform. The survey's participants did not encounter all the questions below. Rather, participants were directed to specific sections in the survey according to their answers. The flow of the survey was as follows: I opened the survey with a consent form participants had to accept in order to proceed. The survey itself started with general questions about devotional habits and media use that all the participants answered (Q2-22). Then I asked if they know or heard of websites and/or mobile applications that offer Hindu products, services, or practices (Q23). If their answer was NO, respondents were directed to questions regarding the likelihood of their utilization of such digital services now that they knew they exist (Q51-53). If their answer to question 23 was YES—meaning they are aware of the existence of such services—I asked them if they are using the services they know of (Q24-26). If they said they were using one or several of the digital Hindu options I specified, they were referred to a set of questions about their use and experience (Q27-36). If they said they were not using these services although they know of them, I asked them for their reasons (Q50). Finally, all respondents were directed to a series of demographic questions (Q37-49). As this is a textual rendering of an online survey platform, it does not adequately communicate the experience of answering the survey, but it provides the questions and possible answers that the survey included.

Welcome! My name is Yael Lazar, and I am a PhD student at Duke University. I am inviting you to participate in a web-based online survey on Digital Hinduism. This survey is part of a larger study on the adoption of digital media, mainly websites and smartphone apps, into Hindu practice and performance. Whether you use digital media for religious ends or not does not matter. I am interested in understanding the use and potential use of digital media for Hindu devotional practice.

The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You may skip any question you do not want to answer. You can leave the survey at any time by closing the window on your browser. Use the buttons at the bottom of the survey to navigate through the survey. Do not use your browser's back button. Your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study.

At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview [by phone, in person, or email]. If you choose to provide contact information your survey responses may no longer be anonymous to the researcher. However, no names or identifying information will be included in any publications or presentations based on these data, and your responses to this survey will always remain confidential.

You can contact me at any time if you have additional questions at yl246@duke.edu. If you would like to speak with someone besides me about the research, you can contact my adviser, Professor Leela Prasad, at leela@duke.edu, or if you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Duke University IRB Office at +1 (919) 684-3030.

Thank You!!

By clicking the 'Next' button below, you agree that:

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You are 18 years of age or older

Q2 What is your religion?

- Sikh (1)
- Christian (2)
- Jewish (3)
- Hindu (4)
- Muslim (5)
- Jain (6)
- Buddhist (7)
- Atheist (8)
- Other (9)

Q3 Would you describe yourself as...

- Extremely religious (1)
- Very religious (2)
- Somewhat religious (3)
- Neither religious nor non-religious (4)
- Somewhat non-religious (5)
- Very non-religious (6)
- Extremely non-religious (7)

Q4 Would you define yourself as part of a specific Hindu sect?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Would you define yourself as part of a specific Hindu sect? Yes Is Selected

Q5 Which Hindu sect do you belong to?

Q6 How often do you attend the temple?

- Every day (1)
- More than once a week (2)
- Once a week (3)
- At least once a month (4)
- Only on festivals and/or special occasions (5)
- Never (6)

Q7 How often do you perform puja or take darsan outside temple visits?

- Every day (1)
- More then once a week (2)
- Once a week (3)
- At least once a month (4)
- Only on festivals and/or special occasions (5)
- Never (6)

Q8 How often do you travel for religious purposes/pilgrimage/yatra?

- At least once a year (1)
- Only on special life events (2)
- Never (3)

Q9 Do you follow the teachings of a specific Guru?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Do you follow the teachings of a specific Guru? Yes Is Selected

Q10 Which guru do you follow?

Q11 How important is religion in your daily life?

- Extremely important (1)
- Very important (2)
- Slightly important (3)
- Not at all important (4)

Q12 To what extent do you agree or disagree that Hinduism should adopt the internet (and smartphone apps) to facilitate devotional practices.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q13 To what extent do you agree or disagree that Hindu adoption of digital media helps it to remain accessible and relevant in today's modern life.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q14 Do you own a computer?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q15 Do you own a smartphone?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Do you own a computer? No Is Selected

Q16 Where do you use computers and the internet? (Check all that apply)

- At school (1)
- At public libraries (2)
- At friends/relatives' house (3)
- At internet cafes (4)
- At work (5)
- I rarely use computers (6)
- Other (specify) (7) _____

Q17 How often do you access the internet?

- Several times a day (1)
- Every day (2)
- Several times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- Once a month (5)
- Rarely (6)
- Never (7)

Q18 What do you primarily use the internet for? (Check all that apply)

- Searching for Information (1)
- Catching up on the news (2)
- Connect to friends through social media (3)
- Entertainment (4)
- Online Shopping (5)
- Religious needs (6)
- Work/Business (7)
- Education (8)
- Manage personal accounts (such as bank account, utility bills, etc.) (9)
- Other (specify) (10) _____

Q19 How often, within the last year, did you access the internet to use these?

	Daily (1)	4-6 times a week (2)	2-3 times a week (3)	Once a week (4)	Occasionally (5)	Never (6)
Email (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Google/Search engines (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School related sites (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
News sites (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e-newspapers (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Blogs (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
YouTube (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sport-related sites (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Video games (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Video chat services (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q20 Which social media platforms do you use? (check all that apply)

- Facebook (1)
- Twitter (2)
- Tumblr (3)
- Snapchat (4)
- Instagram (5)
- YouTube (6)
- Reddit (7)
- WhatsApp (8)
- YikYak (9)
- Google+ (10)
- Pinterest (11)
- LinkedIn (12)
- Viber (13)
- Periscope (14)
- Meerkat (15)
- Other (specify) (16) _____

Display This Question:

If Do you own a smartphone? Yes Is Selected

Q21 What do you primarily use your smartphone for? (check all that apply)

- Voice calls (1)
- Text messages / chat services (like WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, etc.) (2)
- Browsing the web (3)
- Email (4)
- Video chat (Such as FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp video, etc.) (5)
- News apps (6)
- Weather apps (7)
- Religious apps (8)
- Food, travel, and transportation apps (such as Uber, Ola, Yelp, Zomato, etc.) (9)
- Taking pictures and videos (10)
- Calendar (11)
- Reminders / Taking notes (12)
- Games (13)
- Other (specify) (14) _____

Display This Question:

If Do you own a smartphone? Yes Is Selected

Q22 Do you feel the various smartphone apps you use help you accomplish things you need or want to do?

- Definitely yes (1)
- Probably yes (2)
- Probably not (3)
- Definitely not (4)

Q23 Have you ever come across or heard of websites and apps that offer Hindu products, services, or practices?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q24 Which of these digital Hindu practices and services you encountered or heard of before? (Check all that apply)

- Live darsan (online streaming of the murti from temples) (1)
- Live streaming of festivals and special events (2)
- Order and download video of aarti service from a temple (3)
- Virtual puja (digitally performing a puja with digital idol and offerings) (4)
- Customized puja to be done in one's name in a specific temple (5)
- Customized puja to be done in one's name by a pundit (not necessarily in a specific temple) (6)
- Booking a pundit to come perform a puja at your own venue and time (7)
- Ordering prasad from a specific temple (8)
- Online shopping of religious artifacts (9)
- Spiritual teachings and programs (such as those being offered by various modern Gurus) (10)
- Conducting puja with a pundit via video chat (like Skype and FaceTime) (11)
- Booking a yatra/pilgrimage package (12)
- Booking darsan tickets for a specific temple for a specific time (13)
- Social media profiles of temples, organizations, or gurus (14)
- Puja tutorials, music, images, etc. available for download (15)
- Astrological services (16)
- Matchmaking sites (17)

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "Which of these digital Hindu practices and services you encountered or heard of before? (Check all that apply)"

Q25 Have you ever used any of the options you selected above for your religious needs?

	Yes (1)	No (2)
Live darsan (online streaming of the murti from temples) (x1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Live streaming of festivals and special events (x2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Order and download video of aarti service from a temple (x3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Virtual puja (digitally performing a puja with digital idol and offerings) (x4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customized puja to be done in one's name in a specific temple (x5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customized puja to be done in one's name by a pundit (not necessarily in a specific temple) (x6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Booking a pundit to come perform a puja at your own venue and time (x7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ordering prasad from a specific temple (x8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online shopping of religious artifacts (x9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spiritual teachings and programs (such as those being offered by various modern Gurus) (x10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conducting puja with a pundit via video chat (like Skype and FaceTime) (x11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Booking a yatra/pilgrimage package (x12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Booking darsan tickets for a specific temple for a specific time (x13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media profiles of temples, organizations, or	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

gurus (x14)		
Puja tutorials, music, images, etc. available for download (x15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Astrological services (x16)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Matchmaking sites (x17)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q26 How did you come to know about these digital services? (check all that apply)

- News articles (1)
- Friends and/or relatives told me about this (2)
- Ads (3)
- Social media (4)
- I was looking for digital solutions to my religious needs (5)
- I do not remember (6)
- Other (please specify) (7) _____

Q27 How often do you use digital media for religious ends?

- Daily (1)
- 2-3 times per week (2)
- Once a week (3)
- 2-3 times per month (4)
- Monthly (5)
- Once every 2-3 months (6)
- Once every 6 Months (7)
- Once a year (8)
- Less than once a year (9)

Q28 Do you have specific religious websites or apps you like to use? Please write the names or URLs of your preferred providers. Otherwise click next.

Q29 Does anyone close to you know that you use these digital religious services?

- Yes, my friends and family know (1)
- If they ask I would tell but otherwise I won't (2)
- I tell only those who are the closest to me (3)
- I try to avoid sharing this (4)
- Not at all, I keep it to myself (5)

Display This Question:

If Does anyone close to you know that you use these digital religious services? Not at all, I keep it to myself Is Not Selected

Q30 What is the most common response you get from the people you share it with?

- Extremely positive (1)
- Somewhat positive (2)
- Neither positive nor negative (3)
- Somewhat negative (4)
- Extremely negative (5)

Q31 To what extent do you agree or disagree that these digital religious options change the tradition?

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q32 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following reasons for using the digital Hindu services? Try to think what best describes your own reasons for using these services.

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Strongly disagree (4)
It fits my schedule better (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm elderly or disabled - can't go to the temple physically (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I live in India but I am far away from these specific temples I wish to visit/worship (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I live outside India and can't get these services in the diaspora (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It feels like the right way to do things these days (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can't figure out how to perform this myself (gives explanations and facilitates performing specific rituals) (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It saves money (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It's convenient (all in one or few clicks) (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It allows me to perform things I otherwise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

wouldn't have (10)				
It's quick / saves me time (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It's effortless (doesn't demand much of me) (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't see why not (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe it is as efficient and valid as the traditional version (16)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify) (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q33 What qualities of the religious digital practices and the specific sites you use are important to you and will determine your choice to use them? Please rate each option on a scale of 'Not at all important' to 'Extremely important'

	Extremely important (20)	Very important (19)	Slightly important (17)	Not at all important (16)
Saves time (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Design and general look (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Authentic (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free of ads (16)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Temple based sites (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Innovative (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gives me immediate satisfaction (17)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Effortless (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Authoritative (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Price (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Convenient (all in one or few clicks) (18)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Value for money (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Anonymous (19)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Closest to the traditional way to do it (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seems knowledgeable in the scripts (22)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify) (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If What qualities of the religious digital practices and the specific sites you use are important to... Authentic - Not at all important Is Not Selected

Q34 How do you determine the feature, service, or website's authenticity?

Q35 How satisfied are you with the religious digital services and features you use?

- Extremely satisfied (1)
- Somewhat satisfied (2)
- Somewhat dissatisfied (4)
- Extremely dissatisfied (5)

Display This Question:

If How satisfied are you with the religious digital services and features you use? Extremely satisfied Is Not Selected

Q36 What would you like to see improved in these features? What would make you more satisfied with it?

Q37 What is your age?

- Less than 18 (1)
- 18-24 (2)
- 25-34 (3)
- 35-44 (4)
- 45-54 (5)
- 55-64 (6)
- 65+ (7)

Q38 What is your sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Q39 In what country do you currently live?

- India (1)
- USA (2)
- UK (3)
- Other (specify) (4) _____

Display This Question:

If In what country do you currently live? India Is Not Selected

Q40 Were you born in the country you currently live in?

- Yes, but my parents were not born here. (1)
- Yes, and also my parents were born here. (2)
- No, I immigrated here. (3)
- No, I am on a temporary status here (for example - student visa). (4)

Display This Question:

If In what country do you currently live? India Is Selected

Q41 In what Indian state do you live?

Q42 What languages do you speak? (check all that apply)

- English (1)
- Hindi (2)
- Tamil (3)
- Telugu (4)
- Punjabi (5)
- Marathi (6)
- Kannada (7)
- Bengali (8)
- Gujarati (9)
- Malayalam (10)
- Urdu (11)
- Odia (13)
- Assamese (14)
- Maithili/Manipuri (15)
- Kashmiri (16)
- Nepali (17)
- Bhili/Bhilodi (18)
- Santali (19)
- Gondi (20)
- Sindhi (21)
- Konkani (22)
- Other (specify) (12) _____

Q43 What is your marital status?

- Single (1)
- Married (2)
- Widowed (3)
- Divorced (4)
- Separated (5)

Q44 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED) (2)
- Some college but no degree (3)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year) (4)
- Master's degree (5)
- Doctoral degree (6)
- Professional degree (JD, MD) (7)

Q45 What is your current occupation?

Q46 In relation to the average national income where you live, your income is...

- Far above average (1)
- Somewhat above average (2)
- Average (3)
- Somewhat below average (4)
- Far below average (5)

Q47 Would you be willing to participate in a short interview regarding your answers in this survey?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Would you be willing to participate in a short interview regarding your answers in this survey?

Yes Is Selected

Q48 Thank you! Please enter your email address for further communication

Q49 Do you have any comments you wish to add? Feel free to write whatever comes to mind, or not write anything at all.

Q50 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following reasons for not using these digital Hindu services? Try to think what best describes your own reasons for not using these services.

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Strongly disagree (4)
Digital media are not suitable environments to fulfill my religious needs (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I never had the need to use them (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer to keep my religious practice in its traditional form (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I mainly use digital media for work and day-to-day stuff, and my devotion should have a separate space in my life. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer to do these things offline / myself (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't trust these websites to be authentic and knowledgeable enough (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have my local temple/pundit/store and am able to perform everything I need (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It's too expensive (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seems like a shortcut that I	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

shouldn't take in my personal devotion (9)				
Doesn't give the same solace or immediate satisfaction (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't understand why should I (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe it is not as efficient and valid as the traditional versions (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify) (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q51 Have you ever looked for a way to fulfill your religious needs outside traditional temple and domestic practices?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q52 Would you consider the various solutions digital media initiatives has to offer for your religious practice now that you know they exist?

- Definitely yes (1)
- Probably yes (2)
- Might or might not (3)
- Probably not (4)
- Definitely not (5)

Q53 What kind of digital religious services or features are you likely to use, either on the internet or as a smartphone app, now that you know they exist? Please rate how likely or unlikely are you to use each of these services

	Extremely likely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Somewhat unlikely (3)	Extremely unlikely (4)
Live darsan (online streaming of the murti from temples) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Live streaming of festivals and special events (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Order and download video of aarti service in a temple (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Virtual puja (digitally performing a puja with digital idol and offerings) (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customized puja to be done in my name in a specific temple (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customized puja to be done in my name by a pundit (not necessarily in a specific temple) (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Book a pundit to come perform a puja at your own venue and time (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Order prasad from a specific temple (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online shopping of religious artifacts (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Spiritual teachings and programs (such as those being offered by various modern Gurus) (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conduct puja with a pundit via video chat (like Skype and FaceTime) (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Book a yatra/pilgrimage package (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Book darsan tickets for a specific temple for a specific time (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Follow temples, organizations, or gurus on social media (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Download puja tutorials, music, images, etc. (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Astrological services (16)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Matchmaking sites (17)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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