The Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, one of the most popular temples for ordering pujas online. Photo by Ankur P in 2017 via Flickr Creative Commons: https://bit.ly/2TnhI4r

Note on this Case Study:

New technologies present both opportunities and challenges to religious communities. Throughout history, many religious people have created and used new technologies on behalf of their religious traditions. At times, religious needs have driven technological innovation. Yet many religious people have also tried to limit the use of certain technologies that they felt violated principles of their tradition. The relationship between religion and technology is complex and highly dependent on context. As you read these case studies, pay attention to that context: Who are the groups involved? What else is happening in their context? Who benefits from new technologies? Who gets to decide if they are legitimate or not?

As always, when thinking about religion and technology, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Internet Pujas

Many Hindus practice the *puja*, a form of worship in which they experience a moment of connection with a deity, usually through a visual interaction with an image of the god (*darshan*). Pujas can take place in temples, at home, outdoors, and elsewhere, and they often include offerings to the deity (*prasad*) that are later shared among the worshipers. Pujas vary depending on the deity and the cultural context of the worshipers, but darshan and prasad are common in most contexts. At temples, priests perform these rituals, usually after a donation from the worshiper. Hindus have practiced pujas for millennia, but two new forms of puja that occur on the internet have changed the ways some Hindus practice these rituals, especially those living far from sacred sites in India.

The first form of online puja ceremonies enables Hindus to order a puja to be performed on their behalf at an Indian temple. For a set fee, worshipers can request a specific puja at one of thousands of temples, and online puja companies will send a representative to perform the ritual. For an extra fee, companies will mail the prasad and a photo of the ceremony to the client. At one of the most popular temples for ordering pujas online, the Kalighat temple in Kolkata, a customer outside of India can pay anywhere between $60 and $230. Customers in India have similar options, but prices are lower, ranging from 1,500 Rupees (around $30) to 4,500 Rupees (around $90). Multiple options exist, from the cheapest, which include prayers with no offerings, to the most expensive, which include prayers, offerings, photographic proof that the puja took place, and prasad mailed to the customer.[1]

These online puja services give global access to Hindu temples that are otherwise difficult to reach. Hindus across the world can give offerings at remote sites without the challenge of pilgrimage to the specific temples. In addition, some Hindus claim online pujas democratize worship. Historically, some Hindu groups have been prevented from participating in religious rituals in many temples, including women, low-caste people, and non-Indians. But through online pujas, some Hindus argue that these groups can participate for the first time, since the companies will send a representative who will be granted access and keep their client's gender,

[1] Madhavi Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities: Hindu Temples, Online Cultures, and the Politics of Remediation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2010): 112-3; Heinz Scheifinger, "Internet Threats to Hindu Authority: 'Puja'-ordering Websites and the 'Kalighat' Temple," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38, no. 4 (2010): 644-5.

caste, or ethnicity anonymous. However, in choosing representatives, these companies continue to comply with any exclusions enforced by temple staff. In fact, online puja companies often add further exclusions. For example, the Kalighat Temple allows non-Indians to enter and worship, but some online puja companies refuse to accept orders from non-Indians, creating new virtual exclusions where none exist in person. These new policies are based solely on the opinion of company owners, who often have no formal religious training. In short, online pujas do not always lead to inclusion of marginalized groups; they merely shift authority for religious decisions away from priests and temple administrators to the internet companies themselves.[2]

In fact, online puja companies shift authority from religious professionals in several ways. For instance, company owners determine what worshipers need to do for an online puja. Often, temple priests do not agree with these instructions. At times, this means pujas are performed in ways that temple staff would not allow or encourage. Other times, online customers are not able to worship in ways that temple staff do allow. For example, at Kalighat, though priests do accept animal sacrifices, at least one company does not offer them because its owner does not believe the goddess Kali requests such offerings. Online puja companies can also disrupt ritual donations at the temples. While traditionally Hindus will give donations to both temple priests and administrators, online puja company representatives often bypass administrators and only pay priests. Some adminstrators are not even aware online pujas are offered at their temple.[3]

A second form of online puja occurs entirely on the internet. The worshiper goes to a temple's website to a page that visually recreates a Hindu shrine. An image of the god appears for darshan as well as buttons to give virtual offerings. To many Hindus, deities are just as present in their online images as in print images or statues in temples. Some Hindus have compared these online temples to home shrines, which are quite common.[4] Still, many Hindus are concerned that the internet may be inappropriate for pujas. They note that computers tend not to be spatially pure: computer spaces are usually not meant for worship, but for work, recreation, and other profane tasks. Some of the websites themselves are also spatially impure, as the worship space is surrounded by ads—often ads for ordering pujas at the temple. Many Hindus believe these ads also compromise mental purity. They see a mind free of distraction as a prerequisite for worship, but the internet is incredibly distracting and "prompts non-religious activities." For some, these challenges make the internet wrong for Hindu worship.[5]

To address these concerns, online puja practitioners have created pre-puja rituals to purify the computer in preparation for it to house the gods. Some worshipers find it important to physically clean the computer, keyboard, and surrounding areas to enhance its spatial purity, just as they might purify a physical shrine in their home. Others note that to purify their virtual temple space, it is necessary to close all other open programs, and clear their browser history, cache, and cookies to remove any traces of mundane or profane uses of the computer. Some add that the computer should be restarted to "wash away" any last traces of non-religious tasks. These steps can also help the worshiper's mental purity, preventing them from browsing other distracting sites.[6] Ritual innovations like these are sure to proliferate as Hindus across the world encounter the increasingly popular practice of online pujas.

[2] Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities….", 115-119; Scheifinger, "Internet Threats to Hindu Authority…," 643, 647-8.
[3] Heinz Scheifinger, "Internet Threats to Hindu Authority…," 646-8.
[4] Stephen Jacobs, "Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 143-4.
[5] Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity & Novel Ritual Solutions," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4, no. 1 (2010): 182-9.
[6] Ibid., 189-91.

Additional Resources
Primary Sources:
- Example of an ad for an online puja ordering service (2015): https://bit.ly/2XFzGy5
- Example of a popular puja ordering website (NB: the RLP does not endorse this site): https://bit.ly/2ITSJlb

Secondary Sources:
- Article on puja apps from *The Christian Science Monitor* (2018): https://bit.ly/2H2AzM5
- *Times of India* article on India's online spirituality industry (2017): https://bit.ly/2HIhxuh
- Article on popularity of online puja ordering services among Hindus outside of India from the *LA Times* (2016): https://lat.ms/2SOzFoc
- Article on popularity of online puja ordering services among Hindus in India from the *Hindustan Times* (2015): https://bit.ly/2H0S0Na

Discussion Questions
- How do online pujas expand or limit access to pujas for Hindu worshipers?
- Hinduism scholar Heinz Scheifinger has written that the internet creates a "threat to Hindu authority." How has the internet changed traditional structures of authority around pujas? How might this change how people practice Hindu traditions?
- Read the article from *The Christian Science Monitor* in the secondary sources. How does the response of Hindu priests to online pujas demonstrate different reactions to the changing authority structures within Hinduism?
- What is the traditional relationship between money and pujas, and how are online puja companies transforming that relationship?
- How does the cultural context of Hindu worshipers play a role in their preparation for pujas?
- More and more Hindus are living outside of India, a phenomenon known as the "Hindu Diaspora." As more Hindus live outside India, how does this diaspora drive the growth of online pujas?
- Most online pujas orders are placed in India by Indians (up to 70% for one company).[7] How does this complicate the common view that online pujas are intended for Hindus living outside of India?

An in-person puja in 2013. Photo by Sakkhar21. Via Wikimedia Commons: **https://bit.ly/2KqszHf**

---

[7] Samuel Steinberger, "Hindu Prayer Service? There's an App for That," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 18, 2018, https://bit.ly/2H2AzM5.