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## Playing with the Gods: the Making and the Un-making of the Baba

*Chandrabhanu Pattanayak*

Sometime in 2014, a controversy arose in the Indian media about whether one of the saints/gods of India was indeed a god. More importantly, whether he was a “Hindu” god. *Śaṅkarācārya* is a commonly used title of heads of monasteries called *mathas* in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. The title derives from Adi Shankara, an 8<sup>th</sup> century CE reformer of Hinduism. He is honored as *Jagadguru*, a title that was used earlier only to Lord Krishna.

Shankaracharya is also seen as an avatar of Shiva (Shankara). Shankaracharya is responsible for founding many *punyakshetras* throughout India by taming avatars of Parvati and imprisoning her essence in Sri Chakras.

### The Sai Baba-Sankaracharya Controversy

True to the tradition that he has to uphold, Dwaraka Shankaracharya denounced the worship of anyone other than Rama or Krishna just as any Shaivite acharya would expect his followers to worship only Shiva. He, therefore, questioned the fact that Sai Baba of Shirdi, who was a mere mortal could not be worshipped as God. He also said that since Sai Baba himself used the phrase “Allah Maalik” in all his discourses, he was a Muslim and therefore could not be worshipped as a God. Of course there were counterarguments. Things escalated with Baba devotees going to court and Naga sadhus coming to defend the Shankaracharya who is facing a vilification campaign by what he calls the neo-Hindus. The arguments for and against were many. But just two examples from two very popular blogs of the time may suffice here.

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## The Argument FOR

This blog comes with a prescript:

### Non-random Thoughts

This blog aims at bringing out the past glory of India, Hinduism and its forgotten values and wisdom. This is not copyrighted so as to reach genuine seekers of these information. Its my prayer that only genuine seekers—and not vandals & plagiarists—come to this site.

In my opinion this controversy was waiting to happen and it had happened now. With heavy commercialisation of bhakthi happening on one side and the growth of neo-Hindus on the other, who see themselves as revivalists and guards of Hinduism and think that they know Hinduism better than even the Shankaracharya, this issue was waiting to explode. What the Shankaracharya had said may have been new to neo-Hindus, but not many seemed to realise that he did not say anything new or different from what the numerous acharyas around India had been saying to their devotees. The only difference is that Dwaraka Shankaracharya had been more vociferous and his views were reported widely. Perhaps the high rate of depletion of Hindus from traditional practices in North India had an impact on the Acharya.

One may find fault with this trend saying that Hinduism is divisive and narrow minded. No, what these acharyas are saying is in tune with any one of the Shanmathas which ultimately lead one to the Brahman. These acharyas have the duty to uphold the tradition that they are expected to safeguard and preserve. All the six groups of deities of the Shanmatha are the manifestation of the all pervading Brahman and anyone following one of them can attain Brahman through the path he had taken. The fact of the matter is that Shirdi Sai Baba does not come under any of the Shanmatha concepts.

As if to overcome this, Baba devotees have started telling that he is an incarnation of Shiva. Some people say that he is an incarnation of Dattatreya. If all these spinning are acceptable

why leave out Jesus who is described by his devotees as Purusha of Purusha Suktha? It is a matter of acceptability by Hindus, one may argue. But one must remember that our ancestors did not even accept a Buddha or a Mahaveera as Hindu deities though they sprang from Hindu thought. Buddha was initially regarded as an avatar of Vishnu due to his Godly attributes as those of Vishnu. But he was removed from the list of avatars of Vishnu when it came to be known that his ideas did not align with the Vedic concept. Those questioning the Shankaracharya must probe why Buddha and Mahaveera were severely rejected by all acharyas, azhwars and nayanmars. They must also probe whether they (Acharyas, aazhwars, etc.) would accept Sai Baba as a Hindu God if they are living now.

Looking on those lines, accepting Shirdi Sai Baba as a Guru by Hindus raises some basic questions. A Guru is one who not only removes the darkness of ignorance but also connects a devotee to God. A Guru is essentially a medium between a person and God. Which God is being shown by Sai Baba as the object of ultimate realisation? Are any of the deities of Shanmatha or their parivar deities pointed out by Sai Baba as a Guru to the Hindu devotees? In the absence of this, what people are doing by extolling him as Shiva or Dattareya are attempts at cult-formation and giving a Hindu status to him.

Giving a status as a Hindu Guru and Hindu deity to Sai Baba has no basis in the Hindu concept of deification. One may argue that numerous men and women who had lived or died for some cause had been deified as rural or local Gods in the past. So what is wrong in deifying Sai Baba who lived like a saint? It is replied here that the Godhead of those men and women were aligned with or as some parivar of one of the Shanmatha deities based on the attributes exhibited by them. Such deities were not elevated as main deities either. Even the Gurus of the Hindu fold who are worshiped are shown as subservient to the God who they worshiped and not as Gods themselves. But what is happening in the case of Sai Baba is that he is being elevated as Shiva which has the potential to mis-guide Hindus into believing what he is originally not. There were many siddhas in the Hindu cult who

gained extraordinary powers through their meditation and did miracles. Even they were not elevated on par with Shiva.

### **The Argument AGAINST**

Shankaracharya's information that Muslims do not form part of the devotees of Sai Baba is only partially true as many Muslims could be seen visiting Sai temples in Delhi, Shirdi and other places but definitely their visibility is much less.

However, it looks strange why the Shankaracharya raised the issue at the present time and while rejecting a large group of Hindu devotees to be Sanatani Hindus? His media reported comparison of the incomes of Tirupati Balaji Temple with Shirdi Sai Temple may be taken as a clue.

Shirdi Saibaba Sansthan Trust has recorded Rs 1441 crore of income during five years ending in 2013, with 22 per cent higher donations received every year, whereas the current budget of Tirupati Devasthanam reached Rs 2400 crore this year. The annual income of Veshno Devi temple is considered to be around Rs 500 crore. The most revered shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath respectively score incomes of Rs 10 crore and 5 crore a year. Jagannath Mandir's income stands lower than Rs 150 crore. Thus, it is only the Shirdi Sai Baba temple which is competing with the richest deity in the country—Balaji of Tirupati.

It is reported that about 20,000 devotees used to visit the Saibaba's shrine daily some five years back, but the present figures show that around 60,000 people come to visit the temple everyday and the number goes up to about one lakh on weekends. In terms of devotees, Sai Baba of Shirdi has overtaken the Balaji of Tirupati which is thronged by 50,000 pilgrims a day.

The Shankaracharya's opinion that Sai Baba of Shirdi is coming in the way of Ayodhya movement may be substantiated from the fact that only 7000-8000 pilgrims visit Ayodhya per day as compared to eight times more visitors per day to Shirdi and all efforts to make Ayodhya acquire religious eminence among

Hindus have so far failed.

The controversy has inadvertently brought Islam and Muslims into the debate. Sai Baba of Shirdi preached monotheism by inculcating that "Lord of all the people is One." He spread his precepts from a small mosque in Shirdi village of the time, called by him as Dwarkamai Masjid. Such an approach instill a tolerant tendency among Hindus as regards other persuasions.

Sai Baba is not a single example of Muslim saints' influence on the Hindu society. There are instances of many Sufi saints whom mainly Muslims revere but they also receive devotion of many Hindus. The typical example of the shrine of Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer may be considered here. Shirdi gives a reverse view wherein Hindus are the main devotees and Muslims are lesser in number. However, the Balaji Temple of Tirupati, many Rama temples of Ayodhya, Veshno Devi of Katra, Jagannath temple of Puri, Kedarnath-Badrinath temples, Kashi Vishvanath temple of Varanasi, etc enjoy exclusive devotion of Hindus.

Kabir Panth is a typical sect now pursued only by Hindus, although all the modern objective studies depict Kabir as a discrete Islamic preacher. Kabir's preaching illuminated the way of many great saints of medieval time such as Guru Nanak. In a way the entire Bhakti movement echoes of Muslim influence under the waves of teachings of Kutban, Manjhan, Jayasi, Abdur Rahim Khankhana, Ras Khan, Dadu and many others. Raja Ram Mohan Roy formed Brahma Samaj by synthesizing the teachings of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. Ram Krishna Paramhans is known for his appreciation of Islam. The modern maestros as Shri Ram Sharma, the founder of Gayatri Pariwar movement and J. Krishnamurti founder of another Hindu movement are said to be the descendants of lesser known chains of Muslim saints.

By raising a controversy on the increasing devotion of Hindus on Sai Baba of Shirdi, the Shankaracharya of Dwarka has only negated the whole legacy of Bhakti movement. His attempt to discredit any meaningful movement among Hindus having inclination towards a Muslim saint reveals the increasing

intolerance among some sections of the country and also the frustration on the declining support for the Ayodhya movement in spite of all recent efforts by Hindu organizations.

The Shankaracharya blames the followers of Sai Baba cult for dividing the Hindu society but his own attempt to create an issue out of a non-issue may lead to this divide in an unimagined way. Already members of Ramakrishna Mission have declared themselves as non-Hindus. If the present controversy goes on unabated then the adherents of Sai Baba may also follow suit.<sup>1</sup>

During the 2013 ARC Roundtable, I spoke of the Asaram Babu rape case. Asaram Babu was a tremendously popular baba or guru who was arrested for raping a young girl. Before this there were several other cases registered against him which he had denied. Despite the fact that there was a case registered against him and that he was sent to jail, his several million devotees from across the world insist that he is innocent. I have always asked myself: Are we, as a race, that stupid or that blind that even after we are shown empirical evidence to the contrary, we are convinced of his innocence? Asaram is not the only one in this kind of a situation. There are many in the same boat.

### **The Asaram Babu Case**

#### Land encroachment

In 2000, the Asaram Ashram was allocated about 10 acres (4 has.) of land in Bhairavi village of Navsari district by the Gujarat government. The ashram encroached on an additional 6 acres (6 ha), leading to protests in the local villages. On a complaint filed by locals, and after repeated notices were ignored, the district authorities with police assistance bulldozed the encroachments and took possession of the land.

The Yog Vedanta Samiti of Asaram was reportedly given permission to use the premises of the Mangalya temple in Ratlam in Madhya Pradesh for 11 days for a satsang in 2001. The samiti failed to vacate the premises after the satsang, and continue to occupy a total of 40 ha (100 acres) of land, valued at over R7 billion.<sup>[27]</sup> The land belongs to the now defunct Jayant Vitamins Limited.

Asaram denied any involvement, saying the reports were baseless and untenable.

The Nashik Municipal Corporation destroyed a part of Babu's ashram in Bhilwara for a 10-year encroaching on government-owned land.

#### 2012 Delhi gang rape

Asaram was widely criticised after his remark that the 2012 Delhi gang rape victim was equally guilty along with those responsible for the sexual assault on her. He is reported to have said: "Only five or six people are not the culprits. The victim is as guilty as her rapists... She should have called the culprits brothers and begged before them to stop... This could have saved her dignity and life. Can one hand clap? I don't think so." He is also reported to have said that he was against harsher punishments for the accused in the Delhi rape victim case, as the law could be misused. To support his point, he is said to have stated that, "Dowry law in India is the biggest example of law being misused."

Asaram denied giving any statement in which he blamed the girl for the gang rape. According to him, his statement was distorted and misrepresented.<sup>[34]</sup> He announced a reward of 50,000 rupees for anyone who can prove he blamed the victim for the gang rape.

#### Allegations of sexual assault

In August 2013, Asaram was accused of sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl at his ashram in Jodhpur on the pretext of exorcising her from evil spirits. Two days after the alleged assault the girl's parents filed a complaint with the police in Delhi and a medical examination confirmed that she had been assaulted. When Asaram did not appear for interrogation by 31 August, Delhi police booked him under Indian Penal Code sections 342 (wrongful confinement), 376 (rape), 506 (criminal intimidation), and sections of the Juvenile Justice Act, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. Asaram remained inside his other ashram in Indore and avoided arrest while his devotees

clashed with journalists and policemen outside. Eventually, the Jodhpur police arrested him on 1 September 2013 from his ashram. He has dismissed the girl's allegations and said accusations were a conspiracy orchestrated by Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi of the ruling Congress Party.<sup>2</sup>

Before I go any further, I must mention that we have 330 million gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon and it is believed that from a person who worships one god to a person who does not believe in any god with 330 million gods and goddesses in between, all of us are Hindus. Seen within this context, it seems to me that the Sai Baba controversy is a facetious one. Just like it is believed by scientists across the world that bio-diversity is not only desirable but a necessary condition for human existence, it must be believed that cultural, linguistic and religious diversity are also necessary conditions for the health of human civilization.

I must also emphasize here that syncretism and assimilation have always been the defining factor in the Hindu way of life. When large populations of indigenous people in India were converted into the Christian faith, Christianity did not replace their own religious beliefs. They simply added a set of new beliefs to their own and there was no contradiction in their minds at all. In fact, in most cases they even put the crucifix along with their own gods and goddesses and continued with their own rituals. A long time ago, I met a member of a very primitive tribe in Odisha on my fieldwork and asked him why they had kept Jesus Christ in their little altar along with their tribal deities, he retorted "if our Gods listen to us when we do Puja to them then this is a bigger god who has come from foreign, he surely will understand our language and surely our rituals, and if God has no problems why do you ask?" This great ability to syncretize and assimilate is most aptly demonstrated when Buddha whose thoughts and philosophy is framed by the reaction to Brahmin Orthodoxy, was assimilated into the fold of the Vaishnava hierarchy which is represented today by the Sankaracharya.

In this context, I would like to talk about the making of a baba and his unmaking. How does a baba operate and how can we actually theoretically contextualize this process?

In the paper that I had presented in 2013, I had spoken about a film that was made by Vikram Gandhi called 'Kumare.' I had then suggested that the

babas and gurus of modern India could in fact be created by the mechanisms and processes of advertising and media and that one of the ways of reading this phenomenon is by looking at it as "play." I would now like to take another story of which I am making a film. I haven't yet had the time and gathered the resources to make the film, however, I would like to narrate a story that one of these babas told me. I shall not mention the name of the baba or the place where he practices now, but the story itself is nevertheless true. I shall then try to extend the attempt to theorize that I had attempted last year.

A baba worships in a temple. He wears clothes of a holy man and sports a robust beard which has streaks of grey in it. His eyes are kind of droopy and his look is distant, as if immersed in great mystical thought. He finishes his puja, washes and settles down to talk to me. He asks all else to leave us alone and lights a 'chillam'. He begins to speak. "I come from a 'untouchable' family and yet I am priest today." I was intrigued and ask how this might be possible. He said, "my father was a priest in our village temple and worshipped our caste deity. He died when I was young. The members of my village asked me to take his place. But I knew nothing about being a priest. So I hit upon a plan to escape. I told them that I was ignorant about priesthood, however, if they collected money and gave me I would go to the Himalayas and learn how to be priest and return to take over the priesthood of the temple. This was my plan to get away from the whole thing. Everybody agreed and they collected about Rs.6000.00 and gave me a grand farewell. I was going to study to be a priest. I left the village and went to the city and took a train to Delhi and then a bus to Haridwar where I spent a few months. I observed every baba, sadhu and guru in Haridwar. I made friends with a couple of them. Among them was also a foreigner Sadhu. They were travelling to the himalayas and I joined them. They had very good ganja and a lot of it grew wild all along the way. Many weeks of walking and resting we arrived in a small village off the main road, deep in the mountains. I found that there several others just like me from different parts of the country. I was welcomed and given a place to stay. Most of the time we just sat around a fire and smoked ganja. We walked to the various temples and got food. We had a great

time. Months later, I felt I ought to go home. So I bid farewell to my friends, some new and old, and started back for home. Again I came to Haridwar, bathed in the holy Ganga and started back home. The big city close to my village was a hundred miles away. I stopped there and bought myself some clothes which made me look like a Baba. My beard had already grown and my hair was unkempt. I headed home. When I arrived home I was welcomed with great fanfare and even the upper caste people came to see me. I had changed, they told me.

After a few days, I found that I had to take over the temple. I decided to again go to the people and raise funds to build a bigger, better temple. I raised enough money to build a big temple and decided to install Krishna in it as Krishna is the one God who has no caste. Then I requested the BDO to link our village temple with the main Road and the highway under the prime ministers rural road scheme. Once this was done, Most of the upper caste women from the upper parts of the village started coming to worship in our temple which is the untouchables village and where no upper caste people used to come before.

Wendy O'Flaherty, in writing about the concept of *Maya*, says, "magicians do this; artists do it; gods do it. But according to certain Indian philosophies, everyone of us does it every minute of our lives.....This concept of maya as a kind of artistic power led gradually to its later connotation of magic, illusion, and deceit.....it often means not merely bringing something into existence.....but manipulating the existent forces of nature or invoking the power to create and achieve the marvellous."<sup>3</sup> The other concept *lila* is, however, more ordinary word meaning play, sport, or drama. It is etymologically linked to the latin word *ludus* and English word *ludic*. Richard Schechner writes, "Gods in their lilas make maya, but so do ordinary people, each of whom shares in the identity of individual *atman* with their absolute *bramhan*. Maya and Lila create, contain and project each other; like a snake swallowing its own tail."<sup>4</sup>

Maya-lila is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where completely positivist distinctions between "true" and "false", "real" and "unreal" cannot be made. Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, while describing the process of playing that begins in infancy says:

That the essential features in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena.....is the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object.....we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it?<sup>5</sup>

Such a paradox concerns the whole world: did we humans create it or did we find it? And within this paradox, precisely does the baba operate. He "plays" in and with the believer and is both the creator as well as the performer as in the case of the story I narrated above. The priest/guru is both a crook and a social reformer because in the lila that is ensuing, there is no true and no false.

Winnicott's ideas mesh nicely with Van Gennep's, Turner's and Bateson's, in whose "play frame" (1972: 177-93) "transitional phenomena" take place. The most dynamic formulation of what Winnicott is describing is that the baby – and later the child at play and the adult at art (and religion) – recognizes some things and situations as "not me .... Not not me." During workshops—rehearsals, performers play with words, things and actions, some of which are "me" and some "not me". By the end of the process the "dance goes into the body." So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in the production of the play, Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field of frame of double negativity, choice and virtuality remain open.<sup>6</sup>

In religious terms, *maya-lila* is the presence of the "performer" enacting the "not" of his role. The guru/baba does not exist in the playing field between rehearsal, performers, performance, dramatic text, performance text, spectators and believers. Just as in *Ras Lila*, where little boys (*swarups*) enact/become young Krishna, his beloved *Radha*, and all the *gopis* who dote on Krishna, wanting to dance with him. Just as Krishna summons the women of Braj away from the mundane occupations to come out to the forest and dance with him the mating dance, the dance of love, the *ras*; and as the peacock rotates in order to be visible to every eye, so does Krishna multiply himself to be available with equal intimacy to every girl he summons. The role of *Radha*, *Krishna* and the *gopis* are sanctified and dignified by the *swarup*, which means that the Bramhin boys who adopt them

are thought to take on the very form of the personages they portray once their costumes are complete. The term applies quintessentially to *Radha* and Krishna, and once the two don the crowns appropriate to their roles they are venerated as the divine couple itself.

Richard Schechner has suggested that “these appearances are the same in principle to the Christian Eucharist, but are, in fact much less abstract, so immediate in the flesh-and-blood presence of the *swarups* and the acts of devotion shown to them by the thousands who gather to catch a glimpse, a *darshan*, of the divine.”<sup>7</sup> One must understand that as Gods, the boys don’t stop being little boys, the two realities exist side by side completely porous. The boys/Gods swat at flies, doze, giggle or look longingly for their mothers; but they acquire sudden dignity while dancing or while reciting the lines whispered into their ears by ever attentive priests/directors. This kind of performing-being-playing is not unique to Raslila. It constitutes an essential quality of a number of performance genres in India.

It is my contention, as was in my paper last year about Kumare, that we must see the phenomenon of the guru/baba and the faith imposed in them within the frame of “play.” Our concept of “play” as enumerated in the *Natyashastra*, (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE – 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), is Maya. Maya is simply the multiplicity which the world is, creative, slippery and ongoing. In simple terms, just keeping the world going takes a playful effort on the part of Bramha or whichever God you want to have. This playfulness accomplishes the art of creation. The cosmos itself, from the highest heavens to the Raslila, Ramlila and then to the most mundane and commonplace activity on earth is a great playground. This playground is not necessarily always a happy place. Shiva dances the creation into being and then destroys it after every *yuga*. Shiva’s dancing, both creates and destroys maya and is his lila. Asserting that existence is a continuous dance is not merely a soft-headed metaphor in India nor is it entirely inconsistent with modern theories of particle physics or cosmology as astronomers playfully construct them. This “play” is what gives sustenance to the everyday mundane life of the Indian people.

In the eleventh teaching of the *Bhagavat Gita*, Krishna allows Arjuna a theophany:<sup>8</sup>

“I see the gods in your body, O God, and hordes of varied creatures... I see your boundless form everywhere, the countless arms, bellies, mouths, and eyes. Lord of All, I see no end, or middle or beginning

to your totality.... Throngs of gods enter you, some in their terror make gestures of homage.... As moths in the frenzy of destruction fly into a blazing flame, worlds in the frenzy of destruction enter your mouth.... Tell me – who are you in this terrible form?” Krishna replies: “I am time grown old, creating world destruction.”

Theophany is one of Krishna’s favourite kinds of dark play. In the story of the young Krishna eating mud, Yashoda asks him to open his mouth. Then she saw in his mouth the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind and the lightening and the orb of the earth with the oceans and the mountains, and the moon and the stars and space itself; and she saw her own village and herself. She shuddered with terror and joy at the same time, and when she asks her son to close his mouth, shutting out from her all knowledge of the absolute, she felt relief. What the babas/gurus do with their hordes of believers is a performance of the interrealities coexisting on different scales simultaneously. This system of non-exclusive, porous, multiple realities of maya-lila rejects the Western systems of rigid, impermeable frames, unambiguous metacommunications and rules inscribing hierarchical arrangements of reality. As Schechner asks, “but if reality and experience are networks of flexible constructions, dreams of dreams, unsettled relationships, transformations and interactions, what then of “ordinary play”—children manipulating their toys, adults playing ball and so on?” Of course, these exist in India as they do anywhere in the world, but they can suddenly, shockingly open to whole worlds of demons, humans, animals and gods as Yashoda found out when she looked into her son Krishna’s mouth.

In my paper, *An Act of Faith: From Spiritual to Ritual*, presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> ARC Roundtable, I argued that there is a difference between the internal and the external and that in India we play with the internal while keeping the external constant. I take this argument a step forward and suggest that if we look at the whole phenomenon of the baba/guru in the context of “play,” the internal and external are no longer mutually exclusive but in fact porous categories which can be moved in and out of without much disturbance to the nature of things. It is entirely acceptable that the celebration and violence are one and the same in the larger play of the cosmos. This may seem a bit far-fetched, however, Schechner tries to explain this by his concept of dark play. He says that dark play maybe conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark when some or even all of the players don’t know that they are playing. Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out as in the old Indian tale of “the Bramhin who dreamed he was an untouchable who dreamed

he was a king” but he could not determine who was the dreamer and who was the dreamt of because each of his realities tested out as true.<sup>9</sup> Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, as in spying, con games etc. Unlike the inversion of carnivals, ritual clowns and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play’s inversions are not declared or resolved, its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess and gratification. Playing occurs on several levels simultaneously, an on-going construction-deconstruction, destroying creating. Like the theophany of Krishna, it is impossible to look at this play for a long time. It is as terrifying as it is exciting, as blinding as it is beautiful. In order to live our daily lives, lives of mundane work and play, humans have created “cultures.” The many genres of play, sport, game, art and religion are part of these cultures within maya-lila. Therefore, it is possible to surmise that maya-lila exists outside of cultures. Therefore any “play”, the play of Kumare, the play of Sai Baba, the play of Asaram bapu, are only efforts to contain, enslave, tame, use and colonize playing. We really need to look so seriously at the play genres and look more carefully at “*playing*,” the ongoing, underlying processes of off-balancing, reconfiguring, transforming – the permeating eruptive disruptive energies. I think that if we look at the phenomenon of the guru/baba in India in terms of denied or repressed playing and therefore not sustainable, we will realize that whether Saibaba is a god or not, or whether Kumare is a god or not, or whether Asaram Bapu’s devotees believe him to be innocent or not, become meaningless in our context. I am not trying to be cryptic here. All I am suggesting is that there is a dark play happening and all the players are not necessarily aware that it is happening.

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Extracted from Wikipedia on Asaram Bapu

<sup>3</sup> O’Flaherty Wendy Doniger (1984), *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 117-19

<sup>4</sup> Schechner Richard, (1993), *The Future of Ritual*. New York: Routledge, pp.29

<sup>5</sup> Winnicott D.W.,(1971), *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock. Pp. 89

<sup>6</sup> Schechner Richard, (1985), *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 110.

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<sup>8</sup> Vyasa (1986), *The Bhagavad Gita*. trans. Barbara Stoller Miller, New York: Bantam Books. pp. 99-103.

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## **Impact of New Communication Technology on the Shias of South Asia**

*Nadeem Hasnain*

### **Introduction**

South Asia has the largest Muslim population in the world. It is estimated that around 40 percent of the Muslim population lives in this region mainly in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In terms of sectarian composition, India and Pakistan have the largest Shia population after Iran and Iraq. It is estimated that 10-15 percent of the Muslims of South Asia are Shia. There were only a few Shia ruling dynasties in India and among them the Nawabs of Oudh in the North and the Qutubshahi dynasty in the South are the most important in terms of power and grandeur. Lucknow, the capital of Oudh, has been the center of Shia culture and politics and hub of Shia intellectual life.

### **Changing Religious Communication**

The ways of religious communication have been changing through the ages. Making the journey from oral to audio, audio-visual, satellite television and Internet. The medium and the message have both changed. The 'cyber Islamic environment' has produced and coined new terms—'E Jihad,' 'digital sword,' 'online *fatwa*,' to mention a few. Like others, thousands of Islamic groups are also using the television and the Internet. Thus, for the first time in its history, we have 'Islam online' and different religious groups have waged a war in cyberspace. Lack of control or censorship has facilitated the propagation of different versions and interpretations of Islam.

A typical feature of Islamist or Islamic missionaries has been 'Daawaa' (*Daawat*/ invitation) because they think that it is enjoined upon them to invite

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people to Islam's fold. In order to invite and attract non-Muslims to Islam they not only present their point of view/interpretation as the 'true' and 'authentic Islam' but condemn or malign others as 'fake' and 'distorted.' Thus, rhetoric and polemics degenerate into mud-slinging and obscenity. Several radical Sunni groups describe the Sufis, Shias, and Islamic liberals as *kafir* (infidels), 'deviants,' and sometimes, 'internal saboteurs.' In retaliation, these groups accuse Sunni as *Takfiri* (one who believes that only he/she is a Muslim while others are worthy to be condemned and, annihilated).

Thus, in the realm of Blogosphere one may come across the mind boggling multiplicity of ideas and interpretations which may only confuse the naïve and gullible who have neither the time nor the inclination to read the original sources themselves and come to their own conclusions. Gary Bunt (2009) makes a very relevant observation when he says that "the Internet has profound contemporary impact on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the twenty-first century. While these electronic forces appear new and innovative in terms of how the media is applied, much of their content has a basis in classical concept...specific forms of online or digital Islam, distinct from offline or analogue Islam, has developed." Internet TV and satellite TV channels through audio-visual medium are also impacting the Muslims in a variety of ways. 'Virtual Haj,' 'Virtual Ziarat' of sacred places and tombs, online *Khutba* (sermons) and *Majlis* (mourning congregation of the Shias) and 'Virtual Urs' of the Sufi saints are the contemporary reality of the twenty-first century.

### Other Islamic Groups

The Shias, like other Islamic groups, have also come under the influence of the new communication technology. But besides technology, the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 radically changed the Shia discourses. His writings, recorded speeches on audio and video cassettes and sermons on television virtually transformed the Shias of the world including the Shias of South Asia. From a defensive and persecuted minority, they became a community confident of their identity, position and power. Khomeini, significantly, never talked of Shiaism in his discourses and sermons but asserted his 'Islamic identity' and advocated unity between different sects of Islam especially between Shias and Sunnis. He made a conscious attempt to tone down the religious differences between sects.

With the increasing access to the Internet and Satellite TV their visibility increased. For the first time many Shias came to know of the presence of Shias in

several regions of the world. Television images of Shias of different ethnic groups with varying physical features fascinated them. The Shias of Kargil (Jammu and Kashmir), Hazara tribe, spread over Balochistan in Pakistan to Afghanistan, the Arabic speaking Shias of UAE were 'new discoveries' to many of them. Thus the idea of 'Shia *Ummah*' (Shia universal community) also took shape in the mind and imagination of many Shias of South Asia.

### Shias and Internet

Shias enjoying access to the Internet have been exposed to a new world of advice and *fatwas*. Websites such as ShiaChat.com, Shia.com, Al-Islam.com and Shiasource.com are full of information and raising questions they never thought of. The 'helpline' maintained by several of them facilitated access to interpretations and explanations they were never exposed to. This has raised new questions in their mind about their stand, understanding and status in the societies they are living in. Thus, the Internet has come as a new Shia Islamic tool in the local, regional and global context. Before it has a very low level of access to Internet and almost total absence of non-English content. Now, several of these websites offer content in Persian and Urdu and with the technological innovation of instant translation into different languages and increased access to Internet have changed the whole scenario.

Surfing/use of the Internet becoming cheaper and cheaper and the expansion of the Internet facilities to small towns and even villages have virtually brought a revolution in communication. Yet, the striking feature in the Indian society (for that matter even Western societies) is the lack of interest in the use of this new communication technology among the elderly and persons sixty years old and above. Thus, it can be inferred that the content of the Internet is impacting only the relatively younger generation. But at the same time, it cannot be ignored that in a number of cases the younger members of the family share the content with the older members or operate the Internet and do surfing for their parents and other older members. Thus, the 'digital divide' between users and non-users is narrowing.

### Shia Websites

There are a number of Shia websites offering to display matrimonial advertisements free of cost or for a nominal fee. This is changing the very face of ways of choosing a spouse. Earlier, the 'catchment areas' were consanguineal

and affinal kins or the circle of friends and acquaintances. Now, marriages are being performed with strangers. It never happened before. Moreover, the open matrimonial sites and newspapers, even in vernacular languages, display these ads classifying the aspirants into castes, sects and regions. We also see interesting and funny advertisements of such matrimonial agencies and websites on popular TV channels.

In terms of religious discourses and sermons Internet TV channels such as Shia TV offer a variety of programs of religious nature. *Majlis* (mourning congregation) is an integral part of Shia religious life throughout the world especially in South Asia. Before the advent of the Internet the Shia mourners (during the mourning months of Moharrum or on the occasion of death in the family) were never exposed to the *majlis* speech and *nauha* recitation (mourning rhymed poetry with beating of chest) of *Zakir* of other regions or countries. Now, they are watching recorded *majlis* by so many different scholars and speakers and live *majlis* during the mourning days of Moharrum.

Sites, such as the popular YouTube, have had a profound impact on the Shias. Hundreds of videos uploaded on it are captioned ‘Shia Kaffir’ (infidels) and exhortations to eliminate them or declare them non-Muslims. Inspired by the Wahabi version of Islam, several fundamentalist and militant groups of extremist Sunnis especially of Pakistan and Afghanistan are responsible for it. Perhaps the most glaring example is a video in which the Shia pilgrims returning from Iran by road are ambushed in Baluchistan, taken out from the bus and shot in cold blood amidst the chant of “Allah o Akbar” and “Shia Kaffir.” The cruel and bizarre portrayal makes the Shia of elsewhere more rigid and stubborn in their points of view and ideology and gives them a ‘halo of martyrdom.’ The most frequent reaction among them is in the form of a question: “Who are these organizations to decide whether the Shias are Kaffir or not? Even it is conceded that they are Kaffir, where does the Quran or the Prophet say that Kaffir has no right to live and must be put to death?” Such propaganda makes the task of those working for reconciliation between different Islamic sects more and more difficult.

### Impact of Television

Satellite TV and cable TV are the new Islamic tools. Several channels of religious TV also give space to Islamic programs including those of the Shia. In the context of India, not only this, there are several channels such as Zee

Salam which seems to be totally devoted to programs of Islamic nature and also gives space to the Shia point of view. Besides these the state-owned DD Urdu and ETV Urdu also telecast programs of Shia interest especially during Moharrum days. These channels have immense reach among the Shia too. They also watch the Islamic TV Channels from Pakistan wherever they have access to these in India.

As compared to satellite TV and cable TV, the local cable TV provided by a local cable operator has a stronger impact at the micro level. For instance, Lucknow can boast of having 3-4 local channels which are in good demand in areas inhabited by Shia Muslims. During two and half months of Moharram mourning, these channels telecast non-stop *majlis* speeches, *nouha*, *mersia*, and *salaam* recitation. Besides these programs, factional politics of the Shias also figure on these local channels and various factional leaders and *Ulema* present their point of view on religious as well as secular matters. Scores are also settled between not only among the various factions of the Shias but also on sectarian matters of Shias and Sunnis. All sorts of rhetoric and polemics may be seen on these local channels.

### Shia News Agencies

Among several other news portals, Jafariya News and Ahl-al Bait News Agency cover all the events and happenings in the Shia world extensively. Most of the interested Shias using the Internet, instead of visiting these websites regularly, prefer to go for a ‘Google alert’ using the keyword ‘Shia’ and receive all the happenings in the Shia world in their mailbox.

### Conclusion

Interface with the new communication technology is rapidly changing, like others, the response of the Shias in a variety of socio-religious spheres. On the one hand it may be seen as the Shia political expression online and on the other hand it is also inducing some rethinking in Islam/Shiaism. It is also serving, in a way, as a force of democracy through free speech panacea. To an extent it may also be contributing to the radicalization of educated youth among the Shias who do not attend religious congregations, especially in metros and big cities, and prefer to go by whatever is available in the cyber environment and engage in dialogue in ‘blogosphere.’ A very significant point that needs to be further researched and probed is: Can the new communication

technologies make *Ijtihad* (independent judgment based on authentic Islamic sources in the light of changing times) easier? There is no doubt that instant availability of all sources including original ones and their multiple explanations and interpretations can make the clerics, going by their vested interests, irrelevant. Thus, there is a range of possibilities vis a vis the new communication technology.

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## Communicating Religious Dimensions of Culture in the Traditional and New Social Media: The Christian Experience in India

Keval J. Kumar

Infinite diversity, plurality and multiplicity are the primary features that mark popular Indian culture and religion. This culture and religion have come about through centuries of absorption, integration and acculturation as the subcontinent evolved at its own leisurely pace engaging with invaders, settlers and colonialists who brought with them their own audio, print and visual cultures. Conversations and exchanges with these different cultures and religions over two millennia gave rise to the ecumenical, syncretic and hybrid cultures of contemporary India. There were along the way many conflicts and resistances, narrow chauvinisms, nativism, and even fundamentalism.

These tendencies also contributed to and in some ways vitiated attempts at fusing the many strands that make for any national culture and its expression in religious beliefs and practices. The fine and the plastic arts, applied arts, performing arts, literature, and the numerous local and regional folk art traditions contributed to this cultural and religious evolution. True, some cultures and religions dominated in each space. Others fell by the wayside, most just plodded along, happy to be left alone. The Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, Syrians, Sakas, Hunas, Turks and Mongols, and finally the Europeans (mainly French, Portuguese and British) came as explorers, traders, missionaries, and invaders: some left in a hurry, others stayed on for some time, while still others settled down among the natives and made the country their home. The colonizers from Central and West Asia stayed for more than three centuries (1526-1857), though many came, plundered and went away,

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technologies make *Ijtihad* (independent judgment based on authentic Islamic sources in the light of changing times) easier? There is no doubt that instant availability of all sources including original ones and their multiple explanations and interpretations can make the clerics, going by their vested interests, irrelevant. Thus, there is a range of possibilities vis a vis the new communication technology.

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the Europeans remained for almost a hundred years (1858-1947); while the Mughals stayed on and ruled some parts of North, West and South India, the Europeans edged out the Mughals, except for some princely kingdoms, and then transformed much of the subcontinent into the British Raj. All and sundry cultural and religious groups left their mark and even blended into the huge melting pot of native Aryan, Dravidian and tribal cultures. In their turn, Indians travelled to other parts of the world, including the countries that colonized India, giving rise to 'old' and 'new' diasporas of over 24 million in around a hundred countries, though largely concentrated in North America, Great Britain, South Africa, Fiji, Australia, West Asia and parts of South-East Asia. These Indians of the diaspora took their cultural and religious practices to countries around the world, adapting and re-adapting them over the centuries in terms of their needs and interests. Among these Indians of the diaspora were not only Hindus of various sects and denominations but also Muslims and Christians from different parts of the country.

This paper will focus on Christianity in India and how the religious experience of 'Indian Christians' within the context of this cultural diversity (though dominated by Hinduism) is reflected and perhaps shaped by its presence in the traditional and new digital social media.

### **Religious Dimensions of Culture: Christianity and Hinduism**

In late July 2014, The Deputy Chief Minister of Goa, a Catholic and a member of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), raised the eyebrows of many Christians and minorities. He declared that 'India is a Hindu nation' and that he himself was a 'Hindu' though being a baptized Catholic. A few days earlier, another BJP loyalist and also from Goa, declared that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would make India a Hindu nation. More recently, other BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS) leaders, echoed these very same sentiments in public speeches and public fora. These include Yogi Adityanath, BJP member of parliament, Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the RSS; some have even advised Muslims and those who support them to go to Pakistan.

The current debate in India on Indian and Hindu identity raises several issues related to the religious dimensions of Indian culture and the cultural dimensions of Indian religions. The emergence of Hindu fundamentalism has been given a fillip by the victory of the BJP, the political arm of the Sangh Parivar. In public speeches and media talk shows, elected BJP leaders and

RSS officials are making claims that 'all Indians are Hindus' and that 'India is a Hindu nation.' A Catholic member of parliament in the state of Goa, where a third of the population is Catholic, recently declared in public that he was a 'Hindu.' The only Muslim Minister in the Indian cabinet argued recently that 'Indians are Hindi' using the Arabic word for Indians. Earlier, the same Minister asserted that 'there are no minorities in India.'

### **Religious and Cultural Hinduism**

Such public statements raise questions about the cultural dimensions of religion (Hinduism) and the religious dimensions of 'Indian' culture. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, those questions do not have straightforward answers since for most Indians, religious or secular, there is little or no distinction between the two. They are seen as inseparable, the one and the same. Indeed, Indian languages do not have a distinct vocabulary for religion and culture. It is interesting that the Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger (2013), in her 660-page volume entitled *On Hinduism* has no entries at all for the terms 'religion' and 'culture' in the index of the book. One reason for this could be that, as Vishram Dhole (2006) argues, "there is no exact equivalent to 'religion' in Sanskrit or other Indian languages. The term instead is 'Dharma' which is very broad and interpreted in flexible ways. The word originates from the Sanskrit 'Dhru'(Dharayati) which means 'to bear' or 'to be the basis of' or 'to nurture.' Therefore, dharma takes into its ambit a whole range of ideas and actions leading to various interpretations.... Sometimes the term may bear no direct relevance to the divine or the spiritual.' Dharma is 'a code of conduct and thought,' referring to 'rights, responsibilities and duties of an individual in a particular situation and as member of a community or society" (ibid.).

Who then is a 'Hindu' or what is 'Hinduism'? Wendy Doniger in her two tomes on Hinduism, one of which has been withdrawn by Penguin India, states that Hindus are defined by geography, by texts and by practices. The name 'Hinduism' that we now use is of recent and European construction. Prior to the British, 'few people in India defined themselves exclusively through their religious beliefs: their identities were segmented on the basis of locality, language, caste, occupation and sect. Even today... most people in the country would define themselves by allegiances other than religion' (Doniger 2013, p. 3). The term 'Hindu' derives from a word for 'river' (Sindhu or the Indus). Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian called them 'Hindoi' while the ancient

Arabs and Persians used to refer to everyone who lived beyond the great river of the northeast of the subcontinent. “It was,” Doniger argues, “an outsider’s name for the people who inhabited the territory around the Indus river.” The Persians called the region ‘Hindustan’ (p. 7) and its people ‘Hindus’ as they still do today (Interestingly, as Doniger points out, Manu the code-giver, does not use the word ‘Hindu’).

Sometimes, the Hindus defined themselves by texts (p. 8) or by practices. In general though, Hindus have defined themselves not by beliefs, or even by geography, but by practices. Hindutva (Hindu-ness), however, is a political and nationalist ideology. As Ashish Nandy describes Hindutva: a modernist creed which seeks to retool, on behalf of the global nation-state system, Hinduism into a national ideology and Hindus into a ‘proper’ nationality (qtd. in Osuri 2012). For Vinay Lal, Hindutva is ‘political Hinduism’ (ibid.), for Osuri it is ‘Hindu nationalism.’ For the founder of the RSS, Veer Damodar Savarkar, ‘Indian national identity must, at its foundation, be based on the political philosophy of Hindutva’ (quoted in Osuri 2013); this philosophy is not identical to Hinduism.

### Religious and Cultural Christianity

Christianity in India is anything but a single whole or a monolithic entity (Frykenberg 2008, vii). Indian Christianity has three major branches: the Catholic (or Roman Catholic), the Orthodox and the Evangelical (also termed the Protestant). The Indian States of Kerala and Goa were the earliest parts of the country to turn to Christianity; Kerala from the days of The Doubting Thomas in the first century (52 AD) and Goa from the 16<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Fernando and Gispert-Sauch, 2004; Frykenberg, 2008 for a more detailed account of the history of Indian Christianity). These Christians of Kerala are the Thomas or Syrian Christians, one group following the Syrian rite, the other the Latin rite.

Further, Christianity within India is ‘Indian’ indigenous for the most part. “Christianity within India can be seen as rooted within the history of distinct ethnic communities, each different from the next. These are distinct peoples that have not or do not, as rule, intermarry or even interdine outside of their own community and often do not share many common memories or traditions” (Frykenberg, 2008, vii). The result for Christians has almost always been that they have tended to carry ‘dual identities’ or have become manifested as possessing ‘hybridized’ cultural features; moreover, since all ethnicities are ranked by degrees, into respectable and non-respectable, or polluting, categories

or varnas (or ‘colours’), various Christian communities are also fitted into some category and ranked, whether they like it or not. In this respect, Christianity in India merely reflects the entire country and its multiple antiquities and legacies—which are very difficult to escape (ibid, p. viii).

The Christian community is just one of the many religious minority groups of India; it comprises barely 2.3% (24 million) of the entire population in comparison with Hindus who comprise 80.5% (one billion) and Muslims 13.4% (135 million). Yet, it is perhaps one of the most ‘visible’ in both urban and rural India, particularly in the south and north-eastern regions of the country. It remains ‘visible’ in terms of the prominence it exhibits in the public spaces. Churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, care centers and a host of other institutions scattered all across the country. In the public sphere too, Christian media institutions and professional personnel in both the traditional and new social media find a rather disproportionate space in comparison to its minority status.

It was perhaps in recognition of this service to the nation that in April 2014, the Vice-President publicly acknowledged this when he released a postage stamp commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the National Council of Churches, which represents all the Protestant and Orthodox Churches of India. The Catholic Church, which is the largest Christian denomination in India, is not a part of this Council but works closely with it when lobbying with the national government whenever the occasion arises. An ecumenical relationship pervades this collaboration.

Christian ownership in print and electronic media is limited to weekly or monthly publications from the metropolitan cities; hardly any TV channels are owned by Christian media groups. Yet, as a recent survey of news media professionals in the print and electronic media suggests, Christian participation in the Indian public sphere is much greater than that of any other religious minority.

According to this survey, most professional journalists in India belong to the higher castes. According to Robin Jeffrey’s (2000) survey of Indian journalists, this is perhaps why the interests of the poor and the dalits are rarely on the agenda of public discussion.

Jeffrey’s conclusion is confirmed in a survey conducted in June 2006 of 315 senior journalists working for 37 English and Hindi dailies and television news channels. The survey found that ‘India’s national media lacks social diversity



and does not reflect the country's social profile... Hindu upper-caste men dominate the media. They are about 8% of the population but among the key decision makers of the national media; their share is as high as 71%. Twice-born Hindus ('dwijas' comprising Brahmins, Rajputs, Vaishyas and Khatri) account for about 16% of the population but are 86% among key decision-makers. Brahmins (including Bhumiars and Tyagis) alone constitute 49% of key media personnel; if non-dwija forward castes like Marathas, Patels, Jats and Reddys are also added to this list, the total share of the upper-castes would be 88%. Dalits and adivasis are conspicuous by their absence among the decision makers: not even one of the sample of 315 journalists belonged to the SCs or STs. The proportion of the OBCs is abysmally low: only 4% compared to their population of around 43% in the country.' Muslims comprise 13.4% of the population but have a share of only 4% in top media posts. However, the share of Christians who make up only 2.3% of the population is 4%. And women make up 17% of key decision makers in the media (Yadav, Chamaria and Kumar, 2006).

### Indian Christianity Online

Heidi Campbell's (2012) critical review of recent studies on 'Internet and Religion' in edited books and journals (comprising 109 articles and chapters) suggest that there are five clear themes that are explored in this literature. The dominant theme is the exploration of religious rituals and practices online (with as many as 49 articles). The conclusion Campbell draws from these 49 studies is that users' tendency is to combine traditional and new forms of social and spiritual engagement in a type of 'convergent practice.' The second and third themes (with 16 and 15 articles respectively) relate to how the internet influences the definitions and understandings of religion, and the extent of interconnections or embeddedness of online and offline contexts.

The fourth and fifth are minor themes (with only 12 and 11 articles): the study of religious community and the study of identity. These explore how the internet facilitates new forms of community and how it contributes to "the fluid construction of religious identities." Seven research articles are devoted to the question of authority in religion. They highlight "shifting understandings of authority related to the online context."

In the context of Christians' experience of using the Internet in India's multi-religious situation, these five themes are relevant, though, hardly any

such surveys of Christians' use of the social media have been conducted; anecdotal accounts though abound. Where religious rituals and practices online are concerned, it is widely known that those with access to the digital media, make 'online petitions' to the Blessed Virgin and the saints. A search for 'Apparitions of Our Lady' does yield hundreds of results. Stories of online Confessions have been written about in the popular press, but there is little discussion of how 'absolution' is granted in cyberspace. Further, there is an abundance of religious hymns, sermons and prayers available online. The Vatican has a YouTube channel ([www.youtube/user/vatican](http://www.youtube/user/vatican)) and if one searches for 'Indian Christian movies' one is given the choice of over 17 million religious films, feature length films, short films and clips. Moreover, several religious events are streamed 'live' by the Vatican and other Christian bodies. Most notable in recent months was the live coverage of the prayers for peace by Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders in the gardens of the Vatican. The global Catholic television network EWTN ([www.youtube.com/EWTN](http://www.youtube.com/EWTN)), is also available as an app. The United Evangelical Church in Fellowship is yet another Christian community that has its own website ([www.uecf.net](http://www.uecf.net)). Among the websites openly hostile to Indian Christianity, the most virulent perhaps is the Hindutva site, [www.indiachristianwatch.com](http://www.indiachristianwatch.com).

However, as to what extent the Internet influences definitions and understandings of religion, it is difficult to pinpoint. It's apparent though that offline religion does impact upon the online practices, and vice versa. Often, one 'extends' the other. Also, the extent to which online religion undermines the religious authority of official or religion online is unclear. The religious-social shaping approach to technology, taken by Heidi Campbell, takes into account the factors informing a religious community's responses to new media—their relationship to community, authority, and text, and combines it with a social shaping approach that highlights the practices surrounding technology (Campbell 2013, pp. 41-42).

In the digital social media too, the Indian Christian presence is fairly significant. The thrust of religious sites is to promote both inter-religious and intra-religious communication, though addressed primarily to their own religious communities. However, the attempts to proselytize by the Evangelical Churches do take on aggressive overtones; so do the attempts by fundamentalist Hindu, Muslim and other religious groups. Popular sites for international and national news from a Christian perspective include [www.christiantoday.co.in](http://www.christiantoday.co.in) and [www.ucannews.org](http://www.ucannews.org). Further, most Catholic dioceses

in India, for instance, have launched websites of their own to inform and to inspire their congregations with news reports, articles and films. These are instances of what Campbell (2013) and others term ‘religion online.’ Then there are deeply personal expressions of religion and spirituality, termed ‘online religion’ (ibid.) in the form of blogs, forums, tweets and social network sites. These provide what Stewart Hoover (2013) calls a ‘generative space for religion.’ “What is new and what is different about the digital” states Hoover “is the extent to which it encourages new modes of practice, and that it is practice that defines what is going on and not the symbols, not the history, not the authority. We need to explore the *generativity* of digital religion, and how ‘it’ becomes a complex expression of nuance and constantly layered practice of interacting with tradition, quoting religion, particularizing religion, coming up with new and elastic forms of tradition. We need to explore more how the digital serves as a generative space for religion, and how we can actually generate meaning from online engagement and interaction” (Hoover, 2013, p. 267).

### Religion on Indian Television

Religious programs do comprise a popular genre in the Indian context. In recent years a number of religious channels (one estimate suggests that there as many as 35 channels) have drawn millions of the faithful, each to his own religion. The Christian evangelical channels of the United States such as God TV, Miracle TV and TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network) and the Catholic channel EWTN set the trend for other religious denominations. The major elements that make up religious TV programs are discourses, readings from the scriptures, rituals and services, the singing of bhajans, and finally the request for donations. Some channels have introduced programmes on Ayurveda, Yoga, Vastu and Astrological Forecasts. Panjabi channels transmit the ‘Gurbani’ direct from the Golden Temple. Among the top Hinduism-oriented religious channels are: Sanskaar, Aastha, Zee Jagran, Jain TV; the main Christian channels include Jesus Calls, GOD, Miracle, TCTV (Tamil Christian TV), PowerVision and Velugu TV. Most channels do not produce their own programmes; rather, they sell television time to religious leaders and sects that can afford to pay upfront for time-slots. So, for instance, Jain TV sells time-slots to Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Sikh groups. This business strategy of religious channels appears to be paying dividends.

### Major Religious Channels

1. Ashirwaad
2. Aastha
3. God
4. Jagran (Zee Network)
5. Jesus Calls
6. Sanskar
7. Power Vision
8. TCTV
9. Velugu TV Network
10. QTV

### Main Religious TV Genres

1. Religious Discourses / Pravachans
2. Bhajans / Hymns
3. Gurbani (Satsang)
4. Ayurved
5. Yoga
6. Astrological Forecasts
7. Vastu
8. Religious/Mythological Movies
9. Health and Nutrition Programs
10. Serials

### Conclusion

Unravelling the religious dimension of Indian culture or the ‘cultural’ dimension of multi-religious India is no easy task for the social scientist. The religious and the cultural are so intertwined in the Indian historical experience that to separate one dimension from the other is problematic, particularly at a time when the country is witnessing a rise in religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Any talk now about either ‘culture’ or ‘religion’ turns immediately ‘political.’ Indeed, the politicization of the public sphere has made serious discussion about the need for dialogue between and among the major religious groups (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) well-nigh impossible.

A Christian or a Muslim citizen of India (or for that matter a Sikh, Jain, Zoroastrian or Jew) has as much claim to being ‘Indian’ as the members of the majority Hindu community. True, etymologically the terms ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ can be traced to the geographic term for the river Sindhu (later Hindu) preferred by the Greeks, Arabs and Persians for its people, but in contemporary India with political Hinduism on the rise, Christians or Muslims who declare that they are ‘Hindus’ are playing into the hands of fundamentalist forces. This is precisely what such forces want to hear and then to capitalize on such declarations to propagate their kind of ‘cultural nationalism.’ As James (2010) in his analysis of the competitive media campaigns of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in India reveals, several promotional strategies by the Hindutva brigade are borrowed from Christian evangelical churches in the United States. Religious television channels and digital social media while propagating a militant form of Hinduism have taken a leaf out of American televangelists;

they reflect the language and tenor the ‘hellfire and brimstone’ discourse of these evangelists. Such is the practice of ‘Internet Hindus’ in the social media where hate-speech rather than any talk of peace, love, and dialogue rules cyberspace. Religion online and online religion, while extending the practices of offline religion, have proved to be a mixed blessing indeed.

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## **Religious Aspects of Chinese New Year Celebration**

*John Mi Shen*

Chinese New Year, also known as Spring Festival, is a traditional typical Chinese festival which has been celebrated for over 4000 years. There are many versions of its origin among which is the commonly accepted version that it originated from the time of Yu and Shun (21 BC). Usually, Spring Festival falls on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January in the lunar calendar and also called “passing the year.” However, traditionally in the folk, Spring Festival extends from offering sacrifices to ancestors or kitchen god worshipping (the 23<sup>rd</sup> day or 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month) to the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of lunar year and culminates in New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day in the Chinese lunar calendar.

The Spring Festival has been influenced, to some degree, by varieties of religious cultures during the period of its formation and evolution. New Year Celebration originated in the totem worship with the original form—offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors. The celebration of worship mainly manifests that humankind show their respect, worship and fear of the supernatural powers which have the ability to dominate human’s destiny and all kinds of natural phenomena.

### **Laba Festival**

Laba Festival is the prelude to the Spring Festival with the popular name “Lari Festival.” In ancient China, the sacrifice offering to gods at the end of the year is called “蜡” (la) while the sacrifice offering to ancestors is called “腊” (la). In Chinese culture, people attach importance to the sacrifice offering to gods

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and ancestors, which is manifested in the grand celebration at the end of the harvest year.

### A Lunar Year (Xiao nian)

*Xiao nian* is a festival that falls on the 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> day of the twelfth month of the lunar year with the celebration of kitchen god worship. A lunar year is the beginning and foreshadowing of the whole Spring Festival celebration, mainly consisting of two activities: sweeping for the New Year and Kitchen God worship. People also write spring couplet and stick door gods to prepare for the New Year celebration.

#### (1) Sweeping for the New Year

According to the record of *The Annals of Lv Buwei* (Lv Shi Chun Qiu), the custom of sweeping dust for the Spring Festival started from the period of Yu and Shun. According to the legend, people believe that at the end of the year, all the gods and spirits will disappear from the earth and some of them will go to heaven while others will go to hell. If people do not thoroughly clean the house, the gods and spirits will have a place to stay. Besides, the day of sweeping must be best selected according to the lunar calendar in case of encountering with evil spirits. This kind of religious ceremony, which originated from ancient people's driving out ghosts and monsters, gradually evolved into the thorough clean up at the end of the year.

#### (2) Kitchen God Worship

This is a popular custom with far-reaching influence among Chinese people. In ancient times, almost every family has set up a memorial tablet of the kitchen god. People regard this god as the one who masters the destiny of human life. According to the legend, the Emperor of Heaven assigned him to manage every house's kitchen so that he is to be worshiped as patron by the people. The shrine of the kitchen god was often set up in the northern or eastern side of the kitchen with its statue at the center. For those who have no shrine, they just put an image of the kitchen god on the wall instead. In some pictures of the kitchen god, it is alone but in some pictures it is accompanied by the kitchen goddess. Kitchen god worship on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the twelfth month has an influential meaning to the New Year because one week later, on New Year's eve, the kitchen god will bring all the blessings and adversities which will be granted to families on earth together with other gods, but the kitchen god is considered as the pathfinder. After the New

Year celebration, all gods will go to heaven again except for the kitchen god who will remain in the kitchens of the families.

During the feast of the kitchen god, people prefer to eat dumplings. In the mountainous areas, people choose to eat pudding and buckwheat while in the southeast area of Shanxi, people are fond of consuming fried corn with malt sugar.

#### (3) Eating Oven Sugar

It is said that on that day, the kitchen god will go to heaven to give a performance report. With that each family offer candies made of malt sugar to the kitchen god so that it will share with the Emperor of Heaven the good words about the family and that they might be granted a good fortune in the coming year. In some places, people put candies around the mouth of the kitchen god in the picture and saying, "Speak more good words and avoid worse words." After putting candies into the mouth of the kitchen god, people will burn its picture so that the ash and smoke will go to heaven together.

#### (4) Writing Spring Couplets

After the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the twelfth month of the lunar year, it is customary for each family to write spring couplets. Traditionally, people paste spring couplets on every door and every tangible thing. According to their belief, wherever gods reside or pass by, the spring couplets should be placed there. The contents of the couplets are differentiated according to the respected gods of the places. The common couplets about gods are like: "Graces from heaven as deep as the sea, virtues on earth as heavy as the mountain." While another couplets about gods are regarding the earth, such as "Soil brings out white jade; land brings out the gold." Couplets of financial gods are like "Heaven as the source of wealth, earth as the blessings of gods."

#### (5) Sticking Door God

The door god's picture is placed on the door during the Lunar New Year. In Daoism and during the Han dynasty, it was the custom to stick the picture of the door god during the New Year in all Chinese family homes. It is said that by sticking the picture of the door god on the entrance door, all ghosts and monsters will be kept at bay. Among the Han people, the door god is the symbol of a healthy atmosphere and military force, so the image of the door god in China is always the picture of a person with big eyes in anger, hands holding various traditional

weapons and all the time ready to fight with ghosts who come near the house. Usually, the entrance door consists of two sides, so the pictures of the door god are also symmetrically posted on both sides.

### Chinese New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve falls on the evening of the last day of the twelfth month of the lunar year. It is followed by the Spring Festival, which is the time for people to bid farewell to the old days while welcoming the new ones. Due to the lunar month's distinction between the Small Month (29 days) and the Big Month (30 days), the date of New Year's Eve is on the 29<sup>th</sup> of the twelfth month or on the 30<sup>th</sup> of the twelfth month. At New Year's Eve, the whole family gather together to have dinner in accordance with their custom. The process of the New Year's Eve are the following:

#### Setting up tables for worship

According to legend, it is on New Year's Eve when all gods descend on earth, so people conventionally welcome them. A table for worship is temporarily set up and especially used to welcome the gods. Usually, the family which has no ancestral temple pay much attention on setting up the table because on ordinary days, they do not worship gods and ancestors so they would like to remunerate gods and ancestors at the end of the year. Different from the things offered during the whole year in the ancestral temple, what is offered on the table for worship includes portrait, fake money, incense, candles, etc., which conveys their worship and respect to the gods and ancestors which is distinct from idolatry. The place to set the tables is not fixed. If the central room is big enough, the table will be set there; if not, it will be set up at the center of the yard.

#### Having dinner on New Year's Eve

On New Year's Eve, when children are playing with firecrackers, housewives, meanwhile, are busy cooking in the kitchen. All the vegetables, meat and other ingredients and materials for cooking have been prepared already days before. The dishes for New Year's Eve dinner must be ready during the daytime. In the northern part of China, dumplings for Spring Festival must be ready on the New Year's Eve. To have New Year's Eve dinner is the most joyful and lively time. The whole family gather together and sit around the table and enjoy the hearty meal which makes people have a sense of fulfillment. Among the dishes and

dessert on the table, there are two which have to be present: hotpot and fish. Hotpot, boiling out of steaming hot, symbolizes booming and flourishing. Since the pronunciation of Yu (鱼)-fish is the same with that of Yu (余) - the leftovers, the fish dish symbolizes continuous lucky celebration and having more than what they need every year. At the end, the dessert, which symbolizes sweet life, will be served. That day, those who cannot drink wine will drink it more or less.

There are many kinds of food for New Year's Eve, such as dumplings, long life noodles, and Chinese lantern cake, etc., of which the northern part of China is different from the southern part. People in the northern part are more accustomed to make dumplings (the custom of making dumplings has been derived from the Han dynasty), which means the new replaces the old. Besides, the shape of dumplings made of white flour looks like silver treasure, pots of which presents the meaning of "treasure rolls in during the New Year." Some people put one clean coin in one of the dumplings and believe that the one who eats it will earn much money.

#### Welcoming God

Welcoming god is the division between the old year and the new year. The time of holding the activity varies according to the local tradition: some before midnight, some at the midnight, some after midnight. The ceremony of welcoming god is led by the first-born son of the family. Concerning the name of the god and the time and the direction to welcome it, the host must check the constitution of books. Facing the proper direction, the whole family will silently wait for the incense to burn out and kowtow towards the statue of the god. After that, all the offerings are put into fire together with pine and sesame stems. Together with the sound of the firecrackers, the atmosphere is so strong.

#### Stepping "Sui"

After welcoming god, people put sesame stems on the road that they can walk on followed with the sound of the horn called "Stepping Sui." Since "岁" (year) and "碎" (broken) have the same pronunciation, stepping Sui during the New Year symbolizes the driving out of ghosts.

#### Staying-up during New Year's Eve

It is also customary to stay up late at night in order to welcoming the coming year. The origin of this custom is from this story:

In ancient times, there was a ferocious monster called “Nian” (Year) which roams in the dense forest in the high mountain. This monster specially ate birds and animals—even humans. Some years later, people gradually mastered the regularity of the monster’s activity: every 365<sup>th</sup> day of the year, it comes to the residence of people to eat during the night and when the dawn comes, it goes back to its place in the mountain. After knowing the time of the monster’s coming, people made efforts to think of ways to deal with it: every New Year’s Eve people prepare dinner in advance and put their poultry inside the shelter, closing all the gates. The whole family gather together to eat a hearty dinner because people might encounter one disaster as a result of the monster’s coming. Beside the meaning of reunion, before dinner, people also worship god and ancestors and to pray for the peace of the family. After dinner, nobody would dare go to sleep. Instead, people sit together and chat to conquer their fear. This is the formation of the custom of staying up late during New Year’s Eve.

### **New Year’s Day**

The original name of New Year’s Day is “Yuan Dan” (元旦). The literal meaning of Yuan is “head,” extending to the meaning of “beginning.” That day is the first day of the year, the first day of spring and the first day of the lunar month of January — this is called “Three Yuan.”

#### (1) Firecrackers after opening doors

In the morning of the Spring Festival, it is believed that it is lucky to open the doors followed by setting off firecrackers. After setting off the firecrackers, there are plenty of crushed red papers on the ground with the appearance of brocade, which is called “yard full of red.” Then the bling full of the streets and it is bursting with happiness.

#### (2) Paying New Year’s call to the elders

On the first day of the New Year, all men must get up very early to pay New Year’s call to the elders and wish them long life and good health. In return, the elderly will distribute *Hong Bao* (money inside a red paper envelope) to young people. It is said that when young are given *Hong Bao*, they will spend the whole year in peace. There are two kinds of *Hong Bao*: one is made of colorful strings weaved into the figure of a dragon and is placed beside the foot of the bed; the other is the common one, which is money inside a red

paper envelope. *Hong Bao* could be distributed after paying New Year’s call to the elders or while children are sleeping, parents quietly put the *Hong Bao* under their pillow.

#### (3) Collecting treasure

According to custom, New Year’s Day is the birthday of the broom. That is why on that day, people are not allowed to use brooms otherwise good luck will be swept away from the family and the star of the broom will bring bad luck. Additionally, it is better not to sprinkle water and take out the trash because it will break treasure. In many places, there are traditions observed like sweeping the house thoroughly a day before the New Year and reserving one big bottle where waste water is placed.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of the Lunar Month**

On the second day of the New Year, married daughters together with their husband and children go and pay New Year’s call to their parents, bringing with them big bags of crackers and candies which are distributed by the mother to the villagers. This conveys the married women’s feeling of missing the village. After lunch, they have to return to the husband’s family.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> Day**

The third day of the lunar month was the day when Nv Wa made the sheep, so on that day people are not allowed to kill sheep. In the southern part of China, in the early morning of the third day of the lunar month, people stick the red paper written with lucky words on the roof of the front gate and back gate in order to avoid quarrels during the whole year and wish that everything goes well. In the olden times, at the night of the third day of the New Year, people collect pine branches and light it together with paper statues of gods. It signals that New Year’s celebration has come to an end and making a living will start again. In the evening, the ceremony of sending year will be held where people send all gods and ancestors to heaven.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Day**

The fourth day of the Chinese New Year is quite an auspicious day which is commonly referred to as “Yang Ri” (the Day of Goat). In Chinese culture, the goat is a symbol of good luck. This is the day to welcome the kitchen god,



the god of fortune and other gods. Families stay at home to prepare abundant fruits, burn incense and light candles to welcome the gods. The sacrifices provided to the god of fortune should include goat head and carp. On this day, families can finally clean their house. They collect all the rubbish and put them in one place and throw them all which symbolize that they throw away all the bad luck and possible poverty of the present year. This day is the last day that shops are closed. During the midnight and before the dawn of the fifth day of the Chinese New Year, all businesses will operate as usual.

### **The 5<sup>th</sup> Day**

On the fifth day of the New Year, people usually eat dumplings for five days which symbolizes their felicitous wish of making money. On this day, women can visit friends or relatives. Starting this day, all that was forbidden in the beginning of New Year will be now allowed, so this day is also called “po” (破) “wu” (五). It also means warding off poverty and welcoming the god of wealth.

On this day, in the southern part of China, people worship the god of wealth. It is said that it comes through four directions: east, west, south and north, so at midnight people get up and open all the windows and doors, set off firecrackers to welcome the god of wealth into their house. People are full of hope waiting for the god to come so that they will earn much money in the whole year. From the first to the fifth day of the New Year, all kinds of stores and malls are closed. Since the fifth day of New Year, as it is said, is the God of Wealth Day, people usually open business on that day so that they have opportunity to be granted more wealth from the said god.

### **The 6<sup>th</sup> Day**

On the sixth day of the lunar month in ancient China, people hold the ceremony of warding off poverty, which is a special custom. The custom symbolizes that through sending off the god of poverty, people could be free from poverty. The god of poverty is also called “the son of poverty” who is short and weak, fond of wearing dirty clothes and rags and eating rice porridge.

### **The 7<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar month**

The seventh day of the lunar month is the day of humankind. According to the legend, it is on this day that Nu Wa created humankind after creating all the

animals such as pigs, dogs, sheep and cows etc. The symbol of the celebration is that people wrap their heads with strips of linen cloth. Besides, there is also the tradition that some people climb the mountain and create poems. Until the Tang dynasty, this ceremony has been attached importance on. The Emperor brought people and officers to go to mountain in order to hold the grand celebration. If on that day the weather is sunny, people will enjoy a peaceful life the whole year.

### **The 8<sup>th</sup> Day**

In the evening of the eighth day of the New Year celebration, whether people go to the temple to worship the god of star or not, it is a must for them to have the ceremony of the stars. When all stars appear in the sky, people gather together and light up the golden lamps which are put on the desk, threshold and kitchen. The lamps scattered in different places are called “scattered light flower” which implies avoidance of bad luck.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar month, there is the custom of setting free domesticated animals such as fish, birds etc. back to the wild. This activity not only embodies the ancient people’s respect for nature and the moral character of harmony, but also conveys that, in the beginning of the lunar New Year, people have good wishes for the prosperity of various kinds of thing in the world.

### **The 9<sup>th</sup> Day**

It is said that on the ninth day of the lunar month is the birthday of the Emperor of Heaven, so it is called “the Day of Heaven.” The Emperor of Heaven is the origin of heavenly dignity according to Daoism. He is also the superior in heaven who rules the universe and all gods and is respected as the almighty God.

On this day, the main custom celebrated is the worship of the Emperor of Heaven. On this day, women in the family will have to prepare the fragrance candles and put them on the ground in the yard and pray for the blessing from heaven. This grand ceremony is usually held in the main hall where the altar for worship is prepared. The altar is composed of two tables: the top table and the bottom table. On the top table, the seat for god made of colorful paper is offered; in front of the center there is an incense burner; on the bottom table, five animals such as chicken, duck, fish, and pig which represents the subordinate gods, are offered.

### **The 10<sup>th</sup> Day**

Since the pronunciation of “十” (ten) and “石” (stone) in Mandarin are the same, so the tenth day of the lunar month is considered as the birthday of the stone. On that day, tools made of stones are not allowed to be touched. Even people worship the stone in order to avoid the ruin of crops. For lunch, people eat steamed buns in order to obtain many fortunes in the whole year.

### **The 11<sup>th</sup> Day**

On the eleventh day, the father-in-law is accustomed to invite his son-in-law for dinner. Since there are a lot of food left during the celebration of the birthday of the Jade Emperor on the ninth day of the Chinese New Year, these food are served.

### **The 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> Day**

From this day on, people start to prepare for the celebration of the Lantern Festival. They choose and buy lanterns and build the lantern shed. There is one nursery rhyme: “on the eleventh day, people are buying lantern; twelfth, build the lantern shed; thirteenth, turn on the lights; fourteenth, all lights are bright; fifteenth half of the lunar new year; sixteenth, finish the celebration of the Lantern Festival.”

### **The 15<sup>th</sup> Day, the Lantern Festival**

The fifteenth day is the Lantern Festival which is one of the traditional festivals for Chinese Han people and some of the ethnic minorities. It is the first night after New Year with the full moon. And it is also the first important festival after the Spring Festival.

Since the custom of lights decorating was practiced, to light and view the lights decoration has become one grand occasion from dynasty to dynasty. People participant in the guess riddle on the lantern is one of the main activities on the Lantern Festival. It was one kind of word game full of humor, and could enrich thinking and increase wisdom. This festival embodies the characteristic of the Chinese people’s spirit of carnival but its vulgar function has been carried to the daily life, people gradually lost the spirit of common interest, instead, the complex ceremony has been simplified to custom of eating “Yuan Xiao”(rice ball with sweet filling).The Lantern Festival is also marked with the dragon dance

and the lion dance. Both the dragon and the lion are considered as symbols of good luck.

### **Summary**

What are described above are the main activities of Chinese New Year and its cultural background from which we can conclude the following points:

Worshiping and asking for blessing are the main concern from the beginning to the end of the essay. There are two kinds of worshiping: firstly, worshiping God; secondly, worshiping ancestors.

The important influence of religion to Chinese New Year mainly is embodied in the three following aspects: (1) the integration of religion in Chinese cultural festival; (2) the religious characters are relevant to the Spring Festival; (3) expanse of New Year’s significance. With traditional Chinese New Year as the carrier, the dharma, teachings and ideas have been transmitted and penetrated into all fields of social life, so that it occurs the fusion of two cultures.

The characters of the influence of religion to Chinese New Year are the three following points: firstly, the time of the integration of religion and Chinese New Year plays a vital role; secondly, the effect of local religion is deeper than that of foreign religion; lastly, the influence of the religion earlier introduced into China is more significant than that which is later introduced.

The factors of religion have the tendency of becoming secular and national. As time goes on, many of the traditional New Year’s ritual and content have been abolished, transformed and sublimated. In the end, it has been combined with the New Year. Actually, Traditional Chinese New Year is the direct product of religion.

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## New Media to Promote Religious Communication in Jainism: An Exploratory Study

Komal Shah

### Introduction

The aim of the paper is to discuss the prevailing communication trends in Jainism and the methods used in new media for religious communication. The paper will also highlight use of new media communication for spreading social as well as religious messages. In addition, the paper will attempt to examine as to how new media communication could be beneficial for the Jain youth in the present context. The paper is based on the analysis of selected websites which propagate Jainism through new media since its inception up to the present time.

According to Binod C. Agrawal,

There are three communication technology perspectives of new media in the context of Indian democracy. First, the notion of 'new media' has been referred to as by several names, depending upon the context and professional background. New Media has often been referred to as 'digital media' and 'social media' though all have accepted that at the core of new media is a rapid growth of digital technology communication innovations and new technology applications accelerated by global market forces. Today, the rate of obsolescence of digital technology is astronomical. I think soon the new media will become 'traditional media' and will be transformed into something new 'biometric media'. Further, expansion of New Media has crossed

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## New Media to Promote Religious Communication in Jainism: An Exploratory Study

*Komal Shah*

### Introduction

The aim of the paper is to discuss the prevailing communication trends in Jainism and the methods used in new media for religious communication. The paper will also highlight use of new media communication for spreading social as well as religious messages. In addition, the paper will attempt to examine as to how new media communication could be beneficial for the Jain youth in the present context. The paper is based on the analysis of selected websites which propagate Jainism through new media since its inception up to the present time.

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the time and space boundary. Therefore, new media must be viewed within a global perspective having ever changing digital technology at the core of its growth and development influencing and changing human cultures and societies including political systems globally (Agrawal, 2014, p. 3).

There has been considerable amount of research as to how new media is transforming the religious lives of young men and women (Campbell, 2012). For a young Jain, the use of new media is an important means to reaffirm, reconfirm and reach to a decision whether the use of yeast for baking purposes is compatible with Jain tradition of vegetarianism or not. Similarly, whether observing fast on auspicious days would lead them to salvation! Thus, getting an answer to the questions above would lead them to build a consensus on the same. The age-old religious communication in the past has been hierarchical, unitary and authoritative in Jain tradition. It seems that new media may turn religious communication into horizontal and de-centralized rather than vertical and centralized; diverse and fragmented rather than unitary; devolved rather than authoritarian. New Media has provided multiple channels of access and has encouraged discursive interaction on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, mobile applications to bring about de-centralization and democratization of religious communication and knowledge.

### **New Media and Jainism**

Jainism made its appearance on new media especially around the end of 1994, thus bringing about the next major transition in religious communication of Jainism. Many believe that new media has become a boon for Jains all over the world. In the past, Jains, being a scattered and small population, has had no Jain neighborhood to support them. It seems that the new media has helped the Jain population to form neighborhood in various parts of the world including India. The Jains have adopted and embraced new media to increase their access to these religious sites of communication.

### **Layout of the Paper**

In the first section, the role of communication and media in religious propagation of Jainism will be examined followed by a concise presentation of the history of religious communication in Jainism. The paper further introduces the new approaches of interpretation of Jainism which are currently being

used in religious communication. The second section of the paper focuses on quantitative and qualitative research analysis of existing new media use and the role it plays in religious communication and information dissemination. Possible contributions of new media in a theoretical framework has been attempted and presented to illustrate how it plays in determining the content of religious communication and information. The third section identifies some elements of Jain religious communication which may influence the way religious communication is imbibed by lay Jains. This section also includes an examination of possible relationships between Jain religious communication and the process by which a lay Jain interprets the social reality around him or her. At the end, a brief summary of the whole process of Jain religious communication through new media, the promotion of religious communication in Jainism and its effectiveness has been presented.

### **Jain Way of Life: A Brief Discussion**

Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that emphasizes on non-violence (*ahimsa*) and the ascetic life. It began somewhere in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in India at about the same time Buddhism was developing. Jainism shares similarities with Hinduism and Buddhism, due in large part to the historical and cultural context in which it arose. Jainism, however, doesn't have as many followers as Hinduism or Buddhism nor has it made as many inroads into the Western world. Jains derive their name from the *Jinas*, spiritual conquerors who have achieved liberation and perfection. Included amongst these *Jinas* are the twenty-four spiritual leaders called *Tirthankara*<sup>1</sup>. The last of the *Tirthankara* was Mahavira (599-527 BC), a contemporary of the Buddha and the man generally considered to be the founder of Jainism.

There are three aspects that distinguish a Jain follower from others. These can be identified at the individual, community and social levels:

- (1) Individual identity - conduct and behavior conforming to the basic principles.
- (2) Community identity - group activities such as prayers, worship, study of scriptures and celebration of festivals organized by temples and Jain centers.

<sup>1</sup> *Tirthankara* are special *Siddhas* (liberated souls) who has attained omniscience and guides the other souls to save them from the cycles of repeated earth existences (rebirth).

(3) Social Identity - recognition by the society at large as a group that practices the virtues of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, purity of body and mind, and non-possessiveness; maintains a vegetarian diet and abstains from drinking, smoking and drugs; and believes in contentment rather than rampant desires for money and materials. (Dedhia, 2007)

There are certain ethical conducts being stated in the religious scriptures of Jainism for a lay person to follow. These encompass six religious activities to be conducted on daily basis, eight forbidden or tabooed attributes to be avoided, and the observance of five vows all Jain followers should adhere to in their day-to-day activities. At present Jains are divided into two major sects namely *Swetamber* and *Digambar*. The religious practices among them differ though common rituals and festivities are imperative to be observed by all Jains.

In the last 150 years since census was started in India by the British, the total population of Jains remained very small. As late as 2011, the Census of India reported a total population of Jain below five million in a population of 1.2 billion. In terms of literacy, way back in 1891, the Census of India recorded a literacy rate of only 1.4% amongst female Jains and of 53.4% amongst male Jains. In 2011, the female literacy rate has risen to 90.6% and for the Jain altogether to 94.1%. Today, Jains are the best educated community in India apart from the Parsees (Census of India, 2011).

### Religious Communication in Jainism: A Brief History of 2,500 Years

In the last 2,500 years, the Jain religion was professed through oral communication and through performing arts and repetitions. As Jainism is based on the principle of non-violence, the practice of writing was avoided due to the pain incurred to the microcosms. Only in the last five hundred years, with the advent of industrial printing, has there been a major push to record and write the stories of Jain religion, songs and poetry. Print media has made possible for many Jains to have books which are being used by Jain followers all over the world since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Shah, 2013).

It is often said that Jains are very enthusiastic about erecting temples, shrines or *upāsraya* (meditation centre) but not much interested in promoting Jain religion and converting others to Jainism. Jains are especially not interested in the modern study of Jainism. It is not so because when a Jain studies in a historical perspective, the Jain promotes the beliefs in local language for a better

understanding of its philosophies and to spread its religious practices. This has limited scope to promote Jainism beyond a given linguistic region of the sub-continent unlike Buddhism which has a pan-Indian language of Sanskrit as religious communication.

Prasannanshu (2010) states:

One of the first thing a student of communication reads is about the barriers to communication and how to overcome them. A look at the history tells us that Jain preachers took a bold step of using ‘*Prakrit*’ the then language of the masses to send out its messages... which perhaps motivated the Jain to pray, preach and prepare their canonical literature in a language which in general was looked down upon and could in no way have been considered fit for serious discourses like propounding abstract entities such as religious philosophies.

Jainism is promoted by self-realized individuals who have attained perfect knowledge, omniscience and self-control by personal effort and have been liberated from the bonds of worldly existence. In the present context, one finds a new trend of substituting English over Hindi due to the demands of the information-based economies of the Euro-American countries, and because of the vast improvements in the formal educational standards of Jains in India.

Today, Jainism is no more dependent on face-to-face sermons of the monks to promote its religious philosophies. One can now access various print and electronic media like newspapers, magazines, television and radio together with the new media which have opened up instantaneous sources of information pertaining to Jainism, mostly in three languages—English, Hindi and Gujarati. Though all the media act as mediator in delivering Jain sermons, they do permit interpersonal, face-to-face communication and immediate feedback. New media interactions have made it possible for the Jain disciples to use various forms of interpersonal communication through personal mails, chats, messages, blogs and miniature commenting sites.

### Analysis of Selected Jain Websites

A few years back, Jainism was conspicuous by its absence in new media but today, anyone in any part of the world can access information, articles, texts,

pictures, even music at the touch of a button about Jains and Jainism. There are many websites, blogs, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages on new media dedicated to Jainism and its various activities. The actual figure of new media sites dedicated to Jainism is not available on any website or physical resources. To have a better understanding of the usage of new media, one can access the statistical figures of the Indian Internet users in comparison to international users. Asians (45.1%) top in the list of Internet users according to Internet World Stats (Stats, 2014) among the Asians, the Indians (243,198,922) stand at the third position on the country's share of Internet users which is topped by China (641,601,070). Indians, regardless of their religious beliefs, are fast adapting to the virtual world as the country's share of World Population figure stands at 17.5%. (Stats I. L., 2014) As the Jains are considered to be most literate population within Indian and in the Indian diasporas, it is safe to assume their presence in worldwide web.

### New Media and Religious Communication

A number of scholars in new media and religion have identified the tendency of religious communities, churches, and individuals to use the Internet as a means of information dissemination or transmission of religious ideas. These studies have focused on the phenomenon of religious communities utilizing the Internet mainly for the purpose of exchanging information.

Smith's (2007) study measured non-profit organizations' use of Internet websites who used Kent and Taylor's (Kent, 1998) criteria for the analysis of effective web communication. Smith found that many religious non-profit websites were underutilizing their potential for two-way communication and surmised that this was the case because non-profit organizations depended on more traditional one-way religious communication media.<sup>2</sup>

The method and style of new media communication are similar to those of the pre-Internet period, but the only difference is that, it is now faster, and can take place anywhere at a reduced cost. At present, it is nothing new to observe

<sup>2</sup> In addition to religious nonprofit websites, there are many more research studies conducted on new media and religion, according to its use by different religious groups. Studies have begun to address different uses of new media in religious communication. One can refer to the following studies for further clarification on the use of new media for religious communication: Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Baab, 2008; Frobish, 2006; Hutchings, 2007; Kim, 2007; Smith, 2007; Sturgill, 2004; Campbell, 2005a; Kim, 2005. The Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet published a special issue dedicated to rituals on the internet (Volume 02.1).

about religious organizations utilizing New Media to try and connect with as many people as they can.

In a world where new media helps to connect friends, neighbours and relatives living in any part of the world, it has also helped connecting various diasporas having similar religious faith, especially in case of the Jain community. New media is built on network of friends with common interest. The moot question is, as to how effectively new media can be used to bring together believers of a religion and others. Rev. Michael White, a United Methodist pastor and author of *Digital Evangelism: You Can Do It, Tool*, noted that "People of faith can use such social media as Twitter, YouTube, blogs, etc. to reach out both to 'seekers' (those looking for more information about religious faith) and believers alike to share the tenets of their faith, encourage deepening one's religious faith, answering questions of doubt, and much more" (White, 2011).

### Research

The present research was carried out on two new media sites (Facebook pages, see Appendix 1) which were dedicated to the promotion of Jainism, especially amongst the Jain youth. The sites chosen were based on the consideration that the selected sites had reported maximum number of likes, a minimum of two years have elapsed since the Page was created and the publisher (person, organization, entity) of the Facebook page is based in India. The abovementioned criteria were best fulfilled by two Facebook pages selected for the present study namely: *Jain Site* and *Jain Gyan*.

'Jain Site' started on May 9, 2001 and is inspired by a Jain Muni Bhagyachandra Vijay M.S. Jain Site has a parent website ([www.jainsite.com](http://www.jainsite.com)) published from the city of Mumbai, (Maharashtra, India) and caters to the age group of 18-24 years old. 'Jain Site' had post in Hindi, English and Gujarati. 'Jain Site' has a mission to promote the religion amongst the youth of Jainism.<sup>1</sup>

'Jain Gyan' started on July 4, 2011, and has a parent website ([www.jaingyan.com](http://www.jaingyan.com)) published from the city of Ponda, (Goa, India). Jain Gyan does not state the age group it caters to, thus it is published for all age group users who fall under the religious category 'Jain'. 'Jain Gyan' had posts in English and Hindi. 'Jain Gyan' has a mission to promote Jainism and can be used as a good resource site.<sup>2</sup>

## Study Duration

For the purpose of analysis these two sites namely 'Jain Site' and 'Jain Gyan' were studied for three months starting from 1<sup>st</sup> of June until 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 2014 (92 days). This period of analysis was considered to be appropriate as the study covered major Jain festival of *Paryushana*<sup>3</sup> falling on the month of August or Hindu month of *Bhadrapad*. The analysis was compared with non-festival period to understand religious communication activities of the Jain followers and publishers of these two Facebook pages.

## Method of Analysis

The content analysis method<sup>4</sup> of research was followed while observing and collecting the data for the present research. Since both the Facebook pages under observation were live sites, therefore the researcher noted the posts, likes, comments and shares of these Facebook pages at 9 o'clock in the evening for 92 days. The present research relied on data which was actually collected at the end of each day, therefore any alterations made by the page administrator between two consecutive observations could not be tracked. In the present research the various posts were being categorized for the convenience of the researcher under the following heads:

- Information about auspicious days as per Jain tradition
- Photographs of Jain God
- Photographs of Jain Monk
- Video preaching's of Jain Monk
- Music (*Stavan*<sup>5</sup>) video of Jainism
- Quotations on teachings of Jainism
- Information on health and medicines as per Jain scriptures
- Information on Jain pilgrimage places
- Promotion of Jain websites
- Publishing of online religious scriptures
- News updates on Jainism and Society

<sup>3</sup> *Paryushana* is observed for Self purification and upliftment, annually.

<sup>4</sup> The content analysis method used here is that of Klaus Krippendorff (2012) book entitled *Content analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition).

<sup>5</sup> A eulogy written and sung in praise of God.

## Findings

The posts on these two Facebook pages can be broadly categorized as posts on Jain scriptures (sometimes explained in simpler terms), textual information on the rituals and its importance for a Jain, the news and happenings around prominent Jain *Munis* (monks) and their followers, news on the important acts being passed by the government for Jainism and Jain followers, information was being imparted on Jain religious pilgrimages and the happenings around those places. The Jain followers were intimated early in the morning with posts on the Facebook pages about the five prominent auspicious days of the month (*Tithis*)<sup>6</sup> as this helped Jain followers to renounce green vegetables for the day and observe fast if possible. Enlightening quotations too were posted every day, to help explain the main principles of Jainism. The quotes were posted in any of the three languages viz. English, Hindi and Gujarati. Every day one photograph of a Jain *Thirthankar* was posted for sight (*Darshan*).

The quantitative analysis of data collected for the present research of 92 days is presented in Tables 1 to 4. Table 1 shows that the total number of posts on 'Jain Site' was 113 while on 'Jain Gyan' were 198 or on an average one new post was published on 'Jain Site' while two new posts were published on 'Jain Gyan' per day.

Table 1: Total Number of Posts on Jain Site and Jain Gyan

Posts	Jain Site	Jain Gyan
Posts in June	28	49
Posts in July	39	68
Posts in August	46	81
Total number of Posts	113	198
Average Posts per day	1	2

Table 2 shows that the total number of likes on 'Jain Site' was 79313 while on 'Jain Gyan' were 31417 or on an average each post of 'Jain Site' received 701 likes while 'Jain Gyan' received 158 likes.

Table 2: Likes on Jain Site and Jain Gyan

<sup>6</sup> *Tithi* translates to "lunar day." Due to the lunar high tide on certain days of the month, it is believed that green leafy vegetables retain more water and therefore, more living beings. To limit violence against these beings, Jains may abstain from consuming green vegetables on the days of *Tithi*. This is a practice of discipline over the attachment to taste.



Likes	Jain Site	Jain Gyan
Likes in June	18163	7869
Likes in July	24638	8056
Likes in August	36512	15492
Total number of Likes	79313	31417
Average Likes per post	701	158

Table 3 shows that the total number of comments on 'Jain Site' was 2,137 while on 'Jain Gyan' were 853 or on an average each post of 'Jain Site' received 19 comments while 'Jain Gyan' received four comments.

Table 3: Comments on Jain Site and Jain Gyan

Comments	Jain Site	Jain Gyan
Comments in June	889	390
Comments in July	402	195
Comments in August	846	268
Total number of Comments	2137	853
Average Comments per post	19	4

Table 4 shows that the total number of posts shared to other Facebook profiles from 'Jain Site' was 8,442 while from 'Jain Gyan' were 2,322 or on an average 75 posts were shared to other Facebook profiles from 'Jain Site' while 12 posts were shared from 'Jain Gyan'.

Table 4: Posts Shared to Other Facebook Profiles from Jain Site and Jain Gyan

Sharing of Posts	Jain Site	Jain Gyan
Posts shared in June	2106	894
Posts shared in July	3864	542
Posts shared in August	2472	886
Total number of Posts shared	8442	2322
Average Posts shared	75	12

Further observations indicate that the highest number of likes was received on both the Facebook pages for the post of 'Photographs of Jain *Thirthankar*,' Jain Site (48,906) and Jain Gyan (23,828) as per Tables 5 and 6. Similarly the highest number of comments were received on both the Facebook pages for the post of 'Photographs of Jain *Thirthankar*,' Jain Site (911) and Jain Gyan (578) as per Tables 5 and 6. The highest number of shares as well were recorded on both the Facebook pages for the post of 'Photographs of Jain *Thirthankar*,' Jain Site (2,982) and Jain Gyan (1,273).

Table 5: Number of Posts, Likes, Comments and Shares of Jain Site

Jain Site				
Category of Post	Posts	Likes	Comments	Shares
Auspicious day	12	6537	180	1158
God	23	48906	911	2982
Monk picture	1	43	14	21
Monk video	3	333	9	100
Music Video	9	634	9	121
News	31	9298	584	712
Pilgrimage	3	395	9	67
Preaching	15	7404	315	1955
Quotes	9	5145	94	1260
Health	2	90	1	8
Jain site promotion	3	329	5	9
Hindi typing	1	52	2	2
Online Religious scriptures	1	147	4	47
<b>Total</b>	113	79313	2137	8442

Table 6: Number of Posts, Likes, Comments and Shares of Jain Gyan

Jain Gyan				
Categories of Post	No. of Posts	Likes	Comments	Shares
Auspicious Day	2	250	2	48
God	105	23828	578	1273
Monk Picture	3	330	22	36
Music Video	1	27	0	13
News	13	806	34	85
Pilgrimage	13	1964	53	99
Preaching	40	2861	145	496
Quotes	21	1351	19	272
<b>Total</b>	198	31417	853	2322

## Dominant Pattern

The three dominant patterns of religious communication on the two Facebook pages were observed. These were categorized as; 'one-to-one between the Internet user and the Page publisher'; 'one-to-one amongst the Internet users'; and 'group communication amongst Internet users and Page publisher.'

The Jain Site was observed to be more active in terms of likes, comments and shares as compared to Jain Gyan (Tables 5 and 6). This can be attributed to the place of origin of Jain Site which is published from Maharashtra and has the biggest population of Jain in India (1,301,843).<sup>7</sup> The categories of posts on Jain Site were much diverse with respect to Jain Gyan. There was a total of thirteen categories of posts on Jain Site, while Jain Gyan has eight categories of posts. Taking into consideration number of posts, likes, comments and shares, there was around 75 percent more activity happening on Jain Site as compared to Jain Gyan.

## Qualitative Analysis

The interpretations of the researcher based on her exposure to Jain religion are separately presented. This is the most important aspect of analysis as it provided the action scenario of Jainism in new media.

**Worship of Tirthankara.** Through the virtual posting of photographs of *Tirthankara* on the Facebook pages, the first ritual of worship by a householder is fulfilled. It was observed that these posts got the maximum likes. These likes can be converted to the number of followers visiting the site for virtual *Darshan* of *Tirthankara* without physically going to the temple. Further, these photographs had maximum number of shares which again can be attributed to the use of android mobile systems which automatically saves the photograph in its gallery for reuse. Though *Murti Puja* (Image Worship) finds a prominent place in some sects of Jainism, but here a follower can perform *Bhaav Puja* (Spiritual Worship) through these photographs.

**Worship of preceptors.** Through the posts on prominent Jain *Munis* (monks) and their photographs, the second ritual worship by a householder

<sup>7</sup> As per the data from [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/Census\\_data\\_finder/C\\_Series/Population\\_by\\_religious\\_communities.htm](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm). Data for 2011 is still not available on the website.

was fulfilled. Here too the number of likes were many in comparison to other, these again can be interpreted as virtual salutations to the preceptors.

**Study of religious scriptures and performing rituals of *Pratikramana* and *Samayika*.** Through the posts of Jain scriptures in audio-visual and textual formats the followers can fulfill their daily ritual of religious study. This simplifies things as one can access the scriptures anywhere, anytime. The importance and teachings of religious scriptures were explained in simple language for a better understanding of the Internet user. The Jain follower could also perform the rituals of meditation by just listening or reading out these scripture texts. Most of the texts had meanings attached to it, thus it becomes easier for a laymen to comprehend the religious teachings.

**Practice of self-control, austerity, non-violence and truthfulness.** Through various quotations and real life inspiring stories, the religious followers were motivated to walk on the path of self-control, austerity, non-violence and truthfulness, and the vows to be observed in the daily life of Jain laymen. There was a news post on Jain monks agitating for ban of consumption of non-vegetarian food near a prominent pilgrimage (*Palitana, Gujarat*) place. This post was well supported by Jain followers through likes, comments and shares. The thought inspiring religious quotes had maximum shares on Facebook pages.

**Practice of Vegetarianism and importance of drinking filtered water.** The posts on health benefits through *ayurvedic* (Indian method) treatments and drinking boiled water inspire a Jainism follower to lead a simple and ascetic life. There was a news post of a few Muslim sculpturers who abandoned non-vegetarian food, after etching an idol of *Tirthankara* for a Jain temple. Such inspiring stories motivate the followers to ascribe to the Jain way of living and help to build a consensus amongst the Jain youth towards the beliefs of Jainism.

**Celebrating *Paryushan Parva* online.** During the auspicious festival of *Paryushan*, the number of activities had increased in both the Facebook pages starting with announcements of Religious Guru's welcome ceremony for *Chaumasa* (four monsoon months), to reminder calls for the upcoming festivities, to announcements of fasting period, posting photographs of *Angi* (Decorations) of *Tirthankara* at prominent temples, to posting the online scriptures which help in performing the *Pratikramana* (sacred meditation)

ritual at home, last the sacred ritual of *Michaami Dukkadam* (begging for forgiveness) got maximum number of likes and comments. These all point towards the acceptance of virtual platform as the next place for religious promotion. Though there were only a few followers on these sites as compared to the actual population of Jains in India and the world over, it surely points towards a new beginning.

**Reminders for auspicious days.** The five *Tithis* and *Kalyanaks*<sup>8</sup> were always mentioned as separate postings early in the day for a Jain follower to organize those days on the path of renunciation and fasting.

**Promotion of parent website.** The Facebook page ‘Jain Site’ has continuously promoted its parent site. There was at least one post each month. There were dedicated followers too who helped in spreading the word by clicking in likes and sharing the said posts. The other Facebook page (Jain Gyan) did not adhere to such practices. The reason for the same cannot be analyzed here.

**Jain identity through the promotion of Jain i-cards.** The next big activity on the Jain Site was for the application and distribution of Jain Site i-cards which was linked with the minority status application (for Jain) and benefit information. On these posts maximum comments and questions were being asked from India and from other countries too. This proves that the Jains living abroad too are interested in such activities taking place in its motherland and wants to be an active participant in Jain social life. Thus the new media forms a great neighborhood for the Jain follower all over the world.

**Use of comments section as marketing corners.** In the comments section it was observed that the Jain salutations (*Jai Jinendra, Namō Jinanam*) were most prominent. Other than these there were users, posting advertisements on religious books, matrimonial sites and best pilgrimage packages in the comments section. As these comments were not deleted by the Facebook page administrator, it can be assumed as an official approval from the publisher’s end.

## Conclusion

The number of activities on both Facebook pages under observation are not sufficient enough to demonstrate how new media promotes Jain religion. There

were very few theological discussions on the Facebook pages, thus offering no space for community interactions. There is a complete lacuna of heuristic perspectives on communication of Jainism in new media. The expression of the followers in new media is limited to only likes and shares for religious communication of Jainism. The followers of Jainism in new media have still not caught up with the concept of contextual theology with respect to the study of *Tirthankara* rather propositional truths established via tradition or sacred scripture are taken for granted. Communication of Jainism in new media can be conceptualized as just transmission of religious knowledge, ideas, and information; it completely lacks Jain communal and meaning-making view of the followers interactions.

<sup>8</sup> Kalyanaks means auspicious events that took place in the lives of Tirthankars (liberated souls).

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## Appendix 1

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Details of two Facebook pages

Email Contact: [info@jainsite.com](mailto:info@jainsite.com)

Number of total Page likes as on Aug 31, 2014: 55, 258

Number of profiles talking about this Page as on Aug 31, 2014: 882

<sup>2</sup> Email Contact: [news@jaingyan.com](mailto:news@jaingyan.com)

Number of total page likes as on Aug 31, 2014: 13,084

Number of profiles talking about this page as on Aug 31, 2014: 1,752

## Social Media Use in Religious Communication: The Christian Migrants of Kerala, India

*Leslin Bastian*

The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more St. Paul's exclamation: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel."

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Pope Benedict XVI

2010 World Communication Day message

The advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed various developments in the digital media technology. Satellite television has become a household name in Asia and India. The web of the Internet has tapped everyone who could afford to own and use it. Cyberspace communication has been growing steadily during the past decade with new technology and features added everyday. WE are in the middle of unprecedented communication revolutions since the advent of the printing press. Today, Facebook has over 750 million used while three billion YouTube videos are watched everyday across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Digital media have turned out to be the fourth estate of communication. Information is available at a lightning speed. Today, religious communication has moved from Church to television to social media.

The Church has taken various steps in the recent years to tap the social media which is hardly known for the speed with which it adopts modern technology; the Church is surely, but slowly, joining the masses on social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. There are now more social network accounts than there are human beings on the earth and

<sup>1</sup> Church and New Media. <http://www.churchandnewmedia.com/#sthash.Cf3bYnkN.dpuf>

*Leslin Bastian, MA* is a research associate at the TALEEM Research Foundation, Ahmedabad, India.

## Communication, Culture and Buddhism in Asia: Structural Adaptation and Integration of Digital Media

*Binod C. Agrawal*

### Introduction

Radhakrishnan (1969:353) observes that the “Sixth Century B.C. was remarkable for the spiritual unrest and intellectual ferment in many countries. In China we had Lao Tzu and Confucius, in Greece Parmenides and Empedocles, in Iran Zarathustra, in India Mahavira and the Buddha. In that period many remarkable teachers worked upon their inheritance and developed new points of view.”

Scholars of Buddhism have agreed without any reservation that the Buddha was the founder of the religion who attained transcendental wisdom under the *Bodhi* tree. The Buddha himself did not announce the birth of new religion and remained a Hindu in which he was born until his death. He remained closely wedded to the idea of *Vaidic* religion though he opposed associated rituals and sacrifices of *Vaidic* religion. The Buddha remained firm in negating the ritualism and sacrifices as a part of religion (Radhakrishnan 1969). The Buddha believed in the conception of *dharma* considered as imminent order denoting the laws of nature. “For the Buddha, *dharma* or righteousness is the driving principle of the Universe” (Radhakrishnan 1969:341).

“The quest of religious India has been for the incomparable safety, fearlessness, *abhaya*, *moksa*, *nirvana*. It is natural for humans to strive to elevate themselves above earthly things, to go out from the world of sense, to free their souls from the trammels of existence and gross materiality, to

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break through the outer darkness into world of light and spirit. The Buddha aims at a new spiritual existence attained through *jnana* or *bodhi*, absolute illumination” (Radhakrishnan 1969:357). “The Buddha did not concede the reality of an unchangeable self for the self is something that can be built up by good thoughts and deeds, but yet he has to assume it” (Radhakrishnan 1969:359).

“Buddhism did not start as a new and independent religion. It was an offshoot of the more ancient faith of the Hindus, perhaps a schism or a heresy. While the Buddha agreed with the faith he inherited on the fundamentals of metaphysics and ethics, he protested against certain practices which were in vogue at the time. He refused to acquiesce in the Vedic ceremonialism” (Radhakrishnan 1969:361). Buddha’s humanism crossed racial and national barriers. Yet the chaotic condition of the world affairs reflects the chaos in men’s soul. History has become universal in spirit. Its subject matter is neither Europe nor Asia, neither East nor West, but humanity in all lands and ages (Radhakrishnan 1969).

I have paraphrased the essence of Buddhism and Buddha to raise a fundamental question as to how in spite of geo-physical obstacles, lack of means of transportation, political ideological differences, religious and linguistic barriers, three major religions namely Buddhism, Christianity and Islam spread across length and breadth of the globe. It should be clearly recognized that where Buddhism moved east ward from its place of origin in India, all the way to Japan. Christianity moved largely west ward from Jerusalem and Islam to all directions through largely in Western Asia and Northern Africa.

At a later date ambition and quest for territorial and political domination with power of sword, Islam moved across Asia and part of Europe. Christianity reached across the world both by persuasion and brutal force.

Buddhism remains an exception while propagating Buddhism. An article by poetess Kim Yang-shik observed that “Ancient sources reveal interesting stories about Korea and India. During first century A.D. a king named Kim-Suro of Kaya Kingdom married a Princess of Ayodhya, India... the religion, Buddhism has played an influential role in bringing the two countries closer. Old record suggests there had been a few exchanges in relation to propagating

Buddhist religion” (internet communication from Su-Kyung Han, Korea). However, Korean official records, museums and other sources are silent and explicitly recognize that Buddhism arrived from India instead China remains the major source of Buddhism for Korea.

Su-Kyung Han (2011) in a recent paper maintains that Korea is home of all major religions from Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam as major representative world religions with various cultural values. The diversity of religions is a major part of Korean cultural tradition. Buddhism was not seen to have any conflict with indigenous religions or Korean ‘nature worship’, because Korea accepted to blend Buddhism with Korean Shamanism. With wide acceptance of Buddhist followers and with the state support Buddhism during Goryeo period (918-1392) flowered while Confucianism played a subordinate role during this period in Korea.

### Communication Perspective of Religious Spread

One of the major dimensions in the foregoing description is as to how Buddhism spread accepted and integrated diverse cultures of Asia and what were the modes of communication to reach in ancient and surviving civilization? It raises some very serious questions about the process of religious communication, spread, and acceptance of a new religion on an already existing canvas of religious beliefs as a fresh layer of alien religious philosophy without major socio-political, cultural and ideological conflicts. It will remain an enigma as to through what process Buddhism in the existing culture got integrated within the culture and society of Korea, several thousand kilometers away from its origin. Same holds true for many countries of Asia like Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Autonomous Region of Tibet and China.

These religious dimensions are important areas of future research though there are glimpse and historical evidence to advance the view that cultural adaptation as a continuous process of change that allows over a period of time changes both in the original religious philosophy by absorbing local cultural traditions within the religious fold and in the process bring about cultural change by integrating religious doctrine for shaping day to day life and institutions that governs the social structure given society as a dynamic source of energy to be in continuous flux for change.

The communication revolution has invaded South Korea. Su-Kyung Han observed, “Today, young people obsessively use new modern means of media and communication technologies such as Internet and mobile phones with Internet access. Gaming or watching TV is possible anywhere you are, home or in the metro, in South Korea.... which is an essential part of their daily lives. The question is, however, how essential is religion for young people in their daily lives?”. At the same time religious media also attract young people to link their interests to spiritual world...who live in stressful Can consumerist society to master their problems? Can religion media give South Korean youth a peace of mind in such a society? Su-Kyung Han (2011:10) has the question: can religious media play any important role as adviser for personal and social issues in a society where there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor?” There is no definitive answer offered by Su-Kyung Han in her analysis since it is difficult to discern how digital media is getting integrated into the cultural ethos of South Korean society and also what is the actual adaptive mechanism for media mediated religion? I have raised three research issues for digital media propagating religion especially of Buddhism in several countries of Asia including South Korea, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

1. What kind of research paradigm will help discern the contribution of media in integrating religion into changing technological world of capitalism?
2. What is the process of communication keen to propagate persuasive, non-violent Buddhist method of spreading religion in fast changing digital world?
3. Will technological changes reduce religious beliefs and practices as fast moving consumer products which consumers can pickup from the media market as and when required?

On these three issues Su-Kyung Han has hinted in her research study that requires a great deal of in-depth analysis and contemplation for future.

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## Social Media Use in Religious Communication: The Christian Migrants of Kerala, India

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The Church has taken various steps in the recent years to tap the social media which is hardly known for the speed with which it adopts modern technology; the Church is surely, but slowly, joining the masses on social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. There are now more social network accounts than there are human beings on the earth and

<sup>1</sup> Church and New Media. <http://www.churchandnewmedia.com/#sthash.Cf3bYnkN.dpuf>

*Leslin Bastian, MA* is a research associate at the TALEEM Research Foundation, Ahmedabad, India.

thousands belong to Catholic clergy, sisters, parishes, schools, publications and other organizations.<sup>2</sup> Within the current digital media scenario the attempt is to analyze social media use by migrant Christians of Kerala, India.

### Dawn of Christianity in Kerala

The oldest Christians in India live in Kerala. They accepted Christianity in 52AD after (the local Brahmins had) deliberations with St Thomas the Apostle who came to Kerala to propagate the Good News. The Mar Thomas Church claims to owe its origin to the Apostle (Tatford, 1987; pp. 221). Migrations among Kerala Christians are known for over several millennia. The recent economic boom in the Middle East has attracted Kerala Christians to migrate to the Muslim countries in the Middle East for employment apart from several Christian countries in the West. Of the total Indian population of 1,028,610,328 according to the Census of India, Christians constitute 2.3 percent of the total population. Within the Indian subcontinent, three northeastern states—Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya are largely Christian. Among other states/union territories (UT) like Manipur, Goa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Kerala, and Arunachal Pradesh have considerable presence of Christian population to the total population of the state/UT.<sup>3</sup>



Population of Christians in India by State  
(Image from Wikimedia Commons)

### Aim

The paper focuses on the social media use in religious communication by Kerala Christians who largely migrated after India's independence to Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. Further, the paper attempts to analyze the way digital and social media are accessed and utilized by the migrant Kerala Christians in Ahmedabad for religious as well as non-religious purposes.

### Study

The paper is based on a survey of social media initiated by TALEEM Research Foundation and a pilot study was carried out by interns of a business school in Ahmedabad which was followed by a large survey of three religious groups namely Hindu, Muslim and Christian during February-April 2015.<sup>4</sup> The present paper is based on a survey of 211 Christian respondents in the total sample of 711. For the purpose of data collection, an English questionnaire was prepared which was modified after initial pre-testing and few more questions were added in the Christian questionnaire. For the purpose of sampling snow ball technique was used. The respondents were requested to fill the questionnaire. Continuous efforts were made to visit the houses of the individual families and individuals with a request to complete the questionnaire and return it. Response rate was high since the author knew most of the individuals who were also part of the Church congregation of the author. The whole process of data collection took about a month between March and April 2015 and the data entry and analysis was carried out in the following month.

The sample consisted of 54 percent male and 46 percent female in the age group of 18-25 years, 26-40 years and 41 years and above. The average age of the respondents was 35.1 percent. In the present study, 43.1 percent of the respondents are graduates, followed by 27.5 percent who have completed high school, while 19.9 percent are master's degree holders and 3.8 percent had professional degrees. Only 4.7 percent of the respondents are below 10<sup>th</sup> pass. Almost one-third or 33.2 percent migrated to Ahmedabad between the

<sup>4</sup> Three second trimester students—Hardik M. Shingala, Mohammadsuzan A. Shaik, and Vivek R. Kurup of Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad worked as interns from February 23-April 11, 2015. The students were guided by Dr. Binod C. Agrawal and Dr. M. I. Khan who carried out the pilot study of the present survey. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ncronline.org/news/people/church-takes-steps-social-media>

<sup>3</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx).

years 1981-1990 while 29.8 percent of the respondents came to Ahmedabad in 2001-2010 (Table 1).

In the city of Ahmedabad, in the early fifties of the last century, a large wave of Christians along with Hindus and Muslims from Kerala started migrating with their families (58.3 percent) while 32.2 percent as single persons to Gujarat state in search of work. Since then, there has been a continuous migration of Kerala Christians, Muslims and Hindu in Gujarat. The Kerala migrants are considered enterprising. The Christians among them have built churches while they attend services in Malayalam, their mother tongue. Similarly, Hindus have also built a few temples. The focus of this paper is on the Kerala Christians.

### Media and Church

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church embrace motion pictures, radio and television and with the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Internet and social media were also accepted. The digital world of social media offers great potential for those hoping to spread the Gospel message, but comes with the occasional hazard of opposition. Pope Benedict XVI approves of social media and its vast potential. With the click of a button Christians can reach millions of believers and non-believers alike with the message of the Gospel and the call to follow the Lord. Pope Benedict XVI is considered the first pope to have his own YouTube and Facebook accounts.

The Church documents advocate for the use of social media to communicate the Gospel message to a younger audience and those that are increasingly tech-savvy. This medium is a strong tool for the clergy as well. “Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audio-visual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis”<sup>5</sup>

As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his message for the 44<sup>th</sup> World Day of Communication, this new form of media “can offer priests and all pastoral workers a wealth of information and content that was difficult to access before, and facilitate forms of collaboration and greater communion in ways that were unthinkable in the past.”

The Church can use social media to encourage respect, dialogue, and honest relationships—in other words, “true friendship” (43<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day Message). To do so requires us to approach social media as a powerful means of evangelization and to consider the Church’s role in providing a Christian perspective to digital literacy.

### Digital Media Ownership and Religious Use

Today there are more than a dozen non-stop dedicated satellite Christian television channels for Christian viewers across India in various Indian languages apart from English. Almost all Kerala Christian participants in the sample own television (94.3 percent) of which 90.4 percent have direct-to-home (DTH) connections and 9.6 percent have cable connections (Table 2).

The digital media is used by 82.5 percent of respondents mostly for entertainment. It is followed by 59.7 percent who use it for gaining knowledge in their professional fields. Only 46.5 percent of respondents (56.7 percent women and 38.6 percent men) use digital media to receive religious messages (Table 3).

Only 17.5 percent of the respondents have religious apps in their smartphones and only 15.2 percent of them have read any religious e-books. These are mostly young adults in the age group of 26-40 years who have religious apps in their phones and have read religious e-books. It should be mentioned that as much as 93.8 percent prefer and have read the Bible in printed form. At the same time, gospel music is heard by 75.8 percent of respondents. The largest number of gospel music listeners are in Malayalam (58.3 percent), followed by English (34.6 percent) and Hindi (7.1 percent) (Table 3).

Two out of five (39.9 percent) view religious channels on regular basis while 23.3 percent watch it only during festival period. More women (54.3 percent) than men (27.4 percent) watch religious channels regularly. The large majority of regular viewers are 41 years old and above age group (82.4 percent), who are mostly housewives, since they have more time to spare for watching religious television. The most popular religious channel is Shalom TV watched by 95.3 percent of viewers (Table 4).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=36943>

### Impact of Religious Television

Almost five out of ten respondents (46.1 percent) spend 16-30 minutes per day on an average to watch religious programs, while 21.1 percent of respondents spend 31-60 minutes. 6.3 percent of respondents watch religious programs for more than one hour (Table 4).

Of the various religious telecasts, 61.7 percent of respondents prefer listening to and watching preachings followed by night vigils (45.3 percent), celebration of mass (35.9 percent), listening to gospel music (33.6 percent), and live worship programs (29.7 percent) while documentaries and short films is preferred by 11.7 percent of respondents. Though 63.1 percent of respondents watch religious channel regularly or during festivals only 6.3 percent of respondents ever called on a live TV program for religious query. Religious channels can broing about a positive change in the attitude of the viewers. 53.1 percent of the respondents feel tha ththey were able to differentiate between right and wrong by watching religious programs. Further, it should be mentioned that 41.4 percent of respondents feel that their viewing of religious programs have increased in one year (Table 4).

The Malayalam-speaking Christian community has become multilingual and negotiated with the dominant language, culture and religion in their daily life. They have made use of the digital media and social media to meet the Christian religious quest and maintain their social and religious identity in the midst of Hindu, Muslim and Jain employers, business associates and co-workers who speak Gujarati or Hindi apart from English.

### Social Media Ownership and Use

**Facebook.** In the sample of 211, only 61.6 percent of respondents have Facebook account which is accessed through smartphones by 80.0 percent of 61.6 percent similarly out of 211 only 24.6 percent access it through their laptops. Most respondents prefer to liek a religious post (75.4 percent) while only 56.9 percent share it on their wall and only 36.2 percent commented on the posts among them (Table 5).

A Facebook post is shared by 84.2 percent of friends and co-workers while 63.2 percent shared with relatives and family members. 50 percent of respondents who are mostly students shared it with their classmates. While 23.7

percent of respondents shared it with non-Christian friends. Festival greetings (71.6 percent) are the most liked, shared or commented by the respondents on Facebook followed by gospel messages (63.7 percent) and prayer requests (22.5 percent). Religious pages are liked by 66.0 percent (Table 5).

**WhatsApp.** In the sample of 211 respondents, only 123 or 58.3 percent of the respondents have access to WhatsApp and use it for religious purposes. Relatively, more males (65.8 percent) compared to females (49.5 percent) use this medium. Young respondents between the age group of 18-25 years (86.0 percent) and 26-40 years (86.8 percent) use WhatsApp the most. 78.9 percent of respondents shared religious messages through WhatsApp while almost 91.9 percent received religious messages through it. Gospel messages (80.0 percent) followed by bible verses (69.9 percent) and religious videos (50.4 percent) are most shared on Whats App. Respondents in the age group of 41 years and above use it more for sharing gospel messages (84.6 percent) compared to other age groups (Table 6).

**Religious Websites and Twitter.** Very small number of respondents (17 or 8.1 percent) open religious websites and Twitter (5 or 2.4 percent). An interesting point to be highlighted is that in both cases, female respondents use Twitter (3.1 percent) and access religious websites more (9.3 percent) as compared to male and female respondents (1.8 percent and 7 percent respectively). Among the respondents who use websites for religious purposes, 47.1 percent have raised questions related to their faith while 76.5 percent downloaded gospel songs from the website followed by preaching (41.2 percent) and 17.6 percent do not download anything from the website (Table 6). Twitter is mostly accessed through smartphones (60.0) percent, laptop and computer at workplace (40.0 percent). Twitter users don't follow any religious heads or tweeted or re-tweeted anything about religion (Table 7).

**YouTube.** YouTube is least preferred as 42 or 19.9 percent of respondents prefer to use it to watch religious videos. Among them, seven out of ten or 76.2 percent of respondents use YouTube to download religious videos while only 9.5 percent uploaded religious videos. More men (86.4 percent) downloaded religious videos compared to women (65.0 percent) (Table 7). The downloading trend was mostly seen among the young users between the age group of 18-25 years (81.5 percent) and 26-40 years (75.0 percent). Most of the respondents prefer to watch gospel songs (83.3 percent) followed by live worship and preaching (31.0

percent). 11.9 percent of respondents watch Eucharistic celebrations on YouTube (Table 7). The use of social media as indicated in the analysis is marginal while television viewing remains most prevalent. Social media at present has limited access and use by Christians in Kerala in spite of their high literacy and digital media ownership though they tend to encourage their children to use digital media for religious communication.

### Social Media Impact

Further analysis indicate that in spite of digital and social media use for religious purposes the inclination of the respondent towards religion has remained unchanged as indicated by 62.1 percent of respondents at the same time 36.0 percent feel that their religious faith has enhanced. Same is the case for increased religious faith for 35.5 percent of respondents and decreased for 1.9 percent. However, the faith has remained the same level even after exposure to digital and social media for religious purpose while for 62.6 percent it has increased.

Respondents were asked to share their experience with social media. As much as 43.6 percent of respondents feel that it has helped them to understand their religious much better while 36.6 percent feel no change. For 29.9 percent of respondents it has helped them deepen their belief followed by 23.2 percent of respondents who are able to set their goals as per Christian belief. It seems social media still doesn't have human touch. The respondents are still dependent on religious leaders for seeking religious comfort.

### Conclusion

Even after large-scale penetration of digital and social media and high degree of exposure. The most preferred source for seeking religious information is the Church, followed by television. Social media like WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and blogs have limited presence and impact in which least preferred source is blog, Instagram and Pinterest.

The compelling image of television has intrinsic power due to assumed persuasive effects. It is attractive and influential to most of the viewers. Television has extremely high access and presence in everyday life and consciousness of its viewers in the home or at the workplace (Hoover, 1988: pp. 224).

The Vatican itself is well connected to social media. And, like the first generation of digital media and social communication such as radio and

television, the official arm of the Church uses the new instruments of social communication while encouraging all members of the Church to become digital disciples, especially in the context of embarking upon the New Evangelization.<sup>6</sup>

The digital doors of the Church are wide open today and everyone is welcome to be a part of this community to share their testimonies and fellowship. However, analysis indicates limited use of social media hence the future use of social media and its acceptance in religious communication is yet to be established and defined.

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- <http://www.catholicspirit.com/catholic-church-promotes-use-of-social-media-but-with-caution/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.catholicspirit.com/catholic-church-promotes-use-of-social-media-but-with-caution/>

2Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Male	Female	Total
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	100.00	0.0	54.0
Female	0.00	100.0	46.00
<b>Age</b>			
18-25 years	47.4	42.3	45.0
26-40 years	15.8	20.6	18.0
41 years and above	36.8	37.1	37.0
<b>Age Mean</b>	<b>35.8</b>	<b>34.2</b>	<b>35.1</b>
<b>Education</b>			
<b>Below 10<sup>th</sup> grade</b>	5.3	4.1	4.7
10 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	28.9	25.8	27.5
Bachelor's degree	43.9	42.3	43.1
Master's degree	16.7	23.7	19.9
Professional degree	4.4	3.1	3.8
Others	0.9	1.0	0.9
<b>Year of Migration to Ahmedabad</b>			
Born Here-Not specified	4.4	3.2	3.8
Before 1980	31.0	22.1	26.9
1981-1990	30.1	36.8	33.2
1991-2000	28.3	31.6	29.8
After 2001	6.2	6.4	6.2
<b>Reasons for Migration</b>			
For Higher Education	0.9	2.1	1.4
In Search of Work	47.4	14.4	32.2
Family Migration	47.4	71.1	58.3
To join family/relatives	2.6	8.2	5.2
For business/not specified/others	1.8	0.0	2.9
<b>Current Occupation</b>			
Student	32.5	29.9	31.3
Service	61.4	40.2	51.7
Housewife	0.0	27.8	12.8

Retired/Unemployed/Business	6.2	2.0	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>211</b>

Table 2. Media Access

Access	Male	Female	Total
<b>Television</b>			
Yes	93.9	94.8	94.3
No	6.1	5.2	5.7
<b>Type of TV Connection</b>			
DTH Connection	92.5	88.0	90.4
Cable Connection	7.5	12.0	9.6
<b>Smartphone with Internet</b>			
Yes	71.9	49.5	61.6
No	28.1	50.5	38.4
<b>Internet Facility</b>			
Yes	63.2	53.6	58.8
No	36.8	46.4	41.2
<b>Laptop</b>			
Yes	39.5	39.2	39.9
No	60.5	60.8	60.7
<b>Desktop Computer at Home</b>			
Yes	40.4	29.9	35.5
No	59.6	70.1	64.5
<b>Desktop Computer in Office</b>			
Yes	29.8	19.6	25.1
No	70.2	80.4	74.9
<b>Radio</b>			
Yes	51.8	46.4	49.3
No	48.2	53.6	50.7
<b>Other Devices</b>			
Yes	2.6	2.1	2.4
No	97.4	97.9	97.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>211</b>

Table 3. Purposes of Using Digital Media and Time Spent

Purpose	Male	Female	Total
Entertainment	85.1	79.4	82.5
Knowledge	64.0	54.6	59.7
Professional Use	36.0	30.9	33.6
News	51.8	38.1	45.5
Religious Matters	38.6	56.7	46.9
<b>Religious Apps</b>			
Yes	18.4	16.5	17.5
No	75.4	79.4	77.3
Did not specify	6.1	4.1	5.2
<b>Read Religious Book</b>			
Yes	89.5	99.0	93.8
No	10.5	1.0	6.2
<b>Read Religious e-Books</b>			
Yes	13.2	17.5	15.2
No	86.8	82.5	84.8
Listening to Gospel Music			
Yes	72.8	79.4	75.8
No	27.2	20.6	24.2
<b>Language Preference</b>			
Malayalam	57.9	58.8	58.3
English	35.1	34.0	34.6
Hindi	7.0	7.2	7.1
Total	114	97	211
<b>Average Time Spent in Minutes (Per Day)</b>			
Television	88.3	101.9	94.5
Website	17.2	11.2	14.5
WhatsApp	43.0	34.0	38.9
YouTube	6.8	2.9	5.0
Twitter	0.0	0.6	0.3
Facebook	22.4	16.9	19.8
Pinterest	0.0	1.2	0.6

Instagram	0.2	0.0	0.1
Blog	0.1	2.1	1.0

Table 4. Media Use

Digital Media	Male	Female	Total
<b>Watch Religious TV Channels</b>			
Regularly	27.4	54.3	39.9
During festival	28.3	17.4	23.2
No	44.3	28.3	36.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Religious TV Channel(s) Most Watched</b>			
Shalom TV	98.4	92.5	95.3
Powervision	1.6	1.5	1.6
Athimeeya Yathra	3.3	1.5	2.3
Goodness TV	4.9	0.0	2.3
God TV	8.2	4.5	6.3
Not Specified	1.6	1.5	1.6
<b>Type of Religious Programs Watched</b>			
Night Vigils	37.7	52.2	45.3
Celebration of Mass	31.1	40.3	35.9
Preaching	57.4	65.7	61.7
Live worship	21.3	37.3	29.7
Gospel Music	39.3	28.4	33.6
Short films	16.4	7.5	11.7
Documentaries	14.8	9.0	11.7
Others	0.0	1.5	0.8
Did not specify	0.0	1.5	0.8
<b>Average time in a day spent on TV for religious programs</b>			
15 minutes or less	21.3	10.4	15.6
16-30 minutes	45.9	46.3	46.1
31-60 minutes	18.0	23.9	21.1
61-120 minutes	8.2	4.5	6.3
121+ minutes	1.6	10.4	6.3

Did not specify	4.9	4.5	4.7
Mean	38.9	59.3	49.6
<b>Able to differentiate between right and wrong</b>			
Yes	41.0	64.2	53.1
No	3.3	1.5	2.3
Cannot say	55.7	34.3	44.5
<b>Ever called on a live religious program</b>			
Yes	4.9	7.5	6.3
No	95.1	92.5	93.8
<b>Change in viewing religious program in one year</b>			
Increased	32.8	49.3	41.4
Decreased	3.3	0.0	1.6
Remained the same	31.1	25.4	28.1
Cannot say	32.8	25.4	28.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>128</b>

Table 5. Social Media Account (Facebook)

Facebook	Male	Female	Total
Facebook Account			
Yes	65.8	56.7	61.6
No	34.2	43.3	38.4
<b>Access to Facebook Account</b>			
Smartphone	84.0	74.5	80.0
Desktop computer at home	22.7	25.5	23.8
Laptop	22.7	27.3	24.6
Desktop computer (office/place of work/place of study)	12.0	18.2	14.6
Did not specify	1.3	0.0	0.8
<b>Like religious posts on Facebook</b>			
Yes	77.3	72.7	75.4
No	22.7	27.3	24.6
<b>Share religious posts on Facebook</b>			
Yes	48.0	69.1	56.9
No	52.0	30.9	43.1

<b>Comment on religious posts on Facebook</b>			
Yes	29.3	45.5	36.2
No	70.7	54.5	63.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Sharing of Religious Posts on Facebook</b>			
Classmates	57.9	42.1	50.0
Friends co-worker	84.2	84.2	84.2
Relatives-family member	57.9	68.4	63.2
Teachers	13.2	18.4	15.8
With non-Christian friends	26.3	21.1	23.7
Not specified	2.6	2.6	2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Type of religious message you like/share/comment on Facebook</b>			
Gospel messages	61.7	66.7	63.7
Festival greetings	76.7	64.3	71.6
Prayer requests	21.7	23.8	22.5
Others	1.7	2.4	2.0
Not specified	6.7	2.4	4.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Religious pages liked on Facebook</b>			
Yes	60.0	75.0	66.0
No	35.0	22.5	30.0
Not specified	5.0	2.5	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 6. Social Media Account (WhatsApp/Websites)

WhatsApp/Websites	Male	Female	Total
<b>Have WhatsApp Account</b>			
Yes	65.8	49.5	58.3
No	34.2	50.5	41.7
<b>Share religious messages on WhatsApp</b>			
Yes	74.7	85.4	78.9



No	25.3	14.6	21.1
<b>Receive religious messages on WhatsApp</b>			
Yes	90.7	93.8	91.9
No	9.3	6.3	8.1
<b>Type of Information you send/receive on WhatsApp</b>			
Gospel messages	81.4	77.8	80.0
Verses from the religious book	67.1	73.3	69.6
Talk about religious books	8.6	13.3	10.4
Religious videos	48.6	53.3	50.4
No. I do not send-receive messages	2.9	0.0	1.7
Others	1.4	4.4	2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Do you follow or visit religious websites for seeking religious information</b>			
Yes	7.0	9.3	8.1
No, I do not follow	93.0	90.7	91.9
<b>Ever raised queries related to faith</b>			
Yes	37.5	55.6	47.1
No	62.5	44.4	52.9
<b>Downloaded from religious websites</b>			
Gospel songs	62.5	88.9	76.5
Preaching	50.0	33.3	41.2
Others	12.5	11.1	11.8
<b>I have not downloaded anything from the websites</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>17.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>

Table 7. Social Media Account-YouTube/ Twitter

YouTube/Twitter	Male	Female	Total
<b>Watch Religious Videos on YouTube</b>			
Yes	19.3	20.6	19.9
No	80.7	79.4	80.1
<b>Downloaded Religious Videos from YouTube</b>			
Yes	86.4	65.0	76.2
No	13.6	35.0	23.8

<b>Updated Religious Videos on YouTube</b>			
Yes	9.1	10.0	9.5
No	90.9	90.0	90.5
<b>Type of Religious Videos</b>			
Live Worship	31.8	30.0	31.0
Gospel Songs	90.9	75.0	83.3
Preaching of various preachers	22.7	40.0	31.0
Celebration of Mass	4.5	20.0	11.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Twitter account</b>			
Yes	1.8	3.1	2.4
No	98.2	96.9	97.6
<b>Accessing Twitter Account</b>			
Smartphone	50.0	66.7	60.0
Computer at home	50.0	0.0	20.0
Laptop	50.0	33.3	40.0
Computer in office/place of work/ place of study	0.0	66.7	40.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>

Table 8. Religious Access, Encouragement, Inclination and Reduction of Dependency

Easy Access to Social and Digital Media	Male	Female	Total
Yes	73.7	72.2	73.0
No	3.5	1.0	2.4
Maybe	228	26.8	24.6
<b>Encourage Kids to use Digital Media for Religious Message</b>			
Yes	88.6	876	88.2
Better Understanding by two-way communication	5.3	3.1	4.3
Low reliability, accessibility and others	5.9	9.3	7.6
<b>Inclination towards religion after using digital media</b>			
Increased	36.8	35.1	36.0
Decreased	1.8	2.1	1.9
Remained the same	61.4	62.9	62.1
<b>Digital Media and Christian Faith</b>			

## Communication, Culture and Buddhism in Asia: Structural Adaptation and Integration of Digital Media

*Binod C. Agrawal*

### Introduction

Radhakrishnan (1969:353) observes that the “Sixth Century B.C. was remarkable for the spiritual unrest and intellectual ferment in many countries. In China we had Lao Tzu and Confucius, in Greece Parmenides and Empedocles, in Iran Zarathustra, in India Mahavira and the Buddha. In that period many remarkable teachers worked upon their inheritance and developed new points of view.”

Scholars of Buddhism have agreed without any reservation that the Buddha was the founder of the religion who attained transcendental wisdom under the *Bodhi* tree. The Buddha himself did not announce the birth of new religion and remained a Hindu in which he was born until his death. He remained closely wedded to the idea of *Vaidic* religion though he opposed associated rituals and sacrifices of *Vaidic* religion. The Buddha remained firm in negating the ritualism and sacrifices as a part of religion (Radhakrishnan 1969). The Buddha believed in the conception of *dharma* considered as imminent order denoting the laws of nature. “For the Buddha, *dharma* or righteousness is the driving principle of the Universe” (Radhakrishnan 1969:341).

“The quest of religious India has been for the incomparable safety, fearlessness, *abhaya*, *moksa*, *nirvana*. It is natural for humans to strive to elevate themselves above earthly things, to go out from the world of sense, to free their souls from the trammels of existence and gross materiality, to

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