



Research Article

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# Sacred Screens: Mobile Phones and Temple Worship in India During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Internet technologies have reduced the distance between people and places. The internet and mobile phones gainfully rose to a must have devices for everyday communication. The use of mobile phones for the purpose of religious worship and archive gaining momentum over the years. Due to covid-19 it has made the religious institutions innovate and offer similar experiential worship to the devotees. The practice of keeping the images of gods in digital places has clues from the physical places like calendars, framed photographs and idols made with a variety of metal, rock and earth. But the digital has given an opportunity to keep the most believed god or goddesses as screen saver, live viewing of Aarti (worship prayers), offering donations etc.

The study aimed to explore how the internet and mobile phone infrastructures have reshaped the idea of worship, which includes every prayer, sacred offerings, and keeping the memoirs of god and goddesses in Hindu religion in India. The study identified the most popular Hindu temples includes Tirupati Balaji, Vaishno devi temple, Shree Jagannath Temple based on geographical location as well as diversity of devotees. The three temples have a grand history and are situated in three different parts of India.

The study also incorporated the interview with the devotees for understanding the mediating of devotion through mobile phones. The mobile phone practices of sacred and devotional activities were also studied.

## INTRODUCTION

The integration of new technologies, specifically smartphones, and the internet, has given rise to novel religious rituals rooted in digital practices within spiritual culture. Virtual realms now abound with various forms of religious observances. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent impacts, such as city-wide lockdowns, the enforcement of social and physical distancing, the closure of places of worship, and the shift to online communication, have compelled ordinary individuals to turn to their digital devices, particularly smartphones, to engage in their daily religious practices. This trend is not exclusive to one single religion. In India, these new technologies have permeated the mechanisms of everyday religious rituals. Therefore, the research endeavor seeks to

investigate how internet and mobile phone infrastructures have become integral to the concept of worship, with a specific focus on the most renowned Hindu temples, including Tirupati Balaji, Vaishno Devi Temple, and Shree Jagannath Temple.

The precautions and measures implemented during the pandemic period revealed a complex mix of emotions, desires, and social commitments that individuals naturally possess due to their daily lives. The lived experiences and emotions in formal society are not easy to express formally and Williams describes it as "structures of feelings" (Williams, 1977, p. 131). Covid pushed the boundaries of lived experiences with respect to religion, the digital platforms and mobile phones are windows to express, share and learn one's own Bhakti or devotion individually as well as collectively engaging in faith in new ways. Amid

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various Covid restrictions, people found a new way to celebrate their religious festivals. Bengali Hindus in Britain adopted a virtual method to celebrate Durga Puja through live streaming, and even people from India participated virtually (Mukherjee, 2022).

Williams' theory helps us understand this shift not as a rigid ideological change but as a lived, evolving experience of faith, where emotions, technology, and spirituality intersect in new, unstructured ways before becoming part of formal Hindu religious practice.

The physical world strongly influenced people's thoughts and emotions during the pandemic. This interplay between institutional structures and emotional experiences is tightly interconnected and largely evident in everyday life. Consequently, the adoption of digital religious practices served as a way for believers to find meaning and engage with their faith.

One of the most evident consequences of the changing social and cultural landscape in practicing religious rituals and traditional spirituality has been the gradual transition of websites, mobile phones and wearable devices which are specially designed devices to as well as smart watches to provide prayer reminders, spiritual guidance and quick resource access were used for expressing faith and engaging in religious rites into the "phygital" realm, encompassing both physical and digital spaces. This shift is a result of the increasing digitalization of everyday life, which blurs the boundaries between conventional binaries such as the self and the other, the individual and the group, and the living body and the machine (Reading, 2009). Through these digital rituals, a sense of mutual connection and engagement is fostered, moving beyond mere spectatorship and reinforcing interactive experiences. Ultimately, this enhances the participatory nature of digital religious practices for ordinary individuals.

As Nietzsche (2008) says "God is dead and we killed him" due to the penetration of modernism into the mechanics of everyday life. Contrastingly, new technologies helped in bringing gods closer to the devotees during covid-19 pandemic where life is uncertain. Utilizing smartphones for religious practices exemplifies Jenkins' (2006) concepts of cultural consolidation and media convergence. Jenkins argued that the society is witnessing the final stages of integrating technologies and media, leading to a new hybrid form that defies traditional differentiations between mass media and interpersonal communication, as well as between senders and receivers, thus, lines between producer and consumer have blurred. This blending occurs not only at the technological level, where features are shared across various digital platforms but also in terms of genre and content, which are no longer confined to a single medium. This breakdown of predefined functions, both within the media and among users, fosters a participatory culture that promotes dialogue, active involvement, and content sharing.

The study investigates the role of smartphones in religious practices, specifically examining how individuals integrate new technology into their religious rituals. It aims to understand the significance and meaning that devotees attribute to smartphones as expressions of their religious identity. Additionally, the research explores how devotees utilize mobile phones to engage in spiritual activities. The study is based on in-depth interviews conducted using snowball sampling at three prominent Hindu temples.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Casey (2001), the relocation of religion and its physical rituals from the tangible world to the virtual realm has contributed to the democratization of the religious sphere. This transition offers individuals an equal platform to share their personal experiences, raising concerns for Casey regarding the online practice and sharing of religious activities. Casey suggests that digital resources for religious engagement have the potential to substitute traditional religious figures. Contrary to the notion that online religious activity is diminishing, Helland (2010) emphasizes the flourishing nature of online religious engagement in Hinduism. It is noteworthy that an expanding community of practitioners now considers online religious activities as an essential component of their overall religious life. These individuals not only utilize the Internet for philanthropy but also engage in long-distance ritual practices at digitally connected temples in India. Significantly, they have played a pioneering role in the development and promotion of virtual pilgrimages. In her work, Nanda, M. (2011) emphasizes the profound changes in religious practices, the commercialization of spirituality, and the emergence of Hindu nationalism in the era of globalization. The author delves into the process of commodifying Hindu rituals, ceremonies, and artifacts, underscoring the shift toward a market-oriented outlook on religion. Nanda also highlights the growing influence of entrepreneurial figures who meet the market's demand for spiritual goods and services. Additionally, she argues the digitalization of religious rituals is a significant factor contributing to the globalization of Hinduism.

### Digitalization of Religion

Understanding the new facets of contemporary life relies on recognizing the importance of digitalization (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). The digital domain brings forth an extensive range of virtual representations, instant communication, pervasive media, and global interconnectedness, which profoundly shape human experiences in the physical world. By placing the groups' spiritual identity in context, smartphones offer a distinct instrument for individuals to engage in religious rituals and cultivate their religious identity (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Consequently, new media technologies play a vital role in religious organizations and energize religious activism.

Religious communication refers to the dissemination of religious concepts or symbols through specific channels. However, the study of religion in the digital realm, which encompasses processes such as mediation, transmediation, and remediation across various interconnected, mobile, and networked platforms, is still a relatively new area of research (Couldry, 2012). Consequently, this emerging phenomenon has contributed to the development of the convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). Media convergence is crucial in the online transformation of Hindu culture as old images and posters of Hindu gods are being modified and shared on various new media platforms in new ways (Bhatia, 2020)

Campbell and Evolvi, (2020) suggests that digital religion is a unique cultural sphere where religious practices are shaped by digital media. However, it is not entirely separate from traditional or offline religious expressions. Instead, it exists as an interconnected dimension where religious beliefs, rituals, and identities are mediated through digital technologies.

With the rise of the internet and digital technologies, there has been an emergence of online religious practices in Hinduism. Madhavi Mallapragada (2010) in her study focused on online Hindu temple sites and services argues that online Darshan, online customs and online Hinduism led to emergence of a 'desktop deity culture'. However, the proliferation of smartphones has added new dimensions to it and easy access to online networks has made online Hindu practices more convenient for the people.

COVID-19 restrictions, such as social distancing measures and the closure of holy shrines, have significantly affected individuals' emotional well-being. Consequently, the use of VR applications for pilgrimage experiences has surged in recent years (Dowson, 2020). The advancement of technology has notably influenced religious identity and practices, leading to significant transformations.

The ability to access multiple religious experiences through a single device (a smartphone) has transformed Hindu worship from a place-based activity to a platform-based experience, redefining sacred space. Mobile application has converted it to a digital temple.

Apps like ISKCON's Krishna Consciousness App, Sadhguru's Inner Engineering, and Gayatri Pariwar's Mantra Sadhana consolidate religious texts, devotional music, live pujas, and community forums into a single digital ecosystem.

Digital platforms host numerous spiritual and religious apps, attracting millions of users. These applications offer diverse services that support religious and spiritual practices. With over 432 million Indians accessing the internet via mobile phones and an average adult spending approximately three hours online daily, the rise of mobile internet usage has led to increased reliance on digital platforms for various aspects of life, including religion (Mathur, 2019).

It has also witnessed user generated content through their active participation, co-create the devotional content across multiple digital platforms. These include sharing of bhajans, text based visual content with personal religious interpretations creating a new converged Hindu religious discourse online.

This perspective on religious communication refers to how individuals, groups, stakeholders, and online participants utilize digital media in addition to traditional and interpersonal means to communicate. Through this process, they actively shape and organize their religious practices, essentially engaging in self-production (Mujkić, 2007). From this standpoint, communication plays a crucial role in enabling a religious community to sustain itself by establishing digital boundaries within its environment and engaging in self-referential communication. Self-referential communication involves activities like sharing information about the organization's achievements with both internal and external audiences, responding to prayers, and regularly presenting spiritual leaders' mantras and teachings (Cheong et al., 2014).

The intersection of new technology and religion, characterized by its dynamic and performative nature, offers a broader empirical perspective on emerging forms of religious practices. This convergence has significantly impacted spiritual practices, leading to transformative changes and restructuring within the realm of religion in the digital sphere (Cheong, 2017). In a "post-modern" world where religion has become more distant (Flory & Miller, 2016), the widespread presence of digital devices has enabled religious stakeholders to persist in society. They actively employ visual platforms to strengthen communication with individuals, thus resisting marginalization.

Ordinary individuals and religious people utilize smartphones to regularly share updates, informing and celebrating their activities and achievements, thereby establishing the legitimacy of the organization's purpose (Peterson, 2020). Additionally, digital platforms are employed to create prayer symbols and terminology that foster unity within the organization. They actively engage in sharing and endorsing intercessory requests, encouraging communal interaction and contributing to the co-creation of the organization's shared understanding. Through these ongoing mediated communicative actions, a "virtual self" (Varela, 1999) is formed, representing a cohesive social collective. The aspirations, functioning, and success of this collective rely on the constitutive power of communication. According to this viewpoint, religion has permeated not just the intricacies of people's daily lives, but has also crossed boundaries to spread religious teachings that do not clash with the activities of stakeholders in the physical realm. The aim is to reorganize their communication methods by integrating online resources that inform and inspire their work.



Religious leaders possess the ability to strategically mediate between conflicting online and offline texts, thereby impacting epistemic reliance and serving as ultimate arbitrators.

### Theoretical background

The connection between religion and new technology differs significantly depending on the geographical context being examined (Martino, 2016). However, religious practices and beliefs are significantly influenced by communication, cultural factors, as well as societal material values, and interests (Pravdová & Radošinská, 2013). The emergence of mediatization as a research field is still in its early stages and has sparked extensive debates among scholars. These discussions revolve around the concept of the media's increasingly complex, active, and performative role in everyday life (Cottle, 2006). Mediatization serves as a tool for comprehending the evolving power of new technologies and their utilization by various individuals and groups. It encompasses diverse viewpoints on how technological progress and sociocultural changes interact, especially concerning the digital transformation of society and its effects on human interaction and the way we make sense of things (Lundby, 2014). Thus, Mediatization revolves around alterations and transformations. It examines the functions of modern media and refers to the progression of societal changes propelled by communication technologies (Zhang, 2021).

According to Habermas (1992), media communication is not directly linked to the concept of "mediatization." In his Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas discusses "mediatization" as the colonization of the life-world by the system. The life world, influenced by rational, bureaucratic, and capitalist imperatives, becomes detached from and dependent on the administrative system due to progressive rationalization. As a result, human activities are increasingly influenced and controlled by system imperatives, leading to their colonization. "Mediatization" refers to the bureaucratic control of social activities and interactions, and the media's role in this process is predominantly negative, contributing to the erosion of the public sphere (Habermas 1992: 325). In contrast, Thompson *et al.* (1995) argues that the development of media communication, starting from the printing press, has led to transforming interpersonal, institutional, and governmental communication. It has altered the flow of social information and influenced people's understanding of their lives and culture. Moreover, it has compelled institutions like governments and churches to engage in public exposure and debate of ideas and concepts.

Thus, the concept of mediatization emphasizes the pervasive existence of media communication in modern society, encompassing various forms such as smartphones, broadcasting, and Internet connection. It highlights that

the media is not merely a means to transmit messages but also has the potential to influence how people interact and communicate in their daily lives.

In the context of practicing religious rituals digitally in the Hindu religion during COVID-19, individuals turned to smartphones not only to participate in prayers but also to express their identity. According to Dorothy Kim (2014), personal experiences and the societal impact of emotions and actions are converted into networkable data streams, influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. These aspects are equally observable in digital participation as they are in face-to-face interactions in the real world. Digital identity refers to the transformation of human identities into digitally encoded information that can be interpreted by machines (Masiero & Bailur, 2020). Scholars in the field of digital media are exploring the actual experiences of Web 2.0 culture and uncovering the blurred boundaries between offline and online existence. Digital avatars serve as intermediaries in online communication and impact, acting as "data-proxies" that represent both the physical body as a networked manifestation of oneself (Smith, 2016) and autonomous entities, such as video game avatars, that possess their own agency (Paasonen *et al.*, 2015).

Baudrillard (1998) argues that the ubiquitous presence of images, especially those generated and disseminated through electronic media, leads to the obliteration of reality itself, giving rise to a hyper-reality known as the "simulacra." In this realm, the distinction between what is real and what is not becomes irrelevant and insignificant. Baudrillard argues that the culture of images is synonymous with a culture of simulacra, where pervasive illusion and make-believe prevail as the norm.

In this context, individuals primarily perceive the real world through visual means (Vaccari, 2010). Consequently, there is a growing trend of people experiencing reality through interconnected devices. The widespread use of new technologies, especially smartphones, has greatly increased people's dependence on digital media as a means of experiencing the world. This phenomenon further strengthens the merging of ontological fusion. Furthermore, the use of smartphones in the Hindu religion during the pandemic period reinforced "emotional contagion" (Ferrara & Yang, 2015) among smartphone users who desired to share their everyday practices or rituals, such as taking attendance in temples, clicking selfies with the gods, and sharing wisdom quotes in the temple, among other activities. Such practices contribute to religious mobilization. Thus, new technology has provided religious people with new tools to represent their identity, not only on the walls of the temple but also through screens that exemplify Jenkins' (2006) concepts of cultural consolidation and media convergence.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed snowball sampling to select participants (Goodman, 1961). Temples were selected based on specific criteria, including their extensive use of technology to facilitate online darshan and mobile application-based access during the COVID-19 pandemic, their high volume of spiritual tourism; and their geographic distribution across different regions of India which helps to look at the Hindu devotees with regional variations. Specifically, participants were approached at three prominent Hindu temples: Tirupati Balaji Temple in Andhra Pradesh, Jagannath Temple in Odisha, and Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Temple in Jammu & Kashmir. Visitors were invited to share their religious practices during COVID-19, with recruitment involving multiple visits and participant referrals until reaching a balanced demographic distribution. Ultimately, the final sample consisted of an equal representation of six women and six men from each temple region.

Participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement. Interviews were conducted through both face-to-face interactions and online platforms, based on participant preference and convenience. The initial segment of each interview focused on participants' experiences of their personal identity and emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, discussions shifted to examining participants' usage of smartphones in facilitating religious practices and rituals amidst pandemic-related restrictions.

The study employed an inductive, reflexive thematic analytic approach, drawing from phenomenological underpinnings to better understand individuals' lived experiences of digital religious practices during the pandemic (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Sandelowski, 2000). For the analysis of the interviews, the study followed the six-phase guide by Braun & Clarke (2006), which involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and finally writing up the results

## Findings and Discussions

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruptions to religious practices, compelling devotees to adopt digital platforms for spiritual engagement. All these three temples, Tirupati Balaji Temple in Andhra Pradesh, Jagannath Temple in Odisha and Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Temple in Jammu & Kashmir are an illustrative example of how technology bridged the gap between devotees and their faith during these unprecedented times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mobile phones emerged as vital tools for maintaining religious practices amidst restrictions on physical gatherings. Devotees reported using live-streaming services to participate in aartis and other ceremonies, enabling them to witness rituals and feel connected to their faith. For instance, Dipesh (personal

communication, May 12, 2023) stated, "Participating in religious events and accessing live streaming of aartis and ceremonies has been a blessing. It allows me to feel connected to the divine even when I cannot physically be present." Such practices reflect the adaptability of religious communities in leveraging digital platforms to sustain spiritual engagement (Goh, 2020).

### Mobile Phones for Spiritual Resilience

Social media platforms have provided devotees with spaces to express their faith and share spiritual teachings. Devotees use these platforms to disseminate prayers, inspirational quotes, and sacred teachings. A. Baisla (personal communication, May 12, 2023) emphasized, "It is a way for me to spread positivity, share the wisdom of my faith, and uplift the spirits of those around me." The digital dissemination of religious content fosters a sense of community among like-minded individuals, enhancing collective faith experiences (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the resilience of faith communities in adapting to unprecedented challenges. Mobile phones facilitated not only religious practices but also emotional support and communal solidarity. Nutan (personal communication, May 12, 2023) observed, "During COVID-19, God was the only hope for us. I exchanged religious feelings via mobile to our near and dear ones and saved many lives by the grace of the Supreme Power." These experiences exemplify how mobile technology can serve as a conduit for spiritual sustenance in times of crisis (Cheong *et al.*, 2020).

Digital symbols like Doodles related to Lord Jagannath are also shared on Google, Facebook, Instagram etc and they are attracting the young people and thus they connect devotees, especially Youth to their God and his cultural stories, faith and tradition (Priyadarshini, Kiran, & Goswami, 2024).

S. Grahacharya (personal communication, April 2, 2023) argues that the Param Brahma and ever-friendly Lord Jagannath of Sri Jagannath Dham, Puri attracts the followers. The Lord has revealed his appearance to devotees in the forms they have seen. In appearance, Lord Sri Jagannath is Param Brahma. Grahacharya believed that the Jagannath is the Param Brahma who can perform a variety of tasks without using his hands, who can taste a variety of foods and beverages without using his mouth, who can touch anything without using his eyes or ears, and who can smell anything without using his nose. Even other gods don't know what Param Brahma is because it is so extraordinarily mysterious. Therefore, Grahacharya states that he prays to Lord Jagannath. He said that during Covid-19 pandemic, they shared videos and photos of Lord Jagannath through whatsapp. These devotees argue that Rama and Lord Jagannath are identical. He stands up for the underprivileged. Like the mountain being guarded by Sheshanaga (Ananta), it appears neglected and



downtrodden. placing the earth on top of it to support the same. Since Lord Jagannath pours blessings, they deeply pray to the god. Sharing videos and photos of Jagannath with other people through mobile provided them the hope to live. It gives them strength and belief inside.

Mobile plays a very key role in sharing our feelings and information to others through whats up, messages etc. Sipu (personal communication, April 2, 2023) explained that they share videos and photos of Lord Jagannth to other people and worship their God. Indian preachers claim that Lord Jagannath accepts everyone and rejects no one. The implication that he is a humanized God who represents all of humanity, or the symbol of universal humanity, is made clear by culture, emphasised.

The use of mobile phones extended beyond rituals to address the emotional toll of the pandemic. Devotees like V. Appala Prasad and D. Lakshmi Bhai used their devices to access sermons, religious quotes, and other uplifting content. "Doing Pranayama and engaging with God through our phones helped us avoid the disturbing news about COVID-19," (V. A. Prasad, personal communication, July 4, 2023). This practice highlights the role of technology in fostering spiritual resilience during crises (Turner, 2021).

### **Personal Devotion and Symbolism**

The personalization of mobile phones with religious imagery serves as a constant reminder of faith. Many devotees of Vaishno Devi temple reported using images of deities as display pictures (DP) or wallpapers. D. Gautam (personal communication, May 12, 2023) shared, "Every time I unlock my device, I am reminded of the divine presence, and it strengthens my faith throughout the day." This act of embedding religious symbols into personal devices underscores the integration of spirituality into daily life through technology.

Devotees also emphasized the importance of respectful mobile phone usage in temples and other sacred spaces. Silent mode was commonly cited as a necessary practice to preserve the tranquility of the environment. Deepak (personal communication, May 12, 2023) articulated, "When I visit temples, I ensure that my phone is kept on silent mode, as I understand the importance of maintaining a serene atmosphere for those engaged in prayer and meditation." Such practices highlight the balance between embracing technology and preserving traditional reverence for sacred spaces (Turner, 2021). Mobile phones were personalized with images of deities as display pictures and wallpapers. Lakshmi Bhai (personal communication, July 4, 2023) noted, "Keeping the image of God and Goddess as a screen saver keeps us mentally peaceful and discourages us from using mobile phones for any inappropriate purposes." Such personalization underscores the symbolic role of mobile phones as tools for spiritual affirmation.

WhatsApp statuses were actively used to share images and quotes from religious scriptures. For instance, Lakshmi Bhai (personal communication, July 4, 2023) mentioned that she tailored her status to reflect specific gods or goddesses based on the day of the week, such as posting an image of Goddess Lakshmi on Fridays. This practice aligns with the broader use of social media as a platform for religious expression and community engagement (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

While some devotees refrained from taking pictures during temple visits to avoid distractions, others viewed photography as a means of capturing and sharing the beauty of sacred spaces. However, most participants agreed on the need to prioritize spiritual immersion over digital documentation. S. Ranjan (personal communication, May 12, 2023) noted, "I personally feel that such moments are best experienced in the heart and mind, without the distractions of technology." This tension reflects broader debates on the role of technology in sacred rituals (Hutchings, 2017).

### **Integration of Traditional Rituals and Vedic Education**

Mobile phones also facilitated the practice of daily rituals such as "Sandhya Vandanam" (twilight prayers), "Surya Namaskar" (sun salutations), and recitations of the Gayatri Mantra. Through digital content, families like Prasad's maintained their connection to tradition while staying informed about devotional practices. These rituals not only nurtured their spiritual lives but also provided solace during a period marked by uncertainty and distress (Cheong et al., 2020).

The pandemic posed challenges to in-person religious instruction, such as the "Upanayanam" (sacred thread ceremony) for young boys. Appala Prasad and Lakshmi Bhai (personal communication, July 4, 2023) shared that their son's vedic education was conducted via a WhatsApp group named "Sri Gayatri," which utilized the Zoom conferencing platform. "The Gurus trained him for 20 days, including Gayatri Japam and other important traditional teachings," they noted. This shift to digital learning demonstrates how religious institutions adapted to ensure the continuity of spiritual and cultural traditions (Goh, 2020).

### **Darshan through mobile phones**

With restricted access to temples during the pandemic, digital platforms became essential for maintaining spiritual connections. The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) offered live streaming services via its dedicated television and YouTube channels, such as the Sri Venkateswara Bhakti Channel. These platforms enabled devotees to participate in rituals such as Sundarakanda (from the Ramayana), Virata Parvam (from the Mahabharata), and Veda Parayanam (Vedic recitations). "The online darshan helped us stay connected to our faith," Lakshmi

Bhai (personal communication, July 4, 2023) remarked, reflecting on the significance of these digital offerings.

Papun (personal communication, April 2, 2023) said that the Lord Jagannath is *Antaryami* (omnipresent) and he is ruling the society. Jagannath knows everything. Everything happens to him on the earth. He is Lord of the earth. He is the source of deep faith. So, I worship him and keep him as my God. Papun also argues that the mobile helped us very effectively during covid 19 pandemic, as we shared photos of Jagannath with our relatives. The video call with relatives helped us become confident within us.

Heinz Scheifinger (2009) has argued that devotees can now have online darshan of Lord Jagannath all the time; and although online darshan has not diminished the importance of physical darshan by visiting the Jagannath temple, it has provided alternative darshan facilities to the devotees.

B. Pattnaik (personal communication, April 2, 2023) believed that Lord Jagannath protects them from any kind of danger. Jagannath and saviour are synonyms to each other. Whenever they pray to Lord Jagannath, they feel peace inside. This is one of the prime reasons why pray to this Lord. During the time of Covid-19, they could derive their peace of mind through mobile screens. We could listen to prayer songs and watch prayer videos on mobile.

As believed in the Hindus, Lord Jagannath is *Jaga tara nath* (Lord of Universe). He is the god of humankind. He always helps people from the mythological times to this cyber era. He always listens to his devotees. He always helps people during troubled times. During the time of Covid-19, these devotees connected to Jaga (another name of Lord Jagannath) on mobile phones. As lockdown was announced, they could only experience the power of Lord Jagannath through digital connection i.e., mobile phones. Mobile phones were the medium which could connect to the lord in receiving the peace of mind in that turbulent time.

### **Temples' digital engagement and its financial impact**

The pandemic also affected the temple's economic operations. However, despite several restrictions in India, religious tourism was kept alive with the help of online platforms (Manhas & Nair, 2020). The digital activities also helped the selected temples' financial recovery. According to reports by *The Print* (2020), the Tirupati temple lost an estimated ₹200 crore daily due to closures. Upon reopening, voluntary donations ('hundi collections') dropped significantly, receiving only ₹25.7 lakhs on the first day (The Print, 2020). Despite these financial challenges, the temple's investment in digital platforms ensured continued engagement with its devotee base. Thus, digital technologies are now playing a key role in the economy of temples. They are generating revenue by offering online religious activities such as online Darshan for their devotees.

The above analysis concludes that the devotees experience a great faith and connection with Lord Jagannath. They believe him as their saviour and hence they feel a very great connection via his pictures on their mobile phones. They feel like doing an online Darshan of their God and it helps them to feel safe during troubled times like Covid-19 period.

Heinz (2009), however, has argued that the convenience of online darshan is not as beneficial as having a physical darshan of Lord Jagannath. But by always keeping the pictures of Lord Jagannath with them through mobile phones or always seeing him through mobile phones, devotees have witnessed a new experience and great connection with their God.

## **CONCLUSION**

The integration of mobile phones into Hindu religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the dynamic interplay between tradition and technology. By enabling participation in rituals, fostering personal devotion, and facilitating community engagement, mobile phones have redefined the boundaries of religious experience. However, their use also necessitates mindfulness and respect for sacred spaces to ensure that technology enhances rather than detracts from spiritual connection. Future research could explore the long-term implications of this digital mediation for religious practices and community dynamics in a post-pandemic world. Issues like caste barriers though not in real sense but digital and accessing from mobile has created a connection.

The experiences of devotees illustrate the transformative potential of mobile technology in mediating religious practices. By facilitating online education, personalized devotion, and virtual temple engagement, mobile phones have redefined the boundaries of religious experience. However, these practices also underscore the need to balance technological convenience with the preservation of sacred traditions. Future studies should explore the long-term implications of digital religious practices in a post-pandemic world. Mobile phones have played a significant role in the spiritual lives of people in India. The whatsapp groups share Aastha (faith) and devotion to particular gods, goddesses and religious practices. The sharing of live aarti of these three temples as well other prominent places like in Ganga aarti of Banaras helped people to maintain their connection with the god/goddesses. Once picturing the gods is seen as a sin, but the temple committee and necessity during Covid-19 pushed the temple to be more active on digital services. More than religious fundamentalism people find peace when they keep the photos of gods as screenshots. Training from experts in religious practices is possible to learn slokas, mantras like Gayatri during Covid-19 and in general wherever they are. Listening to bhajans and kirtans live as well as from archive has been an immersive engagement for housewives.



Covid-19 brought every devotee from all castes to one single platform and access to their devi and devatas unlike special darshans. In this difficult time, donations and offerings are also continued through digital payments. Most of the temples have offered online payment systems.

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