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Linking Ancient and Modern, A Worldwide Web of Worship

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TIRUCHIRAPALLI, India -- Balaji, a Hindu priest, stood before the reclining god and offered a plate of coconut and bananas. His chest bare and his face adorned with red and yellow sacred paste, he set the food at the foot of a statue that Hindus regard as an embodiment of the powerful god Vishnu.

Following ancient tradition deep inside one of India's oldest and holiest temples, he chanted Vishnu's names 108 times to beseech health, wealth and good fortune -- not for himself, but for an Indian emigrant living in London who had purchased the prayer with her credit card on a Hindu Web site.

"If you wish to make an offering, the god will accept it -- even if it's on the Internet," said Balaji, standing barefoot in the hot sand of the South Indian temple compound.

The Internet has become a hub of religious worship for millions of people around the world. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and people of other faiths turn regularly to Web sites to pray, meditate and gather in "virtual" houses of worship graphically designed to look like the real thing. Some sites offer rites from baptism to confession to conversion to Judaism.

For many cyber-worshippers, online religious life conducted at home or in an Internet cafe has replaced attendance at traditional churches, temples, mosques and synagogues. Some are coming to religion for the first time, in a setting they find as comfortable as their grandparents found a church pew, while millions of people reared on churchgoing are discovering new ways to worship.

"The first wave of religion online, in the 1990s, was mainly for nerds and young people and techies," said Morten Hojsgaard, a Danish author who has written extensively about online religion. "But now it really is a mirror of society at large. This is providing a new forum for religious seekers."

Hojsgaard said the number of Web pages dealing with God, religion and churches increased from 14 million in 1999 to 200 million in 2004. Religion now nearly rivals sex as a topic on the Internet: A search for "sex" on Google returns about 408 million hits, while a search for "God" yields 396 million.

The boom in online religion comes at a time when people, especially the young, are questioning traditional institutions, Hojsgaard said. Many are interested in religion, but they want the freedom to fashion a personalized style of worship. "Old mechanisms of religious authority are changing," Hojsgaard said. "There is more emphasis on individualism. We want to decide for ourselves."

India, with more than 1.1 billion people and a passion for technology, has become a leader in the practice of religion online, through a very large number of often very small Web sites, a pattern that reflects the decentralization of much of religious life here. Hindus sitting in the United States or Europe watch streaming live video of morning prayers from temples in their home towns. Sikhs listen to podcasts of prayers from Kashmir. Muslims download schedules of prayer times and recordings of sung verses from the Koran.

Members of India's fast-growing middle class have embraced the Internet in ways that startle their parents, many of whom were raised in villages that still barely have telephone service. At many Hindu temples, a priest's typical day includes pre-dawn prayers for a sacred cow or elephant, and time set aside to read e-mails asking for blessings.

Shopping for Prayers

On a cold and rainy January day, Kumudini Kumararajah logged on to her computer in London and started shopping for prayers.

Kumararajah, 36, is a Hindu who moved to London from India eight years ago. She prays every day, she said, at home and in a small temple in Tooting, a south London neighborhood popular with Indian expatriates. Every morning and evening she performs a puja, an offering to a god, seeking a blessing of health and happiness. But she said performing pujas in London was never as meaningful to her as doing them in the ancient temples of India, where Hinduism was born.

"The gods there are very powerful," said Kumararajah, sitting in the storefront of her family's software company. "I always want to pray there, but it is not possible for me because I live in London."

Then she heard about Saranam.com, a Web site based in Chennai, in southern India, that sells "Hindu rituals and products," whether they are prayers or auspicious names for a baby.

Clicking her way to Saranam.com, Kumararajah recalled, she arrived at a site that looked like the home page of bookseller Amazon.com,

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with colorful graphics and a slick menu of products and services -- and a link to check on "my stuff."

She clicked on the "pujas" tab, which brought her to a page where she could choose from a menu including "pujas for health" and "pujas for children." She chose a puja for wealth, health and happiness -- asking for help in finding a husband and having a family, and for the family software business to prosper.

Then she clicked on the "temples" tab and chose Sri Rangam, a thousand-year-old complex near Tiruchirapalli, about 200 miles south of Chennai near the southern tip of India. She had grown up in Chennai but had never visited the temple, one of India's most venerated religious sites. The centerpiece of the temple is a reclining image of Vishnu, which draws Hindus from across the world. Kumararajah was thrilled to find it on the Web site's list of temples available for pujas.

She clicked again and put her puja in her "shopping cart," then hit "proceed to checkout," filled in her billing address and paid with her Visa card over a secure server.

She chose a package of 12 pujas, one a month for a year, to be performed each month on her "star day" according to Hindu astrology. She also chose a second puja to be performed each month to a goddess at the temple. Total price for her personalized package of worship: about \$140, or about \$6 per puja.

"I could never do this before," she said, her chestnut eyes beaming. "The gods are happy when we perform pujas."

Saranam.com was founded by Mahesh Mohanan and Mervyn Jose, a pair of young computer software engineers in Chennai, the steamy port city formerly known as Madras. It is home both to some of India's most magnificent old temples and to some of its most cutting-edge technology firms.

Mohanan said he hit on the idea shortly after his marriage in 1999, when his new mother-in-law insisted that he and his new bride visit 15 Hindu temples over three days to seek blessings. "It was exhausting," Mohanan said. "I thought it would be so much easier if I could just do it on the Internet."

With financial backing from a local businessman, Saranam.com was up and running within weeks as a for-profit company.

The site now gets about 100,000 visits a year and about 200 orders each month, the company says. Most customers buy pujas to pray for sick relatives, to ease marital or financial problems -- or even, in the case of some Indians living in the United States, to help get a green card.

According to Mohanan and Jose, Saranam limits its advertising and marketing to avoid offending users who visit the site for serious religious purposes. "We can't say 'Winter Sale!' or things like that, because it would damage our credibility," Jose said. But it does use a time-honored promotional technique of posting articles written about it, including a news service account that appeared in The Washington Post.

At first, most of the customers came from the 20 million or so Indians who live overseas. But now most are Americans, Europeans and people from the Middle East who have become interested in Hinduism, at least in part because of information available on the Internet.

Shaunaka Rishi Das, director of the Center for Hindu Studies at Oxford University, said Hindus traditionally give little formal religious instruction to children, who learn largely from family tradition.

Now the Internet is allowing many Hindus to learn about their religion in depth for the first time.

"Hindus have jumped on this technology," he said.

Filling the Order

A few weeks after Kumararajah ordered her puja in London, 5,000 miles away in the 92-degree southern Indian sun, T.K. Jayaraaman walked barefoot into Sri Rangam, a 156-acre complex of 21 towers decorated with colorful and ornate carvings.

The retired schoolteacher, 65, is the local contact for Saranam.com. When someone orders a puja at a temple here in Trichy, as this city is known, the people at Saranam call him and ask him to arrange it; he has handled scores of orders in the past couple of years. Now he was here to take care of Kumararajah's, on her star date, Feb. 27.

Jayaraaman walked past a buzzing hive of vendors near the temple gate, where ancient meets modern: Three-wheeled motorized rickshaws compete for space with Mercedes buses full of tourists; an elderly woman weaves traditional Hindu floral garlands from sweet-smelling jasmine, while a more tech-savvy hawkler approaches tourists, saying, "Mister -- digital camera memory stick?"

Wearing a sarong-like garment wrapped around his waist, Jayaraaman walked through the main gate of the temple, a 236-foot-high structure with ornate carvings in soft pastel blues, pinks and greens. He moved through the dark, shady places where scores of pilgrims were escaping the broiling midday sun by lying on the cool stone worn smooth by a millennium of use, and approached a line of fruit vendors.

He bought a small basket with a coconut, two bananas, a few sprigs of basil and some flowers for the equivalent of about 50 cents. He carried the plate of fruit to a barefoot priest, who cracked the coconut open for him -- opening it loudly in the presence of the reclining god is considered rude.

From another vendor, he bought a small packet of red and yellow powder, made from vermilion, sandalwood and turmeric, and placed it in his basket.

Jayaraaman walked deeper into the temple complex, arriving at a door that only Hindus may pass through. Inside, he said, he stood before the reclining god, bowed his head and handed the offering basket to Balaji, the priest. Balaji tossed flower petals and basil sprigs onto the statue and called the god's names 108 times. Jayaraaman told him the customer's name -- Kumararajah -- and the priest chanted it loudly, praising Vishnu in her name: "You are great! You are good! Bring her good health, good fortune, a good life!"

Balaji blessed the powder, tucked it into a folded bit of white paper and handed it back to Jayaraaman. Eventually the packet would be mailed to Kumararajah in London, along with a letter certifying that her order with Saranam.com had been filled.

For his efforts, Jayaraaman earned about 75 cents.

"I don't know anything about these people -- except their name and star date," he said. "But it makes me very proud to send them God's grace."

Outside the temple later, Balaji said he liked the temple's mix of old and new. Many people live far away and cannot travel here, he pointed out, so Saranam.com and other Internet-based services are bringing a new wave of worshipers to his ancient temple in spirit, a phenomenon the temple encourages.

"Of course," he said, "we have a Web site, too."

Back in chilly London, Kumararajah awaited her shipment in the offices of the family software company; her mother and sister also purchase pujas regularly from Saranam.com. Dressed in a flowing pink traditional dress, Kumararajah said she couldn't wait to get the red and yellow paste, blessed at a temple she dreams of visiting someday.

When it arrives, she said, she will mix it with a few drops of water and wear it on her forehead, in the traditional Hindu style indicating the presence of God.

"I will put it on every day," she said. "It will give me peace of mind."

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