

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/59423>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WARWICK**

**Hinduism and the Internet:  
A Sociological Study**

**by**

**Heinz Scheifinger**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of Warwick, Department of Sociology  
September 2006

# Contents

List of Figures and Tables	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Declaration	vii
Abstract	viii
Abbreviations	ix
Note Concerning Transliteration of Hindu Terms	x
Note Concerning Website Names	xi
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Context	1
Terminology and Definitions	10
Religion	10
Hinduism	13
<i>Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi</i>	17
The Internet and the WWW	21
<i>Brief History of the Internet</i>	21
Website Terminology	23
Hindu-related Websites	23
Cyberspace	25
Online World/Offline World	26
A Note on Sociological Theory	26
A Note on the Methodology Used in the Study	27
Ethical Considerations	28
The ‘Natural History’ of the Project	29
Research Questions	29
Outline of the Structure of the Thesis	31
<b>2. The Nature of Cyberspace and Hinduism</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction	33
The Nature of Cyberspace and Religion	33
John Caputo	33
Margaret Wertheim	33
Cyberspace and Hinduism	35
Structural Aspects of Hinduism	35
Philosophical Aspects of Hinduism	36
Walter Ong	39
<i>Darshan</i> and the image	41
Hinduism and Innovation/Modification	46
<i>Weddings and funerals</i>	47
The Validity of Online Hindu Practices	49
<i>Festivals on the WWW</i>	49
<i>Online Pujas</i>	50
<i>Virtual Pilgrimages</i>	57
Concluding Comments	62
The Digital Divide	63

<b>3.</b>	<b>Embodiment</b>	<b>65</b>
	Introduction	65
	The Neglect of 'Embodiment' in Sociological Theory and the Later Realisation that this was Problematic	65
	The Body in Various Religious Traditions	68
	Western Christianity	68
	Greek Christianity	69
	Buddhism	69
	Islam	70
	What is 'The Body'?	71
	The Body as Metaphor	73
	<i>Zoroastrianism</i>	73
	<i>Theravāda Buddhism</i>	74
	Critical Summary	74
	The Body in Cyberspace	75
	The Understanding of Disembodiment in Cyberspace Used in this Study	76
	The Nature of the Body in Hinduism	79
	<i>Jivanmukti: The Case of Ramana Maharshi</i>	81
	<i>Yoga</i>	82
	<i>Tantric Yoga</i>	83
	The Nature of the Body in Hinduism and Online Disembodiment	84
	Reincarnation	86
	<i>Puja and the Varnashrama-dharma System</i>	87
	<i>Puja</i>	88
	The <i>Varnashrama-dharma</i> System	90
	<i>Varna and Online Disembodiment</i>	92
	Research Questions	96
<b>4.</b>	<b>Globalisation</b>	<b>98</b>
	Introduction	98
	What is Globalisation?	99
	Theoretical Ideas about Globalisation	103
	Ulrich Beck	103
	Jan Aart Scholte	103
	Manuel Castells	104
	Anthony Giddens	105
	<i>Paolo Apolito</i>	107
	<i>Lorne Dawson's use of Giddens and Beckford</i>	107
	<i>From Castells to Baudrillard</i>	108
	<i>Jean Baudrillard</i>	110
	Arjun Appadurai	113
	Roland Robertson	115
	<i>Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt</i>	117
	Hinduism and Globalisation	117
	'Glocalization'	117
	Hindus in the West	118
	The 'Ganesh Milk Miracle'	120
	Research Questions	121

<b>5.</b>	<b>Rational Choice Theory</b>	<b>124</b>
	Introduction	124
	RCT	124
	RCT Studies of Religion	125
	Criticisms of RCT	129
	RCT Criticisms and Hinduism	131
	The Acceptance of the Rational Choice Approach as a Model	134
	Research Questions	136
<b>6.</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>138</b>
	Introduction	138
	Online Methodology	138
	Problems	138
	<i>Volume of Websites</i>	139
	Innovative Multiple Methods	140
	The Methodological Approach Used in the Study	143
	Other Issues	146
	<i>Websites Boundaries and Related Issues</i>	146
	<i>Identification of those Responsible for Websites</i>	147
	<i>Flux</i>	147
	Offline Methodology	149
	Reasons for the Choice of <i>Mandirs</i> and Brief Information about Them	151
	<i>Kolkata and Around</i>	153
	<i>Varanasi</i>	157
	<i>Jagannath Mandir, Puri</i>	161
	Details of the Primary Research Method Used	163
	<i>Further Points Concerning the Interviews with the Mandir Officials</i>	165
	<i>Further Points Concerning the Interviews with the Owners of</i>	
	<i>Websites Offering a Puja Service</i>	166
	Research Inconveniences	167
<b>7.</b>	<b>Mapping Hinduism on the WWW</b>	<b>169</b>
	Introduction	169
	The General Area of Hinduism on the WWW	169
	Search Engine Results	171
	<i>Discussion of Search Engine Results Tables</i>	173
	‘Link Popularity’ and ‘Search Engine Saturation’	175
	‘Touchgraph’ Link Maps	177
	Classification of the Websites: Website Typologies	181
	<i>Christopher Helland</i>	182
	<i>Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan</i>	182
	<i>Anastasia Karaflogka</i>	183
	<i>Gwilym Beckerlegge</i>	183
	Classification Used in this Study	184
	<i>General Characteristics Table Discussion</i>	186
	The SSC and their Websites	188
	The SSC: Origins and Aims	188
	<i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	189
	<i>hinduismtoday.com</i>	190
	<i>hindu.org</i>	194
	The SSC’s Online Presence Compared to ISKCON	195
	Summary	196

<b>8.</b>	<b>Deities Online: World Wide Gods on the Web</b>	<b>198</b>
	Introduction	198
	Applying a Rational Choice Model to Hinduism on the WWW	198
	Hindu-related Websites and Globalisation: Case Studies	204
	Case Study 1: The Online Presence of the Kanchi <i>Math</i> and their Supporters: Crossing Borders and Compressing Space and Time	205
	Case Study 2: The SSC's Online Presence and Globalisation	208
	Online Activity that Challenges Religious Authority	211
	Websites Offering a <i>Puja</i> Service	214
	' Cultural Resource ' Theory	217
	Homogenisation and Heterogenisation	220
	<i>Mandir</i> Research Findings and Analysis	223
	The Universalisation of the Particular and the Particularisation of the Universal	224
	<i>Actions of the Jagannath Mandir Pujaris</i>	226
	<i>The Nature of the Jagannath Deity</i>	229
	<i>Other Deities</i>	230
	The Continued Relevance of Conventional Notions of Time: ISKCON's Reaction to Globalisation	232
	Online Worship – Views and Implications	233
<b>9.</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>239</b>
	Summary	239
	Limitations of the Study	244
	Possible Further Research	245
	<i>Mandir</i> Popularity	246
	The Position of <i>Pujaris</i>	248
	<i>The Situation at Specific Mandirs</i>	251
	RCT and 'Strictness'	254
	Changes in the Nature of Worship	256
	Sanskritization	256
	Language and the Digital Divide	259
	Appendix 1 – 'Touchgraphs'	260
	Appendix 2 – Islam on the WWW	264
	Introduction	264
	Similarities with Hinduism on the WWW	265
	Search Engine Results	265
	Ideological Battles	265
	The BIC and the SSC	267
	Website Similarities	268
	Differences to Hinduism on the WWW	269
	<i>Jihad</i>	269
	<i>Da'wa</i>	269
	Focus Upon the Written Word	270
	Political Factors	270
	State Intervention	271
	Conclusion	272
	Appendix 3 – KKSF Website Launch	273
	Glossary	274
	Bibliography and Webliography	284

## List of Figures and Tables

### Figures

2.1	<i>badrinath-kedarnath.org/Blessings on the Net</i> online puja to Badrinath	53
2.2	<i>Blessings on the Net</i> alternative online puja to Badrinath	54
6.1	Map of India showing the locations of the three cities where fieldwork was carried out	150
6.2	<i>Kalighat mandir</i> , Kolkata	154
6.3	<i>Dakshineswar mandir</i>	154
6.4	ISKCON Kolkata	156
6.5	<i>Tarakanath mandir</i> , Tarakeswar, West Bengal	156
6.6	Entrance to the <i>New Vishwanath mandir (Mir Ghat)</i> , Varanasi	158
6.7	<i>New Vishwanath mandir</i> (BHU), Varanasi	158
6.8	<i>Annapurna</i> giving food to <i>Shiva</i>	159
6.9	<i>Sankat Mochan mandir</i> , Varanasi	160
6.10	<i>Jagannath mandir</i> , Puri	161
6.11	Entrance to the <i>Jagannath mandir</i>	162
6.12	<i>Jagannath</i> (on His chariot during the annual <i>Ratha Yatra</i> festival)	162
6.13	<i>Kalighat mandir</i> administration offices above the main entrance to the <i>mandir</i>	164
6.14	'Sri Jagannath Temple Office', Grand Road, Puri	164
6.15	Walking through floodwater in Varanasi	168
7.1	Homepage of the SSC's <i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	189
8.1	<i>laxminarayan.com</i> homepage	221
8.2	<i>Chandi Devi Temple</i> homepage	222
8.3	'ONLY HINDUS ARE ALLOWED' – Guards at the main entrance to the <i>Jagannath mandir</i>	236
8.4	The chariots of <i>Jagannath</i> , <i>Balabhadra</i> and <i>Subhadra</i> at the <i>Ratha Yatra</i> with the <i>Jagannath mandir</i> in the background	237
A1.1	'Touchgraph' for <i>hindunet.org</i>	260
A1.2	'Touchgraph' for <i>religioustolerance.org/hinduism</i>	260
A1.3	'Touchgraph' for <i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	261
A1.4	'Touchgraph' for <i>hinduism.about.com</i>	261
A1.5	'Touchgraph' for <i>bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism</i>	262
A1.6	'Touchgraph' for <i>hinduism.co.za</i>	262
A1.7	'Touchgraph' for <i>atributetohinduism.com</i>	263
A1.8	'Touchgraph' for <i>geocities.com/9410/hinduism</i>	263
A3.1	The launch of the official website of the <i>Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation</i> (KKSF) on August 2, 2004	273

### Tables

6.1	Details of the Informants at the <i>Mandirs</i>	163
7.1	Search Engine Results for November 13, 2004	172
7.2	Search Engine Results for October 26, 2005	173
7.3	'Search Engine Saturation' and 'Link Popularity' for the Prominent Websites	176
7.4	Total Aggregate Scores for Organisations Which Have More Than One Website Listed	176

7.5	General Characteristics of the Websites of Organisations Having Websites Appearing at Least Three Times in Either of the Searches	185
7.6	Comparison of 'Search Engine Saturation', 'Link Popularity' and Google Search Engine Ranking for <i>himalayanacademy.com</i> and <i>iskcon.com</i>	196



## Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funding (Research Studentship, Overseas Fieldwork Expenses and Research Training Support Grant) which allowed me to undertake this PhD.

The two individuals to whom I owe the most are Jim Beckford and Stella Spanou. Jim had faith in me and provided support and encouragement from the moment that he learned that I wanted to return to the University of Warwick. His supervision was impeccable. Stella also had faith in me and gave me total support both before and during the PhD – including in India. In addition to her general support she also read a draft copy of the thesis, typed up some questions in India, and took most of the photographs that appear in this thesis.

I am very grateful to my informants in India: Anonymous (*Annapurna mandir*, Varanasi), Sanjay Basu (*Kaalighat* website, Kolkata), M.K. Bhattacharyya (*Taraknath mandir*, Tarakeswar), Ashraya Gauranga Das (ISKCON Kolkata), S. Ghosh (*Dakshineswar mandir*, Kolkata), Bhaskar Mishra (*Jagannath mandir*, Puri), Dr. Parmananda Mishra (*New Vishwanath mandir [Mir Ghat]*, Varanasi) (interview arranged by K.N. Singh, Manager), Veer Bhadra Mishra (*Sankat Mochan mandir*, Varanasi), Ajoy Kumar Mitra (*Kalighat mandir*, Kolkata), Nabin Pal (*Ashirbadee* website, Kolkata), Professor R.C. Panda (*New Vishwanath mandir [BHU]*, Varanasi) and D.S. Pathak and S.S. Pandey (*Vishwanath mandir*, Varanasi).

Also in India, Ashutosh Pandey (Varanasi) did some translation work, and the journalist Ranjan Ganguly (Puri) provided me with some photographs, 2 of which appear in this thesis (chapters 6 and 8). In England, Mark Sadler generously proofread the draft chapters and made suggestions for improvement.

## Declaration

I, Heinz Scheifinger, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

## Abstract

This study provides a contribution to the sociology of religion by examining the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet – an area largely neglected by scholars of religion and the Internet. A theoretical discussion as to the suitability of cyberspace for Hinduism – which concludes that there is a high level of compatibility – is followed by a discussion of embodiment (a relatively neglected topic in sociology) in Hinduism in order to assess whether online religious activity which does not require full embodiment could be problematic. Although there is no natural fit between Hinduism and online religious activity, such activity is extensive; and this gives rise to a number of empirical research questions about online practices and their implications for Hinduism ‘offline’.

Empirical research was carried out both online and ‘offline’. Online, data was obtained through the utilisation of innovative research methods which were able to map Hinduism on the WWW and uncover the processes that are occurring. An important finding was that a relatively small number of Hindu organisations are effectively monopolising Hinduism online. Significant websites were also analysed. ‘Offline’, research was carried out at *mandirs* (Hindu Temples) in India. The prime research method used was the semi-structured interview. The informants were high-ranking *mandir* officials. Owners of websites offering a *puja* (ritual honouring a deity) service were also interviewed. The online and ‘offline’ research did not constitute discrete lines of enquiry, and findings were analysed together in the light of sociological theories of embodiment and globalisation, and rational choice theory. These theories contribute to the understanding of processes that are occurring in Hinduism and, in turn, the findings suggested revisions of the theoretical ideas.

The main conclusion is that despite globalisation and the pre-eminent role that the Internet plays in it – contrary to the assertions of some globalisation theorists – local sites of Hindu practice do not necessarily decline in importance. Instead, there is an interpenetration of the local and the global as a result of online Hinduism.

## Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France Presse
AP	The Associated Press
ARPA	Advanced Research Projects Agency
ARPANET	Advanced Research Projects Agency Network
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBS	Bulletin Board Service
BCE	Before the Common Era
BHU	Benares Hindu University
BIC	Belfast Islamic Centre
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CE	Common Era
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CESNUR	Center for Studies on New Religions
CNN	Cable News Network
DNA	Daily News & Analysis
GBC	Governing Body Commission (ISKCON)
GHEN	Global Hindu Electronic Network
HAF	Hindu American Foundation
HPI	Hindu Press International
HSC	Hindu Students Council
HSS	Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh
HTML	HyperText Markup Language
IANS	Indo-Asian News Service
IES	ISKCON Educational Services
INFORM	Information Network Focus on Religious Movements
ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
IT	Information Technology
KKSF	Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation
LSD	lysergic acid diethylamide
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
NRI	Non-Resident Indian
NRM	New Religious Movement
NSF	National Science Foundation
NSFNET	National Science Foundation Network
PDF	Portable Document Format
PTI	Press Trust of India
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SSC	Saiva Siddhanta Church
TM	Transcendental Meditation
TTD	Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams
UN	United Nations
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USC	University of Southern California
USENET	User's Network
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
WFN	Worldwide Faith News
WWW	World Wide Web

## Note Concerning Transliteration of Hindu Terms

There are a number of issues concerning the use of Hindu terms.<sup>1</sup> Sanskrit terms *can* be transliterated from the Devanagari script but, as Eck points out, the necessary extensive use of diacritics make a text ‘unnecessarily cumbersome to read’ (Eck 1993: 367).

Because of this, it has become common to dispense with diacritics altogether (see e.g. Fuller 1992; Krishnananda 1994; Gupta 2002). For example, outside of specialist texts, ‘Śiva’ is rarely seen in place of ‘Shiva’, and the same can be said concerning ‘darśan’ and ‘darshan’. I also omit diacritics in my use of terms in order to make them more easily recognisable,<sup>2</sup> and this is certainly acceptable in a sociological study such as this. Fuller (1992) even omits diacritics when quoting from others who do use them, but I avoid doing this as the authors have their own reasons for their use.<sup>3</sup>

Decisions to deviate from conventional transliteration theory are not only based upon the negative appearance of a large number of diacritics. Universal transliteration from Sanskrit is also not desirable because for many words the correct transliteration is not the one which is in common use (see e.g. Eck 1985: 85). Therefore, it is of little value writing a word in a certain way when it may not be widely used, or even recognisable to a reader. This is related to the fact that not all Hindu terms that need to be transliterated are from Sanskrit. They could, for example, be Hindi or Bengali words (see e.g. Eck 1993: 268), and this also explains different spellings of the same terms (see Williams 1996a: 6). Therefore, it is impossible to remain consistent. The result is that all works which feature Hindu terms are inconsistent with each other as each author has chosen their own way of presenting the various terms according to their own ideas. As in the case with diacritics, in quotations I have kept the author’s spelling of Hindu terms regardless of whether they are different to the ones that I use. In these instances the way that these terms are written are not so different from mine as to be unrecognisable. Nevertheless, these alternative presentations have been included in the glossary alongside my presentation of the term.

---

<sup>1</sup> Terms are briefly defined on first usage in the main body of the thesis. A full glossary is also included in the thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions to this are my use of diacritics for the three branches of Buddhism (*Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*) that I refer to, and for the name Prabhupāda, as these presentations are in common usage.

<sup>3</sup> The exception is when I quote from Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997) (see chapter 1) where I use the commonly-used name ‘*Krishna*’.

As a general rule, my choice of terms and their presentation has been made according to what I believe in each case is the most widespread usage. This ensures that terms are recognisable. Although the choice of the origin (e.g. Sanskrit or Hindi) and the spelling of terms will always be somewhat arbitrary, I have remained consistent with terminology usage throughout. I have italicised all Hindu terms and I adopt this approach in order to avoid further arbitrariness. For example, some authors choose not to italicise certain terms (e.g. *yoga*) as they have worked their way into the English language, but the problem with this approach is in making a decision as to where to draw the line. Finally, following Morinis (1984: ix.) and Brooks (1989: ix.-x.), for ease in reading I have simply added an 's' in order to pluralise Hindu terms.<sup>4</sup>

### **Note Concerning Website Names**

Websites are often known simply by the identifying part of their URL (website address) (e.g. the website at <http://www.kamakoti.org> is known as *kamakoti.org*). However, sometimes the website has a completely different name to the URL (e.g. the website at <http://www.makalipuja.com> is known as *Ashirbadee*). In other cases it is not so clear-cut and a website might be known by the identifying part of its URL or by another name (e.g. the website found at <http://www.hindunet.org> could be referred to as *hindunet.org* or *The Hindu Universe*).

In this study the identifying part of the URL will be used to refer to specific websites unless it is clear (as in the case of *Ashirbadee*) that another name should be used. In the Weblibliography, which contains the full URLs for all of the websites referred to in the thesis, alternative names will also be included for those websites where another name can also be used.

---

<sup>4</sup> An exception is my use of '*jyotilinga*' which is more commonly used as the plural of '*jyotilingam*' than '*jyotilingams*'. It should also be noted that some people use the term '*jyotilinga*' to refer to the singular.

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## Context

Religion is extremely prevalent on the World Wide Web (hereafter the WWW).<sup>1</sup> However, many studies of the Internet have chosen to neglect religion. For example, religion is totally absent from Castells's *The Internet Galaxy – Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (2002) despite the fact that religion is still important in society – an area which Castells claims his book deals with. Furthermore, in this book Castells considers the Forrester research which sought to determine the extent of Internet activity in North America in 2000, but this also neglects religion. Incredibly, out of the fourteen different activities that were included in the survey,<sup>2</sup> the researchers did not see fit to include a category concerning the practice of religion or even the looking up of information about religion (see in Castells 2002: 193). This is surprising because in 2001 it was reported in another survey that approximately '28 million Americans had used the Internet for religious purposes' (Larson 2001 cited in Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 3) and within a period of three years (the period which saw the publication of Castells's book), Hoover, Clark and Rainie's 2004 Pew Internet and American Life Project study concluded that '64% of the nation's 128 million Internet users [almost 82 million people] have done things online that relate to religious or spiritual matters' (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004: i).

Castells is not the only scholar to neglect religion when considering the Internet. For example, both Gauntlett and Horsley's *Web.Studies* (2004) which aims 'to 'address a cross-section of interesting cultural and social things happening on the [Inter]net' (Gauntlett 2004a: 3) and Bell and Kennedy's *The Cybercultures Reader* (2000) include a plethora of diverse articles pertaining to cyberspace and culture, but not one study concerns religion.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, Nayar's *Virtual Worlds – Culture and Politics in*

---

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of various terms such as WWW, Internet and cyberspace will be offered shortly.

<sup>2</sup> The fourteen activities that respondents could indicate whether or not they engaged in were: 'Send e-mail', 'Use search engines', 'Research product purchases', 'Look for medical or health information', 'Visit reference sites', 'Download software', 'Read daily newspaper', 'Use Internet yellow pages', 'View stock quotes', 'Visit local/city guides', 'Play on-line games', 'Purchase', 'Look for job or career information' and 'Use instant messaging' (see Castells 2002: 193).

<sup>3</sup> Mitra's (2000) study concerning online activity amongst Indians in the diaspora in *The Cybercultures*

*the Age of Cyberspace* (2004) also makes no mention of religion whatsoever despite the fact that it is concerned with culture. Religion though, is clearly an integral part of culture.

The neglect of religion when considering the Internet is highly problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, there has often been a link throughout history between technology and religion and this has manifested itself in two distinctive ways – both through an actual association between technology and religion, and through the use of technology by religious groups.

Davis argues that throughout history there has always been a link between new technology (especially communications technology) and the spiritual yearnings of the population (Davis 2004). Furthermore, Lupton is of the opinion that through the use of computers we ‘are searching for a home for the mind and the heart [and that consequently]...our fascination with computers is...more deeply spiritual than utilitarian’ (Lupton 1995: 98). This also suggests a reason why there appears to be a link between religion and new communications technologies and affirms that it may be especially the case with the Internet. Sardar holds a similar view and comments that: ‘Cyberspace did not appear...from nowhere...It is the conscious reflection of the deepest desires, aspirations, experiential yearning and *spiritual* angst of Western man (Sardar 1995 cited in Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 33 [my emphasis]). Advertising agencies also appear to be aware of the links between religion and new communications technologies. For example, Willson mentions IBM advertisements which ‘suggest the possible realization of a spiritual experience, as religious contemplation comes to stand for or is even replaced by experiencing the technology’ (Willson 2000: 648). While Cowan takes some of the more extreme claims concerning religion and the Internet with caution, he concludes that ‘religion and the Internet have become intimately and integrally linked [and that this] is beyond dispute’ (Cowan 2005b: 257). Religious association with the Internet will be considered in greater detail in chapter 2 where I consider the nature of cyberspace.

The link between technology and religion can also be demonstrated by the fact that the first use of a new form of communications technology has often inspired the user to

---

*Reader* does mention religion but this is not the primary concern of his study.

transmit a religious message. For example, Giddens points out that in the mid-nineteenth century the first message transmitted by electric telegraph was 'What hath God wrought!' (Giddens 2002: 10; see also Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 6), and in 1906 the first extended radio broadcast of the human voice contained a reading from the Bible (Barnouw cited in anon. [WFM] n.d.: online).

There is also evidence of this kind of link between religion and technology in the case of the Internet. For example, in 1978 when a discussion group went online for the first time, the opening sentence of the prospectus for the first conference was 'We are as gods and might as well get good at it' (Stone 2000: 509). Furthermore, Helland notes that religious discussion groups were popular in the early days of the Internet prior to the introduction of the WWW (Helland 2004: 24-25).<sup>4</sup>

Concerning religious uses of new technology, Beckford (2000a) argues that 'religious movements have been in the vanguard of *new technology* ever since radical Protestants exploited new printing techniques...in early-modern Europe' and gives examples of the use of technology by the predecessors of Jehovah's Witnesses before World War I and later by Jehovah's Witnesses (see also Blanchard n.d.). He also gives the examples of the importance of technology to Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons and 'The Moral Majority' (concerning the extensive use of short-wave radio and satellite television by Christian evangelists see also Waters 1995: 132) and points to the widespread use of global communications among 'American evangelical, fundamentalist and sectarian movements operating in South America and Africa' (Beckford 2000a: 181-182). Brasher also mentions the use of new technology by religious groups in order to communicate their message (Brasher 2004: 16).

The second, more concrete, reason why the neglect of religion when considering the Internet is problematic is that there is actually a huge amount of religious resources available on the WWW. A number of writers have pointed out that the WWW is awash with religious websites and that their numbers are increasing exponentially (see e.g. Dawson 2000; Helland 2000: 213; 2004: 23-35; Mayer 2000: 257; Beckerlegge 2001c: 224; Brasher 2004: 6, 10; Larson 2004: 17-20 [see Fukamizu 2005: unpublished conference paper, for the situation concerning the growth of Japanese religious

---

<sup>4</sup> See below for an explanation of the distinction between the Internet and the WWW.



websites]). Dawson emphasises the extent of the prevalence of religious websites when he comments that 'there's practically not a religious group or orientation or viewpoint I can think of in the world that haven't gone online...even if its something relatively obscure' (Dawson cited in Pacienza 2005: online). Hadden and Cowan also point out that 'religion is one of the most popular items on the web' (Hadden and Cowan 2000: 7), while Helland notes the large amount of religious websites and reveals that: 'No other category – including activism, lifestyle, choices, relationships, sexuality or law – comes close to this level of representation' (Helland 2004: 26). Larson notes that these resources are being extensively used when she comments: 'for comparisons sake...more people have gotten religious or spiritual information online than have gambled online, used web auction sites, traded stocks online, placed phone calls on the Internet, done online banking, or used Internet-based dating services' (Larson 2000: 17).

The prevalence of religion on the WWW is perhaps unsurprising. In addition to the suggestions above that there have always been links between religion and new technologies, O'Leary offers a simple explanation as to why religion is prevalent on the WWW when he notes that 'it would indeed be an anomaly if a cultural force of this magnitude [religion] were not to find expression in the newly developing world of computer networks' (O'Leary 2004: 37). Furthermore, the implications of the presence of religion online are likely to be significant. For example, it is possible that an online presence could result in changes in religious beliefs. A number of scholars of religion and the Internet point this out, citing McLuhan's well-worn phrase 'The medium is the message' (cited in Beckerlegge 2001c: 256; Brasher 2004: 43; Dawson and Cowan 2004: 9). Similarly, Castells, drawing upon Postman, writes that 'communication decisively shapes culture' and as culture is mediated and enacted through communications technologies, 'our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes – become fundamentally transformed, and will be more so over time, by the new technological system [i.e. the Internet]' (Castells 2000: 356). O'Leary also indicates that the relationship between religion and the Internet is likely to be significant when he compares the rapid rise of the Internet with the introduction of the commercial printing press in early-modern Europe. The latter was a major contributory factor in the Reformation and he argues that 'we may reasonably anticipate that the digital revolution will be accompanied by similarly massive upheavals in the social sphere in general and in religion in particular' (O'Leary 2004: 41).

Therefore, when the above evidence is considered, the inadequacies of general studies concerning the Internet which neglect religion are clearly demonstrated.

The prevalence of religion online and the fact that it is increasing exponentially is further demonstrated through undertaking keyword searches using search engines. For example, in 2001, using the *AltaVista* search engine, the term 'religion' resulted in 7,894,673 'hits'<sup>5</sup> (Dawson 2001a: online). An identical search now<sup>6</sup> would produce 50,500,000 hits. This is as true for Hinduism<sup>7</sup> in its various multi-faceted guises as it is for other 'world religions' and various other religious groups. For example, an Internet search in 1999 by the *Dallas Morning News* found 230,000 sites using 'Hindu' as the search term (search engine type not revealed) (see Collette 1999: online). A search using identical terms now yields 11,300,000 sites using the *Google* search engine<sup>8</sup> and 4,730,000 using *AltaVista*. In an article published in 2000, Mayer reports that using *AltaVista* he found 6,565 websites for the search term '*Transcendental Meditation*' and 760 websites for '*Ananda Marga*' (Mayer 2000: 257). Now the figures are 231,000 and 27,400 respectively. Using *Google* the figures are 213,000/35,500. Furthermore, because of the sheer number of websites and the rate in which they are increasing, the search engines can only keep track of a percentage of them (see Dreyfus 2001: 23, 96) and so there are actually more relevant websites than the search engines reveal. It is therefore not possible to know how many Hindu-related websites<sup>9</sup> there are at any one time (this will be considered further in my methodological discussion concerning Internet research in chapter 6). The figures above, then, are just intended to illustrate

---

<sup>5</sup> Although the number of 'hits' for a specific subject can give an idea of its prominence and growth online, it is a far from perfect indicator. For example, some 'hits' may merely refer to different webpages within websites (these two terms will be explained below), others may refer to websites which are no longer functioning, and some websites included in the total may actually put forward a view which is in opposition to the subject in question.

<sup>6</sup> January 9, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> A conceptualisation of 'Hinduism' will be offered shortly.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this project, unless otherwise stated, *Google* is the search engine used. This is because it is currently the most respected search engine. *The Rough Guide to The Internet* affirms this when it claims that at the moment *Google* is 'the biggest, freshest database...with the most relevant results on top' (Buckley and Clark 2004: 122). Gauntlett shares a similar view and declares that *Google* is an 'excellent search engine' (Gauntlett 2004b: 290; see also 2004a: 8, 23). Through personal experience I have also found the *Google* search engine to be the most efficient.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'Hindu-related website' will be explained shortly.

that a) there is a huge number of Hindu-related websites and b) they are increasing rapidly.

The huge numbers of Hindu-related websites alone, strongly suggest that the WWW is certainly of significance to a sizable amount of Hindus and those interested in Hinduism. However, to my knowledge there have, as yet, been no studies which focus upon Hinduism and the Internet. Astonishingly, in his book *Hinduism and Modernity*, published in 2003, Smith does not even mention the Internet. The closest he comes is when he talks of the '*Ganesh*<sup>10</sup> Milk Miracle' (see chapter 4 of this thesis) and notes that *The Guardian* reported that the religious fervour that ensued worldwide was propagated by mass telecommunications (Smith 2003: 3). However, the Internet is not considered at all despite the fact that the book attempts to analyse the relationship of Hinduism and modernity and, for example, cinema and television are considered.

Even in those studies which recognise the prevalence of religion online, Hinduism is largely absent. For example in the Pew study mentioned above, religious groups in North America are merely divided up into 'Protestant', 'Catholic', 'Jewish', 'Other', 'None' and 'Evangelical' (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004: 10). Presumably, Hindu groups are subsumed in the 'Other' category and this is, to my mind, inadequate to say the least. The problematic nature of subsuming various religions in the 'Other' category is further shown when it is revealed that 55% of those in the 'Other' category 'use the Internet for personal religious and spiritual purposes' which is a higher percentage than Catholics and Jews, and that 37% 'use the Internet for institutional religious and spiritual reasons' and this is more than Catholics and only 4% less than Protestants. Furthermore, when it comes to the seeking of religious information online, 38% of those in the 'Other' category do this, which, along with Jews, constitutes the highest percentage (see Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004: 13). Therefore it is clear that the 'Other' category is far from being statistically insignificant and there can be no doubt that the Pew Internet study treats Hinduism and other religions not mentioned in the categories inadequately.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The elephant-headed god of wisdom.

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, I would argue that although the general conclusion concerning the fact that many North Americans use the Internet for religious reasons seems plausible, the details of the study are of questionable validity anyway as the sample was only 2,013 and there was only a 31.3% response rate (see Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004: 22).

In various academic studies though, a variety of religions not present in one of the named Pew study categories *have* been considered in regard to the Internet.<sup>12</sup> For example, Buddhism (e.g. Prebish 2004; Fukamizu 2005; Kim 2005), Islam (e.g. Bunt 2000a; 2000b, 2003, 2004), Witchcraft (e.g. Berger and Ezzy 2004), Neo-Paganism (e.g. Davis 1995; O’Leary 2004; Cowan 2005a, 2005b) and other New Religious Movements (NRMs)<sup>13</sup> (e.g. The House of Netjer [Krogh and Pillifant 2004]) and issues surrounding NRMs (e.g. Introvigne 2000; Mayer 2000; Barker 2005) have all been studied. However, there has been no study concerning Hinduism. Indeed, in 2004, Dawson, a leading scholar in the field of religion online, lamented that ‘Hinduism online is an unstudied phenomenon’ (Dawson 2004b [personal communication via Beckford]). The neglect of Hinduism in the field of online religion is further demonstrated by the fact that in Charles Ess’s comments at the panel session concerning religion and the Internet at the 19<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in March 2005 there are references to Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam but Hinduism is conspicuous in its absence (see Ess 2005: unpublished conference paper). Concerning academic attention towards Hinduism and the Internet then, there has been no improvement since Bradley gave a paper entitled ‘Religion in Cyberspace – Building on the Past’ at the Institute for the History of Religions of Abo Akademii University in 1997 where she spoke of Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and NRMs but neglected Hinduism entirely (Bradley 1997: online).

Nevertheless, Hinduism is not *entirely* absent from academic studies concerned with religion and the Internet. However, in each of the few cases Hinduism is merely mentioned and is largely incidental to the authors’ central concerns. For example, Bainbridge points out that in 1995 the Meher Baba movement and the *International Society for Krishna Consciousness* (ISKCON) had an online presence, and briefly describes their websites (Bainbridge 1997: 150-151). Barker also notes that ISKCON used the Internet in 1995 as a means of communication (Barker 2005: 67). Brasher

---

<sup>12</sup> Various traditions within Christianity have also been studied (e.g. Bedell 2000; Campbell, R.A. 2004; Laney 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Barker defines a NRM as a movement that has ‘become visible in its present form since the Second World War’ and which ‘proposes answers to at least some of the...ultimate questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions’ (Barker 1999: 16).

talks of an online *puja*<sup>14</sup> to the goddess *Kali* (Brasher 2004: 3-5) while Dawson and Cowan mention in passing *pujas* and the Internet (the nature<sup>15</sup> of the *puja* is not revealed though) (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 12), online festivals (p. 3) and that *pujas* can be ordered online (p. 3). In their respective chapters which deal with the mediation of religious experience through the Internet, Dawson (2005: 20) and O’Leary (2005: 41) also refer to websites through which *pujas* can be ordered,<sup>16 17</sup> while Beckerlegge (citing Bannerjee 1998) reveals that the 1998 *Durga Puja* festival in Calcutta was broadcast online and emphasises that ‘this was not mere reporting but a means to facilitate “cyberworship”’, and also mentions that the 2001 *Kumbh Mela* festival in Allahabad was also broadcast online (Beckerlegge 2001c: 229, 231) (Beckerlegge also mentions the existence of *Hinduism Today* magazine [p. 229] which will be considered in chapter 7).<sup>18</sup> Vásquez and Marquardt also refer to a website offering a ‘virtual pilgrimage’<sup>19</sup> to the *Kumbh Mela* (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 92).

Hinduism on the WWW also features in a number of media reports (mostly from India) which provide little in the way of analysis. For example, *The Tribune* (anon. June 21, 2000: online<sup>20</sup>) reported on the ordering of *pujas* online, and *India Today* (anon. October 16, 2000: online), *The Hindu* (anon. December 14, 2000: online), the Indian news site *rediff.com* (anon. December 26, 2000), *Reuters* (Abraham April 5, 2001:

---

<sup>14</sup> *Puja* is ““worship” [which] involves the presentation of “honour offerings” to the deity’ (Eck 1985: 89) and will be considered in some detail in chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> i.e. whether it is an online *puja* or a *puja* that can be ordered online. Chapter 2 explains this distinction.

<sup>16</sup> Dawson also mentions that ‘virtual temple’ websites are not very technologically advanced (Dawson 2005: 30) but offers nothing more about them.

<sup>17</sup> O’Leary’s comments on such a service are largely irrelevant (see O’Leary 2005: 41-42). He sees websites that offer a *puja* service as evidence that there has been little innovation in the realm of online religious mediation. He argues that such a service still necessitates the physical sacred space because after receiving the online order, somebody in India actually goes to the *mandir* (Hindu ‘temple’) to offer the *puja*. However, the ordering of *pujas* to be performed at a sacred place without physically going there has a long tradition in Hinduism. Therefore, such a service is not attempting to be, and does not constitute, a new form of worship unique to the Internet.

<sup>18</sup> Although Beckerlegge talks about the nature of the image (Beckerlegge 2001b: esp.60-62) and in the same volume (Beckerlegge 2001c) considers religion on the Internet (from a religious studies perspective), he does not consider issues surrounding Hindu images online.

<sup>19</sup> Virtual pilgrimages will be considered in chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> In the bibliography full bibliographical details of articles by anonymous authors are listed in chronological order so as to facilitate ease of location.

online), the *Associated Press* (Srinivasan June 27, 2002: online) and the *BBC* (anon. June 22, 2004: online) also published articles on this phenomenon. A further *rediff.com* article (Kapoor February 26, 2003) also mentions this service and the availability of online *pujas*. Similarly, an *Asia Today* article (anon. January 3, 2001) highlights online *darshan* (the viewing of a sacred image – see chapter 2) and refers to websites that offer a *puja* service while the *Indo-Asian News Service* reported that *pujaris* (Hindu ‘priests’) at a *mandir* in Jharkhand were upset after an online *puja* service was made available by their *mandir*’s administration (anon. June 16, 2003: online). An article in *The Times of India* (anon. July 1, 2003: online) also gives examples of Hindus using the Internet to facilitate worship while Jaisinghani (September 9 2005: 10) and Kumar (n.d.: online) report on the website of the *Siddhivinayak mandir* in Mumbai (see chapter 8). The *Indo-Asian News Service* (anon. June 12, 2003: online) reported on a Hindu crematorium in Gujarat, India that was set to offer live online broadcasts of cremations on its website (*muktidham.org*), and this development was also covered by Rao who reveals that the service began on June 14, 2003 (June 26, 2003: online).<sup>21</sup>

Studies of Internet use by Indians in the diaspora have also mentioned Hinduism. Examples are Rai (1995) (cited in Braziel and Mannur 2003: 291), Mitra (1997, 2000), Lal (1999) (cited in Braziel and Mannur 2003: 291), Miller and Slater (2000) and Mannur (2003). However, no study of Hinduism and the Internet has been forthcoming.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> The cremation ground is situated at Sidhpur and is administered by the *Shree Saraswati Muktidham Trust*. Although *muktidham.org*’s webcam facility has attracted publicity, it is not commonly available. It is only turned on if this is the wish of the family of the deceased and, at least in the early days of availability, this has been a rare occurrence (see Rao V.S. June 26, 2003: online). Furthermore, between October 22, 2004 and August 8, 2006 I checked the webcam facility more than a dozen times, but the Trust were offline on each occasion despite ‘visitors’ to the website being greeted with the phrase ‘Watch Online Funeral Process’ which links to the webcam. Therefore, despite publicity, at the moment at least, it seems that the funeral webcam facility is of little practical significance. Nevertheless, the fact that the Trust are willing to film a funeral and make this available online is noteworthy because traditionally, photography at cremations in India is taboo.

<sup>22</sup> I am baffled as to why this is the case. The complexity of Hinduism could be a factor. What is clear is that a study concerning Hinduism and the Internet is certainly no less important than studies concerning other religions and the Internet. Indeed, in terms of social significance (not least as a result of the number of adherents), a study of Hinduism and the Internet is more important than, for example, a study of a Pagan group and the Internet, of which there are many (see above).

Because of the large amount of Hindu resources online and the fact that Hindus and others are accessing and interacting with these resources, a sociological investigation of what is on the WWW regarding Hinduism, the consequences of this, and various issues surrounding the situation, is extremely worthwhile. In the absence of studies of Hinduism and the Internet, this study will constitute an important contribution to the sociological field of religion and the Internet. Furthermore, in the light of the importance of the Internet, Barker remarks that ‘any student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore [the Internet] at his or her peril’ (Barker 2005: 81) and Flory claims that ‘religion on the Internet is...here to stay [and therefore] scholars of religion...had better take that reality seriously as it will undoubtedly change both the practice of “real-world” religion and our approaches to it’ (Flory 2005: 365).<sup>23</sup> Comments such as these suggest that this study, if deemed successful, will constitute an important contribution to the sociology of contemporary Hinduism and the field of the sociology of religion in general.

Before setting out in more detail the areas that I will be focusing upon and the way in which this study will proceed, it is necessary to provide definitions (or in some cases, conceptualisations) of the key terms used in this study.

## **Terminology and Definitions**

The purpose of this section is not to come up with definitive definitions but rather to explain the terminology used and to provide operational definitions which allow the research to be conducted fruitfully.

### **Religion**

In the ‘Context’ section above I have used the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religious’, and in this research a common-sense dictionary definition of these terms<sup>24</sup> is sufficient. For example, in the above section the terms do not necessitate or invite further definition or

---

<sup>23</sup> Regarding Islam, Bunt makes a similar point and concludes that ‘over time it is anticipated that the Internet will form an integral component of conventional fieldwork’ (Bunt 2000b: 209).

<sup>24</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines ‘religion’ as: ‘the belief in a superhuman controlling power, esp. in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship’. The term ‘religious’ is defined as: ‘of or concerned with religion’ (Allen [ed.] 1990: 1015).

explanation. There is therefore no need to debate the merits of the various definitions of and approaches to religion offered by, for example, Tylor, Engels, Pareto, Freud, Durkheim, Horton, Spiro, Goode, Otto, Wach, Berger, Weber, Geertz, Bell, Turner, Robertson, Goody, Babb and Yinger (see e.g. Turner 1991b; Hamilton 1993; Beckerlegge 2001a). Furthermore, as Turner points out, ‘although the question of the nature of religion has been endlessly discussed by philosophers, sociologists and theologians, the conceptual cows have yet to come home’ (Turner 1991b: 242; see also Beckford 2000a: 167) and so it is likely that such a discussion would not be entirely fruitful. Furthermore, such a discussion is certainly beyond the scope of this project.

It is worth noting here that both the category of religion and various religious traditions are (regardless of whether or not religious experiences are supernatural) social phenomena which are socially constructed (Beckford 2003: 2-8). That is, the meanings attributed to both the category of religion and to various religions are not fixed, and instead are constantly negotiated. For example, a group that previously was not considered to be religious could, after a long complex process of argument and counterargument, achieve recognition as being a bona fide religion. Within traditions, opposing groups may denounce the philosophy and practices of other groups as not being valid expressions of the religion or even religious at all, and the processes in such disputes can be identified and subjected to analysis. It is acceptable and productive for this study to be able to proceed using a common sense understanding of ‘religion’ and the conceptualisation of Hinduism that I will offer below. However, the recognition that the category of religion and various religions are socially constructed is important and should be kept in mind as in chapter 7 I will demonstrate that disputes are being played out amongst Hindu groups in cyberspace, which has become another venue where the meanings attributed to Hinduism are constantly renegotiated.

Prior to the section dealing with defining Hinduism, it is worthwhile briefly mentioning some specific difficulties surrounding the term ‘religion’ in relation to Hinduism as this has relevance to later discussions.

The Indian law courts have faced difficulties regarding the nature of religion (which provides a clear example that religion is socially constructed). It was reported in May 2004 that it was necessary for The Supreme Court to examine ‘what constitutes an essential part of a religion with reference to a particular doctrine or religious practice



followed by a particular community' (anon. [LANS] May 8, 2004: online). Such a question would be difficult for any law court. However, regarding Hinduism this problem is exacerbated. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, as Pocock points out in his anthropological account of an Indian village, in the West the word religion refers to 'an area of the *special*, a mode of reasoning about the universe governed by rules which are not those of day-to-day thought' and that therefore '*the* religious remains...a separate area of life in the West' (Pocock 1973: xiii). However, in Hinduism there is not this separation between the secular and the religious, and the religious should not be seen as constituting a separate sphere from that of daily life. Preston alludes to this when he points out that 'Hinduism is one of the world's most complex religions...[and]...is composed of tightly-knit myths, rites and customs' (Preston 1980: 1). Beckford, following on from Robertson (1993), makes the same point as Pocock and argues that 'only in modern times and predominantly western societies has religion been categorically separated from the rest of culture (Beckford 2000a: 167). Although the argument that religion only became a category when it became separated from the secular in the course of Western modernity is valid, I am not convinced that a lack of a distinction between the sacred and everyday life in Hinduism is as a result of non-exposure to modernity. For example, Indians were subject to modernizing tendencies during the colonial era, and in modern India even amongst highly educated individuals who embrace modernity it is still common for their lives to be inextricably bound up with religion. This is the case even in the diaspora (see e.g. Carey 1983; Carman 1996; Williams 1996b; Sekhar 1999). Therefore, when Hinduism is referred to as a religion there must at least be the understanding that, as Hinduism is inextricably bound up with everyday life, the term 'religion' as used here is somewhat different from how the term is conventionally understood in the West.

The second reason why Hinduism is problematic in relation to the term 'religion' is more serious. Thus far the term 'religion' has been accepted as there is some commonsense understanding of what is being referred to when it is used; and this is sufficient for this project. I have argued that religion is not a separate category in the life of a Hindu. I have also argued that when this is explicitly recognised and appreciated, the term 'religion' can remain in use and it is thus acceptable to refer to Hinduism as a religion. However, this argument is dependent upon an understanding of

what Hinduism is, and this in itself is far from straightforward. I will explain why this is the case and then proceed, drawing upon the work of Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997), to demonstrate that an understanding of what constitutes Hinduism *can* be achieved, and this results in a conception of Hinduism which makes clear what it is that I am studying in this project in regard to the Internet. Therefore, I will argue that in this study, the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' can certainly be used without any threat to academic rigour and this does not imply a lack of awareness of diversity within Hinduism. In the course of the study, instances where specific traditions within Hinduism are relevant to the study, these traditions will be highlighted and discussed.

## Hinduism

It is clear that there is not a homogenous religion that can be termed Hinduism. Instead, the term encompasses a diverse range of practices, beliefs, and groups that can be subsumed under the term 'Hindu' (see e.g. Burghart 1987; Flood 1995, Jackson 1996; Vertovec 1997: 265; Weber cited in Hamilton 1998: 57). Hinduism lacks a central church-like institution (Srinivas 1962a: 60; Kanitkar and Cole 1995: 206; Smith 2003: 6) (Adi Shankara's *maths* [monastic institutions – see chapter 8] were never able to achieve this) but the heterogeneity inherent within Hinduism is far more extreme than this alone indicates. For example, some traditions that are referred to as being Hindu are actually vehemently opposed to one another in terms of beliefs and practices. Indeed, it has been said that to put all the groups that are generally thought to belong to Hinduism in this all-encompassing category is comparable to lumping together religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity and calling them something like 'The Semitic religion' (see Svarūpa-dāsa 1996: 101). However, I will demonstrate that there are still grounds for retaining the term 'Hinduism'.<sup>25</sup> The practical acceptability of the term will be demonstrated through the acceptance of a specific approach to Hinduism, which, significantly, does not seek to define Hinduism.

Robert Jackson (1996) argues convincingly that the reason for the confusion over what Hinduism actually is largely stems from the British in Bengal during the second half of the eighteenth century. Even though the plethora of diverse beliefs and practices of the

---

<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting here that Smith is actually of the opinion that a 'total body' of all the different forms of Christianity is less coherent than 'Hinduism' (Smith 2003: 6).

Indian sub-continent could not be seen as constituting a religion as such, because of their Western cultural paradigm, the British assumed that there was ‘a coherent system of beliefs and practices that could be compared with other religious systems’ (Jackson 1996: 88) such as Christianity which did constitute a coherent system.<sup>26</sup> The diverse beliefs and practices were lumped together, and by the early nineteenth century were collectively referred to as ‘Hinduism’. Within a short period of time, Hindus<sup>27</sup> themselves started to use the term (Jackson 1996: 88-89). Hinduism subsequently came to be known as a ‘world religion’ (along with other religions such as Islam [which, unlike Hinduism, *did* have a holy book on which authority was based]). For example, Hinduism was one of the ‘world religions’ at the ‘World’s Parliament of Religions’ held in Chicago in 1893 (see chapter 4). Hinduism is still commonly referred to as a ‘world religion’ today (e.g. in Hamilton 1998) and is placed alongside religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism on, for example, the BBC website [bbc.co.uk/world\\_religions](http://bbc.co.uk/world_religions) and in *The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Meredith, Hickman and Le Rolland 2005) and in academic books such as Coward’s *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985). It is also extremely common for Hinduism to be taught as a discrete religion in schools in England and Wales (Jackson 1996: 95, 97).

Even amongst those who recognise that the term ‘Hinduism’ is extremely problematic, it can be argued that there *is* such a thing as Hinduism (although there is disagreement as to what this might be). For example, even though scholars may struggle with the term, many people would comfortably assert that they are Hindus. Flood notes that ‘Most Hindus will be certain that their identity contrasts with that of Christian, Muslim or Buddhist’ (Flood 1995: 5). To a large degree this reflexive thought arises only as a result of questions posed through living in an environment (e.g. the UK) where Hindus practise self-consciously, unlike in India where this is not the case for the majority of the population (see Knott 1986a: 233; Michaelson 1987: 46; Thomas 1993: 187). However, some reflexive thought *is* also occurring in India, largely as a result of an

---

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the presence of the large number of diverse beliefs and practices in India, another reason why comparisons with Christianity would be unsuitable is that in India much ritual worship was, and is, carried on outside a formal place of worship (see e.g. Michaelson 1987).

<sup>27</sup> The term ‘Hindu’ can be traced back into ‘ancient antiquity’ where it ‘referred to the natives of northern India’ (Frykenberg 1997: 83-84; see also Jackson [1996: 88] and Weller [1997: 290]).

increase in Hindu nationalism which makes the question ‘What is Hinduism?’ a political one (see Bhatt 1997: 157).

Others reject the term Hinduism altogether, instead referring to their beliefs and practices as the *sanatana dharma*. This is not easily translatable but can be roughly translated as the ‘eternal way of life’ (see e.g. Weller 1997: 290). It is often translated as ‘the eternal religion’ but this is inadequate as the use of the term is attempting to reject the Western term ‘religion’ which is seen as being unsuitable!

I will first briefly consider the views of four scholars (Madeleine Biardeau, Brian K. Smith, Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Heinrich von Stietencron) on the validity of the construct of ‘Hinduism’. These approaches are summarised and commented upon by Aditya Malik (1997) in his aptly named chapter *Hinduism: Three-Thousand-Three-Hundred-and-Six Ways to Invoke a Construct* which I will draw upon. I will then go on to look in more detail at the approach of Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997).

There is a similarity between the first four scholars in that they attempt to construct a ‘unity within Hinduism’ and define it. However, they do this differently even though they ‘make reference to similar terms and materials’. The first three attempt to ‘develop a holistic version of Hinduism’, while von Stietencron ‘asserts the coherent nature of individual traditions’ (Malik 1997: 13). Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, on the other hand, argues that Hinduism displays unity within diversity.

Madeleine Biardeau presents a structuralist approach. She believes that a whole society desires ‘to present itself as a well-ordered whole...[and that]...Unity is sought at a deeper level...on the basis of the explicit or implicit norms which every Hindu carries in his head’ (Biardeau 1981/1994: 2/16 cited in Malik 1997: 13). Therefore the *Veda*<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> The *Veda* (or *Vedas*) literally means ‘knowledge’ and is seen by many to be an essential component in any definition of Hinduism. There are four *Vedas* which are texts that were written down around 5000 years ago. Previously, the knowledge was transmitted orally. They are the most sacred ancient texts and are believed to be eternal (see Weller 1997: 291). The *Vedas* are often seen as ‘the “canon” of Hindu Scripture’ (see Zaehner 1966: pp. v. and vi.; see also Cross 1994: 16) although such a description is perhaps evidence of attempting to understand Hinduism through a Western frame of reference which is problematic (see above).

is seen ‘...not as a corpus of very ancient texts, but above all as a universal reference’ (Biardeau 1981/1994: 14/16 cited in Malik 1997: 14).

As Malik notes, this does not allow the possibility of individual agency. Furthermore there is an absence of any intention whatsoever to engage in dialogue with Hindus themselves and, in Malik’s opinion, dialogue could undermine the theory’s claim of unity. Nevertheless, I do not think it wise to completely reject Biardeau’s theory. After all, as mentioned, many Hindus do seem to know intuitively that they belong to a unified group.

Brian K. Smith’s view is quite similar. Smith believes that Hinduism is ‘less of an essence and more of a process whose referential base is the *Veda*’ (Malik 1997: 14). Tradition is transformed with ‘legitimizing reference to the authority of the *Veda*’ (Smith 1989: 13f. cited in Malik 1997: 14). The *Veda* is referenced in a number of ways. For example, people may claim that something *is* the *Veda*, that it is *based* on the *Veda*, is a *simplified version* of the *Veda* or that it is an enlargement of the *Veda* (see Smith 1989: 29 cited in Malik 1997: 14). There are some groups who actually *reject* the *Veda* (Flood 1995: 9). Therefore it may be prudent to add such groups to Smith’s list. Even if they reject it, such groups are still technically referring to the *Veda*.

Malik points out that the approach is top-heavy as it does not take into account those groups which make no reference whatsoever to the *Veda* (Malik 1997: 14). Such groups predominantly engage in rituals and make no reference to the scriptures. These groups are those that make up the category that has come to be known by many as ‘Folk Hinduism’ that encompasses the most common form of worship in India (see Fuller 1992, where the term ‘Popular Hinduism’ is used). Malik emphasises that although the rituals practised by such groups are certain to have antecedents in the *Veda*, the practitioners themselves do not consciously attempt to legitimise them through reference to the *Veda* – it is only the scholar that does this (Malik 1997: 15).

Günther-Dietz Sontheimer argues that Hinduism is made up of five constituent components that together make up Hinduism (Malik 1997: 16). These components are: The work and teachings of *Brahmans* (members of the priestly caste),<sup>29</sup> Asceticism and

---

<sup>29</sup> I use the alternative spelling ‘*Brahmin*’ in this thesis.

Renunciation, Tribal religion, Folk religion and *Bhakti* (devotional worship) (Malik 1997: 28). The components have a 'dynamic and fluid' interrelationship and Folk religion is the most important of these (Malik 1997: 16).

Malik notes that there are a number of problems with this. Firstly, the approach is, like Biardeau's, ahistorical because it advocates that the five components have existed since Hinduism began (Malik 1997: 17). It is clear that this is highly unlikely. Although some Hindus refer to their tradition as eternal, as this study will clearly demonstrate, it is continually evolving. Furthermore, even if the tradition is not eternal, although the historical date of the inception of Hinduism cannot be ascertained, it seems impossible that all of the components would have arisen simultaneously. Furthermore, argues Malik, Sontheimer's approach is flawed because it is highly unlikely that the different groups engage in discourse at the same level (see Malik 1997: 17). This seems like a valid criticism. For example, urban *Brahmins* who study the scriptures are likely to be far removed from illiterate villagers who worship local deities at village shrines.

Heinrich von Stietencron argues that it is wrong to see Hinduism as one religion. Therefore he departs from the previous approaches outlined. However, his approach is still holistic to an extent because he sees Hinduism as a socio-cultural unit. In his opinion, this unit contains many distinct religions which are coherent and can thus be compared with other 'world religions'. These religions cannot be lumped together under the term 'Hinduism' (here 'Hindu religion') because there are so many contradictions between them (Malik 1997: 15).

Malik identifies two major problems with this approach. Firstly, it attempts to judge others using the Western system of reference (see above concerning this) as it still uses Christian concepts such as 'religion [and] culture'. Furthermore, because of this, different groups within Hinduism are compartmentalised even though (as will be demonstrated) it is clear that there are overlaps (Malik 1997: 16).

### ***Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi***

In her (1997) chapter *The Polythetic-prototype Approach to Hinduism*, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi puts forward an approach to understanding Hinduism which appears to overcome the problems inherent within the previous approaches to

Hinduism. She maintains that we should not get rid of the term 'Hinduism' or deny Hinduism the status of a religion. She argues that it is not Hinduism *per se* which causes problems but the false belief that all concepts can be defined because they must possess common attributes and clear-cut boundaries (see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 294). This can be rectified if we utilise 'Wittgenstein's discovery that concepts need not have common attributes and clear-cut boundaries but may be held together by a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 295). In other words there may be a 'family resemblance'. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi emphasises that such ('polythetic') concepts should not be defined but exemplified, and Srinivas's claim that 'While it is not possible to define a Hindu, it is not difficult to identify a person as a Hindu' (Srinivas 1960: 575 cited in Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 295) backs up this assertion. It would be difficult to disagree with Srinivas. Indeed, many studies including this one rest on the supposition that there are individuals and groups than can be clearly identified as being Hindu.

Before going on to show how her approach can be applied to Hinduism, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi mentions some of the previously inadequate approaches to Hinduism such as those by, for example, Weber, and Radhakrishnan, who both look for a 'core' within Hinduism. Weber saw this as the belief in *karma* (the theory that every action has a consequence), while Radhakrishnan saw it as Adi Shankara's philosophy of *monism*<sup>30</sup> (see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 295-296). However, any such approach is flawed because there will always be some concepts that do not apply to all groups (for example Cohn [1959] says that some Hindus are unaware of the notion of karma [cited in Hamilton 1998: 68]), while some concepts are shared by followers of Buddhism and Jainism (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 296).

Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi goes on to give examples of how different traditions in Hinduism can be held together by overlapping similarities.<sup>31</sup> I present here the best of Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi's examples which clearly shows the application of the approach:

---

<sup>30</sup> Shankara's *monist* philosophy is known as *advaita Vedanta* (see chapter 3). This advocates the view that 'the *atman* or *jiva* (living entity) is identical with God and this simply has to be realised. Only the divine is absolutely real, and everything else is *maya* (illusion or provisional), being real only in a relative and limited sense' (Weller 1997: 296).

<sup>31</sup> In his (1980) study, Preston adopts a similar approach to Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi although he is only referring to 'folk Hinduism' (my emphasis) when he speaks of an 'endless maze of interlocking myths

Village Hinduism with its worship of mostly bloodthirsty goddesses who have to be placated and Sanskritic rites addressed to gentle Gods like Krishna have nothing in common as long as we remain on this general level of description... [However,]...the fact that one deity is female and the other male creates no problem because a village goddess often has male servants who participate in her offerings and Krishna may be worshipped together with...Rādhā. Another overlapping similarity consists in the fact that non-Brahmin *pūjāris* just like Brahman temple priests approach their respective deities in a state of ritual purity...Furthermore, the blood demanded by the goddess and the milk pudding relished by Krishna may either be subsumed under the heading of food or it may be pointed out that, while Krishna never accepts any blood offering, village goddesses enjoy both blood and sweet dishes. (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 298)

It would at first appear that there could be the objection that if this approach is used then it automatically means that Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are Hindu because they are linked to groups which would conventionally be regarded as being Hindu by virtue of their overlapping similarities. However, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi points out that it is exactly her purpose to show that polythetic concepts have no clear boundaries and that such groups remain separate from Hindus only 'because of their members' wish to be separate and not because of an intrinsic criteria justifying their separate status' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 300).<sup>32</sup>

A completely polythetic approach to Hinduism would be very vague. However, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi also stresses the importance of a number of features within Hinduism which she refers to as 'prototypes'. Although all of the criteria that previously 'have been pointed out by scholars as characteristic of Hinduism and useful to identify a Hindu remain valid as prototypical features' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 301), the key features that make up the prototypes are, according to Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, those features that are frequent and highly prestigious. Such features include the

---

and rites' (Preston 1980: 1).

<sup>32</sup> A problematic aspect of this is that Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi does not take into account the fact that the desire for certain groups to remain distinct from Hinduism could be ignored and the approach could be used for political ends. For example, it is common for Hindu nationalists to assert that Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs do form part of Hinduism (see McKean 1996: 118; Williams 1996b: 236; Mannur 2003: 287; Smith 2003: 5) and the approach could be used to back up this assertion.



worship of the gods *Shiva*, *Krishna* and *Ganesh*, the visiting of *mandirs* and going on pilgrimage, and belief in the concepts of *dharma* (religious duty, law and custom), *karma* (the theory that every action has a consequence), *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) and *Brahman* (the supreme Reality) (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 301). Because these prototypical practices and concepts are not essential though, what results is an aid to help scholars employ the overall polythetic-prototype approach which appears to be the only one that accepts both that ‘Hinduism’ exists and that there is real unity in extreme diversity.

This amounts to a kind of common-sense approach. As mentioned above, it is usually possible to tell who is a Hindu; and there is usually the intuitive realisation that there are common links between what might appear to be very diverse groups. In the quote presented above concerning *Krishna*, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi gives quite an extreme example, but there are more extreme ones and even before learning of the polythetic-prototype approach it appeared intuitively clear to me that there was a common thread of overlapping similarities inherent within Hinduism. For example, I could see a near-naked ascetic who lived in a cremation ground and who practised various austerities, and a businessman with a family who conducted a daily *puja* in his home and have no qualms about seeing them both as being Hindus. It somehow also seems apt that when considering Hinduism specifically (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi intends that her approach be used to further the understanding of a plethora of different things), we ‘accept vagueness and disorder’ (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 303) instead of insisting on boundaries where, it appears, they do not exist. This is because Hinduism resists neat definition. Therefore, for all of these reasons, the polythetic-prototype approach which does not insist on a specific definition will inform my understanding of what Hinduism is throughout this study.

It is also necessary to consider just what ‘cyberspace’<sup>33</sup> is, to distinguish this term from the related terms ‘WWW’ and the ‘Internet’ and to clarify other terminology used in this study.

---

<sup>33</sup> The term ‘cyberspace’ was originally coined by the science fiction writer William Gibson in 1984 (see Tomas 1995: 22; Wertheim 1999: 223; Bainbridge 2000: 68; Balsamo 2000: 490; Benedikt 2000: 29; Bunt 2000b: 145; Introvigne 2000: 279; 2005: 102; Stratton 2000: 721; Beckerlegge 2001c: 257; Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 1; Arthur 2002: 307; Whittaker 2002: 135; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 94; Berger 2004: 274; Brasher 2004: 29; Nayar 2004: 66). Gibson’s fictional cyberspace consisting of a ‘consensual

## **The Internet and the WWW**

The Internet is 'the worldwide network of networks' that 'connects millions of computers...around the globe' (Whittaker 2002: 196). These networks 'consist not only of the physical hardware (computers, cables, satellites, etc.), but also the...software *protocols*, that govern the exchange of data between machines' (Whittaker 2002: 4 [drawing upon Young 1999]). Amongst other services, the Internet hosts the WWW which refers to the huge number of various interconnected websites.

It is worthwhile briefly outlining the history of the Internet and its applications as this can help to clarify the above terms and show that, despite the significance of the Internet, it is a relatively recent phenomenon.

### ***Brief History of the Internet***

Dodge and Kitchin (2001) contend that the Internet should not be seen as being a revolutionary development and that its origins lie with the first computer built by Babbage, with Morse and the telegraph, and with Bell and his telephone system. They argue that what distinguishes the Internet as it is today is its 'speed and diffusion of growth' (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 6). The early development of the Internet is linked to the Cold War and started out in 1968 as a project to link incompatible computer systems.<sup>34</sup> An early version of what is now the Internet was called ARPANET (after the US Advanced Research Projects Agency [ARPA]), and by the end of 1969 four computers in the USA were linked. In 1970 software was created which meant that it was possible to send e-mail, and by March 1977 111 computers were linked including some outside of the USA. In the 1970s networks outside of institutions were also developed by computer enthusiasts, and Bulletin Board Services (BBSs)<sup>35</sup> were created (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 7-10; see also Castells 2002: 10-12). The US National Science Foundation (NSF) set up a network in 1988 called NSFNET and this superseded ARPANET and 'formed the basis of the Internet as we now know it'

---

hallucination' (Gibson 1984: 51 in Tomas 1995: 38) is somewhat different from contemporary cyberspace.

<sup>34</sup> However, in 1967 an initial study was undertaken (see Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 7) and according to Gauntlett, the talk of 'an internet' can be traced back to 1962 (Gauntlett 2004a: 5).

<sup>35</sup> BBSs are online message boards where messages can be posted and replied to.

(Dodge and Kitchen 2001: 10), although the afore-mentioned computer enthusiasts who networked their computers also shaped the Internet as it is known today (Castells 2002: 12). In the 1990s the Internet was fully privatised which helped its development and growth (Castells 2002: 12), and other important developments in the 1990s were advances in computer hardware and increased bandwidth (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 11).

However, it was not until the development of the ‘user friendly’ WWW that the Internet started to be widely utilised (see Gauntlett 2004a: 5). This application was developed in 1990 by Tim Berners-Lee and was released in 1991 (Castells 2002: 15) (Dodge and Kitchin [2001: 11] cite the date as being 1992). Berners-Lee’s interface ‘made it possible to retrieve and contribute information from and to any computer connected via the Internet’ (Castells 2002: 15) and meant that text, images and sound could now be combined and the online documents (websites and webpages [see below]) could now be directly linked to each other (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 11 [see also Gauntlett 2004a: 5-6]). After the interface was released it was improved upon by a number of individuals and organisations (see Castells 2002: 15-16). Then, in 1995 when the first commercial browser<sup>36</sup> (*Netscape Navigator*) was released, ‘for most people, for business, and for society at large, the Internet was born’ (Castells 2002: 17) (see also Helland 2004: 25).<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> The fact that the Internet as it currently is<sup>39</sup> has only been around since 1995 yet is undeniably influential in society suggests just how powerful and important it is. In relation to Hinduism, it is this influence that this thesis intends to investigate.

---

<sup>36</sup> Software which allows the WWW to be navigated with ease.

<sup>37</sup> Prior to this, the Internet ‘was used mainly by college professors and students, other researchers, and the military’ (Gurak 2004: 25). Computer enthusiasts should also be added to this list.

<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that there was no mention of the WWW in a special issue of *Social Compass* published in 1995 that was devoted to changes in new religions (Barker 2005: 67). Even only a couple of years later, such an omission would be unthinkable and Barker remarks that: ‘Now it seems almost impossible to believe that the Internet is such a recent phenomenon’ (Barker 2005: 67).

<sup>39</sup> Of course, the Internet is constantly evolving, but since the introduction of the first commercial browser in 1995 its essential nature has remained the same and it has ‘reached a level where people can focus on content and ignore the technology’ (Miller and Slater 2000: 2).

## **Website Terminology**

Terminology surrounding the interconnected websites that make up the WWW also needs to be clarified here. A 'website' is 'a collection of related documents' whereas a 'webpage' is 'a single document' (Buckley and Clark 2004: 530). A 'homepage' is the main webpage of a website. A 'portal website' can be a website which 'specializes in leading you to others' (Buckley and Clark 2004: 527) or that 'aims to be the starting point for all Internet-based activity' (Whittaker 2002: 198). In this study I will also use the term 'portal website' to refer to the homepage of a vast website which allows navigation to a large amount of information and/or services accessible on the website itself. Although such portal websites invariably provide links, they do not necessarily aim to lead a 'visitor' to other websites.

Although these terms are largely unproblematic, because of the interconnected nature of the WWW there is a certain fluidity attached to the term 'website'. For example, a website will almost always contain links to websites of other organisations and/or individuals<sup>40</sup> and therefore it is not always clear where one website ends and another begins (see chapter 6). However, homepages can be identified and the general nucleus of the website can be ascertained.

## **Hindu-related Websites**

In this study I use the term 'Hindu-related websites' to refer to those websites which have at least some content which concerns Hinduism. This covers websites which focus upon Hinduism or have some Hindu content even though Hinduism may not be the central focus of the website. However, those websites which focus upon Hinduism form the core of my analysis (the reasons behind the selection of the websites will be revealed in chapter 6). As I have emphasised above, Hinduism is incredibly diverse and can include a wide variety of traditions including NRMs. Therefore, although what constitutes a Hindu-related website is somewhat arbitrary, I intend to use the term to cover a wide array of websites which could, for example, provide general information

---

<sup>40</sup> The failure to provide links to other websites is considered by many to contravene the basic ethos of the WWW. Berners-Lee, the creator of the WWW, desired that there be extensive links between websites and not websites with only internal links (see Gauntlett 2004a: 6). However, there *are* some websites that do not provide any external links.

about Hinduism, specific information relating to a certain tradition or *mandir*, a forum for discussion concerning Hinduism, an opportunity to engage in certain Hindu activities such as *puja*, or a combination of some or all of these features. The websites could be produced by various diverse groups such as charitable Hindu organisations, commercial organisations or individuals; and the target audiences could also be extremely diverse. Therefore, in addition to adopting Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi's (1997) approach to a conceptualisation of Hinduism, I also adopt it to decide what can be regarded as being a Hindu-related website.

In a sense, the term 'Hindu-related websites' can be seen as analogous with Bunt's term 'cyber Islamic environments', which he uses as 'an umbrella term which can refer to a wide variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media by those who define themselves as Muslims' (Bunt 2004: 5). However, I eschew the possible term 'cyber Hindu environments' in favour of 'Hindu-related websites' for two main reasons. Firstly, although in a general sense, cyberspace can be regarded as being an environment (see below); a distinction can be made between different types of websites. In short, this distinction is between websites where certain activities actually take place which can be regarded as constituting 'environments', and those websites which merely offer information (this is discussed in detail in chapter 7). The use of the word 'environments' may therefore give the impression that it is only websites where certain activities are actually *taking place* online that are of interest to the study and not those websites which may only provide information. However, this is not the case as these latter websites are also important.

Secondly, Bunt's term requires that producers and consumers of websites 'define themselves as Muslims' whereas the 'Hindu-related websites' that I will consider may not necessarily have been created by Hindus or be exclusively accessed by those who define themselves as Hindus. Therefore, in addition to my first reason, the use of the term 'cyber Hindu environments' could be misleading as those who are familiar with Bunt's term may assume that it also only refers to the production and use of websites by those who define themselves as Hindus. I certainly do not want this to be the case.

## Cyberspace

Although I have outlined some important issues that need to be taken into consideration, the above Internet related definitions are largely straightforward and uncontroversial. However, this is not the case for 'cyberspace'. Indeed, some are reluctant to even acknowledge its existence, seeing the Internet as merely being a tool which enables, for example, the dissemination of knowledge or ease of communication (see e.g. in Dawson 2001a: online; in Brasher 2004: 114). However, it does seem that the Internet and the WWW have actually resulted in some sort of new 'environment' where things occur. This appears to have first been suggested by Poster in 1995 (see Brasher 2004: ix.). Vasseleu also refers to cyberspace as a space 'within the electronic network of computers' (Vasseleu 1997: 46); and Willson (2000: 647) and Nayar (2004: 68) also see cyberspace in similar terms.

It is difficult to pin down cyberspace yet it does seem undeniable that it constitutes a new environment. For example, people meet 'there', they perform various activities 'there' (see e.g. Childress 1999: 261, 264 cited in Arthur 2002: 305),<sup>41</sup> and the various websites appear to have some existence somewhere 'out there'. As Beckerlegge points out, people talk of 'visiting' websites (Beckerlegge 2001c: 222, 257),<sup>42</sup> and it does seem reasonable to couch web activity in these terms.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Hine argues that 'the success of ethnographers [see e.g. Mann and Stewart (2000: 7)] in claiming the Internet<sup>44</sup> as a field site attests to acceptance that the Internet is a form of social space' (Hine 2005c: 109). Even Cowan, who criticises the 'hyperbole' surrounding cyberspace, admits that there is some sort of new environment when he remarks that 'cyberspace may exist alongside real space' (Cowan 2005b: 262).

---

<sup>41</sup> Whether or not some form of disembodiment occurs when people 'enter' cyberspace will be looked at in detail in chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> Introvigne believes that the concept of cyberspace is a classic example of a social construction (Introvigne 2000: 279), and the fact that people talk about cyberspace without being able to fully articulate just what this non-physical environment is and see it in different terms (see Brasher 2004: 9) demonstrates that this is indeed the case.

<sup>43</sup> In his criticism of hyperbole surrounding the WWW, Cowan dismisses these metaphors as being misleading (Cowan 2005b: 257-258). However, I believe that the fact that people use this language is significant and it certainly does not necessarily mean that they subscribe to the extreme view that they are literally entering cyberspace and leaving behind space as conventionally conceived.

<sup>44</sup> In this quote Hine erroneously uses the term 'Internet' to refer to cyberspace.

In this study it will be recognised that cyberspace constitutes an environment although my conception of this environment is far from that advocated by those whose comments Cowan dismisses as being hyperbole (such as those of a Neo-Pagan who believes that ‘once we enter cyberspace, we are no longer in the physical plane’ [cited in Cowan 2005b: 258]). *To some degree* activities *are* occurring in cyberspace and this will become more apparent as this thesis unfolds.

## **Online World/Offline World**

At different points in this study it is important to be clear which environment I am referring to. The terms ‘online world’ and ‘offline world’ are used to distinguish between that which is occurring in the cyberspace environment and that which is occurring in the physical world as traditionally conceived. This latter environment is often referred to as ‘the real world’ but this term is problematic as it suggests that cyberspace is somehow unreal. This usage will therefore be avoided in this thesis. The terms ‘online world’ and ‘offline world’ are also not ideal as these terms suggest that there are two different worlds whereas such a duality does not really exist. It will become clear in this thesis that the online world does not constitute a fully separate environment and is instead inextricably related to the offline world. Nevertheless, as long as this is kept in mind, for the purposes of this study, the terms ‘online world’ and ‘offline world’ usefully distinguish between activity which occurs in cyberspace and that which occurs in the physical world as traditionally conceived. In some instances I also use the term ‘online environment’ and this is simply another way of referring to the online world.

This discussion has produced operational definitions or conceptualisations of various important terms that are essential to the central arguments of the thesis.

## **A Note on Sociological Theory**

In this study I do not adopt an all-encompassing sociological theory and then attempt to explain findings in the light of this theory. Indeed, I believe that if researchers fully align themselves with a specific theoretical standpoint and proceed to interpret their findings in the light of this alone, then there is the danger that the interpretation of the data can be extremely limited. Instead, I adopt an approach which Bryant (1990) would

refer to as ‘new pragmatism’ (cited in Craib 1992: 248), which I believe can contribute more to the understanding of social phenomena. I agree fully with Craib that ‘the social world is made of different types of phenomena, and each type needs a different theoretical understanding and explanation’ (Craib 1992: 251). Therefore, I use different theories as tools by working with those theories that are especially relevant to my subject of study and which can help me to understand the data from my empirical research. In turn, when relevant theories are selected, the data from my research also has the potential to contribute to the theories that I am using (see Craib 1992: 4; Beckford 2003: 11-12). Therefore, this study tackles theoretical issues by, for example, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of various theoretical approaches to the understanding of Hinduism and the Internet. The main theories that I use in the study will be introduced in turn as I reveal the structure of the thesis.

### **A Note on the Methodology Used in the Study**

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of Hinduism and the Internet it is necessary to study both the online world and the offline world. In the light of the foregoing discussion, where I indicate that there is no real separation between the two environments, this seems both necessary and obvious. However, such an approach is very different from that commonly used in the field of cultural studies and in ethnographic sociology where the online environment is often considered without any reference to the offline world (see e.g. Bell and Kennedy’s [2000] edited volume). Even in these fields there are some writers who argue that researchers have ‘overplayed the separateness of the offline and the online’ (Hine 2000: 27) and that more understanding can be achieved by also studying the related offline situation (Hine 2000: 59-60; see also Wakeford 2004: 35, 43-48) (such a study was, in fact, undertaken by Miller and Slater [2000] in their sociological study of Internet use in Trinidad and amongst Trinidadians in the diaspora). Despite the fact that this seems obvious, Hine and Wakeford give the impression that they are making radical assertions, but this is perhaps not surprising when, for example, all of the other authors in Gauntlett and Horsley’s (2004) edited volume (of which Wakeford’s chapter is a part) fail to take such a course of action (despite Hine’s plea in 2000).<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Hine (2005b; 2005c) later reiterated her claim that the online world should not be studied in isolation from the offline world. In the same volume in which Hine puts forward this view there are a



Although I recognise that some insights can certainly be gained from studying websites as bounded environments or from studying ‘online cultures’, it is apparent to me that a study that takes into account the offline world in addition to the online world can make a more significant contribution to the understanding of the Internet, cyberspace and the contents of the WWW. Furthermore, a study that also takes into account the offline world can highlight the ways in which the online world affects the offline world.

Online research methods are still in their infancy, and this study provides a contribution to their development. The offline fieldwork was conducted in India in the summer of 2005 and consisted largely of semi-structured interviews with *mandir* officials.<sup>46</sup> Observation was also undertaken at *mandirs*. In addition to this, documentary research was carried out regarding *mandirs* as their histories and characteristics are of relevance to the issues that are explored in this study. A full methodological discussion and details of the methodology used in this study are presented in chapter 6.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The offline fieldwork did not give rise to any obvious ethical problems. The interviews were conducted with informants who were aware of the nature of my research. Observation was carried out in public areas of *mandirs*. While it was not possible to inform all of the participants in rituals that I was a researcher, as I was not a participant and was solely interested in observing and reflecting upon natural events on which I had no influence,<sup>47</sup> this part of the research is also not ethically problematic. The nature of my online research also did not give rise to any significant ethical problems as it involved identifying and analysing websites that are publicly available.

---

number of sociological studies which *do* seek to take into account the relationship between the online world and the offline world (e.g. Forte’s [2005] study of ethnic resurgence amongst aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean, Mackay’s [2005] study of ‘new media use’ in the home, Orgad’s [2005] study of breast cancer patients, Rutter and Smith’s [2005] study of an ‘online community’ and Sanders’s [2005] study of sex workers).

<sup>46</sup> Owners of websites offering a *puja* ordering service were also interviewed.

<sup>47</sup> It is conceivable though that the rare presence of a Westerner at a sacred site could indirectly affect ritual performance. For example, *pujaris* may act more conscientiously.

## The 'Natural History' of the Project

In the early part of 2004 I read a brief account of the 'wars' that were occurring in cyberspace between Scientology and its opponents in Barrett's *The New Believers* (2003), and this caught my interest. Prior to this, although I had used the Internet as a tool in order to obtain information about current ISKCON activities for my MA coursework while at the University of Essex (1997-98) and had again used the Internet to research Hindu groups at the University of Warwick (1999-2000), I had not thought about how the Internet could actually be affecting NRMs. Having already been interested in the sociological study of NRMs as an undergraduate at the University of Reading, and then as a postgraduate at Essex and Warwick, I decided to investigate the subject of NRMs and the Internet in greater depth. I went to INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and was able to consult a number of academic studies<sup>48</sup> and media reports (though there were not many) which looked at the subject from a number of different angles. Having had a prior interest in, and knowledge of, Hinduism (largely as a result of numerous trips to India), I realised that, especially because of the importance of *darshan* and the visual nature of the WWW, there would be a number of challenging issues. As there were no studies whatsoever concerning Hinduism and the Internet, my strategy was to formulate a research proposal which was, in a sense, a continuation of the project concerning Hinduism that I had conducted at the University of Warwick. I had already noted the prominent presence that certain Hindu groups had on the Internet, but the implications that the Internet could have for religion in general, and for Hinduism in particular, had escaped my attention. In short, my main reason for studying Hinduism and the Internet was partly to discover the relevant facts and partly to see how well they could be explained in terms of available theoretical ideas.

### Research Questions

I have already indicated that this study aims to contribute to the sociology of religion and the Internet and the sociology of religion in general. In addition to the aforementioned contribution to the development of online methodology, this contribution

---

<sup>48</sup> Most notably those in Hadden and Cowan's (2000) edited volume *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*.

manifests itself in two different ways which are nevertheless related. Firstly, I discuss in detail aspects of Hinduism which have relevance to the presence of Hinduism online. Secondly, there is the empirical investigation of Hinduism and the Internet. Both of these undertakings are novel.

The main aim of the empirical part of the project is to investigate manifestations of Hinduism online, and to consider the implications of this for Hinduism in general. A further aim is to assess findings in the light of various sociological theories. The investigation can be broken down into a number of key research questions:

1. What are the practical differences between a disembodied online *puja* and a conventional offline *puja* where embodiment is required?
2. According to religious authorities, are online *pujas* valid, and are they as effective as conventional offline *pujas*?
3. Philosophically, what is the difference between receiving *darshan* at a sacred site from the actual *murti* (an image in which a deity is embodied), and from an image of the deity on a computer screen?
4. To what extent do notions of purity and pollution have relevance in cyberspace, and are there any potential 'dangers' for worshippers arising from an online *puja*?
5. What are the implications of an online image of a deity being accessible to everyone, regardless of *varna* (social group) and ethnic origin?
6. What would be the implications if the online mode of Hindu worship became prevalent to the exclusion of conventional modes of worship?
7. Because Hinduism is being practised online, does this call into question the importance of the notion of embodiment to the understanding of Hinduism?
8. How is the online situation likely to affect the traditional Hindu offline site where embodied activity is carried out?
9. As a result of globalisation, here represented by the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet, is there evidence that traditional borders have declined in importance (Beck 2000; Scholte 2000)? What evidence is there that a 'spread of supraterritoriality' (Scholte 2000) is occurring? Has connection become more important than location (Castells 2000)?
10. To what extent have online Hindu images become 'disembedded' (Giddens 1990)? Does it make sense to conceive of online Hindu images as hyper-real simulacra (Baudrillard 1983a)?

11. Has the Internet contributed to Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource' (Beckford 1992; 2000a; 2001)?
12. Can Appadurai's (1990) theory of '-scapes' contribute to the understanding of processes that are occurring as a result of Internet use by Hindus?
13. Has the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet given rise to any examples of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1992)?
14. What reactions are there against forms of Hindu religious expression online? Who is responsible for such reactions, what form did they take, and what effects did they produce?
15. Has the presentation of Hinduism undergone a process of homogenisation as a result of Hinduism's presence online?
16. Have actual forms of Hindu worship facilitated by the Internet undergone homogenisation?
17. At the local level, has the relationship with the global resulted in homogenisation of Hindu rituals, increased heterogenisation, or no change at all in this regard?
18. Is the new venue of cyberspace merely an extension of the original offline market-place for Hinduism or does it give rise to an entirely new market-place?
19. If cyberspace is considered to be an extension of the conventional offline market-place, are there still characteristics of it which have the potential to radically affect the overall success of a religious group?
20. What strategies are various Hindu groups pursuing online and how successful are these strategies?
21. Which Hindu groups appear to be the most successful online?

The reasons behind the formulation of these questions are made apparent in the relevant parts of the thesis.

## **Outline of the Structure of the Thesis**

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 2 considers the nature of cyberspace and the suitability of it for Hinduism. The discussion is largely theoretical in nature and also constitutes a critical review of the previous research concerning cyberspace which is of relevance to this study. Important

aspects of this chapter will be re-considered in greater detail in the light of the empirical research results to be presented in chapter 8.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 all introduce and assess the theories that are utilised in the study. Each of these chapters concludes with research questions that arise from the preceding discussion. Thus, chapter 3 considers sociological theories of embodiment, particularly concerning religion, and goes on to discuss embodiment in the light of cyberspace and Hinduism. This chapter is related to chapter 2 as issues concerning embodiment and cyberspace are linked to issues concerning the nature of cyberspace. Theories of globalisation are sufficiently important to this study to warrant analysis in chapter 4, with special reference to Hinduism. Rational choice theory (RCT) has stimulated a great deal of debate in the sociology of religion (see Beckford 2000b: 491-492; 2003: 170-171) and deserves consideration. It is outlined in chapter 5 because it throws light on the question of how far it makes sense to consider online Hinduism as operating in a market. Aside from this use,<sup>49</sup> RCT is not of central importance to this study and this is mirrored by the length of the chapter.

Chapter 6 outlines and discusses the research methods used in the study. In chapter 7 the findings from my online research are presented and discussed. However, it is in chapter 8 where the theoretical and empirical aspects of my research fully come together. Here, I present the findings from my fieldwork in India and analyse these findings along with those from my online research in terms of the theoretical arguments and research questions that were introduced in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5. In chapter 9 I summarise the main conclusions of my research and highlight important areas for future investigation.

There are 3 Appendices. The first Appendix presents the 'Touchgraphs' which were integral to the identification and subsequent analysis of Hinduism on the WWW in chapters 7 and 8. The second Appendix highlights the features of Islam on the WWW that are shared with Hinduism on the WWW, and the third Appendix contains a picture from a website launch which complements a section in chapter 8. This is followed by a glossary of terms used in this thesis.

---

<sup>49</sup> RCT arguments concerning the 'strictness' of religious groups are also briefly considered in relation to Hinduism on the WWW when I highlight areas for possible future research in chapter 9.

# Chapter 2 – The Nature of Cyberspace and Hinduism

## Introduction

In this chapter I begin with a consideration of the nature of cyberspace and religion in general. This part of the chapter is largely theoretical. I then look at the nature of cyberspace in relation to Hinduism. This discussion draws upon the observations of a number of scholars, and I argue that cyberspace appears to be a suitable realm for Hinduism. In chapter 8 I am able to confirm many of the assertions that I make here through recourse to my fieldwork data.

## The Nature of Cyberspace and Religion

### John Caputo

Like the authors cited in chapter 1 in my discussion of what cyberspace is, John Caputo (2000) also believes that with cyberspace a new space has arisen. Furthermore, he argues that this space is a suitable arena for religion as both cyberspace and religion are ‘*hyper-real*’ (Caputo 2000: 67). For example, he asserts that cyberspace undermines materialism and ‘deprive[s] the material world of its rigid fixity and dense and heavy substantiality’ (Caputo 2000: 76). Therefore, Caputo suggests a reason why religion is so popular on the WWW and can also offer an explanation as to why the ‘nineteenth-century positivists’ were wrong to equate ‘the rapid growth of science and technology’ with ‘the end of...God’ (Caputo 2000: 71): ‘The old-fashioned opposition of technology and religion was forged in the dusty mines and grimy factories of the industrial revolution, not the virtual world of post-industrial cyberspace’ (Caputo 2000: 72).

### Margaret Wertheim

Margaret Wertheim’s (1999) theory also suggests that cyberspace is fully compatible with religion. She argues that it is natural to consider cyberspace as religious *in itself*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This view is also advocated by those (e.g. Cobb) who believe that cyberspace can be equated with the theologian Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the ‘noosphere’ (‘a sphere of consciousness that encircles the

and such a theory automatically suggests that therefore cyberspace is not an alien environment for religion. She argues that because in the West there has been a history of dualism, 'a purely physical world picture [brought about by modern Western science] was perhaps doomed to failure' (Wertheim 1999: 38). She suggests that people in the West 'are *not* content with a strictly materialist view' and that 'in this climate...the emergence of a new kind of *non-physical space* was almost guaranteed to attract 'spiritual' and even 'heavenly dreams' (Wertheim 1999: 38). She goes on to describe the incorporeal nature of cyberspace:

...cyberspace...exists beyond physical space...cyberspace *itself* is not located within the physicalist world picture. It is a fundamentally new space that is not encompassed by any physics equations. ...cyberspace is an *emergent* phenomena whose properties transcend the sum of its component parts. ...[It] is a 'place' outside physical place. ...Despite its immaterial nature, this realm is real. (Wertheim 1999: 39)<sup>2</sup>

Wertheim argues that cyberspace enthusiasts believe such a space has never existed before, but she finds parallels to cyberspace in the medieval belief in 'a non-physical space that existed 'outside' the material domain (Wertheim 1999: 227). She asserts that just like cyberspace, 'This non-physical space metaphorically *paralleled* the material world, but it was not contained within physical space. Although there were connections and resonances between the two spaces, medieval spiritual space was a separate and unique part of reality from physical space' (Wertheim 1999: 227).

Therefore, Wertheim is arguing that it is natural and necessary for humans to conceive of a non-physical space that is in some way connected with material reality. Such a

---

globe') (Jenkins 1998: 2; see also McClellan December 10, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell objects to Wertheim's assertion that cyberspace 'is not encompassed by any physics equations'. He asserts that 'cyberspace...[is]...firmly part of the natural universe as characterised by science' (Maxwell 2002: 346). However, he does 'fully endorse the "peculiar" character of cyberspace' (Maxwell 2002: 346) which suggests that while he may not necessarily regard cyberspace as a spiritual environment, he certainly accepts it as being an unusual new environment.

On the other hand, although he makes no claims that cyberspace is a spiritual space, Dodge is in full agreement with Wertheim concerning cyberspace and the laws of physics. His research into the mapping of cyberspace has led him to conclude that 'the space-time laws of physics have little meaning online' (Dodge 2005: 118).

notion was lost in the West but can be seen as making a comeback with the creation of cyberspace. Wertheim, then, believes that it is entirely natural for cyberspace to be conceived of as a spiritual space.<sup>3</sup>

## **Cyberspace and Hinduism**

In addition to the claims of both Caputo and Wertheim that cyberspace is a suitable arena for religious activity, there are reasons to suggest that cyberspace is an *especially* suitable realm for Hinduism – indeed much more so than for most other religions. In making this claim I am not making a value judgement as to whether Hinduism should have a presence in cyberspace. Instead I will investigate whether various features of Hinduism lend themselves to this unusual environment. If it is shown that there are reasons for suggesting that Hinduism is suited to cyberspace then it suggests that various forms of Hindu religious expression online are valid and thus possess legitimacy in the eyes of Hindus. If this is the case then there is no reason in principle why Hinduism cannot thrive on the WWW.

### **Structural Characteristics of Hinduism**

The observations of Zaleski (1997) certainly suggest that the Internet is a suitable realm for Hinduism. Zaleski points out that cyberspace is organised laterally (as opposed to hierarchically) and this characteristic actually flattens any previously existing hierarchies, thereby automatically favouring those religions that are not generally hierarchically based (Zaleski 1997: 111-112 cited in Dawson and Hennebray 2004: 168). Miller and Slater put forward a similar view to Zaleski. They note that ‘much Internet use involves decentralization and diffusion of authority and power, and hence challenges...hierarchical organizational models’ (Miller and Slater 2000: 18). In the same vein, Apolito notes that ‘the first victim of the Internet is...traditional institutional control’ (Apolito 2005: 73).<sup>4</sup> But Barker points out that in some cases the Internet can

---

<sup>3</sup> Beaudoin suggests a different reason why cyberspace itself could be seen in spiritual terms. She believes it ‘highlight[s] human finitude and limitations [and thus] provide[s]...a metaphor for God at an intersection between spirituality and technology’ (Beaudoin 1998: 87 cited in Beckerlegge 2001c: 259).

<sup>4</sup> Another way in which religions without a hierarchical authority would appear to be suited to the Internet is that unlike groups which do have such a structure and which tend to hold more rigid religious



be used to maintain hierarchy (Barker 2005: 78-81) – a development predicted in 1995 by Kinney who believed that in the future the Internet could be used by religious organisations to overcome the initial threats to their traditional authority (Kinney 1995: 770). Although there is the caste system, the absence of a central church-like organisation means that Hinduism lacks a strong formal hierarchy which can be directly challenged.

In addition to this, those who point to what they see as certain postmodern characteristics<sup>5</sup> of the WWW such as its anarchic and eclectic nature also suggest that religions that share these characteristics would be suited to cyberspace (see O’Leary 2004: 55; Dawson 2005: 21).<sup>6</sup> An argument can be made that Hinduism is, to an extent, postmodern. As I have indicated in my discussion regarding the conceptualisation of Hinduism in chapter 1, it is true to say that a strong feature of Hinduism is its eclectic nature and that its adherents are free to, and do, draw from a number of diverse, sometimes contradictory beliefs and practices.<sup>7</sup>

### **Philosophical Aspects of Hinduism**

In addition to the issues surrounding the structural characteristics of Hinduism, there are also philosophical aspects of Hinduism which suggest that cyberspace is a suitable environment for it.

---

views, they are less likely to come under threat as a result of the wide availability of competing religious views on the WWW (see e.g. Beckerlegge 2001c: 3; see also Dawson and Cowan 2004: 3).

<sup>5</sup> ‘A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism (Beckford 1992: 19; see also 1999a: 30) are important aspects of postmodernity (see also Edwards 2001: 11-12). The term is explained more fully in chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson argues that Neo-Paganism has postmodern characteristics and that in this respect it is a suitable religion for cyberspace (Dawson 2005: 21, 33).

<sup>7</sup> Smith also notes these aspects of Hinduism and points out that they are postmodern in nature (Smith 1993: 158-159). Following Baudrillard, Smith also argues that the image in Hinduism is a simulacrum (Smith 1993: 162) and that therefore there is another link between Hinduism and postmodernity. However, in my discussion of Baudrillard in chapter 4, I argue that it is useful to only regard images (such as images on a computer screen) of original images as being simulacra. Smith does not differentiate between these ‘levels’ of images and merely regards them all as being simulacra (Smith 1993: 162).

Although Wertheim's theory, which advocates that it is natural to see cyberspace as religious *in itself*, deals with the history of Western religious ideas, if cyberspace is considered in the light of Hinduism there is even more reason to suggest that it can be seen as a sacred space. For example, in the West, the notion of non-physical space was largely lost after the Middle Ages, but despite this, when a new manifestation of a non-physical space was created it was recognised by some as a spiritual space. Admittedly, this has not been on a grand scale, but the point that Wertheim is making is that it is entirely natural and understandable to see cyberspace in religious terms and this should not, in itself, be regarded as a bizarre notion.<sup>8</sup> The suggestion is that even if large numbers of people are not actively imbuing cyberspace with spiritual characteristics, the very fact that people are engaging in religious activities on the WWW suggests that, although they may not believe that the cyberspace environment itself is sacred, they do find the cyberspace environment a suitable realm for religious activity. Helland agrees with this when he writes: '...for many people cyberspace is a real place. And for many of them, it is an acceptable medium for religious and spiritual participation. It is becoming an environment – a place – where people can “be” religious if and when they choose to be' (Helland 2004: 31).

The loss in the West of the notion of a non-physical realm can be contrasted with Hinduism. Hinduism does contain a belief in non-physical sacred spaces. This is best seen using the example of the belief in *tirthas* (sacred places). '*Tirtha*' literally means “ford” or “crossing place”, and on a physical level some *tirthas* are situated where rivers can be crossed safely (see Eck 1993: 34). However, a *tirtha* also has a non-physical spiritual dimension:

...the *tirtha* is a spiritual ford, where earth and heaven meet... ...As a place of power, the *tirtha* is a doorway between heaven and earth, or between “this shore” and the “far shore”. ...As a threshold between heaven and earth, the *tirtha* is not only a place for the “upward” crossings of people's prayers and rites, it is also a place for the “downward” crossings of the gods. (Eck 1993: 34-35)

---

<sup>8</sup> Members of various Neo-Pagan groups do actively imbue cyberspace with spiritual qualities (see e.g. Davis 1995; Helland 2000: 218; Arthur 2002; Brasher 2004: 87).

Therefore, in this regard, Hinduism appears suited to cyberspace. If Hinduism can already accept a non-physical space which is conceived of in spiritual terms then there is no reason why the non-physical cyberspace cannot also be recognised. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in addition to the fact that, like Hinduism, many Neo-Pagan groups which draw upon traditional Wiccan beliefs are often non-hierarchical and eclectic, the acceptance of a non-physical space by Wiccans is often given as a reason to explain the high prevalence of material related to these groups in cyberspace and the high incidence of online Wiccan activity (see esp. Arthur 2002: 303-314).

Although the acceptance in Hinduism of a non-physical space does not necessarily mean that Hindus are likely to see cyberspace in spiritual terms, it does suggest that on this consideration alone, cyberspace is not likely to be seen as an inappropriate environment for Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the above discussion suggests that it is an even more appropriate environment than for some other religions which also exist there.

To assert that cyberspace is a suitable environment for Hinduism based solely on the suggestions that the WWW is more suitable for non-hierarchical and eclectic religions, and Wertheim's theory, would be a mistake. The former assertions are based mainly on Zaleski's (1997) belief which is not backed up by empirical research, and the high incidence of Neo-Pagan groups represented on the WWW. Concerning this latter point, Neo-Pagans are over-represented in the computer industry (Griffin 2004: 189), and so it is possible that this could be a factor in the prevalence of Neo-Pagan websites.

Wertheim's theory is speculative, and using it to suggest that Hinduism is suited to cyberspace may be interesting and plausible but it is far from conclusive<sup>10</sup> – and the application of *Vaastu shastra* to websites (see footnote 9) is only one example to suggest that cyberspace is a suitable environment for Hinduism. However, starting with a consideration of the work of Walter Ong, I will now demonstrate that there are more tangible and persuasive reasons for believing that Hinduism is suited to cyberspace.

---

<sup>9</sup> An example of cyberspace being recognised as an appropriate environment for Hinduism is the application of the Indian science of *Vaastu shastra* ('which seeks to create harmony between nature's five elements') to website design (see anon. [CNN.com] June 26, 2006: online).

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, although it forms no part of her general theory, Wertheim briefly considers the Hindu belief in reincarnation, and concludes that it is not compatible with the nature of cyberspace. This will be looked at in chapter 3.

## Walter Ong

Like Wertheim's theory, Walter Ong's (1982) 'evolutionary theory of culture' (O'Leary 2004: 38) does not directly take into account Hinduism. However, if the theory is adjusted, it would suggest that the Internet may actually be the *ideal* form of technology for Hinduism. The following description of the theory is largely taken from O'Leary (2004: 38-46).

Ong looks at communication practices and technologies 'from oral speech to written discourse to printing, radio, television and computer mediated communication' and believes that 'each of the forms of communication utilizes a different complex of the senses' (O'Leary 2004: 38) and this 'impact[s] on the formation of individual and cultural identity' (p. 38). For example 'sound will play a larger role...in preliterate cultures...than [in a culture] dominated by print media' (p. 38-39). In the West, as a result of literacy, sight became more important than sound. Writing 'divorc[ed] the production of a communicative act from its reception...and turned communication from a public act requiring...[a]...presence ...into a private...activity of writing and reading' (p. 39). After printing was invented the word was even further removed from its 'aural basis' (p. 39).

Nowadays, because of electronic media, we are in the stage that Ong calls 'secondary orality'. In this stage, sound becomes important again because of radio, and then image becomes important again because of film and television. As O'Leary relates:

The term "secondary orality" refers to the fact that in the new electronic media the divorce between word and image begun by print culture is reversed so that the total sensorium [i.e. the complex of the senses] again includes sight and sound, voice, image and music. ...aspects of orality and literacy are combined into a new, hybrid form of communication. (O'Leary 2004: 40-41)

The theory, as it only takes into account the history of the West, leads to the conclusion that this stage of secondary orality 'has striking resemblance to the old [primary oral cultures] in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas' (Ong 1982: 136 cited in O'Leary 2004: 40). This leads O'Leary to announce that because of this, 'the

new media of communication [i.e. the Internet] will have cultural consequences that we can barely imagine' and that 'religious discourse will have to reinvent itself to keep pace with modern technology' (O'Leary 2004: 45).

However, when Ong's theory is considered in relation to Hinduism, a different conclusion is reached altogether. The key aspect of secondary orality – the expansion of the sensorium to include sight, sound, voice, image and music – is present already in forms of Hindu worship. The Hindu *pūja* ceremony (which will be described in detail below) is a clear example of this. Therefore, unlike the transmission of Christianity onto the WWW which, according to the theory, needs to 'reinvent itself', it would seem that important aspects of Hinduism, by virtue of already utilising the fully expanded sensorium which the Internet demands, do not need to undergo a radical alteration when manifested on the WWW. Consequently, these aspects of Hinduism are extremely well-suited to the Internet.

When O'Leary concludes that religions must radically alter in order to effectively present themselves online, he is obviously not entertaining the idea that there could be a religion such as Hinduism whose adherents have not passed through a phase where the sensorium is reduced.<sup>11</sup> According to the theory, the idea of a pre-literate culture that has not passed through the phases of the different communications technologies could be recognised, but such cultures are understandably not mentioned as they would have no relevance at all to O'Leary's conclusion concerning the advent of the Internet. This is because these cultures would obviously not be able to present themselves on the WWW; and their members would not be using the Internet. Of course, Hindu culture and society can in no way be seen as pre-literate. As Waghorne notes (when talking of

---

<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise that Hinduism does not fit Ong's theory, and O'Leary does not take it into consideration. Waghorne (2001: 281-287) argues that the analytic theories of religion from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could never take into account Hinduism due largely to the importance placed on divine image. She adds that theorists and commentators tended to brush this aspect under the carpet by just briefly and ambiguously referring to it as a feature of 'popular Hinduism', and that it is only recently that scholars (e.g. Eck) 'have...begun to understand and "to see" those fully embodied gods who inhabit small shrines and great temples' (Waghorne 2001: 282). Beckerlegge also notes that previously, 'the use of sacred images [was] generally presented as something of a problem to be explained, or dismissed as an expression of "lower" Hinduism and so unworthy of serious study' (Beckerlegge 2001b: 59). Fuller also emphasises that 'popular Hinduism' should not be dismissed and that it is 'an authentic religion' (Fuller 1992: 6).

India in the 19th century): ‘India was not a primitive society. No anthropologist could possibly so classify this urbanized and highly literate culture. But India also was undeniably a society that used its senses to experience god’ (Waghorne 2001: 284).

It almost seems as if Hindus in India were merely waiting for the Western world to realise the folly of allowing the various forms of communications technologies to alter their religious experiences, and to start exercising the full sensorium once again. As it stands, it would appear that Hinduism can seamlessly enter cyberspace while Christianity faces more of a struggle to adapt itself to it.

### ***Darshan and the Image***

As mentioned, the full complex of the senses is utilised in Hinduism. However, because of a key aspect of Hinduism, that of *darshan* which involves ‘seeing the divine in an image’ (Eck 1985: Foreword; see also Firth 1991: 86), it is clear that sight is by far the most important sense. Beckerlegge’s definition of *darshan* further shows the importance of sight and image: ‘*Darshana*...means “sight”, and it implies both beholding the deity and being seen by the deity. An exchange takes place through the eyes, and devotees may feel that they have been granted a vision of the deity or have experienced the divine, favoured glance’ (Beckerlegge 2001b: 62).<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, this strongly suggests that, again, Hinduism is particularly suited to cyberspace. This is because the visual nature of the WWW utilises image above all else.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Wertheim notes ‘the emphasis increasingly placed on image’ in cyberspace (Wertheim 1999: 25), as does Cowan (2005b: 259), while in characteristic language, Brasher exclaims that in cyberspace ‘images reign’ (Brasher 2004: xii).<sup>14</sup> The

---

<sup>12</sup> Although *darshan* is a religious practice in its own right and requires no further rites, it also forms part of a *pūja* (see below) (see Chakrabarti 1984: 67).

<sup>13</sup> Apolito makes a similar point concerning Marian apparition cults which have always favoured sight as the primary sense, and which are well-represented online (see Apolito 2005: 4).

<sup>14</sup> It is also interesting to note here that photography was embraced when it was first introduced in India. Ghosh notes that: ‘From the very beginning, the acceptance of photographs – the ease with which photographs made their way into even very orthodox families – was rather unusual. No other product of...nineteenth-century Western technology was given such a welcome’ (cited in Smith 2003: 151). Furthermore, Smith mentions Pinney’s observation that pictures of gods sometimes resemble family photo shoots (Smith 2003: 151). It is tempting to speculate that this embracing of photography is perhaps

image is absolutely crucial to *darshan*. I have mentioned that *darshan* is a key aspect of Hinduism but is worth briefly mentioning the points that Beckerlegge makes which demonstrate just how important, widespread, and persuasive, *darshan* is in Hinduism. This can further demonstrate just how much cyberspace is suitable for Hinduism in general, as distinct from perhaps just one aspect of it.

Beckerlegge notes that ‘cultural and linguistic differences, the use of the ancient language of Sanskrit, restrictions on direct access by certain castes to religious texts and levels of non-literacy...in India’ explain why image became so important (Beckerlegge 2001b: 60). He emphasises that the idea was so persuasive that it managed to cut across sectarian boundaries and that even Hindus who tend to think in abstract philosophical terms usually still regard the image as being of some use and an acceptable focus of devotion for those Hindus who are not philosophically minded. Furthermore, even at the extreme level, those who completely rejected the use of image for themselves usually still tolerated others’ use of image (Beckerlegge 2001b 60-61).

Another point which emphasises the pervasive character of the use of image is that it has endured despite opposition both from outside Hinduism (from Islam and Christianity)<sup>15</sup> and from Hindu reform movements whose founders attempted to intellectualise Hinduism as they believed that this would ‘modernize’ it and thus make it more acceptable to Christians.<sup>16</sup> Beckerlegge also points out that even recent Hindu movements ‘with an international membership, like the Swaminarayan Mission [and] the Ramakrishna Math and Mission...have...given prominence to *murtipuja*’<sup>17</sup> (Beckerlegge 2001b: 72). Therefore, there can be no disputing Beckerlegge’s statement that in Hinduism ‘What unites worshippers from the most ardent to the most pragmatic

---

linked to the importance of *darshan*.

<sup>15</sup> Large parts of the Indian sub-continent were ruled by Muslims from 1206-1761. Despite the fact that this did not always mean widespread prohibitions against Hindu practices (e.g. Akbar [reigned 1556-1605] was religiously tolerant [Smith 2003: 54-55]), some rulers (e.g. Aurangzeb [reigned 1658-1707]) did actively attempt to suppress Hindu practices to varying degrees (see e.g. Abram *et al.* 2003: 1303-1309; Smith 2003: 60). Dalmia notes the Christian opposition (Dalmia 1998: 77 cited in Beckerlegge 2001b: 70).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) (founder of the *Brahmo Samaj*) and Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) (founder of the *Arya Samaj*) were both against the use of image in Hinduism (Beckerlegge 2001b. 70-71).

<sup>17</sup> A *murtipuja* is a *puja* to an embodied deity in the form of an image (Beckerlegge 2001b: 111).

is the belief in the need to stand in the presence of the deity or deities [and] to have the *darshana* of the deity' (Beckerlegge 2001b: 62). He adds that 'There is considerable empirical evidence that sacred images have remained deeply embedded in popular religious practice. In fact, research from the 1970s to the present day shows that the use of sacred images has remained both widespread and constant' (Beckerlegge 2001b: 88).

So, image is of extreme importance in Hinduism (Smith even goes as far as to say that Hindus 'revel in the perfect visibility of the spiritual' [Smith 2003: 201; see also 1993: 161]), and cyberspace favours image. However, this link is merely suggestive of a fit between Hinduism and cyberspace. For example, the importance of image can be accepted but this does not necessarily mean that placing a Hindu image online imbues it with any sort of efficacy. If the placing of an image online is not considered to be efficacious, then the image lacks the desired effect and, for example, *darshan* would not be able to be received. However, there are reasons to suggest that an online image could fulfil this function. These reasons are presented here, and the issue is explored in much greater detail in chapter 8 in the light of my empirical fieldwork.

At the outset of this discussion it is important to note that the replication aspect of having images of deities in cyberspace does not pose any problems. This is because replication is a feature of Hinduism:<sup>18</sup> 'all of India's great *tīrthas* are duplicated and multiplied elsewhere in India' (Eck 1993: 41). Deities, *mandirs*, rivers and towns can all be replicated. For example, the *Kedarnath mandir* in Varanasi is replicated in the Himalayas (Abram *et al.* 2003: 311). Because of this, a pilgrim can perform a pilgrimage to the *Kedarnath mandir* in the Himalayas without leaving Varanasi (Eck 1993: 142). Another example is the *Vishwanath mandir* in Varanasi (see chapters 6 and 8) which is also replicated in Uttarkashi in the Himalayas. The town of Uttarkashi itself is a replication of Varanasi which is also replicated a further two times in the south of India where these towns contain many *mandirs* which replicate the *Vishwanath mandir* at Varanasi and which, it is claimed, offer the same benefits as performing worship in Varanasi (Eck 1993: 40). The god *Jagannath* (a form of *Vishnu*) (the online presence of whom is investigated in chapter 8) is replicated in about four hundred *mandirs* in the state of Orissa and is further replicated in other parts of India and abroad. Furthermore,

---

<sup>18</sup> Replications also involve the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal. This process will be explained in chapter 4 and explored further in chapter 8. At this point in the thesis it is only necessary to appreciate that replication is a common feature of Hinduism.



replications do not even necessarily need to have a myth 'justifying' their sacred status (see Narayanan 1996: 155-157) and this provides a further reason why the replication aspect of deities having an online presence is unproblematic. An example of this is the replication of the *Vishwanath mandir* on the campus of the Benares Hindu University (BHU) (see chapters 6 and 8) which has no mythological association with the *Vishwanath mandir* and even stands outside the sacred geography of *Kashi* (the religious name for Varanasi). Despite this, the *mandir* is very popular and the authorities there claim that worship of this *mandir's lingam* (the symbol of the god *Shiva*) is of the same value as worshipping the *lingam* at the *Vishwanath mandir* even though the latter is considered to be a *vyotilingam* (a 'self-manifest' *lingam* believed to be especially sacred).<sup>19</sup>

From a purely traditional and theoretical point of view it can be argued that for an image to have any efficacy it must first be consecrated through the performance of a number of rites. The final and central rite involves fusing the 'breathlife' into the image thus enabling the 'establishing [of] the breathlife' (Eck 1985: 51-54). Only when the consecration rites are completed is the image accorded divine status. This can explain why some images are not accorded great respect.<sup>20</sup> However, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that Hindus (in India and elsewhere) do often regard images that have not been consecrated as sacred. For example, shrines are virtually ubiquitous in the homes of Hindus (and elsewhere, for example workplaces) (Beckerlegge 2001b: 85; Smith 2003: 136) and images contained in these shrines are worshipped with great reverence even though they are unlikely to have been consecrated.

This is not to say that consecrated images are not shown great respect, but it is clear that for some, their own 'family image' is just as, or more, important. For example, Hinduism permits the adoption of a personal deity (*ishtadeva*) according to one's own preference (Smith 1993: 158), and, according to the belief of the devotee, their chosen image might not just be a symbol of the divine – it can actually be conceived of as 'containing' the divine.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, this personal image may be seen as a guide and

---

<sup>19</sup> However, there are those who disagree with this claim.

<sup>20</sup> For example, images of gods and goddesses are found on the packaging of secular consumer items and are discarded.

<sup>21</sup> Sivaramakrishna makes a similar observation when he notes that 'Some devotees of Ramakrishna assign to the photographic image [of Ramakrishna] the same status as that ascribed to a traditional *murti*.

protector of an individual or a family. Therefore the un-consecrated image can have extreme religious importance in an individual's life.<sup>22</sup>

Un-consecrated images, then, can still have a sacred status. In this respect I suggest that there is no reason why an image on a website could not be able to perform the same function as an offline image. The question still remains, though, as to whether the screen acts as a barrier and causes the image to lose efficacy. Evidence suggests that this is unlikely to be the case. For example, the willingness of some Hindus to show religious respect to on-screen images had already been witnessed before the advent of the WWW. This is demonstrated by the reaction of some Hindus when the televised serial of the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*<sup>23</sup> was shown in India in 1987-1988 (or, according to Smith [2003: 194], 1987-1989):

...many of those who watched the series conducted themselves as if receiving *darshana* in front of a *murti*. Some bathed, put on clean clothes and removed their shoes before the transmission began. In some areas, a television set was set up as the focal point of a shrine. It was draped in garlands, anointed with the substances used in conventional *puja* rituals, and incense was burned in front of the screen. After the transmission, *prasada* (sanctified food...) was distributed... (Lutgendorf 1995: 242 cited in Beckerlegge 2001b: 92)

Although there are no figures concerning the numbers involved in these activities or the social status of participants, it does indicate that the screen is not necessarily seen as a

---

...For them, Ramakrishna "lives" in the photographic image' (Sivaramakrishna 1985: 298 cited in Beckerlegge 2001b: 80).

<sup>22</sup> It is also interesting to note that even Hindu images on secular items or in secular places that are not normally given much attention incite anger in some Hindus if they are used in what is perceived to be a disrespectful way (see e.g. anon. [AP] November 28, 2002: online; Priyadarshi June 9, 2004: online; anon. [PTI] February 7, 2005: online; Rajghatta May 18, 2005: online; anon. [AFP] June 8, 2005: online; anon. [Hindustan Times] June 14, 2005: online). This further suggests that un-consecrated Hindu images still have religious value.

<sup>23</sup> This serial proved to be astonishingly popular. While it was being shown in India, various timetables were even altered so that episodes were not missed (Smith 2003: 194). Overall, the serial has been watched by over one billion people and has been shown in sixty languages in over one hundred countries (anon. [IANS] March 14, 2005: online). The *Mahabharata* (another Hindu epic) was televised in the period 1988-90 and that was also extremely popular (Smith 2003: 194).

barrier between the image and the devotee. Indeed, this is not surprising as Hinduism in general has not been resistant to innovation.

### **Hinduism and Innovation/Modification**

In addition to Hinduism not being associated with resistance to innovation, its ritual practices have continually been subject to modification and this has helped it to survive, thrive and prosper in the face of Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, and secular opposition – including in the diaspora. Innovation and assimilation have also encountered little resistance as a result of the lack of a central organisational hierarchy in Hinduism. Of course, in all religions some change is always resisted as a result of the importance of tradition.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, all religions do change over time (Preston 1980: 92; Brasher 2004: 13) and this is especially the case with Hinduism. For example, in his ethnographic study of a *mandir* in Orissa, Preston concludes that there is ‘a great strength, endurance and flexibility of Hinduism [and there is] a constant process of incorporation’ (Preston 1980: 98; see also p. 90). Venkatachari argues that ‘adaptation and transformation of rituals have been part of the Hindu tradition from ancient times’ (Venkatachari 1996: 188-189). He also provides examples (see pp. 177-190), and concludes that change should not be attacked as dangerous as it ‘is essential to the vitality of any religion’ (Venkatachari 1996: 190). Furthermore, Smith asserts that: ‘More than any other religion, Hinduism welcomes science with open arms’ (Smith 2003: 201), and the head *pujari* of the *mandir* where Preston conducted his fieldwork provides an example of this as he believed that ‘modern technology will improve Hinduism’ (Preston 1980: 79).<sup>25</sup> This adds credence to my claim that there is

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, regarding the use of the Internet, MacWilliams notes a traditionalist member of the Japanese lay Buddhist movement, *Soka Gakkai*, objecting to the *Gohonzon* (sacred *mandala*) being displayed on the WWW (MacWilliams 2002: 277), while in his study concerning Native American traditions and the WWW, Arnold discovered that ‘for many traditional elders, putting traditional knowledge on the web compromises the integrity of their oral languages and ceremonial practices’ (Arnold 2002: 341).

<sup>25</sup> A specific example of the use of technology by Hindus is provided by Beals. In his 1953 study of a village near Bangalore he observed that during a festival where sisters traditionally tie charms to their brothers’ wrists, those who were living away from their sisters ‘tuned into All India Radio in order to receive a time signal at the astrologically exact moment, and then tied such charms to their own wrists, with an accompaniment of broadcast Sanskrit *mantras* [syllables or words with spiritual potency]’ (Marriott 1955: 199).

unlikely to be widespread objection by Hindus to the presence of Hinduism in cyberspace.<sup>26</sup>

It is in the Hindu diaspora that modifications in the way that Hinduism is practised are most clearly seen. When the acceptance of quite radical changes is considered, the acceptance of cyberspace as being a valid venue for Hindu activities is perfectly reasonable, despite the fact that the religion will, by necessity, undergo some modifications in this new environment. Furthermore, I will show that the Internet is able to fulfil a number of functions that are perhaps perfectly suited to Hindus in the diaspora.

Before considering these functions it is worthwhile to briefly consider just some of the changes that have occurred in Hindu religious practices in the diaspora in order to demonstrate that Hinduism is open to innovation and modification.

### *Weddings and Funerals*

In Britain, innovation and modification can be seen most clearly in rites of passage such as weddings and funerals. Menski notes how marriage rituals in Britain have changed over time. He states that the marriage ceremony has changed doctrinally in so far as many of the philosophical aspects are not seen as being relevant in Britain today, and practically, in that certain ritual items that are not easily obtainable in Britain are replaced by other items (Menski 1991: 32-51). Firth (1991) describes how rituals associated with death have been altered in Britain. In India it is common for cremations to take place very soon after a death. However, in Britain, the means of refrigeration has enabled funerals to take place after a longer period of time. This allows relatives from abroad to attend. In India, the journey with the body to the cremation ground was always done on foot but this is not seen as important in Britain. In India this tradition is also diminishing, and this emphasises that ritual modifications are not just occurring because of the situation of diaspora Hindus. Aspects of modernity play a key part (e.g. bodies in India being carried to the cremation ground in jeeps), as do economic factors

---

<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, it is worth remembering that religions in general have often embraced new communications technologies (see chapter 1).

(for example the bed of the deceased was traditionally thrown away but now most people do not do this because of the cost involved) (see Firth 1991: 52, 67, 71-72).

In addition to the previous observations, the following quote from Firth sums up the changes that have occurred in Hindu death rituals in Britain:

The cremation journey with its halts, the offering of pindas [balls of rice], and the breaking of the pot, have either disappeared or lost their emphasis, the cremation itself has altered radically, with no open pyre, no circumambulations at the crematorium, and no kapala-kriya [breaking of the skull]. The fire can only be offered indirectly, and many of the last rites are performed in the home instead... (Firth 1991: 82)

These changes in ritual practice are enormous yet have been accepted and do not undermine the rites of passage.<sup>27</sup> A modified Hindu wedding is still firmly seen as a Hindu wedding, and a modified Hindu funeral is also deemed to be sufficient. There might be some reservations amongst the older generation and the orthodox, but changes have been made out of necessity and Hindus have been shown to be extremely pragmatic. Furthermore, some of the modifications have come about through choice. For example, the increase in the length of time between death and cremation has arisen in response to the desire of relatives to attend the funeral; and the availability of refrigeration is voluntarily utilised by family members.

Over the millennia there have been countless changes, assimilations and compromises in Hinduism. By focusing on relatively recent and radical changes in arguably *the two most important* events in an individual's life, I have aimed to show that Hindus in India and those in the diaspora are open to innovation and pragmatism.<sup>28</sup> This further

---

<sup>27</sup> Another more recent example of funeral modification in the UK is that: 'The river [*sic.*] Soar in Leicestershire has been officially approved as the "Ganges" where British Hindus and Sikhs can scatter the ashes of their dead, instead of flying to India to perform the last rites' (Sonwalker October 13, 2004: online). Martin (March 4, 2006: online) reports that performing the last rites at the Soar is very popular and even attracts Hindus from abroad.

<sup>28</sup> Another clear example of pragmatism is that the belief that leaving India and travelling overseas would result in the loss of caste status, has been largely dropped by Hindus. There are also instances of Hindus in the diaspora interpreting injunctions in a way that suits them. For example, Narayanan notes that according to Manu (see chapter 3) and other law-makers, only in 'the land of the Aryas and the land

suggests that Hindus are unlikely to object either to Hinduism on the WWW or to the idea of pursuing Hindu activity in cyberspace. Furthermore, when Hindus in the diaspora and their possible religious and cultural concerns are considered, it is easy to see that rather than merely *accepting* the Internet, there are reasons to suggest that many are likely to actively *embrace* the use of the Internet for religious purposes. For example, a diaspora Hindu who might find it difficult to visit a *mandir* could receive *darshan* via the Internet. There are also other functions that the Internet might be able to serve. For example, as mentioned in chapter 1, it is possible to watch the funeral of a family member online; and the opportunity to ‘take part in’ a festival is available, as is the means to conduct a *puja*. Virtual pilgrimage is also offered. The convenience of being able to undertake these activities online is obvious – but only if these online activities are considered to be acceptable to Hindus. Therefore, before going any further it is worth considering briefly whether taking part in these activities online as opposed to offline can be seen to have any validity. This is important as, along with *darshan*, funerals, festivals, *pujas* and pilgrimages are key aspects of Hinduism. Issues concerning embodiment are also relevant when considering online practices and this subject is explored in detail in the following chapter.

## **The Validity of Online Hindu Practices**

### ***Festivals on the WWW***

In view of the fact that Hindu funeral practices have altered radically, theoretically it would seem likely that the online participation of the associates of the deceased would be considered acceptable. However, festivals are more problematic than funerals in this regard.<sup>29</sup> Despite the interactive capabilities of the WWW, live video footage of a

---

where the black antelope freely roams [the Indian subcontinent]’ could actions influence an individual’s *karma*. Some Hindus in Texas argue that this can be interpreted as referring to Texas and America (Narayanan 1996: 164).

Yet another example of pragmatism is provided by Ramakrishna’s decision in 1855 to simply fix a *murti* of *Krishna* that a *pujari* dropped and broke despite the traditional view that a broken image cannot be worshipped. This *murti* is still worshipped today and is even ‘lovingly referred to as the “Broken-Image Krishna”’ (Harding 2004: 149) (see Harding 2004: 149-152).

<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, festival modification also occurs. For example, Kanitkar and Cole mention that in Britain, festivals are sometimes celebrated on the Saturday nearest to the actual date so as to allow more people to take part (Kanitkar and Cole 1995: 14). Similarly, Narayanan mentions that the Hindus at the

festival provides an experience that is little altered from watching a television broadcast, and the viewing of this obviously does not suggest participation in a festival.<sup>30</sup> However, the availability of real-time video footage (which was rarely available before the Internet; and never on demand) could still be valuable for those unable to attend the event. In addition to this, *darshan* could be experienced if footage showed the festival deity/deities.<sup>31</sup> (Of course, if a devotee was to see a conventional broadcast where this occurred, *darshan* could also be taken, but again, the point remains that such footage was largely unavailable prior to the Internet, and never on demand.) Therefore, it may be prudent to claim merely that, while online *darshan* of a festival deity may be possible, full participation in a festival online is not.

### *Online Pujas*<sup>32</sup>

In order to assess whether an online *puja* is valid, it is first necessary to describe the conventional offline *puja* ceremony and then give details concerning the online version. In chapter 3 specific concerns relating to embodiment will be discussed, and this also requires a prior description of the two different kinds of *pujas*. In chapter 8 the wider implications of online *pujas* are explored through recourse to my interview data.

I will consider a traditional *mandir puja* and not private *pujas* undertaken by individuals because the latter have no standard form and thus cannot provide a benchmark for comparison. However, private *pujas* will be considered following the

---

Penn Hills *mandir* (to the god *Ventakeswara* [a form of *Vishnu*]) in the USA 'adjust the sacred calendar to coincide more with long weekends' (Narayanan 1996: 148, see also p. 159). It is also interesting to note that at this *mandir* the times of weekly events are also altered for the convenience of the devotees. For example, the ritual bathing of *Ventakeswara* occurs on Sundays, as opposed to Fridays in India, and other weekend activities occur at a much later time than in India (Narayanan 1996: 157).

<sup>30</sup> Some degree of participation could perhaps be achieved through the use of a 'tele-actor' at the site of the festival. A person at the site (the 'tele-actor') would be wearing a webcam and microphones and would represent an individual who would be online but not physically present at the festival. The online 'participant' could instruct the 'tele-actor' to engage in certain activities etc. and thus enjoy a more interactive experience (see Dreyfus 2001: 100-101). Although such technology exists, it is not currently employed in this fashion and in the course of this project I do not wish to dwell on *possible* future developments.

<sup>31</sup> *Darshan* on certain festival days is often considered to be especially auspicious.

<sup>32</sup> Online *pujas* should not be confused with *puja* services offered on websites, which involve a *puja* being carried out (for a fee) on behalf of a devotee at a *mandir* of their choosing.

description of online *pujas*. Such a consideration contributes to my view that online *pujas* are valid.

It is commonly accepted that there are sixteen important processes involved in a traditional *mandir puja* (each one known as an *upachara*) (see Eck 1985: 47; Fuller 1992: 67). There are differences in opinion regarding the nature of these sixteen processes as *puja* is not fully standardised. However, unlike private *pujas* performed in the home, there is some degree of standardisation. For example, Fuller writes that although, according to the texts, there is ‘an ordered sequence of offerings and services’, there are variations but ‘their overall sequence is always much the same’ (Fuller 1992: 67). Therefore, it is not necessary to be concerned with specific differences. One sequence is provided by Krishnananda:

1. *Dhyana* – contemplation of the form of the deity
2. *Avahana* – mentally investing the symbol of worship with the glorious presence
3. *Asana* – enthroning the deity
4. *Padya* – washing the feet of the deity
5. *Arghya* – offering of respectful libations and glorification
6. *Snana* – arrangement for ablutions
7. *Vastra* – presentation of dress or clothing
8. *Yajnopavita* – investiture of the sacred thread
9. *Gandha* – offering of perfumes or sandal paste
10. *Pushpa* – offering of flowers
11. *Dhupa* – burning of incense
12. *Dipa* – waving of lamps
13. *Naivedya* – offering of food
14. *Tambula* – offering of betel leaves
15. *Nirajana* – burning of camphor before the deity
16. *Suvarnapushpa* – offering of a gift (adapted from Krishnananda 1994: 158-159)

Krishnananda adds that in larger *mandirs*, these processes are often combined with a number of practices. These include the chanting of *mantras*, dance and music, and hand gestures called *mudras*. A further important practice is that of *Nyasa*. This ritual



involves the ‘placing of the different limbs of the deity in the corresponding parts of [the devotee’s] own body’ and this aids in ‘the attuning of oneself to the form of the deity’ (Krishnananda 1994: 159). At the end of a *puja*, *prasad* is distributed to devotees. This consists of consecrated substances and is seen as being imbued with divine power and grace. The most common form of *prasad* consists of food, and it is believed that its consumption can result in the internalization of the deity’s power and grace (see Fuller 1992: 74).

The setting for a typical online *puja* simply consists of an image of a deity (which may be a generic deity or a specific deity) on the screen.<sup>33</sup> Icons will also be present, and a worshipper clicks on these icons in turn in order to produce corresponding effects which constitute the *upacharas* of the *puja*<sup>34</sup> and other practices. Empirically, this is all that is involved. The technology is not very advanced compared to other virtual reality environments such as those of some computer games.

Websites that offer online *pujas* are prevalent on the WWW. Examples include *bangalinet.com* which offers online *pujas* to 10 deities, the Hindu portal website *Blessings on the Net* (see chapter 8) to 11 deities, *dfwhindutemple.org* to 12 deities, *kytemple.org* to 13 deities, *rudraksha-ratna.com* to 3 deities and *upportal.com* to 7 deities.

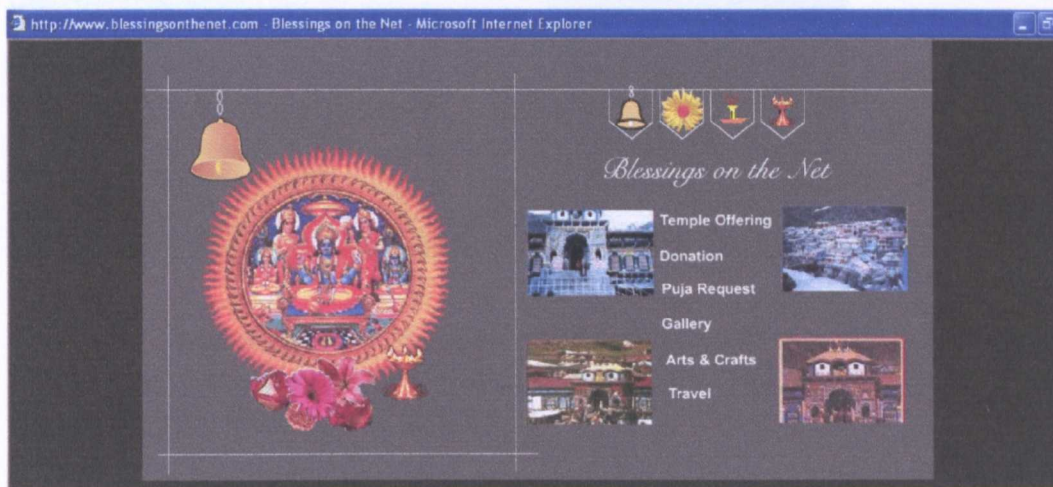
I will now describe in more detail a typical online *puja*. *Blessings on the Net* offers two versions to ten of the 11 deities that are available. Their *pujas* to *Badrinath* (a form of *Vishnu*) will be used as examples. One of the online *pujas* to *Badrinath* (see Fig. 2.1) involves, on an empirical level, looking at *Badrinath* and his attendants who are the recipients of the *puja*, and using a mouse or similar navigation device to click on various icons to perform a number of acts. The first icon is a bell which moves from side to side and produces an authentic sound (as they enter *mandirs*, worshippers traditionally ring a bell to announce their presence). The second icon is a flower, and clicking on this produces flowers that drop and settle in front of *Badrinath* and his attendants (representing the *Pushpa upachara*). The third icon is incense. Clicking on this will cause simulated burning incense to appear in front of the image of the deity

---

<sup>33</sup> Occasionally there will also be *bhajans* (devotional hymns) playing.

<sup>34</sup> As will be seen below, only a few of the *upacharas* are represented in the online *pujas*.

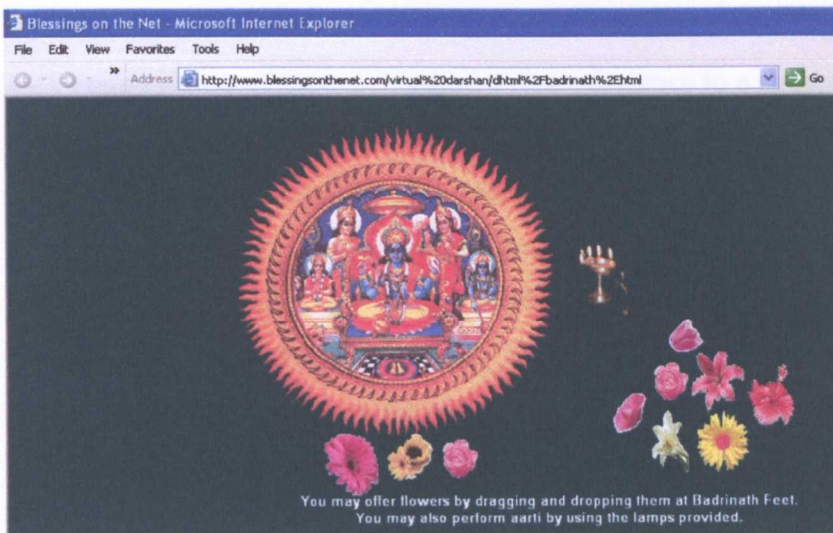
(representing the *Dhupa upachara*). To complete the *puja* the devotee can click on the icon of the *aarti* lamp in order to perform the *aarti* rite which, in the offline world, involves waving a lamp before the deity (see below). On the screen a lamp appears in front of *Badrinath* and his attendants and moves from side to side.



**Fig. 2.1** *badrinath-kedarnath.org/Blessings on the Net* online *puja* to *Badrinath* (window accessed via <http://www.badrinath-kedarnath.org/nindex.asp?tempid=T013>) (March 30, 2006)

In the other type of *puja* to *Badrinath* (see Fig. 2.2), using the mouse, flowers can be dragged across the screen and arranged in front of the image of *Badrinath* and his attendants. In addition to this, the *aarti* lamp can also be moved from side to side by the devotee using the mouse unlike in the previous *puja* described where the lamp moves from side to side automatically. There is no bell or incense. Aside from these differences and the fact that in this *puja* the image of *Badrinath* and his attendants is slightly larger, the two versions are identical.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> A difference in the presentation of the two *pujas* on the screen though is clearly evident in Figs. 2.1 and 2.2. In Fig. 2.1 images of the village of *Badrinath* and the *mandir* are featured below the icons along with links to a number of facilities and services, while this is absent in Fig. 2.2.



**Fig. 2.2** *Blessings on the Net* alternative online *puja* to *Badrinath* (<http://www.blessingsonthenet.com/virtual%20darshan/dhtml%2Fbadrinath%2Ehtml>) (March 30, 2006)

The online *pujas* offered by the other companies display only minor differences, and like the *Blessings on the Net puja*s, involve clicking on icons to produce effects which represent offline practices. For example, the *dfwhindutemple.org* online *puja*s have icons representing a bell, incense, *sindhur* (powder used in the ritual) (clicking on this icon allows the *Gandha upachara* to be represented), the *aarti* lamp and flowers. These are identical for every *puja*, as is the online shrine that the image of the deity is placed inside.

Evidence would suggest that an online *puja* would not lack validity. As has been emphasised, theoretically the *darshan* aspect of this ceremony would not present any problems. The actual conducting of the *puja* itself is also unproblematic, as is the alteration of the ritual. I have already shown that people worship at home without the services of a *pujari*, and Smith observes ‘the emergence within Hinduism of “omnipraxy” – a “do it yourself” attitude to ritual requirements – as against the earlier prevalence of “orthopraxy” – correct performance of ritual requirements, often involving specialist help’ (Smith 1995: 36-40 cited in Beckerlegge 2001b: 89). The new type of rituals include ‘garlanding the image, circling a lighted incense stick, and anointing and decorating the image, accompanied by prayer and meditation’ (Beckerlegge 2001b: 89). Such rituals can be witnessed frequently the length and breadth of India where they are performed by millions of Hindus on a regular basis, and there can be little doubt that it is the most common form of worship.

Fuller adds further evidence to suggest that adherence to a strict form of *puja* is unnecessary when he claims that ‘ritual abbreviation and simplification are ubiquitous procedures that are allowed by the texts themselves’ (Fuller 1992: 68). He also confirms the prevalence of abbreviated *pujas* when he writes that it is common for *puja* to be ‘reduced to no more than the showing of a one-flame camphor lamp with a plantain on the side as a food offering’ and that this use of the lamp known as *aarti* has actually become ‘a synonym for *puja*’ (Fuller 1992: 68). Therefore, the fact that the online rituals mentioned above are heavily abbreviated and only feature a few of the traditional *upacharas*, does not threaten their validity. In the light of Fuller’s observation, the fact that they all feature the use of the *aarti* lamp also gives weight to my claim that online *pujas* are valid. However, this is only the case if it is accepted that a simulated *aarti* lamp is as efficacious as a real one. This will now be considered.

As has been demonstrated, online *pujas* necessitate the use of icons and other images, and it is not intended that a worshipper utilises physical props.<sup>36</sup> However, I wish to argue that the absence of material objects required for the undertaking of an offline *puja* is also unproblematic. This is because, by virtue of the very fact that the *puja* ritual (like any other ritual) is a symbolic act, its performance only requires signifiers to represent the actual props conventionally used because these props are themselves symbolic signifiers.<sup>37 38</sup> Although the symbolic representations used in the online *pujas* may be familiar and attractive visually and aurally, any signifier would theoretically be sufficient to maintain the efficacy of the ritual (for example the practitioner could type

---

<sup>36</sup> Of course, there is nothing stopping a devotee from offering a *puja* to a deity whose image appears on a computer screen using physical props. According to my above arguments this would be unproblematic.

<sup>37</sup> An extreme example that it is the symbolic aspects of worship which are more important than the physical aspects can be seen in the case of the *Nara Bali* practice. At the *Kamakhya mandir* (to a form of *Kali*) in Assam this act of worship traditionally involved sacrificing a human. However, now the priests are content to sacrifice ‘six-foot effigies made of flour’ (Karmakar April 3, 2002: online). Furthermore, during fieldwork at the *Dakshineswar mandir* I witnessed a symbolic animal sacrifice in which the goat was not killed. This again suggests that practitioners are comfortable in substituting real practices within an overall symbolic framework with symbolic ones. Hindu Reform movements that oppose animal sacrifice and advocate alternative offerings (see Srinivas 1962a: 49; Fuller 1992: 257) would appear to be a factor in this development.

<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, many Catholics would disagree that all rituals are symbolic and would maintain that in the Eucharist there is no separation between the signifier and signified (see O’Leary 2005: 45).

'ring bell' and 'light incense', and so on).<sup>39</sup> Therefore, physical props can be overlooked without any detrimental effect if the practitioner approaches worship sincerely and in the right frame of mind. Furthermore, Hinduism specifically condones *pujas* that do not utilise physical props (such a *puja* is known as a *manasa puja*). Krishnananda reveals that spiritually advanced people can conduct a *puja* by imagining the [form of the] deity and the arrangement of the various props and the carrying out of the sixteen *upacharas* (Krishnananda 1994: 159-160). Smith also talks of such a *puja* where 'the physical form [of the deity] is carefully mentally reconstructed, with such rituals as libations and flower offerings being exactly performed in the virtual reality inside the head' (Smith 2003: 144). In the highest forms of worship, the deity, props and the sixteen processes do not even need to be imagined (Krishnananda 1994: 160).

A number of studies concerned with online rituals back up the claim that they are valid.<sup>40</sup> O'Leary notes that in cyberspace participants derive meaning from online rituals, and this can be demonstrated by the simple fact that such rituals are performed regularly (people gather 'again and again' [O'Leary 2004: 47]). He talks of Technopagan<sup>41</sup> rituals where ritual props are 'replaced by textual simulations' (O'Leary 2004: 49)<sup>42</sup> and notes that some practitioners do actually use physical props at home but that this is not necessary (O'Leary 2004: 50).

---

<sup>39</sup> Dawson would appear to concur with this when he does not rule out the possibility of the validity of online rituals, commenting that 'many of the most momentous events in human history are the products of human encounters with words alone' (Dawson 2000: 44). However, in making such a comment he is perhaps thinking of the Abrahamic traditions and not considering the importance of the image in Hinduism.

<sup>40</sup> It is necessary though that participants, at least to some extent, see the Internet as being able to create an environment and not simply as a tool. Merely seeing the Internet as a tool would mean a perceived absence of a possible ritual space thus excluding the possibility of ritual performance.

<sup>41</sup> Technopagans are Neo-Pagans who participate in rituals online.

<sup>42</sup> O'Leary's 2004 chapter was first published as an article in 1996. Although it appears to make sense to argue that it is likely that textual simulations were used as opposed to more elaborate iconic representations because of differences in the level of technology that was available at the time and today, this is in fact not the case; and there has been little in the way of advancements (O'Leary 2005: 39-41). Cowan also reveals in his 2005b study that almost ten years later 'contemporary Pagan rituals...are [still] all but completely text based' (Cowan 2005b: 259).

Arthur also studied Technopagan virtual rituals and similarly concluded that such rituals have meaning for participants (see Arthur 2002: 303-314). Maxwell, commenting on the afore-mentioned study, agrees that:

If even in traditional nature religion the physical tools are less important than the focused will and mind of the practitioner along with the necessary visualisations, then performing such religion in contexts of virtual simulation, where physical tools are replaced by symbols and words, becomes feasible and understandable. (Maxwell 2002: 350)

Further support for the view that online rituals can be valid comes from Schroeder, Heather and Lee's study of the ritual practices of a Christian group. It concludes that while there are some losses, gains and modifications, meaningful ritual *is* nevertheless performed online (Schroeder, Heather and Lee 1998: 1-15).

### *Virtual Pilgrimages*

Pilgrimage<sup>43</sup> has long been an integral part of Hinduism (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 126) and has further grown in importance in the modern era (Fuller 1992: 204). Therefore, it is important to consider the theoretical possibility of online pilgrimage. The idea of pilgrimage is usually associated with a journey to a physical place (which has a non-physical aspect [see above]). A presence and performance of activities (such as bathing) at an actual physical site 'endowed with special merits' (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 126; see also Morinis 1984: 279-280) is usually believed to result in various benefits for the pilgrims (see e.g. Morinis 1984: 282; Kanitkar and Cole 1995: 114). Therefore, it appears difficult to conceive that 'virtual pilgrimages' – which involve a simulated sacred journey via a website (MacWilliams 2004: 223) using text and images, and perhaps sound – could be deemed to be acceptable by Hindus.

---

<sup>43</sup> Morinis emphasises that there 'is a real definitional problem in determining where the boundary between ordinary temple-going and pilgrimage is to be located' (Morinis 1984: 2). However, short trips to a local *mandir* are not seen by worshippers as constituting a pilgrimage (Morinis 1984: 2), and I see no reason to oppose Morinis's argument that pilgrimage is such when an individual consciously sees themselves as undertaking a pilgrimage.

However, according to MacWilliams (drawing upon Morinis 1992), ‘Pilgrimage is as much an act of the mind as an act of the body. There can be “metaphorical pilgrimages”<sup>44</sup> that are as spiritually powerful and meaningful to believers as actual [i.e. physical] ones’ (MacWilliams 2004: 224). In fact, in the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* (texts which cover a wide variety of subjects) where metaphorical pilgrimages are mentioned, they are actually considered to be ‘more effective than the physical ones’ (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 128).<sup>45</sup> It is possible that someone undertaking a metaphorical pilgrimage could use a virtual pilgrimage website with its images, text and sound as an aid to their practice. Therefore, in this sense, virtual pilgrimages are likely to be regarded as a good thing by Hindus.

It is a common belief that hardships should be part of a successful physical pilgrimage (Morinis 1984: 282), and some would argue that it is these hardships encountered on a physical pilgrimage that enable a pilgrim to appreciate the spiritual pilgrimage within. Fuller emphasises discomfort experienced during pilgrimages, but it is important to realise that the ‘extremes of heat, cold, exhaustion, overcrowding [and] squalor’ (Fuller 1992: 222) that he mentions are different from the voluntary austerities that may be undertaken (such as walking barefoot over a long and difficult route [see for example Daniel’s 1984 account of a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Keralan god *Ayappa* in Fuller 1992: 215; see also pp. 209-210]). However, Fuller adds that the unintentional hardships ‘are partly assimilated with ascetic austerities, so that they also contribute to the goals pursued by those who temporarily become or resemble renunciators’ (Fuller 1992: 222), but it still remains unclear whether incidental hardships could ever be regarded as an integral part of pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, putting aside whether or not a distinction can usefully be made between deliberate hardship and incidental hardship, and despite the traditional view that there should be a large element of discomfort and hardship involved in a Hindu pilgrimage, it is important to appreciate that physical pilgrimage has always allowed various innovations that mitigate the element of hardship. This is not even a relatively new phenomenon as, for example, palanquins have traditionally been used (and are still

---

<sup>44</sup> Can also be known as inner pilgrimages.

<sup>45</sup> But Morinis (1984) argues that there is no clear separation between a physical pilgrimage and a metaphorical pilgrimage because a physical pilgrimage is ‘of no value’ if ‘the soul of the pilgrim has [also] not been led along the path to God’ (Morinis 1984: 58). See also below.

used today) to aid pilgrims on their journey. In more recent times, railways and roads have made access to pilgrimage sites easier, and Fuller reports that in the 1840s an ‘association of traditionally minded Hindus in Bengal’ concluded that “‘a pilgrim could travel by railway without losing the merit of pilgrimage’” (Fuller 1992: 205). Nowadays, luxury hotels are available even at some remote pilgrimage destinations, and discomforts are gradually being reduced to such an extent that pilgrimages are now seen by many as being a comfortable activity<sup>46</sup> and are combined with secular tourism (Fuller 1992: 205). It has been a progression which is accelerating rapidly. Whereas a long bus journey as opposed to an even longer walk would once have been seen as a boon to those averse to hardship, an uncomfortable bus journey might now be seen as a hardship for those who are able to utilise air transport on a pilgrimage. In the last stage of a pilgrimage to the *Vaishnodevi mandir* (to *Devi*, the ‘Mother Goddess’) in Jammu where other forms of modern transport cannot be utilised, a pilgrim can even travel by commercial helicopter and land close to the *mandir* (see [maavaishnodevi.org/yatra](http://maavaishnodevi.org/yatra)). Despite increased comforts, these modern pilgrimages are still seen as pilgrimages<sup>47</sup> – it is just another example of the evolution of a traditional religious practice.

Therefore, the idea of online pilgrimage should not be dismissed. Contrary to what some may at first assume, the physical journey, even as traditionally perceived, is not necessary if a true pilgrimage is a pilgrimage within. The argument that a physical journey with its associated hardships and suffering is necessary because it triggers this inner pilgrimage is also invalid because some pilgrims do everything in their power not only to decrease hardship but also to actually increase comfort, yet they are still widely seen as engaging in a pilgrimage.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, there is no reason to suggest that a virtual pilgrimage which does not involve any journey or hardship should not be regarded as a valid pilgrimage.

---

<sup>46</sup> Although ascetic pilgrimage has always been respected in the Christian tradition, the leisure aspect of it has also long been recognised (brilliantly depicted in Chaucer’s [1951] *The Canterbury Tales*). This idea has only recently been adopted by large numbers of Hindus in India.

<sup>47</sup> Although the orthodox view is that if a trip to a sacred centre is primarily ‘a pleasure tour’ then it ceases to be a pilgrimage (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 127).

<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, although a pilgrimage which does not include hardship is still seen as a valid pilgrimage, Fuller claims that ‘it is generally acknowledged that pilgrimage on foot is more meritorious than by vehicular means’ (Fuller 1992: 209).



Furthermore, there is a belief that ideally a pilgrimage should be undertaken alone (Fuller 1992: 210; Morinis 1992: 8 cited in MacWilliams 2004: 236).<sup>49</sup> Whereas this might prove difficult on some popular pilgrimage trails owing to the presence of other pilgrims, a virtual pilgrimage can easily be undertaken alone. Here then, in addition to the negation of hardship, is another example which shows that online pilgrimage could actually be seen as desirable. However, it should be emphasised that the ideal view of pilgrimage is bound up with the idea of renunciation (Fuller 1992: 210). Since the majority of Hindus are not renunciants, going on a pilgrimage with others is not considered to be problematic.

Because a virtual pilgrimage does not involve an individual physically travelling anywhere, it could still aid an individual in the undertaking of an inner pilgrimage, as it is clear that 'The more that pilgrimage generally is conceived as a state that embodies spiritual ideals more than physical, geographical movements, the more virtual pilgrimage will *not* be seen merely as a weak and diluted form of realworld pilgrimage' (Maxwell 2002: 351). However, for most Hindus, the latter conception is most likely to hold true. For example, although Fuller asserts that, in principle, a pilgrimage can be undertaken without physically travelling anywhere (Fuller 1992: 222), he gives the impression that this is not possible for the majority of Hindus when he specifies that 'The *enlightened* Hindu may...participate in pilgrimage without physically moving anywhere' (Fuller 1992: 209 [my emphasis]).

Therefore, although an inner pilgrimage is valid, which means that, theoretically, a virtual pilgrimage could actually be desirable because it could conceivably provide an aid to a mental pilgrimage, there is the strong suggestion that physical pilgrimages are still necessary for most Hindus who see them as a way to obtain merit.<sup>50</sup> There is also

---

<sup>49</sup> Such views are contrary to those of Victor Turner (see below) and others who see interaction with other participants as an integral part of pilgrimage (see in Morinis 1984: 244-246).

<sup>50</sup> Victor Turner (with Edith Turner) (1978) stresses the importance of the physical journey in a pilgrimage as it meant that pilgrims left their 'usual social roles' and this was able to give rise to a 'liminoid' experience – a transitional state which could give pilgrims 'a new depth of understanding of their lives' (MacWilliams 2004: 232). MacWilliams argues that such a liminoid experience can be had during a virtual pilgrimage as 'the user travels to a list of hypertext links that open portals in cyberspace' (MacWilliams 2004: 233). However, this is very different from physically travelling to an unfamiliar destination. Therefore, the argument appears weak. This is especially the case since, according to Turner, it is '*communitas*' – the relationship amongst unfamiliar participants of different social status (see Turner

the belief that the actual journey is ‘not an end in itself but only one of the means to the highest end’ (Aiyangar 1942: xxix. cited in Vidyarathi *et al.* 1979: 127-128), and, according to Morinis, although it may be relatively rare, some pilgrims can actually ‘see in their earthly journey the spiritual progress of the soul’ (Morinis 1984: 298). Furthermore, there can be the belief that the physical act of pilgrimage can still be a highly religious experience in itself even if it does not give rise to any inner spiritual feelings as it could still affirm one’s sense of religious belonging. Moreover, the sights and sounds of a physical pilgrimage might prove inspirational. Therefore, despite the fact that MacWilliams emphasises the central importance of the visual in pilgrimage (MacWilliams 2004: 230) (which is especially the case in Hinduism because of the importance of the image [see above]), and the Internet is a visual medium, for the majority of pilgrims a virtual pilgrimage is unlikely to be seen as a valid substitute for physically undertaking a journey to a sacred site.<sup>51</sup>

---

1969: 96-97, 131-132; 1974: 45) – that is essential to the liminoid experience (see Turner and Turner 1978: 35), and even MacWilliams admits that while he believes that *communitas* can form through a virtual pilgrimage (e.g. as a result of comments in a guest ‘book’) (MacWilliams 2004: 235), there is something missing in this sense of *communitas* (p. 236). However, Turner’s theory of *communitas* has not been universally accepted and his work has been criticised by Morinis for the selective use of examples (Morinis 1984: 255, 257, 260). Morinis adds that ‘no study of a place of pilgrimage tradition by a social scientist has confirmed what Turner has postulated as a universal process of pilgrimage’ (Morinis 1984: 258), and his own research showed that pilgrims in West Bengal still maintained conventional social roles and therefore *communitas* did not develop (Morinis 1984: 274).

<sup>51</sup> Those who hold the view that physical pilgrimage unites Indian culture and religion, thereby uniting even culturally diverse Hindus (see Morinis 1984: 239-240, 244; Brooks 1989: 60, 106; Krishnananda 1994: 153), would also be of this opinion. Such a view is strongly held by Hindu nationalist organisations such as the VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*) who equate the Indian nation-state with Hindu sacred space (van der Veer 2000: 331). van der Veer argues that this view is based on the existence of sacred sites which are connected by pilgrimage routes, and he talks of a ‘pilgrimage’ (involving a number of different processions) undertaken by the VHP in 1983 in order to ‘demonstrate’ a united Hindu India (van der Veer 2000: 331). Bhatt also refers to a similar ‘pilgrimage’ that was held by the VHP along with their related organisations the BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) and the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) in 1990, the itinerary of which ‘relied on a selective religious cartography of northern India’ (Bhatt 1997: 254). Therefore, the importance of physical pilgrimages to such groups is clear. The view of the body held by Hindu nationalist groups (according to Bhatt [1997]) (see chapter 3 of this thesis) also suggests that they would not be in favour of virtual pilgrimages.

## Concluding Comments

Although there are some instances where the practising of Hinduism online may not be ideal, this chapter has brought to light a number of different reasons why, overall, it appears that in principle, the medium of the Internet is not only compatible with Hinduism but is also well suited to it.<sup>52</sup> This alone does not mean that Hindus *will* necessarily utilise the Internet for religious reasons. However, at the outset of this thesis I indicated that there is a huge number of Hindu-related websites and this suggests that many Hindus *are* already using the Internet in different ways.

It seems likely that Hinduism will not be damaged or undermined by the Internet. Maxwell in noting that, in the past, technology has not damaged religion mentions Woolgar's observation that an online presence can increase offline activity (for example, 'when museums go on-line, more persons visit them in person' [Maxwell 2002: 352]). Furthermore, Schultz notes that new media forms do not simply replace older forms. In his discussion of the Reformation he gives the example that 'even after sermons were printed, sermons were still orally delivered' (Schultz 2001: online).

---

<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the above analysis of a number of characteristics of Hinduism suggests that the Internet could benefit Hindus in the diaspora in a number of ways. For example, some activities that could previously not be undertaken or would have been difficult to undertake, are now theoretically possible through the use of the Internet. This is especially the case with online *pujas* and this will be looked at in greater detail in chapter 8 (where it will be shown that performing an online *puja* is fundamentally different to performing a *puja* before an image of a deity that a devotee may possess at home). In addition, even for other Hindus who do not experience problems concerning access to certain activities, the sheer convenience of being able to practise online may prove attractive, as is the fact that in many cases it is likely to be much cheaper. Furthermore, some Hindus may consider practising Hinduism online to actually be more desirable than participating in parallel offline activities in some cases. This will be looked at in chapters 3 and 8.

Internet use also has a practical value in that it has the potential to keep scattered religious communities in touch with each other and thus help to reinforce notions of individual and communal religious identity. Indeed, Mayer makes this point, and his reference to Zoroastrians, a particularly small and scattered group, and their use of the Internet, backs up his assertion (see Mayer 2000: 272). Concerning Trinidadians in the diaspora, Miller and Slater (2000) make a similar point (see chapter 8 of this thesis).

## The Digital Divide

The fact that new media forms do not simply replace older forms is especially relevant in India where the majority of the population does not have access to the Internet. There is a 'digital divide' (i.e. uneven access to the Internet)<sup>53</sup> both between countries and within countries. As Dawson points out: '...cyberspace is still largely the preserve of a small elite. Hundreds of millions of people may now have formal access to the Internet, but half of the world's population has never made a phone call, and only 20 percent own a television' (Dawson 2001b: online). Furthermore, Nayar reveals that 'eighty per cent of the world's population lacks basic telecommunication access' and that 'eighty-four per cent of computer users are from the North American and Northern European regions', adding that even within these relatively prosperous regions there is a divide (Nayar 2004: 280). Bedell (1998), and Spender in her early study (1995), also write about the digital divide within Western countries, showing that the demographic make-up of Internet users has changed little in the intervening years.

Concerning the digital divide within India, despite the fact that there is an information and communications technology sector, 'actual access to the Internet reaches only a tiny fraction of the Indian population' (Warschauer 2004: 60). In 2001 only 0.5% of the Indian population were users. There are a number of reasons for this including low teledensity, high rates of poverty and the limited presence of Indian languages on the WWW (Warschauer 2004: 61). Therefore, the divide within India is not just as a result of economic factors; language is also important. The elite in India are able to use English, and this is also 'the dominant language of the information technology industry in India' (Warschauer 2004: 102). However, approximately 850 languages are spoken in India, and only about 5% of the population speaks English (Warschauer 2004: 102). Nevertheless, English is the dominant language online (Poster 1995: 83; Singh 2001b: online; Nayar 2004: 182; Warschauer 2004: 96). Consequently, '[It] is not possible when using Hindi or any other of India's official languages, let alone its dialects [to search the Internet]. This...is a perfect illustration of the "vast schism" between

---

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Eisenstein (1998); Bunt (2000b: 205; 2003: 9); Castells (2000: 356, 377-382); Helland (2000: 212); Beckerlegge (2001c: 220); (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 5-6, 15, 41-42); Hellowell (2001); Arnold (2002: 341); Maxwell (2002: 352); Mannur (2003: 283, 287); Marshall, Taylor and Xinghuo (2003); Couldry (2004: 185-194); Dawson and Cowan (2004: 5); Gurak (2004: 28); Harcourt (2004: 251-252); Warschauer (2004); Cowan (2005b: 262); O'Leary (2005: 46).

English-speaking, middle-class India and the majority of the rural population, who rely exclusively on India languages' (Beckerlegge 2001c: 244 [see also Hariharan 1999]).<sup>54</sup>

However, these considerations of the digital divide do not imply that the Internet will be of only minor importance to Hinduism. This is because Hinduism *is* prevalent on the WWW and this has wide implications for Hinduism as a whole. For example, its presence on the WWW has already resulted in significant developments (access to deities has been affected [see chapter 8]) and is likely to result in further changes in the future (the position of *pujaris* is likely to be affected [see chapter 9]) despite the fact that most Hindus in India do not have access to the Internet.

---

<sup>54</sup> It should also be noted though that English can enable communication between those who have different languages but also share English as a second language.

## Chapter 3 – Embodiment

### Introduction

In this chapter I will establish the importance of the notion of embodiment for any sociological study of religion, and make explicit how ‘embodiment’ is understood in this study. I will then discuss online disembodiment and explain exactly what I mean when I use this term. Subsequently, in a largely theoretical discussion, I will consider the compatibility of online disembodiment with Hinduism in general by looking at the nature of the body in Hinduism, and briefly comment upon reincarnation – an important aspect of Hinduism. Online *pujas* will then be discussed with the focus on their disembodied character. Following this, I will outline the *varnashrama-dharma* system which is a central aspect of Hinduism that is fully bound up with embodiment. A consideration of *varna* (the most important aspect of the *varnashrama-dharma* system) in the light of online disembodiment finally leads to a number of research questions which are presented at the end of the chapter, and which are addressed in chapter 8.

### **The Neglect of ‘Embodiment’ in Sociological Theory and the Later Realisation that this was Problematic**

A number of scholars, for example Featherstone (1991), Turner (1991a) and Shilling (1993), have argued that the body has largely been neglected in sociology. Sociologists have been concerned with debates surrounding structure and agency, and there have been various attempts (e.g. Giddens’s structuration theory [see Craib 1992]) to produce a theory which encompasses both. However, as a result of the traditional acceptance in Western thought of Cartesian dualism which advocates a distinct separation between mind and body (see Synott 1991: 70 cited in Mellor and Shilling 1997: 5-6; Fisher 1992: 100; Midgley 1997: 53;), with mind being seen as ‘that which defines humans as social beings’ (Shilling 1993: 8-9), even approaches that were not solely structural and which recognised or gave prominence to human agency, accepted that this agency was exercised solely through the mind – through decisions made by individuals (see Shilling 1997: 737).

Therefore, the body was largely ignored and issues concerning it were left to biologists and the medical profession (see McGuire: 1990; 284-285; Berthelot 1991: 398).

However, in everyday life the body *is* important as individuals clearly do not consist of disembodied decision making minds and strongly identify their selves with their body. Mind and body are inextricably related. As Beckford puts it: 'human experiences are grounded in physical bodies; and physical bodies are experienced through the human mind' (Beckford 2003: 206). Therefore, individuals are *embodied*. As McGuire puts it: 'the...body is our fundamental phenomenological basis for apprehending self and society' (McGuire 1990: 285).<sup>1</sup>

In this present study the term 'embodiment' will refer to 'self *as* body' (Coakley 1997b: 4) as opposed to the notion of self *and* body (see also Turner who agrees that it 'makes sense to talk about *being* a body' [1997: 19]). To an extent, the validity of adopting this approach to the body is demonstrated by the fact that physical assaults on the body are usually considered to be assaults on the self (see e.g. McGuire 1990: 285, 287), while Goffman (who never attempted an all encompassing theory of the body) shows the importance of the body for the self when, for example, he points out that blushing can contribute to a negative presentation of self (see Turner 1991a: 11; 1997: 19).<sup>2</sup> However, as Shilling points out, Goffman's social constructionist approach meant that he 'relatively neglected [the body] as an actual object of analysis' (Shilling 1993: 10). Shilling also remarks that the same can be said of Foucault whose extreme social constructionist approach views the body 'as existing only in discourse' (Shilling 1993: 198; see also Nayar 2004: 221), and he criticises Foucault by arguing that:

merely to state that the body is socially constructed does not tell us enough about what it is that is being socially constructed; it fails to consider just how socially constructed the body is, and neglects the possibility that certain dimensions of our embodiment might be more amenable to social intervention than others. (Shilling 1993: 198; see also Mellor and Shilling 1997: 4-5)

Marx and Weber also recognised that the body was important to social analysis as they were aware that our bodies influence how we act in society, and how various factors

---

<sup>1</sup> The anthropologist Merleau-Ponty also advocates this view (see Turner 1997: 19).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Garfinkel points out that certain rituals concerning the body can result in the humiliation of the individual (see Turner 1997: 19).

such as working conditions and diet can affect our body (see Shilling: 1993: 198). However, again, a theory of embodiment was never formulated and the mind/body duality continued to dominate sociology. The inadequacy of this approach was highlighted by sociologists such as Turner and Shilling who began to press for the theorization of the body in sociology, and for studies which took embodiment into account. Such studies were forthcoming but tended to focus upon class, culture and consumption (see Turner 1991a: 11). Indeed, in Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner's (1991) *The Body – Social Process and Cultural Theory*, there is hardly any mention of religion whatsoever. Similarly, in Shilling's (1993) *The Body and Social Theory*, religion is only mentioned when considering 'death', and in the introduction where the growth of rationality in late modernity is commented upon.

Concerning the sociology of religion, Beckford notes that the recognition of the importance of embodiment began in the early 1980s not only as a result of Turner's writings, but also because of the work of McGuire (Beckford 2000b: 489). Before the end of the decade, McGuire used the opportunity of her Presidential Address to the 1989 meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion to emphasise the importance of embodiment to sociological studies concerning religion (McGuire: 1990).

An important study concerning embodiment and religion is Mellor and Shilling's (1997) theoretical work which aims to show how 'different patterns of human community are intimately related to the somatic experience of the sacred' (Mellor and Shilling 1997; back cover). While their study is an admirable attempt to consider how embodiment is related to thoughts and beliefs, its concerns are largely limited to Christianity in Western Europe and the USA (as is Turner's early [1980] work which restricts itself to the Abrahamic traditions). Nevertheless, Mellor and Shilling's study shows that when religion is considered, embodiment is of paramount importance. Indeed, as Beckford emphasises, studies of religion should always appreciate and investigate relations between the embodied agent and religion, as it is clear that 'religion is "embodied"' (Beckford 2000b: 489). For example, concerning the *International Society for Krishna Consciousness* (ISKCON), he notes that its members wear 'highly distinctive clothing and hairstyles, restrict sexual relations...practise meditation for long periods of time and follow a vegetarian or vegan diet', and because of this 'the bodily regime of ISKCON devotees is integral to their religious convictions,



their feelings of loyalty to the movement and their sense of identity' (Beckford: 2003: 182). A similar point can also be made concerning Sikhism as practices concerning the body (see Nesbitt 1997) also fulfil similar functions.

Kasulis, and Coakley, also emphasise the extreme importance of embodiment in religion. Kasulis asserts that: 'Religious beliefs are embodied through religious practices. In fact, the practices may be said to precede the beliefs' (cited in Coakley 1997b: 8), and Coakley clarifies this when she remarks that: 'devotional "practice" is no optional frill attendant on metaphysical theories acquired somewhere else; rather it is the very medium of such belief, ultimately transcending the thought/action divide' (Coakley 1997b: 8). In her study of embodiment, Leder also emphasises that the body is important to various religious traditions, and concludes that 'corporeality is not simply an obstacle to spiritual experience but can be central to its realization' (Leder 1990: 168).

There is a great deal of further evidence from a number of religious traditions which suggests that the body is important to religion. This adds weight to my claim that a sociological study of religion must seriously take into account the embodied agent. I will now consider this evidence.

## **The Body in Various Religious Traditions**

### **Western Christianity**

The body in relation to Christianity has been considered by a number of scholars. Camporesi considers mortification of the flesh in the Christian monastic tradition in the Middle-Ages in Europe (Camporesi 1988: 36-63), religious views regarding bodily decay (Camporesi 1988: 67-89), and the use of drugs to disguise bodily suffering which resulted in 'religious experiences' (Camporesi 1988: 223-242).<sup>3</sup> Like Camporesi, Turner also mentions how the body in the Christian monastic tradition was seen as being a metaphor of 'fallen man' and required practices concerning 'diet, meditation, and constraint' (Turner 1997: 21-22). The medieval Christian philosophy that saw the

---

<sup>3</sup> In the context of Hinduism, issues surrounding the validity of 'religious experiences' brought on by hallucinogenic drug use are discussed in this chapter in footnote 27.

human body as a metaphor of 'fallen man' was inherently dualistic as spirit was divorced from the physical body. This point is made explicitly by Midgley (1997: 55).<sup>4</sup>

## **Greek Christianity**

Kallistos Ware (1997) considers in detail the body in Greek Christianity and makes explicit that in this tradition the body is of extreme importance both historically (see below), and in contemporary liturgical Greek Christianity (Ware 1997: 101-104). Unlike in Western Christianity with its strong sense of duality between mind and spirit (or soul), despite the fact that early theologians in the Greek Christian tradition also held a dualistic view of the human person (Ware 1997: 90), later the belief that in the human person body and soul are unified, became widespread. The term *kardia* (heart) is used to refer to this (Ware 1997: 100) and there was the belief that the heart was 'the point of convergence and interaction within the human person as a whole' (Ware 1997: 101) (this has parallels with Sikh philosophy which also has a non-dualistic philosophy concerning the body/soul and also sees the heart (*hriday*) as being the point of convergence [see Nesbitt 1997: 299]). Furthermore, using certain bodily practices such as posture and breathing techniques, the heart can be sought out (Ware 1997: 105-107). Ware clarifies exactly what is being sought out: 'the term 'heart' is...both literal and symbolical...it signifies not only the physical organ but the spiritual centre of the total human person' and concludes that: 'Here, then, is a tradition of prayer that seeks to assign full value to the body. So far from being a hindrance and cause of distraction, the body if properly disciplined can be a constructive helper' (Ware 1997: 107). As will be seen below, this is also true concerning some traditions within Hinduism.

## **Buddhism**

Concerning techniques utilised to facilitate spiritual progress, the body is also important in *Theravāda* Buddhism, despite the fact that *Theravāda* Buddhist

---

<sup>4</sup> A number of other scholars have also looked at the history of the body in Christianity. Mellor and Shilling consider the body in medieval Western Christianity and after the Reformation (Mellor and Shilling 1993: 36-47, 123-124). Louth (1997) considers the body in Western Christianity (up to the medieval period). Foucault also considers the body in medieval Christianity (see Mellor and Shilling 1993: 37).

philosophy is dualistic in that ‘the body comes to an end at death whereas consciousness continues’ (Collins 1997: 188).

Some strands of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism espouse a similar dualistic idea, and the *Dharmasamgiti Sutra* refers to the body as ‘just a collection of feet and toes, legs, chest, loins belly, navel, backbone, heart, ribs and flanks, hands, forearms, upper-arms, shoulders, neck, jaw, forehead, skull...[and is]...the abode of sundry passions, ideas and fancies’ (Williams, P. 1997: 206). It is emphasised that the body is ‘disgusting’ (Williams, P. 1997: 206) in order to encourage the idea that it is impermanent. However, one fundamental difference between *Theravāda* Buddhism and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is that in the latter there is an emphasis placed on becoming a *Bodhisattva*. A *Bodhisattva* retains his or her body and functions in the material realm in order to carry out compassionate deeds. Therefore, in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, ‘compassion requires some sort of active embodiment’ even though the *Bodhisattva* has been able to transcend the body through meditation (particularly through meditating on its ‘repulsive nature’) (Williams, P. 1997: 228).

*Vajrayāna (Tantric)* Buddhism affirms the body, and like the Greek Christian belief that body and soul are related, its philosophy points towards an embodied individual. Like the other forms of Buddhism mentioned above, the body is important because various techniques can be employed in order to progress spiritually, but the difference here is that not only is the body not seen as being repulsive, it is affirmed and is not seen as being distinct from the soul. Williams sums this up when he asserts that in *Vajrayāna* Buddhism ‘the value of the body lies in the very *structure* of the physical body itself. The human body is valuable not only because of what can be done with it, but because of what it actually *is*’ (Williams, P. 1997: 221). A similar view can also be found in Taoism (see Saso 1997) and the *Tantric yoga* tradition in Hinduism (see below) which is closely related to *Vajrayāna* Buddhism.

## **Islam**

In Islam, the importance of the body is also clear. According to al-Oadah, although there is a dualism between body and soul, ‘both are indispensable’ (al-Oadah n.d.: online). He points to the physical actions that are required in order to pray effectively, and asserts that there is a clear relationship between the physical aspects of prayer and

the spiritual. He also talks about the importance of fasting, which entails embodiment – despite the fact that fasting involves an attempt to deny or to suppress bodily needs. An anonymous writer from the *Jamaat-e-Islami* organisation also emphasises the importance of the body even though there is a dualism between the soul and the body:

According to Islam, *Allah* has appointed the human soul as His *Khalifah* (vice-regent) in this world. He has invested it with a certain authority, and given it certain responsibilities and obligations for the fulfilment of which He has endowed it with the best and most suitable physical frame. The body has been created with the sole object of allowing the soul to use it in the exercise of its authority and the fulfilment of its duties and responsibilities. The body is not a prison for the soul, but its workshop or factory; and if the soul is to grow and develop, it is only through this workshop. (anon. 1948: online)

All of these examples serve to demonstrate that there can be no doubt that religion is embodied. They also serve to demonstrate that there is a multiplicity of views regarding the nature of the body, and that views regarding the nature of the body change over time (for example the notion of the body in medieval Christianity is different from that held in contemporary Christianity). Turner also points out that there are various Western intellectual conceptions of the body that have arisen and that this shows that there has never been a coherent view of the body as a ‘universal historical phenomenon’ (Turner 1997: 15-16).

### **What is ‘The Body’?**

In order to conduct a sociological study which recognises the importance of the body, it is first necessary to formulate a conception of the body. Therefore this will be undertaken prior to considering the status of the body in Hinduism.

There is no single conceptualisation of ‘the body’ (see e.g. Berthelot 1991: esp. 391; Coakley 1997b: esp. 4). However, this does not mean that it is not possible to come up with a conception of the body that can be used in a sociological investigation. It has been demonstrated that the split between mind and body results in an inadequate conception of the body and that instead, a view which holds that mind and body are inextricably linked is necessary. I have shown that a solely social constructionist

approach is inadequate as it does not clearly identify what is being constructed. However, while, from a Western perspective, it is clear that the body is a physical thing which consists of bones, muscles and organs etc., it is also clear that, as the social constructionists advocate, social forces upon the body are important. Humans are certainly not merely physical beings as, for example, the type of upbringing that individuals receive affects their bodies (see Shilling 1993: 12) (see also Coakley 1997b: 3; Turner 1997: 17).

Therefore, what is required is an approach which recognises the physical, biological nature of the human body, and which also recognises the influence of social forces. Such an approach is advocated by James Beckford (2003) who argues against the view that it is contradictory. As mentioned above, he sees individuals as being embodied. Furthermore, he emphasises that 'human meanings and actions are rooted in physical bodies...[but that]...human experiences are shaped by social and cultural processes'. For example, he points out that even the 'physical "facts" of birth, breathing and dying take place in social and cultural frameworks of meaning or contexts' (Beckford 2003: 208).

Similarly, Chris Shilling (1993) also advocates an embodied approach and asserts that the material nature of the human body should be recognised, and that this body is also affected by social forces (Shilling 1993: 10-11). Furthermore, he emphasises that the physical body actually underlies social relations (Shilling 1997: 13). I agree that an approach which recognises that the body is biological, but which also takes into account social factors, provides an understanding of the body which allows sociologists to seek to understand the religious life of embodied actors.

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, there is another reason why such an approach is valuable. Various religious traditions may espouse different views of the body, and their adherents may conceive of the body in these different ways, but this does not mean that sociologists cannot, for empirical purposes, still see individuals as embodied actors consisting of physical bodies which are not separate from mind, and which are influenced by social forces and also contribute to social relations. Nevertheless, in order to understand embodied activity it is essential to understand and take into account the view of the body held by the particular religion(s) that the study is concerned with, in this case those of various Hindu traditions. This is integral to

understanding embodied action. It can appreciate Coakley's claim that social scientists regard the human body in one way, while various other groups (e.g. Eastern religionists, Christian theologians) see it in other ways and that it is questionable that the different groups are even discussing the same thing when they talk about the 'body' (Coakley 1997a: xv.), without letting a sociological investigation collapse into relativism.

### **The Body as Metaphor**

There is also another useful theory of the body that can provide valuable insights regarding the role of the body and religion. This is the view proposed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas who asserts that the human body is a metaphor for society as a whole (see McGuire 1990: 289; Turner 1991a: 5; 1997: 17; Asad 1997: 43; Williams, A. 1997: 165).<sup>5</sup> Her work has influenced an entire generation of scholars, but two examples will suffice to demonstrate its creative potential, which is not without its problems.

#### ***Zoroastrianism***

Alan Williams (1997) explains that in Zoroastrianism 'the body is the symbol of the integrity of the world order of *Ahura Mazda* [the supreme god] against the chaos of *Angra Mainyu* [the god of darkness] which threatens from without' (Williams, A. 1997: 156), and this requires that the human body must be kept pure. These purity rules concerning the body enabled Zoroastrians, despite oppression in Iran, to maintain a strong group identity which was subsequently maintained in India. Williams asserts that, despite the fact that purification is symbolic, consequences could be real:

Purification of the body may seem to the modern reader to be the most private of [the purity] rules, affecting only the individual [but] in fact the rules and rites were emphatically of *public* concern, and infringement of them resulted in nothing less than social ostracization and public ignomy [as this could cause]

---

<sup>5</sup> James and Carkeek also share this view. They assert that: 'At a very basic level the human body is always treated as an image of society – interest in its apertures reflects the social preoccupation with entrances, exits, escapes and invasions' (James and Carkeek 1997: 114-115).

serious physical, moral and spiritual injury, both for the individual and the community at large. (Williams, A. 1997: 159-160)

### ***Theravāda Buddhism***

Similarly, Steven Collins's study of monastic *Theravāda* Buddhism also identifies the link between the individual body and society. Collins draws upon Durkheim's assertion that 'a general function of religious ascetics is to demonstrate, symbolically and in exemplary fashion, the self-control and self-denial necessarily incumbent on all members of society' (Collins 1997: 187). Collins concludes that the religious life of the monks and nuns performs such a function. Furthermore, he makes the claim that 'the austere transcendentalist and immaterialist conception of nirvana is carried into ordinary material life in various ways...[for example by]...the bodies of monks and nuns' (Collins 1997: 188). In this way, the bodies of the monks and nuns contribute to the actualization of the ideology.<sup>6</sup>

### **Critical Summary**

These structuralist approaches which highlight the importance of the human body to religion, and the importance of the religious human body to society as a whole, do not take into account a fully embodied *individual*. They fail to consider the actions and desires of embodied actors. In my view this is a serious deficiency. Failing to take into account the actual activities of embodied individuals will result in an incomplete understanding of human embodiment and its importance to religion. However, I do believe that such approaches have some value and can present an additional way of thinking about embodiment. This goes beyond simply looking at the same phenomenon from different angles. For example, I see no mutual incompatibility between, on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Collins's study can actually act as a refutation of Berthelot's claim that the Durkheimian school completely neglected the body (see Berthelot 1991: 394, 398). Mellor and Shilling would also oppose Berthelot's claim that Durkheim neglected the body. Their (1997) study employs a Durkheimian perspective in order to investigate forms of embodiment (see Mellor and Shilling 1997: 1-4). They argue that Durkheim's notion of 'collective effervescence' is 'sociologically significant' as such experiences 'have the potential to transform people's experiences of their fleshy selves and the world around them' (Mellor and Shilling 1997: 1). McGuire also mentions the importance of the work of Durkheim to the understanding of the link between the body and society (McGuire 1990: 288).

one hand, an approach which recognises full individual embodiment which is non-dualistic and which recognises the importance of the physical aspects of the body and of the impact of social forces upon it and, on the other, structuralist approaches to embodiment. It is entirely possible that embodied individuals themselves could appreciate that their religious bodily practices can contribute to social order and stability in their communities (e.g. amongst Sikhs, and Zoroastrians as mentioned above). Furthermore, it is entirely possible that some individuals may appreciate that certain 'religious' bodily practices practised in their faith community have social antecedents as distinct from religious antecedents, despite the fact that this may be contrary to the accepted and prevailing religious view.

## **The Body in Cyberspace**

I have argued that the notion of embodiment advocated by, for example, Beckford and Shilling, is of value when conducting a sociological study, and that this is especially the case regarding a study of religion. I have also argued that it would be wise not to rule out the structuralist approach which, although it still takes the body into account, focuses much less on the experiences of the embodied individual. However, my project is also concerned with cyberspace, and this raises questions concerning embodiment such as: 'Where or what is the body in cyberspace?' For example, what happens to the body when an embodied individual enters cyberspace? Does disembodiment occur? (see e.g. Bell 2000: 3; Poster cited in Beck 2000: 102).

The question of whether some form of disembodiment is occurring in cyberspace is of immense importance to sociology because it seems that, not long after it was realised that it is essential to take embodiment into account, unexpectedly a new situation arose where the fundamental status of the body came into question. This could potentially be somewhat unfortunate for those social theorists such as Giddens and Shilling, who, writing shortly before the rapid growth of cyberspace, claimed that the body was becoming increasingly important in high modernity to the extent that it could actually be seen as 'constitutive of the self'. Although faith in 'grand narratives' had evaporated, 'at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world' (Shilling 1993: 3) (see Shilling 1993: esp. 1-3). Furthermore, before the advent of cyberspace, Giddens had even asserted that 'our embodiment means that we cannot be in two places at once, and



imposes limits on the number of people we can meet and communicate with at one time' (Shilling 1993: 13).

However, the existence of cyberspace challenges this view. By 1997, cyberspace had already become available to many people (see chapter 1), and there had been a number of studies concerning the body and cyberspace (for example those published in Featherstone and Burrows [1995]). However, whilst they acknowledge the Featherstone and Burrows volume, Mellor and Shilling (1997) are unwilling to consider fully or assign any importance to any possible notions of disembodiment. They note that the studies contained therein merely 'point to important...possibilities of new disembodied subjectivities, but shed little light upon the world in which most people live, and sometimes make few real attempts to put these changes in broader historical and sociological perspective' (Mellor and Shilling 1997: 8). Whilst early studies of the body and cyberspace may have been guilty of this, the consideration of a certain understanding of disembodiment in cyberspace shortly to be discussed in this chapter certainly does have the potential to further understanding of the offline world and of the changes that are occurring there. It is therefore essential to investigate questions regarding the body and cyberspace in a study which must pay a great deal of attention to cyberspace, and is concerned with religion and religious experiences.

### **The Understanding of Disembodiment in Cyberspace Used in this Study**

I do not believe that *full* disembodiment takes place when someone temporarily enters cyberspace.<sup>7</sup> The main reason for this is that the body is still subject to pain during

---

<sup>7</sup> This view is contrary to that of those (e.g. Moravec, and members of the Extropians) (see Lupton 1995: 100; Wertheim 1999: 18-19; Dreyfus 2001: 6, 121) who argue that in the future, 'techgnosis' will be possible. Techgnosis advocates that, in a literal way, as a result of computer technology, humankind will be able to get rid of their bodies altogether and live as consciousness in cyberspace. Those who espouse such a view claim that the mind is, essentially, software, and can thus exist as a result of hardware that is different from the human body – i.e. computer hardware (see Midgley 1997: 65; McClellan December 10, 1998). Such views are largely inspired by science fiction fantasies (see e.g. Featherstone and Burrows 1995: 5, 12; Stone 2000: 524), although they also form a part of the approach advocated by Wiener, the founder of cybernetics (see Tomas 1995: 23-40; Nayar 2004: 65) who asserts that the human organism can be transformed into 'a pattern of pure digital information' (Tomas 1995: 40), and of Lanier, an influential computer programmer (see Lanier and Biocca 1992: 156 cited in Green 1997: 61). For Lanier and others (e.g. Walser [see Vasseleu 1997: 54]); 'Digital embodiment transcends physical

cyberspace activity (e.g. neck and back ache, wrist ache etc.) (see e.g. Lupton 1995: 102; Turkle 1995 cited in Castells 2000: 387), and activities in cyberspace are still limited by the body (see e.g. Stone cited in Nayar 2004: 164; Cowan 2005b: 262). For example, someone entering cyberspace still needs to eat, defecate and sleep (see e.g. Shilling 1997: 747), while Stone points out that having a disembodied presence in cyberspace will not slow the death of somebody with AIDS (Stone 2000: 524).<sup>8</sup> The argument that full disembodiment does not occur in cyberspace is strengthened if it is accepted that experiences in cyberspace at least partly arise out of characteristics that are found in embodied offline social relations (see Green 1997: 59; Hardey 2002: 570-571, 580-581). It appears prudent to accept such a view despite opposition by those such as Lanier who assert that online experiences are freed from 'race or class distinctions or any other form of pretense' (Green 1997: 61).

Nevertheless, it is clear that *in some sense* disembodiment does occur when an individual partakes in activities in cyberspace (see e.g. Bell 2000: 3). This is the case despite the fact that the computer user is subject to bodily experiences and requires the body to mediate between the offline world and the online experience by, for example, physically using a mouse or typing on a keyboard, and that embodied senses and the embodied mind are required to make sense of online experiences. For example, online, it is possible to browse the catalogues of different libraries without having to physically visit these libraries. Therefore, on a practical level *some form* of disembodiment is occurring as physical presence at a library is not required to browse the catalogue.

---

embodiment' (Green 1997: 61) (see also Escobar 2000: 61; Nayar 2004: 71). Although there are some commentators who believe that becoming completely disembodied in cyberspace is not a science fiction fantasy, and that it is only a matter of time before it becomes possible, some put forward the argument that it would be highly undesirable to live forever in cyberspace (see e.g. Sobchack 1995: 210-213; Midgley 1997: 65-66, Wertheim cited in McClellan December 10, 1998; Dreyfus 2001). Furthermore, even if living a disembodied existence in cyberspace were to become possible and the idea became popular or it was a matter of evolution which therefore excluded choice in the matter for the individual, it would not be able to happen in the foreseeable future (see Dyson 1979: 453 cited in Midgley 1997: 65). Therefore, such notions of disembodiment are of limited relevance to this study.

<sup>8</sup> In this instance, Stone shares my opinion that full disembodiment is not experienced in cyberspace. However, when she makes this claim she does so in opposition to those who advocate that consciousness will one day be able to be uploaded into the computer network. However, the whole idea behind this approach is that this *is* pure disembodiment and there is no reference whatsoever to any body in an offline world.

Where online copies of books and articles are available, it is not even necessary to travel to, and be present at, a library. Therefore, in this instance, a form of telepresence is occurring as an individual is, in a sense, able to be at a library without actually physically going there.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning Hinduism, although online *pujas* (described in the previous chapter) do not appear to give rise to an experience of telepresence (it is highly unlikely that someone conducting an online *puja* would feel like they were at the deity's sacred site),<sup>10</sup> some

---

<sup>9</sup> It would appear that the more advanced the technological features that were employed, the more a person could be considered to be experiencing telepresence. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example, in many instances, the more that advanced technology is used, the more the body comes into play. In the virtual reality simulations described by Green (1997: 68-70), the technology tends to get in the way. Furthermore, it is clear that a disabled person would not be able to use the necessary equipment. Others who have a problem concerning their inner ear may become extremely nauseous as a result of using advanced virtual reality software and equipment designed to create a strong sense of telepresence (Green 1997: 72). Green therefore concludes that: 'digital realities remain vulnerable to the intrusions of the physical world' (Green 1997: 69). There is also the argument, put forward by Dreyfus (who takes inspiration from Nietzsche who argues that the body is crucial to our spiritual and intellectual life [see Dreyfus 2001: 6] and without it, 'we would be literally nothing' [Dreyfus 2001: 106]) that even a 'perfect' virtual reality simulation could never result in the telepresence that is required in order to create a convincing disembodied experience for an embodied user of the technology. This is because 'if our body goes, so does relevance, skill, reality and meaning' as 'the actual shape and meaning of our bodies play a crucial role in our making sense of the world' (Dreyfus 2001: 7). Dreyfus concludes that the telepresence that interested parties seek to create 'can never give us a sense of the reality of far-away things' (Dreyfus 2001: 98).

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that this could be a deliberate strategy on the part of the website owners. This is because websites that offer online *pujas* (which are free of charge) usually also offer a *puja* service which is available for a fee. To create an impressive online *puja* environment could therefore be potentially bad for business. In addition to this, the creators of some online *puja* websites may deliberately seek not to encourage some aspects of a sensation of telepresence as they recognise that for many, some of the experiences that they undergo when attending conventional *pujas* are seen as being undesirable. In such cases, online participation is not just seen as being convenient, but in a certain sense at least, preferable, to participation in a conventional *puja*. For example, the website *upportal.com* proclaims: 'Before you go through the grind of embarking on religious tourism, we bring you these great shrines [for online *puja*] just a click away. Tighten the grip on your mouse and be ready for a scintillating darshan experience. We just seek a little patience on your part as the package is loaded... But the wait would be much shorter than the queues outside these shrines, rest assured'. Long waits are common at *mandirs*, and, in the case of the important *Ventakeshwara mandir* in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, can even stretch to more than 72 hours

*form* of disembodiment still occurs when people visit online *puja* sites. This is because devotees are able to perform some of the *puja* processes (e.g. the *Pushpa upachara*) without reference to the body, and they are able to perform an activity which normally requires embodiment at a venue. Performing the activity online means that the traditional embodied religious experience is unobtainable.

The implications of this online disembodiment for Hinduism in general will now be investigated. I will consider beliefs concerning the body in Hinduism in order to assess the extent to which embodiment is important. I am then able to suggest the extent to which Hinduism is compatible with the disembodied character of activity in cyberspace.

## The Nature of the Body in Hinduism

Hinduism is often considered to be otherworldly and therefore unconcerned with the body, but this view is misleading (see Eck 1985: 11-12, 1993: 306; Coward 1989a: 2). While it is certainly true that to detach from the body 'is the goal of most Hindu philosophical systems' (Doniger 1997: 183), I will show that the body is still important in Hinduism. The prevalent non-dual<sup>11</sup> *Vedantic* philosophy<sup>12</sup> (the philosophy of the *Upanishads* [texts which are attached to the end of the *Vedas*]) has given rise to the generally accepted view of the nature of the body in Hinduism. It holds that an individual must 'realise'<sup>13</sup> that everything that is impermanent is unreal and that the only thing that is changeless and hence real is their pure consciousness (the *atman*). Before this is 'realised' this consciousness is known as the *jiva* and is present in successive physical incarnations. However, 'realisation' results in the merging<sup>14</sup> of the

---

(Staff Reporter [*The Hindu*] November 14, 2004: online). (This *mandir* does have its own website [*tirumala.org*] but no online *puja* or *darshan* facility is available.)

<sup>11</sup> In this sense, non-dual refers to the philosophy that there is no duality between humans and 'God', i.e. the *Absolute*. See below.

<sup>12</sup> Known as *advaita Vedanta*.

<sup>13</sup> This type of 'realisation' differs from the usual usage and refers to 'perfect' understanding on an experiential level.

<sup>14</sup> The use of the word 'merging' should not give the impression that there is actually a duality at any stage between the *atman* and *Brahman*.

*atman* with the formless *Absolute (Brahman)*<sup>15</sup> which usually entails the end of embodiment.<sup>16 17</sup> This is known as *moksha* ('liberation'). Although the body is *essentially* unreal because it is impermanent, if an individual does not 'realise' that consciousness is the unchanging *atman* and they still believe that consciousness is related to the notion of an individual identity, the body is *to all intents and purposes*, 'real', i.e. physical (see Cross 1994: 59). It cannot be emphasised enough that although *Vedantic* philosophy advocates that one should aim to become pure disembodied consciousness, it actually holds a *completely different* view of the body from that of Cartesian dualism which holds that mind and body are distinct (which has become the generally accepted view in the West) (see above). This is because in Cartesian dualism, consciousness and mind are seen as being the same thing. However, in *Vedantic* Hinduism a distinction is made between mind and consciousness, with mind not being seen as part of consciousness. Instead, although it is at a very subtle level, mind is considered to be physical and therefore part of the physical body (see e.g. Cross 1994: 66-67).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in Hinduism the individual is regarded as being fully embodied.

Furthermore, through an individual understanding that the body is subject to change, the body can help in the 'realisation' that everything that is not the *atman* is unreal. This understanding can arise through direct experience and/or meditation upon the body's nature. Therefore, as in the case of the *Dharmasamgiti Sutra* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, texts such as the *Maitrī Upanishad* and the later *Manusamhita* which emphasise the undesirability of the body in order to stress that it is impermanent, still affirm its importance.<sup>19</sup> The importance of the body in this regard is shown in the story

---

<sup>15</sup> By its very nature, the *Absolute* cannot be sufficiently defined. However, it is often referred to as being 'undifferentiated existence, consciousness and bliss' (Krishnananda 1994: 102).

<sup>16</sup> However, as will be seen below, it is possible that an individual can remain in an embodied state after this 'realisation' occurs.

<sup>17</sup> Dualistic traditions which believe in the separation between humans and a God with attributes, and thus do not have a conception of the *Absolute*, also see the body as impermanent and still require that eventually the soul be freed from the physical body (see e.g. Prabhupāda 1989: 24-25, 421, 721).

<sup>18</sup> Here I have described the basic nature of the body in Hinduism – further details will be given when I consider the *yogic* traditions which utilise physical practices.

<sup>19</sup> The *Maitrī Upanishad* contains the following description of the body: '...it comes forth through the urinary passage. It is built up with bones, smeared over with flesh, covered with skin, filled with faeces, urine, bile, phlegm, marrow, fat, grease and also with many diseases like a treasure house full of wealth' (cited in Coward 1989b: 15). In the *Manusamhita*, the author Manu asserts that '[A man] should abandon

of Prajapati, who 'realises' that the truth is the unchanging *atman* and declares that this is the only thing worth knowing, and Indra, who seeks this knowledge. It is Indra's 'realisation' that the body is subject to disease and decay that eventually leads him to the truth regarding the *atman* (see Panikkar *et al.* 1977: 466). In the post-*Upanishad Vishnu Purana* the body's importance is emphasised in a different way. Here, it is explicitly revealed that the body is the dwelling place of the *atman*: 'The knowledge that this spirit, which is essentially one, is in one's own and in all other bodies, is the great end, or true wisdom, of one who knows the unity and the true principle of things' (cited in Cross 1994: preface).<sup>20</sup>

### ***Jivanmukti: The Case of Ramana Maharshi***

According to the *Upanishads*, though rare, it is possible that a person can still remain embodied after 'realising' that consciousness is the *atman* (in this case an individual does not achieve *moksha* but instead attains the state of *jivanmukti* ['liberation-while-living']) (see Krishnananda 1994: 181). An example of such a person who is believed to have obtained this state is Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950).<sup>21</sup> After his 'realisation', in his early life he remained in a meditative state in an underground chamber that was permanently damp and dark. Lal tells us that: 'Here ants, mosquitoes and other vermin attacked him, leaving lifelong marks on his legs. But he continued to sit in meditation unperturbed' (Lal 2002: 15). In his later life when he interacted with the devotees who had now sprung up around him, Lal remarks that 'as indifferent to his own body, its pains, its comforts, so was he thoughtful and caring about all those who came into contact with him' (Lal 2002: 41). He was also so concerned with non-human life that

---

this foul-smelling, tormented, impermanent dwelling place of living beings, filled with urine and excrement, pervaded by old age and sorrow, infested by illness, and polluted by passion, with bones for beams, sinews for cords, flesh and blood for plaster, and skin for the roof' (Manu 6. 76-77 cited in Doniger 1997: 169).

<sup>20</sup> The importance of the body can also be seen in pre-*Upanishad* texts that are not very philosophical. For example, in the *Atharva Veda* (the fourth and last *Veda*) the body is seen as something that should be protected and cured from illness, and there is an overall concern with the minimisation of suffering and the achievement of longevity (see Panikkar *et al.* 1977: 462-465).

<sup>21</sup> Ramana Maharshi was born into a *Brahmin* family. As a child he was fascinated with the word 'Arunachala' (the mountain in South India sacred to *Shiva*) and experienced 'realisation' without undergoing any austerities. Afterwards he lost interest in his studies and instinctively travelled to Arunachala where he lived for the rest of his life (see Lal 2002: 8-20).

one day he managed to distract a dog that was chasing a squirrel and, although in the process he slipped and broke his collar bone, he didn't seem to mind (Lal 2002: 33). A more serious situation arises towards the end of Ramana Maharshi's life when his body is subject to terminal cancer. Although the physical pain would have been immense, Lal notes how he was completely indifferent to this (Lal 2002: 62), and this in itself can be considered to be a teaching that the body is impermanent. For example, Lal notes that 'in his serene submission to the long months of pain and suffering he showed that such serenity was possible for those who had anchored in the true Self [and he would also say that] "I am not going away. Where could I go? I am here"' (Lal 2002: 64).

Although Ramana Maharshi recognises that his body is unimportant, he believes that his embodiment can help others to also understand this which can aid them in their spiritual development. Therefore, he is performing a role similar to that of the *Bodhisattva* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism mentioned above. In this sense, embodiment has a role over and above being essential because the individual's own experience of being embodied can lead to knowledge of the *atman*. The hagiographies of Ramana Maharshi reveal that he did not undergo any practices in order to 'realise' that the body was impermanent, and that instead, the 'realisation' came to him suddenly (see e.g. Lal 2002: 10). This is a very rare occurrence, and for most people this could occur only after years of spiritual practice.

## *Yoga*

A consideration of the *yoga* traditions further emphasises the importance of embodiment and provides more details regarding the actual nature of the body in Hinduism. Ramana Maharshi encouraged people to direct their spiritual efforts by way of *Jnana yoga* (see Sharma 1986: 226). This involves intellectual enquiry as to the nature of the body and the Self in order to bring about 'realisation', and does not involve any overtly physical practices. However, the same cannot be said of other *yoga* traditions which, as opposed to merely questioning the true nature of the body (this activity is regarded as being insufficient), actually *use* the body in order to attempt to achieve liberation<sup>22</sup> (see e.g. Cross 1994: 50-51), and thus stress the importance of

---

<sup>22</sup> Such *yoga* traditions include *Hatha yoga* (which emphasises the importance of *asanas* [postures]) and *Raja yoga* (the *yoga* associated with Swami Vivekananda which emphasises the importance of *pranayama* – the practice which involves controlling the 'life force' through various *yogic* breathing

embodiment (see e.g. Leder 1990: 153).<sup>23</sup> These traditions share basically the same view of the nature of the human body. They see it as impermanent (see e.g. Vivekananda 1998: 26) and accept the general views concerning consciousness and the physical mind-body combination explained above.<sup>24</sup> They are also more directly concerned with details of the physical nature of the body. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* which reveal these details are taken as the foundation of their philosophies. Patanjali talks of the three *gunas* (*rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*) that are present in the human body.<sup>25</sup> Together the three *gunas* make up *Prakriti*, which, in the *yoga* tradition, is seen as being material nature (Coward 1989a: 3; 1989b: 22; Smith 2003: 156). Cross explains what these *gunas* are: '[They] are modes of being, tendencies of existence, and in varying combinations they pervade everything that is. *Rajas* is the principle of activity, *tamas* that which restrains and obstructs, and *sattva* that of harmony and clarity' (Cross 1994: 49). In addition to behaving in certain ways, physical techniques (such as *pranayama* and internal cleaning procedures [known as *kriyas*]) are advocated in order to 'purify the *tamas* and *rajas* from one's material nature (*Prakriti*) until one becomes virtually pure *sattva*' (Coward 1989a: 3). Therefore, because the *gunas* are part of the material body, the *guna* theory sees purity and impurity as being physically real (Coward 1989b: 32). If through purification practices one can achieve a state of *sattva* alone, then the body is left behind and *moksha* is achieved (Coward 1989b: 15, 23, 25).

### ***Tantric Yoga***

*Tantric yoga* differs significantly from the other *yoga* traditions which use the body. In addition to the material features of the body identified in *Vedantic* philosophy and in

---

techniques [see e.g. Vivekananda 1998: 98-99, Patanjali cited in Vivekananda 1998: 214-216]). *Tantric yoga* also uses the body in order to attempt to achieve liberation but is distinct from the other traditions and will be considered separately below.

<sup>23</sup> For example, in the quest for spiritual advancement, Vivekananda says of the body: 'it is the best instrument you have' (Vivekananda 1998: 32). Similarly, B.K.S. Iyengar, a leading authority on *Hatha yoga*, 'believes that the body is the gateway to the soul' (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005: 318).

<sup>24</sup> For example, Vivekananda writes that: 'As we proceed [with *yoga*] we shall find how intimately the mind is connected with the body', and he adds that because of this connection it is obvious that 'if the body becomes sick, the mind becomes sick also' (Vivekananda 1998: 11) and therefore it is essential to keep the body in good health (Vivekananda 1998: 22-23).

<sup>25</sup> This idea has passed into the mainstream of Hindu thought (Cross 1994: 48) and 'remains the prevailing view of *Ayurvedic* practitioners today' (Doniger 1997:168).



Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, other physical features of the body which are essential in order to achieve 'realisation' are identified. *Tantric* philosophy (e.g. that expounded by the *yogi* Gorakhnath) asserts that the body contains *nadis*. These are 'subtle channels of power having their ends or outlets in the openings of the body [and] the aim of the yoga practice is to purify these channels so that the breath or *prana* can pass through them freely' (Coward 1989b: 28). In addition to other aspects, the *yoga* practice consists of a large number of *asanas* and cleaning procedures, and when the *nadis* become purified as a result of these activities, the practice of *pranayama* can then allow the dormant *kundalini* power to pass through the body, which results in liberation (Coward 1989b: 28; see also Saraswati 1996). Furthermore, while even in the other yoga traditions which involve physical practices and point to the value of the body, the body is usually ultimately left behind, in *Tantric yoga* the body is completely affirmed and it is normal for embodiment to continue after liberation. The aim is for 'a perfectly purified divine body' (Coward 1989b: 28).<sup>26</sup>

## **The Nature of the Body in Hinduism and Online Disembodiment**

As I have demonstrated, the general view in Hinduism is that one should distance oneself from the body (the *Tantric* view is a minority one). Therefore, at first it might seem that activity in cyberspace is a good thing because it does result in some sort of detachment from the body, or, at the very least, a feeling of detachment from the body, and that anything which results in the distancing from the body is good. However, any detachment that someone engaging in online activity will be experiencing is between *mind* and body but I have emphasised that in Hinduism the mind is not regarded as being separate from the body. Therefore, if Internet use were to encourage a detachment of mind from body then this would undermine the specific notion of embodiment that is essential in Hinduism.<sup>27</sup> In short, this notion of embodiment is at

---

<sup>26</sup> The importance of the body in *Tantric* theory is also demonstrated by the belief that the embodied individual is a microcosm of the universe (see e.g. Cross 1994: 98).

<sup>27</sup> This view might be challenged by advocates of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). Many users of such drugs report an experience of disembodiment (see Castaneda 1968: 100-104, 108; Richards *et al.* 1969: 16, 22) and it is often claimed that this leads to Hindu mystical experiences (see Zaehner 1972: 40-41, 43, 63, 105-106, 114; Stevens 1987: 19, 108-109, 221-222). There is also the assertion that the ingestion of the milk of the *soma* plant, which, according to the *Rig-Veda*, brought about mystical visions, suggests the validity of the 'Hindu mystical experience' brought

odds with the general character of cyberspace which, through encouraging some form of disembodiment, can be seen as helping to create individuals whose nature comes close to that advocated by Cartesian dualism.<sup>28</sup>

---

about by hallucinogenic drugs (see Stevens 1987: 25). Furthermore, Zaehner (who actually questions the validity of the psychedelic 'mystical experience' [see below]) realises that the claims made by users of psychedelic drugs 'had been said thousands of years ago in the Upanishads' (Zaehner 1972: 65). Another link between the LSD experience and Hindu mystical experience is provided by the conclusion reached at Timothy Leary's research centre that the 'psychedelic experience...is essentially religious' (cited in Zaehner 1972: 83) and that this experience was essentially a Hindu one (see Zaehner 1972: 114). Therefore, at first it appears that disembodiment and Hinduism are fully compatible. However, further examination suggests that this is not the case. Despite accepting that 'there are parallels between some aspects of religious mysticism (particularly some Hindu varieties) and *some* LSD experiences – notably cosmic consciousness and an experience of an Eternal Now and an omnipresent Here beyond time and space' (Zaehner 1972: 109; see also p. 66), Zaehner argues (as does Needleman 1984: 44) that the experiences of users of hallucinogenic drugs merely *resemble* mystical experiences and that they are not *genuine* religious experiences. Zaehner also argues that many users merely interpret their LSD experiences through *reference* to Eastern religious texts (Zaehner 1972: 61-62). Although this may seem plausible, there is evidence to suggest that interest in Eastern religious texts comes about *as a result of* the LSD experience (see Stevens 1987). However, there are stronger arguments to suggest that a 'Hindu mystical experience' brought about by LSD is not the same as a genuine Hindu mystical experience. As the psychedelic era was coming to a close in the USA at the end of the 1960s, many hallucinogenic drug users joined Hindu NRMs (New Religious Movements) which, despite the reports of the LSD experience and alleged links to ancient religious texts, were actively against the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Such groups denied the validity of the LSD 'mystical experience', and amongst previous LSD users there was also the widespread belief that although LSD had been a *necessary tool on the road to enlightenment* as it had given many users a glimpse of this, it was necessary to move on (see Robbins and Anthony 1972: 131; Stevens 1987: 468). Therefore, at the end of the 1960s various Hindu NRMs (e.g. TM [Transcendental Meditation] [see Needleman 1984: 129], ISKCON and Meher Baba's organisation [see Robbins and Anthony 1972; Stevens 1987: 468]) now provided an alternative lifestyle. Meher Baba was of the opinion that LSD produced 'a delusion within illusion, that it gave you a glimpse into the lowest plane, only a glimpse' and that it was 'spiritually dangerous' (Needleman 1984: 92). Further evidence to suggest that the LSD experience is not the same as a true Hindu mystical experience comes from the accounts given by various holy men in India. Some took LSD and were still able to carry out embodied activities with full awareness, with others claiming that they did not feel anything while yet others compared the LSD experience to meditation although it was not the same (Stevens 1987: 469). Overall, it appears that the disembodied LSD 'mystical experience' is not identical with a genuine Hindu mystical experience. Therefore, my claim that embodiment is essential in Hinduism is not undermined.

<sup>28</sup> Ess (2005) would agree with this. He sees the online environment in similar terms to myself and asserts that 'only by presuming a radical dis-association between body and mind can we hope for religious salvation in the online world'. Although he does not talk explicitly about Hinduism, he

Furthermore, if Internet use was prolonged, then the detachment between mind and body could contribute to a lack of concern with the gross physical body and therefore bodily experiences that can help towards a 'realisation' of impermanence are likely to be fewer or to become less noticeable. Therefore, when the nature of the body in Hinduism is considered, the online environment appears problematic for Hinduism.<sup>29</sup> This is further confirmed when specific examples of embodiment in Hinduism are considered. For example, in the *yoga* traditions that emphasise physical practices, the implications of widespread Hindu activity online are very damaging if they lead practitioners away from these practices which, in these traditions, are seen as being essential for spiritual progress. This is especially so in the case of *Tantric yoga* because not only is the body essential for the carrying out of the practices, the body itself is also considered as being divine. In addition to this, if cyberspace were to become a widespread and popular arena for Hindu activity, those embodied individuals such as Ramana Maharshi who have achieved the state of *jivanmukti* and have traditionally inspired others who have come into contact with them, may have less influence within Hinduism. This will result in fewer people following a spiritual path after having been inspired as a result of embodied interaction with these individuals.

## Reincarnation

The important Hindu concept of reincarnation (see Hamilton 1998: 59), which is inextricably related to the nature of the body, is also at odds with online disembodiment. In her brief consideration of reincarnation in Hinduism, Wertheim (1999) points out that Pythagoras thought that the soul was essentially mathematical,

---

considers embodiment in a number of religious traditions and concludes that such radical dualism is 'largely missing' (Ess 2005: conference paper). I have emphasised in this chapter that this radical dualism is also certainly absent in Hinduism.

<sup>29</sup> The ideology of Hindu nationalist groups also appears incompatible with online disembodiment (though there is no incompatibility with using the Internet for information dissemination, mobilisation and communication [see chapter 4]). According to Bhatt (1997), such groups are fixated with the body. In Bhatt's view, the reason for this is that authoritarian religious groups aim for 'the personification of their ideologies in the manufacture of new personalities and agents in civil society' (Bhatt 1997: 75). Amongst other things, ideologically they are concerned with 'social totality and social purity' (Bhatt 1997: 75). If Bhatt's view is accepted, for such groups the human body is functioning as a metaphor for society in the way proposed by Mary Douglas (see above).

and that this idea is shared by those who believe that one day the essence of humans will be able to be downloaded into cyberspace (Wertheim 1999: 268) (see above). However, Wertheim goes on to argue that Pythagoras 'believed that the soul was continually reincarnated' (Wertheim 1999: 268), and then mentions that although this also happens in cyber-fiction *fantasies*, Pythagoras believed that there is an ethical context. This ethical context is absent in cyber-fiction fantasies but is an essential aspect of the Hindu concept of reincarnation (see Wertheim 1999: 267-269). Therefore, Wertheim concludes that reincarnation in Hinduism is incompatible with cyberspace.

I am in agreement with Wertheim's view. Despite the prevalent view in Hinduism that the soul becomes disembodied after the death of the physical body before being reincarnated in another physical body, and that the ultimate aim in Hinduism is usually to transcend the recurring embodied existence altogether (see Walter 2001: 22), it is fair to say that ideas about disembodied souls in cyberspace are incompatible with central philosophical ideas concerning reincarnation in which the notion of morality is of prime importance. Furthermore, in the disembodied existence talked about by those who wish to download human souls into cyberspace, individual identity persists. However, this is anathema to the common Hindu view which asserts that the *atman* is not linked in any way with any notion of individual self in the Western sense (Walter 2001: 23).<sup>30</sup>

### ***Puja and the Varnashrama-dharma System***

Despite the fact that there is not a fit between the notion of embodiment in Hinduism and online disembodiment, as was emphasised in chapter 1, the extremely large number of Hindu-related websites suggests that Hinduism is thriving online. Therefore, concerning online disembodiment, there are a large number of diverse issues that invite further investigation. The fact that Hinduism and disembodiment do not naturally go together means that online disembodiment is likely to have even more significant implications than if there was a natural compatibility. Many issues arise from a

---

<sup>30</sup> Walter notes that the idea of reincarnation held by many of those in contemporary Britain who claim to believe in the concept, although inspired by Eastern religious philosophies, is 'link[ed]...to a self-identity that is individualistic, coherent and reflexive' (Walter 2001: 36; see also Bruce 2002: 132). Such a view which is completely opposite to the traditional Hindu philosophy outlined above is therefore more compatible with the philosophy of those who wish to download the essence of humans into cyberspace.

consideration of *puja* and the *varnashrama-dharma* system – fundamental aspects of Hinduism in which embodiment is of paramount importance. Details of the offline and online *puja* rituals have been given in chapter 2 in my discussion of the theoretical suitability of cyberspace for Hinduism. Online *pujas* will now be discussed with issues concerning embodiment in mind.

The *varnashrama-dharma* system will then be introduced and outlined. This is followed by a largely theoretical discussion of the *varna* concept in the light of online disembodiment. This leads to the related research questions concerning online *pujas* and *varna* which are tackled in chapter 8.

### *Puja*

It is clear that the body is central to a conventional offline *puja* for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is instrumental to the actual carrying out of the *upacharas* (apart from *Dhyana* and *Avahana*) and other important practices. Secondly, reference to the body itself (the practice of *Nyasa*) by a worshipper can be an aid to worship. Thirdly, the entire human sensorium is stimulated in the *puja* (see e.g. Eck 1985: 11-12, 49; Brasher 2004: 4) as the senses of sight (e.g. via *darshan*), hearing (e.g. via *mantras* and music), smell (e.g. via incense), touch (e.g. via physically presenting offerings) and taste (e.g. via *prasad*) are all exercised.<sup>31</sup> In his account of a *mandir puja*, Preston emphasises the importance of the body and indicates the extent to which the senses of a devotee are stimulated:<sup>32</sup>

There is a profusion of colours, sweet incense, garlands of tropical flowers, the smell of sweetmeats in preparation, and the odor of livestock that have been tethered in the courtyard ...Drums, bells, conches, horns and prayers fill the

---

<sup>31</sup> Embodiment is also important to those (e.g. Krishnananda [see 1994: 152-153]) who see congregationalism as being an essential part of Hinduism. However, it is usually argued that Hinduism is a religion where solitary worship is common and acceptable. For example, Gupta asserts that 'the Hindu way of worship is a personal communion with God, we do not have any tradition of congregational worship [and that] even when a crowd gathers around the inner sanctum to watch the priests perform the rituals of *puja*, each one prays on his own. This is a very personal faith, there is rarely any mass chanting of prayers or temple sermons, except for the collective singing of *bhajans*' (Gupta 2002: 37).

<sup>32</sup> Embodiment is also important in a *puja* performed at home, although 'the ritual is usually more restrained' (Fuller 1992: 57).

temple with variegated sounds. The whole human body is exercised as individuals genuflect, sing and prostrate themselves on the ground. (Preston 1980: 49-50; see also Fuller [1992: 57] who provides a similar account of a *mandir puja*)

This can be contrasted with the online *puja* where embodiment is far less important. I have argued above that even though a computer user is obviously still reliant upon their body, when entering cyberspace some form of disembodiment occurs. However, I wish to argue that aside from functions such as using a mouse which cannot be seen to constitute embodiment when a user is in cyberspace because when the mouse is being used to, for example, pick up simulated flowers, no corresponding sense of touch is experienced, embodiment *can* still be seen to come into play in an online *puja*. This is through the experience of *seeing*. As has been argued in chapter 2, *darshan* is of paramount importance in Hinduism, and I am of the opinion that it is this key characteristic which provides the link between the fully embodied traditional *puja* experience and the online *puja* experience. Although empirically, a devotee undertaking an online *puja* only performs simple actions, they may actually experience *darshan*. In addition to the recognition that *pujaris* are not necessary in order to conduct the ritual, that modification and abbreviation are acceptable, and that it is the symbolic aspect of *puja* which is important (see chapter 2), this further explains why online *pujas* are prevalent despite the loss of other important features which require full embodiment.

The attitude of the devotee is of paramount importance when conducting a conventional *puja*, and this is also the case when conducting the ritual online. In fact, it is likely that in the absence of full embodiment combined with the absence of any real feeling of telepresence, this is more important when worshipping online. This is demonstrated by the fact that certain features of a traditional *mandir* itself are designed to aid a devotee in fostering a devotional attitude suitable for conducting worship (see Preston 1980: 48; Krishnananda 1994: 155; Kanitkar and Cole 1995: 19; Yocum 1996: 78-80) and that the traditional *puja* ceremony itself which stimulates the full human sensorium is designed to give rise to a spiritual experience. Therefore, because these elements are largely absent online, it would seem that a devotee performing worship in cyberspace would also need a good imagination in addition to a positive devotional attitude. However, the greater the devotional attitude that an online *puja* practitioner

has, the less imagination is required as opposed to a devotee whose devotional attitude was harder to come by and who would therefore normally require the conducive environment of the *mandir*.

If someone conducted an online *puja* and had never attended a conventional ceremony then it would appear that little would be gained because the former is so far removed from the latter that without the required imagination which can only arise from having attended an offline *puja*, the online experience would be meaningless as it is unable to help foster a spiritual state which can contribute to a 'fully effective' *darshan*.

Therefore, although I have argued that a valid *puja* does not require full embodiment, this argument is dependent upon a devotee having already experienced the offline ritual, and so full embodiment is ultimately important. Therefore, if online *pujas* become prevalent amongst future generations to the exclusion of conventional offline modes of worship then an extremely important feature of Hinduism as it currently stands will be lost to those who conduct their devotional activities in this way.

### **The *Varnashrama-dharma* System**

The *varnashrama-dharma* system is revealed in the *Manusamhita*. This text deals with the four hereditary classes or *varnas*, and specifies in detail how the members of these different *varnas* should behave and interact with each other. It asserts that the *varna* classification contributes to the stability of society through the fostering of a productive relationship between the different groups.<sup>33 34</sup> The classification is accorded full

---

<sup>33</sup> It should also be noted that there are those who argue that the main aim of the *varna* classification is not the promotion of harmony in society but the legitimation of hierarchy, power and control. For example, Brown suggests that the author of the *Manusamhita* could have been a *Brahmin* who wrote it as 'a political tract designed to support Brahman rule' (Brown 1958: 27).

<sup>34</sup> The *Manusamhita* also describes the *ashramas* which are the stages of life, through which, ideally, Hindus should pass (see Krishnananda 1994: 149-150). The four *ashramas* involve an individual living as a *Brahmacharin*, a *Grihastha*, a *Vanaprastha*, or *Sannyasin*. The first stage involves spiritual study, the second involves living as a householder, the third involves 'disentangling oneself from the attractions of the world' (Krishnananda 1994: 172) and engaging in spiritual practices, and the fourth stage involves complete renunciation (see Krishnananda 1994: 149-150, 169-176; Brooks 1989: 69). The *Manusamhita* holds that, like the *varnas*, the *ashramas* also contribute to the stability of society as the overall *ashrama* concept and its details provide guidelines that, it is believed, will result in a productive and spiritually satisfying life. The *ashrama* aspect of the *varnashrama-dharma* system is of less importance nowadays

religious authority as the notion first appears in the *Rig-Veda*, the first of the four *Vedas* (Zaehner 1966: vi).<sup>35</sup> This text teaches that the whole of creation emanates from the sacrifice of *Purusha* (the Primal Man), and Zaehner gives us the details regarding the emanation of the four *varnas*:

The Brāhman was his mouth,  
The arms were made the Prince,  
His thighs the common people,  
And from his feet the serf was born. (*Rig-Veda* X, xc: 12 [trans. Zaehner] cited in Zaehner 1996: 10)

The accepted names and hierarchical order for these four different *varnas* are *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. The first *varna* traditionally consisted of priests, the second of warriors and rulers, the third of ‘the producers of economic wealth – farmers, merchants and craftsmen’ and the fourth *varna* consisted of serfs and labourers (Cross 1994: 15) (see also e.g. Hamilton 1993: 93-94; Krishnananda 1994: 149).<sup>36</sup>

Far from being irrelevant today, many of the contents of the *Vedas* remain important to contemporary Hinduism (see Zaehner 1966: vi-vii) and this is especially the case concerning the *varna* classification. For example, Cross notes that ‘the division into four *varnas*...is still the basis of Hindu society’ (Cross 1994: 16), while Brooks also notes how it has endured (see also Fuller 1992: 13),<sup>37</sup> that nowadays many people in

---

than the *varna* aspect. This is perhaps because membership of a *varna* is the primary determinant of status, and going through the different stages in life is only tangentially related to the perceived status of an individual (for example, someone who chooses to remain a *Grihastha* does not normally face criticism). Only the *varna* aspect of the *varnashrama-dharma* system will be considered in this thesis, both because it is of more importance than the *ashrama* aspect, and because it is more relevant to issues concerning online disembodiment.

<sup>35</sup> This may be another reason why the *ashrama* aspect of the *varnashrama-dharma* system is of less importance than the *varna* aspect. The *Manusamhita*, in which the notion of *ashramas* is first introduced, forms part of the much later body of texts known as the *Smritis* which are believed to supplement the *Vedas* (see Krishnananda 1994: 148-149), and which are seen by many to be less authoritative than the *Vedas*.

<sup>36</sup> There are some scriptural debates surrounding the order of the first two *varnas* but in practice the order has remained unchanged over time (see Killingley 1991: 10).

<sup>37</sup> This is despite the fact that there have been attacks upon the *varna* classification, not just in medieval times and by way of theological arguments made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in the



India 'generally see themselves fitting into one of the traditional *varna* categories',<sup>38</sup> and that 'in Indian society there is a pre-eminent concern with hierarchy – for who has the higher status' (Brooks 1989: 68, 69; see also Fuller 1992: 4).

Membership of a *varna* is intimately related to embodiment because the members of *varnas* (especially *Brahmins*) are concerned with levels of purity which maintain the essential boundaries between the *varnas* (see esp. Dumont 1970 cited in Fuller 1992: 16), and these notions of purity are manifested through the body by way of various practices and displays.<sup>39</sup> Coward informs us that: 'Purity...is a fundamental dimension of all Hindu experience' (Coward 1989b: 9) and refers to 'the ideal condition of the human body or the most desired state of being' (Coward 1989b: 10). Different beings, objects and places are all assigned a degree of purity, and in the course of their everyday lives individuals seek to limit contact with various beings (e.g. members of lowly castes<sup>40</sup>), objects (e.g. leather goods), and places (e.g. cremation grounds) that are considered impure and thus polluting. A Hindu's own personal cleanliness constitutes a different but related type of purity (bodily discharges are considered to be very impure) (Coward 1989b: 10). Diet is important, as is clothing and other symbols such as the sacred thread ('the most pure object for the Brahmin' [Coward 1989b: 10]) which cannot usually be worn by *Shudras*. All of these factors require embodiment.

### *Varna and Online Disembodiment*

One of the key features of disembodied online participation is anonymity for the participant. Therefore, in the disembodied world of cyberspace nobody can know the *varna* of other participants, as opposed to in the offline world where embodiment gives

---

*Mahabharata* which is believed by many to derive its authority from the *Vedas* (see Killingley 1991: 12-14).

<sup>38</sup> While this is the case, it is sometimes commented upon that although the *varna* classification is still widely accepted, in many areas of India, to all intents and purposes, only the *Brahmin* and *Shudra varnas* remain (see Srinivas 1962b: 66; Killingley 1991: 16; Fuller 1992: 15; Hamilton 1993: 93-94). In addition to this, members of the different *varnas* have a wider range of occupations than those cited in the *Rig-Veda*.

<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the concept of the *varnas* gives rise to a notion of the body that can be understood in terms of Mary Douglas's idea that the body is a metaphor for society (see above).

<sup>40</sup> A caste is a sub-division of a *varna*.

very strong clues as to a person's *varna*. Fuller gives an indication of the extent to which embodiment betrays a person's *varna*:

How people dress, how they talk, and even how they walk typically reveal their caste membership and in any one place everybody knows the caste of everybody else. If for some reason a stranger comes, it will not be long before that person's caste is known as well...[and]...this is true in towns and cities as well, in spite of the fact that so much urban social activity involves anonymous strangers. (Fuller 1992: 13-14)

Furthermore, in the online world individuals often play with their identities (see e.g. Lupton 1995: 102; Hine 2000: 19-20) and therefore it would be easy for someone to pretend to be a member of a *varna* different from their own. In this respect, a person's *varna* is largely irrelevant online. Those who have a postmodern perspective and who point to the prevalence and desirability of fluid identities in contemporary life see this 'identity play' as being a positive development (see e.g. Dery 1993: 560-1 cited in Hardey 2002: 570; in Willson 2000: 647, 649, 655). However, those who believe in the validity of the *varna* classification would assert that not being able to tell the *varna* of a disembodied participant in cyberspace would result in a chaotic situation online because order based on hierarchy would completely break down. According to these individuals, if large numbers of Hindus were to spend a lot of their time online then this would result in *adharna* (the opposite of *dharma*) and a serious threat to society. Therefore, in this respect, staunch advocates of the *varna* classification would see that practising religion in cyberspace could be potentially damaging for Hinduism.

Aside from potential threats to the stability of society, consideration of the *varnas* in the light of online disembodiment suggests other interesting possibilities for social change within Hindu society. As mentioned, the key factor in the preservation of the boundaries between the *varnas* is the notion of degrees of purity, and it is through the embodied individual that degrees of purity are manifest. Therefore, the disembodiment of the individual in cyberspace has a number of implications for issues surrounding purity.

The use of the Internet could actually be desirable for members of the higher castes who are concerned with purity. For example, the absence of embodiment could mean

that a high-caste person could visit an online *mandir* and have no fear about coming into contact with pollution. In addition, being able to ‘attend’ a funeral online could also be seen as especially desirable in this respect because cremation grounds are considered very polluting.<sup>41</sup> It could also be beneficial for those who are outside the *varna* classification such as the scheduled castes<sup>42</sup> and non-ethnic Indians. For example, the lack of purity concerns online could mean that members of these groups would be able to engage in activities in which they would not normally be allowed to engage because of opposition from *Brahmins*. Performing worship to deities residing in *mandirs* which restrict entry perhaps provides the clearest example.

Although the scheduled castes have had full rights of entry to *mandirs* since 1947, they are still denied entry to many *mandirs*. Fuller showed that this was the case in 1992 (see Fuller 1992: 16; see p. 261 for one individual’s personal comment concerning this), and Pattnaik’s (December 15, 2005) report of an incident in December 2005 and the attitudes of some *pujaris* reveals that denial of entry still occurs, as does an article in *The Times of India* (anon. April 10, 2006: online). Further evidence is provided by Lahangir who reports from an Orissan village where *Dalits* (members of the scheduled castes) are building their own *mandir* because they ‘are refused entry into Hindu temples’ (Lahangir July 26, 2006). Furthermore, even where entry is permitted, access to the deities of certain *mandirs* might still be preferable online. This is because there would be an absence of prejudice that members of the scheduled castes might experience in the offline setting.<sup>43</sup>

There are also many *mandirs* in India that do not allow non-ethnic Indians to enter (according to an HPI report [anon. November 22, 2005: online], this is the norm throughout the State of Orissa). Arguably the most famous of these *mandirs* is the

---

<sup>41</sup> As has been made clear, however, although some sense of disembodiment occurs online, full disembodiment does not occur. Therefore, activity in cyberspace cannot obviate the impurity that is associated with one’s own bodily discharges.

<sup>42</sup> The official term used by the Indian Government to refer to so-called “untouchables” (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1386).

<sup>43</sup> However, such a situation could be open to abuse. For example, if members of the scheduled castes were intentionally encouraged by members of high-castes to worship online instead of visiting the corresponding *mandir* in the offline world, this would be an extremely problematic development.

*Jagannath mandir* in Puri (see chapters 6 and 8),<sup>44</sup> partly because ISKCON are keen that their non-ethnic Indian members should be allowed entry. The reason given for attempting to justify exclusion at these *mandirs* is that non-ethnic Indians can be polluting. This is supposedly the case even if a non-ethnic Indian has converted to Hinduism (as in the case of ISKCON devotees and others).

In November 2005 an incident in which an American woman who had converted to Hinduism and was married to an Indian Hindu 'as per the Hindu marriage Act' was not allowed into the important *Lingaraj mandir* (to *Shiva*) in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, attracted publicity, and her case has gained support from the VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*) (Dash November 7, 2005: online; see also anon. [*newindpress.com*] November 25, 2005: online) and the HSC (Hindu Students Council) (HSC statement November 25, 2005). Later in the same month there was more publicity concerning the entrance policy when a Thai princess was denied entry to the *Jagannath mandir* despite the fact that she is Buddhist (Buddhists from the countries that make up the Indian subcontinent are allowed to enter) (anon. [*HPI*] November 22, 2005: online).

This indicates that the entry policy is more directly related to a person's ethnicity than their religion (see also anon. [*newindpress.com*] November 25, 2005: online, where this is confirmed) (I also know of an ethnic Indian who is able to enter all the Hindu places of worship despite the fact that she is not a Hindu and is from the Caribbean). However, even those indigenous to the Indian subcontinent are considered to cause pollution if they are Christian. For example, also in November 2005, rituals were repeated at the *Guruvayur mandir* (to a form of *Vishnu*) in Kerala after it was discovered that a Christian had been present when the original rituals had been performed (see Sebastian November 19, 2005: online; anon. [*LANS*] November 20, 2005: online). In the case of Orissa, it is the power of the *pujaris* that allows this strict entry policy to persist, and officials at various levels (including up to that of Senior State leader) are unwilling to face up to the *pujaris* (see Dash November 7, 2005: online).

---

<sup>44</sup> Another note-worthy *mandir* which denies entry to non-ethnic Indians is the *Ranganath (Rangji) mandir* (to *Rama*, an incarnation of *Vishnu*) in Vrindaban (Brooks 1989: 128-129). Non-ethnic Indians are also denied entry to the two main *mandirs* (The *Shri Mahabaleshwar mandir* (to *Shiva*) and the *Shri Mahaganapati mandir* (to *Ganesh*) in the holy town of Gokarn in Karnataka (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1259).

In the light of this situation, it is clear that cyberspace, which does not require an embodied presence at a physical location, has the potential to bypass problematic issues concerning purity. The crux of this matter is the extent to which notions of purity and pollution can be seen to have any relevance in cyberspace. Such issues are extremely interesting as in the offline world the inner sanctum of a *mandir* is a pure place and there is a clear injunction that 'no polluted person should approach the gods and goddesses to worship them in their temples or shrines' (Fuller 1992: 16). The belief in the importance of self-purification in order to make a devotee fit for worship is universally accepted (Fuller 1992: 76), and, as mentioned above, the physical journey itself into the inner sanctum can help in the purification of individuals (who would also be likely to have made an effort to purify themselves before entering the *mandir* anyway). However, visiting an online *puja* website does not involve any overt aids to self-purification, and as such a website is always available and accessible, it is likely that some 'visitors' will access it from an impure location and while in an impure state.<sup>45</sup>

## Research Questions

In the light of the foregoing discussion, the main research question regarding the *varna* classification and purity is:

What are the implications of an online image of a deity being accessible to everyone, regardless of *varna* and ethnic origin?

---

<sup>45</sup> For example, a menstruating woman could perform an online *puja*. A menstruating woman is considered to be very impure by orthodox Hindus (see Coward 1989b: 17, 26, 32; Fuller 1992: 15-16), and is not supposed to enter a *mandir* during this period. Of course, *mandir* officials would not necessarily know when a menstruating woman visited a *mandir*, but it is possible that other family members would be aware of it. Furthermore, there is the belief held by some that entering a *mandir* during menstruation could result in harm (see Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 296-297). Fuller goes as far as to say that 'No Hindu in a severe state of pollution, such as that caused by birth, death or menstruation, would contemplate entering a temple or shrine' (Fuller 1992: 16). However, there is no injunction against a menstruating woman conducting an online *puja*. Therefore, the Internet might prove beneficial in this respect.

This question calls for an investigation of fundamental issues concerning the nature of disembodied religious activity in cyberspace – including the extent to which notions of purity and pollution have relevance in cyberspace. Specific research questions are:

According to religious authorities, are disembodied online *pujas* valid, and are they as effective as a conventional offline *puja*?

Philosophically, what is the difference between receiving *darshan* at a sacred site from the actual *murti*, and from an image of the deity on a computer screen?

Are there any potential ‘dangers’ arising from an online *puja*?

What would be the implications if the online mode of Hindu worship became prevalent to the exclusion of conventional modes of worship?

Because Hinduism is being practised online, does this call into question the importance of the notion of embodiment to the understanding of Hinduism?

In the final chapter I shall consider a further question: How is the online situation likely to affect the traditional offline site where embodied activity is carried out?

Questions that arise from the disembodiment that occurs in cyberspace are inextricably linked to the concerns of globalisation. For example, the extent to which the physical religious site retains importance is a theme running through the above questions, and a key question to which globalisation gives rise is to what extent does the physical site become irrelevant to religious practice in a globalising world? Globalisation will be considered in the next chapter.

# Chapter 4 – Globalisation

## Introduction

As I will demonstrate, the Internet is of central importance when considering globalisation. Furthermore, despite the neglect of religion in the work of many globalisation theorists (see esp. Beckford's discussion concerning this [2003: 103-105]), Beckford asserts, citing especially the work of Robertson (1992), that there are grounds to suggest that religion is actually of extreme importance in any consideration of globalisation as it is an integral aspect of it (see Beckford 2003: 107) (see also Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: esp. 35). The ensuing discussion will show that this is certainly the case. Therefore, it is essential to take globalisation into account when considering Hinduism and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I will highlight that diasporas are a central feature of globalisation and, on account of the relationship between the Hindu diaspora and Hinduism and the Internet, it can be further appreciated that a suitably clear concept of globalisation can be an important tool for contributing to an understanding of the features and processes surrounding Hinduism and the Internet. This is not just at a theoretical level – it can also lead to a number of empirical research questions which have the potential to contribute to the understanding of the situation.

In order to achieve some clarity about the concept of globalisation, I shall review the ideas that are central to the thinking of a small selection of authoritative theorists. The theorists that I will consider are Ulrich Beck, Jan Aart Scholte, Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai and Roland Robertson. My selection of these theorists is guided by two criteria: the generalisability of their ideas about globalisation and the possibility that their ideas could help to illumine Hinduism and the Internet.

---

<sup>1</sup> The same is obviously the case concerning other religions and the Internet. However, in the studies of religion and the Internet mentioned in chapter 1, globalisation is often ignored completely. Even Bunt, an authority on Islam and the Internet, although he does mention globalisation, predominantly seeks to merely find examples of it. For example, in his 2000b book he quotes a simple definition of globalisation (p. 13) and aims to discover if the Internet has resulted in traditional borders declining in importance and whether it has facilitated challenges to traditional authority (p. 12). He provides examples of both the former (e.g. pp. 52, 67) and the latter (e.g. pp. 66, 134), but he offers no further analysis of his subject in the light of globalisation. Such analysis is also absent in his 2003 book which looks in greater depth at the key issues introduced in his earlier volume.

There is no intention or necessity to discuss a representative – let alone an exhaustive – list of thinkers. My aim is merely to put in place a conceptual framework with which I can frame globalisation as a phenomenon with implications for Hinduism and the Internet. The research questions relating to globalisation that will be answered in chapter 8 will be identified at the end of this chapter.

Some theorists (e.g. Edwards 2001) believe that globalisation and postmodernity<sup>2</sup> are inseparable. In the light of this, some aspects of Baudrillard's (1983a; 1983b) theoretical ideas which have relevance to online Hinduism need to be considered. Although such considerations are largely theoretical, I argue that a careful consideration of Baudrillard's work can actually contribute towards informing an empirical study – even if one is unwilling to equate globalisation with postmodernity<sup>3</sup> – as modern communications technologies (which are an important feature of globalisation) are central to the philosophical ideas that underpin his theory. Furthermore, I will show that other globalisation theorists have drawn upon the work of Baudrillard.

## **What is Globalisation?**

In order to investigate how the concept of globalisation might help to inform an empirical study, it is first necessary to consider what globalisation actually is. This is not an easy task. As Scholte reveals: 'the only consensus about globalization is that it is

---

<sup>2</sup> Like globalisation, postmodernity is also a contested term (see e.g. Beckford 1992: 19). Most authors concur with Lyotard who asserts that 'postmodernity refers to a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology and from faith in humanly engineered progress' and the collapse of the notion of 'the grand narrative' where humans 'have a definite past and a predictable future' and that instead, 'the postmodern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge in which science does not have a privileged place' (Giddens 1990: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Giddens (1990: 46-49), Scholte (2000: 202-203), and Beckford (2003: 104) are examples of scholars who do not equate globalisation with postmodernity. Concerning contemporary religion, Beckford does not embrace the notion of postmodernity as he argues that despite the fact that some religious meaning systems have experienced fragmentation, and in some cases, juxtaposition, many religious groups have not abandoned universal truth claims and there has not been a widespread turn away from conventional science. Furthermore, conservative tendencies are actually growing while postmodern forms of religion are not (see Beckford 1992: 20-21) (see also Beckford [1999: 43-44] for his general criticisms of the notion of postmodernity).



contested' (Scholte 2000: 39).<sup>4</sup> In my opinion, the best way to come up with a workable concept to aid the investigation of the topic is to first briefly note and assess the central features of the definitions of globalisation provided by theorists currently working in this field. In doing this, in the same way as it is possible to come up with a working definition of Hinduism through recourse to Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances', where a concept can be held together by a network of overlapping similarities (see chapter 1), a conceptualisation of globalisation can also be reached. Where necessary, points will be expanded and I will discuss features which I believe are especially pertinent to my study.

In my view this approach is useful because although different theories place emphasis on various different aspects of globalisation, perceive it in different terms, and argue that it started at different periods in history,<sup>5</sup> what is striking is that the major theories share certain core features which are consistent, and this implies that the theories share a 'family resemblance'. For example, although there are differences of opinion as to when globalisation began, it is commonly accepted that the process is accelerating and that modern forms of transport and new communications technologies are major factors in this rapid increase. Because a central feature of both of these factors is speed, time and distance are also greatly affected. For example, a hundred years ago, travel between India and England took significantly longer than at the present time when the trip can be taken in fewer than ten hours. Similarly, before the availability of current communications technologies (with the exception of the telegraph which was not widespread and which still required human mediators), a message could take weeks to arrive, while exchanges can now happen in real time as a result of the telephone and through the utilisation of the Internet. Through use of a videophone, or more commonly, through the WWW, images can also be viewed in real time.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in a sense, time and distance have been compressed.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In Beck's opinion, 'the concept and discourse of globalization are so fuzzy [that] [t]o pin them down is like nailing a blancmange to the wall', while Jameson believes that 'given its complexity, it is not yet possible to come up with anything like a comprehensive definition of globalization' (Beynon & Dunkerley 2000: 4). Furthermore, some people actually deny that globalisation even exists (see e.g. in Scholte 2000: 18; Giddens 2002: 7-8).

<sup>5</sup> Concerning differences in opinion regarding when globalisation began, see esp. Beck (2000: 167).

<sup>6</sup> Although television also allows for the transfer of images in real time, it does not usually allow for the transfer of private messages; and for the majority of people it does not fulfil an interactive function.

Another core feature of the globalisation theories that will be examined is that boundaries (e.g. those of nation states) have become less important. Again, it is clear that, especially with regard to the new communications technologies, and especially the Internet, this is indeed the case. For example, a central feature of the Internet is that it can be used to communicate and disseminate images and information across the globe regardless of national boundaries (as Dodge and Kitchin put it: 'cyberspace knows no borders' [2001: 59]). It is worth remembering here that there is a 'Digital Divide' (see chapter 2) which means that there is uneven distribution of access to the Internet worldwide, but this does not negate the argument that information can travel via the Internet regardless of national boundaries. It is also worth noting that, despite the fact that some Governments, for example the Chinese (see Watts February 7, 2004: online; anon. [AFP] April 4, 2005: online; Warschauer 2004: 182-183; Millard April 15, 2005: online), have attempted to restrict access to certain information on the WWW, they have largely been unsuccessful in this respect (see e.g. O'Leary 2002; see also Poster 1995: 84; concerning Governments of countries where Islam predominates, see Appendix 2). This is largely due to the nature of the WWW, which means that 'censorship can be circumnavigated' (Bunt 2000a: 147; see also Introvigne 2005: 104).

It might at first seem unreasonable to select certain broad features of globalisation theories and then concentrate on specific aspects. However, the purpose of this discussion is not necessarily to engage in a theoretical debate concerning globalisation for its own sake. As mentioned, the purpose is to consider how the concept can help in the understanding and the investigation of the topic of Hinduism and the Internet. As indicated at the outset of this discussion of globalisation, Beckford (2003) claims that many globalisation theorists virtually ignore religion altogether. Furthermore, he asserts that it is common for theorists to selectively cite cases of unrepresentative religious groups or behaviour to back up their theories (this will be elaborated upon when I consider Giddens's view of globalisation). Therefore, many of the best known theories of globalisation do not assign importance to religion and/or consider it in an inappropriate way if they do mention it (see also Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 4).

---

Therefore it is not a *private* communications technology. However, television and the media in general are central features of globalisation.

<sup>7</sup> In 1989 David Harvey coined the term 'time-space compression' to refer to this (see Beynon and Dunkerley 2000: 31; Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 124).

However, I will show that religion is important to any consideration of globalisation. Therefore, it seems reasonable to me, and in fact, profitable, to examine globalisation by drawing upon a number of sources (which can still contribute to our understanding of globalisation despite virtually ignoring religion) and by highlighting important aspects of theories of globalisation which do take into account religion and are valuable for an investigation of Hinduism and the Internet. I do not think that this leaves me open to the criticism that I have just selectively chosen the parts of the theories which are of interest to my research and thus only provided an incomplete picture of globalisation. Instead, this enables me not only to proceed with a kind of loose workable conceptualisation of globalisation, but it also allows me to apply useful and pertinent theoretical ideas from a number of different theories which can contribute greatly to the understanding of issues surrounding Hinduism and the Internet. Towards the end of my discussion of the various globalisation theories it will become apparent that, like Beckford (2003), I am of the opinion that a discussion of globalisation that does not take proper account of religion is flawed. The converse is also true: any discussion of religion that does not take globalisation into account is also flawed. It will become clear that this is the case even when discussing 'local' religious sites.

Throughout the following discussion of globalisation,<sup>8</sup> I shall place emphasis on the Internet because it is central to the topic of my thesis. For the same reason, the discussion will move towards globalisation and Hinduism. The research questions at the end of the chapter will bring the discussion of globalisation into direct relation with Hinduism and the Internet.

---

<sup>8</sup> In my examination of what globalisation is, I have taken up the challenge of Scholte who remarks after his discussion of different theories of globalisation that 'Everyone...has to see their way through the debates to their own account of globalization' (Scholte 2000: 39). I make no claim to be seeking to reconcile various theories or to create a hybrid theory. Instead, in spelling out the features which give rise to the 'family resemblance' (see above), my own working concept of globalisation should become clear.

## Theoretical Ideas about Globalisation

### Ulrich Beck

According to Ulrich Beck (2000) “*Globalization*”...denotes the *processes* through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks’ (Beck 2000: 11 [emphasis in original]). Beck elaborates upon this when he reveals that he prefers to see globalisation as actually consisting of a number of different dimensions. These dimensions are those of ‘communications technology, ecology, economics, work organization, culture and civil society’ (Beck 2000: 19). He asserts that these dimensions cross national boundaries ‘as if they did not exist’ (Beck 2000: 20). Therefore a key feature of Beck’s notion of globalisation is the claim that traditional boundaries have lost a great deal of importance. While the dimensions that he identifies are undeniably important, it must be acknowledged that in his theory religion is conspicuous by its absence. Beck mentions culture as one of his dimensions but he does not refer to religion when he talks of this. This appears strange. As I indicated in chapter 1, in my opinion at least, religion is an integral part of culture. However, both the observation that borders are decreasing in importance and the recognition that communications technologies are an integral part of this development appear well founded. They form an integral part of the central framework within which I shall analyse Hinduism and the Internet.

### Jan Aart Scholte

For Jan Aart Scholte globalisation gives rise to ‘*detrterritorialization*’. He refers to this as ‘a spread of supraterritoriality’. This means that ‘social space is no longer wholly mapped in terms of territorial places, territorial distances and territorial borders’ (Scholte 2000: 16). Like Beck’s notion of globalisation this also indicates that borders are losing their importance. Furthermore, it alludes to the fact that territorial space itself is losing importance. In the age of the Internet this would especially seem to be the case as this has seen the creation of cyberspace, which is of a very different nature from territorial space as traditionally conceived (see chapter 2). However, importantly, Scholte emphasises that despite the rise of supraterritoriality, this ‘has not meant –

either logically or in practice – the end of territoriality as a key aspect of social geography’ (Scholte 2000: 41).

Indeed, he argues that globalisation ‘can also be linked to processes of *reterritorialization* such as localization and regionalization’ (Scholte 2000: 42, see also pp. 59-61).<sup>9</sup> Building upon the idea of reterritorialization, Scholte adds that ‘Globality [‘the condition of being global’ (p. 42)] and territoriality can also intertwine in consciousness’ and gives the example of groups in the diaspora who may ‘feel transworld unity and at the same time forge their solidarity around a shared connection to a territorial homeland’ (Scholte 2000: 60). It is also important to note that it is not only in the case of groups in the diaspora that globalisation is subjectively perceived (as opposed to objective features of globalisation such as the rise in supraterritoriality). Scholte argues that ‘many people now hold macroscopic notions, where the planet is regarded as a “global village”...where territorial distances and borders are (at least in certain respects) irrelevant’ (Scholte 2000: 54). Like Beck, Scholte concerns himself with culture but also omits discussion of religion. Nevertheless, his work does provide important insights into supraterritoriality, and this has relevance to Hinduism and the Internet.

### **Manuel Castells**

Like Beck and Scholte, Manuel Castells also emphasises how space and time are being transformed and he cites information technology as one of the main factors causing this transformation (Castells 2000: 407). Castells argues that there is a new space which he calls the space of flows (which contain, for example, flows of people and information) and, crucially, connection is more important than location (see Hine 2000: 61, 84). This latter point makes sense, but it is worth considering some objections to it. Whilst appreciating the importance of ‘interconnectedness’ (Hine 2000: 59), in her ethnographic study Hine (2000) argues that it is wrong to assert that a different form of spatiality has necessarily developed as a consequence of the Internet (Hine 2000: 114). She emphasises that although theoretically, space and time might have been altered, the findings of her study suggest that users still make reference to conventional

---

<sup>9</sup> Robertson also considers the interplay between the global and the local and his notion of ‘glocalization’ will be considered below.

understandings of time and are still aware of physical contexts, especially local contexts (Hine 2000: 115). Contrary to theorists such as Castells<sup>10</sup> she concludes that:

Time and Space [understood in the conventional sense] help the users of the Internet to orient themselves towards it and to the other social beings who are construed as inhabiting it (Hine 2000: 115) [and] the net does not transcend traditional notions of space and time; rather, it produces multiple orderings of time which cross the online/offline boundary. (Hine 2000: back cover)

I am more inclined to accept this as it is based on an ethnographic study, whereas Castells provides only a theoretical argument. His argument may appear plausible, but on further reflection it does seem unlikely that time and space, on a practical level, are radically transformed despite the immediacy afforded by the Internet. Nevertheless, Castells's assertion that connectivity can be more important than locality does appear to be a worthwhile observation. Furthermore, in a practical sense, it *is* possible to see that something *has* happened to distance and that physical location has, in some respects at least, declined in importance in a globalised world. The extent to which the physical site has declined in importance is central to this thesis.

### **Anthony Giddens**

Another major globalisation theorist is Anthony Giddens. He has defined globalisation as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1990: 64). Globalisation has occurred as a result of the long-term processes of modernisation which have become more intense, and Giddens believes that 'modernity is inherently globalising' (Giddens 1990: 63). Amongst other factors, again, transport and communications technologies are implicated as being essential in bringing about globalisation. Developments in communications technologies since 1960 are especially singled out as being a key to globalisation (see Giddens 2002: 10; see also 1990: 177). If Giddens's theory is investigated in a little more detail, then both strengths and weaknesses are revealed. For example, although he asserts that

---

<sup>10</sup> Hine adds that Mitchell (1996) and Cairncross (1997) also assert that the Internet replaces conventional notions of time and space (Hine 2000: 84).

globalisation should not be seen solely in economic terms, and although he says it is also cultural (Giddens 2002: 10), again religion is not properly considered. As has been mentioned above, Beckford objects to such improper consideration, and he adds that when Giddens does talk about religion in a globalising world he simply associates it with fundamentalism, whereas evidence shows that this is not the case and that the majority of contemporary religious groups are not fundamentalist (see e.g. Beckford 2003: 124, 136).<sup>11</sup> Giddens even goes as far as to say that:

Fundamentalism is a child of globalisation which it both responds to and utilises. Fundamentalist groups almost everywhere have made extensive use of new communications technologies. ...Hindutwa militants have made extensive use of the Internet and electronic mail to create a “feeling of Hindu identity”. (Giddens 2002: 49-50)

While the point concerning the use of new communications technologies by Hindu fundamentalist groups is true (see e.g. Bhatt 1997: 252-253, 264), this in no way suggests that globalisation and fundamentalism go hand in hand. Indeed, despite the fact that fundamentalism has experienced an increase, in some cases as a result of a reaction to perceived external threatening globalising tendencies, the role of religion in globalisation is much more varied and interesting than this. It does seem incredible that this has been overlooked by Giddens and others.

Like the other theorists mentioned above, time and space play a key part in Giddens's theory. He emphasises that in modernity, 'place' and locale no longer simply coincide (Giddens 1990: 19) and that time and space have become separated. He refers to this as 'time-space distanciation' (Giddens 1990: 20). A key feature of time-space distanciation is that of 'disembedding' – 'the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space' (Giddens 1990: 21). Another important point to note from Giddens is that, as a result of

---

<sup>11</sup> Giddens is not the only theorist considered here who associates fundamentalism with globalisation. Castells also does this (see Castells 2000: 24) and is criticised by Beckford (see Beckford 2003: 131-132). Edwards also associates fundamentalism with globalisation when she talks of 'fundamentalism as the flip side of postmodernity' as she believes that postmodernity is inseparable from globalisation (see Edwards 2001: 10, 17). Jameson also associates postmodernity with the rise of fundamentalism (Smith 1993: 162).

modernity, we have become more reflexive concerning knowledge, but the disembedding that is taking place has meant an increase in uncertainty as knowledge is no longer derived from 'the fixities of tradition' (Giddens 1990: 53). An impressive aspect of this theory is that it was formulated prior to the commercial launch of the Internet. Previous communications technologies are heavily implicated in the theory, but the concept of disembedding takes on an even greater significance when it is considered in the light of the Internet which can appear to lift social relations out of their local contexts and restructure them 'across indefinite spans of time-space.' Indeed, some sociologists of religion online have accepted Giddens's theory of disembedding and assert that this is clearly evident in the case of the Internet and religion. Berger and Ezzy's (2004) study of Witchcraft provides one such example, as does Lövheim's (2004) study of 'Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet'. I shall investigate the extent of 'disembedding' in the uses made of Hinduism on the Internet in chapter 8.

### *Paolo Apolito*

In his consideration of Catholic religious sites in Europe, the cultural anthropologist Paolo Apolito (2005) identifies a similar process to Giddens. Apolito notes Christian's view that in Spain, 'In the wake of the Industrial revolution, the growth in spatial mobility, and the development of the mass media...local sacred statuses have progressively declined in importance' (Apolito 2005: 152), but then adds that local sites have undergone 'a transformation rather than a simple weakening' and that there has been 'a general delocalization of the sacred' (p. 152). In the case of Lourdes this began in the 1870s with 'imitation grottoes' (p. 152). According to Apolito, reproductions play a key role in the delocalization of 'sacred statuses' (p. 153), and this delocalization reaches its culmination with the Internet (p. 155). Apolito admits that some elements of localization remain, but that because of the changes wrought by the Internet, this aspect is of limited importance (p. 155).

### *Lorne Dawson's Use of Giddens and Beckford*

More attention is given to Giddens's theory by Lorne Dawson who has it in mind when he asserts (drawing upon the work of Beckford [1989]) that religion is coming adrift from its conventional social moorings. He then explicitly draws upon the work of Giddens to show that the same can be said concerning our identity-constructing



processes (as a result of our disembedded reflexive knowledge), and he concludes that 'the Internet offers one of the few forums for the reflexive construction of identity by means of the interpenetration of highly personal and more or less global concerns, issues and resources' (Dawson 2004a: 86). However, he admits that 'At this point there are more questions than answers' (Dawson 2004a: 86).

Dawson and Hennebry also ponder these questions and ask: 'What unanticipated consequences might stem from the attempt of religions to take advantage of the disembedded freedom of cyberspace?' (Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 165). They speculate that such questions might best be approached through a consideration of Beckford's idea that in the contemporary Western world it might be more apt to conceive of religion as 'a cultural resource...than as a social institution' (Beckford 1992: 23 cited in Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 165) (see also Beckford 2000a: 177-178; 2001). Beckford had earlier proposed this idea in 1989 and so, like Giddens's theory, this idea precedes the commercial introduction of the Internet. Beckford argues that, as a result of the 'profound and continuing transformations of advanced industrial societies since the 1960s' (Beckford 1992: 22), religion can be seen as 'a cultural resource' because, although 'the power of formal religious organisations has declined, religious issues have not necessarily withered away or simply been privatized'. Instead, they have 'drifted away from their former points of anchorage' (Beckford 2000a: 178). Importantly, 'religious and spiritual forms of sentiment, belief and action' still retain an important symbolic capacity 'and can be deployed in the service of virtually any interest-group or ideal' (Beckford 1992: 22-23 cited in Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 166).

In the light of the different observations made by Giddens and Beckford, Dawson and Hennebry ask: 'Is the "disembedded" social reality of life in cyberspace contributing to the transformation of religion into a "cultural resource" [and] if it is, what would be the consequences for the future form and function of religion?' (Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 166). Concerning Hinduism and the Internet, this is considered in chapter 8.

### ***From Castells to Baudrillard***

To an extent, Castells also seems to indicate a fusion between the ideas of Giddens and Beckford when referring to new communications technologies. Echoing Giddens's

view, he asserts that the Internet ‘radically transforms space and time [and that] localities become disembodied from their cultural, historical geographical meaning’ (Castells 2000: 406). When he remarks that ‘the inclusion of most cultural expressions [in cyberspace]...weakens considerably the symbolic power of *traditional senders external to the system*’ (Castells 2000: 406 [my emphasis]) he comes close to Beckford’s view. However, while he also indicates that religion would not disappear because of this, he emphasises that it is largely traditional institutions themselves which must adapt the ‘cultural expressions’ to the new medium. By contrast, as explained above, Beckford would argue that religion is more like a ‘cultural resource’ that can be utilised by anyone, and not just for religious reasons.

Drawing upon the work of Baudrillard, Castells considers in more detail questions surrounding disembodied phenomena. He asserts that ‘there is no separation between “reality” and symbolic representation’ (Castells 2000: 403) but wishes to make it clear that, despite the views of critics of electronic communication, this has always been the case as ‘all realities are communicated through symbols [and] in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are somewhat displaced in relation to their assigned semantic meaning’. Therefore in Castells’s view: ‘In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived’ (Castells 2000: 404). However, Castells believes that the difference with the Internet is that it not only induces virtual reality but actually constructs real virtuality (Castells 2000: 403). This is because:

*It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people’s material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience. All messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and future. (Castells 2000: 404 [emphasis in original])*

These assertions are obviously important to any study of religion and the Internet.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is worth looking at Baudrillard's observations concerning the image which have informed Castells's work. In addition to this, the fact that Baudrillard stresses the importance of new communications technologies and the nature of the image<sup>13</sup> means that his work should not be ignored. Furthermore, Baudrillard also has some interesting observations regarding, specifically, religious images, and these also deserve consideration.

### *Jean Baudrillard*

Poster claims that, according to Jean Baudrillard, 'Culture is now dominated by simulations [and that] objects and discourse...have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation' (Poster 1988: 1). By a simulation, Baudrillard means that there is no distinction between the object and its representation. He calls these simulations 'simulacra', and he asserts that the world is made up of these simulacra which 'have no referent or ground in any "reality" *except their own*' (Poster 1988: 5 [my emphasis]). If Baudrillard's argument is accepted, it is easy to see that, again, this would be especially the case when considering the Internet. Indeed, with each successive communications technology it seems reasonable to suggest that the notion of the simulacrum becomes stronger as images become even further adrift from their original reference points.

Baudrillard's comments concerning religious images appear in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1983a). In this work Baudrillard applies his idea of the simulacrum to religious images, and this leads him to interesting conclusions which invite theoretical analysis in the light of Hinduism. Baudrillard's opinion is that the simulacrum does not represent the real; it becomes the real. Because of this, Baudrillard concludes that this is why iconoclasts wanted to destroy images of God. He asserts that iconoclasts sensed the 'omnipotence of simulacra' as they have the facility of 'erasing God from the consciousnesses of people'. This suggests that 'ultimately there has never been any

---

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here, however, that these assertions are quite hyperbolic - a charge often levelled against the work of Baudrillard (see e.g. Poster 1988: 7). Furthermore, Poster also criticises Baudrillard for talking about media images 'as if nothing else in society mattered' (Poster 1988: 7) and there is a suggestion in this instance that Castells is also guilty of this to an extent.

<sup>13</sup> As has been shown (in chapter 2), the image is of central importance in Hinduism.

God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only been his own simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1983a: 169).

As for the iconolaters, Baudrillard claims that they were 'content to venerate God at one remove' (Baudrillard 1983a: 169). He also adds, however, that perhaps they were aware of the nature of simulacra but did not want to unmask images as this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them (Baudrillard 1983a: 169). This view is very problematic indeed. Firstly, Baudrillard only makes a distinction between iconolaters and iconoclasts. He does not appreciate the diverse range of meanings that are placed upon the image in Hinduism (see Preston 1980: 73; Beckerlegge 2001b: 108). Use of the image should certainly not indicate iconolatry in the sense that it is the actual image that is being worshipped.

Furthermore, it appears that Baudrillard's view of religion is anchored in a Western understanding. For example, he is of the opinion that those who used images were content to venerate God 'at one remove', but as has been shown in chapter 3, in Hinduism there can be the conception of the *Absolute*. In many cases the image is used as an aid in the quest to gain appreciation of this formless *Absolute*, which, 'though it is everywhere, it *cannot be seen*' (Krishnananda 1994: 102 [my emphasis]). In the case of Hinduism then, perhaps rather than Baudrillard's view that those who use images are afraid to unmask them as this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them, it would be more apt to suggest that it could be a desirable goal for many Hindus to be able to unmask the image, as behind the image is the "opposite" of "nothing".<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> My argument that Baudrillard appears to be religiocentric is further strengthened when one considers that in *Fatal Strategies* (1983b) he asserts that 'gods can only live and hide in the inhuman...and not in the human realm...[and that]...a human-god is an absurdity' (Baudrillard 1983b: 200). However, Hinduism has a long history of belief in the presence of *avatars* – manifestations of God on earth in physical form – and this belief is still very popular today (Smith 2003: 34-35). Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was a famous *avatar* (see Beckerlegge 2001b: 80; Smith 2003: 173-174), and a good example of a contemporary *avatar* is Sathya Sai Baba who enjoys a huge worldwide following (see Sharma 1986: 228-231; Fuller 1992: 177-181; Smith 2003: 179) – although there are countless others who enjoy lower levels of popularity (see Pocock [1973] who writes that it is common that men are elevated to the 'status of godhead' [pp. 98-99]). Furthermore, in addition to *avatars*, gurus in Hinduism are also seen as being God (see Hutchinson 1996: esp. 110; Juergensmeyer 1996; Smith 2003: 171-179) (there is thus an overlap between an *avatar* and a Guru), and it is also important to note that during the Hindu wedding ritual the bride and groom 'assume a divine form' and are worshipped by their family and friends 'in

It is fair to say that it is necessary to be careful when considering Baudrillard's notion of simulacra in the light of religious images. Baudrillard does not entertain the notion that, owing to their very nature, i.e. the unique way in which individuals perceive religious images as distinct from other simulacra, it is possible that other variables might come into play.

Nevertheless, the notion of the simulacrum, especially when applied to images on the WWW, does appear to make sense. For example, it does seem plausible that an online image which has, on one level at least, been lifted out of its referential context, could become so far removed from its original meaning that it becomes a hyper-real simulacrum. Whether or not this can actually be considered to be the case with Hindu images online will be investigated in chapter 8. This is important because of the large number of Hindu images on the WWW and the fact that increasingly large numbers of people are spending time online.

Of course, Baudrillard would argue that, for example, the original image in a *mandir* is already a simulacrum<sup>15</sup> and that the presence of such an image on the WWW merely exacerbates this. However, the acceptance of this theory in its entirety, instead of helping to facilitate empirical research, gets in the way of it. For example, in my opinion, the best way forward is, regardless of whether according to Baudrillard's speculative theory, a *mandir* image, for example, is a simulacrum, it is more productive that the meanings that people give to the original image are first considered and that meanings surrounding images on the WWW are also investigated. Therefore, for the purposes of this investigation, only the online image will be seen as a possible simulacrum, and the original image will be regarded as being securely bounded in an acceptable referential context. Only in this way is it likely that there will be a good opportunity to discover any consequences for Hinduism and the experiences of its

---

much the same way as deities are worshipped before their images in temples' (Fuller 1992: 30-31 [my emphasis]). In addition to these examples which show that a 'human-god' is certainly not an absurdity in Hinduism, there is the example of priests in some South Indian *mandirs* who, at one level at least, actually become *Shiva* during worship (Fuller 1992: 61; see also Smith 1993: 163).

<sup>15</sup> Smith agrees with Baudrillard and asserts that the image in a *mandir* is a simulacrum (Smith 1993: 162).

practitioners following from the presence of Hindu images online which appear far removed from their original referential context.

After this excursus into Baudrillard's work I will now return to my consideration of various globalisation theories and consider the work of Arjun Appadurai (whilst briefly mentioning Waters's addition to his theory) and the work of Roland Robertson. Their ideas contribute to my understanding of globalisation and creates further insights into how empirical research in the area of Hinduism and the Internet might unfold.

### **Arjun Appadurai**

Arjun Appadurai's (1990) theory, which places a strong emphasis on culture, offers another approach to globalisation. He identifies a number of dimensions of globalisation and, crucially, argues that we should not adhere to approaches which consider globalisation processes in terms of transference from a centre (usually associated with the West) to a periphery.<sup>16</sup> The five major dimensions that he identifies are: 'ethnoscapes' ('the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live'), 'mediascapes' (which refers 'both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information...and to the images of the world created by these media'), 'technoscapes' ('the global configuration of technology [which allows information to move]...at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries'), 'financescapes' (the movement of vast amounts of money around the world) and 'ideoscapes' (like 'mediascapes', 'ideoscapes' also involve images but these images are more closely linked to dominant ideologies) (see Appadurai 1990: 95-96). Appadurai emphasises that these '-scapes' are 'fluid' and 'irregular' and are 'deeply perspectival constructs', and he thus wants us to appreciate that they are 'not objectively given relations' (Appadurai 1990: 95).

Importantly, the flows (for example, of people or images) 'occur in and through the growing disjunctures' between the various '-scapes' and give rise to 'deterritorialization' (Appadurai 1990: 97) (an example would be diasporic populations). The '-scapes' contribute to the 'imagined worlds' of people (Appadurai

---

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, according to Appadurai, any flows from the East to the West do not simply constitute 'reverse colonisation' as proposed by Giddens (2002: 16-17).

1990: 95), and ‘mediascapes’ are implicated most strongly in the ‘blurring of [the] division between the realistic and the fictional’ (Beynon and Dunkerley 2000: 38). Here Appadurai is also drawing upon the work of Baudrillard discussed above (see Appadurai 1990: 99). It is easy to see the importance of deterritorialization in the formation of ‘imagined worlds’ (Appadurai comments that it provides ‘fertile ground’ for the acceptance of mediascape ideas and images). For example, deterritorialized diasporic populations often do not have access to authentic goods and experiences and are reliant upon inauthentic media images (see Appadurai 1990: 97).

It is clear that Appadurai’s conception of globalisation is very complex and fluid and not exclusively concerned with objective social relations. This approach seems to grasp globalisation much better than those theories that give primacy to a centre from which globalising tendencies radiate out. Although Appadurai’s work takes culture into account, he does not have much to say about religion. This omission is rectified by Waters who builds upon Appadurai’s work by adding a religious dimension – ‘sacriscapes’ (see Waters: 1995: 156-157) – to Appadurai’s five dimensions. With this further inclusion of a religious dimension, the theory is refined and enriched and seems to hold the potential to contribute to the understanding of Hinduism and the Internet.

Finally, concerning Appadurai, it is important to note his belief that ‘The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (Appadurai 1990: 94). This is a central concern of Appadurai’s work and is certainly relevant to a study of Hinduism and the Internet. There are those who assert that homogenisation is taking place as a result of globalisation, while others believe that this is not the case and that the opposite is occurring (see e.g. Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 124). It is also possible that homogenisation and heterogenisation can occur simultaneously. Appadurai himself concludes that: ‘The globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization, but globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization...that are absorbed into...cultural economies, only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues’ (Appadurai 1990: 99).

This is interesting as, instead of simply coming down on the side of homogenisation or heterogenisation in the debate, Appadurai considers the question on two levels and

asserts that globalisation is ultimately likely to give rise to heterogenisation although, ironically, homogenisation will be a factor in this.

## **Roland Robertson**

Roland Robertson is another sociologist who asserts that questions concerning the degree to which globalisation encourages homogenisation or heterogenisation are extremely important (Robertson 1992: 12). He believes that although there are instances of homogenisation as a result of globalisation, ultimately, globalisation is unlikely to result in cultural homogenisation. Instead, homogenisation and heterogenisation are 'complementary processes' (Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 125) (see below).

Robertson's approach to globalisation directly addresses religion, and he believes that religion is actually 'a critical ingredient of globalization' (Robertson 1992: 87) (see also Robertson and Chirico 1985: 163). He argues that 'Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole' (Robertson 1992: 8). Consciousness has been globalised in the sense that people conceive of the world as one place (see Beynon and Dunkerley 2000: 35; Beckford 2003: 139), and, according to Robertson, religion is a key factor in giving rise to this change in consciousness because many religions espouse globalising themes (see e.g. Robertson 1992: 175).<sup>17</sup> However, although various religions may promote and disseminate universalistic notions (such as the oneness of humankind), it is important to note that universalistic claims made by various religions can never be purely universalistic because they necessarily derive from a specific cultural viewpoint (Beckford 2000a: 173, 181). Therefore, such universalistic claims are actually particularistic notions of universality, and this seemingly paradoxical statement provides an example of the core dynamic of Robertson's theory – that is, that there is a 'massive, twofold process involving *the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularism of universalism*' (Robertson 1992: 100 [emphasis in original]). Put simply, there is interplay between the global and the local. Robertson refers to this as 'glocalization' – from 'to glocalize', originally a Japanese marketing

---

<sup>17</sup> This has been the case since long before modernity (for example, Robertson points to the role of Buddhism in India in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and Confucianism in China from 206BCE-220CE [see Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 35]), and this emphasises the importance of religion within globalisation.



term which can refer to the tailoring of products to local markets (see Robertson 1992: 173-174).

Robertson claims that the particularisation of the universal encourages the formation of distinct groups that are searching for identity and ‘the meaning of the world as a whole’ (Robertson 1992: 178). Fundamentalist groups can certainly be seen in this way. However, Robertson wishes to emphasise that ‘the expectation of identity declaration *is built into the general process* of globalization’ (Robertson 1992: 175 [my emphasis]), and while fundamentalism as a reaction to a perceived threat is not rejected, this possibility must be ‘viewed in a more general frame’ (Robertson 1992: 175). Therefore, if it is accepted that in the particularisation of the universal various distinct identities (which are not necessarily fundamentalist in orientation) are created, it is clear that globalisation can result in an increase in heterogeneity. However, it is important to note that globalisation in the form of global capitalism also ‘promotes and is conditioned by cultural homogeneity [as well as] cultural heterogeneity’ (Robertson 1992: 173).

It is essential to appreciate that there is constant mediation between the global and the local, and the relationship between the two should not be seen as contradictory (see Robertson 1992: 165). Beynon and Dunkerley (2000) sum up succinctly Robertson’s ideas concerning the universal and the particular:

People are influenced by the global, but this is interpreted locally and local transformations are as much a part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space. It is for this reason that it is important not to see globalization as “squeezing” locals, but as a dialectic, with people as intermediaries between the global and the local. Mass communication and travel bring the world to the individual and the individual to the world. (Beynon and Dunkerley 2000: 36)<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Beckford pointed out, in a private communication, that this quote could be ambiguous as it is unclear whether Beynon and Dunkerley are saying that people are influenced by the *idea* of the global or the *reality* of the global. Their reference to interpretation *and* mass communication and travel convinces me that they are referring to both. If this is accepted then this quote does sum up Robertson’s ideas well.

Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt (2000; 2003) also identify the process of 'glocalization'. Their 2000 study will be briefly considered here as it not only clearly demonstrates how globalisation theories can enrich an empirical study, but also suggests that the same approach can pay dividends in my investigation of Hinduism and the Internet. Vásquez and Marquardt apply Robertson's (1992) theory to a study of a Marian apparition in Florida and conclude that worldwide Marian apparitions are part of a process involving the interpenetration between the global and the local (see Vásquez & Marquardt 2000: 120). By way of the operationalisation of key theoretical insights, they are able to provide 'enough descriptive elements to illustrate the complex relation between the local and the global and the role religion plays in mediating this relation' (Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 120). One example concerns the car park of the bank where the apparition appeared and where, on account of the fact that people had congregated there from all over the world to view the apparition, it is clear that: 'While the newly created sacred space is local in the physical sense, it is clearly subject to globalizing tendencies' (Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 125).

Vásquez and Marquardt are thus able to demonstrate that Robertson's theory which focuses upon 'the local refraction and re-appropriation of religious currents circulating around the world' (Beckford 2003: 125) has a great deal to contribute to the understanding of religion in a globalising world. Their study also draws upon the work of Appadurai (1990) by showing that 'mediascapes' in the form of television images and, especially, images on the WWW, were crucial for the promotion of the local Marian apparition (see Vásquez and Marquardt 2000: 128).

## **Hinduism and Globalisation**

### **'Glocalization'**

In the context of Hinduism, instances of glocalization are not difficult to find. For example, in Pune, Maharashtra there is the *Christa Prema Seva ashram* (a centre for spiritual development) which offers a hybrid of Christianity and Hinduism. A member of this *ashram* spoke of how 'When Christians came to India, they tried to plant Christianity like a full-grown tree. If you became a Christian you had to become

alienated from your culture, your roots, your own spirituality' (cited in Cushman and Jones 1999: 211). To counteract this, the community attempted to conform to certain Indian *ashram* customs and now, among other instances of hybridity,

the central spiritual celebration at...the ashram is the daily celebration of the Eucharist – but with several key modifications. Instead of hymns, you'll get bhajans... Along with readings from the Old and New Testament, you'll get excerpts from the [Bhagavad-]Gita,<sup>19</sup> the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, and other Indian classics. Grape juice is served at communion instead of wine, to avoid offending orthodox Hindus. (Cushman and Jones 1999: 213)

At *Jeevan Dhara Sadhana Kutir* in Rishikesh similar processes are occurring, and at the entrance to this *ashram* is a statue of Jesus Christ in lotus position (Cushman and Jones 1999: 336). The ethos and practice at both of these *ashrams* provide concrete examples of Robertson's notion of glocalization.

## **Hindus in the West**

Although, as Robertson (1992) argues, the universalistic message of some religions means that religion could be central to globalisation, the fact that Hinduism has not usually been a proselytising religion means that Hinduism is unlikely to have played a key role in globalisation in the past. However, the conference known as the 'World's Parliament of Religions' which brought together representatives from a number of different religions in Chicago in 1893 (see Bainbridge 1997: 181) (the event itself can be seen as an aspect of globalisation) propelled 'Hinduism' onto a world stage. This was largely due to the fact that Vivekananda, one of the representatives of Hinduism, was extremely charismatic and articulate (see Bainbridge 1997: 180; see also Juergensmeyer 1996: 278).<sup>20</sup> He gave the impression that the universalistic philosophy of *advaita Vedanta*<sup>21</sup> was indicative of Hinduism as a whole and not just the tradition that he belonged to, and even implied in an essay of the same year that *advaita Vedanta*

---

<sup>19</sup> An important text which is part of the *Mahabharata*.

<sup>20</sup> Flood also stresses the importance of Vivekananda to the spread of Hindu ideas (Flood 1996: 267), while De Michelis emphasizes his central role in 'the shaping of Modern Yoga' (De Michelis 2004: 3).

<sup>21</sup> Or, to be more accurate, *neo-advaita Vedanta* as Vivekananda had refined the *advaita Vedanta* philosophy propounded by Adi Shankara (see Thomas 1993: 176).

was *the* philosophy of Hinduism (Bainbridge 1997: 182-184). After the conference he stayed on in Chicago for a further three months and then went on a successful lecture tour (Bainbridge 1997: 187).

Vivekananda was not alone when he travelled to Chicago and his associate Majumdar also travelled around the USA giving a large number of lectures (Bainbridge 1997: 187). After this, other Hindu religious teachers (e.g. Swami Yogananda) travelled from India to promote (their strand of) Hinduism, and from 1965 onwards the flow increased rapidly as a loosening of immigration restrictions to the USA (see Flood 1996: 271; Williams 1996b: 256; Bainbridge 1997: 206-207) coincided with receptivity to alternative religious ideas at the time of the counter-culture (see e.g. Beckford 1985: 33; Brooks 1989: 74). This led to a sharp increase in the number of Hindu NRMs (New Religious Movements).

The introduction of Hindu ideas to the West as a result of visits by Hindu teachers set in motion other globalisation processes. For example, largely on account of the success of Vivekananda, universalistic ideas became widespread in India, and this acceptance in both the East and the West resulted in a positive feedback process which promoted *advaita Vedanta* and advanced the view that it was representative of Hinduism. This is a clear example of complex flows in a globalising world.

The case of ISKCON (*International Society for Krishna Consciousness*) (who advocate a dualistic philosophy far removed from *advaita Vedanta*) provides another example. Swami Prabhupāda, the founder of ISKCON in the USA in 1966, returned to Vrindaban, India in 1971 with an entourage of ‘fifty international devotees’ in order to attempt to ‘bring ISKCON back to India in force...and attract India back to what he saw as its original religious consciousness’ (Brooks 1989: 89).<sup>22</sup> An important part of Prabhupāda’s plan was to build three large *mandir* complexes in significant places (Vrindaban, Mayapur and Mumbai) in India (Brooks 1989: 89), and Brooks notes the popularity of the Vrindaban *mandir* amongst residents of the town and Indian pilgrims (see e.g. Brooks 1989: 97). My visit to the Mayapur (West Bengal) *mandir* in September 2005 also provided evidence that Indians in India are exposed to ISKCON by way of visiting their *mandirs*. Furthermore, ISKCON have also sought to develop a

---

<sup>22</sup> Prabhupāda made a similar attempt in 1967 on a much smaller scale (Brooks 1989:72).

relationship with some Hindu communities in the diaspora (see Beckford 1985: 33; Nye 1996; 1997). The Indian diaspora (see e.g. Baumann 1999), itself a key aspect of globalisation, has also directly contributed to the spread of Hinduism worldwide. The interplay between Hindus *and their religion* worldwide and the societies that they have joined (see e.g. Sekar 1999) clearly demonstrates that Hinduism can be a key factor in globalisation.

Any sociological study which concerns itself with Hindus in the diaspora or with Hindu NRMs should be, by its very nature, a study of Hinduism and globalisation. Indeed, if globalisation issues are ignored and groups are only studied in a discrete local context then it is clear that a full picture will not emerge. Of course, most studies, even if they do not focus upon globalisation, place the group that is being studied in a wider context and thus, effectively, take into account globalisation. In the consideration of such studies it is possible to apply aspects of globalisation theory in an attempt to further understand processes which are occurring. For example, Beckford argues that the attraction of Hindu NRMs to certain young people in the UK and France identified by Altglas (2001) is dependent upon a notion of oneness which overrides certain aspects of Hinduism that might be seen to be particularistic (Beckford 2003: 117). Such studies are too numerous to list and it is not necessary, or indeed possible, to consider them here. Instead, I will take just one example of Hinduism within globalisation which is especially relevant to my topic of study and which has been described and commented upon in the social science literature: the role of the Internet in the ‘*Ganesh Milk Miracle*’ episode (see Bhatt 1997: xvi-xvii, 251-252; Beckerlegge 2001b: 57-58; Giddens 2002: 43-44).<sup>23</sup>

### **The ‘*Ganesh Milk Miracle*’**

In September 1995, an individual in New Delhi claimed that a stone *murti* of *Ganesh* actually consumed the milk that it was offered. Within hours, Hindus around the world had been informed of this, largely as a result of mass telecommunications (see Smith 2003: 3) (including the Internet). Because of this, it was possible that on the same day as the *murti* in New Delhi was said to have consumed milk, millions around the world

---

<sup>23</sup> See also Veylanswami (2005) for a Hindu’s view of the ‘*Ganesh milk miracle*’.

were able to offer milk. The miracle was re-enacted with *murtis* in diverse locations also being seen to consume milk. Within 24 hours, the miracle was over.

Bhatt emphasises that there was a secular side to the miracle. For example, reports of the event tend to omit the fact that the milk drinking claims arose in the midst of a religious dispute (Bhatt 1997: 252) and that the related nationalistic fundamentalist groups, the VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*) and the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) (see Bhatt 1997; van der Veer 2000), were instrumental in the promotion of the miracle on a global basis. The first manifestation of the miracle in the UK occurred when an RSS member offered milk to a *murti* at a *mandir* in London, and the VHP and RSS 'were quick to mobilise their international networks to generate the miracle globally' (Bhatt 1997: 252).<sup>24</sup> Their successful use of the Internet in this regard clearly demonstrates the involvement of religion in globalisation. As Bhatt concludes, the episode 'highlighted how various social spaces – such as community, city, nation and the “global” – were connected in some non-systematic way and, in their connection, they told us something about “globalization” and “time-space compression”' (Bhatt 1997: xvi-xvii). Smith adds that 'Ganesha became the first god to span the world instantaneously. What occurred was not simply world-wide reporting of a miracle, but the instantaneous world-wide occurrence of multiple instances of the same miracle' (Smith 2003: 4). This example, no less than the case of the Marian apparition in Florida (Vásquez and Marquardt 2000), suggests that the Internet and other advanced communications technologies create novel opportunities for religious groups.

## Research Questions

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, although the various globalisation theorists that are discussed have a variety of views, these views share a 'family resemblance' and thus it is possible to come up with a loose workable definition of globalisation.

---

<sup>24</sup> As it was fundamentalist groups that were integral to the promotion of the miracle worldwide, this again suggests that the claims made by Giddens and Castells that fundamentalists are necessarily reactionary towards globalisation (see above) are unfounded. To emphasise, regarding the VHP, van der Veer writes that they 'do not resist globalisation but in fact embrace it' (van der Veer 2000: 318). This is not surprising as, in accordance with my discussion of Robertson's notion of the particularization of the universal, fundamentalist groups attempt to put forward a view which they claim to be universal but which is in fact 'particular'.

Globalisation involves a number of processes. On one level it is clear that it has resulted in the transformation of space and time. Time and distance have become simultaneously distanced *and* compressed, while the status of physical space has altered as phenomena have been disembedded from specific locales. Physical borders and boundaries have become less important as, for example, information and images can now traverse them with ease. Moreover, the global and the local are mutually implicative and complex dynamic processes are occurring as distinct from a mere transference from a centre (usually associated with the West) to a periphery.

The main 'globalisation' research question is: How is Hinduism (its form, practices and institutions) being affected by these processes that are central to globalisation? With a specific focus on the Internet's implication in these processes, my aim is to discover, on a practical level, the extent to which the development of globalisation and the development of Hinduism are intertwined.

I will approach this through the formulation of a number of empirical research questions that have been informed by the insights of the globalisation theorists whose ideas enabled me to form my conceptualisation of globalisation. In turn, this will also enable me to assess the extent to which these theories are useful in understanding the processes that are occurring as a result of the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet. My questions are:

As a result of the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet, is there evidence that traditional borders have declined in importance (Beck 2000; Scholte 2000)? What evidence is there that a 'spread of supraterritoriality' (Scholte 2000) is occurring? Has connection become more important than location (Castells 2000)?

To what extent have online Hindu images become 'disembedded' (Giddens 1990)? Does it make sense to conceive of online Hindu images as hyper-real simulacra (Baudrillard 1983a)?

Has the Internet contributed to Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource' (Beckford 1992; 2000a; 2001)?

Can Appadurai's (1990) theory of '-scapes' contribute to the understanding of processes that are occurring as a result of Internet use by Hindus?

Has the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet given rise to any examples of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1992)?

What reactions are there against forms of Hindu religious expression online? Who is responsible for such reactions, what form did they take, and what effects did they produce?

Has the presentation of Hinduism undergone a process of homogenisation as a result of Hinduism's presence online?

Have actual forms of Hindu worship facilitated by the Internet undergone homogenisation?

At the local level, has the relationship with the global resulted in homogenisation of Hindu rituals, increased heterogenisation, or no change at all in this regard?



# Chapter 5 – Rational Choice Theory

## Introduction

Rational choice theory (hereafter RCT) has been influential in the sociology of religion and has the potential to contribute to the understanding of Hinduism online. Therefore it will be considered here. I will briefly outline the theory and then outline a number of important studies of religion that have used the RCT approach as these studies can serve to clarify the approach. Furthermore, they can also indicate ways in which RCT can be beneficial for this study. I will then outline criticisms of RCT in general and RCT studies of religion, and then consider a major criticism in relation to Hinduism.

Despite these criticisms, in agreement with a number of scholars, RCT will not be rejected in its entirety, but used as a model. The usefulness of this model to this research will then be demonstrated through it leading to the formulation of a number of research questions which can be used to investigate the online Hindu religious market. The adoption of RCT as a model also leads to an avenue of research concerned with the practising of Hinduism online.

## RCT

The RCT formulated by Gary Becker (see e.g. 1986) has become an important paradigm in the sociology of religion largely through the applications of theories based on Becker's work by, for example, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1987), Laurence Iannaccone (1995) and Roger Finke (1997).<sup>1</sup> Becker favours an economic approach which he believes is 'uniquely powerful because it can integrate a wide range of human behavior' (Becker 1986: 109). The approach 'assumes the existence of markets', the behaviour of which is *mutually* linked to participants (e.g. individuals,

---

<sup>1</sup> Different scholars make various alterations to the RCT formulated by Becker. However, the RCT of the scholars mentioned here that will be considered below share key fundamental concepts which derive from Becker's work. RCT is thus 'a complex set of varied ideas that share a family resemblance' (Beckford 1999b: 671). Beckford notes that Stark and Finke do not wish that the term 'RCT' be applied to their work (Beckford 2000b: 493). However, their work is generally considered to be representative of RCT.

firms and nations) (Becker 1986: 110). Becker argues that individuals are rational actors and that the notion of strict rationality can be applied to *all* forms of human behaviour (including religion) (Becker 1986: 112, 119).<sup>2</sup> Individuals weigh up costs and benefits and seek to maximise utility through performing rational choices (Becker 1986: 109). In making this assertion Becker draws upon the utilitarian philosophy of Bentham and his concept of the pleasure-pain calculus which he claimed was ‘applicable to all human behavior’ (Becker 1986: 113) (see also Craib 1992: 71). However, Becker goes beyond Bentham who, he claims, ‘did not maintain the assumption of stable preferences’ (Becker 1986: 113). ‘Stable preferences’ are ‘underlying preferences [that] are defined over fundamental aspects of life’ (Becker 1986: 110). They ‘are assumed not to change substantially over time, nor to be very different between wealthy or poor persons, or even between persons in different societies and cultures’ (Becker 1986: 110). It is this notion of ‘stable preferences’ which is essential for Becker’s theory and leads him to conclude that his ‘economic approach provides a unified framework for understanding behaviour that has long been sought by and eluded Bentham, Comte, Marx and others’ (Becker 1986: 119).

## **RCT Studies of Religion**

Laurence Iannaccone favours a rigid RCT approach which directly draws upon the work of Becker and thus asserts that ‘people approach all actions in the same way, evaluating costs and benefits and acting so as to maximize their net benefits’ (Iannaccone 1995: 77; 1997: 27). Because he accepts Becker’s notion of stable preferences, when looking at changes in religious behaviour, a change in tastes, norms or beliefs is not accepted and instead changes are considered to be ‘optimal responses to varying circumstances – different prices, incomes, skills, experiences, resource constraints, access to different technologies, and the like’ (Iannaccone 1995: 77). Regarding the supply-side of religion, similar economic principles apply: ‘Religious “producers” are also seen as optimizers – maximizing members, net resources, government support, or some other basic determinant of institutional success. The actions of church and clergy are thus modeled as rational responses to the constraints and opportunities found in the religious marketplace’ (Iannaccone 1995: 77). The

---

<sup>2</sup> Because RCT advocates that strict rationality is applied to religious choices, the theories of religion of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche are all rejected (see Spickard 1998: 100).

extent of market regulation is important in this regard and Iannaccone maintains that ‘in competitive environments, religions have little choice but to abandon inefficient modes of production and unpopular products in favor of more attractive and profitable alternatives’ (Iannaccone 1995: 77).

Using these principles, Iannaccone argues that it is then possible to perform analysis at three different levels: ‘the level of individuals and households; the level of congregations, denominations and other groups, and the level of entire groups or societies (Iannaccone 1995: 78). He argues that the application of the RCT approach can explain denominational mobility, the typical age of converts (older individuals are less likely to change their religion because it will be difficult for them to gain the benefits from this new investment),<sup>3</sup> the typical pattern of interreligious marriage (marriage partners who share the same religion produce more efficient households), and the levels of participation found in different sorts of marriages’ (Bruce 1993: 198).<sup>4</sup>

In one application of the RCT approach, Iannaccone considers religious groups and asserts that it is those groups that are strict, that will be successful (see e.g. Iannaccone 1995: 78). This is because he believes that, for rational reasons, people are against ‘free-riders’<sup>5</sup> – in this case, those people who belong to a religious group and who derive benefits but do not offer much in return. ‘Strict’ groups do not have a problem with free-riders as such individuals are barred from participation.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, such groups will prosper because the ‘cost-benefit ratio’ of members will be improved (see Spickard 1998: 101) and this will result in ‘stronger’ members. Iannaccone explains this in relative detail:

---

<sup>3</sup> Therefore concerning denominational mobility and age of converts, Iannaccone explains choices through reference to ‘religious capital’ which means that the notion of underlying stable preferences is not rejected (see Spickard 1998: 107). Finke also believes that the building up of religious capital can explain why people stay within certain religious groups even though it might appear that they ‘receive little return on their investment’ (Finke 1997: 60).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce (1993) criticises all of these explanations provided by Iannaccone.

<sup>5</sup> According to Beckford, RCT has been criticised on the grounds that it has an ‘excessive preoccupation with the free-rider principle’ (Beckford 2000b: 492).

<sup>6</sup> One problem I have with such an assertion is that it assumes that perceptions of strictness are universal, whereas I would assert that this is not the case. For example, Iannaccone and Finke might assert that a rejection of technology or the adoption of a vegetarian diet might be seen as being indicative of a strict group. However, some individuals may not regard such practices as involving costs.

Costly demands mitigate the free-rider problems that otherwise undermine a religious group. They do so for two reasons. First, they create a social barrier that tends to screen out half-hearted members. No longer is it possible simply to drop by and reap the benefits of attendance or membership. To take part one must pay a price, bearing the stigma and sacrifice demanded of all members. Second, they increase the relative value of group activities, thereby stimulating participation among those who do join the group. (Iannaccone 1997: 36)

Conversely, those groups that do not demand a high degree of commitment will be threatened as the presence of free-riders will increase the costs for active members (see Beckford 2000b: 491-492), and overall, this will result in 'weaker' members. Finke concurs with Iannaccone's view concerning a group's strictness resulting in 'stronger' members and adds that membership costs must not be raised *too* high so that they outweigh benefits:

When organizations raise membership costs too high, the costs of joining exclude all but a few. Many sects and cults hold such high standards for membership that few will join even if the production of collective goods is high. Thus when religious groups are competitive, organizations must produce high levels of religious goods without making the costs prohibitive. (Finke 1997: 54)

This explains why very strict sects do not have large memberships. Concerning such groups, most individuals will decide that despite the fact that there will be no free-riders, costs are considered to be greater than benefits.

Roger Finke also considers the supply-side of religious markets (see e.g. Finke 1997).<sup>7</sup> As a proponent of RCT he proposes that religious markets function in rational economic ways in the same way that other markets do. Finke argues that the supply-side is important in considering religion, and, like Iannaccone, emphasises the importance of de-regulation. Finke draws upon historical data which showed that there were significant religious revivals in America between 1730 and 1830. He argues that

---

<sup>7</sup> Although Finke emphasises the supply-side of religious markets he does recognise that the demand side is also important (Finke 1997: 49). Indeed, this is to be expected because, as has been mentioned above, according to a rational choice approach, producers and consumers are mutually dependent.

this was due to ‘a shift in supply, not demand’: ‘As the colonial establishments lost support, upstart sects gained freedom. With the restrictions on new sects and itinerants reduced, a new wave of religious suppliers emerged – suppliers that aggressively marketed their product to the masses’ (Finke 1997: 48). The de-regulation reduced start-up costs for the producers of religion and this resulted in a vibrant and healthy religious market and a corresponding high degree of religiosity. Therefore, ‘early American religion flourished in response to religious *deregulation*’ (Finke 1997: 48). Furthermore, Finke argues that ‘the effects of regulation...are not confined to one nation or time period’ (Finke 1997: 48). He gives the example of Japan after 1945. Following defeat in World War II all laws controlling religion were abolished which resulted in ‘unprecedented religious freedom’ (Finke 1997: 48). This gave rise to a proliferation of religious groups and this period was termed ‘the rush hour of the gods’ (Finke 1997: 49). As in the case of America, Finke wishes to emphasise that that this was solely as a result of supply-side reasons and not an increase in the demand for religion. In both cases, the lack of state regulation meant that there has not been a ‘lazy’ monopoly which breeds inefficiency and results in producers failing to meet the needs of consumers, and instead there is pluralism and healthy competition.<sup>8</sup> This leads Finke to conclude that ‘for unregulated markets, today’s religious majority is formed from yesterday’s minority (Finke 1997: 51) and that ‘America is a classic land of efficient sects’ (Finke 1997: 60). Concerning an absence of religious regulation, Stark and Bainbridge (1987) come to similar conclusions (see Beckford 2000b: 492), as does Iannaccone who comments on the positive nature of religious pluralism for religious vitality (Iannaccone 1995: 78).

Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1987)<sup>9</sup> also employ RCT in the field of the sociology of religion. Whereas Becker sought to explain the lives (and even deaths) of individuals through recourse to the notion of the maximisation of utility, Stark and Bainbridge use the approach to consider notions of life *after* death (Mellor 2000: 279). In line with other rational choice theorists, they assert that individuals ‘seek rewards and avoid costs’. However, some rewards that individuals seek, such as immortality, are ‘beyond reach’. Because of this, Stark and Bainbridge assert, ‘compensators’ are therefore required (Mellor 2000: 279). Various religious beliefs constitute such

---

<sup>8</sup> Secularisation theorists, on the other hand, believed that religious pluralism damaged the plausibility of religion and hastened its decline (see e.g. Ammerman 1997: 119).

<sup>9</sup> See also Stark (1997) for a discussion of their 1987 work.

compensators and thus the choice of what beliefs, if any, are adopted, is seen as being entirely rational. Iannaccone also holds a similar view (see Mellor 2000: 279) and a version of the theory also appears in Stark and Finke (2000) where the theory 'seeks to explain how and why humans believe that they can enter into exchange with deities' (see Beckford 2003: 65). Therefore, the RCT approach used by Stark, Bainbridge, Finke and Iannaccone 'sees no essential differences between selling automobiles or absolution' (Mellor 2000: 279).

It is important to keep such arguments concerning individual psychology separate from market arguments even though rational choice theorists assert that the two are related. In my research I shall only be considering the market arguments as these are clearer and can inform an empirical study and thus contribute more to an understanding of the online situation. Furthermore, my subject of study is more concerned with issues surrounding the religious market-place (see below). On the other hand, in my opinion, issues regarding psychological compensators do not lend themselves to convincing empirical research.

## **Criticisms of RCT**

RCT theory has proved controversial and has been criticised by, for example, Bruce (1993; 1999) (see below), Chaves (1995),<sup>10</sup> Ammerman (1997) (see below),<sup>11</sup> Spickard (1998) (see below), Mellor (2000) (see below) and Beckford (2003).<sup>12</sup> The major criticisms of RCT in general and RCT studies of religion will now be outlined. An important objection is that RCT makes too many assumptions about what it actually is that people are thinking about (see Mellor 2000: 279-280). Secondly, there is the objection that stable preferences simply do not exist (see e.g. Spickard 1998: 106).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Chaves argues that the assumption inherent in RCT that individuals engage in cost-benefit analysis in order to maximise benefits is 'a very weak assumption' (Chaves 1995: 99).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Ammerman's key criticism mentioned below, he believes that it is dangerous not to take intuition and transcendent experience into account (Ammerman 1997: 120).

<sup>12</sup> Although Beckford appreciates that a consideration of rationality is of value in sociological studies of religion, he asserts that alone it is 'rarely capable of providing well-rounded explanation in isolation from other considerations' and mentions factors such as 'hope, creativity and fear' (Beckford 2003: 170).

<sup>13</sup> Spickard is adamant in his belief that 'needs vary from time to time and place to place, and not all of the people in each particular time and place have the same spectrum of needs' (Spickard 1998: 106), and I agree with him on this point.

Furthermore, RCT asserts that it is rationality at the level of the individual actor that determines decisions. Therefore, the idea that socialisation and culture have relevance is rejected. Many sociologists find such an assertion extremely problematic.<sup>14</sup> There is also the criticism that while RCT may be applicable to some spheres of social life, it is not suitable for explaining religious preferences (see e.g. Bruce 1993). Some sociologists that assert this are perhaps influenced by the fact that Durkheim's notion of 'collective effervescence' has enjoyed popularity in the sociology of religion. RCT goes against this by focusing on the rational choices made by individuals and it is this, it is asserted, that results in collective social phenomena. This claim therefore leads to a rejection of Durkheim's notion (see Mellor 2000: 273).<sup>15</sup> Coleman's RCT studies provide an example of this (see Mellor 2000: 277), and Stark and Bainbridge also adopt a similar position (see Mellor 2000: 281).

Secularisation theory provides another challenge to RCT. Although the Enlightenment was linked to rational thought (see Mellor 2000: 275), religion became increasingly seen as a vestige of irrationality. It was believed (by e.g. Berger [1969] [see Ammerman 1997: 119]) that increasing modernity had contributed to rationality and therefore secularisation (see Mellor 2000: 276). However, the advocates of RCT maintain that there is no evidence of secularisation and are adamant that people make rational choices when deciding which religion to follow.<sup>16</sup> The notion of secularisation is replaced with the idea that the religious market simply registers gains and losses in particular brands.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Some rational choice theorists have recognised other influences but, as Mellor points out, this 'calls into question the distinctiveness of the rational choice approach' (Mellor 2000: 284).

<sup>15</sup> RCT is also in opposition to the Parsonian view that 'religious behaviour could not be understood as an outcome of individually rational action' (see Hechter 1997: 147).

<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps possible that RCT has given rise to a lot of studies in the sociology of religion precisely because of the commonly accepted notion of religion as being non-rational. If the approach proves successful in this area then supporters of RCT can cement their claims that RCT can explain *all* aspects of social life. Hechter though believes that the amount of available survey and census data concerning religion is also an important factor contributing to the popularity of the application of RCT to religion (see Hechter 1997: 149). It is also worth pointing out that religion and rationality are not necessarily incompatible (Beckford 2003: 48).

<sup>17</sup> The secularisation thesis has actually come under attack from a variety of angles (not just from RCT) and is no longer popular (see e.g. Mellor 2000: 274). Even Berger, a prominent advocate of the secularisation thesis, subsequently rejected it (see Ammerman 1997: 119; Beckford 2003: 51, 83; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 16).

Another common criticism of RCT is that the role of emotions is significant (see e.g. Mellor 2000: 286) – although supporters of RCT such as Stark assert that even actions that appear to have a non-rational character are in fact a result of rational choices (see Mellor 2000: 277). The ungendered nature of the theory is also seen as problematic by some (see e.g. Carling 1986<sup>18</sup> cited in Craib 1992: 75; Neitz and Mueser 1997: 107-110; Mellor 2000: 286). A further criticism is provided by Beckford (personal communication) who points out that although rational choice theorists argue that regulation of religion suppresses religious vitality (see above) and is therefore irrational, for some states it is fully rational to regulate religion. Therefore, contrary to the claims of rational choice theorists, there are actually different conceptions of rationality and this threatens to undermine the approach.

### **RCT Criticisms and Hinduism**

A further major criticism of RCT is against its claim to universality. While this criticism applies to any RCT study of religion, it is especially relevant when Hinduism is concerned. Therefore, this criticism will be looked at in more detail and discussed in relation to Hinduism.

A striking feature of the influential RCT studies outlined above is that they are mainly preoccupied with Christianity in the USA and Europe. I have shown that Finke mentions the situation in Japan after World War II where there was an absence of religious regulation, but I suspect that rather than the Japanese case demonstrating the claimed universality of RCT, Finke has merely chosen an example to fit the theory.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the prominent RCT studies outlined above are mainly concerned with Christianity in the USA and Europe obviously does not in itself suggest that RCT is not universal. However, I consider it to be problematic that RCT is claimed to be universal despite the fact that research in other contexts has not been undertaken. Some scholars do argue that RCT is not universal. Mellor argues that there is a relationship between religion, culture and identity and that RCT could be ‘culturally and historically specific’ (Mellor 2000: 286). He also adds that Robertson (1992) has suggested that: ‘rational choice theories of religion are a characteristically American development,

---

<sup>18</sup> Carling adds that RCT also cannot deal with ethnic differences (see Craib 1992: 75).

<sup>19</sup> Bruce believes that Iannaccone is also guilty of using examples selectively (see e.g. Bruce 1993: 197; 1999: 55).



reflecting values and cultural assumptions about the nature of individuals and religion specific to this context' (Mellor 2000: 286). Norris and Inglehart consider empirical data regarding churchgoing in the USA and in Europe and conclude that RCT 'fits the American case but the problem is that it fails to work elsewhere' (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 24). Ammerman also questions RCT's claims to universality and argues that culture is important. Like Norris and Inglehart, Ammerman is able to make this objection through referring to Christianity in different countries. Furthermore, he claims that even a comparison between different places within the USA demonstrates that RCT is not universal (see Ammerman 1997: 121-125). If Ammerman's arguments are accepted, it would suggest that Hinduism – which is very different from Christianity and is practised in a society with a markedly different culture from that of the USA – presents a serious challenge to RCT.

I am unaware of RCT being considered in relation to Hinduism.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it is not difficult to identify unique aspects of Hinduism which clearly suggest that it is difficult to reconcile Hinduism with RCT's starting assumptions. Before providing specific examples I will mention two general aspects of culture that have arisen as a result of Hinduism, that are not found amongst Christians in the USA and Europe, and which pose problems for RCT.

Despite claims by Srinivas (see 1962a: 42-62; 1962b: 63-69), it is fair to say that as a result of Hinduism, India has a social structure with a relatively high degree of rigidity, and this seriously restricts the ability of individuals to make free choices. This is especially the case concerning women, many of whom are, to all intents and purposes, prevented from exercising a full range of rational choices. Secondly, Hinduism is, for many adherents, a true way of life to an extent which is simply not the case in Christianity (see chapter 1). This also restricts the ability of individuals to make

---

<sup>20</sup> As part of his wider project to consider the relationship between religions and economic circumstances in various countries, Weber investigated the extent to which religions could be characterised as being rational in method. Weber believed Hinduism to be rational in some respects and irrational in others. However, Weber's conclusions are highly problematic and he has been criticised as he only worked from textual sources created by *Brahmins*. There is also the accusation that he was Eurocentric (see Smith 2003: 80-81). Smith concludes (perhaps rather harshly) that Weber has 'done nothing to assist Western understanding of Hinduism' (Smith 2003: 80-81).

rational choices.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the unique social structure that Hinduism has given rise to in India and the fact that Hinduism is largely conceived of as a way of life certainly means that any decision that an individual makes is not solely as a result of a cost-benefit calculation, and this suggests that applying RCT is problematic. Specific examples back up this assertion and will now be considered.

As has been mentioned above, RCT claims that due to rational choices there is a high likelihood of those who share the same religion becoming marriage partners. However, within Hinduism many marriages are arranged and individuals have little or no say in the matter. Therefore, although it can be argued that arranged marriages are an excellent example of the value of RCT as parents take a number of what would appear to be purely rational decisions based on factors such as economic position, prospects, and cultural group of a potential suitor in order to produce what they see as a suitable match, the prospective partners themselves are afforded no autonomy whatsoever and this is completely anathema to any RCT approach. Concerning marriage, an integral part of Hinduism for many Hindus, potential marriage partners clearly do not have the power to make entirely free, rational choices, and this demonstrates that RCT fails to distinguish between the different levels at which rationality is assessed.

Another example to show that it is difficult to reconcile Hinduism with RCT's starting assumptions is demonstrated when *pujaris* are considered. Iannaccone confidently claims that RCT 'predicts a reduction in entrants to the priesthood when its pay, power, and prestige decline relative to that of other occupations' and that this is 'obvious' (Iannaccone 1995: 83). However, in Hinduism there is the tradition of hereditary *pujaris*. Despite the fact that since Independence this system has declined, it is still widespread. While rational choice theorists might argue that sons of *pujaris* might seek better paid employment elsewhere (this is certainly the case in some instances [see e.g. Chakrabarti 1984: 92]), this does not detract from the fact that rational economic criteria are not the sole factors in determining who enters the 'priesthood' in India. Therefore, concerning the 'priesthood', when the situation in India is considered, it is certainly not 'obvious' that solely economic principles apply.

---

<sup>21</sup> Even if the beliefs that inform this way of life are concealing rational choices, the fact remains that because of widespread societal acceptance of these beliefs, they are likely to be adhered to by individuals even if they might prove unsuitable at certain times. Therefore, choice remains severely restricted.

The problems with applying the RCT assumptions to Hinduism are mainly concerned with traditional Hinduism. Concerning the involvement of non-ethnic Indians with Hinduism, (leaving aside the afore-mentioned general criticisms of RCT,) RCT is not faced with the same sort of problems. For example, non-ethnic Indian converts have probably been able to freely choose to become Hindu and to choose which strand of Hinduism they wish to align themselves with. While this is important to keep in mind, ironically, the suggestion that RCT presents fewer challenges to Hinduism when non-ethnic Indian converts are concerned appears to add further weight to the assertion that RCT is culturally specific.

In addition to the general criticisms of RCT, the specific examples regarding Hinduism clearly show that it cannot be easily accommodated by the theory.

### **The Acceptance of the Rational Choice Approach as a Model**

Despite the fact that it is clear that RCT is extremely problematic (especially when applied to religion), there is a general consensus, even amongst some of its critics, that it should not be totally disregarded, and I tend to agree with this. While critics are adamant that, contrary to the claims of rational choice theorists, factors such as emotions are important and human behaviour cannot be solely explained through recourse to economic rationality, if RCT is kept as a *model* consisting of (Weberian) rational ideal-types then it is still of some use.<sup>22</sup> In such a model the notion of rationality is retained<sup>23</sup> and although human beings are seen as predominantly exercising rational choices (non-rational factors are also recognised), the idea that rationality can actually *explain* behaviour is not crucial. Instead the model can be used to look at ‘the way in which reality differs from what we might expect if individuals were acting rationally’ (Craib 1992: 75-76), and while of course this does not explain the situation, it offers a ‘grid against which we might begin to discern complexity’ (Craib 1992: 80).

---

<sup>22</sup> Spickard emphasises such an approach (1998: 101, 110), as do Craib (1992: 75-76) and Beckford (1999b 683; 2003: 170-171, 202) (see below).

<sup>23</sup> Even Bruce, perhaps the fiercest critic of RCT considered here, certainly does not wish to assert that most behaviour is not rational (see Bruce 1993: 203), and Ammerman praises the RCT approach for asserting that individuals who participate in religious practices are making rational choices (see Ammerman 1997: 120).

There can be little objection to claims that people do act rationally even when it comes to religion,<sup>24</sup> and this is clearly demonstrated in the case of Hinduism. For example, Hindus are able to choose their favourite god or goddess to be the focus of their devotional activities (their *ishtadeva*) (Beckerlegge 2001b: 60; Smith 2003: 144) (but note that it is not possible to tell why any particular god or goddess has been chosen) and can also worship particular gods and goddesses to achieve specific desired ends. For example, the goddess *Saraswati* is worshipped by students before exams [Fuller 1992: 41-42]) and the god *Tarakanath* (see chapter 6) is worshipped for a variety of reasons including ‘getting a house, ending a quarrel, for a cow’s pregnancy, for the safe delivery of a child, for getting a lorry, for getting hair on the head, for the safe installation of a well, and for the return of a lost relative’ (Morinis 1984: 114; see also Preston 1980: 77; Chakrabarti 1984: 2, 197; Fuller 1992: 36; Abraham April 5, 2001: online; Srinivasan June 27, 2002: online; Jaisinghani 2005: 10).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, devotees transfer worship from one deity to another if desired results are not forthcoming.<sup>26</sup> For example, in their study of Varanasi Vidyarthi *et al.* note that ‘the popularity of a god or a shrine depends largely upon its specialization and effectiveness in fulfilling the human desires’ (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 39). The rational acts of devotees appear to be remarkably close to those identified by Stark and Bainbridge who speak of exchanges with gods which are conducted in a rational manner (see Beckford 2003: 170). Nevertheless, the theory should not be accepted in its entirety, because, as has been emphasised, there are other factors apart from rational ones, and the reasons behind the actual behaviour of individuals cannot be adequately explained by RCT.

Beckford believes that the use of a rational choice model is certainly of value when considering the supply-side of religion. He adds that it ‘can bring to light many important considerations that would probably be overlooked or omitted in studies based on different theoretical assumptions’ (Beckford 2003: 171; see also p. 202) and gives the example that the historical development of religious organisations could be

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, concerning Hinduism and the Internet, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that individuals who are interested in Hinduism might visit various Hindu-related websites and make rational choices about how to proceed, taking into account various costs and benefits.

<sup>25</sup> Concerning Buddhism, Obeyesekere (1977; 1986: esp. 200-202) shows that in order to achieve specific aims, Buddhists in Sri Lanka worship particular Hindu deities which have been assimilated into Buddhism.

<sup>26</sup> Sacred items are similarly often used in an instrumental way.

profitably looked at using the model (Beckford 1999b: 683). Beckford is not alone in this view since most critics of RCT do not wish to argue that producers and markets do not act in a rational way.<sup>27</sup> I also agree that there is no reason to believe that different religious producers do not act rationally and compete with each other in order to attain, for example, prestige, influence, money and adherents. The rational choice model can certainly be useful as a starting point for analysis even if the findings do not necessarily conform to the model.

## Research Questions

As indicated above, I will not seek to utilise all aspects of a rational choice model to investigate action at the level of the individual or the collectivity. It is only in the supply-side area where the rational choice model holds the most promise, and this is certainly the case in relation to the topic of Hinduism and the Internet. The reason for this is not only because I accept that religious groups act rationally and compete with each other in a market-place, but also because the Internet, through its emergent feature of cyberspace, has brought about a new site in the religious market-place.

My investigation will therefore ask the following questions:

Is the new venue of cyberspace merely an extension of the original offline market-place for Hinduism or does it give rise to an entirely new market-place which is not subject to the assumptions inherent in the rational choice model?

If cyberspace is considered to be an extension of the conventional offline market-place, are there still characteristics of it which have the potential to radically affect the overall success of a religious group? For example, groups that were unable to compete

---

<sup>27</sup> Bruce is a notable exception concerning this as he argues that religious producers do act in an irrational manner as they tend not to change their beliefs and practices even if these put them at a disadvantage in the religious market (see Bruce 1993: 202-203). However, I would argue that religions can and do change in order to increase their share in the religious market-place. For example, ISKCON (the *International Society for Krishna Consciousness*) originally sought to have the majority of their members living in ISKCON institutions and working exclusively for ISKCON goals. However, due to economic pressures and cultural changes in the wider society, they now seek to recruit members who live in their own homes and who work in occupations unattached to ISKCON.

successfully in the offline market-place for one reason or another might be able to compete online, and this could help them to be more successful. Conversely, a religious group which has tended to do well in the traditional offline market-place may not be able to compete effectively in the online religious market-place and thus be adversely affected in the offline world.

What strategies are various Hindu groups pursuing online? How successful are these strategies? Which Hindu groups appear to have been the most successful in this regard?

In addition to the religious market aspect, the situation of online Hinduism is worth examining in terms of a rational choice model based on the RCT assertion that strict religious groups tend to be more successful than those that make it easy for free-riders. This is worth looking at because online, a whole new situation has arisen. With the introduction of Hinduism online it has become possible for individuals to practise their religion from the comfort of their own home without making much investment. According to RCT, religious groups that offer the facility to practise religion online which would thus make it easy for free-riders, would be weakened. Therefore, a key question is: Will the easy accessibility of religion online result in religious groups becoming weaker? Consideration of this is of special interest because, like the online market-place, the possibility to practise religion online was not considered in the RCT studies of religion mentioned above. At this point in time it is too early to be able to gather empirical evidence in order to consider this question fully. Instead, it is only possible to discuss issues that arise from this question through recourse to early observations. This discussion appears in chapter 9 where I highlight areas for further research.

# Chapter 6 – Methodology

## Introduction

The study employs a variety of triangulated methods<sup>1</sup> in order to attempt to increase the validity of interpretation (Orgad 2005: 52). I was not attempting to check different findings against each other, but instead I used different methods in order to look at the subject of study from a number of different angles (see Bryman and Burgess 1994: 222). For reasons made clear in chapter 1, research was conducted both in the online world and in the offline world (which, I have argued, are not constitutive of a duality). For reasons that will become apparent, the nature of the study lends itself to a qualitative research methodology and the emphasis throughout is on validity rather than reliability.

## Online Methodology

Online methodology is still in its infancy (Wakeford 2004: 34, Hine 2005a: 1). It is undeveloped and non-standardised. Concerning the study of religion online this can clearly be seen. For example, Dawson, one of the prominent scholars in the field, notes that ‘I know of no efforts to systematically gauge the degree of real religious interactivity happening online’ (Dawson 2005: 30).

## Problems

Online methodology poses a number of problems, some of which are shared with traditional research, and some of which are entirely new. The former category includes problems that arise when the Internet is utilised as a research tool and primarily concern the difficulty in identifying and obtaining representative samples (Laney 2005: 168), and low response rates from the population (Witmer *et al.* claim that ‘response rates to online surveys may be 10 percent or lower’ [cited in Herring 2005: 162]). Compared to conventional offline research, in the case of online research these problems are far greater (Bedell 1998: online). For example, in offline research, using the snowballing sampling method, it is common to achieve a reasonable response rate.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Triangulation’ was introduced by Denzin (1970) (see Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 205-206).

However, Sanders shows that when this method is used in online research this is not the case (Sanders 2005: 73). It has also been argued that online, respondents are more flippant in the way that they fill out online forms and there is also a far higher level of untruthfulness than is found in the offline context. Furthermore, online it is easy for informants to offer multiple submissions and this can produce misleading data (Konstan *et al.* 2005: online). In addition to these problems, there are other issues such as those concerning actually being able to contact identified populations. For example, there are laws in the USA against unsolicited e-mail (Bedell 1998: online) and many people simply regard unsolicited e-mails as spam and ignore them anyway (which is a contributory factor to the afore-mentioned low response rates).

In this study such problems which are associated with using the Internet as a research tool are not of concern as online interviews were not carried out. This was because such a line of enquiry was not required for the issues under investigation. Indeed, in the light of the poor response rates for online surveys, the study was deliberately designed so as not to require online responses as the extremely low response rates are likely to result in a study which is of questionable validity.

### *Volume of Websites*

However, other problems connected to researching the online situation need to be addressed. One significant problem is the sheer number of websites on the WWW (see chapter 1) which means that it is impossible for a single researcher to investigate even a significant proportion of them<sup>2</sup> or even to gain a representative sample. The problem is exacerbated because the amount of websites is growing at such a rate that search engines are unable to keep track of them. For example, Dreyfus noted in 2001 that the WWW was growing at a rate of at least a million pages a day (Dreyfus 2001: 8) and he quotes a *New York Times* article from 2000 which states that 'There are now more than one billion Web pages and, according to some experts' calculations, the number has been doubling once every eight months' (Dreyfus 2001: 96). Therefore, when a search engine is used, the results that it produces omit many websites. In fact, according to Dreyfus, it is estimated that search engines 'can recall at most 2 per cent of the relevant

---

<sup>2</sup> In his (2003) study of Islam, Bunt mentions this problem (Bunt 2003: 7), as do Dawson (2005: 15) and Apolito (2005: 14).



sites' (Dreyfus 2001: 23) and that those in the search engine industry believe that "30 per cent is all one can hope for" (Dreyfus 2001: 25). Furthermore, there are also other questions concerning the accuracy of search engines.

As there are many search engines, if a study (such as this one) requires the use of a search engine then a decision must be made as to which one is to be employed. As long as a researcher makes explicit which search engine she or he is using, and for what reason this decision has been made, then this is largely unproblematic. However, it must be remembered by consumers of the research that different search engines provide different results.

Because of problems pertaining to the sheer number of websites, a suitable research plan must be devised – it is of limited value simply choosing random websites, or solely referring to websites that a researcher has come across as a result of surfing the WWW.<sup>3</sup>

### **Innovative Multiple Methods**

As online methodology is still in its infancy it is left up to the researcher to devise a research strategy which she or he feels will give rise to valid research. Examples where new and different research methodologies are revealed in sociological studies of religion and the Internet include Mayer (2000), Dawson and Hennebry (2004), Campbell, H. (2004), Campbell, R.A. (2004), Helland (2004) and Højsgaard (2005). Such studies can be distinguished from studies of religion and the Internet which do not attempt to formulate or use rigorous research methods such as those by Beckerlegge (2001c), Bunt (2003; 2004), Brasher (2004) and Apolito (2005) (which still contribute to our knowledge of issues surrounding religion and the Internet). What is apparent from the first set of studies is that the respective researchers have had to be creative in formulating their research methods and there are wide differences between the various approaches. However, in his review of *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (from which all of the 2004 studies in the above list are taken), Flory (2005) argues that the lack of a unified methodological approach is one of the volume's shortcomings and

---

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that referring to such websites cannot contribute to knowledge in some way.

However, a rigorous research methodology is far preferable and has the advantage of enabling at least some aspects of the research to be replicated at a later date.

notes that there is no mention of methodology in the editors' introductory essay. Furthermore, he argues that methodological statements are generally inadequate in the subsequent chapters (Flory 2005: 364-365). However, the methodological statements provided in the studies that I have selected are actually far more comprehensive than in many others. This is not to say, though, that there shouldn't be an improvement in this respect. Furthermore, the fact that these studies are criticised for their methodology despite the fact that they are better than others in this respect emphasises that methodological issues need to be considered further. Therefore, I fully agree with Flory's assertion that much work needs to be done concerning online methodology, although I am unconvinced when he says that 'a systematic methodological approach is necessary' (Flory 2005: 364 [my emphasis]).

Because of the diversity of studies of religion and the Internet, I believe that different methodological approaches need to be formulated and refined, instead of there being an attempt to achieve a unified methodological approach. Højsgaard and Warburg highlight the diversity of the [experimental] methodological approaches featured in their 2005 edited volume and agree with my view that multiple methodologies are desirable and necessary (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 8-9). Hine also notes that diverse methods are needed. In the introduction to her edited volume dealing with online methodology, she notes that the respective authors in the book were involved in 'working out a situated response to the research question they wished to address, appropriate to the conditions which they found in context' (Hine 2005a: 1) and stresses the need for 'innovation'<sup>4</sup> in formulating online research methods (Hine 2005a: 9; see also 2005c: 109). Jankowski and van Selm also advocate 'multiple methods' (Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 206), as does Guimarães Jr. (2005: 141). Indeed, I find it strange that Flory argues for a unified approach as there are vast differences in research methodologies between various offline projects, tailored to meet the needs of the research situation. For example, there are even different ways to select a sample to be studied, depending upon the rationale behind the research.

The need to formulate suitable research methods both provides a good challenge and adds to the importance of this study as the methods used can contribute to the

---

<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered though that innovation in research methods is not solely restricted to online methods – innovation has always been a necessary part of methodological development (see Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 200).

advancement of methodological approaches to the Internet. There are also challenges not only for the researcher, but for the consumer of the research. If the methodology which is considered to be productive by the researcher is made explicit, the audience can decide whether the methodology is largely unproblematic and productive.<sup>5</sup> When this occurs, all carefully thought out approaches, even if they are not perfect, are likely to contribute to more coherent ways of researching the online situation in the future. Different types of research methods can be built up and drawn upon, albeit with constant modification. Hine also makes this point when speaking about the studies in her afore-mentioned edited volume (Hine 2005a: 1-2). Importantly, new methods need to suit the online situation rather than merely adapting conventional methods which appear ill-suited to the Internet.<sup>6</sup> Sanders reaches a similar conclusion to this and asserts that: 'transferring a methodological procedure from a traditional context to the

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, a reading of Dawson's (2005) study concerning religious mediation in cyberspace leads me to conclude that there are methodological problems. Dawson reveals that 'with the helpful suggestions of some colleagues, I explored twenty sites' (Dawson 2005: 30). Such a methodological approach is highly questionable and it is clear that improvements need to be made. For example, the websites that Dawson considers might not be representative, and although he is likely to be aware of significant websites in his field, the possibility remains that there could be other websites in existence that could lead him to different conclusions. However, in Dawson's defence, the fact that he is open about his method of selection means that he is making no claim to representativeness. Nevertheless, I cannot help thinking that a little more care in this regard would have improved the study.

<sup>6</sup> An example of the inadequacy of the use of traditional methods for researching the Internet is provided by Laney (2005) in his study concerning Christian websites. Although Laney appreciated that 'a rather comprehensive research design needs to be set up' (Laney 2005: 167) and subjected results to analysis before drawing conclusions, it is revealed that out of an initial sample of 1101 websites, 1061 were found to be still functioning. Out of these 1061 websites, only 85 of those responsible for the websites initially agreed to take part in the study. Out of these 85, only 40 then actually bothered to link their website to Laney's online survey ('lack of time' was an excuse given) (Laney 2005: 169). Despite the impressive looking tables of results, the validity of this study thus needs to be questioned. Similarly, Dawson and Hennebry (1999) received a 'very low' response rate when they administered a survey by e-mail (Dawson and Hennebry 1999: 20).

Of course, in the future there may be methodological advances in the area of online surveys, but at the moment online methodology concerning surveys is still in its infancy and, as I see it, is not producing valid results. In the future the Internet *might* become an effective means of data collection, and some researchers are already having some success in tackling repeat submissions from informants, although it is admitted that 'it may never be possible to claim 100% confidence in eligibility or uniqueness of subjects' (see Konstan *et al.* 2005: online).

virtual environment is not necessarily effective' (Sanders 2005: 73), although Hine warns that not all conventional research methods should be jettisoned (Hine 2005a: 2).<sup>7</sup>

My argument, against Flory, that in Internet research it is acceptable to utilise various eclectic methods would perhaps also gain support from Shipman. Concerning traditional offline methodology, Shipman (1988) asserts that although textbooks may give the impression that there are certain methods to be followed, in reality most studies are not completely rigorous (see also McNeill 1990: 14) and cannot fully justify their attempts to achieve reliability and validity but these bases are often still there, albeit implicitly (Shipman 1988: 22). I would argue that in the same way that offline research methods depart from templates available in methods texts and therefore result in a study that is not fully rigorous but can still be acceptable, online research methods which do not follow any template can also result in a valid study even if validity cannot be demonstrated explicitly. I would even go as far as to say that in all social research, craftsmanship, innovation, intuition and common-sense judgements during the research process and analysis can not only be a substitute for rigorous 'textbook' procedures, but even be more suitable in the 'real world',<sup>8</sup> although some methods texts might give the impression that this is not the case.

### **The Methodological Approach Used in the Study**

As has been emphasised, in my quest to find out just what is on the WWW concerning Hinduism, there was no methodological template that I could follow, and it was necessary to give the methodology used some thought and design a new way to conduct the investigation. Again it should be emphasised here that the main obstacle is the vast number of relevant websites.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jankowski and van Selm go further than Hine in this respect and actually argue that the application of conventional research methodologies to the online situation is more productive than Internet researchers 'seem willing to acknowledge' (Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 200). I have made it clear that I disagree with such a view.

<sup>8</sup> This is especially the case in studies which are not quantitative and which make few claims regarding reliability. The validity of such studies depends upon the actions, ideas and decisions of the researcher, rather than conformity to a methodological model.

My key methodological approach is unusual in that, in the light of the problems regarding the number of websites, I decided that the most productive starting point would be to initially adopt an empathetic approach and consider what a general seeker might encounter when searching the WWW for Hindu-related websites. Starting with the assumption, backed up by research, that a general seeker would likely start by typing 'Hinduism' into a search engine,<sup>9</sup> I did this myself using a number of different search engines. With the help of mapping software,<sup>10</sup> I then followed the links from the 'prominent websites' (see chapter 7) in the top ten of the search engine rankings to other websites. All of these websites (and their links) constitute the 'object' of study.<sup>11</sup> I then subjected this to analysis. For example, I considered the websites, the organisations/individuals behind them, and the links between websites. I also repeated the search approximately one year after the first search and considered the differences between the results, and this contributes to the overall analysis.

I am confident that this approach allows me to give a good overview of Hinduism on the WWW and that this provides useful data for analysis.<sup>12</sup> This might seem like an unrealistically bold claim, but in chapter 7 it becomes clear why I am able to make this assertion. The methodology is shown in detail in that chapter, and not here, because the process that I undertake goes beyond methodology as traditionally conceived and is inherently tied up with the processes and dynamics that actually produce the WWW. This type of methodology is mentioned by Hine (2005c: 111) and is discussed and

---

<sup>9</sup> Helland reports that according to the GVU 10<sup>th</sup> WWW User survey; 'most persons find the web sites they are looking for by linking through from one site to another by using a search engine' (Helland 2002: 299).

<sup>10</sup> Dodge emphasises that maps of the WWW can help a researcher to comprehend areas of the WWW through providing understanding and aiding navigation (Dodge 2005: 117).

<sup>11</sup> The links between websites are also utilised to contribute to the construction of a field site in a study by Beaulieu, and as in my study, the significance of the hyperlinks is further analysed (see Beaulieu 2005: 192).

<sup>12</sup> In the wider field of religion and the Internet, I believe that my methods would help to highlight the general online situation for various different religions and provide valid data for analysis. However, this is not to say that I would not want such a method to undergo possible refinement in the future. This could perhaps be achieved through advancements in mapping software. Furthermore, in line with my earlier arguments, I am not asserting that this is the only way to obtain a sample, and other researchers may wish to try to attempt to achieve a sample which has different criteria from those that I believe form a foundation of an effective study.

utilised by Beaulieu (2005) and Park and Thelwall (2005).<sup>13</sup> This approach is very different from other research projects in which the method of data collection is usually a separate tool from the data that is collected and does not figure as part of the analysis itself.

It is important to emphasise that my methodological approach does not provide a representative sample of Hindu-related websites. Such a sample would also need to include Hindu-related websites that do not feature in the top ten of search engine rankings. I have argued above that achieving a representative sample is actually impossible. Even if a procedure could be devised that is able to deal with the huge number of websites, there is still the problem that there are websites that are not even picked up by search engines. It is only my intention to give an overview of Hinduism online. This is achieved through identifying (and then describing and analysing) the 'general area of Hinduism on the WWW'.<sup>14</sup> Even if my methodology were to be criticised on the grounds that it is not fully rigorous (for example problems and issues regarding search engines could be cited) then this is not fatal to my central concern. This is because I have attempted to identify those websites that would be encountered by a general seeker which (for reasons which are apparent in chapter 7) constitute the general area of Hinduism on the WWW.<sup>15</sup> Similar to any arguments concerning representativeness and search engine problems, there could be the argument that many individuals just go straight to websites that they are already aware of and do not use search engines. This is true. However, again, for the reasons listed above, such a criticism does not render my approach invalid.

---

<sup>13</sup> Park and Thelwall even go as far to say that such an approach (which they term a 'network approach') 'has become not only a methodology but also a theoretical perspective' (Park and Thelwall 2005: 171). For example, the 'theoretical framework' can be used to consider in detail the relationships between groups. In my study I utilise the approach to do just that. However, I then go beyond this and consider my findings from using the approach in the light of 'embodiment' and the theoretical approaches of globalisation and rational choice. Therefore, while I appreciate that the approach is not merely a methodological approach, I hesitate to call it a theoretical perspective.

<sup>14</sup> By this I mean the collection of those interconnected websites that are both easily accessible to a general seeker and likely to be encountered by a general seeker (this will become clearer in chapter 7).

<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I do not share Bunt's concern that while conducting research 'it is possible to miss crucial websites' (Bunt 2000b: 140).

In addition to this methodological approach which both provides an ‘object’ of analysis and contributes to the actual analysis, some websites which did not appear when I applied the afore-mentioned research methods have been selected for a number of other reasons. While their selection is not rigorous, there is a rationale behind their selection. For example, they may have been referred to in previous literature, or website addresses may have been discovered while researching the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. In a few cases websites which are discussed may have been found through searching the WWW in a non-systematic manner. Although not rigorous, such searches are necessary for a project such as this as they provide valuable context and contribute to my knowledge of what Hindu-related websites are on the WWW – restricting my knowledge only to prominent websites would thus be a shortcoming of my research. When important websites that have been encountered outside of my standard methodology are referred to as I believe them to be of importance when considering issues surrounding Hinduism and the Internet, the fact that they are primarily used as examples and were not discovered using the afore-mentioned methodological approach is made clear.

Other websites are selected on the basis of their relevance to the research that I conducted in the offline world. For example, if a *mandir* that features in my research has a website, I obviously consider this website and its implications. The reasons for the choice of *mandirs* in my offline fieldwork will be discussed in the next section after I conclude my discussion of methodological issues relating to online research.

## **Other Issues**

### ***Website Boundaries and Related Issues***

In addition to the sheer volume of websites, another problem that is experienced by a researcher investigating the online situation concerns the boundaries of websites. For example, in many cases it might be difficult to discern where one website ends and another begins. This is considered in chapters 7 and 8. Here it is sufficient to say that I believe that in general, it is possible to identify the boundaries of websites if they are analysed carefully. Indeed, such an investigation is an important part of the research and can give an indication of links between different organisations. Other related problems are identified by Bowie. In her consideration of hypertext (image or text that

facilitates navigation to other webpages or websites), amongst other things, she identifies 'getting lost in the links' and the 'possibility of missing information' as being problematic (cited in Nayar 2004: 115). Again, careful research can minimize such problems but the sheer size of some websites does mean that the possibility of missing information is always a danger.

### ***Identification of those Responsible for Websites***

A further research problem concerns the identification of who is responsible for a website as this is not always made explicit. However, if the website is a significant one, it is usually possible to identify who is behind it. Indeed, in many cases those behind websites wish to make themselves known in order to further their interests. However, in some cases the situation is not so cut and dried, and organisations may wish not to make explicit their ideological position and have specific reasons for this. Again, this difficulty is not merely predominantly a problem as the intention of organisations not to make explicit their ideology or links with other organisations is of sociological interest in itself.

### ***Flux***

The WWW is in a constant state of flux. For example, website content changes, and new websites appear while others disappear. In addition to this, the positions of websites in the search engine rankings change over time. There is the common belief that this poses a great problem for online research. However, flux is an inherent characteristic of the WWW and must be dealt with by researchers. Unlike my earlier assertion that the problems (such as gaining an acceptable response rate) associated with attempting to undertake research *through* the Internet mean that this method is largely unproductive<sup>16</sup> and should be avoided where possible,<sup>17</sup> this 'problem' of Internet research should not discourage researchers. The 'problem' of flux is simply a result of the inherent nature of the WWW and is therefore part of the object under

---

<sup>16</sup> An exception to this is that methodological problems concerning Internet research can (rather ironically) actually give rise to 'important questions about the nature of the Internet and the nature of the forms of human organization that use the Internet' (Bedell 1998: online).

<sup>17</sup> In studies where this method of data collection is inherently related to the subject under investigation, there is no option but to use it.



investigation. Indeed, if problematic aspects of various subjects of study put off researchers then there would be very few sociological studies in existence.

Because of the constantly changing nature of the WWW it is sometimes argued that research can only provide a snapshot in time of the online situation. Concerning this, firstly I would say that while this is true to an extent, the idea of a snapshot can be misleading – it gives the impression that if research were carried out, say, six months later, research results would be markedly different and that, apart from providing a snapshot in time, this would render the original research as being of little importance. I believe that although the Internet is indeed constantly changing, the speed and extent of this change is largely exaggerated, at least concerning Hinduism and the Internet, and therefore it is not necessarily the case that only a snapshot in time is provided. For example, I conducted two online searches about a year apart from each other. Although there were changes (and it is such changes that are actually sociologically significant!), the overall situation largely remained the same. Furthermore, while content of many websites obviously changes, in some cases change is minimal. In addition to this, even when content does change, website ethos usually remains the same. For example, some content of the *Saiva Siddhanta Church's* (SSC) main website changes almost daily, but a large amount of the content remains the same. Furthermore, the ethos of websites such as those of the SSC does not change radically over time. In short, it is wrong to suggest that online research can only provide a snapshot in time.<sup>18</sup> This claim is supported by Dawson who, writing in 2005, argues that since 1998, although there has been an increase in religious websites, 'the landscape of virtual religion has not changed much' (Dawson 2005: 30).<sup>19</sup>

However, it is certainly important to appreciate that change *is* occurring constantly. For example, in a decade it is certainly likely that there *will* be significant changes in the online situation (see chapter 9). However, if replicable research methods are used, such as those in this study, in some areas replication can be successfully carried out. For

---

<sup>18</sup> An exception would be research which offers analysis of website discourse – for example that of participants in an online ritual involving textual simulations.

<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter 2, Cowan (2005b: 259) and O'Leary (2005: 39-41) note that the nature of online pagan rituals did not alter significantly between 1996 and 2005.

example, replication of the methods that I utilise will be able to identify any significant changes in the general area of Hinduism on the WWW.<sup>20</sup>

There are also other reasons why I believe that an effective study goes beyond merely being a snapshot in time and these are unrelated to my arguments above. For example, my online research enables me to directly consider contemporary Hinduism in a number of different ways which are not solely dependent upon the online situation as it currently stands. Furthermore, I demonstrate that a consideration of the online situation and Hinduism in the light of a number of sociological theories also contributes to the understanding of contemporary Hinduism. In doing this, I am also able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of three sociological theories. Again, insights are not just dependent upon the current online situation. In addition, the study investigates a number of theoretical issues such as the suitability of the online environment for Hinduism, and such an analysis is dependent largely upon the general nature of cyberspace. Therefore, whilst the changing nature of the WWW is fully acknowledged, it is not regarded as being especially problematic. This study certainly constitutes more than a snapshot in time.

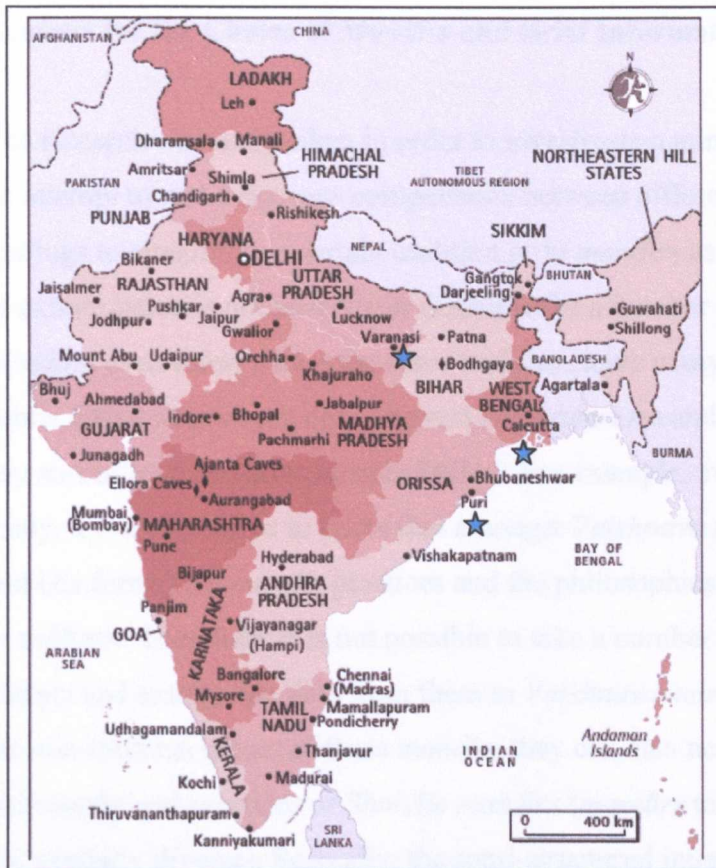
## Offline Methodology

Fieldwork was carried out between July 9 and September 20, 2005 in India, in the cities of Kolkata (West Bengal), Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) and Puri (Orissa) (see Fig. 6.1). The primary research tool used was the semi-structured interview. These interviews are the link between the online and the offline research as issues that arose from looking at

---

<sup>20</sup> Against the objection that the Internet is in a constant state of flux and that this means that studies are mere snapshots in time, I would also point out that no area of social life is fully static. For example, even Selltitz *et al.*, when talking about rigorous survey design which aims to have a high degree of reliability, argue that, of course, 'independent but comparable measures of the same object (or attitude, or whatever) should give similar results' but then add that 'provided of course, that there is no reason to believe that the object being measured has in fact changed between the two measurements' (Selltitz *et al.* 1962: 148). Then there is always the attendant problem of distinguishing true change from unreliability (Bohrnstedt 1983: 80). This demonstrates that pointing to the online situation and saying that it cannot be adequately researched because it is constantly changing is unfair – traditional offline studies also have to deal with issues concerning the object of study changing, although in the quest to demonstrate the reliability of a study this is often not explicitly recognised. In this research, one of the objects of study is the actual online situation which, as emphasised, is subject to change, and this is sociologically significant.

the online situation were then able to be investigated in depth. Observation at *mandirs* was also carried out.



**Fig. 6.1** Map of India<sup>21</sup> showing the locations of the three cities where fieldwork was carried out (Kolkata here written as Calcutta, the former name)

There were two different focuses for the research. Firstly, websites which offered an online *puja* service were investigated. Secondly, the situation occurring at various *mandirs* and the views of high-ranking officials at these *mandirs* were examined.

Documentary research (see McNeill 1990: 108-112) was first undertaken (through recourse to literature provided by *mandirs*, and websites) in addition to consulting relevant academic books, both in order to identify suitable *mandirs* for the research and to learn more about these *mandirs* and their principal deities. Detailed knowledge was necessary as there are links between, for example, the nature of the deity and the views of the *mandir* officials regarding its image appearing online. I will now give reasons for the choice of the *mandirs* featured in this research. The reasons for the choice of the

<sup>21</sup> Source: *RoughGuides.com – Travel (India)*.

websites whose owners I interviewed are also mentioned in the following section as key reasons are related to those behind the choice of *mandirs*.

### **Reasons for the Choice of *Mandirs* and Brief Information about Them**

The research was undertaken in order to investigate a number of issues and there was no attempt to make rigorous comparisons between different *mandirs* or to extrapolate findings to *mandirs* in a certain tradition or to *mandirs* as a whole. Such a comparison or extrapolation is not possible or desirable for a number of reasons. Firstly, all *mandirs*, even those within the same tradition, have many and varied subtle and not-so-subtle differences which defy any sort of comparison and make any attempt to obtain any sort of representative sample futile.<sup>22</sup> For example, even outside this realm of study, it is not possible to claim that amongst *Vaishnava mandirs* (*mandirs* to *Vishnu* and His forms) the *mandir* practices and the philosophies of the committees are similar or uniform. Therefore, it is not possible to take a number of *Vaishnava mandirs* as a sample and extrapolate data from them to *Vaishnava mandirs* as a whole. Because of the non-uniform nature of these *mandirs* they can also not be compared to the philosophy and practices of *Shaivite mandirs* (*mandirs* to *Shiva* and His forms) (which are similarly diverse). Secondly, the semi-structured interview method which was used in this phase of the research (see below), and which is essential in order to elucidate the plethora of diverse subtle and complex views, also does not favour direct comparisons. Thirdly, for this study it was essential that questions were tailored according to the specific features of each *mandir*'s practices and prevailing philosophy. Therefore, the situation at the *mandirs* that were studied should be regarded as being case studies (see Platt 1988).

Nevertheless, *mandirs* should not be seen as discrete from one another. In my interviews other *mandirs* were often mentioned by informants, and it is clear that in some sense there is a relationship existing between different *mandirs* even if it is

---

<sup>22</sup> Although my sample was not representative, responses were obtained from *mandirs* representing the three main devotional traditions within Hinduism: four were *Shaivite mandirs*, two were *Vaishnava mandirs* and three were to *Devi*. Research was also carried out at a *Hanuman* (the 'monkey god') *mandir*. There is thus a similarity with Morinis's sample in his (1984) study of pilgrimage in West Bengal, which, although also not representative, deliberately features *mandirs* representing the three main devotional traditions (see Morinis 1984: 2-3, 8-9).

oppositional. Therefore, attitudes to issues surrounding Hinduism and the Internet are not just relevant to specific *mandirs* – they are also relevant to the situation that exists between different *mandirs*, and this relationship will be affected and will evolve as a result of the different views concerning Hinduism and the Internet. Therefore, the individual case studies actually make up a ‘multi-site’ case study (Burgess *et al.* 1994; Bryman and Burgess 1994). A study of each *mandir* would have sociological value, but when considered in relation to the other cases, more can be learnt.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth pointing out here that overall, the diverse research findings give rise to complex patterns. It is not possible for example to say that *mandirs* which do not allow foreigners will have one view of the Internet, and those which do allow foreigners will have another view. While the individual *mandirs* cannot be directly compared in a scientific way, there are interesting comparisons to be made between them and this is especially the case when they are somehow related. Despite the fact that generalisations cannot be made from the findings, they can still be used as examples for examination in the light of the relevant theories. Furthermore, because these examples show that certain developments are possible, they go beyond only being of relevance to specific *mandirs*, and instead have wide implications for this study even if the selected *mandirs* do not constitute a representative sample. For example, some *mandirs* are putting an image of their deity online and this is a new development within Hinduism which has wide-ranging implications. In this respect, the fact that the *mandirs* that do this are not representative is not important. Platt (1988: 11) makes a similar point in her general discussion of the value of case studies, as do Vásquez and Marquardt (2003: 9) who conduct case studies in order to study religion in the Americas.

As it was impossible to get a representative sample of *mandirs*, instead, *mandirs* had to be chosen carefully, and there was a clear rationale behind this choice. Locations, and *mandirs* in these locations, were carefully selected so as to best explore this project’s concerns. To provide good case studies, *mandirs* needed to be important or have characteristics that were especially relevant to this research. Issues of practicality also needed to be taken into account. For example, ideally I needed a location where owners of websites offering a *pūja* service were residing which also contained *mandirs* of pan-

---

<sup>23</sup> Therefore there are similarities to Burgess *et al.*’s study of four schools where ‘the data in each case study could be compared with that in other case studies, so as to produce four studies in one, and one study from four’ (Burgess *et al.* 1994: 143).

Indian importance. Kolkata and its environs fulfilled this criterion. The websites *Ashirbadee* and *Kaalighat* have owners living within easy reach of central Kolkata and were chosen for the research because they consistently appear high in search engine rankings when relevant search terms are used.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the practical aspect of having both *mandirs* and website owners in the same location, there was another clear advantage. Not surprisingly, the chosen websites actually offered *pujas* at the *mandirs* in and around Kolkata. This made such a location even more relevant to the research as issues surrounding the process could be explored.

### *Kolkata and Around*

Kolkata contains the *Kalighat mandir* (to the goddess *Kali*) which is of pan-Indian importance, and in and around Kolkata there are also other important *mandirs*. *Kalighat mandir* (see Fig. 6.2) is undoubtedly the most important *mandir* in Kolkata and is said to have given rise to the city's name (see Choudhury 1988: 1) and to have resulted in the spread of *Shaktism* [the 'Mother Goddess' tradition] 'throughout Northern India' (Choudhury 1988: 10). It is situated in South Kolkata in an area that also bears its name. The *mandir*'s primary importance lies in the fact that it is considered to be one of the *shakti pithas*. A *shakti pitha* is a place where, it is said, a body part of *Sati* (the 'Mother Goddess', or *Devi*) landed when her dead body was being carried around by *Shiva* in a rage of grief and was cut up by *Vishnu* in order to try to bring *Shiva* back to his senses. It is claimed that *Sati*'s right toe<sup>25</sup> landed somewhere in the vicinity of the current *Kalighat mandir* (Sinha 1972: 62). The construction of the current *mandir* was completed in 1809 but there was a shrine there prior to this (Choudhury 1988: 5-6). It is an extremely popular *mandir* where offerings are performed on behalf of customers by the owners of the websites offering an online *puja* service that I interviewed. Furthermore, it is by far the most popular *mandir* amongst the customers of these websites.

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, *Kaalighat* is ranked 1<sup>st</sup> when 'puja service' is used as the search term and at 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> when 'Tarapith' (a *mandir* in West Bengal) is used. *Ashirbadee* is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> when this *mandir* is used as the search term and ranked 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively when 'Dakshineswar' and 'Kalighat' (two *mandirs* in Kolkata [see below]) are used (on April 16, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Or toes (see e.g. Harding 2004: xxviii).



**Fig. 6.2** *Kalighat mandir, Kolkata*

*Dakshineswar mandir* (see Fig. 6.3) situated at the northern extremity of Kolkata is also dedicated to *Kali*. Like *Kalighat*, this *mandir* also attracts pilgrims from Bengal and from further afield. Construction of the *mandir* begun in 1847 and was completed eight years later (Harding 2004: 163-164). Unlike *Kalighat*, *Dakshineswar* does not have a mythology stretching back into antiquity. Instead it is famous for having been the *mandir* where the mystic Ramakrishna acted as a *pujari* and, it is believed, offered such god-felt devotion to *Kali's murti* that *Kali* became a living presence at the *mandir* and has remained ever since. The *mandir* is therefore extremely popular amongst those who revere *Kali*, and amongst those who revere Ramakrishna who is regarded by many as being an *avatar*. Within the *mandir* compound there are a number of other important subsidiary *mandirs* (most notably the *Vishnu mandir* and the twelve *Shiva mandirs*).



**Fig. 6.3** *Dakshineswar mandir*

Kolkata's ISKCON (*International Society for Krishna Consciousness*) *mandir* is situated on the first floor of an unassuming building in a residential street (Albert Road) (see Fig. 6.4). It was chosen because of ISKCON's status as a NRM (New Religious Movement) which meant that the *mandir* and the views of the authorities there had the potential to offer a good comparison with non-NRM Hindu *mandirs* and views. Furthermore, concerning the issues under investigation in this project, the ISKCON *mandir* can serve as a case study of a *mandir* of one Hindu NRM. ISKCON is a suitable choice in this respect for two main reasons. Firstly, they embrace the Internet and were one of the first organisations to anticipate its importance and to have an online presence. For example, as mentioned in chapter 1, Bainbridge (1997: 151) and Barker (2005: 67) note that ISKCON were already using the Internet in 1995, and I had noticed in 1997 that they already had relatively sophisticated websites. Secondly, ISKCON's quest to become more 'mainstream' which involves engagement with Hinduism as a whole in countries with a large population of diasporic Hindus such as the UK (see Nye 1996; 1997) and their competition with other groups with similar aims is also played out on the Internet (see chapter 7).

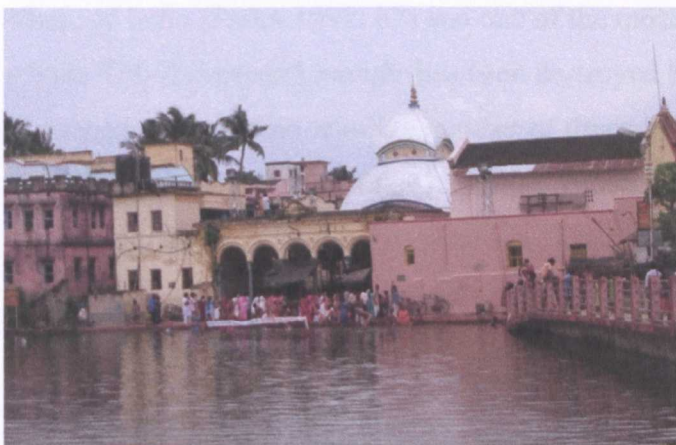
ISKCON, then, provides an extremely interesting case study of a Hindu NRM and can suggest ways in which a relatively small group can both exploit the Internet and be threatened by it. Therefore, it was important to get the views on various issues concerning Hinduism and the Internet of a high-ranking ISKCON official. Because ISKCON has a hierarchy and encompasses a number of *mandirs* which are bound by the same philosophy – unlike Hindu *mandirs* in general – there are unlikely to be differing opinions from officials at different ISKCON *mandirs*. However, as ISKCON *mandirs* are relatively autonomous on a day to day basis, the websites from different *mandirs* are not standardised and some do not have websites even though, as mentioned, the Internet has been embraced by ISKCON.





**Fig. 6.4 ISKCON Kolkata**

I chose to conduct research at the *Tarakanath*<sup>26</sup> *mandir* (see Fig. 6.5) because it is of specific relevance to the project as it is one of the *mandirs* at which the *Kaalighat* website offers a *puja* service. This issue was brought up in my interview with the manager of the *mandir*. Research there was also of special interest because there was the unusual situation of a video screen inside the *mandir* which allowed those whose view of the *murti* was blocked off to receive *darshan*. This is of relevance to the study because it indicates that, according to the *Tarakanath mandir* authorities, the screen is not a barrier to *darshan*. The *mandir* to *Tarakanath* is situated in the town of Tarakeswar in West Bengal, 58 km north of Kolkata's Howrah railway station.



**Fig. 6.5 Tarakanath mandir, Tarakeswar, West Bengal**

<sup>26</sup> *Tarakanath* is considered to be a manifestation of *Shiva*. For the legend of *Tarakanath* see Chakrabarti (1984: 11-15); Morinis (1984: 78-81).

The reasons for choosing the other locations and *mandirs* featured in this research were as follows:

### *Varanasi*

I chose to conduct research in Varanasi due to its status as arguably *the* most important Hindu pilgrimage destination, which means that it contains a number of important *mandirs* which are of pan-Indian importance. Therefore, I was confident that the situation in Varanasi would make an especially worthwhile ‘multi-site’ case study. Furthermore, in Varanasi there is the interesting and important ‘*Vishwanath* situation’.<sup>27</sup> This comprises the *Vishwanath mandir* (also known as the *Kashi Vishwanath mandir*) and the other *mandirs* that have been set up in direct opposition to this *mandir* (the *New Vishwanath mandir* [*Mir Ghat*<sup>28</sup>] and the *New Vishwanath mandir* [BHU<sup>29</sup>]). The case studies of the three *mandirs* involved offer more than just a ‘multi-site’ case study where they can be compared with each other. Because the different cases actually make up the controversial ‘*Vishwanath* situation’, they also contribute to a larger overall case study.

The *Vishwanath*<sup>30</sup> *mandir* (photograph unavailable due to tight security measures around the *mandir*) is, undeniably, the most important *mandir* in Varanasi. The city radiates out from this *mandir* both geographically and spiritually, and its significance cannot be overplayed. It is widely accepted as being the prime *Shiva mandir* in the whole of India (Fuller 1992: 37) and one of the most important *mandirs* in India as a whole. The *Vishwanath mandir* has been destroyed by Muslims on a number of occasions and has been rebuilt a number of times in the vicinity of where it currently stands. The current *mandir* (also popularly known as ‘The Golden Temple’) was built in 1785 and its spires were gold plated in 1835 (Mitra [ed.] 2002: 92-95). The unassuming *New Vishwanath mandir* (*Mir Ghat*) (see Fig. 6.6) is situated in a narrow alley-way near to the *Vishwanath mandir*. It was set up by ultra-orthodox *Brahmins*

---

<sup>27</sup> The ‘*Vishwanath* situation’ turns largely on questions regarding access, and, as indicated in chapter 3, such questions are of key importance to this study.

<sup>28</sup> *Mir Ghat* is the name of the area where this *mandir* is located.

<sup>29</sup> Benares Hindu University

<sup>30</sup> The ‘specialisation’ of the *Vishwanath* deity (a form of *Shiva*) is the bestowing of *moksha* (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 39).

who believed that the *Vishwanath lingam* had been rendered impure after the ban on members of the scheduled castes entering the *Vishwanath mandir* was lifted in 1956 (see Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 15-16; Eck 1993: 135) (foreigners are still prohibited from entering the *Vishwanath mandir*). In contrast, the large and impressive *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) is set in spacious well laid out grounds (see Fig. 6.7) on the campus of the Benares Hindu University (BHU). This *mandir* was set up because its founders did not agree with the *Vishwanath mandir*'s restrictive entry policy and wanted to create a *mandir* that was open to everyone. The foundation stone was laid in 1931 and the *mandir* was completed in 1966.



**Fig. 6.6** Entrance to the *New Vishwanath mandir (Mir Ghat)*, Varanasi



**Fig. 6.7** *New Vishwanath mandir (BHU)*, Varanasi

The reason for the choice of the specific *mandirs* in Varanasi that are not part of the ‘*Vishwanath* situation’ is that they are major *mandirs* of Varanasi that are visited by *Banarsis* (residents of Varanasi) and large numbers of pilgrims throughout the year. They were chosen as a result of prior knowledge and documentary research. The *mandirs* chosen were the *Sankat Mochan mandir*, the *Annapurna mandir*, the *Durga mandir* and the *Kedar mandir*.

The importance of the *Sankat Mochan mandir* and the *Annapurna mandir* is confirmed by Eck who claims that along with the *Vishwanath mandir*, they are generally considered to be the most important *mandirs* in Varanasi: ‘Sankat Mochan is one of Kāshī’s three most important temples in the eyes of most Banārsīs, ranking behind only Vishvanātha [*Vishwanath*] and Annapūrṇā’ (Eck 1993: 264).

The *Annapurna mandir* was built in 1725 (Mitra [ed.] 2002: 96) and is situated very close to the *Vishwanath mandir* on the other side of *Vishwanath Gali* (lane). As the Mother Goddess, *Annapurna* (Fig. 6.8 [photography of the *mandir* not allowed for security reasons]) is the *Shakti* of *Shiva*. *Annapurna* means ‘She of Plenteous Food’ and it is believed that because of Her grace nobody ever dies of starvation in Varanasi (Eck 1993: 160-162). She also ‘specialises’ in bestowing wealth (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 39).<sup>31</sup>



**Fig. 6.8** *Annapurna giving food to Shiva*

The *Sankat Mochan* (‘Remover of suffering’)<sup>32</sup> *mandir* (Fig. 6.9) situated near to the BHU campus is dedicated to *Hanuman* and is associated with the sixteenth century poet

<sup>31</sup> For the legend of *Annapurna* see Vidyarthi *et al.* (1979: 297-298).

<sup>32</sup> In addition to removing obstacles and suffering, it is believed by devotees that the deity has the power to bestow offspring (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 39).

Tulsi Das who received *darshan* of *Hanuman* in a forest where the *mandir* now stands. It is extremely popular with *Banarsis* and pilgrims despite the fact that it is not mentioned in the Sanskrit texts dealing with *Kashi* (Eck 1993: 263).



**Fig. 6.9 Sankat Mochan mandir, Varanasi**

The *Kedar mandir* (to *Shiva*) and the *Durga* (a form of *Devi*) *mandir* were also chosen for the research because of their importance in Varanasi. Unfortunately, the officials of the *Kedar mandir* refused to co-operate with the research.<sup>33</sup> During the whole course of the fieldwork they were the only ones to adopt this position. Officials at the *Durga mandir* were unable to be contacted, and therefore only observation was able to be carried out at this *mandir*. Although I would have obviously liked a response from these two *mandirs*, fortunately out of all of the *mandirs* in Varanasi at which I wished to conduct research, the *Kedar mandir* and the *Durga mandir* are, despite their importance, arguably the least important. For example, they are not directly part of the ‘*Vishwanath* situation’ or in the top three *mandirs* mentioned by Eck. Furthermore, concerning the *Kedar mandir*, it is clear that it occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in the sacred geography of the city. For example, although it is mentioned in the *Puranas* (Eck 1993: 142) and it is *said* to house a *jyotilingam* (Mitra [ed.] 2002: 82), its *lingam* is not mentioned in the usual list of the twelve *jyotilinga*. It is also ‘ignored by pilgrims on the *Panchatirtha Yatra*’ (Abram *et al.* 2003: 311) (the *Panchatirtha Yatra* is ‘the most popular’ pilgrimage route taken by pilgrims who visit Varanasi [Mitra [ed.] 2002: 105]) and this can go some way to explaining why, according to Vidyarthi *et al.* (1979), only 5.8% of the pilgrims that they surveyed had

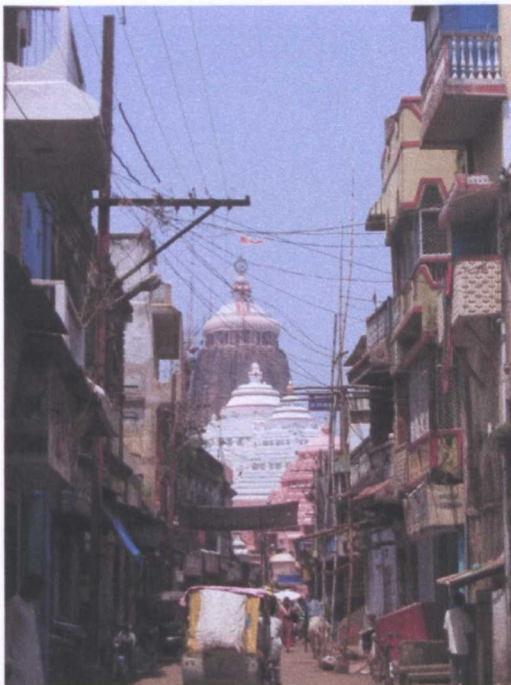
---

<sup>33</sup> Such reactions are, of course, common in social research (see Sanders 2005: 73).

visited the *Kedar mandir* (compared to 100% who had visited the *Vishwanath mandir*) (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 136-137).

### ***Jagannath Mandir, Puri***

The *Jagannath mandir* (see Figs. 6.10 and 6.11) in Puri was chosen for three key reasons. Firstly, like the *Vishwanath mandir* in Varanasi it is one of the most important *mandirs* in India. Secondly, it has a very strict policy of not allowing foreigners to enter the *mandir* compound; and thirdly, it has an official website. The *Jagannath mandir* is extremely large and was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Gupta 2002: 57; Tripathy 2003: 4). The main deities residing there are *Jagannath* (an aspect of *Vishnu*) (see Fig. 6.12) along with His brother *Balabhadra* and His sister *Subhadra* (Gupta 2002: 50). Further details concerning *Jagannath* and the *Jagannath mandir* are given in chapter 8 as they are relevant to the issues discussed there.



**Fig. 6.10** *Jagannath mandir, Puri*

Fig. 6.11 Jagannath on his chariot during the annual Rath Yatra festival (photo courtesy of Ranjan Ganguly)



**Fig. 6.11** Entrance to the *Jagannath mandir*



**Fig. 6.12** *Jagannath* (on His chariot during the annual *Ratha Yatra* festival) (photo courtesy of Ranjan Ganguly)

### Structure of the Mandir

Name	Position
Mr. K. N. Singh	President of the Managing Committee
Mr. K. N. Singh	Trustee and Administrator
Mr. K. N. Singh	General Manager (and Serves of 10 years) Manager
Mr. K. N. Singh	Additional Chief Executive Officer
Mr. K. N. Singh	Representative elected by K.N. Singh (Manager)
Mr. K. N. Singh	Executive Manager
Mr. K. N. Singh	Honorary Official
Mr. K. N. Singh	Member (Spiritual Head) of the <i>Asraya Chakravarthi</i> <i>Samiti</i> (D)
Mr. K. N. Singh	Officer-in-Special Duty

## Details of the Primary Research Method Used

For the first part of the research, two interviews were carried out in Kolkata with the individuals responsible for the websites that offered an online *puja* service (Nabin Pal of *Ashirbadee* and Sanjay Basu of *Kaalighat*).<sup>34</sup> For the second part, ten interviews were carried out with high-ranking officials from *mandirs* in Kolkata, Varanasi and Puri.<sup>35</sup> The names and status of the informants at the *mandirs* are as follows:<sup>36</sup>

**Table 6.1 Details of the Informants at the *Mandirs***

Mandir	Name	Position
Kalighat	Ajoy Kumar Mitra	President of the Managing Committee
Dakshineswar	S. Ghosh	Trustee and Administrator
ISKCON Kolkata	Ashraya Gauranga Das	General Manager (and devotee of 10 years)
Tarakanath	M.K Bhattacharyya	Manager
Vishwanath	D.S. Pathak (assisted by S.S. Pandey, Trustee)	Additional Chief Executive Officer
New Vishwanath (Mir Ghat)	Dr. Parmananda Mishra	Representative chosen by K.N. Singh (Manager)
New Vishwanath (BHU)	Professor R.C. Panda	Honorary Manager
Annapurna	Anonymous	Honorary Official
Sankat Mochan	Veer Bhadra Mishra	<i>Mahant</i> (Spiritual Head) <sup>37</sup> of the <i>Acarya Goswami Tulsi Das</i> <sup>38</sup>
Jagannath	Bhaskar Mishra	Officer-on-Special Duty <sup>39</sup>

The two different focuses of the fieldwork (interviews with website owners and interviews with high-ranking *mandir* officials) do not constitute discrete lines of enquiry and there are overlaps between them. Findings from the interviews with owners of websites offering a *puja* service were analysed alongside the findings from the interviews with the *mandir* officials, insights gained through observation at the

<sup>34</sup> These individuals were contacted via details given on their websites.

<sup>35</sup> All of the interviewees were men, which, in the case of the *mandir* officials, is simply down to the fact that these positions are rarely held by women.

<sup>36</sup> All of the informants gave permission for their names to be used. The exception was at the *Annapurna mandir* where, for religious reasons, the informant preferred not to give his name.

<sup>37</sup> A *mahant* can be compared to an abbot in the Christian monastic tradition.

<sup>38</sup> The institution responsible for the *mandir*.

<sup>39</sup> Bhaskar Mishra is also one of three people responsible for the text of *Swagatam Jagannath Dham* (the official *Jagannath mandir* website – see chapter 8).



*mandirs*, and the findings from the online research. Focusing on central questions, all of this was then considered in the light of those theories presented in the thesis.

I first gave my informants a formal letter of introduction which appeared to enhance both my credibility and their willingness to participate in the research.<sup>40</sup> All of the interviews<sup>41</sup> were held at a location which was of the interviewees' choosing, and it is possible that this encouraged the interviewees to talk more freely (Gillham 2000: 8). Nabin Pal (*Ashirbadee*) was interviewed at his apartment in a housing estate in South Kolkata, while the interview with Sanjay Basu (*Kaalighat*) was conducted at my lodge and at a nearby restaurant. Interviews with *mandir* officials were conducted inside the *mandir* compound itself, at the *mandir* offices situated nearby (see Figs. 6.13 and 6.14 for pictures of two prominent *mandir* offices), or, in the case of Veer Bhadra Mishra of the *Sankat Mochan mandir*, at his home.



**Fig. 6.13** *Kalighat mandir* administration offices above the main entrance to the *mandir*



**Fig. 6.14** 'Sri Jagannath Temple Office', Grand Road, Puri

<sup>40</sup> This observation backs up Gillham's claim that 'there are bonuses in "formality"' (Gillham 2000: 9).

<sup>41</sup> The average length of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes.

Textbook descriptions of desirable interview conditions which require a room with a conducive atmosphere where there is little noise or interruptions (Benjamin 1981: 2-4), and in which there is an optimum level of physical proximity and an angle of 90 degrees between the interviewer and the interviewee (Gillham 2000: 32-33), were laughable in the face of the reality in India<sup>42</sup> and there was no option but to adapt. The interviews were semi-structured, being based around a number of key issues (Brooks 1989: 242-243; McNeill 1990: 23; Gillham 2000). This type of interview technique was used in order to allow the informants to talk in detail, although I was careful to remain in 'control' (Gillham 2000: 1, 4, 45). I also used 'probes' (Gillham 2000: 14, 46-52) as part of the interview technique. This had the potential to open up other avenues of research that I had not previously considered. Furthermore, sticking to a rigid schedule of questions was not appropriate as respondents' answers often cut across specific questions. Where possible (see below), the interviews were recorded<sup>43</sup> and transcribed shortly afterwards. Overall, the technique appeared to be successful and enabled me to gather a great deal of rich data.

### *Further Points Concerning the Interviews with the Mandir Officials*

I had a number of prepared questions for the interviews that were concerned both with views concerning Hinduism and the Internet and with the current situation and future plans of the respective *mandirs* in relation to the Internet. For the reasons mentioned above, questions were not necessarily used in a direct manner. I then consulted my list of questions towards the end of the interview in order to make sure that nothing important had been missed. Some informants preferred to have a copy of a list of my questions in front of them and in these instances the interviews were more structured. One informant followed questions in Hindi translation, which I had provided, while still answering in English. In a few cases recording was inappropriate or impractical<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> For example, at the *Annapurna mandir* I conducted the interview in the *mandir* courtyard sitting directly next to the interviewee while he distributed food to visitors.

<sup>43</sup> The Olympus DS-2 Digital Voice Recorder was used for this. The high quality of this recorder meant that the high level of background noise that was common during some of the interviews did not turn out to be especially problematic.

<sup>44</sup> For example, it was not possible to record the interview conducted at the *Annapurna mandir* (located near to the *Vishwanath mandir*) due to the afore-mentioned strict security measures in place in the *Vishwanath* area which meant that I could not take the voice recorder to the *mandir*.

and in these instances notes were taken contemporaneously and written up more fully immediately after the interview. One informant preferred to have a list of questions and furnished me with a written response a few days later. There were some differences between the questions that were asked allowing for the specific circumstances at the *mandirs* that were covered and, as mentioned, this necessitated prior documentary research.

### ***Further Points Concerning the Interviews with the Owners of Websites Offering a Puja Service***

Online research revealed that a prominent feature of Hinduism on the Internet is that there are a number of websites which offer the opportunity to order a *puja* to be performed at a *mandir* in India (I also noted in chapter 1 that this service has been mentioned in academic literature and in the media). I wanted to learn about these websites, the rationale behind them, and the practical procedures which were undertaken at every stage of the *puja* process from the initial order to the completion of the procedure. This allowed me not only to find out about and to describe these processes, but also to discover whether there were any innovations occurring which constituted a modification of Hindu ritual practice. This is of central importance to the study. Furthermore, the implications of the findings could then be looked at in the light of the theories presented in the thesis.

It was not possible to conduct more than two interviews with owners of websites offering a *puja* service, and it goes without saying that there can be no claim to representativeness – for example both of the websites that were investigated were set up by individuals, while there are also organisations that have similar websites. However, as in the case of the *mandirs*, these websites are able to serve as case studies, and findings are not just restricted to these websites and can actually contribute to the overall conclusions arrived at in this study. Furthermore, as mentioned, those interviewed offer a *puja* service for some of the *mandirs* considered in this study, and this has wide-ranging implications. Again, the fact that the websites are not representative does not negate this claim.

During the interviews with the website owners I was constantly aware that these informants may not be altogether honest in their answers. Both informants obviously

wanted their websites and practices to be shown in a good light. Therefore, claims that they were making little or no money cannot be taken at face value. Even if this is the case at the moment, Basu was keen to expand his website, and Pal did not rule out the possibility of making his service a primary business concern in the future. The personal views of the informants dictated the practical procedures which constituted the whole *puja* process and, while again, it is possible that the respondents are not telling the truth regarding this, there are not really any grounds for questioning whether the procedures are occurring. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to note that these respondents had certain interests, and some of their claims regarding successes etc. may be exaggerated or even not entirely true. Indeed, this was the impression that I got during the interviews and when re-reading the transcriptions. However, this does not interfere with the general findings.

### **Research Inconveniences**

There were no real problems encountered during the research. Rather, there were simply inconveniences which arise in any research project. However, there were some inconveniences that were unique to India, or were more pronounced in India.

On many occasions I made trips to *mandir* offices for appointments only to find that the person with whom I was supposed to meet did not come. Many uncomfortable hours were spent travelling to offices and waiting until an interview was finally able to be conducted. On one occasion I was told that a meeting with an official would be arranged for me at the ISKCON headquarters at Mayapur and when this did not materialise I went there anyway but was unable to conduct the interview there. This trip took up a whole day – although my observation that large numbers of Indian Hindus were visiting the *mandir* there (see chapter 4) meant that the day was far from wasted.

There were also problems with phone numbers that did not work. In addition to this, the available maps of Kolkata were poor and this was problematic at times. There is also the added problem in Kolkata that many streets have an old name and a new name but these are used inconsistently.

In Varanasi and Puri the Internet was often so slow that it was not possible to look at more than a couple of websites in a session, and in Varanasi in particular it was often

not possible to even get a connection. In Varanasi there were also power cuts for at least half of every 24 hour period and this was inconvenient especially as it was extremely hot. When it rained there was a temporary reduction in heat, but this usually resulted in flooding which was both inconvenient and unpleasant (see Fig. 6.15).



**Fig. 6.15 Walking through floodwater in Varanasi**

Overall though, the problems and inconveniences largely paled into insignificance and there are some aspects of being in India which facilitate research. For example, in Kolkata taxis are very cheap and were a good way to get around. People in India are generally also very helpful and this helped to smooth the research. People I met on trains were also interested when they learnt of my research, and this gave me the opportunity to discuss the subject with them. Furthermore, and most importantly, the *mandir* officials were generally excellent. They were usually enthusiastic about the research and often went out of their way to be of assistance to me even though they had more pressing concerns.

# Chapter 7 – Mapping Hinduism on the WWW

## Introduction

In this chapter I first present data concerning Hinduism on the WWW as this is, essentially, the base of the whole project. I follow this by considering in more detail the websites of the *Saiva Siddhanta Church* (SSC) which are identified as being of importance. In both cases discussion accompanies the empirical data. This is because, as explained in the previous chapter, unlike traditional research methods, the method of data collection that I use cannot be separated from the data that is collected. This chapter gives a good impression of Hinduism on the WWW, and this is subjected to full analysis in the next chapter.

## The General Area of Hinduism on the WWW

As has been emphasised in chapter 1, there is an extremely large number of Hindu-related websites. When I conducted a *Google* search on October 26, 2005 using the search term ‘Hinduism’, there were 6,440,000 ‘hits’. Despite this, as I have indicated in the previous chapter, I am able to give an overview of Hinduism online. This is achieved through the consideration of ‘prominent’ websites<sup>1</sup> and the online situation that these websites give rise to (what I referred to in the previous chapter as the ‘general area of Hinduism on the WWW’).<sup>2</sup> These websites are the key to an analysis because not only are they encountered when searching for Hinduism using a search engine, but they are also important because their prominence is such that they are continually encountered when searching the WWW for Hindu-related websites. In fact, as will be revealed, linkages are related to search engine rankings, and this results in a positive feedback system whereby prominent websites become even more prominent. This explains why there are a relatively small number of organisations/individuals that have prominent websites. Nevertheless, although this situation can be understood, it

---

<sup>1</sup> The actual websites that I regard as being prominent will be indicated below, as will the exact criteria used to determine this.

<sup>2</sup> The ‘general area of Hinduism on the WWW’ described below has similarities to that of Islam on the WWW. This demonstrates that the Hindu online situation is not unique, and the fact that Islam and Hinduism are markedly different religions suggests that the general online situation for other religions is also likely to be similar. The features that Islam on the WWW shares with Hinduism on the WWW are highlighted in Appendix 2.

can still appear extraordinary that out of so many Hindu-related websites, there are a few small organisations or a few individuals whose websites repeatedly appear while exploring Hinduism on the Internet. I will also demonstrate that some organisations actually have a number of prominent websites.

Aside from the number of links which can affect a website's search engine ranking, it is also important to note that the actual links between websites are highly significant. One reason why this is the case is that links from prominent websites, where they extend to other websites not belonging to the same organisation, are often to the other websites which are also prominent. Furthermore, when the prominent websites link to websites that are not prominent, they tend to link to websites which approach Hinduism from a similar viewpoint. In addition to this, links from 'objective' organisations (such as the BBC) often lead to websites of those organisations that are prominent on the WWW and this not only increases the credibility of a website, but it also actually helps in its *Google* search engine ranking. This is because keyword relevance is not the only criterion which is used by the *Google* search engine.<sup>3</sup> For example, according to *Google*, in addition to text analysis, a major way to determine the value of a website is through the number of links there are to the website, and so this criterion is also used. However, *Google* staff also analyse the websites which offer links and assign them a level of importance. Therefore a link from a BBC website is considered to be more significant than a link from an obscure website and this contributes to the website appearing higher up in the *Google* search engine rankings. This also means that if an organisation or individual creates a large number of bogus links to its page then this will have no real impact on its search engine ranking (see [google.com/technology](http://google.com/technology); see also [marketleap.com/linkpopularity](http://marketleap.com/linkpopularity)).

Although the complex way in which the prominent websites are linked to each other is bewildering at first, after research over a period of months, the general area of Hinduism on the WWW can be comprehended and subjected to analysis. However, I first wish to emphasise the point made in the previous chapter that although a

---

<sup>3</sup> Therefore the strategy described by Dawson and Hennebry whereby websites are launched with 'unusually long and diverse lists of keyword search terms' in order to make sure that the website 'will appear when requests are made' (Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 160) is largely ineffective (although it might have been effective when a version of this chapter first appeared in 1999). Mayer also refers to strategies employed in order to try to achieve high search engine rankings for websites (Mayer 2000: 255) and to the fact that the managers of search engines attempt to counteract this (Mayer 2000: 261).

discussion of the prominent websites on the WWW and their relationships to each other can provide a good overview of Hinduism on the WWW, it is also important to note that there are, of course, a huge number of other significant and important websites that are not prominent. Examples of such websites will therefore also be considered in this chapter after the general overview. However, the fact remains that in a consideration of the online situation, it is the analysis of the prominent websites and their links which can go a long way to providing an overview of Hinduism on the WWW. For the general searcher or surfer a small number of organisations have almost monopolised the realm of the WWW which deals with Hinduism, in a highly effective way. Not only does an investigation of this provide a picture of the online situation, following a theme of this project, it is also important to realise that the online situation can affect the offline situation. Therefore, an analysis of what is actually out there on the WWW is extremely important.

Admittedly, those Hindu organisations that are prominent on the WWW are not necessarily those that are the most prominent in the offline world.<sup>4</sup> However, it is the very fact that a group or individual's online presence is not comparable with their offline presence that is significant because, as I will demonstrate (especially in the case of the SSC), a strong online presence can lead to increased credibility and influence in the offline world – i.e. previously insignificant groups have the potential to become significant as a result of their presence on the WWW.

I will now present the process that I undertook in order to identify the 'general area of Hinduism on the WWW':

### **Search Engine Results**

On November 13, 2004 and October 26, 2005<sup>5</sup> I typed 'Hinduism' into five popular search engines with the rationale being that someone interested in Hinduism and who sought information about it on the WWW would be likely to choose one or more of

---

<sup>4</sup> Bunt makes a similar point regarding Islamic organisations (see Bunt 2004: 127).

<sup>5</sup> These dates were chosen for the following reasons: The first date was chosen as it was the earliest point that I could conduct such a search. Prior to this, I was coming to terms with my area of research and formulating a research plan suitable for researching the online situation. The second date was chosen as it was approximately one year after the first search which I feel is a reasonable amount of time which promises to highlight any significant differences between results.



these search engines and perform this task (see chapter 6). Search engine rankings are highly significant as search engines are the starting point of any general search on the WWW. Because of this, those responsible for websites in any field usually seek to make sure that their websites appear high in search engine rankings. As mentioned above, although this may not have been the case in the past, questionable activities on the part of those responsible for websites are unlikely to result in a high search engine ranking, and instead the key is to ‘offer good content and features’ to naturally increase links to the website (see *marketleap.com/linkpopularity*).

In the following tables of results which show the websites that were ranked in the top ten, cells containing those websites of organisations or individuals that have websites that appear at least three times in total, are coloured. This makes it clear to see that there are a small number of organisations/individuals whose websites populate the top ten across the different search engines. These websites are the ‘prominent websites’.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 7.1 Search Engine Results for November 13, 2004**

Rank	Google	Yahoo!	AlltheWeb	Ask Jeeves	MSN
1	hindunet.org	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	hindunet.org	religioustolerance.org/hinduism
2	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism	hinduism.co.za	hinduism.co.za	hinduismtoday.com
3	himalayanacademy.com	hinduism.about.com	hinduism.about.com	indiadivine.com	geocities.com/9410/hindu
4	hinduism.about.com	hindu.org	hinduismtoday.com	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	hinduism.about.com
5	hindu.org	eh.sc.edu	geocities.com/9410/hindu	hindu.org	hindunet.org
6	hinduismtoday.com	atributetohinduism.com	hindunet.org	himalayanacademy.com	geocities.com/7153/hinduism
7	giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism	hinduism.co.za	geocities.com/7153/hinduism	d.umn.edu/~thats/hindu	beliefnet.com/index
8	bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism	hindunet.org	beliefnet.com/index	hinduismtoday.com	sacred-texts.com/hinduism
9	hinduism.co.za	hinduismtoday.com	giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism	atributetohinduism.com	kamat.com/hindu
10	atributetohinduism.com	geocities.com/9410/hindu	sacred-texts.com/hinduism	hindukids.org	himalayanacademy.com

<sup>6</sup> Aside from search engine ranking, three further indicators (see below) are used to justify this categorisation.

**Table 7.2 Search Engine Results for October 26, 2005**

Rank	Google	Yahoo!	AlltheWeb	Ask Jeeves	MSN
1	hindunet.org	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	wikipedia.org/hinduism
2	religioustolerance.org/hinduism	hinduism.about.com	hinduism.about.com	indiadivine.com	hinduismtoday.com
3	hinduism.about.com	bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism	hinduism.co.za	hindunet.org	sacred-texts.com/hinduism
4	himalayanacademy.com	eh.sc.edu	geocities.com/9410/hindu	hinduism.co.za	religioustolerance.org/hinduism
5	bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism	hinduism.co.za	wikipedia.org/hinduism	himalayanacademy.com	religioustolerance.org/hinduism.
6	hindu.org	geocities.com/9410/hindu	hindunet.org	hindu.org	hinduism.about.com
7	hinduismtoday.com	hindu.org	hinduismtoday.com	hinduwebsite.com/history	hinduismtoday.com
8	hinduism.co.za	atributetohinduism.com	bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism	hinduismtoday.com	himalayanacademy.com
9	gessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism	wikipedia.org/hinduism	giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism	iconsoftec.com/gita	hinduwebsite.com
10	wikipedia.org/hinduism	hindunet.org	sacred-texts.com/hinduism	kamakoti.org	geocities.com/9410/hindu

### Discussion of Search Engine Results Tables

The two tables show that there was very little difference in the results between the two search dates. The fact that the leading websites have largely been able to maintain their position over the period gives an indication of their prominence as it strongly suggests that, for the foreseeable future at least, they are here to stay.

In 2004 *religioustolerance.org/hinduism* was second in the *Google* rankings (out of 918,000 results), first in *Yahoo!* and *AlltheWeb*, fourth in *Ask Jeeves* (out of 852,200 results) and first in *MSN* (out of 260,763 results). A year later it was also second in *Google* (out of 6,440,000 results) and first in *Yahoo!* (out of 9,500,000 results) and *AlltheWeb* (out of 8,510,000 results). In *Ask Jeeves* it had dropped to fourth (out of 1,688,000 results) and while it had lost top spot in *MSN*, it occurred twice in the top ten, in fourth and fifth place (out of 1,256,888 results). *hindunet.org* is first in the *Google* rankings in 2004 and 2005. In the *Yahoo!* rankings it slips from eighth to tenth and in *Ask Jeeves* from first to third. However, it does slip out of the top ten in the *MSN* rankings altogether. *hinduism.about.com* has remained remarkably consistent over the period – a slight rise in the rankings of *Google*, *Yahoo!* and *AlltheWeb* and a slight fall in the *MSN* rankings. Overall, *hinduism.co.za* has also remained relatively consistent.

*bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism* and *bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism* have risen from two appearances to three, and *geocities.com/9410/hinduism* appeared three times in both searches.

The main difference between the two searches is the appearance in the search engine rankings of *wikipedia.org/hinduism*. Its appearance in the search engine rankings is certainly noteworthy and has resulted in other websites dropping out of the top ten. Whereas the *wikipedia.org/hinduism* website appeared four times in the 2005 search engine rankings despite the fact that it did not appear in 2004, *atributetohinduism.com* dropped from three occurrences in 2004 to only one in 2005 (position eight in the *Yahoo!* search engine rankings).

Aside from the consistently high rankings of *religioustolerance.org/hinduism*, the most striking feature of the results tables is the high incidence of websites from the SSC (*himalayanacademy.com*, *hindu.org* and *hinduismtoday.com*) (see below). Apart from *religioustolerance.org/hinduism*, the websites from this organisation are the only ones to appear in the top ten of all five of the featured search engines on both of the search dates. Furthermore, on some rankings, more than one website from this organisation appears. In 2004 the websites appeared third, fifth and sixth in the *Google* search engine rankings and in 2005 they appeared fourth, fifth and sixth. In the *Yahoo!* rankings the websites had gone down from two occurrences (at fourth and ninth) to one occurrence at seventh. In the *AlltheWeb* rankings this particular website still remained in the rankings (at seventh place compared to fourth). In the *Ask Jeeves* rankings there were three websites which occupied the same positions (fifth, sixth and eighth) although the order of the specific websites had changed, and in the *MSN* rankings there was an increase in the number of SSC websites that appeared. In 2004 there was one in second position, while in 2005 this website remained at number two; and two more websites from the same organisation also entered the top ten (at positions seven and eight).

Alone, these statistics might suggest that there are a relatively small number of organisations that inhabit the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. When a further three indicators are used and the results investigated, I am able to fully demonstrate that certain organisations are colonising the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. This is not just applicable to the general

seeker. Even those who choose to look up specific websites are likely, through links, to end up at a website from one of these organisations. As for those who are just seeking general information about Hinduism, they are certain to come across those websites of the relatively few organisations mentioned above. Therefore, the three further indicators that I use demonstrate why I classify these websites as ‘prominent’ websites. The three indicators are ‘search engine saturation’, ‘link popularity’, and the actual links that are revealed using ‘touchgraph’ mapping software which will be investigated.

### **‘Link Popularity’ and ‘Search Engine Saturation’**

‘Link popularity’ and ‘search engine saturation’ can be ascertained through software available at *marketleap.com*.<sup>7</sup> ‘Search engine saturation’ refers to the number of times that a website address appears in a search engine’s index. Although it is not necessarily related to search engine ranking, it is clear that if a website manages to ‘saturate’ a search engine, this gives an indication of its prominence (see *marketleap.com/saturation*).

‘Link popularity’ refers to the number of links from other websites that a website has, and, as mentioned above, this affects a website’s search engine ranking (see *marketleap.com/linkpopularity*). However, in addition to search engine rankings and ‘search engine saturation’, it also gives a partially independent indication of a website’s prominence. ‘Search Engine Saturation’ and ‘Link Popularity’ checks<sup>8</sup> for the already identified prominent websites were carried out on November 11, 2005 with the following results:<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> I was made aware of ‘marketleap’ through Højsgaard (2005: 53).

<sup>8</sup> ‘marketleap’ provides ‘search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’ figures for the following search engines: *Google/AOL, Hotbot, MSN and Yahoo!!FAST/AltaVista*. The aggregate numbers are shown in the table.

<sup>9</sup> In the following table, for clarity, the websites of a single organisation are coloured, using the same colours as in tables 7.1 and 7.2.

**Table 7.3 'Search Engine Saturation' and 'Link Popularity' for the Prominent Websites**

Website	Total Number of Indexed Pages ('Search Engine Saturation')	Number of Links From Other Websites ('Link Popularity')
<i>hindunet.org</i>	305,023	112,455
<i>hindukids.org</i>	325	4,685
<i>hindu.org</i>	642	31,936
<i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	57,973	28,578
<i>hinduismtoday.com</i>	35,526	24,749
<i>hinduism.co.za</i>	2,055	7,741
<i>religioustolerance.org/hinduism</i>	7	1,626
<i>hinduism.about.com</i>	106	1,041
<i>bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism</i>	1	1,610
<i>bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism</i>	4	0
<i>atributetohinduism.com</i>	2,315	5,830
<i>geocities.com/9410/hinduism</i>	1	108
<i>wikipedia.org/hinduism</i>	7	2

**Table 7.4 Total Aggregate Scores for Organisations Which Have More Than One Website Listed**

Name of Organisation	Total Aggregate Score for 'Search Engine Saturation'	Total Aggregate Score for 'Link Popularity'
Hindu Students Council (HSC)	305,348	117,139
Saiva Siddhanta Church (SSC)	94,141	85,263
BBC	5	1,610

These tables demonstrate that among the prominent websites there are two organisations (the SSC and the HSC) that have been far more successful than the others in saturating search engine indexes with their websites. The reason why some websites have a 'search engine saturation' figure of less than ten is that they are webpages within larger websites, while the others with a higher figure are homepages. The fact that those websites with such a small 'saturation' figure are still prominent Hindu-related websites further demonstrates the significance of those that have a high level of 'saturation'. The SSC and HSC also have by far the highest level of 'link popularity' out of all of the organisations having prominent websites, which again emphasises their pre-eminent position.

## 'Touchgraph' Link Maps

Now that the 'link popularity' of the prominent websites has been shown, I will explore the links from these websites in more detail.<sup>10</sup> Links are revealed through the use of 'Touchgraph' software,<sup>11</sup> and these links can then be followed manually and subjected to analysis. I produced the website linkage 'maps' ('touchgraphs') on October 26, 2005. They are presented in Appendix 1. Although they look complicated and have some nodes which partly overlap, I have studied them on a larger scale and followed the links. They have been included as an Appendix on a smaller scale as, even if they are not studied in detail, an overview can be gleaned if a reader takes a quick look at them. However, I will comment upon them fully here. On first mention of each website I will add very brief information about it. More details are provided about the prominent websites in table 7.5.

*hindunet.org* (see Fig. A1.1) is a huge portal website offering access to a large amount of Hindu-related material.<sup>12</sup> It is part of the Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN) which is a project of the HSC. *hindunet.org* links to other HSC websites, websites of associated organisations, and websites of organisations which share a similar ideological position to the HSC. There are also links to other websites that appear in the search engine results tables. For example, in one 'direction' *hindunet.org* links to *hscnet.org* (obscured on Fig. A1.1) which is the homepage of the HSC. *hscnet.org* then links directly to *hindukids.org* which is a teaching resource for children that is part of the GHEN. *hindukids.org* links to *rss.org* which is the website of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the fundamentalist Hindu organisation that the HSC is associated with. *hscnet.org* also links to *ekalvidya.org*<sup>13</sup> (which is concerned with

---

<sup>10</sup> Where a featured organisation has more than one website listed in tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3, I consider the links from only one of these websites. Therefore I analysed the links from 9 of the prominent websites.

<sup>11</sup> The software (available at *touchgraph.com*) is mentioned by Wakeford in her chapter dealing with online methodology (Wakefield 2004: 39-40), and is used by Helland (see 2004: 28).

<sup>12</sup> 'Visitors' to the website can listen to *slokas* (verses) from the *Bhagavad-gita* and *bhajans*. News stories concerning Hinduism are available and there are a number of sections: 'Hindu Resources', 'Kids and Youth', 'Women', 'Health and Lifestyle', 'Marriage and Family', '*Pujas* and *Samskars* (rites of passage)', 'Spiritual Tourism', 'Community', 'India', 'Hindu Shops', 'Multimedia' and 'Education'. There is also a popular message board at *hindunet.org/forum*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ekal Vidyalaya* is an organisation which provides education for underprivileged children.

social development in rural areas of India), to *hssworld.org* (the website of the US branch of the fundamentalist *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh* [HSS]), to *sanskrit.gde.to* (a resource for learning Sanskrit) and to *hindu-universiy.edu* (the website of the Hindu University of America).

In another 'direction', *hindunet.org* links to *hindu.org* (a directory of Hindu-related websites) which is one of the three websites of the SSC. From there, links extend to the other two SSC websites: *himalayanacademy.com* (the homepage of the SSC) and *hinduismtoday.com* (an online version of the SSC's magazine). From *hindu.org* there is a link to *hindulinks.org* (primarily a directory of *mandirs*)<sup>14</sup> which is another website of the HSC. *hindu.org* also links to *hinduism.co.za* (a huge resource containing information about Hinduism) – another website that appears prominently in the search engine results tables (7.1 and 7.2) above. Although it is not linked directly to *hindunet.org*, *religioustolerance.org/hinduism* which appears in the rankings for every search engine in both of the search engine results tables, is closely linked through other websites. It is a webpage concerning Hinduism which is part of the large *religioustolerance.org* website<sup>15</sup> which, in turn, provides information and articles about various religions.<sup>16</sup>

*religioustolerance.org/hinduism* (Fig. A1.2) is, not surprisingly, linked to other *religioustolerance.org* webpages. There is also a direct link to *bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism* (a BBC website that contains information about Hinduism) which features in the search engine rankings tables. It is directly linked to *hindu.org* which links to the other SSC websites which, as has already been demonstrated in Fig. A1.1 and is confirmed in Fig. A1.2, link to *hindunet.org*. In another 'direction' *hindunet.org* is also linked to *religioustolerance.org/hinduism*, as shown in Fig. A1.1. Again, it can be seen that *hinduism.co.za* is also closely linked to the websites under consideration.

---

<sup>14</sup> Over 1000 mandirs around the world are listed (more than 800 of which are in India). From this website there are also links to other HSC website webpages such as those dealing with Arts, Customs, Interfaith relations and History. However, there are many 'Bad Gateways' which means that access can be extremely problematic.

<sup>15</sup> According to Hadden and Cowan (2000: 19-20), this website is the most 'visited' religion website on the WWW.

<sup>16</sup> The other websites featured on the *hindunet.org* 'touchgraph' are not concerned with Hinduism and go beyond the boundaries of this project.

When *himalayanacademy.com* is used as the central node (Fig. A1.3), not only are the unsurprisingly clear links with the other websites of the SSC shown (the website names are partly obscured in the small ‘touchgraph’ presented in Appendix 1) but the aforementioned links to the HSC websites in more than one direction are also clearly demonstrated. There are also links to *hinduism.co.za* and *atributetohinduism.com* (a website set up by an individual offering information about Hinduism) – another of the prominent websites.

Fig. A1.4 contains the ‘touchgraph’ of *hinduism.about.com* (a large commercial portal website concerned with Hinduism). The website is linked to all of the websites which appear three or more times in total in the two search engine results tables (7.1 and 7.2) apart from *geocities.com/9410/hinduism* (a website which consists of an essay about Hinduism).

When *bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism* is used as the central node (see Fig. A1.5), the interesting nature of its relationship with other websites is clearly seen. Unsurprisingly, it links to other BBC websites and other websites of an educational nature. It also links to *hinduism.co.za*. This website is closely linked to *geocities.com/9410/hinduism* which appears a number of times in the search engine results tables. Although the BBC website links to a number of other websites, it is noteworthy that there are close links to *atributetohinduism.com* and *religioustolerance.org/hinduism*. Furthermore, there are direct links from these two websites to websites of the HSC and the SSC.

In Fig. A1.6 where *hinduism.co.za* is the central node, the links to the other websites mentioned above are clearly apparent. The only exception is that no link to *hinduism.about.com* is shown on this ‘touchgraph’. However, there is a close link as, in Fig. A1.4 where *hinduism.about.com* is the central node, there is a simple link via *hindu.org*.

On the *atributetohinduism.com* ‘touchgraph’ (Fig. A1.7) the links to the SSC websites and to the HSC websites are clearly visible and, as has been mentioned, there are strong links between these websites and the other prominent websites featured here.

The ‘touchgraph’ for *geocities.com/9410/hinduism* (Fig. A1.8) does not reveal many direct links to the websites mentioned above. However, there is a link through another



website to a webpage from *atributetohinduism.com*. There is also a link to the SSC's *himalayanacademy.com*, which, as has been demonstrated, links to all of the other websites mentioned.

On the 'touchgraph' that I produced for *wikipedia.org/hinduism* (an online encyclopedia article on Hinduism which is part of the overall website *wikipedia.org*<sup>17</sup>) no links were shown.<sup>18</sup> However, this indicates a problem with the 'touchgraph' software as this webpage does actually contain external links. Perhaps the fact that *wikipedia.org* does not encourage external links means that the website is set up in a certain way and this has somehow resulted in a blank 'touchgraph'.<sup>19</sup> On the actual website *wikipedia.org/hinduism*, aside from three references, there are 18 external links. It is significant that 7 of these links are to websites which appear at least three times in total in the search engine results tables (7.1 and 7.2) (the prominent websites): *atributetohinduism.com* (2 links to different webpages within the website), *bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism*, *hindu.org*, *hinduism.co.za*, *hinduismtoday.com* and *hindunet.org*.

---

<sup>17</sup> *wikipedia.org* is a free online encyclopaedia which first appeared on January 15, 2001 (see *wikipedia.org/history*). Anyone who wishes to can edit the various entries (see *wikipedia.org/wikipedia*). Therefore, entries are written collaboratively between various people, and the rationale is that, over time, the constant re-editing will result in a high standard of entries (see *wikipedia.org/welcome*). Because anyone can edit entries there is the danger that biases can occur within entries. This is especially important when it comes to religion. Cyberspace itself is a venue where different groups are seeking to put forward their strand of Hinduism as being representative of Hinduism (see below). However, *wikipedia.org/hinduism* actually represents a venue in itself, with various interested parties continually altering the text and attempting to put forward their view of Hinduism. For example, an ISKCON (*International Society for Krishna Consciousness*) slant can be identified, and amongst the external links there are links to a number to ISKCON websites.

<sup>18</sup> Therefore, this 'touchgraph' does not appear in Appendix 1.

<sup>19</sup> *wikipedia.org* actually discourages those editing entries from adding external links because, although there is the recognition that external links could be useful for readers, its founders do not want it to become like a Web-directory. There is even a preference for internal links over external links even if these internal links are to non-existent articles (the idea is then that someone will write an article which will then be subject to constant re-editing). Overall, adding external links is strongly discouraged, and if an editor feels the need to include an external link, *wikipedia.org* say that it should be to 'official websites' (see *wikipedia.org/external\_links*).

My central claim is not only that there are certain websites which appear high in search engine rankings (and may have a high level of ‘search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’), but also that these websites link to each other. This dense pattern of reciprocal links helps to explain the general area of Hinduism on the WWW.

The websites of the SSC are especially important in three ways. The first two have already been indicated. Firstly, I have shown that more than one of this organisation’s websites occur even if only one search is conducted (e.g. there are three in the top ten rankings of *Google*, *Ask Jeeves* and *MSN*). Secondly, as has been emphasised, even if one of the other websites which appears prominently in the search engine rankings is chosen by somebody searching the WWW, it is likely that they will be led to one of the SSC websites. Thirdly, I have mentioned that the SSC is responsible for *hindu.org* which is a directory of Hindu-related websites. Because this website is easily accessible and does not overtly appear to be linked to a specific group, there is no reason to suggest that the links that it offers will not be followed. An important note of caution about this, however, is that these links are provided with commentary reflecting the views of the SSC. This will be investigated below.

Before this investigation can begin, however, it is necessary to complete the picture of the general area of Hinduism on the WWW by describing the characteristics of the afore-mentioned prominent websites that are constitutive of this.

### **Classification of the Websites: Website Typologies**

Hindu-related websites are extremely diverse and it can be difficult to make sense of them. To a large extent this problem can be overcome through the use of a typology, although the complex nature of many websites means that a large number of them defy a rigid classification. Relating to religion in general, a number of scholars have attempted to devise a typology to aid in the understanding of the material that they have encountered on the WWW. Before considering specific Hindu-related websites it will be useful to discuss these typologies and to assess whether they can be useful in helping to explain the vast amount of Hindu-related material that is on the WWW. I conclude that a ‘loose’ typology can be more helpful than attempting to stick to a rigid typology. I then present my own typology in table 7.5.

## *Christopher Helland*

Christopher Helland (2000) was the first to propose a typology containing the useful distinction between 'religion online' and 'online religion'. For Helland, 'religion online' is religion 'from the top down'. Established religions with a hierarchical authority carry on in much the same way as their offline manifestations and seek to 'retain complete control over the belief system and present it to their practitioners without allowing for any reciprocal input from those receiving the message' (Helland 2000: 220). 'Online religion' is religion 'from the bottom up'. Individuals interact with religious belief systems; and beliefs are able to change and develop (see Helland 2000: 214-221; see also Dawson and Cowan 2004: 7).

## *Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan*

The modifications made to Helland's typology by Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan (2000) have resulted in a typology which is much more useful when looking at religion on the WWW. Hadden and Cowan also talk of the difference between 'religion online' and 'online religion'. For them, the first category essentially refers to the dissemination of information and resources concerning religion while the second category refers to actual participation in the religion (Hadden and Cowan 2000: 8-9). For example, for Hadden and Cowan, a website which merely offered religious literature and other information about the religion is a 'religion online' website while a website that allows for participation in a ritual is an 'online religion' website. However, many websites offer aspects of both 'religion online' and 'online religion'. Furthermore, as Maxwell notes, for some people, merely looking up information is considered to constitute the practising of religion. (Maxwell 2002: 349-350).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the general distinction between 'religion online' and 'online religion' is useful when religious websites and religious activity on the WWW are considered, especially if Young's advice to consider

---

<sup>20</sup> In his research, Maxwell also used a typology which distinguished between 'religion online' and 'online religion'. The first term was used to 'denote the various religious existences and manifestations in cyberspace *as a whole*', while the latter term referred specifically to 'those situations where persons are endeavouring to practise their religion in cyberspace'. This can be confusing because although the definition of the latter term is identical to that mentioned by Hadden and Cowan, the first term also encompasses 'online religion'. Maxwell himself admits that his typology is 'somewhat crude' (see Maxwell 2002: 349-350).

the two categories to be end points of a continuum, and not dichotomous, is kept in mind (Young 2004: 93-94).

### ***Anastasia Karaflogka***

Anastasia Karaflogka (2002) proposes a typology that has undergone a number of revisions. Her first typology divides religious websites up into four categories (which are not necessarily rigid): 'objective' (e.g. academic), 'official web pages', 'personal' (websites of individuals) and 'subjective' (websites of groups). Finding this to be insufficient, she devises a second typology which supersedes the first. She changes and reduces the number of categories to three (the sub-sections in each category are increased): 'academic', 'confessional' and 'subjective'. In her third and final typology which still contains the three categories, she distinguishes between 'religion on' and 'religion in' (which she refers to as 'cyberreligion'). The first category refers to online resources that can also be accessed offline. The latter refers to religious manifestations which are 'created and exist exclusively in cyberspace' (Karaflogka 2002: 285) (see Karaflogka 2002: 279-288).

Karaflogka's typology is of some use as it does detail certain categories which Dawson and Cowan's does not. However she only provides three categories, and they are extremely arbitrary. Her necessary revision perhaps suggests that attempting to categorise religious material on the Internet may be an endless task. Karaflogka's distinction between 'religion on' and 'cyberreligion' has similarities to Hadden and Cowan's distinction between 'religion online' and 'online religion' but is less helpful as it seems to suggest a link between 'online religion' (in Hadden and Cowan's terms) and religious manifestations that exist solely in cyberspace despite the fact that traditional religions may offer the opportunity to practise religion online. Therefore, in the course of this project, Hadden and Cowan's typology will be used and, importantly, it will be recognised that the terms are not dichotomous.

### ***Gwilym Beckerlegge***

As a further aid to understanding, general sub-categories will also be used and they will be based on Gwilym Beckerlegge's (2001c) categories found in his 'Summary of web site usage'. These ten categories can help to make sense of the diverse kinds of religious websites. Beckerlegge asserts that websites may provide:

- (i) information relevant to, or even necessary for, participation in religious activities and...act as general notice-boards;
- (ii) commercial and other services related to religious practice;
- (iii) information for inquirers and to support proselytism;
- (iv) a medium for support groups;
- (v) an arena for virtual, participatory religious activity, either as a complement or as an alternative to participation in religious activities in person;
- (vi) assistance in religious education and nurture;
- (vii) a platform for religious mobilization and dissent;
- (viii) means for linking together followers, whether in the immediate locality or globally;
- (ix) support for the study of religion. (Beckerlegge 2001c: 234)

These categories are clear and simple, and along with Hadden and Cowan's 'religion online/online religion' distinction offer a genuine aid to making sense of the diversity of Hindu-related websites as opposed to being part of an attempt to create a complicated all-embracing typology which is of little practical use. In asserting this I am in agreement with Maxwell who declares that, whatever is decided, 'The important point is not to split hairs about terminology or to insist that [certain] terms...be used only in particular ways. The point is to be aware of the diversity of contexts and motives in connection with religious resources online' (Maxwell 2002: 350).

### **Classification Used in this Study**

The following table (7.5) which provides a classification of the prominent websites from the search engine results tables (7.1 and 7.2) gives a good impression of their general characteristics. Hadden and Cowan's conceptualisation of 'religion online' and 'online religion' appears in column 1. Some of the other categories have come about through modifying and building upon those of Beckerlegge which apply to religious websites in general, while others I have created independently. The details are as follows: Columns 2 and 3 contain categories that I have created that I have found to be beneficial in attempting to classify Hindu-related websites. Column 4 contains one of Beckerlegge's categories, while columns 5 and 6 both contain an amalgamation and modification of several of his categories. The category in Column 7 is formed from one of his categories while that in column 8 has been taken from him. In Column 9 is another of my own categories that I have found valuable.

**Table 7.5 General Characteristics of the Websites of Organisations Having Websites Appearing at Least Three Times in Either of the Searches\***

Website	1. 'religion online' (R-O) or 'online religion' (O-R) or both†	2. created by individual(s) or organisation	3. academic/objective or political or neither	4. commercial e.g. religious items/services offered	5. offers info about Hinduism in general	6. primarily offers info about a particular group's philosophy	7. offers info about participation/general notice board	8. offers religious education	9. offers articles about Hindu current affairs
<i>hindunet.org</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither‡	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	
<i>hindukids.org</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither§	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>hindu.org</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
<i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
<i>hinduismtoday.com</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	
<i>hinduism.co.za</i>	R-O	Ind.	Neither††	No	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>religioustolerance.org/hinduism</i>	R-O	Org.	Ac./Ob.	No	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>hinduism.about.com</i>	R-O	Org.	Neither	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	
<i>bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism</i>	R-O	Org.	Ac./Ob.	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	
<i>bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism</i>	R-O	Org.	Ac./Ob.	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	
<i>atributetohinduism.com</i>	R-O	Org.	Ac./Ob.	No	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>geocities.com/9410/hinduism</i>	R-O	Ind.	Neither	No	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>wikipedia.org/hinduism</i>	R-O	Ind.	Neither	No	Yes	No	No	No	
<i>wikipedia.org/hinduism</i>	R-O	Org.	Ac./Ob.§§	No	Yes	No	No	No	

\* Again, for clarity, the websites of a single organisation are coloured, using the same colours as in tables 7.1-7.4.

† I have emphasised above that the categories of 'religion online' and 'online religion' are not necessarily dichotomous. However, a continuum cannot be adequately accommodated here, so websites which offer some level of online religion in addition to information etc. would be classified as 'both' in this category. In this table no websites are classified as 'both' (or as 'online religion' [O-R]) and this is significant (see below).

‡ However, although the website does offer a wide variety of diverse content, there is a Hindu nationalist current running through the website.

§ This website which is closely related to *hindunet.org* also has a nationalist slant.

\*\* However, the influence of the *Swaminarayan sampradaya* (the tradition of the Gujarati ascetic Swaminarayan [1781-1830]) can be clearly seen in some of the website's content.

†† The website is claimed to be an academic resource by the author and so represents one individual's opinion.

‡‡ However, this website consists of one essay by an individual and so represents one individual's opinion.

§§ However, on *wikipedia.org/hinduism*, because anyone can offer to edit the text (see above), the value of the information on the website is highly questionable.

## *General Characteristics Table Discussion*

(Category) 1. The striking feature of the table contents is that none of the prominent websites provides the opportunity to engage in online religion.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, websites which offer the opportunity to engage in online Hinduism are not especially common despite the fact that the media and academics often mention such websites (see chapter 1). For example, I looked at the afore-mentioned Hindu-related websites (identified by the relevant ‘touchgraph’ [Fig. A1.1]) that are linked to *hindunet.org*, and none of these websites offers online religion either. In addition to this I looked at a number of websites that, according to the relevant ‘touchgraph’ (Fig. A1.3), are linked to *himalayanacademy.com* but were not prominent websites. These websites were *karunamayi.org* (the website of Sri Karunamayi, a *Guru*); *ramakrishna.org* (the website of the *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York*); *kataragama.org* (the official website of the *Kataragama Guru Parampara* [a lineage in Sri Lanka]); *vedanta.org* (the website of the *Vedanta Society of Southern California*); *darshani.com* (a website of an individual who was a Wiccan and married a Hindu and converted to Hinduism) and *sacred-texts.com/hinduism*<sup>22</sup> (the Hinduism section of a large resource containing texts and information about a variety of religions). None of these websites provides the facility to engage in online religion either.

2. Websites from organisations predominate, although websites created by individuals also appear and are thus an important part of Hinduism on the WWW.

3. A quick look at the table appears to indicate that politics is largely absent from the area of the WWW analysed here. However, as I have indicated in the notes accompanying table 7.5, the HSC’s two GHEN websites are nationalistic to an extent. The portal website *hindunet.org*, although providing a great deal of information about Hinduism not necessarily related to nationalism, has an undercurrent of nationalism running through it. *hindukids.org* aims to teach children about ‘*Bharat*’ (the name for India generally favoured by Hindu nationalists), the country’s national insignia, and the

---

<sup>21</sup> *himalayanacademy.com* though offers an online course (see *himalayanacademy.com/study*). If religious study is equated with the practising of religion then this website does offer ‘online religion’. This is further evidence that there is not a strict dichotomy between ‘online religion’ and ‘religion online’.

<sup>22</sup> This website appears twice in both of the search engine results tables (7.1 and 7.2).

freedom movement in India. In addition to this, there is a high proportion of Hindu-related websites outside of the other GHEN websites to which *hindunet.org* and *hindukids.org* link that are political. Out of the six Hindu-related websites that were closely linked to in addition to the prominent websites (see above), four are overtly political, and three of them are directly related to Hindu nationalism. Overall though, objective resources are well represented in the general area of Hinduism on the WWW, as are those that do not have an overt political agenda.

4. Surprisingly, despite the rapid commercialisation of the WWW, aside from the HSC's GHEN websites, the SSC websites and the very commercial *hinduism.about.com*, the other prominent websites are devoid of any commercialisation. The general area of Hinduism on the WWW is thus relatively non-commercial. This is surprising as it is undeniable that for many, 'cyberspace is a commercial product to be economically exploited [and] used to open new markets of opportunity' (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 32). It could therefore be expected that individuals and organisations with commercial intentions would attempt to monopolise an area of the WWW which attracts a high number of 'visitors'. However, as yet, such monopolisation has not occurred. A possible reason for this is that many individuals or organisations with a commercial intent may simply be unable to usurp the prominent Hindu-related websites (the reasons why it is difficult to usurp prominent websites will be looked at in the next chapter). For example, aside from the prominent Hindu-related websites there *are* numerous Hindu-related websites which are commercial.

5. Every single website surveyed offered information about Hinduism in general, and this is perhaps unsurprising when 'Hinduism' is used as the search term. However, when links are followed, such general information may not be available. For example, when the Hindu-related websites mentioned in this section above that link from *himalayanacademy.com* are analysed, only two provide general information about Hinduism; and four only provide information about a particular group's philosophy.

6. Amongst the websites in the table, aside from offering information about Hinduism in general, only the SSC websites can be regarded as primarily offering information about the group's own philosophy. This is unsurprising as the SSC is the only religious group responsible for any of the prominent websites.



7. Aside from two of the SSC websites, none of the websites featured in the table gave information about participation or had a section which acted as a general notice board. One feature of the Internet is that it allows this facility, but it is entirely understandable that this feature is largely absent as it is best utilised by those who already belong to groups in order to gain information. Such groups do not necessarily need a prominent presence on the WWW. This therefore acts as a reminder that the analysis of prominent Hindu-related websites can only provide a general overview of Hinduism on the WWW and cannot probe the subject in detail.

8. and 9. The final two columns of the table reveal that some sort of Hindu religious education can be easily found online – as can articles about Hindu current affairs, and this observation contributes to the picture of Hinduism on the WWW.

## **The SSC and their Websites**

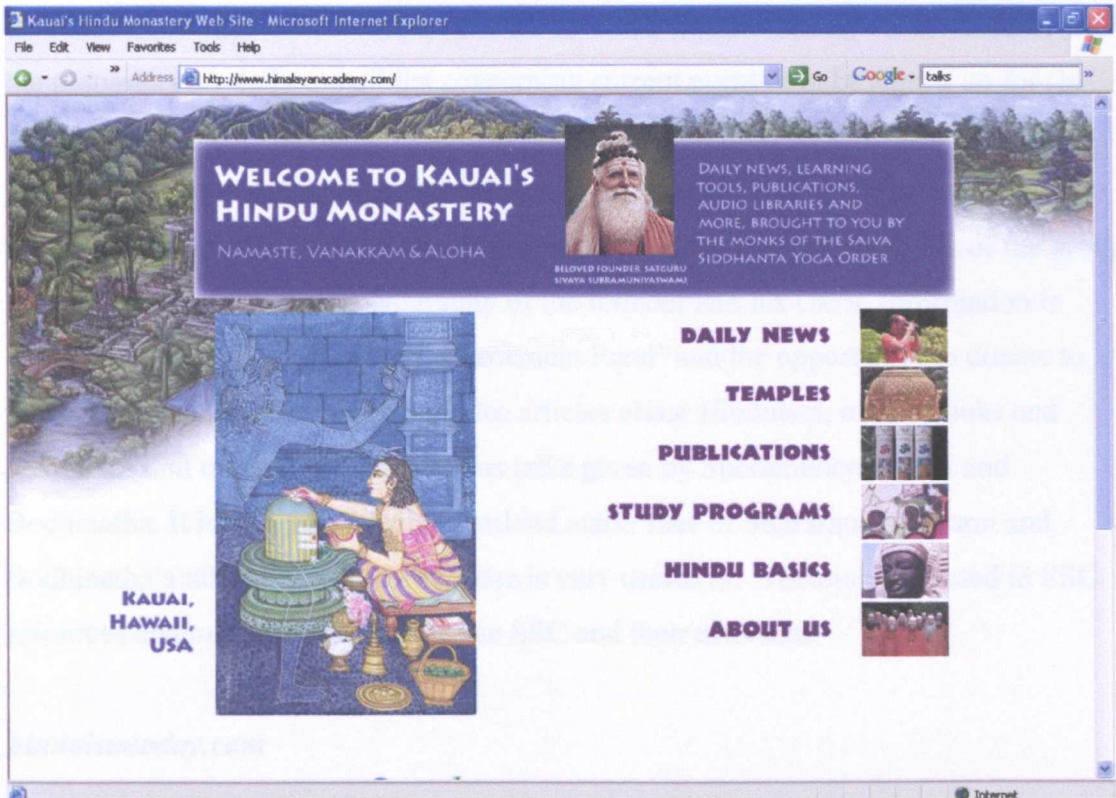
It should be clear from tables 7.1-7.4, the ‘touchgraphs’ and the accompanying discussion, that the HSC websites (especially *hindunet.org*) and the SSC websites are the most important among the prominent Hindu-related websites on the WWW. The scope of this project only allows me to consider the websites of one organisation in detail. I will describe and comment upon the websites of the SSC and the issues surrounding them, and further demonstrate the prominence of the SSC’s online presence by comparing it to that of ISKCON, another Hindu NRM (New Religious Movement) that has embraced the Internet. I chose to consider the SSC and their websites as this provides a good case study which allows me to approach (in chapter 8) some of the research questions that have been presented, particularly those in chapters 4 and 5.

### **The SSC: Origins and Aims**

In 1949, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001) – a former dancer of European descent from Oakland, California – was initiated into a Sri Lankan *Shaivite sampradaya* (tradition) by Sage Yogaswami in Jaffna and later the same year founded the SSC (Hudson 1996: 24, 50). The SSC established its headquarters on the island of Kauai, Hawaii in 1970 and is currently led by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami. The purported aim of the SSC is to ‘preserve and promote the Saivite religion’ and it claims

that it 'broadly serves the one billion-strong Hindu faith' (*himalayanacademy.com/ssc*). This is an extraordinary claim from a relatively recent monastic Order consisting of a small number of monks living on a Hawaiian island.

*himalayanacademy.com*



**Fig. 7.1** Homepage of the SSC's *himalayanacademy.com* (November 15, 2005)

*himalayanacademy.com* is the SSC's main website. It has been created, and is maintained, solely by SSC monks. It is aesthetically pleasing (see Fig. 7.1), technologically advanced and contains a large amount of content. Daily news (with photos) from the monastery is available, and this daily content is fully archived – with a full search facility. In addition there is a significant amount of information (some of which is in Finnish, Japanese and Tamil) about the large *mandir* which the SSC are currently building; and movies of phases of the construction are available to download. A DVD about the *mandir* project can be bought from the online shop, and a trailer of this DVD is available for free and can be downloaded. There is an opportunity to donate money, and it is possible to sponsor a stone used in the *mandir* construction. In the online shop, books (some of which are available in Braille) and other religious

items can be purchased. Free educational resources are available in the 'Resources for Parents and Educators' section in the form of downloads which consist of 'Interactive Digital Presentations for computer viewing or large screen classroom projection', and pamphlets.<sup>23</sup> Children's books can also be found in this resources section and they are also found in a section of the website devoted to children which contains an animation of 'mystic mouse' prostrating to a *Guru*. Also on the website is information about a home study course, and there is an invitation to males under the age of 25 to study at the monastery. A daily e-mail list concerning current events can be signed up for (in doing this the prospective recipient also receives a hard copy of an issue of *Hinduism Today* magazine [see below] in the post), and this leads to offers to sign up for other related e-mail lists. In the 'About Us' section the history and current status of the group are described, and there is a biography of the founder and his *Guru*. Information is given about the 'Hindu Heritage Endowment Fund' and the opportunity to donate to this is available. Other content includes articles about Hinduism, online books and pamphlets and transcripts from various talks given by Subramuniaswami and Bodhinatha. It is also possible to download audio files of Subramuniaswami and Bodhinatha's talks. Overall, the website is very useful for 'visitors' interested in SSC resources and/or information about the SSC and their activities.

### *hinduismtoday.com*

Although it offers substantial content, *himalayanacademy.com* can be regarded as the portal website to the other websites that the SSC is responsible for. One of these is *hinduismtoday.com* which contains the online version of the magazine *Hinduism Today*.

The SSC has published the magazine since January 5, 1979. It has the following six aims:

1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a 'unity in diversity' amongst all sects and lineages.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Educational resources are also contained in and advertised in *Hinduism Today* magazine (see below) where the relevant website address is also given (see October/November/December 2005: 16).

<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere Subramuniaswami similarly states that: '*Hinduism Today* was created to strengthen all the many diverse expressions of Hindu spirituality, to give them a single, combined voice because

2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism.
3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism.
4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion, especially the Nandinatha Sampradaya [the specific tradition of the SSC].
5. To nurture a truly spiritual Hindu renaissance.
6. To publish a resource for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. (*hinduismtoday.com*)

These aims clearly demonstrate that the SSC seeks to represent Hinduism through their activities and through their magazine. However, it is interesting to note that their 4<sup>th</sup> aim reveals that, although they wish to speak for all Hindus, it is their own tradition to which they give prominence (see chapter 8). Furthermore, despite their 1<sup>st</sup> aim which seeks to ‘foster Hindu solidarity... amongst all sects and lineages’, the SSC actually criticise those Hindu traditions that they are opposed to. They even go as far as to say that these traditions are not part of Hinduism. For example, in the October 1998 edition of *Hinduism Today* there is the following statement (which also appears on *hindu.org/teachers-orgs/identity* [see below]):

The organizations which are firmly in the Hindu camp are those that share responsibility for all Hindus. Those who have set themselves apart are not necessarily concerned with the promotion, protection and renaissance of our religion. Hindus need to educate themselves about organizations, and especially distinguish in their minds those, such as ISKCON, the Brahma Kumaris and TM [Transcendental Meditation], who have completely forsaken the Hindu fold to pursue an independent path. (*hindu.org/teachers-orgs/identity*)

Although TM may be unconcerned with such comments, ISKCON certainly would be concerned as they, like the SSC, see themselves as firmly belonging to ‘the Hindu fold’.<sup>25</sup>

---

everywhere else their voices were individualized. There was nothing that encompassed the whole Hindu experience around the world’ (see Melwani n.d.: online).

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Carey (1983; 1987); Knott (1986a; 1986b); Brooks (1989); Nye (1996; 1997); Zaidman (1997); Brzezinski (1998). It is also worth noting here that for pragmatic reasons and in opposition to

*Hinduism Today* has been a success in terms of the number of readers (see [hinduismtoday.com](http://hinduismtoday.com); [himalayanacademy.com/ssc](http://himalayanacademy.com/ssc); Melwani [n.d.: online]). This is largely as a result of support from Hindus in the diaspora, especially second generation Hindus, who are living in a non-Hindu culture and who have few resources for learning about and keeping in touch with their religion (Clothey notes that ‘there are no centrally coordinated agencies, hierarchies and educational programs’ [Clothey 1996: 136; see also Menski 1991: 33] and that this poses problems for Hindus in the diaspora). The magazine is published largely with this group in mind. Melwani reports that although other groups are also targeted, ‘A very vital contingent of Hinduism Today is the second-generation Indians growing up in foreign lands’ (Melwani n.d.: online). The magazine also contains a dedicated ‘Diaspora’ section (see e.g. October/November/December 2005: 6-8).

The Internet has allowed the SSC to place the magazine on the WWW, and whereas previously it was available online in HTML format one or two issues behind the hard copy, now it can be downloaded for free as a colour PDF version even before the magazine becomes available at newsagents. A Press Release publicised the fact that the April/May/June 2006 issue was the first to be available as a PDF version (at [hinduismtoday.com/digital](http://hinduismtoday.com/digital)) and that this version contains ‘rich media’ features which allow a reader to click on a website address and be directed to that website. Furthermore, ‘rich media’ enables ‘really cool’ features – for example, in the April/May/June 2006 issue, in addition to listening to the editorial (which is also available as a free podcast from the iTunes Music Store), a movie about a *mandir* can be viewed and Sanskrit chanting can be listened to. With this format the SSC ‘especially hope to engage the computer-savvy youth’ (HPI Press Release April 1, 2006). The magazine’s availability through the Internet has increased readership and means that the SSC are even better placed to represent Hinduism. This is in addition to their [himalayanacademy.com](http://himalayanacademy.com) website, and taken together this has resulted in this small group being able to wield influence and be a competitor in ‘who speaks for Hinduism’.

---

certain common ‘Hindu’ practices, Prabhupāda on occasion wished to distance ISKCON from Hinduism (see e.g. Prabhupāda 1982: esp.123). However, Brzezinski argues that Prabhupāda ‘felt he had been misrepresented as denying Hinduism entirely’ (Brzezinski 1998: 28), and the studies mentioned in this footnote clearly show that ISKCON should certainly be considered to be within ‘the Hindu fold’.

The extent of this influence became clear when their website announced that in 1997 they were approached by members of a Select Committee, who were preparing a report for the US President, for their views concerning the ethics of human cloning. Moreover, in March 2005 the Ford Foundation sponsored two members of the SSC to attend a meeting of the '50 most prominent religious editors in the US' (see [hinduismtoday.com/about\\_us](http://hinduismtoday.com/about_us)). Furthermore, when McDonalds were ordered by the courts to pay \$10,000,000 to various organisations as a result of not making it explicit that their fries contained beef, in July 2005 the SSC received \$254,733<sup>26</sup> (see [hinduismtoday.com/mcdonalds](http://hinduismtoday.com/mcdonalds)). This also gives some impression of their standing.<sup>27</sup> In addition to this, Melwani reveals that the UN is developing an 'Earth Charter', and as well as the views of scientists they are seeking religious views. In this connection, 'the UN committee has approached...[the SSC]...to help develop the Hindu representation for a panel of spiritual experts who can give voice to environmental ethics for the Earth Charter' (Melwani n.d.: online). The SSC has also wielded influence in the sphere of education. For example, according to Melwani, a large school textbook publisher in the USA showed two prospective chapters about Hinduism to the editors of *Hinduism Today*. The chief editor remarked that 'The two chapters were awful, devastatingly bad, even wrong in places. We ended up rewriting the whole thing, and also provided graphics'. The publishers then simply accepted these altered chapters as they were, and these chapters are now read by about half a million 13 year olds each year at school in the USA.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the SSC monks were invited by Harvard University to assist preparation of the Hinduism section of a CD-ROM aimed at high-school children (see Melwani n.d.: online).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> The HSC (see above) received \$500,000.

<sup>27</sup> It was largely as a result of *Hinduism Today* magazine which advocates vegetarianism that the SSC received the money from McDonalds. The money went to the magazine's endowment fund ('Hindu Heritage Endowment') (see [hinduismtoday.com/mcdonalds](http://hinduismtoday.com/mcdonalds)).

<sup>28</sup> In the USA (and elsewhere) the content of textbooks dealing with Hinduism has become an important issue for many diverse groups (see anon. [HPI] March 1, 2006: online; Hindu American Foundation (HAF) Press Release March 10, 2006; anon. [HPI] April 24, 2006: online). For example, various Hindu groups want Hinduism to be portrayed in a certain way, while academics argue that this can be politically motivated and that their reading of Hinduism is not based on the available evidence. This emphasises the significance of *Hinduism Today's* rewriting of the textbook chapters.

<sup>29</sup> The influence of the SSC can also be seen in more subtle ways. For example, Bhatt (1997) refers to *Hinduism Today* articles on at least ten occasions without providing any context for the magazine. Similarly, Smith (2003: 3) refers to an article from *Hinduism Today* in order to illustrate a point about

The third website belonging to the SSC is *hindu.org*. This website contains a directory of Hindu-related websites and its stated goal is 'to connect all Hindu organisations, leaders and resources'. In the directory there are a number of sections (such as 'Upcoming Events', 'Teachers and Organizations') and these are further divided into sub-sections. In the various listings, links to SSC websites are often prominent as well as being sprinkled throughout. Therefore, 'visitors' to *hindu.org* have a good chance of ending up at other SSC websites. Furthermore, in the directory there is a list of 'Hindu, Quasi-Hindu and Non-Hindu Organisations' in the section entitled 'Who Then Are the Hindus?' (*hindu.org/teachers-orgs/identity*). According to the SSC, this list was created in order to further their 'goal of giving people who are interested in Hinduism correct information and pointing them in the right direction'. The SSC is listed as a 'Hindu Organisation' along with the quote from Subramuniaswami: 'a traditional Hindu fellowship'. In the section 'Non-Hindu Organizations' are listed those groups already mentioned above: ISKCON, TM, and the *Brahma Kumaris*. Obviously the directory is far from objective but in addition to this, the SSC use quotes from the organisations themselves to try to reinforce the SSC view. For example, the ISKCON quote displayed by the SSC claims that ISKCON 'is neither Hindu religion nor any other religion'. This statement is intended by ISKCON to mean that their philosophy transcends dogmatic labels, but the SSC are claiming here that ISKCON should not be associated with Hinduism and that they themselves do not think they should be. However, as mentioned above, ISKCON are certainly a Hindu organisation, and a clear expression of ISKCON's view of themselves as Hindu appears on *iskcon.org.uk/ies/training* where it is stated that 'IES [ISKCON Educational Services] staff are all practising Hindus'.<sup>30</sup> The IES itself was established in 1991 'primarily to offer support to the educational world in its study and teaching of Hinduism', and one

---

Hinduism, and while he mentions that it is published in Hawaii, the special situation surrounding this magazine is not referred to. Beckerlegge (2001b) also refers to the contents of *Hinduism Today* without context and this gives the impression that the publication is 'mainstream' (elsewhere Beckerlegge does reveal that *Hinduism Today* is an online journal for the Hindu diaspora [Beckerlegge 2001c: 229-230] but this is also misleading as the offline situation of the SSC is largely ignored; and the fact that the magazine does not just exist online is also not made clear).

<sup>30</sup> Another example can be found on *iskcon.org.uk/ies/about\_us* where ISKCON claim that they are 'part of the Vaishnava tradition, one of the three principal strands within Hinduism'.

of its aims is ‘to serve the needs of the British Hindu Community’ (*iskcon.org.uk/ies/about\_us*). This is further evidence to suggest that ISKCON see themselves as being part of Hinduism.

The activities of the SSC are thus a clear example of one group using the WWW in a propagandist manner, and this is especially significant when ISKCON are involved as both groups are attempting to be influential in the realm of education, and are thus in competition with each other. The situation also provides an example of ‘cyberspace as contested space’ – with cyberspace being ‘simply one more venue in which struggles for dominance and authority in the real world are carried out’ (Cowan 2004: 257) – and has parallels with the online propaganda wars described by Introvigne (2000: 277-306; 2005: 106-113) (who describes the WWW as ‘an excellent place for spreading rumours, slander, and defamation against a given target’ [2005: 113]). See also Mayer (2000) and Cowan (2004).

### **The SSC’s Online Presence Compared to ISKCON**

The earlier general discussion concerning the SSC websites’ search engine rankings, ‘search engine saturation’, ‘link popularity’, and the links to other websites, suggested that the SSC is, by far, better placed on the WWW than ISKCON. A direct comparison with ISKCON confirms this.<sup>31</sup> For example, on November 13, 2004, *himalayanacademy.com* appeared third in the *Google* search engine rankings. However, the first ISKCON website to appear was the IES’s *iskcon.org.uk/ies/hinduism* which was at number 209 despite the fact that it is entitled ‘Hinduism’ in the *Google* search engine ranking listings. This strongly suggests that the SSC is harnessing the Internet in a far more effective way than ISKCON.

---

<sup>31</sup> Comparisons with other Hindu NRMs have not been made because these groups may not necessarily be seeking to represent Hinduism and so it is not appropriate or possible to directly compare their presence on the WWW to that of the SSC when using the search term ‘Hinduism’. In contrast to such groups, as the aims of the IES suggest (see above), ISKCON have sought to align themselves with Hinduism and to exert influence within Hinduism in general. Nye (1997) makes a similar observation. He reveals that ISKCON get involved in Hindu organisations in order to be able to have a say in how Hinduism is represented, and also notes their association with the Inter-Faith network for the UK. He concludes that this ‘suggests a new attempt to shape outsiders’ perceptions of Hinduism’ (Nye 1997: 11).



On November 13 and November 15, 2005 I again compared the online presence of the SSC and ISKCON, this time in more detail.<sup>32</sup> I compared *himalayanacademy.com* with *iskcon.com*, the official website of ISKCON (this was also the first ISKCON website to appear in the *Google* search engine rankings at this time).

**Table 7.6 Comparison of ‘Search Engine Saturation’, ‘Link Popularity’ and *Google* Search Engine Ranking for *himalayanacademy.com* and *iskcon.com***

Website	‘Search Engine Saturation’	‘Link Popularity’	<i>Google</i> Search Engine Ranking
<i>himalayanacademy.com</i>	59,608	30,168	6 <sup>th</sup>
<i>iskcon.com</i>	16,045	5,265	162 <sup>nd</sup>

Table 7.6 clearly shows that when *himalayanacademy.com* is compared to *iskcon.com* in terms of ‘search engine saturation’, ‘link popularity’ and *Google* search engine ranking, ISKCON is way behind the SSC when it comes to having an online presence. The advantage that the SSC has over ISKCON in this respect is further magnified when it is taken into account that there are the two other prominent SSC websites (*hindu.org* and *hinduismtoday.com*) (see above). However, ISKCON are not merely at a disadvantage in terms of the relative positions of the websites. As mentioned, The SSC actually criticise ISKCON on the WWW and accuse them of not being a Hindu organisation. In view of the prominence of the SSC websites this claim is very likely to be encountered by those seeking general information on the WWW about Hinduism and Hindu organisations.

### Summary

In summary, the SSC have been able to influence the perception of Hinduism not only because their websites are ‘prominent’ and thus highly likely to be encountered by those looking for information online about Hinduism, but also because they link to each other and to the other ‘prominent websites’.<sup>33 34</sup> Therefore, as a result of the SSC’s

<sup>32</sup> ‘Search Engine Saturation’ and ‘Link Popularity’ were checked on November 13, 2005. *Google* search engine ranking was checked on November 15, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> The links to the BBC websites are especially significant. For example, *bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism* offers five external links, two of which are to SSC websites. One of these websites is *hindu.org* which, as

position on the WWW they appear well placed in any attempt to assert themselves as a legitimate voice of Hinduism (much more so than when *Hinduism Today* merely appeared at newsagents – although at the time this was also a way to reach a wider audience)<sup>35</sup> because of widespread use of the Internet which is increasing exponentially. Indeed, it appears highly unlikely that this small Order of monks living on a Hawaiian island would be able to enjoy the influence outlined above if they had a non-existent or minimal presence on the WWW.

---

has been discussed, is a biased directory of Hindu-related websites on the WWW. As a resource, the BBC website is likely to attract a lot of 'visitors', and although the BBC does not take responsibility for the contents of external websites, the SSC websites are likely to be assumed to be reputable resources if they are directly linked to *bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism*.

<sup>34</sup> A further example to show how the SSC have a high profile on the WWW is that in the 'Hinduism' section (which contains information, articles, quizzes and sixteen discussion forums) of the highly popular *beliefnet.com* (a large website launched in 2000 'that encourage[s] interactive participation on issues relating to religion and morality' [Bedell 2000: 197]) there is 'A Summary of What Most Hindus Believe' (*beliefnet.com/story*). This summary is provided by the SSC. Moreover, in addition to merely linking to the important GHEN websites, the Hindi alphabet sub-section of the 'Learn' section of *hindukids.org* has actually been provided by *himalayanacademy.com*.

<sup>35</sup> In connection to the fact that the SSC have embraced the Internet and that their website is technologically advanced, it is worth pointing out that the SSC were 'pioneer[s] in the desktop publishing revolution, embracing the microchip revolution early and with gusto' and that they 'constructed the world's first desktop publishing network' (Melwani n.d.: online). Considering the history of the *sampradaya* that Subramuniaswami was initiated into, this is perhaps unsurprising. Arumuga Avalar (1822-1879), to whom Subramuniaswami is related in the lineage, 'developed modern means to communicate (his message) through the printed book' (Hudson 1996: 24), and his *murti* in India holds a book (Hudson 1996: 43-44).

# Chapter 8 – Deities *Omline*: World Wide Gods on the Web

## Introduction

In this chapter I begin by analysing the online situation outlined in the previous chapter – with special reference to the position of the SSC (*Saiva Siddhanta Church*) – using a rational choice model. Towards the end of this analysis I also mention a few relevant findings from the offline fieldwork, but on the whole the analysis is based upon the online situation. The presence on the WWW of the Kanchi *Math* (see below) and its supporters is then outlined in order to show, at a practical level, how Hinduism, the Internet, and globalisation, are intertwined. I then consider the SSC's online presence in the light of the notion of globalisation. This leads in to a section about challenges to religious authority that have occurred as a result of the Internet, which includes findings concerned with websites that offer a *puja* service. Then follows a section which looks at the issue of homogenisation/heterogenisation in which the *puja* service providers also figure. From this point onwards, the focus is on the empirical data from the offline fieldwork although, as this is related to the online situation, further details of the online situation are also given. I present contextual details concerning the *Jagannath mandir* and its deities, along with findings from my research there and relevant discussion. The *mandir* website is also described. Findings from this *mandir* are crucial to the analysis of the main themes of the project and the *Jagannath mandir* should be seen as a case study. Using the *Jagannath mandir* as the base for analysis I am then able to introduce data from the other *mandirs* where research was carried out, and thus findings and analysis are combined in the same discussion. The chapter ends with a consideration of views about online worship and the implications of the practice.

## Applying a Rational Choice Model to Hinduism on the WWW

Hinduism on the WWW described in the previous chapter and the position and activities of the SSC seem eminently suitable for analysis in terms of a supply-side rational choice model.<sup>1</sup> This involves examining website owners and managers as the suppliers of 'goods' or 'services' to consumers in an online market-place. First it is

---

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in chapter 5, RCT (rational choice theory) arguments concerning the 'psychology of general compensators' are not considered in this thesis.

necessary to ask to what extent the online environment is a free-market. The lack of state controls of the Internet, mentioned in chapter 4, implies that it is a free-market. The extremely large number of Hindu-related websites would further suggest that this was the case because RCT advocates that de-regulation and the corresponding free-market result in low start-up costs for new businesses and an increase in market vitality. However, upon closer inspection, the notion that the online situation constitutes a free-market is questionable.<sup>2</sup> Although it is true that there is a lack of regulation, the situation is more complex than this alone suggests. For example, as has been explained in chapter 2, there is a 'digital divide' which means that there are large numbers of people who simply do not have access to the Internet. Such an observation is usually made concerning consumers but it is just as valid when applied to producers. Furthermore, even if the online situation is investigated as it is, the idea that the Internet automatically brings about a free-market with low start-up costs is still highly questionable. For example, even though it might be relatively inexpensive to set up a website compared to performing other activities in the offline market-place, financial costs must still be incurred, especially if the website is comprehensive (which it will need to be to compete in the market-place).

There are also other start-up costs. For example, in order to achieve a strong presence on the WWW such as that obtained by the SSC, it is essential to appear high in search engine rankings, but achieving this involves huge costs. I have shown in the previous chapter that such a presence cannot be obtained in a short period simply through strategies such as having a large number of keywords that get picked up by search engines. Instead, in order to achieve a high search engine ranking, links must be established (especially with websites which are considered to be respectable and significant by staff of search engine providers). Moreover, the number of 'visits' to a website is also of extreme importance. Therefore, because such decisions are being made and the number of 'visits' is a factor in a website's position in a search engine ranking, it would be extremely hard to usurp the websites that currently occupy the top ten positions in the various search engine rankings. To do so would entail extensive start-up costs consisting of money, time and expertise. Even then, success would not be guaranteed for a group that could at least afford to enter the market in the first place.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is despite the fact that deregulation and a free-market were essential factors in the initial development of the Internet and the WWW (see Castells 2002; Whittaker 2002: 93).

This is because in the online market there are actually factors which are antithetical to a free-market. The best example of this is perhaps the fact that individuals who work for the search engine providers make decisions about the extent to which websites can be considered to be respectable and significant. Moreover, the fact that these decisions are likely to remain relatively stable over time is also important (for example, a BBC website is likely to be considered to be highly respectable and significant by staff who work for the search engine companies). Furthermore, most 'memorable domain names' (Bunt 2000a: 129), which are also important in the online market-place as they can help to increase the flow of 'traffic' to a website, are already taken. For example, the SSC utilise the highly desirable domain name *hindu.org*.

It is clear, then, that a religious group in India or elsewhere who decides now to have an Internet presence is unlikely to be able to compete easily with groups such as the SSC and the HSC (Hindu Students Council) who have expertise and resources in abundance, and who, crucially, have already cemented their place on the WWW. My detailed investigation of the online situation in chapter 7 has shown that these groups have almost monopolised the general area of Hinduism on the WWW.

It should perhaps be emphasised here that the situation of a newcomer entering the online religious market is entirely different from that of a newcomer entering the offline market. In this latter scenario, despite the fact that there will be large established groups which would appear to make it difficult for newcomers to achieve their goals, in this situation, rational choice theorists argue, there is at least a free-market where new groups can and do become successful (remember that Finke confidently asserted that: 'For unregulated markets, today's religious majority is formed from yesterday's minority' [Finke 1997: 51]). However, as has been emphasised, the online market is relatively unregulated but still subject to major constraints.

Overall it would appear that the RCT assumption that de-regulation automatically brings about a free-market is problematic. In turn, the fact that there is a huge number of Hindu-related websites and that their numbers are increasing rapidly despite the absence of a free-market, suggests that a free-market is not necessarily required for religious vitality. Therefore, when the online situation is considered, a distinction needs to be made between de-regulation and a free-market. The two should not be seen to be as inextricably related as RCT normally posits. In short, online, de-regulation appears

to result in religious vitality but does not give rise to a free-market. Furthermore, Finke's assertion that monopolies damage religious vitality, which is a key aspect of RCT, also does not seem to hold true for the online market. This is because although there is no state-sponsored monopoly online, to all intents and purposes the prominent websites *have* monopolised the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. Despite this, there is a large number of Hindu-related websites, and this number is also increasing. This is not suggestive of a lack of religious vitality online.

Although I have argued that there is not a free-market online, there is still an online market-place; and there is evidence that organisations are employing rational strategies in order to increase their market share.<sup>3</sup> This again shows that the rational choice model is useful when considering the online situation. It should be clear from chapter 7 that the SSC are enacting such rational strategies and that their methods appear to be highly effective. I have emphasised that they have a very strong presence online and that they also have influence in the offline world. It is not possible to empirically ascertain how much of their offline influence is attributable to their presence on the WWW. This is because, before the advent of the Internet, the SSC also competed in the traditional market-place, and now they continue to operate in the offline market-place. However, it is highly likely that their influence is boosted by their strong online presence. For example, it is unlikely that the US Select Committee would have contacted them if they did not have a credible presence on the WWW.

A key rational strategy is the investing of time and money in producing aesthetically pleasing, informative, and technologically advanced websites and other multimedia that can be accessed via the Internet. If this is looked at in more detail, the expertise that has been needed to achieve this has also involved an investment of time, money and dedication. In addition to this, crucially, the SSC were already well placed to adapt to the Internet environment as they were already at the forefront of computer technology since they used state of the art software to publish their magazine at a time when computers were not ubiquitous. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that this group has been able to grasp the opportunity afforded by the introduction of the Internet. At another level, through their websites other rational strategies can be easily ascertained –

---

<sup>3</sup> Those with websites that offer a *puja* ordering service (see below) provide another example of suppliers operating in the online market-place.

for example linking with other prominent websites and websites which have high status, creating directories of favoured organisations, and criticising other Hindu NRMs (New Religious Movements) in a way in which – to someone who knew little about Hindu groups – would not appear to be ideologically motivated.<sup>4</sup> These latter two tactics involve misleading potential ‘religious consumers’ which is, of course, entirely rational – at least in the short term – if an organisation wishes to increase its market share.<sup>5</sup>

Although I have argued that it is not possible to ascertain exactly how the strategies employed by the SSC to achieve a strong online presence have contributed to their status offline, if the strategies are assessed in terms of their performance in the online market only, there can be no doubt that they are extremely effective. This is so to such an extent that other Hindu religious groups are unable to compete with them effectively. Over time, this is likely to result in increased influence in the offline world.

The RCT assertion that religious suppliers act in a rational way clearly appears to hold true in cyberspace as well as in the offline world. My research also provided evidence of the fact that religious suppliers in the offline world are operating in a religious market-place. For example, in Varanasi two *Vishwanath mandirs* were set up in direct opposition to the original *Vishwanath mandir* (see chapter 6). The strategy of the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) of not discriminating against would-be visitors was designed to encourage visitors to attend there instead of at the original *Vishwanath mandir*. Furthermore, the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) was criticised by V. B. Mishra of the *Sankat Mochan mandir* who clearly saw his *mandir* in competition with it when he declared that it was ‘not a traditional temple’. V.B. Mishra added that ‘there are so many things being done in the name of religion and tradition...which are purely from the...professional point of view’, and this further suggests that there is a religious market.

---

<sup>4</sup> To gain a more balanced view, it is necessary for a ‘web-surfer’ to explore the field in more depth. However, as Bunt reasonably points out, ‘individuals with the time and inclination to “surf beneath the surface” may be few in numbers’ (Bunt 2000b: 140).

<sup>5</sup> The *Blessings on the Net* website also employs similar tactics and will be examined in more detail when I consider challenges to religious authority below.

For the purposes of this study, however, it is more relevant to look at examples which are concerned with the Internet to show that the RCT assumption of a religious market is correct. One such example is that it is entirely rational for *mandir* officials to want to retain control of their deities because, if an unofficial website displays them, then devotional activities and, just as importantly, donations, could be directed there and not to the deities residing at their *mandir*. At the *Vishwanath mandir*, for example, photographs of the *lingam* are forbidden but photographs are available for sale from street stalls. It is then possible that a photograph can find its way onto a website, and this has indeed happened (see below). V.B. Mishra insists that the *murti* at the *Sankat Mochan mandir* should not be photographed, and this insistence is entirely rational as it represents an attempt to retain control of the deity. Rationality in the offline market-place related to the online market is also evident in the case of the *Jagannath mandir* where the stated reason for having a website was that other famous *mandirs* – such as the *Ventakeswara mandir* at Tirupati and the *Vaishnodevi mandir* in Kashmir – already had websites (*tirumala.org* and *maavaishnodevi.org* respectively), and they did not want to be left behind.<sup>6</sup>

The application of RCT as a model has allowed a key conclusion to be drawn: The offline market-place and the online market-place are inextricably intertwined. However, I have argued that the latter is not merely an extension of the former because there are fundamental differences between them. While rational strategies are employed in both market-places, the de-regulated nature of the online market-place has not resulted in a free-market, although this has not damaged religious vitality. Because the two markets are related, it is likely that the online situation, whereby those who have a strong online presence are able to eclipse those that do not, could be mirrored in the offline world. This would especially be the case where institutions have no online presence at all. At the moment, prominent *mandirs* without an online presence may feel that, as a result of their status this will not happen, but it is worthwhile appreciating that throughout history the popularity of various *mandirs* does not remain constant. Rather, their popularity is related to a number of factors, and previously great *mandirs* have experienced spectacular declines (see e.g. Choudhury 1988: 157). Therefore it is certainly possible that *mandirs* could suffer as a result of not embracing the Internet.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dawson has identified such a ‘snowball effect’ whereby competitors are seen to go online and others feel that they cannot be left behind (Pacienza 2005: online).



For example, *Kalighat* is a *shakti-pitha* but, because its administration have no plans to have a presence on the WWW, it is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that it could one day be eclipsed by a currently relatively insignificant *mandir* whose administration embraced the Internet. A similar process has already occurred in the case of film. For example, *Santoshi Ma* was a relatively unknown goddess until a 1975 film resulted in her become extremely popular (Beckerlegge 2001b: 91; Smith 2003: 127).

RCT arguments concerning the strictness of religious groups in relation to Hinduism and the Internet will be discussed in chapter 9 where I highlight areas for possible future research.

### **Hindu-related Websites and Globalisation: Case Studies**

If online Hinduism operates in a market that imposes various constraints on suppliers – actual and would-be – it should also be recognised that this market is transnational and, in part, global. The next task then is to consider the online presence of a Hindu group in the light of globalisation (more wide-ranging globalisation issues which overlap clearly with issues regarding embodiment [such as those concerned with online worship] will be discussed when I consider my findings from the offline fieldwork below). As asserted in chapter 4, the decline in relevance of traditional borders, the fact that information can travel vast distances in a short amount of time which means that time and distance have, in a sense, been compressed, and that the Internet is a key factor in these developments, are the basic non-contentious core features of globalisation. Therefore, any organisation (or individual) with a Hindu-related website is operating within the context of globalisation. For example, Hindu-related websites are obviously dependent upon the Internet and are offering information which can be quickly and easily accessible around the world. Therefore, it is not necessary to specifically identify these characteristics when considering Hindu-related websites. Instead I want to analyse the role of the SSC's websites in globalisation at a higher level through recourse to the insights of some of the globalisation theorists outlined in chapter 4 which can throw light upon the processes that are occurring (the websites of the SSC are chosen as a case study because of their importance which has been demonstrated in chapter 7). However, before attempting this, it is worthwhile to briefly highlight a good example of how, at a practical level, a group of Hindu-related websites are

demonstrating that borders are now of little relevance and that space and time have been compressed.

### **Case Study 1: The Online Presence of the Kanchi *Math* and their Supporters: Crossing Borders and Compressing Space and Time**

The websites chosen to demonstrate the capacity to cross national boundaries and to compress time and space are concerned with the Kanchi *Shankaracharya*.<sup>7</sup> The Kanchi *Math* (also known as the *Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham*) has a vast official website (*kamakoti.org*) consisting of over 2000 webpages<sup>8</sup> which has been conceived and is maintained by a group of devotees.<sup>9</sup> I became aware of this website as a result of

---

<sup>7</sup> The current Kanchi *Shankaracharya* is Jayendra Saraswathi. His importance is demonstrated by the history of his lineage and contemporary accounts: The Saint Adi Shankaracharya was born in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD (see e.g. Gupta 2002: 15; Rao, S. 2003: 10) and through the founding of the philosophy of *advaita Vedanta* he contributed to the revival of Hinduism. He also founded four monastic Orders which still have their *maths* today (the largest *math* is in the city of Kanchi) and are thus part of a long and impressive lineage (see Gupta 2002: 15; see also Bhatt 2001: 184). The heads of the *maths* are known as *Shankaracharyas* and they are influential and revered by many. Jayendra Saraswathi has ‘millions of followers in India and abroad’ (anon. [IANS] November 12, 2004: online), has been described as ‘the biggest Hindu leader’ by the religion editor of *The Indian Express* (see anon. [AFP] November 15, 2004: online) (see also Smith 2003: 177), and Nathan writes that he ‘is one of the most powerful religious figures in the country’ and has influential political allies (Nathan 2004: online) (concerning the *Shankaracharya*’s political allies see also Bhatt [2001: 183-185]; anon. [AFP] [December 8, 2004: online]; anon. [IANS] [January 11, 2005: online]; anon. [AP] [January 19, 2005: online]). Cenkner highlights the high status of the Kanchi *Math* (Cenkner 1996: 52-67), notes that its *Shankaracharyas* over the centuries have been ‘formidable’ (pp. 59-60), and explains that Jayendra Saraswathi is extremely popular (pp. 60-63).

<sup>8</sup> The website contains information about, and the history of, the Kanchi *Math*. A number of downloads are available consisting of audio and video (over five hours worth) and images. There is also the facility to contact those responsible for the website in order to ask questions, and to be placed on a mailing list. The outstanding feature of the website is the large amount of written material available on it. For example, two large books are available online as well as a number of smaller books and pamphlets. In addition, there are a large number of articles written about the *Math* and the current and former *Shankaracharyas* at Kanchi. Aside from the large number of pages in English, a very small amount of content is in Telegu. Further content in Tamil is also available, but this is tiny compared to the content in English and only constitutes an additional feature. The website is completely devoid of advertisements.

<sup>9</sup> According to Smith, Jayendra Saraswathi is in favour of new technology and once stated that there should be an embracing of both the ‘culture of one’s own land and technology from abroad’ (see Smith 2003: 177). Therefore it is unsurprising that the Kanchi *Math* has embraced the Internet. Fig. A3.1 (Appendix 3) shows Jayendra Saraswathi and Vijayendra Saraswathi (see below) at the launch of the

‘surfing’ the WWW looking at various Hindu-related websites. It is not surprising that I came across it as it is one of the five websites to which *bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism* (see chapter 7) offers a direct link, and it appeared at position 10 in the *Ask Jeeves* search engine rankings on October 26, 2005 when the second of my two searches were carried out (see table 7.2). Shortly after my first visit an incident occurred that both shaped the website and caused related websites to appear. The processes that occurred demonstrate the core themes of globalisation and the Internet’s part in this.

On November 11, 2004 Jayendra Saraswathi was arrested on murder charges and imprisoned.<sup>10</sup> Within a short period, devotees started to mobilise support through websites, and this has continued up to the present time (August 8, 2006). Concerning *kamakoti.org*, this is the sequence of events:

- November 11 – November 17 (2004): *kamakoti.org* continued as if nothing had happened.
- November 18: The website was removed and ‘visitors’ were only able to see the following message on an empty background:

Praying for the security, safety, health and immediate release of His Holiness Pujyasri Jayendra Saraswathi Sankaracharya Swamiji, various prayer meetings, mass chantings of Vishnu Sahasranama Parayanam, Hanuman Chalisa, Kanda Sashti Kavacham and Veda Parayanam [hymns and prayers] are being held in several places, under the guidance of His Holiness Pujyasri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Sankaracharya Swamiji.<sup>11</sup> All devotees are requested to participate and offer prayers. Our email: [kanchimutt@kamakoti.org](mailto:kanchimutt@kamakoti.org).

- November 19: The website is up and running again – accessed through the webpage showing the afore-mentioned message. Shortly after, direct access is available again. There are some references referring to the current situation.

---

*Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation* (KKSF) (an organisation in the USA that is associated with the *Kanchi Math*) website.

<sup>10</sup> Bail was granted by the Supreme Court on January 10, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Vijayendra Saraswati (Jayendra Saraswathi’s junior) was also later arrested in connection with the same murder (see anon. [IANS] January 11, 2005: online; anon. [IANS] June 8, 2005: online).

- November 23: Only twelve days after the arrest a new website is available specifically dealing with the situation. Those on a mailing list are alerted to this fact. Meanwhile, the original website carries on as normal with some references to the current situation and with the link to the new website on its homepage.

The new website (*kanchi-sathya.org*) (*sathya* means ‘truth’ in Sanskrit) puts forward the view that the *Shankaracharya* has been unfairly treated. Furthermore, it is concerned about the media attention surrounding the case, which is seen as propagating lies. Amongst other facilities, *kanchi-sathya.org* offers the opportunity to download all the documents that have been filed with the court concerning the case, gives access to various articles online, and provides an online petition asking for the release of the *Shankaracharya* and apologies from the officials responsible for his arrest. It is also possible to post questions in the expectation of receiving a personal response. In addition, an appeal for help is made by the devotees responsible for the website.

On December 4, 2004 those registering with *kanchi-sathya.org* received an e-mail requesting a donation to help in the dissemination of truthful information concerning the situation and another e-mail containing an invitation to a meeting held in Chennai on the same day. This was organised by the trustees of a Chennai organisation of the *Kanchi Math*.

More than eighteen months after the initial arrest of the *Shankaracharya*, *kanchi-sathya.org* continues to publish material regarding the ongoing case (a number of digests of early material have now been created and individuals are urged to distribute copies of these digests [see *kanchi-sathya.org/kanchidigest*]).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, because of rising legal costs the *Kanchi Math* is now, reluctantly it claims, soliciting donations from devotees specifically to cover these costs.

On January 17, 2005, in addition to *kanchi-sathya.org*, another new website (*kanchiforum.org*) (hosted in North America) was set up as a result of the *Shankaracharya*’s arrest.<sup>13</sup> Although those responsible for the website claim not to be

---

<sup>12</sup> Website last consulted on August 8, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the new websites concerned with the arrest of the *Shankaracharya*, existing websites in which Jayendra Saraswathi is the focus are also concerned with his arrest. For example, the website of the KKSF (*kksfusa.org*) runs a campaign to support Saraswathi.

associated with *kamakoti.org* and *kanchi-sathya.org*, these websites are recommended on the homepage; and there is the comment that these websites ‘have been our source of strength, inspiration and motivation’. The stated aims of the website listed on the homepage are: to act as a support group, to channel energy, to spread the ‘real’ news, and to link all devotees. The website consists of a discussion board where interested parties can discuss issues concerning the case against the *Shankaracharya*. It is a lively forum with frequent posts.

The Kanchi *Math* and its supporters have utilised the Internet effectively. Devotees have used it to try to counteract what they see as the lies of the media and to simply provide a means to publicise the situation and propagate their point of view. The Internet has also been used to communicate with other devotees in an attempt to mobilise them. For example, the online petition and the quick and widespread dissemination of details about the meeting in Chennai could not have been accomplished if it had not been for the Internet; and the discussion forum allows devotees from around the world to discuss the matter. The availability of all the documents submitted to the court is also highly significant as these documents can furnish readers with facts concerning the case in a way that the media is unable to. Prior to the Internet, the number of those who would be able to scrutinise the court documents would obviously be very small indeed. Therefore, in a number of ways the online activities of the Kanchi *math* and its supporters provide a clear example of the extent to which the Internet can cross traditional borders and bring about a compression of space and time.

### **Case Study 2: The SSC’s Online Presence and Globalisation**

Even before the use of the Internet, the SSC could be regarded as a prime example of a religious group’s involvement in globalisation. For example, the SSC’s founder was an American who received initiation in Sri Lanka, and who set up an organisation with headquarters in Hawaii aiming to attract Hindus in the diaspora as well as those with no prior association with the Indian subcontinent. The SSC’s aim to speak for all Hindus, even though they wish to place primacy on their own tradition, also reflects their use of globalisation. Putting forward such universal claims even though their philosophy derives from a specific *sampradaya* within the *Shaivite* tradition is a clear example of the universalisation of the particular – a process identified by Robertson (1992) as a

key characteristic of globalisation. The appropriation of the Internet in order to further their distinctive aims results in the particularisation of the universal, which completes the process identified by Robertson.

The role of the SSC within globalisation is further exemplified by the uses to which they put the Internet. For example, *himalayanacademy.com* offers the means to obtain spiritual 'knowledge'. Prior to the introduction of the Internet this 'knowledge' had already become 'disembedded' (Giddens 1990) to an extent because it had travelled beyond the Indian subcontinent and was now available in a new environment (Hawaii). However, the new environment for the transmission of knowledge did still have a link to the Indian subcontinent. For example, the *ashram* in Hawaii where teachings are transmitted has its own sacred mythology<sup>14</sup> and is recognisable as a Hindu *ashram* as a result of the presence of Hindu deities and other accoutrements, including the dress of the monks. However, online, the 'knowledge' has become disembedded to a far greater degree as now it is no longer a recognisable physical environment but the website's name *himalayanacademy.com* which provides the main link to the Indian subcontinent, the original context of the 'knowledge'. This link appears to be very tenuous indeed with the result that the original 'knowledge' has become almost completely disembedded. The disembedding of this knowledge also suggests that the physical space has declined in importance (as asserted in the theories of Giddens [1990] and Apolito [2005]) because it is now not necessary to travel to the Indian subcontinent or Hawaii in order to obtain the spiritual 'knowledge' on offer.

The SSC's role in globalisation as a result of their online presence is also seen if Appadurai's (1990) conception of globalisation is adopted. For example, they are seeking to influence Hindus in the diaspora (and so they have influence in the sphere of 'ethnoscapes'), they distribute images and information around the world (and so they contribute to 'mediascapes'), they utilise global technologies such as the Internet (and so are involved in 'technoscapes') and have an involvement with 'financescapes' because the payment facility on their website is dependent upon the global financial system. Their implication in Waters's (1995) addition of 'sacriscapes' is clear and it is also possible that they have a role in 'ideoscapes' (this will be looked at below).

---

<sup>14</sup> An important component of this myth is the belief that Subramuniyaswami (the founder of the SSC) had three visions in which *Shiva* was in Hawaii (see Narayanan 1996: 156).

Appadurai's (1990) work seems especially relevant when the SSC's online presence is considered because of their contribution to 'mediascapes' and the specific audience at which this contribution is aimed. As explained in chapter 4, Appadurai emphasises that the '-scapes' contribute to the 'imagined worlds' of people and that they are fluid and that flows occur where there are disjunctures between the '-scapes'. These disjunctures bring about 'deterritorialization'. Appadurai asserts that deterritorialized populations are more vulnerable to the blurring of the real and the fictional. Diaspora Hindus are a prime example of a group that has been deterritorialized and, as has been emphasised, the SSC seek to influence this group. According to Appadurai's theory, the SSC are *heavily* implicated in globalisation because their form of Hinduism and the images associated with it that they present online are a contribution to 'mediascapes'; and 'mediascapes' have more potential than the other '-scapes' to create an 'imagined world'. In Appadurai's theory 'mediascapes' are closely linked to 'ideoscapes', the difference being that the latter carries dominant ideologies. As those in the diaspora are vulnerable as a result of deterritorialization, and in the absence of other organisations with a strong online presence who aim to influence this group, the SSC are perhaps even contributing to 'ideoscapes'.

Through considering the SSC's involvement in the '-scapes' as a result of their online presence, Appadurai's theory can be used effectively in order to gain some understanding of the SSC's role in globalisation. However, the extent to which the view of the SSC does actually contribute to an 'imagined world' cannot be ascertained. Especially because Appadurai himself emphasises the complexity of globalisation, perhaps 'mediascapes' are not as influential as he makes out. Furthermore, there may be other elements of globalisation which allow a deterritorialized population to retain or even improve ties with the 'real world', and this would make them less susceptible to an 'imagined world'. An example of this is improved communication as a result of the Internet. Miller and Slater (2000) make this same point in their study of the Trinidadian diaspora and conclude that

the Internet allows for an expansion of communication...thereby helping communities and people to come closer to a realization of who they already feel they "really" are. ... In these cases the increasingly global use of the Internet

across the Diaspora is a function of the re-establishment of local communications that had become sundered. (Miller and Slater 2000: 178; see also pp. 10, 23, 85)

When using Appadurai's theory it is easy to overplay the SSC's importance and influence but it is necessary not to get carried away. There are other aspects of life aside from 'mediascapes', and it seems unlikely that 'imagined worlds' will replace the 'real world'. Consequently, the role of the SSC in globalisation as a result of their presence on the Internet is likely to be less significant than Appadurai would perhaps suggest.

### **Online Activity that Challenges Religious Authority**

The SSC's attempt online to put forward their claim to represent Hinduism at the expense of other groups which have an online presence, as outlined in chapter 7, is a clear demonstration of a struggle *for* authority that occurs online, and this is especially interesting in the case of Hinduism because of the lack of a central authority (see chapter 1). However, in other cases, challenges *to* authority in Hinduism (for example the authority of those who administer specific *mandirs*) are occurring on the WWW. Furthermore, unlike in the case of the online struggles between competing groups, there might not be awareness on the part of those who currently have authority that this is occurring. This can happen whether or not those in authority have an online presence themselves.

One way in which this happens is through the existence of unofficial websites. For example, although there is the recognition by the administration of the *Jagannath mandir* that some websites are in competition with their official website (*Swagatam Jagannath Dham*), the website that I had identified – that claimed to be official – was not known to them. The unofficial website (*jagannathtemplepuri.com*)<sup>15</sup> claims that it is a 'website authorised by Jagannath Temple Managing Committee'. However, in Puri

---

<sup>15</sup> The fact that this website appears high in search engine rankings when *Jagannath mandir* websites are searched for suggests that those responsible for this website are operating far more effectively in the online market-place (see above) than those responsible for *Swagatam Jagannath Dham*.



I was categorically told that this is not the case.<sup>16</sup> The website is hosted by the *Blessings on the Net* website which describes itself as ‘a comprehensive portal on Indian culture providing value added services and products, catering to religious and spiritual needs of Indians across the globe’. In addition to *Blessings on the Net* offering a number of features,<sup>17</sup> it also links to sixteen *mandir* websites which it designed and maintains, and which it claims are the official websites of the *mandirs* in question (there are also links to three *mandir* websites that have not been created by *Blessings on the Net*). These links with relevant pictures are portrayed prominently in the centre of the homepage. It could be argued by *Blessings on the Net* that there is no claim to official status on the *jagannathemplepuri.com* website itself. However, when this website is listed on the homepage of *Blessings on the Net* it is clearly listed as an official website of the *mandir*. Furthermore, on the website itself they do claim that they have been given authorisation.<sup>18</sup>

A further investigation of the *Blessings on the Net* portal website reveals other similar ways in which authority can be challenged. From this website there are a number of links to websites (which are actually webpages of *Blessings on the Net*) that are not official websites of *mandirs* and which are not claimed to be. However, since *Blessings on the Net* designed these websites in the same way as the *mandir* websites which they claim are official, these websites give the appearance of being official. On closer inspection, the word ‘official’ is omitted but ‘unofficial’ is not inserted. The fact that the websites appear visually the same as the ones that are claimed to be official, and also offer photos and other information and may even provide the opportunity to offer an online *puja* (as in the case of the website that they provide concerning the *Shirdi Sai Baba* [A Maharashtra Saint] *mandir* [*shirdisaitemple.com*]), this gives the impression

---

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, there is a website (unconnected to *Blessings on the Net* [see below]) concerning the *Vishwanath mandir* in Varanasi (*kashivishwanath.org*) which appears to be an official website but which officials there are also unaware of.

<sup>17</sup> A ‘visitor’ to the website is greeted with Sanskrit chanting. As well as offering books, handicrafts and *puja* items for sale, there is information about festivals, *mandirs* and various other aspects of Hinduism. An online travel agency offering pilgrimage packages is available, as are photos of *mandirs* and sites in India, and images of gods and goddesses. Audio recitations of texts such as the *Bhagavad-gita* can also be accessed via the website.

<sup>18</sup> Although as a result of my fieldwork in Puri I was able to discover that *jagannathemplepuri.com* is an unofficial website, it is not my claim that the other websites that are claimed by *Blessings on the Net* to be official are necessarily unofficial.

that they are of the same status as the websites that are claimed to be official.<sup>19</sup> Giving the impression that a website is official is, in itself, a threat to the authority of the original *mandir*, but for the unofficial websites to actually offer an online *puja* facility at a *mandir* where the authorities have clearly not given permission for an official website demonstrates that the Internet has brought about a loss of control at a level that was not seen before its introduction.

In addition to outside agencies creating websites for specific *mandirs* which might even offer the opportunity to perform an online *puja*, important prohibitions can also be flouted in cyberspace and are indicative of further threats to authority which occur there. For example, as mentioned in my discussion above of the religious market-place, although *mandirs* may not want their deity to have an online presence, there is little they can do about it. For example, the *Vishwanath* lingam appears on the unofficial website *kashivishwanath.org* and on the ‘*Darshan*’ section of *upportal.com* (*upportal.com/darshan*).<sup>20</sup> Perhaps in the future *mandirs* will need to copyright their deities to stop this occurring although it is notoriously difficult to police copyright issues on the Internet (see e.g. Olson 2004: 195).

To my mind, loss of control and the threat to the authority of certain groups is perhaps the most significant omission on the part of the featured globalisation theorists – although this threat to authority has been identified by scholars of the Internet. For example, Dawson specifically refers to the ‘loss of control over religious materials’ (Dawson 2001b: online) (see also Miller and Slater 2000; Apolito 2005 [see chapter 2

---

<sup>19</sup> The twelve *jyotilinga mandirs* are also given websites (which are actually webpages from the *Blessings on the Net* website *jyotirlingatemple.com* [the exceptions being the websites for the *Bhimashankar mandir* [*bhimashankar.com*] and the *Kedarnath mandir* [*badrinath-kedarnath.org*] which are separate websites hosted by *Blessings on the Net*]) that look the same as the *mandir* websites hosted by *Blessings on the Net* which are claimed to be official. The *Blessings on the Net* website *ashtavinayaktemples.com* works in the same way as *jyotirlingatemple.com*. It leads to eight *Ganesh mandir* websites which again have the same appearance as the official *mandir* websites, and all are claimed to be independent websites when really they are merely part of *ashtavinayaktemples.com*. In addition to indicating threats to authority online, these examples also clearly demonstrate the points made in chapter 6 that it is not always made explicit who is responsible for websites and where one website ends and another begins.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the displaying of images of deities online by organisations/individuals unaffiliated with *mandirs* has implications for Hinduism that go beyond a loss of control. This will be investigated below.

of this thesis]). My fieldwork also revealed that this situation is especially significant because it does not just involve certain groups being able to publicise themselves and/or criticise others online and the existence and strategies of unofficial websites. Instead, I also found evidence of non-religious professionals actually determining the form of worship. In this case, then, it is not just that certain *mandirs* or religious organisations might be harmed, but that the authority of religious professionals (such as *pujaris*) and *mandir* authorities is also undermined. Furthermore, there is the possibility that important aspects of Hinduism could be altered. This is demonstrated in the case of those responsible for the websites offering a *puja* service.<sup>21</sup> My discussion of this will begin with a brief description of the featured websites and how their *puja* service works.

### Websites Offering a *Puja* Service

Those responsible for the websites offering a *puja* service are entrepreneurs and are not affiliated with any *mandir* or organisation. Nabin Pal of *Ashirbadee* offers *pujas* at a number of *mandirs* in the vicinity of Kolkata. The most popular *mandir* where he arranges a *puja* (which includes offerings) for absent devotees is *Kalighat* (\$230<sup>22</sup>). Amongst other places *Dakshineswar* (\$260) is also listed. Sanjay Basu of *Kaalighat* also arranges *pujas* to be offered at *Kalighat* (\$15) and also revealed that this was the most popular *mandir* for this service. *Pujas* are also arranged by Basu at other *mandirs* where research was carried out for this project – *Dakshineswar* (\$15) and *Tarakeswar* (\$15).<sup>23</sup> Customers can browse the available options on the websites and choose a place, and, in the case of *Ashirbadee*, a time, for a *puja* to be conducted on their behalf.

---

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1, the *service* offered by these websites is not indicative of a new development within Hinduism. However, the *presence* of such a service online *is* significant because now it is possible for individuals with no connection to *mandirs* to offer the service which also becomes more accessible to Hindus and others around the world. The implications of this will be investigated below. Because such a service is not new and is not unique to the Internet, this means that it is not relevant to consider the fact that the physical place in such a service retains importance in the light of theories of globalisation.

<sup>22</sup> All of the amounts on the websites are in US dollars.

<sup>23</sup> Pal has offered the service for approximately 5 years while Basu's website has been available for about 8 years, although only in the last 4-5 years has time been spent developing it. Both Pal and Basu maintain their websites without any professional help, and both claim that they do not employ any strategies to maintain high search engine rankings.

Orders can be made online, and *Ashirbadee* offers an online payment facility (which incurs an extra cost) in addition to the option of sending money by post. At the outset of this research, in the case of *Kaalighat* it was only possible to send payment. However, later on *Kaalighat* also introduced payment by credit card and also offered other ways of payment (such as a direct bank transfer and through *Western Union* [an organisation which facilitates money transfers]). In both cases customers must also provide details of their *gotro* (the group that a person is believed to have originated from) in order to ensure the efficacy of the *puja*. If a person's *gotro* is not known then Pal believes that the person's date of birth (preferably also with the exact time) and the names of their parents will be sufficient as the *pujaris* at *Kalighat* will be able to work out the person's *gotro*. Both providers say that they attend the majority of the *pujas* that are carried out on their customers' behalf, and both assert that a *pujari* is necessary to ensure the efficacy of the *puja*. The *pujari* is paid for this service.

After the *puja*, *prasad* is sent to the customer by both Pal and Basu, although Pal offers a cheaper option in which no *prasad* is sent. Pal offers 'proof' (at an additional cost) that the *puja* has been carried out by providing a photograph of a banner at the *mandir* where the *puja* has been conducted. In the case of *Kalighat* this photo cannot be taken in front of the *murti*. At *Tarapith*, another *mandir* for which Pal offers a *puja* service, photography of the *murti* is usually prohibited, although due to connections, this restriction can be bypassed (a photograph of a banner in front of the *murti* appears on *Ashirbadee*). Basu does not offer such 'proof'.

According to Pal it is not sufficient for a customer to order a *puja* and do nothing more themselves. The customer must offer a prayer at the same time as the *puja* is being offered. Pal pays the *pujari* with whom he has an arrangement so that he can bypass queues at the shrine. However, because there are other agents offering a similar service to him (which indicates the popularity of such a service), it is not possible for him to guarantee the *exact* time that the *puja* will be performed. The actual *puja* only takes between 15-20 minutes. Therefore, Pal insists that the customer pray for an hour so that both parties can be certain that both processes are occurring simultaneously. For example, if a *puja* is scheduled for 8 pm then it is necessary for the customer to pray between 8 pm and 9 pm. Although this means that the customer will be praying for up to 45 minutes longer than the actual *puja* takes, it guarantees that the prayer and the *puja* happen at the same time. A few days before a *puja* is offered, Pal reminds the

customer of this procedure. Basu does not ask his customers to pray at the same time as the *puja* is being carried out and arranges for the *pujas* to be offered at a time of his convenience.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, despite the fact that both providers are not religious professionals, they are determining what must be done in order for the *puja* to bring about the desired benefit and so the authority of religious professionals is undermined. At the *Kalighat mandir*, the most popular *mandir* amongst their customers, Ajoy Kumar Mitra (who claims knowledge of the *Shastras* [texts concerning religious rules of conduct]) puts forward another view as to how a *puja* should proceed. In his opinion, during the *puja*, an image of the person ordering the *puja* should be placed in front of the deity. Neither Pal nor Basu does this. None of the other *mandir* officials that I interviewed shared the view of Mitra but the fact remains that *pujas* are being performed at the *mandir* in a different manner from that advocated by the *mandir* President. Furthermore, in addition to undermining religious authorities, the fact that the two providers that I interviewed offer two different ways of conducting the *puja* process could result in confusion. For example, only one of the different views concerning whether or not it is necessary to pray at exactly the same time as the *puja* is being performed can be correct but because neither of these views has backing from religious authorities, potential consumers are not in a position to be able to effectively choose between the two.

In addition to this there are other ways in which the *puja* providers are determining what should happen or what is acceptable. For example, although animal sacrifices are performed at *Kalighat*, Pal does not arrange animal sacrifices there (despite the fact that he has been asked) because he personally believes that *Kali* does not request such offerings. Basu and Pal also have different beliefs as to who is entitled to avail themselves of their *puja* service. For example, *Ashirbadee* is aimed at Indians (primarily those in the diaspora) and Pal sometimes refuses to arrange *pujas* for those who are not of Indian origin and who, he believes, do not have faith in the Hindu gods and goddesses.<sup>25</sup> This means that despite the fact that some *mandirs* may have no

---

<sup>24</sup> Because Basu can therefore easily offer a number of *pujas* in a single day, this helps to explain why the *pujas* that he offers are much cheaper than those offered by Pal. Another reason for the big difference in prices between the two providers is that offerings are made to the deity in Pal's *pujas*.

<sup>25</sup> It would appear difficult for Pal to judge this, and the very fact that someone would want a *puja* performed on their behalf and is willing to pay for it, would suggest that they did have faith.

prohibition against foreigners worshipping there, Pal attempts to block access to the deity. A prime example of this is at *Kalighat* where the President said: ‘To me, Goddess *Kali* is not only for Indians but for foreigners too provided they believe’. Basu, on the other hand, arranges *pujas* for customers abroad and in India, regardless of ethnicity. For example, he offers *pujas* at the *Tarakeswar mandir* which generally does not permit access to foreigners. Therefore, via Basu, foreigners are able to offer a *puja* at *mandirs* where they may be unable to gain physical access to the deity.

Although I have considered only two websites which offer a *puja* ordering service, I have discovered that individuals with no religious training are determining aspects of the *puja* process – including how a devotee should worship – according to their own beliefs. The loss of authority of those in charge of *mandirs* is further emphasised because it is happening without their knowledge. For example, at the *Tarakeswar mandir*, even though Basu told me that he has arranged for *pujas* to be performed there, the *mandir* authorities were completely unaware of this fact:

HS: Some agents are offering this [*puja*] service. They are advertising on the Internet and NRIs [Non-Resident Indians] are using this service in *Tarakeswar*.

MKB (M.K. Bhattacharyya): Is it a possibility?

HS: It’s happening now!

MKB: Happening? We are not yet aware of it.

### **‘Cultural Resource’ Theory**

My evidence that a loss of authority of Hindu organisations is being facilitated by the Internet because online there is evidence of the appropriation of images that were previously largely controlled by religious organisations is congruent with Beckford’s ‘cultural resource’ theory (1992; 2000a; 2001) outlined in chapter 4. Beckford argues that if religious symbols ‘float free’ from their traditional ‘points of anchorage’ (Beckford 1992: 22) then ‘religious organisations are able to exercise less control over the uses made of their own religious symbols’ (Beckford 2001: 232). However, because of the characteristics of Hinduism some further comments need to be made regarding this. Beckford’s theory applies to ‘advanced industrial societies’ where there is

compelling evidence of decline in the power, influence and significance of religion as an institutional force. As such, religion has lost much of its capacity to shape the social action and cultural values of people other than those who choose to align themselves with religious norms. (Beckford 2001: 233; see also 1992: 22)

However, in chapter 1 I pointed out that in Hinduism there is no separation between the secular and sacred and therefore Hinduism is inextricably bound up in an individual's everyday life. Consequently, I would assert that in Hinduism, religion has not lost its capacity to shape action and values. A further complication when the theory is applied to Hinduism is as a result of the fact that Hinduism does not have a unified institutional base. Because of this, if Hinduism as a whole is looked at it is difficult to see exactly where religion has come adrift from. However, at the level of individual Hindu organisations such as *mandirs*, the part of the theory that refers to the appropriation of religious symbols by groups not associated with religious organisations makes sense. It should be noted though that there is no evidence to suggest that individual religious organisations are declining in importance, and this shows the significance of the Internet because it has contributed to Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource' without the organisations first declining in importance.

It is worthwhile adding that appropriated Hindu images are not necessarily used in non-religious ways on the WWW. Although images have been wrested from the control of individual organisations and this has been done in order to make a profit, they are still often used in a religious manner which is not in contradiction to the original use. For example, at the *Tarapith mandir* in West Bengal, photography of the deity is not permitted. However, as mentioned above, as a result of connections at the *mandir*, an associate of Pal is able to photograph the *murti*, and the resulting image appears on *Ashirbadee* and forms part of Pal's strategy to attract potential customers. Although the *Tarapith mandir* authorities have lost control of the image in this way, it is still firmly associated both with the Hindu religion and the *Tarapith mandir* and is not 'free floating'.

However, this is not to say that Hinduism cannot also be used as a 'cultural resource' that is unrelated to religion as traditionally conceived. The following examples are different from the cases of websites offering a *puja* service where individual *mandirs*

lose control of images. In the following cases, symbols are drawn from 'Hinduism'. The first example is provided by Beckford who points to groups such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in India which cannot be described as religious movements but which appropriate Hindu ideas and practices (Beckford 2000a: 178-179). In an indirect way the Internet is implicated in this because such nationalist groups embrace the use of the Internet (see chapter 4).

A further example of Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource' is in order to sell products. For example, an image of a Hindu deity or an 'Om' symbol (ॐ) might be used to sell clothing (e.g. anon. [PTI] February 7, 2005: online; anon. [AFP] June 8, 2005: online) and other products (see e.g. Rajghatta 2005: online).<sup>26</sup> I have shown that it is not uncommon for Hindu-related websites to offer commercial products, and in this sense the Internet can contribute to Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource'. However, the main role of the Internet in this regard is to carry (via the WWW) images of Hindu deities and symbols. The fact that these images are now accessible to many non-Hindus who are not influenced in their everyday lives by Hinduism (unlike in the case of Hindus) means that the Internet is especially likely to accelerate this process.

The presence of Hindu-related websites and the fact that non-Hindus are accessing them could also accelerate the notion held by some that Hinduism should be seen as a universal religion as distinct from an ethnic religion inextricably tied up with the Indian sub-continent. The fact that Singh (2001a) believes that, as a result of the Sikh presence on the WWW, this process is already occurring with Sikhism suggests that this could indeed happen. Singh notes that 'The Sikh gurus always had a global outlook, never considering their religion as one meant only for a specific people or a regional faith' and he believes that only now is this starting to be realised by Sikhs in the diaspora and this is 'further being facilitated and accelerated by the Internet' (Singh 2001a: online). Beckerlegge also mentions that Pannyavaro holds a similar view regarding Buddhism: '...the Internet "will eventually globalise the Dhamma [Buddhist philosophy] and free it of its cultural accretions", liberating Buddhism "from the institutional grip of the irrelevancies of non-Buddhist cultural practices"' (Beckerlegge 2001c: 243). Regarding Hinduism, any widespread shift to a belief that it should be seen as a universal religion

---

<sup>26</sup> The cited articles indicate that Hindus are reacting against this trend. This backs up Beckford's claim that religion used as a 'cultural resource' is likely to result in controversy (Beckford 1992: 23).



is likely to have significant implications. For example, it would be likely to increase the perceived legitimacy of Hindu groups that claim the universality of Hinduism and seek a multi-ethnic membership. Furthermore, the amount of Hindu-related websites on the WWW could both be indicative of, and contribute to, 'the Easternisation of the West' (Campbell 1999).<sup>27</sup>

## Homogenisation and Heterogenisation

My research suggests that in the case of Hinduism on the WWW, globalisation has clearly resulted in significant instances of homogenisation. This is predicted by Appadurai (1990) who asserts that 'globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization' (Appadurai 1990: 99) (e.g. the English language; certain presentation styles).<sup>28</sup> This finding is also congruent with Robertson's (1992) view that there are instances of homogenisation as a result of globalisation.

Hinduism has experienced a degree of homogenisation both in terms of its presentation and in terms of actual forms of worship as a result of its presence on the WWW.<sup>29 30</sup>

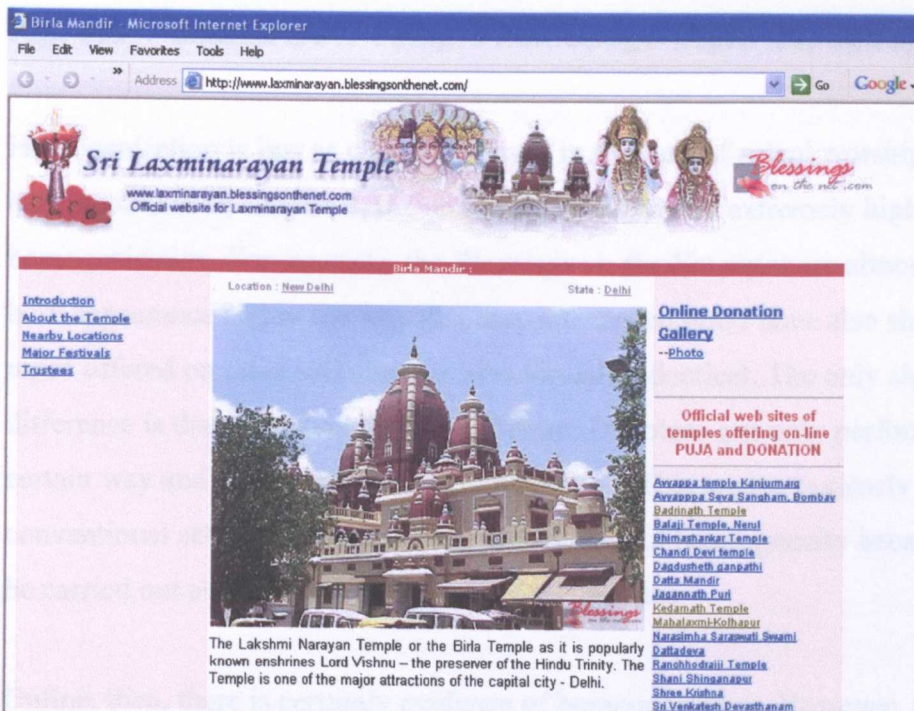
---

<sup>27</sup> Campbell's (1999) theory asserts that Eastern ideas have permeated the West to the extent that 'the traditional Western cultural paradigm no longer dominates in so-called "Western" societies [and] it has been replaced by an "Eastern" one' (Campbell 1999: 41). This has been criticised by, for example, Bruce who argues that 'the rejection of Western values and beliefs is only partial and superficial' and who emphasises that the self remains 'autonomous and very important' (Bruce 2002: 134), and by Hamilton who similarly believes that the theory has difficulty with the Western ethos of individualism (Hamilton n.d.: 29). These views of Bruce and Hamilton are backed up by Walter's (2001) empirical research which concluded that the majority of those in the West who believed in reincarnation saw it in individualistic terms (see chapter 3). Nevertheless, Campbell's theory should not be rejected in its entirety. Although it is unlikely that the Western cultures are undergoing a paradigm shift, *aspects* of Eastern ideas are being adopted; and whilst there is no evidence of the ethos of individualism being replaced, it can 'act as a prism through which [the Eastern notions of] holism and immanentism will be refracted to be mixed with many other strands of thought producing not one but an ever evolving and diversifying array of ideas, beliefs and practices' (Hamilton n.d.: 29).

<sup>28</sup> The second part of Appadurai's (1990) theory asserts that the use of 'instruments of homogenisation' ultimately leads to heterogenisation (see below).

<sup>29</sup> At the level of presentation, Hinduism also underwent a degree of homogenisation as a result of globalisation prior to the Internet. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-production meant that devotional prints in India became 'increasingly standardized in style and content' (Beckerlegge 2001b: 79), and standardisation has continued up to the present day (Beckerlegge 2001b: 90).

Concerning presentation, the *Blessings on the Net* designed and maintained websites provide a clear example of homogenisation. Despite the fact that diverse *mandirs* are represented, there is a high degree of uniformity amongst the websites. All of the homepages have a header with the respective *mandir*'s title (in identical script) and a number of images concerning the *mandir* and the deity. The *Blessings on the Net* logo is also present. In the centre of the homepage is always a large photo of the *mandir* or the *murti*, with a brief introduction written below. In each case, on the left of the homepage are links containing information about the *mandir* and other relevant information. The right side of the homepage demonstrates an even higher degree of standardisation. There is a standard menu which includes some or all of the following: 'Online Donation', 'Online Puja Booking' and 'Gallery'. Below this list is the full hyperlinked list of the other *Blessings on the Net* *mandir* websites. (See Figs. 8.1 and 8.2 for two examples of *Blessings on the Net* *mandir* website homepages.)



**Fig. 8.1** *laxminarayan.com* homepage (April 20, 2006)

<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting that, according to Dawson, between 1998 and 2005 websites in general became more standardised (Dawson 2005: 30). This suggests that the presentation of Hinduism on the WWW may undergo further homogenisation in the future.



**Fig. 8.2 Chandidevi Temple homepage (April 20, 2006)**

Homogenisation is just as clearly apparent in the case of actual worship online. As I have explained in chapter 2, the online *pujas* display an extremely high degree of homogenisation. For example, the *Blessings on the Net pujas* are almost identical in both appearance and in the way that they are carried out. I have also shown that online *pujas* offered on other websites are also virtually identical. The only significant difference is that the actual deity is different. Devotees can only perform *puja* in a certain way and there is no scope for innovation. This contrasts clearly with a *puja* in a conventional setting where there is a high degree of heterogeneity because worship can be carried out according to the wishes of the devotee.

Online, then, there is certainly evidence of homogenisation. However, at the physical site there is evidence of homogenisation *and* heterogenisation as a direct result of the Internet. For example, on the one hand *pujas* ordered through a website such as *Ashirbadee* or *Kaalighat* give rise to a degree of homogenisation because the individual is not performing a *puja* according to his or her own method, and instead the *pujari* will perform the *pujas* received from different people in the same way. On the other hand, the section above concerning challenges to authority demonstrates that the *puja* providers have different ideas about how worship should proceed. Moreover, the fact

that there are a number of websites offering such a service<sup>31</sup> means that in this respect the Internet, which has led to the use of ‘instruments of homogenisation’, has actually brought about heterogenisation. Such a process is identified by Appadurai (1990), and the example given here clearly demonstrates that the situation is far more complex than polar views which assert either that globalisation gives rise to homogenisation, or that it brings about heterogenisation. Instead, homogenisation and heterogenisation are complementary processes (Robertson 1992).

## ***Mandir* Research Findings and Analysis**

There are vast differences between the different *mandir* administrations regarding having a presence online. For example, while the *Jagannath mandir* administration have their own website (*Swagatam Jagannath Dham*), the administrations of the *Annapurna*, *Kalighat*,<sup>32</sup> *New Vishwanath [Mir Ghat]*, *Sankat Mochan*, *Taraknath* and *Vishwanath mandirs*, do not, and have no immediate plans for one.<sup>33</sup> The officials at ISKCON [*International Society for Krishna Consciousness*] Kolkata and the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) are planning to introduce websites, while the *Dakshineswar mandir* administration used to have a website (*dakshineswar\_kali\_temple.org*) which they did not bother maintaining and which is now defunct.<sup>34</sup>

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, the following analysis will focus upon the *Jagannath mandir* but will also take into account the other *mandirs*.

---

<sup>31</sup> According to Srinivasan (2002: online) there were about 300 such websites in June 2002. Aside from the websites that I consider, examples include *eprarthana.com*, *prarthana.com*, *puja.by-choice.com* and *saranam.com*.

<sup>32</sup> The *Kalighat mandir* administration have not even published anything about their *mandir* since they were established in 1962 and currently do not even have a telephone line which can accept incoming calls.

<sup>33</sup> All of the officials interviewed at *mandirs* which did not have an online presence and which had no immediate plan for one saw such a presence in positive terms. The exception was V.B. Mishra of *Sankat Mochan* who was strictly opposed to the idea of having an image of his *mandir*'s deity online. A website purely for information was not ruled out although such a development was still not seen as being especially beneficial.

<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Preston's 1980 claim that *mandirs* 'vary greatly in their adaptive characteristics' (Preston 1980: 5) is supported by my research.

## The Universalisation of the Particular and the Particularisation of the Universal

An investigation of the *Jagannath mandir* and its use of the Internet in the light of globalisation – with a special emphasis on issues of embodiment/disembodiment – leads me to believe that the local site has not declined in importance. The universal medium of the Internet is embraced although the way that it is used is clearly shaped by the situation at the local level. Furthermore, there is clear evidence to suggest that the presence of the deity online does not contribute to any decline in the importance of the original *murti* or the physical place. Therefore, my data fits Robertson's (1992) theory of globalisation outlined in chapter 4.

The interplay between the global and the local ('Glocalization') – the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal – is demonstrated in a number of ways in the case of the *Jagannath mandir* and its use of the Internet.<sup>35</sup> As in the case of the SSC, through their website the Internet is used by the *Jagannath mandir* administration as a tool in order to promote claims of universality (which derive from a particularistic viewpoint). Such an attempt has gone on since long before the introduction of the Internet, and this backs up Robertson's assertion that one of the reasons why globalisation theorists need to take religion into consideration is because religions have traditionally been implicated in globalisation through this process. For example, although *Jagannath* sits squarely within the *Vaishnava* tradition, His name means 'Lord of the Universe' (see e.g. Tripathy 2003: 1, 17); and the *mandir* administration claims that He 'represents all the Gods and Goddesses known to the entire Hindu World, either directly or indirectly' (Sri Jagannath Temple Administration n.d.: 3). Furthermore, in the case of the *Jagannath* cult the interplay between the universal and the particular is likely to also have occurred at another level. For example, although the origins of *Jagannath*, *Balabhadra* and *Subhadra* (see chapter 6) are shrouded in mystery, it is likely that they were originally tribal deities (see e.g. Gupta 2002: 51). Therefore, it appears that even before claims were made about the

---

<sup>35</sup> Therefore, this case study is comparable to Vásquez and Marquardt's (2000) study of a Marian apparition in Florida where the interplay between the global and the local was also identified (see chapter 4).

universal nature of *Jagannath*, the pre-Hindu tribal deities of Orissa were de-particularised and became part of the *Vaishnava* tradition.<sup>36</sup>

Online though, especially since there is no injunction in Hinduism against the replication of deities (see chapter 2 and footnote 36 of this chapter), the universalisation of the particular takes on a new level, and this appears to be fully grasped by the *Jagannath mandir* administration. For example, the chairman Gajapati Maharaja Dibyasingha Deb writes on *Swagatam Jagannath Dham*:

As a token of humble offering at the lotus Feet of the Lord, this service through Internet is being provided for the benefit of devotees all over the world and for those keen to know about this unique and glorious tradition... ..every effort will be made to add more features and relevant material to this new initiative from time to time.

B. Mishra, the *Officer-on-special duty* of the *mandir*, emphasised that the administration is delighted that *Jagannath* appears on television and online ‘because the *Sri Jagannath* culture will be spread throughout the world’. His view on the matter was further emphasised when he gave the following enthusiastic response: ‘There are no disadvantages. Rather it is advantageous. The *Jagannath* Temple Administration is very proud of the spread of the *Jagannath* culture throughout India and the world.’ Suresh Chandra Mohapatra, the chief administrator, confirms the willingness to

---

<sup>36</sup> The universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal is a prominent feature of Hinduism (see esp. Marriot [1955] who studies in detail the interplay between ‘universalization’ and ‘parochialization’, and Fuller [1992: 36-44, 55-56]). As pointed out in chapter 2, replications are ubiquitous in Hinduism, and these replications involve the interplay between the particular and the universal. For example, Pocock points out that a *Shiva* particular to a village may be replicated in other villages, and these replications are equated with the original village deity ‘who is, with Shiva himself, local and particular as well as unlocalized and general’ (Pocock 1973: 89) which means that ‘every local ling[am] is *the* ling[am] of Shiva’ (Pocock 1973: 92). A specific example is *Taraknath* at Tarakeswar. *Taraknath* is considered to be one of the manifestations of *Shiva* and although he is ‘conceived of as a deity in his own right’ he is also identical with *Shiva* (Morinis 1984: 83). Furthermore, Presler mentions that local traditions are often based on Pan-India traditions but are altered and ‘given special meaning in their local variations’ (Presler 1987: 155). An example is the particularisation of the *Mahabharata* where ‘great names’ are related to ‘particular local beliefs and legends’ (Pocock 1973: 92). The universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal can also be seen in other cases. For example, towns can be microcosms of India and a *tirtha* is ‘a microcosm of the universe’ (Fuller 1992: 209).

embrace the universal when he writes on the website that: 'It is all the more welcome when scientific contrivances are harnessed for spiritual purposes'.

The *Jagannath mandir* administration has had their website for the past seven years. The National Informatics Service (an IT [Information Technology] organisation of the Government of India) developed the website and provides the service free of charge (notwithstanding the fact that India has a secular constitution). There were no objections to having the website amongst those in the administration, although, as will be seen below, the *pujaris* at the *mandir* have some reservations concerning an online presence.

The website itself is particularly strong on information. For example there is reasonably comprehensive information about the deities, the *mandir*, the administration of the *mandir*, festivals, subsidiary shrines, various associated *maths* and *ashrams* and the town of Puri. There are a fair number of photographs and the deities, replicas of the deities, the *mandir* and the festival chariots are all featured. Videos of past *Ratha Yatras* (the annual 'chariot' [or 'car'] festival) can be viewed, and during the *Ratha Yatra* live webcasts are available. A 'visitor' to the website can also listen to devotional music, and there are three different schemes whereby donations can be made to the *mandir*. According to B. Mishra the website is a success, and this assessment is based upon the fact that people are donating via the website, and that comments are received via e-mail. Most of the comments have been complementary with some users requesting more updates and data. Such requests indicate further that the website enjoys popularity as these users are requesting more from the medium.

The fact that the *mandir* administration has an online presence is, in itself, an example of the universalisation of the particular. Furthermore, to different extents, all of the facilities on the website itself constitute a deliberate attempt by the *mandir* administration to universalise the particular.

### ***Actions of the Jagannath Mandir Pujaris***

In addition to the universalisation of the particular, the particularisation of the universal also occurs – both on the practical level and as a result of philosophical views regarding the deity. On the practical level it is the actions of the *pujaris* at the *Jagannath mandir*

that show that the Internet has not meant that the local has been subsumed by the universal. Although the *pujaris* are not responsible for *Swagatam Jagannath Dham* they are able to actually shape the website and the facilities that it offers. For example, unlike *jagannathtemplepuri.com* (see above), *Swagatam Jagannath Dham* does not offer a facility whereby an order for a *puja* can be made online. According to B. Mishra this is 'because the *pandas* [religious guides] and priests have their own *puja* systems'. Even if people specifically request to the administration through the website that a *puja* be done on their behalf, B. Mishra says that because of the *pujaris* it is 'impossible to do this'. This demonstrates both the power of the *pujaris*<sup>37</sup> and that there is a clear demarcation between the administration who are responsible for the website and the hereditary *pujaris* who perform the religious practices. If this was not the case then there would be no reason for the *pujaris* to oppose this as they would still be performing the *pujas* and would have access to the *puja* fee.<sup>38</sup> However, as it stands, they would have no control over the destination of the *puja* fee so it is in their interests to oppose any online *puja* ordering service.

Not only is there the lack of a facility to order *pujas* online, there is also the absence of an online *puja* facility on *Swagatam Jagannath Dham*. Again this is because the *pujaris* do not allow it as it would pose a threat to their financial situation and lifestyle. B. Mishra even went as far as to say that because the *pujaris* would be vehemently opposed to online *pujas* the administration would never consider having this facility. Although I have shown above that the administration wished to have a website because other *mandirs* had one, a webcam like the one at the *Siddhivinayak mandir* in Mumbai which allows devotees to view the deity if they 'visit' *siddhivinayak.org*<sup>39</sup> is similarly

---

<sup>37</sup> The number of *pujaris* (there are over one hundred) and the fact that they have a dual source of income (although they are not directly employed by the committee they receive 'daily cash rewards' from the committee in addition to the *dakshina* [payment for spiritual services] that they receive from devotees) along with the fact that they are part of a hereditary tradition which stretches back for hundreds of years all contribute to their relative power.

<sup>38</sup> Another example which indicates that there is a clear demarcation between the two groups is that if there is some problem with a *pujari*, it is the *pujari*'s association which is responsible for solving this problem and not the *mandir* administration.

<sup>39</sup> The *Siddhivinayak mandir* in Mumbai is devoted to *Ganesh*. Their website was introduced in 1998 which meant that they were 'probably the first [Indian *mandir*] to go online' (anon. [*India Today*] October 16, 2000: online). The homepage of the website features a message from the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) concerning the webcam facility whereby it is possible to get live *darshan* of *Ganesh*.



out of the question: ‘...there is no possibility because the *pujaris* would not agree for this proposal’ (B. Mishra).

In the case of the *pujaris*, the globalising impact of the Internet has resulted in a struggle at the local level. Because their actions determine what the website at the global level can offer, the interaction between the global and the local is inevitable. Their strategies are also clearly indicative of a reaction against the global which has resulted in a compromise between the *pujaris* and the *mandir* administration – a situation brought about by the incursions of the global into the local. As the website currently stands, it is beneficial to both the administration and the *pujaris* as it offers no features that could adversely affect the *pujaris*, while still having the potential to attract even more devotees to the *mandir*. B. Mishra believes that the website will attract more devotees and gives the example that, despite the fact that the *Ratha Yatra* started to be televised ten years ago and now a large number of different channels are telecasting it, the number of pilgrims attending the event has actually increased: ‘We are thinking that the people will not come here because they are sitting in their room and seeing the festival through their TVs. But actually there are more people. The amount of devotees are increasing’. Whether the increase in visitors to the *Ratha Yatra* can be attributed solely to the television coverage is doubtful, but the fact remains that B. Mishra appears to hold this belief and sees a website as being able to have the same potential, which contributes strongly to his view that a website can only be a good thing. B. Mishra would therefore agree with Woolgar’s assertion that an online presence can contribute to offline presence (see chapter 2).

Robertson’s (1992) theory also proves helpful when the *Jagannath mandir* and its online presence are considered from the point of view of philosophical ideas about the nature of the deity. A consideration of these views of the deity is essential when investigating issues surrounding online worship.

---

On the webpage which actually offers the facility there are options for those with broadband and for those with a dial-up Internet connection, and there is the request not to spend too much time viewing the image of *Ganesh* as only so many people can avail themselves of this facility at any one time.

## *The Nature of the Jagannath Deity*

In the case of *Jagannath*, online *darshan* is not considered to have the same value as receiving *darshan* from the original *Jagannath murti*. This is because the power of this deity derives from the actual content of the *murti*. It is believed that the *Jagannath murti* contains an ‘essence’ and that this ‘essence’ is actually *Brahman*:

Lord Jagannath is also called Darubrahma. It means the prime soul enshrined in wood. He is shrouded in mystery like Brahma in Vedanta philosophy. In the sacred body of Jagannath, something unknown has been kept in a cavity. This ‘something’ is called Brahma [Tripathy uses the term ‘*Brahma*’ for ‘*Brahman*’]. (Tripathy 2003: 11)

The *murtis* of *Jagannath* and His brother *Balabhadra* and sister *Subhadra* are made of wood. Because of this material the *murtis* need to be replaced periodically (usually every 8-19 years [see *Swagatam Jagannath Dham/Festivals*]) on certain auspicious days in a ceremony known as the *Navakalebara* (new body) ceremony (Tripathy 2003: 43). During the *Navakalebara* ceremony, after the new *murtis* are made, ‘the life substances (brahma) from the old images are transferred secretly into the new images’ (Tripathy 2003: 43). Because the old *murtis* are replaced and the ‘essence’ is actually transferred to a cavity inside the new *murtis*, it is clear that it is this ‘essence’ that is being worshipped. Therefore, because the ‘essence’ is literally enshrined inside the *Jagannath mandir murtis*, other *murtis* elsewhere do not hold the same power; and this is also the case concerning an image of *Jagannath* on a computer screen. While the image on the screen may be an image of the actual *Jagannath* containing *Brahman*, it is not identical with it because this essence of *Brahman* cannot be present in an image. Nevertheless, although these characteristics of *Jagannath* rule out the possibility that full *darshan* could be had through a picture, there is still some benefit – albeit reduced – from taking *darshan* through an image.

Therefore, the presence of images of *Jagannath* on the WWW has not resulted in a decline in the importance of the local site because an online *Jagannath* is not identical with the *Jagannath* at Puri. If a devotee wishes to obtain full *darshan* then it is still necessary to travel to Puri physically, thereby not transcending embodiment. In other words, the presence of *Jagannath* online has not meant that this image has become

disembedded from Puri, as Giddens's (1990) globalisation theory would suggest. Furthermore, the Baudrillardian (1983a) argument put forward by both Appadurai (1990) and Castells (2000) that images on the Internet are hyper-real simulacra is also called into question in the case of *Jagannath*. As argued in chapter 4, unlike Smith (1993), I do not adopt Baudrillard's (1983a) view that images of deities in a secure referential context are already simulacra. Following on from this, an online image of *Jagannath* is not hyper-real because there is no suggestion that this image is more real than (or even *as real as*,) the original *murti*. Devotees of *Jagannath* fully appreciate that there is a difference between the image and the original *murti* and that the former cannot provide a full *darshan* experience.

Therefore, in the case of the *Jagannath mandir* there is no evidence to suggest that an online presence means that the religious site declines in importance, and this is difficult to reconcile with the views of Giddens (1990), Castells (2000) and Apolito (2005). This latter theorist specifically asserted that, largely because of replications, the sacred site declines in importance and that this 'reaches its culmination with the Internet' (Apolito 2005: 155 [see chapter 4 of this thesis]). But I found no evidence to suggest that this is the case. This is perhaps related to the fact that replications in Hinduism are unproblematic (Apolito based his theory on Marian cults). My findings also did not support Scholte's (2000) notion of supraterritoriality (which at first glance might appear to be helpful because of the fact that Hindu sacred sites can be replicated). This is because although in Scholte's theory supraterritoriality does not bring about the end of territoriality; territorial space is still seen as declining in importance. My conclusion that the local site retains importance also calls into question Castells's (2000) belief that connectivity is more important than location.

### ***Other Deities***

Significantly, my conclusion is applicable not only to deities such as *Jagannath* whose *murtis* have a very different status from their replications. It is also the case where a replication is believed to be of the same status as the original *murti*, which means that the online *darshan* experience is held to be of the same value as traditional *darshan* of the deity in the offline world. Such a view is held about *Kali* at *Kalighat*, *Annapurna* at the *Annapurna mandir* in Varanasi and the *lingam* at the *New Vishwanath mandir*

(BHU).<sup>40</sup> Since, in these cases, *darshan* can be had without going to these *mandirs*, it would appear that these physical sites may decline in importance if their deity has an online presence. It might appear that online images of these deities would be ‘disembedded’ from their original physical sacred site. However, even in these cases, the physical site still has relevance, which means that the situation is more complex than the theories of Giddens (1990), Castells (2000) and Apolito (2005) suggest. This is because such images are still replications of *actual* physical *murtis*. Just because they appear to be free-floating in cyberspace and are able to provide a full *darshan* experience does not mean that the original physical *murti* is unimportant. It is the *particular* deity that has been replicated online which gives it meaning. This is another clear example of the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal. The deity is universalised through its availability on the WWW, but at the same time the universal becomes particularised as, for example, those who seek to receive *darshan* from an image of *Kali* in cyberspace, wherever they are in the world, are entering into a relationship with *Kali* at *Kalighat* – not a generic *Kali* disembedded from any referential locality. Therefore, again, my data suggest that the ideas of Robertson appear more valid than those of the other globalisation theorists who claim that the importance of the physical site is in decline and assert that an online replication is divorced from the original image. Even in cases where an online image has a status identical with that of the original image, I still assert that replicated images on the WWW are not merely hyper-real simulacra, as Baudrillard (1983a) and Castells (2000) would suggest, and that they do not blur reality, as proposed by Appadurai (1990).

The fact that an online image of a deity is still inherently related to the *murti* at the physical site is exemplified by the fact that a deity’s power is related to the level of service that it receives. Gauranga Das of ISKCON Kolkata, in line with other authorities (see e.g. Brooks 1989), explained that the power of the deity is directly

---

<sup>40</sup> It should be emphasised that these are the views of the *mandir* officials that I interviewed. In the interviews with Panda at *New Vishwanath* (BHU) and the official at the *Annapura mandir* it became clear that they had an *advaita Vedantic* viewpoint, and it seems likely that this has shaped their view as to the nature of the deity and the subsequent status of the online image. In Hinduism devotees conceive of the nature of deities in a number of ways (see chapter 4), and some conceptions (for example that which sees the *murti* as sacred in itself) may result in a different view from that of these *mandir* officials regarding the status of the online image. Nevertheless, the views of the *mandir* officials still reflect the implications of the Internet for their *mandirs* and the devotees of the deity.

related to the level of devotional service that it receives from *pujaris*: 'When the service is neglected then *Krishna*'s presence becomes less. This depends on how much and what standard the service is to the deities. When the old standard goes away then Krishna also disappears'. Mitra of *Kalighat* also stressed this point, emphasising that the services of the *pujaris* are crucial. At *Kalighat* there is a continual round of complex procedures that are required to look after the deity which is 'conceived of as a living being'. Therefore, the belief is that an image of a deity on the WWW can only give an efficacious *darshan* if the physical *murti* is given adequate service. This clearly gives further weight to my claim that the local is still of paramount importance in Hinduism. In addition to this, in some cases, even those authorities who believe that it is unproblematic to have an image of the deity online still stress the importance of the physical place despite the fact that replication is acceptable in Hinduism. For example, Panda at the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) stressed the importance of the sacred place as being conducive to worship.

### **The Continued Relevance of Conventional Notions of Time: ISKCON's Reaction to Globalisation**

A core feature of any notion of globalisation is that conventional notions of time are of little relevance online. However, my data indicate that this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, the fact that this is not the case and that this is because of decisions made at the local level provides (along with the actions of the *pujaris* at the *Jagannath mandir*) another example of a reaction against globalisation. Again, at first it would appear that globalisation theorists were correct in asserting that time diminishes in importance online. This is because online *darshan* is theoretically available 24 hours a day – something which cannot happen at the local site where conventional notions of time must be abided by and *darshan* is only available at specific times. However, with the website planned by ISKCON Kolkata, conventional notions of time persist. Although information will be available 24 hours a day on the website, 'offline' time will still be of importance despite a deity's presence online because this deity would only be available at conventional *darshan* times: 'Everyday all Calcuttans can have *darshan* in their home as soon as we...7:30 [am] we open the curtain – new dress every day – they can also 7:30 [am] open the screen and have *darshan* – they will be very happy – that will be very good' (Gauranga Das).

Therefore, in this case, Castells's emphasis on the transformation of time in his theory of globalisation (2000) – with the Internet being a key factor in this – is not supported by the fact that ISKCON will be able to maintain the importance of conventional time. Instead, Hine's (2000) assertion that people still make reference to conventional understandings of time when they approach the Internet makes more sense. However, in this instance, Castells's (2000) assertion that connectivity is more important than location has merit. For, if this service were to be introduced, it would be much easier for a devotee in the UK with an Internet connection to access the Kolkata deities than for a devotee unable to access the Internet who lives the other side of Kolkata to the ISKCON *mandir*.

### **Online Worship – Views and Implications**

As explained above in my discussion of the websites offering a *puja* service, devotees can perform worship without actually going to a physical site. Therefore, disembodied online worship, which will now be considered, has some sort of precedent. However, the main difference between *ordering* a *puja* online and *performing* a *puja* online, is that in the former case, *somebody* is still going to the physical site and offering the *puja*, whereas this does not occur when engaging in online worship.

Every single authority interviewed asserted that online, a deity is not subject to pollution.<sup>41</sup> This is despite the fact that (as explained above) the image of the deity on the screen is inextricably related to the physical *murti*. My research indicated that purity concerns are to do with the environment and not the deity (see also Hamilton 1998: 72). This is summed up well by Panda at the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU):

HS: God cannot be polluted by impurity – is that true?

RCP (R.C. Panda): The situation will be polluted. God is not polluted.

HS: God can't be polluted?

RCP: No, not at all. But the situation there will be polluted.

---

<sup>41</sup> Although V.B. Mishra of *Sankat Mochan* (the only religious authority interviewed who would not entertain the idea of his *mandir*'s deity having an online presence) agreed with the other authorities that a deity is not subject to pollution, he was vehemently against an image of the deity appearing online because he felt that the deity could be shown disrespect. For the other authorities a possible lack of respect was only a minor concern.

HS: The place will be polluted?

RCP: It's very important. If the place is...you yourself have said that this is a very spacious place, garden, everything – it's very nice – your mind – now you are happy. When you are happy you offer your *puja*. Now if it is impure – everywhere there are dirty things and other things then there is...God is not affected by that. But *you* are affected by that – benefit you will not get. Because your mind cannot concentrate. That is the problem. Because we are human beings – God is God. It is not affected by any dirty things or anything like that.

Therefore, the key point concerning a deity's online presence is that online the *mandir* environment cannot be polluted. Furthermore, importantly, in many cases online worship does not pose any dangers for devotees. This contrasts with the offline situation where care to keep the environment of *mandirs* pure must be exercised and there can be dangers for devotees in an impure state. For example, ISKCON's Gauranga Das asserted that 'If you appear in front of the deity [physical *murti*] then the offence is there – counted. In the screen you will not offend but you are taking some benefit'. The view of Gauranga Das is clear – you *can* take benefit and you *can't* offend. Therefore, for ISKCON, the lack of embodiment during online worship is not problematic and is actually an encouraging development. It is clear then that not only does the Internet create *an entirely new way of taking darshan*; it also results in *an entirely new set of conditions* relating to *darshan*.

The suggestion made in chapter 3 then, that online worship could be advantageous to those who are in an impure state, appears to have some validity. However, this comment needs to be tempered because there is the view that 'the worshipper must be in as pure a state as possible [and] worship should not begin without rituals of purification having been carried out' (Hamilton 1998: 76; see also Fuller 1992: 76).<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the view of ISKCON's Gauranga Das suggests that even if somebody is in an impure state he or she can still get benefit: 'Even if they are not in that pure consciousness but still they are taking *darshan* it is good for them. It is like better something than nothing. Like that'. Gauranga Das concluded that the presence of a deity online can only be beneficial to all concerned: 'people all over the world can take

---

<sup>42</sup> It is worthwhile pointing out that 'although personal purity is necessarily required for any sacred performance', purification rites for *darshan* are far less elaborate than for a *puja* (Vidyarthi *et al.* 1979: 59).

*darshan* every day of their deities and this is good’,<sup>43</sup> and Panda made the same point concerning *Vishwanath*.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the WWW, for devotees who are temporarily unable to enter a *mandir* because they are considered to be in an impure state, worship can be performed online where purity concerns are overridden.<sup>45</sup> However, this situation has even more wide-ranging implications. This is because of the fact that non-ethnic Indians are prohibited from entering many *mandirs*. As indicated in chapter 3, the *Jagannath mandir* in Puri is arguably the most famous example. On *Swagatam Jagannath Dham* a number of ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ are listed, with number one being: ‘Only Hindus are allowed to enter in the Temple’, and B. Mishra was very forceful when he emphasised that foreigners are not allowed to enter the *mandir*:

BM (Bhaskar Mishra): As per our traditions only Hindus are allowed...only born Hindus. If we have a doubt we are calling *pujaris*. Hindus are allowed, no restriction. Converted Hindus are not allowed!

HS: Which?

BM: Converted Hindus are not allowed – like ISKCON people – they are not allowed.<sup>46</sup> ...The foreigners only see the deities or Lords during the car festival only.

---

<sup>43</sup> *Darshans* of various *Jagannaths* are available on the ISKCON website [iskcon.net/darshan/jagannath](http://iskcon.net/darshan/jagannath). *Darshan* of the *Jagannath* at the ISKCON *mandir*, Mayapur can be had at [mayapur.info](http://mayapur.info).

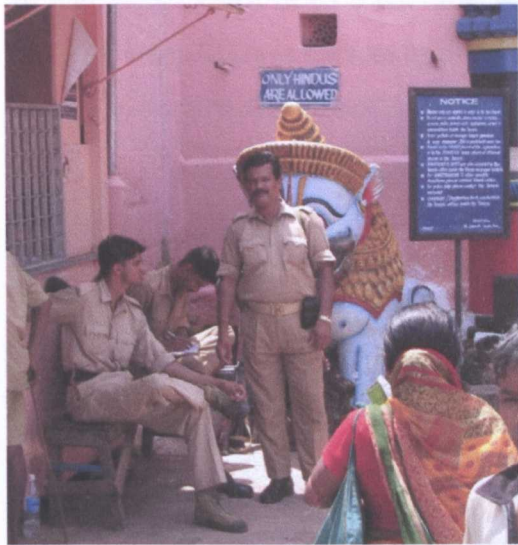
<sup>44</sup> Panda also made the same point concerning *Jagannath* and television: ‘...every year on the day of *Ratha Yatra* we see god *Jagannath*, *Balabhadra* and *Subhadra* on the TV screen and we are *so* happy you see because we cannot go there but we see here – sitting here.’

<sup>45</sup> In 1986 Sharma asserted that, in general, Hindu NRMs are achieving ‘the modernization of Hinduism’ and that this is largely through ‘de-emphasizing... considerations of ritual purity...caste and the ritual inferiority of the female’ (Sharma 1986: 235). Because online worship clearly de-emphasises purity concerns and renders caste and gender less important; according to Sharma’s criteria the Internet can also contribute to the modernisation of Hinduism. Sharma admits that he offers a generalisation, and mentions that ISKCON are conservative regarding purity concerns (Sharma 1986: 235). This emphasises that ISKCON’s views regarding an image of the deity on the WWW have the potential to greatly affect worship patterns within the organisation.

<sup>46</sup> B. Mishra revealed that there have been discussions with interested parties concerning entry but nothing has been resolved as yet. A *newindpress* report also stated that discussions have been ongoing concerning ‘whether or not to allow Hindus, Buddhists and Jains of foreign origin into the...12<sup>th</sup> Century Shri Jagannath Temple’ (anon. November 25, 2005: online) but a later *Indo-Asian News Service* report



This rule concerning foreigners is strictly enforced at the *Jagannath mandir* (see Fig. 8.3) unlike at other *mandirs* where there is a general rule against foreigners entering, although it is not always enforced.<sup>47</sup>



**Fig. 8.3 'ONLY HINDUS ARE ALLOWED' – Guards at the main entrance to the *Jagannath mandir***

Since foreigners are prohibited from entering some *mandirs*, the question of whether these *mandirs* will allow an image of their deity to appear online takes on added significance. This is because if such an image is allowed online, then *darshan* is possible for those who have not previously been able to experience this. As has been indicated, the *Jagannath mandir* administration is in favour of *Jagannath* appearing online, and their website offers many different *Jagannath* images. In addition to the

---

indicated that foreigners were still prohibited from entering the *mandir* (anon. June 14, 2006). ISKCON Kolkata's Gauranga Das informed me that Jayapataka Swami, a member of the ISKCON Governing Body Commission (GBC), had been granted entry but he declined to enter until all ISKCON devotees were allowed. According to B. Mishra the administration are unable to change the rule because the old policy of not allowing foreigners to enter was inserted into the '*Sri Jagannath Temple Act 1954*' by which the administration must abide.

<sup>47</sup> For example, during the course of this research I entered the *Tarakanath mandir* at Tarakeswar, West Bengal which traditionally prohibits the entry of foreigners. There is also a sign outside the *Durga mandir* in Varanasi which prohibits entry to 'non-Hindus' but foreigners are more than welcome to enter and nobody at this *mandir* appears interested in barring their entry.

Sinha wrote in 1972 that 'Christians' were not allowed to enter the inner-precincts of the *Kalighat mandir* and that this was because Hindus 'cannot afford to give up such an important point of anchorage for social identity' (Sinha 1972: 71) but now foreigners are even allowed to enter the *garbha-griha* (inner sanctum) and touch the feet of *Kali* if they so wish.

view that it is the environment or the setting and not the deity that can be subjected to pollution, this is perhaps unsurprising because, although foreigners are prohibited from entering the *mandir* in order to receive *darshan* from *Jagannath*, every year during the famous *Ratha Yatra* festival the three main deities travel through Puri on giant chariots (see Fig. 8.4). There is thus an opportunity for even those who are denied entry into the *mandir* to receive *darshan* of *Jagannath*.



**Fig. 8.4** The chariots of *Jagannath*, *Balabhadra* and *Subhadra* at the *Ratha Yatra* with the *Jagannath mandir* in the background (photo courtesy of Ranjan Ganguly)

In view of the nature of *Jagannath*, online *darshan* is not as beneficial as *darshan* received from the original *murti*. In this sense, online *darshan* is of little difference from the *darshan* of a lesser *Jagannath* that is available for foreigners all year round at the main entrance to the *mandir*. This replica of *Jagannath* (known as *Patitapavana* [which means ‘the redeemer of the fallen’]) is situated at the main entrance gateway to the *mandir* complex and was placed there in the eighteenth century specifically in order to allow ‘non-Hindus’ to obtain *Jagannath*’s *darshan* (see Tripathy 2003: 29).

Therefore, an online version of *Jagannath* could perhaps be seen as a kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century version of *Patitapavana*.

Compared to the *Jagannath mandir*, restrictions regarding entry are even stricter at Varanasi’s *New Vishwanath mandir* (*Mir Ghat*). The fact that this *mandir* was founded because it was believed by ultra-orthodox *Brahmins* that the *lingam* in the *Vishwanath mandir* had become polluted after members of the scheduled castes were allowed to have access to it (see chapter 6) emphasises just how seriously pollution concerns are taken there. The situation at this *mandir* is unusual in that it is not freely open to the public. Indeed, given the reasons for its creation, if the prevailing orthodoxy remains

the same, it can never be a fully public *mandir*. The ‘common man’ is not allowed to enter, and only *pujaris* authorised by the *mandir* are allowed access to the deity. Because access to the deity is even stricter here than at the *Jagannath mandir*, the implications of being able to worship online are even greater. At this *mandir*, although the administration do not currently have a website, having the image of the *lingam* online is considered as being a good thing for the same reasons as at the other *mandirs* – access becomes possible but the environment cannot be polluted. This emphasises the point that restrictions on access to deities do not mean that those restricting access are claiming that the deity is not universal (this is also clearly seen in the case of the *Annapurna mandir* [see below]). However, importantly, as in the case of the *Jagannath mandir*, although the online image is inextricably related to the original *murti*, it is not seen as being of equal value. Instead, the claim is that a devotee will get some benefit but not full benefit. This is yet another example to show that the local does not necessarily decline in importance as an effect of the Internet.

Among the *mandirs* included in this research, the full potential of the WWW in allowing worship which does not involve an embodied presence at a *mandir* could be best realised at the *Annapurna mandir*. Here, despite the fact that *Annapurna* is a universal goddess, foreigners are usually denied entry and can only worship from outside the *mandir* without receiving *darshan*. However, as mentioned above, there is the belief here that online *darshan* is identical with *darshan* from the actual *murti*. Therefore, the implications of online worship are greater here than at *mandirs* where foreigners are not allowed to enter and where online *darshan* is seen as not being of equal value to conventional *darshan*, and at *mandirs* which see online *darshan* in the same terms as conventional *darshan* and which allow foreigners to enter. However, unlike in the case of ISKCON, there are still risks attached to online worship. Regardless of whether worship of *Annapurna* is performed at the *mandir* in Varanasi or online, if this is done in an impure state then it is believed that ‘nature will punish’ the devotee. Therefore, worship at the *Annapurna mandir* has the potential to be revolutionised by the Internet. Online though, the traditional environment of *mandirs* which helps devotees achieve a pure state suitable for worship is absent, and this increases the risks for worshippers.

The possible implications of online worship upon the situation at *mandirs*, especially regarding religious professionals, will be considered in the next chapter.

# Chapter 9 – Conclusion

## Summary

Because there has been no previous study of Hinduism and the Internet, this study represents an important original contribution to a number of overlapping fields – for example, the sociology of religion, the sociology of the Internet, and religious studies. My contribution has been significant in a number of areas:

I have provided a **theoretical investigation** as to the compatibility of Hinduism and the WWW, and concluded that, overall, Hinduism is compatible with the WWW – indeed more so than other religions. Embodiment, a relatively neglected theme in sociology, has been considered in relation to Hinduism and then Hinduism has been considered in the light of the level of disembodiment that is experienced in cyberspace. I concluded that because embodiment is important in Hinduism, there is not a natural fit between Hinduism and online activity. Significantly, this conclusion led to a number of important research questions which I was able to address in the empirical part of the project.

A further significant contribution that this study has made is in the **development of online methodology** – an area still in its infancy. My approach has been innovative and rigorous – the latter attribute often missing in previous studies of the Internet. This means that my methods can be replicated in the future by myself or other researchers in order to identify changes in the online situation.

A third contribution is the **mapping of Hinduism on the WWW** that I have been able to undertake through employing my research methods. I was able to show that it is possible to gain a picture of the general situation of Hinduism on the WWW and that, despite the vast number of Hindu-related websites, there is a relatively small number that are prominent. Furthermore, I discovered that these websites tend to link to each other, and this reinforces their dominant position.

My greatest contribution is my **empirical analysis**. Significantly, I have gone beyond merely analysing the online situation. I have also conducted fieldwork in the offline world and this has enabled me to investigate the relationship between the situation on the WWW and the offline situation. I have shown that the local has not been subsumed by the global, and that instead, globalisation has resulted in the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal.<sup>1</sup>

The specific research questions that were presented in chapter one have been addressed in detail in the thesis. Summarised answers to these questions are as follows:

1. The main practical difference between an online *puja* and a conventional offline *puja* is that in the former, icons are used instead of physical props. Sense stimulation – an important aspect of the offline *puja* – is significantly lower online, but *darshan* – the key aspect of *puja* – along with the symbolic nature of the ritual, means that an online *puja* does share important similarities with one conducted in the offline world.

2. According to the various religious authorities interviewed, online *pujas* are valid because online *darshan* is valid. For some, the benefit is considered to be the same as for those who attend the actual religious site, while for others, the benefit for the devotee is considered to be weaker.

3. The philosophical reason that explains why, for some authorities, there is a difference between receiving *darshan* from the original *murti* and from an image of the deity online, is the belief that the original *murti* has some intrinsic power and that an online image of the deity cannot have this intrinsic power. For those who believed that *darshan* was the same, this was related to their particular philosophical view of the nature of the deity.

4. Issues of purity and pollution are less pronounced in cyberspace than in the offline world, although they are still important. The deity cannot be polluted whether online or in the offline environment, but the offline *environment* can be polluted by those who visit in an impure state which affects all worshippers who visit there. In contrast, online worship by those in an impure state does not affect the physical site and its visitors.

---

<sup>1</sup> A process identified by Roland Robertson (1992).

However, those who worship online in an impure state will find it more difficult to gain benefit, and, according to some authorities, worshipping online in an impure state could even result in harm to a devotee.

5. Because deities cannot be polluted through their images appearing online, the immediate main implication of an online image of a deity being accessible to everyone is simply that those who would previously have been prevented from receiving *darshan* of a specific god or goddess are now able to receive *darshan*. In the future this could increase the perception held by some that Hinduism is a universal religion, and it could result in an increase in the popularity of certain deities (see below).

6. In chapter 3 I suggested that although online *pujas* are valid, if they became prevalent to the exclusion of conventional modes of worship then the ritual would become meaningless because its efficacy depends upon a devotee having experience of the offline ritual. Therefore, an important aspect of Hinduism would be lost to those whose only knowledge of the *puja* ritual was through online participation. Local sites would also be affected (see below).

7. The fact that individuals are able to practise Hinduism online where purity issues associated with the body are less pronounced means that the notion of embodiment declines in importance to an extent. However, as indicated above (see 4), purity concerns do remain online. Furthermore, because *full* disembodiment does not occur online, and, for example, I have suggested that embodiment is necessary to make sense of the *puja* ritual (see 6); this means that the notion of embodiment remains important to the understanding of Hinduism. This conclusion suggests that sociological theories of embodiment retain their importance despite the introduction of cyberspace.

8. Although it is too early to be able to determine exactly how online developments will affect traditional Hindu offline sites, there is the strong suggestion that the position of *pujaris* could be adversely affected (see below).

9. The use of the Internet by the Kanchi *Math* and its supporters provides clear evidence that the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet can bring about a decline in importance of traditional borders, and this supports a key aspect of the globalisation theories of Beck (2000) and Scholte (2000). However, findings from my

main case study (the *Jagannath mandir*) did not support Scholte's (2000) notion of the 'spread of supraterritoriality' because the relationship between the *mandir* and the Internet does not result in a decline in the importance of the local site. This also means that Castells's (2000) assertion that connectivity is more important than location does not apply in this case. However, my findings from ISKCON (*International Society for Krishna Consciousness*) Kolkata show that Castells's assertion can certainly apply in some cases.

10. My findings indicate that online Hindu images have not become 'disembedded' (Giddens 1990) from the local site (however, I did find evidence to suggest that religious 'knowledge' had become 'disembedded' from its original context) and that they should not be considered to be hyper-real simulacra (Baudrillard 1983a).

11. Although there are specific aspects of Hinduism which are in tension with Beckford's (1992; 2000a; 2001) 'cultural resource' theory, there is evidence that the Internet is contributing to Hinduism being used as a 'cultural resource'.

12. In my investigation of the use of the Internet by the SSC (*Saiva Siddhanta Church*), Appadurai's (1990) theory of '-scapes' proved useful in understanding the processes that were occurring. However, his approach should be used with caution and it seems unlikely that 'imagined worlds' will replace the 'real world'.

13. My research uncovered many examples of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1992). For example, what may appear on the WWW is being determined by the situation at local sites (e.g. at the *Jagannath mandir* and at ISKCON Kolkata). Indeed, out of all the globalisation theories that I employed in order to attempt to understand the processes that were occurring as a result of the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet, Robertson's theory which emphasises the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal proved to be the most helpful.

14. I did not identify many reactions against forms of Hindu religious expression online by the representatives of *mandirs*. Out of my informants, only the *Mahant* of the *Sankat Mochan mandir* was vehemently against having an image of the deity online. As he has complete control of the *mandir*, he is able to simply not have a website. Only in the future will the implications of this decision be able to be seen (see below). I have

shown that the *pujaris* at the *Jagannath mandir* reacted against a specific use of Hinduism on the WWW and were able to compromise with the administration as to what services are permitted on the *mandir* website. *Pujaris* would appear to be the key group most likely to react to the Internet, and such a reaction has already been reported in a media article (see below).

15. I have found evidence to suggest that in some cases, the presentation of Hinduism has undergone a process of homogenisation as a result of Hinduism's presence online.

16. The various online *pujas* available on the WWW are virtually identical, and this can be contrasted with the offline situation where there is a far higher level of diversity. Thus, actual forms of Hindu worship facilitated by the Internet have undergone homogenisation.

17. At the local level, the relationship with the global has resulted in both the homogenisation and heterogenisation of Hindu rituals. For example, *pujas* ordered online through the same website will display a far greater degree of uniformity than if those ordering the *pujas* were to perform them themselves. On the other hand, because the different *puja* service providers have different ideas as to how a *puja* should be conducted, there is a degree of heterogenisation of *puja* rituals at the local site.

18. Cyberspace gives rise to an online market-place which is intertwined with the traditional offline market-place – although there are fundamental differences between the two. The de-regulated nature of the online market-place has not resulted in a free market, but this has not damaged religious vitality. Therefore, the key tenets of RCT (rational choice theory) do not appear to apply to the online market-place.

19. Cyberspace is not merely an extension of the conventional market-place (see 18).

20. Key strategies that I have identified which have brought about success for Hindu groups in the online market-place include creating informative websites, linking with other prominent websites (sometimes from the same organisation), encouraging 'visitors' to 'visit' other websites with a similar ethos, and criticising other Hindu groups. My research indicates that the second strategy is very successful. It has not been possible to empirically ascertain the level of success of the other strategies.



21. The Hindu groups that are the most successful online are, by far, the SSC and the HSC (Hindu Students Council).

### **Limitations of the Study**

My study – like any other – can only describe and analyse the situation as it currently stands. Although I have argued in chapter 6 that the online situation does not, despite a popular view, change rapidly over a short period of time, any project which concerns the study of the Internet is likely to date more quickly than many other studies – primarily because Internet use is increasing rapidly.

Furthermore, the scope of this project meant that not every important aspect of Hinduism and the Internet could be investigated. One area of research that I did not approach concerns the *use* of Hindu-related websites. It would be valuable to discover the extent of Hindu-related website use and the uptake of the various facilities offered on them (over and above comments by those responsible for the websites), and investigate the motivations of these users. It would also be helpful to discover the demographic characteristics (e.g. caste, ethnicity, age, gender, educational level, occupation) of those ‘visiting’ the websites and to compare this with Internet users as a whole and non-Internet users. One reason why a strategic decision was made in this project to concentrate on other areas was because of the vast methodological problems associated with researching this area online (see chapter 6). Nevertheless, with more time and resources, an attempt could be made to undertake such research.

Another feature of the online environment that would be possible to study at the present time if the scope of the project was broader is anti-Hindu websites and anti-Hindu NRM (New Religious Movement) websites. A study of this aspect of the online environment would complement the part of this thesis which deals with the ideological battles that occur in cyberspace between different Hindu groups. As mentioned in chapter 7, similar work has been undertaken by Introvigne (2000; 2005), Mayer (2000), and Cowan (2004), who have looked at the battles between NRMs and their opponents. This influenced my decision to concentrate upon other areas.

In my opinion, the most significant limitation of my study is that *pujaris* were not interviewed. The length of time of the fieldwork in India meant that I made a decision to focus my research activities in other directions. If I had more time and resources I would have conducted interviews with *pujaris* as their views would be likely to provide a good contrast with the views of the high-ranking *mandir* officials, and this would result in a more well-rounded study.

## **Possible Further Research**

In addition to the further research that could be carried out if the scope of this project was greater, there are other important areas where further research would be desirable. These further research areas could not be addressed not simply because the scope of this project is necessarily limited. The important areas for research that I will now propose could only be investigated in the future because the online situation is still in its infancy at the moment.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that an analysis of the current situation is valuable and can reveal a great deal, and that this is in fact especially the case *because* the situation is still in its relative infancy, it is only after a number of years when more religious websites appear, when websites become more technologically advanced, when more people have access to the Internet, and when the use of the Internet for religious matters becomes more common (assuming that it will) that the overall impact of the Internet on Hinduism will become clearer. In some cases, future research results could be compared to the situation as it currently stands.

My suggestions for possible future research include speculation as to what could potentially happen in the future. In many cases such speculation is useful because it can indicate specific avenues of research. Furthermore, in the case of the position of *pujaris*, I am able to discuss the situation as it currently stands. This can both emphasise why *pujaris* are especially likely to be affected in the future, and suggest at which *mandirs* included in the research the effects will be felt the most.

---

<sup>2</sup> Concerning Islam, Bunt notes that the overall impact of the Internet will only be able to be fully assessed in a number of decades (Bunt 2000b: 144), and in the case of Hinduism I see no reason to disagree with this claim.

In chapter 8, two areas which could only be investigated in the future have already been mentioned. One of these concerns the question of whether a view that Hinduism is a universal religion – as distinct from an ethnic religion – would become more widespread as a result of its presence on the WWW. This is especially interesting because Vertovec claims (drawing upon Burghart 1987) that Hindus in the diaspora ‘have developed Hinduism into an “ethnic religion”’ (Vertovec 1997: 289). It would be worthwhile to investigate in the future whether this trend showed any sign of a reversal.

### ***Mandir* Popularity**

The second area concerns the implications for those *mandirs* that do not have an online presence compared to those that do – would *mandirs* that did not have an online presence be eclipsed by previously lesser *mandirs* which embraced the Internet and were thus able to effectively exploit the new ‘political opportunity structure’ (McAdam 1996 cited in Guidry, Kennedy and Zald 2000: 2)?<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> Regarding this, it is worthwhile noting that *mandirs* which have a website are clearly more accessible to a potentially wide audience. For example there are some *mandirs* that I had not previously heard of and that are relatively obscure, that I have since learnt about through their websites which were easily found when looking for Hindu-related websites. It seems reasonable to suggest that amongst those in the diaspora and foreigners interested in Hinduism who draw heavily upon the WWW as a resource, information about Hindu *mandirs* will be drawn increasingly from the Internet.

It would be especially fruitful to conduct research at the *Sankat Mochan mandir* as this was the only *mandir* in the research that was actively against putting an image of the deity online. Indeed, there was not even any enthusiasm or intention to have a website which just offered information (although this was considered permissible and was not

---

<sup>3</sup> A difficulty associated with this question is that *mandirs* cannot be hierarchically ordered. This is partly down to the fact that, depending upon their devotional orientation, individuals assign prime importance to different *mandirs* (see Morinis 1984: 268). This methodological difficulty could be overcome either by comparing *mandirs* within the same tradition that clearly have a different status, or by using indicators such as income in order to determine rank. Furthermore, longitudinal research aimed at discovering the implications of Internet take-up compared to non-take-up would be very challenging because, as has been made clear in chapter 6, it is not easy to compare *mandirs*.

<sup>4</sup> Similar research could also be carried out regarding differences in the online presence of various religious groups.

ruled out). Assuming that not having an online presence in the future would put a *mandir* at a disadvantage, it seems likely that *Sankat Mochan* would not be as adversely affected as would other *mandirs*. I make this claim not because the *Sankat Mochan mandir* is extremely popular despite the fact that it does not engage in publicity. As I pointed out in chapter 8, even important *mandirs* can decline in popularity over time. The main reason why the lack of an Internet presence is unlikely to harm the *mandir* for the foreseeable future is the demographic make-up of its visitors. A large number of its visitors are from villages, and the pilgrimage activities of this group are not dependent upon publicity, let alone media such as the Internet. *Sankat Mochan* attracts this group because *Hanuman* is largely a god of ‘folk Hinduism’ and is therefore important for villagers. Indeed, Eck reveals that many village pilgrims who visit Varanasi come ‘primarily’ to visit *Sankat Mochan* (Eck 1993: 263). Therefore, it would appear that *Sankat Mochan* does not need to embrace the Internet in the foreseeable future. This can be contrasted with the situation at ISKCON Kolkata where the congregational devotees are generally urbanised, educated, and from a social stratum whose members are able to access the Internet. ISKCON’s Gauranga Das was explicit that it would be the congregational devotees who would benefit most if the Kolkata *mandir* offered online *darshan*. He specifically spoke about plans for a website with this group in mind. It is even conceivable in the market-place of religion (see chapters 5 and 8) that such a group might be attracted to look elsewhere if this facility was offered by an organisation other than ISKCON.<sup>5</sup> This is certainly worthy of investigation.

Despite my argument that the *Sankat Mochan mandir* is not likely to be adversely affected through not having an online presence, it would be valuable to conduct research in the future concerning the *mandir* when there are likely to be many *mandir* websites on the WWW. This would be in order to see if the *mandir* is affected in any way as a result of its stance towards the Internet. Indeed, because of the demographic make-up of its visitors, it would provide an ideal-type case study because if even *this mandir* was adversely affected, then it strongly suggests that *mandirs* that do not primarily attract villagers would also be affected if they did not have an online presence. Furthermore, there is the possibility that in the future the *Mahant* of the *Acarya Goswami Tulsi Das* will change his mind regarding the Internet, and if this

---

<sup>5</sup> It is clear then, that there are interesting issues concerning the digital divide over and above looking at the implications of certain sections of the population not having access to the Internet – the demographic make-up of devotees at different *mandirs* varies, and this means that the situation is very complex.

were to happen it would obviously be interesting to look at the reasons for this and any changes it would bring about. In fact, regarding all of the *mandirs* included in this research, it would be extremely valuable to conduct research again in the future as many of them were without a website but expressed a desire to have one in the future. Follow-up research at the *Jagannath mandir* which has its own website would also be of interest, as at the time of this research, having a website is still a relatively new development, and the full implications of it are therefore yet to unfold.

### **The Position of *Pujaris***

A fascinating area for future research concerns the implications of online developments for *pujaris*. Online *pujas*, *darshan* via a webcam, and the ordering of *pujas* online, none of which involves the embodied presence of a devotee at a physical site, have the potential to affect *pujaris*. *Pujaris* are especially vulnerable to these online developments because of their low status (see Preston 1980: 27, 41; Chakrabarti 1984: 92; Presler 1987: 46, 112, 137, 144) which means that they are ‘insecure, individually and collectively’ (Presler 1987: 140). Because of this, some *mandir* administrations are able to introduce new developments (such as requiring devotees to buy tickets for services directly from them) regardless of the wishes of *pujaris*, and this results in tension between the two groups (see e.g. Preston 1980: 41; Presler 1987: 114).<sup>6</sup> Online developments constitute another ingredient in the tension that commonly exists between the *pujaris* and the administration. For example, at the *Baba Vaidyanath Shiv mandir* in Deogarh, Jharkhand, an online *puja* facility has been introduced by the administration but this has upset the *pujaris*. The general secretary of the *Panda Dharmarakshi Sabha* (a *pujaris*’ association) commented that as a result of online *pujas*, the administration is “gradually depriving priests of their right to conduct rituals” (anon. [IANS] June 16, 2003: online). On the other hand, the administration brushes aside these claims saying that it will only be people in faraway places that perform online *pujas* and that others will still come to the *mandir* and will still require *pujaris*. However, those who might have intended to visit the *mandir* can now do an online *puja* instead. For example, a resident of Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand (about 350 km from Deogarh) commented that during the holy month of *Shravan* it ‘is a tough job to

---

<sup>6</sup> However, as I have shown in the previous chapter, in the case of the *Jagannath mandir* the *pujaris* are relatively powerful and have ensured that, concerning the Internet, the *mandir* administration can only pursue certain developments.

offer puja there' and 'now I can offer puja to Lord Shiva from Ranchi' (see anon. [LANS] June 16, 2003: online). Such a practice clearly undermines the role of *pujaris* and, if it were to become widespread, would likely have a detrimental effect upon their status and income.

As in the case of online *pujas*, *puja* ordering services on the WWW have the potential to affect the livelihoods of *pujaris*.<sup>7</sup> The following discussion concerning this is necessarily speculative and emphasises that this is an interesting area for future research.

The *Blessings on the Net mandir* websites list the various services that are available to be performed by *pujaris* along with the cost of each service. Aside from postage costs,<sup>8</sup> services cost the same as if they were ordered at the *mandirs*. Significantly, *Blessings on the Net* declares that 'All the pujas will be performed by the authorized temple priests and *no extra payment* to them is need[ed] to [be] made unless it is clearly specified by the temple authorities' (*Blessings on the Net.com/temple* [window: 'Code of Conduct'] [my emphasis]). Instead, 'all contributions made to temples are credited/transferred directly to the temple account by the Payment Gateway Service Provider' (see *Blessings on the Net.com/temple* [window: 'What is Offerings' [sic.]]). Therefore, this system does not allow *pujaris* to solicit extra payment. This contrasts with the ordering of services by devotees at *mandirs* where, although payment is supposed to go to the administration, at the time of the service the *pujaris* are still able to try to get extra money from devotees. Therefore, if the opportunity to order *pujas* online is offered by *mandir* authorities, then the financial position of *pujaris* will be adversely affected. Even if offering the facility to order the service via the Internet meant an increase in the amount of *pujas* to be performed at a site, the *pujaris* would not benefit from this financially.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in chapters 1 and 8, prior to the Internet it was also possible to order *pujas* from afar. However, now that the service is offered on the WWW there is the potential for the practice to become widespread, and it is this aspect of the *puja* service on the WWW that has the potential to affect the livelihoods of *pujaris*.

<sup>8</sup> This is to pay for the sending of *prasad* (which can only be solid and non-perishable).

<sup>9</sup> Although the various administrations might see offering the service as a positive development because it enables them to have control over the flow of money to the *mandir*, it could backfire on them. For example, Preston writes that prior to any moves by an administration to control *pujaris*' earnings, 'the amount of money a priest makes depends on free access to temple profits [and] at least this motivates

This situation whereby the *mandir* administration is responsible for a *puja* ordering service online in which the *pujaris* can only be adversely affected can be contrasted with the offering of the service by private organisations or individuals such as Pal (of *Ashirbadee* website) and Basu (of *Kaalighat* website). For example, both Pal and Basu pay the *pujaris* directly for their services and so in this case, if offering the service online resulted in more people ordering the *pujas*, then it would mean that the *pujaris* would benefit financially. This is especially the case because, for example, Pal pays the *pujari* more than does an average worshipper at *Kalighat* because he pays for the privilege of being able to jump the queue in order to ensure that the *pujas* are performed on time. Therefore, it is not the actual service that can have a positive or detrimental affect on *pujaris*. Instead it depends upon who administers the service. If the service is offered by the actual *mandir* authorities themselves then the *pujaris* will be likely to lose income. On the other hand, if the service is offered by private organisations or individuals<sup>10</sup> then the income of *pujaris* has the potential of being supplemented, although it is only certain *pujaris* who will have connections with the *puja* service providers. Advantages for *pujaris* would be especially evident if the *puja* ordering websites primarily caused those who had no intention of actually visiting the *mandir* in person to order a *puja* (as opposed to those who might have travelled to the *mandir* but who chose to order a *puja* online instead). Because Hindus in the diaspora are targeted by *puja* ordering websites, it seems likely that the former scenario would be the more likely.

If *pujaris* were able to offer the *puja* ordering service themselves online then they would be able to bypass the administration and not lose a cut of their fee to middle-men such as Pal and Basu. However, this is unlikely for a number of reasons. Firstly, because *pujaris* are generally of low economic and social standing, this means that they

---

him to attend to the needs of devotees' (Preston 1980: 85). However, if *pujaris* are not rewarded adequately then there could be repercussions. For example, because of a loss of control, some *pujaris* 'claim to have lost incentive to improve the...quality of worship' and therefore 'Hinduism could suffer seriously from an apathetic priesthood' (Preston 1980: 87). Preston made these observations long before the introduction of the WWW which has allowed a method of ordering *pujas* whereby the administration can have complete control of the payment for services provided by *pujaris*. Uptake of this new development by administrations means that any apathy in performing worship could increase.

<sup>10</sup> As I have indicated in chapter 8, at *mandirs* where this service exists, the authorities are not always aware that the service is being offered at their *mandir*.

are not likely to have access to the Internet or the necessary skills to set up such a service if access was available. Secondly, it is common for them to be unorganised and, consequently, any organisation they may belong to will not be strong (Presler 1987: 153; see also Chakrabarti 1984: 92) and would therefore be unlikely to be able to offer help in this regard. Thirdly, the *mandir* administration would find out about such a development eventually, and would almost certainly try to put a stop to this. Given their relative power in most cases, it is likely that they would be successful in such an attempt.

In the case of *online pujas* and *darshan* via a webcam, *pujaris* would not have any access to any fee (neither would *mandir* administrations – although such a facility might encourage individuals to make donations, and theoretically the *mandir* authorities could charge for a webcam facility). Unlike in the case of *pujas* ordered online where there is a possibility that *pujaris* could benefit, there appears to be no direct way that they could benefit as a result of these developments.<sup>11</sup> However, as explained in the previous chapter, an online *puja* or *darshan* via a webcam is often not considered to be of the same value as performing worship at the physical site. Therefore, in such cases, the introduction of these facilities online may not necessarily adversely affect the physical site and the position of *pujaris* to a great degree because it might not lead to a decline in the embodied presence of devotees. However, only in the future when these developments become accessible to more people will it be possible to ascertain the extent to which the number of visitors to traditional sacred sites will be affected.

### *The Situation at Specific Mandirs*

A brief consideration of the situation at specific *mandirs* is also valuable in this section dealing with possible future research concerning the position of *pujaris*. Such a consideration indicates that possible implications of online developments for the position of *pujaris* are different depending on the current situation at respective *mandirs*. I will focus upon the situation at *Kalighat* (because it was the *mandir* where I was able to observe the behaviour of the *pujaris* the most) and then briefly mention the situation at other *mandirs*.

---

<sup>11</sup> They could benefit, though, if these developments resulted in more people visiting the physical site.



There are five major lineages of *pujaris* at *Kalighat* which have hereditary rights to perform worship. The *pujari* families also claim that they have the right to control the affairs of the *mandir*, but they have no documentary evidence to support this, and in a High Court decision in 1949 it was decided that they only have the service rights to the deities. In 1965, after a number of quarrels, it was decided in the High Court that the *pujaris* would be responsible for *pujas* and would be answerable to the *mandir* administration (see Sinha 1972: 63-65, 71).<sup>12</sup> This, combined with the fact that since the Second World War, those who visit the *mandir* on pilgrimage try to complete their worship as quickly as possible – with the consequence that strong relationships between the *pujaris* and pilgrims are not built up (unlike in the past) (Sinha 1972: 65-66) – means that the *pujaris* at *Kalighat* have experienced a loss of income and status and are thus relatively vulnerable compared to the *mandir* administration.

In addition to the *pujaris* having no control over the affairs of the *mandir*, they do not receive a wage from the administration. Instead they are reliant solely upon *dakshina*.<sup>13</sup> Because of the belief that *dakshina* is necessary for a *puja* to be efficacious, individuals may willingly give donations directly to *pujaris*, so they can be sure that their money is fulfilling its intended function. If *dakshina* is not offered freely then the *pujaris* at *Kalighat* are still able to solicit donations or obtain money in other ways from those who go to the physical site to perform worship. For example, at the place where the *pujaris* stand at the front of the *garbha-griha* where people also stand for *darshan*, there is a donation box, the contents of which go to the administration. The *pujaris* are able to intercept the money intended for the box by physically grabbing money out of devotees' hands. This state of affairs at *Kalighat* means that the *pujaris* are vulnerable to any development which may result in fewer visitors attending the *mandir*. At the *Tarakanath mandir*, *pujaris* would also be very vulnerable to such a development

---

<sup>12</sup> Disputes between the *pujaris* and the administration at *Kalighat* have continued until the present day. For example, in February 2006, a petition was moved to the Calcutta [Kolkata] High Court by a *pujari* who alleged that the *Kalighat Temple Committee* were misappropriating funds (see anon. [*The Telegraph* – *Calcutta, India*] February 25, 2006: online).

<sup>13</sup> It is a common belief in Hinduism that for a *puja* to be effective, the *pujaris* must receive payment – *dakshina*. It is because of this belief that the *puja* service provider Sanjay Basu can arrange for *pujas* to be performed on behalf of his customers before they send payment. On a section of his *Kaalighat* website it is written: 'We believe that eventually you will send the money to us. Remember, no *Puja* is successful without 'dakshina' which has to be made only from the money sent by you' (*Kaalighat/Puja*).

because they are numerous (there are more than 100) and, as is the case at *Kalighat*, they do not get any money from the administration.<sup>14</sup> Instead it is up to them to solicit donations:

HS: Do the *pujaris* get a wage from the estate?<sup>15</sup>

MKB (M.K. Bhattacharyya): No, no, no! [laughs] They collect from devotees – as much as they can.<sup>16</sup>

HS: Is that *dakshina*?

MKB: *Dakshina*. Yes, as much as they can or as much as possible a person can offer.<sup>17</sup>

At other *mandirs* this level of vulnerability does not exist. For example, at the *New Vishwanath mandir* (BHU) there are only seven *pujaris* and so because of this alone, they are less likely to be affected by a decrease in attendance than the *pujaris* at the *Taraknath mandir*. Furthermore, six out of the seven *pujaris* also receive a wage (from BHU [Benares Hindu University])<sup>18</sup> and can still obtain extra money from devotees:

RCP (R.C. Panda): If they [devotees] put some money [*dakshina*] there near the *Shivalinga* then that money is kept in the donation box. But if you go and give some money to the *pujari* – in the hand of the *pujari* – then he takes.

HS: And that's OK?

RCP: Yes. So that is in addition to his salary.

There is a similar arrangement at the *Annapurna mandir* where the *pujaris* are 'paid servants' of the *mandir* and also receive *dakshina*, and at *Sankat Mochan* where the (non-hereditary) *pujaris* get paid a wage by the institution and are also welcome to keep any *dakshina* which is offered to them by devotees (although they are not

---

<sup>14</sup> As in the case of *Kalighat*, there have been disputes between the *pujaris* and the administration at the *Taraknath mandir* (see Morinis 1984: 110).

<sup>15</sup> At the *Taraknath mandir* the administration is known as 'the estate'.

<sup>16</sup> The exception to this is one head *pujari* who does actually receive a salary from the estate and so occupies a very different status from the other *pujaris* at the *mandir*. This situation is unchanged from that described by Chakrabarti (1984: 159-160).

<sup>17</sup> In his 1984 study, Chakrabarti noted that *pujaris* were dissatisfied with this arrangement (Chakrabarti 1984: 92).

<sup>18</sup> The other *pujari* is paid out of money from the donation boxes.

supposed to *ask* for any money). The same system is in place at *Dakshineswar* where the *pujaris* receive a wage in addition to money that is directly given to them by devotees (money placed in the donation box in front of the *garbha-griha* goes to the administration). At the *Vishwanath mandir*, the *pujaris* also receive a wage (*dakshina* is supposed to be placed in donation boxes),<sup>19</sup> as do those at the *New Vishwanath mandir* (*Mir Ghat*).

This brief discussion indicates that if a decrease in attendance at *mandirs* were to occur as a result of online developments, *pujaris* at different *mandirs* would be affected to varying degrees depending on their current position. Only in the future though would this area be able to be investigated properly.<sup>20</sup>

### **RCT and 'Strictness'**

In the previous chapter I looked at the situation of Hinduism on the WWW in the light of a supply-side rational choice model. RCT arguments concerning the strictness of religious groups will now be briefly discussed in relation to Hinduism on the WWW. It is another area where, as a result of the fact that the online situation is still in its infancy, any conclusions would only be able to be drawn following specific research in the future.

This area of study is especially interesting because it can be looked at in conjunction with the religious market-place issues discussed in chapter 8. For example, it would initially appear that a religious group with a strong presence on the WWW, which

---

<sup>19</sup> This arrangement has been in place since the *pujaris* became employees of the *Vishwanath mandir* administration when the *mandir* was taken over by the Government in 1983.

<sup>20</sup> The same is the case concerning other groups who would be affected. The economy of a *mandir* also affects others not directly related to the *mandir* (concerning Tarakeswar and the surrounding area, see Chakrabarti [1984: esp. 57-88]; concerning Vrindaban, Uttar Pradesh, see Brooks [1989: 111-113, 208]). In addition to, for example, stallholders and restaurateurs in the vicinity of *mandirs*, 'guides' would be particularly vulnerable if attendance at *mandirs* declined. Guides assist pilgrims (e.g. in obtaining *puja* materials) at the sacred site. They are not involved in the performing of rituals and their occupation is very precarious. No qualification is needed and people just set themselves up in this role if they are unable to earn more elsewhere (see Morinis 1984: 104-105). Guides at the *Taraknath mandir* are especially likely to be threatened by potential online developments because their position is already particularly vulnerable as a result of their high number (more than 500).

normally requires an advanced website or websites, would be doing well in the competition for adherents. However, on the other hand, there is the RCT notion that making a group easily accessible for free-riders would weaken the group. Having an advanced website can make it easier for free-riders, and this is especially the case where websites offer the facility to actually practise Hinduism. Nevertheless, it appears that some religious producers are attempting to make their websites as advanced as possible. For example, as mentioned in chapter 8, *siddhivinayak.org* offers devotees the facility to engage in online *darshan* via a webcam. Because this enables individuals to worship without making much effort or to contribute in any way to the group, according to RCT this will result in the *mandir* becoming less successful and the ‘congregation’ becoming weaker. However, at this stage it is too early to be able to determine if such an online presence could be damaging in the long term.<sup>21</sup>

It is also worth remembering that RCT asserts that the strictness of a group is not the only factor in determining membership and that benefits must outweigh costs. This explains why the groups that are the most demanding do not automatically have the most members. Therefore, it could be conceivable that, for example, although the *Siddhivinayak mandir* ‘congregation’ is not strict because the webcam facility promotes free-riders, this facility might be considered to be so beneficial to a large proportion of all ‘members’ that the benefits that it brings about might outweigh the costs that are incurred through the presence of free-riders. Conversely, a group which had a website with a minimum of features would not necessarily incur costs via free-riders but might also produce minimal benefits to adherents or potential adherents and thus be less successful than a group which permits free-riders. This highlights the criticism that RCT is left wanting when it comes to explaining what individuals consider as being beneficial.

The ability to practise religion online was not available or recognised when the rational choice theorists featured in chapter 5 undertook their studies of religion. It is therefore possible that the consequences of this new development, which is radically different

---

<sup>21</sup> There is also the danger that the model would actually be of little analytical use in this instance as questions regarding the cultural specificity of the model are raised. For example, there is the question as to the extent to which a group of Hindu worshippers can be regarded as being a congregation in the western sense of the word (see chapter 3), and the western notion of congregations is integral to RCT arguments concerning ‘strict churches’.

from any situation in the past, mean that the RCT assertion that non-strict religious groups will be unsuccessful does not necessarily apply online.<sup>22</sup> This would certainly be worth investigating because, as indicated in chapter 5, RCT has been influential in the sociology of religion. Such research would complement my findings gathered through an investigation of the online market-place using a rational choice model, which called into question the applicability of RCT tenets to the online situation (see chapter 8).

### **Changes in the Nature of Worship**

Another area which cannot be fully investigated at the present time but which would benefit from further investigation in the future concerns whether an increase in online *pujas* and reliance upon them by some individuals could encourage a more internal form of worship. Against such a suggestion, Kinney argues that the online environment is not very compatible with the demands for solitary contemplation (cited in Dawson 2005: 18). However, I disagree with this view and believe that a carefully designed website could actually provide an aid to the solitary contemplation required in order to undertake a *manasa puja* (mental *puja*) or a metaphorical pilgrimage (see chapter 2). Beckerlegge notes that there are those who believe that the Internet encourages introspection, and that furthermore, this introspection ‘may also foster a religious outlook’ (Beckerlegge 2001c: 235). Such individuals would therefore agree with my view.

### **Sanskritization**

It would also be worthwhile in the future to find out if there is any evidence that the WWW is facilitating Sanskritization, and, if this were the case, to look at this in greater depth. ‘Sanskritization’ is a process first identified by Srinivas in 1952 (Srinivas 1962a: 42). It refers to the process<sup>23</sup> whereby lower caste groups adopt the habits and lifestyles of groups higher in the hierarchy in order to attempt to bring about a rise in their status (see Srinivas 1962a: esp. 44). The term also refers to a low-caste group’s ‘exposure to

---

<sup>22</sup> Kim (2005) refers to an online Buddhist community (C-BUD) that has ‘gained the interest of many people who regard offline meetings as too demanding’ (Kim 2005: 146), and this provides an example to add weight to my claim.

<sup>23</sup> Not always successful (see Srinivas 1962a: 57).

new ideas and values which have found frequent expression in...Sanskrit literature... [such as]...*karma*, *dharma* and *moksha*' (Srinivas 1962a: 48).

In addition to pointing out that when discussing Sanskritization and the Internet I am engaging in speculation, it is also important to mention that the concept has been criticised,<sup>24</sup> and that many low-caste groups would not have access to the Internet or have relevant Internet skills.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Indian society has undergone vast changes since 1962 when Srinivas published his influential chapter 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization'. Nevertheless, as the following discussion is merely hypothetical, I will ignore these considerations which would be an important concern for any research in the future.

A future investigation could focus upon a number of different areas. The first of these concerns the presentation of groups online. Low-caste groups could use the Internet to present themselves in a way of their choosing.<sup>26</sup> For example, a website could have an attractive and professional appearance, and, as Brooks points out, according to Srinivas, 'evaluations of purity and pollution are as much a result of appearances as they are of birth-status' (Brooks 1989: 21). A website could also, for example, demonstrate an awareness of 'Sanskrit ideas' (see above), and claims identifying a group's particular deity with a universal deity (a key Sanskritization technique [see Marriott 1955: 215]) could be made. A presence in cyberspace could also result in the shortening of the length of time necessary for Sanskritization to occur. For example, Srinivas claims that it is common only for later generations of groups which attempt to Sanskritize to be able to pass themselves off as a higher status because 'the people who first hear the claim know that the caste in question is trying to pass for something other than what it

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, Fuller argues that the Sanskritic ideas and values identified by Srinivas (see above) 'are only tenuously Sanskritic' and therefore there is no dividing line between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic concepts, which means that 'in the end, we seem to be left with a concept of Sanskritic Hinduism that has no definable empirical content at all' (Fuller 1992: 26). However, despite this, there are still certain values that lower castes adopt, although rather than these values being 'Sanskritic', Fuller argues that they are merely those practices which *Brahmins* have been able to claim to be superior as a result of their dominant position in the hierarchy (see Fuller 1992; 28, 256, 257).

<sup>25</sup> However, this observation does not apply to all low-caste groups, and in the case of a presence on the WWW (see below), even one example would suffice to show that the Internet can help to facilitate Sanskritization.

<sup>26</sup> This discussion concerning the possible presentation online of a group low in the status hierarchy is related to the discussion in chapter 3 of *varna* and the disembodied nature of cyberspace.

really is (Srinivas 1962a: 57). Furthermore, Srinivas claimed that for the scheduled castes, ‘their only chance of moving up [the hierarchy] is to go so far away from their natal village that nothing is known about them in the new area’ (Srinivas 1962a: 59). Online, the audience is far less likely to know the true origin of a group. Therefore, Srinivas’s claim that ‘the group must be content to wait an indefinite period’ (Srinivas 1962a: 57) may not apply in the future.

A second area of possible investigation involves the potential increase in the dissemination of ‘Sanskrit ideas and values’. According to Srinivas, under British rule, ‘the development of communications carried Sanskritization to areas previously inaccessible’ (Srinivas 1962a: 48). Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether, in this respect, the Internet could contribute to further Sanskritization.

Another reason to suggest that Sanskritization could be facilitated by the Internet also invites future investigation. One aspect of Sanskritization is the replacing of blood-sacrifices with alternative offerings (see Srinivas 1962a: 49). I showed in chapter 2 that online *pujas* are purely symbolic. Therefore, if online *pujas* became widespread and started to replace blood-sacrifices then this would be evidence of the Internet contributing to Sanskritization.

The possible relationship between Sanskritization and the Internet is also worth investigating because of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism which has become an important development within Hinduism (see e.g. Bhatt 1997). Vertovec points out that whereas Srinivas proposed that Sanskritization could eventually lead to a group improving their place in the status hierarchy, now the process is also adopted by Hindu fundamentalist groups so as to enable Hindus to ‘rally around mutually accepted or commonly venerated religious or cultural institutions and tenets’ (Vertovec 1997: 267). Therefore, Sanskritization has taken on a contemporary significance beyond that envisaged by Srinivas. Because Hindu fundamentalists embrace the Internet (see chapter 4); the possible role of the Internet in the facilitation of Sanskritization could be especially significant.

Finally, it is also worth pointing out that, according to Srinivas, ‘as a caste rises in the hierarchy and its ways become more Sanskritized, it adopts the [restrictive] sex and marriage codes of the Brahmins. Sanskritization results in harshness towards women’ (Srinivas 1962a: 46). I have indicated above that it is possible that the Internet could

help facilitate Sanskritization, but also (in chapter 3) that the Internet could, in some ways, perhaps be beneficial for Hindu women. This observation possibly hints at the complexity of the implications of the Internet for the position of women in Hinduism and suggests another important area for further study.

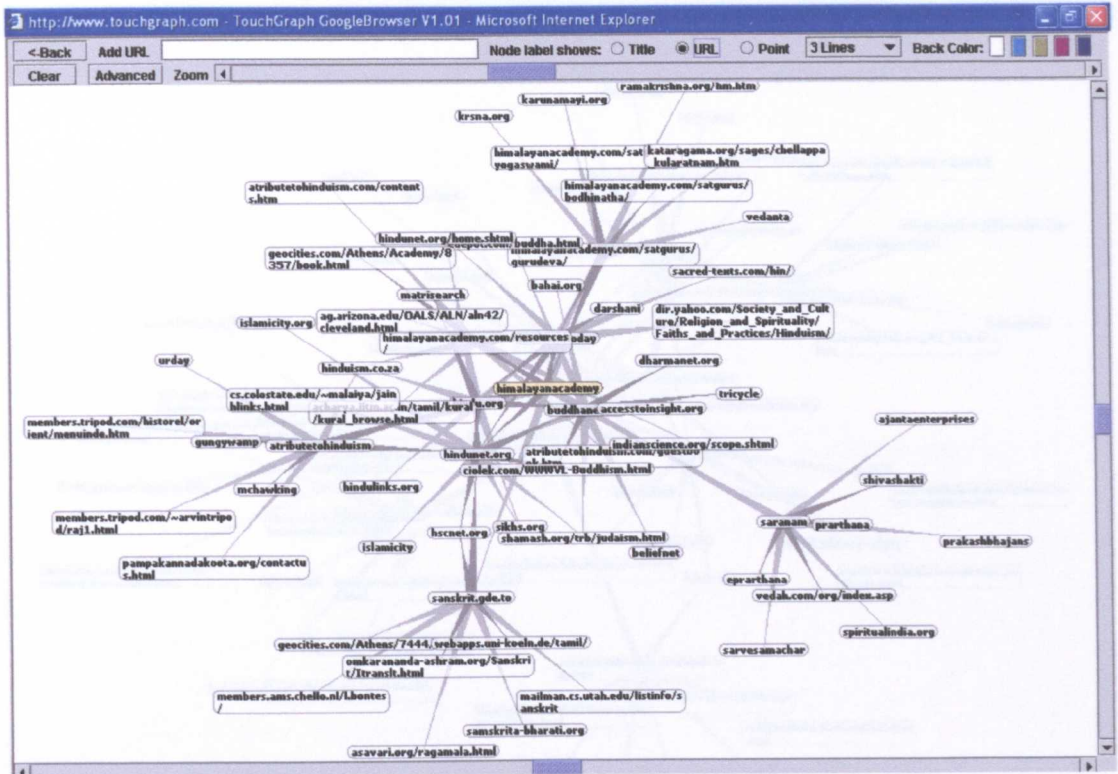
### **Language and the Digital Divide**

In chapter 2 I highlighted the digital divide and the fact that most material online is in English. The amount of material in other languages is almost certain to increase, and the implications of this are also worth investigating in the future. In the case of Islam, Bunt makes this point (Bunt 2000b: 132) and speculates that an increase in material online in languages other than English will ‘perhaps shift the current emphasis away from Muslim [web]sites emerging from “western” contexts, back to the traditional centres of Islamic learning’ (Bunt 2003: 208). In the case of Hinduism, such speculation would be inappropriate because organisations in India are producing websites in English – a language which many *mandir* administrators, Government officials and middle-class Indians are familiar with. For example, the huge website *kamakoti.org* emerges from a traditional centre of learning in India (the Kanchi *Math*), and, aside from a very small amount of content in Telegu and Tamil, its material is in English (see chapter 8). Therefore, concerning Hinduism, the current relative lack of languages other than English online is less likely to be a barrier to online participation by religious organisations than in the Islamic context.

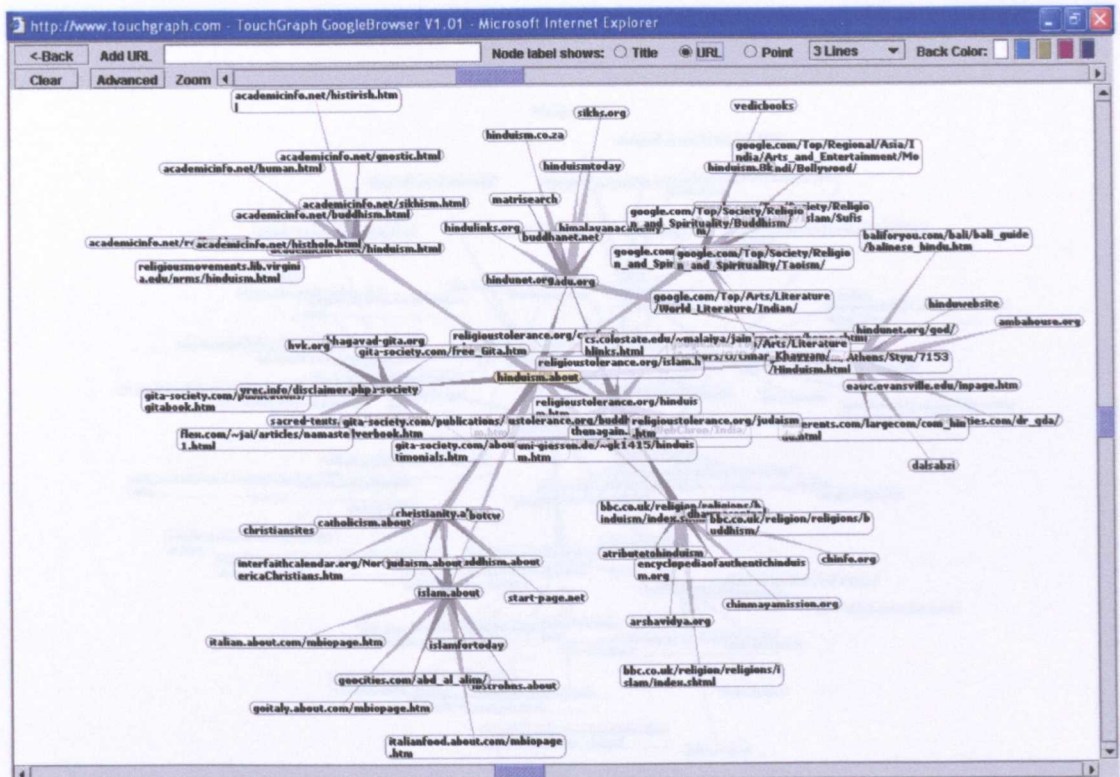
The fact, though, that the majority of Indians do not have knowledge of English, and that there is a pronounced digital divide in India, should always be recognised. This digital divide is another important area for possible future research. This is because Hinduism on the WWW could also affect those who do not have access to the Internet. For example, any changes at a physical religious site as a result of online developments could affect worshippers who visit that site. The implications could also be more wide-ranging – the digital divide might accelerate the schism within Hinduism which is already present as a result of existing social inequalities. Dawson and Cowan note that the Internet could both ‘reflect...deeply embedded social and cultural divisions and further contribute to them’, and remark that more research is needed on this (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 4). Because of the possible implications of such a development, this is perhaps the most important area of study for future researchers of Hinduism and the Internet.







**Fig. A1.3** *himalayanacademy.com*



**Fig. A1.4** *hinduism.about.com*





## Appendix 2 – Islam on the WWW

### Introduction

The purpose of this Appendix is to demonstrate that despite the fact that Islam and Hinduism are very different, overall, Islam on the WWW is remarkably similar to Hinduism on the WWW. Because this section is merely for the purpose of comparison, I will only give reminders in relevant places as to the situation of Hinduism on the WWW and not repeat in detail what I have already said about Hinduism.

It is not practically possible to compare Hinduism on the WWW with a large number of other religions on the WWW. I chose Islam for a number of reasons. Firstly, like Hinduism, Islam appears to be thriving in cyberspace (Bunt 2000a: 128). Secondly, Islam and the Internet has already been studied and this work can be drawn upon instead of having to undertake a great deal of primary research in this field which is not possible in a project of this size that primarily concentrates upon Hinduism and the Internet. This previous work has been undertaken by Bunt (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2004), who, although does not approach the subject through the application of systematic, rigorous research methods and does not provide a theoretical analysis, nevertheless provides a good overview of Islam on the WWW.

In addition to the practical reasons for a comparison with Islam, there are also other reasons for its choice. Firstly, the religion coexists with Hinduism in India (after Hinduism, Islam has the most adherents there).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, a comparison is especially interesting because Islam and Hinduism are in many ways diametrically opposed to one another. For example, Islam is certainly not as eclectic as Hinduism.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Muslims make up 12% of the population of India (Hindus make up more than 85% of the population) (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1326 and 1334).

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Islam is homogenous. For example, three main strands can be identified (Sunni ['orthodox'], Shi'a and Sufi) which can overlap (especially between Shi'a and Sufi), and within these overlapping categories are many different groups with different philosophies (see Bunt 2000a: 129-130; 2000b: 29; 2004: 123). However, the different groups themselves within the 'categories' are not necessarily eclectic. Sufism is associated with a degree of eclecticism but Sufis constitute a minority in the Islamic spectrum. Sunni Islam is the predominant form of Islam which wields the most influence and,

## Similarities with Hinduism on the WWW

### Search Engine Results

Bunt indicates that there are certain ‘market leaders’ (Bunt 2000a: 135; 2004: 127) in the Islamic online environment which appear high in the rankings of the popular search engines. To investigate this claim further, using the search term ‘Islam’ I performed searches<sup>3</sup> using the five search engines featured in chapter 7.<sup>4</sup> A small number of organisations were well represented in the search engine rankings, and a small number of websites appeared more than once throughout the different top ten rankings despite the fact that the search engines identified millions of websites. The clearest example of this is the *islamworld.net* website which appeared first in three of the search engine rankings and second and third in the other two search engine rankings. *islam-guide.com* (5 appearances: 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>) was also well represented, as were *islamicity.com* (4 appearances: 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>), *al-islam.org* (3 appearances: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>) and *islam.com* (3 appearances: 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>). This near-monopolisation of the search engine rankings by a small number of websites when the search term ‘Islam’ is used is thus similar to the situation regarding Hinduism.

Other similarities in this respect can also be seen when the ‘Islam’ search engine rankings are looked at further. For example, *bbc.co.uk/religion/islam* appears twice, as does *religioustolerance.org/islam* and *wikipedia.org/islam*. The corresponding Hindu sections of *bbc.co.uk/religion*, *religioustolerance.org* and *wikipedia.org* also appeared a number of times in the search engine rankings when the search term ‘Hinduism’ was used (see chapter 7).

### Ideological Battles

As with the case of online Hinduism described in chapter 7, there are ideological battles in the contested space of cyberspace. Bunt recognises ‘the domination of certain political-religious “Islamic” viewpoints, seeking to represent themselves as *the*

---

in general, it is certainly true to say that compared to Hinduism, doctrinally and organisationally, Islam is not eclectic in nature.

<sup>3</sup> On December 12, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *AlltheWeb, Ask Jeeves, Google, MSN and Yahoo!*

authentic voice of Islam on the Internet' (Bunt 2000b: 13; see also p. 37). In the same way that Hindu organisations that do not have a strong online presence are at a disadvantage not only because of this but also because the prominent websites actually criticise some of these organisations, Islamic websites are finding themselves in this same position. Furthermore, even between groups that have a reasonably strong presence on the WWW, ideological battles are being fought. For example, the *Muslims Online* website lists other Islamic websites but states that it will only list websites with 'authentic content' and refuses to list websites from *United Submitters International*, *Ahmadiyah* groups and the *Nation of Islam*. Furthermore, many of the links offered by the Sunni-centric *Muslims Online* are to websites that are actively anti-*Ahmadiyah* (see Bunt 2000b: 44). Similarly, the *Islamic Gateway* website states that on this website 'all legitimate views and Islamic beliefs can be represented' and that 'All Muslims regardless of race, colour, geographical location and belief are welcome' but also prohibits certain Islamic groups and also contains material opposing certain Islamic viewpoints (Bunt 2000b: 46-47) (see also Bunt 2003: 146 for a similar example concerning the Sunni-centric website *Fatwa-Online*).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Bunt notes that in addition to websites actually denouncing other views, they are used as a forum to address criticisms offered by opponents and he concludes that many groups 'seek to project themselves as the authentic, definitive voice of their belief-system' (Bunt 2000b: 123-124).

Bunt also emphasises that those organisations that have a strong presence on the WWW may not necessarily be those that are prominent in the offline world or necessarily have a view that is representative of the majority of Muslims (see Bunt 2000b: 3, 39; 2003: 180; 2004: 127) and that therefore, online, 'traditional structures of authority and power can be reconfigured...and new forces of authority are emerging (Bunt 2000b: 13). Good examples of this are the *Nation of Islam* which has a strong online presence (see Bunt 2000a: 130), and the South African group *Jamiatul Ulama* which has a minority perspective but which appears high in search engine rankings when the search term 'Shiism' is used (Bunt 2000a: 142). Another example is *United Submitters International* who, despite the fact that they have a strong presence on the WWW,

---

<sup>5</sup> Bunt also mentions a Sufi organisation that criticises other Sufi organisations on its website (see Bunt 2000b: 59).

propound a minority view within Islam (Bunt 2000a: 138-139).<sup>6</sup> Concerning their situation, Bunt comments that ‘the Internet is able to transform such “minority” views on Islam, and provide them with an on-line prominence equal to that of the “major players” within Islamic cyberspace’ (Bunt 2000a: 140). The fact that groups such as the *Nation of Islam* and *United Submitters International* have a strong presence on the WWW whilst they are attacked elsewhere on the WWW clearly demonstrates that, as in the case of Hinduism, online there is competition regarding claims to authority.

A related point that Bunt makes – which is also clearly true for Hinduism – is that online sources must be approached with a great deal of caution. There is the danger that those who are not knowledgeable about Islam could be presented with a specific interpretation which merely represents one view and is not representative of wider Islamic thought, and not be aware of this (see Bunt 2000a: 142, 143, 148; 2000b: 3, 130, 141).

Aside from these important overall similarities between Hinduism and Islam on the WWW, there are also similarities at the level of the actual websites themselves. Before considering these similarities it is worthwhile considering the case of the *Belfast Islamic Centre* (BIC) as it shares characteristics with that of the *Saiva Siddhanta Church* (SSC).

### **The BIC and the SSC**

Like the SSC, the BIC (see Bunt 2000b: 40-43) is a relatively small organisation. Furthermore, similarly to the SSC, the BIC have embraced new technology and appreciate future possibilities. They have had an online presence since 1995 and Bunt notes that the BIC website enjoys extensive links to other Islamic websites and concludes that ‘the BIC has the advantage of being, developmentally, several years ahead of the competition in digital terms’ (Bunt 2000b: 41). As I have made clear in chapter 7, the same can certainly be said concerning the SSC.

---

<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the Al-Azhar University in Cairo – ‘a prominent institution of Muslim learning and source of Islamic authority’ did not appear high in the search engine rankings using the search term ‘Islam’ when Bunt conducted his research (see Bunt 2004: 127).



However, a major difference between the online situation of the SSC and the BIC concerns search engine rankings. The BIC website did not appear in the top ten of any of the five search engine rankings when I conducted my searches on December 12, 2005 using 'Islam' as the search term. As has been emphasised, the prominence of a website in the search engine rankings is of paramount importance to an organisation aiming to exert influence online (and Bunt indicates that despite the BIC's geographical origins, they certainly do wish to have influence globally). Therefore, despite some significant similarities, the online situation of the SSC and the BIC is very different in one important respect.

### Website Similarities

I will now briefly mention similarities at the level of the websites themselves.<sup>7</sup> Bunt comments upon the existence and importance of Islamic portal websites (see 2004: 124, 127-129),<sup>8</sup> Islamic websites which provide commercial services (see 2000a: 134; 2000b: 28, 44-47, 63; 2003: 174; 2004: 132) and Islamic pilgrimage websites (2000a: 135-140; 2004: 132).<sup>9</sup> All of these types of websites also exist in Hindu cyberspace (see table 7.5). A further point that Bunt makes is that it is not only organisations that produce Islamic websites – there are also those that are produced by individuals (see 2000a: 130, 147-148; 2000b: 12, 27, 105; 2003: 167). This is also the case with some of the prominent Hindu-related websites (see table 7.5).

---

<sup>7</sup> It is also worth noting that there are similarities in the type of names that some of the prominent websites use. For example, simple and direct names such as *islamworld.net* and *islam.com* are utilised by prominent Islamic websites and these are reminiscent of *hindunet.org* and *hindu.org* – names used by prominent Hindu-related websites.

<sup>8</sup> An example of a major Islamic portal website is *islamicity.com* (which was prominent in the search engines when I conducted my search [see above]). According to Bunt, the sheer amount of material on this website means that it is difficult to navigate (Bunt 2000b: 26), and in this sense it is very similar to the portal website *hindunet.org*.

<sup>9</sup> In general, the websites that offer online Islamic pilgrimages appear to be more technologically advanced than those which offer online Hindu pilgrimages. This may or may not be related to the fact that while pilgrimage is important in Hinduism, it is of paramount importance in Islam (see Bunt 2000b: 182-183).

## Differences to Hinduism on the WWW

Aside from obvious differences between the two religions (such as the use of sacred images in Hinduism) which result in differences between the websites, there are also other differences which shape the online situation. The characteristics of Islam which result in the differences will be briefly looked at.

### *Jihad*

I have already emphasised that various claims to authority are asserted in both Hindu and Islamic cyberspace. However, in Islamic cyberspace this takes on another dimension as it spills over into authority claims over other religions and points of view. They take the form of attacks (concerning attacks on Hinduism [where one Islamic website advises Muslims to take on a Hindu identity in cyberspace in order to attempt to demolish Hinduism from within] see Bunt 2003: 105-107). According to Bunt, this is an online manifestation of *jihad* (an attempt to obtain an Islamic objective, including defending Islam against non-Muslims)<sup>10</sup> (Bunt refers to evidence of online jihad as *e-jihad*) (see Bunt 2003: 12, 25-34). It is certainly true that Hindus also defend Hinduism and attack other religions online but this appears to happen to a lesser degree than on Islamic websites. It seems likely that it is the Islamic concept of *jihad* that gives rise to this situation which is prevalent on Islamic websites and which also spills over onto websites dealing with other religions (sometimes facilitated through hacking) (see Bunt 2003: 38-61).

### *Da'wa*

Bunt also highlights that *da'wa* (the promotion and propagation of Islam) (see Bunt 2000a: 128; 2000b: 183) is also occurring online (see Bunt 2004: 124). The spreading of Islam is an obligation for Muslims, and thus it is hardly surprising that *e-da'wa* is occurring. The Internet allows a website to have the potential to be accessed by a large number of people worldwide, and is therefore a medium which greatly facilitates

---

<sup>10</sup> *Jihad* can also have a spiritual dimension (see Bunt 2000b: 184) but Bunt notes that: 'In the context of cyberspace, the traditional concept of jihad as an inner Muslim spiritual striving has frequently been negated in favour of a digital sword striking in a number of different ways at a broad selection of targets' (Bunt 2003: 26).

*da'wa*. The concept of *da'wa* therefore contributes to the content of Islamic websites. Again, whereas there are Hindus who obviously want to promote their religion and there are some groups that do proselytise, because proselytism is generally not considered to be appropriate in Hinduism, such practices appear to be less widespread online than in the Islamic context.

### **Focus Upon the Written Word**

A central feature of many Islamic websites is the Qur'an (see Bunt 2000a: 131-135; 2000b: 17, 26; 2004: 125). This focus on the sacred text is understandable as the written word is of far greater importance in Islam<sup>11</sup> than in Hinduism where there are many diverse religious texts. Furthermore, while Hinduism undeniably draws upon these sacred texts, it is not essential for Hindus to directly draw upon these texts in their religious lives. Therefore, although Hindu religious texts are widespread online, there is certainly not the focus on text as there is on many Islamic websites. Instead, as has been emphasised in this thesis, primacy is given to the image.<sup>12</sup>

### **Political Factors**

Political factors relating to Islam have also shaped the online orientation and content of websites (see Bunt 2000a: 130). Indeed, Bunt notes that online, 'some [Islamic] ideologues make little distinction between "religion" and "politics" in Islam' (Bunt 2003: 11). This orientation is somewhat different to the Hindu context. For instance, political issues surrounding Palestine, Afghanistan and Chechnya are inextricably linked with Islam. There is a great deal of online content concerned with such political issues (see Bunt 2000b: 66-103; 2003) as those who are interested in them utilise the Internet to inform the public about the different situations and to mobilise support.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Bunt notes that 'Islam is focused on the power of the word' (Bunt 2000b: 18).

<sup>12</sup> Another interesting point concerning the Qur'an and cyberspace is that it is not intended that the Qur'an be read from cover to cover, and in this sense, it appears that the WWW is a suitable home for the Qur'an as it encourages browsability through the use of hypertext (Bunt 2000b: 20-21) (the same can also be said of the Talmud [see Miller and Slater 2000: 174; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 100]). Conversely, although Hindu sacred texts can also be browsed, some of them also have an important linear narrative.

<sup>13</sup> There is also a great deal of material online relating to 9-11 (Bunt 2003: 17, 67-86).

While it is true that there are important political issues regarding Hinduism (such as the political situation in Kashmir which Bunt notes that Muslims are concerned with online [see Bunt 2000b: 81-83; 2003: 41]), the range and scope of political issues regarding Islam is undeniably far greater.<sup>14</sup>

### **State Intervention**

Another important difference between Hinduism on the WWW and Islam on the WWW is State involvement in Islamic websites and access to the WWW. Bunt points out that the Governments of Iran (Bunt 2000a: 141; 2000b: 52), Singapore (2000b: 88-89; 2000a: 146-147), Malaysia (2000b: 84-85) and Pakistan (2000b: 73-74) are all involved in the production of Islamic websites. Furthermore, he adds that Singapore also attempts to block other Islamic websites (in addition to various other types of websites) which offer an interpretation of Islam that they do not endorse (though this has been largely unsuccessful) (see 2000a: 147) – as does Saudi Arabia (where attempts have been similarly unsuccessful) (see 2003: 209),<sup>15</sup> while a Malaysian Government website puts forward a ‘non-inclusive’ view of Islam and ‘react[s] strongly against elements that in other contexts are important in Islam and Muslim world views’ (Bunt 2000b: 85).

Although I have emphasised that in the case of both Islam and Hinduism on the WWW a key feature is that there are competing authority claims, State involvement in the production of websites and attempts to restrict access to alternative viewpoints add a whole new dimension to the online religious market-place where different groups are seeking to assert these various authority claims. In India, although Government agencies might assist important *mandirs* in achieving an online presence (for example, the Government of India’s National Informatics Centre created and maintains *Swagatam Jagannath Dham* [the website of the *Jagannath mandir* in Puri]), State intervention does not occur in the same way that it does in the Islamic context. However, although through its various websites the Indian Government does not

---

<sup>14</sup> The fact that, unlike India, many countries with a majority Muslim population are not democratic also contributes to the politicised nature of some Islamic websites. Bunt briefly considers the online situation concerning opposition to the Saudi Arabian authorities (see Bunt 2000b: 92-4).

<sup>15</sup> Warschauer also notes that Singapore and Saudi Arabia attempt to restrict Internet use, as does Syria (Warschauer 2004: 182-183).

directly oppose certain religious views and it is unlikely to attempt to block certain websites merely because they advocate a particular religious view, there is clear evidence on one of its official websites (*Know India – People and Lifestyle*) that it does seek to associate India and its people solely with Hinduism and not with other religions.<sup>16</sup> Overall though, in India there appears to be a relative lack of State involvement in websites dealing with Hinduism or religion in general.<sup>17</sup> The extent of the lack of State involvement in India when it comes to Hinduism on the WWW is emphasised when it is considered that it is common even for those important *mandirs* that have been taken over by the Government (e.g. the *Vishwanath mandir* in Varanasi and the *Kalighat mandir* in Varanasi) not to have an official website. The extent of State involvement is thus a big difference between Hinduism on the WWW and Islam on the WWW.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite these differences, overall, Islam and Hinduism on the WWW are remarkably similar. Because the two religions are very different, this suggests that the online situation regarding other religions is also likely to be similar. This indicates that it is highly likely that general conclusions drawn from investigating the online situation of a single religion can be applied to other religions. For example, my assertions concerning Hinduism, such as the ability of a small Hindu organisation which has a strong online presence to exert influence in the offline world to an extent that was not possible before the advent of the Internet, are also likely to apply to Islam.

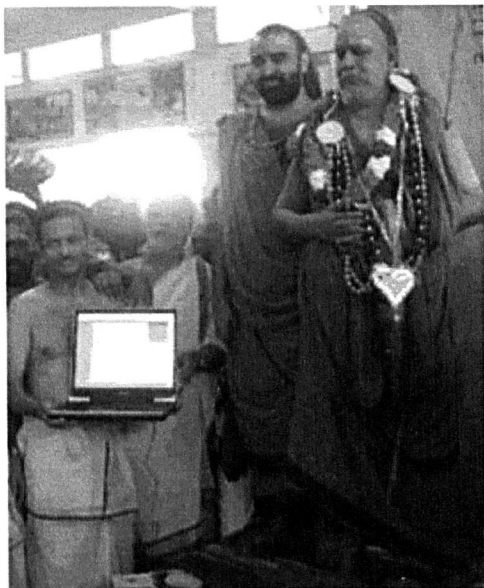
---

<sup>16</sup> In his study of websites concerning India, Mitra notes that such an association is also apparent in non-Government websites (see Mitra 1997: 173).

<sup>17</sup> Official Government of India websites can be accessed through the *Directory of Indian Government Websites*.

<sup>18</sup> Nepal is of minor significance in a consideration of this issue. Despite the fact that 80.6% of the population of Nepal are Hindu (source: *CIA World Factbook (Nepal)*: online), and that Hinduism was the State religion when I investigated this issue (January, 2006), Hinduism is barely mentioned in the official Government websites (accessed through the website *His Majesty's Government of Nepal*). One Government website which does mention Hinduism is *tourism.gov.Nepal/culture* where Hinduism and Buddhism are treated equally.

## Appendix 3 – KKSF Website Launch



**Fig. A3.1** The launch of the official website of the *Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation (KKSF)* on August 2, 2004<sup>1</sup>

Jayendra Saraswathi, the current Kanchi *Shankaracharya*, is on the right of the picture next to his junior, Vijayendra Saraswathi.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: [kksfusa.org/Content](http://kksfusa.org/Content).

# Glossary

Note: All terms in the glossary are associated with Hinduism/India apart from the following:

- \* Buddhist terms
- \* Greek Orthodox term
- ◻ Islamic terms
- ◻ Sikh term
- ° Zoroastrian terms
- Other terms

**Aarti** – The rite which involves waving a lamp or lamps before the image of a deity ‘as a symbolic act of the soul’s surrender to God’ (Harding 2004: 93).

**Absolute, The** – Another term for **Brahman**.

**Acarya Goswami Tulsi Das** – The institution responsible for the **Sankat Mochan mandir** and **Tulsi Das’s** house.

**Adharma** – The opposite of **dharma** which results in chaos.

**Adi** – ‘Original’.

**Adi Shankara** (*circa* 693-725) – The founder of **advaita Vedanta** who also established four famous **maths** which still exist today (Cross 1994: 55-56).

**Advaita Vedanta** – The non-dualist philosophy expounded by **Adi Shankara** in the eighth century (Cross 1994: 55) which posits that ‘the ultimate reality lies beyond the individual condition, outside the dualism of subject and object in which thought operates’. The philosophy asserts that the **atman** is the true self which consists of pure consciousness which is identical with **Brahman** (The **Absolute**) (Cross 1994: 122).

◻ **Ahmadiyah** – An Islamic sect with many groups that is considered by many Muslims to be heretic (Bunt 2000b: 182).

° **Ahura Mazda** – The supreme god in Zoroastrianism (Smith 1999: online).

**Ananda Marga** – A religious organisation founded in Bihar in 1955 by Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar which advocates **Tantric yoga** (An 2001: online).

° **Angra Mainyu** – The god of darkness in Zoroastrianism (Smith 2005: online).

**Annapurna** – A form of **Durga**. ‘She who fills with food’ (Wilkins 1991: 318).

**Arghya** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. Offering the deity ‘special hospitality by way of respectful libations’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Arya Samaj** – A revivalist Hindu organisation founded by Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) which strongly criticises **murtipuja** (Beckerlegge 2001b: 71).

**Asana** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. Enthroning the deity (Krishnananda 1994: 158); In **Hatha yoga** – A posture.

**Ashram** – A centre for spiritual development usually offering accommodation.

**Ashrama** – One of the four stages of life which, ideally, a Hindu should pass through. The four **ashramas** involve an individual living as a **Brahmacharin**, a **Grihastha**, a **Vanaprastha** or a **Sannyasin** (Krishnananda 1994: 169-170).

**Atharva Veda** – The fourth and last **Veda** ‘largely composed of magic charms’ (Zaehner 1966: vi.).

**Atman** – The true self which is pure consciousness and is identical with **Brahman** (Cross 1994: 122).

**Avahana** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. ‘Mentally investing the symbol of worship with the glorious presence’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Avarna** – Those outside of the **varnashrama-dharma** system (Fuller 1992: 14-15).

- Avatar** – A manifestation of God on earth in physical human form. Also refers to an individual's identity signifier online which may or may not correspond to their actual identity (Nayar 2004: 160).
- Ayappa** – A Keralan deity whose popularity has increased dramatically in the last few decades. Especially popular in the south of India (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1175).
- Ayurvedic** – Refers to the indigenous medical system of India.
- Badrinath** – A form of **Vishnu**. Also the name of the sacred site in the Himalaya where **Badrinath** resides.
- Balabhadra** – **Jagannath's** brother (Gupta 2002: 50).
- Banarsis** – Residents of Varanasi.
- Bhagavad-gita** – An important text which makes up part of the **Mahabharata** in which **Krishna** teaches the warrior **Arjuna** about the nature of reality.
- Bhajan** – A devotionalist hymn (Fuller 1992: 267).
- Bhakti** – Worship which involves loving devotion to a personal god.
- Bharat** – Another name for India. Often favoured by Hindu nationalists.
- Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** – 'Indian People's Party'. Hindu nationalist political party formed in 1980. Linked with the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)** and the **Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)** (An 2001: 402).
- \***Bodhisattva** – One who puts off **nirvana** in order to stay in the world and help others (Zaehner 1972: 122-123).
- Brahma** – Used by Tripathy (2003: pp. 11 and 43) to mean **Brahman**. Not to be confused with the Hindu god of the same name.
- Brahma Kumaris** – A Hindu **New Religious Movement (NRM)** in the **Shaivite** tradition formed in 1930 (Cushman and Jones 1999: 239).
- Brahmcharin** – An individual in the first **ashrama**. A celibate student (Krishnananda 1994: 170).
- Brahman** – Also known as **The Absolute**. It defies definition. It has been referred to as 'undifferentiated existence, consciousness and bliss' (Krishnananda 1994: 102). It is the 'Supreme Reality' (Cross 1994: 123). Confusingly, sometimes used in place of **Brahmin** (see below).
- Brahmin** also **Brahman** (not to be confused with **Brahman** as Supreme Reality) – The highest of the four **varnas** traditionally consisting of priests (Cross 1994: 15). Also refers to a member of this **varna**.
- Brahmo Samaj** – A reformist Hindu organisation founded by Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) which strongly criticises **murtipuja** (Beckerlegge 2001b: 71).
- Caste** – A sub-division of a **varna**. See also **jati**.
- CD-ROM** – A CD commonly containing multimedia software.
- Dakshina** – A financial offering to a **pujari** believed to be necessary for the efficacy of a ritual.
- Dalit** – 'Oppressed'. A member of the **scheduled castes** (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1383).
- Darshan** also **Darshana**, **Darśan** – The act of seeing the divine in an image (Eck 1985: foreward).
- Da'wa** – 'The propagation of Islam' (Bunt 2000b: 183).
- Devi** – 'The Mother Goddess' in Hinduism which has a number of forms. Along with **Shiva** and **Vishnu**, **Devi** (especially in the form of **Durga**) is the focus of one of the three main devotional traditions within Hinduism.
- Dharma** – Religious duty, law and custom (Fuller 1992: 268).
- \***Dharmasamgiti Sutra** – A **Mahāyāna** Buddhist text (Williams, P. 1997: 206).
- Dhupa** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The 'burning of incense' (Krishnananda 1994: 158).
- Dhyana** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. 'Contemplation on the form of the deity' (Krishnananda 1994: 158).



- Dipa** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The ‘waving of lamps’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).
- Durga** – A popular form of **Devi** efficient at killing demons (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1333).
- Durga Puja** – Important festival celebrating **Durga**’s victory over the Buffalo Demon. Especially popular in West Bengal (Abram *et al.* 2003: 63).
- Ekal Vidyalaya** – An organisation that provides education for underprivileged children in rural areas in India.
- Gali** – Lane.
- Gandha** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. ‘The offering of perfumes or sandal paste’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).
- Ganesh** also **Ganesha** – The elephant-headed god of wisdom who is also the remover of obstacles and thus is often worshipped before the worship of other gods or before an important undertaking. Son of **Shiva** and **Parvati**. Especially popular in Maharashtra.
- Garbha-griha** – ‘Womb house’. The inner sanctum of a **mandir** containing the **murti** (Kanitkar and Cole 1994: 19).
- Ghat** – A riverbank. In Varanasi nearly all of the **ghats** consist of stone steps and the name of the **ghat** also refers to the locality.
- Gita** – See **Bhagavad-gita**.
- Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN)** – A project undertaken by the **Hindu Students Council (HSC)** which utilises the Internet to disseminate news and information regarding Hinduism.
- \***Gohonzon** – A **mandala** sacred to **Soka Gakkai** members (MacWilliams 2002: 277).
- Gorakhnath** – A famous **Tantric yogi** whose life is shrouded in myth (Banerjea 1962).
- Gotro** – The group that a person is believed to have originated from (Morton 1966: online).
- Grihastha** – An individual in the second **ashrama**. A householder (Krishnananda 1994: 170).
- Gunas** – The three aspects of **Prakriti**. They are **rajas**, **tamas** and **sattva**.
- Guru** – A wise teacher who imparts knowledge to disciples.
- Hanuman** – The ‘monkey god’. A faithful servant of **Rama**.
- Hanuman Chalisa** – A prayer to **Hanuman**.
- Hatha yoga** – A form of **yoga** which emphasises the importance of **asanas** for spiritual development. Popular in the West.
- Hindu Students Council (HSC)** – A fundamentalist organisation which seeks to unite Hindus around the world.
- Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS)** – A worldwide Hindu fundamentalist organisation.
- Hindutva** also **Hindutwa** – ‘A political ideology of Hindu nationalism propounded by V.D. Savarkar in 1923 and based on the primacy of blood belonging, religious identity and territorial nationhood’ (An 2001: 402-403). ‘Hindu-ness’ (Raj 2000: 554).
- Hriday** – The heart as the point of convergence of the body/soul in Sikhism (Nesbitt 1997: 299).
- HTML** – HyperText Markup Language. A computer language that enables websites to be displayed.
- International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)** – A religious organisation focusing upon the worship of **Krishna** founded by **Swami Prabhupāda** in New York in 1966 (Brooks 1989: 78).
- Ishtadeva** – The deity ‘chosen’ by an individual worshipper (Fuller 1992: 268).

**Iyengar, B.K.S. (1918-)** – A **Hatha yoga** teacher who has been influential in the popularisation of **yoga** in the West.

**Jagannath** also **Jagannatha** – A form of **Vishnu** especially popular in Orissa.  
**Jagannath's** main sacred site is at Puri.

▫ **Jamaat-e-Islami** – A Pakistani political party (Bunt 2003: 228).

▫ **Jamiatul Ulama** – A South African group that has a 'minority perspective' within Islam (Bunt 2000a: 142).

**Jati** – An occupational group in Hindu society. Also commonly known as **caste** (Cross 1994: 16).

**Ji** – A term of respect suffixed to a name.

▫ **Jihad** – An attempt to obtain an Islamic objective (militaristic or spiritual) (Bunt 2000b: 184).

**Jiva** – The soul before it is 'realised' as being the unchanging **atman** (Cross 1994: 59).

**Jivanmukti** – 'Liberation-while-living' (Krishnananda 1994: 181).

**Jnana yoga** – The yoga of knowledge which involves philosophical and intellectual inquiry into the nature of the Self. Sometimes practised in conjunction with other forms of **yoga**.

**Jyotilingam** also **jyotilinga** – A **lingam** which is especially revered as it is believed to be self-manifest – i.e. it has not been installed by anyone. There are commonly thought to be twelve.

**Kali** – A fierce form of **Durga** (Wilkins 1991: 309).

**Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation (KKSF)** – An organisation in the USA associated with the **Kanchi Math**.

**Kapala-kriya** – The breaking of the skull of the deceased as part of the funeral rites (Firth 1991: 82).

\***Kardia** – 'Heart' in Greek. The point of convergence of the body/soul in Greek Christianity (Ware 1997: 100-101).

**Karma** – The theory which postulates that every action has its inevitable "fruit" or consequence, so that a person's condition is determined by good or bad deeds in this and previous lives. Conceptually inseparable from **dharma** (Fuller 1992: 245).

**Kashi** – The religious name for Varanasi.

**Kataragama Guru Parampara** – A lineage at Kataragama, Sri Lanka – a town sacred to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.

▫ **Khalifah** – 'Vice-regent' (Bunt 2003: 228).

**Krishna** – An **avatar** of **Vishnu** (Brooks 1989: 93). Seen by some traditions as being the supreme God in Hinduism (Brooks 1989: 177).

**Krishna Consciousness** – A term used by **ISKCON**. Consciousness which has fully 'realised' **Krishna**. Can also be used to refer to the **ISKCON** movement itself.

**Kriya yoga** – A **yoga** system taught by **Yogananda** which incorporates 'breathing exercises and visualizations' (Cushman and Jones 1999: 390).

**Kriyas** – **Yogic** purification techniques (Sharma n.d.: 17).

**Kshatriya** – The second highest of the four **varnas** traditionally consisting of warriors and rulers (Cross 1994: 15). Also refers to a member of this **varna**.

**Kumbh Mela** – A massive festival held every three years to commemorate a scuffle between the gods which resulted in four drops of nectar dropping to earth (Abram *et al.* 2003: 294).

**Kundalini** – The dormant power located at the base of the spine according to **Tantric** philosophy. Symbolically represented as a coiled serpent.

**Lingam** also **Linga** – A stone shaft which is the symbol of Shiva (Eck 1993: 4).

- Mahabharata** – The most popular of all of the Hindu texts. The epic tells the story of a feuding **Kshatriya** family during the fourth millennium BCE (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1329; Zaehner 1966: xv.).
- Mahant** – The head of a Hindu monastery.
- \***Mahāyāna Buddhism** – The school of Buddhism whose adherents aim to become a **bodhisattva** as opposed to attaining disembodied **nirvana**. Also known as “The Greater Vehicle”.
- Maitrī Upanishad** – An **Upanishad** which refers to the nature of the physical body.
- Manasa puja** – A **puja** performed mentally as opposed to physically.
- Mandala** – A sacred diagram (Preston 1980: 48) (also used by Buddhists).
- Mandir** – Technically correct name for a Hindu temple.
- Mantra** – ‘A syllable, word, or verse with special spiritual potency chanted or meditated upon to invoke spiritual understanding and realization’ (Prebish 2004: 359).
- Manusamhita** – An important text which outlines the **varnashrama-dharma** system (Krishnananda 1994: 149).
- Math** – A Hindu monastery.
- Maya** – ‘Illusion’. The hiatus between the two different orders of reality (the **atman** and **Brahman**) which can never be explained (Cross 1994: 61).
- Meher Baba** (1894-1969) – A Maharashtran **Guru** who visited the USA six times and whose movement sought to embrace all religions ‘while simultaneously transcending them’ (Bainbridge 1997: 150-151).
- Mir Ghat** – The area in Varanasi where one of the ‘New’ *Vishwanath mandirs* is located. Also the name of a **ghat**.
- Moksha** – Liberation or salvation from the cycle of rebirth (Fuller 1992: 269) arising from the merging of the **atman** with **Brahman**.
- Monism** – The philosophy which asserts that ‘the divine is simultaneously both one and many’ (Weller 1997: 293). **Advaita Vedanta** is a form of **monism**.
- Mudra** – Hand gestures which indicate feeling and intention during worship (Krishnananda 1994: 159).
- Murti** – An image in which a deity is embodied (Beckerlegge 2001b: 111).
- Murtipuja** – ‘The worship of an embodied deity in the form of an image’ (Beckerlegge 2001b: 111).
- Nadis** – ‘Subtle channels of power having their ends or outlets in the openings of the body’ according to the **Tantric** philosophy expounded by **Gorakhnath** (Coward 1989b: 27).
- Naivedya** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The ‘offering of food’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).
- Nandinatha Sampradaya** – A **Shaivite** philosophical tradition. The **SSC** are part of this **sampradaya**.
- Nara Bali** – The practice of human sacrifice during the worship of the Mother Goddess (Perry 2002: online).
- Nation of Islam** – A ‘schismatic’ Islamic sect (Bunt 2003: 200).
- Navakalebara** – ‘New body’. There is a **Navakalebara** ceremony held periodically in Puri in which the ‘soul’ residing in the **Jagannath murti** is transferred to a new **murti** (Tripathy 2003: 43).
- Neo-advaita Vedanta** – **Vivekananda**’s refinement of the **advaita Vedanta** philosophy expounded by Shankara (Thomas 1993: 176).
- New Religious Movement (NRM)** – According to Eileen Barker, a religious movement that ‘has become visible in its present form since the Second World War’ (Barker 1999: 16).

**Nirajana** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The ‘burning of camphor before the deity’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

\***Nirvana** – Enlightenment in Buddhism.

**NRI** – ‘Non-Resident Indian’ – An ethnic Indian living permanently outside of India.

**Nyasa** – The ritual of the placing of the different limbs of the deity in the corresponding parts of one’s own body (Krishnananda 1994: 159).

**Om (ॐ)** – A sacred syllable believed to have mystic power used in prayer and meditation (Dowson 1992: 224).

**Padya** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. ‘Washing the feet of the deity’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Panchatirtha Yatra** – An important pilgrimage in Varanasi which encompasses five sacred places (Mitra [ed.] 2002: 105).

**Panda** – A guide at a religious place.

**Panda Dharmarakshi Sabha** – A **pujaris**’ association.

**Parvati** – The wife of **Shiva**. A form of **Devi**.

**Patanjali** – A sage and grammarian who lived in the second century BCE (Kishore 2000: 144), and who wrote the **Yoga Sutras**.

**Patitapavana** – The replica of **Jagannath** at the entrance to the **Jagannath mandir** in Puri (Tripathy 2003: 29).

•**PDF** – Portable Document Format. A type of document that can be downloaded onto a computer.

**Pindas** – Balls of rice used as an offering (Firth 1991: 82).

•**Podcast** – A downloadable file available on subscription.

**Prabhupāda, Swami (1896-1977)** – The founder of the **International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)**.

**Prakriti** – Material nature in the **yoga** tradition (Coward 1989a: 3).

**Prana** – The ‘life force’ in **yoga**. ‘The infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe’ (Vivekananda 1998: 34).

**Pranayama** – The practice of controlling **prana** through various **yogic** breathing techniques (Vivekananda 1998: 33).

**Prasad** also **prasada** – Consecrated substances which are seen as being imbued with divine power and grace as a result of the **puja** ceremony. The most common type of **prasad** is food (Fuller 1992: 74).

**Puja** – The act of honouring a deity or deities which comprises a series of offerings and services (Fuller 1992: 81).

**Pujari** – A priest who performs **pujas**.

**Puranas** – Texts which cover a wide variety of subjects. Large sections are devoted to the glorification of individual gods (Krishnananda 1994: 53).

**Purusha** – The Primal Man in the **Rig-Veda** from which the four **varnas** emanate (Zaehner 1966: 10).

**Pushpa** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The ‘offering of flowers’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Rādhā** – **Krishna**’s consort.

**Raja yoga** – Literally ‘Royal **yoga**’. **Vivekananda** uses the term to refer to the **yoga** which he advocates. It is sometimes used to refer to a combination of a variety of different types of **yoga** – although it is not used in this way by **Vivekananda** who does not advocate, for example, **Hatha yoga**.

**Rajas** – One of the three **gunas**. The **guna** of activity (Cross 1994: 49).

**Rama** – An incarnation of **Vishnu**.

**Ramakrishna (1836-1886)** – A ‘goddess intoxicated mystic’ who worshipped at the **Kali mandir** at Dakshineswar (just north of Kolkata). He is believed by many to have been an **avatar** (Cushman and Jones 1999: 382-383).

- Ramakrishna Math and Mission** – A worldwide institution with its headquarters in Kolkata which promotes the teachings of **Ramakrishna** (Cushman and Jones 1999: 383).
- Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950)** – An advocate of **Jnana yoga** who obtained **jivanmukti**.
- Ramayana** – A popular epic featuring **Rama**, **Sita**, and **Hanuman** (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1327).
- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)** – ‘National Indian Volunteer Corps.’ ‘A semi-paramilitary organization created in 1924-25...to inculcate Hindu supremacist ideology and promote disciplined physical training among young Hindu men’ (anon. May 2000: 404). Associated with the **Hindu Students Council (HSC)**.
- Ratha Yatra** – The annual ‘chariot’ (or ‘car’) festival in Puri honouring **Jagannath**. The festival is also replicated in other places.
- Rig-Veda** – The first of the four **Vedas** (Zaehner 1996: vi.).
- Saiva Siddhanta Church (SSC)** – A **Shaivite** Order of Hindu monks based in Hawaii.
- Sampradaya** – A philosophical tradition within Hinduism.
- Samskars** – Rites of passage.
- Sanatana dharma** – A term used to refer to Hinduism that *some* Hindus prefer. It can be translated as the ‘eternal way of life’ (Weller 1997: 290).
- \***Sangha** – Buddhist monastic community (Prebish 2004: 145; Collins 1997: 189).
- Sankat Mochan** – ‘Remover of suffering’. An important **Hanuman mandir** in Varanasi.
- Sannyasin** – An individual in the fourth **ashrama**. A renunciant (Krishnananda 1994: 172).
- Santoshi Ma** – A relatively unknown goddess who became extremely popular following a film about her (Beckerlegge 2001b: 91-92; Smith 2003: 127).
- Saraswati** – The goddess of learning.
- Sathya** – ‘Truth’ in Sanskrit.
- Sathya Sai Baba (1926?-)** – A **Guru** from South India who has a huge worldwide following.
- Sati** – A form of the Mother Goddess who killed herself after a perceived humiliation and was afterwards carried by **Shiva** until the various parts of her body dropped to the earth (which gave rise to the **Shakti pithas**) (Morinis 1984: 16-17).
- Satsang** – Large prayer meeting (Krishnananda 1994: 163).
- Sattva** – One of the three **gunas**. The **guna** of ‘harmony and clarity’ (Cross 1994: 49).
- Scheduled castes** – The term used by the Indian Government to refer to so-called ‘Untouchables’ (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1386).
- Shaivite** also **Saivite** – devotee of **Shiva**. Also used to refer to all aspects of the tradition associated with **Shiva**.
- Shaktaism** – The religious tradition centered on the Mother Goddess.
- Shakti** – ‘The supreme female deity, who represents the energy of the universe as well as the Mother Goddess’ (Morinis 1984: 15).
- Shakti pitha** – An especially sacred pilgrimage place of the Mother Goddess. Most authorities assert that there are fifty-one (Morinis 1984: 16-17).
- Shankaracharya** – The head of any of the four **maths** founded by **Adi Shankara**.
- Shastras** – Ancient texts dealing with rules of conduct – especially concerning religious matters (Gupta 2002: 43).
- Shirdi Sai Baba (?-1918)** – A Maharashtran Saint revered by both Hindus and Muslims.
- Shiva** – A prominent god in Hinduism. Along with **Vishnu** and **Devi**, **Shiva** is the focus of one of the three main devotional traditions within Hinduism.
- Shivalinga** – See **lingam**.

**Shravan** – An auspicious month characterised by many religious festivals.

**Shri** also **Shree**, **Sri** – Term of respect prefixed to names.

**Shruti** – ‘Heard’. Can be used to refer to the **Vedas** as they were ‘heard’ by ancient seers (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1326).

**Shudra** – The lowest of the four **varnas** traditionally consisting of serfs and labourers (Cross 1994: 15). Also refers to a member of this **varna**.

**Sindhur** – Powder which is smeared on a person’s forehead or the **murti**.

**Sita** – The wife of **Rama**.

**Sloka** – A verse.

**Smritis** – Those scriptures which have been ‘remembered’ as opposed to the **Vedas** which were ‘heard’ (**shruti**) (Abram *et al.* 2003: 1326-1327).

**Snana** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. ‘Arrangements for ablutions’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

\***Soka Gakkai** – An organisation offering a Japanese form of Buddhism which is numerically strong in Europe and has many European converts (Waterhouse 2001: 147; Baumann 2001: 304).

**Soma** – A plant (*Asclepias acida*) referred to extensively in the **Rig-Veda** (Dowson 1992: 301; Wilkins 1991: 69). The ingestion of its milk is said to bring about mystical visions (Stevens 1987: 25).

**Subhadra** – **Jagannath**’s sister (Gupta 2002: 50).

**Suvarnapushpa** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The offering of a gift (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Swami** – A Hindu monk.

**Swaminarayan** – (also known as Sahajananda Swami) (1781-1830) – An ascetic who travelled around Gujarat preaching a form of **Vaishnavism** (Fuller 1992: 171). Regarded by followers as being an **avatar** (Weller 1997: 304).

**Swaminarayan Mission** – An organisation which follows teachers in the line of **Swaminarayan**. The UK centre is in Neasden, London (Weller 1997: 304).

**Tamas** – One of the three **gunas**. The **guna** of restraint and obstruction (Cross 1994: 49).

**Tambula** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. The ‘offering of betel leaves’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Tantras** – **Tantric** texts. The earliest are thought to date from the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century (Cross 1994: 90).

**Tantric** – Refers to philosophy or practices that derive from the **Tantras**. ‘A **Tantric**’ is somebody who practises, and is an adept at, **Tantric yoga**.

\***Tantric Buddhism** – Another name for **Vajrayāna** Buddhism.

**Tantric Yoga** – An esoteric form of **yoga** introduced in the **Tantras** which uses advanced physical techniques to prepare the body for, and to raise, the **kundalini** – in order to achieve **moksha** in one lifetime. There is an overlap between the Hindu **Tantric** tradition and the Buddhist **Tantric** tradition.

**Tarakanath** – The form of **Shiva** at Tarakeswar, West Bengal (Morinis 1984: 83).

\***Theravāda** Buddhism – A Buddhist tradition based directly on the actual words of the historical Buddha which emphasises the desirability of individual enlightenment. Also known as “The Lesser Vehicle”.

**Tirtha** – A sacred place. A “crossing place”...where earth and heaven meet’ (Eck 1993: 34).

**Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD)** – The organisation responsible for the **Ventakeswara mandir** in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh.

**Transcendental Meditation (TM)** – A practice invented by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1911?-) which involves chanting a **mantra** for a few minutes each day with the aim of obtaining bliss. The organisation of the same name was especially

- popular in the late 1960s in the USA (Needleman 1984: 129-130) and can be classified as a Hindu **New Religious Movement (NRM)**.
- Tulsi Das (1543-1623)** – A poet and holy man of Varanasi who was devoted to **Rama** and **Hanuman** (Eck 1993: 87-88).
- **United Submitters International** – A controversial Arizona-based group that criticises many contemporary Muslim practices through recourse to a literal reading of the Qu’ran (Bunt 2000a: 138-139).
- Upachara** – A ritual performed in a traditional **mandir puja**. There are sixteen **upacharas** (Fuller 1992: 67).
- Upanishads** – Philosophical texts that deal with **Brahman** and the **atman** (Zaehner 1966: v., viii) and which ‘mark the transition from the old **Vedic** religion to Hinduism proper’ (Cross 1994: 26). They are attached to the end of the **Vedas**.
- **URL** – Uniform Resource Locator. Website address.
- Vaastu shastra** – The Indian science ‘which seeks to create harmony between nature’s five elements’ (anon. [CNN.com] June 26, 2006).
- Vaishnava** – A devotee of **Vishnu** or one of His forms. Also used to refer to all aspects of the tradition associated with **Vishnu** or one of His forms.
- Vaishnavism** – Any tradition which has **Vishnu** or one of His forms as the focus of devotion.
- Vaishnodevi** – A form of the Mother Goddess residing in Jammu.
- Vaishya** – The third of the four **varnas** traditionally consisting of ‘the producers of economic wealth – farmers, merchants and craftsmen’ (Cross 1994: 15). Also refers to a member of this **varna**.
- \* **Vajrayāna Buddhism** – A branch of **Mahāyāna Buddhism** which employs **yogic** techniques in order to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime (Williams, P. 1997: 221).
- Vanaprastha** – An individual in the third **ashrama**. Involves ‘disentangling oneself from the attractions of the world’ (Krishnananda 1994: 172).
- Varna** – A class classification in Hinduism. There are four **varnas**: **Brahmin**, **Kshatriya**, **Vaishya** and **Shudra** (Cross 1994: 15).
- Varnashrama-dharma** – The system which divides Hindu society hierarchically into four **varnas** and advocates the four **ashramas**.
- Vastra** – One of the sixteen **upacharas**. ‘Presentation of dress or clothing’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).
- Vedanta** – Literally means the ‘End of the **Veda**’ and refers to the **Upanishads** (Zaehner 1966: v.).
- Vedantic** – Refers to the philosophy of the **Upanishads**.
- Vedas** also **Veda** – There are four **Vedas** which are often regarded as being “the canon” of Hindu scripture’. They consist of hymns and chants, and deal with sacrifices and magic charms (Zaehner 1966: v., vi.).
- Vedic** – Pertaining to the **Vedas**.
- Ventakeswara** – A form of **Vishnu** at Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh.
- Vishnu** – A prominent god in Hinduism. Along with **Shiva** and **Devi**, **Vishnu** is the focus of one of the three main devotional traditions within Hinduism.
- Vishnu Purana** – One of the eighteen **Puranas**. It is devoted to the exploits and glorification of **Vishnu** (Krishnananda 1994: 53-55).
- Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)** – ‘World Hindu Council’. A federation of Hindu religious organisations founded in 1964 by the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)** (anon. May 2000: 406).
- Vishwanath** also **Vishvanātha** – A form of **Shiva** residing in Varanasi and whose **mandir** is arguably the most important **Shiva mandir** in the world.

**Vivekananda, Swami** (1863-1902) – A disciple of **Ramakrishna** who spoke at the ‘World’s Parliament of Religions’ in 1893 (Bainbridge 1997: 181) and who founded the **Ramakrishna Math and Mission** (Beckerlegge 2001b: 81). An advocate of **Raja yoga**.

**Yajnopavita** – One of the sixteen upacharas. ‘The investiture of the deity with the sacred thread’ (Krishnananda 1994: 158).

**Yatra** – Pilgrimage.

**Yoga** – One of the six schools of Hindu philosophy founded by **Patanjali** (Dowson 1992: 81). Traditionally there are eight stages, only one of which involves performing various **asanas** (Sharma n.d.: preface). In the West, it is this stage under the name of **Hatha yoga** which has come to largely represent **yoga** as a whole. There are a number of traditions within **yoga**, for example **Jnana yoga**, **Raja yoga** and **Tantric yoga**.

**Yoga Sutras** – **Patanjali**’s famous works on **yoga** which form a complete text (Vivekananda 1998: vii).

**Yogananda** (1893-1952) – An Indian **yogi** who taught **Kriya yoga** (Cushman and Jones 1999: 390).

**Yogi** – An adept at **yoga**.

**Yogic** – Refers to the philosophy and practices of **yoga**.



# Bibliography and Webliography

## Bibliography

- Abraham, M. (April 5, 2001), 'World's Hindus Can Invoke Heaven via India Website' *Reuters*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=13429>, accessed April 21, 2006.
- Abram, D. et al. (2003), *The Rough Guide to India* (London: Rough Guides).
- al-Oadah, S.S. (n.d.), 'The Partnership Between Body and Soul', <http://www.missionislam.com/health/partnershipbodysoul/htm>, accessed December 12, 2005.
- Allen, R.E. (ed.) (1990), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Ammerman, N.T. (1997), 'Religious Choices and Religious Vitality – The Market and Beyond', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion – Summary and Assessment* (New York/London: Routledge), 119-132.
- An, A. (July 17, 2001), 'Ananda Marga Yoga Society', *New Religious Movements Homepage*, <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/anam.html>, accessed June 26, 2005.
- Anonymous (1948), 'The Spiritual Path in Islam', <http://www.jamaat.org/islam/IslamSpiritual.html>, accessed December 12, 2005.
- (May, 2000), 'Terminology and Glossary', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (3), 401-406.
- (June 21, 2000), 'Religious Outsourcing Goes to the Heavens', *PTI in The Tribune*, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040622/biz.htm>, accessed October 19, 2004.
- (October 16, 2000), 'God's Only a Click Away', *India Today*, <http://www.saranam.com/press2.asp>, accessed October 15, 2004.
- (December 14, 2000), 'Rich Assortments', *The Hindu*, <http://www.saranam.com/press3.asp>, accessed October 19, 2004.
- (December 26, 2000), 'Hurry Om! God Lives in a Cybercafe and He Downloads Real Fast', *rediff.com*, <http://www.saranam.com/press4.asp>, accessed October 15, 2004.
- (January 3, 2001), 'Hinduism Online', *Asia Today*, [http://www.asiasource.org/news/at\\_mp\\_02.cfm?newid=39841](http://www.asiasource.org/news/at_mp_02.cfm?newid=39841), accessed January 28, 2005.
- (November 28, 2002), 'Buddha Bar Upsets Swedish Hindus', *AP*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=7109>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- (June 12, 2003), 'Crematorium to Offer Webcast of Last Rites', *IANS*, [http://religoscope.info/article\\_171.shtml](http://religoscope.info/article_171.shtml), accessed October 22, 2004.
- (June 16, 2003), 'Priests Sulk as Jharkhand Temple Goes Online', *IANS*, [http://religoscope.info/article\\_175.shtml](http://religoscope.info/article_175.shtml), accessed October 22, 2004.
- (July 1, 2003), 'Religion Offers Online "Satsang"', *The Times of India*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=9011&c=85>, accessed January 24, 2005.
- (May 8, 2004), 'Supreme Court to Define "Essential" Part of Religion', *IANS*, <http://www.wwrn.org/parse.php?idd=97468&c=85>, accessed February 1, 2005.
- (June 22, 2004), 'Outsourcing Gets Religion in India', *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/3829161.stm>, accessed October 19, 2004.
- (November 12, 2004), 'Shankaracharya in Jail – Shock, Anger Across Nation', *IANS in The Times of India Online*,

- <http://www1.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/921199.cms>, accessed November 17, 2004.
- (November 15, 2004), 'Arrest of Indian Religious Leader Causes Astonishment and Outrage', *AFP*, <http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story>, accessed November 17, 2004.
- (December 8, 2004), 'Hindu Priest Denied Bail in Murder Case', *AFP*, <http://wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=9854&c=85>, accessed December 12, 2004.
- (January 11, 2005), 'Jayendra Out of Prison, Mutt Shifted', *IANS*, <http://wwrn.org/prse.php?idd=9876&c=85>, accessed January 16, 2005.
- (January 19, 2005), 'Monastery Official Murdered in Southern India', *AP*, <http://wwrn.org/parse.php?idd=9881&c=85>, accessed January 24, 2005.
- (February 7, 2005), 'Om on Thongs Invites Hindu Ire', *PTI*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=13882>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- (March 14, 2005), 'Mythological "Disneyland" in India', *IANS*, <http://wwrn.org/parse.php?idd=9909&c=85>, accessed March 16, 2005.
- (April 4, 2005), 'China blocks Internet Comments on the Pope', *AFP*, <http://www.wwrn.org/parse.php?idd=9744&c=69>, accessed April 14, 2005.
- (June 8, 2005), 'Shankaracharyas to Return to Kanchi Mutt', *IANS*, <http://www.wwrn.org/parse.php?idd=17238>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- (June 8, 2005), 'UK Hindus Call for Global French Boycott Over Deity on Shoes', *AFP*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=17246>, accessed 15 June, 2005.
- (June 14, 2005), 'UK Hindus Rally Against Minelli in London', *Hindustan Times*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=17330>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- (November 20, 2005), 'All Rituals Repeated After a Christian Enters a Temple', *IANS*, [http://religion.info/english/articles/article\\_207.shtml](http://religion.info/english/articles/article_207.shtml), accessed November 27, 2005.
- (November 22, 2005), 'Thai Princess Denied Entry to Puri Temple', *HPI*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/11/25.shtml>, accessed November 27, 2005.
- (November 25, 2005), 'Jagannath Temple Ponders Entrance Policy', *newindpress.com*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/11/28.shtml>, accessed November 29, 2005.
- (February 25, 2006), 'The City Diary' ('Temple Funds'), *The Telegraph – Calcutta, India*, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060225/asp/calcutta/story\\_5893500.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060225/asp/calcutta/story_5893500.asp), accessed May 7, 2006.
- (March 1, 2006), 'California Board of Educational Committee Approves Most Hindu Changes to Textbooks', *HPI*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2006/3/1.shtml#1>, accessed July 25, 2006.
- (April 10, 2006), 'Dalits Build their Own Temple in Orissa', *The Times of India*, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1483941.cms>, accessed April 17, 2005.
- (April 24, 2006), 'California Textbook Lawsuit Moves Ahead in Court', *HPI*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2006/4/24.shtml#3>, accessed July 25, 2006.
- (June 14, 2006), 'American Builds Jagannath Temple for Foreigners', *IANS*, [http://religion.info/english/articles/article\\_252.shtml](http://religion.info/english/articles/article_252.shtml), accessed June 15, 2006.
- (June 26, 2006), 'Indian Web Sites Go With the Flow', *CNN.com*, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/TECH/internet/06/26/vaastu.web.sites.reut/>, accessed July 3, 2006.
- (n.d.), 'The First Radio Broadcast', *WFN*, <http://www.wfn.org/story.html>, accessed January 8, 2005.

Apolito, P. [trans. Shugaar, A.] (2005), *The Internet and the Madonna – Religious Visionary Experience on the Web* (Chicago and London: The University of

- Chicago Press).
- Appadurai (1990), 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Beynon, J. and Dunkerley, D. (eds.) (2000), *Globalization - The Reader* (London: The Athlone Press), 92-100.
- Arnold, P.P. (2002), 'Determining the Place of Religion: Native American Traditions and the WWW', *Religion*, 32, 337-41.
- Arthur, S. (2002), 'Technophilia and Nature Religion: The Growth of a Paradox', *Religion*, 32, 303-14.
- Asad, T. (1997), 'Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 42-52.
- Bainbridge, W.S. (1997), *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (London: Routledge).
- (2000), 'Religious Ethnography on the World Wide Web', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 55-80.
- Balsamo, A. (2000), 'The Virtual Body in Cyberspace', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 489-503.
- Banerjea, A.K. (1962), *Philosophy of Gorakhnath - with Goraksha-Vacana-Sangraha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).
- Barker, E. (1999), 'NRMs: Their Incidence and Significance', in Wilson, B. and Cresswell, J. (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London: Routledge), 15-31.
- (2005), 'Crossing the Boundary – New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.) *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 67-85.
- Barrett, D.V. (2003), *The New Believers: Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions* (London: Cassell Illustrated).
- Baudrillard, J. (1983a), 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Poster, M. (ed.) (1988), *Jean Baudrillard - Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 166-84.
- (1983b), 'Fatal Strategies', in Poster, M. (ed.) (1988), *Jean Baudrillard - Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 185-206.
- Baumann, M. (1999), 'The Hindu Diasporas in Europe and an Analysis of Key Diasporic Patterns', in Rukmani, T.S. (ed.), *Hindu Diaspora - Global Perspectives* (Montreal: Chair in Hindu Studies, Concordia University), 59-79.
- (2001), 'Buddhism in Europe: Past, Present, Prospects', in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: The Open University), 295-317.
- Beaulieu, A. (2005), 'Sociable Hyperlinks: An Ethnographic Approach to Connectivity', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 183-197.
- Beck, U. (2000), *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Becker, G. (1986), 'The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour', in Elster, F. (ed.), *Rational Choice*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 108-122.
- Beckerlegge, G. (2001a), 'Introduction', in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: The Open University), 1-7.
- (2001b), 'Hindu Sacred Images for the Mass Market', in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: The Open University), 57-116.
- (2001c), 'Computer-mediated Religion: Religion on the Internet at the End of the Twenty-first Century', in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: The Open University), 219-64.
- Beckford, J.A. (1985), *Cult Controversies – The Societal Response to New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock).
- (1989), *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Unwin Hyman).
- (1992), 'Religion, Modernity and Post-modernity', in Wilson, B. (ed.), *Religion:*

- Contemporary Issues – The All Souls Seminars in the Sociology of Religion* (London: Bellew Publishing), 11-23.
- (1999a), 'Postmodernity, High Modernity and New Modernity: Three Concepts in Search of Religion', in Flanagan, K. and Jupp, P.C. (eds.), *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion* (Basingstoke: MacMillan), 30-47.
- (1999b), 'Rational Choice Theory and Prison Chaplaincy: The Chaplain's Dilemma', *British Journal of Sociology*, 50 (4), 671-685.
- (2000a), 'Religious Movements and Globalization', in Cohen, R. and Rai, S.M. (eds.), *Global Social Movements* (London: The Athlone Press), 165-83.
- (2000b), "'Start Together and Finish Together": Shifts in the Premises and Paradigms Underlying the Scientific Study of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39 (4), 481-95.
- (2001), 'Social Movements as Free-Floating Religious Phenomena', in Fenn, R.K. (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell), 229-248.
- (2003), *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge University Press).
- Bedell, K. (1998), 'Religion and the Internet: Reflections on Research Strategies' (paper presented to the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Montreal, Quebec [November 6-8, 1998]), <http://www.religion-research.org/rrpaper.html>, accessed May 18, 2005.
- (2000), 'Dispatches from the Electronic Frontier: Explorations of Mainline Protestant Use of the Internet', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 183-203.
- Bell, D. (2000), 'Introduction 1 – Cybercultures Reader: A User's Guide', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 1-12.
- Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.) (2000), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge).
- Benedikt, M. (2000), 'Cyberspace: First Steps', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 29-44.
- Benjamin, A. (1981), *The Helping Interview* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
- Berger, A. and Ezzy, D. (2004), 'The Internet as Virtual Spiritual Community: Teen Witches in the United States and Australia', in Dawson, L.L and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 175-88.
- Berger, R. (2004), 'Digital Media Futures', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 274-283.
- Berthelot, J.M. (1991), 'Sociological Discourse and the Body', in Featherstone, M., Hepworth, M. and Turner, B.S. (eds.), *The Body - Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage), 390-404.
- Beynon, J. and Dunkerley, D. (2000), 'General Introduction', in Beynon, J. and Dunkerley, D. (eds.), *Globalization - The Reader* (London: The Athlone Press).
- Bhatt, C. (1997), *Liberation and Purity: Race, New Religious Movements and the Ethics of Postmodernity* (London: UCL Press).
- (2001), *Hindu Nationalism – Origins, Ideologies, and Modern Myths* (Oxford: Berg).
- Blanchard, A. (n.d.), 'The Material Dimension of Jehovah's Witnesses' Experience: Shaping Organization and Individual Commitment Through Print' (unpublished work).
- Bohrnstedt, G.W. (1983), 'Measurement', in Rossi, P.H., Wright, J.D. and Anderson, A.B. (eds.), *Handbook of Survey Research* (New York/London: Academic

- Press), 70-121.
- Bradley, R. (1997), 'Religion in Cyberspace - Building on the Past' (paper presented at the Institute for the History of Religions of Abo Akademii University, Turku, Finland [April 23, 1997]), <http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/1114/cyberspa.html>, accessed February 9 2005.
- Brasher, B. (2004), *Give Me That Online Religion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press).
- Braziel, J.E. and Munnar, A. (eds.) (2003), *Theorizing Diaspora* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Brooks, C.R. (1989), *The Hare Krishnas in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Brown, D.M. (1958), *The White Umbrella - Indian Political Thought from Manu to Gandhi* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Bruce, S. (1993), 'Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations of Religious Behaviour', *Sociology of Religion*, 54 (2), 193-205.
- (1999), *Choice and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2002), *God Is Dead* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (1994), 'Reflections on Qualitative Data Analysis', in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (eds.), *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (London: Routledge), 216-226.
- Brzezinski, (1998), 'What Was Śrīla Prabhupāda's Position: The Hare Krsna Movement and Hinduism', *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 6 (2), 27-49.
- Buckley, P. and Clark, D. (2004), *The Rough Guide to the Internet* (London: Rough Guides Ltd).
- Bunt, G.R. (2000a), 'Surfing Islam: Ayatollahs, Shayks and Hajjis on the Superhighway', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 127-51.
- (2000b), *Virtually Islamic – Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press).
- (2003), *Islam in the Digital Age – E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press).
- (2004), "'Rip. Burn. Pray.'" Islamic Expression Online', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith Online* (New York: Routledge), 123-34.
- Burgess, R.G. *et al.* (1994), 'Four Studies From One or One Study From Four – Multi-site Case Study Research', in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (eds.), *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (London: Routledge), 129-145.
- Burghart, R. (ed.), (1987), *Hinduism in Great Britain* (London: Tavistock).
- Campbell, C. (1999), 'The Easternisation of the West', in Wilson, B. and Cresswell, J. (eds.), *New Religious Movements – Challenge and Response* (London: Routledge), 35-48.
- Campbell, H. (2004), "'This is my Church": Seeing the Internet and Club Culture as Spiritual Spaces', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 107-21.
- Campbell, R.A. (2004), 'Searching for the Apocalypse in Cyberspace', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 239-53.
- Camporesi (1988), *The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutilation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Caputo, J.D. (2000), *On Religion* (London: Routledge).
- Carey, S. (1983), 'The Hare Krishna Movement and Hindus in Britain', *New Community*, 10 (3), 477-486.

- (1987), 'The Indianization of the Hare Krishna Movement in Britain', in Burghart, R. (ed.), *Hinduism in Great Britain* (London: Tavistock), 81-99.
- Carman, J.B. (1996), 'Handing Down and Reaching Across: Stability and Movement in Indian Religious Traditions', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread - Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 7-20.
- Castaneda, C. (1968), *The Teachings of Don Juan – A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Castells, M. (2000), *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2002), *The Internet Galaxy - Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Cenkner, W. (1996), 'The Sankaracarya of Kanchi and the Kamaksi Temple as Ritual Center', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 52-67.
- Chakrabarti, P. (1984), *Social Profile of Tarakeswar – Study of a Pilgrim Town in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma KLM).
- Chaucer, G. [trans. Coghill, N.] (1951), *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Penguin).
- Chaves, M. (1995), 'On the Rational Choice Approach to Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (1), 98-104.
- Choudhury, P.C.R. (1988), *Temples and Legends of Bengal* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan).
- Clothey, F.W. (1996), 'Ritual and Reinterpretation: South Indians in Southeast Asia', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in Indian and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 127-146.
- Coakley, S. (1997a), 'Preface', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), xv-xvii.
- (1997b), 'Introduction: Religion and the Body', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1-12.
- Collette, L. (1999), 'Cyberspace: The New Frontier for Religion', *Cybersociology*, 7, <http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/7/lin.html>, accessed October 18, 2004.
- Collins, S. (1997), 'The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 185-204.
- Couldry, N. (2004), 'The Digital Divide', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 185-194.
- Cowan, D.E. (2004), 'Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda', in Dawson, L.L and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 255-71.
- (2005a), *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge).
- (2005b), 'Online U-Topia: Cyberspace and the Mythology of Placelessness', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44 (3), 257-263.
- Coward, H.G. (1985), *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis).
- (1989a), 'Introduction', in Coward, H.G., Lipner, J.J. and Young, K.K. (eds.), *Hindu Ethics - Purity, Abortion and Euthanasia* (Albany: State University of New York), 1-7.
- (1989b), 'Purity in Hinduism: With Particular Reference to Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras', in Coward, H.G., Lipner, J.J. and Young, K.K. (eds.), *Hindu Ethics - Purity, Abortion and Euthanasia* (Albany: State University of New York), 9-39.

- Craib, I. (1992), *Modern Social Theory - From Parsons to Habermas* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf).
- Cross, S. (1994), *The Elements of Hinduism* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd.).
- Cushman, A. and Jones, J. (1999), *From Here to Nirvana - The Essential Guide to the Yogis and Gurus, Ashrams and Temples of Spiritual India* (London: Rider).
- Dash, J. (November 7, 2005), 'Denied Temple Entry, American Woman Gets Support', *IANS*, [http://religion.info/english/articles/article\\_202.shtml](http://religion.info/english/articles/article_202.shtml), accessed November 27, 2005.
- Davis, E. (1995), 'Technopagans - May the Astral Plane be Reborn in Cyberspace', *Wired*, 3 (7), [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.07technopagans\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.07technopagans_pr.html), accessed February 21, 2004.
- (2004), *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent's Tail).
- Dawson, L.L. (2000), 'Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies', in Hadden, J.K and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 25-54.
- (2001a), 'Cyberspace and Religious Life: Conceptualizing the Concerns' (paper presented at CESNUR Conference, London), <http://www.cesnur.org/2001/london2001/dawson.htm>, accessed October 10, 2004.
- (2001b), 'Doing Religion in Cyberspace: The Promise and the Perils', *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin*, 30 (1), 3-9, <http://orts.uwaterloo.ca/soc/relcyberssr.html>, accessed February 21, 2004.
- (2004a), 'Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 75-89.
- (2004b), Personal communication via Beckford, J.A.
- (2005), 'The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 15-37.
- Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (2004), 'Introduction', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 1-16.
- Dawson, L.L. and Hennebry, J. (2004), 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 151-73.
- De Michelis, E. (2004), *A History of Modern Yoga – Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum).
- Dodge, M. (2005), 'The Role of Maps in Virtual Research Methods', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 113-127.
- Dodge, M. and Kitchin, R. (2001), *Mapping Cyberspace* (London: Routledge).
- Doniger, W. (1997), 'Medical and Mythical Constructions of the Body in Hindu Texts', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 167-84.
- Dowson, J. (1992), *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* (New Delhi: Heritage).
- Dreyfus, H.L. (2001), *On the Internet* (London: Routledge).
- Eck, D.L. (1985), *Darśan - Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg: Anima Books).
- (1993), *Banaras: City of Light* (New Delhi: Penguin Books).
- Edwards, L. (2001), *A Brief Guide to Beliefs - Ideas, Theologies, Mysteries, and*

- Movements* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press).
- Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, G. (1997), 'The Polythetic-prototype Approach to Hinduism', in Sontheimer, G.D. and Kulke, H. (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar), 294-304.
- Eisenstein, Z. (1998), 'Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism and the Lure of Cyberfantasy', in Beynon, J. and Dunkerley, D. (eds.) (2000), *Globalization - The Reader* (London: The Athlone Press), 212-13.
- Escobar, A. (2000), 'Welcome to Cyberia - Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberspace', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 56-76.
- Ess, C. (March 30, 2005), 'Respondent's Comments' (paper given at The 19<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Tokyo).
- Featherstone, M. (1991), 'The Body in Consumer Culture', in Featherstone, M., Hepworth, M. and Turner, B.S. (eds.), *The Body - Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage), 170-196.
- Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. (eds.) (1995), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk - Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage).
- Featherstone, M., Hepworth, M. and Turner, B.S. (eds.) (1991), *The Body - Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage).
- Finke, R. (1997), 'The Consequence of Religious Competition - Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion - Summary and Assessment* (New York/London: Routledge), 46-61.
- Firth, S. (1991), 'Changing Patterns In Hindu Death Rituals', in Killingley, D., Menski, W. and Firth, S. (eds.), *Hindu Ritual and Society* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Dermot Killingley), 52-83.
- Fisher, D. (1992), 'Kristeva's Chora and the Subject of Postmodern Ethics', in Crownfield, D. (ed.), *Body and Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 91-106.
- Flood, G. (1995), 'Hinduism, Vaisnavism, and ISKCON: Authentic Traditions or Scholarly Constructions', *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 3 (2), 5-15.
- (1996), *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Flory, R. (2005), Book Review: 'Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44 (3), 364-365.
- Forte, M.C. (2005), 'Centring the Links: Understanding Cybernetic Patterns of Co-Production, Circulation and Consumption', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods - Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 93-106.
- Frykenberg, R. (1997), 'The Emergence of Modern "Hinduism" as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India', in Sontheimer, G.D. and Kulke, H. (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar), 82-107.
- Fukamizu, K. (March 30, 2005), 'Internet Use by the Followers of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism' (paper given at the 19<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Tokyo).
- Fuller, C.J. (1992), *The Camphor Flame - Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Gauntlett, D. (2004a), 'Web Studies: What's New', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 3-23.
- (2004b), 'Glossary', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 285-296.
- Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.) (2004), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold).
- Giddens, A. (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity).



- (2002), *Runaway World - How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Profile Press).
- Gillham, B. (2000), *The Research Interview* (London: Continuum).
- Green, N. (1997), 'Beyond Being Digital: Representation and Virtual Corporeality', in Holmes, D. (ed.), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage), 59-78.
- Griffin, W. (2004), 'The Goddess Net', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 189-203.
- Guidry, J.A., Kennedy, M.D. and Zald, M.N. (2000), 'Globalizations and Social Movements', in Guidry, J.A., Kennedy, M.D. and Zald, M.N. (eds.), *Globalizations and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1-32.
- Guimarães Jr., M.J.L. (2005), 'Doing Anthropology in Cyberspace: Fieldwork Boundaries and Social Environments', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 141-156.
- Gupta, S.S. (2002), *Puri - Lord Jagannatha's Dhaam* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co.).
- Gurak, L.J. (2004), 'Internet Studies in the Twenty-First Century', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 24-33.
- Hadden, J.K and Cowan, D.E. (2000), 'The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Toward Understanding Religion on the Internet', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 3-21.
- HAF Press Release (March 10, 2006), 'Hindu American Foundation Plans to File Suit Against California State Board of Education Over Textbook Adoption', <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2006/3/10.shtml#2>, accessed July 25, 2006.
- Hamilton, M. (1993), *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (1998), *Sociology and the World's Religions* (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press).
- (n.d.), 'The Easternisation Thesis: Critical Reflections' (unpublished work).
- Harcourt, W. (2004), 'World Wide Women and the Web', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 243-253.
- Hardey, M. (2002), 'Life Beyond the Screen: Embodiment and Identity through the Internet', *The Sociological Review*, 50 (4), 570-85.
- Harding, E.U. (2004), *Kali - The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).
- Hariharan, V. (1999), 'Is India on the Brink of a Digital Abyss?', *Cybersociology*, 7, <http://www.cybersociology.com/>, accessed April 17, 2005.
- Hasselle-Newcombe, S. (2005), 'Spirituality and "Mystical Religion" in Contemporary Society: A Case Study of British Practitioners of the Iyengar Method of Yoga', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20 (3), 305-321.
- Hechter, M. (1997), 'Religion and Rational Choice', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion – Summary and Assessment* (New York/London: Routledge), 147-157.
- Helland, C. (2000), 'Online-Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 205-23.
- (2002), 'Surfing for Salvation', *Religion*, 32, 293-302.
- (2004), 'Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 23-35.

- Hellawell, S. (2001), *Beyond Access – ICT and Social Inclusion* (London: Fabian Society).
- Herring, D. (2005), 'Virtual as Contextual – A Net News Theology', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 149-165.
- Hine, C. (2000), *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage).
- (2005a), 'Virtual Methods and the Sociology of Cyber-Social-Scientific Knowledge', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 1-13.
- (2005b), 'Research Relationships and Online Relationships: Introduction', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 17-20.
- (2005c), 'Research Sites and Strategies: Introduction', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 109-112.
- Højsgaard, M.T. (2005), 'Cyber-religion – On the Cutting Edge Between the Virtual and the Real', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 50-63.
- Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (2005), 'Introduction', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 1-11.
- Hoover, S.M., Clark, L.S. and Rainie, L. (2004), 'Faith Online - 64% of Wired Americans Have Used the Internet for Spiritual or Religious Purposes', [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Faith\\_Online\\_2004.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Faith_Online_2004.pdf), accessed April 28, 2004.
- HPI Press Release (April 1, 2006), 'Hinduism Today Magazine Launches Free Digital Edition', <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2006/4/1.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2006.
- HSC Statement (November 25, 2005), 'Hindu Student Council Supports Temple Entry for Non-Indian Hindus', <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/11/26.shtml>, accessed November 27, 2005.
- Hudson, D. (1996), 'Winning Souls for Shiva – Arumuga Navalar's Transmission of the Saiva Religion', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 23-51.
- Hutchinson, B. (1996), 'The Divine-Human Figure in the Transmission of Religious Tradition', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread - Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 92-124.
- Iannaccone, L.R. (1995), 'Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (1), 76-89.
- (1997), 'Framework for the Scientific Study of Religion', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion* (New York/London: Routledge), 26-45.
- Introvigne, M. (2000), "'So Many Evil Things": Anti-Cult Terrorism via the Internet', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 277-306.
- (2005), 'A Symbolic Universe – Information Terrorism and New Religions in Cyberspace', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 102-117.
- Jackson, R. (1996), 'The Construction of "Hinduism" and its Impact on Religious Education in England and Wales', *Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values*, 8 (1), 86-104.
- Jaisinghani, B. (September 9, 2005), 'Prasad in Your Inbox', *The Times of India*, 10.

- James, P. and Carkeek, F. (1997), 'This Abstract Body: From Embodied Symbolism to Techno-Disembodiment', in Holmes, D. (ed.), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage), 107-24.
- Jankowski, N.W. and van Selm, M. (2005), 'Epilogue: Methodological Concerns and Innovations in Internet Research', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 199-207.
- Jenkins, M. (April 28, 1998), 'Surfing the Net for Souls', *Network+ (The Independent)*, 2-3.
- Juergensmeyer (1996), 'A New International Religion: Radhasoami', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 278-99.
- Kanitkar, V.P. and Cole, O. (1995), *Hinduism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).
- Kapoor, G.V. (February 26, 2003), 'Om Click Om', *rediff.com*, <http://www.rediff.com/netguide2003/feb/26god.htm>, accessed January 28, 2005.
- Karaflogka, A. (2002), 'Religious Discourse and Cyberspace', *Religion*, 32, 279-91.
- Karmakar, R. (April 3, 2002), 'Indian Temple Revives "Human Sacrifice"', *BBC News*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=4512&c=85>, accessed April 27, 2005.
- Killingley, D. (1991), 'Varna and Caste in Hindu Apologetic', in Killingley, D., Menski, W. and Firth, S. (eds.), *Hindu Ritual and Society* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Dermot Killingley), 7-31.
- Kim, M-C. (2005), 'Online Buddhist Community – An Alternative Religious Organization in the Information Age', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 138-148.
- Kinney, J. (1995), 'Net Worth? Religion, Cyberspace and the Future', *Futures*, 27 (7), 763-76.
- Kishore, B.R. (1995), *Hinduism* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books).
- Knott, K. (1986a), *Hinduism in Leeds: A Study of Religious Practice in the Indian Hindu Community and in Hindu-Related Groups* (Leeds: University of Leeds Department of Theology and Religious Studies).
- (1986b), *My Sweet Lord – The Hare Krishna Movement* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press).
- Konstan, J.A., et al. (2005), 'The Story of Subject Naught: A Cautionary but Optimistic Tale of Internet Survey Research', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10 (2), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/konstan.html>, accessed April 17, 2005.
- Krishnananda, S. (1994), *A Short History of Religious and Philosophic Thought in India* (Shivanandanagar: The Divine Life Society).
- Krogh, M.C. and Pillifant, B.A. (2004), 'The House of Netjer', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 205-19.
- Kumar, S. (n.d.), 'Direct Deposit Devotions', *India Abroad News Service*, [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/33/story\\_3375.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/33/story_3375.html), accessed January 28, 2005.
- Lahangir, S. (July 26, 2006), 'Orissa Dalits Break Age-old Taboo', *IANS*, [http://www.dailyindia.com/show/45741.php/Orissa Dalits break age old tabo o](http://www.dailyindia.com/show/45741.php/Orissa%20Dalits%20break%20age%20old%20taboo), accessed August 1, 2006.
- Lal, A. (2002), *Sri Ramana Maharshi - Sage of the People* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co.).
- Laney, M.J. (2005), 'Christian Web Usage – Motives and Desires', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 166-179.
- Larson, E. (2004), 'Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet*

- (New York/London: Routledge), 17-20.
- Leary, T. (2000), 'The Cyberpunk – The Individual as Reality Pilot', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 529-539.
- Leder, D. (1990), *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Louth, A. (1997), 'The Body in Western Catholic Christianity', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 111-30.
- Lövheim, M. (2004), 'Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 59-73.
- Lupton, D. (1995), 'The Embodied Computer User', in Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk - Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage), 97-112.
- Mackay, H. (2005), 'New Connections, Familiar Settings: Issues in the Ethnographic Study of New Media Use at Home', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 129-140.
- MacWilliams, M.W. (2002), 'Introduction to the Symposium', *Religion*, 32, 277-78.
- (2004), 'Virtual Pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 223-37.
- Malik, A. (1997), 'Hinduism or Three-Thousand-Three-Hundred-and-Six Ways to Invoke a Construct', in Sontheimer, G.D. and Kulke, H. (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar), 10-31.
- Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000), *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research – A Handbook for Researching Online* (London: Sage).
- Mannur, A. (2003), 'Postscript: Cyberscapes and the Interfacing of Diasporas', in Brazier, J.E. and Mannur, A. (eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (Oxford: Blackwell), 283-290.
- Marriott, M. (1955), 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization', in Marriott, M. (ed.), *Village India – Studies in the Little Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 171-222.
- Marshall, S., Taylor, W. and Xinghuo, Y. (eds.) (2003), *Closing the Digital Divide – Transforming Regional Economies and Communities with Information Technology* (Westport, CT: Praeger).
- Martin, D. (March 4, 2006), 'River Funerals in High Demand', *This is Leicestershire*, <http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeID=132935&command=displayContent&sourceNode=132702&contentPK=14124463&folderPk=77465#views>, accessed March 20, 2006.
- Maxwell, P. (2002), 'Virtual Religion In Context', *Religion*, 32, 343-54.
- Mayer, J-F. (2000), 'Religious Movements and the Internet: The New Frontier of Cult Controversies', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (New York: JAI), 249-76.
- McClellan, J. (December 10, 1998), 'Log On, All Ye Faithful', *The Guardian*.
- McGuire (1990), 'Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29 (3), 283-96.
- McKean, L. (1996), *Divine Enterprise* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
- McNeill, P. (1990), *Research Methods* (London: Routledge).
- Mellor, P.A. (2000), 'Rational Choice or Sacred Contagion? "Rationality", "Non-Rationality" and Religion', *Social Compass*, 47 (2), 273-292.
- Mellor, P.A. and Shilling, C. (1997), *Reforming the Body - Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: Sage).

- Melwani, L. (n.d.), 'The Story of Hinduism Today', [http://www.hinduismtoday.com/about\\_us.shtml](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/about_us.shtml), accessed November 16, 2005.
- Menski, W. (1991), 'Change and Continuity in Hindu Marriage Rituals', in Killingley, D., Menski, W. and Firth, S. (eds.), *Hindu Ritual in Society* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Dermot Killingley), 32-51.
- Meredith, S., Hickman, C. and Le Rolland, L. (2005), *The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of World Religions* (London: Usborne).
- Michaelson, M. (1987), 'Domestic Hinduism in a Gujarati Trading Caste', in Burghart, R. (ed.), *Hinduism in Great Britain* (London: Tavistock), 32-49.
- Midgley, M. (1997), 'The Soul's Successors: Philosophy and the Body', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 53-68.
- Millard, E. (April 15, 2005), 'Study: China Tops in Net Censorship', *Tech News*, <http://wwwn.org/parse.php?id=9701&c=84>, accessed April 16, 2005.
- Miller, D. and Slater, D. (2000), *The Internet – An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg).
- Mitra, A. (1997), 'Diasporic Web Sites: Ingroup and Outgroup Discourse', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 14, 158-181.
- (2000), 'Virtual Commonality – Looking for India on the Internet', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 676-694.
- Mitra, S. (ed.) (2002), *Varanasi - City Guide* (New Delhi: Eicher Goodearth Ltd.).
- Morinis, E.A. (1984), *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition - A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Morton, K. (1966), 'Marriage Rules in Bengal', *American Anthropologist*, 68 (4), 951-970, [synopsis:] <http://www.publicanthropology.org/Archive/Aa1966.htm>, accessed November 9, 2005.
- Narayanan, V. (1996), 'Creating the South Indian "Hindu" Experience in the United States', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Princeton), 147-176.
- Nathan, J. (November 15, 2004), 'Hindu Cleric Held Over Murder of Rival', *Times Online*, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper>, accessed November 17, 2004.
- Nayar, P.K. (2004), *Virtual Worlds - Culture and Politics in the Age of Cyberspace* (New Delhi: Sage).
- Needleman, J. (1984), *The New Religions* (New York: Crossroad).
- Neitz, M. and Mueser, P.R. (1997), 'Economic Man and the Sociology of Religion', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion – Summary and Assessment* (New York/London: Routledge), 106-118.
- Nesbitt, E. (1997), 'The Body in Sikh Tradition', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 289-305.
- Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. (2004), *Sacred and Secular – Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Nye, M. (1996), 'Hare Krishna and Sanatan Dharm in Britain: The Campaign for Bhaktivedanta Manor', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 11 (1), 37-56; *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 4 (1), 5-23.
- (1997), 'ISKCON and Hindus in Britain: Some Thoughts on a Developing Relationship', *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 5 (2), 5-13.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1977), 'Social Change and the Deities: Rise of the Kataragama Cult in Modern Sri Lanka', *Man*, 12 (3/4), 377-396.
- (1986), 'The Cult of Hūniyan: A New Religious Movement in Sri Lanka', in Beckford, J.A. (ed.), *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (London: Sage), 197-219.
- O'Leary, S.D. (April 4, 2002), 'Falun Gong and the Internet', *USC Annenberg Online*

- Journalism Review*, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1017964337.php>, accessed February 22, 2004.
- (2004), 'Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 37-58.
- (2005), 'Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities of Networked Religion in the New Millennium', in Højsgaard, M.T. and Warburg, M. (eds.), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Abingdon: Routledge), 38-49.
- Olson, K.K. (2004), 'Copyright in Cyberspace: Protecting Intellectual Property Online', in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies* (London: Arnold), 195-203.
- Orgad, S. (2005), 'From Online to Offline and Back: Moving from Online to Offline Relationships with Research Informants', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 51-65.
- Pacienza, A. (April 14, 2005), 'New Passover Website Latest Example of Religious Groups Using Web to Teach', *Canadian Press*, <http://wwwn.org/sparse.php?idd=72&c=171>, accessed April 14, 2005.
- Panikkar, R. et al. (1977), *The Vedic Experience - Mantramañjarī* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd).
- Park, H.W. and Thelwall, M. (2005), 'The Network Approach to Web Hyperlink Research and its Utility for Science Communication', in Hine, C. (ed.) *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 171-181.
- Pattnaik, S. (December 15, 2005), 'Dalit Women Pay for Temple Entry', *Hindustan Times*, [http://hindustantimes.com/news/181\\_1573805.000900030010.htm](http://hindustantimes.com/news/181_1573805.000900030010.htm), accessed December 30, 2005.
- Perry, A. (December 31, 2002), 'Killing for "Mother" Kali', *Trinidad and Tobago News Bulletin Board*, [http://www.trinidadandtobagonews.com/forum/webbbs\\_config.pl/noframes/read/933](http://www.trinidadandtobagonews.com/forum/webbbs_config.pl/noframes/read/933), accessed April 19, 2005.
- Platt, J. (1988), 'What Can Case Studies Do?', in Burgess, R.G. (ed.), *Studies in Qualitative Methodology* (Stamford: JAI), 1-23.
- Pocock, D.F. (1973), *Mind, Body and Wealth - A Study of Belief and Practice in an Indian Village* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).
- Poster, M. (1988), 'Introduction', in Poster, M. (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard - Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 1-9.
- (1995), 'Postmodern Virtualities', in Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk - Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage), 79-95.
- Prabhupāda, A. C. B. (1982), *The Science of Self Realization* (New York: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust).
- (1989), *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* (Bombay: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust).
- Prebish, C.S. (2004), 'The Cybersangha: Buddhism on the Internet', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 135-47.
- Presler, F.A. (1987), *Religion Under Bureaucracy – Policy and Administration for Hindu Temples in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Preston, J.J. (1980), *Cult of the Goddess - Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple* (Ghaziabad: Vikas).
- Priyadarshi, R. (June 9, 2004), 'Harrods Apology over Hindu Bikinis', *BBC News*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=14569>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- Raj, D.S. (2000), "'Who the Hell Do You Think You Are?'" Promoting Religious Identity Among Young Hindus in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (3),

- Rajghatta, C. (May 18, 2005), 'Beer "Ganesh" Brews Storm in US', *The India Times*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=16885>, accessed June 15, 2005.
- Rao, S. (2003), *Adi Sankaracharya – The Voice of Vedanta* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co.).
- Rao, V.S. (June 26, 2003), 'Watch Last Rites Online', *rediff.com*, <http://www.rediff.com/netguide/2003/jun/25mukti.htm>, accessed October 31, 2005.
- Richards, L.G. et al. (1969), *LSD-25: A Factual Account* (Washington D.C.: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs).
- Robbins, T. and Anthony, D. (1972), 'Getting Straight With Meher Baba: A Study of Mysticism, Drug Rehabilitation and Postadolescent Role Conflict', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 11 (2), 122-140.
- Robertson, R. (1992), *Globalization - Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage).
- Robertson, R. and Chirico, J.A. (1985), 'Humanity, Globalization and World-Wide Religious Resurgence', in Beynon, J. and Dunkerley, D. (eds.) (2000), *Globalization - The Reader* (London: The Athlone Press), 159-63.
- Rutter, J. and Smith, G.W.H. (2005), 'Ethnographic Presence in a Nebulous Setting', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 81-92.
- Sanders, T. (2005), 'Researching the Online Sex Work Community', in Hine, C. (ed.), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (Oxford: Berg), 67-79.
- Saraswati, S. (1996), *Kundalini Tantra* (Munger: Bihar School of Yoga).
- Saso, M. (1997), 'The Taoist Body and Cosmic Prayer', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 231-47.
- Scholte, J.A (2000), *Globalization - A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: MacMillan).
- Schroeder, R., Heather, N. and Lee, R.M. (1998), 'The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 4 (2), <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue2/schroeder.html>, accessed February 22, 2004.
- Schultz, Q.J. (January 31, 2001), 'Going Digital', *The Christian Century*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2210>, accessed October 22, 2004.
- Sebastian, D. (November 19, 2005), 'Non-Hindu Present, Guruvayar Temple Repeats Pujas', *DNA*, <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=10546>, accessed November 22, 2005.
- Sekhar, R. (1999), 'Authenticity by Accident: Organizing, Decision Making and the Construction of a Diasporic Hindu Temple in the Nation's Capital', in Rukmani, T.S. (ed.), *Hindu Diaspora - Global Perspectives* (Montreal: Chair in Hindu Studies, Concordia University), 307-28.
- Selltiz, C. et al. (1962), *Research Methods in Social Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston).
- Sharma, A. (1986), 'New Hindu Religious Movements in India', in Beckford, J.A. (ed.), *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (London: Sage), 220-239.
- Sharma, P.D. (n.d.), *Yoga - Yogasana and Pranayama For Health* (Ahmadabad/Mumbai: Navneet).
- Shilling, C. (1993), *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage).
- (1997), 'The Undersocialised Conception of the Embodied Agent in Modern Sociology', *Sociology*, 31 (4), 737-54.
- Shipman, M. (1988), *The Limitations of Social Research* (London: Longman).

- Singh, S. (2001a), 'Sikhs and the Internet I: Developing a New Global Outlook', <http://www.sikhe.com/gsdno/articles/perspectives/sandeepsingh/sikhsandtheintemetI>, accessed October 17, 2004.
- (2001b), 'Sikhs and the Internet II: The Digital Divide and the Generation Gap', <http://www.sikhe.com/gsdno/articles/perspectives/sandeepsingh/sikhsandtheintemetII>, accessed October 17, 2004.
- Sinha, S. (1972), 'Kali Temple at Kalighat and the City of Calcutta', in Sinha, S. (ed.), *Cultural Profile of Calcutta* (Calcutta: The Indian Anthropological Society), 61-72.
- Smith, A.E. (1999), 'Ahura Mazda', *Encyclopedia Mythica*, [http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/ahura\\_mazda.html](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/ahura_mazda.html), accessed June 18, 2005.
- (2005), 'Angra Mainyu', *Encyclopedia Mythica*, [http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/angra\\_mainyu.html](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/angra_mainyu.html), accessed June 18, 2005.
- Smith, D. (1993), 'The Premodern and the Postmodern: Some Parallels, with Special Reference to Hinduism', *Religion*, 23, 157-165.
- (2003), *Hinduism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Sobchack, V. (1995), 'Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text, Or How to Get Out of This Century Alive', in Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk - Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage), 205-14.
- Sonwalker, P. (October 13, 2004), 'Soar is the New Ganges for British Hindus', *IANS*, [http://religion.info/english/articles/article\\_107.shtml](http://religion.info/english/articles/article_107.shtml), accessed October 22, 2004.
- Spender, D. (1995), *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* (Melbourne: Spinifex).
- Spickard, J.V. (1998), 'Rethinking Religious Social Action: What is "Rational" About Rational-Choice Theory?', *Sociology of Religion*, 59 (2), 99-115.
- Sri Jagannath Temple Administration (n.d.), *Jagannath Puri* (Puri: Sri Jagannath Temple Administration).
- Srinivas, M.N. (1962a), 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization', in Srinivas, M.N., *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (London: J.K. Publishers), 42-62.
- (1962b), 'Varna and Caste', in Srinivas, M.N., *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (London: J.K. Publishers), 63-69.
- Srinivasan, S. (June 27, 2002), 'Religion Online: Hindus Turn to the Internet for Prayer', *AP*, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=5417&c=85>, accessed January 24, 2005.
- Staff Reporter (November 14, 2004), 'Pilgrim Rush has TTD Officials in a Tizzy', *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/2004/11/15/stories/2004111508550500.htm>, accessed November 16, 2004.
- Stark, R. (1997), 'Bringing Theory Back In', in Young, L.A. (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion – Summary and Assessment* (New York/London: Routledge), 3-22.
- Stark, R. and Bainbridge, W.S. (1987), *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang).
- Stevens, J. (1987), *Storming Heaven – LSD and the American Dream* (London: Flamingo).
- Stone, A.R. (2000), 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? - Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 504-28.
- Stratton, J. (2000), 'Cyberspace and the Globalisation of Culture', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 721-31.
- Svarūpa-dasā (1996), 'A Response to Daniel Acharuparambil, "Hinduism in



- Interreligious Dialogue”, in IJC Vol. 4. No. 1 (June, 1996), *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 4 (2), 100-05.
- Thomas, T. (1993), ‘Hindu Dharma in Dispersion’, in Parsons, G. (ed.), *The Growth of Religious Diversity - Volume 1: Traditions* (London: Routledge in association with the Open University), 173-204.
- Tomas, D. (1995), ‘Feedback and Cybernetics: Reimagining the Body in the Age of Cybernetics’, in Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk - Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage), 21-43.
- Tripathy, M. (2003), *A Brief Look at Shri Jagannath Temple* (Puri: SGN Publications).
- Turner, B.S. (1980), ‘The Body and Religion: Towards an Alliance of Medical Sociology and Sociology of Religion’, *The Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion*, 4, 247-86.
- (1991a), ‘Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body’, in Featherstone, M., Hepworth, M. and Turner, B.S. (eds.), *The Body - Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage), 1-35.
- (1991b), *Religion and Social Theory* (London: Sage).
- (1997), ‘The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and Its Perspectives’, in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15-41.
- Turner, V.W. (1969), *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- (1974), *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors – Symbolic Action in Human Society* (London: Cornell University Press).
- Turner, V.W. and Turner, E. (1978), *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture – Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- van der Veer, P. (2000), ‘Religious Nationalism in India and Global Fundamentalism’, in Guidry, J.A., Kennedy, M.D. and Zald, M.N. (eds.), *Globalizations and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 315-36.
- Vásquez, M.A. and Marquardt, M.F. (2000), ‘Globalizing the Rainbow Madonna’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 17 (4), 119-43.
- (2003), *Globalizing the Sacred – Religion Across the Americas* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press).
- Vasseleu, C. (1997), ‘Virtual Bodies/Virtual Worlds’, in Holmes, D. (ed.), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage), 46-58.
- Venkatachari, K.K.A. (1996), ‘Transmission and Transformation of Rituals’, in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 177-190.
- Vertovec, S. (1997), ‘Hinduism in Diaspora: The Transformation of Tradition in Trinidad’, in Sontheimer, G.D. and Kulke, H. (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar), 265-293.
- Veylanswami, S.G. (2005), ‘The Milk-Drinking Miracle of 1995’, *Hinduism Today*, October/November/December 2005: I-6-I-7.
- Vidyarthi, L.P. et al. (1979), *The Sacred Complex of Kashi* (Delhi: Concept).
- Vivekananda (1998), *Raja-Yoga or Conquering the Internal Nature* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama).
- Waghorne, J.P. (2001), ‘The Embodiment of Divinity in India’, in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press), 281-87.
- Wakeford, N. (2004), ‘Developing Methodological Frameworks for Studying the World Wide Web’, in Gauntlett, D. and Horsley, R. (eds.), *Web.Studies*

- (London: Arnold), 34-48.
- Walter, T. (2001), 'Reincarnation, Modernity and Identity', *Sociology*, 35 (1), 21-38.
- Ware, K. (1997), "'My Helper and My Enemy": The Body in Greek Christianity', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 90-110.
- Warschauer, M. (2004), *Technology and Social Inclusion – Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Massachusetts: MIT Press).
- Waterhouse, H. (2001), 'Representing Western Buddhism: A United Kingdom Focus', in Beckerlegge, G. (ed.), *From Sacred Text to Internet* (Milton Keynes: The Open University), 117-60.
- Waters, M. (1995), *Globalization* (London: Routledge).
- Watts, J. (February 7, 2004), 'China Tightens Net Around Online Dissenters', *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,,1143011,00.html>, accessed August 18, 2006.
- Weller, P. (ed.) (1997), *Religions in the UK - A Multi-Faith Directory* (Derby: University of Derby and The Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom).
- Wertheim, M. (1999), *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (London: Virago Press).
- Whittaker, J. (2002), *The Internet - The Basics* (London: Routledge).
- Wilkins, W.J. (1991), *Hindu Mythology - Vedic and Puranic* (New Delhi: Heritage).
- Williams, A. (1997), 'Zoroastrianism and the Body', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 155-66.
- Williams, P. (1997), 'Some Mahāyāna Buddhist Perspectives on the Body', in Coakley, S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 205-30.
- Williams, R.B. (1996a), 'Introduction: A Sacred Thread', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread - Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 3-6.
- (1996b), 'Sacred Threads of Several Textures: Strategies of Adaptation in the United States', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread - Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 228-57.
- Willson, M. (2000), 'Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma', in Bell, D. and Kennedy, B.M. (eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge), 644-57.
- Yocum, G. (1996), 'The Coronation of a Guru: Charisma, Politics and Philosophy in Contemporary India', in Williams, R.B. (ed.), *A Sacred Thread – Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press), 68-91.
- Young, G. (2004), 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in Dawson, L.L. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion Online - Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York/London: Routledge), 93-105.
- Zaehner, R.C. (1966), *Hindu Scriptures* (London: Everyman's Library).
- (1972), *Drugs, Mysticism and Make-Believe* (London: Collins).
- Zaidman, N. (1997), 'When the Deities are Asleep: Processes of Change in an American Hare Krishna Temple', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 12 (3), 335-352.

## Magazine

*Hinduism Today* (October/November/December 2005), published by Himalayan Academy, Hawaii.

## Webliography

- al-islam.org*, <http://www.al-islam.org/>, accessed December 12, 2005.
- AlltheWeb*, <http://www.alltheweb.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.
- AltaVista*, <http://www.altavista.com/>, accessed January 9, 2005.
- Ashirbadee*, <http://www.makalipuja.com>, accessed October 23, 2005.
- ashtavinayaktemples.com*, <http://ashtavinayaktemples.com/>, accessed November 7, 2005.
- Ask Jeeves*, <http://www.ask.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.
- atributetohinduism.com*, <http://www.atributetohinduism.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.
- badrinath-kedarnath.org*, <http://www.badrinath-kedarnath.org/>, accessed November 7, 2005.
- [Window:] Online *puja* to *Badrinath*, <http://www.badrinath-kedarnath.org/nindex.asp?tempid=T013>, accessed March 30, 2006.
- bangalinet.com*, <http://bangalinet.com>, accessed May 19, 2005.
- bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism (Religion & Ethics – Hinduism)*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml>, accessed October 26, 2005.
- bbc.co.uk/religion/islam (Religion and Ethics – Islam)*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/index.shtml>, accessed December 12, 2005.
- bbc.co.uk/world\_religions*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world\\_religions](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions), accessed October 26, 2005.
- bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism (Your Guide to the Religions of the World - Hinduism)*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world\\_religions/hinduism.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions/hinduism.shtml), accessed October 26, 2005.
- beliefnet.com*, <http://www.beliefnet.com>, accessed January 8, 2005.
- *beliefnet.com/story*, [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/26/story\\_2656\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/26/story_2656_1.html), accessed November 7, 2005.
- bhimashankar.com*, <http://www.bhimashankar.blessingsonthenet.com>, accessed November 7, 2005.
- Blessings on the Net*, <http://www.blessingsonthenet.com>, accessed May 19, 2005.
- Alternative online *puja* to *Badrinath*, <http://www.blessingsonthenet.com/virtual%20darshan/dhtml%2Fbadrinath%2Fhtml>, accessed March 30, 2006.
- *Blessings on the Net.com/temple* [Windows:] 'What is Offerings' [sic.]' Code of Conduct', <http://blessingsonthenet.com/temple/temple1.asp#>, accessed May 19, 2005.
- Chandi Devi Temple*, <http://www.blessingsonthenet.com/newtemple/nindex.asp?tempid=T027>, accessed April 20, 2006.
- CIA World Factbook (Nepal)*, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/np.html>, accessed June 5, 2006.
- dakshineswar\_kali\_temple.org*, <http://www.dakshineswarkalitemple.org>, access unavailable.
- darshani.com*, <http://www.darshani.com/>, accessed November 4, 2005.
- dfw.hindutemple.org*, <http://www.dfwhindutemple.org>, accessed May 19, 2005.

*Directory of Indian Government Websites*, <http://goidirectory.nic.in/>, accessed January 4, 2006.

*ekalvidya.org*, <http://www.ekalvidya.org/Ekal/index.php>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*eprarthana.com*, <http://eprarthana.com/>, accessed April 21, 2006.

*geocities.com/9410/hinduism*,  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/9410/hindu1.html>, accessed October 26, 2005.

Google, <http://www.google.com>, accessed October 26, 2005.

--- *google.com/technology*, <http://www.google.com/technology/index.html>, accessed November 14, 2005.

*himalayanacademy.com*, <http://himalayanacademy.com/>, accessed May 19, 2005.

--- *himalayanacademy.com/study*,  
<http://www.himalayanacademy.com/study/mc/about.shtml>, accessed March 27, 2006.

--- *himalayanacademy.com/ssc*, <http://www.himalayanacademy.com/ssc/>, accessed November 2, 2004.

*hindu.org*, <http://www.hindu.org>, accessed November 11, 2005.

--- *hindu.org/teachers-orgs/identity*, <http://www.hindu.org/teachers-orgs/identity/>, accessed November 15, 2005.

*hindu-university.edu (Hindu University of America)*, <http://www.hindu-university.edu/> accessed October 28, 2005.

*hinduism.about.com*, <http://hinduism.about.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.

*hinduism.co.za*, <http://www.hinduism.co.za/>, accessed October 26, 2005.

*hinduismtoday.com*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.

--- *hinduismtoday.com/about\_us*, [http://www.hinduismtoday.com/about\\_us.shtml](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/about_us.shtml), accessed November 15, 2005.

--- *hinduismtoday.com/digital*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/digital>, accessed May 9, 2006.

--- *hinduismtoday.com/mcdonalds*,  
[http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press\\_releases/mcdonalds/](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press_releases/mcdonalds/), accessed November 15, 2005.

*hindukids.org*, <http://www.hindukids.org/>, accessed November 3, 2005.

*hindulinks.org*, <http://www.hindulinks.org/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*hindunet.org (The Hindu Universe)*, <http://www.hindunet.org/>, accessed January 8, 2005.

--- *hindunet.org/forum (The Hindu Interactive Universe)*  
<http://www.hindunet.org/forum>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*His Majesty's Government of Nepal*, <http://www.nepalhmg.gov.np/ministry.php>, accessed January 4, 2006.

*hsnet.org (Hindu Students Council)*, <http://www.hscnet.org/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*hssworld.org (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh)*, <http://hssworld.org/index.html>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*iskcon.com*, <http://www.iskcon.com>, accessed November 15, 2005.

*iskcon.net/darshan/jagannath*, <http://www.iskcon.net/darshan/jagan/jagan.html>, accessed August 28, 2005.

*iskcon.org.uk/ies/about\_us*, <http://www.iskcon.org.uk/ies/aboutus.html>, accessed June 11, 2006.

*iskcon.org.uk/ies/hinduism*, <http://www.iskcon.org.uk/ieshinduism.html>, accessed May 19, 2005.

*iskcon.org.uk/ies/training*, <http://www.iskcon.org.uk/ies/training.html>, accessed May 19, 2005.

*islam.com*, <http://www.islam.com/>, accessed December 12, 2005.  
*islam-guide.com*, <http://www.islam-guide.com/>, accessed December 12, 2005.  
*islamicity.com*, <http://www.islamicity.com/>, accessed December 12, 2005.  
*islamworld.net*, <http://www.islamworld.net/>, accessed December 12, 2005.  
*jagannathtemplepuri.com*, <http://jagannathtemplepuri.com/>, accessed November 7, 2005.  
*vyotirlingatemple.com*, <http://www.vyotirlingatemple.com/>, accessed November 7, 2005.  
*Kaalighat*, <http://www.geocities.com/kaalighat>, accessed October 23, 2005/new version accessed May 9, 2006.  
--- *Kaalighat/Puja*, <http://www.geocities.com/kaalighat/Puja.htm>, accessed May 9, 2006.  
*kamakoti.org*, <http://www.kamakoti.org>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*kanchi-sathya.org*, <http://www.kanchi-sathya.org>, accessed May 15, 2005.  
--- *kanchi-sathya.org/kanchidigest*, <http://www.kanchi-sathya.org/kanchidigest.htm>, accessed November 7, 2005.  
*kanchiforum.org*, <http://www.kanchiforum.org>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*karunamayi.org*, <http://www.karunamayi.org/>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*kashivishwanath.org*, <http://www.kashivishwanath.org>, accessed October 22, 2005.  
*kataragama.org*, <http://www.kataragama.org/>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*kksfusa.org* (*Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation*), <http://www.kksfusa.org>, accessed November 15, 2005.  
--- *kksfusa.org/Content*, <http://www.kksfusa.org/Content.asp?Contenttype=News&contentid=443>, accessed November 11, 2005.  
*Know India - People and Lifestyle*, <http://india.gov.in/knowindia/lifestyle.php>, accessed January 4, 2006.  
*kytemple.org* (*Hindu Temple of Kentucky*), <http://www.kytemple.org>, accessed 19 May, 2005.  
*laxminarayan.com*, <http://www.laxminarayan.blessingsonthenet.com/>, accessed April 20, 2006.  
*maavaishnodevi.org*, <http://maavaishnodevi.org/new1/index.html>, accessed April 10, 2006.  
--- *maavaishnodevi.org/yatra*, [http://maavaishnodevi.org/katra\\_holys.asp](http://maavaishnodevi.org/katra_holys.asp) [sic.], accessed April 10, 2006.  
*marketleap.com*, <http://www.marketleap.com>, accessed November 11, 2005.  
--- *marketleap.com/linkpopularity*, <http://www.marketleap.com/help/seo/01/linkpopularity.htm>, accessed November 1, 2005.  
--- *marketleap.com/saturation*, <http://www.marketleap.com/help/faq/saturation.htm>, accessed November 14, 2005.  
*mayapur.info*, <http://www.mayapur.info/>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*MSN*, <http://www.msn.com/>, accessed October 26, 2005.  
*muktidham.org* (*Shree Saraswati Muktidham Trust – Sidhpur*), <http://www.muktidham.org/>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*prarthana.com*, <http://www.prarthana.com/>, accessed April 21, 2006.  
*puja.by-choice.com*, <http://www.puja.by-choice.com/>, accessed April 21, 2006.  
*ramakrishna.org* (*Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York*), <http://ramakrishna.org/>, accessed November 4, 2005.  
*religioustolerance.org*, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/index.html#new>, accessed October 28, 2005.  
--- *religioustolerance.org/hinduism*, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hinduism.htm>,

accessed January 26, 2005.

--- *religioustolerance.org/islam*, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/islam.htm>, accessed December 12, 2005.

*RoughGuides.com – Travel (India)*, <http://travel.roughguides.com/roughguides.html#>, accessed February 16, 2006.

*rss.org (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)*, <http://www.rss.org/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*rudraksha-ratna.com*, <http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com>, accessed May 19, 2005.

*sacred-texts.com/hinduism*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm>, accessed November 4, 2005.

*sanskrita-bharati.org*, <http://www.sanskrita-bharati.org/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*sanskrit.gde.to*, <http://sanskrit.gde.to/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*saranam.com*, <http://www.saranam.com/>, accessed October 28, 2005.

*shirdisaitemple.com*, <http://www.shirdisaitemple.com/>, accessed November 3, 2005.

*siddhivinayak.org*, <http://www.siddhivinayak.org/>, accessed November 6, 2005.

*Swagatam Jagannath Dham*, <http://164.100.140.7/jagannath/>, accessed October 22, 2005.

--- *Swagatam Jagannath Dham/Festivals*, <http://164.100.140.7/jagannath/festival.htm>, accessed October 22, 2005.

*tirumala.org*, <http://www.tirumala.org/> accessed November 16, 2004.

*touchgraph.com*, <http://www.touchgraph.com/TGGoogleBrowser.html>, accessed October 26, 2005.

*tourism.gov.Nepal/culture*, <http://www.tourism.gov.np/culture.htm>, accessed January 4, 2006.

*upportal.com*, <http://www.upportal.com>, accessed May 19, 2005 (website now defunct).

--- *upportal.com/darshan*, [http://www.upportal.com/tourism/online\\_darshan](http://www.upportal.com/tourism/online_darshan), accessed October 22, 2005 (website now defunct).

*vedanta.org (Vedanta Society of Southern California)*, <http://www.vedanta.org/>, accessed November 4, 2005.

*wikipedia.org*, <http://wikipedia.org/>, accessed October 26, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/external\_links*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/External\\_links](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/External_links), accessed December 14, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/hinduism*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism>, accessed October 26, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/history*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Wikipedia), accessed December 14, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/islam*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>, accessed December 12, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/welcome*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Welcome%2C\\_newcomers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Welcome%2C_newcomers), accessed December 14, 2005.

--- *wikipedia.org/wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>, accessed December 14, 2005.

*Yahoo!* <http://www.yahoo.com>, accessed October 26, 2005.