

Hindu Religious Devotion in Media as Contemporary Folklore: Prospects for Religious Tourism in India

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ABSTRACT: The matter of pilgrimage is a surprisingly ubiquitous one and it is quite likely that the reader will reflect wryly that his/her faith, society, and traditional culture all contain matters closely patterned on the present account. Ironically, the differences between countries and cultures only underscore the more the persistence of timeless observances and human needs for all mankind. In the last hundred years, a pattern wars, holocaust and natural disasters has re-enforced the urge to make such journeys with piquantly different and yet basically similar motivations and distinctive side activities.

The practice of pilgrimage is a matter closely related to both folk stories and folk songs and, in general terms, to the folklore surrounding religious markers as 'gods, myths, sacred texts and beliefs' (Kraft, 2007, p. 233). Such dedicated devotees often visit places belonging to their faith to perform religious rituals, and to fulfill religious needs and spiritual quests. But they are equally influenced by religious functionaries in these places, who assist them in fulfilling their goals, and also create eulogies of (all such) sacred places, narrate them and present them in folkloric forms, in order to excite the devotees' interest in and desire to undertake journeys to those places (Caplan, 1997; Parry, 1994). Thus, folklore continues to influence the general perception of sacred places, deities, gods, goddesses, and their miraculous powers.

In the contemporary world, the mass media has begun to perform this essentially hitherto religious and cultural role. A plethora of religious-themed and devotional films, religious discourses and music available on albums by religious gurus and clergymen, and 'Television Soaps' are all dedicated to recreate lives of gods, goddesses and repackaging of religious and miraculous stories about places and their presiding deities. And this falls little short of creating contemporary folklore within/in relation to religious practice. Such transformations have also fuelled the increase in travel to sacred and religious places worldwide. One of the notable examples in the western world is the release of the film *Passion of Christ*, and its follow-on effect, that helped the surge in the numbers

of visitors to Italy to see and experiences the places where the movie was shot (Garber, 2006).

In this paper, I demonstrate that similar, and in fact, even more intense influences of the new mediums of/for folklore are also to be seen in non-western contexts, especially in the Hindu pilgrimages in India. I will explain how folkloric character of Hindu devotion in mass media—including films, television, and music industry—has made a significant contribution to the growth in contemporary religious tourism to Hindu pilgrimage sites in India.

Hindu Pilgrimages and Religious Tourism

Pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites have existed in India since ancient times. According to one source, the number of these pilgrimage sites exceeds 2000 (Bhardwaj, 1973). Given the diverse influences of different cultures on the history of India and its religions, the antiquity of most Hindu traditional pilgrimage sites is shrouded in mythological legends and undated religious scriptures (Singh, 2006). Nonetheless, they continue to attract visitors and devotees.

The *Domestic Tourism Survey* conducted in 2002-2003 by the Indian government's Ministry of Tourism indicates that every year more than 100 million people have travelled to various religious events, temples and pilgrimage sites.¹ The numbers of visitors recorded in few pilgrimage sites are indicative of the magnitude of religious travel; 23 million in Tirupati, 18.2 million in Puri, 17 million in Vaishno Devi, 11 million in Haridwar, 8.3 million in Mathura-Vrindavan, and so on. According to the survey, short-term trips by middle and upper-income groups contribute a substantial share of travel to sacred sites: nearly 50 percent of package tours were for religious and pilgrimage travel and almost 20 percent of one-day trips were also for religious and pilgrimage purposes (NCAER, 2003, p. 33). Not only has the magnitude of the linked travel has changed, but the patterns of visitation and ritual performances are also changing. Shinde (2008) offers a detailed insight in some of these changes based on the findings from visitors' survey he conducted in Vrindavan, a popular pilgrimage site in north India. A brief summary of these findings is presented here:

More than 80% of respondents were regular visitors to Vrindavan and the main motive was seeking darshana (divine sight) of Krishna in his various manifestations and images at different temples. About 20 percent

¹ The National Council of Applied Economic Research for the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Government of India conducted the Domestic Tourism Survey in 2002-03. It surveyed 800,000 households across the country in December 2002. The main objectives of the survey were to estimate the total number of domestic tourists by different purposes of travel and to estimate the total magnitude and patterns of tourist expenditures.

attended the ceremonial prayers performed at temples during different times of the day; 50 percent of those visiting the temple did not wait to attend the worship rituals (aarti), nor intend to perform any specific pilgrimage associated rituals. Less than 10 percent of the respondents had performed the customary circumambulation (parikrama) of Vrindavan.

Only 5 out of the 45 respondents in the survey indicated that they had relied on the services of pandas or local guides during their trip. An important reason offered by most day and weekend visitors to Vrindavan was that they felt Krishna to be an important 'wish-fulfilling' god and that it was worth the effort to visit the temples where the Krishna deities were well-known for their wish fulfilling powers (Shinde, 2008, p. 182)

The Matter of Motivation?

People visit pilgrimage sites for a multitude of reasons including: fulfillment of religious rites of passage; seeking divine intervention; and spiritual growth. In achieving their goals, they often recruit services of religious functionaries who perform necessary rituals for them. In doing so, religious functionaries often use place-mahatmyas which also help in propagating the eulogy of the place. 'Mahatmyas' are written texts that describe the sacred geography of the place, its mythological origins (often by referring to ancient epics such as *puranas*), and the nature of pilgrimage performances that visitors need to undertake while at the sacred place. While the traditional ritualistic format continues to dominate the cultural economy of pilgrimage, the nature of visitation and performances in contemporary pilgrimage travel is also changing significantly. It is well known how religious practices continue to evolve as they intersect with broader socio-economic and political changes, and therefore, for a better understanding of contemporary religious practice and religiosity in the Indian society, it is first necessary to provide the context in which these transformations are taking place.

Recent decades have witnessed the 'emergence of Hindu religious movements that revolve around solving the stresses and strains of contemporary life' for middle-class and upper-class Indians (Madan, 2004, p. 265). The expansion of industrial activity and subsequent liberalisation of the Indian economy from the 1980s onwards has been accompanied by rising numbers of the Hindu urban professional classes who have sought new ways of engaging with religious beliefs and rituals. 'Family well-being and success in this world' (Rinehart, 2004, p. 86) has always been a central preoccupation for the Hindu populace, but the need to achieve this is acutely felt in the new climate of uncertainty and alienation, and this has particularly led the middle-class to seek refuge in religious traditions and modern gurus (Varma, 1998). And Warrior

(2004, p. 14) notes of the 'spiritual striving' by the well-off urban middle-class and its search for self-identity and sense of fulfillment.

The demands in the business of religious devotion (Harman, 2004) are being fulfilled by growing numbers of charismatic gurus who provide a 'religion of choice' for their followers. In addition, new technologies of mass communication including television, print media, and the Internet have helped revive some traditional practices and transformed others (Llewellyn, 2004). The new information and communication technologies have also created an array of services including virtual temples where religious practices and rituals can be performed online, as well as virtual blessings that can be sought online from gurus for a fee (Kong, 2001; Rinehart, 2004a; Shackley, 2001).

While virtual religiosity continues to grow, it has not diminished the need for physical travel to pilgrimage sites. On the contrary, reverse is true as more and more people are seeking to experience of a divine intervention in their everyday life when they hear or read about it (Nandy, 2001). It has reinforced the desire to see those places associated with gods and saints. This is particularly the case with the Indian diaspora, which is increasingly trying to reconnect with their homeland and its religion (Waghorne, 2004). An additional factor that has reinforced such needs is the adoption and embracing of religious themes in mass media.

New Media Increase Public Knowledge of Gods, Places, and Devotions

The new media comprising films, television and music industry has not only increased the amount of exposure and knowledge about different gods and goddesses and sacred places but also began to reinterpret, portray and represent devotion and faith in a manner that is exciting for many and so has significant contemporary appeal. While the folklore of the past relied on conflating of myths, legends and facts in publicity of pilgrimage places and continuity of pilgrimage practices, this role is now being served by the new media as they use same epics, religious scriptures and place mahatmyas as the basis for recreation and re-enactment of mythological legends. In this section, I will illustrate the follow-on effects of portrayal of devotion and religious themes through medium of films, television and music on contemporary patterns of religious tourism.

Religious-themed films based on stories and characters from mythological legends have occupied a special place in Indian cinema. In fact, the first Indian film, titled 'Raja Harishchandra' depicted the ancient story of a Hindu king who sacrificed everything he had to uphold the values of truth. Such films continued to amuse audiences, but their direct contribution to the practice of religious travel has hardly been discussed

in the literature. It would be futile to try and list all such religious films, their storylines, characters and places. Instead, I will present an overall picture of what may be considered as some connections between films and religious travel. These explanations are based on anecdotal information and data collected over several years of fieldwork in different pilgrimage sites in India.

In order to understand the relationship between devotional films and religious travel, I would like to make two distinct categories within such films. The first one includes films about gods and goddesses, and the second includes those that are place-specific. The first category is more generic, i.e. films in this category are aimed at reinforcing the images of gods and goddesses, these considered to be omnipresent since the ancient times. Most Hindus worship most of these deities in their temples that are spread all over the country, even if there might be regional variations. For example, popular mythological figures such as Ram, Krishna, Hanuman, Ganesha, Laxmi, Saraswati etc. belong to this category. These films help to reinforce overall faith in the practice of religious rituals to achieve blessings of the deity being worshipped. These are also regularly presented in newer forms to make them socially relevant.

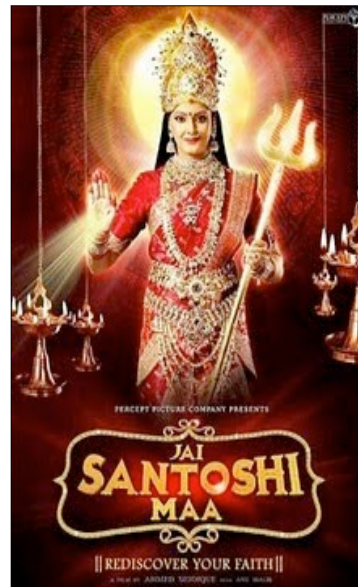


Figure 1: Posters of the film *Jai Santoshi Maa*, 1975. Source: www.filmlinks4u.net

One of the earliest films that exemplify this category is *Jai Santoshi Maa*. Since its release in 1975, the film almost has had a hysteria-arousing effect. A poster of this film is shown in figure 1. The story is about a newly wed bride whose life is made miserable by her in-laws and social pressures, but who finds a deity in the form of devi Santoshi (goddess of satisfaction) and decides to worship her. In the final analysis, her devotion wins over all the evils. The movie was particularly appealing for female audiences, even as it also struck a chord with and conveyed a message of vindication and ultimate triumph for the sincerely devoted. Consequently, several stories of miracles were reported many women folk who, in real life, began to worship devi Santoshi. There were more and more people attracted to the temples of the goddess and even new ones were built. The stories of Santoshi Maa (mother) are being retold in newer formats and sequels have been produced.



Figure 2: Poster of a subsequent film on Santoshi Maa. Source: www.filmlinks4u.net

At present five movies are dedicated to Santoshi maa. Films in this category focus on mythological characters and therefore are generic with little references to a place-specific. The place for worship is often the temple in the home or the neighborhood, a venue for the everyday life of the lead character. Yet, it is the faith in those gods and deities in general that ultimately drives surges in numbers of visitors to all their temples that area spread across the country (Joshi, 2006; Prabhakar, 2001).

The second category is of the specific deities belonging to specific pilgrimage sites. Almost all popular pilgrimage sites in India have been portrayed in one way or another in devotional films. These films have made definite contribution by propagating eulogies of the places to bring more people to the pilgrimage sites. I will select two films for explanation of this phenomenon.

Sai Baba, A Modern Saint

The story of Sai baba, a modern saint from the village of Shirdi (in Maharashtra) was adopted and recreated on the silver screen the name *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* in 1977. To make it look more real and appealing, the movie was shot in Shirdi and its surroundings. Not only was the movie a hit, it began to drive hoards of people from major urban centres to visit Shirdi where the saint had lived and had his tomb and temple. Sai Baba already had a large following of urban dwelling middle class, but when it was shown as a film, most people easily related the common stories they had heard as legends with their own struggle (Srinivas, 1999). In the hope to see similar positive results in their own lives, they were ready to put their faith in the power of Sai Baba. The film (see poster in figure 3) also acted as a catalyst in publicizing Shirdi.

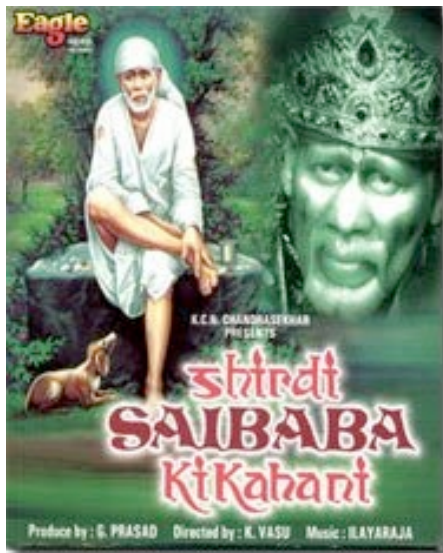


Figure 3: Poster of the film *Shirdi Ke* 1977. Source www.filmlinks4u.net



Figure 4: Poster of the film *Sai Baba, Ashtavinayak*, 1979. Source: www.filmlinks4u.net

It was hard to imagine that a village of 200 houses at the beginning of the century would become one of the most frequently visited pilgrimage sites. According to a rough estimate, more than six million pilgrims visited Shirdi in 2010 (Shinde, 2010). The local community honored one of the lead actors in the film, for his contribution in popularizing Shirdi and Sai Baba, as they renamed the main street adjacent to the temple after him.

Similar movies based on stories of regional deities are also popular all across India. Most places depicted and recreated in these movies have witnessed increase in the numbers of visitors when those become commercially successful. Examples of such phenomenon abound, one more should suffice for the sake of explanation.

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A regional film (in marathi) in Maharashtra by the name of *Ashtavinayak* was released in 1979 (see poster in figure 4). This film was the elephant-headed god Ganesha, its eight different forms that preside over eight different temples in the state. It showed how a middle class family faced several challenges including financial bankruptcy and fidelity issues and how by worshipping Ganesha at all these places helped them to overcome their problems. Needless to say the film was a huge hit and a commercial success, but the spin-off effects were even greater. Several tours and travels companies in the state began to offer 2-3 days package tours to the Ganesha temples in these places and have continued to work successfully in creating a pilgrimage product in the Eight-Ganeshas pilgrimage circuit.

Films from other regions in India are equally popular and have contributed to the growth in numbers of visitors undertaking pilgrimage travel on circuits and to specific destinations.

Television Serials

The first Indian television series based on religious stories was the epic of *Ramayan*. It was a television adaptation of the epic of the same name that described adventures of the god-king Rama (Lutgendorf, 1991). The first of the 78 episode-serial was aired on 25 June 1987 and soon it became enormously popular, drawing over 100 million viewers (Karp & Williams, 2008). This serial was not only listed in the Limca Book of Records as the world's 'most viewed mythological serial' until June 2003, but it also inspired a raft of other religious televisions series including the *Mahabharata*, *Vishwamitra*, *Buddha*, and *Luv-Kush* and *Krishna*. What the televised Ramayan created was much more than just a spectacular presentation of the epic. While Hindus are generally aware of this legend, seeing it for the first time as a real-life enactment, they readily related with the story and its characters (Lutgendorf, 2006). The grandeur of sets, the opulence of royal life, the expounding of virtues and values, the place references, and the overall image was created in such a way that it reinforced the faith of the Hindus in the legend of Rama and visualize the existence of 'once upon a time' Ram-Rajya (the time in cosmic history where everything was virtuous and good). The effect was so real that whenever the actors from the serial made public appearances, they were not treated as individuals, but as the characters from the epic

and worshipped accordingly. The extent of the public display of devotion was such that the two leading actors playing the role of King Rama and his wife, Sita, decided to contest the parliamentary elections on a ticket offered by the pro-Hindu political party. Their popularity was not unfounded; both of them won the elections from different constituencies. It can be speculated that the renewed interest in building of a temple that commemorated the birth of Rama in Ayodhya (the birth-place of Rama) and demolition of an adjacent mosque in 1993 was one of the follow-on effects. What is more relevant to the present subject is that the place-stories depicted in the epic were believed to be real, which view led to an increase in the numbers of people traveling to these places.

The specific references to places and their physical manifestation was even more pronounced in the serial on Krishna that followed after Ramayan. Consequently places such as Mathura-Vrindavan (where Krishna was born and spent his childhood), Dwarka (where he founded his kingdom) that were central to Krishna legend began to experience a growing number of visitors. Although these places already have an established pilgrimage industry, the influx of visitors dramatically increased after this serial was televised. Shinde reports on how many of his interviewees informed that their visitors had seen the serial and now wanted to see where Krishna lived, how he lived, where he danced and performed his miracle plays and so on. As television serials began to merge legends with historical interpretations, they became even more effective. Mahabharata, Chanakya, Discovery of India, Sai Baba have been immensely successful in creating awareness about religious practices and places of religious importance.

The Devotional Music Industry

Devotional music has been one of the pillars of Indian culture. With its regional variations, it has spanned from the domain of temples, royal families and social elites who could patronize it, to the poor who sang devotional songs to appease gods and goddesses and for a better life. However, the contemporary form is even more widely accessible and appreciated as albums of devotional songs sung by popular playback singers proliferated in last few decades. In the 1980s, one of the well-known music promoters, almost single handedly produced record numbers of cassettes and CDs describing deities and places of north India using hymns, folk songs, and Sanskrit prayers. (A couple of examples are shown in figure 5.) Increasingly there has been a move from studio sets to shooting in real temples with real people, and representation of real experiences in surreal locations. With so much propagation and musical narratives, it was only logical that ordinary people would be heading to sacred places.



Figure 5. Devotional music presented in cassette and cd format.

The foray of religious functionaries, priests and gurus in this industry signaled a new era in contemporary religious practice (Shinde, 2010). Their impact on devotional music industry is nothing less than spectacular. For instance, In Vrindavan, a music company established by a *religious guru* claims to ‘own 3,500 titles of which a minimum of 10 have been 10 million sellers, and over 15 have grossed more than 5 millions in sales and another 20 have bagged sales of about a million’ (<http://mridulvrindaban.com>). According to this performer the inspiration to do so has come from a ‘divine dream’, one in which he was summoned and directed by Krishna to make his legend accessible to people who are unable to attend the cultural performances in Vrindavan. When such music is played, it keeps reminding the listener of the glory of the deity and of how ordinary people can also benefit by undertaking religious travel to seek *darshana* and the blessing of the deity. The business of Video CDs and audio CDs is supplanting the traditional medium of religious scriptures and texts and in no small measure, almost acquiring a folkloric proportion.

More General Discussion and Conclusion

Folklore is the composite of cultural ways in which traditional beliefs and practices are shared and in that sense the new media as it portrays devotional worship constitutes contemporary folklore.

The role of religious scriptures is taken over by the new visual media, which is proving to be more effective in publicizing pilgrimage sites.

Devotional films, television serials, and music help people to visualize a nostalgic past where gods and kingdoms reigned. Though this may be a temporary distraction, it affirms their belief in miracles and also gives them hope. It also provides a significance to uphold religious practices for their existence and rekindle their faith in miraculous powers embodied in the personas of gods, saint and sacred places. By linking miracle stories of deities and places, they are not only creating eulogies of places but also offering alternative directions and choices for fulfilling religious needs of people. In essence, they provide number of opportunities for the 'searching' and 'striving' of the contemporary society.

The new media and its folkloric character are but one factor that can be considered as a significant contributor to the growth in the numbers of visitors to pilgrimage places. However, such contribution needs to be viewed in conjunction with increases in travel facilities and improvement in tourism infrastructure in the country.

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