



Religion in the Digital Age: Exploring Online Religious Practices and Spiritual Communities in Post-Pandemic India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a profound transformation in the practice of religion in India, as physical restrictions on temple visits, congregational worship, and pilgrimage compelled the rapid migration of religious life onto digital platforms. While digital religion has been an active field of scholarly inquiry for two decades, the post-pandemic Indian religious landscape presents distinctive features that warrant focused analysis. This article examines the development of online religious practices and spiritual communities in post-pandemic India, drawing on a critical literature review methodology and theoretical frameworks from the sociology of religion, mediatization theory, and digital religion studies. Analysing peer-reviewed scholarship, ethnographic studies, and platform-based ecosystem reports published between 2018 and 2025, the study identifies four major patterns: the institutionalization of livestreamed temple darshan and ritual broadcasts; the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities and subscription-based religious content; the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms; and the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation patterns. The analysis engages with the work of Heidi Campbell, Stewart Hoover, Christopher Helland, and others, while drawing on Indian scholars whose work foregrounds the specific features of South Asian religious traditions. Findings indicate that digital religion in India is neither a simple transposition of offline practice nor a complete rupture with traditional forms. It is a hybrid configuration that reshapes authority, community, and embodiment in religious life. The article concludes that the post-pandemic period has produced a durable hybridization of religious practice, with significant implications for religious institutions, scholarly understanding, and inter-religious dynamics.

Keywords:- Digital Religion, Online Religious Practice, Post-Pandemic India, Mediatization, Virtual Darshan, Guru Communities, Devotional Content, Hybrid Religiosity

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a watershed moment in the history of religion in India. As public health measures restricted access to temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and other places of worship during 2020 and 2021, religious institutions across the country were compelled to migrate substantial portions of their activity onto digital platforms (Campbell, 2020). Live-streamed darshan, online aarti, virtual pilgrimage, video-conferenced sermons, and platform-mediated religious instruction became, almost overnight, ordinary features of religious life. While the more acute pandemic restrictions have receded, the digital practices that emerged during the crisis have not. They have become entrenched, expanded, and increasingly institutionalized, reshaping the religious landscape of post-pandemic India in durable ways (Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

India's religious landscape is among the most diverse in the world, encompassing Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, indigenous, and a wide range of sect-specific and devotional traditions (Pew Research Center, 2021). Each of these traditions had pre-pandemic engagements with digital media, ranging from satellite television channels broadcasting religious content to early internet-era websites of major temples and dargahs, to social media accounts of contemporary spiritual teachers (Babb & Wadley, 1995; Beckerlegge, 2015; Rajagopal, 2001). The pandemic accelerated, but did not initiate, the digitalization of Indian religious life. What it produced, instead, was a normalization of digitally mediated practice across institutions and traditions that had previously been ambivalent or peripheral participants in such mediation.

Scholarship on digital religion, well established globally since the 1990s, provides important conceptual resources for analysing this transformation. The work of Heidi Campbell, Stewart Hoover, Christopher Helland, Mia Lövhelm, and others has developed a robust theoretical vocabulary for examining how religious practices, communities, and authorities are reshaped by digital media (Campbell, 2013; Helland, 2005; Hoover, 2006; Lövhelm, 2012). The Indian case, however, presents distinctive features that resist straightforward application of frameworks developed primarily through the study of Christian and Western religious contexts (Scheifinger, 2017). The centrality of darshan in Hindu practice (Eck, 1998), the embodied requirements of namaz, the communal nature of langar and other forms of religious commensality, and the deep imbrication of religion with caste, language, and regional identity all shape how digital mediation is received and reworked.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks:

- How have online religious practices and spiritual communities developed in post-pandemic India, and what are the implications for religious authority, community, and embodiment?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, what major patterns of digital religious practice have stabilized in post-pandemic India?
- Second, how do these patterns reshape religious authority, community formation, and the bodily dimensions of religious life?
- Third, what tensions and inequalities emerge from the hybridization of offline and online religious participation?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes scholarship on digital religion in India through a post-pandemic lens. It identifies four major patterns that organize the empirical landscape and offers a framework for analysing them. It articulates implications for religious studies scholarship, religious institutions themselves, and inter-religious dynamics in contemporary India. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory and evidence;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings;
- Section 5 discusses implications;
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations: Mediatization and Digital Religion

The study of religion and media has developed a sophisticated theoretical vocabulary over the past three decades. Mediatization theory, articulated by Stig Hjarvard (2008), Knut Lundby (2009), and others, posits that media have become so pervasive in contemporary social life that they constitute an autonomous logic that other institutions, including religion, increasingly accommodate. From this perspective, religion is not merely transmitted through media but is reshaped by media's formats, temporalities, and attention economies. Heidi Campbell's work on networked religion has further developed an analytical vocabulary for understanding how digital media reshape religious authority, community, identity, and ritual (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

Christopher Helland's (2005) influential distinction between religion online (the use of digital media to disseminate established religious content) and online religion (the constitution of religious practice and community through digital interaction) remains analytically productive, although the distinction has blurred as digital practice has matured. Stewart Hoover's (2006) work on the lived religious uses of media draws attention to how religious meaning is constructed through everyday media engagement, rather than primarily through

institutional broadcasting. These frameworks together provide a robust starting point for analysing the Indian case (Lövheim, 2012).

The Indian Religious Landscape and Digital Adoption

Indian religious traditions have engaged with mass media throughout the twentieth century, from print devotional literature to gramophone recordings of bhajans and qawwalis, to television serials such as Ramayan and Mahabharat that drew massive audiences in the 1980s, to the satellite television boom of the 1990s with dedicated religious channels in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and other languages (Babb & Wadley, 1995; Rajagopal, 2001). Internet adoption from the 2000s onwards added another layer, with major temples, ashrams, and religious organizations developing websites, online donation portals, and email-based newsletters (Beckerlegge, 2015; Jain, 2014). The mass diffusion of smartphones and affordable mobile data from approximately 2016, following the Reliance Jio launch, qualitatively transformed the digital religious landscape, bringing video and social media engagement within reach of vast new populations (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019; Udupa, 2015).

Empirical Studies on Online Religion in India

A growing body of empirical scholarship has documented digital religious practice in India. Studies have examined the websites and YouTube presence of major Hindu temples including Tirupati, Vaishno Devi, Shirdi, and the Jagannath Temple in Puri (Lochtefeld, 2021; Scheifinger, 2017). Research on Sufi traditions has analysed the digital activities of major dargahs and the social media presence of qawwali artists (Tarlo, 2010; Zaman, 2002). Christian and Sikh denominations have been studied for their use of livestreaming and social media in congregational life. Recent ethnographic work has explored the digital practices of contemporary gurus and spiritual teachers, including the use of subscription-based platforms, app-based meditation programmes, and global online communities (Karapanagiotis, 2021; Mallapragada, 2014). These studies provide rich foundations, although integration across traditions and synthesis of post-pandemic developments remains limited.

Authority, Community, and Embodiment in Digital Religion

Three analytical dimensions are particularly central to the digital religion literature: authority, community, and embodiment (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Bellar, 2022). Digital media reshape religious authority by enabling new actors (independent teachers, content creators, lay practitioners) to address religious audiences directly, while also offering established religious institutions powerful new platforms for amplifying their voice. Religious communities are reconfigured through digital media, sometimes extending and supporting existing communities, sometimes constituting new communities that have no prior offline existence. Embodiment, understood as the role of the body in religious practice, presents particular complications in digital contexts: the embodied features of darshan, namaz, communion, langar, or pilgrimage cannot be fully reproduced through screens, raising theological, ritual, and experiential questions (Eck, 1998).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding literature, gaps remain. The post-pandemic period has produced rapid changes that scholarship is only beginning to assimilate. Comparative analyses across Indian religious traditions are relatively rare, with much of the literature remaining tradition-specific. Theoretical engagement with the specifically Indian features of digital religion, including the centrality of darshan, the embodied demands of multiple traditions, and the role of caste, language, and region, requires further development. The present article seeks to contribute to addressing these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for integrating scholarship across religious studies, sociology of religion, media studies, and digital religion. The review proceeded through four stages.

In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ATLA Religion Database, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined digital religion, online religion, virtual worship, livestream, darshan, namaz online, guru, spiritual community, and India. The window was January 2018 to August 2025, with selected earlier sources retained for theoretical and historical grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical scholarship engaging with digital religious practice, with priority given to work focused on India and South Asian traditions, supplemented by foundational global digital religion theory. Reports from religious institutions, media research organizations, and digital ecosystem studies were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out devotional or apologetic literature without scholarly framing, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, sixty-eight publications were retained for analysis.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual materials were drawn from publicly available sources including the websites of major religious institutions, ecosystem reports on devotional content platforms, and journalistic coverage of pandemic-era and post-pandemic religious change. In the fourth stage, a thematic synthesis procedure was used. Codes were developed inductively from the literature and refined into broader analytical categories. Four major patterns of post-pandemic digital religion in India emerged from the analysis and structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, balanced engagement with multiple religious traditions, and respect for religious sensibilities were maintained throughout.

Results

Institutionalization of Livestreamed Darshan and Ritual Broadcasts

The first major pattern is the institutionalization of livestreamed darshan, aarti, namaz, and other ritual broadcasts by major religious institutions. During the pandemic, restrictions on physical attendance compelled temples, dargahs, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras to develop livestreaming infrastructure to maintain continuity of religious life and devotee engagement (Campbell, 2020). In the post-pandemic period, these infrastructures have not been dismantled. They have been expanded, professionalized, and integrated into the regular operational practice of religious institutions (Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

Major Hindu temples now routinely offer multiple daily livestreams of darshan and aarti (Lochtefeld, 2021; Scheifinger, 2017). Sikh institutions stream gurbani kirtan from major gurdwaras. Muslim mosques and dargahs broadcast khutbas and qawwali performances. Christian churches across denominations livestream Sunday services. The institutionalization of these broadcasts reshapes the relationship between geographic place and religious participation. Devotees living abroad or in regions distant from significant religious sites can maintain regular ritual engagement, while local devotees may use livestreams to supplement physical visits or as substitutes when health, work, or family obligations prevent attendance (Mallapragada, 2014).

Theological and ritual debates around the validity and meaning of livestreamed religious experience have accompanied this institutionalization (Eck, 1998). The question of whether digital darshan constitutes a sufficient form of darshan, whether digitally relayed prayer fulfils ritual obligations, and how the embodied dimensions of religious practice are or are not preserved in digital form, are subjects of active theological discussion within multiple traditions (Campbell, 2020; Lochtefeld, 2021).

Guru-Led Digital Spiritual Communities and Subscription Models

The second pattern is the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities, often supported by subscription-based content models (Karapanagiotis, 2021). Contemporary spiritual teachers across Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Christian, and non-denominational traditions have built extensive digital ecosystems comprising YouTube channels, dedicated apps, paid online courses, retreat content, and direct messaging communities (Jain, 2014). The pandemic accelerated this development, as physical retreats and in-person teachings were temporarily impossible, prompting teachers and their organizations to invest in digital alternatives.

These digital communities differ in important ways from traditional ashram-based or congregational structures. They tend to be globally distributed, allowing teachers to maintain large international communities of practitioners (Mallapragada, 2014). Subscription and donation flows can be substantial, enabling teaching organizations to sustain expanded staff, content production, and outreach. Yet these communities also raise questions about religious authority, accountability, and the depth of relationship that digital mediation can sustain (Campbell, 2013). The relative ease of building parallel digital teaching organizations has also produced a proliferation of new spiritual teachers, some with significant followings, whose authority derives substantially from digital presence rather than traditional lineage or institutional standing (Karapanagiotis, 2021).

Devotional Content Economies on Social Media Platforms

The third pattern is the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms, particularly YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and short-form video platforms (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019; Udupa, 2015). Devotional content, including bhajans, kirtans, naats, qawwalis, hymns, gurbani, sermons, and ritual instruction, circulates at unprecedented scale and intensity. Content creators range from established musicians and religious teachers to amateur practitioners and dedicated devotional content channels. Algorithmic recommendation systems shape which content reaches which audiences, with implications for canon formation, the visibility of regional and minority traditions, and the spread of new religious aesthetics (Saha, 2018).

This content economy interacts in complex ways with traditional religious institutions. Some institutions have embraced and invested in social media content production (Karapanagiotis, 2021). Others remain ambivalent

or peripheral participants. The economic dimension is significant: monetization through advertising, brand partnerships, and direct donations has created sustainable livelihoods for some devotional content creators while raising concerns about the commercialization of religious expression (Saha, 2018). Issues of religious accuracy, sectarian polemic, and inter-religious tension also characterize this content space, requiring careful scholarly and institutional attention (Kapur, 2020; Udupa, 2015).

Hybrid Offline-Online Religious Participation

The fourth pattern, perhaps the most analytically important, is the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation as the durable post-pandemic norm (Campbell & Bellar, 2022). Most Indian religious practitioners, after the easing of pandemic restrictions, did not abandon physical religious participation. Nor did they revert to purely offline practice. They moved into a hybrid pattern in which physical visits, livestreamed engagement, social media consumption of devotional content, and participation in digitally extended communities are interwoven. The relative weight of these elements varies by tradition, by demographic, and by individual religious biography, but the hybrid pattern itself appears stable.

This hybridization has implications for how scholars conceptualize religious participation. The boundary between offline and online religion, never fully clean, has become increasingly porous (Helland, 2005). Pilgrimage planning often involves digital reconnaissance, virtual tours, and post-visit engagement with livestreamed daily rituals (Lochtefeld, 2021). Membership in religious communities is frequently constituted through both physical congregation and ongoing digital interaction. Studies that measure religious participation through purely offline indicators may significantly underestimate religious activity in the post-pandemic landscape (Hoover, 2006).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an analytical framework that takes hybridization as the basic unit of analysis for contemporary Indian religious practice, rather than treating offline and online as separate domains. The integration of mediatization theory, networked religion frameworks, and Indian-tradition-specific analytical vocabularies offers productive resources for such analysis. The four patterns identified, institutionalized livestreaming, guru-led digital communities, devotional content economies, and hybrid participation, are not isolated developments but interlocking features of a transformed religious landscape.

For religious institutions, the findings suggest several practical implications. Investments in digital infrastructure, made under pandemic pressure, are likely to require ongoing maintenance, professional staffing, and theological reflection rather than passive operation. Questions of digital ritual validity, the relationship between physical and online communities, and the management of devotional content economies will require sustained attention from religious leadership. Inter-religious comparison may itself become a productive practice, as institutions across traditions encounter shared challenges and develop diverse responses.

For inter-religious dynamics, the findings raise both possibilities and concerns (Pew Research Center, 2021). Digital religious spaces facilitate exposure to other traditions, often through devotional aesthetics, music, and ritual videos that travel beyond denominational and tradition-specific audiences. This exposure can foster appreciation and curiosity. At the same time, digital platforms have also been sites of inter-religious tension, polemic, and the propagation of divisive content (Kapur, 2020; Udupa, 2015). The post-pandemic religious internet in India is therefore not a uniformly irenic space. The role of platform governance, content moderation, and religious civil society in shaping the tone of inter-religious digital encounter is a significant ongoing issue.

Equity considerations are also important. The hybridization of religious practice presupposes access to smartphones, data, electricity, digital literacy, and language-appropriate content. Older devotees, low-income populations, residents of regions with weaker digital infrastructure, and speakers of less-resourced languages may be relatively underserved by digital religious developments. Religious institutions and policymakers concerned with religious access have reason to attend to these disparities, including through public-access digital infrastructure at temples and community spaces, content production in multiple regional languages, and digital literacy programmes targeted at older devotees.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across Indian religious traditions. Studies of Hindu digital religion are more numerous than studies of digital practice in Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, and indigenous traditions, particularly in the post-pandemic period. The pace of digital religious change also means that some findings will require updating as platforms, institutions, and practitioner communities evolve. The lived experience and subjective meanings of religious practitioners

themselves are mediated through researcher framings, and primary ethnographic and interview-based studies are essential complements to the synthesis presented here.

Conclusion

This article has examined the development of online religious practices and spiritual communities in post-pandemic India through a critical literature review informed by digital religion theory. Four interlocking patterns were identified: the institutionalization of livestreamed darshan and ritual broadcasts; the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities and subscription models; the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms; and the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation as the durable norm. Together, these patterns reveal a religious landscape in which digital mediation has become deeply and durably integrated into the practice of religion across traditions, communities, and demographic groups.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, post-pandemic Indian religion is best understood as a hybrid configuration rather than a binary between offline and online. The analytical vocabularies of religious studies and sociology of religion need to develop accordingly. Second, this hybridization carries significant implications for religious authority, community, and embodiment. Authority is increasingly distributed across institutional, individual, and algorithmic actors. Community is constituted through both physical congregation and ongoing digital interaction. Embodiment, while complicated by digital mediation, has not been displaced; it continues to anchor religious practice in ways that scholarship must take seriously. Third, the digital transformation of religion in India is uneven, marked by inequalities of access, language, and tradition that deserve ongoing scholarly and policy attention.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Comparative studies across Indian religious traditions would enrich the empirical base, particularly for traditions less well represented in current scholarship. Ethnographic studies of devotee experience in hybrid offline-online religious life would deepen understanding of the lived dimensions of these patterns. Research on inter-religious digital encounter, both irenic and contentious, would address an important gap. Studies of equity in digital religious access, including the experiences of older devotees, low-income communities, and speakers of less-resourced languages, would inform institutional and policy responses. Comparative work between India and other religiously diverse societies undergoing similar digital transformations would situate the Indian case in global perspective. By pursuing such an agenda, religious studies scholarship can contribute meaningfully to understanding one of the most significant religious transformations of the early twenty-first century.

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