

Are Hindu Virtual Prayers Legitimate?

Prayers are beliefs and practices that seek to create a bond with God through higher Vedic deities, usually by a means of deliberate communication. Prayers can be done privately with well-wishers and family, or performed cooperatively with fellow followers.

Prayer is that medium through which we connect to the divine or Supreme Being. It creates an accord between a deity and the devotee, achieved by the rhythmic chanting of mantras, powerful verses and hymns. Prayers, when performed by devotees alone, are often answered indirectly. However, when prayers are conducted through a spiritual medium such as a priest or guru, who prays with a strong and powerful belief and much dedication, the deity often answers to the prayer directly, in the most spectacular manner.

Spirituality is no stranger to hand-held devices. Think of Christian podcasts, virtual Buddhist prayer wheels, or apps listing the start time for breaking the Ramadan fast or for each week's Jewish Sabbath. But perhaps nowhere are the boundaries for religion and technology wider, or more prominent, than in Bharata (India). Roughly 1 billion residents identify as Hindu, with more than half the population still off-line as of February 2021.

There are many Hindus who still feel that there's no substitute for an in-person temple visit of prayer. However, we are now seeing more religious leaders appreciate the so-called "modern tools" with renewed calls for us to evolve and adapt.

The concern is that even relatively modern Hindu movements who turn away from new forms of communication, will risk being overlooked. It's important that Hindus not lose that connection to the community, especially those who have a difficult time visiting temples for various reasons namely, Covid restrictions, financial reasons etc.

Faith and technology don't always seem like a natural pairing. One evokes long-standing tradition; the other, high-speed change. But the combination is increasingly common in our plugged-in world, and highlights how religions constantly shape the world around them, and vice versa. So, virtual prayers are really a way to merge the previous generation to the present generation.

One may argue that here in South Africa, the present generation of Hindus have lost touch with a lot along the way in terms of tradition and culture. However, if there is a way that keeps tradition and culture alive, and helps promote continuity, surely, we should consider if not embrace it? We are taught from a young age that our spiritual master and creator is omnipresent and omnipotent. We are also taught that priests perform prayers and offer spiritual guidance by taking/stating our name (sankalpa) when performing a prayer. So why then should the actual physical venue of the puja make a difference?

India's most popular Hindu temples can exhaust even the most patient person during high festival seasons. Devotees spend hours in snaking lines for a few hurried seconds of prayer before beloved deities. Temple attendants scold stragglers hoping to catch a couple more moments in the presence of a murti or icon embodying the temple deities, as those next in line jostle for their own brief connection with the divine.

The VIP experience of a personalized prayer ceremony or a special request is a service reserved for a privileged few. This private ceremony would likely set back that devotee a good few hundred dollars/rupees etc.

That may soon change however, thanks to new start-ups and a growing group of followers channeling their faith through the internet. Through online pujas, or prayer services, internet providers allow users to witness priests/gurus perform bespoke

spiritual interventions from faraway temples, while users sit in the comfort of their homes hundreds of kilometres away.

The introduction of Covid restrictions and accompanying financial hurdles, has brought a surge in requests for priests to perform virtual pujas while devotees view the puja live. This kind of portal has allowed the Yajman (client of a priest) to perform the kind of pujas they prefer at a time that fits their schedule. It also allows for a much larger audience, where family members from around the globe are able to witness and "attend" the puja - a privilege that would not otherwise be available.

Today, online Hindu religious service companies allow those journeys to be made with a few clicks. After users book and pay for a prayer service via ePuja, the puja is then completed on their behalf by the online temple priest/s where no travel is necessary. With regards to the technicalities, "Google Meet" and many other livestream apps offer an easy solution to create a livestream link which could have as many as 100 members join for up to an hour. If more time is needed, another link can easily be sent. It's as simple as that.

I myself have performed many prayers with the Yajman witnessing the puja live (either via Zoom or Whatsapp). Devotees can also actively participate in the prayer, depending on the puja requested.

I have also performed many virtual funerals and prayers for devotees outside South Africa, due to the families overseas not being able to secure a local priest to conduct the prayers. This allowed family and friends from all around the world who would not have been able to attend the funeral, to actually witness the proceedings and pay their final respects to the deceased.

At ISKCON'S Shree Mayapur Dham Mandir, virtual prayers are conducted daily for individuals around the world that need Lord Nrsimhadeva's blessings, mainly with regard to health. Kindly click here to learn more <https://www.mayapur.com/2020/online-puja-offerings-are-limited/>

During the January 2021 Kavady "Thaipusam" festival in Kuala Lumpur, for the first time in 120 years, Covid restrictions prevented public devotees from carrying their Kavady at the main Muruga temple. An estimated two million Hindus in Malaysia observed the Thaipusam at home on January 28, 2021, with temple ceremonies broadcast live on social media. Due to a steep increase in COVID-19 infections, Malaysia had banned inter-district travel and all types of gatherings, including religious events since January 13, 2021. Similarly, many Hindus in India, due to circumstances beyond their control (such as age and financial hurdles), cannot travel to temples in remote regions of the country, so this virtual option offers an easier and more convenient alternative.

A growing number of religious institutions are keen to expand their reach and retain their followers using this new technology, and an increasing number of priests are now accepting donations and puja requests online. The Hindu embrace of techno-religiosity isn't particularly surprising. Visuality has long been important to Hindu/Vedic practices and the photos that devotees take and share via cell phones fit into that tradition.

Initially, when traditional music gradually progressed to religious/devotional music on the radio, many people resisted this change, but eventually Radio Lotus/Lotus FM and Hindvani became standard listening stations in most Hindu homes in South Africa.

While it is true that nothing compares to physical human presence when attending a katha and jandha, funeral, wedding, Satsang or any other gathering, nowadays, that is not always possible.

It is human nature to resist change. However, when that change has more positive results/effects/outcomes, compared to the "same old ways", resistance begins to crumble and it is then embraced.

We should take a moment to consider the benefits of virtual pujas to all types of people and circumstances, including pundits and gurus.

For example:

1. Family members who live in various different areas, where travelling to the prayer may be difficult if not impossible due to Covid, time, travel, financial restraints and so forth.
2. Individuals who have lost the use of their limbs and cannot physically partake/attend a prayer. A virtual puja would offer the necessary convenience and safety measures required to assist that individual attend the pooja conveniently, light the match, offer water, offer flowers and so forth.
3. Someone who has lost their eyesight (from birth, circumstance of life or health eg. diabetes) and cannot perform a havan or any other pooja by themselves eg. planetary (graha) pujas. Advantages are the same as above.
4. Mass pujas at traditionally spiritual venues all over the world that are so spiritually rewarding, but have many factors to consider such as expenses, time, travel, accommodation, safety in large numbers etc. These can now be enjoyed by anyone from anywhere, safely, without the restrictions of time, travel or financial burdens.
5. Not many people are choosing to become religious leaders or pundits these days, so finding someone who is knowledgeable, dedicated, committed and not self-serving is quite difficult, making such a person very highly sought after. Conventionally, the priest or guru cannot assist many people due to time, travel and Covid restrictions. However, by means of virtual pujas, many more people can be assisted with ease.

Ultimately, many Hindus are optimistic about the trend towards virtual pujas. Technology has brought a new generation of people of all races to Hindu temples - even if those visitors are digital devotees ordering a puja from the screen of their smartphone.

Question: Is the puja performed on behalf of the Yajman by the priest/guru accepted by Chitragupta? (the Vedic deity assigned with the task of keeping complete records of the actions of human beings and punishing or rewarding them according to their karma. Chitragupta is the right-hand man of Lord Yamaraja - The Vedic deity of Death)

Answer: Yes most certainly. If SANKALPHA is performed and the Yajman name/s are uttered, then certainly the Yajman receives the full benefit of the prayers.

Question: What is Sankalpa?

Answer: Sankalpa is a Sanskrit term in yogic philosophy that refers to a heartfelt desire, a solemn vow, an intention, or a resolve to do something. It is similar to the English concept of a resolution, except that it comes from even deeper within and tends to be an affirmation. This term comes from the Sanskrit roots "san", meaning "a connection with the highest truth," and "kalpa" meaning "vow." Thus, it translates to denote an affirming resolve to do something or achieve something spiritual.

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read this article. We pray that this article will assist you in some way and we also pray that it helps you to appreciate the beauty and remarkable foresight of our ancient Hindu culture. We wish to educate all readers and demystify the path of Hinduism (Sanatan Dharma). Please feel free to share these articles with friends and family who do not have direct access to our website or articles. If you use the articles in any form including blogs and/or as part of other articles kindly credit our website as a source. We hope that the articles serve as a reference to you and your family when you need clarification of certain topics. JAI MATA DI



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