

Hinduism & Coronavirus: How The Digital Becomes Sacred

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The coronavirus has led to seismic and widespread changes across all nodes of society, not least, religion. In a recent article in *The New York Times*, Vivian Yee writes, "Religion is the solace of first resort for billions of people grappling with a pandemic for which scientists, presidents and the secular world seem, so far, to have few answers. With both sanitizer and leadership in short supply, dread over the coronavirus has driven the globe's faithful even closer to religion and ritual."¹

As a researcher in the field of religion and anthropology and specialising in Hinduism, I have witnessed substantial changes and innovations to how Hinduism is *lived* and *practiced* in contemporary Britain due to the coronavirus. In what follows, I consider the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in London, commonly known as the Neasden Temple, as a case study, as it happens to be a field site for my current research.² It was the first traditional Hindu temple built in the western world and has arguably become a symbol of Hinduism across Europe.

I have interviewed 15 congregation members over the past weeks through Skype and have conducted some basic digital ethnography by viewing the temple's social media accounts and live streams.



¹ Vivian Yee, 'In a Pandemic, Religion Can Be a Balm and a Risk', *The New York Times*, 22 March 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/world/middleeast/coronavirus-religion.html>.

² Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 231; 'BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London (Neasden Temple)', accessed 25 March 2020, <http://londonmandir.baps.org/>.

Temple Closure

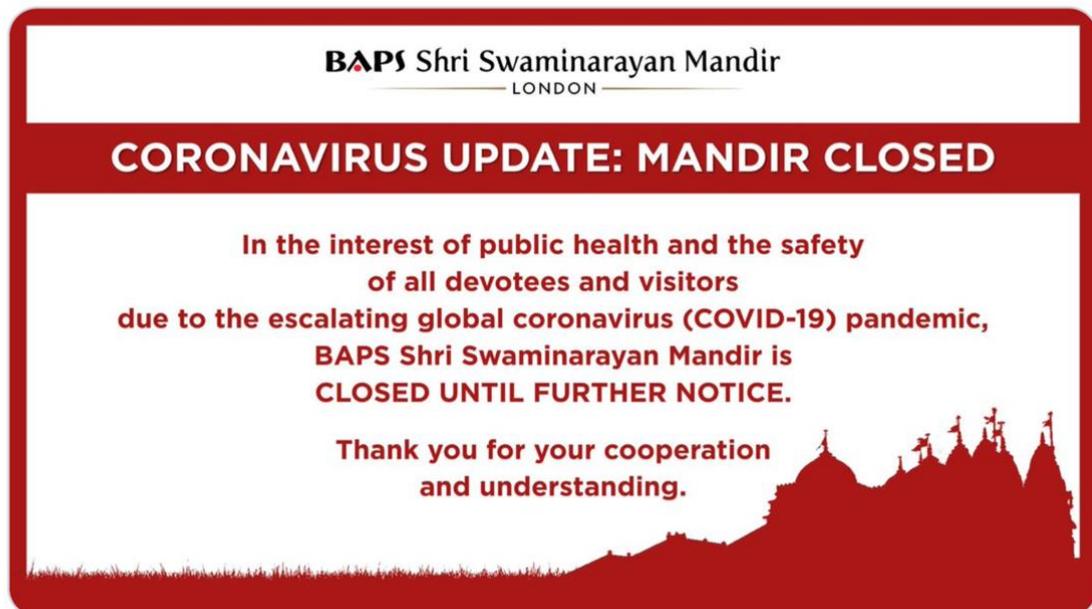
As Durkheim and many other scholars of religion, sociology, and anthropology have noted, religion is a phenomenon of social cohesion.³ Every weekend, the Neasden Temple hosts a congregation of almost 3,000 devotees and receives thousands of visitors throughout the week. On 5th March, early on during the crisis, the temple made the decision to suspend all events⁴ and then from 13th March to completely close its doors in the interest of public health and safety.⁵ For tourists, this would perhaps mean one less stop on their tour of London; however, for devotees it was a significant move that has altered their religious lives. A 24-year-old devotee reflected, "Since I was born, I have been coming to *mandir* (temple) every single Saturday. Saturday evenings from 5pm-9pm were blocked off for my devotional rituals, discussion seminars, assemblies and of course a great meal at *mandir*! It has become a central part of my life. For it to be shut completely is very sad, but it makes sense because of the virus." Her comments reflect the important role places of worship play for believers, even young believers, and the ramifications of its closure. Members have emphasized how they are regularly staying connected through social media apps such as WhatsApp, evidencing how in times of social distancing and self-isolation, the social dimension to religion still remains as powerful as ever.



Neasden Temple @NeasdenTemple · Mar 13

PUBLIC NOTICE: In the interest of public health and the safety, due to the escalating global [#coronavirus](#) [#COVID19](#) pandemic, [#NeasdenTemple](#) and all [@BAPS](#) mandirs across the UK and in Europe will be closed until further notice. [#COVID_19uk](#)

londonmandir.baps.org/2020/03/corona...



Digital Religion

The internet, smartphones, and mobile applications shape the way we communicate, interact, and live our lives. Religion has not been exempt from this steamroller of digital media, and several studies explore the dense and

³ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Courier Corporation, 2008); Malcolm B. Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2012), 131; Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Waveland Press, 2008).

⁴ "BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London", accessed 25 March 2020, <http://londonmandir.baps.org/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-public-announcement-regarding-all-baps-events-in-uk-europe/>.

⁵ "BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London", accessed 25 March 2020, <http://londonmandir.baps.org/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-public-announcement-update-mandirs-closed/>.

dynamic intersections between the two.⁶ But particularly during this coronavirus pandemic, the intersection between digital media and religion has become vital to keeping religious practices alive.

The Neasden Temple swiftly decided to live stream its religious assemblies every weekend and based off view counts on YouTube, thousands have been tuning in. These assemblies consist of singing religious hymns and prayers as well as a presentation on Hindu beliefs, ethics and values. Three separate webcasts are broadcasted: one catered for children, a second for the youth, and a third for those above the age of 40.⁷ These assemblies which are normally physically conducted at the temple are able to continue through setting up such live broadcasts. A 33-year-old congregation member remarked, “These online webcasts of the *sabhas* (assemblies) have been amazing. I miss going to *mandir* in person, but it’s amazing that I can get my weekly spiritual nourishment through these webcasts. The best part is that my two children can engage in the children’s assembly on Sundays. With schools closed, the webcast from the *mandir* is brilliant for them! The special Mother’s Day programme yesterday for mothers and young children was so much fun. I was impressed how, even virtually, they could make it interactive and so engaging. It just goes to show how technology can be used for so much good!”

Alongside such religious assemblies, devotional rituals are central to temple life. Devotees usually congregate at their local temple for the *arti* ceremony. However, due to the temple closures across the country, devotees can no longer attend these. The main temple in Neasden has therefore initiated a daily live broadcast on the web from 6:45pm to 7:30pm. The broadcast begins with a short reading, followed by a 15-minute ritual. After the ceremony, the head sadhu (priest) of the temple announces the key news of the day alongside public health information in Gujarati which is then followed by a prayer for all those affected by the virus. A common thread throughout all my interviews was that in these unprecedented and difficult times, engaging in this ritual has helped keep devotees in ‘good spirits’ and that the efficacy of the devotional ritual has not been reduced by being presented online. Interestingly, devotees reported that the social and collective dimension of the ritual has in fact



⁶ H.A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Taylor & Francis, 2012); L.L. Dawson and D.E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Routledge, 2004).

⁷ ‘Broadcast of Weekly Assemblies for All BAPS Centers Worldwide’, BAPS, accessed 25 March 2020, <https://www.baps.org/News/2020/Broadcast-of-Weekly-Assemblies-for-All-BAPS-Centers-Worldwide-18599.aspx>.

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha
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Live Webcast



been enhanced through these webcasts. Although there will only be a single family in a room conducting the online ritual, practitioners say they are experiencing a sense of solidarity alongside the thousands of other devotees participating in the same ‘digital’ room.

Although our case study here has been the Neasden Temple, such a drive to conduct ‘online Hinduism’ during this pandemic can be witnessed in many other prominent Hindu traditions as well. For example, the Bhaktivedanta Manor temple of the Hare Krishna tradition in Watford and the Parmarth Niketan Ashram situated on the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh, India, are both streaming various rituals, prayers and scriptural readings on a daily basis.⁸

While a rosary (*mala*), a sacred image (*murti*), and an *arti* candle are sacred tools for Hindus, this global pandemic has made phones, laptops, and mobile applications necessary sacred tools that not only facilitate, but are indeed a lifeline for religious practices. Technology, which has been perceived as secular and even detrimental by some orthodox believers, is now being sacralised.



⁸ ‘Manor Media’, accessed 25 March 2020, <http://manor.media/home/>; ‘Parmarth Niketan - YouTube’, accessed 25 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/parmarthniketan/videos>.

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Tilak completed his BA in Theology and Religion at Oxford and then did an MPhil at Cambridge. He is currently pursuing an MSc, Social and Cultural Anthropology at UCL and will be starting a PhD at Cambridge later this year.

Images:

Sourced from Twitter and <http://londonmandir.baps.org>.
With permissions sought from the Neasden Temple.

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