

Shirdi Sai Baba Online

Devotion in Cyberspace

A Dissertation for the Award of Master of Arts

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Summary

This brief study brings together two previously unrelated academic discourses in the field of the study of religion. Firstly, the scholarly work on Shirdi Sai Baba – an enigmatic, holy figure whose popularity has grown significantly throughout the twentieth century. The second discourse is that which examines the intersection between religion and the internet; studying if, how, and why this new global medium is used by religious believers, especially Hindus.

Through a survey of online websites, utilizing a phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the content of these websites with a particular emphasis on where devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba communicate and express their devotion (*bhakti*) through the internet, a range of activity is explored. Alongside traditional websites, the use of social networking, online forums, collaborative blogs, websites devoted to online ritual, multimedia and live video feeds, are all examined.

The study reveals that many of the significant aspects of religious life online discussed in the academic literature are clearly present in the Shirdi Sai Baba websites too – yet the previous typologies and categories formulated by those scholars are not wholly adequate to account for the diversity (and increasing interactivity) of how religion is expressed and experienced in cyberspace in the Shirdi Sai Baba movement. There are also novel uses of the internet for religious practice and as a medium to share information that have not featured in previous studies.

There is evidence of both the continuation of ‘old media’ (such as images) online and also intriguing adaptations of existing practices that allow them to flourish in cyberspace. Yet there is also considerable caution about the perceived popularity of religion on the internet and the reality of how limited access to this new technology is for most Shirdi Sai Baba devotees.

Introduction

There have been a series of scholars who, especially over the past decade, have noted the dramatic increase in technology use and have conducted some initial studies that have drawn tentative conclusions about what this means for religion. Equally, other academics have examined the exponential growth of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement in the latter half of the twentieth century and discussed the aspects of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba which may have fuelled such growth, many claiming that it is now a major movement within Hinduism. Yet these two discourses have not met in any academic scholarship to date.

How and why are devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba using the internet as a medium for their devotion to him? From this a dual approach is taken. There are two fundamental questions: are there distinctive features of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement that make it amenable to utilising this new media? Is there something about new media that makes it particularly amenable to use by the Shirdi Sai Baba movement? Finally, and importantly, are there any problems encountered in either of these? Thus, this brings together two hitherto unrelated strands of academic scholarship – popular devotion to Sai Baba and the internet as a medium for religion.

White, quite prophetically in the first scholarly analysis of the movement published in 1972, concludes that Sai Baba is “coming to be regarded as a major incarnation and may acquire a kind of pan-Indian devotion”¹ and he notes Aurobindo and Ramakrishna as individuals who have achieved such a status in India. Sikand too writes that Sai Baba is “one of the most widely revered Indian saints of recent time, with a following that transcends all barriers of caste and community”.² Antonio Rigopoulos, whose 1993 study of Shirdi Sai Baba constitutes the most significant and detailed study of the enigmatic Maharashtrian figure to date also notes Sai Baba’s ascent to widespread notoriety.

¹ White, Charles S. J. (1972) ‘The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints’. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31:4, p868

² Sikand, Yoginder (2003) *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India*. Penguin India, New Delhi. p118

He writes that “[n]owadays Sai Baba of Shirdi [...] is the most popular saint in India”, that his “temples and shrines are found all over the country” and the many pictures of Sai Baba are “ubiquitous on town and village walls, in shops, cars [...] and he has a place in almost all family altars and *puja* rooms”.³

Marianne Warren writes of the rapid growth of the movement domestically and internationally; that “Sai Baba of Shirdi is attracting a wave of popular devotion, being revered not only locally in Maharashtra, but increasingly his spiritual reputation is growing throughout India – and is now spreading around the world”.⁴ At the conclusion of her recent 2012 article, *Be United, Be Virtuous: Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion*, which pays particular attention to the media used to represent the character of Sai Baba, Karlina McLain comments that Shirdi Sai Baba’s “message is now being spread throughout India and abroad through a range of new media, including comic books, magazines, television shows, films and the Internet”⁵ – it is the last of these, the internet, that this study will focus upon.

New technology is perceived to have a considerable impact upon religion. Scholars have made bold claims that the internet is “changing the face of religion worldwide”⁶ and how, increasingly, for “more and more practitioners, online religious activity is becoming a significant component of their overall religious life”.⁷ Still others have noted “the Internet is transforming religion”.⁸

³ Rigopoulos, Antonio (2011) ‘*Sai Baba of Shirdi and Yoga Powers*’ in Jacobsen A. (ed.) (2011) *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration*. Brill, Leiden. p381

⁴ Warren, Marriane (1999) *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*. Sterling Publishers, New York. p18

⁵ McLain, Karlina (2011) ‘*Be United, Be Virtuous: Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion*’. *Nova Religio* 15:2, p42

⁶ Dawson, Lorne L. & Cowan, Douglas E. (eds.) (2004) *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Routledge, London. p1

⁷ Helland, Christopher (2010) ‘*(Virtually) Been There, (Virtually) Done That: Examining The Online Religious Practices Of The Hindu Tradition – Introduction*’. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4:1, p148 [online]. Available From: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11302/pdf/08.pdf> [Accessed 18/7/2012]

⁸ Campbell, Heidi (2010) ‘*Internet and Religion*’ in Burnett, Robert & Consalvo, Mia et. al. (eds.) (2010) *The Handbook of Internet Studies*. Blackwell, Chichester. P243

More specifically, Hinduism is marked out as a religious tradition that can well adapt (and is indeed adapting to) this new media environment. This is most notably present in the work of Heinz Scheifinger; he writes that Hinduism's "key characteristics – especially *darshan* – which fit well with the online environment means that Hinduism is unlikely to undergo and radical changes in cyberspace".⁹ Writing in the *Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* in 2010, Christopher Helland too believes that when considering the advent of the internet "Hinduism may be experiencing the greatest impact of this technology upon their religious tradition"¹⁰ given the diversity and relative ease with which it can be incorporated into religious life.

When it comes to studying the interaction between Hinduism and new communications technology, Stephen Jacobs perceptively notes how the dialogic nature of Hinduism online demands both an understanding of the religious traditions of Hinduism and a technological awareness of the capabilities of the new media – a key point that forms the foundations of the examination I am carrying out. He writes that the "communication of various aspects of Hinduism in new media forms derive their conventions from preceding forms as well as the conventions of the medium itself"; this means that "to understand the nature of virtual *satsangs*, it is necessary to not only investigate the nature of computer-mediated communication but also to inquire into the role of the *guru* in more traditional contexts".¹¹ Jacobs is not alone in making this point; Cowan has made a similar suggestion, he writes that "there is a need to conduct research that is informed by a deep understanding of the particular religious traditions at hand"¹², one which is attentive to subtle ways in which religiosity is brought online. There is a need to contextualise what is happening online with the broader religious movement of which it is a part. Such an approach will be taken in this research.

⁹ Scheifinger, Heinz (2008) '*Hinduism and Cyberspace*'. *Religion* 38:3. p247

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Helland (2010), p149

¹¹ Jacobs, Stephen (2012) '*Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context*'. *Religion Compass* 6:2, p145

¹² Cowan, Douglas E. (2007) '*Religion on the Internet*' in Backford, James A. & Demrath, N. J. (eds.) (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. SAGE Publications, London. p372

Finally, the religious identity of Shirdi Sai Baba is perhaps one of the most debated (and contentious) themes in the works written about him. Throughout this piece of research, terms such as 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are repeatedly used of Sai Baba and his followers, yet a few qualifications about this are important. Without being drawn into the extensive debates surrounding the use of these terms, Hinduism in this study is not perceived as a unified, homogenous entity. Vineeta Sinha has very aptly made this case, she writes: "[u]nquestioning invocations of the terms 'Hinduism and 'Hindu' as self-evident and convenient descriptions of complex 'religious' scenarios in practice are no longer possible in scholarly discourses"; she goes further to add: "the label 'Hindu' and the use of 'Hinduism' to denote a single, unified, coherent religious tradition are alien impositions and distort forum of religiosity practiced in the Indian subcontinent".¹³ Yet Sinha also admits that these terms have been taken up by the adherents themselves, which has to some extent "legitimised and normalised them as valid and meaningful categories".¹⁴

¹³ Sinha, Vineeta (2011) *Religion and Commodification: "Merchandizing" Diasporic Hinduism*. Routledge, Abingdon. p24-25

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p25

Literature Review

There are a few key aspects about the character of Shirdi Sai Baba and how his followers interpreted (and still interpret his life) – the first of these is *bhakti*, an intense love for Sai Baba. Perhaps the definitive academic treatment of Shirdi Sai Baba and the Sai Baba movement is Antonio Rigopoulos's *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, published in 1993. Rigopoulos's extensive study brings together a great number of sources and offers the most comprehensive account about the history, teachings and practices of Shirdi Sai Baba and the movement that developed around him. The "fundamental practice advocated by Sai Baba" according to Rigopoulos "was a burning love for his *guru*, to the point of absorbing/identifying himself with him. Everything is understood to be the *guru's* grace. Nothing else is needed but a heart full of love for one's *guru*".¹⁵ In relation to *bhakti* Rigopoulos writes that "the themes of devotion and surrender to the teacher's will may indeed have constituted the backbone of [Sai Baba's] religious upbringing".¹⁶

McLain's recent ethnographic research highlights stories of individuals whose daily lives are touched by the perpetual presence of Shirdi Sai Baba.¹⁷ He exists actively as a personal guru, a human face of the divine who is able to understand and empathise with the very human problems of his devotees. Yet, as he is divine he is able to act supernaturally to affect changes and benefits to those followers. The boons that he is capable of bestowing are ones eagerly sought by his devotees and form an important part of the relationship they have with their beloved Sai Baba. The relationship that Sai Baba had with "devotees and visitors was very personal and direct, heart to heart".¹⁸

His unique role as a guru and 'saint' is given great significance especially in the work of both White and Srinivas in their narrative accounts of the rapid growth in popularity in the Shirdi Sai Baba

¹⁵ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (2011), p405

¹⁶ Rigopoulos, Antonio (1993) *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*. State University of New York Press, Albany. p10

¹⁷ Op. Cit. McLain, p40

¹⁸ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p86

movement at the start of the 20th Century. Srinivas writes of the Shirdi Sai Baba temples of Bangalore and how “temple codes allow different suburban ‘Hindu’ communities to come together in common worship through an adoption of both Saivite and Vaishnavite rituals. All these differentials and domains – of language, sect, occupation, residential area, regional origin, etc. – that cannot be collapsed spatially or culturally within the city achieve magical resolution in the figure of the *guru*”.¹⁹ Similarly Charles White writes that “[w]hereas it is difficult for Hindus of unlike caste, social status or wealth to meet together and be at ease in most of the course of life, yet in homes, ashrams, and even in the context of the nation a socially unifying experience becomes possible in the presence of the saint”.²⁰ The movement of Sai Baba and its message was interpreted as a “mission of unification”, according to Srinivas.²¹

A key facet of the literature found in the Shirdi Sai Baba movement is that written by devotees – McLain writes of the “substantial body of testimonial memoir literature produced by these newfound devotees, who are drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba’s composite nature and who seek to testify to his all-pervasiveness and continued accessibility beyond the grave by sharing their personal experiences of him”.²² White too points to the “volumes of collected experiences of his followers who have believed that it was the direct intervention of Sai Baba that brought them health, wealth or remedy in some pressing life situation”.²³

Shirdi Sai Baba himself did not put any of his teachings or thoughts into writing. It was his life that made the message – as Rigopoulos writes: “Baba conveyed his teachings more through his own way of life than through his words; that is, his life was his message” and “he disliked discourses and theorizing about the spiritual path”.²⁴ However, under pressure from followers, Sai Baba assented to

¹⁹ Srinivas, Smriti (1999) *The Brahmin and the Fakir: Suburban Religiosity in the Cult of Shirdi Sai Baba*. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14:2, p254

²⁰ Op. Cit. White, p875

²¹ Srinivas, Smriti (2008) *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*. Brill, Leiden. p231

²² Op. Cit. McLain, p30

²³ Op. Cit. White, p869

²⁴ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p86

the request made by those around him who wanted to document his life and works – authorising these people to “[m]ake a collection of all the authentic stories, experiences, conversations and talks, etc.”²⁵ This summation accurately describes perhaps the most prominent written source (albeit with a considerable hagiographical bent) in the Sai Baba movement, the *Shri Sai Satcharitra* authored by Hemadpant a devotee particularly close to Sai Baba. The *Shri Sai Satcharitra* is “regarded by Hindu devotees as the most authoritative repository of the life and deeds of the beloved saint” and the “most powerful propagator of the Sai Baba cult, offering a picture of how the saint was understood and worshipped by the overwhelming Hindu majority of devotees”.²⁶ This text describes biographical details of Sai Baba’s life, but perhaps more importantly it also describes the many miracles he performed.

Stories of how Sai Baba interacted with those who sought his company are so popular amongst followers of Sai Baba that they form a considerable part of their religious practice – as McLain writes: “the stories are a primary form of devotional expression for Sai Baba’s followers, who are instructed to read or listen and share them with others” and in doing so the devotees “continue to interact with Shirdi Sai Baba, who remains accessible – even enslaved – to them despite the fact he is no longer embodied in human form”.²⁷

From early on, Rigopoulos writes, “to his devotees he was regarded a *sarvajña*, an omniscient person”.²⁸ McLain also writes how for his devotees, “Shirdi Sai Baba is not limited to a single place or time; he is all-pervasive, and with the proper devotional mindset he is accessible to his followers anytime, anywhere”²⁹ – even away from the often elaborate temples, small street shrines abound and McLain notes their popularity in her study of the Sai Baba movement. From her own research, McLain writes that a “recurring lesson encountered in these stories is Shirdi Sai Baba’s all-

²⁵ Op. Cit. McLain, p27

²⁶ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (2011), 389

²⁷ Op. Cit. McLain, p27

²⁸ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p65

²⁹ Op. Cit. McLain, p28

pervasiveness and accessibility”³⁰; he is ever present and ever able to listen and be attentive of his devotees needs. In relation to one particular poster McLain also writes that the image evokes the “simultaneous multiplicity and singularity of Shirdi Sai Baba, by suggesting that he is both in Shirdi and elsewhere, both on Earth and in the heavens, both an embodied human being and an all-pervasive disembodied presence”.³¹ As well as omniscient, he soon became regarded by the people of Shirdi and the surrounding area as ‘*bolte calte dev*’, which Rigopoulos translated as a “speaking and walking god”³²

What then did Shirdi Sai Baba offer those who gathered around him? There was something different about Shirdi Sai Baba; “he did not respond to the traditional image of the ascetic or holy man” – he was “viewed as a bestower of both spiritual freedom (*mukti*) and temporal welfare (*bhukti*)”.³³ As his notoriety grew as a healer and thaumaturge many would visit Sai Baba with requests – “[f]rom the young *fakir*, most asked for blessings of a material kind (progeny, jobs, cures for illness, etc); very few requested spiritual guidance”.³⁴ An aspect that is particularly clear amongst those who revered and paid homage to Sai Baba is that “[a]lmost everyone asked Sai to grant some special grace, usually a very material one”³⁵; whilst this might appear to be antithetical to his spiritual teachings, this was by no means problematic for Sai Baba as he “showed deep concern with material and physical problems of his devotees”.³⁶ Rigopoulos writes that he would often even construe these material desires of his visitors in a positive way, as “they functioned as bait, attracting them to Shirdi” where Sai Baba could help them towards “the discovery of religious values [and] initiate them along the path of purification”.³⁷ The granting of requests thus was part of Sai Baba’s outreach, a way to convey his message and draw in followers. Devotional material found amongst followers

³⁰ Ibid, p27

³¹ Ibid, p37

³² Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p85

³³ Ibid, p339

³⁴ Ibid, p71

³⁵ Ibid, p82

³⁶ Ibid, p87

³⁷ Ibid

depicts “Shirdi Sai Baba [as] an active presence working to bring peace to his individual devotees” and that through *bhakti* he was always within reach.³⁸

Perhaps the most predominant theme in the existing studies on Sai Baba are his universal nature, and how strands of Hindu and Muslim thought are intertwined through the figure of Sai Baba. This is very much linked to the broader Maharashtrian culture from which Sai Baba emerged. This context from which Sai Baba expounded his teachings is most succinctly and adeptly (albeit briefly) explained in the recently published *Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*. Here, drawing upon the geo-political history of the region and well-attuned to the range of influences pressing upon religious life along the west coast of India, Sai Baba is aptly called “a mirror of the culture of Maharashtra in which the Muslim cultures that crossed the Thar desert and Arabian Sea combined with the Saivism and Jain renunciatory traditions of the west of India”.³⁹ The religious milieu of Maharashtra from which he emerged – and which is fundamental to any nuanced understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba – has been called a “charismatic, eclectic religious culture, giving a new form to universalist traditions in the region and spreading them widely throughout India and the Diaspora”.⁴⁰ Contrary to Marianne Warren’s view of Sai Baba identity as primarily Islamic, here Sai Baba’s religious background is more complex and is described as a “universalist belief that spanned Sufi, Tantric and Vedantic practices”.⁴¹

From the outset Rigopoulos emphasises the inclusivity of Sai Baba’s teachings – he writes that “[p]erhaps the most significant element of Baba’s *updesa* is his constant call to interreligious understanding and tolerance”, his message one “rooted in Hindu universalism”.⁴² This is also the theme at the heart of Karlene McLain’s study – she contends that it is by this universalism Sai Baba rejected the caste system and the social stratification of different groups. This attitude is attested to

³⁸ Op. Cit. McLain, p26

³⁹ Frazier, Jessica (2011) ‘*Future Directions: Issues and Debates*’ in Frazier, Jessica (ed.) (2011) *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*. Continuum, London. p335

⁴⁰ Frazier, Jessica (2011) ‘*Regional Perspectives, Local: Local Traditions*’ in Frazier (ed.) (2011), p283

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p367

by almost all of the scholarly literature on Sai Baba – it may be said that it is perhaps one of the defining features of the movement that developed in his name.⁴³ It is worth mentioning that whilst Rigopoulos’s study is the most comprehensive academic work to date on Shirdi Sai Baba, it is not without its faults. As well as the criticism of Marianne Warren I would also add that using the proclamations of Sathya Sai Baba as a reliable source about his ‘previous incarnation’⁴⁴, in which Sathya retells the narratives from a first person perspective, is (I believe) unacceptable evidence.

This universalism is manifested in how Sai Baba advised his devotees, depended on their own religious tradition. He would encourage Muslims to express their devotion to God through their own distinctive practices, whilst he encouraged Hindus to use existing practices from their own tradition - “within a Hindu majority context” which was the environment in which he lived his entire life, “Sai Baba emphasized not *dhikr* but its Hindu counterpart, that is, *namasmarana* coupled with *japa*”.⁴⁵ It was an activity which Sai Baba himself regularly engaged in, *naam japa*, either one of his favourite phrases (‘Allah Malik’) or reciting the names of Vishnu or Krishna. He even attributed this to curing an illness he had.⁴⁶ The importance of it is linked to *smarana*, the remembrance of God and the divine.⁴⁷ Rigopoulos quotes Narashimaswami, who writes that whilst Sai Baba himself preferred that his Hindu followers recite the name of Rama, he did at times state that reciting his own name would also be beneficial. Narashimaswami write: “On occasions he allowed the repetition of his own name (Sai): Simply say ‘Sai, Sai’ with heart overflowing. I care not for show of respect and forms. I rest in such devotees”; and that also “[t]hose who perpetually repeat my name reach their goal”.⁴⁸

It is quite clear from the few academic works on Shirdi Sai Baba that this osmosis between Hindu/Muslim practices and beliefs has now been replaced by a thoroughly ‘Hinduized’ Shirdi Sai Baba. Srinivas contends that the Islamic element has been overlooked. She writes that from an

⁴³ Op. Cit. McLain, p29

⁴⁴ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p67

⁴⁵ Ibid, p297

⁴⁶ Ibid, p276

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

individual who had almost no possessions and lived in a disused mosque, this “mad mendicant” with a “multiple heritage” has “come to be imagined in the Bangalore temple in a way that resembles a Hindu guru, even a Hindu deity, the other elements being pushed underground, if present at all”.⁴⁹ Srinivas believes that with the economic and social change in India came with it the “stripping away of Baba’s concrete qualities, a bourgeois incarnation of Baba appears unlimited by historical facticity”.⁵⁰ She remarks that near ubiquitous image of Sai Baba “clad in ochre or rich silks” which are found today at the elaborate complex of Shirdi, is “a far cry from the uncoloured, sober garments he probably wore in real life”.⁵¹ Sikand concurs and writes of Shirdi Sai Baba “now transformed into a powerful god himself, comfortable accommodated in the ever-expanding family of Hindu deities”.⁵² The academic Nile Green’s brief mention of Shirdi Sai Baba certainly supports Srinivas’s view – he writes that “Sai Baba was an heir to the Sufi traditions of the Hyderabad Deccan, even though the religious politics of an independent India would gradually de-Islamicize his cult and memory”.⁵³

Marianne Warren locates the Maharashtrian figure firmly within the context of Islamic, Sufi mysticism –her goal, as she writes, is to “re-examine the Hindu gloss given by virtually all of his biographers from 1910 onwards” and to amend the “*Sufi-bhakti* imbalance”.⁵⁴ She notes that whilst several texts repeatedly emphasise Sai Baba’s dual identity as both Hindu saint and Muslim *‘faqir’* the latter of these two is downplayed. As such, Warren’s perspective offers an intriguing counterpoint to the wealth of devotional Hindu literature that focuses on Sai Baba and his veneration in the Indian *bhakti* tradition. The universalism so prominent in Sai Baba’s teachings, argues Warren, needs to be understood as part of a tradition that is heavily influenced by Deccani Sufism.

⁴⁹ Op. Cit. Srinivas (1999), p253

⁵⁰ Ibid, p258

⁵¹ Srinivas, Smriti (2012) ‘*Urban Forms of Religious Practice*’ in Dalmia, Vasudha & Sadana, Rashmi (eds.) (2012) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. p76

⁵² Op. Cit. Sikand, p129

⁵³ Green, Nile (2006) *Indian Sufism Since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan*. Routledge, Abingdon. p117

⁵⁴ Op. Cit. Warren, p7

In his emphatic riposte to Warren's criticism of his 'Hindu gloss', Rigopoulos writes that Sai Baba "is the result of a complex, 'non-dual' process of identity development, freely combining Hindu and Islamic elements 'on the ground'".⁵⁵ To identify Sai Baba only as Hindu or Muslim results in a "historical, scholarly fallacy" because it completely misunderstands his "liminal, hybrid character".⁵⁶ He writes that "even accentuating the Islamic, Sufi side of Sai Baba in order to 'restore the balance' and counter the Hindu gloss [...] is merely a quantitative way of addressing the inextricably interwoven fabric of Maharashtrian nineteenth-century popular religion"; adding that Warren's study "presupposes a dualist, 'essentialist' model in which Sufism and Hinduism 'face each other' as separate, even antagonistic religious objects".⁵⁷

The importance of the internet for the academic study of religion, and for Hinduism in particular has been asserted time and again by numerous scholars. In his recent 2012 article *Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context* Stephen Jacobs writes: "developments in communication technologies are important in understanding Hinduism today, and the way in which it has evolved in a global context".⁵⁸ It is a relatively small but rapidly developing aspect of Hinduism that has only recently begun to draw serious academic attention. Similar sentiments have been expressed by other scholars – with the religious life of India in view, Helland enthusiastically writes that "online religious activity within Hinduism is flourishing", the growth of which he attributes to the burgeoning development of the IT industry in India and that this is being "assimilated into the spiritual and ritual practices of the Hindu tradition".⁵⁹ Similarly, Vasudha Narayanan has claimed that "technology is transforming the dissemination of Hindu culture and rituals".⁶⁰

Helland and Karaflogka have both produced theoretical categories that distinguish between a distinct, new religious activity that occurs online and information online that can be used for offline

⁵⁵ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (2011), p423

⁵⁶ Ibid, p424

⁵⁷ Ibid, p424

⁵⁸ Op. Cit. Jacobs, p145

⁵⁹ Op. Cit. Helland, p148

⁶⁰ Narayanan, Vasudha (2006) 'Hindu Communities Abroad' in Juergensmeyer, Mark (ed.) (2006) *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. p63

religious purposes. Helland's *Surfing for Salvation* offers a way to understand material found on the internet as falling into one of two "heuristic" categories – online religion and religion online. Religion online refers primarily to data that web users can access and use offline, Helland includes in this category the websites of religious organizations and churches. Summarised by Helland, in this category "the web site has been created to utilise traditional forms of communication [...] information is presented about religion in a manner that harnesses the Internet to communicate in a one-to-many fashion".⁶¹ Helland remarks that in this group "there is no avenue for the participants to contribute their beliefs and input into the site".⁶² The second heuristic group, online religion, includes the participation and input of web users – it "closely mirrors the ideal interactive environment [...] the web traveller is allowed to network with the website in a variety of active and interactive ways, including online prayer, worship and even meditation".⁶³ These two classes of websites are a useful way to begin trying to understand the content that exists online and, more importantly, how precisely individuals *are* active users, interacting online.

Karaflogka, writing in her 2002 article *Religious Discourse and Cyberspace* develops a number of typologies, but the one she finally arrives at is incredibly similar to that posited by Helland. Karaflogka's 'religion *in* cyberspace' and 'religion *on* cyberspace' refer to religious activity conducted online and information gathering about religion online. The former she also calls "cyber-religion", which "is a religious, spiritual or metaphysical expression which is created and exists exclusively in cyberspace".⁶⁴ The latter of the two refers to "information uploaded by any religion, church, individual or organization, which also exists and can be reached in the off-line world".⁶⁵ These categories are based on the research that both of these academics have conducted and are indeed helpful in categorizing material found online. However, I am doubtful whether such broad (and few) classifications will be able to account for the diverse range of uses that the internet is now used for. I

⁶¹ Helland, Christopher (2002) '*Surfing for Salvation*'. *Religion* 32:4, p294

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Karaflogka, Anastasia (2002) '*Religious Discourse and Cyberspace*'. *Religion* 32:4, p285

⁶⁵ Ibid

suspect that both Helland and Karaflogka's categories (now a decade old) are growing increasingly anachronistic in the age of 'Web 2.0' when the online experience has interactivity at its heart and that it can be customized to suit the wishes of the user.

More nuanced and receptive to advances in technology which are constantly shifting the experiential element of religious activity online, Heidi Campbell, writing in her 2005 *Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage*, goes further than Helland's 'religion online' and 'online religion', as well as Karaflogka's 'religion *in* cyberspace' and 'religion *on* cyberspace', in creating a frameworks for examining religion on the internet. After considerable research on the phenomenon of religion on the internet Campbell posits an eight part scheme of four discourses and four narratives. These discourses are summarised as the internet being: (a) 'spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences'⁶⁶ – that the internet offers a novel medium through which individuals can encounter the sacred; (b) 'sacramental space suitable for religious use' – enabling users to participate in rituals, that the internet can be "infused or wired to be a spiritual space"⁶⁷; (c) tool to promote religion and religious practice⁶⁸ – here referring to both the possibility of using technology as a means for proselytizing but also using the internet as an information source; and finally (d) technology for affirming religious life – the internet as a socially cohesive tool that "provides a new image of the global community of the faithful".⁶⁹ The four narratives are: (a) spiritual network, (b) worship space, (c) missionary tool and (d) religious identity.⁷⁰ These four in many ways mirror the previous four discourses. It is expected that these categories will grant a richer and more detailed evaluation than those proposed by Helland and Karaflogka.

⁶⁶ Campbell, Heidi (2005c) '*Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage*'. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1:1, p10 [online]. Available From: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell4a.pdf> [Accessed 22/8/2012]

⁶⁷ Ibid, p11

⁶⁸ Ibid, p12

⁶⁹ Ibid, p13

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp14-17

However, it is also anticipated that there will be considerable overlap between Campbell's four-part classifications.

Phyllis Herman's work focuses upon the rich visual culture of India and the centrality of the sacred image as a cornerstone of Hindu religious practice. Her work is particularly admirable in that it looks beyond the computer screen to engage with those who use the websites, asking how and why it forms part of their religious life. Speaking to them, she found that they "were adamant that the computer allowed them to 'make a connection' with god, both literally and spiritually"⁷¹ – yet, during her interviews, she found that they still believed the "e-experience [of computer *darshan*] should not completely displace in-person temple *darshan*".⁷² This is a critical point – that whilst all *darshan*, by whatever medium, is still *darshan*; there is still a difference perceived between *darshan* online and offline. Herman's work offers compelling evidence that Hindus can easily appropriate new technology to complement (but certainly not replace) current practices.

A common element in many of the academic studies on Hinduism and the Internet is the role of imagery and *darshan*. The *darshan* "experience itself is adaptable, readily portable from one medium to another".⁷³ Mass media thus becomes yet another conduit for religious experience, of transmitting "new theophanic artifacts"⁷⁴ – contrary to the work of Jean Baudrillard (a point that has been made by Scheifinger) the proliferation of images in the Indic religious context does not have the same effect of degradation between sign and signified. Indeed it has lead David Smith to suggest that Hinduism may be a "Hyper-real" religion.⁷⁵ There is something very unique and important about imagery in Hindu culture. Images are at the very core of Indian religious life – as Herman writes:

⁷¹ Herman, Phyllis K. (2010) 'Seeing the Divine Through Windows: Online Darshan and Virtual Religious Experience'. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4:1, p161 [online] Available From: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11303/pdf/09.pdf> [Accessed 3/9/2012]

⁷² Ibid, 157

⁷³ Ibid, p152

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Scheifinger, Heinz (2012) 'Hinduism and Hyper-Reality' in Possami, Adam (ed.) (2012) *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*. Brill, Leiden. pp300

“[e]very image of a *murti* is authoritative merely by its presence”⁷⁶, be that offline or online, they all grant an experience of “seeing the divine” to quote Diana Eck.⁷⁷

Heinz Scheifinger’s *The Jagannath Temple and Online Darshan* published in 2005 is a key piece of research in understanding the continued religious potency of *darshan* into the new media age and he suggests that contrary to some theorists such technology may not have a negative effect on the importance of sacred sites in Hinduism. Evidence indicates that the new technology and the availability of *darshan* ‘online’ are not detrimental to religious practice ‘offline’. Regarding the use of imagery in the religious life of Hinduism Scheifinger notes that: “[i]t is important to point out that online *darshan* does not lack validity [...] the replication of deities in Hinduism is unproblematic”⁷⁸ – in fact it is part of a rich visual Indian culture that has thrived as a result of the ability to mass produce religious pictures. Tulasi Srinivas too writes that there is considerable ease in the way that this technology is integrated into devotees religious lives; in the case of receiving *darshan* online she writes that “new media such as the internet are assimilated in a fluid way into a devotional praxis that conforms to the far from standardized and rigid understandings of the status and power of the *murti* (image), which is a fundamental part of Indic religious traditions”.⁷⁹

Stephen Jacobs 2007 *Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces* draws attention to the phenomenon of online *puja*. He defines these “asynchronous cyber-rituals” as “rituals that are performed online at a time convenient to individuals and do not require collective online assignments at specified times”.⁸⁰ Following a detailed description and discussion of these sites he concludes that in the case of the virtual Hindu temple, this “can be considered as

⁷⁶ Op. Cit. Herman, p170

⁷⁷ Eck, Diana L. (1998) *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Columbia University Press, New York.

⁷⁸ Scheifinger, Heinz (2009) ‘*The Jagannath Temple and Online Darshan*’. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24:3, p281

⁷⁹ Srinivas, Tulasi (2010) *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement*. Columbia University Press, New York. p81

⁸⁰ Jacobs, Stephen (2007) ‘*Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces*’. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12:3 [online]. Available From: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/jacobs.html> [Accessed 3/9/2012]

being homologous to a domestic shrine”.⁸¹ Jacobs quotes Jay Kinney’s 1995 article and its suggestion that “technical innovations on the Net are likely to encourage new forms of ritual”.⁸² Given its design, Jacobs writes that “the Internet is utilized as a tool in the maintenance of traditional practices”.⁸³ Yet there are certain limitations that Jacobs has not considered, questions of if, how and why Hindus might actual use this form of worship or the barriers that might prevent them from engaging in this ritual activity online. This is taken up by the Karapanagiotis’s *Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual Solutions*.

In her research on cyber-*puja* Karapanagiotis notes that “there is seemingly no limit to the locations in which Vishnu may manifest or be worshipped”⁸⁴ – this is also true of cyberspace, to quote one of her interviewees, “[i]f cyberspace is a place, then Vishnu is there”.⁸⁵ Although she also found that there were issues of purity amongst individuals in her ethnographic project – some of whom, however, did find ways around this question of ritual purity; thus the “cyber-altar can be spatially purified and [...] worship online made more easily generative of mental purity”.⁸⁶ She concludes by noting that sincerity and a pure intention are most important – Karapanagiotis writes: “what matters *ultimately* is one’s intention and sentiment. And in this sense, as long as one’s heart is pure, and full of love for Vishnu, then all worship that one performs to him is good worship”.⁸⁷

Tulasi Srinivas’s *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Baba Movement*, examines how devotees of Sathya Sai Baba utilize technology. She found devotees who accessed religious material without inhibitions, that of those she interviewed they looked upon “the Internet, radio and television as divine portals” and that, to one individual Srinivas

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Kinney, J. (1995) ‘Networth? Religion, Cyberspace & the Future. *Futures* 27:7. Quoted in Jacobs (2007)

⁸³ Op. Cit. Jacobs (2007)

⁸⁴ Karapanagiotis, Nicole (2010) ‘*Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Ritual Purity & Novel Ritual Solutions*. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4:1, p180 [online]. Available From: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11304/pdf/10.pdf> [Accessed 3/9/2012]

⁸⁵ Ibid, p181

⁸⁶ Ibid, p189

⁸⁷ Ibid, p193

had spoken to as part of her research, the internet was “a magical portal to the divine world”.⁸⁸

There were few factors which deterred them from using the internet spiritually.

Work on online communities is still a developing field of study – it is “still in its infancy”, according to one of the most prolific scholars in this area, Heidi Campbell. In her 2005 *Considering Spiritual Dimensions within Computer-Mediated Communication Studies* she develops a typology of religious communities online – the four categories explore the “narratives these communities use to give meaning and cohesion to their membership”.⁸⁹ The first of these is religious identity; here a common religious identity coalesces online amongst members who use it to reaffirm their own particular identity – as Campbell writes how [i]dentity comes from reinforcing a particular set of beliefs or rituals that are transported online”.⁹⁰ The second, online community as spiritual network, views online communities as invested with a divine power – Campbell uses examples from Christian groups who see themselves as ‘pioneers’ in cyber-space – that this “empowered members to understand their community as possessing power from God [...] as designed and initiated by God for a specific purpose”.⁹¹ Thirdly, religious communities found online act as a support network. The difficulties and problems encountered by one member are shared with the community. This “support network narrative allows members to see this community as a place offering ‘blind love’ and acceptance to those coming from similar experiences, providing care for members”.⁹² Finally, online communities can be interpreted as a space for worship – the internet becomes, according to Campbell “a tool for transmitting spiritual activities” and that this “online community as worship space occurs when individuals sacralise cyberspace as a place to practice online ritual”.⁹³

⁸⁸ Op. Cit. Tulasi Srinivas, p152

⁸⁹ Campbell, Heidi (2005a) *Considering Spiritual Dimensions Within Computer-Mediated Communication Studies*. *New Media Society* 7:1, p112

⁹⁰ Ibid, p126

⁹¹ Ibid, p127

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid, p128

Although she does briefly mention other religious traditions, Campbell is basing these typologies on research conducted amongst online Christian communities.⁹⁴ Whilst these categories may well fit groups in cyber-space devoted to Shirdi Sai Baba, to formulate such categories on the basis of only one religious tradition may over-exaggerate some aspects of online community whilst leaving others absent completely.

When considering all that has been written by scholars on the issue of religion online - there are, however, significant limitations to access of this technology to most of the world's population (ones which are not always acknowledged by scholars). India is certainly no exception to this, although from recent studies the growth in use of the internet in the Indian subcontinent is dramatic. It could be argued quite easily that both the Internet and the Shirdi Sai Baba movement do not recognize social class or discriminate against anyone, the simple (and unfortunate) truth however is that, as Cowan writes, "there is a digital divide" and the "Internet access [...] is as subject to the processes of social stratification as other technological and cultural products".⁹⁵ Whilst a devotee's religious affiliation Sai Baba does not hinder their use of new media, their economic status and access to the internet inevitably will for those in poverty.

Cowan also writes that "[c]ontrary to much of the rhetoric that surrounds the World Wide Web – especially in highly technologized nations – the world is not nearly so connected as it first appears. Indeed, less than 15 percent of the world's population has internet access".⁹⁶ From a global perspective the internet is still a medium for the privileged few – statements such as that by J. M. Van Der Laan, that the "Internet has become a resource for everyone", one which "permeates every aspect of contemporary life" display a naivety regarding access to this new technology.⁹⁷ Claims such as these are castigated by Arvind Sharma who treats them as blindly optimistic and dismisses

⁹⁴ Ibid, p125

⁹⁵ Cowan, Douglas E. (2004) *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*. Routledge, Abingdon. p13

⁹⁶ Op. Cit. Cowan (2007), p362

⁹⁷ Van der Laan, J. M. (2009) 'How the Internet Shapes Religious Life, or the Medium is Itself the Message'. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 29:4, p272

“the utopian rhetoric of cyberspace as a space devoid of race, class, gender, and [...] caste”.⁹⁸

Likewise, Fred Clothey too makes the point that access to the communications technologies that mark globalization are “accessible to different degrees [...] more accessible in urban areas and to elites [...] less accessible in rural areas and to the half billion persons who remain poor in India”.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Sharma, Arvind (2008) ‘Caste on Indian Marriage Dot-Com: Presence and Absence’ in Gajjala, Radhika & Gajjala, Venkataramana (eds.) (2008) *South Asian Technospaces*. Peter Lang, New York. p145

⁹⁹ Clothey, Fred (2006) *Religion in India: A Historical Introduction*. Routledge, Abingdon. p196

Methodology

One of the most universally accepted problems with religious studies research online is the lack of pre-existing methodologies. Campbell has identified the question of “standardized methods and theories” as one of the key areas where more work needs to be done to advance scholarship.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, there is no general consensus on the methods most apt for enquiring about religion online – leading Douglas Cowan to conclude that “no one method should determine how research into religious usage of or activity on the Internet is conducted”.¹⁰¹

Whilst the ‘presence’ of Shirdi Sai Baba online is a novel aspect of this research, the intersection between religion and technology has been the subject of academic study for the past 20 years. Yet, the way in which new technology is used has changed a great deal and there will always be a need to keep re-evaluating the ideas and theories put forward by scholarly studies of the past in light of the new technological developments. Thus, a perspective that is driven by a balanced and detailed description will always be of value. This has been reiterated by several scholars - Heidi Campbell has written: “much work remains at the level of documenting and defining the phenomenon of religion online”.¹⁰² Likewise, Lorne Dawson too has written: “[t]he task of measuring and describing what is happening on the Net in terms of religion has barely begun”.¹⁰³ Douglas Cowan too, believes that “initial surveys are important first steps in understanding how different religious traditions have found homes on the web”.¹⁰⁴ Given how the Sai Baba movement online is an area that has yet to be explored in *any* scholarship, a surveying approach does indeed seem like the necessary “important first steps” – to lay some foundations for future study.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell, Heidi (2010) *When Religion Meets New Media*. Routledge, Abingdon. p190

¹⁰¹ Op. Cit. Cowan (2007), p365

¹⁰² Op. Cit. Campbell (2005c), p1

¹⁰³ Dawson, Lorne L. (2005) ‘*The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace*’ in Hojsgaard, Morten T. & Warburg, Margit (eds.) (2005) *Religion and Cyberspace*. Routledge, Abingdon. p30

¹⁰⁴ Op. Cit. Cowan (2007), p362

The methods employed in this study will be one rooted in the phenomenology of religion to describe and interpret the relevant data found online in order to both engage with relevant scholarly studies and identify the salient features of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba in cyberspace either not present or not given due prominence in the existing scholarly literature. What ‘phenomenology of religion’ means has been a perpetual and unresolved issue - as Chris Arthur writes: “[o]ne of the most extensive yet least conclusive methodological debates within religious studies revolves around the question of what, precisely, the phenomenology of religion is [...]”.¹⁰⁵ Arvind Sharma too discusses how there has been (and still is) a very dense “mist of confusion surrounding the meaning of the term”.¹⁰⁶

Writing in *To the Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse of the Phenomenology of Religion*, the academic Arvind Sharma writes of five generally accepted distinguishing features of the phenomenological approach to studying religion; it is: thematic, sympathetic, value-free, investigates forms and structures, and it is interpretive.¹⁰⁷ Douglas Allen’s brief but balanced description of the phenomenological approach is particularly clear and so will be quoted in full:

“Phenomenology of religion attempts to avoid such narrow, overly broad, ethnocentric, and normative approaches. It attempts to describe religious experiences with their religious phenomena as accurately as possible. In its descriptions, analysis, and interpretation of meaning, it attempts to suspend value-judgements about what is real or unreal in experiences of others. It attempts to describe, understand, and do justice to the religious phenomena as they appear in religious experience to others”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Arthur, Chris J. (1992) ‘Phenomenology of Religion and the Art of Story-telling: The Relevance of William Golding’s *The Inheritors* to Religious Studies’ in Twiss, Sumner B. & Conser Jr, Walter H. (eds.) (1992) *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*. University Press of New England, Hanover. p146

¹⁰⁶ Sharma, Arvind (2001) *To the Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin. p33

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Allen, Douglas (2010) ‘Phenomenology of Religion’ in Hinnells, John (ed.) (2010) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Routledge, Abingdon. p205

Both of these description by Sharma and Allen reflect the approach that I hope to take – one that aims to be as impartial as possible (yet which acknowledges the problems associated with such a position), a view that is critical though still sympathetic, and one that aims at interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Tremlett's 2007 *The Ethics of Suspicion in the Study of Religion* sums up several of the criticisms of the phenomenological approach.¹⁰⁹ Yet, despite the criticisms many scholars still believe that with adjustment, phenomenology of religion still has a valuable future. I wholly agree with Douglas Allen who writes that what is required of any *contemporary* phenomenological study of religion is “a more self-critical and modest phenomenology [...] providing descriptions and interpretations of phenomena” and that it has a keen awareness of its own “presuppositions, its historical and contextualized situatedness, and its limited perspectival knowledge claims”.¹¹⁰ A future phenomenology of religion, according to Allen, will attempt to “formulate new, dynamic, open-ended, contextually sensitive projects involving creative encounter, contradiction, and synthesis”.¹¹¹ All of which are considerations I hope to be aware of during the analysis.

The task of surveying this previously unstudied area does bring with it considerable challenges. I would agree with Douglas Cowan that citing the number of results from a web search of a particular term is meaningless in quantifying how popular something is – yet it may indicate how difficult conducting research online can be. Typing “Shirdi Sai Baba” into Google brings up over three and a half billion results. To sift through these results as a researcher requires an ability to develop the right search terms, discretion in deciding which are ‘important’ websites and which are not, and an element of intuition to find links within web pages which might link to other relevant pages – the development of what Gary Bunt calls an “awareness of the language and technological development

¹⁰⁹ Tremlett, Paul-François (2007) *'The Ethics of Suspicion in the Study of Religion'*. *Diskus 8* [online]. Available From: <http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus8/tremlett.htm> [Accessed 3/9/2012]

¹¹⁰ Op. Cit. Allen, p223

¹¹¹ Ibid

issues associated with Internet cultures”.¹¹² A range of skills are brought to bear with web based research – many of which place a great emphasis on the discretion of the researcher to decide what is most relevant.

There are, of course, serious issues by taking this approach that places so much emphasis on the researcher’s own predilection. The obvious risk is that researchers will simply pick and choose the websites that reflect their own view point or what it is the hope to find. Cowan makes the point about this tendency amongst researchers who bring the academic fields of information technology and the study of religion together. He poses the question: “[h]ave discussions [...] been framed too much in terms of what researchers would like to find, or believe they ought to find, rather than what is actually there?”¹¹³ I would argue that it is inevitable to some extent that what a researcher has read concerning religion and the internet will invariably have some influence on what it is they perceive when they carry out a study. That is not to say that research *should* be limited by what the research is explicitly looking for, research ought to be as open and receptive to websites and online activity that are found unexpectedly. Certainly, Cowan’s point is a moot one, given the incredible diversity and sheer amount of online material, it would be easy to find only what you are looking for – yet when faced with over a billion websites, the research has to frame the study in such a way that pays more attention to some websites than others. Search engines, especially Google, are for most the gateway to the World Wide Web. These by their very nature are built around what a devotee (or a researcher) “would like to find” and so Cowan’s statement is one that whilst pertinent, is one that any internet researcher is going to find difficult to overcome. Perhaps what would be more appropriate would be to pay attention to what is *unexpectedly* found.

Whilst it is straightforward to examine, describe and compare websites themselves, there are also significant issues when attempting to understand *who* is using these websites and *why*. If internet

¹¹² Bunt, Gary R. (2009) ‘*Religion and the Internet*’ in Clarke, Peter B. (ed.) (2009) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford University Press Oxford. p708

¹¹³ Op. Cit. Cowan (2007), p365

users are not actively participating in online discussions or submitting content to blogs or message boards, then their online presence is almost invisible to other internet users – they are passive viewers. This is an issue Gary Bunt, he writes : “[e]xactly who uses such content is open to question: the counters that record page visits are not necessarily a useful indicator of how a site is being used”¹¹⁴; he goes on to write that the “potentially high degrees of anonymity in cyberspace [...] make realistic assessment of visitor profiles problematic”.¹¹⁵ Cowan, focusing upon modern pagans using the internet (yet his is a point which I believe is readily applicable to Shirdi Sai baba online) succinctly sums up the issue, he writes: “[i]n the real world, active participation in a discussion is not a necessary index of physical presence at a gathering. Online, however, the only indicator of presence is participation. If you don’t post, no one knows you’re there”.¹¹⁶

There is also the problem of blending, which specific activities online can be counted as religious? At first this seems quite straightforward but with the greater integration of technologies especially through social networking websites, the lines begin to blur. It is a point Gary Bunt makes, he writes that “It is problematic to attempt to acquire a representative sample of surfing habits in specific religious-cultural groups; claims of religious activities online may mask or interact with other surfing activities, including shopping, interaction with popular culture, and social networking”.¹¹⁷

Another problem, also highlighted by Bunt, is the transience of Internet websites. Basic websites are replaced with more interactive sites; blogs are notorious for developing (even finding a large readership) only to fall dormant and visitors to wane then to be replaced by another blog; Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are created and regularly updated with zeal for months before being abandoned by their original creators, leaving only a virtual relic. It is indeed true that “[t]he ever changing face of the World-Wide Web means that sites evolve, change content, and at times

¹¹⁴ Op. Cit. Bunt, p713-714

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p714

¹¹⁶ Op. Cit. Cowan (2004), p161

¹¹⁷ Op. Cit. Bunt, p718

disappear or relocate”.¹¹⁸ Bunt points out the profound obstacles that face researchers and how the “ephemeral nature of the Net, the mundane nature of content, and the sheer volume of material raise specific issues for those analysing the relationships between religions and the internet”.¹¹⁹

As already stated, the immense volume of information about Shirdi Sai Baba online precludes any realistic broad survey that could take into account even a small number of the hundreds of millions of websites which mention his name. Techniques must be developed to tease out the ones which are most popular or which contribute the most to understanding how the Shirdi Sai Baba movement uses the Web. Bunt writes of “evolving and mutating cyber environments” that cyberspace is in a perpetual state of flux with more website coming online as others fall into disuse; it is because of this that he remarks how studies which look to the web “cannot always be systemized in a scientific, rigid, or hierarchical fashion”¹²⁰ – the content is far too numerous and the media used in the websites themselves diverse. Describing the internet, Rosalind Hackett points out this nebulous character of cyberspace. She writes that “we need to recognize the ambiguous, fluid, almost volatile, nature of the internet, as well as its composite character. The combination of static and moving images and text, as well as aural and tactile forms of communication, lends it an aura of mystery”.¹²¹ To hope to study such a phenomenon is going to cause inevitable problems.

For my own research, unable to offer a comprehensive account of websites dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba, around a dozen sites will be chosen which either reflect broader themes of other websites or are by themselves quite unique in what they offer internet users. This is far from idea but as part of an initial survey that takes the formative steps in examining how devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba use the web, it is a beginning. In particular, given that perceptible interaction between internet users is the hallmark of online activity, it is the websites that facilitate interaction that are particularly sought

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p713

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p717

¹²⁰ Ibid, p708

¹²¹ Hackett, Rosalind I. J. (2006) *Religion and the Internet*. *Diogenes* 53:3, p67-68 [online]. Available From: <http://dio.sagepub.com/content/53/3/67> [Accessed 3/9/2012]

after in this study. The study will focus primarily upon the modes of communication found online amongst followers of Sai Baba – this is important, as Cowan has highlighted, because “[o]ne of the most essential characteristics of computer-mediated communication is that it is and remains *communication*”.¹²² By using a range of searching techniques and tools over several months, the goal is to uncover and examine those websites which are actively bringing devotees together online. To explore where this “communication” takes place and what it entails for those engaging in it. Rather than merely describing the websites as static artefacts, the aim is to see where people are interacting with one another online and using the web as a religious communicative medium.

A detailed and nuanced description of the content of Shirdi Sai Baba websites is most apt to engage with previous scholarship – the questions asked in the introduction would be most clearly answered by a phenomenological approach, questions such as: how what is known about devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba is reflected in the way he is portrayed online? Are there indicators that Shirdi Sai Baba devotion is one based in a ‘composite culture’ as McLain argues? In what ways do the websites dedicated to Sai Baba use the internet as a medium for *darshan*? This range of questions requires a broad yet malleable methodological approach which would be most straightforwardly met by phenomenology.

Empirically based quantitative work that deals with a broad range of websites is untenable is a piece of research this short, whilst qualitative work would require focusing upon a small aspect of religiosity online to keep it manageable in this brief study. The phenomenological method allows considerable freedom to make observations and describe websites, yet not gather and collate the significant amount of data needed in a work that adheres to the stringent requirements of a more scientific approach. In this regard I agree with Bunt, the nature of the internet means that a “systematic” approach is not feasible. I intend to choose categories that best illustrate the different kinds of web content found on the internet.

¹²² Op. Cit. Cowan (2007), p371

Bunt himself makes a strong argument that this technology poses a challenge to any modern approach to phenomenology. Yet I would contend that it is not an issue for phenomenology alone, all research focused upon religion online need to develop frameworks to make sense of a vast, every changing medium.

Website Analysis

Imagery

What extends to all the websites that will be discussed here is the incredible proliferation of pictures. In blogs, messages boards, personal websites – images of Sai Baba abound in quantity and in terms of the website's presentation, account for a considerable portion of the space on each page. The image of the *murti* at the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi, of the marble Sai Baba bedecked with flowers and wearing a cloth around his head, is perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all.

Popular unedited images include the famous few black and white images purported to be of Sai Baba whilst he was alive, or those of a *murti* of Sai. Those black and white photos depict a man in very simple attire, wearing a *kafni* and a cloth wrapped around his head. The most famous photo, and most common purportedly authentic image of Sai Baba, is one of him sitting upright atop a rock with his right foot slung over the knee of his left leg, his left hand gently resting on his ankle. This serene image is also sometime manipulated to include it into a collage of photographs and pictures of Sai Baba. Other pictures, manipulated images, are by far the most prolific on websites about Sai Baba. There is an active culture of image production that combines brightly coloured backgrounds and images of Sai Baba, either as artistic representations of Sai Baba or as a cartoon-style character, or utilizing photographs taken at Sai Baba temples, especially that of the Samadhi Mandir at Shirdi. (A sample of these images have been included in the Appendix)

Especially of note regarding the edited or enhanced images are the pictures of Sai with other figures. Whilst not as common as the pictures of Sai alone, these very colourful pictures still constitute a substantial percentage of the images of Sai Baba found online. Shirdi Sai Baba is pictured alongside Hindu deities such Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Hanuman, Ganesh, as well as figures from other religions, like Jesus and Gautama Buddha. These pictures often have the theme of a particular festival – be that Hindu (as with the picture of Sai Baba as Krishna playing a flute for *Janmasthami* or *Navarathri*

where Sai Baba is pictured alongside a statue of Shakti) or non-Hindu, as is the case with Sai Baba and Jesus in a Christmas themed image. Certainly rarer but worth noting are those images that relate Sai Baba to Islam. These include images of Sai Baba ethereally floating above what is presumably an open Qur'an being held in a book cradle with the text 'Allah Malik Hai' ('Allah is Lord'); another shows a painted Sai Baba in front of the dome tops of a mosque, accompanied with a greeting of "Eid Mubarak!", celebrating Eid.

A Personal Website

From the perspective of communities online, one particular personal website that is quite novel in the way it uses the web is www.mysaibaba20.com and its very active sister Yahoo! Groups page (with 11,641 members at the time of writing). Run by a husband and wife from New Delhi, they use the web to include a global audience in their weekly performance of *amrit vani*, *parayan* and *arti*. Those that are able to can attend in person in New Delhi and are welcomed to do so, those that are not able to be there may send messages – either to ask for prayers to be said on their behalf, or to follow along at home by reading the *Sri Sai Satchaitra* (online members usually do both of these). Those that do not attend in person send an email to the Yahoo! group, this is either publically displayed or, if they prefer, kept private, detailing the subject of their prayer request. Extensive details, outlining the information that will need to be submitted, are offered for those wishing to participate in the *amrit vani* and *parayan* by 'distance'. Thus, a very small group have the options to include a global audience as part of their religious life, reaching out to create an informal network of individual devotees. They fully utilize existing tools for groups such as those offered by Yahoo! Groups, which give a readymade template that only requires individuals to join and start discussions. The group itself has seen a steady amount of activity since October 2007.

Embedded into the website are a range of multimedia material – including an audio player, a photo slideshow, a number of YouTube videos and there is integrated interactivity with the page via a

comments/suggestion box. There are also links to 'Sai Bhakti Radio'(an online audio streaming service) and the Facebook page for the group. PDF files of the *Sri Sai Satcharitra* are hosted in English, Hindu, Gujarati and Marathi, as well as a detailed introduction to the text and information on how to conduct *parayan*; as well as mp3 files of the *Sai amrit vani*. The *amrit vani* texts themselves are hosted on the site in seven different languages. Their website contains details of forthcoming events, address details, times and dates are given for future meetings. A section of the website is dedicated to experiences that devotees have had of Shirdi Sai Baba and a form is also included for users to submit their own such experiences to the website too.

Blogs

Prayer is a prominent feature in some of the many blogs dedicated to Sai Baba. Two in particular are worth noting. The first is 'Prayers to Shirdi' (<http://prayerstoshirdi.blogspot.co.uk/>), the second is the 'Shirdi Sai Baba Prayer Club' (<http://shirdisaibabaprayclub.blogspot.co.uk/>). Prayers to Shirdi is a unique collaborative blog that brings pilgrims and Sai Baba devotees who for one reason or another are unable to go themselves to the sacred site of Shirdi, together. Each post on the blog is made by someone planning a pilgrimage to Shirdi, readers can then either e-mail that person directly or leave comments on the post with the prayers that they wish to have written down (or printed out) and taken to Shirdi. The requests left in the comments range from problems paying back loans, people unable to find a suitable partner to marry, couples unable to conceive a child, close relatives who are severely ill, students hoping to do well in their exams and get on the college course they want. There are also messages of thanks, of prayers answers and messages of praise to Sai Baba. Whilst the posts themselves are infrequent, it does provide a unique service to devotees. This blog acts as a hub for pilgrims, an online site that facilitates correspondence between pilgrim and those who wish to have their online prayers delivered *offline* to Shirdi.

The Shirdi Sai Baba Prayer Club, which unfortunately has ceased to be as active recently as it has been in the past, offers another approach to prayer. Individuals can email their prayers in messages that highlight their particular plight, gaining a wider audience and thus have others praying for them too increasing the efficacy of their prayers. These responses are either private or are included in the comments to the post – personal responses such as: “Baba, please help your child asap. Remove all his sorrows and miseries and please give him happiness and your abundance of blessing and love”¹²³ are quite common; others may simply post repetitions of ‘*Om Sai Ram*’. The blog owner calls upon devotees: “lets join our hands and lets pray for those who are in need”.

Highly active since 2008 the ‘Shirdi Sai Baba Experiences’ (<http://www.shirdisaibabaexperiences.org/>) blog is a site that documents individual encounters with Sai Baba. Contributors share their stories of the ways in which Sai Baba has touched their lives, often these stories have a miraculous outcome. Updated daily this website allows devotees to share their own experiences and testify to the real, active participation of Sai Baba in their lives, and that he can affect profound positive change; the events in their lives interpreted in light of their faith. The brief vignettes they offer are a tremendous insight into the lives of Sai Baba devotees.

These include narratives of serious illnesses and the cures brought about by praying to Sai Baba; job interviews that were successful with the intervention of Sai Baba; inter-family conflict resolved and relationship problems overcome; mental anguish and worry is dissipated in the experiences documented in this blog. Events are interpreted through their love of Shirdi Sai Baba – as is the case with the experience by one follower who lost the cards from her wallet. In panic she turned to Baba for help and prayed that they may be found again. Upon looking in her bag she saw that the cards had fallen out. Yet events such as these are indeed religious experiences and reaffirm their devotion to Sai Baba. As a result of finding her lost cards, the contributor writes: “I couldn’t thank Baba enough. He saved me from such a big trouble. He reinforced my faith and assured me that He is

¹²³ Anonymous comment left on blog post (<http://shirdisaibabaprayerclub.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/baba-get-me-out-of-struggles-devotee.html>) [Accessed 22/9/2012]

always around and looking after all the affairs of our lives. All that He expects from us is unwavering faith and steeled confidence in Him".¹²⁴ Several hundred stories have been posted all attesting to the power, love and wisdom shown by Sai Baba to those who reach out to him. The perception of how devotees view the blog is mentioned by several contributors. One anonymous poster writes: "Thank you very much for this wonderful blog [...] It give lot of confidence and faith on Sai Baba".¹²⁵

Turning to other popular blogs dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba, 'Shird Sai Baba Bhajan' (<http://www.shirdisaibababhajan.org/>) allows users to download devotional songs in mp3 format. This colourful and media rich website, if the statistics offered by the embedded applications which track visitors are to be trusted, can receive over 50 visitors at a time. This regularly updated site, like all blogs, offers RSS subscription and also has updates available by email too. A useful application built into the blog allows users to search for *bhajans* either by specific album, singer, or type of *bhajan*. As well as a small built in message board that allows users to communicate with one another as well as conveying messages to the website owner, there are also links to both Facebook and Google Friend Connect which allows visitors to find others who are also interested in the website and Shirdi Sai Baba *bhajans*.

A large media based blog, this time focusing on images, is 'Sai Snaps' (<http://saisnaps.blogspot.co.uk/>). This blog brings together hundreds of photos of Sai Baba *murtis*, pictures from festivals and desktop wallpapers to download. Interestingly, rather than the popular manipulated images of Shirdi Sai Baba that includes an image or collage of images superimposed upon a colourful background; the most prolific images on Sai Snaps are photographs of temples and places of worship in India and around the globe. As well as photographs of an elaborate and ornate *murti* of Sai Baba in large temple complexes, there are some images of much smaller places of worship, these include some small street shrines. There are a number of photographs of festivals

¹²⁴ Submitted by 'Priyambada' (<http://www.shirdisaibabaexperiences.org/2012/03/couple-of-sai-baba-experiences-part-158.html?m=0>) [Accessed 22/9/2012]

¹²⁵ Submitted anonymously (<http://www.shirdisaibabaexperiences.org/2012/06/thank-you-baba-for-accepting-me-sai-daughter.html>) [Accessed 22/9/2012]

and also of devotees. Descriptions are included which outline the history of the places as well as information about the daily events. The blog owner also includes details of how to get to them and when they are open. Whilst the page itself is cluttered and not always easy to navigate, it brings together a vast collection of imagery. The site has an embedded Twitter feed into the page, as well as numerous embedded YouTube videos and links to audio and text (PDF) files.

Epithets such as those frequently incorporated into many of the 'photoshopped' pictures of Sai Baba found online are given their own blog with 'Sai Baba Maxims' (<http://www.saibabamaxims.com/>) – the design of which is simple and clean, the posts themselves are always very brief. These messages are accompanied either by cartoon depictions relating to the theme of the maxim, or more conventional depictions of Sai Baba, either artistic or photographic. These brief pithy phrases are incredibly common when encountering websites created by devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba. In the maxims posted in this blog key words are thematically hyperlinked so that a message that might include the word 'devotee' can be clicked on to reveal another maxim on the blog that also has that same theme. The site includes integration with Facebook and Google Friends Connect although neither of these are subscribed to by many.

Other blogs, such as Shirdi Sai Baba Kripa (<http://www.shirdisaibabakripa.org>) and Shirdi Sai Deva (<http://www.shirdisaideva.com/>) include several of the elements found in other blogs, yet these two blogs do not restrict themselves to a particular topic, theme or media type – both of these blogs include stories in the news about Sai Baba, desktop wallpapers to download, devotees' experiences, *bhajans* available to download, and serialised chapters from books. The blogs bring together a range of material – textual, audio and visual – for devotees.

These are only a few of the many blogs dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba. Yet they offer a brief but important sample of the uses to which online media is being used at present by devotees in the Shirdi Sai Baba movement.

Messages Boards and Forums

Internet forums dedicated to Sai Baba also draw considerable membership. Two particularly large and active ones are the Spiritual India forum (<http://forum.spiritualindia.org/index.php>) and *Sai-Ka-Aangan* forum (<http://sai-ka-aangan.org/index.php>) – unfortunately, their size and diversity (especially of the former of these two) mitigate any thorough analysis that offers a comprehensive survey of them – yet an attempt will be made here to investigate some of the most prominent and common features of them both.

The two forums both identify themselves with a physical place. What *Sai-Ka-Aangan* actually means to the users is a matter some members have written about themselves. The website administrator writes: “SAI-KA-AANGAN is a channel for communicating with SAI BABA. In this channel, BABA will hear you and care you. You can express your feelings, ask for help and pray for ailings. You can spread BABA's message to the whole world through SAI-KA-AANGAN. It is meant for you and you can feel BABA's presence every where in this AANGAN”.¹²⁶ The Spiritual India forum calls itself the *Dwarakmai*, the name of the mosque Sai baba lived in. In a message calling for members to describe how they came to follow Sai Baba, one member of the forum described the website as a “closely knit Sai family” and an “online Sai Mandir”.

Both of these forums share a number of prominent features. Each forum website contains many sub-forums, devoted to particular topics – including philosophical discussion, experiences of Sai Baba’s role in the lives of members, news stories relevant to Sai baba, images and *bhajans* praising Sai Baba, and both websites also have a place for members to confess things to Sai Baba. The most popular and active ‘boards’ were those pertaining to prayer - the ‘Sai Baba Help Me’ sub-forum with over 114,000 posts and the ‘Prayer Requests’ sub-forum with over 54,000 posts. The nature of the posts is varied but three common themes emerge, having spent some months regularly reading them (between February and June 2012).

¹²⁶ Forum post by ‘sree’, forum administrator of *Sai-Ka-Aangan* (<http://www.sai-ka-aangan.org/welcome-message-greetings-introductions/840-sai-ka-aangan-channel.html>) [Accessed 22/9/2012]

- Impassioned pleas (either for oneself or others, usually a family member) for matters relating to: health, education, financial concerns, careers, family/personal relationships and marriage. These account for by far the vast majority of prayer requests on both of the websites I visited.
- The prayers for help and assistance can be quite vague, with the poster assuming that as their relationship with Sai Baba is very personal and being omniscient he is already aware of the problem, precise details can be omitted. Prayers are often prefixed with a comment such as “Baba you know about my situation” or “you know we have been suffering difficulties recently”, testify to the very personal relationship they have with Sai Baba. That their relationship with Sai Baba *online* is contiguous with their relationship with Sai Baba *offline*.
- The most common responses to these posts are mantras. ‘*Om Sai Ram*’, ‘*Jai Jai Sai Ram*’, ‘*Om Sri Sai Nathaya Namaha*’ occur frequently – either in English or in an Indian language. At times more detailed responses are given but these are very hopeful in tone and usually ask the poster of the original prayer request to be patient, reminding them of Sai Baba’s compassion and ability to affect tremendous positive change. These prayer ‘threads’ can extend to over a hundred pages as members regularly post and others include their own prayers. Pictures of Sai Baba are also common in these lengthy prayer posts.

Relating to the posting of *mantras* is the performance of *naam jaap* – particular message board threads (sometimes including thousands of messages) are the most popular pages on these web forums. A *naam jaap* post on the Spiritual India forum has received thousands of posts and now extends to over 3,500 pages. These *naam jaap* posts also includes “prayers for all deities” (which whilst seeming universalistic, the *mantras* associated with Hindu gods and goddesses are almost exclusively recited). The most popular at present is the ‘*Akhanda Sai Naam Japa*’ (the ‘eternal’ or

‘unbroken thread’), dedicated to the continued recitation of the name of Sai Baba and praising him. Devotees are requested only to post once a day although the length of their post is not limited. These threads of posts appear to be a collaborative religious activity in cyberspace.

What is found in these forums is a practice that is widespread around the web on nearly all of the websites featuring Shirdi Sai Baba that also have some degree of interactivity through comments boxes or integrated message boards. The repetition of ‘*Om Sai Ram*’ or other mantric phrases are the most remarkable feature of how individuals respond the websites they visit. Web forums such as those mentioned here have specific area and sub-forums that are dedicated to this practice.

As with *mysaibaba20.com*, the Spiritual India forum also uses the web to organize offline group *parayan*. Each forum member who wishes to participate is allotted a particular chapter from the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, which they agree to read; studying and praying at a certain time together – although rather than being a specific time, to accommodate a global audience individuals are asked to do *parayan* between 6am and 9pm Indian Standard Time (IST). The organizer of the *parayan* includes detailed instructions and makes all efforts to ensure that it is conducted properly, to not do so would have a detrimental effect – the forum moderator writes: “Kindly note that even if a single person does not do the PARAYAN the THURSDAY GROUP PARAYAN is not complete and the sanctity is lost because of that one person [...]”.¹²⁷ The group normally has 50-60 members (thus, given that there are only 50 chapters, they are split into two groups). Specific prayers are also included – either for a person who has requested prayers be said or more general prayers, such as “Prayers for good rain fall and to prevent the country from drought and help the farmers”.¹²⁸ Thus, as well as religious activity online, the web here is used as an organizing tool for ‘offline’ religious activity.

The ‘SAI Dwarakmai’ sub-board found at *Sai-Ka-Aangan*, named after the mosque that Sai Baba resided in for most of his adult life, advertises open inter-faith discussion about religious matters. In

¹²⁷ Forum post by ‘ShAivl’, moderator at Spiritual India (<http://forum.spiritualindia.org/thursday-ssc-group-parayan-13th-september-2012-week-2-t44651.0.html>) [Accessed 22/9/2012]

¹²⁸ *ibid*

the description for this forum, it notes “Sai Baba of Shirdi is the Symbol and Essence of all religions. No religion was ever intended to be anything more than the Gateway to God as Truth. Shirdi Sai is the Path and Goal in the realisation of this Truth. Sai Dwarkamai is open to all religions of the world”. Yet, after many visits to this particular forum, it was relatively little used compared to the others – the posts made in this inter-faith area of the message board also solicited very few responses and actual discussions were almost absent entirely.

Social Networking

The rapid, recent development of religion’s role in social networking (an area still to be explored by scholars) is one prevalent in the Shirdi Sai Baba movement. There are several Facebook pages dedicated to Sai Baba. The most popular (or ‘liked’) being ‘Sai Baba of Shirdi’ (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sai-Baba-of-Shirdi/21229818125>) with well over 1.5 million members, ‘SHIRDI SAI BABA’ (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/SHIRDI-SAI-BABA/126166840144>) with over 950,000 ‘likes’ and ‘Shirdi Sai Baba Devotees’ (<http://www.facebook.com/saibabadevotees>) with over 124,000 members. The first of these three is updated intermittently; during my time monitoring the site there were a flurry of messages based on user-submitted photos of their local Sai Baba temple, these were submitted almost every day and garnered thousands of ‘likes’, hundreds of comments and were also shared by hundreds of Facebook users. Later on though the rate at which it was updated slowed down considerably (presumably as these pages are often run by individuals, their own life circumstances dictate how often new material is added). The second of the three has not been regularly updated since March 2012 and the last of the three was updated regularly with photos and sayings of Sai Baba until August 2012. Nevertheless, when posts are made they reach a very wide audience. In response to the posts, as with blog comments and the forums dedicated to Sai Baba, the commonly found mantras such as ‘Om Sai Ram’, ‘Jai Sai Ram’, ‘Om Sri Sai Namoh Namah’ are the most popular response. There is little

to no interaction between people who comment on the public Sai Baba Facebook pages; their individual messages are directed towards the original post and the pictures of Sai Baba. The structure of the pages themselves are the same as all other public Facebook profiles and the ability to customize the interface the web user sees is incredibly limited.

Another social network that is less well known in America and Europe is Orkut, owned and run by Google. The most popular Shirdi Sai Baba page here (<http://www.orkut.com/Main#Community?cmm=936879>) has 145,395 members (although exactly how many of these are active is unknown). There is relatively little in terms of content, given the vast numbers of members of the group. The Shirdi Sai Baba Orkut page does receive regular updates, in terms of people commenting on message 'threads' and creating new topics for discussion on the site. However, the content of these messages follow a similar format to the bulk of comments and messages found elsewhere on the web. There are the appeals for help and assistance from Sai Baba, thanks for answered prayers, sharing of experiences of Sai Baba, panegyric comments praising Shirdi Sai Baba and also message threads devoted to mantras (here too these are the most popular and commented upon topics).

Video Streaming

As well as the still imagery, a live video stream is offered by the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust of the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi, which broadcasts for over 19 hours a day (<http://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/shirdilivedarshan1.htm>). This live web stream offering *darshan* is one embedded into several websites dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba. One website on which the live video is hosted clearly frames the live stream as *darshan* and of considerable potency.

“Baba has promised, “I shall be active and vigorous even from the tomb,” and it is perhaps in the Mandir that we can most fully experience the phenomenon of Shri Sai Baba [...]"¹²⁹

Videos relating to Shirdi Sai Baba are also very popular on video sharing websites such as YouTube—these include a range of videos, such as films and television series’ based on the life of Shirdi Sai Baba (included animated films about Sai Baba, perhaps aimed towards young audiences), recordings of events at the Samadhi Mandir at Shirdi, home-made productions with devotional songs and mantras over a slideshow of images of Shirdi Sai Baba. Often the videos accumulate hundreds of comments. These are useful as they offer an insight into the responses to such material by devotee – they offer a form of ‘feedback’ on their experience. This medium (as with the other channels for leaving messages) also accumulates prayer requests to Shirdi Sai Baba; in response to a video of a Sai Baba *mantra* one commenter posts “Baba We are thinking to visit shirdi since last 3 months. But we are un-able to visit due to physical or other problems. We have a strong wish to see you. Please help us to fulfill our wish” .¹³⁰

Given the notoriety of YouTube for often uncivilized and abrasive discussions, it is not surprising to find that comments on the Shirdi Sai Baba videos are not immune from these comments. It is always difficult to tell whether these are made by *agent provocateurs* keen to see how much they can offend or those who genuinely believe the remarks they leave. Yet alongside those remarks that are inflammatory, YouTube is perhaps the one website where the universal nature of Shirdi Sai Baba is most keenly proclaimed by followers. In response to less than positive remarks about Shirdi Sai baba, comments such as this one (here quoted *verbatim*) are not uncommon:

¹²⁹ Shree Sai Baba Sansthan Trust (Shirdi)
[online](http://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new_eng%20template_shirdi/shirdi/samadhi_mandir.html)
{Accessed 22/9/2012}

¹³⁰ YouTube comment left by Vangala RamanaMurthy’ [online]
(http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=xohCvc8yLqY&page=1) {Accessed 22/9/2012}

“sai baba, jesus, prophet mohammed, buddha everyone are messengers of god. who came to earth to teach people to live a spiritual life. god is one in many names, these messengers were sent to different parts of the world for people who speak different languages. and hence these messengers spoke their language and taught them ways of life and that is how there is christianity, buddhism, hinduism, jainism, muslims. they are all the same that teach to adore god almighty and do good to people.”¹³¹

Prayer Online

Another website which functions primarily as a communication medium – be that between Sai Baba followers, or communication directed at Sai Baba himself is ‘Shirdi Sai Leelalu’ (<http://www.shirdisaileelalu.com/>). A site that once received dozens of submissions a day, it is only partially functioning at the time of this research. This site’s subheading invites users to “talk to Shirdi Sai Baba” and includes a quote from the *Sai Satcharita*, which touches upon perhaps the most common theme in the movement – ““If you seek my advice and help, it shall be given to you at once. I am ever living to help and guide all, who come to me, who surrender to me and who seek refuge in me”.

The nature of the prayers posted on the website is often incredibly personal. Devotees reveal intimate information about themselves, their families and work colleagues. There is an outpouring of emotion in these petitions to Sai Baba. The prayers themselves are very similar to those mentioned earlier in relation to the message boards. The main theme of the prayers involves troubled personal relationships, health issues, financial difficulties, and stress about matters at work or school/college. The full gamut of personal difficulties finds expression in the prayer section.

¹³¹ YouTube comment left by ‘metersable’ [online] (http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=d6We008rVgg&page=1) {Accessed 22/9/2012}

Online Puja / Religious Ritual

Despite extensive searching, only a few 'virtual *puja*' web pages were found online dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba – all of which are very similar in their presentation and the interaction they offer the user. These include the 'pooja room' at saibaba.org (<http://www.saibaba.org/pooja/poojaroom.html>) or the less elaborate virtual *puja* offered at Eprarthana.com (<http://www.eprarthana.com/virtual/vsaibaba.asp>). In the one offered by saibaba.org an image of Sai Baba taken from the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi is placed above a line of 'virtual' items normally used as part of a *puja* ceremony. Specific acts are performed by clicking on buttons to the left that initiate the action stated. Here the *puja* performed at the most sacred site of Shirdi can be recreated by the web user with merely a few clicks of their mouse – in animation flowers float to be placed around the neck of the *murti* and the *arti* lamp repeatedly circles the image of Sai Baba upon a mouse click.

Other interactively oriented websites include 'Sai Baba – Questions and Answers' (<http://questions.shirdi-sai-baba.com/>) where the user is asked to type in their specific question and click a button, "Sai Baba please answered my question", before an answer is given by Sai Baba. Incorporated into the page is a large portrait of Sai Baba, this time not one taken from a temple, but a more simple and austere looking Sai Baba in his *kafni*. However, this page appears somewhat flawed as the user need not even type a question in – simply clicking the button reveals a brief piece of advice from Sai Baba. Nevertheless, for devotees this is another way they could interact with Sai Baba online. Similarly, prashnavali.org (<http://www.prashnavali.org/>) is one of several websites that uses numbers as a means to solicit advice from Sai Baba. Users are asked to follow a series of instructions – which begins with clearing one's mind before meditating on Sai Baba and finally asking him for a number to come to you. When a number between 1 and 720 is entered into the web page and the "Ask Sai Baba" button pressed, a box smoothly slides down from the top of the page

revealing Shirdi Sai Baba's response. An almost identical website in its format is yoursaibaba.com (<http://www.yoursaibaba.com/>), although this website does include a substantial information section explaining the life and teachings of Sai Baba. Here again the user must enter a number to receive a personalised response from Sai Baba. It is unknown how often or how seriously these websites are taken by devotees of Sai Baba hoping to gain some experience of him via the web, although it is evident that the websites makers themselves believe it to be effective – at the yoursaibaba.com site they sternly note that “This is **Not for Fun or Comedy..**”. Unfortunately, as no statistics or options for feedback are provided on the web page, it is almost impossible to tell exactly how popular they are with devotees or whether they are even seen as legitimate by Sai Baba devotees.

Discussion

What is evident from the analysis is that, in agreement with Antonio Rigopoulos's study, the linguistic and symbolic world of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba is indeed a Hindu one; whilst openly acknowledged, the Islamic elements found through the life of Sai Baba as expressed on the internet are far less common than the Hindu. Despite highlighting some occurrences, overall there are relatively few instances where Shirdi Sai Baba's composite character is brought to the fore; whilst it is not absent it is dramatically overshadowed by the predominantly Hindu portrayal of Sai Baba. As such, it seems that the purported 'Hinduization' of Sai Baba is evident from his portrayal online. Few, if any, references were made to Islam or Sufism in the websites I visited and in the discourse of internet users who communicated in open online areas such as message boards, talk of the Islamic religious nature of Sai Baba was absent.

Exactly why this is the case is unknown. However, I would draw attention to the persistent (and to my mind flawed) theme of alterity that exists in the scholarly literature about the nature of Shirdi Sai Baba. For the likes of Warren and Sikand, there was a conscious process to eradicate Islamic elements from Sai Baba – in their work there is an implicit value-judgement that the Sai Baba found in India today is to some extent mythically based, and that the *real* Sai Baba can be sought in some historical quest. It is far more likely that given the majority Hindu population of Maharashtra and in Shirdi itself, as McLain writes, devotees inevitably understood his life and the message he promoted through their own "Hindu filter".¹³²

It is indeed true that with the internet and new media "darshanic images can be re-embedded, created, recreated, and manufactured"¹³³ – they are done so in all of the Shirdi Sai Baba websites I visited. The dissemination and sharing of images of Sai Baba is one of the most common uses that

¹³² Op. Cit. McLain, p28-29

¹³³ Op. Cit. Herman, p150

the internet has for devotees – there constant ‘recreation’ and ‘manufacturing’ has lead to a profusion of devotional artworks. There are dedicated personal websites, blogs and even social networking groups whose main purpose was to share photographs and more artistic pictures of Shirdi Sai Baba. The online culture of image creation has produced thousands of diverse pictures. Almost all of the websites visited either hosted desktop wallpapers of Shirdi Sai Baba available for download, or they posted links where such images could be downloaded. Blogs such as <http://saisnaps.blogspot.co.uk/> are dedicated to the dissemination of photographs, in all the websites I visited there is strong evidence to suggest the centrality of images in devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba.

From looking at the websites themselves, I would contend that much like the *darshan* offered by the countless images of Sai Baba online, a divine channel is opened when web users are given the opportunity to interact with the page. The incredible number of prayers, messages of thanks, and those who simply invoke the name of Sai Baba by commenting “*Om Sai Ram*” lead me to believe that most people who do interact with website believe they are reaching out to Shirdi Sai Baba, that it is possible for them to hear him. Therefore, like Srinivas and Karapanagiotis whose studies have suggested that *bhakti* is experienced via the web, I believe that Shirdi Sai Baba can indeed be found and encountered online for devotees. The question surrounding the quality of these experiences, however, remains to be seen.

Those websites, especially blogs, which deal with experiences of Sai Baba constitute an online repository of testimonial literature and ones of considerable value in any attempt to research the lives of Sai Baba devotees today. Whilst the veracity of these narratives submitted to the websites is difficult to certify (many of them are contributed on the basis of anonymity), they nevertheless represent an interesting continuation of an older tradition, bringing it into the new media age and allowing anyone to contribute towards it. As such the medium of the internet is used to add to an existing repository of offline testimonial literature, opening the doorway to *any* Shirdi Sai Baba

devotee to add their own personal stories and continue (in a virtual context) what Karline McLain called the “primary form of devotional expression” and devotees “continue to interact with Shirdi Sai Baba”.¹³⁴ It is unsurprising to see that for those who keenly follow the blog, the miraculous and heart-warming narratives of fellow devotees, reinforces their faith and keen devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba.

As has been shown, websites such as the pilgrimage themed prayerstoshirdi.blogspot.com where a devotee may ask a family member or friend who is embarking on a journey to visit Shirdi to take prayers with them, through the global reach of the internet individuals can connect. It is with connections such as these that, to quote Lorne Dawson “[p]eople can readily enter into conversations to which they would never be exposed in the normal course of events”.¹³⁵ People of disparate social, economic and (most intriguingly) geographic backgrounds are here brought together to fulfil a desire to have their prayers delivered to the sacred site of Shirdi. The web is being used for novel and innovative solutions for those who lack the means to make a pilgrimage. The popularity of such blogs testifies to the importance of Shirdi as a sacred site – even the presence of an email that has been printed off. What it also shows is that whilst live video feeds of the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi may be popular, that they may offer what Jacobs calls the “concentrated presence”¹³⁶; nevertheless what the existence of such blogs suggests is that these are still approximations; they are not the same as actually visiting the site itself. Visits to Shirdi also frequently occur in blogs dedicated to recounting experiences of Sai Baba – miraculous events and long-term difficulties soon abate after a pilgrimage to Shirdi from the narratives contained in such blogs.

¹³⁴ Op. Cit. McLain, p27

¹³⁵ Dawson, Lorne L. (2004) *‘Religion and the Internet: Presence, Prospects, and Promises’* in Antes, Peter & Geertz, Armin W. et al. (eds.) (2004) *New Approaches to the Study of Religion Volume 1: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin. p396

¹³⁶ Jacobs, Stephen (2010) *Hinduism Today*. Continuum, London. p97

One of the most predominant forms of message left on websites, be they in blog comments, message board posts or on dedicated websites such as Shirdi Sai Leelalu, is prayer. When describing the posting of a prayer in an open setting online, one where anyone can read the content of that prayer, Helland asserts that, in instances such as these, “they can [...] be considered manifestations of online religion because they were genuine expressions of religious beliefs and practices, placed within an interactive environment”.¹³⁷ The public display of messages and prayers directed towards Sai Baba, as well as the deeply personal and confessional contents of them, puts such a website firmly within the class of ‘online religion’, per Helland’s scheme. Those posting these prayers online clearly have Shirdi Sai Baba as their intended recipient and hope that he will assist them having read their petitions. Given the incredibly personal and moving content, I do not doubt that the vast majority are sincere in their prayers, and as such they clearly constitute religious activity conducted *online*.

The natures of the prayers themselves concur with what has been said about the relationship that exists between devotee and *guru* in several ways – in terms of his omniscience and immanent nature, in his ultimate compassion towards devotees, and his divine ability to intercede and produce miraculous results that can affect not only the spiritual but the material conditions of individuals who pledge their devotion to him. Indeed, the more material prayer request that seek good exam results or the resolution of financial issues, are more widespread than those that request more spiritual blessings. Through the prayers posted online it is evident that devotees have a close, loving and deeply personal relationship with Sai Baba and they sincerely believe that he is able to act and help them in very material ways. The *guru*, as Rigopoulos writes, who is “a bestower of both spiritual freedom (*mukti*) and temporal welfare (*bhukti*)”¹³⁸ is one found online in the concerted appeals of those who reach out to him in financial difficulty or hoping to pass an important exam. I would argue

¹³⁷ Op. Cit. Helland (2005), p9

¹³⁸ Op. Cit. Rigopoulos (1993), p339

that devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba actively embrace the medium of the internet as something that can be used to communicate with the divine.

The claim made by Shirdi Sai Leelalu that Sai Baba could be 'sent a message' through a website seems to be a belief that far transcends that one specific site. The appeals of devotees are ubiquitous on Facebook, message boards, the comments section of blogs, small 'chat boxes' embedded into website – opportunities for leaving feedback or messages are seen by some as windows to Sai Baba. Thus, I am inclined to agree that Shirdi Sai Baba devotees may possess the same attitude towards the internet as those in Srinivas's study of Sathya Sai Baba. She wrote: "[Sathya] Sai devotees see both Web pages and religious objects as representations of [Sathya] Sai Baba's divinity and as a portal through which his divinity may shine [...] these spaces are devotional and structured by the divine transcendence of [Sathya] Sai Baba. They allow devotees to be touched by [Sathya] Sai Baba's divinity through e-darshan".¹³⁹ There is a considerable fluidity with which many devotees use technology uninhibited.

One of the key features of how devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba use the internet is for prayer and the performance of *mantras* online – yet this practice has not been discussed in any depth in previous academic literature. When reviewing the literature mention was made of religious practice, in particularly *naam japa*, but the practice of mantra writing was not included. Being such a prominent feature – perhaps *the* predominant feature – of how Sai Baba devotees use the web interactively, it is worth discussing in some detail.

Klaus Klostermaier's has emphasised the importance of mantras, he writes that the "whole life of a Hindu is enveloped in Mantras"¹⁴⁰ and Gavin Flood too calls mantras "central to the ritual traditions of Hinduism"¹⁴¹; Flood also writes that they are perhaps a key distinguishing feature, he writes that

¹³⁹ Op. Cit. Tulasi Srinivas, p149

¹⁴⁰ Klostermaier, Klaus K. (2007) *A Survey of Hinduism*. State University of New York Press, Albany. p57

¹⁴¹ Flood, Gavin D. (1996) *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. p222

“Hindu traditions can sometimes be defined or delineated by the mantras they use”¹⁴² – the wide proliferation of the use of mantras online easily fits in with these statements. Their importance to religious practice offline is mirrored in their presence online.

Precisely what these phrases mean as sacred words is complex (and also contested). Axel Michaels discusses the possible meanings of mantras – he begins by asserting: “[a] controversial question is whether mantras have any meaning” and then assuming the orality of mantras as phonic acts in nature, Michaels writes that “the sacred substance of the mantras depends on (ritually correct) saying and hearing”, concluding that “[i]n the Hindu view, this substance is the condensation of a comprehensive truth”.¹⁴³ Commenting upon the meaning of mantras, Klaus Klostermaier similarly writes that “mantra need not have an intelligible word meaning: it is the sound equivalent of reality and at the same time the medium by which this otherwise transcendent reality is reached”.¹⁴⁴ For both brevity and clarity, Stephen Jacobs definition is perhaps the best – he writes: “I will take a *mantra* to be a syllable, phrase or short verse that is believed to possess power, and the repetition of which can produce religious, spiritual or magical effects”.¹⁴⁵

The preponderance of mantra writing (*likhita japa*) online is a key element of how devotion to Sai Baba of Shirdi manifestst itself. The internet is a visual medium, primarily of images and texts, yet the sacred orality of words and sounds in Hinduism is transposed into this textual domain through *likhita japa*. Yet, despite considerable searching, very little information could be uncovered relating to the writing out of mantras as a religious practice in Hinduism. It is a relatively well known meditative activity within some schools of Buddhism, yet there exist no scholarly studies that have focused upon this kind of *japa* in Hinduism. Devotional books and a number of websites discuss *likhita japa* but this is usually in relation to using ink and paper to keep journals which are then

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Michaels, Axel (tr. Barbra Harshav) (2004) *Hinduism: Past and Present*. Princeton University Press, Princeton. p229

¹⁴⁴ Op. Cit. Klostermaier, p56

¹⁴⁵ Op. Cit. Jacobs (2010), p48

stored in a sacred place (such as near a *puja* room), not as an activity to be conducted on the internet. One brief mention is found in *Hinduism Today* by Stephen Jacobs, who writes that it is “not as common [as other forms of *japa*]” yet “it is still fairly widely practiced” and he remarks upon the thousands of notebooks filled with mantras at the Sivananda Ashram.¹⁴⁶

It could be noted that the apparent popularity of *likhita japa* online is one way in which forms of religious practice are indeed being determined by the medium through which they are conducted. If the medium does not allow groups to chant (in a sonic sense), an activity that is important in the religious practice of Hinduism, then religious practice can adapt, internet users can ‘chant’ and perform *likhita japa* on websites via their keyboards. Clearly, further study amongst the groups that perform *likhita japa* online would be needed to determine their motivations and how it fits in with their offline religious lives.

It could be argued that whereas some religious groups may have to actively adapt practices to fit into an online ritual context, Hinduism can adapt much more easily; Jan Fernbeck writing about neo-pagan groups online, notes that “while cyberspace is a ritual site of religiosity, it can also serve as a site for the reconstruction of embodied rituals in a textual mode”.¹⁴⁷ The Hindu practice of *likhita japa* indicates such a reconstruction – by using this in an online environment, it draws from the incredibly diverse range of religious practices within Hinduism and picks one that most aptly fits the medium in which it is to be used. I have been unable to find information on the practice of *likhita japa* amongst Sai Baba devotees offline. I suspect that it is a burgeoning digital religious practice opened by the increasing opportunities for interactivity with websites.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Fernbeck, Jan (2002) ‘Internet Ritual’ in Hoover, Stewart M. & Schofield Clark, Lynn (eds.) (2002) *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, And Culture*. Columbia University Press, New York. p266

Campbell writes: “[a]s a spiritual space the internet is seen to possess special qualities that facilitate spiritual experiences and encounters”.¹⁴⁸ This is something evident in the two online communities I examined – members of the forums express their belief of their forum hosting an “online *mandir*” (in the case of Spiritual India) and a “beautiful virtual temple” (according to the the Sai Kaa Aangan forum), a cohesive community. However, it is worth noting that whilst there was considerable activity, this was mainly due to a small number of members. New members joined and contributed, occasional members also left message, yet most of the messages found in these web forums are those left by a small group of core members.

The phenomenon of *e-puja* either by conducting *puja* online or ordering a *puja* to be conducted ‘offline’ is particularly difficult to evaluate. As this takes place between individuals and websites, ascertaining the numbers of those engaged in *e-puja*, especially given the global reach of the medium, would be near impossible. Therefore, trying to substantiate the claims that some scholars have made about the popularity of performing *puja* online is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, there are a number of websites that aim to recreate the ceremonies of the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi.

It is highly probable that the problem raised by Helland in relation to ‘e-communion’ is one also found within the websites that offer online rituals such as *puja* in the case of Shirdi Sai Baba. Here too, with the Sai Baba ‘pooja room’ (<http://www.saibaba.org/pooja/poojaroom.html>) that allows the user to perform virtual *puja* at the Samadhi Mandir at Shirdi, it is also the case that “it is impossible to gage the intent of those using the website; there is no way to tell if they are practicing an authentic form of online ritual because they cannot be observed or evaluated. It is clear that the people who designed the website and ritual page did so to allow for a genuine form of religious experience, but there is no way to tell, how, or even if, this ritual is being undertaken

¹⁴⁸ Campbell, Heidi (2005b) *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*. Peter Lang, New York. p56

authentically”.¹⁴⁹ For this to be established, a great deal of fieldwork would need to be conducted. The conclusion he arrives at does however show the difference between the *e-communion* and the *e-puja* – that the latter may be more common than the former. Helland writes that the *e-communion* is “not really a form of online religion” because with a legitimate communion “the majority of the activity occurs offline with the drinking of the juice and the eating of the bread”¹⁵⁰ whilst *e-puja* could be more readily adapted. Clearly, as Scheifinger has argued, conducting *puja* online is possible as a legitimate religious ritual – yet it is also important to keep in mind Karapanagiotis’s work on the issue of (both mental and spatial) purity which for some create a barrier to engage in online worship. There is also the matter of being able to ascertain whether these virtual rituals are at all popular.

Helland’s online religion / religion online thesis has become almost paradigmatic for scholars who are investigating how religions use and manipulate new technology for their own religious uses. Through the previous analysis it is possible to point to online activity that falls into both of these categories. It is also possible to see web content that blurs or challenges the dichotomy between online religion and religion online.

The traditional websites linked to physical places, such as a *mandir*, obviously fall within the “religion online” category – their sole purpose to inform people about activities offline, important dates, opening times, and directions for visitors. Then there are websites which are clearly aimed towards online religious practice, specific virtual rituals – such as those website offering virtual *puja*. Many of the websites, however, seem to fall some way between the two. Where in this schema would reading others’ experiences of Sai Baba fall? It is not offering information for offline religion, yet it is also not explicitly religion online. In the case of the *mysaibaba20.com* website, this seems to fall into the religion online category, giving information about meetings offline. Yet, unlike conventional ‘religion online’ websites that offer little or no interactivity, the *mysaibaba20.com* website uses the

¹⁴⁹ Helland, Christopher (2005) ‘*Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet*’. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1:1, p11 [online]. Available From: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5823/pdf/Helland3a.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

web as a networking tool, helping members to communicate with one another and giving them the ability to request prayers or conduct *parayan* in some form of 'satellite' ceremony. As the web becomes increasingly more interactive, the boundary between information and communication is eroding. Almost all website now offer a degree of interactivity yet few would be described as online religious ritual.

When exploring the online communities too, I believe that Helland's paradigm of "online religion" is evoked when viewing the forums dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba. Writing about a Christian group who used the internet for religious purposes, Helland highlights how "[t]hey shared information, prayed together, participated in group ceremonies and created an environment where religiosity could be expressed. This was an ideal example of online religion".¹⁵¹ Shirdi Sai Baba message boards such as the Spiritual India forum (<http://forum.spiritualindia.org/>) surely exemplifies these notions of religious community and the practice of religion online; and clearly fit the criteria, as Helland describes, for 'online religion'.

Yet, still, as I had expect these bounded categories are generally insufficient to understand the manifold varieties of Hindu religiosity expressed online, with devotion to Sai Baba of Shirdi a prime example of this – the interplay between the two of is far too subtle for such simple categorization. When discussing how religion is often separated into online and offline, a point Karaflogka herself has admitted is that: "religious discourse [...] in cyberspace cannot be classified in terms of solid, polarised types, but as fluid arrangements which blend in a spectrum".¹⁵² Dawson and Cowan likewise note that these categories are "not absolute" and that increasingly "websites fall somewhere between these two extremes, offering their visitors some combination of the two".¹⁵³ The online/offline divide is not a strict dichotomy and like a Venn diagram as interactive technologies develop many websites fall in between the two types, blurring the lines between

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p10

¹⁵² Op. Cit. Karaflogka, p287

¹⁵³ Op. Cit. Dawson & Cowan, p7

Helland's scheme— especially when considering how integrated social networks are into everyday communication.

The framework set out by Heidi Campbell did better at identifying important aspects found in the websites, but her scheme too does not seem wholly adequate to account for the diversity of what is found online. As a means for spiritual exercise – this is certainly evident; the spiritual value of *darshan* and the live video stream from the Samadhi Mandir allow devotees to “encounter the sacred” via their computer screens. Secondly, the internet as sacramental space is manifested through the website offering virtual *puja* and the numerology-themed websites offering a ‘personalised’ message from Sai Baba, as well as the near ubiquitous inclusion of the name of Sai Baba repeat over and over in websites that allow visitors to comment. These highlight religious activity occurring *in cyberspace*. The third category of Heidi Campbell's four part typology is more problematic than the previous two. The internet as a tool for proselytizing is not a feature that is obvious in the websites dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba – there is evidence testifying to the universality of Sai Baba and many messages which attest to his positive influence; though I would not immediately interpret these as attempts to recruit new followers (most likely because the Sai Baba movement, like the most of Hinduism, is not a rigidly institutionalised and hierarchical body – it does not seek the exclusive membership of new adherents, as a Christian church may); as an information source, there is certainly ample evidence for this given the dissemination of texts such as the *Satcharitra* by blogs and websites. Regarding this idea of the internet as a means of proselytizing, here Campbell's choice of using Christianity as a template for developing a typology becomes apparent. The last part of her typology, the internet as “affirming religious life” and the promotion of a new kind of worldwide community, is most striking in the case of Facebook and the several, extremely popular public Shirdi Sai Baba Facebook profiles. Questions surrounding the cohesiveness of this community will be discussed shortly, but it does represent a way in which followers of Sai Baba have asserted their religious identity with their co-religionists by consciously selecting to become members of these Facebook groups online and share that with their friends and colleagues.

What has been shown is that affiliating oneself online with Shirdi Sai Baba is something that has attracted millions of people. When considering the several, extremely popular Sai Baba Facebook pages, it is important to point out that the 'likes' system does not necessarily mean that these Facebook users are actively engaged in religious practice online. Favourite television shows, sports personalities, or brands of clothing are also 'liked' as individuals subscribe to Facebook pages that represent an interest of theirs or a way in which they would like to present themselves to other Facebook users. Facebook users are able to define themselves through sharing who their favourite actress is or that they support a particular charity, on their individual Facebook profile (what Nancy K. Baym has called "identity work"¹⁵⁴).

Writing in 2000, Dawson wonders whether online groups are "too intermittent or transitory to evoke the sense of we-ness commonly associated with the word community"¹⁵⁵; it is a point also raised by Heidi Campbell, she notes that whilst some interpret the internet as a medium that "liberates people and breeds communities, others believe online relationships are shallow and impersonal". This is certainly my suspicion with the public Shirdi Sai Baba Facebook pages. From the observer, there lacks cohesion and incredibly few people are 'talking' to one another despite the vast membership of these groups extending into the millions. This is less so in the case of the two web forums, where debate and discussions did exist, members reflected on one another's experiences. There are several more similar Facebook pages that have membership of tens of thousands. As mentioned previously, social networks like Facebook pose both opportunities and challenges in terms of research – those who view these pages and leave messages on them far surpass any online community of Sai Baba followers, yet their interaction with other devotees within this particular 'hub' of users appears minimal. This may, however, be due to the way in which Facebook is structured and the privacy restrictions that are built into it limit access to outside observers.

¹⁵⁴ Baym, Nancy. K. (2010) *Social Networks 2.0* in Burnett & Consalvo (eds.)

¹⁵⁵ Op. Cit. Dawson (2004), p396

There is evidence to suggest that the few people who do openly engage in activity online and contribute towards message boards, blogs and social networking are only the tip of a virtual iceberg – research on so-called ‘internet lurkers’ suggest that for every person who creates something new online, nine people will contribute further to it, whilst 90 people will just view, download it or use it and will add no new content. The notion of “participation inequality” in online activity was first uncovered by Jakob Nielsen.¹⁵⁶ In Charles Arthur’s 2006 *Guardian* article ‘*What is the 1% Rule?*’ he writes about statistical data gathered from popular sites such as YouTube and Wikipedia, where the number of contributors is several orders of magnitude smaller than those who simply watch a video or look up an article.¹⁵⁷ There is, when examining the websites people visit, a silent majority whose traces of internet activity are unavailable to other internet users. The statistics offered by the websites themselves lends evidence to this, the numbers of active participants relative to those who were merely viewing showed an obvious disparity in both of the message boards – in the case of the Spiritual India forum the ratio of roughly 200:1 was regularly observed.

If this concept of “participation inequality” is carried over to Facebook, the numbers involved are still considerable. If only 1% of one Shirdi Sai Baba Facebook page (the ‘Sai Baba of Shirdi’ public profile with a membership of 1.6 million) is active, this still amounts to 16,000 people. Although, as mentioned, the “identity work” highlighted by Nancy Baym is also a factor that needs to be taken into account – that people are subscribing to the group as a means to promote their religious affiliation, not necessarily taking part in online religion. Also, social networks by their very nature demand that individuals participate and contribute; their primary purpose is to encourage individuals to form groups, share information/media and communicate with one another.

Campell’s typology of online communities is one that can certainly be transposed on to the online Shirdi Sai Baba websites mentioned in the earlier analysis. In terms of religious identity the

¹⁵⁶ Jakob, Nielsen (2006) *Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Participate* [online]. Available From: http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html

¹⁵⁷ Arthur, Charles (2006) *What is the 1% Rule?* [online]. Available From: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/jul/20/guardianweeklytechnologysection2>

importance of *shraddha* and *saburi* (faith and patience), two very important qualities of any devotee, are ingrained into the online discourse of Sai Baba. It is on the utmost faith in Sai Baba that followers keenly petition him and their unwavering belief in him is portrayed as the basis on which all blessings that they receive are dependent. The notion of patience is found in the responses to appeals to Sai Baba; in the prayers found in the Shirdi Sai Baba Prayer Club blog individuals who leave comments emphasise the importance of patience, if one does so then their prayers are certain to be answered. Secondly, as a spiritual network on a divine mission, both the forums examined identify themselves as a virtual temple or *mandir*. One of the administrators for *Sai Ka Aangan* writes: “He [Sai Baba] graces us by appearing to us in Sai-Ka-Aangan and that is the speciality of our Aangan”¹⁵⁸; similar sentiments are found on the Spiritual India forum – there the administrator tells a story of how Sai Baba built a sacred place out of bricks. The administrator writes: “Do you want to know where is that place? That place is our DwarkaMai. Sai itself (*sic*) chooses bricks across the word. I am lucky to be one of them. We all are the small bricks of this DwarkaMai”.¹⁵⁹ Thirdly, the support network is found both in the blogs but especially in the web forums – the notion of “acceptance to those coming from similar experiences” is very much the basis on which such communities are built. Here the universal message of Sai Baba comes through, and individuals of any religious orientation are generally welcomed. The “sacralisation of cyberspace”, Heidi Campbell’s fourth and final category, is overtly evident in most of the websites. The Shirdi Sai Baba Prayer Club and Shirdy Sai Leelalu are both advertised (and certainly perceived by its users) as sacred channels through which Sai Baba can be reached.

This four part typology for online religious communities does, however, exhibit some overlap between the categories – both online community as support network and online community as spiritual network are somewhat vague and could probably be merged into one category. Despite

¹⁵⁸ Forum post by ‘sree’, forum administrator (24/7/2009) (<http://www.sai-ka-aangan.org/welcome-message-greetings-introductions/2527-sai-ka-aangan.html>) [Accessed 3/9/2012]

¹⁵⁹ Forum post by ‘RAVI’, forum administrator (9/4/2007) (<http://forum.spiritualindia.org/sai-dwarkamai-welcome-message-t16062.0.html>) [Accessed 3/9/2012]

this, Campbell's work is helpful in trying to make sense of religious communities online by beginning to break down and analyse the several features that are common to (and underpin) religious communities in cyberspace.

Evaluation

The phenomenological method which I used in my analysis of the websites is subject to considerable criticism – many of which were succinctly examined in Paul-Francois Tremlett’s 2007 article *The Ethics of Suspicion in the Study of Religion*. Despite the well argued critique of phenomenology offered by Tremlett, he does however note the reformulation and adaptation of the phenomenological method by academics like Flood and Cox, and the staunch defence of the traditional phenomenological approach by Twiss and Conser¹⁶⁰; the continued engagement of scholars with this methodological approach indicates at least the potential for phenomenology to play a fruitful role in the future study of religion. In this study I felt the phenomenological approach was necessary as the volume of content was too great a hurdle to be overcome by an overtly social-scientific method of data gathering. For example, it allowed me to talk about the theme of the thousands of prayers posted online without the need to record and analyse each one.

It has been an incredible challenge to summarise and concatenate an incredible wealth of literature in this brief study. Much has been left out and of course there are concerns that material that would be relevant has been omitted. Taking a broad view meant that only a small number of websites could be dealt with and they were only examined and described in a quite a cursory manner. Such brevity probably does little for a methodological approach that is dependent upon detailed description. Yet, it is hoped that the descriptions that have been included are sufficient to link in with recent scholarship and afford some (albeit tentative) conclusions about how a relatively modern Indian religious movement utilizes the Internet. Many of the studies conducted researching religion on the internet have simply enumerated ‘what is there’, I believe that in this study I have gone further than this and, whilst agreeing with scholarship where appropriate I have also highlighted many of the shortcomings and limitations on making broad statements of how religion

¹⁶⁰ Op. Cit. Tremlett

has manifested itself online, and how difficult it is to arrive at solid conclusions when researching websites. To offer anything but a cursory description of blogs that contain several hundred posts, or web forums that contain tens of thousands of posts, would be a daunting challenge even in a piece of research many times the length of this one. What I hope to have achieved (and this is where a phenomenological approach excels) is to offer a hint or a small sample of the key issues behind each of these websites. I hope to have drawn out the fundamental concerns as they are embedded in what the website creators themselves have put online as well as how individuals have reacted to it and sought to interact with the websites where possible.

Another important issue is one of linguistic ability and online content in languages other than English. Many of the messages and posts made on message boards, Facebook and in blogs were in languages native to India (such as Hindi and Marathi) – none of which I have any competence in and thus omitted them from this study. The analysis of the websites would have been more comprehensive and all of the user-generated content subject to study if this was not a limitation.

The absence of fieldwork is perhaps the one key area where this research could have been better. To speak with and interview those who use the Internet, who own the blogs, are members of the message boards and who count themselves as part of the 1.6 million people who follow Sai Baba on Facebook, would grant an insight into what all these activities mean for those who use them; to move towards an understanding of how they are incorporated into their other, offline, religious practices. Reflecting on the issues in his own study, Helland writes: “there is more to evaluate online religion than just an examination of the setting or the links. The participants must be observable”.¹⁶¹ The absence of this fieldwork, whilst not uncommon in studies looking at religious activity online, is a key area for further research and one that will add considerable depth to this very provisional survey of websites.

¹⁶¹ Op. Cit. Helland (2005), p9

Conclusion

Those aspects of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement that are so commonly discussed in academic literature (and which I had hoped to investigate online) – the ‘composite culture’ that brings together strands of both Muslim and Hindu belief and practice – are actually quite rare when examining how devotees of Sai Baba use the web. Shirdi Sai Baba’s universalism is certainly present, in pictures depicting Sai Baba with a range of other deities, his identity as a Muslim *fakir* briefly mentioned in an animated film about his life, and the comments left on websites that proclaim Sai Baba as a divine incarnation just as Jesus, the Buddha and Muhammad were all point towards an open, universalist theme. Yet these facets of Sai Baba’s identity are not at the fore in his online depiction. The claims made by Rigopoulos, White, McLain and others, about the universalism of Sai Baba are not always expressed clearly via the web but this is not to say that they do not exist at all.

What interested me most was an aspect of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba that did not feature strongly in the academic works written about him. The use of *mantras* and the practice of *likhita japa* that was a near ubiquitous feature on all of the pages where people interacted with the website is a novel means to practice what Helland calls “online religion”. Having not featured in any of the academic studies I had read about religion on the internet, I was surprised to find it being so prominent online. It marks what I believe to be a new and, as I hope my brief survey to have shown, prolific way that Hindus practice their religion in cyberspace – one that certainly merits further, more detailed study.

The theories posited by Christopher Helland, Anastasia Karaflogka and Heidi Campbell all helped to understand what was examined of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement online. Yet as well as concurring with their approaches, there were shortcomings with them. Broadly, the congruity of Hinduism and cyberspace, a notion repeatedly emphasised by scholars such as Heinz Schiefinger, is one that I am inclined to agree with on the basis of this study – although, so little is actually known and the

remarkable lack of fieldwork in this area is surely one area that needs to be addressed before suggestions such as those made by Schiefinger are to be validated with any confidence. Scholarly studies that have focused upon *darshan* and *puja* both seem to concur with what I have found online amongst Sai Baba devotees.

The belief in the omniscience of Sai Baba (including in cyberspace) is clearly reflected in the very direct way in which individuals attempt to reach out to him online – in their prayers and *likhta japa*. The theme of these prayers also accords with the scholarship, they often display a concern with material success (jobs, exams, business deals) that Sai Baba is able to assist with. Online, as in the ‘offline’ tradition, Sai Baba is portrayed as both human and divine; an enigmatic figure who lived in the remains of a disused mosque – he is someone who expresses an ultimate concern in the well-being (spiritual and material) of his devotees. In the freedom with which he placed alongside Hindu deities as well as divine figures from other traditions, the universalism of Sai Baba is manifested. However, the Islamic aspect of Sai Baba is presented only in the context of his universalism and is not given special treatment or seen as something central to his character. The *fakir* Sai Baba discussed in the academic literature is very rarely mentioned online.

Jacobs has written that in relation to Hindu websites, it is impossible to know whether or not they are actually being used by religious adherents – “there is no evidence as yet” writes Jacobs, “that Hindus are actually integrating this possibility into their daily patterns of worship”.¹⁶² By drawing attention to the few that are using the internet as part of their religious lives and charting which areas are growing and which appear most cohesive, which has been the aim of my brief piece of research, initial steps can be made that begin to try and link up the wealth of theoretical material written about what religion and the internet mean when they come together with what is actually there and what is actually happening in cyberspace.

¹⁶² Op. Cit. Jacobs (2010), p98

What is indeed evident is the manifestation of devotion in cyberspace. There is evidence of continuity (the cataloguing of experiences), new and novel practices of devotion (the predominance of *likhita japa* and collaborative *naam japa* in blogs and message boards) and those that exist somewhere between the two, (using the web as a means to reach out to Shirdi Sai Baba in prayer). There is a broad range of websites that span the spectrum from those that focus upon the manifestation of religious ritual online to those that offer only information, directions and opening times. What is more interesting, however, is where these two begin to blur and the online/offline divide begin to break down. Several of the blogs show how there is indeed a contiguousness with what people do online to what people do offline. I am thus inclined to agree with the remarks of several scholars such as Dawson who writes that “[p]eoples’ experiences on the internet are not significantly discontinuous with their offline lives. Continuity is more the norm [...]”.¹⁶³ Her work with Douglas Cowan also firmly reiterates this point; they write: “Cyberspace is not quite as unusual a place as sometimes predicted. Life in cyberspace is in continuity with so-called ‘real life’, and this holds true for religion as well. People are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently”.¹⁶⁴ In the study of Vasquez and Marquardt, they suggest that some scholars have portrayed an “artificial dichotomy between traditional and virtual communities” when in fact they blend into one another in a complimentary, if not wholly unproblematic manner.¹⁶⁵

The next stage is to seek out those who use these websites and attempt to understand the quality of their experiences and where they fit in the broader practices of religion in their everyday lives.

¹⁶³ Op. Cit. Dawson (2004), p394

¹⁶⁴ Op. Cit. Dawson & Cowan, p1

¹⁶⁵ Vasquez, Manuel A. & Marquardt, Marie Friedmann (eds.) (2003) *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across America*. Rutgers University Press, Piscataway. p97

Appendix



Image A - Black and White photograph of Shirdi Sai Baba (Available online from: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/11/Baba_stone.jpg/200px-Baba_stone.jpg)



Image B – Photograph taken at the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi. (Available online from: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-9a0gAcP-JaM/T785ENhb3wI/AAAAAAAAABBM/gN8bOKLkV2s/s1600/sai+baba+samadhi.jpg>)



Image C – Heavily modified picture with original image taken from the *murti* at the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi (Available online from: <http://www.saibabaofindia.com/aug-oct2010/sri-shirdi-sai-baba-samadhi-mandir-darbar-statue-murthi.jpg>)

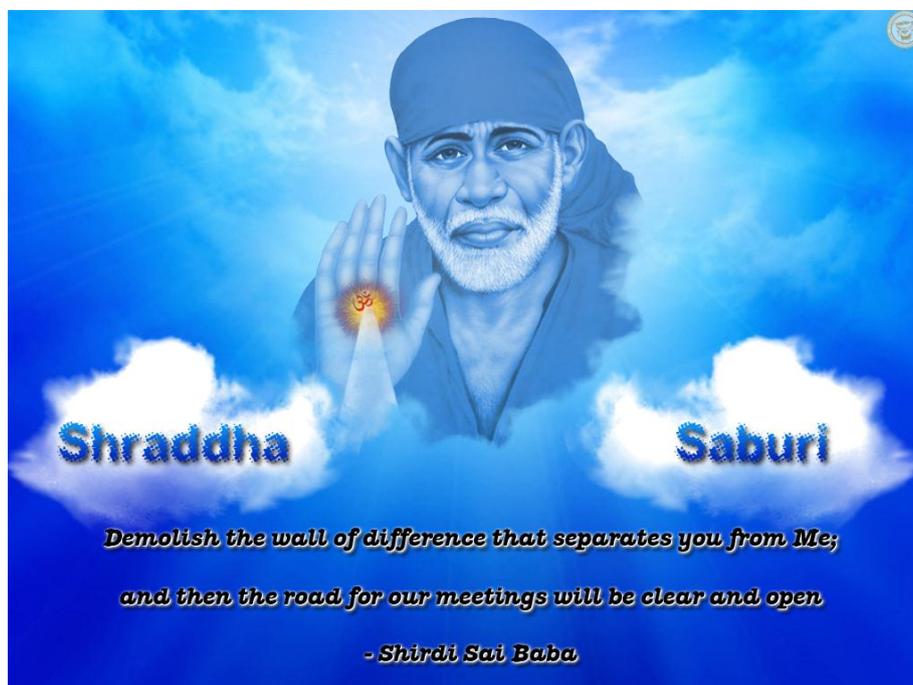


Image D – Picture of Sai Baba flanked by “shraddha” and “saburi”, faith and patience, along with a maxim. (Available online from: <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/p7HlwKFozoU/T1dFSibQwII/AAAAAAMho/GqxIkh9sWDw/s1600/1+5+March+2012.jpg>)

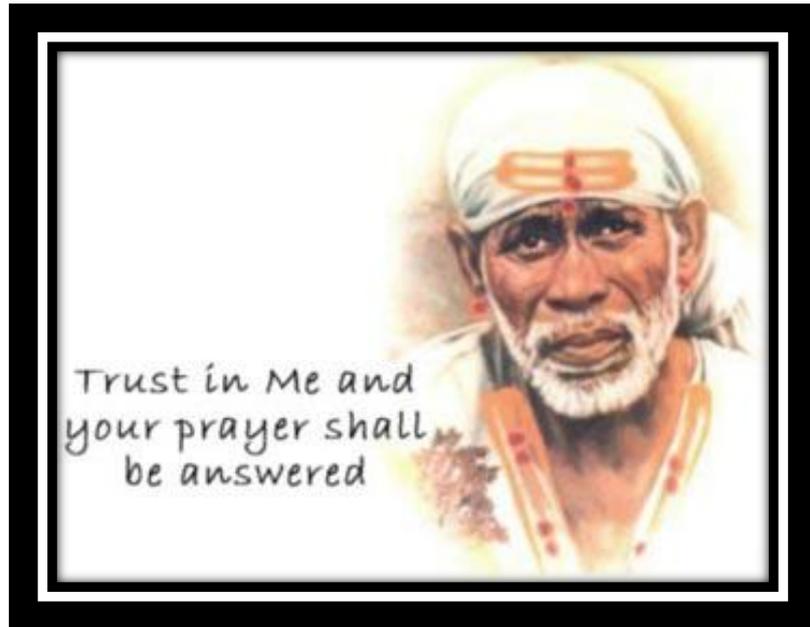


Image E – Artistic representation of Shirdi Sai Baba alongside brief epithet. (Available online from: <http://www.yoursaibaba.com/images/saibaba.jpg>)

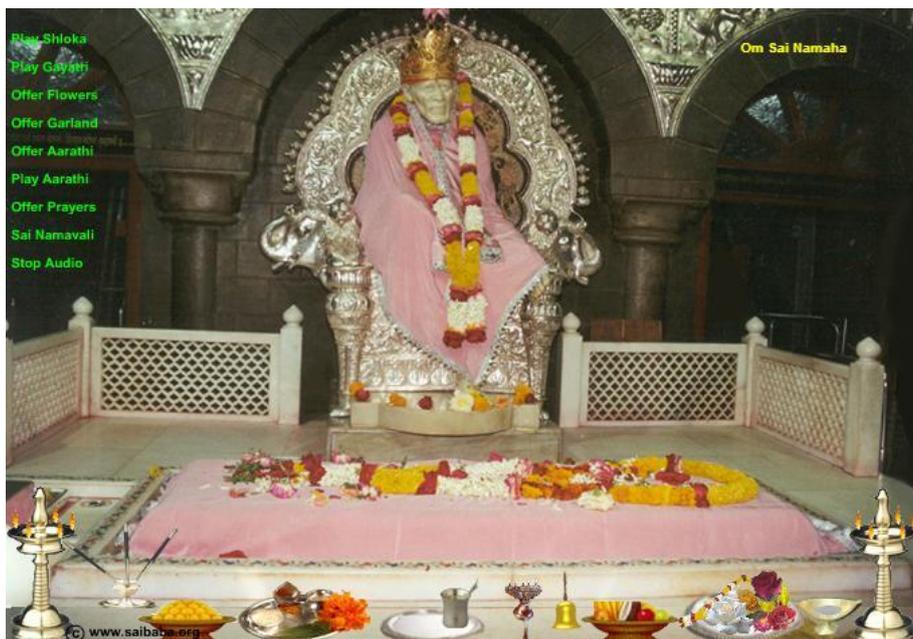


Image F – A screen grab of a 'virtual puja' page (Available online from: <http://www.saibaba.org/pooja/poojaroom.html>)



Image G (designed by 'Kowshik') – Picture featuring Shirdi Sai Baba and Shiva. (Available online from: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_AJLN9CQdImM/SwuRoiK9kfl/AAAAAAAHT8/Xt6t2_a2iCM/s1600/shirdi_7.jpg)



Image H – An artistic representation of Shirdi Sai Baba with Ganesh (Available online from: <http://www.saibabaofindia.com/march09/ganesha-shirdi-sai-baba-wallpaper-3.jpg>)



Image I – An artistic representation of Shirdi Sai Baba along with Rama, Sita and Hanuman (Available online from: http://www.superkrishna.com/contentimages/IMG_1994.jpg)

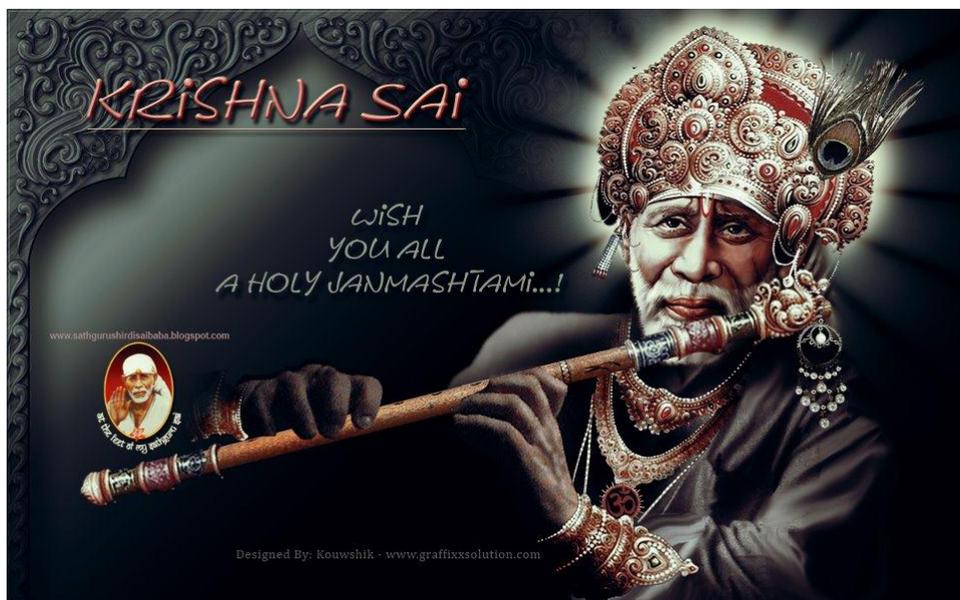


Image J – Shirdi Sai Baba as Krishna (by graffixsolutions) (Available online from: <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-bm3ZOtr-fWc/UCU0ijZMvHI/AAAAAAAAOYc/6rGrRV84tO8/s1600/Janmashtami.jpg>)

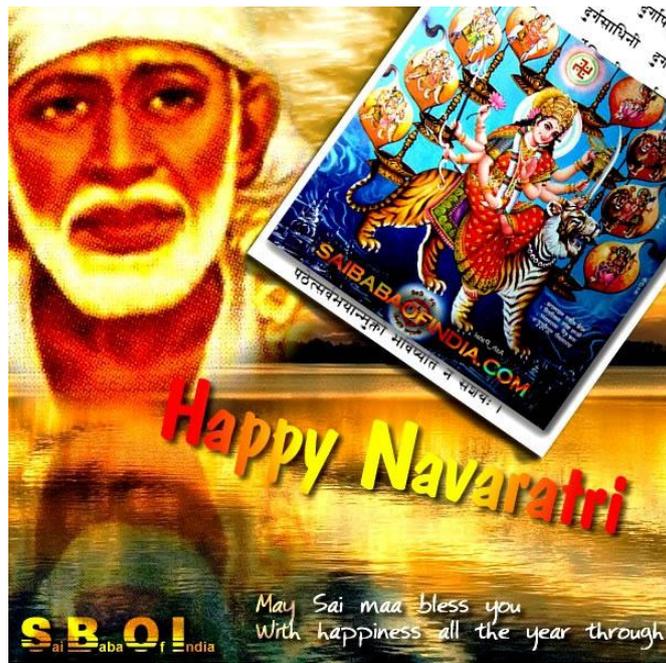


Image K – Image of Sai Baba and Shakti in Navaratri celebration (Available online from: <http://www.saibabaofindia.com/march09/happy-navaratri-sri-shirdi-sai-baba.jpg>)



Image L – A Christmas themed image of Shirdi Sai Baba, Jesus and festive background (Available online from: <http://www.saibabaofindia.com/aug-oct2010/2-sri-shirdi-sai-baba-christmas-wallpaper-greetings-sboi.jpg>)

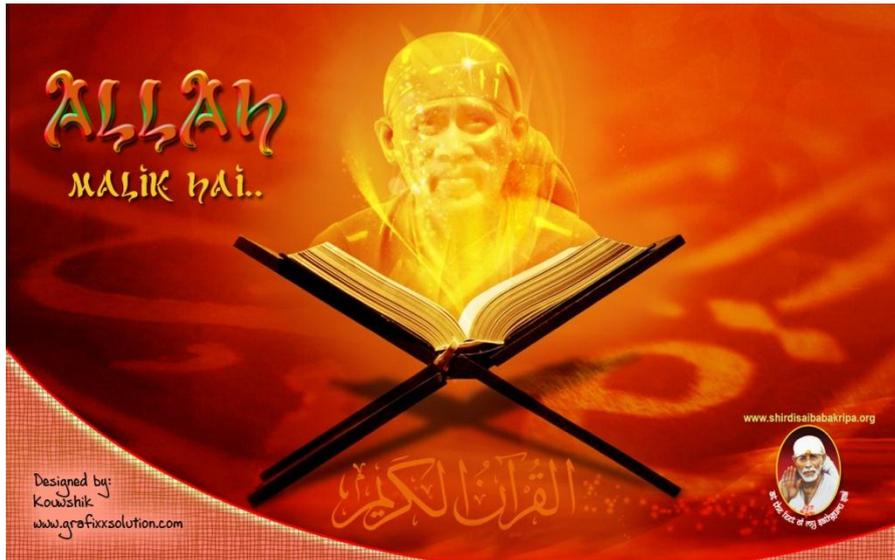


Image M (designed by 'Kowshik') – Picture of Shirdi Sai Baba and Qu'ran in Eid themed image.
 (Available online from: <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Q40ImApbf-M/TluLhYx6Ipl/AAAAAAAAALVc/L2DrySOGL88/s1600/ramzan3.jpg>)



Image N – Eid celebration picture featuring Shirdi Sai Baba (Available online from: <http://www.saibabaofindia.com/Jan-2012-feb/eid-mubarak-eid-ul-fitr-ramadan-shirdi-sai-baba-muslim-saint-islam-unity.jpg>)



Image O– A cartoon-like drawing of Shirdi Sai Baba being worshipped (Available online from:
[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-
RMM17oLMBP4/SpVwKoYzdyI/AAAAAAAAHwI/9xwNPKEspCI/s400/jul_11.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-RMM17oLMBP4/SpVwKoYzdyI/AAAAAAAAHwI/9xwNPKEspCI/s400/jul_11.jpg))

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