RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN SIMULATED SACRED SPACES: A STUDY OF PILGRIMAGES IN DIGITAL MEDIA

Dr. Prabha Shankar Dwivedi
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences,
IIT Tirupati, AP

Dr. Amit Narula
Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,
DAV College, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

Virtually real spaces are emerging as an alternative to the physical spaces. Cyberspace is not entirely new to the world of entertainment, but its entry into sacred spaces, where sheer rules control the community, is inviting the concerns of the priestly communities. The virtual world created with the help of technology has begun to affect the approaches towards pilgrimages. The impact may be perceived to be adverse or favourable depending upon the varied perspectives. This simulacrum of pilgrimages allows enormous freedom to the pilgrims presenting them with a customized to be more real pictures of the houses of worship. The virtual world is more persuasive in comparison to the world we live in, as this cyberworld, unlike the world of restrictions and virtues, discourages the self-denial and persuades the subject to be more indulged into it considering it a replacement. It can prevail on the subject only through its more appealing truth-like imaginary (but not in all cases) pictures. Thisresearcharticle is intended to discuss and assess the impact of the entry of the cyberspace into the sacred space over the religiosity of the communities in India. The paper further examines the complementarity offered by these two spaces for each other.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Religious Communities, Cyberspace, Digital Content.

INTRODUCTION

A simulated world, no doubt, has an appeal for millions of people around the globe, especially forentertainment in leisure and specific mental exercises, but whether these simulacra of sacred spaces are complementing the pilgrimages or substituting them, will be discussed in the article. The discussion in the article encompasses assessing the influence of the computer-interceded environment over the religiosity of people in India. It not only focuses on the 'virtual reality,' in terms of computer-mediated environment, but also refers to the simulation of reality created with the help of technology other than computer, and fictionality. Patrick Maxwell, talking about online religious possibilities, says, "Imagination, visualisation, magic, and metaphor can be interwoven in the experience of today's cyberspace traveller, and all of them are obviously relevant to religious possibilities online" (2002:345).

Simulation of religious space is not strictly confined to the immersive experience instead, it encompasses a wide range of contents that have been helping the pilgrimages in enlightening and attracting the prospective pilgrims through sophisticated picture galleries, historical accounts, and some other tourist attractions nearby.JurajSkačan, talking about this phenomenon, notes, "The issue of virtual reality has been playing an ever more existential role in the lives of individual people and society as such. Bearing in mind Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, we do not want to be limited to viewing virtual reality as defined in most dictionaries and encyclopaedias, i.e., as an alternative three-dimensional world generated by computers. Instead, our broader concept based on media theories includes any depiction of reality by the media." (2017:20). This phenomenon of immersive experience in terms of religious places is comparatively new that somehow is creating prospects and challenges both to the pilgrimages.

Talking about the impact of cyberpilgrimages, Hill-Smith says, "The online 'virtual world' game Second Life offers numerous cyberpilgrimages, allowing users to broaden

their knowledge and experience of religious traditions virtually; and public panorama technologies such as Google Street View are also embracing pilgrimage 'markets'. This highly contemporary expression of the pilgrimage tradition is attracting interest from diverse traditions, increasingly altering the way that faith communities express and experience religiosity." (2011:236). This computer-mediated simulation of pilgrimages grants enormous freedom to the pilgrims by customizing spaces as per their needs. Saied Reza, in this regard, notes, "The virtual space overcomes the limitation of time and place, and makes parallel interaction possible, since religiosity in different places and times comes true for religious people, and the noted limitation would be minimized or removed." (2009:221). The article further argues how this alternate intercession of a virtual world may initially attract people towards it as a substitution to the actuals. Subsequently, it cannot sustain to serve the purpose of religion in the lives of people, particularly in the case of a country like India, where the religio-cultural identity secures a primal place.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The methodology followed in conducting research for this article includes certain sub-genres of qualitative content analysis, like analysing media content, netnographic analysis, and the analysis of the previous literature available. Further, the research was executed through secondary research mixed interpretative methods through the use of scholarly literature to ascertain the main themes that present themselves in the article. For evaluating contents available on the websites, this research will depend on 'netnography', a naturalistic method for interpretation with a combination of elicited and non-elicited data available online without being visible to cultural members (Kozinets et al., 2014:263). This article being interpretative is grounded, as stated earlier, in qualitative research, which seeks to bring forth affective intensities permeating through contemporary houses of worship and their functions.

Virtual Religious Spaces: Virtually Real or Truly Real
Discussing about the virtual pilgrimage MacWilliamscites Shawn Wilbur, "What is a 'virtual pilgrimage'? Shawn Wilbur has noted that 'virtual' typically means something that appears to be but is not real, authentic, or proper. It is important to note that some virtual pilgrimage sites fit this definition. They are informational only, designed to provide clever simulations or representations for instructional purposes." (2002:317). Here, MacWilliams primarily refers to those websites and webpages that are used for promotional purposes. But if we talk exclusively about the immersive virtual space, in some cases, tampering with the recordings of the actual space for creating simulation is considered to be a violation and may cause the loss of faith of pilgrims in this platform.

To understand it further, let us examine 'virtual reality' from the point the word 'virtual' was used for the first time. It was primarily used in the context of imitation of reality on stage, a theatrical performance, which essentially is an amalgamation of fact and fictionality. Literary productions take an audience/spectator with its flow to live in the world created by it, which is neither virtual nor real but a concomitance of the two. However, the audience knows that the film/drama being shown is not real, yet he suspends his disbelief to enjoy the world that resembles his and laughs and cries with pleasures and pains of that world during the time he is involved with the performance.

Talking about the attainment of the enormous popularity of virtual reality, Robin Kabha cites Jurgenson (2011), "The concept of virtual reality reached enormous popularity with the advent of a science fiction movie called "The Matrix," in which the characters resided in a completely virtual world simulated to such precise levels that it was identical to the real world and the character being totally unaware of this. This movie introduced the concept of virtual reality to a massive audience and had a significant cultural impact which still resonates in the contemporary world." (2019:42-43). Virtual reality or VR is widely known as a computer-mediated simulation of reality that projects fictional and physical environments as if real. When a spectator wears the VR headset, he, with the projected environment, gets transported to a supra-real world that he finds in front of his eyes being projected through that machine. And, to enjoy, or to be involved with this supra-real projection, one has to estrange one's cognitive critical faculty and start believing without any

kind of doubt in what is being shown. Here Coleridge's conception of "willing suspension of disbelief" becomes more relevant and meaningful to enjoy this virtual world. Questioning the entity of this world may spoil all its attraction and purpose. So, immersing in this virtually real world, one should forget the actual, and enjoy its created beauty.

This paper not only concentrates on computer-mediated virtual reality but also takes into consideration the reality that is virtual in a literal sense and is produced with the help of technology and imagination. Here, the focus is also centered on an aspect of simulation of reality where virtual reality is presented to be more real than the truly real by adding creativity.

The term 'Virtual Reality' came into existence or in vogue only after it was used in the context of literature or fiction. Antonin Artaud, a French dramatist, poet, and theatre director, used this term in the context of characters and other objects used in theatre, which are unreal. Hereafter, the term was frequently used in the context of fiction, from where it rolled down to its present area, identity, and meaning. Virtual reality works on the principle of exclusion from the source environment. This exclusion sometimes is mere exclusion, and sometimes a replacement of harsh by mild, or sour by sweet though false to please the audience because its success very much depends on the liking and disliking of the people viewing it. And, it is for the sake of pleasing the spectator; therefore, in VR contents, all kinds of things which are more appealing are added.

About virtual, Gilles Deleuze, who is also known as the philosopher of virtual, in one of his most famous books, '*Bergsonism*' writes, "A philosophy like this assumes that the notion of the virtual stops being vague and indeterminate. In itself, it needs to have the highest degree of precision" (1988:94). The point being made here is that virtual doesn't mean unreal, only it is not actual. Deleuze's explanation of virtual goes along with Bergson's understanding of the term. Bergson sees virtual as a part and real as the whole. Today's meaning of the term has deviated a lot from Deleuze's idea of the word, which he expounded in his books. Keith Ansell Pearson in this context writes—

Today, however, the notion is widely treated in imprecise and ill-defined terms, namely, as all the other stuff that is not actual, something like the Universe in its totality and unfathomable complexity. It requires a pluralist ontology since one can speak of diverse modalities of the virtual, even though one is, in fact, speaking of a being of the virtual: for example, one can speak of the virtual or partial object, of the virtual image, virtual memory, and so on (2005:1113).

So, the digression in meaning of the term is criticized by Pearson keeping in view the propositions of Deleuze and Bergson. This term, outside the periphery of Philosophy, loses its philosophical specification and gets explained/defined in terms of literal and current usage that more or less becomes its identity. Deleuze, following Marcel Proust, attempts to explicate the term 'virtuality' in his*Difference and Repetition*, and says, "We opposed the virtual and the real: although it could not have been more precise before now, this terminology must be corrected. The virtual is opposed not to the real but the actual. *The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual*. Exactly what Proust said of states of resonance must be said of the virtual: 'Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'" (1968:208). Here Deleuze's idea of the term is very explicitly put forth. He doesn't consider virtual as unreal, but he also doesn't recognize it as actual as the actual is the source for this virtual to be created.

If we focus our attention on the role of technology apart from virtual reality in deluding and disillusioning people from religion, we'll find that it plays an immense role. It was with the invention of the printing press that religious treatises, scriptures, and simultaneously religion became accessible to common men. After the printing press becamefunctional, the very first significant things published were religious materials. Similarly, if we talk about other scientific inventions that played crucial roles in making religion instilled more in the lives of people, we will find that these inventions, by making God and religion easily accessible to common men, created a big market.This market is simultaneously available for the benefits of even those who are less religious, or, for that matter, consider themselves more rational, who moving beyond the blessings and curses

of God uses the market to the fullest for their benefits. These technological advancements take physical places (site) as raw materials for creating the new version of the same effecting desired changes to produce a more fascinating and enticing virtual world. In various games, many of the places of religious importance having been taken as a raw material of physical places are used, and the creator of Augmented Reality games having the freedom to usurp the sanctity, violates/may violate the norms leading to conflicts and tussles among people.

In VR, the viewer is given the power to navigate through which he can feel like he is walking through the streets. The VR headset bars the viewer from viewing anything else other than the thing being viewed. In the current technological world, two terms are in vogue for the simulation of reality, namely, Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). Both were initially created for recreational purposes with the help of technology. Still, now they have headed towards the various other phases of human lives, particularly religion, which is being influenced by these in both the ways – positively and negatively. Augmented Reality is not the concern of this paper, but it would add to the clarity in understanding VR if it gets explained to be differentiated with similarities and contrasts. VR is entirely a simulation of real-life environments created with the help of a computer and imagination, sometimes excluding things from the real world.

In contrast, Augmented Reality uses the virtual as well as real images for the purpose. The fundamental difference identified is that VR is immersive; with it, the viewer gets immersed in the created environment and feels as if he is in the actual world. Augmented reality (AR) is not immersive like VR, it also is not viewed through any headset like VR headset, and instead it is used through mobile apps and computers/laptops for a similar purpose. It is primarily used for playing games. 'Pokémon Go' is one of the top-rated augmented reality games. Augmented reality creates a totally artificial environment. In it, some juxtaposition is made on the existing physical environment with information, graphics, sound, etc.

VR and AR, in a way, attempt to create a situation where the harsh reality of the physical world/environment is overcome and provides a world more than it exists. The world of virtual reality is bound to be different from the world of harsh realities as its existence depends on its difference from its source. It can persuade the subject only through its more appealing truth-like imaginary figures. Talking about Mark Zuckerberg's vision of new technologies put forth at 'F8 Annual Global Developer Conference' where he expressed his desire to create augmented reality to spice-up the everyday reality of our existing world, SundarSarukkai writes, "It begins with dissatisfaction with the way the world appears before us. It panders to the worst of our human desires when it creates a world which is special to each one of us as if the world should be amenable to our desires rather than the other way around." He continues saying, "Like religion, this new technology begins with a suspicion of the real physical world, always searching for something more than the world outside us. Both technology and religion do so by choosing the physical body as the fulcrum of all problems of the physical. They use selective ideas of liberation and freedom as an escape from the physical." These technological products are gaining popularity more due to the approach of today's world, as we believe that escape is the easiest and the safest thing to accommodate us.

I feel, seeing virtual spaces in contrast to the truly real spaces may not be a correct approach in all cases. I agree with David J. Chalmers's views in this regard, which says, "Virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, virtual objects are real objects, and what goes on in virtual reality is truly real." (2017:309). As some VR platforms, being true to their profession, do not tamper with the actual scenario of the religious spaces maintaining their sacredity, and provide the pilgrim undertaking this virtual journey to the pilgrimage a real-life experience true to the physical one. In this regard, Hill-Smith observes, "Some cyberpilgrimages, such as the *Second Life hajj* can be undertaken on real-life hajj dates to enhance the experience." (2011:238). He further adds,

In Second Life's hajj, cyberpilgrims can 'journey' together in pilgrimage garb via their avatars, an undertaking that can attract large numbers during real-life hajj. Using chat-windows, pilgrims can discuss personal experiences, motivations, thoughts and problems, with other pilgrims, who form visible 'presences' onscreen. Such interconnections, though lacking the depth of real-life face-to-face communication, can certainly help to foster a genuine sense of community, camaraderie, and common purpose, and imply a desire to build closer and more meaningful social interactions online, a point Lorne Dawson explores in 'Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community' (2004, pp. 75–89)." (Hill-Smith, 2011:239-40).

Simulated Space and Religion: Analysis and Examples

These days, a shift in approach can very well be observed that religious places are also using these technological developments for their promotions and other purposes. Many of the holy places provide the opportunity to the whole world to havea virtual tour of those sacred places. The website of the national Tamil daily 'Dinamalar'offers a 360degree view (a virtual tour) to most of the temples situated in Tamilnadulike Minakshi temple, Madurai; Parthsarthy Temple, Chennai; ViyakulaAnnai Church, Madurai; Santhome Church, Chennai; Kazimar Big Mosque, Madurai; JummahPalliVasalPanikulam, Ayyappa temple Sabrimala etc. under the head 'V-Darshana', which present exquisite instances of highly advanced architecture of South India, and are simultaneously promoting, satisfying, and invigorating at least partially the feeling of involvement with the religion. The official website of TamilnaduTourism offers a virtual tour to almost all the temples, churches, mosques, museums, and beautiful and enchanting places like Ootyand Kodaikanal to attract tourists for actual visits. Likewise, Kerala Tourism and some other Indian states are making use of this technology for promoting tourism in the states.

Talking about the virtual church Rev. Dr. Christopher J. Benek, a techno-theologian,and Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church, Floridatold *Hypergrid Business* Magazine, "Numerous persons and groups have developed churches in the virtual world, mainly Second Life," and "I would venture to say that the most have been less concerned with true evangelical success and more focused on what their technological exploratory experience may yield in the future."Dr. Benek goes to the extent of saying in his article titled, 'Virtual Reality is the Future of Religion' published in *h*+Magazinethat we won't even be able to imagine our existence without VR in next 25 years. He, talking about VR and Christianity, says—

One of the largest beneficiaries of this technological development could be the global church because VR is going to change the way that Christians participate in worship. The main impact that VR is going to have on the global church is that it is going to, one-day, enable Christians to easily gather from a variety of places without being in the same physical location. This will enable persons who are homebound, sick, caregivers, without transportation, on vacation, or severely disabled to participate in worship with the larger community of faith without needing to leave the place where they are physically residing.

The move of virtual reality in religion is very swift. In Indian religious spaces, Virtual reality is making its place at a breakneck pace, sensing an immense scope of business for the developers. A news article published in the Indian Express dated April 8, 2016, makes mention of this new shift in the approach of Indian pilgrims who removing their 'chappals or shoes' were entering the small temple-themed stall to experience the virtual as real replacing the actual. The news article depicts people of all ages wearing the VR headsets with the folded hands and reverent hearts overcoming their inability to visit the exact place of KumbhaMela and lord Mahakaal of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. Here, the center of attention for developing VR content was the visit of 75 million people to the pilgrimage facing all sorts of difficulty. To enable people to avoid the journey, and to replace the actual with the virtual, the content developers worked on the project and spent substantial time in developing the content. They received tremendous response from people because physically visiting Ujjain during this Kumbha period is almost impossible for many, but their reverence for lord Mahakaal and Kumbha is

unfathomable. So, utilising the most appropriate time with the thing in the highest demand, i.e., Darshan and Mahakaal Bhasma Aarti though simulated, was quite satisfying for people who could not visit the place actually due to one or the other reasons. Religious tourism space has been identified as the potential place for work for VR and AR industry, which positively will affect India's approach to religion.

The virtual world created by technology affecting the religion will eventually change the culture, society, and ethnicity of a nation. This effect may be measured in both ways depending upon the perception of the evaluator. This VR is a byproduct of simulation and simulacra both; here, some images, ideas, and environment don't have their originals in the existing world, and some are simulated from the actual world only. The terms, 'Simulation, and simulacra' have been used here with their literal meanings to convey the ideas in a better manner.

The virtual world, in comparison to the actual one, is more persuasive as here we have scope to create, include, and exclude based on our choices, but in the world where we live, we have no choice but to live and face whatever comes before. Benson Rajan says, "The religious institutions believe that the digital cannot make up for the physical, as they see digital interactions as a cold form of interaction. It is unlike face-to-face interactions, which are seen as a more desirable means of attaining religious objectives as the individual is emotionally charged in physical encounters." (2019:101-102). However, this world of virtual reality is competent enough to create a Utopian society, which is not possible in reality. A spectator can enjoy the freedom and pleasure of being in Utopia through it and can also feel the awe of being in a dystopian world. However, the feeling would be momentary yet it is possible.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that technological advancements are directly interfering in the lives of people. Though they are virtually easing the journey of life yet actually depriving us of many things which we may not be noticing. Like God, technology demands complete surrender to it for working efficiently as VR can serve the purpose when and only when you are not able

to see anything other than what is being shown. But, simultaneously, speaking strictly about VR, it is going to serve for a better cause to an extent by providing a chance of a virtual visit to those who are not able to visit certain religious places physically. Therefore, we can see and say that the future of this virtual reality is very bright; now, we have to see whether it brightens and expands the feelings and attraction for religious places or darkens by confining them to the VR headsets and screens.

If attention be paid, it can easily be observed that virtual reality, being a product of actual and fictionalenvironment, affects the real in the way the creator wishes. As happens in the case of Sociological criticism, society produces/affects the writer, and in turn, the writer and his writings affect/change the thinking and approach of society. This influence leading to a change in society may be perceived as positive or negative, depending upon the perspective of the perceiver. This VR environment may also create a lot of positive changes in affirming the faith of religious creed by enabling them to overcome the physical obstacles in worshipping their gods in a more peaceful and harmonious (as per their comfort) environment. Enquiring about the difference between virtual and actual Darshan, some responded that in both the cases the God is seen through eyes, feeling a touch, in most of the cases is not allowed or possible due to the place being overcrowded.

Thus, the virtual darshan seems to be more fruitful from the monetary point of view too. But some, who have already visited the temple for quite some time and did the virtual darshan just for the sake of comparison, could explain the difference in a better manner. They believed that in the virtual darshan, some unexplored aspects make them interested in it and also in the actual darshan time for a devotee for being in the temple is a significantconstraint, but here darshan is more thorough. The only difference that dominates is that the virtual darshan is not able to give the feeling that one finds being in the temple actually after facing a lot of hurdles for darshan. But it can be concluded from the foregoing discussion that virtual reality platforms are facilitating darshan, worship, prayer, Aarti etc. to them who are not able to

do all this physically due to some reasons and may produce in days to come more religious and culturally abided persons. The findings noted by Foltz in his article also go similar, "The study found that most people using the Internet for religious purposes use it wisely, well aware of the limitations of electronic communities. It isthe media that islimited, not the participants. Most participants realize the poor and hungry are not found in cyberspace, especially not in customized disembodied communities. Most warn against using the Internet as an escape from the real needsof real people. Most are aware that we have more to say to one another than can be conveyed in binarystructured sentences." (Foltz, 2003:329).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ameli, Saied Reza, (2009). Virtual Religion and Duality of Religious Spaces. Asian Journal of Social Science 37, 208–231.

Ansell Pearson, Keith. "The reality of the virtual: Bergson and Deleuze," MLN (Modern Language Notes], vol. 120, no. 5 (Dec. 2005), 1112-1127. [UM] [Deleuze] DD1704.

Benek, Rev. Christopher. (2015). Virtual Reality is the Future of Religion. h+ Magazine. Retrieved 4 December 2018, from http://hplusmagazine.com/2015/07/16/virt ual-reality-is-the-future-of-religion/

Chalmers, D. J. (2017). The Virtual and the Real. Disputatio, 9(46), 309-352.

Dawson, Lorne L. (2004). Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community. Chapter 6 in: Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas Cowan (eds.), Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet, pp. 75–92. New York/London: Routledge.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Paul Patton, Trans. New York: Columbia U P, 1994.

- - - . *Bergsonism*. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Trans. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

Foltz, Franz, and Frederick Foltz, (2003). Religion on the Internet: Community and Virtual Existence. Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, Vol. 23, No. 4, 321-330.

Hill-Smith, C. (2011). Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience. Religion Compass, 5 (6), 236–246.

Jurgenson, N., 2011. Digital dualism versus augmented reality. The Society Pages, 24. Retrieved 13 March 2019 from, https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/201 1/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmentedreality/.

Kabha, Robin, (2019). Ethical Challenges of Digital Immersive and VR. *Journal of Content, Community & Communication*, 9, p41-49.

Kozinets, R., Dolbec, P. &Earley, A. (2014). Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture through Social Media Data. In Flick, U. edited *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: SAGE Publishing, 262-276.

MacWilliams, Mark W. (2002). Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet. Religion, 32, 315–335.

Maxwell, P. (2002). Virtual Religion in Context. Religio, 32, 343–354.

Prisco, Giulio. (2015) Virtual reality a new frontier for religions. Hypergrid Business. Retrieved 5 December 2018, from, http://www.hypergridbusiness.com/2015/02 /virtual-reality-a-new-frontier-for-religions/

Rajan, Benson, (2019). Smartphones in Churches: An Affective negotiation around Digital Disruptions and Opportunities in Delhi Christian Churches. *Journal of Content, Community & Communication*, 9, 93-104.

Sarukkai, Sundar. (2017). New technology and old religion. The Hindu, Bangalore edition. Retrieved 5 December 2018, from, http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/ne w-technology-and-old-religion/article18429751.ece

Skačan, Juraj (2017). On Virtual Reality of Religion. European Journal of Science and Theology, 13, (6), 15-23.

VDarshan, 360 View. Dinamalar, National Tamil Daily. Retrieved 10 December 2018, from, http://www.dinamalar.com/360_view_detail. asp?id=272#top

Verma, Hansa. (2016). The 360-degree darshan: Virtual Reality finds a new use case around the Ujjain Kumbh. Madhya Pradesh, The Indian Express. Retrieved 10 December 2018, from, http://indianexpress.com/article/ technology/tech-news-technology/kumbh-ujjain-virtual-reality-google-cardboard-oculus-rift-vr-360-degree-darshan-mahakaal-temple/

Virtual Reality, Kerala Tourism. Retrieved 9 December 2018, from, https://www.keralatourism.org/virtual-reality-movies/

Virtual Tour, Tamilnadu Tourism. Retrieved 9 December 2018, from, http://www.tamilnadutourism.org/virtualtour/

Wilbur, Shawn (1997). 'An Archaeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity', in *Internet Culture*, 5–22. Ed. by David Porter. London: Routledge.

***