

SOCIAL PATTERNING THROUGH RITUALISTIC PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

'Puja' is a sacred ceremonial act in the Hindu religion which unifies social groups. The tradition of Puja has persisted through its sanctity and plainness, which has shifted to a more adaptable and individualistic form of doing it. Nonetheless, it remains rigorously and conventionally practised. The temples made the Puja form of worship an important and integral theistic practice of Hinduism. At the manifest level, temple Puja can be considered a unifying act; however, the unity of Puja is not necessarily the unity of the groups. The very act of performing Puja in itself is restricted, and the very fundamentals of the sacred ritual are built upon the power relation. Through an analysis of the various phases and components of temple Puja, the research seeks to uncover how intricate bonds between participants, such as those between the deity and the performer, are established, revealing underlying power dynamics. Additionally, the examination of Puja narratives and prayers sheds light on how these rituals reflect and perpetuate social hierarchies and relationships. By delving into the complexities of temple Puja and its role in shaping social dynamics, this study offers insights into the multifaceted nature of religious practices and their impact on broader social structures. Through this exploration, a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between ritual, power, and social patterning is sought, enriching our comprehension of Hindu religious traditions and their sociocultural significance.

Temple Puja in India

At an onset, analysis of ritual must begin by describing what it is and what is distinctive about performing it. Performance of rituals includes certain acts, gestures and utterances that are of a particular kind with an underlying function that sets them off from the acts performed in all other contexts and situations. The primary function of religion is to promote group solidarity, and

the performance of rituals is regarded as the mechanism through which this solidarity is achieved. Puja is an important religious ceremony in the Hindu religion in which one salutes and worships the deity of one's choice. It can be defined as an act which is performed to connect oneself in some or the other way with the supreme power through an expression of devotion. In Puja, the worshipper cultivates a deep, personal relationship with the deity that might otherwise seem distant and inaccessible. The reasons for performing Puja are many, such as gaining wealth, prosperity, hopes of help, sheer joy and as an expression of love and devotion. Therefore, the performance of rituals is regarded as vital in the Hindu religion as it is believed that everything, i.e., health, happiness, peace, prosperity, progeny, victory, fulfilment and even this whole world emerged out of these rituals and also depended upon it.

It is very difficult to say whence the Puja ceremony evolved in the Hindu religion. The way, the Puja ceremony is practised today was not practised similarly during the Vedic period. The idea of the ritual offering of flowers, incense and other substances as an act of worship to the images of deities came to Hinduism from distant cultures that existed outside the Indian subcontinent. The ritual was considered to be a creative process during the Vedic period. Therefore, distinct ways of worshipping gods were followed by the Vedic people, which involved physical as well as ritual sacrifices accompanied by the invocation of several deities through the chanting of mantras and magical incantations. Evidence of some kind of Puja performances has also been noted in the epic period. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata also provide instances where the main characters (kings or saints) related themselves with their gods through religious fervour by performing ritual worship of gods with the help of some objects.

Apart from the indigenous development of Puja, there have also been foreign sources through which certain elements in the ceremony were added. The contributions of Greeks/ Bactrians/ Kushanas who established their domains in the Indian subcontinent can not be ignored in this respect. Likewise, the role of migrating groups (especially, Dravidians) cannot be ruled out in creating a fusion of cultures and religious practices. The emergence of the Bhakti movement also contributed to the emergence of Puja as a popular form of religious worship among the Indian masses. The growing popularity of Buddhism and Jainism also played an

important role in the development of Puja as a counterattack to religious proliferation by making ritualistic performances public and less elaborate.

During the post-Mauryan period, with the construction of temples all over the subcontinent and the daily worship of deities installed in them by communities of priests following elaborate procedures to appease them, Puja became a very popular religious ceremony. While the methods of worship grew along independent lines in the individual households, depending upon their caste backgrounds, with or without the use of Sanskrit mantras, in the temples the Puja ceremony acquired a more elaborate structure, becoming a separate ritual by itself. With the use of more formal mantras or sacred chants in the invocations and supplications of the deities installed in the temples, necessitating the mediation of priests, it became an integral aspect of temple traditions. The practice of Puja continued to flourish in different forms during the subsequent periods and became the main form of Hindu worship.

Today, Puja is the most common form of divine worship in Hinduism. It is the most popular medium through which a Hindu worshipper communicates with one's god or goddess. There are different forms of Puja performed at different scales and different manners on different occasions, places and times. In this paper, the researcher will try to analyse the idea of social patterning through the everyday evening Puja ceremony conducted in the temples of north India, as the patterns of Puja vary from each other in different parts of the country.

Collective Rituals and Unification of Social Life

Emile Durkheim in his book '*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*' discusses the role of ritualistic performances by claiming that the 'effervescent' state of ritual performance minimizes individual distinctions thereby, emphasizing the unity of the group (Durkheim, 1976). For Durkheim, collective rituals are how individuals bond with one another in the community. Therefore, ritualistic performances are a means for bringing social cohesion in society as their performance requires collective participation. This also points out that religious behaviours serve to promote cooperation among their performers.

In Hindu religion, performances of rituals vary according to 'Space'. Rituals performed in public spaces vary from those performed in private spaces. In Public, they are performed more

collectively by the group whereas; in private, they are performed differently by the head of the households. Therefore, space functions differently in performances of the rituals. Performance of Puja ceremony in the Temple (i.e., a public performance) is a collective act as it is held by a group of individuals who follow a similar pattern of observance of the ritual. With the domestication of Gods, i.e., each house having a temple god, in the form of idols of its own (that also shows the crumbling down of religious disabilities in contemporary society) the participation of people hailing from different backgrounds can also be seen in the various processes and phases of Puja. Though temple Puja is a more elaborate form of Puja and is done several times a day and is performed by a priest/ pujari yet, the other groups also participate in it irrespective of the social divisions.

In addition, the temple deity is considered a resident rather than a guest, so the *Puja* is modified to reflect the same idea. All human beings are accorded a similar position about the deity, i.e., Children/ Dasa's of God who come to its dwelling place. People participate to a greater degree in the performing ceremony which brings worshippers face-to-face with God, in a very personal and touching way, and makes the act of worship a purely emotional affair. The Puja ceremony often reveals strong emotions among participants, motivated by feelings or intended to generate them among the others in what Durkheim calls a state of 'collective consciousness', where group consciousness overpowers the individual consciousness and binds an individual to behave in a particular manner. All the participants undergo a similar state of mind during the performance of the ritual which is reflected through chanting of common bhajans/ hymns, clapping in tune with the genre of the Bhajan and also acceptance of the objects used in the ceremony as sacred such as the 'Aarti Plate/ Thaal' ¹. After chanting hymns, the Aarti is circulated to the deity by which the lamp supposedly acquires the power of the deity, which is then circulated by the priest to all the performers who take blessing from it. Therefore, the objects of the Puja also acquire new meanings bestowed by the collectivity.

Integration or unification of groups is also reflected through the concept of 'Sewa - Bhava'. Sewa is an element of devotion and has always been a part of religious duty. Puja performance does not only involve a priest or mute spectators, but several active participants who directly or indirectly contribute to the making of the ceremony. The Puja commences in the 'Back-Stage' where the preparation for Puja is undertaken involving several people who are assigned different duties, thereby making it a collective act. Several 'Things' are required and

several 'Tasks' have to be performed before Puja such as procuring the ingredients, and offerings which come from different sources (flowers, essence, clothes and jewellery to dress up the idol that are made by people from different communities or backgrounds). Likewise, people from different backgrounds perform the tasks of sweeping and cleaning the 'performing area', i.e., temple premises, making the floral garland merely because of Sewa-Bhava. However, the role of the main performer on 'Front Stage' appears to be that of the temple priest. After the preparatory stage, the participation of 'others', is also seen when the actual performance takes place wherein, the ceremony becomes completely 'Public'.

Participation in the Puja ceremony is not obligatory; one can be part of it as and when he desires and at any phase. Therefore, Puja is a collective act, even if the collectivity is not present or the overt performer is a priest. Religious rituals are performed collectively so that participation of the community is publicly observable, which would also reflect the solidarity or oneness of the social units. The collective performance of the rituals hence enables the expression and reaffirmation of shared beliefs, norms and values that are essential for maintaining communal stability and group harmony.

Puja as a Channel of Communication

In the former part of the paper, the discussion was carried out on how the ritual performances lead to social solidarity. In this part of the paper, the discussion will be carried on how rituals crumble social cohesion. The researcher seeks to examine how ritual performances reflect the images of the social order. Social divisions continue to be expressive in the religious sphere. Puja ceremony reflects the social patterning, i.e., how groups are organised, structured and represented through public performances. In Indian society, man's bonds with others are related to the bonds with tradition that are with the wider community and the god. Purity and impurity are the two poles of the continuum, based on which Indian society is set into different poles. Groups are not just divided or defined based on what poles they are associated with but also in terms of who can, may and does participate in the various spheres of activities related to those groups. At the manifest level, ritual performance may seem to be inclusive and open; however, unity of performance is not necessarily the unity of groups likewise; unity of Puja is not the unity of the groups. Therefore, such division is ideal, real and historical in this case.

During the dynastic rule in India, kings/ Rajas gave images, and festivals of deities to their subjects and the Brahmin priest served on various occasions for performing rituals (Öster,

1984). In that period, Puja ceremony was exclusively performed by the king with the help of the priest, and it was completely a restricted act. However, temple building brought this entirely restricted act within the scenes of the community or the common masses. The temples also belonged to subjects of the king, as deities of the kings were naturally the deities of the people. However, the king's Puja was placed as the epitome and even the community Puja did not supersede the king's Puja. With the breakdown of the kingdoms, the supremacy of the king was replaced by the supremacy of the temple priest. Brahmins have always been regarded as the highest in the social order and started performing worship of the gods in actuality as it was believed that they shared a special relation to god which was earlier of the king. The idea of sacredness that was derived from the 'royal model' came to stand in the same relation to priests as did for the kings. Even today, the priests still maintain their exclusive control over the temples as well as ritual performances (in India) of more complex forms by their caste privileges and their knowledge of the sacred scriptures.

Secondly, the ceremony is a display of hierarchies, power and social relation in the sense that in an obvious manner, it gives primacy to the God (before whom the desire of satisfaction of wants is put forth and there is acceptance of power by the worshippers) as compared to the subjects. This display of power and conflict is also presented through the narratives such as hymns and myths which sometimes contain snippets of information on the life of the gods and are sung in the ceremony such as:

“Jai Jagdambey jagatjan-ni, ashapoorikaromannki—Aarti Maa Jagdambey

Hey Goddess Jagdambey, the mother of all, fulfill all our desires.

“jo dhyayep hallpawe, dukhwinseymannka- Aarti jai jagdish hare”

Whosoever worships you gets a reward; you take away the sorrows from their life

“Tum daata , hum baalaktumhre”

You are the father, all in all, and we are the children

Likewise, Puja not only exhibits the relationship between human and the divine but also among human beings. It is exclusively a restricted act in many ways, as it is purely a casteist/

class act. As Puja is a sacred act hence the very act of performance also requires sacred elements as who would carry these sacred activities (assignment of rites according to the caste), what kind of performance would be taken, what sort of priest would be there, what kind of offerings would be made, who would get involved at what stage or phase of Puja. The very initiating act of the Puja involves purification.

The initiating act or the preparatory stage is restricted or exclusively private one, where the priest prepares himself for the ceremony by making himself clean/ pure by bathing and wearing clothes which are exclusively meant for worship and cleans the stage (where the idol is placed) collects ingredients from different sources and welcomes the god, washes his feet bathes it, puts attire and ornaments purifies his premises with holy incense, lights, flowers, leaves etc. The second phase of Puja becomes all altogether public when devotees from varied backgrounds participate in the secondary activities related to preparation for Puja. The third stage of the Puja also is entirely public as the masses participate in a great number in the ceremony and chant mantras, and hymns and play musical instruments (traditional) as the priest officiates the other rituals with the god.

However, in the fourth stage, the Puja again turns exclusively into an affair between the priest and the god when the curtain is thrown down and the priest serves the food to the deity (Bhog) and the priest leaves the space to allow the god to take the meal. During this stage, the performance reaches its zenith as the whole community gets involved in celebrating the visit of the god, the participation thus shifts from private to public again with the raising of the curtain. In the end, it concludes with offerings made by people and a token of pious food (Prasad, that can be anything like a flower, water etc) given by the temple priest and bowing down before the idol. Low caste participation is not visible even in Puja committees also; they can't worship directly in the temples of higher caste as priests. Lower caste devotees participate under the ritualistic scheme, which reflects their presence in the high caste religious sphere. But, under the ideal scheme, Puja performance is a higher-order cult without the involvement of others below them in the world of desires, profits, power and rule.

There is also a gender dimension to such ritual performances. As it is believed in Hindu religion, men possess a higher degree of religious purity than women. Women are regarded more

like profane beings. It also gets reflected through the idea of why only males serve as priests in the temples and why women (in particular, the singles) can't touch some particular idols and participate in other pious tasks. The touching of the idol is also prohibited by barring the space of the idol. Hence, in a temple Puja, there is often less active participation of others, with the priest acting on behalf of others. Therefore, ritual performances such as Puja ceremony in Hindu Temples (excluding temples of lower caste) set an example of what, why and how groups in the society are brought about by or are perceivable through ritualistic practices.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that religious practices remain important in modern India, even as traditional ideas about royalty become less relevant. Globalization, cultural commercialization, and modernization have transformed the religious landscape, but the core meaning of religion persists as a way to understand new social groups and dynamics. While some priests are reluctant to cross caste boundaries, people from marginalized communities have found ways to reinterpret and engage with Hindu rituals on their terms. This has led to the creation of alternative religious organizations and temples. However, ritual behaviour is still structured, formalized, and stereotyped, mirroring the nature of religion itself. As Durkheim proposed, religion serves as a manifestation of social unity, particularly evident during public religious events where social bonds are strengthened. Religion is truly, what Durkheim states as 'an expression of social cohesion' but it is only during public performance that the social divides seem to disappear as formal and symbolic behaviour attains a collective representation. However, the latent function of the rituals and such ceremonies is a display of power, hierarchy, continuation of traditions, and communication of meanings to the masses about the social order or the social patterning.

Notes:

- I. Deity of one's choice refers to the personal liking of an individual of a particular deity whom he regards as ideal in the hierarchy of gods. Although children grow up following family beliefs, they are encouraged as young adults to make their own choices of which gods or goddesses they find personally inspiring.
- II. As per the Hindu Mythology, it is believed that this whole world emerged out of ritualistic performances.
- III. 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' is a book written by Emile Durkheim. He was among the first to appreciate the unifying nature of religious rituals.

- IV. 'Aartithaal/plate' constitutes certain items such as a lamp with a burning wick, particular types of flowers, leaves and incense. It revolves around the idol when Puja reaches its peak and bhajans are sung. It is later passed on to the devotees to receive blessings from the god and back to the priest.

References

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