

**Amplified Imagery:
Trustworthy Projections of the Goddess from the Shree Mahalaxmi Darśan Livestream**

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THESIS

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This thesis contains transliterations of Sanskrit words whose forms change from source to source, including within the temple's website. There are instances of multiple spellings of the same word within a single webpage. I maintain consistent spellings based on those present on the temple's website and the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) unless directly quoting sources that use a different spelling.

INTRODUCTION

Kolhapur, located near Maharashtra's southern border with Karnataka, was a former princely state and is home to about 500,000 people¹ along with several gods and goddesses. One of the goddesses, Ambabai/Mahalaxmi,² resides in a Chalukya-era temple known locally as the Shree Ambabai Mahalaxmi Temple. The temple resides south of the Panchganga river and east of Lake Rankala and possesses an unusual westward orientation that allows the sun's rays to enter her inner sanctum for a few days each year. Her particular story is laid out in the *Karavira Mahatmya*, which identifies the goddess's victory against a demon and the significance of Kolhapur as a religious site.³ The temple and the entirety of Kolhapur are also considered a *śakti pītha*, or a "seat of *śakti*" where pieces of Sati's body fell to earth during the events of the *dakṣayajña* myth.⁴ As a site of local pilgrimage that also inhabits a separate, wide-reaching pilgrimage network, demand for access is high and continues to rise as the city itself grows.

The Hindu temple as the abode of a *mūrti*, the material embodiment of a god or goddess, exists to grant controlled access to the divine to worshipers. One of the many reasons that a worshiper might desire such reliable access is to take *darśan* with the goddess. The concept of *darśan* pervades South Asia ritual practice. The literal translation of the word from Sanskrit is "sight," but within the context of Hinduism and other religions the word takes on a more

¹ Kolhapur's population totaled 561,837 according to India's 2011 census.

² The goddess goes by either "Ambabai" or "Mahalaxmi" depending on the speaker. In a phone conversation with my grandfather on April 16, 2022, he confirmed that locals refer to her as "Ambabai" while those outside of Kolhapur tend to call her "Shree Mahalaxmi".

³ Tamara Suzanne Jackson Lanaghan. "Transforming the Seat of the Goddess into Visnu's Place: The Complex Layering of Theologies in the "Karavira Mahatmya"." (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2006), 56-57.

⁴ The *dakṣayajña* myth recounts the tale of Shiva's first wife, Sati, whose immolated body fell to the earth piece by piece, producing pilgrimage sites known as *śakti pītha*. D. C. Sircar outlines the narrative in fuller detail in his publication *The Śākta Pīthas*.

significant meaning and at times multiple meanings depending on context. The initial materialization of the goddess into her *mūrti* can make *darśan* possible for devotees who are able to visit her earthly abode. However, issues arise when devotees are not able to visit the temple during operating hours or, as is increasingly more common, they have emigrated away from Kolhapur.

The management committee of the Shree Ambabai Mahalaxmi temple of Kolhapur, India, proposed providing a livestream service as early as 2014.⁵ Well before the Covid-19 pandemic, the temple and the Devasthan Management Committee directly cited increasing demand for guest access to *darśan* with the goddess as a motivating factor for creating a livestream alongside other remote religious services. My first encounter with this livestream was in January 2019 on temple grounds. While standing outside of the temple with my mother and grandmother, I noticed a CCTV installed in a walkway entrance. It displayed a live video feed of the temple's inner sanctum even though the inner sanctum was physically a few yards away. The camera was pointed directly at the *mūrti*, and the framing was composed in a manner that made the feed's purpose clear; if I was interested in taking *darśan*, I did not have to wait in line to enter the temple. Taking *darśan* is no longer dependent on my physically entering the temple.

Soon afterward I visited the temple's website to learn more about this development and discovered that this livestream was also available through the website, iOS, and Android. On the website, the temple attendants and the management committee also provide daily *pūjā* photo uploads and occasionally post recordings of seasonal events such as *kirnotsav*, the few days out of the year when sunlight touches the *mūrti* directly due to the temple's aforementioned

⁵ Vivek Waghmode. "Now, Right Click for e-Darshan of Kolhapur's Goddess Mahalaxmi." *The Times of India* (Mumbai, 2014), Apr. 4, 2014.

westward orientation. The content of the website points not only to increased internet access among locals and temple administrators, but also to an increasing value in incorporating the internet in ritual practice due to its ability to create access to the temple for Kolhapur's diaspora within India and abroad.

My interest in the livestream as a work of visual media was ignited upon reading Madhavi Mallapragada's "Desktop Deities: Hindu Temples, Online Cultures and the Politics of Remediation" and Tulasi Srinavas' *Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*. Mallapragada's concept of "desktop deity culture" speaks to the livestream and website's use value as a medium for representation and common ritual activity facilitated online, while Srinavas' concept of wonder in the context of Hindu ritual practice speaks to the value of the livestream as a novel visual experience that encourages improvisation in ritual practice. While the livestream itself is not improvised, as the process of creating this resource likely required the planning and coordination of multiple parties over a long period, the unique qualities of the medium promote the improvisation of ritual behavior while providing an avenue through which the behavior can be repeated in the future. Thus, the livestream must function both aesthetically and ritually as a suitable image for *darśan* to elevate the temple website from a simple information source to a ritual space in its own right. By doing so, the livestream provides immediate visual access to the goddess for the temple's audience who are otherwise absent. Not only is the livestream accessible regardless of the viewer's distance from Kolhapur, but it also provides a recognizable and thus trustworthy view of the goddess via visual amplification. The livestream is at once a novel and familiar presentation of the divine.

The presentation of the goddess's image within the laterally-oriented, two-dimensional space of the internet can be considered a type of visual amplification that operates similarly to

soundwaves, which expand through physical space radially. That is to say, they spread uniformly outward from a central source. Within this thesis, I argue that the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's livestream similarly acts as a radial, visual amplification of the goddess's *mūrti* in Kolhapur which projects her image into the lateral, democratized (that is to say publicly-accessible) space of the internet. In order to demonstrate this, I draw comparisons to other public ritual spaces such as wayside shrines, monumental icons, and mythological film. Kajri Jain's concept of "iconic exhibition value" in response to Walter Benjamin's ideas of cult/exhibition value provides a springboard for my analysis of the livestream as "mixed use time and space" that emerges as a result of the livestream's residence on the internet. The result of the livestream's format and amplification is an increased visual accessibility for Kolhapur's diaspora both within India and abroad that provides a legitimate/verifiable view of the goddess. Furthermore, it is a view that cannot be reproduced offline. The livestream thus does not act as a replacement for in-person views of the *mūrti*, but instead produces a view that is irreplaceable in its visual form and function as both a tool for worship and as a pathway for connection to the goddess. Arguments for the efficacy of the livestream of Ambabai/Mahalaxmi as both amplified visual media and pathway for ritual practice are at the center of this thesis.

Efficacy within this context relies on the *viewer's* recognition of the livestream's visual forms as efficacious, which is tied to the viewer's sense of the livestream as *trustworthy* rather than as *authentic*. Richard Handler's assessment of authenticity as carrying with it modern, Western notions of individual-centric reality is connected to the sense that one must encounter "the real thing" in order to have the authentic experience. The question of authenticity becomes a problem in the context of this livestream because this modern individualism demands that the individual, their society, their nation, and (for the purposes of this thesis) their religion exist in

“discrete, bounded units.”⁶ However, the livestream dismantles physical and religious boundaries while retaining worshipability in a manner that is sanctioned by the temple and the state in which it resides. By reorienting claims of efficacy away from arguments around the livestream’s “authenticity” within any hierarchy of legitimate worshipable forms, this thesis focuses instead on the image’s ability to create a flexible ritual space and the ways in which the livestream’s worshipability is personally determined by each visitor’s involuntary reaction to the image. These qualities are accomplished through the combination of the real-time nature of the livestream, the novel yet unmanipulated view of the inner sanctum that it provides, and the lack of instruction for ritual behavior within the livestream webpage.

The livestream, while sharing a novel view of the goddess within a new ritual space, evokes in the viewer a sense of recognition through the display of the goddess and inner sanctum. These visual forms are specific to the Shree Ambabai Mahalaxmi temple and have already been determined to be efficacious by in-person devotees. Additionally, the viewer’s recognition of the goddess in Kolhapur is an involuntary reaction to the image, which produces a type of *darśanic* experience that leaves room for spontaneity and fluidity in visual perception. *Darśanic* spontaneity and fluidity are accepted and perhaps implicitly encouraged by the temple website through the webpage’s lack of prescriptive ritual behavior. The livestream effectively lets the viewer determine how they interact with the divine image, allowing each visitor to draw on their personal ritual habits or practices. By relinquishing control over the devotee’s behavior, the livestream is a novel view of the goddess that each viewer can recognize and thus trust as ritually efficacious, even when ritual behavior varies from person to person.

⁶ Richard Handler. “Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 1 (1986), 2.

The first chapter argues that the livestream does not act as a substitute for in-person temple visits, but instead amplifies the goddess's image in order to connect with viewers who are unable or unlikely to enter the physical viewing hall. The chapter begins with an introduction to the temple and the conceptions of *darśan* from which the rest of the thesis operates, as well as new media's acceptance into Hindu practice. I use the categories of religious websites provided by Madhavi Mallapragada in "Desktop Deity Culture" to argue for the website as a representation of the temple within the space of the internet whose power of representation centers rather than replaces the physical temple. By defining just what kind of *darśan* the livestream can provide and just where the livestream itself resides, I draw on Tulasi Srinavas' concept of wonder to characterize the wonder produced by having immediate access to a view of the goddess within her Kolhapur abode no matter how remote the viewer's relative position. This sense of wonder is also due in part to the novel view of the goddess implemented by the livestream that cannot be reproduced in person, which further casts the livestream as a new *darśan*-oriented space that does not merely mimic (and thus does not replace) possible in-person ritual activity.

The second chapter compares the *darśan* livestream with other publicly accessible religious spaces or sacred images to better understand how the livestream achieves its specific method of visual amplification, or projection, that is candid without being voyeuristic. Comparison to immediately accessible religious spaces such as wayside shrines serve to illustrate ways in which conceptions of distance differ between physical landscapes and the virtual space of the internet. Kajri Jain's research on colossal cement statuary provides the foundation to reframe the livestream as an assemblage of materials and social/economic conditions. Additionally, Jain's interrogation of Walter Benjamin's criticism of mass reproduction and the dichotomy between cult and exhibition value in art proves relevant in understanding the *darśan*

livestream's potential for mixed ritual and observational use. The comparison to other new media forms concludes with the discussion of the time-and-space-occupying properties of film and how those properties produce a mixed-use visual experience where the divine occupies a period of time rather than a specific material form. In contrast to film, the livestream is an amplified image of Ambabai/Mahalaxmi whose projection into space and time produces an image that is candid to the point of being mundane, which in turn cultivates a sense of trustworthiness for devotees seeking *darśan*. This sense of trustworthiness is established through the livestream's embrace of the everyday via its presentation of an uninterrupted chronology.

OPTIC-SOMATIC CONNECTION IN THE DARŚAN LIVESTREAM

According to the Shree Mahalaxmi temple⁷ of Kolhapur's website, the goddess Mahalaxmi's schedule begins at 5:00 in the morning when she is awoken and ends at around 10:00 in the evening when she is put to bed.⁸ During the day she receives throngs of visitors coming from nearby and afar. As is common with South Asian temples, the Shree Mahalaxmi temple of Kolhapur has several layers of separation between the profane exterior world and the inner sanctum where the goddess resides. Visitors enter from the street into a courtyard (**Fig. 1**) where temple vendors do business and lay people can visit other temple features such as the neighboring Mahasaraswati and Mahakali shrines. A massive banyan tree on the temple grounds provides some shade from the sun and reprieve from the sun-heated stone ground in the summer. From there, anyone wishing to see Mahalaxmi can enter the queue (**Fig. 2**) which passes through one or two hallways that gradually bring one from the outside to the inside of the temple. Once at the end of the queue, the visitor enters the inner sanctum and finds themselves face to face with the goddess and her attendants. The sanctum is a place of activity; the viewing hall is intimate, so on particularly auspicious days the air is thick with humidity, the smell of incense and flowers, and the hum of movement and worship. Visitors' spoken prayers and instructions from temple attendants bounce off the stone walls, underscored with the rustling of fabric and the jingling of bangles. The goddess Mahalaxmi stands serenely at the center of it all, looking back at the viewer with a set of enamel eyes.

⁷ From this point forward, I will refer to the goddess as Mahalaxmi and the temple as the Shree Mahalaxmi temple.

⁸ Devasthan Management Committee, "Shree Karveer Niwasini Ambabai Mahalaxmi," 2020, <https://www.mahalaxmikolhapur.com/index.php>

Initially, I thought that the local temple setting was at odds with the dematerializing tendencies of the internet and digital media. If a person's experience at the temple is concerned with the material and the sensorial, what possible interest could temples like the Shree Mahalaxmi temple have in maintaining a website, much less hosting a livestream of Mahalaxmi's image there? Answers to this question speak to the physical limitations of the temple setting and force one to consider the reasons why remote access might benefit both visitors and the temple as a reservoir of both religion and culture.

Instead of positioning the livestream as a replacement for the original temple, I posit that the goddess livestream is a visual amplification of the goddess's presence, and to an extent, the temple where she resides. This amplification is accomplished through the real-time projection of her image and her surroundings into the space of the internet. Additionally, the *darśan* available via the livestream cannot be attained in person, due almost entirely to the sense of disembodiment that is unique to the livestream's view. The livestream does not render the temple obsolete but rather promotes the remote devotee's connection to the physical site. The livestream invites viewers to forge their relationship with the goddess even if they reside at a relatively far distance. The dissemination of the goddess's image from the temple into the publicly available space of the internet transforms the livestream and the temple website into amplifiers for her divine presence and undermines sensations of physical distance between viewers and the goddess by allowing the two parties to share time together.

My analysis of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's *darśan* livestream emerges partially from my perspective of a member of one of the livestream's intended audiences. I am a member of Kolhapur's diaspora living abroad in the United States who has a desire to know more about the temple as a site of history and ritual practice. I am in the fortunate position of having visited the

temple at the beginning of 2019, not long after which I learned of the temple's livestream. This analysis, while generally grounded in art historical and anthropological perspectives on new media in Hindu practice, also considers my own observations and experiences as a member of the temple's diaspora so as to provide a more nuanced picture of the types of distances the *darśan* livestream overcomes.

Darśan in South Asia

The ritual activity that seems to be at the center of this temple livestream is *darśan*. A worshipper goes to the temple for a variety of reasons, one of which includes taking *darśan* with the deity's *mūrti* housed there. The *mūrti* is the god or the goddess in physical form, rendered visible for the sake of those who wish to worship them. The *mūrti* could thus be understood as a material vessel within which the deity resides in order to physically receive acts of worship. The forms that a *mūrti* can take are diverse; however, they are commonly three-dimensional and follow aesthetic guidelines in texts such as (but not limited to) *śilpasāstra*, which outline the physical characteristics of a suitable vessel.⁹ While a *mūrti* is not strictly necessary for worship or ritual practice, it is a form of the divine that is often central to worship in a temple setting. The *mūrti* makes it possible to feed, clothe, bathe, and attend to the divine as acts of devotion. The daily schedule of a *mūrti* parallels the daily schedule of a living being. Just as we follow schedules for eating, bathing, and dressing, so do the gods. In the temple setting, Mahalaxmi and other *mūrtis* on site are cared for by temple attendants while her visitors filter in and out with offerings, prayers, and acts of worship.

⁹ Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the divine image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 51.

It is through the *mūrti* that a Hindu takes *darśan*. The term *darśan* generally means “seeing,” but the term describes a specific type of ritual gazing commonly found in South Asia across a variety of religious communities. This form of gazing does not limit the agency of seeing to the viewer, nor is it a passive act. Diana Eck’s description of *darśan* establishes the following: seeing is the same as touching, seeing is the same as knowing or gaining insight, and seeing is a two-way street. Therefore, to see the *mūrti* is to touch and know the *mūrti*, and to see the *mūrti* is to be seen by the *mūrti*. When taking *darśan*, one is touched and known by the god or goddess that is giving *darśan*. It is important here to remember that the *mūrti* and the god are one and the same. The *mūrti* is not merely a likeness of Mahalaxmi; it is Mahalaxmi in material form. The distribution of agency between the goddess and the worshipper in this interaction is also denoted in the vocabulary choices around discussing *darśan*. The goddess manifests herself in the *mūrti* for the benefit of Hindus. According to Eck, when discussing this aspect of worship, the deity “gives” and the worshipper “takes” or “receives” *darśan*.¹⁰ In this way, the creation of and people’s interaction with the *mūrti* centers around the goddess’s agency.

Eck’s research on the topic of *darśan* is a touchstone in discussions of the Hindu ritual practice and often serves as an introduction to the concept for the uninitiated art historian.¹¹ Portions of her book *Darśan: Seeing the divine image in India* generally focus on defining the term *darśan* and the contexts in which one can take it, both textually and practically. As a result, the work characterizes the act of *darśan* as an auspicious interaction between the giver and the receiver in both religious and secular contexts. However, there is an element of bodily

¹⁰ Eck, 6.

¹¹ In “Situating Darśan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century North India,” John E. Cort draws attention to the tendency of art historical discussions regarding South Asian art to cite only Eck’s monograph when defining *darśan* without expanding on or developing her ideas further, if there is any discussion at all.

ambivalence to the ritual act that John Cort, Shaila Bhatti, and Christopher Pinney among others have identified that complicates and often challenges Eck's assertions. John E. Cort specifically characterizes *darśan* as a "super-category" of activity that "encompasses a wide array of practices in South Asia."¹² Reframing the concept as a super-category acknowledges the contributions that non-optical behavior or sensations in the act. Cort, along with Bhatti and Pinney, explore the ways *darśan* can promote a connection between vision and the body. Cort's research on *darśan* with Digambar Jina images in northern India provides an example of optic-somatic unity. Cort observes that the devotees' seemingly involuntary recitation of hymns creates a type of intersensorial *darśan* that is not "ideologically mediated," but rather spontaneously enacted.¹³ Furthermore, Cort's assessment of devotees' inclusion of memorized hymns in this form of ritual practice is that it resembles a type of muscle memory, an ingrained bodily response to the ritual activity that the devotee is undertaking.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Bhatti and Pinney speak of the inextricable relationship between the viewer and the viewed, as well as between sight and bodily response as central to understanding *darśan* as more than an optical activity. With the corpothetic-tendency of *darśan* in mind, Bhatti and Pinney assert that "vision in South Asia, it seems, has never been concerned with just looking: it has always sought in many arenas to incorporate other senses and emotions, uniting vision with the somatic while concurrently diminishing the distance between subject and object."¹⁵ The supposed diminishment of distance between the subject and object is of particular interest to my

¹² John E. Cort, "Situating Darśan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century North India," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012), 7.

¹³ Cort, 14.

¹⁴ Cort, 14-16.

¹⁵ Shaila Bhatti and Christopher Pinney, "Optic-Clash: Modes of Visuality in India." in *A Companion to the Anthropology of India* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 227.

investigation of *darśan* in the livestreaming context, as I find that the distance is not “diminished” as much as it is undermined.

The idea of spontaneous bodily response (or physical sensations of ambivalence) toward the *darśan* livestream is certainly relevant to understanding *darśan* taken from a livestream. The Shree Mahalaxmi temple livestream exists to provide the opportunity for the viewer to take *darśan* yet does not prescribe any specific actions or inactions. Any behavior undertaken by the viewer would thus be the result of impulse or practiced response to the presentation of the goddess’s *mūrti*. Perhaps for many viewers, such as myself, there is no ingrained bodily response to this image beyond the feeling of recognition due to infrequent interaction with the physical image. The livestream thus opens itself to a variety of *darśans*, even potentially allowing the viewer to take multiple types of *darśan* within one visit. The limitation of the livestream as a visual experience, then, is not necessarily a flaw; the livestream should really be seen as a prompt for mental and perhaps even bodily reaction from the viewer. While the livestream might initially seem to embrace oversimplified notions of *darśan* as a solely optical activity, I instead argue that the livestream evokes a fascinating bodily and optical ambivalence that provokes within the individual viewer a spontaneous pathway for *darśan* otherwise unexperienced in other visual media, virtual or physical. Before I can fully describe this bodily and optical ambivalence, I must clarify just *who* the viewer is looking at when they enter the livestream.

Divine Media

The medium of a *mūrti* can often be as worthy of study as its identity.¹⁶ While the images can often be prescribed a set of visual characteristics via texts such as the aforementioned

¹⁶ This argument limits the discussion to manufactured images. There are also examples of geological and landscape features that become *mūrtis*, such as the ones at the center the

śilpasāstra, the material executions of *mūrtis* across time and space are plentiful. Medium often follows function; “permanent” *mūrtis* tend to be made of “permanent” materials like stone and metal while *mūrtis* used only on festival days or who are regularly decommissioned and remade might be made of wood or *terra cruda* to borrow Susan Bean’s terminology for air-dried clay.¹⁷ The vessel for Shree Mahalaxmi in Kolhapur is considered permanent and is thus made from black basalt commonly found in the region. The images’ locations also vary. From formal temples to wayside shrines to private home shrines, there are numerous contexts for worshippers to encounter these embodied forms of the divine. This potential for variety in location also allows for a greater diversity in scale, material, and format of divine vessels, from monumental icons to nearly life-size sculptures with features carved in the round to smaller, simpler figures that can be easily replaced.

Across scale, setting, and medium, *mūrtis* still retain a few key similarities. For anthropomorphic imagery (and the purposes of my investigation), the eyes are a feature of great interest. This is because the eyes are the site of *darśan*. The practice of *darśan* can be seen as desirable in both the context of *pūjā* and as an act of devotion in its own right. The desirability of *darśan* with the divine as the driving force of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple’s establishment of their *darśan* livestream. The key justification for this view is the availability of the livestream on both the temple grounds and the internet. The same stream can be viewed both virtually via computer/smartphone and “in person” via a flatscreen monitor installed outside of the inner sanctum. From a crowd-management perspective, it is clear that the implementation of the “in

Kamakhya temple in Assam or the Guhyeshwari temple in Nepal. These are described as *swayambhu*, or self-manifested.

¹⁷ Susan S. Bean, “Making, Using, Disposing, Remaking...: Terra cruda Sculpture as an Art of Re-creation in Southern Asia,” (symposium presentation, American Council for Southern Asian Art, Athens, GA, April 10, 2022).

person” livestream within the physical temple is intended to reduce the number of devotees waiting to enter the *darśan mandapa*, or the viewing hall, by addressing the needs of those visitors primarily seeking *darśan* during their temple visit. Whether or not this actually reduces the number of people entering the *darśan mandapa*, the livestream’s installation within the temple grounds indicates the temple’s approval of the stream as a source of *darśan*. Therefore, the livestream when viewed through laptop or smartphone screen is also intended to satisfy viewers who have a desire for *darśan* with the Shree Mahalaxmi *mūrti* in Kolhapur.

This is not the first instance of temples and Hindus at large incorporating new media and technological developments in ritual practice. Heinz Scheifinger and Stephen Jacobs among many others have extensively covered the historical and contemporary adoptions of newer media forms into wider Hindu practice. In “Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context,” Jacobs cites the introduction of print to the subcontinent as the site at which the concept of “Hinduism” as a religion emerges. According to Jacobs, the publishing of the Raja Rammohun Roy’s writings and translations of sacred texts in the early 19th century “was a significant factor in the conceptualization of Hinduism as an imagined (religious) community.”¹⁸ From this point, Jacobs gives an overview of other media forms commonly adopted in Hindu practice, such as God posters, photo icons, film, television, and ultimately internet livestream. A fuller exploration of the aesthetic and sensorial similarities of the *darśan* livestream and previously adopted media occurs in the next section. Here, I unpack potential uses for the livestream, as well as the potential impact of this kind of access on its intended audiences, as well as its unintended audiences.

¹⁸ Stephen Jacobs, “Communicating Hinduism in a Changing Media Context,” *Religion Compass* 6/2 (2012), 138.

Heinz Scheifinger briefly addresses the efficacy of *darśan* via webcam in “Online Hinduism” in the context of the Siddhivinayak temple’s projections of their Ganeśa *mūrti* via livestream. The livestream’s content is described similarly to the one on the Shree Mahalaxmi temple’s website, where both the *mūrti* and the temple attendants’ activity are on display. While somewhat overshadowed by the phenomenon of online cremation and virtual *pūjā*, Scheifinger’s assessment of the *darśan* livestream concept is that it “constitutes a unique development within Hinduism and is particularly beneficial to those Hindus in the diaspora who feel affinity with the Siddhivinayak temple and/or are especially attracted to worship of the temple’s *Ganeśa mūrti*.”¹⁹ In other words, Scheifinger finds it feasible that there would be an audience for both the Siddhivinayak temple as a place as well as the particular *mūrti* housed there. The livestream thus acts as connection to the *mūrti* for the initiated audience and as a possible avenue for advertising Siddhivinayak temple’s significance as a place.

This interest in appealing to established and potential audiences was essentially the intention of the “Shree Ambabai Live Darshan App” which was released to the Google Play Store circa 2017; the president of the temple’s management committee at the time of the app’s development stated, “We aim to provide hassle-free darshan of goddess Mahalaxmi... We will be able to reach out to maximum people through social media and spread information about the significance of the temple and Kolhapur.”²⁰ According to Vivek Waghmode’s 2017 article in *The Times of India*, the app had “500 to 1000”²¹ downloads at the time of writing. While data on the distribution of users’ locations is not available, the quantity of users so soon after the app’s

¹⁹ Heinz Scheifinger, “Online Hinduism.” In *The Oxford History of Hinduism: Modern Hinduism*, ed. Torkel Brekke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166.

²⁰ Vivek Waghmode, “Mobile App to Make Mahalaxmi Temple Live ‘Darshan’ Easier.” *Times of India (Bombay, India)*, October 24, 2017.

²¹ *Ibid.*

development does point to an interest in immediate, albeit remote, access to this specific goddess located in Kolhapur.

Scheifinger's stance on the suitability of online forms such as a *darśan* livestream for Hindu practice comes from a theoretical perspective. While *darśan* and even *pūjā* via the internet are activities that can be justified theoretically, the mere existence of livestreams that provide images for worship and ritual services does not reveal information about their actual usage by devotees. Nicole Karapanagiotis identified and addressed this blind spot in "Cyber Forms, 'Worshipable Forms': Hindu Devotional Viewpoints on the Ontology of Cyber-Gods and -Goddesses" through the investigation of the ontological status of a god's "cyber-image" among devotees. The category of "cyber-image" is applicable to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream, as it is a form of the goddess whose image is composed of pixels and whose *darśan* is mediated by the computer and its screen.²²

Karapanagiotis' survey of Hindus both within India and abroad across multiple continents brings forth questions and observations that are relevant to discussion of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple livestream. While the livestream provides an image of a *mūrti*, is the image itself also a *mūrti*? Furthermore, is it a "worshipable form," defined as a form of God "that is powerful, special, and emotionally evocative enough to a given devotee so as to command worship or reverence,"²³ to use Karapanagiotis' words? Karapanagiotis uncovers a range of arguments both for and against the categorization of cyber-forms as *mūrtis* that simultaneously unveil a variety of perspectives on divine embodiment in Hindu practices. Karapanagiotis reports

²² Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Cyber Forms, 'Worshipable Forms': Hindu Devotional Viewpoints on the Ontology of Cyber-Gods and -Goddesses." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013), 57-58.

²³ Karapanagiotis, 74.

that the majority of the people surveyed considered cyber-forms of deities to be full forms of the God or Goddess and that “it seems, therefore, that at least ontologically speaking, devotees believe that taking *darśan* of cyber-forms of God and taking *darśan* of non-cyber forms of God are functionally equivalent.”²⁴ This majority becomes split, however, when asked if cyber-forms are *mūrtis*. According to Karapanagiotis, the worshipability of a deity’s image may often derive from an individual’s internal response to the presentation or framing of the image.²⁵ Of note is the group of people in Karapanagiotis’s study who deny cyber-forms’ status as *mūrtis* because of the image’s capacity to vanish, which is perceived as an unacceptable instability.

While I cannot report that the majority of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple’s visitors or would-be visitors had a similar response to the livestream as a divine cyber-form without conducting a survey of my own, I posit that we can address the temple management committee’s intention for the worshipability of the livestream image through the lens that Karapanagiotis provides. The management committee exhibits a desire for a high *devotional value* of the livestream through the framing and aesthetic choices evident in the stream’s execution, both of which are concerns that Karapanagiotis cites as central to understanding worshipability in this context²⁶ and both of which are subject to analysis in later sections of this chapter. In order to understand how the website produces potential for the livestream’s worshipability and variety of pathways for *darśan*, I draw upon Madhavi Mallapragada’s ideas of “desktop deity culture.”

The Livestream and Desktop Deity Culture

Madhavi Mallapragada’s concept of “desktop deity culture” is useful in understanding just what kind of website the Shree Mahalaxmi temple has produced and how the management

²⁴ Karapanagiotis, 64.

²⁵ Karapanagiotis, 75-76.

²⁶ Karapanagiotis, 74-75.

committee's push to increase the goddess's availability fits into similar trends in online ritual practice. While Mallapragada's concept of "desktop deity culture" covers a broad range of ritual spaces and behaviors on the internet, the three categories of temple websites that the author describes illuminate the changing shape of worshippers' relationship to the temple as a site of worship. Using Mallapragada's website categories, one can envision the website less as a flat series of webpages and more as a representative of the temple in online space. Furthermore, rather than complicating classification of the Shree Mahalaxmi website within Mallapragada's framework, I suggest that the introduction of the livestream *darśan* service cements the website's identity and intended use as a digital representative of the temple site.

Mallapragada fleshes out three categories that websites for Hindu practice generally fall under: "(1) the temple homepage, which functions as the online home for a physical temple; (2) the commercial *pūjā* site, which facilitates ritual services in prominent temples on behalf of their clients for a fee; and (3) the Hindu discourse site, which presents the temple as a virtual space for mediation, prayer, and explication of Hindu religious discourse."²⁷ The Shree Mahalaxmi temple website falls firmly within the category of "temple homepage" even with the addition of the livestream. That is, the website specifically represents the physical site of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple of Kolhapur over the internet. While we can observe this solely through the URL and the information sections of the website, the incorporation of the livestream pushes the website further into this category by challenging and renegotiating the boundaries between the physical temple grounds and virtual space. When addressing the Hindu Temple of Atlanta's homepage's hypertextuality, Mallapragada recognizes that the HTA's provision of online access to ritual and

²⁷ Madhavi Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities: Hindu Temples, Online Cultures and the Politics of Remediation." *South Asian Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 1, 2010), 110.

communal resources does not negate the relevance of the temple as a physical place. Instead Mallapragada asserts that “often, such negotiations involve making some services of the temple network-accessible while simultaneously privileging the temple’s physical identity.”²⁸

Much like the HTA website at the time of Mallapragada’s writing, the Shree Mahalaxmi website has sections dedicated to the temple’s history (**Fig. 3**), photo galleries (**Fig. 4**), and the temple’s daily schedule (**Fig. 5**). Both websites also provide visitors with a variety of means for donating to the temple. With these sections along with daily *pūjā* photo uploads and the *darśan* livestream, the website deploys “aspects of digital media such as hypertextual connectivity, virtual forms of dis/embodiment and im/materiality and mobile flows of capital and culture...to pay service to place-centric, embodied and material practices shaping Hindu temple cultures.”²⁹ Focusing specifically on the visuality of the livestream and *pūjā* photos, the Shree Mahalaxmi temple website employs photography and video technology to produce that sense of hypertextual connectivity primarily through their live, virtual display of the goddess’s physical image from its position within the *darśan mandapa*. Mallapragada refers to the temple website as a hypertext³⁰ that derives its content (and, to an extent, form) from the physical temple, which acts as the hypotext, in order to illustrate the nature of the relationship between both places. For the purposes of my argument, the *darśan* livestream and daily *pūjā* photos act as the hypertext to the *darśan mandapa* facing the goddess’s *mūrti* in Kolhapur. This particular hypertextual connection is also the source of the website’s “virtual forms of dis/embodiment and im/materiality” because

²⁸ Mallapragada, 112.

²⁹ Mallapragada, 111.

³⁰ Not to be confused with hypertext in computing.

the hypotext (i.e., the viewing hall) is a place within the temple that is alluded to by the position of the camera within the livestream/photos.

Using Mallapragada's logic, the website and thus the livestream do not undermine the importance of the temple as a physical place, but instead serve to promote it by employing technological developments in e-commerce, web design, and livestreaming. Rather than just serving as a basic informational webpage that would abstract the temple as a place, the current temple website conveys a sense of continuous activity through their multimedia display of the goddess's daily schedule, regularly updated photo galleries, and contemporary images of the temple and its grounds. The livestream amplifies the temple's presence and the importance of the physical temple within its framing by placing the camera in the *darśan mandapa* so that the viewer faces the *mūrti*. By emphasizing the contemporary visuality of the goddess and her abode, the website testifies to the original site's continued relevance. In a sense, the Shree Mahalaxmi temple has been able to appropriate tools that we might associate with secular interests (e.g., telecommunication, e-commerce, social media³¹) in order to reach potential devotees who reside outside of Kolhapur and whose access to the internet can be leveraged to help close that distance. Most importantly, the website also retains the physical temple's relevance, particularly in the realm of ritual practice, by maintaining the temple's identity as a site in Kolhapur. For example, by embedding a link within the website that connects to the city government's tourism webpage, website visitors are reminded that they are reading about and supporting a physical place.

³¹ While Mallapragada might not have been able to predict the trajectory of social media platforms' development and popularity in the decade following 2010, I rely on her argument of temple websites acting as representatives in virtual space in my discussion of the temple's social media accounts.

The livestream also confirms that the website is a forward-facing realm meant to represent but not embody the experience of visiting the temple, which is particularly useful for those who were unfamiliar with the temple before visiting the website. For this audience, the livestream provides visual evidence of the temple's layered history and identity that makes the temple and the goddess real. For example, they can see the goddess's centuries-old vessel alongside newer architectural and decorative elements. If they happen to watch the livestream while the attendants bathe and dress the *mūrti*, viewers can watch as the original stone sculpture of the vessel is enhanced by the application of enamel eyes, brass-colored feet, and saris with bright colors produced through modern dying techniques and textile production (**Fig. 6**). Rather than focusing on the precise date of the *mūrti*'s origin, the website describes her physical characteristics while the livestream instead emphasizes how she lives from moment to moment. Seeing the center of an active, Medieval-era temple helps newcomers envision the temple beyond the abstraction produced from reliance on textual or oral description alone. For the informed audience or an audience already invested in Shree Mahalaxmi temple, however, there is a different logic to understanding the livestream's ability to disseminate the goddess's image. In this case, the technology of livestream amplifies the goddess's image in order to reduce the feeling of physical distance to the goddess herself.

The Livestream as a Technology of Wonder

Another concept that can be applied to the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's livestream is Tulasi Srinavas' "technology of wonder."³² While not quite as awe-inspiring as the animatronic Devi for Navaratri or the mythical Garuda-helicopter that Srinavas discusses, the creation and

³² Tulasi Srinavas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 138.

implementation of the livestream experiment with new modes of ritual practice. It is a similar form of experimentation seen in Srinavas' experience in "FaceTiming God" when the author was able to request and participate in several healing rituals performed by priests in a specific temple in Bangalore from abroad via the internet.³³ "FaceTiming" and livestreaming are not synonymous experiences, but they both allow remote video connection between physically distant parties via network access. The *darśan* stream thus provides a similar sense of spatial and visual immediacy, as well as the sense that one is sharing their time with the goddess.

I often take this route to enter the livestream: type in the first few letters of the URL until it autocompletes and tap the enter key. I scroll down the homepage until I find the link that advertises a virtual *darśan* livestream with the Shree Mahalaxmi. I click the link and wait for the page to load. Once the page loads, I wait on the buffering video window for a short moment before the livestream and subsequently the goddess come into view. She stands quietly in the center of the video, gazing back at me (**Fig. 7**). Since the livestream provides no sound or movement of its own,³⁴ the live appearance of the goddess is marked by silence and often catches me by surprise when the page has fully loaded when I was not looking. The portion of the inner sanctum where the *mūrti* resides is brightly lit by a non-tinted light source, making shadows scarce. This is because the fixed camera shows only the *mūrti* and her immediate surroundings, which are well-lit within the inner sanctum. Other portions of the room, particularly where the visitors stand to view the *mūrti*, are more dimly lit in real life but cannot be seen on camera.

³³ Srinavas, 164.

³⁴ Some exceptions apply, of course. Often there is a recording of a festival livestream present on the page as well that, when clicked, plays the recording with an overlaid audio (usually a recorded *stotram*).

When fully dressed, the *mūrti* sports a sari with associated underclothing, detachable eyes and feet, and gold accessories. The enamel eyes in particular stand out. They are white with stark black irises and pupils, which contrast with the dark stone and quickly catch the viewer's attention. Both in virtual and physical spaces, this is intended to facilitate *darśan*. The *mūrti* is framed in the foreground by a silver-colored façade that includes architectural elements such as a pillared archway which allows the viewer to see into Mahalaxmi's space. While the archway's gap is meant to highlight the form of the goddess, there are also gaps which let the viewer see into the left and right "wings" of the *mūrti*'s space. This is where attendants place tools for *pūjā* as well as her clothing and bathing supplies when not in use. This visual access to the staging area existed before the implementation of the livestream and likely makes an appearance in the stream as a result of the 16:9 framing ratio that has become standard in online video format. The visibility of these wings highlights not just the space of the *mūrti*, but also the movement of her attendants in their service of her.

The framing of the livestream induces a sensation of being at eye level with the *mūrti* as she stands on her platform. This is not something the viewer really notices until an attendant comes into frame, which is when the camera's height from the ground becomes apparent (**Fig. 8**). People who appear on stream, when not standing on the *mūrti*'s platform, appear quite short. When not sneaking glances at the camera, their gazes are often set at what feels like my stomach. The overall sensation is that of being disembodied and suspended in air at the *mūrti*'s platform's height. It is at these moments that I might start to realize that I occupy the position not only of a person, but also of a camera. Visitors to the Shree Mahalaxmi Temple livestream experience a sort of collapsing of space, allowing them to more easily share time with both the goddess and the temple as a whole without the burden of travel. The ability to share the experience of this

specific temple with people who are not physically present in Kolhapur or even India is what constitutes the wonder of the livestream.

Srinavas describes experimental Hinduism as a practice in which homage to the deity, prayer, and worship are often merged. While I would not categorize worship of Mahalaxmi in Kolhapur as experimental Hinduism, the *darśan* livestream is certainly an experimental form of ritual practice that allows one the freedom of time and space to merge all three ritual behaviors. This idea of sharing, be it the sharing of time and gazes between the devotee and the goddess or the temple's sharing of the goddess's image, is also at the core of the temple's management committee's self-described mission for the livestream and the app.³⁵ The livestream literally shares the goddess and her temple with the public, connecting Kolhapur as the home of Mahalaxmi to the world beyond. Srinavas articulates the power of this form of sharing in the generation of wonder with the following:

Through sharing, we gain an understanding of prayer not as a silent return to the interior of the reflective subject but as an agentive state in which the material and the technological become an apparatus in creating intersubjective wonder. As with prayer, wonder is a subjective and transformative experience, but one made more meaningful by sharing with others.³⁶

The notion that one is sharing this view of the goddess with any number of viewers located in a variety of places itself produces wonder. In this case, not knowing the explicit number of audience members allows the livestream's visitor to imagine themselves as viewing the stream in isolation or in a crowd with whom they undergo a single experience. And from another

³⁵ Vivek Waghmode, "Mobile App to Make Mahalaxmi Temple Live 'Darshan' Easier." *Times of India (Bombay, India)*, October 24, 2017.

³⁶ Srinavas, 140.

perspective, the ability to share time with the goddess throughout the day has the potential to transform one's relationship with the goddess and her temple. I also argue that *interpersonal* sharing of the livestream with others produces meaningful experiences in the right circumstances. Speaking from my own experience with sharing and the wonder it produces, nearly every person to whom I have shown the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's *darśan* livestream has had a positive reaction to it, regardless of religious affiliation or even familiarity with Hindu practice. Very frequently, I have been asked to provide the link to the livestream so that the person asking could revisit it when they had the chance. Even members of my own family who frequently visit Kolhapur and the Shree Mahalaxmi temple have expressed interest or even delight at the existence of the livestream if they were not already aware of it. The act of sharing the livestream regularly fosters questions or discussions about the temple, the goddess, and Kolhapur in my experience. While this experience is not the result of systemic fieldwork, I find that as an incidental observation it bears a resemblance to the intersubjective wonder that Srinavas describes.

Srinavas' characterization of wonder helps explain the wonder produced through the sharing of time with the goddess and other viewers, but I assert that the wonder of the livestream does not translate into any sort of spatial collapse between the devotee and Mahalaxmi in Kolhapur. Viewers of the livestream do not get the sense that they have been transported across space into the inner sanctum. The aforementioned notion of disembodiment emerges as a result of this. Viewers of the livestream are instead embodied by the stationary camera within the space of the temple, while the viewer themselves cannot see the camera from which they view. Additionally, when people in the temple look into the lens of the camera, they see only the device and not the person/people gazing back. While the viewer's position relative to the *mūrti*

remains distinct from that of a physical visitor, the ability to share time with the goddess and to share the goddess with the world does not erase the centrality of the physical temple. In fact, the livestream and its shareability emphasize the notion that the viewer is in a place where the temple and the *mūrti* are not. Whereas the viewer's position in space constantly changes, the view of the *mūrti* and the livestream's camera placement remain fixed physically and temporally.

For members of the diaspora living abroad, we are still bound by the time difference between where we live and the local time of Kolhapur. Kolhapur is about ten hours ahead of the U.S. Eastern Standard Time. Visiting the livestream at noon in most regions of the United States yields a view of a pair of closed doors (**Fig. 9**), behind which the goddess is resting. Furthermore, the ability to see these closed doors is only possible through the livestream; the entirety of the temple grounds is closed during these hours. The camera cannot be removed from the temple grounds the way a person can, and to a broader extent cannot interact with or be interacted with the way a person can.

This is what makes the limitation of the livestream's medium a strength; while watching the livestream, I am acutely aware of my lack of physical presence when a temple attendant looks past me and when moving my eyes does not yield a different view of the inner sanctum. I cannot experience the sounds, smells, or other physical sensations of the space nor do I expect to. If my internet connection is weak and causes the livestream to buffer, it is not as if I suddenly disappear from the room in the middle of taking *darśan*. The wonder of the livestream is in its ability to undermine the sensation of distance between the devotee and the goddess rather than an ability to transport the viewer. Just as a FaceTime call makes one feel as if they are sharing their time with a physically distant person by presenting their face on a screen, the livestream

similarly makes one feel as if they face to face with the goddess despite their distance from the *mūrti*.

The Website and Social Media

The main page of the website for the Shree Mahalaxmi temple has four icons that link to the temple's various social media accounts; from left to right they are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter.³⁷ Each of these, like the main website, is run by the Devasthan Management Committee and contains content that might be found on the website. The Twitter and Instagram accounts generally post the daily *pūjā* photos (**Fig. 10**) while the Facebook and YouTube accounts primarily post video recordings of events at the temple, recorded either by phone or video camera.

The Devasthan Management Committee's usage of these sites further diffuses the content of the temple homepage across multiple platforms, trading information density for increased remote accessibility. Just as the temple website can act as an intermediate place between the devotee in their home and the temple in Kolhapur, the website and the livestream also serve as an intermediate place between the time consumptiveness of visiting the temple and the immediacy of opening a popular social media app one might already have downloaded. In return for this increased internet presence, the new iterations of the temple's website on already established platforms where there are fewer options for customization decreases these iterations' ability to substantially represent the temple in cyberspace. That is to say, the Shree Mahalaxmi website offers a better and more nuanced representation of the temple in the online realm than the

³⁷ Devasthan Management Committee, "Shree Karveer Niwasini Ambabai Mahalaxmi," 2020, <https://www.mahalaxmikolhapur.com/index.php>

temple's social media accounts, even if visual and informational materials can be shared across the platforms.

This observation should not be interpreted as criticism of the temple or the management committee's decision to create social media accounts. Instead, it should serve to highlight the heightened potential that a temple website like the one currently operated by the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's management committee possesses to form connections with several audiences. These audiences possess a range of perspectives, from the local/informed to the distant/uniformed, with the city's national and international diaspora occupying many positions in the middle. Exposure to the temple website also creates potential for individuals to move in and out of their initial audience/perspectives as they become more acquainted with the temple through the website.

The previously mentioned social media platforms all offer or have offered users the ability to "go live", allowing users to broadcast live video feeds of themselves or whatever is in front of their cameras. Despite the resemblance in terminology, one should not consider "going live" on social media analogous to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream. Anyone who "goes live" is expected to end their broadcast eventually. In contrast, the point of the temple's livestream is that it is continuous and readily available with minimal interruption. The *darsan* livestream available on the temple's website cannot be hosted on any of the previously mentioned social media platforms because the purpose of the stream is that it is a continuous and stable experience that one can leave and return to as desired. This alone is an argument for the continued relevancy of an independent website in the era of social media. Just as the physical temple shelters and houses the goddess's *mūrti*, the website also acts as a sort of architectural abode in cyberspace which

shelters and houses the livestream, complete with distinct pathways within the website to access the virtual viewing hall.

While the temple's presence on popular social platforms might hold greater benefit for the local population who have access to the temple and familiarity with the place's history, they still only serve to promote visiting the website's/app's livestream, which also serves to promote visiting the goddess in person by amplifying the visibility of the temple from a remote location. Assuming that one purpose of social media is to promote the temple to both informed and uninformed audiences, a pathway of representation emerges. Rather than acting as a substitute for the website, I see the temple's social media accounts as producing a second layer of representation in which the temple's social media presence is a virtual representative of the temple's online identity. The devotee, once introduced to the temple as an entity in cyberspace, then becomes acquainted or reacquainted with the goddess and her physical abode in Kolhapur through the website and the *darśan* livestream. In this manner, the pathway can be traversed in both directions; just as someone who has visited the goddess in person can re/discover and utilize her representation on the internet, they can also re/discover her physical representation in Kolhapur through her online presence. In either case, these are both potential pathways that can be utilized by newcomers, members of the diaspora, or locals alike.

Conclusion

The Shree Mahalaxmi temple's *darśan* livestream should be understood less as an attempt to replicate the experience of visiting the temple and more as an expansion upon the visibility and visuality of the goddess through her projection into the space of the internet. By amplifying her image to reach audiences across physical distance via virtual space, the temple livestream makes the viewer aware of their lack of proximity to the *mūrti* while offering a pathway for

darśan that embraces the viewer's sense of disembodiment while viewing the livestream. This is made possible through the medium of live video feed where the framing of the feed invokes the traditional viewing hall placement of the body alongside an optical perspective that is unfeasible for a person's body to reproduce. That is to say, the livestream produces an impossible view of a physical place in real time, provoking within the viewer that sensation of disembodiment. This disembodiment is enhanced through the livestream's residence within a website, which is a place that represents the temple yet does not replicate the space. The idea of a human devotee experiencing disembodiment while taking *darśan* with an embodied image such as a *mūrti* is thought-provoking and worthy of deeper exploration. This invocation of spatial and optical disembodiment as the method by which the livestream reduces the sensation of distance between the viewer and the goddess produces a pathway for *darśan* that makes room for spontaneous, internal response, whether it is ingrained or newly discovered in the present.

DARŚAN LIVESTREAM AS PUBLIC DEVOTIONAL FORM

The concept of a *darśan* livestream offers solutions to the central issues of access and visuality in a unique manner not seen in other forms of media which have been at the center of studies of *darśan* in new media. The temple dedicated to Mahalaxmi in Kolhapur presents its livestream, in part, as a “hassle-free” pathway to *darśan* that allows the devotee to bypass the inconveniences of an in-person temple visit.³⁸ No longer does one need to travel to the place where Mahalaxmi resides and stand in line to spend time with her. Additionally, the livestream offers a pathway for *darśan* that cannot be recreated offline. Thus, the livestream is much more than a recreation of the experience of standing in the *darśan mandapa*. The novel view displayed by the livestream invites spontaneously enacted *darśans* made possible by addressing issues of physical proximity via the projection of the goddess’s image online.

The previous section positioned the livestream as an amplifier for the temple and the goddess’s image that undermines the sensation of distance between herself and the viewer while simultaneously producing a novel viewing experience. The livestream can serve as a means of sharing time with the goddess when physical proximity is not convenient or possible. This section explains how the amplification is accomplished by viewing the livestream as a kind of public sacred image whose entrance into public space is the result of the unique material and economic conditions of the region. I then dissect the ways in which a *darśan* livestream such as this one produces a sense of candidness without voyeurism from the perspective of the viewer. The result of this particular candidness is the feeling that the footage from the livestream is at once mundane and trustworthy. This dissection requires comparison to other forms of visual

³⁸ Vivek Waghmode, “Mobile App to Make Mahalaxmi Temple Live ‘Darshan’ Easier.” *Times of India (Bombay, India)*, October 24, 2017.

media that possess similar qualities to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream but that cannot produce the same effect. The key thread between these visual media is their occupation of space outside of the traditional temple setting and incorporation of “modern” materials and image-making techniques.

In order to better understand this sensation of candidness without voyeurism, several investigations of *darśan* beyond the walls of a temple are in order. This section begins with an exploration of the implications of placing access to the goddess in the spiritually unregulated space of the internet and the ways in which this decision produces little risk to the divine and the worshipper. To do so, I consider other forms of public, sacred spaces found within Maharashtra, such as wayside shrines and the similarly “amplified” images of monumental concrete sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses. This section also provides insight into the ways the livestream resembles and differs from mythological or devotional films, largely due to their initial similarities in medium and usage as sites of *darśan*. By providing a tour of a variety of *darśan*-oriented spaces and experiences, this section illustrates the manner in which the aforementioned candidness of the livestream and its value and desirability as pathway for ritual gazing are produced.

Wayside Shrines

The increasingly widespread affordability of both network access and network-enabled devices within India in the 2010’s led to an explosion of internet use within the subcontinent.³⁹

With the financial barrier to internet access diminished, online space was and is increasingly a

³⁹ Stephen Baker, “Virtual Darshan: Social Networking and Virtual Communities in the Hindi Film Context.” in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge, 2013), 416

place for representation on the individual level as well as the organizational level. Because the internet is quickly becoming a public space on the global scale, it should come as no surprise that within this place are realms of religious activity that are more accessible than they would be offline.

As I mentioned previously, I was initially surprised that there are temples that consider the internet a suitable place for the broadcast of a god or goddess's *mūrti*. Rather than enclosing the temple and the goddess within the walls of the temple grounds in Kolhapur, the Shree Mahalaxmi temple website essentially bypasses any literal and metaphorical gatekeeping in order to place this particular manifestation of the divine into mainstream space.⁴⁰ This defies common conceptions of sacred spaces as distinct or sequestered from spaces that are secular or even polluted. However, there are many instances in the physical world where a deity has had their image reside in a public place or amplified across visual space. Instead of viewing this diminished spatial separation as an erosion of the sanctity of a preexisting sacred place, it should be seen as producing new sacred places and *darśanic* activities that override initial conceptions of division between the divine and the profane. In order to unpack these ideas, the transformation of physical place from wholly mundane to sacred via the introduction of highly visible sacred forms within wayside shrines must be addressed.

Wayside shrines are common in western India and take on a variety of visual and material forms. The structures can be miniscule or the size of a house. Just like the *mūrtis* in “full” temple shrines, the images within them can run the gamut of materials and form. There are

⁴⁰ The following section does not consider *utsava mūrtis*, or *mūrtis* used in festivals, which can often be paraded through public space. The justification for this exclusion is that this discussion is mainly concerned with images that do not experience a period of retirement.

even shrines where the divine image is not “housed” so much as sheltered by a niche in a wall (Fig. 11) or a natural feature such as a tree. The identity of a wayside shrine is defined less by its content and more by its location relative to pathways. I use Borayin Larios and Raphaël Voix’s description as the basis for my discussion on wayside shrines as a form of public divine image:

...we propose to demarcate a “wayside shrine” as “*a site that houses a worshipped object that is immediately adjacent to a public path, visible from it and accessible to any passerby.*” The emplacement, visibility and accessibility are thus three essential criteria that distinguish wayside shrines from “temple shrines” and “domestic shrines.” They have a direct consequence both for the public they affect and for the time that is devoted to the ritual act. For example, people who are in a hurry may find it very convenient to stop at a wayside shrine before an exam, on their way to their workplace, before embarking on a journey or before a medical test.⁴¹

Larios and Voix’s description lays out the wayside shrine in spatial terms and notes how their orientation along pathways inform people’s interactions with them. Alongside the description above, William Elison’s extensive research on the visual culture of wayside shrines in Mumbai’s urban spaces also provides a counterpoint to the visibility of the livestream as ritual space. Portions of Elison’s article “Site, Sight, Cite: Conceptualizing Wayside Shrines as Visual Culture” examine the visibility and aesthetic preference among the shrine’s adjacent communities in the ultimate use or disuse of a given wayside shrine. Elison’s discussion of the convergence of “site, sight, and cite” offers an analysis of these shrines that I use to outline the ways in which the livestream avoids some of the issues experienced by wayside shrines as ritual spaces outside of common religious hegemonies:

⁴¹ Borayin Larios and Raphaël Voix, “Introduction. Wayside Shrines in India: An Everyday Defiant Religiosity,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 18, no. 18 (2018): 6. (original emphasis)

These are complex questions, and I locate them both at the nexus of Site, Sight, and Cite. This opens the sacred image's operations to inquiry along three vectors: the relation of the sight to the point it marks in space; the sitedness in society of the public to which it appeals; and the fields of discourse, affect, and bodily habitus it cites as a sign or material extension. And animating all three lines of inquiry is a common point of concern: efficacy.⁴²

Elison's subjects deal with varying levels of "faithful" reproducibility of images and visual forms; incorporation of mass-produced chromolithographic prints of saints and gods are common visual elements of wayside shrines, yet the efficacy of each shrine is highly individual since the shrine is made anew each time it is "reproduced." That is to say, each shrine's efficacy is individually determined even when housing mass-produced images. The livestream, on the other hand, is a direct visual projection of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple's inner sanctum onto the internet. The direct quotation of the physical inner sanctum visible in the livestream is an attempt to appeal to the anticipated preferences of the audience, whose preference for the visual forms of the Shree Mahalaxmi temple can include sensations of familiarity and/or legitimacy produced by the imagery. Even the webpage within which the livestream resides, while "produced anew" each time it is loaded, is predetermined by the website's code and maintains its appearance each time unless the temple management committee consciously changes the page's appearance. Rather than being multiple ritual spaces across multiple devices, the temple livestream is one ritual space faithfully reproduced for each visitor. Nonetheless, Elison's analysis of the convergence of "site, sight, and cite" is relevant in the discussion of the livestream's efficacy within the public space of the internet in its application toward the efficacy of the livestream as a place for ritual practice.

⁴² William Elison, "Site, Sight, Cite: Conceptualizing Wayside Shrines as Visual Culture," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 18, no. 18 (2018): 12.

Returning to Larios and Voix's definition, key concepts in their description can apply to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream which provide additional understanding of how the livestream facilitates ritual practice. The proximity of the shrine to a public, geographic pathway mirror that of the livestream's proximity to public, virtual pathways. There are countless virtual pathways that exist in proximity to the temple livestream due to the space of the internet not being beholden to the constraints of physical proximity. That is to say, all websites are equidistant from one another in terms of travel or "surfing." Therefore, the temple livestream is adjacent to *every other website* to which the viewer has access in the sense that pathways to the livestream are not fixed within a physical landscape.

In terms of the wayside shrine's relationship to the community, the shrines create a democratized religious space in public places. In this context, the term "democratized" denotes spaces that are publicly accessible regardless of religious affiliation or caste placement,⁴³ even if limitations such as financial barriers prevent the space from being fully accessible. In contrast to many sequestered temple spaces in India, "Wayside shrines defy the monolithic notion of a religious community as an exclusive group, because they offer a space that is more informal and anonymous in nature and that is open to devotees of any caste, class or denomination."⁴⁴ The notion of democratized religious space that affords visitors informality and anonymity is common thread throughout the spaces/images discussed in this chapter. Wayside shrines become home to multiple, at time competing, religious denominations by providing a space more concerned with communal participation than the proliferation of a single doctrine. The

⁴³ Issues of exclusion on the basis of caste remain relevant in discussions of accessibility of ritual space of all kinds, even in unmoderated spaces like the livestream's webpage. The scope of this thesis prevents in-depth investigations of the role of caste-based exclusions within democratized cyberspace. This topic would be better addressed in a future project.

⁴⁴ Larios and Voix, 10.

livestream in its own way produces a similar space; there are no instructions for use on the webpage nor any prescribed prayers or actions, which in turn opens the livestream to multiple religious publics as well as secular ones.

Additionally, an element of Larios and Voix's definition that can be connected to the livestream is the emphasis on the ways a wayside shrine impacts the time people spend with the divine engaging in ritual behavior. The word "convenient" in particular resembles the Devasthan Committee's perspective on the livestream app's value; it is a convenient and hassle-free resource for accessing divine presence. The previous section argued that the livestream allows the devotee to share time with the goddess by undermining the interference of physical distance. This increased accessibility has the potential to transform the distribution and frequency of this shared time. The devotee no longer has to go out of their way to see the goddess. For example, whenever I visited Kolhapur in previous years, I would have to figure out which days are convenient for a temple visit based on factors such as transportation, auspicious calendar days, and sometimes weather. Furthermore, once I am at the temple, I rarely have the opportunity to linger in the *darśan mandapa*. In contrast, the livestream can be understood as placing the goddess's image adjacent to a pathway that happens to be accessible from anywhere on the internet. The *darśan* livestream is thus perfectly set up to allow the visitor to spend as little or as much time with the goddess as they need or want. While I would not call the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream a virtual wayside shrine, it takes on characteristics found in wayside shrines due to its residence on the internet.

There are key differences between the livestream and a wayside shrine; *mūrtis* within wayside shrines are publicly visible divine images whose visibility *relies* on its proximity to a pathway. This pathway is by definition physical and thus its relative distance to other paths is

crucial to understanding the shrine's relationship with devotees. The scale is of note in this case, as the biggest shrines are often much smaller than a typical temple. Furthermore, wayside shrines still offer avenues for social interaction, solidarities, and interpersonal networking.⁴⁵ As such, the devotee's physical proximity to the wayside shrine becomes even more integral to their interaction with the shrine and taking *darśan*. The opposite is true for the livestream in part because of the aforementioned equidistance between websites and other virtual places and for the viewer's lack of visibility to other livestream viewers.

Monumental sculpture

In contrast to wayside shrines, the monumental divine images at the center of Kajri Jain's publication *Gods in the Time of Democracy* provide a fruitful comparison to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream that elaborates on the kind of image the livestream projects and how that projection acts as an expansion of the divine across the landscape. Additionally, Jain's research on colossal statuary highlights the problems that can arise in art historical study of images as works tied to the emergence of artistic mechanical-production, which finds relevance in my investigation of the publicly available *darśan* livestream.

As with wayside shrines, Kolhapur and Maharashtra in general are home to examples of colossal religious icons. The Chinmaya Ganadhish of Kolhapur (**Fig. 12**) sports a 61-foot tall sculpture of Lord Ganeśa atop a 24-foot tall meditation hall. Consecrated in 2001, the image is made of "cement concrete" and painted a light pink, rendering it visible from the Pune-Bangalore highway situated about 13 km from the city within the Chinmaya Sandeepany

⁴⁵ Larios and Voix, 10-12.

Ashram.⁴⁶ The Chinmaya Ganadhish is a highly visible, public image of Ganeśa whose scale is intended to overcome the optical limitations of physical distance for viewers travelling along the highway. Additionally, the *darśan* offered by Chinmaya Ganadhish and similarly monumental icons is more effective at a distance, especially if one considers eye contact to be necessary for the ritual activity.

Such colossal sculptures are the subject of Kajri Jain's research in *Gods in the time of Democracy*. Much like the *darśan* livestream, these monumental sculptures often portray subjects that are traditional but whose materiality, execution, and display are decidedly contemporary. Rather than addressing this category of statuary through the lens of period/nation/culture, Jain's approach "reintensifies art history's focus on the object, this time not just as a bounded and given entity that is a node in networks of circulation, but as *itself* a bundle of multiple interlinked processes unfolding stochastically, at varying speeds and intensities: an assemblage."⁴⁷ The assemblage of both monumental sculptures and, as I argue, the *darśan* livestream is composed of material forms as well as the intangible components such as historical events that made the assemblage in its current form possible. That is to say, changes to India's economic policy in the 1980's contribute to the statuary assemblage's current appearance as substantially as the material used to sculpt the icon. Viewing the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream and the colossal sculpture at Chinmaya Ganadhish as assemblages makes it possible to articulate their similarities by reframing them as "emergent properties."

⁴⁶ Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, "Chinmaya Ganadhish – Kolhapur," accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.chinmayamission.com/where-we-are/temples-shrines-18/>

⁴⁷ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 10.

The formation and evolution of an assemblage produces a set of emergent properties that can shift as time passes and the assemblage's constitution changes. To clarify, "emergent properties" refers to the qualities and characteristics that are produced by the interactions between the individual components of the assemblage. Jain's example provides a helpful illustration: "the properties of bronze are emergent because they are not reducible to those of copper and tin, its constituent elements."⁴⁸ While this example is one of a chemical interaction, assemblages for the purposes of this analysis possess immaterial components such as legislation and economic activity. The Chinmaya Ganadhish (and other sculptures of this scale) and the *darśan* livestream share a key emergent property that was intentionally produced when both assemblages were initially formed. That emergent property is their enhanced visibility from a distance. With this shared attribute in mind, the *darśan* livestream and the monumental icon share a few crucial assemblage components as both the products of and solutions to increased mobility of devotees and potential devotees.

One key component of monumental icons and the *darśan* livestream is that both assemblages maintain the centrality of physical place. As established in the previous chapter, the temple website and thus the livestream instead act as representatives for the physical temple within the space of the internet that then amplifies the goddess's image to wherever there is an internet connection. Jain also claims that "the new monumental public statues do not replace the smaller icons sequestered in temples or that appear by the roadside, even as their emergence might affect those icons in ways that produce further assemblages such as temples-cum-theme parks."⁴⁹ Jain's description of the "temple-cum-theme park" refers to the manner in which the

⁴⁸ Jain, 11.

⁴⁹ Jain, 16.

sites that host colossal icons become destinations akin to tourist attractions. While I have noted previously that the Shree Mahalaxmi *darśan* livestream has the potential to produce a desire within the viewer to visit the goddess in person, Jain explicitly claims that the monumental sculptures’ “drive-by” *darśan* inspires motorists to treat the sculpture as a destination in the future.⁵⁰ After all, visitors will likely remember the route they were taking when they saw a monumental Lord Ganeśa. Likewise, in order to view the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream, one is also reminded by the webpage and the URL of the city in which the *mūrti* is located. The locational specificity is intimately tied to both viewing experiences.

To an extent, Jain’s attribution of India’s economic liberalization in the 1980’s to the revival and transformation of India’s monumental icon tradition finds relevance in this assessment of the development and proliferation of *darśan* livestreams. The previously mentioned internet boom in India during the 2010’s is certainly due in part to the country’s economic liberalization thirty years prior both in regard to increased expendable income for the average Indian and the creation of a market for internet-oriented devices such as smartphones and laptops. As such, this is one of the components that both assemblages have in common. That said, the *nature* of each assemblage’s enhanced visibility is undeniably distinct, due in part to the notable differences in their conceptions of and approaches to the problem of distance. The monumental icon generally concerns itself with the viewer’s rapid movement across the landscape via modern roadways and is thus placed relatively adjacent to a section of the roadway. The livestream concerns itself primarily with people whose distance is remote and whose relatively stationary position produces the opportunity for stable wireless connection.

⁵⁰ Jain, 167.

Therefore, the monumental sculpture's solution is an increase in scale while the livestream's is a potentially international projection of an image in virtual space.

The livestream is not of monumental stature, of course, yet it certainly occupies a similar kind of space and possesses similar constituent parts. Kolhapur's monumental Ganeśa occupies (relatively) newly opened space along the Pune-Bangalore Highway that emerged in response to widespread economic liberalization within India during the late 20th century. This increased the availability of concrete and other industrial materials for the production of these icons, which gained popularity as materials that are financially accessible and easily manipulated for largescale sculpture. In comparison, the *darśan* livestream of Shree Mahalaxmi occupies a virtual space which emerged as a result of increased internet usage in India during the 2010's and greater availability of the equipment needed to produce and maintain a livestream hosted on a custom website.

Additionally, both amplified imageries exist with ideas of devotees' locations and movement in mind. Chinmaya Ganadhish, like other monumental icons, exists to catch the attention of motorists on the highway whose highspeed forward motion might initially only allow them to catch a glimpse of Lord Ganeśa. The Shree Mahalaxmi livestream exists to allow devotees at much more remote distances to view the *mūrti* in real time for as long as they wish. With these similarities in mind, the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream and Chinmaya Ganadhish are two assemblages whose emergent properties solve the problem of visibility over distances produced by modernity (automobility and need for remote communication) through distinct forms of amplification. Whereas the Chinmaya Ganadhish icon amplifies his image *vertically* (or hierarchically), the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream amplifies her image *radially* and therefore *laterally*.

Accessibility and The Livestream's Aura

The necessity of radial amplification of Shree Mahalaxmi is due to the internet's lateral (and thus flattened) orientation. To be specific, hierarchies of authority within space of the internet, both secular and sacred, are laterally oriented, which is different from the traditionally hierarchical authority found in temples and other religious settings offline. Additionally, within the livestream's webpage there are no instructions or prescribed protocols for behavior. This lack of prescribed behavior seems to recognize the difficulties that would arise from attempts to enforce rules for access within the space of the internet. Jain described the monumental statuary as "gods in the time of democracy" in part because of the (often sacred) images' encroachment into public spaces such as urban centers or along highways. The internet is a similarly public space into which Shree Mahalaxmi's image and surroundings are projected. The *darśan* livestream resides in a novel space where traditional authority cannot be enforced, thus providing something like a tabula rasa for individual viewer's inclinations toward ritual behavior. It is in this manner that the livestream provides a type of *darśan* that makes room for spontaneous bodily response to the divine, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Jain frequently references and responds to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as the monumental icons of deities challenge Benjamin's conceptions of exhibition value and cult value of art objects. Additionally, the mechanical re/producibility of monumental icons, from Jain's observations, does not diminish the icons' "aura" as sacred imagery. With the understanding that Shree Mahalaxmi's livestream similarly occupies a publicly accessible space and possesses a comparable mechanical re/producibility, Jain's assessment of monumental icons as possessing an "iconic exhibition value" equally applies to the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream. This is in part due to both image-types' display of

“auratic” elements which designate the images as properly worshipable, which is then combined with technological innovations that concurrently produce a sense of spectacle. Furthermore, the sensation of “oscillation” between exhibition and cult value described by Benjamin, the meaning which Jain extracts from Benjamin’s footnotes, is induced within the viewer of the *darśan* livestream due to the real-time nature of the medium.

Jain consistently finds her research on monumental icons defying Benjamin’s idea of the difference between an artwork’s exhibition value and its cult value. Specifically, Benjamin frequently associates artworks of the past with high cult value because he views their production as innately tied to religion and/or ritual, with their existences largely sequestered from public view. Benjamin describes cult value and exhibition value as two poles, the implication being that an artwork cannot occupy both places simultaneously. Either an artwork possesses cult value through sequestration or exhibition value through display. Jain’s perspective on Benjamin’s polarization of cult and exhibition value is as follows:

Benjamin is simply not oriented to the possibility that religion, too, in Europe as elsewhere, has always had its elements of exhibition value, as well as of cult value: a visible, public side whose ritual cycles have complemented those of the hidden, “sacred” side. This is evident in architecture...processions, festivals, theater, dioramas, roadside shrines, monumental and polychrome statues, and devotional prints, not to mention films, televangelism, and multimedia spectacles.⁵¹

Jain’s response exposes Benjamin’s tendency to view religious art of the past and present as inherently hidden and cultic. This quote by Jain expands upon the idea of what constitutes “art,” as well as the ways in which these artworks from a range of time periods and medium find

⁵¹ Jain, 175.

common ground with one another through their religious affiliation. Jain further defines a new category that reframes the relationship between cult and exhibition:

I want to argue for a category of “iconic exhibition value” to name the visible, public face of iconopraxis, operating in the realm of religious images that may or may not also be seen as artworks. This enables a recognition of the dynamic between sequestration and exhibition as a key ingredient of religious authority (as it is for the artwork in Benjamin’s account), instead of simply collapsing all religious power and efficacy into the cultic power that stems from sequestration.⁵²

By reframing cult and exhibition value not as polarized concepts but instead as tools for religious authority, the public accessibility of Jain’s monumental icons and the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream can be understood less as the reduction of the images’ religious efficacy via relinquishment of authority by the images’ custodians and more as an enhancement of the images’ iconic exhibition value via their display by religious authorities.

There remains the question of medium for the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream. Within the first few sections of his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin describes how reproductions of art through media such as photography and film allow the authentic original subject to meet the viewer halfway at the expense of the original artwork’s “aura.” Initially, this might seem to be the case for the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream, as one could consider the video feed a reproduction of her image for distribution to interested viewers at the expense of the sensorial experience of meeting her in person. However, I disagree with this interpretation of the livestream and desire to complicate the matter; the livestream does not merely “reproduce” of the goddess’s image because, as mentioned in the previous section, the livestream shows an entirely new view of the goddess that is not inferior to the view from within

⁵² Jain, 176.

the *darśan mandapa*. The livestream's value as a visual experience is not derived from its ability to imitate the "authentic" embodied experience.⁵³ To that end, the livestream is just one of many ways that the *mūrti*'s iconic exhibition value is enhanced.

Part of the livestream's iconic exhibition value is (somewhat ironically) derived from Jain's elaboration on Benjamin's concept of "oscillation" in the context of a viewer's reception of artwork. Because Benjamin conceives of cult and exhibition value as two poles, one of his solutions for artworks that possess palpable cult and exhibition values is the idea that the viewer oscillates between perceiving the work's cultic efficacy and exhibitionary force.⁵⁴ With Jain's reframing of the relationship between cult and exhibition value in mind, I find that, from my perspective as a remote viewer, the livestream makes room for that type of oscillation in reception. In fact, the livestream *invites* the viewer to spend enough time viewing the livestream to allow that kind of oscillation to occur. Furthermore, the livestream's framing and "live" nature is the driving force behind this oscillation. The video feed places Mahalaxmi's *mūrti* at the center of the frame, yet the video captures multiple depths of field that give viewers the ability to watch some of the activity that surrounds her. That is to say, the livestream *exhibits* the daily life of the *mūrti* while providing avenues for *darśan*. Additionally, the livestream webpage provides a space with no real restrictions on time or behavior, as mentioned previously. The viewer may view the livestream for as long as their internet connection lasts. In my case, I find myself spending equal amounts of time watching the daily routine of the *mūrti* as I am taking *darśan* with her. The livestream blurs the line between ritual and secular gazing in a manner that allows

⁵³ As for the undeniable mass reproducibility of the "authentic" livestream across countless internet-enabled devices, I echo Jain's stance on page 176: "Little withers in the age of mass reproduction. There is just more of everything."

⁵⁴ Jain, 16.

the viewer to experience greater overall visual exposure to the *mūrti* and thus the goddess. This then increases her iconic exhibition value both in that moment and when the viewer sees this particular *mūrti* in different contexts, potentially invoking spontaneous bodily responses to *darśan* with the goddess outside of the livestream context.

Returning to the role of public accessibility of space, the efficacy of the divine image that resides in public space is in fact determined by the viewer through their recognition of the divine. In this manner, the aura of the livestream is intimately connected with the viewer's determination of the image's efficacy. I argue that this is one of the primary benefits of religious artworks possessing iconic exhibition power. This recognition can occur through the aid of "auratic" elements, which in the case of the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream is the framing of the video feed which allows viewers to see the inner sanctum where she physically resides. The thinning of the membrane between the sacred and the mundane in the physical and virtual world produces pockets of divine presence that induce in the viewer altered behavior, thus transforming the space into one of ritual significance. When speaking of public reactions to the 85-foot-tall statue of Mangal Mahadev in Delhi, Jain observes motorists on the highway slowing down or even pulling over to take *darśan* and perform other abbreviated ritual activities.⁵⁵ Jain also speaks of the Mangal Mahadev statue as a destination and the ways in which the icon's presence alters visitors' behavior in non-prescriptive ways:

Whatever the aims with which the space was conceived, as its heterogeneous idioms came into everyday use, it turned into a mixed-use space in which people seemed intuitively to know what to do and how to be, drawing on their experiences of temples, roadside deities, pilgrimages, "spiritual" spaces, tourist sites, historical monuments, and public parks.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jain, 140.

⁵⁶ Jain, 144.

The Shree Mahalaxmi livestream is a space that mirrors the one in Jain's description above. The laterally-oriented nature of authority on the internet cannot produce anything other than a "mixed-use space" because there is no reliable way to keep the sacred and the secular separate. While there likely are devotees who only open the livestream when they wish to worship the goddess and close it as soon as they finish, there is no prescribed use for the stream. This opens the livestream up for mixed usage which promotes the oscillation in reception that was mentioned earlier. For viewers like me, the mental oscillation between focus on the divine and focus on her surroundings is a result of our ever-changing perception of the livestream from moment to moment, producing something of a "mixed-use time." This aspect of the divine occupying *time* in addition to space is better addressed when comparing the livestream to another mechanically reproduced artform: film.

Film and Livestream as Divine Domain

Before diving into the subject of *darśan*-oriented film, I return to the work of Elison which covers a different phenomenon; in a sort of cross-pollination between the wayside shrine and monumental icon, chromolithographic portraits of the popular saint Sai Baba can be found throughout Mumbai as a result of his large following within the city. With regard to Sai Baba's permeation of Mumbai's urban space, Elison brings up a key idea that may serve to illuminate not only the place-occupying and -making abilities of the livestream, but also its ability to occupy time:

To restate a commonplace, all visual signifiers occupy space, just as all aural signifiers take up time. All such spaces are materially constituted—even the pages of books and television screens—and are modified by the signs that mark them,

although the relation of that mark to the space it occupies has not traditionally been the main concern of visual studies, let alone the history of religions.⁵⁷

Of particular interest is Elison's inclusion of "aural signifiers" the domain of which is time rather than space. The Shree Mahalaxmi livestream, as well as devotional films or video recordings meant for ritual use, straddle the implied gap between the visual and the aural signifier. The Shree Mahalaxmi livestream is noticeably silent; however, its dependence on the passage of time as part of its identity is what makes Elison's assessment of the aural signifier relevant. "Live" within the word "livestream" acknowledges that its relation to the passage of time is an inherent part of the medium's identity and value. The same can be said for the medium of film, which possesses a substantial history of facilitating *darśan*.

According to Adrian Athique, cinemas have constituted a vast majority of publicly available leisure space since the early years of India's independence, and the development modern multiplexes in particular shares its origin with the introduction of expanded highway routes and internet access that followed India's economic liberalization.⁵⁸ Also like the internet and the space around highways, the cinema houses and displays another mechanically-produced medium of art that Walter Benjamin explicitly finds bereft of aura: film. The similarities of the cinema and its films to the Shree Mahalaxmi temple website and its livestream go beyond the circumstances of their development as products of modernity. Within this chapter, film is the medium that most resembles the *darśan* livestream in terms of its style of display and interaction

⁵⁷ William Elison, "Sai Baba of Bombay: A Saint, His Icon, and the Urban Geography of Darshan," *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (2014): 159.

⁵⁸ Adrian Athique, "Cinema as Social Space: The multiplex," in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge, 2013), 406.

with space and time as a visual experience. As media, film and video livestream are primarily visual signifiers that occupy both space and time.

Using a well-discussed example of a film which became a “space” for ritual practices like *darśan*, *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) provides a compelling narrative alongside information about and images of the goddess Santoshi Maa, embodied by the actress Anita Guha (**Fig. 13**). *Jai Santoshi Maa* loosely occupies the genre of mythological film, a designation that Rachel Dwyer argues for due to the film’s portrayal of the goddess in human form.⁵⁹ Beyond its market success, the film is notable for its role in inspiring and/or reinvigorating worship of the goddess,⁶⁰ with screenings that drew devotees to the space of the cinema for the purpose of ritual practice. The film’s narrative reenacts the creation of the goddess and helpfully includes instructions for pious observances and ritual practices such as *pūjā*, which are modeled through the devotional acts of the heroine, Satyavati. The film also provides scenes which allow viewers to take *darśan* with the goddess as embodied by sculpture (**Fig. 14**) or by Guha.

Unlike the stable position of the livestream’s camera, the views of Santoshi Maa that the film produces are more dynamic. The camera moves from place to place as the action of the story unfolds in a variety of settings. The viewer gets the sense that they are moving from place to place as well, but the images before them are carefully selected to tell a story. The viewer’s vision is thus still heavily limited, just as it is in the livestream. Because the viewer still has little control over the framing of the film’s scenes, there is an element of anticipation experienced by viewers of films like *Jai Santoshi Maa*. While this characteristic contributes to a compelling narrative within the film, it is hard to predict when the camera will yield a *darśan*-friendly view

⁵⁹ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

⁶⁰ Dwyer, 45-48.

of the goddess. Views like the ones seen in Figures 11 and 12, beyond their literal duration, seem to briefly flash across the screen within the scope of the entire film. For example, the scene of Satyavati's worship of Santoshi Maa that follows the heroine's celebration of the completion of a difficult period of fasting and mistreatment by her in-laws during her husband's absence is one that disperses *darśan*-friendly views among more action-packed shots and offers a fruitful avenue for comparison with the livestream.

This scene within the film is a visually complex one, as it serves as a vehicle for rising action, a musical number, and moments of *darśan*. As with the livestream and with most films, the camera serves to place the viewer within the space of this scene. The viewer is thus similarly disembodied as they are when viewing the livestream. Additionally, just as the livestream is usually silent or overlaid with recorded music, this scene provides very little information by way of audio; the audio elements of the scene are limited to the playback of "Main Toh Aarti Utaru Re Santoshi Mata Ki." However, unlike the livestream, the position of the camera changes frequently. This scene hosts both Santoshi Maa's *mūrti*, a song and dance of devotion from Satyavati, and the sabotage of Satyavati by her in-laws. The solution for such a narratively and visually complex scene is that the camera and therefore the viewer frequently alternate perspectives. There are moments when the film provides straightforward avenues for *darśan*, and in these moments we seem to view Santoshi Maa from Satyavati's perspective. However, in the same scene we experience moments where we appear to be seeing the mortal characters from Santoshi Maa's perspective, which offers the audience an unusual moment of giving rather than taking *darśan*. Furthermore, the film's editing interlaces instances of more typical, cinematic camerawork, which allows us to catch important details outside of the perspectives of Satyavati or Santoshi Maa.

Additionally, the film exists in fabricated physical locations meant to represent a non-specific, fictional setting during a vague historical era. While the livestream's efficacy relies on its locational and temporal specificity, *Jai Santoshi Maa* employs a completely different set of visual characteristics to achieve observable ritual efficacy among viewers. These characteristics, which are discussed later in this section, are unique to the medium of film and its identity as a visually constructed narrative.

Benjamin's assessment of film as bereft of aura is, unsurprisingly, challenged by films like *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which have inspired a considerable number of people's ritual habits. At once entertaining and ritually instructive, *Jai Santoshi Maa* as a work of art possesses considerable cult and exhibition value. Veena Das attests to the auratic qualities of the film and its iconic exhibition value:

Jai Santoshi Ma [sic] tells a story which is at once new and at once understood. By this statement I mean that it uses a grammar for communication which is well-rooted in Hindu culture, but is not a copy or repetition of earlier myths about mother goddesses. On the contrary, it seems to be a myth that is, perhaps, particularly suited to our times.⁶¹

While more ritually prescriptive than the *darśan* livestream, the film provides a similar experience as a form of visual media projected into a public space. The idea of taking *darśan* with divine embodiments in films like *Jai Santoshi Maa* leads me to question just what constitutes "site" in the discussion of *darśan* with visual forms. Rather than understanding the divine, embodied image as necessarily material and static, film screenings as sites of *darśan* blur the line between space and time to the extent that they become nearly synonymous experiences.

⁶¹ Veena Das, "The Mythological film and its framework of meaning: an analysis of *Jai Santoshi Ma*," *Indian International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (March 1981), Special Issue ed. Pradip Krishen: 45.

As suggested previously, films that become sites for *darśan*, like livestreams, produce something akin to a “mixed-use time” alongside the mixed-use space of the cinema, where the audience’s view oscillates between recognition of *darśan* with divine forms and the entertainment or mere observation of the film as media.⁶²

In order to flesh out how “mixed-use time” operates both in film and in livestream, the effective differences between the two types of media must be established. While the *mediums* of both works are virtually identical, the *format* of the *darśan* livestream differs almost completely from that of film. The way that the film and the livestream present their images and chronologies are at the root of this difference in format. The duration of film is necessarily finite and displays consecutive images in an intentional, constructed chronology. Furthermore, the finite format of film makes repeat viewings possible. The Shree Mahalaxmi livestream, on the other hand, attempts to provide a continuous, uninterrupted, live view of the goddess. Yet, the livestream and the film achieve efficacy despite possessing opposing characteristics. This is because the nature of the ritual efficacies they hold are completely different. The difference between their efficacies emerges from the ways viewers/devotees interact with the film and livestream’s opposing presentations of images and the passage of time. Whereas the viewer is expected to remain in the cinema for the duration of the film to properly view it, viewers of the livestream are free to leave and return as desired. While films can be rewatched from beginning to end, repetition within the livestream resides more in the cycle of her schedule within the unaltered time as experienced by visitors both online and in-person.

⁶² From this point onward I will use the term “film” to denote mythological films like *Jai Santoshi Maa* which can and have been used for *darśan*. I also posit that television series of mythological narratives like the *Ramayana* can be included in this discussion.

Ultimately, the potential for oscillation while watching a film or livestream is the result of different kinds of visual interruptions. The constructed chronologies of film make strategic use of interruption; scenes are “cut” (or “interrupted”) in such a manner to produce a flowing narrative that holds the attention of the audience. Films can also “cut” to alternative views within one scene, as seen in the previously discussed musical scene in *Jai Santoshi Maa*. In a meta sense, the films present their stories in a series of curated moments with (sometimes) aesthetically enhanced visuals, implying the exclusion of the “tedious” moments that would exist between scenes. Meanwhile, interruption in the livestream is generally unintended, undesirable, and attributable to technical problems. Alternatively, interruptions of *darśan* during livestream are an unavoidable side-effect of the goddess’s schedule, for she must sleep, bathe, and disrobe like anyone else. When the camera changes position, it is either the result of an accident or maintenance. When considering the entirety of both media forms, film produces moments of *darśan* between scenes of driving action/narrative while the livestream produces moments of action/daily events that interrupt long durations of *darśan*.

The format of film and its ability to repeat a constructed chronology renders the experience entertaining and to an extent relies on visual manipulation. One immediately noticeable example in *Jai Santoshi Maa* is the occasional presence of a spinning halo behind Guha or a *mūrti* of the goddess. Meanwhile the *darśan* livestream’s unfiltered candidness and (at times) visually underwhelming moments serve to elevate the format’s trustworthiness as a source of *darśan*. Rachel Dwyer assesses the genre of mythological films (particularly during the height of its popularity) as intentionally distancing itself from the everyday through the implementation of special effects:

While the religious image is held to be efficacious in films as it is elsewhere, cinematic special effects of beams of vision and of light moving from eye to eye emphasise the very nature of the religious image whether in the mythological film, such as *Jai Santoshi Maa*, or in moments in other films where images become efficacious, such as *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*...⁶³

Special effects, both as overt as “beams of vision” and as subtle as suggestive practical effects and strategic editing, are the means by which film visually demonstrates the presence and power of the divine. Just as the actors on the screen act out their roles, the film also acts out divine action through visual effects. The livestream does exactly the opposite, providing a very real view of a *mūrti* without narrative. The livestream is an embrace of the everyday through the display of the divine as mundane. Whereas someone’s view oscillates between taking *darśan* and observing the narrative, oscillation to the observational gaze in the livestream yields a candid view of the goddess’s life and the people who care for her, which can allow for a more meditative mode of observation.

For the majority of a typical day, the Shree Mahalaxmi livestream shows the goddess dressed and adorned, eye and foot attachments in place. Sometimes her dwelling has been decorated (**Fig. 15**), but most days the only thing that changes is her sari (**Fig. 16**). Taking into account the 10-hour time difference, I can anticipate when she will be asleep, when she will be bathed and fed, and when she will change saris. Activity within the livestream is the result of her attendants, who are responsible for her care and facilitating contact between visitors and the goddess’s *mūrti*. They also frequently enter and leave the frame when not actively tending to her schedule. Viewers of the livestream have the privilege of access to her schedule as it unfolds throughout the day, something that is very difficult if not impossible to experience in person. An

⁶³ Dwyer, 19.

in-person visitor might not even wish to watch her schedule unfold throughout the day either. The care and worship of the *mūrti*, while meaningful, are not particularly exciting activities, especially when spaced out over the course of a day. Unlike film, there is no climax to her daily schedule nor is there a resolution since the cycle restarts each day. Time, objects, and people move around her, but the goddess herself remains fixed.

The livestream is ultimately not meant to excite the viewer. On the contrary, the view presented by the livestream is purposely stable, with a static camera focused on a single subject. It shows events as they happen, even when nothing is happening. The viewer is firmly in the position of the party that takes *darśan*, and the only way to stop taking *darśan* is to leave the livestream. A devotee can plan their day around the schedule of the goddess with reasonable expectation that she will be on the other side of the camera lens. The video feed does not spare the viewer from the less interesting moments and thus the viewer gets the sense that they are not missing anything when they look away for a moment. Unlike in feature films, the view of the livestream is predictable and consistent. Furthermore, the *mūrti* appears just as it would during an in-person visit, without clever visual effects to communicate her identity as a goddess. This unaltered, unmanipulated quality in the livestream acts in the service of keeping the livestream legible as a pathway for uninterrupted *darśan*.

Without the concept of *darśan*, this view might appear candid to the point of voyeurism. This certainly might be the case when observing the temple staff as they appear on the screen. However, because the goddess returns one's gaze despite the one-way nature of the video feed, the livestream instead becomes candid to the point of *trustworthiness*. That is, one can trust that familiar image that appears in the livestream is in fact a live projection of the goddess in Kolhapur. The real-time enactment of her daily schedule and inclusion of moments of mundanity

act in part as verification for the livestream's legitimacy as a live image of the *mūrti* in her earthly residence. As stated in the previous chapter, the livestream does not attempt to convince the viewer that they have been transported to the physical temple. In addition to this, the livestream foregoes the spectacle-oriented visual trickery common in film and similar video-based media in favor of the trustworthiness of the underwhelming mundane as a means to verify Mahalaxmi's presence on the screen.

Conclusion

By understanding the internet as a laterally-constructed, public space, the internet bears some resemblance to other forms of public sacred spaces that have emerged as a result of economic liberalization and the evolutions of visibility and materiality due to mass-production. The *darśan* livestream relies on the viewer's recognition of the divine through its visual signifiers (i.e. the goddess's *mūrti* on the screen) to transform the space of the livestream webpage into a suitable place for ritual practice while refraining from prescribing any particular ritual activity beyond taking *darśan*. The result of this open-ended visual experience is the transformation of the livestream and its webpage into a mixed-use space that makes room for both ritual and observational gazing, between which the viewer can oscillate from moment to moment. I have argued that the lack of direction given to the livestream visitor, on top of the uninterrupted video stream, produces a candid view that is not voyeuristic due to the nature of *darśan*. Furthermore, by projecting an ultimately mundane chronicle of the goddess's residence in Kolhapur onto the internet, the livestream comes across as trustworthy in its display of the everyday.

CONCLUSION

While many of the decisions made in the execution of Shree Mahalaxmi temple's *darśan* livestream likely come from a place of practicality (for example, the camera could be trampled by guests if not suspended the way it is), they are decisions that contribute to the execution and outward appearance of the livestream as a piece of visual media. The visuality of the livestream is central to its existence. Whether or not the livestream is a suitable for ritual use is ultimately dependent on the viewer's reaction to the culmination of these practical and stylistic decisions. One of the goals of this thesis was to tease out the results of some of these choices and to place the results within a larger discussion of images like the livestream whose function is to amplify the goddess's image via projection across the flattened space of the internet. Another goal was to analyze the livestream as an iteration of popular Hindu religious imagery that produces a *darśanic* experience which resembles other common devotional forms while also providing an entirely new experience.

In chapter one, I argued that the livestream does not attempt to recreate the perspective of a visitor in the *darśan mandapa*, but instead produces a new view of the goddess that embraces diverse ranges of optical and bodily reactions to the divine and produces a sense of disembodiment. The chapter's discussion of the livestream through the lens of Madhavi Mallapragada's concept of desktop deity cultures and Tulasi Srinavas' descriptions of technologies of wonder characterize the livestream as a forward-facing representative of the temple where a variety of wonder-producing "sharing" can occur between viewers and the goddess. As a result, the livestream ultimately undermines the viewer's feeling of physical distance by invoking a sensation of disembodiment while simultaneously allowing them to share time with the goddess.

In chapter two, I position the *darśan* livestream's as a piece of sacred imagery occupying publicly-accessible space. Through comparison with other public-facing sacred images such as wayside shrines, monumental concrete icons, and film, the livestream's efficacy emerges from its implementation of familiar sacred forms/locations within the medium of video in the livestream format. Furthermore, the livestream's continuous, candid view of the *mūrti* embraces the mundane cycles of the everyday to produce a trustworthy *darśan*.

Throughout this thesis, I argued for the understanding that the livestream is an example of visual media whose value in ritual practice exists not in its ability to mimic the original, but in its ability to transform the original for use a new space. The transformation of original occurs through characteristics such as the position of the camera, lack of non-visual elements, and the display of uninterrupted chronology. The amplification of this transformed view within the space of the internet provides new avenues for connection with Kolhapur's diaspora and audiences who are otherwise unaware of the temple via unregulated *darśan* with the goddess. The livestream does so without attempting to provide the entire, embodied experience, potentially acting as an invitation for an in-person visit in the future.

IMAGES



Figure 1. View of the temple courtyard with the banyan tree and an entryway. Shree Mahalaxmi/Ambabai temple, Kolhapur, Maharashtra. January 22, 2019.



Figure 2. Queue for entry to the *darśan mandapa*. Shree Mahalaxmi/Ambabai temple, Kolhapur, Maharashtra. January 22, 2019.

https://mahalaxmikolhapur.com/about-temple.php

श्री अंबाबाई महालक्ष्मी मंदिर दर्शनासाठी खुले झाले असून , भाविकांनी देवस्थान समितीने केलेल्या नियमांचे पालन करून दर्शन घ्यावे.

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WELCOME

The Shri Ambabai/Mahalaxmi Temple of Kolhapur in Maharashtra, India,

The Shri Ambabai/Mahalaxmi Temple of Kolhapur in Maharashtra, India, is one of the three and half Shakti Peethas listed in various puranas of Hinduism. According to these writings, a Shakti Peetha is a place associated with Shakti, the goddess of power. The Kolhapur Shakti Peetha is of special religious significance being one of the six places where it is believed that one can either obtain salvation from desires or havethem fulfilled.

DHARMA PROTOCOL

About Shri Ambabai/Mahalaxmi Temple

The temple takes its name from Ambabai/Mahalaxmi, and it is believed that the divine couple reside in the area. The

Figure 3. The “about” section of the temple’s website. May 31, 2022.

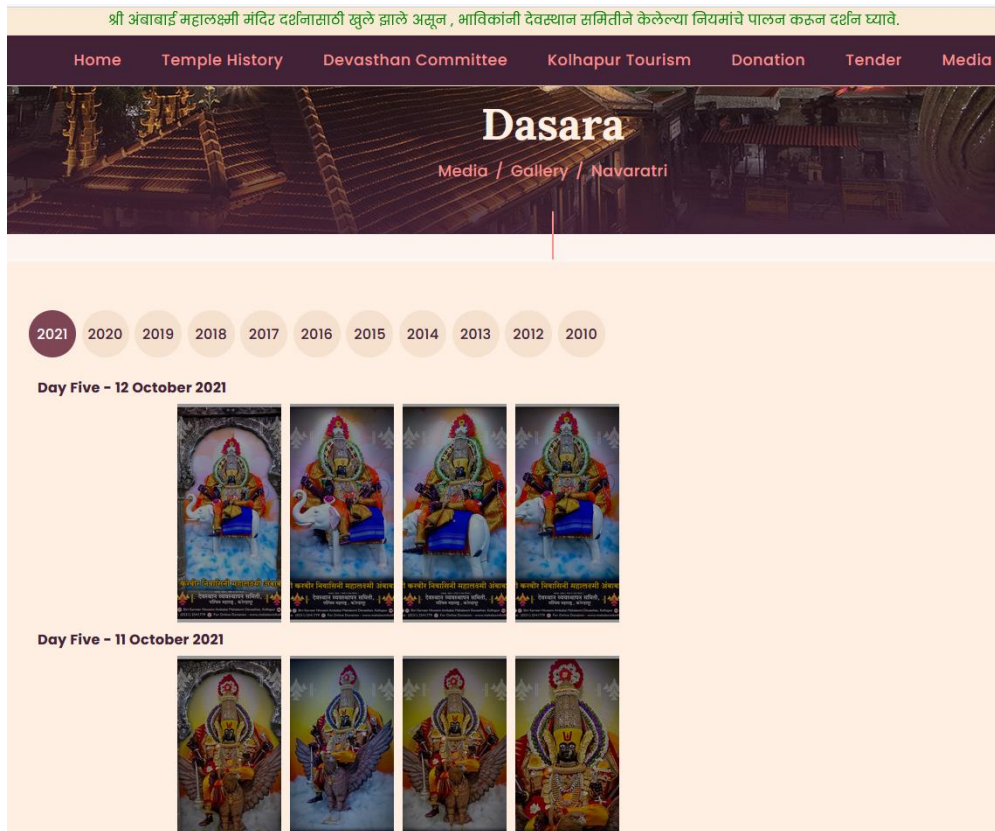


Figure 4. Dasara section of the Shree Mahalaxmi Kolhapur photo gallery. June 5, 2022.



Figure 5. A partial screenshot of the temple's daily schedule, May 31, 2022.



Figure 6. Screenshot of the Shree Mahalaxmi *darshan* livestream. November 16, 2020.



Figure 7. Screenshot of the Shree Mahalaxmi *darshan* livestream. June 14, 2022.



Figure 8. Shree Ambabai Mahalaxmi livestream screenshot with attendants. June 14, 2022.



Figure 9. Shree Ambabai Mahalaxmi livestream screenshot with closed doors. May 20, 2022.

← shri_karveer_nivasini_a... ⋮



561

Posts

1,367

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0

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Shri Karveer Niwasini Ambabai

The Temple is Administered by Devasthan Management Committee, Western Maharashtra, Kolhapur Appointed by Law and Judicial Department Bombay, Govt.

www.mahalaxmikolhapur.com/

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Figure 10. Screenshot of Shree Mahalaxmi temple’s Instagram page. June 6th, 2022.



Figure 11. Hanuman Shrine, Khetwadi, Mumbai. William Elison, Figure 4, in “Site, Sight, Cite: Conceptualizing Wayside Shrines as Visual Culture,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 18, no. 18 (2018), 7.



Figure 12. Photograph of the colossal Lord Ganeśa at Chinmaya Ganadhish, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, ca. 2004.



Figure 13. Screenshot from *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975). The goddess Santoshi Maa is embodied by Anita Guha with a spinning halo and a silver trident.



Figure 14. Screenshot from *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975). The goddess Santoshi Maa is embodied by a *mūrti* in a shrine with a spinning halo.



Figure 15. Screenshot of the Shree Mahalaxmi *darshan* livestream with banana leaves (July 11, 2022)



Figure 16. Screenshot of the Shree Mahalaxmi *darshan* livestream (July 13, 2022)

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