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Category : April/May/June 2010
Published by senthil on Mar. 02, 2010

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Digital Pujas

Web Streaming God's Grace from India to the World

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When Arivudai Nambi was living in Boca Raton, Florida, in 1996, he found himself in a predicament. He had just bought a new car and wished to perform a puja for it. However, there was no temple in the area. He wound up driving to Miami and having the ceremony performed at the home of a Hindu priest.

This experience impelled Mr. Nambi to found EPrarthana.com, the virtual puja service, in 2000. Based in Chennai, India, the company brings to the Internet the ancient custom of conducting pujas, archanas and other ceremonies at temples on behalf of devotees. For a fee of just us$9, customers can order an archana online by specifying their desired South Indian temple, Deity and other necessary details. A company agent has the service conducted on the customer's behalf, and the company sees that the prasad and other offerings are mailed to the client.

Several other virtual puja services are now available, as well as online donation portals, such as the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanam's e-hundi service (www.ttdsevaonline.com/ehundi/eHundi.aspx). Sites like Saranam.com and E-Pooja.in perform temple services in South India, while Kalighat.net specializes in North Indian temples.

In addition to these surrogate puja services, devotees around the world can also witness temple ceremonies through live-streaming and on-demand video in the comfort of their homes. One of the more popular live-streaming websites is E-Darshan.org, which broadcasts videos from over a dozen temples in South India. For those who do not wish to miss a live broadcast, the site's Twitter feed (

www.twitter.com/livedarshan) provides instant updates to followers.

Such services are expanding and becoming more popular. Mr. Karthikraj, founder of E-Darshan.org, estimates that around half of his site's visitors are from India, while the rest are scattered around the world. Mr. Venkatesh Mayakoothan of Chennai turned to E-Darshan.org when his mother was unable to visit the Kapaaleeshwar temple. The webcast made it seem "like the Goddess Herself came to our home."

Mr. Arun Gurjale of Annandale, Virginia, tells how EPrarthana.com helped his Hindu community. "The website proved invaluable when a friend suddenly fell ill with leukemia. The whole community was very worried, so we organized a 14-day puja at the Vaideeshwaran temple over the Internet. It was a difficult time, and the people behind EPrarthana were an enormous help." In addition to prasad, the company routinely sends extra gifts--such as silver coins, audio CDs of shlokas, and DVDs of the rituals being performed--to loyal customers.

Mr. Gurjale's mother, Ms. Alamelu, is even more effusive in her praise. "I have been living away from home for 25 years. Services like these are marvelous. When you see the DVDs of the magnificent rituals, even those who do not have bhakti will be inspired to believe."