A Study on the Usage of Online Media by Selected Hindu Temples in South India.

Padma Rani

The history of religion on Internet can be traced back to the 1980s when religion enthusiasts began to explore ways the Internet could be used to promote religion, faith or belief. Media is used for sharing common religious themes and experience, and also for interaction and connection. Today every religion, no matter how small or unusual has a presence online. Online digital media is interactive and effective medium for religious communication. For millions of believers, the digital media has become a platform where one can easily find God—or at least his followers and participate in public spaces in a private and free manner.

The aim of this paper is to carry out qualitative and descriptive analysis of four cases of Hindu religion in India. These include Tirupati Balaji, Udupi Krishna Matha (temple complex), Meenkashi Temple, Madurai and Rameshwaram Temple, Rameswaram.

Tirupati Balaji is considered as one of the highly visited temple in India and abode of one of the richest Gods. Udupi Krishna Matha is a well-known pilgrimage site, particularly famous among the Hindu Vaishnava sect. Lately Udupi Krishna Matha has attracted international devotees, from those countries where there is an International Soceity for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) membership. The Meenkashi temple is a highly revered temple and is one of the famous pilgrimage of Southern India. Rameshwaram temple is under the four religious sites of the country which every Hindu is supposed to visit in his lifetime.

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The case studies of the temples will be analyzed to answer and understand the ways in which digital media are being used for the promotion of religion. Further how digital media is efficient and effective among the devotee users and in what way the digital media has aided religious practices and beliefs. The analysis of case studies has helped shed new light to examine the central question as to how digital media empowers and challenges religious institutions.

Introduction

Various aspects of human life like beliefs and practices have evolved over a period of time. Communication methods have evolved from oral to written and to the audio-visual. In the contemporary era, communication is done with the aid of the Internet. Religion is now widely spread on the Internet. It has given rise to various online religious communities. Even if the politics of identity and community exists in online religious sites because of the struggles between and within groups for domination of ideas. The Cyberspace is considered a more democratized version given its mass-participatory nature (Kong, L., 2001).

The history of the relationship between religion and the Internet can be traced back to the early 1980s when the religious enthusiasts began to explore ways the Internet could be used for religion or faith or belief. The first religious-orientated online group was the Usenet ‘net.religion’ discussion list (Stout, D., 2006). Churches and denominations worldwide have established websites in the hope of reaching the maximum number of people who are part of the community and converting non-believers. The entire spectrum of religious purpose on the Internet is based on one principle: to go into the entire world and preach the gospel to everyone. Even though Christianity is the only religion that has dominated the electronic media, in e-space it cannot claim this superiority and “it is not an exaggeration to say that almost every religion, no matter how small or unusual has a presence online.” Stephen O’Leary one of the first scholars to analyze the role of new media for religious communication claims that the advent of the Internet has been as revolutionary for religious growth and dissemination as was the invention of the printing press (cited in Hackett, 2006). The Internet’s interactive nature may prove that it is an effective medium for religious communication since the ordinary participant can take an active role in the communication process. For millions of believers, the Internet has become a place where one can
easily find God—or at least his followers and participate in public space in a private and free manner. Religion has become so prevalent on the Internet that according to a statistics gathered by the Time Warner Company estimate, there are almost three times as many as Internet sites concerning God than there are about sex (Selvan, A., 2003).

Religious engagement through TV, radio, music and the Internet generally complements—rather than replaces—traditional kinds of religious participation, such as going to church. Americans who said they frequently attend religious services were more likely to engage in these electronic religious activities than those who said they attend religious services less often (Pew Internet Research, 2014).

Review of Literature

Religion has evolved over and changed the way it is expressed with the advent of technology (Scott Thumma). The Internet can be used for religion because of its multi-dimensionality, multi-functionality and multi-disciplinarity. The concept of proselytization—to disseminate one’s religion has grown largely (Rosalind Hackett, 2006).

There exists both positive and negative aspects of the relationship between religion and the Internet, commercialization of the medium, trends among the online users for religious purposes have been discussed. Websites were able to reach outsiders, whereas e-mail is used most successfully among the congregation, To attract new young members online sites need to be attractive.

Mark Williams talks about the important characteristics of virtual pilgrimage and how different is the experience there. Virtual pilgrimage on the Internet is the new way of being spiritual in the postmodern world. The four key characteristics are: (1) it creates a mythscape, an immaterial mental geography that originally comes from sacred oral or scriptural traditions; (2) it exists as an interactive visual-auditory medium for experiencing a sense of sacred presence; (3) it generates symbolic forms of entertainment that are liminoid in character; and (4) as a leisure activity of individuals ‘Net surfing’ from their home or office computers, it can create ‘virtual travelling communities’ of pilgrims who use the discourse of communitas to describe their experience.
How religion is portrayed on the Internet and how it is different from the traditional ways of preaching religion has been discussed widely.

In a study conducted in 2000 in the United States regarding the usage of the Internet for religious purposes by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that the Internet has become a vital force in many faith communities. Students of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research conducted a study in 2000 on Religion and the Internet. The findings were:

- None of the webmasters surveyed reported that their congregations contracted with professional web design firms outside of their membership to create their sites.
- The layperson had the original idea for a congregational website. Pastors were the catalyst for the website in just 30 percent of cases, with the remaining 20 percent included team members, committees, and individual staff members.
- As stated above, in the majority of cases (75.8 percent) a skilled member of the congregation was responsible for the site creation, with an additional 21 percent made by congregational staff members. In slightly more than half cases, the congregation as whole was encouraged to contribute to the website creation and construction process.
- The majority did not spend extensive time planning their websites.
- A majority of webmasters, a few who were not the original creators of their sites, stated that it was comparatively easy to get the original material for their sites. Several of those surveyed voluntarily reported that it is a difficult task to get continual new material to update their sites. The responsibility of generating web content was shared in over half the cases. The webmaster was responsible for this effort in a quarter of sites, a pastor was in 15 percent and a secretary was in 10 percent of the sites surveyed.
- Nearly 50 percent of webmasters stated that their sites were equally aimed at the public and at their own members. Another large group of sites (43.5 percent) were seen as more for the public, with only 7 percent stated that they designed their sites mostly for an internal congregational audience.
- The congregations reported that they used 2 to 6 different methods to publicize their sites.
- Webmasters overwhelmingly reported a mix of outsiders and congregational members using their sites, although a quarter thought
most of their traffic was from non-member visitors. Nearly a third of webmasters did not know which pages on their sites were the most popular.

- 13 percent claimed to have gotten first time visitors because of the website and all but one of these eight said the congregation gained new members directly because of the site

The Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted another study in the end of 2003. The findings are as follows:

- 64 percent of Internet users in the U.S. have used the Internet for religious purposes.
- Majority using the Internet for religious purposes are mostly women, white, middle aged, college educated, and relatively well to do.
- People using the Internet for religious purpose are devout and they mostly use the Internet for personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions or work related to their places of worship.
- 26 percent of online religious users seek information about the religious faith of others. Most of them are doing this out of curiosity.

In a follow up question about the motives of those who got information about others,

- 51 percent said they did it out of curiosity,
- 13 percent said they did it for their own spiritual growth
- 31 percent said both reasons were important to them.
- The majority of online religious users describe themselves as spiritual and religious.
- Evangelicals are among the most passionate Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes.

It found evidence that the online environment is facilitating interactions of a religious or spiritual nature for a variety of people who are actively engaged in traditional religious contexts and bodies.

The Pew Internet Research Group study on Religion and Electronic media in 2014 revealed the following findings: 20 percent of Americans said they had shared their religious faith on social networking websites or apps (such
as Facebook and Twitter) in the past week while 46 percent said they had seen someone else share “something about their religious faith” online. The percentage of Americans who shared their own faith online is similar to the proportions who said they watched a religious TV program (23 percent), listened to religious talk radio (20 percent) or listened to Christian rock music (19 percent). Even more (40 percent) said they shared something about their religious faith “offline, in a real-life setting.” Young adults (ages 18-29) are about twice as likely as Americans ages 50 and older to see people sharing their faith online. This pattern reflects broader generational differences in technology adoption and media consumption with young adults using the Internet more than older people do. By contrast, watching religious television is considerably more common among older adults than among those under 30.

Aleks Krotoski explains how the urge to know everything is human nature and is supported by the web by providing answers to it. Similarly, the web is providing almost all the answers related to religion.

Most of the studies in this field are conducted on Christianity. However, there are articles which focus on different religions and rituals affected due to the Internet.

Christopher Helland, in his paper on ‘Online Religion as Lived Religion-Methodological Issues in the study of Religious Participation on the Internet,’ talks about how due to the ever changing face of the technology makes it difficult to study religion online as religion has also changed online and also the changes that has taken place over the period of time.

In the feature ‘Treading Online an Act of Faith’ available on ‘Insights into Religion’ talks about how church leaders are presented on the Web with mixed emotions of reaching the masses and losing investment in the local congregation. The media in the countries like India where religion is a way of life for many is quoting incidents and pointing out at the benefits of religious sites. It is not only about religious sites but also about the design and the sites that help in designing such sites. In 2007, the Hartford Institute of Religious Research conducted a research on trends for church web designs. It was that none of the webmasters surveyed reported that their congregations contracted professional web design firms outside of their membership to create their sites. The web sites are “homegrown” grassroots projects of committed and motivated members. Often, the congregational sites are
little more than electronic brochures, rarely are they made appealing and interactive. In either case, it is certain that with increasing use of the Internet greater attention needs to be paid to the method and manner by which this process happens.

Methods

Descriptive content analysis was utilized for four cases of Hindu religion in India. These include Tirupati Balaji, Udupi Krishna Matha (temple complex), Meenkashi Temple, Madurai and Rameshwaram Temple.

Tirupati Balaji is considered as one of the highly visited temples in India and abode of Balaji—an incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, one of the richest Gods.

Udupi Krishna Matha is a well-known pilgrimage site and particularly famous among the Hindu Vaishnava sect. Lately, Udupi Krishna Matha has attracted international devotees from those countries where there is International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) membership. The Meenkashi temple is a highly revered temple and is one of the famous pilgrimage sites in Southern India. Rameshwaram temple is one the four religious sites of the country which every Hindu is supposed to visit in his/her lifetime.

The websites were analyzed for the content, the display and the information they provided as well as the accessibility and the navigation feature the language of the site etc.

Analysis and Interpretation

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam has a website (www.tirumala.org) copyrighted in 2015 under the name of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD). As of 4 February 2017 at 8.30 AM, the number of visitors is 20,320,460; it also has details about visitors of the day. These numbers are a reflection of the volume of traffic this site has been attracting. It also shows the popularity of the webpage and also that devotees are using online media for various religious purposes. At the bottom of the page it has provision by which one can directly go back to the top of the page. The navigation through the various toolbars is very easy and smooth.
The mast head of the page has the logo of TTD on the left hand side and on the right corner a photo of Padmavathi and Lord Balaji are placed. In the middle, the words Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam is written both in Telugu and English. Otherwise the rest of the text on the page is only in English.

Below the mast head various options of scrolling down are given with a drop down menu: Temples, Pilgrim Services, Online services, News and Events, TTD Management, Photo Gallery and General Information.

Below it is a photograph of the sanctum sanctorium. As soon as one opens the page, the background music starts playing. Just below the photograph there is a scroll which has information about vacancy in seva (refers to the offerings both in the form of prayers and service that can be performed at a place of worship) as well as some pertinent information related to the temple for the devotees.

Three numbers of call centers are given. Next to the numbers are the other headings--Online Booking facility, E-publication and Srivari Seva Services. Sevas, Darshan and Accomodation. Tirumala updates are also mentioned. Below these are: Siddhanta Panchagam, Schemes/Trusts, Social Services, Day Schedules.

In a box is mentioned the latest updates, notification and tenders. Below that a table of contents is put up which can be expanded as per the requirement of the reader.

At the bottom of the page are other links and information below that are given the mandatory information about copyright and the browsers in which the website can be best accessed such as Chrome, Mozrilla and Firefox.

On the right hand corner of the homepage, three options are given: Survey, Feedback and Map

Each of the options mentioned on the homepage has a drop down menu. The first option is ‘Temple’ which has three options under it: At Tirumala, At Tiruchanoor and At Tirupati. Under At Tirumala, various sub-headings are given which are further sub-divided and has complete explanations under it.
At Tirumala has the sub-heading of Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple; Sri Bhu Varaha Swamy Temple and Sri Bedi Anjaneya Swamy Temple.

Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple has the following sub-headings under it: Temple Legend, History, The Srinivasa Kalyanam, How to Reach Tirumala and Places to Visit Around Tirumala. The Temple Legend sub-heading traces the legend behind the temple in a very simple language. It is further divided into various sub-headings which makes it easier for the reader and also makes understanding of facts easier.

The ‘History’ sub-heading traces when the temple was established and the significance of the various structures in the temple. It is again divided into various sub-headings and explained in two to three simple sentences.

The Srinivasa Kalyanam depicts the story of the marriage of Lord Venakteswara, also known as Lord Srinivasa, with the Goddess Padmavathi. It has texts and pictures. The pictures depict the story. It has seventeen pages and the reader can navigate by clicking on next and previous buttons. On each page, there are three pictures depicting the story mentioned in the text.

The ‘How to Reach Tirumala’ sub-heading talks about the various modes of transport by which one can reach Tirumala like road, rail, air and by foot. It mentions the distance and other information required by a traveler to reach the place. It also gives information that people who want to go by foot will be provided assistance in the form of luggage transportation, medical help, canteen, toilet and other facilities required on the way.

The ‘Places to Visit Around Tirumala’ sub-heading mentions some of the must visit places in Tirumala Swami Pushkarini, Sri Bhu Varaha Swamy temple, Sri Hathiramjee Mutt, Sri Bedi Anjaneya Swamy Temple, Srivari Sikhara Darshanam, Sila Thoranam, Dharmagiri, Narayangiri, Papavinasanam, Akasa Ganga Waterfalls, Temple Museum, Asthana Mandapams and Gogarbhgam Gardens. Tirumala also has various theerthams which can be visited by visitors.

Under the ‘Sri Bhu Varaha Swamy Temple’ sub-heading, tells of a legend that it must be visited before visiting Lord Venkateswara Swamy Temple. It also gives the timings and the special abhishekam (a special prayer for special occasions) performed in the month of Shravan.
Under the ‘Legend’ section of the ‘Sri Bedi Anjaneya Swamy Temple’ sub-heading mentions why one should visit this temple, the timings, special puja on Sundays and the special occasion is the Hanuman jayanthi which is celebrated once every year.

At Tiruchanoor the temple to be visited is the Sri Padmavathi Ammavari temple. It mentions the legend of the temple as well as the sevas and other temples.

At Tirupati the temples mentioned are Sri Govindarajaswami Temple, Srivari Padalamandapam Temple, Sri Lakshmi Narayan Swamy Temple, Sri Vinayak Swamy Temple, Sri Kapilswaraswamy Temple and Sri Kodandarama Swamy Temple. It also mentions three other temples which comes under the TTD in Kadappa and West Godavari district. TTD has temples outside Tirupati their names and location with brief details is provided.

Under ‘Pilgrim Services’ the various subheadings are ‘Darshan,’ ‘Sevas,’ ‘Accomodation at Tirumala and Tirupati,’ ‘Transport’ and ‘Others.’ Darshan has details about ‘Sarvadarshan,’ ‘Special Entry Darshan,’ ‘Divya Darshan for Pedestrians’ and ‘Special Darshan for Physically Challenged and Aged.’

The different types of sevas under the same heading are: ‘Arjitha Sevas,’ ‘Daily Sevas,’ ‘Weekly Sevas’ and ‘Annual or Periodical Sevas.’ The schedule of sevas throughout the week is given. It also mentions that the seva could go beyond 1 AM depending upon the demand. The rates for the sevas are not mentioned but there is a mention that the rates are subject to change from time to time.

Accommodation is provided both free and on payment basis. The various options with their rates are quoted. The free accommodation is for the dormitory type. There are provisions for marriage halls as well as halls of various sizes depending upon the group.

Under the ‘Transportation’ sub-heading, it describes how a person can reach Tirupati by air, rail and road. There are free bus services from the railway station to Tirumala with an interval of 30 minutes. A number of buses with good frequency ply from different places directly to Tirumala.
Under ‘Online Services’ the various facilities provided are ‘Sevas,’ ‘Darshan,’ ‘Accommodation,’ ‘Hundi,’ ‘Donation,’ ‘Publications,’ ‘Kalyana vedika,’ and ‘Kalyanamandapam.’ One can access the online services by registering with a valid email ID. A registration link is sent to the email for verification and activation. The registered mobile number will get the one-time password (OTP) verification process. Seva tickets can be booked three months in advance while donations can be done online.

Under ‘News and Events’ is the tab for the S. V. Museum which houses 6,000 items of historical interest ranging from archaeology to contemporary items.

Bramhotsavams are special days throughout the year. It provides details like timings of various events. A brochure is maintained by the PRO of Tirumala. However, on the website it has not been updated since October 2016.

Sri Venkateswara Bhakthi channel is multi-lingual: Telugu, Tamil and English. It has options for YouTube videos and Live TV on Android. The site is svbc.tirumala.org. and the number of visitors since 2014 is 870,758 as of 4 Feb 2017.

The TTD news page has eight sub-headings ‘Home,’ ‘Brahmotsavams,’ ‘Darshan,’ ‘Utsavams,’ ‘Special Articles,’ ‘Events,’ ‘Photo Albums,’ and ‘Press Releases.’ The archives has been maintained since May 2010. This page has been copyrighted since 2013 and was designed by O/o EDP Manager TTD. The news section is divided into ‘Latest News,’ ‘Temple News,’ ‘General News,’ ‘Board News,’ and ‘VIP news.’

Under the ‘TTD Management’ sub-heading, the following can be found: ‘Administration,’ ‘TTD Trust Board,’ and ‘Board Resolutions.’ The administration is done by the chief executive officer of TTD. He is assisted by two joint executive officers, chief vigilance officer, conservator of forests, financial advisor, chief accounts officer, chief engineer and a host of other people to help in the maintenance of twelve temples and sub-shrine and employs around 14,000 persons. The administrative works are from 10 AM to 5 PM from Monday to Saturday. The temples and choulties work round the clock throughout the year. The office address and phone numbers are also mentioned.
The Trust Board members are listed: the chairman, members and ex-officio members. The new Trust members have been appointed in April 2016.

The various resolutions passed by the board since 1995 are also put on the site.

The ‘Photo Gallery’ sub-heading is categorized into ‘Past-Present,’ ‘Unique Photos,’ and ‘News Album.’ They are further categorized as ‘Brahmotsavam,’ ‘Temple,’ ‘Culturals,’ ‘Nature,’ and ‘Pilgrims.’

The ‘General Information’ sub-heading has the following drop down menus under it: ‘Do’s and Don’ts,’ ‘FAQs,’ ‘Dress Code,’ and ‘Contact Us.’

The ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ lists out certain things that need to be done in Tirumala and inside the temple. The FAQs are related to ‘Donations,’ ‘Online Bookings,’ and ‘Subscription’ and a link has been provided for more FAQs. The ‘Dress Code’ was formally introduced in 2013. For men, it is dhoti or pyjama with upper cloth. For women it is saree or half-saree or churidar with pyjama and the upper cloth.

In ‘Contact Us’ a list of all the officials with their email IDs and phone numbers is given.

Shri Krishna Mutt, Udupi

There are a number of websites you get as you type Sri Krishna Mutt on Google Search. The official website at present is the www.pejavaraparyaya2016.com. The Sri Krishna Mutt has a system of rotation and whoever is the Seer in-charge of the temple runs the website. Each of the eight Mutts have their own websites and whoever is in-charge of the temple runs the official website also. At the bottom-left side of the page mentions that it is copyrighted in 2015 and designed by Leobots Technologies.

The website has a mast head with the photo of the senior seer (priest-in-charge of the temple) on the left side and the junior seer on the right side. In the center there is a small photo of Udupi Krishna, below it is written Jagadguru Sri Madhavacharya Moola Samsthana, Sri Krishna Matha, Paryaya Sri Pejvar Adhokshaga Matha, Udupi.
The various options available at the Homepage are ‘Home,’ ‘Daily Alankara,’ ‘About Matha,’ ‘Paryayotsava,’ ‘Events,’ ‘Timeline,’ ‘Seva List,’ and ‘Contacts.’

Below mentions ‘Sri Krishna matha-pejavara paryaya 2016’ and ‘Sri Krishna janmastami programme live streaming.’

Below that in a box download is written in bold letters with the following text ‘3 easy step: 1. Click Downloads; 2. Download On Our Website; and 3. Get Free File converter.’


Just above that is a box with a maroon background and white folded hand with ‘E-SEVA’ written on it. When one clicks on the ‘E-SEVA,’ it directs to a page which on the left side has ‘Seva Details,’ ‘E-Seva,’ and ‘E-kanika.’ It also has a small box which says ‘Donate.’ There is a provision on the Seva app through which sevas can be booked. At the bottom of the page it has contact details like address, phone number and e-mail id.

‘Online Seva Bookings’ has the following: ‘Worship,’ ‘Amount,’ ‘Seva Performed’ and ‘More Details.’ It lists all the sevas that can be done in the temple.

‘E-Kanike’ lists five categories under it. In order to do any of them the devotees have to give their details with their photo. There is an option if they would take the Prasad in person or want it posted for them.

When one clicks on the ‘Home’ button, it directs to a page which has an invitation card in kannada. On the right side, there are images with recent updates under three headings: ‘Today’s Programme,’ ‘Alankara,’ ‘Mahapooja,’ and ‘Event Archives.’ It has a calendar that when one clicks on a date it shows the person to the events of that particular day.
The Alankara drop down menu has photos of Puja performed on the various occasions of the day. It is listed chronologically.

‘About Matha’ has the following drop down menu: ‘Pejawara Adhokshaya Matha,’ ‘About Pejavara Matha,’ ‘Guru Parampare,’ and ‘Sri Sri Vishwaeshatheertha Swamiji.’ ‘Peejawara Adhokshaya Math’ details about the temple, the various mathas and the deity worshipped in the temple. ‘About Pejavara Math’ talks about the history of the math in brief. It also lists the various activities that they do like running educational institutions, hospitals, and orphanages, marriage halls, goshalas (a combination of cow shed and diary for a non-commercial purpose), Gurukul (an educational institute where education and training is imparted in the Hindu religious texts), temples, monasteries and chatra’s all across the country. ‘Guru Parampara’ lists all the 34 gurus of the Matha. ‘Sri Sri Vishwesheertha Swamy’ gives a brief account of the worldly life of the seer. It then talks about his spiritual journey and his achievements. It also sheds light on his paryaya and how this is his fifth Paryaya. It describes the various services he has rendered to humanity.

The ‘Parayayotsava’ sub-heading has details about the ‘Udupi Krishna Matha Paryayotsava,’ ‘Paryaya History,’ ‘Madhavacharya’ and ‘Ideology,’ ‘Sri Krishna Matha,’ and ‘Astha Matha.’ This section briefly gives the idea about the origin of the temple, its history and the matha system established by Madhavacharya the founder who runs the administration of the temple, the other work he assigned them was to propagating and promote Dvaita philosophy. Every two years, on January 18th, the change of administration takes place at the temple and it is a big affair which lasts for ten days culminating in honoring people who have contributed in public life. It also has a documentary on the Udupi temple history.

‘Events’ is the largest sub-section under it, it has ‘Pryaya 2016-18,’ ‘Srikrishna Pooja,’ ‘Dignitaries’ Visit,’ ‘Articles,’ ‘Invites,’ ‘Muhurthas,’ ‘News and Events,’ ‘Meeting,’ ‘Sri Vishvesh Teertha Swamiji,’ ‘Govardhanji Trust,’ ‘Daily Events,’ ‘Cultural Programme,’ ‘Mahapooja,’ and ‘Invitation.’ This section also has videos which can be downloaded for viewing. There is an option for subscribing to the newsletter. It has a number of photographs in each section.

‘Timeline:’ Timeline of Pejavara Paryaya 2015-16; various religious and cultural programmes.
‘Seva List:’ The various seva available in the temple are listed with their corresponding cost. It seems like a notice has been pasted online. There is a provision here to book seva online.

‘Contacts’ has address, phone number, email id, the URL of the temple as well as details of banks through which donations could be made.

At the bottom right side is ‘Contacts’ and ‘Donations.’

The options for language are mentioned on the top left hand corner. The website can be accessed in Kannada and English. Kannada is the local language of the state of Karnataka.

The temple provides free food to all the visitors but there is no mention of it on the website.

Though the Sri Krishna temple is an ancient temple, its website has been developed recently. Within a year, it has been continuously updated and still needs to be improved in terms of its aesthetics. There are no information regarding how an individual can reach the place, accommodation, etc. The devotees are mainly people whose origin is Kerala and Karnataka. Now that its reach is widening, it should also include such information.

**The Meenakashi Temple**

The official website of the temple is www.maduraimeenakshi.tnhrc.in. It was copyrighted in 2015 and created by ISRY techies. The website is only in English. Visitors as of 3 February 2017 at 8 AM is 294,073.

The masthead has the name of the temple “Arulmigu Meenakashi Sundareshwarar Thirukkoil, Madurai.” It also has photos of deities. On the right side of the page it has ‘Home,’ ‘Mail,’ and ‘Sitemap’ each one of them has a drop down menu. The sitemap gives a clear idea to the reader about the contents of the site. The centre of the page has images of various parts of the temple which scroll continuously. The other things listed on the page are ‘Home,’ ‘History,’ ‘Worship,’ ‘Festival,’ ‘Services,’ ‘Administration,’ ‘Gallery,’ and ‘Location.’
The page when clicked on www.tnhrce.org directs to the page of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu. A body instituted by the government to run the administration of various religious bodies and properties in the state.

The ‘Home’ has moving images below with the recent news scrolling horizontally.

Below that on the right side you have ‘E-donations,’ ‘E-booking,’ ‘Temple Worship Timings,’ and ‘Temple Highlights’ which is about the annual festival celebrated around April and May and attracts around one million visitors. On the left is a brief description about why the Goddess has been named Meenakshi and her various names. Below this is a detailed Puja schedule of the day. A video on Meenaksahi Sundraeshtwarar temple which has a classical music played in the background highlighting the various towers of the temple. The temple is known for its tower’s size and grandeur. The towers have carvings of various mythological scenes from Indian epics. It also has a view of the areas around the temple. On the left side the heading ‘Halls and Sculptures’ mention about the importance of the various halls and sculptures in the temple. On the right side the heading is ‘Towers’ which explains about the various towers in the temple also known locally as gopurams. There are four majestic towers or Rajgopurams and there are ten other gopurams out of which two are made of gold.

Below this are moving images of the temple.

At the bottom the other things mentioned are ‘Festival,’ ‘Gallery,’ ‘Site Inscriptions,’ ‘Temple Towers,’ ‘Holy Tank,’ ‘Pooja,’ ‘Administration,’ ‘Tourist Places,’ ‘Tourist Structures,’ ‘Transport’ and a map of the temple location in Madurai which can be expanded.

The other things on this page are ‘Thirukoil Magazine,’ ‘Tenders,’ ‘Warnings,’ and ‘Property Register.’

‘Worship’ has in its drop down menu pooja time and procedure for worship which tells a devotee on how to go around the temple in which sequence.

Under ‘Festivals,’ is the Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Thirukkoil – Festivals with corresponding photos. During the 12 months of the Tamil calendar year, every month there is a festival in the temple. The whole list with links with further information are displayed in a tabular form. Some of the most popular festivals of the temple are Chitra Festival, Avanimoola Festival, Masi Mandala Festival, Float Festival and Navarathri Cultural Festival.

The most important festival associated with the temple is the Meenakshi Thirukalyanam (the divine marriage of Meenakshi) that is celebrated in April of every year. The wedding of the divine couple is regarded as a classic instance of south Indian female-dominated marriage—an arrangement referred as “Madurai marriage.” During the one month period, there are a number of events including the Ther Thiruvizhah (Chariot Festival) and Theppa Thiruvizhah (Float Festival). Major Hindu festivals like Navrathri and Shivrathri are celebrated in the temple. Like most Shakti temples in Tamil Nadu, the Fridays during the Tamil months of Aadi (July–August) and Thai (January–February) are celebrated in the temple by thousands of devotees. An example is the Avani Moola Utsavam, a 10-day festival mainly devoted to Sundareswarar which describes his various Thiruvilayadal meaning Shiva’s sacred games.

‘Services’ has in the drop menu ‘Annadhanam-The Scheme’ was launched in this temple in March 23, 2002. Subsequently the scheme was extended in two sub-temples, Arulmigu Marriamman Temple - Theppakulam, and Arulmigu Thiruvappudaiyar Temple-Sellur. A table displaying the rates for feeding people is put up. Donations for Annadhanam can be sent either by cheque/demand draft drawn in favour of “The Joint Commissioner / Executive Officer” Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple, Madurai. The bank details are provided for reference of the devotees.

Free Marriage schemes at the temple are for the benefit of indigent Adi Dravidars, Adivasis and backward classes. Under this scheme the couple undergoing free weddings are gifted with new clothes, Thirumangalyam and
other presentation at a cost of Rs.3,000. Twenty guests are also fed at the temple’s expense. On February 17, 2002, grand free weddings were conducted for 70 couples. On that day, the temple also bore the cost of the wedding of 72 couples in Chennai. So far 175 couples have benefitted from this scheme. Application forms for assistance under this scheme are available at the temple office.

Moral education classes are conducted for children every Sunday from 4.00 p.m. to 5 p.m. More than 35 children are benefitting from these classes. This scheme was also extended to the Arulmighu Mariamman Temple at Teppakulam. There are about 35 children attending these classes. Karunai illam- A new building has been built for providing free education shelter and dress to poor and girl children.

Joint prayers to seek the blessings of the deities are held for the quick recovery of patients at the emergency wards of the Government hospital, Madurai joint prayers are conducted at 5.30 p.m. every Friday. This facility is also extended to patients at other places. They can send their details to the temple and prayers will be offered on their behalf. Prasad will also be sent to them by post.

‘Carrieall Car Service’ is an off-road Electric Vehicle (EV) and All Terrain Vehicle (ATV). This service aims to help tourists especially the senior citizens. It goes around the four chithirai streets of Madurai in order to view the four temple towers.

‘Other Activities’ under which various activities undertaken by the temple authorities are mentioned like water tank at the entrance of each tower, Birla Vishram lodge for pilgrims; discourses arranged by spiritual leaders and academicians; the temple-run school for girls, homes for girls, guides for people in Tamil and other languages and free marriages. In order for pilgrims to understand the importance and history of the temple, audio, video cassettes as well as maps are provided. Special prayers are offered on the birthdays of Alwar saints.

Under ‘Administration’ the details of the office of the Executive Officer and Joint Commissioner who is appointed by the government to administer the temple. ‘Gallery’ has two drop down menus: ‘Photogallery’
and ‘Alangram’s Photos.’ The ‘Photo Gallery’ has photos of various areas of the temple. ‘Alangram’s Photos’ are exclusively of the deity decorated on various occasions in various forms.

‘Location’ has details on ‘Contact,’ ‘Transport’ and ‘Tourist Places.’ ‘Contact’ has details of the executive officer. ‘Transport’ has details about how to reach the area by road, rail and air with the help of map and text. It also gives the location with timings within the limits of Madurai. Under ‘Tourist Places’ other places other than the temple are mentioned like the Gandhi Museum, Amusement Park and other temples in Madurai.

At the bottom of the homepage there are certain things, some of which are already described like stone inscriptions. There are about 44 stone inscriptions on the corridors of the Sundareswarar Shrine and that of Meenakshi Amma Shrine. These inscriptions contain details of lands donated to the temple, the rituals for worship, the list of articles used for performing neivethiyam, the religious status of the people in ancient days, government procedures and social habits.

‘Temple Tower’ The temple has four Rajagopurams or majestic towers, there are five towers on top of the sanctum sanctorum of the Lord, three on top of the sanctum sanctorum of the Goddess and two golden towers or gopurams, all which have been exquisitely designed and sculptured. All fourteen towers have been segregated based on the stages they are:

- Nine tier gopurams- four
- Seven tier, Chittirai gopuram- one
- Five tier gopurams- five
- Three tier gopuram - two
- Golden gopurams- two.

It goes on to further who built these towers, the dimensions of the tower and what the tower contains.

Other things like ‘Temple Tank,’ ‘Halls and Structure,’ ‘Pooja,’ ‘Administration,’ ‘Tourist Places,’ and ‘Transport’ are also provided at the bottom with a map and contact details. The link to the site of the Hindu Religious Endowment and Charitable Department is also there. The tender
system for the temple is completely online. The property register of the temple in complete details is maintained in eight parts.

‘Thirukoil Magazine’ is a monthly magazine under the name of Thirukoil is published by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Administration Department since 1958. Eminent scholars regularly write articles on Hindu religion, temples and spirituality in this magazine. Thirukoil Magazine is the only magazine published by the Hindu religious and endowments. All information about the temple activities are published in the Thirukoil magazine.

There is a warning mentioned at the bottom of the page with the following information:

Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Thirukoil-A Kind Appeal. This is the only official Website of Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Thirukoil, Madurai. This temple is under the control of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department, Government of Tamil Nadu. The contents of this Website belong to this temple. Misuse and reproduction of contents and photographs are prohibited. Devotees are informed that this is the only official website, which is linked with www.tnhrce.org, an official website of HR&CE Department, Government of Tamil Nadu. The request for donation by using this temple by name the other private website is punishable under Rule 5 of Collection of Income and the Incoming of Expenditure Rules (G.O.Ms No.4065, Revenue, dated 26th September 1961)

The Rameswaram Temple

Arulmigu Ramanatha Swami Temple, Rameswaram is more popularly known as Rameswaram temple. The official website is www.rameswaramtemple.tnhrce.in.

The masthead of the page has the name Arulmigu Ramanatha Swami Temple, Rameswaram. Under it are mentioned ‘Home,’ ‘History,’ ‘Pooja Details,’ ‘Festivals,’ ‘Teertham,’ ‘E-services,’ ‘Gallery,’ ‘Location,’ and ‘Sitemap.’ Below it the photographs of the different corridor and towers of the temple scroll. Overlapping the pictures are three boxes ‘E-donation,’ ‘E-room booking,’ and ‘E-food donations.’ Under that it has provisions to select the language. This is powered by Google Translate. Indian languages and other major world languages are mentioned.
There is a photograph of Arulmigu Parvathavarthini Amman and Arulmigu Ramanathan Swamy on the left side and on the right side a story about Ambica is mentioned.

Below it is the Temples inside threethams. It has the photographs of eighteen tanks which are inside the temple. Under the heading ‘Latest News’ are ‘Temple Pooja,’ ‘News and Events’ and ‘Temple Important Festivals.’ ‘History,’ ‘Contact’ and the location of the temple with a map is given. Department links to TNHRCE, Thirukoil Magazine, tenders and warnings are also present. At the bottom of the page is ‘Home,’ ‘History,’ ‘Poojas,’ ‘Festivals,’ ‘Gallery,’ and ‘Contact.’ At the bottommost corner is the copyright dated 2015 and developed by ISKY TECHIES.

On clicking ‘History,’ one is directed to a page which has two photographs on the left hand side and in the rest of the page it is about the origin of the temple. It also tells us about the towers of the temple when they were made, by whom, and why they were made. The dimensions of the tower and also when the towers have undergone renovations are also indicated. The temple and the island of Rameswaram have acquired this name because Lord Rama worshipped Lord Shiva, the God of Gods here on return from Sri Lanka. According to legend, after killing Ravana, Lord Rama returned with his consort Goddess Seetha to India first stepping on the shores of Rameswaram. To expiate the “dosha” of killing a brahmin, Lord Rama wanted to offer worship to Lord Shiva. Since there was no shrine in the island he dispatched Sri Hanuman to Kailash to bring an idol of Lord Shiva.

‘Pooja Details’ has two items in the drop down menu: ‘Pooja Timings’ and ‘Pooja Details.’ ‘Pooja Timings’ has ‘Worship timings,’ ‘Pooja Timings’ and ‘Temple Timings.’ It also mentions the facility of offering Ganges water to the Lord personally or through post. It also outlines the procedure to be followed for various offerings to the Lord either in cash or in kind. On the right hand side it mentions the E-sevas that are available. ‘Pooja Details’ give the list of various Poojas and its cost.

The ‘Festivals’ link has details about the seven main festivals that are held. It gives details about the beginning, ending and duration. Two festivals are mentioned: Mahasivarathri and Thirukkalynam indicating that they are two very important occasions for this temple.
‘Theerthams’ has two categories under it: one inside the temple and the other outside. The inside the temple mentions 22 theerthams in a tabular form with location and significance. On the right side of the page there are photos of theerthams. Outside the temple 22 theerthams are also mentioned. The photos are placed on the left side of the page and in a tabular form their location and significance are also mentioned.

‘E-services’ are of three kinds: ‘E-Annadhanam,’ ‘E-Accomodation’ and ‘E-Donation.’ When one clicks on the ‘E-Annadhanam’ it leads to a page which has a calendar of the month and colour codes are used to mark the availability of dates. There is a small icon which says ‘How to book’ that leads to the ‘Payment Gateway’ and ‘Terms and Conditions.’ In the case of ‘E-Accomodation’ the same procedure has to followed except that in case of rooms they can book a minimum of 3 days to a maximum of 45 days. In ‘Terms and Conditions’ it is clearly stated that once payment is done, they have to wait for clearance from the bank and make a print out. No cancellation can be done. In case of cancellation, no refund is possible. At the bottom of both the pages there are ‘FAQs,’ ‘Privacy Policy,’ and ‘Disclaimer.’ In ‘E-donations’ the various categories are ‘General Donations,’ ‘E-Hundi,’ ‘Elephant Maintenance,’ ‘Karuna Illam,’ and ‘Kosalai Donations.’ Clicking on any of them takes one to the payment gateway where one has to fill their details and make the payment. Payment has to be above Rupees 100.

Once you click on ‘Gallery,’ the photos of various corridors, platforms, and gopurams appear. Below it are the photos of the Kumbabishekam Festival which was held on January 20, 2016.

Under ‘Location’ the various headings are ‘Contact Us,’ ‘The City Info’ and ‘Travel Info.’ Under ‘Contact Us,’ the complete address, phone number, E-mail id and URL of the Joint Commissioner/Executive Officer of the temple are given. On the right hand side the ‘E-services’ are mentioned and below is a map which can be enlarged. The ‘City Info’ has general information about Rameswaram, the temple area, population, the climate, language spoken, post offices, hospitals etc. The various Social Welfare Schemes run by the temple are: ANNADHANAM a). Karunai Illam (Charity Home), Ayurvedic Hospital, girls’ school, Thevara School, Library and Gosalas. It has a small map about the islands around Ramasewaram.
‘Travel Info’ has details about flights to Madurai complete with timings, schedule and contact number of various airlines. It also gives information about trains from Madurai to Rameswaram and Chennai to Rameswaram. By road, the area can be reached from different places. There is a map on the page. For local transportation one can hire jeeps, auto, rickshaws and cycles.

‘Tourist Info’ has information about places in Rameswaram and around the temple. It also has details about Pamban Bridge and Dhanuskodi. The temples mentioned are: Arulmigu Subramania Swamy Temple, Thiruchendur Arultharum Mutharamman Temple, Kulasekaranpatinam, Arulmigu Sankararameswarar Temple, Thoothukudi, Arulmigu Mariamman Temple, Irukangudi. Arulmigu Andal Temple, Srivilliputhur, and Arulmigu Sundaramahalinga Swamy Temple, Sathuragiri. A brief write up and their weblink is provided for anyone interested in knowing more about them.

The ‘Latest News’ has information about timings of the various pooja done at the temple. Devotees can click on ‘Read More’ to get detailed information however, ‘News and Events’ is not regularly updated. The temple’s important festivals are mentioned.

Conclusion

The four websites analyzed reflect the website design and content is related to the time when the website was started by the Temple Trust. The once which was started early have improved over time and integrated various features on the website like streaming. The website were designed by professionals.

All the four websites provide information on the history of the temple, and the schedule that is followed in the temple prayers. There are mentions of special occasions of the temple. It provides information on how to offer prayers in the temple, how to go around the temple, and the sequence to be followed in visiting the various deities.

The photograph are of the structure of the temple, its aerial view and the temple’s main deity. Only in some cases do you have photographs of the temple surroundings (Madurai), devotees performing offerings and prayers are displayed only of special occasions. Both Tirupati and Udupi temples have photographs of some well-known personalities who visited in the past.
All of them have provisions for offering their service to the temple without being physically present. People can give donations for various activities of the temple, like free food, education, maintaining of the orphanage, hospital assistance and maintenance of elephants. All of them provide bank details through which a devotee can donate for various services. There are also provisions for e-payments. So digitization has been integrated by these websites in its financial dealings with the public. There is also a provision for devotees to get the Prasad delivered to their homes. The Rameswaram temple has a provision by which one can send River Ganges water to the temple that can be offered to the Lord on behalf of the devotees.

With the exception of Udupi Temple, all of them provide information about travel and accommodation to the places. All options are posted in detail. Provisions for booking in advance is also available. Rameswaram Temple has even laid down certain rules and regulations for booking and cancellation. It also gives details about various facilities available in the temple complex.

All of the websites are protected and copyrighted. The number of visitors to these sites reflect their popularity. They are also used to disseminate information about the various charitable activities undertaken by these temples. These websites are also multi-lingual like the Rameswaram temple which has options not only for Indian languages but also for foreign languages.

To conclude, the website of the temple is a form of virtual pilgrimage. The four key characteristics of virtual pilgrimage are: (1) it creates a mythscape, an immaterial mental geography that originally comes from sacred oral or scriptural traditions; (2) it exists as an interactive audio-visual medium for experiencing a sense of sacred presence; (3) it generates symbolic forms of entertainment that are liminoid in character; and (4) as a leisure activity of individuals ‘Net surfing’ from their home or office computers, it can create ‘virtual travelling communities’ of pilgrims who use the discourse of communitas to describe their experience. The websites are used by temples administrations to educate the people about the temple and its history. The service of experts led to the development of the websites which can be easily navigated. It opens in English as the digital presence of educated people is much more than illiterates. It is used to inform people about the various activities at the temple and the importance of certain days and certain ceremonies. In contemporary times, due to migration and globalization it help people to keep in touch with their place of worship and enable them to perform their religious activities.
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