





Digital Offerings and the Virtualization of Ritual Food: Rethinking Death Practices in the Age of Technology

¹Shashi Pathak  and ²Richa Mishra *

¹and²Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Institute of Technology, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, India
*23ptphde267@nirmauni.ac.in

Abstract. Food is an integral part of human life. The type of food, method of its preparation, and the way of its consumption tell a lot about a culture and tradition. In Hinduism, after the death of a family member, people show grief and remembrance through food. Rituals like Pind-daan, where rice balls are offered to the deceased, represent the family's aspiration to nourish the ancestors. Food is the only medium that connects the living with the dead.

However, in modern times, such practices are either diminishing or have experienced a substantial transformation. These changes are the result of migration and technological mediation. The families who have migrated to far off places are increasingly turning to digital platforms to perform the death rituals. Digital platforms provide them the option to perform the death ritual of their family member at sacred places like Gaya or at the ghats of Varanasi.

This study is focused on such practices like “digital food rituals” to examine this shift from the physical rituals to digital rituals. It will focus on the shifting meaning of ritual food relating it with the contemporary time where virtual representations may partially or completely replace physical presence. The study is based on three methodological approaches: (1) textual analysis of Garuda Purana and Bhagavad Gita, as they provide the guidelines for Hindu death rituals, (2) ethnographic observation of Gaya and Varanasi where priests offer digital death rituals services, (3) semi-structured interviews of few families who participated in digital death practices.

This study asks pivotal questions: Will there be a time when the digital offerings will replace the material and sensory elements of food completely? How do families be able to balance technological mediation with spiritual authenticity? What will be the impact on ecology and community when the materiality of the ritual food get transferred to the virtual domain. This study interrogates the interwoven relationship between tradition and modernity, loss and continuity and presence and absence.

Keywords: Digital Rituals · Food Symbolism · Hindu Death Practices
· Virtual Offerings · Diaspora

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1 Introduction

In the 21st century, the intersection of technology and ritual practices has gained immense prominence. During Pitru Paksha, online advertisements like “Book an online pind-daan” or “Participate in shraddha via live video” or “Video call your priest during the ritual” proliferate over the internet, including social media feeds, WhatsApp forwards and temple websites. The amalgamation of ritual and technology has reintroduced the Hindus’ death rituals and their execution. The pind-daan ritual, involving the offering of rice balls to ancestors, symbolises sustenance, remembrance, recollection, and the connection between the living and the departed. The current generation of Hindus lives in various cities across the globe. Digital rituals hold significance as they eliminate the necessity of travelling to India to conduct the rituals at the ghats of the Ganges. Technology has given an option to substitute the physical ritual presence with virtual participation. Whether it is live-streamed antyesti or online pind-daan, technology helps bridge the gap between the living and the dead. Nevertheless, beneath these advertisements exists a distinct set of questions:

- (a) When rituals are outsourced, digitised and livestreamed, do they really provide the sustenance and continuity necessary for the deceased?
- (b) In what manner does it alter the significance of remembrance?
- (c) Furthermore, what are the symbolic and material significance of food, pinddaan, and the practice of serving Brahmins?

The globalization of Hindu communities, together with post-pandemic mobility restrictions, has expedited the emergence of “digital rituals,” where death rituals are performed through screens, applications and livestreams [1,2]. In cities like Gaya and Varanasi, the performance of death rituals via video calls and temple websites has become widely common. This comforts the diasporic communities to fulfil religious obligations pertaining to death and post-death, even when they are away from their homeland. On one hand, these practices promote cultural continuity, and on the other, they challenge the embodied and localized dimensions of ritual performance that are fundamental to Hindu theology and social order [3,4].

Earlier scholars, like Hjarvard in 2011, looked at the mediatization of religion and explored the religious implications of digitalization [5]. Campbell (2013) examined how Hinduism and its followers adapt fluidity to digital platforms, but the material and sensory aspects of digital rituals are still undiscussed and underexplored [6]. Food and its significance have received minimal attention from scholars. Food is something that connects the living with the dead. The rise of digital food rituals reflects not only technological adaptation but also a transformation of religious materiality and presence. This study, based on the theories of digital anthropology by Miller and Horst (2012) and material religion by Meyer (2012), investigates how the virtualization of ritual food both challenges and enhances the Hindu notion of sacred embodiment [7,8]. It highlights how the migrated communities maintain ritual obligations and follow them because of digital platforms.

This study focuses on how ritual foods are offered virtually in Hindu funeral practices. People performing the digital food rituals argues that this is not the decline of tradition but it is an evolved adaptation in response to displacement and technological mediation. The study is based on textual analysis of Garuda Purana and Bhagavad Gita and examines how the sacred intersect with the digital in contemporary Hindu death practices. It also employs ethnographic observation priests performing online rituals and semi-structured interviews with Hindu families who have performed digital death rituals. This study brings different views from material religion and digital anthropology to enrich the discussion on transformation of ritual authenticity and sacred materiality.

Across the globe, food is consumed for the purpose of nourishment but together with that it also represents the culture, tradition and the unique identity of that community. Our lives and emotions are shaped by the food we eat. According to Feldman and Goodman, food is essential for both self-identity and maintenance of cultural hierarchies [9]. In addition to aiding in reproduction and challenging societal norms, food creates identity, culture and a social structure. Together with food, digital culture has become a major element of our everyday life. Today, digital tools not only help us organize our ideas but also our daily chores and activities. It is difficult to imagine our lives without digital platforms. This digital culture is especially pertinent to society in the post-COVID-19 period [2].

Due to elaborate visual iconography, intricate ritual practices, emphasis on the sacred sight darshan and receiving prasadam, it may appear that Hinduism is closely related to materiality and the physical world. Multisensory engagement is very common in traditional Hindu rituals, such as touching holy objects, inhaling the flowers and incense. Worshipping God also includes meditating on a picture of God, chanting mantras, and listening to devotional music [1]. Therefore, how do these practices, which require bodily presence, translate to digital environments that are disembodied?

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift from reality to the virtual world. With restrictions on physical travel, gatherings, and isolation, people went to online platforms. Priests offered the facility of live-streamed cremations via Zoom and guided mourners through antyesti rites over WhatsApp and also introduced “e-pind-dana” packages for global devotees. Though these adaptations provide comfort and easy access, they also raise questions about authenticity and the commercialization of grief. It is true that, for the diasporic Hindus, such services provide a means of maintaining cultural continuity and fulfilling ritual obligations, but they simultaneously challenge the embodied nature of ritual food and its cosmological significance.

2 Significance of Food in the Hindu Death Ritual

Food has a central, often sacred, role in the Hindu religious community. Food holds paramount significance in Hinduism, often referred to as ‘the kitchen religion’ [10].

Scriptures like the Taittiriya Upanishad and Garuda Purana, connect food (anna) with the Absolute. The Sanskrit phrase “Annam Parabrahma Swaroopam” says grain (food) is a form of Brahman. This also asserts that the whole universe survives based on the cyclical process of offering and feeding food which gives nourishment and then leads to regeneration [10]. The physical world is considered as the food body, as it is born, grows, and die on food. As the Bhagavad Gita says, “All living beings originate from sustenance. All beings come into existence from food. Food is given by rain. Rains fall from the execution of sacrifices. And sacrifice arises from the execution of prescribed duties” 3:14 [11]. The funeral rites consist of offering food to the deceased to honor, appease, and facilitate the soul’s journey to the afterlife [10]. However, when these practices migrate to the virtual domain, the tangible elements of the food, with its preparation and texture, are displaced by digital representations. Here, the question arises, does the food still have symbolic economy when its presence is virtualized?

Cremation is followed by another very important ritual, Shradha. It is believed to transform the disembodied spirit (preta) into an appeased and nourished ancestor (pitr), who resides in the ancestral realm (pitr-lok) [12]. It is thought that after death, the departed person’s soul hangs around the living family members and may inflict harm upon them. For this shradha ritual is performed, which consists of a modest feast with specific food preparations, to facilitate the soul’s passage to the astral world. Here, the soul awaits its next incarnation. It is believed that this astral plane is occupied by the three prior generations of the deceased individual [10]. During the shradha, ritual food offerings, which include pinda, small rice balls made with barley flour and milk, are believed to nourish the spirit of the deceased and aid its transition to pitrloka [13]. The pindas also serve as material for the new physical form of the soul [13]. Food is the most important substance required for this spiritual metamorphosis.

According to Vedic belief, the deceased spirit has a “third birth” and enters the domain of ancestor spirits [14]. In this new realm, families gift of pindas, after the cremation, gives a new body to the deceased person’s soul [12]. The Garuda Purana divides each pindas into four segments, where one of them is given to the messenger of death, one is eaten by the preta, and two are assimilated into the five elements to form the deceased’s new body [15]. The first sixteen pindaas create a preta’s transitory and temporary ethereal body. This process is known as Malin Shodashi, offered over ten days, and parallels the ten lunar months of gestation. On the tenth day, preta’s head, eyes, limbs, and the digestive system (thirst and hunger) are created. Once the new body is created, the dead person begins their travel to the land of their ancestors. The third and final set of sixteen offerings helps the dead person in this journey.

Food serves as a channel which connects the living and the dead. Meyer (2012) and Keane (2008) argue that religious experience can only be made possible when the material and sensory objects are present. Material religion focuses on the taste of

offerings, the feel of rice on hands, the scent of ghee when made pindas, freshness of water and the sound and rhythm of mantras. These things provoke what Meyer termed as “sensational form” a material presence of the supreme power [8,16].

3 The Importance of Places and the Person Feeding the Deceased

The death rituals in Hinduism prioritize the geography, where the ritual should be performed and the identity of the ritual performer. It posits that the place should be sacred for the execution of the ritual and the ritual practitioner should be near family member, as it influences the moral, religious, social and cosmological efficacy of post-death rituals.

Both the dimensions, place and personhood, function as mediating axes through which the living facilitate the seamless transition of the deceased soul (preta) into the ancestral realm (pitr.loka). The Garuda Purana and Vayu Purana assert that the appropriate ritual, conducted by the rightful heir at a consecrated site, ensures both shanti (peace) for the deceased and pun.ya (merit) for the executor [17].

3.1 The Person Performing the Ritual: The Kart̄a as Mediator

In the Garuda Purana, the necessity for Hindu death rituals to be performed by the son or the closest male heir is mentioned extensively, as are the resulting consequences if a kin fails to do so. The Garuda Purana explains that “he who saves his father from the hell named put is called putra here and hereafter” [17]. This defines the son based on his religious and spiritual functions. It says that a son is someone who can help his father get out of a certain kind of pain.

It also states that there is no salvation for a man without a son. The son can only come to the succor of his father in the abode of Yama and helps him escape hell. According to Hindu culture, the last rites can be performed only by a male member, who can be a husband, father, or son [18]. Furthermore, the deceased moves in his subtle body and will derive enjoyment if the son performs the Sradha rites until his death. There is a reference to Sapindikarana, a crucial ritual of uniting the dead with the deceased ancestor, which should always be performed by the son alone. In the absence of the son, the brother, the younger brother’s son, or a close relative can perform the ritual. If the deceased dies without any sons, the daughter may perform sapindana [18].

Ethnographic accounts of Odisha confirm that the eldest son is the kartaa (principal performer) of the last rites, and failure to fulfill this role results in severe spiritual, legal, and social repercussions for the deceased and the family. That is why in Odia society, for any couple, having a male child is considered so mandatory that a word like ‘aaNThukuDi,’ which means ‘a woman having no child,’ is used as a term of

abuse [19]. The funeral rites are performed not merely for the disposal of the body but to assist the departed soul in its transmigration to the next destination.

3.2 The Sacred Geography of Rituals: Space as a Mediator

Sacred places, along with the sole mourner, also play an important role in Hindu death rituals. Rituals such as shraddha and pind-dana at specific sacred sites are founded on cosmological beliefs regarding the soul's transition and emancipation. According to Hindu culture, certain holy centers possess the inherent power to grant salvation. For instance, Varanasi (Kashi) is revered as the most sacred city, and popular belief holds that those who die there attain direct liberation. Varanasi is a safe place for people who didn't know the scriptures, gave up their purity, and sinned to find salvation.

Along with Varanasi, there are other sacred places, such as Ayodhya and Mathura, that are believed to confer salvation [17]. The Garuda Purana states that performing the shraddha at Gaya yields merit and pleases the deceased's family. Those who die in warfare are deemed to have given gifts during an eclipse and bathed in a holy place, thus going to Gaya and offering rice balls to the manes. Also, Shraddha offerings performed in holy centers help ward off the wrath of Yama [18]. Within Varanasi, specific ghats along the river, such as Manikarnika Ghat, are central locations for performing the rites of circumambulation (parikrama) [3].

According to the Vayu Purana, if the ancestral rites are performed at Gaya, it will provide a superior path to liberation compared to acquiring supreme knowledge of Brahman or dying while protecting a cow [20]. The Mahabharata also mentions the importance of Gaya, saying that one should always aspire to have many sons in the hope that one of them will go to Gaya and liberate the ancestors by offering pindas (rice balls) [20]. Vedic literature focuses on the concept of death and the afterlife and talks about the "World of Fathers," or a realm of ancestors or pitrloka. It states that Pitrloka cannot be attained as a gift from God but only when proper ritual actions are performed, both by the deceased before death and by their descendants after death [20]. The age-old tradition and culture persuade devotees and descendants to go to Gaya and perform ancestral rites for those ancestral spirits who are not yet at peace due to wrong deeds or untimely death. The rites are performed with the hope that the ancestral spirits will receive a proper place in the prescribed abode of manes, find relief from their ghostly existence and sufferings, and attain liberation.

4 Digital Pind-daan Services

As Hindu funerary rituals moved online from tirthas like Gaya and Varanasi during the past decades, they underwent a significant transformation. The revolutionary online pind-daan, done through livestreaming, video conferencing or distant priestly delegation, shows Hinduism's adaptability to technology. Faith, mobility, and meditation meet in digital space, which was once grounded in sacred geography.

During the time of Pitru Paksha and Shraddha Paksha, the faith, culture, tradition and rituals get merged with the technology and shift to the digital sphere. It is believed by Hindus that during this phase ancestors come to this physical world to see their family members. Also, the offerings performed during this period reaches directly to the ancestors. This gives it an important place in cultural and religious sphere. Traditionally Hindus believed that the death ritual should be performed at sacred geography like Gaya, Varanasi and Prayagraj and by the son or any close family member. But in modern practice, where the ritual underwent a notable evolution and shifted to digital platforms, this belief is diminishing.

Families who live remotely are turning to online intermediaries, temple websites, and app-based ritual services. They often hire priests to perform rites in their absence. Recent ethnographic research confirms that online pind-dana has evolved from anecdotal evidence to a recognized practice. Nishant (2025) conducted a field study comprising 120 semi-structured interviews with devotees and priests in Gaya, revealing that 37 percent of participants had commissioned or engaged in digital shraddha during travel restrictions or from abroad. People from the UK, Canada, and Singapore who were living in the diaspora said the experience was “virtually sacred.” They compared the livestreamed ritual to darshan and said they felt a presence even though they weren’t there in person [21].

In September 2025, The Times of India reported that the Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation (BSTDC) announced its “e-pind daan” service, along with its special tour packages to various sacred places. The price of the “e-pind daan” service is Rs 23,000, which gives this facility to people living outside India and for those who cannot travel to sacred sites like Vishnupad Temple, Akshayvat, and the banks of the Falgu River. The hired priest would provide a video recording of the entire ceremony, including all the performed rituals [22].

In September 2024, The Times of India reported that in the era of Digital India, faith tech has become significant and is used for the liberation of the departed ancestor [23]. Anand Ranjan, from Banka district, wrote in his research that young priests are easily accommodating the digitalization of religious practices, but the elders have difficulty adapting to the digital wave. Elder priests believe that online pind daan rituals cannot bring spiritual satisfaction to people and may upset and destabilize the pilgrimage ecosystem in Gaya. It was Saumya Vardhan in 2013, who first proposed the idea of selling religious services online. She used to live in London, and one of her friends’ fathers died in New Delhi; his widow could not manage to arrange the rituals of 13 days of mourning alone. After leaving her position as a management consultant, Saumya relocated to India and co-founded a business with her father, Harsh Vardhan. They equipped a decades-old temple in New Delhi and installed high-resolution cameras. They also equipped the cameras with hard drives to record all the performed rituals [24].

In Gaya, each element possesses its own narrative, be it the roads, the trees, the river, or even a humble stone. All things convey a narrative rooted in mythology. The

city was named after a demon called Gayasur, who was bestowed a boon by Lord Vishnu. According to this legend, if a family member performs the pind daan in the name of the deceased, the soul will attain mukti. Lord Ram also performed the pind daan of his father, Emperor Dasharath, in Gaya, and Yudhisthir, the eldest son of Kunti, also performed pind daan in Gaya. In an article released by the Hindustan Times on 18th September 2016, it mentioned that with the advent of technology, there are a few innovative priests who expanded their reach outside Gaya to those who could not travel to Gaya for pind daan [25]. Also, they are publishing the importance of pind daan for the ancestors on social media and other websites. Mahesh Lal Gupt, a member of the Gayawal Panda community, told the Hindustan Times that online pind daan is contrary to what is mentioned in the scriptures. He said that the ritual of pind daan is to remember and pay respect to ancestors, and it helps in nurturing the bond between different generations.

Community members maintain a thorough record, in which each member is assigned clients from a specific area of the nation. They fear that online pind daan may undermine their control, allowing any priest or company to approach clients and perform pind daan in Gaya through an online platform. For the online pind daan, a priest, who is in Gaya, connects with the client online. Here, it is the responsibility of the priest to make all the arrangements and recite the mantras, which the client repeats, and make a virtual offering while sitting at home. Govind Lal Gupt says this type of online pind daan will not give any benefits, as the client is negating the importance of the place. It is not at all according to what the scriptures have prescribed. Another community member, Hiranath Dariwale, mentions the details of how the online pind daan is performed. He said that in this process, the client sends details such as the name of the deceased, gotra, and time of death via email or social media platforms, and also makes the payment online. Then the priests in Gaya find a Brahmin to represent the client and to perform the procedure. Then the priest mails the photos and videos of the ritual performed to the client. He also mentioned that this procedure is very much similar to a traditional system called representative pind daan, in which any member of the family, a friend, or even a Brahmin was allowed to perform it. Mahesh Lal Gupt said representative pindaan was performed in extremely rare cases, but online pindaan is becoming the norm. More and more people are joining it, which goes against the tradition and culture of Hinduism. Furthermore, online pind daan is not performed during the pitrapaksha period as priests are engaged with clients who travel to Gaya to conduct the ritual in person.

5 Conclusion

Pind-daan, a very important death ritual in Hinduism, which helps the soul in liberation, has now evolved from location-specific practices to the digital platforms. This shows a significant integration of spirituality, tradition, technology and contemporary mobility.

Online pind-daan is an alternative for the people who have migrated to distant places. This is not a temporary or experimental practice but a recognized adaptation within the changing ritual economy.

Digital ritual helps Hindu communities maintaining their death ritual obligation to liberate their ancestor's soul even when they are geographically dispersed. Together with the food, its presentation also shows the affection and remembrance of families towards the deceased. When the rituals are performed through digital means, it raises a question regarding intention and sensory images. People who participated in "virtual darshan" reported that everything goes beyond the physical realm. They also mentioned that rituals or darshan performed virtually do not provide any emotional, cultural, traditional, symbolic and cosmological satisfaction.

This study raises question on this transition. It invites a closer look between what is important in context of death rituals; being authentic or easily accessible. Few priests of Gaya raise concern that rituals performed through digital ways is just commercializing the grief and undermines the purity that rituals hold. But there are few, who see it as a modern way to make sacred participation easily accessible for everyone.

Even in the time of digital era, Hindu death rituals did not extinct but underwent transformation. Hindu philosophy assert that it is the intention behind the ritual performance that matters rather than form. Intention of the performer promotes spiritual authenticity rather than with what medium it is performed. The shifting of death rituals from physical realm to digital platforms does not represent disruption but another way of performing the ritual. It shows another way of showing devotion and memory. But together with that it raises question on its authenticity, as this is not according to what was prescribed in the scriptures.

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