

Understanding the Perception Behind the Creation of 'Sacred Spaces' in the Profane World

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists in many ways have tried to understand religion in terms of sacred and profane as it tries to be more inclusive than just limiting our understanding of religion to God and other supernatural elements. Sacred and profane space in reality may present in the same place where one will take precedence over the other. The idea of modernization advocates for a secular outlook in terms of religious practices, belief and faith. Moreover, a space may become a sacred place temporarily to accommodate a sacred activity even when the profane present. Therefore in this way the sacred spaces become practicality based for life oriented outcomes. This paper explores the reality of the sacred and the profane. While taking into consideration how the people traveling in the metro create a sacred space amid a profane.

Keywords: *Sacred, profane, religion, space.*

INTRODUCTION:

There is no one way of understanding what religion is; it is present in every known society in some form or the other. Social thinkers since times immemorial have been trying to understand what religion is, however it has always been difficult to come up with a broad definition of religion such that it is inclusive of everything that is understood as a religious belief or practice.

Religion is also understood by differentiating it from magic and science. Bronislaw Malinowski in his work, '*Magic, science, religion and other essays*' discusses about various religious ceremonies, and their functions. Ceremonies such as, initiation, marriage, birth, death etc. also point out at the idea of belief in spirit that indicates towards the very fact that there is belief in new life as well among the primitive population of Trobriand Island. Also, when we talk about magic and religion then if magic is made up of beliefs and

rites where what magician is to magic, the priest is to religion. And it has been argued that the line between magic and religion is one which is impossible to draw in many primitive societies.

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Religion is said to be a kind of cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, ethics, prophecies or organizations that relates humanity to the supernatural or what we called spiritual entities. There have been a wide range of studies particularly on religion as mentioned in the above discussion, the study of religion comprises a variety of academic disciplines which includes theology, comparative religion etc. the various theories of religion which offers various explanations for the origins and functioning of religion.

One of the finest sociological study done on religion is by *Emile Durkheim* in his book '*Elementary forms of religious life*' where he defined religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church'. According to Durkheim two of the essentials that build a religion are beliefs and rituals where rituals being the visible manifestation of beliefs. He tries to understand religion through the function that it performs in the society. Such an examination is done from the functionalist perspective where the role of religion is evaluated in terms of meeting the needs of society such as maintaining social solidarity, integration, and building value consensus. Such an approach however fails to critically evaluate the dysfunctional effects of religion where it acts as a disruptive force. If we look at anthropological explanation of religion then according to Clifford Geertz religion as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".

The Marxist perspective on religion looks at religion as the '*opium of the masses*'. It is nothing but an ally of the oppressing group to dull the pain of the oppressed group by promising them eternal bliss in life after death or by showing that suffering is a punishment from God. Religion also plays a very important role in acting as a mechanism of social control. *By providing false hope in hopeless situations, it prevents people from thinking about their actual situation and what can be done to change their situation.*

Many thinkers have argued that with the advent of globalization and industrialization, modern societies would embark on a journey towards secularization

resulting in eventual decline of religion. Far from seeing a decline we have witnessed that religion has permeated deeper into society. Religion has moved out from its assigned space of sacred religious institutions and sacred spaces within home to the everyday profane world. One such space is that of politics. One of the most used tactics by the politicians to maintain their vote bank is to campaign in the name of religion. In the Indian context the use of religion to create 'us' and 'them' is not something new. The creation of the Indian nation itself began with the demarcation of two separate spaces; the Muslim dominated Pakistan and India which though constitutionally is secular would be for the Hindu. One of the key reasons why religion has survived is because of its innovative nature. Religious innovations are seen as a departure from orthodoxy and provide room for fresh ideas and practices. In this paper we are making an attempt first to study the perception of spaces where people offer prayer, particularly in the context of Hindu religious beliefs and practices based on the observations that people are these days very often could be seen reading a particular chalisa during the time when they are traveling in the metro. Secondly, find out how much differences have been made in between the conventional form of offering prayers at temples and nowadays how people are making spaces in the public domain for what is considered to be their private choice i.e. religion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The source of data incorporated from the interview of people who have been otherwise observed for quite a long period of time during their travel in metro. The interview has given the insight of how these people are trying to create spaces for the religion in their everyday profane life example during their travel in metro. Therefore, here in this paper we have tried to understand their perspective of religion by shifting it to the public spaces from their private spaces. As it is very well known that how much religion is being debated historically and in some of the very recent cases also, of it being a very personal and private matter but then with the sight of those people who are reading, watching and listening to various religious texts and bhajans during their everyday travel in the metro which is a public transport system creates a lot of question in the mind. What are the possible reasons behind performing certain practices in the public space which are otherwise labelled as matters of private choice?

This research is based on case study method. As per the nature of the research, purposive sampling or judgmental

sampling has been used. For this research it was essential to find respondents who are reading a religious book such as chalisa and who are involved in any such activity hence the most useful sampling method was purposive sampling because in this method the researcher has the agency to select the respondents most useful or fit for the research.

RESULTS

The interview has been taken from the people traveling in the metro particularly for those who were very often seen reading various kinds of religious texts (the various chalisa's that are available for various Hindu gods).

The number of people who were interviewed is five. Out of five people who were interviewed four of them were female who are employed in various professions like teaching, counselor, as an assistant etc. one of them was a teacher who has been teaching in different schools. The other three were working in the private companies such as Vodafone service centre, Akash institute, and some pharmaceutical companies. They prefer commuting by metro in order to reach their respective working places. And the fifth person was a priest whom we have interviewed.

NARRATIVES OF THE PEOPLE WHO WERE INTERVIEWED

First respondent:

Religion is something that is a very personal matter in my opinion. Also, for me it is something which brings peace to my mind and it is something which gives me a hope that everything will be fine in the end because of the fact that I feel strengthened in order to face any hurdle that comes in my way.

For me it would be something a motivation to believe in the positivity of the universe. In the sense that religion provides us with the belief that there are sources of good vibes amid of all these uncertainties of the people in terms of them treating other people unfairly.

The rituals that I practice on a daily basis are I go to temple every morning to offer prayer after taking bath and then perform daily prayer at my own house. Also, reading hanuman chalisa is also a part of my daily routine.

I always had a very keen interest towards religious practices and rituals and I always take part in various events be it singing bhajans and organize certain religious events. Therefore, being surrounded in this

kind of environment that made me learn all these rituals and practices in my everyday life

I go to temple say on Tuesdays and Mondays and on rest of the days I use to pray at home only where we have kept the idols in our house.

The place should be kept apart from the other daily activities that are being performed within a household. It needs to be cleaned on a daily basis. And should be kept away from all kind of noises so that there should be an environment of peace

In my opinion there are certain parameters that is already there in order to establish a place of worship be it in the house or building a temple at some place. That is, one needs to keep in mind the direction of the place where are you offering the prayer because you need to face in the particular direction.

In my home there is this particular place in the north-east direction which was suggested by the priest being the best place to establish an idol there. Therefore, we consider that place as sacred

Although we do worship to almost all god but then majorly, we pray to goddess *Durga*, lord *Ganesh*, *Shiva*, *Hanuman*.

There is no such reason behind why I started reading *Hanuman chalisa* as it was basically learning came from my father as he always used to read *Hanuman chalisa* whenever he prays.

The feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction that I have after reading the chalisa is immensely soothing to my mind and if a single day I go without reading this chalisa I feel missed out on something the whole day therefore I think it has become necessary for me to read it every day despite of all the other things for which I used to read it.

Reading chalisa during my metro ride is my personal choice because of the fact that I use to travel for quite a long time i.e. 40 min and I think this is the best utilization of my time during the metro ride because the time which I save otherwise at home I do some work which is needed to be done there. And there is no such hard and fast rule which needs to be followed in order to read the chalisa.

I think sometimes it becomes difficult to read it in the metro because there is no place to stand because of the huge rush that is there very often. But then all in all it is nice only that because we don't really interact with our

co-travelers although most of us very often board the same metro which is weird sometimes but then nobody actually cares about what the other person is doing.

Second Respondent:

‘*Bhagwan*’ is religion; it is everything no matter how much people try to deny this fact in the end everything comes back to god. According to me religion is something that teaches us the morals of life and if one is following it then that person will always have a happier living.

Religion guide us towards the path of truthfulness and righteousness which I think very important in today’s fast changing world where people are more into making money and thinking about profit through whatsoever means. Also, it teaches me to be content with what one has in life, which in turn enables a person to lead a happy life.

There are few of them which I perform on a daily basis. The first is what one would be say for example cleaning of the house because I need to lit a ‘*Diya*’ in front of the idols that is kept at the place where I pray. Secondly, I always water ‘*Tulsi*’ plant which I have kept in my balcony. And I read ‘Santoshi Mata chalisa’ on a daily basis.

It was taught from the very beginning of my socialization because I was told that it is a really good habit and over the years, I have learnt that it gives me a ray of hope in difficult situations and also fills me with positivity.

Usually I perform my daily prayers at home only but then on the occasions such as at times when I am fasting, I prefer to go to temple and perform these daily rituals.

The idea about the area where one offers prayer should be kept clean and one also the idols need to be kept clean and, in my opinion, one also has to have specific color cloth in order the idols and the pooja place such as for e.g. a red colour ‘*chunari*’ will work for that matter.

I think any place would be fine if one needs to offer prayer but on certain occasions one needs to follow certain rules such as during the time ‘*kanya puja*’ we are very particular about how the direction in which are making them sit and also take care of which rituals needs to be one first and subsequently the rest of it.

I do have a particular place where we have kept the idol without looking into the significance of the place but then ultimately it becomes sacred as we have kept idols

and we offer our daily prayer there but one thing is there we have kept it away from the places such as kitchen because we cook non-veg sometimes.

I pray to lord Shiva, goddess Durga, Laxmi and Santoshi Mata.

It was because we were facing some mental stress in our house therefore, we were suggested by some of our neighbors to talk to some priest so that he can give some solutions to it and then they talked to a priest and he then performed one ‘*havan*’ and then suggested me to read Santoshi Mata chalisa on Fridays. And from that time onwards I have started and continued reading this chalisait was when the priest suggested me to read Santoshi Mata chalisa on Fridays. And from that time onwards I have started and continued reading this chalisa and because I can feel and see the change it pushed me to continue reading it because in no ways it is creating any disturbance all it is doing is giving positive results.

Third Respondent:

Religion is believing in supernatural powers. It is something for me that I usually keep away from the day to day normal works. That is keeping it as something which is sacred and also one needs to be very careful while carrying out several rituals and practice related to the religion.

Religion helps in promoting feeling of togetherness particularly during the time of religious festivals, which in my view is of great significance. It teaches me to have patience and not to demand for results in hurry all we need to have is faith.

Waking up early in the morning because I had to do certain daily task that are needed to be done in order to perform pooja lighting up a *Diya*, reading *Laxmi Mata chalisa* on a daily basis and then also the ritual of offering prasad to the family members after the prayer.

I have learned these various practices after my marriage because my it is really a kind of ritual which everybody at home needs to follow. Therefore, being a daughter-in-law of the house, I was obliged to perform all these rituals.

Inside my house there is this particular place which has been drawn out especially for this purpose. It should be kept away from the other mundane tasks of the household and should have designated space following certain directions which is considered as the good one in order to place the idols or other religious symbols.

I will not say that there should only be the place of worship which needs to have certain guiding principles rather it should be flexible with regard to the rigid structures that is usually being followed. I only pray to goddess Durga although we do visit temples of another god as well but at our home, we worship particularly goddess Durga

It was basically because the priest told me to do it in order to have an easy life that is a life free from stress and also because I was really having a tough time during the days when I was desperately searching for a nice job. And I think now it has been almost four years that I am reading Durga chalisa

Because it was only after when I started reading the Durga chalisa immediately within 6 months I got a job so to say in a good company with a better pay scale. And because reading a chalisa doesn't demand anything it is just that you have to read keeps me motivated to continue reading it.

Fourth Respondent:

According to me religion is very important part of an individual's life. In terms of the fact that it gives hope in the hopeless situation and also provides us with the strength to deal with all the odds of life. Therefore, according to me it is a belief that provides us a sense of happiness also it has been largely considered to be the last resort when nothing works religion comes to the rescue.

It is of a great significance in my life particularly because of an incident in our house where when everything was not going well and the situation was very tough and at that particular time we have lost all hopes in the fact that the situation will ever go well but then we went to a priest who told all the ills that is there in our life and also he talked about the 'graha' and 'nakshatras' being not in place and other such things. After that we have performed each and every rituals and practices as guided by the priest and things actually got better in our house. Therefore, it has been a real experience that made us belief in the presence of god.

The first task is to wake up early in the morning and after taking bath first thing I do is pouring water in front of rising sun, then offering prayer at home also reading *Laxmi chalisa* and on certain occasions I also visit temple with the purpose of doing some 'daan punya' (giving foods and cloths to the poor) as suggested by the priest.

I have learned these various practices after my marriage only and also because of the family crises which we have faced in the past year because it is really a kind of ritual which everybody at home need to follow. Therefore, being a daughter-in-law of the house, I was obliged to perform all these rituals.

Inside my house there is this particular place which has been drawn out especially for this purpose

I always keep it clean as in I always clean that particular area and also sprinkle 'ganga jal' time to time. Rest there should be silence when one person is praying as it needs concentration in order for one to feel the connectedness with the god. But sometimes it is good if we have some bhajans which are playing in the background while offering prayers

I think it is all about faith as one needs to be true about their devotion and dedication towards the god and then although in my home, we do follow certain specific rules and rituals when we offer prayer but then I personally believe a place of worship shouldn't be bound of anything.

There are certain distinctions that is being made one the basis of sacred and mundane tasks as one is not allowed to enter the area of worship with putting n slippers or shoes also nobody is allowed to take any food near the temple etc. so I think this much restriction I justifiable when we talk about creating a place particularly for offering prayers.

I pray to goddess Laxmi, Durga, lord Ganesh, Shiva and Hanuman.

It was only after that incident which has happened in the house, I started reading this chalisa

Because it has been an experience that god is there and one can alter the current situation of a person by praying and doing certain rituals and practices it is of no question that why I shouldn't continue reading it. It always gives me a sense of security in terms me being able to do my work thinking that nothing will go wrong.

Because of the schedule and sometimes when I fail to wake up early in the morning then I end up reading chalisa in the metro and now it happens very often because I do nothing while travelling so it is better that I complete it during this travel time.

I don't know actually because I have never thought about it but then I can say that amid of all the noise and

congestion there is this feeling that nobody knows me gives me a sense of comfort when I read chalisa also I am not bothering anyone. Therefore, all in all it's fine.

Fifth Respondent (the Priest):

Religion is worshiping god. Believing in the fact that *god is omnipresent* i.e. his presence could be sensed in each and everything that comes your way. Also believing in the fact that no lie, deceive of a person will go unnoticed and will be punished in some or the other way. Other than that, one need to have a deep faith in the powers of the god and a person should always be motivated towards doing well to others.

For us religion is our life. Because this is what for which we are living, giving our service to god. Religion gives us hope that despite of all bad there is some power which is working towards mending the chaos that has been created in the society.

We use to wake up very early in the morning say around 4 or 4:30 without fail. Then clean the premises of the temple. Take a *holy bath* that is while taking bath we used to chant some mantras which is to purify the soul. Then the day starts with the morning aarti by lighting up with ghee in the Diya as ghee is considered to be the pure and sacred in some cases. Later distributing, prasad to the people who attend the aarti after that the day ends with an evening aarti. So, these are the basic daily rituals that we usually do.

This has been continued from generations and as this is what we live for giving our service to god by offering prayers organizing various events on various religious festivals. Basically, from the very childhood we have been taught that this is our main occupation and we have been observing all of the events very closely and carefully and this has ultimately developed my interest towards devoting my service to god.

Temple is the place where we do all the rituals and practices whatsoever it is and, on any occasion, also we decorate temple on some major festivals such as navratri, mahashivratri etc.

It is the temple only which is considered to be the place where one needs to offer the prayer. Because according to me it is the place which has been built keeping each and everything in mind be it *nakshatra*, *muhurta*, *disha* (direction) etc. hence, this is the most sacred and correct place to offer prayer. And this is according to me a place which could be termed as the most sacred place from all the other places that we visit in our everyday life.

There are so many chalisa that we have for almost every god we have some or the other sloka, aarti, doha and chalisa's reading chalisa brings you closer to that a particular god and it also depend upon the kind of dedication you are putting towards reading that. And different gods are known for different kind of powers which they possess and also the kind of strength and blessings they provide to a person such as for example. Reading *Ganesh chalisa* will help you to remove obstacles from all areas of life and also for the *accomplishments of desires; intelligence and fame*. Secondly goddess *Laxmi*, praying to her will *help in increasing wealth*. Thirdly, praying to goddess *Durga* that is *known for acquiring comforts, happiness and wealth*, for the *welfare of the family* and also for *attaining success in all walks of life* and for *acquiring authority and power*.

There are certain specific days for particular chalisa such as *Hanuman chalisa should be read on Tuesdays*, *Vishnu chalisa on Thursdays* etc. and there are other things which one needs to follow such as wearing a particular on that day such as *wearing a yellow color dress on Thursday's* and *orange color cloths on Tuesdays* etc. Then there is this particular month called '*savan*' in which one *prefers to wear green color dresses*.

There are certain stories which we read in chalisa and other religious scripts which shows some instances where it can be seen that when a person doesn't perform a pooja in accordance with the particular rules and rituals which are mentioned in the text itself or otherwise then there will be some or the other tensions will come into the life of that person. But I personally believe that it is not the case because god won't be angry if at all you are performing your prayer with the utmost devotion and truthfulness. Therefore, until and unless a person is fully dedicated towards offering a prayer to the god nothing will go wrong.

There are only positive points if you are reading a chalisa as it has so much power in it that if continued over a period of time one can even witness a miracle. Because so far there are many such cases that have come in front of me where people come to me tell their stories of witnessing a miracle in various walks of their life.

DISCUSSION

So the finding from the above work which we have studied have provided us with a lot of new understanding of the religion so as to how the notion of sacred and profane have always been there and no matter how much

one fails to maintain it still some or the other way one do consider the fact that religion is the sacred part of their life although through the interviews which we have taken shows us that there are some part of the religious practices that people are performing in the public spaces between the crowded spaces where nobody had a clear idea about the direction in which they are standing or sitting while reading those chalisa and when we talk about the direction then as per the knowledge which the priest has suggest that one should really take care of the directions in which one is facing towards because of its significance during the time of offering prayer. Also according to the priest one needs to clearly take out time solely dedicated for the prayer but as mentioned by the respondents some of them mentioned that it is their personal choice to read chalisa in the metro whereas on the other hand some talked about their busy schedule and lack of adequate time so as to perform daily prayer at home therefore, because one thinks that reading that particular chalisa brings peace and positivity to their mind they cannot miss reading it. Therefore, although all of them have their own experiences and belief which they manifested during the time of interview suggests that all of them have some or the other idea of what being considered as sacred and profane but then some of them are really not clear about maintaining it on a daily basis mentioning reasons such as them being not able to manage time because they all were employed in some or the other occupation so we can also argue that modernization have to an extent have impacted the changing notions of belief and practices among people.

And also, religion for these people is not something that they are living for as in the case of the priest who is comparatively clear about the distinction between the two. Religion for the people has become a medium through which they tend to seek answers to the things which are happening around them over which they don't have any control.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, in the popular imagination the busy metro spaces is associated with modernity and it has always

been assumed that public spaces should be separated from the religion and religious practices however we have made an attempt to challenge this common sense understanding of the relationship between modernity and religion in terms of the two spaces the sacred and the profane. Hence, modernity in this case needs not imply secularization in fact religion and modernity tend to coexist with each other. And the understanding of people about religion tends to reflect here in a very carefree manner in terms where to carry out certain practices as what we have discussed in this paper.

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