

# Indian festivals stream to mobile web worshippers

September 23 2012, by Rachel O'brien

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While devout Hindus wait for up to 90 hours to see their favourite deity at Ganesh Chaturthi, one of India's major festivals, others are opting to dodge the queues this year and say a virtual prayer instead.

The 11-day celebration of the birth of elephant-headed Lord Ganesha draws millions to worship at decorated idols of the god, but the statues are increasingly available to followers via live Internet streams.

"Every year people were requesting it, so this year we decided to go online," said Uday Salian, committee spokesman at the Andhericha Raja, a popular Ganesha idol in Mumbai.

The colourful figure can be watched for free on their website during the twice daily "arti" ritual, when offerings of light are made to the deity, meaning devotees can receive their blessings through the net.

The move was largely meant for overseas followers, but religious domestic markets are also being tapped.

The Lalbaugcha Raja, Mumbai's favourite statue, gets about ten million visitors during the festival. It also appears on [YouTube](#) and television, and is being live streamed around the clock to mobile phones—for a fee.

Live streaming is just one way [content providers](#), telecom firms and mobile app makers are latching onto Hindu traditions as the online Indian market grows, especially on phones.

During the ongoing festival, which runs until Saturday, people can download Ganesha puzzle games, perform a ceremony known as "pooja" with the help of a mobile instead of a priest, and listen to chanting applications.

Other gods are also proving lucrative.

Vistaas Digital Media, which has acquired the live mobile rights to the Lalbaugcha Raja, started the "Divine India" website three months ago and so far has 50,000 paid subscribers, paying 200 rupees (\$3.75) a month.

The site offers live streaming from more than 60 holy sites of different religions practised across the country, along with footage from more than 1,500 shrines. The firm aims for half a million subscribers by the year's end.

"I saw people travel for a long time and stand in long queues and they didn't get a single second in front of the god. I wanted a way for people to pray peacefully at home," said Vistaas founder Rajiv K. Sanghvi.

Making money from religion is nothing new in India, observers say.

"All the Ganesha pandals (religious structures) in the city have become more and more commercial," Anil Dharker, a Mumbai-based columnist on social issues, told AFP.

But he doubted that Internet schemes would win over physical visitors.

"It's not just a religious experience, it's also a social occasion," he said.

Much of the online demand unsurprisingly comes from the global Indian diaspora, but entrepreneurs still see potential gaps within India itself.

"There's so much demand on the priest's time that he might not be available at the time you want," said Rajendra Vaishampayan, whose company provided audio content for a series of iChants and iPooja mobile applications.

The apps for the pooja ceremony, including one tailored for Ganesha, assist in a do-it-yourself version of the elaborate ritual so that a family member can take on the role of the priest.

The rise in religion-to-mobiles fits the Indian pattern more generally. The mobile apps market generated \$28 million in revenue in 2011, a four-fold rise from the previous year, according to research firm Analysys Mason.

Sourabh Kaushal, lead consultant at the group, expects revenue to reach \$80-100 million this year.

Smartphone users now number 25 to 30 million, but this is still a fraction of India's 550 million or so unique mobile users—almost half the population—who mostly use cheaper "feature" phones, Kaushal said.

"Mobile Internet usage is primarily driven by feature phones," he told AFP, adding that about 40 million Indians have had their first online experience via their handset, accessible for five rupees (nine US cents) a day.

Chirag Shah, of [mobile](#) games developer Nazara Technologies, agreed feature phones "are still the dominant share and can't really be ignored".

A new Ganesha game released for the festival by Nazara, downloadable for 50 rupees on Android and feature phones, had a few thousand downloads in the first few days.

"It has a short shelf life but the acceptance is high. It goes with the whole occasion," said Shah, whose company makes products to match other religious events such as Diwali, the Hindu festival of light.

For some, virtual prayer will never rival the real thing.

Undeterred by the chaos and the afternoon sun, 28-year-old Chetan Lad joined the jostling hours-long queue in Mumbai to see his beloved Lalbaugcha Raja, despite having access on his phone.

"I watch 'aarti' online as well, but on one day I have to come and visit," he said.

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