

Televising religion: A study of Sathya Sai Baba's funeral broadcast in Gangtok, India

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Abstract

The live funeral broadcast of one of India's most popular, albeit controversial, saints from Andhra Pradesh on April 27, 2011, by almost all satellite TV news channels in the country, was watched by large number of audiences in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim State, more than 2000 km away from the broadcast site. This merits serious scholarly inquiry. The ethnographic study¹ was undertaken to 1) elicit the reasons behind the popularity of the "godman" in such a distant place, 2) examine the ritualisation of the production and consumption of the broadcast, and 3) trace "religion" both in the broadcast and in its consumption by the audiences as they drew meanings from their engagement with it. The study involves reading of the broadcast narrative as well as its interpretations by the audiences elicited through in-depth interviews with select households in the town. Articulating how television in general and the funeral broadcast in particular facilitated and provoked religious and spiritual imagination among the audiences, the paper posits that despite a collective consumption of such media events, interpersonal communication among viewers on the broadcast is highly restrictive. Arguing for a broader definition of religion to accommodate studies on televised religion, this paper, among other things, highlights the priestly rituals that journalists perform during such broadcasts.

KEYWORDS: television, religion, funeral, death, rituals, media event

There is an unusual but silent crowd in and around Bari's shop this morning. Some of them have taken positions inside the small shop while most stood outside as there is little space left for anyone else to move in – all eyes fixed on the portable television kept atop the refrigerator. The elderly lady, sitting on her cot in her usual posture, (un) surprisingly, is not irritated today at the presence of the gathering who are here not to buy anything at her shop. Rather, she seems to be enjoying their company, though she does know not all of them. Some passersby stopped to ogle what this unusual crowd was watching so seriously at this rather odd hour; only to join the gathering to see Sathya

¹ The author's doctoral study conducted at the Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India.

Sai Baba's funeral being shown live on the Aaj Tak news channel. Above Bari's shop, from her four storied building, the soaring sound of the same broadcast was flowing down on the street... The first trip of the Sikkim University bus that is normally packed is rather empty today. In the bus, two students discuss why many students have not turned up, and both agreed that it was the funeral broadcast that many were watching today.

Extracted from field diary, dated: 27 April, 2011

Introduction

The resurfacing of religion in contemporary “post-secular” society (Caputo 2001), is witnessing a critical role being played by modern day media in defining and enhancing new religious sensibilities (Stout 2012; Winston 2009; Hoover & Lundby 1997; Martin-Barbero 1997). Religion today finds itself increasingly manifested in the form of coverage of non-fictional deaths on the media, particularly on television (Hanusch 2010). Funeral broadcasts on television offer an interesting site to explore not only the relation between the medium and religion but also to help understand how ritualisation happens both on the production and consumption fronts of the televisual text. This paper concerns itself with the broadcast of the funeral of one of India's most prominent spiritual personalities, telecast live on almost all national news channels across the country on 27 April 2011, four days after he died at his super-speciality hospital in Puttaparthi in south India's Andhra Pradesh state, reportedly due to multiple organ failure. The funeral broadcast, as revealed by a formative study,² was widely viewed by the audiences in Gangtok, the capital town of Sikkim state in the far northeast of India across the India-China border, around 2,400 km from the site of the event.

Dayan and Katz (1992) classified a special genre of television broadcasts as “media events” in terms of three categories: syntactic (interruption of the flow of daily life), semantics (dealing reverently with sacred matters) and pragmatics (enthraling very large audiences who view them in festive style). Given that the funeral broadcast clearly exhibited such attributes, it could be, as the study shows, theoretically considered as a media event. Such was the significance attached to the broadcast and its viewing in the region that the state government declared a state holiday on the day to enable the people view the televised funeral, a unique state decision not seen anywhere else in the country, not even in the home state of Sathya Sai Baba. The extract from the field diary at the beginning of the paper reflects the seriousness the broadcast commanded in the town.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first, the paper seeks to elicit the reasons behind the popularity of the godman in the region – a context that is important to understand why the funeral broadcast was so largely viewed in the town. In the second part, a ritualisation of the production of the broadcast is examined. In the third part, an attempt is made to trace “religion” in the broadcast and its consumption by the audience as they drew meanings from their engagement with it.

² The formative study was conducted by the author in the town during March to May 2012 to determine the most viewed broadcast over a seven-year period between January 2005 and December 2011. In-depth interviews with key informants followed by a formal survey among 110 households in the town revealed the finding.

Popularity of Sathya Sai Baba in Sikkim region

The charisma of Sathya Sai Baba could be gauged from Indian newspapers in the 1970s reporting him to be the largest crowd puller in the country after India's then prime minister (cited in Swallow 1982: 124). Though he had (and still has) many detractors and is frequently accused by sceptics of fraud and favouring only the rich and powerful, the size and influence of his following, argues Babb, 'certainly justifies ranking him among the most important of modern India's religious personalities' (1983: 16).

The manifestation of Sathya Sai Baba in Sikkim and particularly in Gangtok and his growing popularity in the state is associated with a couple of factors as illustrated in Figure 1. The "miracles" that started happening in various households in Gangtok beginning from the late 1960s, according to key respondents, is one such factor. For example, the flow of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) from a photo frame of Sathya Sai Baba in the house of Deepak Tailor in New Market,³ or the flow of *amrit* (nectar) from an old *Sai bhajan* booklet at Sonam Gyamcho's altar in Tibet Road⁴ were some of the early miracles that devotees either have witnessed themselves or have heard of and remember and they continue to witness these even today (see Figure 2).

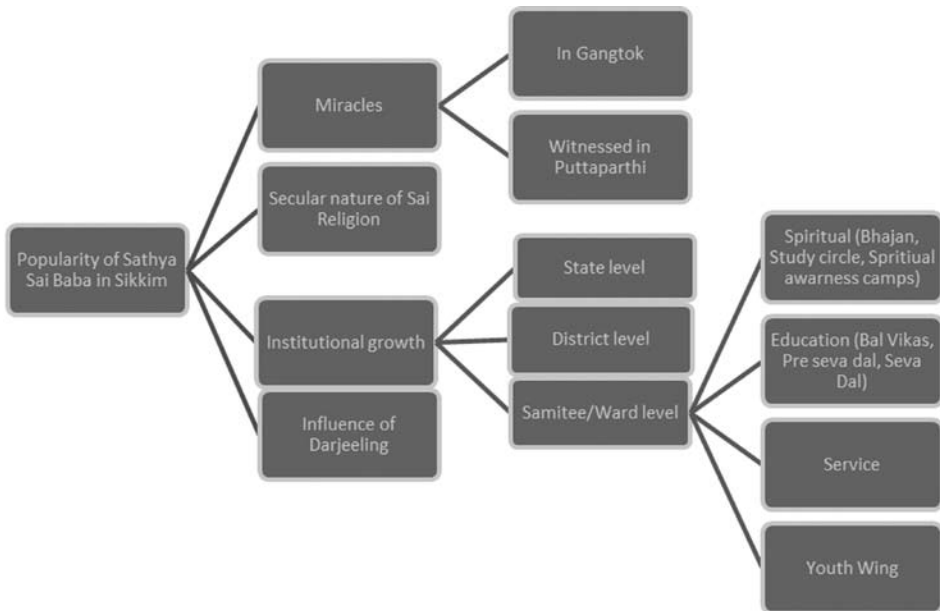


Figure 1: Factors contributing to the popularity of Sathya Sai Baba in Sikkim including Gangtok.

³ Personal interview with Ratan Pradhan, President, Sathya Sai Organisation, Sikkim.

⁴ Personal interview with Dr. Sonam Gyamcho, Sathya Sai devotee.



Figure 2: A photograph of the sacred ash flowing from the photo frame at a devotee's house one day after the godman's demise, which appeared in a popular local magazine (Credit: Talk Sikkim)

Devotees of Sathya Sai Baba from the town began to visit Puttaparthi and White Field⁵ starting in the 1960s. A few also had studied at the institutes that the godman had set up there. Many of them had witnessed “miracles” during such visits or stay there. One devotee displayed to this researcher the brass shiva *linga* kept in his altar room that *Swami* (as the devotees fondly call him) had materialised for his mother long ago. Recounting his own experience of witnessing a miracle, the state president of the Sathya Sai Organisation, who sometimes back went to Puttaparthi with a group of children from the state to present a dance performance for Sathya Sai Baba says:

I was sitting with the other state presidents at the front. Baba was so pleased with the performance of the children from Sikkim that he asked me who the choreographer was. I called the choreographer – a young man from the region who was seated in the midst of the crowd, to come in front of Swami. As he came, Swami materialised a ring for him and presented it to him. It happened right in front of us... (Ratan Pradhan).

⁵ These are two Sathya Sai centres in India. The other is at Kodaikanal.

The photograph capturing the godman materialising the ring in the above instance is displayed at select places in the town.⁶ Devotees bring back to the state such stories of miracles witnessed during their pilgrimages at Puttaparthi and Whitefield.

Babb (1983) notes that the most striking feature of Sathya Sai Baba's cult is the extreme emphasis given to the "miraculous". Among other extraordinary feats, the godman was credited with the power of materialising objects from nowhere, magical flights (simultaneous presence in various geographical locations), the resurrection of devotees from death, his ability to effect cures and all these find mention in both scholarly works (Babb 1983; Swallow 1982; White 1972) as well as official literature of the cult (Kasturi 1973) and a host of accounts by devotees (Murphett 1971).⁷ Scholarly neutrality has not stopped researchers from sharing their own experience of witnessing the godman's "magic". In his study of what he calls the 'Sai Baba Movement,' White (1972: 874), for example, uncritically refers to his own experience of receiving *vibhuti*, the sacred ash, from the godman who produced it through a wave of the hand and also of having witnessed the flowing of vast amounts of the sacred ash from a photograph in a photographer's shop in Madras.

Belief on and acceptance of miracles, it must be noted, comes as "natural" for the people from the region, and this came out repeatedly during in-depth interviews with audiences.⁸ Commenting on the significance miracles and magic play in the everyday life of the people of the state, a well-educated local scholar reveals: 'I don't normally go to a doctor when I am ill. I go to a faith healer. Few days back, I had a severe fever. I went to a healer, an old lady with special powers. She performed some rituals with rice and some other things, and I was ok' (Samtung Bhutia).

Anthropologically speaking, the traditional conviction of the people regarding magic and miracles made it easier for them to accept Sathya Sai Baba and this partly explains why his following is considerably large in the state. It is thus not surprising, argues the State President of the Sree Sathya Sai Organisation, that while other states in India's northeast region do not have much of a following of Sathya Sai Baba, Sikkim excels in contrast.⁹

Institutionally, the growth of the Sathya Sai Baba's cult in Gangtok could be traced to the establishment of the Sathya Sai Organisation in the state in 1972.¹⁰ The following of Sathya Sai Baba in the neighboring hill district of Darjeeling in West Bengal state was by then already reasonably established and devotees coming from there to Sikkim for jobs played a key role in advancing the following here. Furthermore, the

⁶ Such a photograph can be seen prominently displayed at the Sai School in 5th Mile, Gangtok.

⁷ Such magical feats have however been questioned by both "rationale" critics, magicians and devotees-turned-foes since long. The BBC, for example, had telecast an investigative documentary in 2004 titled *The Secret Swami* and Radio Holland produced another documentary 'Seduced by Baba' based on interviews by devotees alleging sexual abuse by Sathya Sai Baba. Also see Venkateshwarlu (2011).

⁸ Every community has their natural healers here and often they have male and female classifications.

⁹ This could also be credited to the fact that most of the states in the northeast are exclusively Christian or Christian dominated areas, whereas Sikkim is predominantly a Hindu dominated state.

¹⁰ In an interview with the State President, Sree Sathya Sai Organisation, Sikkim.

matrimonial alliances of people from the state with natives of Darjeeling helped establish the popularity of Sathya Sai Baba in the state. Over a period, the Sree Sathya Sai Organisation saw its expansion in the town and the state as a highly federated structure with the entire state divided into four districts. Each district is divided into a number of *Samittees* (committees), and each of these would have a large number of *bhajan mandalis* (prayer groups). This saw a large number of devotees getting involved both in spiritual as well as social works, and this threw open a new form of socialisation in the region and also drew the attention of the local politicians who found a potential constituency that could yield them rich electoral dividends.

At least two aspects need to be noted in terms of understanding Sathya Sai Baba's following in Gangtok in particular and Sikkim and the Himalayan region in general. First, scholars have described the Sathya Sai Cult as 'deeply and authentically' Hindu (Babb 1983: 116; Swallow 1982: 134) and unlike Sai Baba's¹¹ cult, there is no sign of any synthesis of Sathya Sai Baba's tradition with any other religion, especially Islam (White 1972). However, devotee-respondents resent such an understanding as too narrow and attribute this to a lack of proper understanding of Sathya Sai Baba's doctrine. Almost all respondents, during the field study, argued that Sathya Sai Baba's religion is "universal", summarised in the Sanskrit term *sanatan dharma* (universal religion) that respected spiritual freedom of others. As one devotee/respondent¹² says: 'Swami never spoke against any religion. He always insisted that a Christian truly follows his Bible, a Muslim his Quran, a Buddhist the teachings of the Buddha. People of all faith come to Swami, and they never give up their own religion' (Passang Sherpa).

Devotee-respondents even pointed out how Ramadan is observed at Puttaparthi by both the Shias and Sunnis: 'Something that never happened in the history of Iraq and Iran or anywhere in the world happens in Puttaparthi' says a respondent who had witnessed this at Prashanti Nilayam, Sathya Sai's main *ashram*.

Such a belief on the "secular" characteristic of the Sathya Sai cult is reflected in the demography of the cult members in the state. Devotees in the state come not only from Hindu religious faiths, but Buddhists also constitute a considerable section of the devotees' proportion, though those from the ethnic Sikkimese Bhutia or Tibetan population are far less common.¹³ In all the altars at the households of the Buddhist respondent/ devotees of Sathya Sai Baba that this researcher visited during fieldwork, the photo frames of the godman was placed alongside the Buddhist religious images and sacred artefacts clearly reflecting that both religious traditions of Sathya Sai Baba and of the Buddha are followed by the devotees and that there is complete compatibility between the two.

¹¹ Sai Baba was a 19–20th century saint from Shirdi, Maharashtra believed to have reincarnated as Sathya Sai Baba.

¹² Some names of the respondents had to be changed as per their wishes, though their surnames have been retained.

¹³ The Nepalis and Bhutias are two major communities that constitute the demography of the state. The Tibetans have been residing in the state since their exodus from Tibet in 1959. While the Bhutias and the Tibetans are exclusively Buddhists, the Nepalis are divided into Hindu, Buddhist and Christian sub groups.

Second, devotees of Sathya Sai Baba were classified in the scholarly literature as a 'highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan, bureaucratic, political, commercial and academic elite' (Babb 1983: 116). What is striking, however, far from such scholarly observations, is that in Sikkim and the neighbouring Darjeeling District of West Bengal and for that matter across neighbouring Nepal, it was not just the elites but the common folks who became absorbed into the cult. As devotee / informant Sonam Gyamcho, argues, 'even in the deepest pockets in the region (Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Nepal), among the poorest of the hamlets where people struggle for survival, one will find ardent devotees of Sathya Sai Baba in large numbers.'

Thus, it would not be unfair to say that the demographic profile of the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba in the state cuts across religions, ethnicities, and classes. This, devotees believe, is truly reflective of the secular religion that Sathya Sai Baba advocated throughout his life, much in contrast to what Western scholars opined in the 1970s and '80s.

It was interesting to note the relationship the non-believers in the town maintain with Sathya Sai Baba. As a key informant opined 'even those who are non-devotees of Swami in the state, notwithstanding whichever religious faith they subscribe to, have high regards for him.' Lily Dengzongpa, a Sikkimise Bhutia who accompanied her aunt to White Field in 2007 to have a *darshan* (sacred view) of Sathya Sai Baba corroborates this:

My aunt is an ardent believer. As we waited in the crowd to get a glimpse of Sathya Sai Baba, he came and from thin air, materialised a *rasgulla*. I found it very funny and started giggling only to be scolded by my aunt. I am not a believer and think he is nothing more than a 'magician', though my father always tells us that we should never criticise Sathya Sai Baba (Lily Dengzongpa).

Even as Lily displayed her rather sceptical attitude towards the godman, at the end of the interview, she took out a photocard of Shirdi Sai Baba¹⁴ from her wallet and, displaying it, said: 'I ardently believe in him and always keep this in my purse.' Like Lily, many other respondents had also expressed their reverence for the Shirdi Sai Baba and often during the discussions on Sathya Sai, as with Lily, references to Shirdi Sai invariably emerged.

The popularity of the godman in the town could be gauged from the presence of his photographs at various public sites even more than four years after his demise. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate this vividly.

¹⁴ For an illuminating account on the connection between the two saints and also between heritage of Sathya Sai Baba and of other saintly figures, see White (1972).



Figure 3: Sathya Sai Baba photo-frames prominently displayed at the entrance of a photo-framing shop in Deorali, Gangtok (photo taken on 17 September 2014)

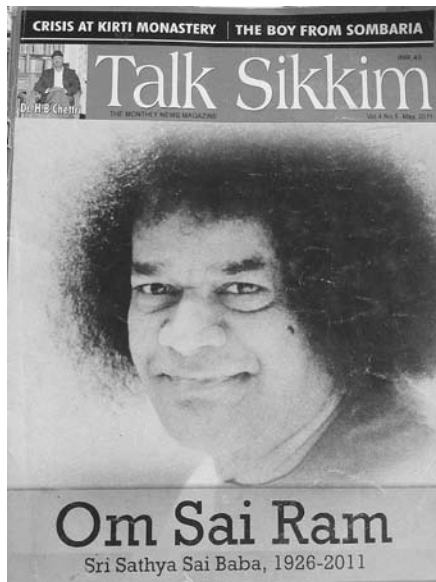


Figure 4: Cover story in a leading local monthly news magazine after the demise of the godman (Credit: Talk Sikkim)

Ritualisation of the high-profile death on television

Ever since Sathya Sai Baba became ill and was admitted to the super speciality hospital in Puttaparthi on 28 March 2011, media, both print and television, began focusing on the developing news that had the potential to become a mega-event in the days to come. National television news channels and their web portals broke the news of Sathya Sai Baba's critical condition on 4 April for the first time. The broadsheets carried the story prominently the next day. By 12 April, speculations began to emerge as a press release from the hospital said that there was a sluggish recovery in the condition of the godman. The media reported doctors being flown in from abroad and extra security force of 500 police being provided to the hospital.

As devotees, apprehensive about facts being hidden, moved the court to know the condition of the godman, the Sai Central Trust at Puttaparthi issued statement that Sathya Sai Baba was recovering and would be transferred to his residence in 15 days. On 16 April, television channels and the dailies subsequently reported the story widely.

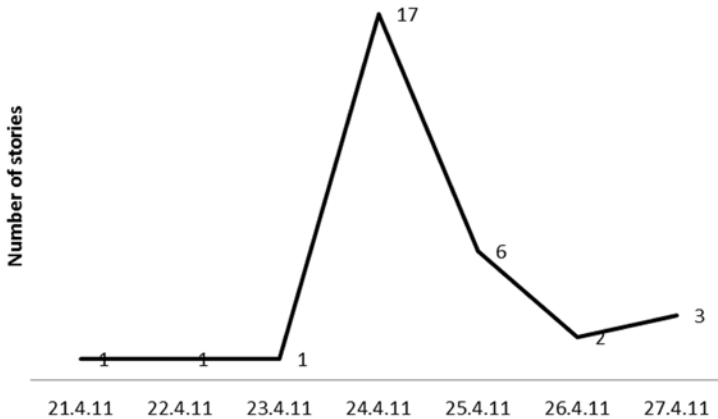


Figure 5: Number of stories (according to date) on Sathya Sai Baba over one week on NDTV 24x7 before and after his demise

Ritualisation (Grimes 2011) of the broadcast is particularly evident from 21 April, both in terms of the number of different stories carried by the channels each day as well as the time devoted to the broadcasts around the issue (Figures 5 and 6). On 21 April, stories about Sathya Sai Baba being still very critical figured in the national news channels and web portal of newspapers.¹⁵ NDTV 24x7, a popular English satellite TV news channel, updated the health status of the godman the next day reporting that he is 'still very critical.' On 23 April, the news channel followed up the story showing visuals of devotees arriving in distress to Puttaparthi from all over the country and the world;

¹⁵ See <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/sathya-sai-baba-very-critical-say-doctors/197291>; Outlook put the story in their web portal: <http://news.outlookindia.com/items.aspx?artid=719537>

bytes of such devotees along with reporters’ piece to camera and narrations formed a substantial part of the reportage. Stories were also woven around the expectation of the devotees that the godman will recover since he had himself predicted that he would live up to 96 years.

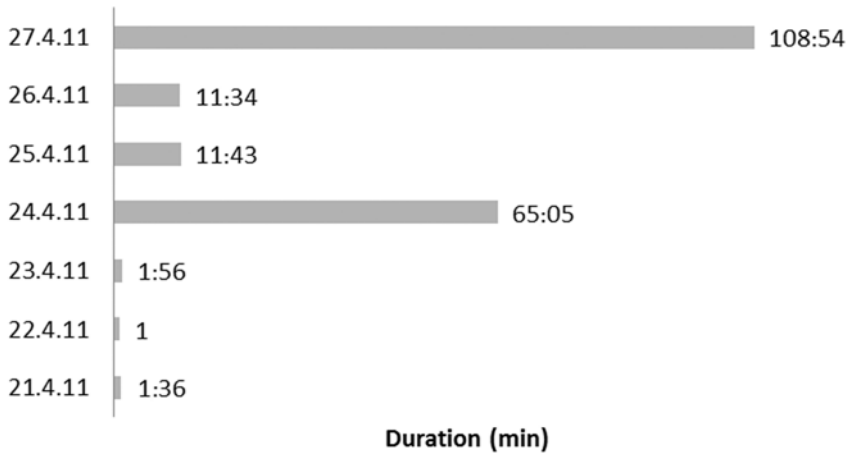


Figure 6: Date-wise duration of coverage on Sathya Sai Baba by NDTV 24x7 during the week preceding and following his demise

On April 24, the tone of the morning news on television was that of awe and mystery even as it was signalling that what was anticipated had eventually happened. Thus NDTV 24x7 reported (in a 3:44 minutes story) in its morning news that there has been no usual health bulletin issued in the morning, and ‘something’ had happened though there still was no ‘official confirmation’; that security has been enhanced in Puttaparthi and roads leading to the hospital where Sai Baba was admitted had been blocked.¹⁶The formal news of the passing away of the godman was soon to be followed. Television channels ran a variety of stories on him throughout the day. In terms of number of different stories carried on given days, as graphically shown in Figure 5, NDTV 24x7 had broadcasted a total of 17 stories devoting them over an hour of programme on 24 April. The number and variety of stories and the time devoted to one single event by television on the day is highly significant and marks a startling departure from everyday reportage. Apart from tributes and condolences from various well-known names in politics, cinema, sports, religion, the stories highlighted the secular nature of his religion. Some stories focussed on his humanitarian work in his own state and also the neighbouring states; other stories focussed on the grieving devotees. Cricket icon and Sai devotee Sachin Tendulkar, whose birthday incidentally fell on the same day, deciding not to celebrate it as a mark of respect to the departed saint was also widely covered by all national television news channels

¹⁶ See <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/security-enhanced-in-puttaparthi/197541>

and online editions of newspapers and magazines. Similarly, NDTV 24x7 broadcast two special obituaries in the evening: one, a 16-minute story on *The early years of Sathya Sai Baba* and the other a 21-minute story titled *The man who touched all*.

The next day, 25 April 2011 was another “high” day for television channels as reportage continued focussing on Puttaparthi. Stories ranged from devotees descending from all over the world to the cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar and his wife Anjali visiting Prashanti Nilayam and paying homage to the departed guru and the former breaking down, from endless lines of devotees to strangers consoling each other to “battle” over Sathya Sai Baba’s legacy just one day after his demise.

On 26 April 2011, news channels broadcast the visit of the Indian Prime Minister and Congress Chief Sonia Gandhi to Kulwant Rai Hall and paying their homage to the spiritual guru lying in the glass casket amidst ongoing *bhajans* (prayer songs) by devotees. NDTV broadcast an almost 10-minute news item on it in its prime time news. The announcement of the following day’s planned funeral schedule was also widely broadcast by TV channels and published in the dailies.

Stories were not only being widely covered across channels on a daily basis but also repeated in different news broadcasts by a particular channel. The wide and sustained coverage of the health condition of Sathya Sai Baba and his demise, ever since his hospitalisation, by media – regional, national and international – as a run-up to the funeral on 27 April 2011 effectively enhanced both the symbolic significance and news value of the live broadcast of the funeral from Puttaparthi that was to be staged the next day.

The funeral: The live broadcast of death ritual

27 April 2011 was an eventful day for all the national news channels – both English and Hindi – and for many of the regional ones as well, particularly those from the south, almost all of which broadcast live the funeral of Sathya Sai Baba from Puttaparthi. Satellite news channels, including Star News, Aaj Tak, India TV, NDTV India, NDTV 24 x7, DD news, IBN7, CNN-IBN, News 24, ETV Jharkhand, Total TV, India News, Live India, Times Now, Headlines Today and others, were preoccupied with the live broadcast of the event. The daily morning news broadcast at 8.00 A.M. was relegated to the scrolling news space at the bottom of the television screen with occasional graphics on some other significant news developments of the day appearing even as the funeral was broadcast live not just in the country but across the globe, particularly to those 160 odd countries where Sathya Sai Centers exists, transforming the broadcast to nothing less than what Dayan and Katz (1992) would call a media event. Television reporters had been camping at Puttaparthi for days for the grand finale and television news anchors at the studios prepared well for the show.¹⁷

The ritual significance of the broadcast could be better appreciated when contrasted with two other instances of live coverage related to funerals on Indian television in recent times: one, of Bhupen Hazarika, the internationally famed music maestro from Assam who died in Guwahati the same year (2011) as Sathya Sai Baba did and the other of Bal

¹⁷ News anchor from NDTV studio on 27 April 2011 appearing during the funeral broadcast informed this.

Thackeray, the Shiv Sena supremo in Mumbai in 2012. While in the case of the former, of all the national news channels, it was only Times Now that broadcast it live from Guwahati, though a state funeral was accorded to the singer, in the case of Thackeray's funeral, the funeral procession was shown live on many national news channels, the visual and narrative focus was on the huge crowd of party supporters moving along with the casket carrying the body of Thackeray, repeatedly questioning where the estranged nephew Raj Thackeray was. Unlike the high-profile funeral of Sathya Sai Baba, it was a typical show of party cadres and fans and television did not show or refer to the presence of any important person from other political parties or walks of life at the event. Both the funerals were of significant public personalities, but nowhere close to that of Sathya Sai Baba, who was equated with "God on earth" by television journalists themselves and also in terms of ritualisation of the event and its potentials of provoking religious sensibilities and imaginations. A fuller treatment of the ritualisation will emerge from the audiences' use of television and readings of the television coverage and of the funeral broadcast live on 27 April 2011.

Tracing "religion" in the funeral broadcast and in its consumption

In his discussion on emerging religious forms of television in late-modern societies, Thomas (2005) provides a four-level framework for analysing the possible interactions between television and religion; it is instructive to analyse the broadcast of the funeral of Sathya Sai Baba by NDTV 24x7 from such a theoretical framework, albeit with modifications.

Level 1: Third party presentation

At Level 1 of the analysis, one finds the television news channel acting as a "third party" broadcasting live an explicit religious service, in this case, a typical Hindu or *vedic* death ritual. For some time, the distinction between a religious channel (or a religious programme) and news channels collapsed. From the very beginning of the broadcast until the end, *Bhajans* (prayer songs) ensured a seamless continuity of the show that ran for almost an hour. Sung collectively by the Sai devotees seated at the Sai Kulwant Hall, the music was in the background, but often, and for a considerable time, in the foreground as the television reporter went mute with her narration thereby submitting herself to the performance on the screen. By withdrawing both her physical as well as her "notional" presence from the television screen off and on, she avoided "interrupting" the ongoing rituals and facilitated an intrusion-free viewing experience for the audience, creating an ambience truly befitting a religious service. In the midst of the devotees lay the body of the saint inside the glass casket, clearly made visible by the cameras that turned the "living god" into a "still image". The close-up shots of saffron dressed priests chanting aloud the Sanskrit *slokas*, as the chief priest, assisted by his peers, led the rituals and Ratnakar, the nephew of Sathya Sai Baba, performing it dominated the television screen for most of the time. The accompanying narration of the reporter further added to explicit religious

ambience on the screen and around it. Television audiences were drawn, repeatedly and for considerable periods during the broadcast, towards the body of Sathya Sai Baba lying inside the glass casket, as the reporter in the field added value to the image by narrating about 'a lot of devotion on display.' Intermediate shots of devotees in the hall singing devotional songs captured the religious ambience at the site again and again. The growth of the Sai cult and centres since the 1950s around the globe and how devotees considered the saint to be God on earth were highlighted by the reporter in her narration. Even as the reporter carefully avoided mentioning the word *Hindu*, trying to be secular in her ostensibly objective reporting during the rites (she pointed this out only twice during the broadcast), the visuals made it explicitly clear that a Hindu ceremony was on display.

Diki Sherpa, who had seen the televised funeral on 27 April 2011 together with her husband and seven-year-old son at their home in Tadong, was more confused after seeing the funeral. She did not understand why the funeral was done in such a Hindu way when Swami advocated all religions. 'All religious rituals should have been equally emphasised,' she said, wondering whether it was the godman's wish or the Trust's decision to do this way. She and her husband Amit Tamang also did not understand why Swami was buried when everything that went before it was very Hindu. 'Television channels also did not explain this,' said Amit, to which Diki nodded her head in approval.

Unlike the Sherpa-Tamang couple, the Pradhan family at Dara Gaon had a different take, as reflected in what Vivek Pradhan, the 70-year-old head of the family had to say: 'Bhagwan was a god himself. As per Hindu ritual, the dead body of a saint is not burned, but buried. The human body of God could not have been put to flame.' Pradhan's daughter, 35-year-old Binita and her sister-in-law, however, were not aware of this Hindu custom. For them, it could be because there was a need to balance the overt Hindu rituals with a Christian/Muslim one to bring to the fore the secular religion that Sathya Sai preached throughout his life.

For Anjali Dahal, 24, of Deorali, the burial was probably because the trust members wanted to ensure that Sathya Sai resurrects, and so keeping his body intact was important. Her brother Vishal, 18, did not understand why the final ritual was not shown: '... but why was the final ritual of burial shielded from public viewing?' he asked, having witnessed the funeral intensely on the television with his family members. 'We were waiting for the last moment, the most important moment, and when the time came, they hung down a screen...' added Vishal, sharing his frustration over how the body was cremated.

For 28-year-old Kritika Sharma, the Internet was a significant venue for eliciting information on the funeral of Sathya Sai Baba. 'I know a lot of my friends went online to search information about the meaning of the rituals. Even I did so. But surprisingly, at least I did not get much fruitful stuff on the web,' admitted Kritika.

Sonam Rai, 66, is a mother of two married daughters. She stays with her elder daughter at Deorali. She had watched the funeral of Sathya Sai Baba with her two daughters and their kids. 'But I never discussed the funeral with any of them. Death is a taboo subject and is not generally discussed,' said Sonam, adding 'though we never believe that he died.'

Therefore, even as the audiences avoided interpersonal discussions, the ability of a televised broadcast to provoke and invigorate religious imaginations has been brought to the fore at Level 1. This emerges more forcefully as the analysis moves to the subsequent levels.

Level 2: Motifs, symbols, and stories

The focus of the analysis changes significantly when moving to Level 2 as the search for interaction between religion and television is directed at motifs, symbols, roles, stories and themes in fictional (and non-fictional) broadcasts that are ‘either taken from the historical religions or that can at least be traced back to them,’ as Thomas (2005: 81) argues. In the broadcast under consideration, various such elements are evident. The visuals and narration around the state honours, such as the 21-gun salute, the draping of the body in the national flag by the police personnel who marched barefoot, and the presence of national political leaders, cutting across party lines, were all national symbols and imageries that transformed the event into a national mourning.¹⁸ The camera shots zooming on the VIPs witnessing the funeral rites in reverence and the accompanying narration by the NDTV reporter affirmed the unity of the nation by describing the respect shown to the departed saint by both eminent people and commoners, and signified the collective sense of shock and grief, thereby transforming the ritual into a national performance of solidarity:

Several senior leaders, of course, making trips here to show their last respect. We have got BJP’s L.K.Advani and Venkaiha Naidu here to pay their last respect. Yesterday we had Prime Minister and Sonia Gandhi. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was also here. Karanataka Chief Minister V.M. Yedurappa as well as Ashok Chavan also making the trip. Of course, Andhra Pradesh Governor and Chief Minister will be here today for the funeral. Of course, Sathya Sai Baba was from Andhra Pradesh. So senior leaders from Andhra Pradesh making trips here to pay their last respects. Sachin Tendulkar had come on the first day with wife Anjali, very emotional, sat by the side of the casket for a while. So several VIPs here. But, perhaps the real proof of the widespread reach of Sathya Sai Baba was the *lakhs*, literally *lakhs*, of regular people who made it here to the town, the town where Sathya Sai Baba is actually from (Narration by Maya Sharma, NDTV reporter).

The underlying theme of the broadcast was that of a high-profile death of a ‘god-on-earth’ as the NDTV reporter Maya Sharma often stated. Her narratives on and extensive close-up shots of the dead body of Sathya Sai Baba in the glass casket were testimonies of the fact that nobody born can escape death and suffering. The “limitedness of life”, has been brought to the fore as the visuals belied the hope that death cannot come to god himself.

The story of Sathya Sai Baba as a reincarnation of the 19–20th-century saint Sai Baba of Sirdhi and the former’s declaration that he would soon be reborn in the Mandya district of neighbouring Karnataka was drawn from the larger body of myths around reincarnation. Displaying cautious professional objectivity, however, the journalist

¹⁸ Such a state honour to a civil citizen is a rare occasion and was also seen for the first time in India during the funeral of Mother Teresa in 1997 in Kolkata when official protocols were waived off to honour her.

attributed the myth to spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, to the people, and to Sathya Sai Baba himself. Quoting spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's statement that in six years time, Sathya Sai Baba will indeed reincarnate in Mandya district of neighbouring Karnataka and at the age of 18 he will proclaim himself to be the Sathya Sai Baba further added credence to the myth of life after death and of the religious imagination around it. Supplementing the reincarnation theory, the reporter spoke thus: 'This belief is held by many devotees we spoke to here. Sathya Sai Baba will be back... While there were tears, sorrow among people, some spoke of faith being renewed' (Maya Sharma, NDTV).

On another occasion, just before the final rites were to start and the glass casket was to be removed, the reporter offered this in her narration:

We have *lakhs* of devotees in Puttaparthi. A very sorrow moment in Puttaparthi. But not just sorrow, but also peace... Many devotees, we talked to, telling us that Sathya Sai Baba will be with them always. In fact, Sathya Sai Baba himself said that he will be reincarnated in Mandya District of Karnataka within a few years time. And that is a belief that many of his followers have faith in. While they bury his mortal body today, they say he will be back. Sathya Sai Baba, himself at the age of 14, declared that he was the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, and he would once again come back as Prema Sai in Mandya district of Karnataka (Maya Sharma, NDTV).

The fact that Sathya Sai Baba died as a result of multiple organ failures and apparently had a painful death was read by audiences in a variety of ways. Passang Sherpa and his wife understood it as a message of the god:

He wanted to tell the world that if you are born in this world, you have to suffer in this worldly life and leave it one day, no matter how powerful you may be. So learn to accept death in all humility (Passang Sherpa).

On the issue of why a god who is known to have 'treated serious patients in dreams and given life to the dead' had to himself suffer so much at the hospital for days and ultimately succumb to death, Chandra Dahal (68) said:

If god came today in front of man, man would never accept him. So a god had to be born as a man, live like a man and die like a human being. This has happened with Sri Krishna, Sri. Ram, Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha (Chandra Dahal).

For 53-year-old Bijay Rai and his wife Sangmu, who saw the funeral broadcast at the prayer session at M.G. Marg, along with their 13-year-old son Sandip, there were genuine expectations from the funeral:

As we fixed our eyes on the television, every moment we were expecting that a miracle was going to happen. Swami saved so many people from the jaws of death and even brought dead people back to life. We genuinely believed that the 'biggest miracle' was now to come – the glass casket would break, Swami would sit, stand and walk away (Bijay Rai).

Some respondents, however, did not expect anything unusual. As the State President of Sathya Sai Trust, Ratan Pradhan opined: ‘... there are various types, or shall we say, levels of devotees. Yes, many people expected miracles during the funeral. But I knew there was not going to be any of these.’

Comparing Sathya Sai Baba with Jesus Christ during his “death”, another respondent Basant Chettri, like the state president, did not expect any magic during the funeral, but had a slightly different take on the reasons:

Jesus Christ was beaten to death, and people expected that somebody who did all wonderful miracles throughout his life would be able to do some miracle and save himself. But nothing happened, He was nailed to the cross, and spears went through his heart. By not showing any miracle, Swami, like Jesus, wanted to give a message (Basant Chettri).

Invoking his Buddhist religious knowledge of *moksha*, a 45-year-old school teacher stated:

There is a difference between rebirth by default and rebirth by choice. The former is, in fact, a punishment for worldly deeds, a result of not been able to achieve the ultimate goal of life. The later is a power only the exceptional are gifted with. Swami was not even a human being, he was God, and so his reincarnation had to be by choice (Vishal Lama).

A central theme that ran across the live broadcast was the description of Sathya Sai Baba as a “saviour figure” as it appeared a number of times in the reporter’s narration. The story of how he transformed the town of Puttaparthi and his immense contribution to the cause of humanity in his state and neighbouring states was repeatedly recounted by the journalist. The reporter’s narration referred to the ‘lakhs and lakhs’ of commoners arriving at Puttaparthi to pay homage to the spiritual leader and the presence of “who’s who” in public life witnessing the funeral rites in person; the television cameras vouched for this with matching close up shots of VIPs, displaying unusual silence, sadness, and reverence in their faces. The underlying message was that the dead in question was an extraordinary public figure and the ongoing event a highly sacralised, one that has broken the profanity of everyday life.

The short visuals of religious representatives from other religious faiths attending the funeral and narrative around the hymns from other religions being sung at the beginning symbolised that the ceremony was a celebration for a secular religion, a religion that accepted and accommodated all faiths. The underplaying of the overt Hindu rituals by the TV reporter only reiterated the grand narrative of the secular credentials of *Sai dharma*. Respondents reiterated it:

People from all walks of life used to come to Prashanti Nilayam when Swami was alive. In his bodily death, it was no different. Some people have criticised Swami, but see his following during his physical death. Why else would so many people and so many significant persons come to attend his funeral? Why would all television channels show it in such a grand way? (Lalit Bahadur Neopany).

Level 3: Performative and ritual event

At level 3 of the analysis, the focus is drawn primarily towards the idea of media events as posited by Dayan and Katz (1992), discussed earlier. During such events, audiences view the broadcast in groups rather than in isolation and media cautiously avoids “intrusion” and present the occasion with utmost reverence in line with the organiser’s definition of the event. In the case of the funeral broadcast in question, ceremonial reverence was displayed not only by the large number of viewers in Gangtok as they collectively viewed the broadcast but also by the journalists, as was reflected in the NDTV reporter’s reverential tone and her use of the communal “we”, thereby transforming her status to that of a “witness” rather than an impartial journalist who could not resist abandoning her professional objectivity. The viewers in Gangtok pre-planned the viewing, kept fasts and rescheduled their work, which itself was largely facilitated by the state holiday; guests were invited by households to enhance the viewing experience.

Significantly, one could find that the mourning rituals at homes and at M. G. Marg on 27 April 2011 were patterned along the one shown on television. Bindya’s family has four television sets in their house: one is in her own bedroom which she shares with her younger sibling Rekha, the other in her grandparents’ bedroom, a portable television in the kitchen and a wall-mounted 48-inch Sony LCD TV in her parents’ bedroom. During special television shows in the house (like the cricket world cup finals), the television in the parents’ bedroom becomes the centre of attraction as all would gather around it. During the Sathya Sai Baba’s funeral broadcast as well, the family stayed indoors, fasted and sat around this television set to witness the cremation of the saint. Bindya informs:

Normally, when we gather to watch some programme on the television (in the parents’ bedroom), we spread ourselves comfortably on the bed and sofa. But on that eventful day of Swami’s funeral, mummy instructed that we all sit on the ground. A mat was spread out. Even my grandparents who normally don’t sit on the ground sat that day on the mat, and we all watched the funeral together. A few of our friends and relatives were invited to witness the funeral. At one point in time, I had unconsciously spread out my legs towards the TV screen, and my mother reminded me to sit ‘properly’. As we watched the funeral, we were simply struck with wonder. We sang *bhajans* along with the devotees on the screen, not very loudly, though, as my father insisted that we also listen to the narration and the chanting on the TV. That helped us to understand the ceremony better (Bindya Rai).

It is apparent from Bindya’s description of the scene at her house that the mourning at the house was patterned along the one at Sai Kulwant Hall brought by the television. Breaking away from the everyday practice of sitting on chairs or bed while watching television, the broadcast of the funeral was received by everybody consciously sitting on the ground, singing *bhajans* and praying as the funeral was watched, mimicking the scene at Sai Kulwant Hall. The reverence towards the broadcast is reflected in the way Bindya and others sat on the ground and is particularly displayed when her mother asks her to tuck in her legs; pointing the feet towards a god is not acceptable.

Level 4: Religious and cultural forms and functions of television

The focus of the analysis here shifts to how television provides ontological security and helps experience transcendence beyond everyday experience, its use of myths to transform reality, generating a feeling of “*communitas*”, i.e., a public celebration of shared values, an idea that is close to Durkheim’s (1995) understanding of religion. Ever since television news first broadcast the story of Sathya Sai Baba’s admission to the hospital on 28 March 2011, the medium began to assume special significance for both devotees and non-devotees alike. Television mediated the event and provided the framework for the community experience. As Johana Sumiala (2013) argues, such shared common space is created out of an imagined presence, and though audiences spread across the globe cannot see each other, they can imagine how everyone is watching the same broadcast, generating what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls an imagined community. Television, particularly through its news and live broadcasting, condenses the experience of time, involving a great deal of symbolic communication that is central to the development of “community”.

As the NDTV reporter from Puttaparthi, in her narration, informs the viewers during the funeral proceedings:

There is, of course, huge interest in the funeral around the world. The following of Sathya Sai Baba is not restricted to India alone. There are centres in 160 countries ... The funeral proceedings are being telecast to all the centres. Devotees who have not been able to attend the funeral are watching the live telecast of the funeral of Sathya Sai Baba... (Maya Sharma, NDTV).

Such information further enhanced the community experience among the viewers in Gangtok. As Binita Sherpa, 54, reflects:

Not just people in houses, but everywhere people were following up the developments at Puttaparthi. And since it was coming on the news and all the TV news channels were showing it, it was easier to access. On the day of the funeral, everyone was watching the broadcast, not just at homes. All the shops in M. G. Marg were playing the broadcast. Across the world, people were glued to TV screens. It gives you a strangely good feeling when you know that everybody is watching the same programme at the same time (Binita Sherpa).

The “strangely good feeling” that Binita refers to is that of the imagined community that television had constructed. Sumiala’s (2013: 18) construction of community as ‘conscious efforts to create a certain type of shared social reality through the use of certain shared or at least commonly recognised images, gestures, signs and practices’ is instructive here.

Viewers not only wanted to read about the developments, which in any case they could find it in the newspapers and the Trust’s online portal, but they seriously wanted to see for themselves the developments at Puttaparthi. The visuals and narratives that television news channels brought to the development of Sathya Sai Baba’s health

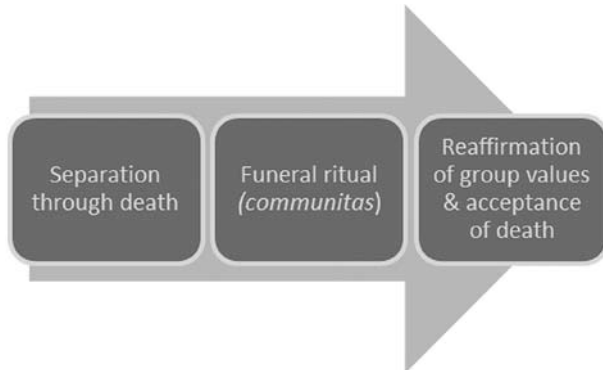
condition upgraded the profane television to a “sacred” status.

Starting from the morning news broadcast on 24 April 2011, television news channels assumed great importance as devotees and audiences, at least in Gangtok, became extremely dependent on the news channels for credible information. As a 23-year-old female devotee said: ‘Normally I don’t regularly watch TV news. But ever since the news of Swami in hospital started appearing on the television, I never missed the news updates on Swami’s health’ (Shanti Thapa).

The role of journalists in mediating stories to the viewers and facilitating them through the process of *rite de passage* is particularly noteworthy. Speaking of the important role that the television played during the period, Passang Ghimire, a devotee said: ‘Every time we saw some news story around Swami, we were better prepared for the eventuality; thanks to television for taking us through.’ Another devotee Vimal Subba, emphasised: ‘... imagine if we had to hear suddenly that Swami had left us!’

Both Ghimire’s and Subba’s above comments on television’s role in aiding the gradual acceptance of a shocking eventuality can be explained with the help of Kitch’s (2000) theorisation of a three-stage process through which journalists mediate the larger cultural process of mourning, beginning with the separation through the death itself, followed by the funeral ritual characterised by a feeling of what Turner (1969) termed *communitas*, and concluding with the reaffirmation of group values and acceptance of the death (see Figure 7 below).

Figure 7: Showing mediation of cultural process of mourning



Even as the devotees would not initially, and in fact till the news of the death appeared, accept any possibility of their Swami’s separation from them, the breaking news on television of the saint being admitted to hospital and subsequent regular updates on his deteriorating health status over the one odd month progressively leading to the building up of the news around his eventual death helped move the devotees from a state of what was outrightly rejected initially to that of acceptance though with disbelief. The variety of special features televised on 24 April 2011 added to the process.

At the second phase of the mourning process, by “transporting” the viewers to

the site of the funeral and treating them with the live coverage of the final death rituals of the godman, television channels helped further convince the viewers that the saint was no longer there. The detachment process, however, passed through its logical conclusion in the third phase as stories on the funeral earlier in the day figured prominently in the evening television news.

Folker Hanusch (2010) articulates that in this process, journalists play the role of what Carey (1989) calls “healing spiritual leaders” as they draw the community together suddenly abandoning their professional objectivity and distance by continuously employing the subjective first person plural, and a communal “we”. It must be noted that there were at least three disruptive elements that the reporter could have invoked in her narration: one, the wide-ranging controversies around the godman, two, the falsity of his own prophecy regarding when he would die¹⁹ and three, the absence of Satyajit, one of the closest aides of Sathya Sai Baba, who was supposed to perform the last rites of the godman according to earlier media reports. By de-emphasising and muting any such disruptive potential of his death and controversies that surrounded the godman’s life (except the uncertain future of the Trust), the journalist successfully accomplished the task of symbolically uniting the dead and the living and in transforming private emotions into public ones that Kitch and Hume (2008: xx) argue.

After feeding the viewers for days with stories of Sathya Sai Baba, television news channels started shifting their priority to other developing news stories: the wedding of Prince Henry of Britain and the coronation of the young king in Jaipur being the prominent ones. Stories around the wedding of the British prince were to be followed intensely for quite some time.

Conclusion

This study brings to the fore few lessons that could be instructive for understanding televised religion. First, there is the need to broaden the definition of religion from a purely theological or institutional one to a cultural one as it opens wide the analysis of televised religion or media-religion studies. This is, in a sense, in line with Stout’s (2012) idea of cultural religion that is defined by the presence of the numinous characterised by four elements: community, ritual, belief, and deep feelings. To that extent all media events are associated with religious elements and experience.

Secondly, if confronting mortality is so basic to the spiritual life as Christian Brother David Steindl-Rast (cited in Fisher & Luyster 1990: 13) observes, television facilitates and in fact not only provokes spiritual imagination but also fulfills religious thirst to some extent as viewers intimately engage with the consumption of such existential discourses. As demonstrated in the current study, this is so even as viewers largely avoided interpersonal communication despite having collectively consumed the broadcast. The broadcast of the funeral as well as the ritualisation around it drew the audiences to what Panti and Sumiala (2009) term as a “sacred centre” of the society, which in this case were existential issues around life and the inevitable mortality of even a godman who is

¹⁹ Sathya Sai Baba had proclaimed in 1961 that he would die at the age of 96, but he passed away at 85.

believed to have resurrected many from the dead.

Thirdly, distinct patterns both in production as well as consumption rituals were observed. The priestly role that the journalist performs during such media events is based on a script not written by her or by her employers. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, cited in Grimes 2011: 11) argue that in such ritual acts, 'one will not be the author of one's acts.' Even as the reporter was conscious about her position as a journalist, she unconsciously became part of the witnessing crowd and stood by them uniting them in their grief.

Fourthly, the crucial role that television plays in the mourning process has been brought to the fore in the study. During such moments of "crisis", television assumes an indispensable position as audiences rely on it to believe, like never before. The distinction between sacred and profane collapses as profanity of television and mundane viewing of it transforms into a sacred ritual giving a serious blow to critics who argue that religion and television are oxymorons. In fact, as the study demonstrated, both re-impose and strengthen each other.

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Povzetek

Prenos pogreba enega najpopularnejših, čeprav tudi kontroverznih indijskih svetnikov iz Andra Pradeša 7. marca 2011 na skoraj vseh satelitskih tv kanalih v državi si je ogledalo tudi številno občinstvo v Gangtoku, glavnem mestu več kot 2000 kilometrov oddaljene zvezne države Sikim, kar je zadosten razlog za akademsko proučevanje. Z entografsko študijo skušamo: (i) izluščiti razloge za priljubljenost tega svetnika v tako oddaljenem kraju; (ii) proučiti ritualizacijo produkcije in potrošnje televizijskega prenosa in (iii) poiskati "religijo" tako v televizijskem prenosu kot v njegovi potrošnji pri občinstvih, ko iz te vsebine razbirajo pomen. V raziskavo so vključena tako branja televizijskih naracij kot skozi poglobljene intervjuje v izbranih gospodinjstvih tudi branja občinstva. Članek skozi iskanje odgovorov na vprašanje, kako televizija nasplošno in prenosi pogrebov še posebej omogočajo in vzpodbujajo religiozno in duhovno imaginacijo med občinstvom ugotavlja, da je kljub kolektivni potrošnji tovrstnih medijskih dogodkov medosebna komunikacija med gledalci zelo omejujoča. Zagovarjajoč širšo definicijo religije, ki bi upoštevala tudi raziskave o televizijskih prenosih religije, članek izpostavlja duhovniške rituale, ki jih med tovrstnimi prenosi uprizarjajo novinarji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: televizija, religija, pogreb/smrt, ritual, medijski dogodki

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