

10-9-2008

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**Faithful Leisure, Faithful Work:
Religious Practice as an Act of Consumption in Nepal¹**

Charis Boke²

Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Himalayan Policy Research Conference, 2008

The University of Wisconsin's 37th Conference on South Asia

Madison, Wisconsin

October 16th, 2008

¹ I'd like to thank Yamuna Maharjan, Mukunda Arayal, and Peter Moran in particular among many others. This research was funded by a grant from the Fulbright Commission; conducted most recently from September 2007-July 2008

² Division of the Social Sciences, Master of Arts Program in the Social sciences, University of Chicago

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to further discussion on the changing landscape of Nepal's socioeconomic world as seen through the lens of religious worship sites and practices. Anthropologists of religion in Nepal have a long history of exploring worship sites and practices, and the ways in which those sites and practices integrate, and integrate into, Nepali cultures and societies. As Nepal is increasingly connected to an economically, politically and socially globalizing world, a fresh review of worship sites and practices is in order—not only from a strictly ethnographic, documentary perspective, but from a perspective that considers how the rapid changes in the structure of Nepal's economic, political and social structures are affecting, and being affected by, religious realities.

This paper will address two connected themes. The first looks at the economic relationships implicit in the interaction between worshiper and temple space, and questions how those economic (and thereby, social) relationships affect worship practice, attitudes and the spaces themselves. The second theme explores the different approaches to religious site organization and worship practice from urban areas (Kathmandu, Pokhara) through ex-urban areas (Pharping, Nagarkot, Sarangkot) to rural areas (Dolakha district, Mustang district, parts of Gorkha district). This exploration is done with an eye towards how socioeconomic factors, such as time spent engaging in primary economic activities (such as farming) and related observed cash flow, may affect the sites, practices, and local attitudes; so deeply that in some cases, religious practice looks and behaves more like 'work, and in some cases it looks and behaves more like 'leisure.'

I don't intend, with this paper, to provide any hard and fast answers; I intend to start conversation about the economics of religion in the specific context of Nepali Hinduisms and Buddhisms, and to provide some thoughts on observations from my preliminary research.

Introduction

Increasingly, scholars are seeing the interactions between what may seem to be disparate disciplines—psychology and biology, chemistry and sociology, religion and economics. Traditional engagement in the study of religion and faith practices has seen them as not only separate from more ‘worldly’ concerns like economics and politics, but also almost as an opposition to those things—sacred where they are profane. But in the last decade or so, it has become increasingly clear that religion and the practices involved in and around it is not separate from the world—it is an integral part of how human beings create understanding of their worlds, and how they relate that understanding to societal interactions on personal and political levels. While some significant research has been and continues to be conducted on the phenomena of religion as a practice of consumption (Iannaccone 1991, 1998; Weber [1905] 1930; Smith [1776] 1965), ‘consumer ritualized symbolic practices’ (Thornberg and Knottnerus 2007) and economics in relation to Christianity (Iannaccone 1998, Gruber 2005), there has been less consideration of such things in the context of other faiths than Christian, and other areas than the west. Notable exceptions include Barro and McCleary (2003), who include non-western traditions in their consideration of the interaction of belief and economics.

What is primarily interesting to me about this subject are some observations I made on the ground during the course of my research—namely, that there is a strong element of connection between ‘religion/faith practice’ and ‘work.’ Faith practice fits into an understanding of ‘work’ as follows: if ‘work’ is taken as any activity which contributes to the real or perceived continuity of financial and social security for the self or kin-group, and faith practices (such as doing puja or prostrations) enhance the perception of appropriately beneficial relationship with a deity (or multiple deities), then part of the benefit of doing worship practices is an implied greater social and financial stability, suggested by the good relationship with the deity, when the deity is believed to have the power to bestow and remove financial and social success.

If economic, social and religious worldviews are integrated in the mind of a practitioner (or for that matter anyone), it can be extrapolated that the religious activity, though not a

primary activity or one lending immediate financial profit, is subconsciously seen as beneficial to the overall and ongoing financial state of the kin-group. This benefit stems from the fact that an ongoing positive relationship with a deity or multiple deities is often seen as providing real-world amelioration for the worshippers, usually in terms of bestowing *sakti*ⁱ or the divine energy which (among other things) enables ‘good work,’ or by the more general idea of *bardan dine* or giving blessings to the practitioner’s life. Worship practice itself becomes more integrated into this equation when we learn that there are ways of doing ‘bad puja’ and ‘good puja,’ which could (according to some of my interlocutors)ⁱⁱ affect the results of the prayers.

The assignation of value-judgments to the quality or perceived quality of worship at a temple is evidence for the social importance of worship practices. A ‘good puja’ may indicate not only faith in the divinity but also buy-in to the entire socioeconomic system indicated by the way worship and faith work in Nepal. To follow Thorstein Veblen’sⁱⁱⁱ line of thought, religion as an economic practice (especially in modern consideration) can be partially understood as communal expression of both conspicuous leisure and consumption—classes with more leisure time and leisure money^{iv} have the mobility to engage in more frequent worship, thereby constantly reaffirming their association with the system which afforded them the time and money to begin with.

Even more interesting are the comments people made to me about ‘real’ faith in others (and by implication themselves), and how that ties into economic considerations around temple practices and beliefs. Elements of the ‘sacred’ morph their way into economic practices—as William Paden points out^v, ‘Durkheim’s *le sacre* was a social representation rather than a superhuman presence,’ (2008, p 33) and when temple practice in Nepal is examined through the lens of economic and social world-building, it is clear that while much of the ‘sacred’ in a temple is atemporal and superhuman, there are also some grounded human elements, some very important social processes that are themselves understood as sacred. Also of interest are the differences in attitude toward religion, faith, worship and temples in several parts of rural Nepal (Dolakha, Mustang, Manakamana, the rim of the Kathmandu valley) versus those found in urban Nepal

(Kathmandu, Pokhara), and the correlation of those differences in attitude to differences in economic pastimes.

Methodology

I approach my work not as an economist, but as an anthropologist—my main modes of data gathering for this project were participant observation, informal interview and the occasional survey. To turn to William Paden again^{vi}, ‘religion is not an object for which one can have an explanation, but a word which points to a variegated domain of different but related phenomena.’ (1998, 91) As an extension of that argument I believe that this kind of research, involving malleable and ‘variegated’ aspects of the human condition such as world-building and ethos formation as it does, is suited well to qualitative data-gathering, though where quantitative data is reliable I have used it.

Over the course of my research, I conducted ten-minute to two-hour-long formal, survey-style interviews with 17 people. I asked questions informally of approximately 200 others at various locations, and I spent something like 300 hours in temples observing behavior and interaction. A section of my project also involved temple distribution mapping in the urban areas of Kathmandu and Pokhara. My intent with the mapping sub-project was to gather further evidence for theorizing about relationships between economic status of communities and/or demographic relationships with temple distribution and density in any given area. By examining how many and what kind of temples certain demographic areas have, I hoped to be able to establish a stronger and more specific correlation between relative wealth, social status, and worship practices. This sub-project in particular was difficult, as physical maps of Kathmandu are not always as accurate as one might hope—a significant amount of time was spent re-routing or creating roads on the map copies I was using for documenting temple locations. Problems aside, the information yielded from this project was well worth the effort.

Most of the formal interviews I conducted were continuations of previous, informal conversations, and they were also mostly conducted with people who had exhibited physical evidence of frequent worship and/or a relationship with a god. That physical

evidence included such things as: doing puja (bringing a tray of flowers, powder, incense, cloth and other offerings to give to the deity in the temple); accompanying a family member in the conduct of doing puja; such physical behavior as touching the hand to the head and chest one to five times as the person passed a temple; living in the temple. Therefore my interlocutors ranged in type from resident *pujari* or priest to people who may have never visited the temple in question but ‘*bhagavanlai bishvas garnu,*’ or ‘believe in god’ generally speaking, and therefore have a proto-relationship with the god in the temple, one which has the potential to develop into a more complex and ongoing thing.

The time I spent in observation was useful to me in helping me to understand how people tend to behave and interact on a moment-to-moment basis in temples. How do people demonstrate their thoughts through actions—thoughts about themselves and their space in relation to that of others in the temple, understandings of the space of the temple in general, how the space occupied by one temple may not be the same kind of interactive space as another temple. In the interest of broad observation, I noted at points how many people were in the temple in question, how old they were, what gender they were, what clothing they were wearing (color, style, newness), whether they were in family or in peer groupings, who was doing the puja and who was watching, the tone and tenor of their actions. Were they quiet? Loud? Taking photographs? Looking at the focal worship point? Smoking cigarettes? Talking on cell phones? Approaching the prospect of Hindu and Buddhist worship spaces from the perspective of a western observer necessitated noticing all these seemingly innocuous details in order to create a fuller vision.

Over the course of ten months, I visited several major worship sites to get an idea of what large-scale temples are like, as well as hundreds of less-widely worshiped, more local temples. Some of the major temples I visited were Dakshinkali-mai, Manakamana, Dolakha Bhimsen, Tripura-Sundari and Muktinath. Some of the more locally worshiped sites included (in Dolakha district) Mahadevsthan, Bhimeswor, Kalika, Kalinag; (in Kathmandu valley) Tridevi mandir; Mhepi; Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu Darbar Squares, Kirtipur Indrahini, BaghBhairav, Raato Machhindranath; several temples in

Pokhara including Bhadrakali, as well as various temples and gombas in Pharping, Mustang and Manakamana areas. Even the total list of every temple I visited is only a fraction of the temples in Nepal—I don't pretend to have gone to every one, but I believe that I have spent enough time in enough different temples and worship sites to have a decent preliminary picture of what goes on there.

After five months of observation and informal discussion and interview at all those sites and more, I developed a questionnaire to administer more formally. Though I still do not believe that the questions I was asking were always the right ones, nor were they the only ones that could have been asked, I felt that five months of observation gave me a good idea of which questions to start with. Out of 17 people to whom the questionnaire was given, my research assistant and partner Yamuna Maharjan conducted 13 of the interviews. Though my Nepali language is more than adequate for most purposes, it was useful to have a social sciences trained assistant in the field in this case.

Because I spoke primarily with people in and around the context of temples and worship, it must be taken into account that these folks have self-selected for demonstration of religiosity. I do not have a large enough sample size to include significant figures from irreligious or 'agnostic' elements of the population, though I did speak with some people who categorized themselves as such. Though there is no way to ever truly know what any other person believes, the people I spoke with were by and large going to temples on a regular basis (1-7x per week) to do worship. Therefore, they must be considered as believers on some level, which is important to keep in mind—several people made statements along the lines of 'everyone in our country believes in bhagavan,' or 'everyone has faith in Nepal.' These 'everyone' statements become problematic, and it is likely safest to assume that they indicate not actual fact, but a measure of faith on the part of the speaker—a faith in the faith of her fellow country-people.

A note on translations: there are concepts and words in Sanskrit that are notoriously difficult to translate precisely into the English language. Thus, we find ourselves using '*karma*' in conversation because saying 'fate' does not quite cover all the meaning—or,

for that matter, '*dharma*' cannot accurately be translated as religion, faith, teaching, or any other almost-right English word. Similarly I have encountered problems when trying to translate '*bhagavan*' accurately into English. Though it is usually translated as 'god,' or 'lord,' I believe that these are inexact renderings of the concept. Where I could translate '*Krsna bhagavan*' as 'Lord Krsna' with no problem, since it is a referent for a specific deity, I have more trouble translating '*bhagavanlai bishvas garchhu*' to 'I believe in the lord,' because that is not what the phrase *means*; *bhagavan* as a concept is emphatically neither monolithic nor essentially masculine in Nepali, both of which are connotations associated in the western world with the term 'the lord.' Similarly, it does not work to translate '*bhagavan*' in that case as 'god.' I am still looking for a useful, easy way to render '*bhagavan*;' for the purposes of this paper I will translate it as 'the divine,' 'deity,' or simply leave it be in Nepali.

Space, Place, and the Worshipper

Though it does not always act exactly as such, the metaphorical place occupied by a temple or site of worship is inevitably and at its root aimed at a consumer. The consumption is cloaked—infinately, indivisibly—in a reality of belief and faith, such that the definition of place cannot be separated from the understanding of faith that goes with it. Even so, the worshipper entering a temple is a consumer. Some worshippers are familiar with the physical and temporal place that the temple occupies, some are only familiar with the metaphysical space occupied by the resident deity, and others are familiar with neither (perhaps as a first-time visitor). Regardless of how much or how little faith and belief a person has, the physical actions undertaken to indicate worship—lighting of lamps, circling of incense, touching of head to stone—are relatively the same across the board. In fact, one cannot use temple attendance or behavior therein as an accurate indicator of belief—further, one cannot assume that large monetary and in-kind donations to temples or for the construction thereof are indicators of belief and faith.

All of those acts—doing *puja*, donating money, sponsoring large worship ceremonies—while potentially internally meaningful to the person engaging in them, are more potently meaningful to the observing community. Financial and in-kind donation, whether through a moment of worship (giving eleven rupees to Dakshinkali), or through an extended, multiple-interaction involved process (collecting funds for and building a new temple in a section of Pharping), may be understood primarily as indicators of faith. But they are not only that—these acts are also primary indicators of socio-cultural buy-in. They indicate the willingness of the person or family concerned to act within understood and accepted social parameters, for the upholding of a common, though little articulated, moral sentiment and organizational principle—a culture.

This is not to say that people doing worship do not believe that their worship affects their relationship with their gods. Nor is it to say that the act of worship is only ever a form of ‘showing off,’ though I did encounter interlocutors who expressed exactly that belief. ‘80% of people,’ I was told by one woman, head of a *pujari* family resident in a temple, ‘don’t really believe. They do it to show off. They are *dekaune manchhe* (showing-off people).’ Interestingly, such statements came quite frequently from people who were themselves the most invested in the financial system of temple-going that exists in Nepal—the *pujari* families and the *jankris*. There seems to be a hierarchy of belief perceived not only by those on top of it, but also by those within it: repeatedly throughout my fieldwork when I asked about something specific and related to religion, my interlocutors would tell me that they didn’t know for sure, and that I should ask the *pujari*.

It is plausible that because of the intimate nature of the relationship between a *pujari* and the resident deity at a temple—a relationship not only socially mediated but financially supportive for the *pujari* family—that the intensity of social implications regarding ‘true belief’ is much higher on the part of the *pujaris*. After all, the level of faith that is physically indicated by worshippers determines how economically secure the *pujaris* are: if a family decides to demonstrate their deep trust in Dakshinkali mai by giving her 3,001 rupees and a nice sari, it is the *pujari* family that benefits in a direct, immediate financial

way. One of the questions on my survey was ‘When puja is over, what happens to the puja materials?’ and participants repeatedly pointed out that it is the *pujari* family that benefits directly from the puja materials. The benefit implied for the worshipper is that the deity will know that it has been offered materials, and respond in kind. In response to the survey question ‘What happens to the things you give to god for *puja*?’ the most common answers ran along the lines of ‘Priest will be rich,’ ‘Pujaris will have rich [sic] collection of all those materials,’ and ‘*Pujari* takes it. He distributes it to his relatives and devotees as *prasad* (substances blessed by the divine).’ The tenor of these answers can’t be said to be fully negative, but certainly the fact that all but two of the respondents answered in this manner is indicative of awareness of the economic system that supports and is supported by the existence of *pujari* families. The two outlying answers were as follows; ‘It’s only a waste of money and grains,’ and ‘Makes the surroundings polluted.’ These two answers indicate a dramatically lesser buy-in to the socially mediated financial system that worship practice indicates in Nepal, and stand out significantly in attitude from the majority of the population.

The perception may be that the worshipper also benefits—by doing ‘good puja’ the worshipper and her family are accorded more *sakti* or divine energy with which to more effectively live their lives and do their work. After realizing that, though I was familiar with the dictionary meaning of the word *sakti* (essentially ‘divine energy,’ particularly of the female sort) but unfamiliar with how people actually interact with the concept, I asked one interlocutor ‘*sakti ke ko lagi ho* (what is *sakti* for)?’ This particular interlocutor is around 80 years old, the grandmother in a Bahun family, living on the rim of the Kathmandu valley. She responded to my question with the following statement:

bhagavan ko yo raamro kaam garne, aba, aakhaa ko biram na garne, raamro raamro kaam garne, tebul banaune, mandir banaune...raamro raamro kaam garne... Raamro kaam garepani ani sakti aaena? Bhagavan le sakti dinu bhaena? Aaphai raamro raamro kaam garnu parchha ani sakti aayalchha.

(to do *bhagavan*’s good work, and, well, to not get sick in the eyes, to do good, good work, to make a table, to make a temple...to do good, good work...while doing good work you didn’t get *sakti*? *bhagavan* didn’t give you *sakti*? you have

to do your own good, good work and *sakti* will come).

It is not clear, from her statement, what ‘good work’ means, but in the context of the later interview, it became obvious that she meant not only the doing of *puja* and celebrating the divine, but also that ‘good work’ means going about one’s day-to-day life in a proper manner. This particular interlocutor also professed that one doesn’t have to do *puja* to get *sakti*—one mostly has to keep the ‘*bhitra ko bhagavan*,’ or ‘deity inside yourself’ clean and be respectful of that deity in others, and from this practice will come the most *sakti*. Though several people expressed similar sentiments to me in other conversations, all of those people were also engaging in more elaborate *puja* at one or another worship site, indicating to me the powerful social place that temple worship occupies. It may be true that to please the divine one doesn’t necessarily have to do temple worship, but it is also true that in order to be seen as a non-deviant, proper and working part of the social order, it is better to buy into the system of worship at temples.

However, although these aspects of the relationship between the *pujari* and the worshipper reflect positive gains on both ends—the worshiper can get *sakti* and social recognition, the *pujari* can get *sakti* and financial gain—there are other aspects of that relationship. Possibly because of the sense of partial financial dependence on the worshippers—almost all *pujari* families have at least one member of the family who has a paying job outside the temple—I spoke with some *pujaris* who expressed some negative sentiment towards worshippers. For instance, the following conversation is one I had with the female head of a *pujari* household. Her mother was the instigator for the building of the temple complex, and therefore the history of her family as a *pujari* family is not a long one—perhaps 40 years.

Interviewer: *mandirmaa basne kasto raamro chha!* (How nice it is to live at a temple!)

Conversant: *gaado chha.* (It’s hard.)

I: *kinaa gaado chha?* (Why is it hard?)

her: *kinaabhane manchheharu dherai phohar raknuhunchha. manchheko aaphai phohar sapha garnuhunna. haami saDhai sapha garnu parchha—dinbaari sapha garnu parchha. haamro aaphno ghar yehi ho, ra sadhai aru manchheko sapha garnu parchha.*

aaphno phohar wahaharulai madlav chhaina! (because people leave a lot of trash. They don't clean up their own trash. we always have to clean—all day we have to clean. this is our house, and we always have to clean up other people's trash. They don't care about their trash!)

While having this conversation, my interlocutor made frustrated and dismissive hand gestures and facial expressions. Though she is the most vocal of the family about these frustrations, it is clear that the rest feels the same from time to time. What is interesting about this is the ambivalent relationship it indicates between *pujari* family and worshippers—though she was wearing a sari that she had gotten as *prasad*^{vii} after a worshipper offered it to the goddess, her vocal disenchantment indicated to me a sort of cognitive dissonance. Without them, her family would have far fewer resources and mobility—but with them she feels put upon. Indeed, she seems to perceive an implicit element of servitude in her relationship with worshippers; partial and badly recompensed servitude.

And alternately, what follows is a negative sentiment the other way 'round regarding the number of worshipers at a given temple. The following is part of a conversation I had with an interlocutor at Tridevi temple in Thamel area of Kathmandu:

A: 'Is it hard cleaning everything in the temple? My friends at Dakshinkali mai temple said it was hard, that there was a lot of trash.' She responded

I: 'No, it's not hard. Not many people come through here. Yes, at the Dakshinkali mai temple they have lots of people who come through, it's a big temple. They also get a lot of money there, I bet. People don't come here because it's in Thamel area, and there are lots of foreigners.'

This statement expresses a similarly frustrated but different in tone sentiment to the former, though it still indicates a discontent with, and self-assigned place occupied separate and apart from the worshipers. Worshipers are still the 'outsider' in this scenario, a sort of interloper—an easy sentiment to understand, when the temple is one's house, though a sentiment complicated by the fact that without the support of those interlopers, the family's continued existence in that position would be impossible.

Economic Commitment to Worship in Rural and Urban Nepal

In any nation, under any religious structure (or lack thereof) there are visible differences between the way rural dwellers and urban dwellers approach their understanding of, and relationship to, their religious practices. So, too, upon examination, one can see such differences in Nepal. On a very basic level, there are often more raw materials available in an urban area to build a temple or to offer puja to a god, while in less populous areas, the fancy cloth, strings of glass beads, and self-stick bindis will be in lesser abundance.

And on a more interesting, but very connected level is the difference in time spent in temple-based worship activities in rural areas versus that in urban areas. While every small village has a temple (or two or three), the number of times per day, per week and per year that the temple sees visitors is far less (on average) than most temples in urban areas. There are several factors involved in this difference. As one person pointed out to me in regards to Dolakha district, '*pahila yo Thaaau maa manchhe thorai aayo, tyaskaran mandirharu thorai chha*' (at first this place was settled by less people, so there are less temples), and that is indeed true. Also at play, I believe, are the underlying economic realities of rural versus urban lifestyles—in order to be a successful subsistence or semi-subsistence farmer, one must work the land almost constantly. This reality is so difficult that many families have one or two members who also work outside the home, if there are jobs available, in order to bring in extra capital to support the family. Because so much time is spent at such primary economic activities, there is less time, and of course fewer resources, to devote to frequent worship practices outside the home.

Conversely, in urban areas, a much higher proportion of the population regularly does *puja* at temples outside the home—and there are many, many more temples in the major urban area of Kathmandu. The greater number of temples cannot simply be explained by the greater density of people, but must be considered in the light of many interlocking factors. One factor, and perhaps the most potent one on a personal-worshipper level, is

that when people migrate to the valley from rural areas to look for work (the frequency of which has increased dramatically in the last ten years), they may want to worship a familiar god, a god with whom they have an ongoing relationship. So a stone or statue is brought, a place is created, and a priest or jankri is hired to properly request the presence of that particular form of god that the person knew in their village reside in this new site. Some people even take this into their own hands, choosing a stone and asking the god politely to live in it. ‘Temples,’ one person said ‘and statues cost a lot of money,’ but she wanted to be able to worship the specific form of the Naga that she had worshiped in her home village.

Another factor is that a greater sense of autonomy and individuation is inherent in urban living. People begin to feel ‘self-sufficient’ within the urban system. Temples and worship sites are no longer necessary as the sociological bonding tool that they were in isolation, in rural areas—the ‘system of symbols’ that Geertz proposed still exists upon shift to urban areas, but exists in a different way. The tone and tenor of worship practices in rural areas tends to have much stronger emphasis on the coming-together aspect of the worshippers, from scattered villages to main rural temples. Not only does the coming-together provide time to worship, it also provides time to pass information, to re-cement old friendships, to make new ones—in other words, to create and renew communities. Alternately, in urban areas, though communities are still built during religious ceremonies, they tend to be more insular communities, ones that involve kin-groups and perhaps close friends, but not much more—a reaching-out beyond the current ‘known’ group is less likely in a densely populated urban area. The events that could be recognized as potentially involving city areas or even whole cities are large festivals such as Indra-Jatra^{viii} and Dasain. But the sheer number of people who attend festivals like these in Kathmandu makes any kind of bonding and re-cementing more of a wishful thought than a reality.

And a third factor is that since people in urban areas have more leisure time, if not leisure money, they have more to spend on worship practice in general. The better a worship practice is done for a deity, the more likely it is that the leisure money will continue in

its' present state. This connection is made consciously by some worshippers who see doing worship as a way to build up their *sakti*, which enables them to do good work—the connection is also made subconsciously, with an understanding that worshipping the divine is a family tradition and will sustain the current social structure, in which the folks with leisure money are already doing well. In many rural situations, any money that could be leisure money is usually fed back into the family and kin-group subsistence system, for food, education or secondary support of primary economic efforts.

In an urban area, the cost-benefit ratio of getting food to eat is a very different thing than in a rural area. While food prices may be expensive, all that is required to buy a kilo of rice is (for instance) 60 rupees and five minutes. The walk from the urban dweller's home in Kathmandu to the nearby shop where rice, lentils and vegetables (staples in the local diet) are sold is short—the time-sacrifices made for the food are taken on in the form of one or another jobs by one or more members of the family. Some people do office work, some people do housework and get paid, some people do manual labor. But in essence, each of these jobs is a way of earning 'concentrated' food—the ten hours spent in an office on one day may earn 200 rupees, while a ten-hour day in a field hoeing potatoes comes nowhere near to earning 200 rupees. In sum, because of the work of the rural farmer, the urban dweller ends up earning more money in less time, and therefore, it can be assumed, more leisure time as well as more leisure money.

In the last ten years or so, people with enough leisure money to pay for long-distance travel have begun to engage in a phenomenon known as *darshan* tourism^{ix}. A new form of pilgrimage, *darshan* tourism essentially re-commodifies religious site visitation and makes pilgrimage in this manner even more openly consumer-driven and -aimed.

But *darshan* tourism has a different tone and tenor than either traditional commercial tourism or traditional spiritual pilgrimage. Erik Cohen^x points out a important distinction between the perceived purpose of travel for tourists and pilgrims: while tourists journey away from their known space, their 'center,' towards an exotic and pleasurable 'other' space, pilgrims journey closer to their 'center,' the most deeply known spaces. The

phenomenon of *darshan* tourism rests in some liminal space between these two ways of journeying. *Darshan* tourists tend to be family groups, and as such not able to release the ‘worldly ties’ that bind them in the same way that single pilgrims find important to do. The journey that a family makes from Kathmandu to Manakamana to do *darshan* is often accompanied by other, more openly consumeristic tendencies—buying gifts or toys at the shops lining the way to the temples, buying photographs of the temple, or of the family at the temple (these can be developed within several hours of taking them, in a shop around the corner at Manakamana). Frequently, not all members of the family participate in the worship—I spoke with several grown children and observed many more who observed their parents doing elaborate worship practices, but did not engage in them themselves. When I asked why not, they said ‘Because dad is doing it for the whole family.’

So while there are distinct similarities between *darshan* tourism and pilgrimage—that is, the worship aspect, the attempt at a journey to the spiritual ‘center’ of the journeyer’s world—there are also recognizable similarities between *darshan* tourism and regular commercial tourism—that is, the perceived need to acquire things to commemorate the journey and the fact that people on such trips tend not to attempt to reach a state of detachment from worldly concerns. Also of note is the fact that while the journey is intended as one to the spiritual ‘center,’ because of the speed with which *darshan* tourism is done these days, it often ends up seeming and looking as much like an escape outward, away from ‘normal’ life, as it does like a spiritual journey.

Darshan tourism has been made truly possible only recently, with the advent of easier access to many major rural worship sites—buses to Dakshinkali temple in Pharping, a cable car to Manakamana temple in Gorkha district, and the latest addition of a road and jeeps up to Muktinath temple in Mustang. Instead of needing six months to two years to walk from Tamil Nadu to Muktinath, now pilgrims and tourists alike can hop on two planes and a jeep (or even a helicopter) and get from Chennai to Muktinath and back in a week or less, for a number of thousands of rupees. One thing occurring here is an exchange of time for money—because the convenience of swift travel is in place, people who have the money can now use it to go do *darshan*. The traditional understanding of

the long, thoughtful journey as vitally important seems to have partially slipped by the wayside, now that money can pay for convenience—instead of expending physical energy and time on the trip itself, the physical energy and time are expended on the economic activities (office job, teaching, etc.) that enable the traveler to save money to pay for the short trip. What matters now is doing the *darshan* itself, not how we get there—an economic exchange of a most fundamental nature^{xi}.

In a very basic way, while religion or spirituality may provide a sense of communal belonging, a sense of safety and the protection of a deity, it is also an economic process. Time and/or money resources are expended in order to acquire the commodities of ‘faith,’ ‘the divine,’ ‘worship,’ ‘true sight.’ Of course, the economic exchange implicit in any spiritual encounter (particularly the ones just discussed) does nothing to delegitimize the experience of the practitioner, nor does it indicate any sort of ‘wrongness’ or ‘falsehood’ about belief as a phenomenon. This is merely to point up the fact that, alongside belief and faith and the divine comes the economy, and exchange.

Conclusion

My considerations in this paper are designed to begin discussion and framework-building for further explorations into the interplay between economics and religion in Nepal. The things that became clear to me during my research—that there is a deep and abiding connection between religious practice and the work/leisure dichotomy; that this connection is reflected differently in rural and in urban areas; and that worship practices and both socially mediated and economically significant as well as spiritually important—are general indicators for directions of study, not final answers.

Like so many elements of life these days, religion and worship compete with other economic entities to attract ‘customers’ and to provide the ‘commodities’ of faith, duty, worship and ‘god.’ In order to supply those commodities, the consumer (worshiper) has to spend time, money and often other material goods—urban worshipers sacrifice far

more time in temples than rural worshipers, because they are less involved in primary economic activities such as farming. Rural worshipers sacrifice less time, but it is on average a bigger sacrifice, since their access to financial resources is more curtailed than that of the urban worshiper.

In an increasingly consumer- and marketing-driven world, it would be a painful oversight to assume that religious practice was exempt from considerations of commoditization and consumption. How, then, do Nepali worshiper/consumers fit into a framework where religion is not only a socio-culturally mediating force but also an economic commodity? And how are Nepali worshiper/consumers themselves different from place to place within Nepal? These questions and others should be more deeply examined—to do so will give a better overall understanding of the structure and function of economic life in Nepal in this changing world.

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ⁱ For the purposes of documenting conversations and survey responses, I will use Nepali phrases and provide English translation wherever possible; some conversations occurred in English, and will be quoted accordingly.

ⁱⁱ Though there may seem, at times, to be different ways of doing puja or worship, there is actually a set of acceptable practices within which one can improvise. Worshippers don't usually deviate (or even think about deviating) outside of these generally understood acceptable practices and rituals. For example, at the Dakshinkali mai temple one of my interlocutors pointed out '*bhagavanko makeup*' or 'makeup for the deity' in the puja-materials basket. The 'makeup' was a set of glass bangles and self-stick bindis—the latter certainly are not 'traditional' in the sense of having a history of hundreds of years. What was important, she said, was that 'we give things to *bhagavan* that girls like, because Dakshinkali is a girl.' But there's only so much flexibility in the system, and there are very definite ideas of 'badness' related to both thought at the temple and to physical ritual.

ⁱⁱⁱ Veblen, T. ([1899] 1994). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. (Mineola, N.Y., Dover Publications)

^{iv} By 'leisure money' I mean money that is not immediately required to be fed into the family system through schooling costs, food costs, transportation to work costs or health needs.

^v Paden, W. (2008) 'Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. (EDITED BY WHOM?)

^{vi} Paden, W. (1998) 'Religion, World, Plurality,' Ed. Idinopulos & Wilson, *What is Religion?: Origins, Definitions, and Explanations*

^{vii} *prasad* is the term for any object left over at the temple after it has been offered to the deity. sometimes worshippers take edible *prasad* (apples, meat, coconut) with them to give to their families, but most often the bulk of *prasad* becomes trash when the individuals' puja is over. Flowers are swept up and thrown away, incense sticks are allowed to burn down in the fire pit, butter lamps are burned out and washed, clothes and money are taken by the *pujari* family.

^{viii} Michael Baltutis' recent examination of Indra-Jatra is worth looking at.

^{ix} *Darshan* is a Sanskrit word indicating an act of seeing. '*Darshan garne*' or 'doing darshan' is a vital part of worship practices across Southasia—for an excellent and insightful discussion of it, see Diana Eck's [Darsan](#).

^x Cohen, E. (1992) Pilgrimage centers: Concentric and excentric, *Annals of Tourism Research* 19; 33-50. Cited in [Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys](#) (2006) pp. 7.

^{xi} While in Mustang I, too, took a jeep (Mahindra TaTa) to Muktinath. I had walked up to Kagbeni, and since I saw all the modern pilgrims heading up by jeep, I thought it would be wise for me to see what it was like to be a modern pilgrim. If I had not ended up sitting on the roof of the vehicle because there was no room inside, I am sure I would have been ill—many of the people getting out at the end of the ride were. I also encountered more sick people just outside the temple on rest benches—when I spoke with them, I learned that they had come from Delhi to Pokhara just recently, and taken a helicopter from Pokhara to Muktinath—a gain in altitude of 3000 meters. It was no surprise that they felt ill, and I wondered briefly if this altitude sickness is some sort of replacement for the suffering of a two-year pilgrimage.