

## **Commodification of Hinduism in Contemporary Thailand: Evidence from a Hindu Shrine in Bangkok**

**Ruchi Agarwal**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I present the argument that Buddhism in Thailand has not been successful in satisfying the religious desires of the Buddhist population. This has attracted the Buddhist devotees to other religions, giving rise to the commodification of religious beliefs in contemporary Thailand. This paper aims to bring the commodification of Hindu religious beliefs to light by examining the growing popularity of a 'Hindu' shrine in a commercial district of Bangkok, Siva's Shrine in the Pinklao District. Run by a charity organization, the shrine reveals both syncretism and commodification of religious Hindu beliefs. A descriptive approach utilizing interviews and observations has been adopted. The findings show how the local Thai population has modified Hindu belief systems, especially in the capital city of Bangkok. The paper is divided into mainly two parts: the first section explores the concept of commodification and the later section details findings from the chosen shrine.

**Keywords:** *Commodification; Buddhism; Hinduism; Hindu temples; Shrine; Siva; Thai; Thailand.*

### **Introduction**

Walking down the streets of Bangkok several shrines dedicated to Hindu gods are evident on many corners. Housing estates and office complexes enshrine a Hindu god in their premises, with Brahma and Ganesh being most common. People pay respect and make offerings as they pass by. Additionally tens of thousands of people turn up for an annual festival at a local Hindu temple, Wat Khaek, in downtown Bangkok. Despite heavy rain, devotees, merit makers and blessing seekers spill out of the temple grounds to fill virtually all of the surrounding streets, bringing traffic to a standstill. Visibly present in the crowd are large numbers of spirit mediums and cross-dressing gays. Roadside altars and performances are also remarkably eclectic, with transvestite dance routines and Thai *luk thung* (country) singers competing with local Brahmans.

A recent display of religious iconography of Ganesh in a shopping mall depicted him in different forms, some astonishing and others amusing. Also found on sale are religious paintings, books, CDs, and other religious items. Hindu gods being put on sale in a shopping mall, a public place for economic interaction and transactions? Why are the Hindu gods popular in a Buddhist country? What is really happening in contemporary Bangkok? The presence of Hindu gods on the busy streets and shopping malls give clear evidence that religion has become a consumable commodity that can be bought and sold. Arendt (1993) mentions that a society requires culture, evaluates and devaluates cultural things into social commodities, uses and abuses them for selfish reasons but does not consume them. However in the case of Thailand, I would argue that the cultural objects, which in this case are religious objects, are not only used and abused but also consumed widely for different reasons. The shrine explored in this paper gives the evidence of how the traditions are restructured in the new fabricated public cultural spheres of everyday life. Traditions in this case are not in opposition with modernity but rather represent modernity itself.

Adorno (1991) sees the culture industry as transferring profit motives into cultural forms. These cultural forms bring economic privileges to their creators, and after introduction, commodification intensifies overtime. Culture has therefore been forced into an appropriation dominated by capitalist economies. In Thailand and especially Bangkok, the appropriation of Hindu religious traditions is highly evident at different Buddhist and newly emerging Hindu shrines giving rise to different religious cults

that are increasingly becoming popular among the general Thai population. One such cult known as the Siva shrine at Pinklao in Bangkok is explored in this paper. It is important to know that Hinduism has had a long presence in Southeast Asia and in Thailand. The historical roots of Hinduism and the remaining faith in Siva in Thai society help us to understand why people worship at the Pinklao Siva Shrine.

According to Kitiarsa (2010: 565), religious commodification is “an emerging multifaceted and multidimensional marketised process that changes a religious faith or tradition into consumable and marketable goods. It is an interactive and repetitious relationship between religion and market.” He suggests that religious commodification exists everywhere and is part of all complicated human religious ventures to a certain extent. In fact, it is not possible to separate the rise and fall of faith from its marketable qualities (Kitiarsa, 2010). Commodification has turned religion into marketable goods bought and sold just like any other commodity in the market. Living in a consumerist society requires people – on the one hand – continuously to protect the religious choices linked with their consumerist and cultural choices. On the other hand, within a consumerist society, religions transform into a commodity in order to serve the religious needs of the seekers and thus forcing religions to promote themselves to ensure survival (Gazzah, 2015). The promoters then turn religions into something easily consumable creating a link between themselves and those searching for religious guidance. The commodification of the sacred then happens through an exchange between two individuals, the seeker and the provider. Thailand being a multi-cultural country has present different faiths including animism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, and Hinduism among others but is still predominantly a Buddhist country. The presence of different faiths has thus provided the religious consumer with a variety of religious choices. The commercialization of Thai Buddhism has long been talked about and according to Kitiarsa (2007), it is the most influential concept defining prosperity religions in Thailand.

Kitiarsa (2007) presents the cults of *phutta phanit* as a defining feature of prosperity religion in Thailand. Coined in late 1980s, *phutta phanit* is a term referring to commercialization of Thai Buddhism both inside and outside temples in the emerging religious market places. It represents a religio-cultural space where popular Buddhism has converged with the market economy, consumer practices and the quest for personal and cultural identities. Kitiarsa (2007) argues that the cults of *phutta phanit* should be taken as sites where popular religion and culture operate on highly syncretic religious grounds, including animism and other belief systems. He has presented cultural practices such as purchase of religious symbols and practice of rituals, as the engine driving Thailand’s religious commodifying machine.

Jackson (1999) sees the rapid decline of state involvement in religious issues as the reason behind the emergence of new cults in par with organized Buddhism. He argues that the rapid economic growth and turbulent change in Thailand’s politics and modern life in 1990s intensified the spread of prosperity religion. He examined the incorporation of the cult of the supernatural monk Luang Phor Khoon and the Chinese cult of Guan Yin into Theravada Buddhism (Ibid.) as some of the examples of the religious adoptions. Similar appropriation is explored in this paper with the emphasis of the appropriation and incorporation of a Hindu God, Siva, into the Theravada Buddhist practices. Additionally Kitiarsa (2005) argues that the hybridization, a concept pioneered by Bhabha (1994)<sup>1</sup>, of Thai popular religion has become more visible since 1990s. This visibility as he sees has been made possible by the mass media and the marketplaces helping religions to expand beyond their conventional spaces, the temples. Religious expressions in Thailand are more evident in shopping malls, in office and residential complexes, and the market places rather than in temples alone. This has transformed religions into prosperity cults aiming to fulfill the worldly desires with a capitalist logic.

Several different sects of Hinduism emerged in Southeast Asia. Between all Vaishnavism and Saivism were the most popular. While Vaishnavism was popular in the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century, historical evidences suggest the presence of the Saivism sect during the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gingmanee, 2008a). Here, the word ‘Siva’ means ‘luck’ or ‘favorable things’ symbolizing the concept of continuous movement, which is birth, decay, and rebirth. Of all deities, Siva is the Highest and the Greatest in this sect (Gingmanee,

2008b). Characterized as a male hermit with a wrapped hair bun, sitting on the crescent-shaped throne, he is believed to possess greater power of birth and destruction. He is also represented in the form of Nataraja (King of Dance) or a *Lingam* (symbolizing creation) (Prapapitthayakorn, 1986).

The strong beliefs in Hindu deities have remained widespread during different historical eras. After the establishment of Bangkok, the Brahmin Temple near the Giant Swing was founded consisting of the Hall of Siva, Ganesh, and Vishnu. Moreover, the Giant Swing was constructed in 1784 to perform Tri-Yampawai<sup>2</sup> ceremony. This was done upon the request of Phra Khru<sup>3</sup> Sitthichai who made a request to King Rama I to do so. It is said that Phra Khru Sitthichai (also known as Kra Tai) was a Sukhothai Brahmin specializing in Brahmanism (Gluaymai Na Ayutthaya et al., 2006). In addition to the local Brahmins, Brahmins from India had migrated to Siam during the reign of King Rama IV. During this time, royal rites were re-adjusted by the king with the incorporation of Buddhist rituals into Hindu rituals. For example, Brahmins conducting the ceremonies of Tri-Yampawai and Tri-pawai<sup>4</sup> in the Brahmin Temple must also perform the worship of Lord Buddha and Emerald Buddha in Wat Phra Kaew (Ibid.). The essays by King Chulalongkorn on 'the Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year', explains the historical roots of the royal rituals and outlines the ways of performing them (Chulalongkorn & Chanthaburisanat, 1953). Moreover, the festival of Sivaratri<sup>5</sup> was also observed here which was not a royal ritual but was reserved for the Brahmins only. Kitiarsa (2007) mentions that some of the elements of the royal ceremonies were adopted by the public and were incorporated into their own practices. The worship of Hindu deities is evident in urban spirit-medium cults with Brahma, Siva, and Ganesh being the most popular, along with spirits of national royal heroes like Kings Naresuan, Taksin and Chulalongkorn.

Although Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country, the Hindu traditions continue to be an important part of Thai society. One obvious reason is the long presence of Hindu beliefs and the other reason I would like to argue is that Buddhism has not been able to serve all the religious needs of the Thai population. The main aim of Theravada Buddhism is to attain Nirvana; however, the general population do not aim to achieve this goal but rather focus on accumulating merits for better afterlife, with a strong belief in karma. An important contribution to the understanding of Theravada Buddhist societies is the work of Melford Spiro (1982) and Winston King (1964) highlighting the distinction between Karmic and Nibbhanic motives in Buddhism. The karmic motives refer to accumulating goodness and reward while Nibbhanic motive aims for salvation and transformative liberation. While the monks aim to achieve Nibbhana, the karmic motives are relevant to the layperson (Spiro, 1982, p. 68, cited in Keown, 1992). This then attracts the layperson to different religious traditions including Hinduism in an urge to accumulate rewards. In addition, Kitiarsa (2001) shows how popular Buddhist practices and beliefs have some common characteristics with those of popular spirit-medium cults and therefore have been combined together into a single religious entity by the laymen (Kitiarsa, 2001). Similarly Buddhism and Hinduism share several commonalities such as shared origin from India, strong belief in karma, and a belief that ritual practices can help individuals to reach their goals. This makes temples and shrines dedicated to different Hindu gods a center of religious focus among Thais.

### **Recognized Siva Temples and Shrines in Bangkok**

Bangkok, a metropolitan modern city, serves as a center of religious diversity with a variety of places of worship belonging to different religions. Siva has been an important deity of worship from historic times. In Bangkok, the statues of Siva are installed in five different places: The Brahmin Temple (Devasathan), Dev Mandir (Hindu Samaj), Vishnu Mandir on Thanontok Road (Hindu Dharma Sabha), Sri Mahamariamman temple, and Siva's shrine on Pinklao Road.

The process of setting up a religious place of worship requires establishment of either a foundation or an association by the particular religion. The association will then have to register themselves as a religious organization with the Department of Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Culture. Only after the approval from the Ministry can the organization run its religious activities. The five Hindu temples

mentioned earlier are officially certified as a Hindu religious organization. The names of the first four temples themselves reflect that they maintain the status of a foundation or a religious association. The Brahmin temple falls under the Royal Bureau; Dev Mandir, also known as Hindu Samaj means a Hindu association; Vishnu Mandir, also known as Hindu Dharma Sabha, means again a Hindu association; Sri Mahamariamman temple is also an association; and the Siva Shrine on Pinklao is a foundation. Moreover, a religious organization has to be run by a working committee that includes members of the association that looks after the temple's everyday activities. Therefore, Brahmins are required to be at the temple all the time as caretakers, performers of rituals, and supervisors of the daily religious rites.

The Brahmin Temple in Bangkok is a Hindu temple under the management of the Bureau of The Royal Household. Appointed by the present king (Rama IX), a group of Brahmins are the caretakers of the temple, supervising royal rites and receiving orders from the king. Each year during the annual Brahmin rituals, the Brahmins report to the Bureau and receive permission from the king to perform the rituals. Manguin, Mani, and Wade (2011) in their study confirmed that the king legitimizes the social status of Brahmins in Thailand. This temple belongs to the Saivism sect. In the grand hall of the temple, statues of Siva are installed. The prime one is made of bronze in Sukhothai style while the other is of Nataraja. Other gods such as Nandi (white bull) and Sati are also installed in this temple. In addition to these statues, two *Siva-lingams* are placed in the grand hall in accordance with the beliefs of the Brahmins<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, a sandstone *Siva-Lingam* taken from Wat Bowonniwet was installed at the Brahmin Temple in 2010. This event was conducted and monitored by Brahmin heads from three different temples: Hindu Samaj, Sri Mahamariamman Temple, and the Brahmin Temple. After which a Devalai<sup>7</sup> was built to cover the *Siva-lingam*. On the left side of its entrance, there is a model of Mount Meru<sup>8</sup> in which a brazen image of Siva is placed for worship. The worship of Siva and the lingam for the public is allowed in the weekdays during official hours. The main offerings include joss sticks, candles, and flower garlands primarily used for worship by visitors. However, some may also offer fruits and milk as well. The use of joss sticks and candles is confined within the outside area. Pouring water or milk and placing coin money on the *lingam* are not allowed like in other Hindu temples.

The Brahmin Temple is reserved for worships and royal rites, permitted by the present king. Tri-yumpawai as well as Tri-pawai ceremonies are still celebrated as the royal rites annually. The performances of these two religious events are carried out in accordance with Siamese-Hinduism, which is influenced by Southern Indian-Hinduism. The temple performs the annual festivals according to the South Indian calendar thereby following the south Indian traditions. However, the materials used in the ceremonies and rituals will be Thai. For example, *vibhuti*<sup>9</sup> to mark the forehead is replaced with *din sor phong* (white clay filler) and the aarti is done in Thai style with candles instead of the traditional way of using wicks soaked in clarified butter. Of all royal rites, the worship of Siva only appears in the Tri-yumpawai ceremony. The celebration of the other important festival, Maha Sivaratri, has never been celebrated at this temple. The reason is that it is part of the Brahmin tradition and not a royal ceremony. The Brahmins may celebrate the festival on their own individually.

The Dev Mandir and the Vishnu Mandir belong to the Smartha<sup>10</sup> sect. Smartha is an ancient Brahmanical tradition, reformed by Adi Shankara<sup>11</sup> in the ninth century and involves the worship of six forms of god. Worshippers in this sect can choose their personal deity from Ganesh, Surya, Vishnu, Siva, Sakti, and Kumara (Hebber, 2010). It is because of this reason that the statue of Siva and Lingam are installed in both Dev Mandir and Vishnu mandir. In Dev Mandir, a white marble statue of Siva and a *Siva-lingam* are placed inside. In 2011, a new one replaced the old *Siva Lingam*. Strict rituals were performed by the Brahmins from Dev Mandir to mark the installation of the new lingam, which included establishing the Devalai, the worship of the Nava-graha (nine cosmic planets), gods of six directions, Goddess Earth, Saptha Matrika<sup>12</sup> (Pal, 2009), and the establishment of god in the Siva Panchayat<sup>13</sup>. Four Hindu deities (Ganesh, Vishnu, Sun god, and Sati) were also appointed as the entourage of *Siva-Lingam* (a prime statue of Devalai).

Dev Mandir permits the public to worship Hindu deities two times a day: 7.00 – 12.00 and 15.00 – 20.00. Lighting joss sticks and candles are prohibited since the worship area is on the third floor. Only fruits, flowers, flower garlands, and vegetarian food are allowed as offerings. In order to perform the worship of *Siva-lingam*, water and milk are the common offerings poured by the devotees on the *lingam*, especially on Sundays (weekend) and Monday (day of Siva) mornings. Such worships are usually supervised and monitored by the temple Brahmins. Furthermore, Maha Sivaratri is held at Dev Mandir annually and is attended by a large number of Thai and Hindu devotees. The temple allows the *lingam* worship, but it is performed only by the Brahmins on behalf of individuals or families.

Likewise, Vishnu Mandir is considered a religious institution in Samartha sect. Thus the statues of Hindu deities here are arranged in the similar position as in Dev Mandir. There are two images of Siva installed at the temple, first located in the hall of Siva made of colored marble displaying Siva sitting along with Sati and Ganesh as a family along with Nandi as well as Skanda.<sup>14</sup> A *Siva-lingam* made of stone from Narmada River in India, is placed in front of it. The other statue of Siva, which depicts him as a meditating yogi, is installed in the hall of Devi. Similar to Dev Mandir, the rules of worship are not different. Sivaratri is also arranged annually just like Dev Mandir. Pouring milk or water on *Siva-lingam* by public can be conducted under the supervision of Brahmins or the temple staff.

Unlike Dev Mandir and the Vishnu Mandir (Northern Indian Hindu temples), Sri Mahamariamman (also known as *Wat Khaek*) is a Southern Indian Hindu temple. The temple belongs to the Saktism sect. Saktism is the Hindu sect that worships goddess Sakti, (meaning 'Power' in Sanskrit), rose as an organized sect in the fifth century in India and has four expressions – devotional, folk-shamanic, yogic and universalist. Saktism reveres the Divine Mother, Sakti in her many forms. In the Mahamariamman temple in Bangkok, one of her form is of Samayapurathal Mariamman<sup>15</sup> revered as a prime deity of the temple. In addition to the image of Mariamman, bronze statues of Siva and Nataraja are also located within the temple. The hall of *Siva-lingam* is located inside the temple as well. Similarly, this *Siva-lingam* is made of stone taken from Narmada River. Moreover, a black stone sculpture of Siva is found installed in the outer hall of Siva. A statue of him is also located in the north of the temple while *Siva-lingam* is placed on the west side; to the south lies an image of Dakshinamurti<sup>16</sup>. Such arrangement of the images of Hindu deities derives from Southern Indian Hinduism. Like other Hindu temples, worship of Siva at Sri Mahamariamman by the public is allowed. The temple has daily worship conducted five times a day. Furthermore, an exclusive worship of Siva is also performed in accordance to the temple's belief on the arranged dates. Sivaratri as well as other Hindu festivals are held here. The presence of Mariamman<sup>17</sup> in these religious events is common, and a celebration is held to mark the day of Minakshi's<sup>18</sup> marriage.

Unlike the earlier mentioned temples, for several reasons Siva's shrine at Pinklao cannot be considered as a religious organization, and thus may not be certified as a Hindu organization. Through personal observations, three main reasons can be identified that do not allow this shrine to be classified as a Hindu religious organization. First, as mentioned earlier, any religious organization has to set up a foundation first and then operate its religious activities, including establishing the religious building, only upon approval from the Department of Religious Affairs. The Siva shrine here was established even before the foundation was set up in the first place. Secondly, the shrine lacked a working committee and Brahmins to perform the daily religious rites. The presence of a Brahmin at the shrine is a very recent discovery. Thirdly, a religious organization must transparently disclose its financial accounts on an annual basis, which is done by all of the earlier discussed temples, but not by the management of this Siva shrine. Lastly, any temple is supposed to be open to the public where anyone can visit and pay their respects. In contrast, the Siva shrine was set up for personal use to bring prosperity and good luck to the establishers, and was not initially meant to serve the religious needs of the public.

### **Establishment of the Siva Shrine at Pinklao**

Siva Shrine at Pinklao, a roadside shrine was constructed in 1990 and was officially inaugurated in 1992 when Princess Bejeratana Rajasuda Sirisophaphannawadi presided over the opening ceremony. The Siva Pakprahprasidh foundation was set up only later in 1994 on 31 January by a group of executives from the Phongsirichai<sup>19</sup> Complex. This shrine serves as an example of an expansion mentioned by Werbner in addition to religious syncretism<sup>20</sup>, appropriation, and commodification of an alien religious beliefs system, which in this case is Hinduism. Following Werbner's (2003) argument, it is true and evident that different Hindu sects have expanded from their centers in India to cultivate a transnational stretch among migrants in different countries, and have accommodated to new cultural spheres. The official website of the shrine promotes the shrine as a Hindu temple or Devalai. However, in an interview with Phra Khru Sayomphu<sup>21</sup>, he argues that a Hindu temple is where the statues of Hindu deities are installed in accordance with the beliefs of the different Hindu sect. Daily worship of Hindu gods must also be performed in accordance with the Hindu beliefs by the heads of the temple. Building Hindu temples must strictly follow the Hindu rules. It must reflect the Hindu sect to which it subscribes. Moreover, the installation ceremony is required for such religious place to conduct any rituals publicly. Importantly, the Department of Religious Affairs must officially certify it as a Hindu organization. It must also identify its management team. Hindu temples should be accessible for public to worship or to perform religious rituals under rules and regulations.

In contrast, a shrine is built on the private land of a landowner to house particular Hindu deities depending on the personal choice of the landowner. Pertaining to setting up a Hindu shrine, Phra Khru Sayomphu states that several companies, shops, malls, and other commercial businesses usually have a shrine of Brahma or Ganesh to bring prosperity and success to the businesses and individuals living there. Their selection of Hindu gods for a shrine is subject to their beliefs and preferences. The same case applies to the Siva shrine on Pinklao Road. It is believed that the shrine of Siva was established because of the owner's strong belief in Siva, with the aim that Siva will bring him business prosperity.

Indeed distinctions exist between the installation of Hindu deities' shrines and the establishment of Hindu temples. In order to set up a shrine for Hindu gods, it is necessary to conduct the rituals in accordance with the Siamese Hinduism, which requires proper time, date, and location for a shrine. Food for the offerings include a hog's head, a boiled whole duck, a boiled whole chicken, rice, curries, fruits, flowers, flower garlands, and Thai sacrificed food or Krueng Kraya Buad. The Krueng Kraya Buad consists of basi, taro, sweet potato, beans, sesame, milk, and butter. These offerings will be placed on a table covered with a white cloth in front of the shrine. The ritual is performed outdoors at the location where the shrine is to be set. The prepared offerings will then be made to the gods of the shrine. Later the ceremony begins requesting gods to dwell in their shrine and in their images or statues. Therefore, the installation of a Hindu shrine has different objectives; the location determination is also different from a Hindu temple. In Thailand, the Siamese Brahmins installed most of the Hindu deities' shrines.

### **Increasing Popularity of the Shrine**

With this understanding of distinctive installation rituals, let us now move back to the Siva shrine. The shrine was inaugurated in 1992; however, it was serving the religious purpose of only the owner. Among the general population, this shrine became popular much later. According to a group of Siva devotees, the shrine was not well known among the public in general. It was only in 2007 that the reputation of the shrine became widespread and the number of devotees increased. The increasing awareness of the presence of this shrine was brought about with the popularity of Ganesh in 2007. Ganesh is increasingly popular because of his mediatorial role. Paul Courtright (1985) in his study of the elephant-headed Ganesh emphasizes the "mediatorial roles" of the deity. "Half animal/half deity, broken and joined together, half wild/half tamed son of the lord and lady of the universe, yet

acquainted with demons, he is made up by joining that which at other times stands apart. He does not reconcile these opposites, he holds them together in dynamic tension” (1985, pp. 250–251).

It is worth noting that although Ganesh was historically known in Thailand, his popularity gained momentum only in 2007. This happened after the extreme success of Jatukham Ramathep<sup>22</sup> amulets, which brought huge amount of income to its sellers. Crowell (2007) mentions that the first Jatukam amulet was produced and sold in 1987 in Nakhon Si Thammarat province but was not that popular. However, the Jatukam fever peaked in Thailand in 2006 and brought over 10 billion baht worth of income to Nakhorn Si Thammarat. The national trade of amulets in the same year was estimated to be at 40 Billion baht. The income was so high that the Thai Revenue Department was considering collecting tax to offset the losses due to the downturn in the economy. The amulet was associated with a provincial police chief, believed to have magical power and died at the age of 103. He was involved in building the City Pillar, now a center of amulet trade. Thousands of people witnessed his cremation in the hope of obtaining one of the talismans given away to the mourners. The tales of the miraculous powers of Jatukam, like people with amulets surviving accidents and murder attempts, made the amulet extremely popular. McCargo (2008) sees the economic and political concerns among the general Thai population prompting them to buy different amulets to provide protection against adversities. The year of 2007 was a troubled year for Thailand and for the Thai population. It followed a year of political turmoil including the military coup in September 2006, eight small explosions in Bangkok killing three people, and other political events (McCargo, 2008).

The fever of Jatukam was in a decline in Thailand by mid-2007. Ganesh was then picked as a religious commodity for economic gains and protection. Moreover, a famous entertainment company known as “Work Point”, in front of their new premises also brought this popularity in with the establishment of a huge Ganesh statue in April 2006. Ganesh is seen, as the god of Arts and thus his presence in the premises of Work Point would bring wealth and prosperity to their business. A number of Thai actors became Ganesh devotees, which prompted the general population to adopt the same. Nonetheless, the shrine devotees argue that there were a number of Siva devotees visiting the shrine prior to 2007. Prior to 2007, with the recognition of the presence of the shrine, Siva Rakprahprasidh foundation provided visitors with small or large sets of offerings. Each set included joss sticks, a candle, a flower garland, and a bottle of oil, whose price was subject to the foundation’s decision.

Thai devotees at this shrine can easily be seen as practicing a hybrid form of Hinduism, where they worship a Hindu god, Siva, but in their own Thai style. As observed, the devotees offer lighted joss sticks, a candle and recite a prayer. The prayer in Pali language dedicated to Siva is transliterated in Thai at the shrine itself. However, this prayer is not the Hindu Shloka<sup>23</sup>, which is generally used during Siva worship. The origin of the prayer is not yet known. Later in 2009, an increasing number of worshippers’ flocked to this shrine since the Chinese astrological calendar designates the year as the year of the Ox. Those born in this year are recommended to worship Siva, as the Ox is associated with him in the form of Nandi. A ritual was arranged at the shrine linking the worship of Siva to the year of the Ox. The foundation was successful in promoting this idea that those born in a year of the Ox should worship Siva for a good and prosperous life. The Bad Year concept, Pi Chong, a belief in Chinese astrology, was applied to the worship of Siva in a year of the Ox. Thus, it was widely believed that Siva should be worshipped for protection and blessings in a year of the Ox. A further appropriation of the Hindu ritual was evident when the shrine started performing the Hindu rituals of Aarti<sup>24</sup> and Maha Sivaratri. A monthly worship of Siva (Mas<sup>25</sup> Siva) has also been carried out since then. Each month, according to the Hindu calendar, has an auspicious day to perform the worship of Siva known as the Masa (or Masik) Sivaratri. The day falls on the thirteenth day of the Krishna Paksha (waning moon) when the moon enters its thirteenth day. The Masa Sivaratri in the month of Magha<sup>26</sup> is considered even more auspicious, and is thus known as Maha Sivaratri. Masa Sivaratri has its own importance but is of less significance when compared to

Maha Sivaratri. It has been actively promoted as an authentic ritual in order to attract devotees. The more obvious benefit is accumulation of capital, with rituals and donations to the shrine and the priest.

Initially only a Siva statue was installed here, but with increasing numbers of visitors over the years, the shrine premises expanded with the help of donations. A medium-sized brass statue of Durga has been installed within the area, and at the same time, the presence of Ganesh is found. The form of Ganesh found at this shrine is of Heramba Ganesh<sup>27</sup>, a very rare image of Ganesh riding a lion with five faces and ten hands, which was installed during 2008 and 2009. Other images of Ganesh in seven different attitudes were also established within the shrine compound each representing a day of the week. In front of the shrine also installed is a granite *Siva-lingam* surrounded by colored marble images of Parvati, Ganesh, Skanda, and Nandi signifying the beliefs in Siva Panchayat. Shrine visitors offered donations in an effort to accumulate merits by making contributions for the installation of different images of these Hindu gods.

Based on observations after several visits, the shrine itself looks like a bazaar of Hindu religious goods. The devotees visiting the shrine do not need to bring any offerings as the staff hired by the shrine trustees arranges the offerings for them. A complete set of offerings consists of two types of trays. The first type, known as the grand set for the worship of Siva and Durga, contains raw bananas, a coconut, a pineapple, an apple, a Chinese pear, and nine joss sticks. This grand set is available to the worshippers at a price of 100 Baht. The second type of offering consists of a glass of water, milk, a cup of green beans, red beans, white sesame, roasted green beans, and nine joss sticks, which altogether costs 70 Baht. These offerings are generally made at a Thai shrine and are not in accordance with the Hindu traditions. Similar to other religious places and temples, donation boxes can also be found at the shrine. A further form of religious syncretism here is the Thai and Indian classical dance performance offered as worship to the Hindu deities at the shrine. The Thai classical dance performance is available daily from 17.45 to 21.00, and dancers can be hired to perform, which costs 300 Baht for a ten minutes performance. The performance is done by four dancers, two performing as male protagonists and the remaining as the female protagonists, and a musician playing a Thai xylophone. On the other hand, the Indian classical dances are only performed on Monday and Saturday evenings at a price of 400 Baht a show. Dancers are hired to perform Indian songs (often from Bollywood movies and soundtracks), either to worship or redeem a vow made to Siva. As part of Thai religious tradition, it is common to make sacrifices, offerings or arrange dance performances as a way of redeeming a vow to gods. A dance called Rum Thawai Mue, a dance requesting the presence of deities for blessings, is often performed to redeem a vow.

The foundation also produced Siva coins in different colors according to the colors of each day and distributed them to the visitors; a shop also sells statues of different Hindu gods within the shrine area. There is now a presence of Indian Brahmins at the shrine near the image of Durga. The Brahmins would anoint tilak<sup>28</sup> and tie white cotton strings on the wrist of the devotees in exchange for dakshina (donation). Apparently, these Indian Brahmins do not perform daily worships at the shrine unlike Brahmins at Dev Mandir, the Vishnu Mandir, and Sri Mahamariamman. As for festivities, the shrine's caretaker mentions that the Siva Rakprahprasidh Foundation organizes Mas Siva Puja on the 14th day of the waning moon or the 15th day of the waxing moon each month. In an observation of one of these monthly worships, the worship and the Soha Aarti<sup>29</sup> were conducted and organized by a group called Soha Baramee. The foundation Chairman presided over the ritual, which generally begins at 19.00 and ends at 22.00 with the aarti. It was carried out along with singing of songs praising Siva. It is interesting to observe this highly syncretic ritual, with a huge number of devotees attending worship, as public participation is embraced in all religious rites. The quest of Thai devotees to be part of such Hindu ritual is an attempt to be alternatively modern, as was the case of Gebusi studied by Knauff (2002, pp. 25-28). He presents the idea of alternatively modern as "harboring a dialectical concept of how becoming locally or nationally developed occurs through selective appropriation, opposition, and redefinition of authenticity in relation to market forces and aspirations for economic and political improvement."

An evidence of syncretism involving the refashioning of native traditions and practices was highly visible at this shrine. A combination of different types of visitors including males, females, children, and the third gender were evident. Spirit mediums also joined the rituals. Devotees usually wore white clothes which traditionally are not worn during Hindu ceremonies as white is considered a color of mourning. Some were also seen wearing graphic t-shirts with pictures of Hindu deities. They were also wearing Hindu sacred accessories such as bracelets, Om-necklaces, lockets with images of different Hindu gods. None of the devotees were seen wearing sari<sup>30</sup> or a dhoti during ritual unlike those at Dev Mandir and Sri Mariamman Temple. A large number of participants joined the worship of Siva. Since the shrine has limited space devotees had to sit outside the shrine along the Pinklao Road. Bangkok municipal officers offered their services and security for devotees and attendants.

Offerings for Siva were prepared in Thai style but meat is excluded. Fruits, water, milk, flowers, flower garlands, joss sticks, candles, trays, and a flower cone were used as offerings here. At 20.00, the foundation's Chairman started with the lighting of candles and joss sticks, as well as making offerings to Siva. He then poured milk and water over the *Siva-Lingam* while an Indian Brahmin was monitoring him through the entire process. After the worship of *Siva-lingam*, the worship of Durga and of Ganesh were carried out respectively. At the end, classical Thai dance was performed by four dancers, which included two leading actors and two leading actresses asking Siva for his blessings. The Soha Aarti followed this where mantras were chanted. The mantras included a syncretism of Wai Khru chants<sup>31</sup> and Hindu mantras praising different gods. Soha Aarti began firstly with the Wai Khru chants followed by the mantras sung in Indian manner and were dedicated to Siva, Brahma, Vishnu, Ganesh, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Skanda. Damaru, a small two-headed drum, and a conch shell were also used to create the rhythm. The head of prayers also chanted words inviting other Hindu gods to visit the ceremony. It is important to note that Shloka chanted during the Soha Aarti, consists of Dev Prathana<sup>32</sup> and other mantras that can easily be bought in the form of CDs in Pahurat<sup>33</sup> and Silom areas<sup>34</sup>. During Soha Aarti a small number of participants demonstrated the behavior of spirit possession such as dancing, changing their behavior and speaking incomprehensible languages. Interestingly, at least ten people were seen dancing in front of Siva's shrine. Each possessed person showed a particular attitude, describing the Hindu god who was dwelling in them such as screaming and sticking out their tongues, raising a hand and bending it like an elephant trunk, and raising the right hand in a posture of giving blessings. After the chants of mantras the chairman offered aarti, and a brass tray containing menthol was used to light the fire to offer to Siva. This marked the completion of the ritual of Mas Siva Puja.

## Conclusion

The changing society in the modern times is bringing about several new developments. With modern stressful lifestyles, a move towards different religious beliefs that can provide some kind of mental comfort. This has led to commodification of religious goods and practices where religions transform into commodities that can easily be bought and sold just as any other commodity in the market. In the case of contemporary Thailand, religious beliefs and practices are highly commodified in nature. Evidence of commodification can be found in several Buddhist places of worship and in marketplaces, giving rise to new prosperity religions and cults that serve the religious need of the Thai population that Buddhism lacks. Earlier scholars in the field have coined the term *phutta phanit* to refer to the commercialized versions of Thai Buddhism. Overtime the religious commodification has extended to other religious faiths present in the Thai religious marketplace. One such commodified and increasingly growing cult discussed in this paper is the cult of Siva. Siva and Hinduism have a long presence in Thai society and in Southeast Asia for about 2000 years. Several Hindu traditions and ceremonies have been adopted, appropriated, re-adjusted, and conducted on a regular basis.

The appropriation and commodification of Hindu beliefs and practices and their incorporation with the Buddhist religious practices in Thailand have produced a hybrid form of a Hindu cult in Bangkok such

as the Siva shrine at Pinklao. The shrine is distinct from other Hindu temples in Bangkok for several reasons. Most importantly Hindu temples have shrines along side the roads with stones placed under the trees or they can be found within temple compounds. Shrines are less grand and imposing than most temples, separation between the sacred and profane space is not clearly defined as in temples, and a ritual specialist is not present at the shrines. Siva Shrine at Pinklao does not follow any of these features of a shrine and yet it is a shrine. The shrine has been arranging the ceremony of Mas Siva every month as well as Sivaratri every year. Most Hindu temples do not perform these two religious ceremonies or at least not the Mas Siva Puja, thus making the Siva shrine exclusive and attractive. Hindu temples merely allow devotees and visitors to offer flowers, garlands, candles and joss sticks for the worship according to the Thai tradition. Moreover, mediums are granted permission by the shrine to attend its religious ceremonies and to exhibit themselves during the rituals. In contrast, an expression of spirit possession by mediums is forbidden in any religious rituals held in almost every Hindu temple.

Therefore one can conclude that the increasing popularity of Siva's shrine has been more through word of mouth among the Hindu and Siva devotees<sup>35</sup> even though the caretaker believes its sacredness attracts a large number of devotees to participate in the monthly Siva worship. The rumors about the shrine's sacredness and Siva, monthly worship of Siva, and strategic emphasis on the interrelation between Siva and the astrologic belief<sup>36</sup> has contributed to the popularity of the shrine among the Thai devotees. Moreover, it is the only Siva's shrine located in Bangkok, where public participation is open, is easily visible, and can be accessed by anyone, as it is conveniently located. The location plays a vital role in the popularity since the shrine is located on the busy commercial and residential street of Pinklao, walking distance from the Central Department store. Additionally being on the roadside in an open area and with regular ceremonies, it grabs the attention of the passersby. The central location also played a fundamental role in the shrines' recent popularity giving room for further commodification the of Hindu belief system. Its location has allowed for moving up the geopolitical ladder. Syncretic forms of worship are evident with Hindu rituals conducted by Buddhist worshippers making Thai style offerings and offering Thai style dance to Hindu gods. The religious demand of the Thai devotees is served and fulfilled by the shrine in return for financial spending following the economic market model of demand and supply. In conclusion, the immigrant culture of Hinduism in a Buddhist country like Thailand has become a highly marketable commodity that can be bought and sold easily in the marketplace.

### About the Author

Ruchi Agarwal is Senior Lecturer in the Social Science Division at Mahidol University's International College. The research for this paper was funded by the Seeds Grant, Mahidol University. Research assistance drawn upon in this paper was provided by Chulasak Keawkan and Woramon Peelay.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha, a post colonist pioneered the concept of hybridity explaining that colonizers and the colonized are mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture and the invention of tradition. His work developed the concept of hybridity with respect to the cultural politics of migrancy in the contemporary metropolis. More recently, hybridity is used with flow of different cultures rather than just the migrant populations.
- <sup>2</sup> The Brahmanical New Year falls in the second month of the lunar calendar, and commemorates welcoming the visit of Siva on earth lasting for 10 days. The festival is of great significance to the Saivism sect and here Brahmins are considered as the civil servants of the king.
- <sup>3</sup> In Siam, the title Phra Khru (Master) is given to Buddhist monks and Thai Brahmins when they are appointed. It is believed that the title itself was coined to glorify the status of the Brahmin. Phra Khru Sitthichai here was a member of Pathipath Brahmin group, one of the three Brahmin groups in Siam. Brahmins of the Pathipath group often performed rituals regarding elephants such as the ritual of elephant hunting, the ceremony for elephants to bring them health and fortune, and looking after elephants. These are rituals and ceremonies requiring Brahmins with a particular knowledge of superstitions. Elephants represent a sacred symbol of kingly power; since they were also used in wars, these Brahmins are thus important in performing any rituals regarding elephants.
- <sup>4</sup> The religious ritual held to welcome Vishnu on earth.
- <sup>5</sup> An important festival celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> night of the new moon in the month of Phagun. It means the night of Siva where devotees observe strict fasting, which may last up to 24 hours. The night of Sivaratri is spent in deep meditation; offerings of flowers and bilva leaves on the Siva *Linga* are generally made. The worship also involves bathing the *Linga* with milk, honey, clarified butter, rose water, sugar, cane juice, etc.
- <sup>6</sup> These are known to have migrated from Rameshwaram, India.
- <sup>7</sup> Devalai is a building consisting of four poles with a rooftop similar to a Khmer-style tower on temples.
- <sup>8</sup> A golden mountain in the center of the universe believed to be located in the Himalayas. It is the residence of gods in Hindu tradition and thus acts as the basis for the layout of all Hindu temples.

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- <sup>9</sup> The sacred ash made of burnt dried cow dung and used in Vedic rituals.
- <sup>10</sup> A liberal Hindu tradition that accepts all major Hindu gods as forms of one Brahman; in contrast to Vaishnavism, Saivism, and Shaktism that revere Vishnu, Siva, and Shakti as their supreme beings respectively.
- <sup>11</sup> Adi Shankara, a Brahmin and a philosopher, lived from 788 to 820 CE and gave a new liberal denomination to Hinduism in the form of Smartism. He campaigned through India to consolidate Hindu faiths and unified the worship of five ancient Hindu deities.
- <sup>12</sup> The seven divine mothers representing the energies including Chamundi, Mahesvari, Vaishnavi, Brahmani, Kaumari, Indrani, and Varahi. According to legendary stories, these matrikas were created to help Siva in his fight against a demon, Andhakasura.
- <sup>13</sup> Is a pattern of positioning statues of four deities around *Siva-lingam*, which include Ganesh, Vishnu, Sun, and Parvati in accordance with the beliefs of the Smartha sect.
- <sup>14</sup> Also known as Kartikeye, one of the sons of Siva and Parvati, popular among the Tamil Hindus as Murugan.
- <sup>15</sup> The female deity believed to have the power to cure illness. She is also known as Siva Sakti.
- <sup>16</sup> An incarnation of Siva in the form of a guru with all the knowledge. It means one who faces in the southern direction. The southern direction is seen as a direction of death (change). Thus, in any Siva temple the image of Dakshinamurti faces the south.
- <sup>17</sup> Means Mother Mari, a South Indian Hindu goddess of rain closely associated with Parvati, Durga and Shitala Devi.
- <sup>18</sup> Minakshi is a female deity of Madurai and an avatar of Parvati.
- <sup>19</sup> A house estate company
- <sup>20</sup> A term used by Asian scholars of religions to refer to the fusion of differing systems of beliefs resulting from heterogeneity. See Kitiasara, P (2005)
- <sup>21</sup> Also known as Kajorn Nagadevin, Chairman and founder of the Ganesh Foundation in Bangkok. He is a Brahmin of the Bureau of the Royal Household. He was interviewed on 18 May 2012 at the Ganesh foundation.
- <sup>22</sup> An extremely popular talisman amulet in Thailand believed to have special magical powers providing protection.
- <sup>23</sup> Shloka means 'song' from the root meaning. Hindu prayers dedicated to different gods, expressing intense devotion and faith to particular gods.
- <sup>24</sup> Thai devotees in Hinduism see the worship of fire as Homa ritual (offering things to gods in front of fire) and Aarti is seen as part of the ritual. It is Hindu religious ritual where light from oil lamp soaked in clarified butter is offered to the deities.
- <sup>25</sup> The shrine coined this term, adopted from Sanskrit, to refer to monthly worship of Siva; *Mas* refers to *month*.
- <sup>26</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> month of the traditional Hindu calendar followed in north India; generally falls in February and March.
- <sup>27</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> among the 32 different forms of Ganesh, also seen as the protector of the weak. In this form, Ganesh appears with five heads and ten hands and the worship of this form is believed to bring confidence to the weak, overcome fears, and knowledge to accomplish tasks.
- <sup>28</sup> A mark of auspiciousness placed on the forehead. It can be made of sandal paste, sacred ashes, or kumkum (red turmeric) and is generally marked by the Brahmin as a blessing.
- <sup>29</sup> Singing of songs in praise of the deity while the lamps are being offered.
- <sup>30</sup> Traditional Indian dress for females.
- <sup>31</sup> A Thai ritual in which students pay respects to their teachers in order to express their gratitude and formalize the relationship of student and teacher.
- <sup>32</sup> A mantra chanted to worship and praise gods after an evening aarti at Dev Mandir. It was later translated into Thai for Thai devotees.
- <sup>33</sup> Little Indian market in Bangkok selling religious goods and grocery brought from India.
- <sup>34</sup> Mantras used in Soha Aarti are often short ones such as the Gayatri Mantra and the Bija Mantra. Those interested in Hinduism are familiar with these mantras, as they are readily available on CDs and can be accessed through the Internet.
- <sup>35</sup> This assumption is made from the unofficial interviews with participants and devotees attending religious rituals at the shrine. This also includes people living nearby the shrine and regular visitors from 2004 to 2012.
- <sup>36</sup> Siva is connected to the belief in astrology. For example, the year of Ox was considered a year of Siva. In this way, the worship of Siva in the year of Ox would likely result in a particular fortune.