

## Prayer and profit

# India's startups pray for a Hindu super-app

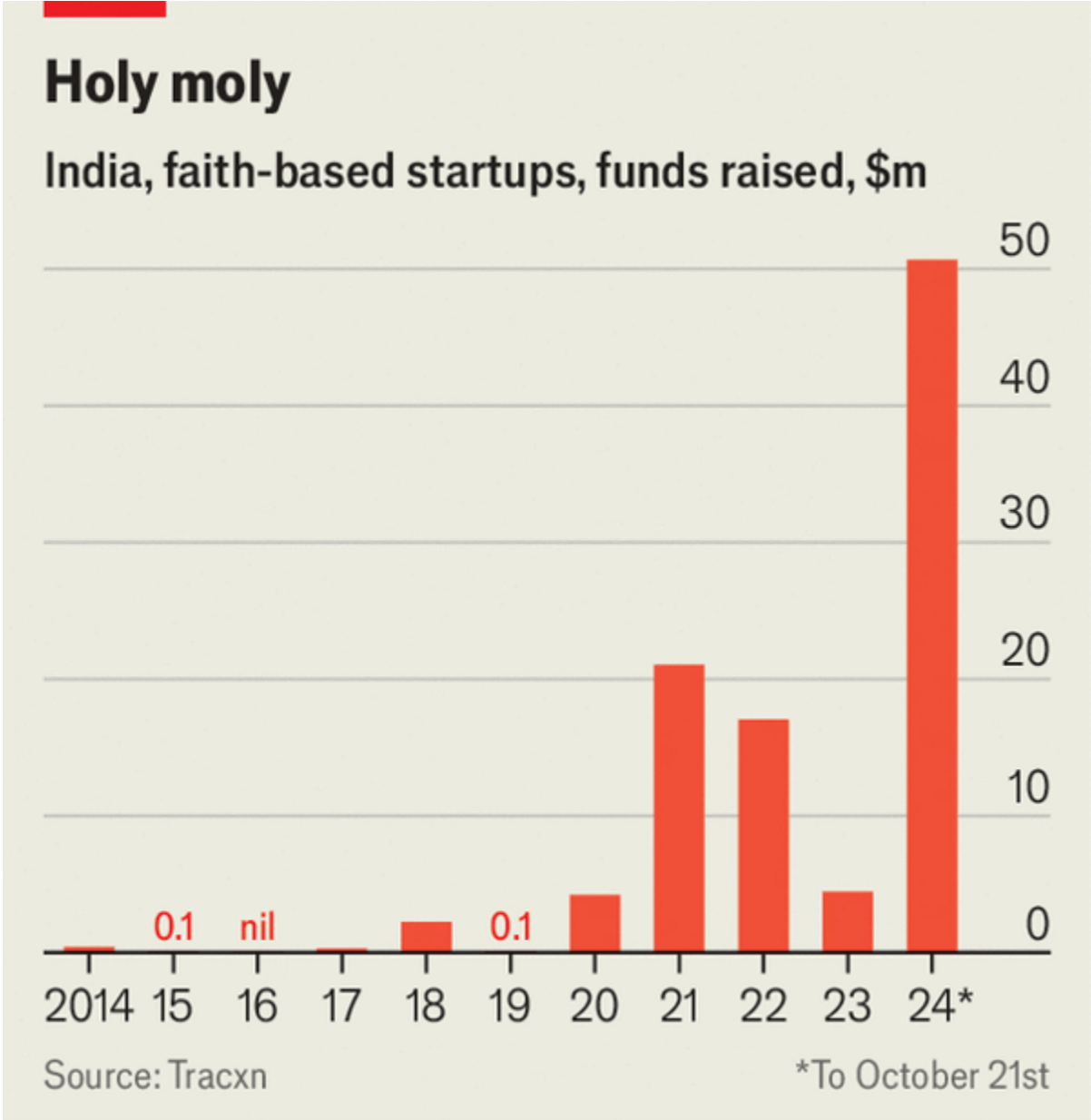
*The business of God could yet create an Indian unicorn*

10月 31, 2024 11:36 上午 | CHENNAI



THE TRADITIONAL start to Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights that falls on October 31st this year, is a *puja* (ceremony of worship) either at home or at a temple. Technology has ushered in a third way: through the phone. The Sri Mandir app offers the devotee sitting anywhere in India or outside it a virtual *puja* at an auspicious temple for 891 rupees (\$11). On VAMA, another such service, 101 rupees allows them to light a lamp remotely in the holy city of Ayodhya. In addition to receiving divine goodwill, customers get a video to enable repeated viewing and, of course, sharing.

These apps are part of a wave of startups seeking to bring Hinduism closer to 1bn believers in India (and around 100m outside). According to Tracxn, a data provider, there are nearly 1,000 faith-based Indian startups. Collectively, they have raised \$51m so far this year, up from \$5m in 2023. They offer more than remote access to religious services. Customers can also conduct *pujas* on their phones. At a click, an on-screen deity is showered with flowers to the score of devotional music. Astrological services, such as personal horoscopes, are also popular.



The Economist

The emergence of such services is a result of the rapid proliferation of smartphones in India. The potential for growth is enormous, says Manu Jain, the co-founder of VAMA. He points to super-apps, such as YouVersion Bible and Muslim Pro, that serve hundreds of millions of Christians and Muslims around the world. Hindu startups have a long way to go to reach that scale. But unlike those monotheistic faiths, Hinduism's pantheon of gods allows businesses to roll out more services, says Mr Jain. Offerings can vary by temple but also by god.

Underpinning the business model is India's deep and evolving religiosity. In 2023 around 80% of Indians said they consider religion to be an important part of their daily life, according to a survey by Gallup, a pollster. The global figure is 63%. Such faith has always been a defining feature of Indian society, but in recent years it has also become a more conspicuous one. That is partly because of economic growth, which has given Indians more spending power. Where Indians would once purchase pictures for their household shrines, today they splurge on idols and jewellery, says Aniruddha Singhai, the co-founder of Divine Hindu, an e-commerce startup.

Another reason is cultural. Public displays of Hinduism are more common, whether by young men donning a *tilak* (sacred mark) on their foreheads or on car windows emblazoned with images of gods. The trend has been fuelled by India's elite, including cricketers, movie stars and business honchos, now flaunting their Hindu-ness more openly. Driving this cultural change is India's political leadership. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), from Narendra Modi, the prime minister, down to the field-level cadres, routinely extols the virtues of prayer.

The government is also supporting the business of religion directly. Shortly after winning power in 2014, the BJP launched the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive. Through that scheme and other initiatives, it has spent more than \$120m on building religious infrastructure. Most notably, this year Mr Modi consecrated the Ram Mandir, a grand temple in the northern city of Ayodhya. The controversial temple, which was built on the site of a razed mosque, is expected to attract 50m visitors annually. Meanwhile, religious tourism is booming: in 2023

pilgrimages accounted for 60% of India's domestic tourism. Spending on religious travel is expected to quadruple over the next decade.

The ultimate goal for firms like VAMA is to capture some of this market. For true believers, a visit to a real temple is still preferable. And the financial opportunity from the bricks-and-mortar temple economy far exceeds the app-based equivalent. Devotees visiting Tirupati, a historic temple in southern India, drop roughly 16bn rupees every year into its donation boxes. Thanks to such spending, India's religious market is estimated to be worth \$60bn annually (the equivalent of 1.7% of GDP), according to IMARC, a market-research firm. That figure is expected to more than double by 2032. Today's startups may see their faith richly rewarded. ■

*Stay on top of our India coverage by [signing up to Essential India](#), our free weekly newsletter.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/10/31/indias-startups-pray-for-a-hindu-super-app>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |