CHAPTER 6

Listening to Vrindavan: Chanting and Musical Experience as Embodying a Devotional Soundscape

INTRODUCTION: HEARING THE PLACE

After the intense summer and monsoon, from October all the way through February villagers all over rural Bengal attend devotional musical sessions (kirtans) organized by Vaishnavas. Kirtan singers are invited to temples, devotees’ homes, and village street corners, to do kirtan continuously for 24, 72, or 96 hours, or a week or a fortnight. These collective occasions are of two types: nam-kirtan, when musician groups sing Radha-Krishna’s names in different melodies following the repeated chanting cycle of sixteen names (mahamanstralsholo nam), Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare; and lila-kirtan, when musician groups describe the deities’ divine activities and love-play in celestial Vrindavan by singing songs composed by medieval Vaishnava practitioners who were also poets, and who are highly revered by Bengal-Vaishnavas.

One of the evocative memories from my fieldwork is of a typical week-long nam-kirtan session organized in Navadvip’s Radharani temple in November 2009. Situated in a bustling area of the town, the temple was built in memory of Radharani, disciple of a babaji and a famous woman kirtan singer of Navadvip. Kirtans are organized on large scales by temple authorities and attract large numbers of devotees.

Parts of this chapter appear as an essay in an edited volume (Sarbadhikary 2015).
Groups were appointed to do nam-kirtan for three hours each, in rotation, for seven days and nights. All over the temple’s broad courtyard mattresses had been laid where hundreds of men and women of all ages sat huddled together encircling and listening intently to the musicians who stood in the center singing the deities’ names. The particular kirtan group I describe here was a male one, although women groups are also common. Kirtan-singers in Bengal are mostly from humble backgrounds, although since kirtan is immensely popular in rural Bengal, professional singers are able to ensure more or less comfortable lives. The singers wore tilaks and basil-seed necklaces like Vaishnavas, and an old woman went around putting sandalwood-paste tilaks on all the devotee-listeners’ foreheads, sandalwood being considered Krishna’s favorite. The main singer sang the sixteen names in different melodies and a couple of other singers followed. The tunes were mostly sad, and while singing, the singers and some members of the audience wept. The singers sang in a very high register, generating a sense of urgency among devotees, and they listened intently. Gradually, the rhythm played by two chief musicians on the main kirtan instruments, khol (barrel-drum) and kartal (cymbals), escalated. As the music became faster and the rhythm reached its crescendo, all the musicians, their instruments hanging from slings on their bodies, began jumping up and down with their hands stretched upwards as a mark of submission to the Vrindavan deities, just as Chaitanya is described in his biographies doing kirtan with other devotees. The singer then shouted the line: “Where there is nam-sankirtan [collective naming], there is Vrindavan,” and listeners ran to hug each other, irrespective of familiarity and gender, and others cried bitterly and rolled on the ground. Like them, I felt the most ecstatic exhaustion at this stage, after the sheer repetition of divine names continuously, and while they sobbed, I enjoyed the auditory pleasures. The musicians continued singing and sobbing before the hanging mikes such that the sounds of their collective ecstasy reached others in Navadvip, who came and joined in increasing numbers throughout the week.

The interacting triad of place, affect, and sanctity acquire yet other very distinctive dimensions in Vaishnavas’ experiences of music. Irrespective of their differences, all Vaishnavas agree that every site of utterance of deities’ names or lilas is gupta (veiled) Vrindavan, which manifests the transcendental place to devotees through cultivated, attentive listening. Vaishnavas philosophically borrow from the predominant Hindu understanding that the name and named are indistinguishable, or that uttering the name makes the named apparent. Thus,
in the Vaishnava context, every musical speech-act is considered a performative utterance which makes Radha-Krishna and their location in the sacred place apparent. Holdrege (2009, 4) describes this as a “multileveled ontology”: the deities’ presence in eternal Vrindavan, and their simultaneous “descent” to the utterance site.

To explain this to me, all devotees cited a couplet where Krishna assures us, “I am neither in any distant abode, nor in yogis’ hearts. I am manifest in any site where my devotees sing [my name or doings].” Another couplet sung during kirtans says, “Wherever there is kirtan, there is Vrindavan, and the endless flow of pleasure.” Another similar Bengali proverb says, “Vrindavan’s love-wealth [prem-dhan] is deities’ names.”

Music is therefore one of the key means by which the critical act of Vaishnavite place-making occurs. Stage by stage, through every chapter, this book explores complex ways of apprehending, producing, and relating to Vrindavan, and simultaneous ways of cultivating religious subjectivities which are represented and understood as mystically translocating oneself to Vrindavan. All Bengal-Vaishnavas consider the practice of kirtan to be a most significant means of emplacing oneself in or experiencing Vrindavan, although they sense this interface of music and place in a range of different ways. These different ways of experiencing music and place have overlaps with the dimensions of place-experience discussed in previous chapters, including how chanting and music can make ISKCON devotees productive in their devotional services, and the close intertwining of the way the body’s sexual responses can be cultivated and perceived in relation to the way the rhythmic sounding of voice and instrumental sound can be tuned by both performers and audiences among other Vaishnavas. In fact, to a large extent, I analyze sound issues as dimensions of Vaishnava life where the sexual-arousal and spiritual-ecstasy sides of achieving Vrindavan attain particularly rich and empowering levels of significance for devotees. Thus, chanting and music involve a lot more than the auditory sense; they involve the entire body, its sensory experiences and affective responses. So, when devotees say that Vrindavan “manifests” (prakat hoy) before them during kirtan, they mean that a sense of place is strongly engendered by their musical experiences which they conceptualize as most real, since it impacts their entire devotional bodies and sensibilities. This sense of reality of the place is achieved in different ways: through singers’ describing in detail every element of Vrindavan’s natural scenic beauty and the deities’ erotic passions, and explaining the sense of presentness engendered therein by singing the line, “Wherever there is kirtan there is
Vrindavan”; or through the rhythmic structures of music which impact the body’s immediate sexual/orgasmic sensations, sensations which give devotees the sense of ultimate bliss that Radha-Krishna experience in Vrindavan. So this chapter rounds off the discussions of place, affect, and devotion, and adds new dimensions to the arguments of preceding chapters.

My most intense ethnographic absorption in the devotional world of Bengal-Vaishnavism was through the ecstatic chanting and musical acousteme that characterizes its central aesthetic. I realized that kirtan is absolutely essential to the lives of all Vaishnavas living in Navadvip and Mayapur, although they conceptualize and experience it in different ways. I learned about kirtan’s nuances both through my own listening experiences and through discussions with goswamis, babajis, and ISKCON devotees, all of whom chant regularly, and with professional musicians, who are often but not always Vaishnava practitioners.

When the chant of sixteen names is sung in groups it is known as nam-kirtan, and when muttered and iterated to oneself either aloud (upanghsu) or as silent meditation, hearing the sounds in the mind’s ear (manas-jap), it is known as japa. Narrative forms of kirtan consist of remembering deities’ lilas through reading out loud from Vaishnava texts like the Bhagavatam and Gita by practitioners (path), and singing of their love-acts by trained singers (lila-kirtan) to devotee-congregations. These different kinds of kirtan dominate devotees’ regular lives in Navadvip and Mayapur.

Chanting is the most important element of vaidhi bhakti, and thus it is mandatory for Vaishnavas to chant the sixteen names (the Hare Krishna cycle) daily. All Vaishnavas possess jap-malas, or basil-seed necklaces with 108 beads, to keep count of the chanting when doing japa individually. The sixteen names are chanted for each bead, and one round of the necklace, or 1,728 names, constitutes one chanting round. ISKCON is the strictest about chanting, instructing its devotees to chant a minimum of sixteen rounds, which normally takes two hours. Other Vaishnavas are relatively flexible and chant as many rounds as possible, and increase the number of rounds or times they chant, with increasing attraction for the divine names. Thus, my babaji friend, Shyamchand, chanted continuously for five hours first thing in the morning. He told me, “Uttering deities’ names is addictive, since names and the named are same; naming them is feeling them. I began chanting as discipline, but got captivated in passions, for the auditory space between the tongue, throat, ears, and heart sounds Vrindavan’s love when naming.”
Devotees agree that the syllables of the divine names have innate ritual efficacy. They say that beginning to chant is the way to awaken one’s spiritual self in tune with universal auditory vibrations. Just as a sleeping person awakes with sound, transcendental sound, they say, awakens their selves in Vrindavan. This is therefore a claim about the utterance of deities’ names themselves being the source of the utmost efficacious power which manifests Vrindavan for devotees. Many devotees explained this to me by saying that unlike the utterance of ordinary words, for instance “water,” which obviously does not make water present before the person, just uttering Radha-Krishna’s names makes their entire locational entourage, that is, Vrindavan, manifest.

ISKCON devotees argue that since chant-sounds have intrinsic sacrality, one need not and must not employ one's individual imagination in thinking of possible meanings of chanting; and that chanting has “scientific” effects which automatically make them productive in their devotional services toward Mayapur.

The mainstream opinion among Vaishnavas is that the different names in the chant are vocatives referring to Vishnu’s forms. But some Vaishnavas provided meanings and interpretations which introduce Radha-Krishna’s love-play in the chant. So for example they said that Hare (one who steals the heart) is Krishna’s call to Radha, and Krishna (all-attractor) and Rama (pleasure-giver) are uttered in reciprocation by her. The auditory universe is thus imagined as a perpetual chant constituted by cries of separation and union between Radha-Krishna in Vrindavan, and they say that the divine sounds of deities’ names which their mouths produce resonate in ways that synchronize with these cosmic forces. Thus, they seek eventual subservience to the names such that the ideal state is to habitually chant all the time, either consciously, or unconsciously under the breath.

Apart from individual devotees’ daily japa regimens, Nadia’s sacred soundscape becomes sensually imposing during different time-periods, especially dusk, when all the temples echo with the sounds of heavy drum-cymbal and ecstatic collective nam-kirtan. Devotees congregate after their day’s work and along with temple residents repeat the sung sequences of the mahamantra amid loud conch-shell sounds; they sway their bodies, clap, and jump to escalating rhythms, while priests do evening-aratis. Then, following readings from the Bhagavatam or Gita by goswamis, babajis, and ISKCON devotees, there are the last temple-aratis. When strolling through Navadvip’s alleys in the evening, one can also sometimes hear people practicing lila-kirtan songs or the khol.
ISKCON devotees focus only on chanting, individually or collectively. They do not listen to *lila-kirtan*, the songs with intricate descriptions of the deity-couple’s passionate activities, which they consider inappropriate and cheap entertainment for the uneducated masses. However, the vast majority of Bengali villagers and people from small towns and urban outskirts derive the utmost delight from attending *lila-kirtan* sessions (Sil 2009, 89–91). In rural Bengal no Vaishnava festival is celebrated without appropriate *lilas* sung by trained singers. *Lila-kirtan’s* popularity has been further facilitated since singers now record their songs, and their CDs and cassettes are widely circulated. In Navadvip’s busy pilgrimage areas, the monthly sale of over 2,000 CDs in shops is not uncommon.

This most popular musical form describes in detail Vrindavan’s beautiful scenery and seasons, and Radha-Krishna’s various activities, love-moods, secret trysts, and erotic acts, normally in three-hour sessions. Thus, devotees say that like *nam-kirtan*, *lila-kirtan* also makes celestial Vrindavan apparent in the musical site.

*Lila-kirtan* traditions have been an integral part of Bengali culture ever since the spread of Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism, especially since the late sixteenth century, when Vaishnava poets composed sophisticated poetry describing Chaitanya’s and Radha-Krishna’s *lilas* on a large scale. *Kirtan*-singers say that over 12,000 poems were composed by Vaishnava poets over three or four centuries, of which around 6,000 have been published and 1,000 are sung. Kirtan gurus teach these songs, and particular guru-lineages specialize in singing particular *lilas*.

Some of Navadvip’s musicians have been involved in *lila-kirtan’s* rich performative tradition over two or more generations. While *nam-kirtan* mostly involves simple tunes which ordinary devotee-listeners can repeat after professional singers, *lila-kirtan* is a most sophisticated art form, with complex rhythmic structures and tunes, and erudite lyrics. Thus, only expert singers who have apt training from *kirtan* gurus can perform *lila-kirtan*. While most of my performer friends were not highly educated, their rigorous musical training ensured that they understood *kirtan’s* lyrics and their intricate philosophical underpinnings.

Musicians spend a lifetime cultivating musical skills and are therefore rarely devotional gurus. Most of my musician friends identified themselves as Vaishnava devotees but were not devotional gurus like *goswamis* or *babajis*. However, those who are especially good singers or drummers become *kirtan* gurus later in their lives.
However, many devotional gurus like goswamis, babajis, and some sahajiyas specialize in *path* (reading and explaining from sacred texts), which, like *nam-kirtan*, does not require as much expertise as *lila-kirtan*. *Kirtan* singing and *path* in contemporary Bengal are also lucrative career options. Audiences pay respect by giving voluntary sums of money to singers and readers. While many musicians are from relatively depressed backgrounds, these days those who are locally renowned are paid well for performing and for recording CDs. Trained musicians, and many goswami and babaji gurus who are good *pathaks* (readers), go on extensive tours, especially all over eastern India, Vrindavan, and Bangladesh.

What the different *kirtan* forms have in common is their capacity to manifest the sacred place, Vrindavan, to participant singers and listeners. My main concerns are to document different kinds of relationships between experiences of sacred sound or music and place-experience on one hand, and music and intense visceral pleasures on the other. I show that experiences of repetitive chanting, rhythm, and music serve different functions: from making ISKCON devotees productive in their devotional services, to helping other practitioners cultivate powerful passionate and erotic sacred sensibilities in relation to Vrindavan deities. These sexually constituted apprehensions of the divine range from being able to witness erotic *lilas* in the *manas* during individual *japa*, to feeling Vrindavan’s pleasures on the skin through collective repetitive chanting, ecstatic rhythms, and participation in detailed narrative descriptions of deities’ erotic *lilas*, to musicians cultivating what Hirschkind (2006, 78) calls the “entire body as an auditory instrument,” which experiences deep-grained musical arousal in attentive appreciation of the materiality of drum and cymbal sounds. Thus, I analyze affective experiences of music and sacred sound, especially how they apprehend the “aural eros” (Peraino 2003, 440) of the transcendental place.

Chanting and musical practices are also common among other Indian Vaishnavas, and indeed, among most religions, including the Islamic *dhikr* tradition, and my descriptions of musical emotions also hope to contribute to general understandings of the body’s experiences of sacred sound. However, while it is widely recognized that devotional music in general and *kirtan* in particular evoke powerful affective sentiments in listeners, what has not been documented enough, and what is distinctive about the Vaishnava experience of music, is its capacity to bring to life a real sense of place. Thus, I bring together dimensions of place, affect, and music, and instead of theorizing *about* sound and
music, I use my intense auditory memory of kirtan’s lyrics and rhythms, individual and collective chanting, and intricate drum-cymbal sounds to theorize through music.3

Classen (1997, 401) argues that the fundamental principle of the anthropology of the senses is that senses are both physical and cultural. I concur with him, and show that the various Vaishnava soundscapes, both external and internal to the body, are both culturally constructed and experienced at the most intensely visceral, affective levels. Music as discursively constructed is best exemplified by lila-kirtan. Devotee-audiences are able to appreciate the spiritual import of this musical form because through repeated listening they learn to understand the detailed lyrics describing the deities and their activities in Vrindavan. Also, musician-performers and listeners exhibit stereotypical physical stimuli and emotional reactions to nam-kirtan and lila-kirtan, like sobbing, jumping with outstretched hands, and clapping. And devotees associate their intense auditory pleasures with emplacement in Vrindavan, as part of the central Vaishnava discourse which describes Vrindavan as the transcendental space of ultimate bliss. But I show throughout that relations between sound and place, and sound and visceral pleasures, are also affectively experienced. I argue that sound also has innate properties which help one sense the place one is in, and characteristics which apprehend erotic sensibilities. I show for instance that aural repetitions in chanting and escalating rhythmic patterns and their climax have bodily effects on listeners which have semblances to the sexual act and orgasm. Sound, rhythm, and repetition also stimulate visceral affective responses of aural ecstasy and heightened eros, such as goose bumps, perspiration, stupor, and trembling.4 Thus, affective characteristics of sound and music, and Vaishnava discursive understandings, together constitute ways in which devotees experience music as transporting them to the sensuous place, Vrindavan.

In theorizing the relation between sound and place, I am influenced by Rodaway’s (1994, 4) use of the terms “perception geography,” “intimate geography,” and “sensuous geography,” which introduce new dimensions in thinking about “senses both as a relationship to a world and the senses as in themselves a kind of structuring of space and defining a place.” I also borrow from Feld (1996, 94), who argues that to overcome the dominance of visualism in studies of place one should acknowledge the auditory and multisensory dimension of place-experiences.
Studies of sound locate an undeniable silhouette of presence that the auditory sense provides, its capacity to evoke nowness, a sense of being-in-place. This is especially explained through sound’s “tautological accusative” nature: that is, it can have a common source and recipient. Our own sounds return to us, and we can hear ourselves speaking, singing, whispering, and so on (Margolis 1960, 82–7). This enveloping characteristic of audition gives us the rounded sense of being emplaced as sounding subjects (sources) and objects (recipients), and “the hearer or the listener (the sentient) is at the center of the soundscape” (Rodaway 1994, 85). In the Vaishnava context this translates as the utterer/listener’s experience of being emplaced in Krishna’s dham through concentrated utterance of his names and lilas.

Sound also has the ability to impact interiorized experiences. Many Vaishnavas assert that attentive listening sensitizes the inner sensory substrate toward sublime, erotic realizations. Thus I agree with Ingold (2000, 155–56, 268) that sounds may be felt by the hearer’s external sense, as well as body-interiors. Phenomenological studies have generally argued that sound is the most insistent sense, invading our interiors even while we are asleep (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 468). Because of this penetrative effect, sound is also characterized as the most emotional sense (Gell 1995, 235; Rodaway 1994, 95).

My reflections on Vaishnava musical practices demanded sensitive autoethnography, or lending an intensely attuned ear to Vaishnava sound-worlds. In comparison with other chapters, therefore, my reflections on music are more participatory, and my analyses in many cases bear similarities with phenomenology-inspired works on sound and music.

While anthropological discourses primarily foreground the “observed,” I argue that methodological debates should have iconic resemblances with the object being studied (Gell 1995). So I speak through participant-hearing and the “metaphoric language of the ear” (Ihde 1976, 109). Lambek (1998) argues that both contemplation (theoria) and doing (praxis) involve intellectual capacities. I extend the proposition to argue that a feeling subject may be equally involved in contemplation. As Marsden (2005, 137) reminds us, “Listening to music requires . . . a subtle combination of thoughtful reflections and honed sensory capacities.”

In writing about music and translating sound and the bodily reactions it generates into words, a tension arises about whether it is possible to narrativize others’ experiences. This doubt is somewhat resolved
through a sense-able process of sympathy, of feeling along with others (Leavitt 1996, 530). If an anthropological study of others helps understand the self, then an attentive disposition to one’s own body also helps understand others’ affective temperaments (Mitchell 1997, 79). Wikan’s (1992, 471, cited in Svasek 2005, 16) musical metaphor of “resonance,” or using one’s own experiences to understand another’s, is thus apt in this case.

I have been trained in Indian classical music since early childhood, and my music and rhythm training helped immensely in merging with the community acousteme. I honed my auditory sensibilities further to appreciate the specialized Vaishnava aesthetics. Early in my fieldwork I learned how to chant aloud with the jap-mala, and gradually even tried to chant in my mind whenever I had free time. Even though I started chanting aloud, I would get exhausted after some time and automatically start repeating the names in my mind’s ear. Every time differential interpretations were offered by devotees about their chanting experiences, I comprehended them through my own repeated naming. I became almost addicted to attending collective nam-kirtan and lila-kirtan gatherings. Since kirtan is largely a rural listening practice, I bought large numbers of CDs from Navadvip, Mayapur, and the railway platforms of local trains connecting Bengal’s towns and villages. The active culture of kirtan listening ensured that I was always surrounded by interested fellow purchasers eager to comment and advise as I made my selections. Many texts containing kirtans dating back to the seventeenth century were also helpful.

Along with conceptualizing kirtan through my own listening experiences, I had practitioner friends who discussed their chanting experiences, and trained musician friends who taught me nuances of lila-kirtan and drum-cymbal sounds. While most of these musicians live in Navadvip, I also befriended others living in other Bengali towns, who my friends recommended as most knowledgeable and skilled.

I had intimate experiences with people who sang to me and to whom I sang. Once, an elderly goswami reminisced that in his childhood there were kirtan singers who could evoke the most powerful sentiments in listeners. Hearing that I could sing, he asked me to sing a song. I sang a composition by Tagore which says, “O hear those sweet flute sounds as the smell of his flower-necklace fuses with the melody . . . The ripple-music of Yamuna fills my ears and eyes, O look how the honey-moon smiles at him.” He gazed at me tearfully and gasped, “Will I ever be able to hear those sounds?”
CHANTING, DISCIPLINE, AND PRODUCTIVITY IN ISKCON

ISKCON’s CEO offered this summary of ISKCON devotees’ spiritual yearning: “Prabhupada taught us that our goal is to live in Mayapur and chant Hare Krishna twenty-four hours a day.” One evening I went on a boat ride with ISKCON devotees around places close to Mayapur, organized by ISKCON’s tourism department. It was during the monsoon season and suddenly there was a storm on the river. The water level kept rising, and the boat was almost sinking. I was taken completely by shock. But, to my surprise, a senior devotee maintained his nerves and told others calmly, “Please continue chanting, as that can be the only savior. If not, we are at least sure to reach Krishna’s abode!” He then began singing Radha-Krishna’s names, and others followed, and we all waited desperately for the storm to subside.

Chanting the deities’ names is the central element of ISKCON devotees’ lives. Also, rickshaw-pullers, shopkeepers, small children—everyone in Mayapur greets each other and strangers with a smiling “Hare Krishna!” It has become a surrogate term for “hello,” “sorry,” “thank you,” and “excuse me,” or just to get someone’s attention. As part of their usual dress, devotees carry *jap-malas* in cloth bags, and they chant whenever they have time.

I argue that chanting constitutes ISKCON’s devotional crux since it facilitates the institution’s main aims: to develop devotees’ discipline and productivity in rendering devotional services toward the physical place, and to preach to as many people as possible. With the dominance of chanting in ISKCON devotees’ lives, people commonly refer to them as Hare Krishnas, and the institution as the *sankirtan* (collective singing) movement.

While preaching, ISKCON devotees ask people to begin practicing a single chanting round and gradually increase the number. Only after one habituates to sixteen rounds is one given the first initiation, *harinam-diksha* (initiation into chanting). Since initially there may be mental distractions while chanting, preachers also circulate books explaining the proper chanting techniques, which help focus the mind (see Dasa 2009; Rosen 2008).

ISKCON devotees assert that one must not employ intellectual means when chanting. This means they don’t “think” of possible meanings of chanting as it might derail them from the independent, scientific effects of transcendental sounds, since *kirtan’s* command “is embedded in the actual
sound and not the referenced meaning of the text” (Slawek 1988, 84). Swami, the guru, said, “Sound is scientific. Thinking of sound only means imagination. Esoteric meanings and all—these things are propagated by babajis.” This assertion, I argue, also addresses ISKCON’s preaching philosophy of spreading Krishna Consciousness internationally. The chant itself is convenient, easy to memorize, and since uttering it does not require further understanding, its spirit is essentially democratic: anyone willing to simply hear himself chanting is an appropriate ISKCON devotee.

Devotees attend the first temple-arati at four-thirty a.m., chanting by muttering the deities’ names and keeping count on their jap-malas along the way from their houses to the Chandrodaya Temple. After arati, they chant sixteen rounds for a couple of hours in the temple. Some sit facing Radha-Krishna’s idols, some Chaitanya’s, some Prabhupad’s. Chanting while staring at the life-size idols keeps their minds focused on the divine sounds, they say. Some choose solitary corners and chant with eyes shut. Devotees said, and I myself found, that silent chanting in the mind is the most difficult since other thoughts automatically creep in. Thus, ISKCON instructs devotees to discipline their minds, chant aloud, and concentrate on the sound. While in the temple and public places, however, they chant only loud enough to hear themselves and not disturb others. The practiced discipline then makes them ready for their day’s services.

Those who cannot complete sixteen rounds in the morning chant whenever they have time. Thus, it is common to overhear loud chanting from devotees’ rooms, or to see devotees going on what they call japa-walks, and those with earphones constantly murmuring to themselves while occupied in other jobs. Swami often undertook international trips for preaching purposes. He said, “When travelling, we carry clickers which keep chanting counts for us.” The clickers are a “portable, self-administered technology of moral health,” “adapted to the rhythms, movements . . . characteristic of contemporary forms of work” (Hirschkind 2006, 73).

The chant’s sonic phenomenology of constant repetition, habit, rhythm, or routine has the effect of making one patterned and subservient toward the work/service at hand. Subservience extends from the chanting body to the productive working/serving body, since service itself is devotion, in ISKCON’s understanding.

Repeated chanting as augmenting discipline and focus is identifiable in ISKCON offices, where devotees often play electric chant-boxes in the
background. Recorded chants are perfectly repetitive, with a monotono-
us voice (often Prabhupad’s) chanting aloud the Hare Krishna man-
tra continuously. For a sustained period I played the chant-box as I read
in the evenings, to comprehend its phenomenology.

The rhythmic interval of sound first generates a nervous energy of
anticipation. In a while, through habit, the mind becomes calmer, and
one begins to expect the repetition. The sounds are comforting, as one
does not feel alone and thus does not require breaks from the lonely
work. It keeps one firmly in place. As Attali (1985, 3) observes, in the
modern world, “background noises” give people a sense of security;
Helmreich (2007, 624) says they create “reassuring soundscapes.”
Habituated sounds, clicking like the regular beats of assembly-line pro-
duction, engender the determination to finish the task at hand, since
routine work is then in rhythm with repetitive sonic intervals. Chant-
boxes thus work as background reminders for foreground services.
Listening to chant, in other words, makes devotees productive in their
devotional services. ISKCON’s celebrity devotee, the former Beatle,
George Harrison, said, “Chanting doesn’t stop you from being creative
or productive. It actually helps you concentrate. I think this would make
a great sketch for television: imagine all workers on the Ford assembly
line in Detroit, all of them chanting Hare Krsna Hare Krsna while bolt-
ing on the wheels” (Prabhupad 1987, 11).

The auditory cultures which bind Mayapur’s devotee-community
include both chanting and music. ISKCON is particular about disal-
lowing songs which describe the deities’ passionate activities. These
unseemly songs, they say, detract from devotion’s disciplinary focus.
Thus, they produce their own CDs containing kirtans written by their
gurus and selected ones of older Vaishnava poets. All devotees possess
these CDs and know the songs by heart. Devotees who wish to learn
music in the Bhaktivedanta Music School, within Mayapur’s ISKCON
compound, are also taught only the songs compiled in a special book
by ISKCON gurus.

During the morning-arati in the temple at four-thirty a.m. devotees
sing prescribed kirtans together to wake the deities from sleep. Men
and women are cordoned separately. The temple lights are not put on,
and the devotees sing soft melodies in the faint light of dawn. Then
they begin unified musical chanting, and in the midst of ecstatic ulu-
lation and arati, the deities’ day in Vrindavan begins. Similarly, after
a three-hour session of bhajan (devotional songs) by trained devotees
in the temple every afternoon, at four p.m. a small group goes around
Mayapur and nearby villages singing Hare Krishna on catchy tunes, accompanied by a small synthesizer-like instrument known as a casio. All along their route, ordinary people, grooved into the foot-tapping melodies, join in. The otherwise quiet village then resonates with Hare Krishna from every corner. The main singer explained, “Music is the best way to bind people. It’s the best way to preach.”

The arati at six-thirty P.M. draws the largest numbers. It is famous for devotees’ ecstatic dancing, and that itself becomes as much a spectacle for pilgrims as the deities’ spectacular idols. A group of singers stand behind the crowd and chant to the music using microphones. Like the names, the tunes and rhythms are simple, and everyone joins in. ISKCON devotees dance to the tunes with coordinated steps. As the rhythm escalates they jump rigorously with raised hands, sometimes even “headbanging.” Ordinary people watch them with the greatest amazement and spontaneously emulate their devotional dancing patterns. Cooke’s (2009, 189–210) informants summarized kirtan’s popularity by saying that it is a participatory kind of “rock-n-roll” “mood music.”

Thus, ISKCON’s chanting and musical practices have the capacity to orient devotees toward the place they are in, to serve it with utmost productivity and to preach across larger religious topographies.

CHANTING AND REMEMBERING LILAS AMONG GOSWAMIS AND BABAJIS

Navadvip’s goswamis and babajis embody effects of repetitive chanting which are distinct from ISKCON’s focus on chanting as facilitating productivity and preaching. While ISKCON prefers loud chanting, which they say has sonic-spiritual effects on the body, goswamis and babajis also practice manas-jap (silent chanting in the heart-mind), as names and deities are then integrated into their affective breathing interiors. This is suitable for solitary spiritual practice and concentrating on remembering Radha-Krishna’s passionate lilas in Vrindavan, and serving as handmaiden for the deities’ erotic encounters in imagination.

Famous Vaishnavas are remembered as those who chanted all the time, and spoke little. The most famous example is a Sufi who practiced during Chaitanya’s time, Haridas, who took up Vaishnavism and chanted 300,000 times a day. He is considered the paragon of chanting. Similarly, Navadvip’s Tinkori Goswami (twentieth century) is remembered as having spoken only twice a day, chanting constantly from
three a.m. to midday and always engrossed in imagining Vrindavan. The ontology of not talking is therefore deeply associated with continuous chanting and lila-remembering. Solitary chanting in the mind-heart facilitates inner sound’s rounded journey from and to the self, and the emplacing qualities of sound then manifest Vrindavan to the chanter/listener in the mind-heart. While the mouth remains silent, the mind-heart hears the inner voice chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” continuously. In the Islamic context, too, the heart’s dhikr is considered superior to tongue’s dhikr (Hatley 2007, 357). Lyons (2006) writes similarly about the biblical “murmur” that sounds become indistinguishable from breath due to the phenomenology of repetition. The murmur is the in-between of speech and silence, speaking and reflection, and therefore the best means of mind-body dissolution.

Silent chanting is much more difficult than loud chanting or even whispering the deities’ names to oneself, since the mind is more prone to distractions when sounds are interiorized. I practiced manas-jap intensively to make sense of it. If done with open eyes, concentration is even more difficult, since external sights disturb the process. But on days when I can concentrate attentively on the meditative inner sounds with eyes shut, my body becomes relaxed, my breathing slows, and my senses turn inward toward the repeated names. For some time, even if only for five minutes, I become oblivious to what is happening around me in the external world. Practitioners with regular intensive spiritual practice claim to experience such states for much longer periods.

Concentrated inner hearing often affects the external body, and practitioners may go into fits. A renowned goswami is said to have experienced the “heat of names” so much that he felt his limbs burning (McDaniel 1995, 45).

Some devotees, unabashed, chant continuously as mouth-muttering. A goswami’s wife explained candidly, “The tongue’s service is continuous chanting, and through its increased attraction toward Krishna’s name, which is Krishna himself, it tastes Krishna’s lower lip, the source of greatest nectar-bliss.”

This flesh-depth aspect of dedicating every breath to chanting is related to devotees’ cultivation of subservience to the deity-couple. As Cataldi (1993, 105–06) argues, “the Flesh ontology generally places much more philosophical stock in ‘the passivity of our activity’ . . . . Being speaks through us—it is not we who speak of Being.”

I learned the most about solitary chanting experiences from Giridhari. Disciple of a Vrindavan babaji, he had been in Vrindavan for a long
time earlier. A serious, middle-aged man, Giridhari did not have children. His wife told me that he did not have much interest in worldly affairs, and for a long time in the day, would sit before his altar-deities, chanting. He would instruct her that no one should disturb him during this time. Giridhari was also a diligent practitioner of manjari sadhana. When conversing with him it was uncomfortable to see Giridhari speak, but not listen, for he chanted continuously while I spoke. His mouth moved, but the chant was silent. I expressed my discomfort, and he smiled and explained, “My full concentration lies with you. It is like breathing. Do I stop anything while I breathe? Rather, if I stop breathing, I won’t be able to do anything. I can hear chant [nam] resounding from my heartbeat, non-stop.”

This state of bodily subservience to the agency of names comes after practiced repetition. Repetition generates further attraction toward the habit. Names are repeated “till they become a part of the utterer’s inner constitution” (Wolf 2006, 251; see also Deleuze 1994, 5). Repetition unclutters external distractions. Its vibrational groove induces meditative concentration (see also Morse 1990; Willis 1979, 96), creating the sedate trance-effect of a lullaby which facilitates dream-like imagination of Vrindavan.

Giridhari explained: “First I dominate the names—I fix them to rounds. Then divine taste bursts in the mouth and I do it no more for discipline but love. Then the names control. . . . I sing, dance, trance—without control and with love.” Stewart (2005, 259), borrowing from Bourdieu, characterizes Vaishnavas’ shift from discipline to passion as a journey from the “conscious” to the “operational” level of habitus.

Once, after a day-long musical chanting, the spiritual atmosphere became very charged. The singers had been passionately involved and left the listeners in a trance-like state. Giridhari was crying copiously. He looked at me and said, “When I speak the names aloud, my breath transforms to sound; when I hear them in my heart-mind sound transforms to breath. Where am I then? It’s only Radha-Krishna and Vrindavan, outside and inside.”

While ISKCON stresses not to “think” during chanting, babajis and goswamis realize meanings of chanting experiences. I argue therefore that not only is it possible to “think how it sounds” (Shiraishi 1999, 152), or to form external intellectual impressions of sounds, but also that philosophical cognition may be embedded within experiences of sonic name-repetition. Just as Vaishnava discipline begets passion, sustained repetition produces a state of calm and focus, makes the mind
restful, and allows free play of the cognitive imaginative elements which
the practitioner is socialized into.

Thus, the ravenous taste ingrained in naming also stimulates pas-
sionate synesthetic imagination. Practitioners say that “names con-
tain lilas”—they are gateways to remembering Radha-Krishna’s erotic
activities in Vrindavan, which then shine in the “heart-mirror.” Casey
(1992, 273–81) similarly argues that the resonance of repeated names
is apposite for passionate rememberings (see also Csordas 1994, 142).

Chandrika, then one of the most famous woman kirtan singers in
Bengal, and a close friend, explained—and even I recognized when prac-
ticing music—“Early in the morning we repeat only the first note of the
musical scale [she sang the low tone with a grave tonality]. My singing-
guru explained that the first tone contains the vibration of all others.
So, when repeating it, we can hear the rest in the mind-ear. Haven’t you
seen how a good background clarifies the whole painting? Similarly,
with continuous chanting, lilas manifest clearly.” Then she held her jap-
mala in the middle of her chest and said, “Our hearts are the unstruck
sound, gupta-Vrindavan. During the chanting-round of the necklace, I
think I am crossing the Yamuna, and when I return to the big central
bead and strike with the sound of Radha-Krishna’s names, I return to
Vrindavan. Lilas then shine in my manas.”

What devotees mean when they say that “names contain lilas,”
therefore, is that continuous repetition engenders acute concentration,
and through sustained chanting, one can imagine deities’ activities in
the mind-heart then experienced as Vrindavan. Philosophically, they
explain this by saying that since the names are the same as the deities,
when practitioners utter the names, they also passionately experience
the yearning to witness the deities’ lilas.

Besides solitary chanting, collective musical occasions also aid
in imagining lilas. The best instance of “aural imagination” (Hedley
2008, 41) is embodied in Navadvip’s Samajbari temple. For more than
a century, resident babajis have been singing kirtans describing Radha-
Krishna’s erotic activities through eight daily periods, in the mood
of deities’ manjaris, serving them during their intimate moments. At
present kirtans are sung a minimum of four times daily, describing the
corresponding lilas then ongoing in celestial Vrindavan. Babajis copy
the songs into their notebooks and do not publish or show them to
outsiders, since they contain details of deities’ activities realized by
poet-practitioners during their personal spiritual imaginations. When
devotee-singers sit and sing together on the temple grounds facing the
altar-deities, the temple priest offers *aratis* to the idols. Their collective aim is to witness the deities’ Vrindavan *lilas* in imagination, aided by the songs’ detailed lyrics. With lowered eyes and a coy smile, the head priest added, “I also chant during *arati*, since chanting manifests *lilas*.”

The songs sung during late-night and early-morning sessions are the most passionate and graphically describe the deities’ encounters before and after they retire in Vrindavan’s forest bowers. Lay people are usually not present during these hours. The songs, written in archaic Bengali, describe for instance how Radha’s handmaidens dress her to attract Krishna, how they sneak out from their homes and cross the beautiful nocturnal forests, how they decorate the bower in which the deity-consort will meet, how the deity-couple finally meet, and what they then say to each other. Then, leaving the deities alone for their erotic night, the curtains facing the idols are dropped, and the temple closes. Samajbari *babajis* have a distinctive, almost intoxicated style of singing. The four or five musician-devotees, led by a main singer, sing while looking at the idols, engaged in the lyrics to the extent that they share their emotional realizations with fellow singer-*manjaris* by smiling at each other when singing lyrics expressing Radha’s handmaidens teasing her, for instance. Some have mild convulsions when singing about such intimate acts as Radha’s sitting on Krishna’s lap. The main singer’s voice breaks from emotion at times, and they indicate their own body parts when describing the deities’.

**NAM-KIRTAN AS EXPERIENCING VRINDAVAN**

While Samajbari’s *kirtans* are primarily shared among *babajis*, more common among Vaishnavas is *nam-kirtan*: public, participatory occasions of loud musical chanting. Sometimes *nam-kirtan* is more performative, and trained singers chant before the audience, which participates through attentive, embodied listening.

Devotees argue that singing the deities’ names converts the auditory space into celestial Vrindavan. The deity-consort, they argue, delight in erotic pleasures at the site of musical utterance, pleasures which they too can experience. Thus, a Vaishnava proverb says, “In naming itself eros will be found.” Hein (1982, 121) says similarly, about Radha-worshipping communities, that a “bond of erotic imagination” develops in devotional congregations.

This association between music and eros, I argue, is engendered by the auditory experience itself. Also, the rounded acoustic experience in
this case emanates from and returns to the choral collective, giving them the sense of being emplaced together in the sacred place.

Before kirtan begins, the singing site is set up. A stage may be prepared, but more often the audience sits on the same level as the performers, around them or facing them. Deities’ idols or pictures are present at the site, flowers are decorated, incense is lit. Lights are dimmed or turned off to intensify the mellow devotional mood. Cool, soothing sandalwood paste, considered Krishna’s favorite, is put on devotees’ foreheads (symbolizing their participation in the place-to-be Vrindavan), conch-shells are sounded, and naming begins on different melodies: “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare . . .”

The aromatic atmosphere creates synesthetic associations draped in resounding echoes of nam-kirtan. The khol and kartal are instrumental accompaniments. The auditory space resonates synchronously with the heartbeat. Tactile sensibilities are equally operative as people hover, singing together (Kakar 1985, 444). The smearing of boundaries of the voice and skin of oneself from others, felt through the body-ear, creates an indomitable ego-effaced community spirit, where every embodied listener “carries an anticipation of others’ bodies” (Downey 2002, 503). Thus, I often found myself swaying or clapping at a frequency similar to others.

The circular seating arrangement is considered to be the spherical stage for Krishna’s appearance before his lover-singers. The circular seating and the ceaseless name-repetitions have a correspondence. The logic of nam-kirtan is that “in identifying the sung name of the god with divinity itself, kirtan singers, in the same moment, create that which they propitiate” (Slawek 1988, 90).

Nam-kirtan’s spirit lies in its entrancing iterative fervor. While repetition presents an addictive propensity, it also creates a restless anticipation in the listener. Constraint and freedom together create tensions in the tuned body. While tedious routine generates an inescapable sense of habitual pleasure, the certitudes of security, one also feels the urge to break through it, and trample off-beat. Metaphorically, this tension is heard, mismatched and tussling, between the somber, hollow sounds of the khol and the cacophonous, impatient sounds of the kartal. This is also the sense of sexual impatience that the perpetual call between Radha and Krishna, as Vaishnavas assert, embodies in their continuous naming.

This acoustic anxiety manifests in the music’s tempo constantly increasing. Continuously escalating rhythm is an immediate correlate of
the erotic act. Nam-kirtan rhythm automatically involves a sense of passage, sensory arousal, and pleasurable climax. This is when devotees with raised hands ululate together, roll on the ground, cry, and shout Radha-Krishna’s names, and the main singer sings the line: “Where there is kirtan, there is Vrindavan.” In other words, sonic arousal and its climax become synonymous with emplacement in the transcendental place.

So, while some have argued that music replaces sexual arousal, calling it “misattribution of effervescence” (Marshall 2002, 366), or that bhakti’s eros finds indirect expression in music and dance, I argue that distinctions between music and sexuality are misplaced. Musical structures generate sexual auras. “Music does not make one think of tension—it is tension itself,” says Pike (1970, 243). Participants swaying their bodies to kirtan melodies, quivering to sonic vibrations, and the entranced dances of some devotees, are only ripples of the disquiet spread over listeners’ entire epidermal surfaces. Their collective rigorous clapping throughout the kirtan session articulates a euphoric climactic anticipation.

Just like erotic pleasure, musical satisfaction never lies in the climax’s quick resolution, however. The end is incessantly postponed through continuously rising rhythms. I call this a process of devotional longing, or intentionally making the singing process long, so that the sonic pleasures may be experienced more and more. Repetition and anticipation inhabit the musical body where postponement itself becomes the telos. The end is simultaneously also craved for, since without it no musical experience is possible. On completing a rhythmic cycle, however, another nam-kirtan round begins, and this process goes on for a long time.

It is common to see devotees cry profusely during musical sessions or their exhausting, cathartic ends. These climactic tears approximate Wolfson’s analysis of tears in Jewish mysticism. He says that “weeping of the eye symbolically displaces the seminal discharge of the phallus” (2004, 281). As part of kirtan’s collective ecstasy devotees may also experience other involuntary external states, known in the Vaishnava discourse as asta sattvika bhavas. These are “stupor, perspiration, horripilation, breaking of the voice, trembling, change of colour, tears, loss of consciousness” (Klostermaier 1974, 104). The associations of music and sexuality led Panksepp (1995, 203, cited in Becker 2004, 63) to call the chills felt during musical gatherings “skin orgasms.” I have myself experienced goose bumps during rhythmic climaxes, when singers, in
their high-pitched voices, passionately sing deities’ names finally. I also found myself unwilling to talk too much immediately after attending nam-kirtan sessions.

Stewart (2010, 91) makes a discursive point in asserting that the bodily practices and responses of kirtan are “entextualised” and thereby authorized within Indian aesthetic theories. However, Becker (2004, 10, 52–56) argues that rasaesthetic manifestations of “deep listening” are both spontaneous and culturally learned. I similarly argue that sensory excesses are also felt naturally due to the music’s affective effects. Thus, there is an established discourse about kinds of acoustic sensations. However, since the discourse is prevalent, the sensations also become culturally established and part of a celebrated sacred ideal.

Famous Vaishnavas are remembered by their affective responses to kirtan. A resident of Navadvip’s Nitaibari Temple is said to have shouted and entered trance every time he heard Radha’s name. Others fainted in emotional crescendo while dancing with raised hands. Some people become immobile for some time after the music is over. Participants often run to touch the feet of the devotee who experiences trance-states, as respect for these sensory gifts from Vrindavan.

LILA-KIRTAN AS EXPERIENCING VRINDAVAN

Equally popular as nam-kirtan is lila-kirtan, the rich performative tradition of describing Radha-Krishna’s and Chaitanya’s lilas to devotee audiences through songs performed by trained musicians in three-hour sessions.

Lila-kirtan consists of a series of poems (padas) of the highest literary standards, with sophisticated tunes often set to Indian ragas, composed by Vaishnava devotee-poets over three or four centuries, and imparted through generations of trained singers. The poems describe the deities’ activities through the day, or Radha’s/Krishna’s/Chaitanya’s love-moods. A day in celestial Vrindavan is divided into eight periods when Radha-Krishna meet for secret trysts (Delmonico 1995, 263–67). Very often twenty-four-hour lila-kirtans are organized in which eight musician-groups describe deities’ different activities throughout the day. Lila-kirtans also describe special romantic occasions in celestial Vrindavan such as Ras or Holi. The songs contain intricate details of how the deities look, how they are dressed by handmaidens for the particular occasion, how they feel when separated from each other, how their handmaidens arrange for their trysts, what they say to each other
when they meet, how they make love, and so on. Thus, devotees argue that the elaborate performance and embodied listening of lila-kirtan, like nam-kirtan, manifests celestial Vrindavan in the sonorous site. Preceding every narrative account of Vrindavan lilas, songs describing Chaitanya’s corresponding emotions in Navadvip are sung, since the saint is imagined to have embodied every element of the deity-consort’s passions.

Unlike my spontaneous participations in nam-kirtan, which I could analyze through attentiveness to my own and audiences’ reactions to music, understanding lila-kirtan required more specialist knowledge and intensive conversations with musicians. It was through attending numerous lila-kirtan sessions plus discussions with musicians that I developed insights into lila-kirtan music and its erotic power. I had very good relations with two lila-kirtan singers especially. Chandrika, a government-paid radio singer over 50, was the most dedicated and knowledgeable singer I knew. As a young girl she had been very poor, but had a keen interest in learning lila-kirtan. She stayed and studied with her kirtan-guru for 22 years in Navadvip, and served in his house, since she could not pay him anything monetarily. She also remained unmarried, since she did not want anything to distract her from her sadhana (musical/spiritual discipline). At the time of my fieldwork, she had been performing for over 35 years. She had a highly trained and husky voice due to intensive practice. She was a very popular singer throughout Bengal and had opened a kirtan learning center in Navadvip, where she was teaching sixty young boys and girls. Madhusudan was younger, 30–35, and formally educated, with a bachelor’s degree in the humanities. My musician friends in Navadvip recommended that I meet Madhusudan, who lived in another town. He was then the most popular and highly paid singer in Bengal. He was a friendly person, and in addition to singing songs, explaining their meanings and philosophical import, and elucidating difficult kirtan rhythms, as Chandrika did, he also took me along on his various musical tours. He also asked his wife’s kirtan-guru to teach me the basics of lila-kirtan and record some of the oldest and finest kirtans for me.

Kirtan performances include vivid explanations of the philosophically difficult verses for popular understanding (Christof 2001, 65, 72). Thus, singers also learn Vaishnava philosophy and effective oratory from their kirtan-gurus. There is a debate about whether singers need to be Vaishnava practitioners themselves, and most agree that they should. The poems were mostly composed by devotee-poets in the mood of
the deities’ manjaris and as reflections of their spiritual realizations in imagination of Radha-Krishna’s passionate lilas. Thus, the songs, characteristic of medieval North Indian bhakti poetry, are written in the first person, ending with the poet’s spiritual signature (bhanita) in their feminine moods as witnesses of divine lilas. Chandrika confessed that unless she knew how a manjari feels, she could never render the songs with apt expressions or communicate with listeners’ emotions.

Hayes (1995, 335) argues that the use of spiritual signatures rather than personal names at the end of songs is an expression of ego-effacement, of disclaiming personal authority as poets in favor of conveying only the song’s spiritual mood. Chatterji (2009, 64), borrowing Goodwin’s idea of a “spectacle poem,” adds that the poet’s role as a “witness rather than an author” gives the art form a “collective signature.” This enables singers and listeners to appreciate the songs in similar moods as witnesses of divine erotics.

Experienced singers also compose independent poetic interjections as couplets (akhbars) explaining their own spiritual realizations of the original text (Wulff 2009). Along with poems, akhbars are also imparted through guru-lineages.

In a lila-kirtan gathering the main singer stands in the middle, surrounded in a semicircular fashion by his musician accompanists. A supporting singer, two drummers, and cymbal-players are essential. To make the music contemporary, these days, synthesizers, harmoniums, and flutes are also used. All the musicians wear the Vaishnava adornments: tilaks and basil-seed necklaces. The main singer plays a pivotal role as his sonic-devotional mood percolates to the other musicians and to the listeners. During a kirtan class, Chandrika told her students, “As you learn singing, also learn bhava-expressions. You must not sing with ego. The moment one sings as Radha-Krishna’s servant, her vocal renditions will naturally communicate with devotees’ heart-ears; every time she cries, all listeners will also sob aloud.”

The singer’s empathic communication with listeners was especially evident during a three-hour lila-kirtan, about Krishna deceiving Radha and spending the night with another lover, performed by Madhusudan in a babajis’ ashram in Calcutta during one of his musical tours. Typical of kirtan singers, he was singing in a very high register. High pitches automatically ensure a sense of urgency and attentive listening. Also, when sad lilas of separation between deities are sung, the tunes are melancholic, and rhythms, long-drawn. High-pitched tunes also naturally sound more feminine and almost like insistent weeping. The lyrics
Chapter 6

described what Radha told her handmaiden-friends about her waiting alone in Vrindavan bowers, her sense of being betrayed and dejected; how the handmaidens felt Radha’s pain, and eventually fetched Krishna. Inherently musical and cultural elements, that is, the tunes, rhythm, and beautiful lyrics, together create the appropriate devotional aesthetic.

The babajis listened with rapt attention, gazing at Madhusudan, and reacted appropriately as he sang. They nodded their heads, jerked their hands in disapproval, as if arguing with Krishna on Radha’s behalf, cried on each other’s shoulders, smiled at each other in feminine ways when the deities met, and eventually stood up and jumped with raised hands when Radha united with her lover. Both the experienced musicians and the listeners, in their sonic imaginations, witness the deities’ lilas in their spiritual moods as devotee-manjaris, during lila-kirtan.

Kirtan-singers are deft managers of musical and affective excesses. The singer stops after singing a few lines and explains their meanings to the listeners. This is also intended, Madhusudan explained, to disallow listeners from getting emotionally too carried away in the tuned passions, since occasionally performances need to be paused when devotees lose consciousness or go into intense fits.

I have also seen Madhusudan crying copiously, for instance while describing Krishna’s leaving Vrindavan or Chaitanya’s leaving Nadia, while simultaneously indicating to the drummer with his hands the rhythm he wants next. Thus, kinesthetic and sensory habits during lila-kirtan are both naturally musical and “scripted” (Corrigan 2004, 16) and fall between what Bruckner (2001, 320), in the context of canonical text-performances, calls “spontaneous” and “controlled possession.” My analysis therefore differs slightly from Marglin’s (1990, 212) theorization of “spectator-devotees’” experience of “erotic emotions” while watching the ritual dance form in the Jagannatha temple, which she conceptualizes as “radically culturally constituted.”

The body’s reactions to rhythm during lila-kirtan, for instance, are both immediate and learned, affective and cultural. The drums play along with the music and their echoes pulsate in the collective ears and heart. Unlike nam-kirtan, where the rhythm is marked by gradual acceleration, in lila-kirtan the rhythm is characterized by an enjoyable unpredictability. However, experienced listeners can usually anticipate the rhythm changes. After repeated listening, even I could sometimes tell when the rhythm would change. When the rhythm is slow, a natural sense of sleepiness descends on the audience, which is conducive to relaxed imagination to witness Vrindavan lilas being described. Stewart
(2005, 263) also demonstrates relations between Bengal-Vaishnava listening practices in general and visualization of Vrindavan *lilas*. The phenomenology of repetition is such that listening to *lilas* time and again helps devotees identify with those narratives, till *lilas* eventually “possess” them, he says (see also Lutgendorf 1991, 244). Palmer and Jankowiak (1996, 240) similarly argue that performance contexts often facilitate experiences of collective imagination. However, when the rhythm changes, the singer indicates with hand-movements, and the audience ululates. This generally corresponds to descriptions of Radha-Krishna’s happy unions; and the musical groove automatically makes one want to dance. This rhythmic diversity helps sustain audience attention, avoids monotony, allows a range of emotions among listeners, and makes the entire listening experience spiritually consuming.

Mostly, the rhythm follows the singer’s tunes; sometimes the singer repeats a line continuously, allowing the rhythm to lead in the meantime. Repeating the same lines evokes the lulling sense of contemplation and facilitates thinking about the deities’ erotic pleasures described in those lines, while the heart-mind beats with the galloping rhythm. “So the musicality is not only an aesthetic gloss over the discursive content but rather a necessary condition for . . . ethical action” (Hirschkind 2006, 12).

Chandrika explained that the sonic site as Vrindavan has affective power over both singers and listeners. She said, “Through the songs’
descriptions, the entire place becomes Vrindavan, and it feels like moving about in the beautiful place with other devotees, and relishing sights of the deities’ *lilas.*” Throughout the performance singers indicate with their hands and on their bodies every element being described, as if it is present right there. For instance, if they sing about Vrindavan’s fragrant flowers, they either make feminine gestures with their hands in the shape of flowers, or point toward some imaginary tree where they have blossomed. Also, they wear anklets and sound them when describing Radha or her handmaidens. Their facial expressions and hand-movements are also soft and feminine then. I also saw Madhusudan open his flower-necklace, bring it close to his lips and stretch it, when describing Krishna’s flute. Thus, music and its embodied cultural expressions together help the devotee gathering experience the acoustic site as Vrindavan.

Toward the climax, after explicit lyrics about Radha-Krishna’s union are sung in the devotee-poet’s mood as witness of divine erotics, and the rhythm finally ascends, then as in *nam-kirtan*, the singer shouts into the microphone, saying, “Where there is kirtan, there is Vrindavan,” “With pleasure, look at this honeyed-Vrindavan,” and so on. The devotees’ ecstatic collective sobbing or shouting then contribute to kirtan acoustics, and as among the Kaluli where “becoming a bird” becomes the metaphor for sound and weeping (Feld 1982, 17), in *lila-kirtan* it is “becoming a woman,” or Krishna’s lover. The highest rhythm played at this point is called *murchona* or “fainting,” referring also to the final affective state that passionate listeners may ideally embody. Devotees ululate together at this point, and that sound, coupled with the restless cymbal jingles, gave me goose bumps repeatedly.

The three-hour *kirtan* performances tread different temporalities. The singer elaborates on some Radha-Krishna *lila*, its correlate in Chaitanya’s life, and its metaphoric relationship to devotees’ lives. For instance, early-morning *kirtans* may be sung to wake Chaitanya in Navadvip, then Radha-Krishna in Vrindavan, and devotees’ hearts to spiritual arousal. Real musical time, devotees imagine, is congruent with cosmic time. Madhusudan explained, “Even if I sing a monsoon-*lila* in peak summer, the sonic atmosphere will give devotees the sense of a wet Vrindavan. All time condenses where Vrindavan *lilas* are sung. . . . *Lila* time is present time.” This sense of presentness generates a real impact upon listeners, which they identify with the manifestation of celestial Vrindavan.

With the end of an intense *lila-kirtan* session, devotees rush aggressively to touch the singer’s feet. Through a successful performance a
singer comes to mean much more than a mere performer—she is the fullest embodiment of aspired devotional moods. Thus, unlike Chatterji’s (1995, 437) description of a Bengali folk-dance form where lilas are imitations of the deities’ activities, in lila-kirtan the music is considered to directly manifest the deities’ passions, transforming the sonic site to Vrindavan. Mason (2009, 2–19) summarizes Vrindavan’s theatrical performances similarly and argues that they blur the boundary between mimesis and ontology such that theatre is religion. Since there is a reciprocal relation between geography and performance, both theatre and religion can manifest the sacred place, he argues.

**EMBODIED INSTRUMENTS AND AUDIBLE BODIES**

The chief instruments used during kirtan, the khol and kartal, are sacred objects themselves. In some Bengal-Vaishnava temples, the khol is worshipped on the altar with the deities, and before every kirtan performance the drummer offers mantras to the khol.

Following a complex phenomenology of listening practices, musicians and instrumentalists state that by itself, careful audition of the materiality of khol-kartal sounds can manifest Vrindavan lilas. Stoller (1989, 108), a pioneer in the anthropology of senses, pointed out decades ago that the sounds of musical instruments had not been put under descriptive scrutiny, and the situation is not much better now. However, I analyze devotee-musicians’ claims that the instrument sounds themselves become Vrindavan’s sonic secrets, and manifest Radha-Krishna’s intense eroticism. I document body-theological practices of integrating iterative chanting into the breathing interior of the musician’s corporeal space, such that the inner sensate body then echoes with khol-kartal sounds, or Vrindavan’s aural aesthetics.

Here I summarize views expressed by a few practicing musicians, especially Navadvip’s khol players. Of them, my relationship with Govinda, one of the most renowned drummers in Bengal, proved to be most productive in honing my own listening acumen and musical imagination. Although he lived in Navadvip, I first met him in another town during a lila-kirtan program where he played the khol most beautifully and was much appreciated by the audience. Unlike other aspects of my research, the complex theology of instrument sounds is not widely known, and Govinda took pride in his extremely nuanced and rare domain of experience and knowledge. Sonic understanding of the khol, he emphasized, came down to him as oral lore through generations.
of trained instrumentalists. Govinda’s father was the most respected khol player of the earlier generation, and many of Govinda’s sensibilities were influenced by him. Govinda also accompanied important singers and held discussions with other instrumentalists of Navadvip and Vrindavan who he said had ratified his musical-spiritual understandings. Govinda was close to 60 during my fieldwork, and I had by far one of my most intimate friendships in the field with him. Our musical wavelengths matched very well, and apart from discussing the deep philosophies of khol-kartal sounds, Govinda occasionally also taught me some basics of khol-playing and helped me maintain a notebook about the significance of its multiple nuanced tunings.

Govinda exemplified the ideal combination of spiritual and musical discipline. He had been practicing the khol since he was a child. Also, since the age of 23 he had spent a great portion of his life in Vrindavan as a Vaishnava practitioner in the mood of a handmaiden-friend of the deity-couple. He used to have long hair and wear anklets then. It was while in Vrindavan that he explored the experiential connections between Vaishnava spiritual practices and the metaphysics of instrument sounds—between corporeal and musical acoustics.

I observed how khols are made in Navadvip’s and Mayapur’s instrument shops. Khols are crafted out of mud since its sound, musicians and khol-makers agree, is very sweet. The constituent element has an impact on sound’s materiality (Hurcombe 2007, 536). The Sanskrit name for the khol is mrdangam, “body of mud.” Khols all over Bengal are known as Nadia khol, since Nadia’s soil is preferred in making them. Khols are asymmetrical, conical, barrel-like drums, 23–24 inches in length and 42–45 inches in diameter. Once the body is made, it is covered with cow skin (like other membranophones) considered sacred by Hindus, and thirty-two strings are pulled between top to bottom. The tension of these strings tunes the instrument. Finally, a small air hole is punched in one of the edges, as sounds are produced by air-passage in the inner hollow.

During kirtan performances the khol hangs from the drummer’s neck with a strong cord, so that he may play it either sitting next to the singer or standing—to allow the audience to see him and the instrument clearly when he plays difficult rhythms, or when the rhythms are faster and he wishes to move about or even jump to the ecstatic rhythms he plays.

Navadvip is also famous for cymbal-makers. Large instrument shops all over Bengal outsource the work to Navadvip, and craftsmen make
them in their homes. Cymbals are of different sizes. The smallest pairs (mandirā/manjari) make a “tung tung” sound; the middle ones (kartal) make a similar sound but with more resonance; and the big ones (jhompo), weighing about a kilo together, make a loud “jh(n)a jh(n) a” sound. The shrill, sweet kartal sounds are due to constitutive properties of bell-metal. All cymbal varieties are generically referred to as kartal. Kartals are played in pairs and attached to the player’s hands with cloth strings.

Khol and kartal make the ideal combination as kirtan-accompaniments, since their tunings suit any scale of singing. Apart from their musical properties, devotees attribute this to their innate sacredness. Graves (2009b, 105) says that the khol has an “affecting presence” in the Vaishnava world and is treated more as an embodied person than as a thing. I also agree with Graves (2009a, 4) that the sonic ontology of Bengal-Vaishnavism is situated at the junction of religious discourse and affective efficacy of instrument sounds. Panopoulos (2003, 640) says similarly that both bell-sounds and the meanings they acquire in a Greek island village make them significant “aural cultural artefacts.” Thus, I concur with Ingold (2000, 1, cited in Chua and Salmond 2012, 106) that agentive primacies of human intention and artefacts are not discernible when cultural realities are studied in their entangled entirety.

Related to the idea of the sacrality of instrumental sounds is the parallel discourse about essential sounds of the spiritually perfected body. Govinda asserted that the khol is the perfect embodied correlate of the human body and that the ultimate spiritual purpose of advanced practitioner-musicians is to be able to hear the instrument sounds arising from one’s own corporeal interiors, even when the physical instrument stops playing. Khol-kartal sounds which echo Vrindavan lilas then manifest in the body-Vrindavan, according to him.

Once, during a discussion with my singer friend Chandrika about khol-kartal sounds, she insisted that rather than only ask about them I should try to understand through my own concentrated listening. She then asked what I feel exactly when I listen attentively to the instruments. I said, “I cannot concentrate on them for too long, since the repetitive khol-sounds bang intensely in the middle of my chest and navel, and the kartal’s shrill sounds have a deafening impact.” Happy with my attentive answer, she smiled and explained, “Precisely. The middle of the navel, the chest, and so on, correspond to the chakras, whose intrinsic, hidden sounds are then in tune with the khol-sounds outside.” And the kartal’s deafening sounds are the sounds of Radha’s
anklets. If you keep chanting well, your breath-chant will sound the body-
_khol_ one day.” I could not understand exactly what she meant till later when Govinda told me about Vaishnava musicians’ beliefs.

When Radha and Krishna decided to be reborn in Chaitanya’s body, their indispensable belongings, Krishna’s flute and Radha’s anklets, wanted to come along. Since the flute and anklets sound together during Radha-Krishna’s love-encounters, they wished that the flute and anklets incarnate as drums and cymbals for _kirtan_-music. Passion, in other words, was incarnate as music. Graves (2009b, 104) identifies this instrument incarnation as an “identity transposition.”

During a conversation with a musician-couple in Navadvip, the man, who is a _khol_ player, said, “When Krishna’s lovers run to meet him, they giggle, and their anklets dance in pleasure. Those are the tinkling sounds _kartals_ make. No wonder _kartals_ are also known as _manjaris._ So when I hear the _kartal_ my _manjari_-self rushes to see Radha-Krishna. Also, you will see that _kartals_ play in the same rhythm in which _kirtan_-participants clap—as if Radharani’s ornaments are clapping in rhythm in the devotee’s heart-temple.”

In general, sounds and erotic sensibilities are acutely embroiled in Vaishnavas’ life-world. This is most evident in the hundreds of poems dedicated to Krishna’s flute. The search for Krishna and Vrindavan is often articulated as a search for the sound of flute or anklet. The flute is often a metaphor for erotic irresistibility, its seductive sound claimed to be a direct, penetrative eros entering the body through the ears’ interstices (see also Hayes 1995, 348). The poetics of the flute is described in some Vaishnava poems with the idea that as Krishna exhales his moist breath through the different holes there are different tunes, which, carrying his lip-nectar, fill the air of Vrindavan, attracting his various lovers.

The passionate flute-sounds are conceptualized as being in tune with the breathing body. I befriended a Muslim villager, 92, who lived in a village adjacent to Mayapur and was locally renowned as very knowledgeable about Vaishnava and Sufi aesthetics. He once said, “One of Krishna’s flutes [ _banshi_ ] has nine openings, and so does our body. If through spiritual practice we pull up breath-air and shut these nine doors, we trap breath-sound inside. . . . Krishna brought the flute with him; then as Chaitanya, he brought chanting. The two are the same. After sustained practice of chanting, it becomes indistinguishable from breathing. Thus breath is chant is flute-sound, and then the body-flute plays.” 11 Others say that one of Krishna’s flutes ( _murali_ ) has five holes, with which he attracts the five senses. Madhusudan, in explaining a song during one of
his *lila-kirtan* performances, said, “I will play as he wants to play me. He chooses to touch any pore in me, and my body sings along.”

The flute and the *khol* are both hollow, such that air can pass without hindrance. That is the sounding principle in both cases. Practitioner-musicians imagine this as emblematic of the feminine heart’s subservience to the lover, Krishna, without any obstruction or ego. The energy-centers in the hollow inside of the body-*khol* or body-flute can then echo Vrindavan’s passions. Irigaray (2002, 84–100, cited in Kearns 2005, 110) similarly argues that yogic practices sensitive to breathing apprehend subterranean, feminine, subservient, and erotic aspects of the self. Similar to the flute-phenomenology, she suggests therefore that we are breathed as much as we breathe (113).

Which sounds will be heard in the practitioner’s body is deeply in tune with how the *khol* and *kartal* sound in general. The timbre of instruments, as Balkwill and Thompson (1999, 50) remind us, determines the emotional moods accompanying them.

The repetitive rhythmic tones during a *kirtan* performance create an ecstatic atmosphere. Practitioners who prefer sonic meditation may choose to gradually stop listening to the *kirtan’s* lyrics and concentrate fully on the instrumental sounds. When the rhythm reaches its climax, the musical-orgasmic pleasure bursts both in collective shouts and in the individual listener’s inner body-space.

During one of Govinda’s *lila-kirtan* tours, in a Vaishnava devotee’s house in a Bengali town, the musicians rested before their scheduled performance. Govinda and one of his students (who had been learning the *khol* for more than fifteen years) brought their *khols*, and I brought my notebook, and we had the most enlightening discussion for four hours at a stretch. After Govinda showed me some basics of *khol*-playing, his student struck different portions of his *khol*, and both of them together explained:

The right-hand part of the *khol* has a treble, sharp sound [*tang tang*], almost as sweet as the flute. Its echo resonates for a long time after it is struck. There are large, round bangles around the *khol’s* edges, like Radha’s ornamens. When we strike the *khol*, the bangle also sounds [*chn chn*]. The *kartal*, also like Radha’s different ornaments, echoes for almost thirty seconds after it is struck. As the sharp rebounds resonate, our mind-hearts travel on the echo-trail left by the instrument-sounds, to Vrindavan, and we can hear/see Radharani dancing, her ornaments sounding in rhythm with Krishna’s flute. The left side has a deep, hollow, bass sound. As its repeated *dhakdbak-dbak* or *gurgurgurgur* strikes, the heartbeat also pounds, as if in the excitement of seeing Radha-Krishna together.
Rodaway similarly says that auditory experiences are synchronous with the body’s biorhythms (1994, 91).

The khol rhythms taught by gurus are called bols. Govinda explained how different bols, as devotional embodiments, say different things to the deities. For instance, the khol might say, “I will only speak of Krishna,” “O hear how the flute plays,” or “Hail Radhe, Hail Krishna.” Advanced practitioners, he explained, are able to embody these words of subservience when they concentrate on the rhythms. Similarly, in Sinhalese Buddhist rituals drum-beats sound like spoken sentences (Becker 2004, 32). Jankowsky (2006, 389) also demonstrates that among sub-Saharan the Gumbri drum communicates with listeners like a speaking voice. Similarities can be observed in sonic conceptualizations across cultures, I argue, because music, albeit cultural, has sonic elements with affective generalities.

In similitude with khol rhythms, kartals play, and people clap. Kar-tal literally means “keeping rhythm with the hands,” which also refers to keeping count on the fingers while chanting. Just as there are 32 strings which tune the khol-sounds, the two kartals are divided into 32 portions, each of which has a tone aligned with the khol’s sounds. Govinda said, “Why do you think there are 32 possible sounds in khol-kartal? Because there are 32 syllables in the Hare Krishna chant. Keep chanting, and khol-kartal sounds will come from inside.”

My conversations with Govinda, our listening to khol together, his continuous reflection on sound, and our introspective ruminations convinced me that the Vaishnava sound-world is as much about internal as about external sounds. For a sustained period I was unable to concentrate on any other work. I was continuously counting chant on my fingers. I listened to khol records even before going to bed, and at times I felt that I could hear khol or anklet sounds just before going to or after waking from sleep. I discussed this with Govinda, who said it was typical for anyone who paid sincere attention to “sacred sounds.”

In a particular yogic posture called bhramar asana (honey-bee posture), one is supposed to pull in one’s breath and shut the eyes, ears, mouth and nose and create the repeated reverberation of the sound “mmm” inside. Beyond a point, the timbre echoes right in the chest cavity (see also Fillippi and Dahnhardt 2001, 355). I especially enjoyed practicing this asana while in college. In the Vaishnava discourse, pulling in the breath signifies shutting the body’s doors so that sonic-affective upsurge is introjected rather than let out (McDaniel 1995, 50–51).
Govinda drew the connection and said, “In our sonic philosophy, the sound ‘mmm’ apprehends the sense of dreamless sleep. When the honey-bee hums, it is the same nagging sound. Krishna, as honey-bee, comes to savor the interior space of the body-lotus, of a Vaishnava who has curbed her ego and let herself be submerged in divine sounds. This is possible through constant chanting in the *manas*. Krishna then breathes into the body and it sounds the *khol* in her body-Vrindavan. She hears the buzzing bee [*gunngunngunngun*] in the middle of the chest.” The metaphor of the bee is commonplace among Vaishnavas. Vrindavan’s maidens are repeatedly compared to flowers and buds, whose hearts, when steeped in honey/love, are cherished by Krishna, the black bee.

The sensory vibration of the bee-buzz has a monotonous insistence. It also has a calm, from within which shines forth the sense of clear perception, a mirror-like reflective quality. This grain-like clarified sensation is similar to the vibrating resonances of string instruments. Indeed, in *nada-yoga* (sonic meditation) traditions, “the word nada signifies the reverberating tone of vocal sound, especially the buzzing nasal sound with which the word AUM fades away” (Beck 1993, 82).

The body’s nasal “mmm” sound is replicated in a number of *khol* bols (*jhna, jhni, najhi, nako, jhini* etc.). These are also like heavy anklet-sounds. Musicians often complain of getting “lazy hands” after playing the *khol* for a long time. The sensation of the lazy hand, once again, has a sensory similitude with the nagging, grainy feeling of the “mmm,” and has a nasal name itself—*jh(n)i jh(n)i*. Similarly, cricket sounds are also called *jh(n)i jh(n)i* in Bengali. Govinda said that his guru asked his students not to stop playing the *khol* despite the tired, lazy sensation in the hands, since the exhaustion is a yogic blessing.

Nasal sounds are also said to echo in the body when a practitioner, with a straight spine, pulls up the breath via the central yogic nerve known as *shushumna*. When pulling up the breath the energy-centers are also pulled up. From the anus to the chest is, in the sonic-yogic imagination, the journey from silence to sounds. When the sounds finally travel from the middle of the eyebrows to the head, Vrindavan is said to manifest with its passion-acoustics in the “touch-hearing geography” (Rodaway 1994, 100).

Innate properties of sounds being linked to deeply felt cultural values is a widespread phenomenon. The Songhay, for instance, imagine high-pitched violin sounds as wailing cries, and the drum’s “clacks” in association with them as making ancestor-spirits present in the site
of sounding (Stoller 1989, 112). Similarly, khol-kartal sounds make the sacred place Vrindavan’s immediate presence felt by sensitive listener-devotees.

However, while I have been describing imaginings of the khol-in-the-body, the khol is also imagined to be the exact corporeal counterpart of the practitioner’s body. The interior space of the khol, in other words, is compared to the inner body-space. Thus, there is also a body-in-the-khol. Both are veiled-Vrindavans, waiting to be manifest to those with sensitive hearing. Govinda explained: “Like the khol, we have a small opening for breath in the nose; and just as our navel maintains bodily balance, the khol’s middle-portion is essential for sonic balance.’

The small black patch on the khol’s right side, musicians say, is Krishna’s embodiment, and the white patch on its left side, Radha’s. As the two are struck together, when Radha and Krishna are in erotic vibration, sounds overflow in the instrument’s affective body-space. A khol player living in Navadvip, who was around 86 years of age during my fieldwork and who had played the khol for 62 years, read a couplet to me from his notebook. It said, “A little air stays inside the khol. It breathes/chants Radha-Krishna all the time.” He explained, “Friction makes sound, and friction gives pleasure. As the khol’s edges shiver in sound, the couple vibrates in love.” Similarly, in the yogic discourse, the body, from the navel down, is the embodiment of feminine vitality, and upwards, of masculine energy. When breath connects the two, it sounds the desired love (Beck 1993, 101).

In the “intuitive imagery” of the “inner senses” (Csordas 1994, 89), the body’s energy-centers are imagined as lotuses. Each of these, Govinda explained, has its own distinctive sounds, and is assigned alphabetic characters with phonetic resemblance to those sounds. Which letters reside in which energy-center is a practitioner’s secret. However, when the practitioner-musician pulls up the breath and as the breath traverses the different chakras, the petals of the lotuses are supposed to blossom, and the sounds within reverberate.

The khol is similarly imagined as divided into corresponding chakras, some below the middle portion (the navel) and some above. The same alphabet combinations can be played on the khol as bols. When a sensitive listener hears the repetitive khol rhythms, he is able to hear the same sounds within the body, rising ecstatically from the appropriate chakras. When the khol player, with intensely shut eyes, plays the instrument hung from his shoulders and leans his ears toward it, then the entire kinesthetics of striking the khol and shaking the body proves
that his *khol*-in-the-body and *khol*-on-the-body are entirely in sync. Sometimes the body sounds/hears the flute, sometimes anklets, ornaments, bees, drums, thunder, and so on. There are many more sounds, which no practitioner was willing to disclose.

Beck (1993, 91–97) similarly speaks about yogic traditions of subtle “mystical auditions” and an “esoteric physiology of sound,” through which the practitioner rises to higher levels of sonic perception. He says that what a musician plays externally and what he hears internally, that is, the link between instrumental sounds and sonic meditation, has not been studied (110). I hope to have partially filled in an ethnographic lacuna in this respect.

Govinda, indicating both the instrument-*khol* and body-*khol*, summarized, “Now I do no other *pujā*. I only worship my *khol*, for it contains the essence of Vrindavan *lilas*. I drown myself in sounds, and the rest simply follows.”

Helmreich’s (2007) notion of “transductive ethnography” has been useful for me in thinking about the phenomenology of instrument sounds, sensitizing my ethnographic ear to the tactile in the sonic, to the bodily interior as a reverberator of sound, and rethinking the boundaries between external and internal soundscapes. In this case, however, the intimate “immersion” has been in the deep oceanic recesses of the body’s interior.

**Conclusion**

Devotees venerate every site of sacred-sonic utterance as *gupta* (veiled) Vrindavan, which manifests the transcendental place to them through cultures of attentive, embodied listening. While senses of sacred sound, music, and rhythm are discursively cultivated and conceptualized through Vaishnava discourses, they also intensely impact the body’s affective, visceral orientations. I have also argued that acoustic experiences and senses of place may be cultivated at the level of the musician’s inner sensate body. Thus, senses of sacred sound and place may be experienced as both external and internal to the devotee’s spiritually cultivated body and self.