CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism

BACKGROUND

The anthropology of Hinduism has amply established that Hindus have a strong involvement with sacred geography. The Hindu sacred topography is dotted with innumerable pilgrimage places, and popular Hinduism is abundant with spatial imaginings. Thus, Shiva and his partner, the mother goddess, live in the Himalayas; goddesses descend to earth as beautiful rivers; the goddess Kali’s body parts are imagined to have fallen in various sites of Hindu geography, sanctifying them as sacred centers; and yogis meditate in forests. Bengal similarly has a thriving culture of exalting sacred centers and pilgrimage places, one of the most important being the Navadvip-Mayapur sacred complex, Bengal’s greatest site of guru-centered Vaishnavite pilgrimage and devotional life. While one would ordinarily associate Hindu pilgrimage centers with a single place, for instance, Ayodhya, Vrindavan, or Banaras, and while the anthropology of South Asian pilgrimage has largely been single-place-centered, Navadvip and Mayapur, situated on opposite banks of the river Ganga in the Nadia District of West Bengal, are both famous as the birthplace(s) of the medieval saint, Chaitanya (1486–1533), who popularized Vaishnavism on the greatest scale in eastern India, and are thus of massive simultaneous importance to pilgrims in contemporary Bengal. For devotees, the medieval town of Navadvip represents a Vaishnava place of antique pilgrimage crammed with centuries-old temples and ashrams, and Mayapur, a small village rapidly
developed since the nineteenth century, contrarily represents the glossy headquarters site of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), India’s most famous globalized, high-profile, modernized guru movement.

My fieldwork in Navadvip and Mayapur, however, predominantly involved carrying out an intensive study of different kinds of very rich everyday spiritual lives engaged in by the large number of ascetic-renouncers and householder devotees who reside in these places. Within a few months in the field I grasped that there are four very different kinds of Vaishnavas who live in Navadvip-Mayapur, each with its own highly distinctive focus in worship. They include the glossy globalized ISKCON devotees; the much-stigmatized quasi-tantric, poor, illiterate Vaishnavas who practice sexual-yogic religious rituals; the knowledgeable ascetic renouncers living in secluded ashrams; and finally the householder Brahmin priests who are the owners of Navadvip’s large and famous temples. I wanted to explore what it was that made Vaishnavism so many things yet still somehow one. What made my fieldwork particularly exciting was that I was able to relate this classic question in the anthropology of Hinduism, that is, whether Hinduism (in this case Vaishnavism specifically) is one thing or many, in a new way, to broader concerns in the anthropology of space and place on one hand, and the anthropology of emotions and affect on the other. This was possible because I realized that the radically contrasting ways in which devotees embody Vaishnavism in Navadvip-Mayapur are interestingly related, since all Vaishnavas pursue versions of a mode of spiritual engagement that they experience as a form of intensely emotional place-making, a process of attaining an ecstatic devotional goal they all think of as Vrindavan. For Vaishnavas, therefore, Vrindavan is not only a place-name but even almost a shorthand term for intense states of devotional exaltation.

While Vaishnavism, a critical strand of devotional Hinduism, refers to the worship of the deity Vishnu and his incarnations, in Bengal, Krishna, his lover Radha, and Chaitanya are revered as the supreme divinities. Radha and Krishna are never worshipped as independent deities in Bengal, but always together, as the divine couple embroiled in the most passionate erotic relationship in their cosmic abode, Vrindavan. Thus, Bengali temples worship vigrahas (idols) of the two deities together, and devotees always refer to them in the same breath, as Radha-Krishna: the couple united in love. Furthermore, the Radha-Krishna sacred aesthetic is not only incomplete but also impossible without the imagining of Vrindavan. Bengal-Vaishnavas also consider Chaitanya to be the
dual manifestation of Radha-Krishna, the deities enjoying their intense union in and through his body.  

These distinct beliefs and practices are bound within the sophisticated philosophy of Bengal-Vaishnavism: *achintya-bhed-abhed* (simultaneous difference/dualism/separation and non-difference/monism/union, a simultaneity that is inconceivable by profane sensibilities). This unique relationship of difference/non-difference exists between the supreme deity, Krishna, and his world, including Vrindavan, where he is manifest, and his lovers or devotees, including Radha. The theology asserts that of Krishna’s intrinsic energies, one amounts to the cosmic pleasure principle (*hladini sakti*), which underlies any manifestation of bliss, including the pleasurable relations Krishna enjoys with his entourage. Since these relations are essentially part of Krishna’s own nature, they are non-different from him, while because they are also different from him, he can engage in intense sensuous relationships with them. This explains why Radha-Krishna and Vrindavan are represented as always-enmeshed entities. The theology further explains that the utmost divine irony was that Krishna, the repertoire of greatest possible bliss, was unable to taste his own sweetness (*madhurya*), though Radha, by virtue of being his supreme lover, could. With a fine stroke of imagination, the two thus decided to incarnate in the same body, to taste each other’s love (*prem*) in the same site. So Chaitanya was literally born as the perfect embodiment of *achintya-abhedabhed* between Radha-Krishna.  

Since Krishna’s devotees, a part of his own divine nature, bound with him in the same relation of difference/non-difference, are also potentially able to realize the intense pleasure principle, so the ultimate purpose of Bengal-Vaishnavas is to drown themselves in the refined erotic ocean which blissfully merges Krishna and his world. Partaking in Vrindavan’s pleasures becomes their goal.

Thus, while South Asian *bhakti* (devotional) traditions in general are widely characterized as personalized devotion with the aim of arousing intense emotional relations with deities, Chaitanyaite devotion holds a special place in this regard. It puts the utmost premium on devotees’ being able to experience these divine erotic moods at their own most embodied, visceral levels.

*Engagement with the Philosophy of Place*

My two, initially distinct, aims of fieldwork were to study on the one hand the different pilgrimage processes of Navadvip and Mayapur and senses of place engendered therein, and on the other hand the devotional lives
of Navadvip-Mayapur’s resident devotees. The most revealing aspect of my fifteen months of fieldwork in the two places during 2009–10, however, was that the connection between my two ethnographic aims was much closer than I had thought. For Bengal-Vaishnavas, senses of place are not limited to physical pilgrimage geographies but interestingly intertwined with their religious practices. My two fieldwork aims thus ultimately merged because distinctive dimensions of place-experience and sensuous apprehensions of divinity through varied spiritual practices overlap, such that devotees experience sacred geography not only in external physical sites but also in interiorized affective spaces of their bodies, minds, imagination, and senses. So my concern is with the exact nature of the rigorous affective and bodily disciplines enacted by different Vaishnavas through regimes of personal and collective practice, and the significant relationships of these practices with the cultivation of senses of place. These practices range from, for instance, spiritual arts of musical exaltation, to the cultivation of impassioned erotic identification with Radha-Krishna and their enactment of cosmic arousal in Vrindavan. So I locate my book within a diverse set of concerns in the anthropology of religion (especially Hinduism), the anthropology and philosophy of place, and the anthropology and philosophy of emotions, affect, and the senses.

The various spiritual practices I document in this book have the aim of transporting or translocating devotees to Radha-Krishna’s cosmic abode, celestial Vrindavan, which is characterized by devotees as a site at once of sensuous delight, divine sexuality, and spiritual bliss. Transportation to celestial Vrindavan, as discussed through the different chapters, implies different things: traversing Navadvip-Mayapur during pilgrimage; serving the deities emplaced there; visualizing Vrindavan in imagination; hearing Vrindavan’s acoustics; and being able to apprehend within one’s own bodily interiors the erotic heightening that Radha-Krishna experiences in Vrindavan. Thus, my book analyzes complex intertwining of affect, cultivated emotion, and physical stimulation of sensory capacities, including hearing, visualization, and sexual arousal, all known to be central to Radha-Krishna-centered devotion, but which I explore in connection with different senses of place. I seek to establish that for Bengal-Vaishnavas the process of being a spiritually active devotee is crucially rooted in different ways of realizing specific sensory awareness of Vrindavan; and the various kinds of intense physicality associated with the experience of Vrindavan are what this book documents and analyzes.
For Bengal-Vaishnavas, Vrindavan is not only the famous and active North Indian Vaishnavite pilgrimage town with its hundreds of temples and practitioner Vaishnavas, but more centrally the deities’ cosmic abode, celestial Vrindavan, alternatively referred to as Vraja or Goloka, meaning “the place of senses.” The physical town of Vrindavan is considered by devotees the earthly manifestation of celestial Vrindavan. This celestial site of divine activities is imagined by them to be a rustic paradise, a beautiful forested area cut across by the rippling river Yamuna, where spring is the eternal season, where the deity-consort enact their daily and eternal passionate love-plays (lilas), and where their attractive handmaidens serve them and sing melodies in their praise. Many Indian households display the famous oleograph with the best-known Vrindavan image: Krishna dancing with his lovers in the dark forest and love-bower on a full-moon night with beautiful peacocks in the background. For all Bengal-Vaishnavas, Radha-Krishna devotionalism is indeed impossible without the imagining of this sensuous place.

Stewart (2005, 267) argues similarly that imagining celestial Vrindavan’s spatial environment is a prelude to establishing relations with deities, since the deities’ romance is necessarily conceptualized as being emplaced in Vrindavan; and Entwistle (1991, 88) says that this idea of Vrindavan is a mode of “pastoralization” in which the aesthetics
of imagining the land is a kind of participation with the intention of traveling to the same place after death.

A sense of place is indeed crucial for many Hindu after-life beliefs, for instance the wish to be transported to Vishnu’s heaven on death. The sacred place as soteriological destination provides a sense of religious belonging and security, and theistic Hindu traditions benefit from tangible references to where and how deities reside. Contrary to monistic Vedantist traditions where the soul is considered to eventually merge with the disembodied almighty, dualist traditions assert the reality of embodied deities and the places they reside in, and the distinct relations devotees embody with them before and after death.

In Navadvip and Mayapur temples, for an hour every morning or evening, scores of devotees gather to hear gurus read Sanskrit verses from a ninth-century Vaishnava text, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and explain their meanings in Bengali.

While the *Bhagavad Gita*, which exalts Krishna as the *Mahabharata*’s warrior-god, is popular among many North Indian devotional groups and appropriated by Hindu nationalist-militant organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS (Horstmann 1995; Malinar 1995), Bengal-Vaishnavas, while respecting the *Gita*, more centrally celebrate the *Bhagavatam*. Hardy’s (1983) classic work shows how the *Bhagavatam*, which narrates stories of “sweet devotion,” of Krishna’s
childhood and adolescence spent in Vrindavan, became the historical harbinger of “emotional Krishna bhakti.” So Bengali devotees hear about Radha-Krishna’s daily routine in celestial Vrindavan—when they wake up together in the forest bowers after their nocturnal passionate love-acts, what they do in their respective homes through the day, how and where they meet for their secret trysts (since Radha is married to another man), and details of their emotions during periods of intense union and separation. Devotees know these stories by heart but still regularly flock to temples to relish them together. The daily routine of serving deities in all Nadia temples also mirrors the deities’ routine in Vrindavan as described in the Bhagavatam. Bengal’s Vaishnava calendar also celebrates monthly festivals commemorating Radha-Krishna’s special activities in celestial Vrindavan, for instance Holi, the colorful spring festival in February/March, or Ras, Krishna’s circle-dance with his lovers on the autumnal full-moon night in November. Vrindavan is thus a one-word representation for the entire emotional apparatus which makes divine activities possible and worthy of spiritual apprehension by Bengal-Vaishnava devotees.

While Bengal-Vaishnavas conceptualize celestial Vrindavan, the quintessential place of love, as the destination they want to reach after lives of spiritual perfection, they also claim to experience glimpses of the deity-consort and their own devotional selves emplaced in and serving them in celestial Vrindavan, during their present lives’ devotional practices. Their spiritual telos is therefore capable of manifesting itself in their practices of the present, and Bengal-Vaishnavas have three distinct senses of place: the celestial after-life destination; the Navadvip-Mayapur sacred topography where they reside; and devotional practices which help them apprehend sensuous pleasures of the divine place within their own minds, bodies, and senses. It is the second and third of these senses of place which this book analyzes in detail. Thus, unlike Ayodhya, Banaras, and other South Asian pilgrimage places which become important for pilgrims as sites where for instance some key manifestation of divinity occurred, say where Ram was born, or where death-rituals may be performed, in Navadvip-Mayapur we encounter forms of place-awareness which are cultivated in sites far exceeding and more complicated than physical, geographical ones. So, while Hindu pilgrimage centers often derive their importance from being associated with providing devotees the potential of “crossing over” from the present life to the next, in light of the distinctiveness of Bengal-Vaishnava practices, to which Entwistle’s (1991) account of Vrindavan
as a goal for devotees’ after-life attainment does not do full justice, what has not been fully documented by other scholars is the complexity of Vrindavan’s significance in the ongoing spiritual lives of devotees.

Thus, the main question my book seeks to answer is what sites and senses of place beyond physical geographical ones can do to our notions of space/place, affect, and sanctity. While I build on the anthropology of religion/Hinduism and pilgrimage which foregrounds senses of place in relation to the sanctity of physically located spaces, I argue that this is not all, and attention to complexities of place and affect as interacting dimensions of religious experience, by conceptualizing senses of sacred place interiorized in devotees’ minds and bodies, can contribute to diverse anthropological interests in devotional Hinduism, sacred geography, senses of place, and cultivation of affective interiors of the body and mind. The analyses of the book congeal with increasing nuances as the narrative progresses. Traveling through both exterior and interior landscapes, I show that the practitioner inhabits Krishna’s world through every daily religious practice. The synesthesia that results from the overlap of these different planes of experience confirms the intensely transformative power of Vaishnava ritual processes.

The ways in which Vrindavan is experienced are not homogeneous, however, and there are contestations among devotees about the ideal mode of apprehending celestial Vrindavan. These different place-experiences demonstrate the political complexity and plurality of Vaishnava subjectivities in contemporary Bengal. I demonstrate that different Vaishnava groups, while borrowing from the same discursive tenets of Bengal-Vaishnavism, emphasize opposing interpretations of devotional emotions, how these emotions are cultivated and affectively experienced, and their significant ways of embodying Vrindavan.

For all Bengal-Vaishnavas, reverence for sacred geography begins with physical landscapes. Thus, since Chaitanya is worshipped as the dual incarnation of Radha-Krishna, devotees refer to and sanctify the Nadia region, Chaitanya’s birthplace, as gupta-Vrindavan, where gupta means “veiled.” That is, since Chaitanya is the embodiment of Radha-Krishna’s love, so devotees venerate his birthplace as undifferentiated from Radha-Krishna’s passion-abode, Vrindavan. The notion of gupta-Vrindavan is crucial for this book as both a descriptive and an analytical category and refers not only to Nadia’s landscape but even to interiorized spaces of the body or mind, cultivated and experienced by devotees as Radha-Krishna’s lila-sthal (playground). Referring to these sites as veiled-Vrindavan signifies that they conceal the spiritual/erotic
essence of celestial Vrindavan, which is potentially accessible to those who cultivate appropriate spiritual techniques. Thus, the notion of the veil as covering or obscuring is a metaphor for the perceptions of the devotee before his or her connection with the place or meaning of Vrindavan is brought to light. My central concern in this book is with the techniques and experiences of unveiling and emplacement in these diverse affective spaces, a key dimension of Vaishnava spirituality not generally recognized in the literature on devotional Hinduism.

Different practices help different groups of devotees experience Vrindavan in distinct ritual sites including but far surpassing physical geographies: in different ways of relating to Nadia’s consecrated landscape; through services rendered toward the physical place, Mayapur; in the interiors of the body-mind through sensuous imagination; in corporeal interiors through intense sexual arousal; and through intensely experienced aural sensations of spiritual music. All my informants, though representing different kinds of Vaishnavisms, affirmed that through their different devotional practices, Radha-Krishna’s cosmic presence in Vrindavan becomes prakat (unveiled/apparent) in these very sites. So, while Sax (1990) and Mason (2009, 16–17) have demonstrated, regarding Ramlila in Ayodhya and Raslila in Vrindavan, respectively, that these Vaishnavite theatrical performances carry an emotional import which transports audiences to the corresponding celestial places, for Bengal-Vaishnavas the difference between spiritual reality and theatricality is blurred. Their differential practices claim to manifest Vrindavan in their everyday lives, in their very sites of ritual performances.5

Crucial implications follow from this. While all devotees living in Navadvip-Mayapur consider their physical locales of residence, and the North Indian town of Vrindavan, sacrosanct, some also emphasize potent ways of experiencing celestial Vrindavan’s sacrality in interiorized sites. Thus, one may well be walking on noisy roads and still consider oneself, in one’s imagination, to be in Vrindavan, and one’s imagination in this case is the sacred place, spiritually as important as the physical town or the Vrindavan heavens. Thus, the sense of place for Bengal-Vaishnavas is marked by the potential of constant reproduction or proliferation, and the different levels of this very complex layered geography, from cosmic heavens to physical places to interiorized affective spaces, are all experienced as equally real.

I grew up hearing innumerable Bengali songs which convey the senses of “I carry Krishna in my heart,” “I have stopped searching for
Vrindavan for it is here inside me,” and so on, but I understood only after intensive fieldwork that rather than being merely poetic and metaphoric references these literally derive from Vaishnava experiences of place as interiorized in devotees’ bodies/minds, that is, the sacred place as both sedentary and itinerant, and of Vaishnavas’ devotional selves as both dwellers and travellers. I demonstrate through the different chapters, therefore, that senses of place are not necessarily only embedded in physical locales, and that even when disembedded they are experienced as thoroughly embodied.

In addition to devotees’ experiences of physical geographies, therefore, through the different chapters I also discuss Vaishnava understandings of the place-in-the-body/mind and so on, that is, the body-as-place, the mind-as-place, and the auditory sense as apprehending senses of place. So, while the contemporary anthropology of place and embodiment, following Edward Casey’s (1993) philosophy, is dominated by the idea of body-in-place, my book seeks to extend his formulations by also analyzing cultural constructions and experiences of place in the body, mind, and so on. My analyses have resonance with Gaston Bachelard’s notions of space. In *The Poetics of Space* (1994, xxxvi) he talks about the “topography of our intimate being,” locating the fullest possible experiences of place and space, from the most intimate to the most immense, within the interiority of the self. Thus, he too articulates the notion of a “layered geography” (viii) and demonstrates, especially with respect to imagination, that senses of place can equally be non-physical.

Bachelard’s philosophy, although much lauded, has recently been criticized as subjectivist and mentalistic. Casey (1998, 295) for instance says that Bachelard’s philosophy, or “psychography,” with its emphasis on the “psychical topography and the inner structure of inhabitation,” relies much on ideas of the psyche and does not account for embodied experiences of the body-in-place (1993, 306). In fact, both the anthropology of place and the anthropology of emotions, affect, and senses have recently criticized studies of interiority, primarily on two related grounds: first, that they highlight dimensions of the mind and consciousness rather than embodied experience, and second, that they assume the idea of the autonomous, bounded, sovereign, thinking subject (Ahmed 2004; Hirschkind 2006, 28–29).

However, Bachelard’s ideas hold much relevance for my work in thinking about people’s notions of space and place as both exterior and interior to the self. But in contrast to Bachelard and in agreement with the recent anthropology of place and affect, I show that Vaishnava
place-experiences in every instance are thoroughly embodied rather than relying only on abstract mental dimensions. Also, in many cases these interiorized embodied experiences are intensely affective, that is, they arise from pre-conscious or supra-conscious and pre- or supra-subjective levels of bodily and mental dispositions. As gushes of sensation, these affective excesses overwhelm consciousness and therefore also the sense of subjective autonomy. Thus, I argue that the anthropology of place and affect have much to gain from conceptualizing people’s relations with both external geographies and interiorized spaces of the mind, body, and senses, and I seek to demonstrate throughout the book that interiorized place-experiences, rather than being biased toward the Cartesian dualist category of the mind, are also experienced as thoroughly embodied and affective.

Engagement with the Anthropology of Hinduism

I grew up observing that many fellow Calcuttans from educated, professional, upper-middle-class backgrounds criticize Vaishnavas, calling them over-affected and hyper-emotional at best and debased at worst. They make fun of Krishna’s popular image as the flirtatious lad of Vrindavan; they laugh at how Vaishnavas roll around and cry out with emotion when listening to devotional music describing Radha-Krishna’s spiritual/erotic activities (kirtan), and at their admitting the poorest and low-caste people into their religion. Urban Bengali films have ample comic songs parodying kirtan tunes, and references to fake gurus as almost always Vaishnava. Also, many urban people who disparage Vaishnavas associate them with dirty sexual practices.

These understandings have insistent pasts. The colonial stereotype, especially among the Western-educated Indian elite, was that the heightened emotionalism associated with the worship of Krishna, the lover-god, was improper for zealous nation-building, while the aggressive masculine vigor associated with Ram-worshipping cults was appropriate.6 There was also the Vedantic assertion that Hinduism is high and exalted only when disembodied, and Krishna cults, with their emphasis on erotic love between deities and on sensuous devotion, were seen as licentious.

In colonial Bengal, similarly, the urban, educated middle class (bhadralok) displayed ambivalent responses toward Vaishnavism. While Chaitanya’s charismatic personality was celebrated, the bhadralok had internalized notions of puritanical religiosity via their colonial education,
and a great part of their anxiety centered on the embodied and therefore emasculating tendencies of Chaitanyaite devotionalism. In this milieu, during the late nineteenth century in Calcutta, a Western-educated colonial bureaucrat, Kedarnath Datta, decided to redefine and consolidate a new Vaishnavism which would no longer be associated with what many of his contemporaries represented as excess emotionalism, and which would have urban, upper-caste, educated devotees, instead of its usual influence among rural people and “prostitutes, beggars and untouchables” (Fuller 2003, 207). Datta’s version of Vaishnavism was extremely popular in urban Bengal, and it was the precursor to modern reformist Vaishnava institutions, the Gaudiya Math (established in 1918) and ISKCON (established in 1966). Calcuttans’ opinions of Vaishnavism were in fact tempered by Tagore’s compositions resembling Vaishnava songs and the increasing influence of Gaudiya Math and ISKCON among them.

My fieldwork, however, exposed me to many faces of Vaishnavism. While Mayapur’s religious landscape is permeated with the kind of Vaishnavism represented by ISKCON and Gaudiya Math, the champions of reformist Vaishnavism, this is far from the entire gamut of Nadia’s or rural Bengal’s devotional variety. The river Ganga is like a divider of devotionalism, and on the opposite side, in Navadvip, I found Vaishnava groups which represent wild diversities in celebrating “alternative Krishnas” (Beck 2005). Navadvip’s Vaishnavas have no shame of their sensuous pasts, and retained their intense religions all through the colonial period. Their relationships with Vrindavan are exalted only when affective, their religion considered high only when embodied. Rather than any aggressive masculinist bias, their practices emphasize the need to cultivate feminine subjectivities and moods as Krishna’s lovers or Radha’s handmaidens. So my concerns about Bengal-Vaishnava devotionalism differ from the analytical tropes of older studies of Vaishnavism and Hinduism.

Fuller (2003, 187–91) infers that with the ascent of Kedarnath Datta’s puritanical Vaishnavism as the unequivocal modern progressive fulfillment of religion, ISKCON and Gaudiya Math became most powerful in Bengal, with the marginalization of other Vaishnavas, including traditional Vaishnavas of Navadvip. I argue that his inference has an urban bias toward what he calls the “bhadralok habitus” (203). It is not entirely correct to assume that the predominant form of religion to study in Bengal is that of the puritanical urban minority, since their pursuits are not representative of the wider Bengali religious world.
However, my focus on the emotive articulations of bhakti, while primarily built on ethnographic evidence, is also heavily influenced by the philosophical history of Vaishnavism. Bengal-Vaishnavism ascribes singular importance to the worship of Krishna’s “sweeter” moods (madhurya), as opposed to his kingly warrior moods (aishwarya), and accordingly to cultivating emotional relationships with him. Hardy (1983) argues that “emotional Krishna bhakti,” a later historical development, evolved with the popularity of the Bhagavata Purana, as the psychological merger of aesthetic, erotic, and ecstatic devotional levels. Intellectual, non-emotional bhakti which focused on yogic concentration on the divine, as propounded in the Gita for instance, received more scholarly attention, however.

But studies of Hinduism which downplayed emotion severely restricted its epistemological possibilities. It is important to recognize the productive analytical capacity of emotion, especially when it is the structuring principle of religion, as in Bengal-Vaishnavism, while also to avoid reified understandings of emotion, by highlighting traditions of debate over it.

The distinctiveness of Bengal-Vaishnavism is that the different groups constitute an intensely competitive topography of contested emotions, each claiming to represent the ideal mode of being Vaishnava. Their debates include contestations over the best way to experience the sacred place, the best way to love Radha-Krishna and place themselves in relation to their sexuality, and the role of the body in devotion. So the situation in Navadvip-Mayapur differs from that of Ayodhya and Vrindavan described by van der Veer (1987, 1989) and Brooks (1989), where inherently very different modes of religiosity—of feminine/ecstatic and militant, and of modern (ISKCON) and traditional varieties, respectively—cohabit peacefully.

My ethnography thus posed the crucial question central to studies of debated traditions of religion, that is, who is a “true” Vaishnava, or which mode of religiosity is “true.” This question of authenticity can be viewed through three possible lenses, and each suggests that all forms of Bengal-Vaishnavisms are equally true, and thus that the search for authenticity is a non-question in the first place. First, in terms of religious truth as textual fidelity, all groups of Bengal-Vaishnavas borrow heavily from the same discursive corpus, especially the Bhagavatam, the Gita, and Chaitanya Charitamrita, Chaitanya’s chief biography, although they offer different interpretations of the texts. Second, since all groups maintain strict self-definitions as Vaishnavas and in fact as
the only true representatives of Vaishnavism, I follow the anthropo-
logical impulse of taking people's narratives seriously, and theorizing
their claims to ultimate legitimacy. Third, if truth is understood in
terms of the immediate effects which religion has, then the practices
of all kinds of Vaishnavas impact the real corporeal bases of devotees’
 bodies and sensibilities. This thread proves to be most critical in the
book’s analyses.

My specific engagements with the anthropology of Hinduism
thus range from issues concerning the relation between devotion and
embodiment—including sensory dimensions of bhakti explored through
religious music, feminine modes of worship, and dimensions of tantric
religiosity—to issues of modern globalized religions and long-standing
traditions of pilgrimage. Also, while it has widely been asserted that
South Asian devotional traditions are associated with intensely corporeal
and sensuous apprehensions of the divine, this book deals with the abso-
lute specifics of how exactly the devotees’ sensuality and sexuality inter-
act with their senses of sacrality. Unlike what has been explored in earlier
studies, I deal with nuanced details of how different kinds of Vaishnavas
use their bodies, minds, and senses, in both similar and starkly dissimilar
ways, to establish relations with Radha-Krishna, and to sense the sacred
place, Vrindavan; that is, how they construct and experience multiple
(and contested) Vaishnava subjectivities.

My exploration of the intrinsic and intricate relations among senses of
place, affect, and devotion also contribute to two related and persistent
debates in the history and anthropology of (South Asian) religions: that is, what enables the continuity of some South Asian devotional
traditions over centuries (in this case, four centuries), and more gen-
erally, how religious discourses sustain and perpetuate themselves in
and through bodily practices. These, however, are issues which I raise
in the conclusion of the book, issues which help me analyze the respec-
tive conditions of experience which constitute the simultaneous impor-
tance, popularity, and continuity of the extremely different kinds of
Bengal-Vaishnavisms. In concluding my work, I argue that despite radi-
cal differences among them, common to all Bengal-Vaishnava groups
is a proliferative impulse which is embodied in and strengthened by
their different practices of place-experience and affective community
formation. The most complex practices of each of the Bengal-Vaishnava
groups are worth book-length analyses, and an ethnographic compari-
son in a single work of all the different religious perspectives they bring
forth has hitherto not been attempted.
Navadvip is one of the oldest Bengali towns, known since the medieval period as a center of Sanskrit learning and the dwelling-place of famous Vaishnava practitioners (Mondol 2002; Radi 2004). All Bengalis immediately associate Navadvip with traditional, knowledgeable Vaishnavas. Today it is a municipal town with primarily a lower-middle-class population, and like other Bengali towns, it is small, and not as developed or well-equipped as the cities. It is better-off than the surrounding villages in Nadia, however. It has very narrow lanes with open drains and old houses, and the town center is bustling with busy marketplaces and loud, honking rickshaws. Small schools, municipality offices, sweet-shops, and shops selling brass and handloomed products, Navadvip’s traditional industrial goods, are common all over the town. Dotted over the entire town, almost in every narrow lane, with maximum concentration in the area between the main railway station to the south, another railway station to the west, and the riverbanks or ghats to the east, are more than hundred temples and ashrams, and Navadvip has a busy pilgrimage life all year.

Generally close to the town center and amid busy pilgrimage routes are goswami temples with centuries-old idols of Radha-Krishna, Chaitanya, and/or his important associates. One of the four major sets of devotee-followers of distinctive Vaishnava traditions I studied were the goswamis, who are economically relatively comfortable by semi-urban standards, often college-educated, married, householder Brahmin-priests, who own and live within their large temple compounds, or in well-built houses adjacent to the temples. They claim to be blood descendants of Chaitanya’s important associates, and this makes them gurus of utmost importance. They have innumerable disciples in the outskirts of Calcutta, in the towns and villages of many North Indian states, including West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and even in Bangladesh.

The two goswami lineages which dominate Navadvip are descendants of Chaitanya’s brother-in-law, and Chaitanya’s major associate, Nityananda. Both date back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and each claims 300–350 members in Navadvip. Although they do not constitute a very big proportion of the town’s population, goswamis are most respected among people as very scholarly and representative of traditional Vaishnavism. Most goswamis earn their living from temple fees paid by pilgrims, and oratory on sacred Vaishnava texts, and these days many members of goswami families are also occupied
in nonreligious and medium-paid jobs like clerical services and school teaching, and some in higher-paid jobs in Navadvip, Calcutta, and other towns and cities. Many goswamis perform puja and are invited to render discourses on spiritual topics from the Bhagavatam, Gita, and Chaitanya’s biographies in different temples and devotees’ houses in Vaishnava-predominant places such as Bengal, Vrindavan, and Puri, and devotee-listeners pay voluntary sums during these occasions. Goswami women mostly take care of their homes, but like their husbands, can be gurus to initiated disciples.

Mostly away from the town center, in isolated quiet areas, are small ashrams known as Vaishnava akhras, meaning places for spiritual discussion, where ascetic renunciate men known as babajis live in small groups. It is difficult to exactly quantify how many hundreds of babajis live in Navadvip. In addition to the basil-seed necklaces (tulsi-mala) and vertical forehead designs made of clay (tilak) which are common to all Vaishnavas, babajis wear a white loincloth (dor-koupin) and carry a white or grey shawl. They are mostly poor, and in some ashrams I have seen wealthy devotees donate blankets to them during winter. Babajis are initiated into Chaitanyaite-Vaishnavism through senior renunciate gurus, and like goswamis, claim that their spiritual lineages date back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century. They live relatively secluded lives doing ashram work throughout the day and dedicating most of their time to personal spiritual practice. Some akhras are also temples and run on pilgrims’ donations. Many babajis maintain the tradition of Vaishnava vairagis (renouncers) and go begging in Navadvip. Those goswamis and babajis who are more popular as gurus are away from Navadvip for extensive periods, rendering sermons and preaching in different areas of Bengal, Assam, Bangladesh, and so on.

Apart from economic disparities, the main difference between goswamis and babajis is that goswamis are householders and babajis, renunciates. Thus one is born into and initiated in a goswami family, but one joins a guru to become a babaji, and goswamis wear the brahmanical sacred thread while renouncer-babajis denounce the caste system. Despite this, these two Vaishnava groups generally share peaceful relations. They together claim to represent Chaitanya’s authentic teachings, and have similar religious practices, which I document and analyze in this book. Babajis invite important goswamis to festivals in their akhras, and vice versa. However, both groups despise another group claiming to be Vaishnava, the sahajiyas, who also feature significantly in my study. They refused to even talk much about sahajiyas. During our conversations
they repeatedly emphasized that *sahajiyas* “do dirty things” and that due to them Vaishnavism “got a bad name among educated people.” They kept saying, “*Sahajiyas* don’t live in our Navadvip. They are not Vaishnavas at all.” “Their” Navadvip is identified as a sanitized sacred space belonging to *goswamis* and *babajis*, while *sahajiya*-Vaishnavas indeed live in the town’s outskirts.

All along Navadvip’s railroad tracks, partly within Nadia and partly in the adjacent district, Bardhamman, *sahajiyas* live in thatched huts. They belong to Bengal’s lowest castes and classes, and own no major temple. It is difficult to assess their exact numbers, although they say there are roughly around 250 (or more) couples in the area. Thus, although fewer in number than *goswamis* or *babajis*, they have a substantial presence. *Sahajiyas* are repudiated by others because they are the only Vaishnava group in Bengal which allows women to take renunciation and permits cohabitation with partners even after renunciation. Thus, householder and renouncer *sahajiyas* follow similar lifestyles, and very often men and women cohabit without getting married. *Sahajiyas* live very modest lives. Renouncer *sahajiyas* mostly go begging (*madhukori*) in the mornings to nearby villages, and some earn money through ad hoc masonry, farming, and so on. Those *sahajiyas* who are gurus have innumerable disciples in rural Bengal, and earn by lecturing on Bengal-Vaishnava scriptures in the rural interior.

Nadia’s look and feel changes completely, however, as one crosses the river to Mayapur. Mayapur is a small, quiet, serene, and clean village with large stretches of green fields. In 1894, Kedarnath Datta identified a particular spot in Mayapur as Chaitanya’s birthplace and built a temple there—in opposition to a group of *babajis* who insisted that the birthplace was in Navadvip (see chapter 2). Since then Mayapur has witnessed a rapid increase in pilgrimage and the growth of a series of massive, glossy temples, and in the late 1960s the Vaishnava guru A. C. Bhaktivedanta popularized in America the reformed Vaishnavism initiated by Kedarnath Datta, founded ISKCON, and declared its headquarters in Mayapur. ISKCON’s devotionalism also occupies an important position in my book.

ISKCON has thousands of devotees all over the world, and middle-class and rich followers in Indian cities, who donate huge sums of money and contribute to Mayapur’s and ISKCON’s development of sites and spaces, which need effective management, embellishment, and upkeep. A large number of foreign devotees live in ISKCON’s headquarters enclosure. Unprecedented in any other East Indian village, amidst the
rural ambience, ISKCON, in addition to its colossal, opulent temples, offers its resident-devotees and pilgrims posh guest-houses, fast-food restaurants, ATM facilities, and international education.

The Navadvip-Mayapur region is thus an interesting complex of varied religious, social, and economic differences.

Nadia’s Vaishnava population and pilgrimage have increased significantly since the 1970s. This is both because of ISKCON’s establishment and because a number of sahajiyas and babajis migrated here from Bangladesh after the 1971 war. Nadia shares a border with Bangladesh on its east, and a significant number of refugee Vaishnavas chose Navadvip because of its age-long reputation as an important Vaishnava center. Although Nadia already had a thriving Vaishnava culture, it witnessed a sudden vibrancy in the competitive socio-religious topography, with greater numbers of goswamis, babajis, sahajiyas, and ISKCON devotees beginning to inhabit a concentrated geography, embodying different kinds of Vaishnavisms, and claiming to be ideal representatives of the religion. All four of the Vaishnava groups I discuss in the book derive their chief means of economic and religious sustenance from increasing numbers of disciples, and claims to the best form of Vaishnavism serve as important means to attract disciples. Each group articulates similar religious principles while displaying subtle mechanisms of explaining the others’ interpretations as at best inadequate and at worst illegitimate.

Despite sharp economic discrepancies, however, no Vaishnava group has been able to displace the religious/social authority of the others. This is because rather than economic wealth, many disciples seek in their gurus scriptural knowledge, emotional intensity, and/or the capacity to teach devotees how to experience Vrindavan. Different Vaishnava groups appeal to different kinds of devotees. While ISKCON is more popular among the urban elite and international patron-devotees, goswamis and babajis have some devotees in Calcutta and in Bengali towns, mostly among those who are not extremely well-off but are educated and who relate to the traditional, scriptural Vaishnavism these groups represent. They also have substantial numbers of disciples, comparable to the massive extent of sahajiya popularity, in rural Bengal. While ISKCON can boast of worldwide popularity and influence as a globalized religious movement, goswamis and babajis boast of their long genealogy of past gurus and tremendous scriptural knowledge, and sahajiyas, of their strong religious convictions and ever-increasing popularity in rural Bengal.
Despite their differences, Vaishnava groups are marked by an ideological equality which this book explores in detail: their competitive relations in asserting ritual superiority as being “true” Vaishnavas. Also, although all my informants recognized that Vaishnavism is a distinct Hindu *sampradaya* (sect/tradition), they consider this more of a factual detail, and are rather more comfortable with the notion of Vaishnavism as an experiential disposition and mode of personhood marked by ego-effacement, humility, and an intense relationship with Radha-Krishna in Vrindavan.

**Senses of Place**

Nadia’s landscape, known as *gupta*-Vrindavan, is revered by all Vaishnavas as the abode of Chaitanya’s and thereby Radha-Krishna’s earthly manifestation, and every Vaishnava group experiences emotive attachment toward the sacred lands in ways that are particular to their varied modes of devotional self-definition. Practitioners express their love of the landscape through historical and mythical stories about temples/ashrams they own in the landscape. In chapter 2, I seek to demonstrate that there are inherent relationships between the devotional self-experiences of contesting Vaishnava groups and the narrativized landscape which is inhabited and constituted simultaneously through the telling of these stories. There are conflicts among Vaishnava practitioners over their claims to Nadia’s physical topography, which also reflect debates about true modes of embodying devotion. The location of Chaitanya’s birthplace, for instance, has been disputed between Mayapur Vaishnavas and a group of Navadvip *babajis* since the late nineteenth century. Also, all Vaishnavas (except *sahajiyas*, who own no temple), emphasize the paramount importance of their own temples/ashrams and their histories, as embodiments of their kinds of devotion, and this serves as a most important method of attracting pilgrims to become their potential disciples in the economic and political competition for sacred space. Pilgrims flock to Nadia from various parts of Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Vrindavan, Orissa, and now, thanks to ISKCON’s influence, from other parts of India and the world. Due to their unrelenting affection for the consecrated lands, however, pilgrims, in the last instance, instead of being caught up in these political debates over specific sites, exhibit passionate engagement with the entire landscape.

My most distinctive revelation during fieldwork, however, was that Vaishnavite devotional life in Bengal is characterized by an immense
Chapter 1

diversity of ways in which the sacred place, Vrindavan, is conceptualized and experienced, of which historicizing and narrativizing the physical landscape is only one component. Vaishnavas also choose to experience the sacrality and passions of Radha-Krishna’s love in Vrindavan in other ritual sites. The mark of spiritual ascendancy, most Vaishnavas assert, is in witnessing Radha-Krishna and glimpses of Vrindavan within themselves, that is, in sensing the sacred place within themselves. Which group identifies and cultivates which site as veiled-Vrindavan, that is, what unveils itself as the ideal location for spiritual emplacement, is determined according to practitioners’ varying social and political positions.

Goswamis and babajis have spiritual practices in common and take great pride in the fact that they have preserved these practices, consolidated by their spiritual ancestors, continuously since the medieval period. An important aspect of this pride is in their claimed sanitization of religion. They reiterate how after Chaitanya’s death a number of religious groups (such as sahajiyas) developed which misinterpreted Vaishnava teachings to foreground “dirty,” indulgent practices. They practiced sex with gurus and identified coital pleasure with experiencing the same erotic pleasures as Radha-Krishna. Goswamis and babajis define their spirituality in clear opposition to these groups. However, they admit that the best way to sense Vrindavan pleasures is to experience divine passions. In chapter 3, I analyze how they resolve this contradiction by locating Vrindavan in their imagination, imagination deemed to be passionately embodied without being carnal. They emphasize that devotees must rejoice in divine sensuality by vividly imagining Radha-Krishna’s erotic lilas (love-plays), but that direct sexual experience must be reserved for the deities. Thus, they imagine themselves as Radha’s young handmaidens, who arrange Radha-Krishna’s secret erotic trysts in Vrindavan’s forests, and even witness them in detail, but never desire similar relations with Krishna. They say that this is the best way to experience erotic passions without allowing them to disrupt a devotee’s humility. They regard their manas (the intermediate space between mind and heart) as the ideal spiritual site, veiled-Vrindavan, which unveils the deities’ lilas in every passionate detail through disciplined imagination. Thus they say “ei manase Vrindavan prakat hoy”: Vrindavan becomes apparent in the mind-heart; or simply, the mind/heart is Vrindavan.

All Vaishnavas are socialized into a common discursive theme, an analytical distinction devotees are taught to make, and which I heard
being reiterated an ample number of times by gurus during morning and evening classes on Vaishnava scriptures in Nadia temples. This distinction is between *vaidhi bhakti* (disciplined devotion), the daily ritual discipline devotees must commit to—for instance, listening to *Bhagavatam* explanations from gurus, chanting deities’ names, performing *puja*, and so on—and *raganuga bhakti* (passionate devotion), which develops after sustained practice of disciplined devotion and refers to emotional relationships devotees cultivate and experience in relation to Krishna. These may be in the mood of Krishna’s mother, cowherd friend, servant, or Radha-Krishna’s friend-handmaiden who rejoices in their erotic pleasures. Bengal-Vaishnavas consider the last variety to be spiritually the most rewarding. Like other key discursive concepts, Bengal-Vaishnavas borrow the distinction between *vaidhi bhakti* and *raganuga bhakti* from the theorizations of Rupa Goswami, one of the chief theologians and aestheticians deployed by Chaitanya to consolidate Bengal-Vaishnava philosophy in the sixteenth century. In Rupa Goswami’s classificatory framework of *bhakti*, both *vaidhi* and *raganuga* constitute *sadhana bhakti*, devotion which is born from active effort (De 1986, 171–73; Haberman 2003, 19).

Clearly, *goswamis’* and *babajis’* practice of witnessing Radha-Krishna’s passionate activities in their imagination is an expression of *raganuga* devotion. However, the group they define their practices against is the *sahajiyas*, who make identical claims of embodying *raga*-nuga devotion and experiencing intense sensual delight. Yet, although embodying the same Vaishnava discourses, their practices are radically different, and all other Vaishnavas detest them as morally repugnant. *Sahajiyas* live a life confined to themselves. They do not flag their identities as *sahajiyas* when they go begging, and if any other Vaishnava identifies a person as a *sahajiya*, they avoid her at all costs. While Mayapur’s ISKCON devotees do not interact with Navadvip’s *goswamis* and *babajis*, their social lives have some inevitable crossroads, for instance when ISKCON brings pilgrims to visit some important *goswami* temple, or when, during my fieldwork, *goswamis*, *babajis*, and ISKCON all concurred in their criticism of a Bengali film that had just been released and which made fun of Vaishnavas in a particular song. But *sahajiyas* are a glaring absence on all such occasions.

For their part, however, *sahajiyas* claim to be the true Vaishnavas. They draw a distinction between the practices of *goswamis*, *babajis*, and ISKCON—which they call *shushko bhajan* (dry worship)—and their own practices, *ras-er sadhan* (juicy worship). For instance, *sahajiyas* associate
the goswami-babaji practice of experiencing Vrindavan in imagination, or imagining deities’ erotic encounters, with indirect intuitions of Vrindavan and therefore inferior devotional experiences. Sahajiyas, in contrast, cultivate and venerate their physical bodies as gupta-Vrindavan and claim to unveil and directly experience Radha-Krishna’s passions in Vrindavan within their corporeal interiors, through yogic breathing routines, ingestion rituals, and sexual relationships with partners and gurus. Rasa means “viscous juice” and is interpreted by other Vaishnavas aesthetically as concentrated love toward Radha-Krishna. But sahajiyas emphasize that the best way to embody divine love is to interpret Vaishnava philosophical concepts as literally as possible. Thus, they understand rasa to mean male and female bodily excreta like sperm, menstrual blood, and urine, each of which is an embodiment of deities according to them, and in exchanging these body-fluids among themselves through yogic sex or ingestion, Vrindavan love, as fluid, flows among devotees’ bodies. Thus, sahajiyas say “ei dehe-i Vrindavan”: Vrindavan is in the body-itself; or simply, the body is Vrindavan. I analyze sahajiyas’ experiences of the body-as-place in chapter 4.

While many studies view sahajiyas and other similar Bengali religious groups as “subaltern” and their practices resistant to ideological intervention by mainstream religious groups, my fieldwork rather suggests that Navadvip’s sahajiyas are religious actors in an equal, competitive political field, where every Vaishnava group claims to be the best representative of Vaishnavism. Sarkar (2011, 347) uses the term “affective subalternity” to describe the devotional experiences of an eighteenth-century low-caste Vaishnava group in Bengal. My sahajiya friends, however, associate their affect with devotion but not any subaltern location. Thus, I avoid paradigms of subalternity when discussing the sahajiyas.

My strategy had been to work in Navadvip with goswamis, babaji, and sahajiyas first, and then do fieldwork in Mayapur. I worked in a milieu of extreme mutual disparagement, with each group claiming to be the true Vaishnavas and viewing the others with suspicion. All Vaishnavas more or less took for granted that I should study only their practices, the only true Vaishnavism(s). So I had to maintain diplomacy in not letting any group feel that for me they were analytically only as important as the others. I worked with one group at a time, giving them my full attention and the time to become familiar with me and discuss their philosophy and practices, and giving myself the time to understand their most complex devotional experiences.
Working with ISKCON in Mayapur after working in Navadvip was interesting since ISKCON devotees stress the absolute inappropriateness of passionate devotion in contemporary times. They assert that all Navadvip Vaishnavas are on different levels of esoterism which unnecessarily complicate devotion. I show in chapter 5 that contrary to the specialist emphases of the other Vaishnavas and their esoteric practices of the body and mind which require long periods of intense training and practice, ISKCON emphasizes a religion that is clear, pragmatic, and definitely non-esoteric, and which has the utmost capacity to communicate with all sections of society. Bhakti, according to them, should be a form of regular ritual discipline (vaidhi) rather than passionate embodiment (raganuga). They admit the theoretical importance of raganuga bhakti, but insist that only very elevated personalities can practice it or even discuss it. Thus, rather than experiencing Vrindavan pleasures within their mental or corporeal interiors, they experience the pleasures of serving Radha-Krishna in Vrindavan by collectively serving the physical veiled-Vrindavan, Mayapur, which is both the earthly manifestation of celestial Vrindavan and the site of the devotees’ physical residence. Thus, ISKCON devotees envision perfect devotion as disciplined and lavish services toward the deities’ physical abode, for instance building huge temples and beautifying them, developing the roads in Mayapur for pilgrims, providing basic food and education to poor villagers, publishing high-quality devotional books and journals, and encouraging more and more people to become Radha-Krishna’s devotees by preaching Krishna Consciousness all over the world from Mayapur, ISKCON’s headquarters.

Navadvip’s Vaishnavas consider ISKCON spiritually immature, commercialized, even fake. They say that their own religions are capable of moving beyond the veneration of physical lands to more subtle, sophisticated, and elevated senses of the spiritual place, while ISKCON remains confined in superficial indicators and early devotional stages. However, ISKCON devotees, like other Vaishnavas, emphasize the absolute importance of affective identification with Radha-Krishna. While they assert that devotional emotions must not be passionate to the extent that devotees engage with the deities’ sexuality, they also emphasize the need to love Radha-Krishna in the most embodied and subservient ways. Thus, for instance, all ISKCON devotees congregate every evening in the main temple in Mayapur’s headquarters enclosure to sing and dance together, staring at the life-size idols of Radha-Krishna; and unfailingly, these musical sessions end up being most
sensuous and ecstatic, with devotees vigorously jumping together and shouting the deities’ names.

Indeed, despite marked differences among Vaishnavas with respect to their place-experiences and understandings of devotion, music is absolutely central to all Vaishnavas’ religious lives. Vaishnava sacred music, *kirtan*, refers to two distinct practices in the Bengal-Vaishnava context, which I analyze in chapter 6: repetitive chanting of the deity-consort’s names—either mentally to oneself, keeping count on one’s *jap-mala* (chanting-bead necklace), or musically in groups—and songs performed by trained musician-devotees for devotee-audiences. These songs’ lyrics explicitly describe Radha-Krishna’s passionate activities in Vrindavan. All Vaishnava devotees agree that both forms of *kirtan* manifest Vrindavan’s sensory bliss in the very site of sonic utterance, transforming it into celestial Vrindavan. They have a common saying that “*nam o nami abhinna*”, the name and the named are the same: uttering the deities’ names (or activities) makes them apparent in the site of naming. So they say, “Wherever there is *kirtan*, there is Vrindavan,” signifying yet another way in which the sacred place is experienced, that is, heard through music. This reminds one of Feld’s (1996, 91) assertion that perceptual experiences are central to conceptualizations of place. When devotees congregate to chant Radha-Krishna’s names, ecstatic rhythms are played on drums, the continuously escalating music is swayed to by participants, and the entire sonic atmosphere creates the most sensually pleasurable experience. This explains why every site in which communal singing takes place is revered as Vrindavan, Vrindavan itself imagined to be the site of the utmost spiritual and sensuous ecstasy.

**THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS**

So, through the next five chapters of the book I document and analyze five different senses of place, five ways in which Vrindavan is experienced by different Bengal-Vaishnavas. My fieldwork sensitized me to a myriad different ways in which a sacred place may be conceptualized and experienced: as an embedded geographical locale where devotees live and pilgrims visit; as complex working of imagination, written in practices of the body, heard through music, and desired as an after-life destination. Thus, mappable external physical geographies may not be exhaustive of senses of place. Bengal-Vaishnavas foreground practices through which the sacred place is literally felt everywhere: in interiorized
spaces (of the mind-heart or body), outside the body in the landscape, and on the body-surface as sensations on the skin. This all-pervading dimension of place-experience renders the body’s boundaries porous, that is, it engenders the body’s capacity to open itself to both the place outside and the place inside.

In analyzing Vaishnavas’ place-experiences, I have been influenced by phenomenological approaches to place-studies and the anthropology of emotions, affect, and senses.

People’s experiential relations with the places they inhabit have been theorized by philosophers and anthropologists for a long time. Influenced by Heidegger’s (1975) emphasis on the absolute centrality of the dwelling experience, Casey (1993, 315; 2001) formulated the idea of “implace-ment,” or inhabitation in the place-world. Casey, however, criticized Heidegger’s general formulation of being-in-the-world as vague and dis-embodied and argued for replacing it with the more concrete and situated notion of being-in-place, thus highlighting the necessary relations between the body and place (1993, xv, 313, 1998, 292, 2001). A plethora of phenomenological approaches to place followed in anthropology—phenomenology defined in this case as ways in which people experience and understand the places they inhabit (Tilley 1994, 11, 2008).

My ethnography shows not only that place-experiences may be embodied and debated but also that places, when felt in imagination, body, or through music, rather than being limited to bounded physical geographies, acquire the unique capacity of mobility. Vrindavan is experienced both in Nadia’s physical lands and as travelling with the devotee in her imagination, or body, or musical sensibilities, as the case may be. Thus, my work avoids both homogenized and static approaches to place-experiences. I agree with anthropologists who have cautioned against emphasizing overtly bounded notions of place. Appadurai (1988) and Rodman (2003) suggest for instance that paying attention to people’s own contested senses of place or “multilocalities” helps avoid enclosed ideas of place.

However, while the anthropology of place mostly focuses only on senses of external physical spaces, some have hinted at other possibilities. Thus, Bender and Winer (2001, 6) point out that while we live in one place, there are others in hearsay and imagination, and Dawson and Johnson (2001) show that migration is as much a cognitive movement as a physical one, thus arguing that movement need not always mean physical dislocation. Yet anthropology largely remains confined to studies of external spaces, and this also stems from philosophical traditions.
which are critical of exploration of spaces interior to the individual. For instance, by “topoanalysis” Bachelard (1994) referred to the study of “sites of our intimate lives,” by which he meant senses of place interior to the self. Casey’s (1993, 103) critique of Bachelard’s approach to place-experience is similar to his critique of Heidegger’s formulations as being inadequately embodied. He says that Bachelard’s focus on interiority is mentalistic, and argues for instance that imagination can provide no genuine sense of inhabitation. Thus, Casey primarily foregrounds the importance of understanding the body-in-place, that is, the body’s intimate relations with external places it inhabits.

However, my fieldwork material, as discussed above, suggests that Bachelard’s analyses are most relevant. So I argue that an anthropologist must be sensitive to and document people’s own senses of place-experience, including when they are conceptualized as interiorized spaces. Thus, in this book I analyze how devotees cultivate and experience their minds-as-places, bodies-as-places, and so on. My work seeks to contribute to the anthropology of place by showing how places can have all-pervasive or enveloping relationships with people, with the capacity to affect both how people negotiate with external physical topographies and how they experience senses of place as interior to them. Extending Bachelard and influenced by Casey, however, I also show how interiorized place-experiences are intensely embodied.

By bringing together dimensions of place and embodiment, my book thus also contributes to classic issues concerning the study of South Asian sacred places. While the academic common sense has mostly concerned itself with the study of either pilgrimage places central to the devotional cartography of South Asia or the theological dimensions of imagined after-life destinations, a careful analysis of the ways in which Vrindavan is embodied and even internalized within devotees’ bodily and mental capacities, and sexual and auditory senses, shows that notions of cosmological spaces do not necessarily remain only distant and abstract. The sense of sacred place, or emplacement in Vrindavan, becomes synonymous with cultivating devotional capacities of the body and mind as well. Vrindavan becomes not only a Vaishnava’s constant companion but also the central marker of her subjectivity. It is this interface of place and affect, the all-pervading experience of a soteriological destination, which defines faith in the context of Bengal-Vaishnavism.

My analyses of the extremely diverse and intensely sensuous place-experiences (which are sometimes conceptualized as external reality and sometimes introjected into inner sensory capacities of the religious
subject) also engage centrally with anthropological debates on emotions and affect. The general understanding is that words can be translated, but emotions cannot (Leavitt 1996, 515). This raises the crucial question for an anthropologist: how to understand another’s emotions.

Throughout my fieldwork and after, I kept trying to understand whether Vaishnavas’ relations with Vrindavan are emotional, that is discursively constituted, or affective, that is felt as more spontaneous experiences. Analyzing the case of ISKCON was easier since they explicitly stress that love for deities should be manifested as externalized services toward the physical place and not internalized into the recesses of the body-mind. They clearly emphasize that this is what senior gurus teach them and especially what is written in the books of A. C. Bhaktivedanta, their founder guru, which they follow word by word. These books contain details of for instance how devotees should feel for and express their love toward Radha-Krishna. Thus ISKCON devotees make it clear that religious emotions are social prescriptions and therefore rigidly constituted. It was the experiences of the other groups that were difficult to conceptualize.

Imagination, sexual pleasure, and musical ecstasy may be said to have both universal relevance and cultural articulations. Whether emotions are universal in nature or culturally shaped has been a central debate since the 1980s. Foucault (1988) and Asad (1983, 1987, 1993, 83–124, 159–203) represent one end of the debate, arguing that (religious) subjects and emotive and moral dispositions are strictly constructed out of social discourses and disciplinary practices. The constructionists’ influence was substantial in anthropology, and a number of studies followed which, although emphasized the importance of dissolving mind–body binaries and foregrounded the role of bodily practices, argued that emotions are primarily socially/discursively constructed—with however a prime ground for such discursive articulations being bodily practices. Others argued against overtly representationalist paradigms in studying emotional and sensory experiences and put forward diverse approaches to burgeoning studies of embodiment, which try to treat the phenomenological or sensory realities as independent objects of study, relatively distinct from the ideological elements which constitute them. Recently, Wulff (2007) has argued that the above debate has been resolved and that the emerging consensus is that social constructionist and universal (biological) approaches to emotion must cohere.

These debates have also influenced the anthropology of devotional Hinduism. Thus, van der Veer (1989, 464) says that in Hindu culture...
emotions are learned and cultivated through discourse. McDaniel (1989) and Stewart (2005), on the other hand, have demonstrated more spontaneous sensory dimensions of devotional experiences.

Recently, new debates have arisen with respect to the “affective turn” in theory. This perspective may be productively engaged as the most sophisticated interrogation of and afterword to both phenomenological and discursive paradigms. Following the works of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) and Massumi (2002), affect is understood as pre- or non-linguistic, ineffable, visceral, oceanic sensations which overwhelm the subject and are not immediately grasped intellectually by her consciousness. Affect, in other words, is pre-subjective or supra-subjective. While emotions, which are linguistic formulations of already-felt affective sensations on the skin, get conceptually ingrained in consciousness and memory, affect, although sensorily as powerful as emotions, is “faster than the word,” and thus escapes consciousness (Massumi 2002, 4). Affect is pre-conscious because it does not register in the brain (7), and supra-conscious because its intensity is “unassimilable” in any linguistic structure of thinking (5). Thus, the affective domain has “autonomy” from linguistic constructions. However, that is also what makes it a most challenging task to conceptualize and write about affective realities in ethnographic contexts.

Thus, affect theorists avoid paradigms of subjectivism and criticize earlier works on emotion which focused on dimensions of interiority, since interiority is associated with the formation and assertion of a conscious, autonomous self/subject (Ahmed 2004). As do philosophers of place, affect theorists associate studies of interiority with a bias toward Cartesian dualism (especially with respect to the mind and consciousness) and additionally with foregrounding notions of a bounded, thinking subject. Yet, all my interlocutors, despite different senses of place, even interior ones, spoke of thoroughly embodied practices. Indeed, my ethnography suggests that not only may interiorized experiences of place be embodied (that is, not mentalistic and abstract), but they may also be experienced at intensely affective, extra-conscious and supra-subjective levels. Thus, I agree with Halliburton (2002, 1126) that anthropologists should be sensitive to “local phenomenology,” or what Feld (1996, 91) calls “social phenomenology,” that is, context-specific dimensions of knowledge and experience—and with Navaro-Yashin (2009) that affect should be situated and understood within ethnographic contexts, since her interlocutors, like mine, were also vocal about (conceptually contradictory) notions of both embodied emotions and interiority.
However, given these debates variously posed between constructionism and universalism, discourse and embodiment, and emotion and affect, the question I asked myself is whether the various Vaishnava place-experiences are socially constructed or more primal and affective, and the simple answer is that they are both. My interlocutors in the field taught me to think that these academic distinctions and debates often get reworked in ethnographic settings. This is not because they could not relate to my complex questions, but because they felt that the debates were misplaced.

Emotions, all Vaishnavas I know agree, are learned. Reading Vaishnava texts, listening to gurus explain verses from the *Gita*, the *Bhagavatam*, and Chaitanya’s biographies during morning and evening temple-sermons, and discussions among fellow-devotees are important ways of learning how to conceptualize Vrindavan, the analytical differences between disciplined and passionate devotion, the importance of the body’s sensory capacities in feeling the pleasures of serving Radha-Krishna with love, and techniques of experiencing the deities’ passions within themselves. Bengal-Vaishnavism is indeed a thoroughly scripted religion, with discursive specifications and complex classifications of different kinds of emotional states of deities and devotees (McDaniel 1995, 48), which practitioners must learn to understand and cultivate. My informants were extremely eloquent (even about the most intimate matters) and had clarified answers to my questions. Their confidence, however, stemmed from both their immaculate knowledge of Vaishnava literature and the intensely felt immediacy and clarity of spiritual/bodily experiences. Thus, they invoke the concept of *kay-mana-vakya*, or the simultaneous importance of the body, mind, and discourse, in experiencing devotion.

However, there were emotional aspects that were most difficult for me to understand and for them to talk about. Their difficulty, I understood later, was due not to any lack of understanding but to the immediacy and obviousness they associated with ineffable experiences which cannot easily be brought into language. And that is the domain of affect. For instance, I kept wondering whether there is anything specific to the *manas* (mind-heart) which helps goswamis and babajis experience it as the sacred place, Vrindavan, through their imagination. This was something intensely visceral, therefore obvious, and thus a non-question to them. Eventually, one day, after thinking as hard as I was about this question, a senior goswami, my close friend, said, “We remember people. It means we keep them in our minds/hearts. We can
do that because these are also places. It remains to us, whether we can experience it as Vrindavan.” In fact, in Bengali, “to remember” is literally mon-e (in heart/mind) rakha (to keep): to keep in the mind/heart. Similarly, sabajiyas explained that breath and food can “pass through us” because our bodies have a space-like quality. Once, a sabajiya man, amused at my thinking hard about this, said, “But you eat too. Don’t you understand this?” Thus, affective experiences were sometimes not spoken about also because practitioners thought I should easily and automatically understand shared experiential realities. They expected me to “feel along with them” (Leavitt 1996, 530). Feeling along with them, therefore, in this book, I analyze in detail how sensory experiences of sound, breath, and imagination, for instance, are felt by the devotees’ affective interiors.

Thus, one of my main concerns throughout the book is to show that Bengal-Vaishnavas’ varied senses of place are both discursively shaped and affectively experienced. I agree with Cook (2010b) that (ascetic) interiority is engendered through social and disciplinary practices, and with Hirschkind (2006) that discursive practices produce ethical substrates which inform affective behavior. So, in every chapter I analyze varied discursive practices through which senses of place are cultivated. However, I also try to articulate more visceral, ineffable dimensions of those sensory place-experiences. This is also conceptually sustainable since affect is not pre-social. It always carries contextual memories of past socialities in the brain and flesh (Massumi 2002, 8). However, unlike Cook and Hirschkind, I also delve into the “asocial” (8) aspects of devotional affects, and their characteristics which are in excess of social dictates.

So, while both Cook and Hirschkind, in a Foucauldian vein, treat the affective domain as an unambiguous product of discursive techniques, I try to maintain analytical autonomy for both the discursive and affective modalities of religion. I argue not only that the discursive (in)forms and gives articulation to the affective, but also that devotion and senses of place can assert and sustain themselves especially when sedimented in the affective capacities of the body. Although heavily influenced by Hirschkind in this matter, I extend his analysis to argue that the affective may also make the discursive possible and sustainable. My analysis also hopes to especially contribute to South Asian studies, since affect has not yet been adequately theorized in the context of South Asian devotion.

What has however been very well conceptualized in the context of Bengal-Vaishnavism is the link of devotional sentiments with classical
Sanskrit aesthetics. These interpretive frameworks, that is, understanding devotion through the lens of contemporary Western debates concerning emotions/affect on one hand and discussions in Indian philosophy on the other, are very distinct and cannot be compared. I want to make a very rough attempt in this regard, however, for the first time. Common to the religious experiences of all groups of Bengal-Vaishnavas is an intense sensory and aesthetic appreciation of divinity, such that the domains of religion and aesthetics are not really separate. This is what makes Bengal-Vaishnavism interpretable within the discourse on rasa, or the theory of “rasaesthetics.” Bengal-Vaishnavism is extremely rich in its textual heritage, and textual discourses even constitute a central element of the religious practices. Indeed, the terms and discourses all my interlocutors use borrow heavily from rasaesthetics, which they are encultured into through their very active discursive culture of temple sermons by gurus and other collective discussions. They directly referred to many of these texts in discussing their practices with me. For instance, the Chaitanya Charitamrita makes heavy use of the concepts and ideas of Rupa Goswami’s rasaesthetics, and my interlocutors regularly discuss this text among themselves and are thus highly aware of these theoretical frameworks. Thus, a brief discussion of the central ideas of rasaesthetics will help contextualize the discussions of later chapters.

The theology, philosophy, poetics, and aesthetics of Bengal-Vaishnavism developed through the influence of Sanskrit love-poetry and especially Bharata’s poetics. Bhakti rasa developed in this context as the intermediary between the devotional paradigm of the Bhagavata Purana (emotional bhakti or love) and the aesthetic theory of Bharata’s Natyashastra (rasa). While classical rasa theory developed through centuries of debates among scholars like Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Bhatta Nayak, and Bhoja, the most important philosophical sources for Bengal-Vaishnavas are the works of the medieval scholars Rupa and Jiva Goswami. In his magnum opus, Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu (see Haberman 2003), Rupa Goswami tried to formulate and understand devotional sentiments as correlates of forms of pure literary enjoyment described in Sanskrit poetics (rasa), wherein the refined devotee becomes the sophisticated literary connoisseur. More specifically, a direct relationship was established between devotion and erotic sensations.

The two critical terms for rasaesthetics are bhava and rasa. Bhava refers to certain latent or dormant emotive predispositions, which in appropriate poetic/discursive contexts transform into the concentrated...
joy of aesthetic sensations (*rasa*). *Rasa*, which literally means juice or essence, and in this context the taste of divine sensations, is constituted and garnished through different devotional practices and realized as ecstatic sentiments and sensations by the devotee’s refined and cultivated body.

This *rasa*, as a physiological and psychological phenomenon, is most complex. It is a subjective experience, which, while affecting the material senses of a person, is simultaneously, and more significantly, of an impersonal order. Its supremacy as a pure sentiment lies in its sparkling, bright, objective universality. When the dormant emotions receive discursive stimuli and transform to the essence of devotional sentiments, *rasa* “cracks the hard shell of ‘I’” (Haberman 2003, xl). This sensation of *rasa* also eludes contemplation or consciousness in its power of “abundant amazement” (385).

While affect is being thoroughly discussed in other contexts, it has not yet been sufficiently theorized or compared in studies of South Asian devotion. However, I propose not an equivalence but a correspondence, in three ways, between what has been identified in classical aesthetics as *rasa* and what I theorize as affect. First, like affect, *rasa* needs a social context or occasions of repeated discursive practice for its articulation. It is not pre-social. Second, like affect, *rasa*, since it is in excess of contemplation, has an aspect of ineffability. And third, both are incompatible with the sense of an ego or “I,” due to the impersonality of *rasa* and the supra-individuality of affect.

Studying affect ethnographically makes it essential for the anthropologist to place herself in the emotional life-world of her people. My understanding of methodology was significantly reworked during fieldwork. It is possible neither to sit and “observe” nor to “participate” when someone else is imagining, or experiencing the sacred place in her body while having sex. Thus, a great part of my fieldwork benefitted from intimate relationships with people and frequent, long conversations with them. However, my interlocutors expected a different kind of inter-subjective participation from me during our conversations, an intuitive participation that relied on understandings of shared experience. I call this conversing with the body. The word *intuition* is instructive here since it conveys an intermediary sense between conception and sensation. Borrowing rasaesthetic language, I too was a connoisseur who tried to sympathetically partake in devotees’ emotions and sensations: in the vibrations of the bliss of their (im)personal joy. *Goswamis* and *babajis* sometimes suggested for instance that I hear songs vividly
describing Radha-Krishna’s (erotic) encounters before speaking with them the next time. In the subsequent conversation they would want me to first tell them whether I could imagine what was being described in the songs and how I felt about it. Or, *sahajiyas* would literally sit with a straight spine, pull in their breath and show how body-muscles flex and straighten with proper inhalation, and ask me to repeat the process. When they felt I was catching up they would ask whether I felt my breath moving inside me, that is, whether I sensed my own body-as-place.

The distance between my objective anthropological position and Vaishnava experience was narrowed the most during collective musical occasions. I am a singer myself and had immediate interest in *kirtan*. My participations in musical gatherings organized in various temples, devotees’ houses, or roadside *pandals* were therefore more conventionally anthropological than participation in another’s imagination or body. I personally felt the extreme sensuous delight of collective chanting, and my analyses of *kirtan* follow closely from my autoethnographic affective responses to the music. While my reactions to worded songs describing Radha-Krishna’s passions were learned, since throughout fieldwork I had discovered various ways of appreciating the meanings and sentiments of these descriptions, my reactions to chanting sounds were more spontaneous. With the continuously escalating rhythm I found my limbs swaying artlessly, while my eyes remained shut and my lips repeated the deities’ names. When I opened my eyes to see everyone else responding in exactly the same manner, I was convinced of Leavitt’s (1996, 530) notion of the anthropologist’s relations of sympathy, rather than ethnocentric empathy, with her subjects.

Place, discourse, and affect thus form the critical analytical tropes in this book, to revisit persistent questions and concerns centering around Vaishnavism particularly and South Asian devotional traditions more generally.