CHAPTER 3

Imagining in *Gupta*-Vrindavan: Experiencing the Self and Emotions in the Mind-Heart Landscape

INTRODUCTION: PLACING IMAGINATION

The exact moment when the field becomes engraved in the anthropologist’s flesh and dream escapes her. It can only be recalled in reactions, much later. On a fortunate day in Cambridge, I woke up before dawn. Sipping my morning tea I looked out at the sky. The golden sun had just started to brighten the cloud lines. I could immediately “see” that Radha was being woken up by her friends after her nocturnal tryst with Krishna in a Vrindavan forest and quickly sent back home, lest her all-night absence from the house be discovered by her in-laws.1 But before I could enjoy the sight of their waking embraces, my objective self kicked in. I realized I was *imagining*. Yet, just as I was beginning to feel distressed by the clash between professional objectivity and an enraptured spiritual self, I remembered what a *babaji* had told me: “Only when one is blessed with divine grace are one’s subtle senses able to feel Vrindavan *lilas* in the *manas* [mind-heart]. This is not to be confused with *kolpona* [unreal]. It is as true as perception. The *manas gupta*-Vrindavan has manifested the simultaneous events of Vrindavan, right there and right then.”

While the previous chapter dealt with the visible, historicized, articulated and publicly accessible face of Bengal-Vaishnavism in discussing debates on Nadia’s geography, here I document another dimension of the experience of place: the practices of an imaginative landscape in the interiorized affective space of the mind. I analyze the key devotional
practice known as *manjari sadhana* performed by Navadvip’s *goswamis* and *babajis*, in which the devotee’s *manas*, is deemed to be a veiled-Vrindavan, which unveils or manifests Radha-Krishna’s erotic activities in Vrindavan through practices of imagination. Thus, the main aim of this discussion is to document techniques and experiences of transportation to an imaginative sense of unveiled Vrindavan. The way in which this transportation is effectuated is quite specific: it is a process of placing the practitioner’s imagined body and self as a handmaiden of the deities’ erotic *lilas* in a particular kind of imagined space. Radha and Krishna enact their sexual plays in celestial Vrindavan. *Goswamis* and *babajis* claim that through their spiritual practices, these sexual plays manifest in their imagination, or simply that their *manas* or imagination then becomes Vrindavan. Shifting from public narratives of places in historical time-space, this chapter thus analyzes the dimensions of the spiritual place experienced by practitioners as an intensely imagined space of the deities’ divine play as lovers and dispensers of erotic bliss, and a radical form of gendered devotion in which practitioners focus on cultivating feminine subjectivities in order to experience the deities’ *lilas* in imagination.

While Navadvip’s *babajis* and *goswamis* have differences in their daily lives, primarily because *babajis* live in monastic ashrams and *goswamis* in familial householder settings, they both practice this form of imaginative devotion. I have discussed *goswamis’* and *babajis’* different ways of engaging with the pilgrimage industry. But the way they treat pilgrims and aspects of physical landscape, and the way they practice imagination, are completely separate realms of life. This chapter is about their inner spirituality as opposed to their relations with pilgrims. Although the details of their esoteric practices are unknown to ordinary pilgrims, it is a part of pilgrims’ devotional common sense that *goswamis* and *babajis* as full-time committed practitioners are extremely knowledgeable about sophisticated Vaishnava practices. *Goswamis* and *babajis* say that their spiritual genealogies date back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that their long-standing tradition of practices and distinctive way of being Vaishnавite were taught by Chaitanya.

In my conversations with them, *goswamis* and *babajis* explained that the physical town of Navadvip is of course most significant since this is where Chaitanya was born, where their gurus lived, and where they practice devotion, but that philosophically there is another equally important if not greater way of understanding and experiencing the
spiritual place: their manas as Vrindavan. Thus, a goswami sitting in his individual worship-room in his house, and a babaji in his personal ashram room, may equally be, in their imagination, in Vrindavan.

However, while the English imagination would usually be translated into colloquial Bengali as kolpona, my interlocutors never used this term to describe their practices, since they associate kolpona with unreality, and their own practice with a true experience of Vrindavan. What they typically say is “manas-e Vrindavan prakat hoy”, “Vrindavan is apparent in the mind-heart,” a process still best captured by the English term imagination. A lot of philosophical and experiential detail is packed into this phrase. It refers to a cultivated spirituality which transforms the mind-heart as veiled-Vrindavan into an unveiled Vrindavan. Practitioners use this phrase to indicate that an entire ensemble which would be called a place, that is, the deities, the celestial space in which they are located, and the devotees’ selves as handmaidens serving them during their erotic moments, together becomes manifest or present in the mind-heart. Thus, while there is a definite aspect of visualization or formation of mental pictures involved here, the word imagination in this case also needs to be readjusted, since the practice is not just about attaining a glimpse of Vrindavan but about bringing the whole place into being, a process which involves not only vision but the entire body’s affective capacities. Thus, in this case the sense of place is intimately connected with imagination’s capacity of making Vrindavan experienced as real. The sense of reality is evident in the term prakat, which means “shining forth” or real or true, rather than unreal in the sense of an illusion or falsity. I therefore argue that in goswamis’ and babajis’ practices, not only is the place imagined but also imagination itself is experienced as the place. So the word imagining in the chapter’s title does not imply the commonsensical idea of “making up” but rather “making apparent” the place—Vrindavan.

Also, therefore, while Basso (1996, 53) says that sensations of the physical landscape are interpolated by imagination, and while “toposemantic” studies imply that an archaeology of landscape will always correspond to an archaeology of imagination (Whitridge 2004, 228), Bengal-Vaishnava practices of imagination are distinctive, in that they do not simply imply a connection between senses of place and imagination but rather show how imagination itself is experienced as the place.

I also analyze the devotee’s experience while journeying to and emplacing herself in imagination, and her emotions as she becomes both a participant and a spectator of her own body-mind practices. Such impersonality
of emotions constitutes the domain of poetic rasa (Haberman 2003, xl), and Haberman (1988, 3) deftly argues that practices of emotional bhakti in Bengal-Vaishnavism generally, and manjari sadhana specifically, depend on the techniques and philosophies of Indian aesthetic theory, especially dramatic experiences and role-playing. Goswamis and babajis claim an exalted form of imaginative participation in divine activities such that sexual dalliance itself is reserved to deities, while they imagine their spiritual selves as the deities’ handmaidens, witnessing and serving them during their sexual play in imagination-Vrindavan and deriving the utmost sensual pleasures therefrom.

The devotee’s imagination follows a predetermined script given by his guru, which describes his perfected spiritual body and personhood in Vrindavan (Haberman 1988, 1–7). My interlocutors referred to this body as the antash-chintita deha (inner-felt-thought body). Irrespective of the practitioner’s gender and age, the self which inhabits the mind-heart is cultivated and imagined as an ego-effaced, subservient, young girl, who remains enraptured in serving the deities’ sexuality. The self’s chief predicament is that it must never desire divine sexuality for itself, while its imagination-as-Vrindavan must manifest the most intensely intimate divine sensuous activities.

Celestial Vrindavan, which manifests in their imagination, is a place of the utmost spiritual beauty, devotees say—with dense forested groves cut across by the rippling river Yamuna; where spring is the eternal season, where spring birds sing melodies and spring flowers are tasted by humming bees; where devotees’ eternally perfected selves as attractive young girls wander and savor the lands and where they serve the divine couple during their passionate love-plays.

Thus, there are three simultaneous senses of place experienced by goswamis and babajis: Navadvip, where they live physically; celestial Vrindavan; and imagination. Devotees consider all these places, and their activities there, equally real. Imagination presents the sense of place in two ways: as a journey and as a destination. Thus, practitioners argue that those whose imagined selves as deities’ handmaidens influence their ordinary selves completely, travel after death to celestial Vrindavan, their after-life destination. Otherwise, even for the temporal span that they imagine intensely, they are transported there. The felt reality of their mind-heart can however be ascribed to the experience of imagination itself as a “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas 1993, 1994, 80), which brings the place into bodily being at every instance of performative utterance.
My interpretations follow closely from devotees’ narrativized practice, since neither participation in nor observation of solitary imagination is possible. Devotees’ interpretations are, however, intensely embodied. Thus, although my analysis is not an exercise in phenomenology, it is influenced by phenomenological approaches to imagination. My anthropological role also involved sympathetic imagination to soften the boundaries of alterity, to travel into another’s body-mind and render the believer’s world in its “sensory richness, philosophical depth, emotional range and moral complexity” (Lambek 2002, 5).

Imagination has received less anthropological attention than other mental processes such as memory, and other categories of affect such as the senses. Influenced by Csordas’s (1994, 74–108) study of charismatic healing in North America, where “imaginal performance” as an embodied process is intimately related to the “autobiographical self process,” I seek to provide a fine-grained analytical account of the synesthetic imaginations which form a central part of Bengal-Vaishnava sadhana. Since I refer to the explanations practitioners themselves offer to narrate emotions of their imaginative landscape, my position comes close to that of Halliburton (2000, 1123), who says in her ethnography of possession experiences in Kerala that locally informed phenomenological philosophies are useful theoretical tools.

Goswamis’ and babajis’ practice of imagination involves prior meditation. While meditation practices are common in other religions, practices of imagination in this case use meditation as a step toward further spiritual goals of emplacement and emotion. Thus, while Buddhist meditative practices aim at cultivating a sense of non-self, and yogic meditation seeks to dissolve the self in the Universal Self or atman,7 both sharing the premise that practitioners must forego their sexuality, my interlocutors assert their difference from such religions which stress meditation, dissolution of the self, and corresponding purging of the sensory body as ends in themselves. A common saying among them goes, “Our sadhana begins where yoga stops.” Vaishnavas emphasize the importance of retaining a qualified self without an ego, whose sexual desire and volition are not eradicated but refashioned to be directed toward Vrindavan deities.

Vaishnavism is indeed a religion of passions, and it celebrates the body’s feeling capacities. It asserts that without intense emotions neither Krishna nor Vrindavan can be apprehended. In general, bhakti traditions do not view renunciation as final detachment from the world but rather as definite attachment to one’s devotional object (Horstmann
Thus, Bengal-Vaishnavas practice meditation and other physical routines as necessary but not sufficient conditions, to cultivate the senses and their creative potential. These constitute the journey toward an embodied imaginative space.

The manas, which means both mind and heart, is gupta (veiled) Vrindavan in this case, and imagination the process through which it manifests the sacred place. So I analyze the mind’s capacity to imagine the place in detail and experience it as real. Thus, developing from anthropological-philosophical debates which question the Cartesian dualism of mind and body (see Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) and those which foreground the notion of body-in-place (Casey 1993), I argue for an understanding of the mind-in-place, and indeed, the mind-as-place. However, in the Vaishnava context, imagination is thoroughly embodied and not an abstract mental process. It is not merely a matter of consciousness, as in Bachelard’s (1994) analysis of interiorized imaginative senses of place, but equally corporeal. The term manas itself points to the equal importance of mind and body, cognition and emotion, in imagination. Thus, I use the word mind as shorthand, in line with Ingold’s (2000, 171) idea of the “embodied mind,” which both develops through practices of and impacts upon the Vaishnava “enminded body.” As Casey (2000, xi) argues, imagination is intimately associated with both emplacement and embodiment.

This then leads to the question: Is embodied imagination emotional—in the sense of being discursively constituted through social and bodily practices—or affectively experienced? In the Vaishnava case, it is both. Imagination is systematically scripted. First, there are detailed bodily practices the practitioner learns from his guru, which cultivate ego-effacement and hone sensory intensities, only after which the devotee is allowed to imagine. Second, there are prescribed rules regarding how and what to imagine, including the devotee’s feminized form of the self and her service to the deity-couple. Third, what practitioners cultivate as embodied spiritual practice is connected with long-standing philosophical discourses which are discussed in sermons and taught by gurus. Vaishnava imagination is therefore a “hypercognised emotion” (Levy 1984, 30) and thoroughly discursive.

However, imagination also has its autonomy and indeterminacy (Sneath, Holbraad, and Pederson 2009, 19; Stephen 1995, 98–99), such that, while governed by strict religious practices, it also has affective creativity which impacts the imaginer’s experience. First, the precise moment when imagination is effective, that is, when exactly the devotee is
able to visualize the sacred place and his aspired form in it, and moments when she experiences novel sights which were not mentioned in the script, are always experienced as totally sudden, and therefore not immediately grasped by her consciousness. This incalculable, unexpected nature of imagination is affective since it overwhelms the sense of subjective sovereignty. Second, imagination deeply impacts the entire physical sensory body in unanticipated ways. In both its pre- or supra-conscious and its visceral aspects, imagination is an affective experience. Thus, goswamis’ and babajis’ interiorized sense of place experienced through imagination is thoroughly embodied and both socially constructed and affectively sensed.

This imaginative sense of place, practitioners assert, is a real experience. This reality is asserted in the sense of both spiritual truth and clarified experience. I made sense of my interlocutors’ interiorized experiences of the mind-heart as place and imagination’s real or apodictic qualities through established studies of imagination.

When viewed as a phenomenological performance, imagination mediates between body and mind, percept and concept, senses and cognition (Casey 2000, 16, 17; Csordas 1993, 148). It also dissolves the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside, and unreal and real. As an “inner enactment,” it reconciles experience and performance (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996, 242). Also, its inherent performativity ensures incessant potential for “eidetic” creativity (Saso 1997, 236). My analysis of Vaishnava imagination will engage with all these different aspects of imagination-as-experience.

Philosophers have often debated imagination’s potential in motivating action (Currie 2002; Funkhouser and Spaulding 2009). However, I concur with Sneath, Holbraad, and Pederson (2009) that imagination must be studied in a non-instrumental way. Thus, I build on the idea of imagination itself as an action, in this case manifesting the place in the devotee’s heart-mind.

Studies of imagination conceptualize it as either recollecting previous perceptions or imagining situations not perceived before (Nichols 2007, 232; Sadoski 1992, 271). Dreamlike in its attributes, its reality or real impact in both cases is asserted in terms of effects it has on the imaginer/dreamer." Indeed, some Vaishnavas say that they were able to witness their feminine selves in Vrindavan for the first time not during *sadhana*, but in dreams. Neither *sadhana* imaginations nor dreams, however, are hallucinatory realms. They are considered spiritual experiences which are more real than ordinary life-experiences. Thus, the Vaishnava sense
of reality cannot only be addressed through phenomenological ideas of real effects on the imaginer’s body-mind.

Bengal-Vaishnavas articulate a unique conceptual position wherein imagination’s reality is affirmed in terms of its material effects on the body and its simultaneous occurrence. Every manifestation moment, they insist, reveals what is then actually happening in eternal Vrindavan. Thus, studies which talk of imagination’s intrinsic sense of reality and real sensory impact on the body, and those which theorize cultural framings of cosmological reality, are both important in this case. So Casey’s (2000, 98, 169) phenomenology is useful insofar as it demonstrates that the element of manifestation or ‘appearing’ that accompanies imagination implies its ‘total transparency’ and affective ‘certainty’ (see also Csordas 1994, 162, 2002, 34). And Mittermaier’s (2011, 12) arguments are particularly useful, since in her study of Egyptian dreams she argues that the conventional divisions between reality and imagination must be rethought. Much like Vaishnavas, Sufis conceptualize imagination as not constructing but perceiving, that is, making present and “tuning in” the divinity that is already present (19). Mittermaier therefore asserts that the anthropology of imagination must pay close attention to how it is conceptualized in different contexts (15).

The Bengali verb *mon-e kora* used by my interlocutors to describe higher spiritual stages reveals the simultaneous senses this chapter analyzes: to practice in the mind-heart, to remember, and to imagine oneself (in Vrindavan).

**Glimpses of the Place and Feminine Selves**

After the heavy monsoon, the onset of winter in October allowed me to spend some relaxed time in Navadvip’s sun-bathed temples and akhras, and to accept several lunch and evening invitations from goswamis and babajis. Some very intriguing discoveries engaged me for most of my time for the next few months. These discoveries began as glimpses, initially. My notebooks were full of these glimpses, and they frustrated me deeply till I made sense of them.

By then I had learned to identify Bengal-Vaishnavas by their adornments—*tulsi malas, tulsi* being a sacred plant considered Krishna’s favorite, and different vertical designs of white or black forehead *tilaks*. *Tilaks* are made from a blend of sandalwood and Vrindavan soil. This soil is distributed among all major Vaishnava pilgrimage-markets by Vrindavan’s shop owners. Devotees explained that Krishna’s lovers
walked on Vrindavan lands and their foot-dust (*pada-dhuli*) was desired by Krishna himself, since his lovers were embodiments of finest feminine love. The soil for a white variety of *tilak* known as *gopichandan* is collected from a Vrindavan pond’s bank, where some lovers of Krishna sacrificed their lives, unable to bear their separation from him when he left Vrindavan. Black *tilaks* are made from another Vrindavan pond’s soil, which is said to have been carved out with Radha’s bangle. The fragrant *tilaks*, sanctified by Krishna’s different names, are used to mark twelve different parts of the Vaishnava’s body as symbols of the erotic Vrindavan lands.

I recognized the *tilak’s* significance during a young *goswami’s* evening sermon. While reading from the *Bhagavatam* to a large group of devotees, he stopped to offer an explanation of a verse and said softly, “*Gopis* [Krishna-lovers] are those who tasted Krishna with all their senses. His name danced on their tongues, their ears heard his flute, their eyes saw those beautiful curls and they smelled lovely flowers on his neck. Like shadows they followed Radha all day and night and arranged her trysts with the dark lord. Keeping their blessings, their foot-dust, on our bodies, we hope to some day taste Vrindavan’s *lilas*.”

As he spoke, there was a marked change from how he spoke when discussing mundane matters: his voice and hand gestures were distinctly more womanly. This is not specific to him. Many practitioners, when narrating divine *lilas*, speak softly with calm, shy smiles, and their body language becomes more feminine. This is a significant dimension of their imagining a female persona for themselves. Also, while they ordinarily speak in colloquial Bengali, when discussing Vrindavan they carefully choose their words, trying to approximate the *Bhagavatam’s* sophisticated and finely detailed descriptions.

The forehead *tilak* is shaped like a U extending from the top of the forehead to the middle of the eyebrows. This is to indicate that devotees’ imaginative experience must always be directed “above” to Krishna’s dwelling and never come “down” to earthly matters. The U also symbolizes a mythological river, crossing which, one travels to Vrindavan. Thus, the devotee’s corporeality is bounded and marked as Vrindavan’s shell. It contains, and waits to manifest, the sacred place.

Similar to all other Hindu temples, *aratis* are offered to the deity-consort in all the hundreds of temples in Navadvip. Navadvip’s *arati* times mirror Radha-Krishna’s *lila* times in eternal Vrindavan. For instance, the first *arati* is performed at around four A.M. to wake the consort; another at six P.M., when the deities sneak out of their houses for a
short tryst; similarly, through the day’s other *aratis*, devotees participate as onlookers in Vrindavan’s cosmic dramas (Hawley 1981, 11). During these *aratis* all Navadvip resounds with cacophonous temple bells, and devotees know immediately what Vrindavan is then experiencing.

In the temple belonging to Manipuri Vaishnavas, before the morning ritual itself, the head priest recites verses commemorating the entire day’s *lilas* in celestial Vrindavan. Samajbari is the only temple in Bengal, however, which commemorates every activity of the deities at appropriate times as mentioned in the *Bhagavatam*. Samajbari’s *aratis* are accompanied by ecstatic devotional singing, the lyrics of which describe the corresponding *lilas*. The more detailed the lyrics, the finer is the listener’s imagination of the divine sensuality being described. Over time I learned that Samajbari’s *babajis* are much respected among *goswamis* and *babajis* since they are very particular about following the correct procedures of commemorating Vrindavan in both temple rituals and imagination.

One time, during the last of these *aratis*, held at midnight, very intimate songs narrating the consort’s entry into Vrindavan’s bowers for their passionate encounter were being sung. The songs described how Radha sneak ed out of her house, how along with her friends she dressed up and went to the forest, how Krishna was waiting impatiently for her, and what Radha-Krishna felt and did when they finally met. I was trying to follow the lyrics carefully, when a *babaji* said, “Shut your eyes and try to feel the *lilas*. The songs’ meanings will reveal themselves to you. Feeling these songs helps us participate in Vrindavan’s daily life. Our material bodies are here then, but we are with Radharani.” Radharani, or “dearest Radha,” is an affectionate way that *goswamis* and *babajis* often refer to Radha, as if she is someone known personally to them, not only a distant deity. Some devotees, almost unconsciously, also refer to her or Krishna as “*amar* Radharani/Shyam”, “my dearest” Radha or Dark Lord, thus even acknowledging a personal claim (*mamata*) over them.

On my first visit to Samajbari, the same *babaji* took me to a *samadhi* within the temple compound. The *samadhi* has a *sari* draped over it. Over the next few months I came to learn that the deceased is one of the most celebrated Vaishnava personalities. Once, during a festival in their ashram, after enacting a play with other *babajis* in the role of a lover of Krishna in an episode of Krishna’s life in Vrindavan, he became completely engrossed in that mood, and remained thus for the rest of his life. He adopted the *sari* as his permanent attire, and led a woman’s life.
She always covered her head with the sari like modest Hindu women, followed her guru’s instructions, and never left the temple. She dedicated all her time to reading scriptures and composing innumerable songs in the mood of a lover of Krishna. His voice too is said to have changed to that of a woman’s, and some devotees believe that she even menstruated. She is fondly remembered as Lalita Sakhi, Lalita being the spiritual name given by her guru, and sakhi meaning Radha-Krishna’s handmaiden-friend. Babajis revere her as an ideal devotee, and her songs are still sung during daily Samajbari rituals.

Once, while showing me his deity-idols, a goswami, immensely famous as knowledgeable in Vaishnava scriptures and a teacher to many younger goswamis, mentioned with moist eyes how he pampers and scolds them and takes them to his bed at night so that they can sleep soundly. He is otherwise a stern person, and I was taken aback at how easily he cried when talking about his idols. When I expressed surprise at his serving me prasad (food offered to and tasted by deities) without uttering mantras, one of his women disciples said, “You must accept that this is the best form of food-offering. She is always in Vrindavan, and therefore the food comes directly from that wondrous place.” She implied that the food needs no added efficacious utterance to impart power and meaning to it, simply because the devotee-goswami is always in his imagination, in Vrindavan.

On another occasion I saw an elderly man sitting in a temple corner, chanting with basil beads, with eyes shut, and having what would strike an external observer as convulsions. Thinking he was ill, I approached to help, when other temple-residents rushed to stop me. They told me he was in his imagination then in Vrindavan, and the spasms were only external manifestations of that affective state.

During a lunch-invitation at a babaji’s disciple’s house, he allowed me to take photographs of his altar-deities but asked me to stop when he went in to give them bhog (the food-offering). Some time later, as he was about to go into the altar room again to serve dessert, he stood before the door and clapped his hands, as if to let them know he was coming inside, then went in and shut the door. His wife, sensing my confusion, said, “He is in a different place now. She is acting in a mood which suits her.”

In some ashrams it is common to find babajis wearing bangles, bindis, and/or alta. Samajbari has a tradition of priests wearing sari and covering their heads with sari-ends while performing the evening arati. If asked why they do this, they say they are intensely involved in serving (seva) deities during those moments.
During Holi, in the midst of a huge crowd, a babaji stared at the idol of Chaitanya in the Dhameswar temple and shouted, “Why can’t I see my own svarup [essential self]?” I was the only one who found this notable. Other devotees seemed to find his lament both normal and common.

On the main day of Ras, I was distressed because I could not make it in time for a particular temple’s celebrations. A senior goswami, on hearing this, said, “Your own heart is a potential gupta-Vrindavan, a Ras-stage. Devotees taste the full-moon Ras within themselves! They serve Krishna’s lovers before their dance begins.”

I was most impressed that almost all religious practitioners, some highly educated and some barely so, were thoroughly fluent in the Bhagavatam, Chaitanya Charitamrta, and other Vaishnava literature. They would quote instances from texts and sing songs during our conversations. Often they would choke with emotion or weep outright when describing lilas. A goswami’s wife explained, “Please do not feel uncomfortable. These are tears of joy. We feel lilas so intimately in our minds that it becomes difficult to maintain public composure at times.”

Thus, there were consistent allusions to intense relationships with Vrindavan’s deities experienced by devotees in a feminine mood in their imagination. The next obvious question was about the exact relationship between embodying femininity and imagining Vrindavan.

**Manjari sadhana and the anthropological journey**

As my devotee friends became more accustomed to my interest in their religiosity, they gradually discussed how Vrindavan manifests its intensity in their heart-minds through a practice called manjari sadhana. I first encountered the term when on learning that he was unwell I went to meet a goswami in his house. Before then we had always sat in his home’s outer reception room. This time he was lying on his bed, and his wife escorted me to their bedroom. I noticed two large framed sketches on the wall, realizing only later that they were not meant for the public drawing-room. The sketches were shaped as lotuses with intricate designs. One of them, captioned “Navadvip yogapitha” (place of union), had male Vaishnavas’ names and corresponding female sakhi and manjari (Radha’s handmaiden-friends’) names, written in tiny Bengali characters in every petal and sub-petal. The other, captioned “Vrindavan yogapitha,” had women-Vaishnavas’ names, each with a
**Figure 7.** Sketch of Navadvip yogapitha.

Picture credit: Tony K. Stewart, reproduced from: Stewart, T.K. 2011. Replicating Vaisnava worlds: organizing devotional space through the architectonics of the mandala. *South Asian History and Culture 2/2, 300-36*, page 311, Figure 6. Copyright year: 2011.

**Figure 8.** Sketch of Vrindavan yogapitha.

Picture credit: Tony K. Stewart, reproduced from: Stewart, T.K. 2011. Replicating Vaisnava worlds: organizing devotional space through the architectonics of the mandala. *South Asian History and Culture 2/2, 300-36*, page 308, Figure 5. Copyright year: 2011.
suffix of sakhi or manjari and detailed descriptions of their physical forms. Since childhood I had heard that celestial Vrindavan is imagined by Vaishnavas as a hundred-petalled lotus, but I had always thought that this was merely metaphorical. I understood during my fieldwork that these pictorial representations of the sacred place facilitate concrete imagination.  

The goswami and his wife were elated that I asked about these pictures. Pointing to them, she said, “Now you are asking about the most significant aspect of our lives. These are sketches of celestial Navadvip and Vrindavan. All of us have a place here.” I later found similar charts in some books given to me by babajis, and other practitioners’ private altars, distributed to them in printed or written forms by their gurus.

However, practitioners were not equally welcoming in discussions of manjari sadhana. Generally, goswamis were more comfortable discussing it. The practice involves imagining passionate erotic details of Radha-Krishna’s relationship and practitioners’ relations with them, and since both the goswamis and I were married, they felt more comfortable; renouncer babajis found it hard to chat with a woman. Also, while I was always welcome in goswamis’ houses, I never sat in a babaji’s personal room but in public spaces such as ashram-compounds. However, with time, I developed very personal relations with both. I never “conducted interviews.” We preferred long, intense conversations which went in unanticipated but most creative directions. Occasionally, some babajis would decide to give short lectures on a question I had. I avoided taking notes, as the atmosphere tended to become emotional, and scribbling intermittently would definitely have been inappropriate. Instead, I used a little recorder, which I could set discreetly to one side.

I came to know goswamis and babajis of over thirty temples/akhras. However, some relationships were more personal, and without intimacy, discussions of erotic imaginations would never be possible. Krishnagopal was an elderly, respected, moderately well-off goswami; he had been a school-teacher and a kirtan singer in his younger days. He was a jovial, intelligent man and we grew very close. He said I must have been his mother in our past life, or else we would not have been so compatible. The large age gap between us also helped alleviate shyness about erotic matters. Kunjabihari, on the other hand, was a very serious, scholarly, middle-aged goswami who spent most of his time sitting in his temple and reading religious books. He was my most important interlocutor in more complex Vaishnava understandings. Despite his gravity, he was extremely welcoming and visibly enjoyed our spiritual
discussions. Haribandhu was the only goswami who said he never practiced manjari sadhana, but he was well-read and knew a lot of people who did. Thus, his objectivity was helpful. Shyamsundar and his parental affection hold a special place in my memory. An elderly, knowledgeable, soft-spoken babaji, he did not have much of a social circle and spent a lot of time reading and writing. Like many other babajis, he was not economically comfortable. He had written four volumes on Vaishnavism, but despite insufficient money to run his ashram, did not do much to publicize them. He said that it would eat up his sadhana time. We had some of the longest conversations sitting in his quiet ashram. Charandas, an energetic and sincere ashram worker, was my youngest babaji friend. We never discussed the practice per se, but he often provided significant clarifications. My comprehension progressed in conversation with these Vaishnavas.

Manjari sadhana is passed from gurus to disciples as a practiced tradition. It is the main devotional practice of goswamis and babajis, the claimants of mainstream Vaishnavism. This claim stems from their lineage affiliations, exact guru-sequences given to them during initiation and mastery over manjari sadhana. These groups compose what Persson (2007, 47) calls a “community of practice” and Jordt (2006, 193) calls “knowledge communities,” who constitute, justify, and share a particular knowledge system and perpetuate social relations on that basis.

Although practitioners insist that both householders and renouncers can cultivate the imaginative spiritual discipline, my sense is that babajis, since they have no householder duties, devote more time to the elaborate practices.

Goswamis generally restrict teaching manjari sadhana to their family members, and babajis allow only ashram residents to practice it. In rare instances, depending on devotional capacity or the devotee’s desire, the practice is taught to other disciples. Also, most practitioners are men, although potentially both men and women (goswamis) may practice.

Being largely an esoteric practice, there is no source material on how individual practitioners perform(ed) it. Also, it was possible neither to directly participate, since I am not initiated, nor to observe, as it is a solitary affair carried out in individual worship rooms. Thus, some important ways to learn about it were to read relevant philosophical texts and local literature produced in Navadvip, hear innumerable songs composed for deities in the lover-mood, and sit through evening sermons in Navadvip’s temples/ashrams. The most important way, however, was to
hold sustained, intensive conversations with practitioners. Knowledge of the practice constitutes goswamis’ and babajis’ proud distinction from other sects and religions, and although the details of personal practice are concealed, they appreciated that I was not being precocious by only reading books but trying to understand its lived dimensions. Also, as Charandas emphasized repeatedly, “One would imagine modern people like you to only be attracted to ISKCON. . . . But . . . ISKCON does not understand any bit of this traditional practice.”

My interpretations of embodied imagination follow from my interlocutors’ interpreted practice. Both their own and my interpretations themselves are also embodied. My interlocutors reflected on intensely visceral aspects of their rituals and imagination, and my analyses of narrativized experiences try to remain close to their fleshy descriptions. The narrative strategy I explore, accordingly, is one of close-grained descriptions and metaphors which form their vocabulary. Also, their acts of narration themselves were very alive—the ways they spoke, the content, postures, and our conversations’ moods, together created an aura that transported us to Vrindavan every time.

However, our conversations intersected and deflected at thorny points of secrecy. Their main problem was how I could study the practice without experiencing it as an initiate. Understanding without the possibility of participation was met with ambivalent responses from devotees.

Practitioners have an aptitude for philosophical discourse, which they are socialized into from childhood through sustained discussions at daily sermons and informal dialogues among fellow Vaishnavas. Thus, I did not have difficulty receiving ample “native exegesis” (Csordas 1994, xi). But there were ethical issues to deal with.

The theoretical/methodological problems they posed were: How, without initiation, would I know the sadhana’s essence? How, without practicing and thereby feeling their intimate imagination of the sacred place, would I write about it? And if I did manage to feel their devotion, how would I return to ordinary life? By only partially resolving these troubling questions, I traced the anthropologist’s emotional interfaces with the field and its self-transforming potentials. As Cook (2010a, 239) puts it, “Rather than reducing emotion to an unfortunate impediment, such an approach allows the anthropologist to understand her field experiences in ways that provide insight into the conditions of the field.”

Secrecy is not an absence but a mode of communication (Fabian 2003, 490). Bellman’s (1981, 4) distinction between private and secret
is useful here. Practitioners’ knowledge is not private. It is a secret which may be shared if one finds an appropriate aesthete. Also, linguistically speaking, “mythological discourse must itself be mythomorphic. It must have the form of that of which it speaks” (Derrida 1978, 286). So esoteric issues were spoken about in ways that pertained to the content of the discourse. The basic problems associated with esoteric understandings are of two kinds: how to know (epistemological) and how to say (ethical) (Price 1983, 23; Urban 1998, 211). Sharing knowledge with the non-rasika (non-feeler), they say, is like pouring water into a broken vessel, one that will bleed out its essential experiences, retaining only dry knowledge. While it is sufficient to feel Vaishnava aesthetics in order to know it, the reverse is not true. Vaishnavas insist that knowledge (gyan) follows from emotional devotion (bhakti) and not the other way round.

However, after sustained efforts, practitioners made way for my knowledge. For instance, on many occasions, sitting on his small bed, Krishnagopal sang beautiful songs describing Radha-Krishna’s love-acts, while I sat at his feet and recorded them. Except for the bed-space his small room was full of old religious books, from which he gave me a number of Bengali books, asking me to memorize Radha-Krishna’s daily activities in Vrindavan. Sometimes he would explain the songs’ meanings, and sometimes ask me to describe what I felt while listening to the songs or reading the books. Gradually he started saying that I could sympathize with his feminine sensibilities as a witness of the deities’ lilas, since I was a woman myself. Many others attributed my research to divine grace. They said it was Radha-Krishna’s wish that I write about them.

However, the practice is dependent on accompanying mantras. Thus, without initiation from authorized gurus who teach these mantras, one will understand but never be able to practice. So I was gradually introduced to their emotional world, but without their making me an insider.

Manjari sadhana is primarily an exercise in ego-effacement, an intense affective imagination without a desire for self-gratification. Yet these imaginings are often of the most erotic sort, bordering on sexual arousal. To intuit the deities’ sexual intimacy without experiencing personal carnal desire is the most delicate paradox of practitioners’ imagination. Their constant fear is that there will be disparagement and sensationalization of the transgendered and erotic dimensions of their imagined place sense. Thus, their initial concern was that I would misread their
imaginations as being of an ego-gratifying, voyeuristic kind. Consistent dialogue, however, gradually convinced them that my association with practicing Vaishnavas was introducing in me the appropriate temperament to comprehend the complexities of their in-depth discipline.

*Manjari* may be translated as “bud.” Since not buds but only flowers are offered to the passion-taster, Krishna, the term signifies the devotee’s affective state—a girl’s liminal adolescent age, when her innocence and emotional intensity combine in measures appropriate for adoration through intimate service toward the deity-couple’s desires, without ever engaging in direct sexual activity with Krishna. Siegel (1983, 17) argues that in Indian aesthetic philosophies, a young girl’s dilemmas between innocence and passion, and her chastity, are imagined as ornaments enhancing her sexual appeal. Thus, this state is an eternally budding one, its incompleteness and youth celebrated as the aspired status of the “devotional connoisseur” (Rosen 1992, v). Irrespective of age and gender, in his or her imagination the practitioner is a *manjari* who finds her existential essence in the role of a passionate handmaiden, Radha’s and Krishna’s pleasures in Vrindavan being her only occupying engagement.

*Manjari sadhana* forms the essence of the Bengal-Vaishnava devotional paradigm known as *raganuga bhakti* (Das 2014, Part 1, 650–51; Haberman 1988, 2003, 270–352). Raga, meaning “passion,” and anuga, “the feminine subservient one,” together point to the devotee’s aspired personhood. *Raganuga* may be translated as a devotional form of tracking traces of the passion trail left by the lovers of Krishna. This points to a genre of devotion, a poetics of femininity, which far surpasses simple deity-allegiance. A crucial conceptual problem then becomes one of theorizing subservience as a form of passionate selfhood.

**Transformation of Discipline to Passion**

Vaishnava experiences of feminine personhood and the sacred place in imagination begin only after rigorous physical discipline.

Devotional practices are classified into two types: those followed as agentive corporeal-psychological discipline (*vaidhi bhakti*), and passionate realizations which descend relatively spontaneously (*raganuga bhakti*). The former, evoked by Krishna’s opulent aishwarya form, arises from fear; the latter, inspired by Krishna’s madhurya form, develops as the greed to serve him (Haberman 1988, 118, 2003, lix; Klostermaier 1974, 102). Fear must ultimately be subordinated to greed and love. Humility and passion form the axiological ethical core of Bengal-Vaishnavism.
The formality of *vaidhi bhakti*, devotees argue, engenders a taste for loving service and prepares the mind-heart for spontaneous desire. Devotees agree that not everyone can experience either perfection in discipline or transformation from discipline to passion, and that these are not considered failures. Since the practice demands spiritual perfection, devotees believe that one’s progress will count toward efforts in the following life. They conceptualize rebirths as progressive steps toward reaching perfection such that finally the karmic cycle stops and one travels to celestial Vrindavan.

Devotees are divided in their views of the relationship between these two devotional forms. Some say rules are inimical to affective development, while most argue that spontaneity or devotional excess develops only through self-flagellating rigor. Exacting discipline invokes the sense of something more permanent than oneself. This in turn is the base upon which spontaneous love feeds. A devotee, invoking cultural stereotypes, said, “From . . . discipline to passion is the journey from being a man to a woman.”

The best ritual example of this process is *kartik vrata* (October, a month of severe austerities). During this time every Vaishnava performs strict regimented routines, including long fasts followed by simple food, little sleep, concentrated chanting, regular temple rituals, and intensive scripture-reading. Some Vaishnavas practice these for a month, and some others, for four months. It ends in November, just before the Ras festival. Once during this period I went to Krishnagopal’s house. He was tired after the day’s fast and asked me to come back later. He said, “This is a difficult month for us. But among those who do the rituals well, some lucky ones will experience Ras in their heart-minds.”

Without discipline, adequate conceptualization is not possible, and without understanding, aesthetic imagination impossible. Intense discipline also embodies ritual suffering and engenders the sense of subservience toward rules and deities. In Hindu imaginings this disposition is especially exemplified by women (Trawick 1991, 19, cited in Hanssen 2006, 115). Thus, the idealized Vaishnava self is a young girl in a mood of enraptured attendance to the deities.

Discipline’s productive capacity has been extensively analyzed by Asad. He argues that medieval Christian practices generated virtues of humility and subservience, or what he calls “the desire for subjectivation,” among practitioners (1987, 187). Ritual pain, including fasts, austerities, and less sleep, was the chief embodied means of establishing
religious Truth in this context (Asad 1983). Influenced by Asad, van der Veer (1989, 459–60) also demonstrates how the Ramanandi spirit of submission to religion is generated through disciplinary practices. Bengal-Vaishnavas embody similar religious virtues of ritual pain and subservience. However, I argue that it is equally important to think about religious practices and the affective experiences they engender, since religious subjects allude to both.

In Bengal-Vaishnavas’ vocabulary, the term raga in raga-nuga refers to pleasurable emotions which have lasting traces in memory. The word also means “color,” implying that the devotee’s heart is gradually colored with passion. Following the linguistic and ritual clues of manjari sadhana it may therefore be argued that there is a necessary association among repeated disciplinary practice (vaidhi), (awakening of) mnemonics, and sensuous desire, wherein “Emotion is memory, feelings are cognition” (Mitchell 1997, 84).

To explicate the affective transformation from discipline to passion, devotees commonly use “embodied metaphors” (Low 1994, 143) of gnawing visceral activities. For instance, it is through careful mastication that one hones the taste-buds, and only after sustained chafing that one can smell sandalwood. Similarly, after having borne the prolonged burning sensation, the incense engenders its perfume. Thus, devotees say that ritual inflictions on the external body automatically alter the internal mentality; disciplined devotion reminds the devotee of his perfected passionate self in celestial Vrindavan.

Vaishnavas associate their pre-sadhana lives with a spiritual forgetting. Shyamsundar said during an evening sermon, “We have forgotten our eternal beautiful selves and place. . . . Just as sometimes when we know but have forgotten something, it comes back in dreams, so also in sadhana. Spiritual essence lies in this remembering [smaran].” In the Buddhist context, similarly, recollective memory is part of repetitive mindfulness (Cox 1992). Its mnemonics consist in “recognizing” forgotten truths and existential delusions (Kapstein 1992).

The act of remembering entailed in Vaishnava devotion falls between what Whitehouse describes as “semantic” and “episodic” modes of memory (discussed in Laidlaw 2004b, 1–3). It is doctrinal insofar as it is prescribed and repeated many times through practices, and imagistic insofar as it is simultaneously also experienced as emotionally intense and spontaneous (see also Laidlaw 2004a, 99). However, the remembering, the anamnetic moment or “flashbulb memory” entailed in sadhana, is part of imagining. After repeated enactment of a script (of
divine plays in the sacred place) in imagination, the memory is gradually reawakened.

While the \textit{vaidhi bhakti} stage corresponds to a “voluntary ethical project” (Laidlaw 2005), the transformation to \textit{raga} is also dependent on divine grace. When exactly discipline will stimulate passion is unknown. This is a complex situation, in which, while there is an element of unanticipated temporal spontaneity, the believer also has an informed idea about what to expect. This situation approximates a “double agency of imagination”—the interplay of human and divine will (Hedley 2008, 7). Also, while \textit{raga} develops through strict discursive practices, its relative autonomy may be ascribed to the psychology of affect.

The spontaneous sacred self which develops from the ritual habitus, the oxymoronic phenomenon of “rehearsed spontaneity” (Csordas 1994, 95), is felt as a sudden achievement. A \textit{babaji}, to make it clear to me in an everyday language, said, “Think of a sportsperson, who after sustained practice is suddenly able to clear a high-jump hurdle, or a scholar able to crack a mathematical puzzle. But for us it is not something novel, but only a manifestation of the hidden. It is like those children’s drawing books where by simply rubbing the pencil constantly, the paper itself reveals the form.”

In this case, the paper is veiled-Vrindavan or \textit{manas}, the hidden form is the eternal feminine self-in-Vrindavan, and the total act of “bodying forth” (Hedley 2008, 6) or manifesting is \textit{sadhana} imagination. Also, one will have to learn the proper technique of rubbing (\textit{vaidhi bhakti}, preparing the self, or the journey), for instance sharpening the pencil, setting it at the proper angle, and so on, only after which the imaginative potentials of “making apparent” (\textit{raganuga bhakti}, or remembering the destination) comes about.

Practitioners were always very willing to discuss the affective orientations of transformation from discipline to passion. It was the practice itself that took longer to learn about and understand.

I had gone to meet a \textit{babaji} one afternoon. This is a relatively free time for them, when after the day’s ashram-work they rest in their shabby rooms, read, or chat with fellow \textit{babajis} in the quiet midday milieu, before waking the temple-deities from their siesta. It was the beginning of winter, and the days were shorter and cold. So we sat in a semi-official ashram-room. We were discussing very mundane matters, and the conversation flowed in ample directions. I don’t at all remember the context, but he suddenly started telling me how he is a teenage girl in Vrindavan, that she is fair, walks slowly, is dressed in blue, is moody, serves
Radha-Krishna betel leaves, and so on. His voice had softened, and he had a coy smile. His description was in complete contrast to his ordinary self—he was middle-aged, dark, and spoke in a rough, hasty manner. I was completely taken aback and about to ask him what he meant, when suddenly his senior babaji friend, overhearing our conversation from the next room, came in and stopped him, saying, “You must never discuss your personal sadhana with anyone.” My interlocutor then changed his narrative technique and continued the discussion by invoking anecdotal references of others’ sadhana instances, without mentioning names.

Striking this sensitive balance between familiarity and distance, practitioners advised me to think about paradigmatic spiritual imaginations. This involves an ethical strategy which avoids utter generality of otherness, yet allows non-attached, unabashed frankness about sensuous effects of imagination, while maintaining a distance from the individual.

**PREPARING TO IMAGINE**

The practitioner’s journey begins with the initiation process, diksha, when the initiated is given a Krishna-mantra by the guru. Following diksha, the Vaishnava is given shiksha (elaborate training) and engages himself in a number of daily rituals which form the sixty-four tenets of spiritual discipline (vaidhi bhakti). Of these sixty-four, nine are compulsory:²⁷

- **sravan**—hearing about gods’ lilas
- **kirtan**—repeating gods’ names and lilas
- **smaran**—remembering/memorizing Radha-Krishna’s daily lilas by reading scriptures, performing commemorative temple rituals, and learning to practice this remembrance in meditation
- **vandan**—singing praises of deities
- **padasevan**—serving deities’ feet
- **dasya**—developing subservience
- **archan**—learning intricate worship rules
- **sakhya**—developing friendship with deities
- **atmanivedan**—surrendering oneself completely to the deity-couple’s service

In Bengal-Vaishnavism, self-abnegating submission is a complex emotion. Subservience must be guided not by fear or reverence but by love and attachment. The conceptual paradox regarding how discipline can effectuate desire is concomitant with how servitude can engender a lover’s longing.

These nine disciplining practices form the practitioner’s ritual body (sadhak deha). When they have mastered these rituals, some babajis
receive a second initiation. This might be given even after up to twenty years of service in the first initiation stage.

As a sign of abstinence, they then give up their desh (old residence), besh (old dress), and kesh (hair). Leaving the old residence symbolizes that they now seek to place themselves in Vrindavan. Babajis refer to this as receiving bhek from the guru. Bhek refers both to the renouncer’s external features, such as loincloth, and to his mental state. He then renounces the material world and attaches himself completely to Radha-Krishna’s thoughts. Ideally, babajis should then beg for their daily food, but these days many babajis who live in ashrams don’t. However, I knew one babaji in Navadvip who lived in a small hut, wore simple jute clothes, had no shoes, slept on rugs, and begged every day.

This ambivalent state of renouncing everything for another form of everything is exemplified especially by a man devotee. He gives up his masculine pride for the mood of a feminine handmaid-lover. Sanderson (1985, 201) argues, with respect to Kashmiri Brahmins, that the shift from asceticism to excess is embodied by a move from the male domain to female. Khandelwal (1997) questions the general assumption that Hindu renunciation is ungendered or unequivocally masculine. Goswamis and babajis embody a most radical form of gendered devotion such that their essential selves (siddha deha) in Vrindavan, which they realize in imagination, are of young girls.

The goswami couple in whose house I saw the lotus-pictures for the first time mentioned that they practice imagination sitting side by side in their worship room. They said that in their eternal roles they are both women and serve Radha-Krishna. I asked whether this complex sexuality does not become a hindrance to their marital life. The man said, “This is not about our material bodies/minds. Why should it create a problem? It brings us closer as we feel like equals and understand each other better.”

However, all agree that the feminine mood must be confined to private imagination moments, and not brought openly to public attention, in order to avoid undeserved criticism. For instance, only one among the senior babajis of Samajbari wears the sari, and only during the evening-arati (rather than during all the eight aratis carried out in the temple), to perform the light-offering in the mood of Radha’s handmaiden. He carefully pulls the sari-end well over his head so that the many devotees who gather in the temple then don’t see his face or know who he is.

Practitioners want to keep their spiritual identities hidden from ordinary people. One of the babajis who conducts the evening-arati told me
later, “Many babajis want to do this. I tell them, do it in your mind-heart. In any case it is as real. Why risk criticism from modern people who won’t see its significance?”

However, the guru allows one to embody one’s feminine self only after he masters ego-effacement, or else there is the fear that in imagination she may want sexual union with Krishna. One afternoon I arrived early at Shyamsundar’s ashram and was waiting to share prasad with him. It was already two P.M. and the other babajis said that Shyamsundar had only had some milk since the morning. Yet he did a lot of work before eating. He cleaned the ashram compound, watered plants, did puja, and served stray dogs, all the while repeating Radha-Krishna’s names softly. I suggested that he should have younger babajis do these chores. But he stressed the importance of hard work and said, “Just as sustained comfort creates an attachment to the body, rigor inflicted by discipline generates the sense of a belittled ego—that we’re all the same and essentially Radha-Krishna’s servants.”

When the disciple exhibits this kind of temperament, and after sustained practice of vaidhi bhakti when suddenly an intense pining (lobh/ sadh) develops in the devotee’s heart to visualize her essential self in Vrindavan, his guru, through developed intuitive/imaginative powers, and on basis of the devotee’s natural propensities, helps him approximate her essential feminine form and service. Those devotees of Krishna who
have acquired a location in Vrindavan forever are known as *ragatmika bhaktas* (devotees with passionate selves). The devotee ought to emulate and serve as handmaiden those friends of Radha-Krishna who perform that particular service, without expecting that she will *become* them. This is the crux of selfhood formation in *raganuga bhakti* (the practice that *follows* the *ragatmika*). Thus for instance if the disciple loves to dress up in his ordinary life, then in her role as the deity-couple’s handmaiden, she may be given the service of emulating and following Radha’s friends who dress her before her nocturnal meeting with Krishna.

The *sadhana* is an introspective journey, turning from one’s given self, through the disciplined ritual self, to finally the eternal, essential, forgotten self. On reaching the required level of spiritual-emotional maturity, the practitioner is taught the most difficult element of *sadhana*: memorizing the deity-couple’s daily pastimes in Vrindavan. It is an intensive temporal engagement with the sacred place, a meditation technique known as *asta-kaliya-lila-smaran* (remembering the pastimes of the eight daily periods). Some do this in their timely temple rituals, some in imagination, some in both. A Samajbari *babaji* said, “We translate our *manas*-service into temple-service. Say, while we do the incense-rounds during the evening *arati*, we think in detail of what Radha-Krishana are doing then in Vrindavan and services we are offering.” Even as he spoke to me, he smiled and rotated his hands most gracefully, as if he were in Vrindavan letting deities smell the incense.

Although ideally one performs this meditation at least once in every three-hour period, most people meditate at night since the intense concentration required might disrupt a person’s external senses and social duties. Kunjabihari said, for instance, that his grandfather would meditate for twelve hours at a stretch. On returning to his ordinary senses he would forget his temporary absence from the social world. This implies that *sadhana*-time, although simultaneous with ordinary time, is an absorbed temporality of complete detachment. Others say that practitioners often have a trace of their concentrated imagination in their ordinary bodies and lives, such that they may cry, laugh, and exhibit all sorts of socially inappropriate behavior. Lalita Sakhi, Samajbari’s *babaji*, whose imagination of her handmaiden-self in Vrindavan overwhelmed her ordinary life completely and who decided to live a woman’s life, was therefore urged by her guru to always stay within the ashram, to avoid ordinary people’s disdain.

Thus, through practiced remembering, the devotee sharpens his imagination which will transport him to the always-simultaneous times
of Vrindavan. Repeated remembering augments perceptual attentive-ness to the object of remembrance, hones “imagination inflation” (Beuke, Garry, and Sharman 2004), and enhances the sense of imaginative reality.

The practitioner now performs daily rituals with his sthul-deha (physical, acting body-mind) and practices cognitive translocations with his shukhho-deha (subtle, dreaming/imagining body-mind). Those who master these practices are said to develop special cognitive powers. Devotees refer to practitioners who foretold their own deaths, talked to dead people, changed real situations in dreams, and witnessed far-off things invisible to the naked eye. It is difficult to tell whether people claim to possess these powers these days, for even if they do, they will not talk about it. Only once did a goswami secretly mention to me his guru’s powers. Yogic powers are however not the aim but a by-product of the imagination process.

However, the mnemonic technique is dependent on yogic discipline, especially breathing routines which affectively pacify the mind. Without this, the calm concentration required for imagination is impossible. Psychologists refer to these meditative conditions as “low-stress” states (Willis 1979, 93). Through deep-breathing practices the basic instincts (including sexual ones) are brought under control. Without that the emotion/taste (rasa), basic to all others, the peaceful one (santa rasa) is not stimulated. Emotions become self-directed unless an ego-effacing perfection is achieved through santa rasa.

After weeks of visits, Kunjabihari explained the phenomenology of breathing. Unlike many others he was not emotionally driven when talking about the practice; he treated it as a sophisticated knowledge system. He sat in his dhoti, poised under the huge tree in his temple compound where he spent most of his day reading, shut his eyes, recreating the meditative mood, and with a proud air of knowledge, clarified clinically:

The aim of discipline is to reduce the sense of ego, yet increase sensory intensity. . . . Disciplined breathing helps in this process. . . . If I continually concentrate and decrease my breathing succession, then four things happen. . . . My concentration increases tremendously; epidermal sensitivity sharpens (just as a flash of light blinds more after darkness); and the temporal sense extends, as I am putting utmost attention on greater breath retention-times. The extended time-sense aids in intuiting the simultaneous cosmic time of Vrindavan. Most important, with sustained practice, my sense of I-hood [ami-tva] decreases. Since it is on breathing’s involuntariness that I-hood depends, the more I am attentive to my not-breathing, the more I am able
to cultivate . . . egolessness. The aim is to belong to Vrindavan with a self/identity \([abhiman]\) but without an ego \([ahamkar]\).\[^{13}\]

After speaking a little he asked me what I understood, went on, stopped again, and so on. My conversations with Vaishnavas were deeply dialogic.

One of his disciples was present as we conversed. Unlike Kunjabihari, these matters were not merely intellectual for him. Leaning toward me with his pupils dilated, he added about sensory heightening, “During these exercises, breath-air circulates in the body. This creates an undulation inside. At higher stages of yogic perfection, practitioners hear different sounds in their inner \([manas]\) ear. The perfected breathing transforms into sacred sounds. The deities’ grace may manifest in the form of the loud tinkling anklet sounds of Radha/Krishna/Mahaprabhu, for instance.” From the urgency in his voice it seemed he was recalling his own imaginative experience. But practitioners never acknowledge their own spiritual experiences and may even ascribe them to others. They believe that telling another about one’s own spirituality decreases its potency.

The stylistics of \(manjari\) \(sadhana\) begin however only after the devotee’s egolessness is confirmed.

Practitioners speak of three embodied states which are active during \(sadhana\): \(sthul-deha\) or \(sthul-sharir\), which performs bodily rituals, \(sukkho-sharir\) which meditates and imagines, and the causal body \((karan-sharir)\) which witnesses these activities as overseer. This approximates Merleau-Ponty’s description of the body which “simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching” (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 124, cited in Tilley 2008, 25).

Most practitioners explain metaphorically that the gross \(sthul-deha\), heavy with unreflective materiality, is like ice, which through breathing practices and yogic contemplations transforms into lightweight vapor-like clarity, and passes through the causal body into Vrindavan’s essential self. This metaphor implies the abandonment of components which clog the imagination’s pores and cause amnesia of the essential self. The subtle and causal bodies have a paradoxical ontological status. Although they are not primarily sensory, they can be grasped only through intuitive affective perception.

The final dissolution of the causal body confirms the suspension of egohood.
Once again, Kunjabihari clarified with a calm confidence. Although I could never witness his imaginative experience, his clear exegesis always proved his perfection as a practitioner. He said:

The causal body is the most imperceptible one. Its ontology comes closest to dreamless slumber. After waking from sleep one says, “I’ve had such a good sleep!” How can he know, if he was sleeping? The sense of self which stays awake at all times to tell us about our sensations is the causal self. Thus, it is the most insistent part of our ego. During rituals of vaidhi bhakti, this observer-self watches over the acting and meditating body. Thus, there is still a false distinction between an active sense of ego as observer and imagined as observed. There is then the unmanifest sense of the mind-heart as Vrindavan’s container. Through sustained breathing practices and scripture readings, as the causal body is dissolved, the difference between subject and object disappears, the potentiality of the container gives way to the essence of the contained and what is left is imagination as occurrence, and the pure self in Vrindavan.34

Through these rarified affective processes of the body and mind, the thinking ego/imaginer as subject, the process of imagination, and the imagined merge, and what is left is imagination as indistinguishable from the place—Vrindavan.

THE MANJARI IN IMAGINATION-AS-VRINDAVAN

Vaishnava imagination follows a strict script, and the manjari’s location is mapped. The devotee is given an exact narrative of divine activities of which she is to be a part, a “canon” modeling affective relationships (Horstmann 2001, 177). It is in the devotee’s being able to partake in the narrative’s rasa that the questions Hardy (1983, 559) raises from the perspective of Sanskrit poetics can be answered; that is, how a man can embody a woman’s emotions, and how one travels from ordinary to cosmic reality.

However, imagination’s pure possibilities and the spontaneity of divine grace also ensure personal creative moments in the manjari’s psychosomatic role-playing. Personal experiences in the manas-Vrindavan are deemed to be real in two senses. First, they impact both the body-mind’s inner senses and the physical body. Second, all imaginative experiences are recognized by Vaishnavas as present occurrences. Summarizing imagination’s apodictic qualities, Krishnagopal said, “If you and I as manjaris are seeing two different things at the same time in our respective mind-hearts, then both are equally true and occurring simultaneously in celestial Vrindavan(s). Proper sadhana cannot be
wrong.” What this implies is that a celestial Vrindavan, in all its reality, is effectuated or manifested with every proper devotional imagination in the space of the manas.

In the Bengal-Vaishnava script, the deity-couple’s intimate activities are very difficult since they have an extramarital relationship. Radha has eight dear friends (sakhis) who make all necessary arrangements for her daily secret trysts with Krishna. Each of these friends has eight assistants, called manjaris.

These characters are represented in an elaborate pictorial chart shaped as a lotus, known as Vrindavan yogapitha, or “place of union” (Haberman 1988, 122). The lotus center houses the deity-couple; the eight sakhis are placed in the main petals, and the manjaris in sub-petals. However, a few sub-petals (manjaris) are closer to the center than the main petals (sakhis) are.

Sakhis are the same age as Radha or older, and married. Thus, they have experienced sexual satisfaction. Some sakhis therefore develop desire for self-gratification while arranging for Radha-Krishna’s sensual pleasures. Manjaris however are all younger than Radha, and unmarried. Without the memory of active sexuality, they never desire any form of selfish sexual gratification. Vaishnavas argue that the complete lack of possibilities of sexual possession, paradoxically, multiplies manjaris’ sensory empathy, while exemplifying the best case of ego-effacement.

Some babajis confessed, however, that during early stages of imagination, there might be moments when they as manjaris develop personal sexual desire to unite with Krishna. But through discussions with the guru and repeated practice, the aim is to abide by the script of egolessness. As Hedley (2008, 65) suggests, practiced imagination itself is responsible for the crystallization of new affects.

Also, sakhis have their households to look after, while manjaris stay with Radha all the time. Thus, manjaris are allowed even in the closest quarters of the couple’s nocturnal pastimes in Vrindavan’s forest bowers, while sakhis are not. This implies that in imagination manjaris can directly witness the deities’ sexual activities. Sakhis can intuit these pastimes, while manjaris directly feel them. Sakhis arouse reverence and inhibition in Radha; manjaris, pure unabashed affection.

Haribandhu cited an instance of a manjari’s eidetic imagination, for instance, where she suddenly had a vision of Radha-Krishna quarrelling and parting. Later, both felt the urge to meet. Radha sent a friend-handmaiden to fetch Krishna. Then, when Radha and Krishna came close, they started calling out each other’s names, and the manjari’s ears filled
with the chants of and by the deities themselves. This is considered the highest possible affective bliss. In another similar instance, when Radha was upset with Krishna, a sakhi prayed and the sky roared with lightning. Scared, Radha forgot her anger and rushed to embrace Krishna, and the sakhi savored the tastes of this sight. Thus, handmaidens’ main engagement consists in staging situations, arranging for the couple’s meeting, and deriving incomparable delight in the process.

Each of the sakhis has particular services which she performs, assisted by her manjaris. These include braiding Radha’s hair, putting alta (red paint) on her feet, fanning the couple when they rest, serving betel nut or perfumed water before they go into the bowers at night, making necklaces for them out of flowers, massaging their feet before and after their erotic activities, dressing Radha for the night, preparing sandalwood for their adornments, and so on. All these services aim at arousing the couple’s senses.

However, there are other very intimate services reserved for Radha’s most cherished handmaidens, her favourite manjaris, which are generally performed during the deities’ late-night sexual dalliance. There is a manjari, for instance, who performs a delicate little service as the keeper of Radha’s anklets, so their sound is silenced when she keeps her tryst with Krishna. Others have responsibilities of waking them in the morning, or collecting the flower petals and pearls that fall from their bodies and garlands during intense lovemaking, and distributing them among manjaris for their savoring.

Once, a manjari, while performing her daily service in her mind-heart-Vrindavan, suddenly saw that Radha’s tightly bound hair was at odds with the ecstasy of Radha-Krishna’s sexual abandon. So she crept into their bedchamber and released the hairpins, with the couple still locked in an unseeing embrace. Another had a vision of Radha’s head slipping off the pillow, and of finding, when she crept to her side to see to her comfort, that she was snugly nestled on her divine lover’s arm. She withdrew in blissful satisfaction. These anecdotes convey the claim that the divine couple take special pleasure in the virginal manjari-handmaidens’ youthful innocence and sexual inexperience. They don’t indulge in voyeuristic participation in the lovers’ bliss and serve in a truly egoless state of non-desiring rapture. Their services remain non-auto-referential. 37

The manjaris’ self-experience is paradigmatic for goswamis and babajis for three reasons. First, manjaris witness the most intimate activities, which give the devotee the finest taste of divine love. Second,
they exemplify a most inexplicable embodied state, which even though participating in sexually charged activities never develops a desire for personal gratification. Third, *manjaris* are role models of perfect subservience, since they are completely controlled by their senior *sakhis*.

Given this “paradigmatic” model (Haberman 1988, 8), the devotee is given an exact imagination technique by his guru. First he is given his *manjari svarup* (eternal form), consisting of eleven components: her age (11–13 years generally), name, dress, complexion, group, relation, command, specialty, residence, the *sakhi* under whom she serves, and service (see also Haberman 1988, 90). These are basic criteria of emplacement in Vrindavan. Next he is given the *guru-pranali* (names of gurus in his spiritual lineage) and *siddha-pranali* (the names of the corresponding *manjari* or “perfected” forms of these gurus, experienced by them in their respective mind-hearts).

After perfecting the knowledge and visualization of deities’ daily activities, the devotee has to practice imagining her own eternal form, get an overwhelming sense of her “real” body, identity, moods, demeanor, and service, and then proceed to imagining the forms and services of her guru lineage.

Practitioners told me that each of these progressions in imagination is equally difficult and takes years to achieve. In fact most stick to only imagining their own and their gurus’ essential forms, and then proceed to performing their services in imagination. Ideally, however, the devotee’s imagination of the guru-lineage goes up to the point of the first guru whose *manjari* self is an eternally perfected one, such that she has received a permanent place in celestial Vrindavan. She is one of the eight main *manjaris* in the lotus-imagining, under the tutelage of one of the eight *sakhis*. The devotee-*manjari* is thus placed in a chained subservience to guru-*manjaris*.

Along with the *manjari* form, the devotee is also given a picture of the lotus-shaped Vrindavan and an exact location in it. A particular route is marked out for her (similar to her guru’s other disciples), traversing various petals and sub-petals, to follow her guru, via the guru-*manjari*-lineage and their senior *sakhis*, to the deities in the lotus-center, and perform her daily services. There is a particular time in the day, which the guru reveals to the devotee, when Radha-Krishna find time out of their daily schedules to gather near a *gupta kunda* (secret lake) in Vrindavan and stand with their friends and handmaidens in the order specified in the pictorial charts, such that devotees, following the scripted route, can offer ritual worship to them in imagination. Their
imagination is then the exact counterpart of the lotus-shaped celestial Vrindavan.

Practitioners compulsorily follow this routine at the given time. However, each devotee may also perform her personal service at other times of the day. Depending on her spiritual mentality, one who gets the taste of these services may want to perform them for extended hours through the day.

However, after imagining oneself repeatedly within a prefigured normative discursive plot, an experienced practitioner suddenly senses extra-script innovative acts in it. Like the leap from discipline to passion, this move from the grammatical to the excessive is a moment of grace. It cannot be intentionally captured. Despite being provided with an “exemplary script” (Haberman 1988, 45), she may encounter an untainted space in her cognition such that she can experience a mythopoetic patchwork, new every time, and unknown to the mediations of her guru and to her own previous imaginations. The infinitely variant, playful possibilities of imagination constitute its domain of autonomy, the domain of affect. Imagination’s affective autonomy also impacts the physical body in unanticipated ways.

Every time the devotee begins sadhana, she hopes for real but unfelt-before lilas of which she is a part. What one experiences then is “neither a suspension of spontaneous emotion, nor a cathartic release of unsocialised elements” (Mahmood 2001, 828). Imagination therefore is precisely this middle ground between the social or discursive and the asocial or affective. This presents “a genre of being with respect to which the subject is not sovereign, but without his being imprisoned in it” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 66, cited in Krell 1982, 503). A practitioner said, summarizing this, “We would not have the incentive to sit for sadhana every day if we had to only do the same things. In repeating the routine, we still have ample hope for tasting lilas anew, every time.”

Thus, following Casey’s (2000, 66) theorization of imagination, the Vaishnava case demonstrates that controlledness is a feature of the “act phase” of imagination, and spontaneity, of the “object phase.” I attribute the former to socially constructed emotion, and the latter to affect.

Devotees assert that intense imagination often impacts the body, the cognized self transforming the physical self. Krishnagopal’s nephew, Radheshyam, cited a beautiful metaphor to explicate these transformative processes. There is an insect known as kumor-poka in Bengali. They hunt in swarms. Once they get hold of some other insect, they encircle it and buzz around, although not attacking it. The other insect
is, however, consumed with fear of being attacked any moment. Due to this constant thought about *kumor-poka*, it is changed into one. Radheshyam said, “The relation between the essential self, the hunter, and the ritual body, the hunted, is similar. Constant thought leads to physical transformation.” He shivered mildly and had goose bumps while describing this, and his eyes flooded with tears.\(^{40}\)

Once, a devotee in *sadhana* imagination learned that her guru-*manjari* could not be found in Vrindavan. Desperately looking for her, she discovered that Radha had lost her anklet and that their lineage had been given the responsibility to look for it. Thus, all the gurus in her line were under Radhakunda (Radha’s bathing lake), searching. Getting permission from them, she too started looking for it. In some time she found the anklet. However, she could not go and directly give it to Radha. So she passed it on to her guru, she to hers, and so on, up to the first *manjari*, who handed it over to Radha through her guru-*sakhi*.

In one version of this celebrated anecdote, Radha, pleased with the *manjari*, graced her by striking her on the head with her anklets (*nupur*), right at the point where the main *tilak* is drawn. When the devotee returned to his ordinary senses, he found a new anklet-*tilak* drawn on his forehead. The practitioner’s subsequent initiated generations wear the same *tilak* to this day.

In another version of the story, the *manjari* told the main *sakhi* that she needed proof that the anklets belonged to Radha. Radha then showed her the bottoms of her beautiful feet, seeing which she immediately fainted. In his real body, too, he experienced a swoon and then a blissful awakening.

Another *manjari* has the service of warming milk for Krishna, which Radha takes to him in the evening. Once, while performing it in her *manas*-Vrindavan, she let her mind wander off to the thought of the deities’ divine activities which were taking place then, and burnt her finger. He was immediately shaken to consciousness, and found that he really had a burnt finger.

Once, an ascetic told another to cook some rice pudding for their altar-deities. Then, in her imagination, a beautiful young girl came and gave her the milk and she cooked the pudding. After he returned to his ordinary senses and tasted the pudding, it turned out to be tastier than ever before. He reported the experience to his ascetic friend, who immediately recognized the young girl as Radha herself.\(^{41}\)

Once, a devotee and his guru were worshipping together when, in their respective imaginative revelations, they together found for Radha
her lost nose-ring, which had fallen off during her love-encounter with Krishna. Pleased, Radha called them close to her and stuffed betel leaves in their mouths. The handmaiden-practitioners came back to their ordinary senses and, chewing on their betel leaves, exchanged aware smiles.

There are other celebrated paradigmatic narratives which reveal the translations among celestial Vrindavan, manas-Vrindavan, and physical lands where practitioners reside. Thus, one time, a practitioner using his yogic powers dipped under the (physical) Radhakunda in Vrindavan to look for Radha’s earrings, which she discovered in imagination were lost in celestial Radhakunda; he got up crying after seven days, saying he had found them.

Certain deductions may be inferred from the preceding exploration of practices of imagination. First, higher stages of rumination effect bodily transformations (McDaniel 1995, 45). Affective and cognitive spaces are co-constituted and intermediated by imagination. No longer does imagination remain confined to visualization. Its synesthetic appeal urges us to take a “methodological step away from an empiricist conception of imagination as abstract representation to a phenomenological conception of imagination as a feature of the bodily synthesis” (Csordas 1993, 147–48).

Second, subservience is the main logic of selfhood here. At no point during sadhana can the manjari outdo her gurus’ primacy. She depends on their orders in imagination/Vrindavan. Yet this is no way hinders but rather augments her pleasures. It is in assisting her guru in facilitating the deities’ eros that her pleasures rest completely.

However, practitioners assert that such is the empathic connection between Radha and the manjari by virtue of being completely engrossed in her loyalties, that she is bound to feel Radha’s pleasure in lovemaking. A babaji explained the nature of this empathy: “Unless one feels what Radha feels, how will she understand what Radha wants? How will she serve her? When you burn a piece of iron, it gradually becomes bright red. It acquires the qualities of fire; but it never becomes the fire. Similarly, both a lamp and a forest fire emit heat. But when wind comes, one dies out, the other spreads. So, both the part and the whole have similar characteristics, but the whole has qualities which supersede the part, and which the latter can hope to embody but not emulate.”

Almost challenging him humorously, I asked Krishnagopal what need there is to empathize with someone else’s sexuality so intensely. Unperturbed by my arrogance, he said with a coy smile, almost as if he could visualize what he was describing, “Manjaris are of impressionable
ages. Their hearts are as soft as clay. Thus, the imprints of Radha’s emotions are distinct. If Krishna kisses or bites or embraces her, then the pain or pleasure that Radha feels will also impact the manjari’s body. The greater the sensitivity, greater is the reception of empathy.” The paradox is that another’s erotic pleasures can be felt in the body without desires developing for ego-gratification.

Practitioners offer interesting explanations for such experiences of submissiveness. At the earliest stages of sadhana, Krishna is imagined to be Vrindavan’s only subject (visaya); all the rest, objects (asraya) of his pleasure. Asraya literally means “vessel.” Devotees explain that if one confines one’s embodied experiences to one’s own body-vessel, then a limited sense of pleasurable empathy is attained. The gurus are spiritually more developed, and thus their senses more refined than the devotee’s. Thus, their capacities to indulge in Vrindavan’s pleasures are multiplied exponentially. When one submits to the powers of the pyramidal guru-lineage, the gurus’ body-vessels, one also apprehends and resonates with the tastes of such (interlocked and exponentially increasing) pleasures. They can then transfer their body-minds onto a realm of infinite affective possibilities. This is literally a model of a vessel, taking as its subject another vessel, and it continues ad infinitum (Haberman 1988, 112).

The weaker the sense of bounded agentive egohood, the greater are the chances of tasting Vrindavan’s aesthetic delights. The only autonomy is thus in accepting and enjoying one’s essential subservience. Ego-effacement is thus cognized in terms of chained subservience. The devotee tries to be like Vrindavan’s eternal participants, without aspiring to equal them.

However, the paradigm of extreme emotional possibility is contained in Radha. She embodies a grammar of affective concentration of sweet-tasting emotions toward Krishna: pure devotion, dalliance, love, attraction, jealousy, romance, passion, and finally, the concentrated form of all these emotions (mahabhava). To explicate this point, many devotees invoke a metaphor of crystallization: from sweet syrup, to jaggery, to sugar, and finally sugar cubes. The greater the emotive congealment, the greater its permanence, and therefore its capacity to be tasted by Krishna. In Bengal-Vaishnava aesthetics, Radha derives more pleasure in serving and loving Krishna than Krishna himself. Thus, the pleasures of the vessel/lover/servant are greater than those of the object/loved/served. For practitioners, therefore, not Krishna but Radha becomes the primary paradigm of worship. The manjari’s true devotion thus
becomes a matter of being able to apprehend Radha’s intense sensuous needs and desires.

In the ego-dissolved state, all manjaris are subservient to and share in the emotional intensity of the sacred place, Vrindavan. Devotees emphasize that their pleasures are then not self-directed (kama) but always focused on the deities (prem). The self thus remains, but with an idea of the affective body and senses mediated by Vaishnava discourses. The affects belong to imagination-Vrindavan, and are heightened without being ego-directed.

As explained above, rigorous bodily practices aim at stifling notions of corporeal autonomy, and practiced contemplations place manjaris in relation to many others, thus placing their independent relationships within an economy of other actors without belittling the importance of each. The egoless appraisal of emotions enables a manjari, as a non-agentive feeler, to taste Radha’s pleasures without authoring them. An “ordinary emotion” is limited to an ego’s pains and pleasures. But manjaris’ experiences are shared and impersonal, and there is therefore an aesthetic “artistic distance” between the spectator and her emotions (Haberman 1988, 17).

Arindam Chakrabarti (2009) makes similar observations in his analysis of rasaesthetics. He argues that “unbelonging” (2009, 190–91) depersonalized affects or “ownerless emotions” (198) are capable of forging impersonal subjectivities. Precisely because there is then no centered ego, no “unsharable individuality,” (190) that perfect empathic possibility is offered. What remains is a pure, self-contained aftertaste of shared, distilled sentiments (rasa). These sentiments are never felt less intensely by actors, however. In fact, they impact the epidermal/cognitive worlds of co-feelers with an even more passionate wrap, for the shame/fear/limits of the bounded egos are now absent. The rasika (aesthete/connoisseur) is defined as a person who through years of practice derives pleasure from the universality of sentiments, as both participant and observer (Siegel 1983, 3).

Although the infinite stylistics of the manjari’s imagination affect her visceral body, imagination as such cannot be exactly located. It is the entire transformative space of the mind-heart geography where Vrindavan is felt. It is also that exercise which dissolves the boundaries between subject and object, inner and outer, knower and known, journey and place. The limits of bodily and subjective sovereignty are automatically released. Imagination is therefore not only embodied but also intensely affective.
The perspectivist position of a thinker-feeler thus gets challenged, in feeling with the same subterranean shared “flesh” (Carman 2008, 1, 133). There is an analogical perception in her, a simultaneity of emotional identification. An elderly babaji summed this up for me: “Since I do not have a sense of my own body, thus, every time my manjari self feels something, she knows this is because she is located in Vrindavan, and that the pleasure belongs to all in Vrindavan.” He maintained an objective distance from his true/essential self by referring to it in the third person.

Ethnographies reveal the translatable potentials of synesthetic experiences, kinesthetics of the body (Csordas 1990, 22), and cognitive and ethical faculties of the mind (Debes 2009; Lutz 1988, 224–25). In this case, similarly, through bodily and mental practices one is able to cultivate ethical ego-effacement and taste the sacred place in one’s heart-mind with all one’s physical and inner sensory capacities: eyes witnessing divine lilas, clairaudience resonating with Krishna’s flute, clairaroma enjoying the smell of wild Vrindavan forest flowers, and skin sensing Radha’s.

This complete sensory absorption is augmented when the bud-like manjari’s devotion is tasted by Krishna. Devotees, comparing him to the taster-bee, explain this beautifully when they say that a bee is attracted with all senses—it sees, smells, touches, and tastes the flower, and only after that emits its gunjan—pleasure sounds. Both the attractor and the attracted indulge in sensory excess because their location, Vrindavan, is the embodiment of visceral bliss. In this case, the embodied place is the mind-heart, and the process of manifesting it, imagination.

OTHER SENSES OF PLACE

So the goswamis’ and babajis’ manas as gupta-Vrindavan is unveiled as the spiritual place through perceptive and fine-tuned imagination. Three components of imagination have been discussed in this regard. The first are practices through which the mind-heart is prepared for imagination. This involves the cultivation of an ego-effaced feminine sensibility in the devotee. Second, Vaishnava imagination follows a strict discursive script defining the location and emotions of the devotee’s spiritual self. These emotions are of egolessness and empathy. Third, imagination’s affective autonomy manifests itself in its unanticipated, creative moments, and also its intense sensory impact on the practitioner’s body. The imaginative sense of place thus operates as an intermediary between socially constructed emotions and the autonomous domain of affect.
Manas-Vrindavan has egoless selves experiencing inter-self empathic continuity. This self exemplifies a paradoxical status of savoring divine sensuality through heightened senses, yet not desiring ego-gratification. The egoless feminine self relishes Vrindavan’s passions; in other words, the emotive body delights in imagination.

However, the politics of placing Vrindavan in imagination has far-reaching consequences for the sect’s consolidation (see also Case 2000, 71). The relation between the goswami or babaji guru and his disciples practicing manjari sadhana is not only a material one based on providing initiation and receiving sectarian loyalty. The perpetuation of their relationship and therefore the strong organization of their Vaishnavism are also conceptualized as spiritual. Even after his physical death, the guru literally continues to hold a crucial location in the disciple’s imagination. The disciple in turn is indispensable for the guru-manjari, in providing her requisite assistance in her services in imagination. All potential disciples are therefore literally promised a place in Vaishnavism, and their spiritual subservience provides the deference necessary for community maintenance. Thus, although imagination is commonly understood as a solitary internal act, imagination here is also inherently social, due to both the embodied socialization the disciple undergoes from his guru as preparation for subsequent imagination, and the reciprocity engendered between guru and disciple in their respective imaginations. These social articulations constitute the basis of the perpetuation of goswamis’ and babajis’ kind of Vaishnavism.

Any “social,” however, thrives on its distinction from others. Imagination experienced as place exerts its power through corresponding social exclusions. Goswamis and babajis assert their difference from ISKCON on the basis that the latter do not have appropriate spiritual lineages through which manjari sadhana is imparted. The persistent discourse is that although ISKCON may have tons of money, temples, and rich international devotees, they will never know or be able to teach their disciples the essence of traditional Vaishnavism, which is manjari sadhana.

However, there is another Vaishnava group against which goswamis and babajis position their practices. They are the sahajiyas who live in Navadvip’s outskirts. While goswamis and babajis think of ISKCON as improper Vaishnavas, they call sahajiyas members of an apasampradaya, literally “outcasts,” and not Vaishnavas at all. Spiritual practices involving imagination are clean and respectable, they assert, because although intensely sensuous they reserve the sexual act itself for the
deities, their own selves being imagined as only serving them during the process. Their chosen site to experience the spiritual place is the sanitized mind-heart and not the body. Thus, although practitioners admit both the corporeal basis (bodily practices preparing for imagination) and bodily receptions of imagination (imagination’s impact upon the senses), their experience of the place in imagination is intimately related to the avoidance of carnal possibilities.

This is the prime factor which distinguishes goswamis and babajis and their sense of place from sabajiyas, who site veiled-Vrindavan within their physical body, which unveils the spiritual place through direct sexual relationships. Indeed, goswamis’ and babajis’ practice of manjari sadhana began as a response to the frequent associations of Bengal-Vaishnavism with sabajiya sexual practices (see also Klaiman 198, 39).

One morning, Krishnagopal was checking whether my work in Navadvip was progressing well. He mentioned a number of goswamis’ temples and babajis’ ashrams and asked whether I had visited them. At one point I told him that I had read books about sabajiya Vaishnavas and asked whether he knew if they live in Navadvip, since I would like to meet them. My jovial friend turned grim, stiffened his lips and said, “Don’t call them Vaishnavas. They are most dirty. I don’t think they deserve a place in your work on Vaishnavism.” Although I sensed what problems he had with the sabajiyas, I still asked why he reacted that way. He raised his voice and continued, “They have random sex, keep unmarried girls as partners, have illicit relations with gurus, and say they are sensing Vrindavan. What more is there to say? . . . They imitate [anukaran] Radha and Krishna, we only follow [anusaran] them!”

Despite similar reactions from a number of goswamis and babajis, I now desperately wanted to meet Navadvip’s sabajiyas. It is to the analysis of the kind of Vaishnavism and sense of place sabajiyas embody that we now turn.