Abstract

From Vedic sacrifices to kīrtan podcasts, sound art and music shape how Hindu religions are experienced. Nonetheless, the social and discursive value of music is easily underemphasized in accounts of religious practice and thought: frequently, music is either viewed as a technical field—best left alone by non-specialists—or taken for granted and dismissed as part of the ‘background’ in rituals and texts. However, the auditory dimensions of religion have very real consequences: historically, musical transmission has been crucial in the dissemination of ideas and texts, while soundscapes and performance genres continue to cultivate identities and moral positions. There is more to music than decoration or mediation: in some contexts, it is possible to consider music and sonic practices as the substance of a theological system, the centre of gravity for doctrine, behaviour, and soteriology.

Keywords

music, practice, Vaiṣṇava, bhakti, visualization
Sounding Out the Divine

Musical Practice as Theology in *Samāj Gāyan*

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From Vedic sacrifices to *kīrtan* podcasts, sound art and music shape how Hindu religions are experienced. Nonetheless, the social and discursive value of music is easily underemphasized in accounts of religious practice and thought: frequently, music is either viewed as a technical field—best left alone by non-specialists—or taken for granted and dismissed as part of the ‘background’ in rituals and texts. However, the auditory dimensions of religion have very real consequences: historically, musical transmission has been crucial in the dissemination of ideas and texts, while soundscapes and performance genres continue to cultivate identities and moral positions.¹ There is more to music than decoration or mediation: in some contexts, it is possible to consider music and sonic practices as the substance of a theological system, the centre of gravity for doctrine, behaviour, and soteriology.

Axel Michaels has stressed that music is not ornamental, but fundamentally ritual, ‘in that it creates singular, elevating spaces of sound that can be bodily sensed’ (*Michaels 2015*: 148). In the context of ritual time, the musical moment is separated from everyday life by

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virtue of its being embedded in a space of action, demarcated by performance, framed, and acknowledged as transformative and elevating (Michaels 2015: 148–9; cf. Sarbadhikary 2015: 179–213). Music is embedded in ritual, but can also be understood as constitutive of theology in a broader sense: music provides access to another existential mode, and can carve out a space of contact with the divine. Michaels suggests that a ‘ritual sound image can never be only in this space, because it is simultaneously the complete Otherworld … without space, there is no ritual music, but ritual music is, at the same time, without dimension’ (Michaels 2015: 151).

Besides the ritual, phenomenological, and metaphysical significance of music and sound, musical texts also have substantial doctrinal value, especially in traditions that do not look back to an original, antique scripture as a source of authority. Following Thomas Coburn’s reconsideration of ‘scripture’ as śruti, Carola Lorea stresses the importance of lyrical tradition in the theology of the Bauls: ‘If anything like a commonly shared canon exists, this would be represented by the corpus of orally transmitted songs’ (Lorea 2016: 1).

Scholarship on musical culture is increasingly attentive to the experience of music and sound, moving beyond the artificial binary of ‘active’ performing and ‘passive’ listening (Small 1998). Listeners possess and perform their own relationships to musical objects, cultivated in particular social contexts, explored through specific associations or discourses, and enacted through the gestures and vocabulary of appropriate listening (e.g. clapping, exclamations, dancing, or reverential silence). Georgina Born suggests that ‘musical experience entails and proffers relations between objects and subjects; indeed it construes what might be called a musical assemblage—a series or network of relations between musical sounds, human and other objects, practices, performances, cosmologies, discourses and representations, technologies, spaces, and social relations’ (Small 1998). Religious music provides especially striking examples of assemblage, where music is deployed in a manner and setting deemed appropriate by a larger system of thought and practice. Born further
suggests that in the musical ‘event’ the object–subject relationship is transformed: in the religious context, the human actor enters into a different mode of engagement with something else—be it a ritual activity or a divine object of veneration—entering Michaels’ Otherworld for the duration of that event.

In this chapter I will consider an example of what Michaels has termed a ‘ritual sound image’, specifically in an eighteenth-century Brajbhasha (Classical Hindi) hymn written by a vaishnava poet and lyricist of the Radhavallabh Sampradāya, a bhakti sect of northern India. Examining the affective potential and doctrinal and ritual significance of the lyric underlines the theological qualities particular to musical texts, and the elements of the Radhavallabhī assemblage that generate the religious power of song.

1. Music and Vaiṣṇava Culture

Music has been especially influential in defining the character of North Indian Hinduism. From the fifteenth century onwards, when Vrindavan became the dominant vaishnava centre in Braj, specific styles of song, dance, and chant travelled across the pilgrimage networks of the sub-continent. Through these musical assemblages—including, crucially, the social gatherings and dialogic sermons that framed the performances—these networks spread ideas, names, and stories that came to define northern bhakti culture (Hawley 2015: 296–300). Many of the founding gurus of the sectarian communities in Braj were singers and poets, whose lyrics, repertoires, and performance practices defined the boundaries of different

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movements. The Gauḍīyas are an especially instructive example: the hagiographies of the sect draw focus to Caitanya’s ecstatic dancing, the devastatingly powerful emotions of those who experienced vaishnava hymns, and the ongoing importance of devotional song (kīrtan) in Gauḍīya history (McDaniel 1989: 29–85).

While many vaishnava performance practices seem distinctive or sectarian, scholars have drawn various connections between temple or havelī music and classical, canonical (sāstriya) varieties. Genres such as dhrupad had a wide range of contexts: assuming sectarian features in some devotional settings, such as the hymnals of the Haridasī Sampradāya, but elsewhere being used in praise of Muslim rulers. Moving beyond this sense of diversity, certain scholars have suggested a ‘liturgical-to-classical flow of influence’ (Ho 2013: 229), such that the musical traditions of bhakti culture were the direct precursors for music that is now considered ‘classical’ or even ‘secular’. Meilu Ho, for example, has argued that certain kīrtans from the liturgical repertoires of the Pūṣṭi Mārg (Vallabha Sampradāya) have been integrated into the compositions (bandīs) of professional gharānas (lineages with distinctive ‘house styles’) who operate outside the temple domain (Ho 2013: 208). However, the larger musical archive suggests a more complicated relationship between different musical repertoires and circles, which cannot be reduced to a binary of a liturgical/temple arena on the one hand and a classical/courtly/secular sphere on the other. In particular, three developments in song culture in the Mughal and early colonial periods complicate the history of music in North India.

Firstly, while historians of religion focus on Brajbhasha as a musical but distinctively vaishnava language, elevated through bhakti culture as the ‘mother tongue’ of Krishna, this dialect was also advanced by the Mughals as the pre-eminent elite vernacular (Busch 2010). Countless manuscripts in Brajbhasha—transmitted in devanāgarī, nastā’liq, gurumukhī, and other scripts—attest to the spread of the language into different social and religious
environments. The reputation of Brajbhasha as melodious, beautiful, and in some circles ‘feminine’ (Phukan 2001: 33–58) meant that it was considered especially appropriate for lyrical composition; literary tropes drawn from Braj and the vaisnava imaginaire were widespread, and can be traced into the works of singers and poets of very different sectarian affiliations. The musicality of the language was further reinforced in the domain of scholastic musicology: new works in Brajbhasha on canonical music-dance-drama (sangita sastra) proliferated from the seventeenth century onwards, which were produced in a variety of patronage contexts, from vaisnava Rajput rulers to Jain bankers.\textsuperscript{3} The importance of Brajbhasha song-craft and scholarship, which has been sorely underestimated to date, suggests a broad language culture where poetry, lyrics, and performance practices could circulate and cross-fertilize, blurring the distinctions between the liturgical and the secular.

A second, related development was the adoption of canonical art music in religious settings. Narahari Cakravarti, an early eighteenth-century scholar and celebrated hagiographer of the Gaudiyā tradition, is an especially striking example of a scholastic musicologist in a temple setting. Buried within the fifth chapter of his Bhaktiratnakara is a substantial section on music (1490 slokas, vv.2347–3837), framed by descriptions of the rasamandal, which installs canonical musical principles into a vaisnava universe. This section clearly conformed to the conventional topoi and epistemologies of sangita sastra. Narahari also composed the Rāgaratnakara, a practical and theoretical guide for singers; a song anthology, the Gitacandodaya, that contained a substantial treatment of rhythm; and a compendium of musicological treatises, the Sangitaśarasangraha. Narahari explicitly cited these scholastic treatise materials (especially the Sangitadamodara, Sangitaparijata,

\textsuperscript{3} E.g. the Rāgakirtihala (1796) of Rādhā Krishna, commissioned by Bhim Singh of Uniara, or the Rāgamalā (1758) of Yasodānand Śukla, commissioned by Mahtab Ray Jagat Seth of Murshidabad.
Saṅgītasāra, and Harināyaka) and engaged with their pronouncements through his own commentaries (Cakravarti et al. 1982). These different studies represent a deeply researched enterprise to train vaishnava devotees in elevated musical techniques, which Narahari argued had two benefits: a musicological training would improve the quality of the performances arranged for worship; and, since the divine experience in the rāsa of Krishna was fundamentally musical, it was only by appreciating the theoretical underpinnings of sound and art music that the devotee might begin to engage fully with the sacred music of Krishna’s līla. Narahari has also been credited with musical portions in works by other vaishnava authors, which is indicative of a larger community of vaishnava aestheticians and theologians engaging one way or another with classical musical scholarship.⁴

Finally, with the arrival of print at the turn of the nineteenth century, the songbook became one of the largest and most significant genres in the colonial-era vernacular book trade (Orsini 2009). Individual songbooks could be compiled following very different criteria, but many collated liturgical hymns or devotional genres alongside folk, theatre, and love songs.⁵ For the reading, listening, and performing public, bhakti lyrics could be performed in different settings, and enjoyed alongside songs that did not make any reference to the religious realm.


⁵ E.g. Nandalal, Turra-rāga (Banaras: Chandraprabha Press, 1883); Kumvar Sen, Rāgamālā (Delhi: Gyan Press, 1877). Songbooks that were primarily bhakti-orientated include Bhaktram, Rāgaratnākara (Bombay, 1893 [4th ed]); Harivamsa Sharma, Bṛhadrāga-kalpadruma (Bombay, 1891); Ganganarayan, Padakusumakara (Agra, 1897).
Texts and tunes travelled and were transmitted by different actors who framed them differently with every telling, musical performance, manuscript, or printed copy. Therefore, considering a song, lyric, or composition as an essentially religious object proves challenging without due attention to its social context, the human agency entangled in its articulation, and the musical culture around it.

2. Ritual Sound in the Radhavallabh Sampradāya

The Radhavallabh Sampradāya is one of the smaller sectarian traditions of Braj. The founding guru, Śrī Hit Harivamś (1502–52), was a lyric poet, and the anthology of lyrics attributed to him, the Hita Caurāśī Pada, takes a central role in the performance culture of the sect (Snell 1991; White 1977). This culture is centred on the samāj gāyan (‘congregational singing’), a structurally complex form of antiphonal singing. Selina Thielemann, Takako Tanaka, and Guy Beck have explored the musical traditions of Braj in considerable detail, and have discussed samāj gāyan in several settings: as well as the Radhavallabhis, the Nimbarka and Haridasaī Sampradāyas are also well known for their congregational singing.6 In the

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Radhavallabhi context, the samaj gayan ensemble usually consists of the principal singer (mukhiyā) and responsive singers (jhela); one devotee who will play the pakhavaj, another the harmonium or sarangi, and another the cymbals (jhanjha, manjira, kartal). Occasionally, a tanpura or drone instrument might also be brought into the ensemble. The samaj gayan sessions are held daily in the temples in conversation with the ritual timetable of the gods’ service; they generally begin with a slow composition (such as in dhamar tal or cautal), and then speed up in later songs (Beck 2012: 175–6). The structure of a gayan itself can be extremely complex, reformulating new arrangements of disparate texts, rāgas, and tālas to create a multifaceted exploration of a theme. Tanaka’s analysis of the ‘chain’ (śṛṅkhlā) structures of musical and textual units in performance demonstrates that the arrangements of lyric are thematic, drawing on various poets’ voices to describe a single episode, marking out interpolations or new perspectives with a change in rāga or tāla, though these are rarely prescribed in the hymnals (Tanaka 2013). These formulas are ‘transmitted orally, but fixed through long tradition’ (Tanaka 2008b: 98).

Samaj gayan is not understood in the same terms as ‘music’ (saṅgīt, gān etc.), but rather as a sonic practice directed towards the performance and utterance of the ‘voice’ (vāṇī): the preferred Radhavallabhi term for poetic texts that are revered as sacred, insofar as they are the primary materials for worship, and act like a springboard into the divine realm when activated through performance. The materiality of scripture is largely irrelevant: if a lyric is performed in samaj gayan, then the manuscript or modern pamphlet is no longer a pustak (‘book’), but is treated reverentially as a vessel of vāṇī. The treatment of text—both its physical handling and the way it is consumed, read aloud, or sung—fundamentally

transforms the expectations of the latent power in the sung words. As Linda Hess has observed, ‘everything changes with the simple fact that each poem is a song. As purely textual scholars, we dealt only with words; no words and music are inseparable. Music affects us physically and emotionally. Emotions shake up the patternings of thought. Mind and body interact. Singing is interpretation. The meanings of the text change when we hear it sung. These are the barest hints of how music affects text’ (Hess 2015: 3; cf. Shukla-Bhatt 2014: 130–52).

Song performances are economical and designed to articulate each word of a verse (pad) with clarity. Kishorisharan Ali has stressed that since samāj gāvan expounds and unpacks the latent power of vāṇī, the lyrics must be prioritized in performance, and the instrumental or vocal dimensions of performance are secondary considerations: the mukhiyā does not perform alāp or rāns, and only sparingly deploys brief murkhit ornaments (Ali 1998: 410–11). While some hymnbooks specify rāgas for the pads, these do not always equate to their ‘nominal counterparts’ in the classical tradition, and many pad collections will forgo the rāga prescriptions altogether (e.g. Khandelval and Khandelval 2009).

The samāj gāvan style distinctively combines elements of classical (śāstriya) music with folk genres (lok gīt) and women’s music, especially domestic songs associated with life-cycle events: for example, sohilau, khicrī caruvā, and jaccā-baccā in relation to birth, and ghori, vannā, cāk bāt, lagan, lārī, and gārī in relation to weddings (Ali 1998: 410). The cultural resonance of women’s repertoires lends itself to a theological emphasis on the sakhīs, the

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7 Selena Thielemann, *The Music of South Asia* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Pub., 1999), pp. 305–6; Beck, *Vaishnava Temple Music*, pp. 61–3. Lalitacaran Goswami, the editor of the principal Rādhāvallabhi hymnbook, notes that a preferred melody may replace a rāga if the rāga’s structure is found to obstruct the clear pronunciation of words. See Lalitacaran Goswami (ed.), *Śrī Rādhāvallabha Vartotsav* (Vrindavan: Śrī Rādhāvallabha Mandir Vaisnav Committee, 1994).
female attendants to the goddess Radha, who represent the highest aspiration of the devotees. The sakhis are considered to be the original and paradigmatic members of the assembly, the samajis, and to perform gayan is to follow the model set by them (Ali 1998: 409). This form of aspiration and imitation through music indicates the soteriological efficacy of samaj gayan: singing aims at achieving the affective state (bhava) of the sakhi, that is, an ‘inner experience of ecstasy’ (Ali 1998: 409). Kishorisharan Ali described the effects of samaj gayan as a driving force, akin to the energy of a warrior in battle, the ‘internal impetus’ (antaḥprerana) of devotees that cultivates an appropriate disposition (samvardhansīla) (Ali 1998: 409). To participate meaningfully in samaj gayan and to aspire to the authentic bhava is not a mechanical activity, but requires the commitment and cultivation of a rasika: an aesthete connoisseur, who is saturated or dripping with affective potential (ras), a ‘heartfelt’ singer and listener (sahāday gayak and sahāday śrotā) (Ali 1998: 409).

Hit Vrindavandās (c. 1700–c. 1787) was a prolific poet in the Radhavallabh Sampradāya, whose members continue to sing his lyrics, and affectionately refer to him as ‘Cācā Jī’ (Uncle) (Entwistle 1987: 212; Snatak 1958: 512ff; Mital 1974: 424–6). After taking initiation into the sect in 1738 he primarily lived in the Radhākant temple in Vrindavan with his guru, Hit Ruplājit, though the political turbulence and frequent violence of the eighteenth century meant that he regularly migrated between safe territories, particularly several Rajput states (see Williams 2016). Today he is especially celebrated as a vānikār, an author of vāni. In the Basanta Prabandha (‘Spring Composition’, undated), Vrindavandās imagined the earliest samaj gayan of the sect, collapsing the distinctions between the historical human assembly and the eternal samaj of the sakhis. He chose to capture the energy and emotion of the gathering through the language of Holi:

\[
\text{jana gunī mile sabahi ju lara} \quad \text{karaiṃ pančandā śravanā sukha}
\]
\[
kau sāra
\]
the virtuous assembled, all of them together,
they made the five sounds—hearing them is the essence of delight
they played and the strings resounded together
the fortunate revelry of spring to the ears
now their thoughts are saturated with colour
at love’s command they delighted in play
the bhajan filled them whole, there was no telling its limit,
rubbing the fine essence of perfume upon perfume
worshipping with the heart, one offers a Holi song

chanting the recitations, one obtains the benefit

drowning in the ras, then being revived,

the wonder is revealed to the heart

crying, ‘Ho! Ho!’ the ball is hurled

    a stream of colour shot from the syringe

the bhajan pours over the head, the strings are played,

    feeling that full embrace, one is lost

head feels kneaded, body unrecognizable,

    smearing on the perfumed paste again and again

garlanding such a loving heart,

    under the power of love they forget themselves, concentration obliterated

Holi came and the heart grew with desire

    this way the rasika devotee became affectionate

the rules were slackened, barriers to nature,

    a canal filled up with colour through the dry heart and head.

(Basaṅga Prabandha Part I vv.40–1, 48–51, in Khandelval 2002: 54–5)
Throughout various compositions, Vrindāvandās played with the semantic possibilities of ṛāṅga, understood as ‘colour’, ‘emotion’, and ‘passion’ (Williams 2018). Emotions spread from different subjects like liquid dye bleeding out from a saturated centre, which made the colourful anarchy and energy of Holi a particularly appealing metaphor. The wet and osmotic fluidity of ṛāṅga gestures to the underlying principle of rasa as the juicy affect that can be squeezed out of an experience. The hymn (bhājan) is wet: it pours over and into the head, filling up the vessel of the samajī’s body like a trench. For all the liquids and colours, it is music and sound that lay the foundations for sensory overload and heightened experience: the five sounds (pancamaṇḍa, perhaps referring to a composition based on five notes), the stringed instruments, the delight in the ears, the Holi song (cāṅcari), the chanting (japa), the shouts and exclamations, and the bhājan itself are all the means by which the devotee becomes a rasika and affectionate with divine love (saumārā). Crucially, engagement with the music and the latent bhāva is not cerebral or intellectual; in fact, it is the opposite. The self is unrecognizable, and mental discernment becomes meaningless in the daze of colour and sound. The process of immersion and saturation in the samaj gāyān is embodied, like the feel of an embrace, or like squeezing out and smearing (gāsī) perfume (saurabha, aragajā) over the body.

These verses have two implications. In the context of samaj gāyān, music serves as a catalyst, admitting the devotees into a different relationship with their bodies, senses, and emotions, re-orientating them towards the bhāvas of the sakhiṣs, and bringing them into closer proximity to the affective core of divinity. Yet in that heightened state, sound cannot be divorced from the larger embodied aesthetic mix: music is the fuel or the engine, but it is also just one sensory component in the total experience.
These implications can be traced in other Rādhāvallabhi thinkers, including Rasikdās, who wrote one generation earlier than Vrindāvandās:8

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ya bana ghana men kaba milen doa parama sukumāra} \\
\text{nīla pāta pata mukha chabi sīsa candrikā dhāra} \\
\text{sīsa candrikā dhāri bajarā murali ati nīkā} \\
\text{mandala jori samāja phirani cahunghāni tiyā piya ko} \\
\text{cangā madanga upānga dhuni parasa anga rati pati gir Anita} \\
\text{racita su ṛīla lalita gati yā bana ghana bāthini dharani}
\end{align*}
\]

when those two meet in that deep forest, it is supremely tender
yellow clothes against blue, radiant crown, a stream of moonlight from the head
moonlight streams from the head, the flute plays so elegantly
uniting in a circle, the assembled sway in each direction around his beloved wife
to the tune of caṅga, maṅdanga, upanga their bodies touch, the Lord of Lust is struck down
crafting their beautiful, charming game, they walk the paths of that deep forest.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{jahān rasa rasa bistāra} & \quad \text{banirāni jatha apāra} \\
\text{rāgīnī rāga ucāra} & \quad \text{sa ra ga ma pa dha na sukhasāra} \\
\text{ye bajāhin bīna upānga} & \quad \text{ati tala tana taranga}
\end{align*}
\]

8 Kishorisharan Ali has identified thirty-one works by Rasikdās. Though his dates are unknown, he was a disciple of Goswami Dhīradhar (fl.1686–96). See Mital, *Braj ke Dharm-Sampradāyon ka Itihās*, pp. 413–14.
there the ras of the rāsa dance spread forth
the mistresses were in limitless multitudes
rāgas and rāginīs sounded
sa-ra-ga-ma-pa-dha-na, the essence of happiness
vīṇā and upānga were played,
great waves of tālas and tānas
the mṛdanga dropped a wedding march
amidst the sweet muralī and cānga.

(Rasikdās, Manoratha Lata vv.73, 103–4. See Yadav 2002: 62, 65)

These poetic tableaus rely upon the evocations of an orchestral range of instruments, from
stringed (vīṇā) and woodwind (upānga),9 to the drum (mṛdanga), the flute (muralī), and
tambourine (cānga). Rhythmic patterns (tāla) and ornamental phrases (tāna) roll into the
scene like waves. The build-up of the instrumental music, against the to-and-fro of the
circling attendants, reaches a climax when Rādhā and Krishna finally touch. Rasikdās was
attentive to these details, and celebrated the potential of musical sound, atomizing the melody
by itemizing the scale through sargam syllables.

In these previous examples, Vrindavandās and Rasikdās were explicit about the musical
content of the divine experience. However, the theological potential of sound is also explored
in other poems without referring to instruments and notes. Here I will explore one poem by

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9 On the ambiguity of the word upānga, see Snell, Eighty-Four, pp. 200–1.
Vrindāvandās that crafts a ‘sound image’ to bring the devotees closer to the goddess Rādhā, while maintaining the principle of her transcendence and ineffability.

3. Accessing the Goddess Through Her Feet

In Rādhāvallabhī theology there is a keen distinction between the forms that Rādhā and Krishna assumed in historical or narrative time—which are ‘victorious’ (vijaya rūpa) but temporal and therefore lesser—and the gods’ transcendent and more authentic reality (nija rūpa) (Snell 1991: 333, 1978: 22–30, 1998: 63–84). As the supreme being, Rādhā is ineffable, existence without quality (nirguṇa), category (nirvīṣeṣa), or form (nirākāra), yet, the Rādhāvallabhis insist, she is nonetheless accessible to experience (anumavaikagamya) (Snatak 1958: 210ff). Through the activation of vāṃ, sound operates as a point of admission into a heightened experience, where an encounter with the divine becomes possible. In his poems and songs, Vrindāvandās celebrated Rādhā in anthropomorphic and narrative terms, but also gestured to a higher, abstract divine reality. In 1774, Vrindāvandās composed the Caraṇapratāpāstaka (‘Hymn on the Glory of Her Feet’), dedicated to the feet of the goddess Rādhā. He began with an introductory verse, pondering over how he might describe them, then presented eight verses (āṣṭaka) that explored the sacred feet through layer upon layer of metaphor and symbol.

The Caraṇapratāpāstaka oscillates between the anthropomorphic and the aniconic, concrete visualizations and intimations of something more abstract. The verses might be confusing at the level of text, but when they are treated as the basis for a performance, the interplay of images is appealing and evocative:

\[
\text{rupa kidhau sarabara sarada ritu hai hita,} \\
tahān phāle arabiṇḍa dvai duti ke dharana hain.
\]
I wonder if their form is like an autumnal lake, oh my love,
where two blossoming lotuses hold the light;
where one exceptional bee is buzzing, greedy and intoxicated,
he goes round and takes his fill, they are his shelter;
where love is the moon, they remain blooming day and night,
full with the pollen of beauty, they overwhelm and render powerless.

Vrindavan’s Loving Beauty, sacrificing myself upon this wonder,
the feet of Queen Radha are my strength.\(^{10}\)

In this verse-vignette, the two feet are likened to a pair of lotuses emerging from a lake: there is no indication of the rest of Radha’s body, besides the suggestion of a light, borne aloft by the flowers. While ‘lotus-feet’ is a very common phrase, Vrindavan’s invocation of the image of actual lotuses transforms them into a platform for the abstract being of the goddess,

\(^{10}\) *Caranapratapastaka*, v.3. I have consulted two manuscripts of this unpublished text, located in the archives of the Ras Bharati Sansthan, Vrindavan (No. 510), and the Vrindaban Research Institute (No. 1732). The text in this chapter is from my own working edition of the text.
a framing device for the devotee to contemplate her aniconic form. Krishna, in his capacity as
the husband or lord of Radha (Radha-vallabha), is the one bee,11 given exceptional access to
the lotuses, though his accessing the holy feet prepares a path for devotees, to whom the feet
are a wonder, and a source of shelter and power.

Devotion to feet was a long-established means to invoke a higher power that is otherwise
beyond form. The buddhapada represented Buddha when his iconic depiction was considered
inappropriate, but also aligned him with the figure of ‘world-conqueror’, the cakravartin
(Tambiah 1976). The iconography of feet was refined and expanded over time (cf.
Cirasutra), most overtly in vaisnava traditions, where the feet of Viṣṇu were reproduced in
sectarian marks, amulets, and tattoos. Jutta Jain-Neubauer notes that since feet are considered
to be the support of the rest of the body, they possess the qualities of the whole, and may be
taken as a synecdoche for a larger identity: just as a woman’s toe provides a sense of her
entire form (cf. the Janatadharmakatha), the foot of a god is a microcosm of the entire
universe (Jain-Neubauer 2000; Rawson 1973: 111). Footprints gesture to an ephemeral
contact with a higher reality, the actual presence of something metaphysically remote.12 Over
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, footprints became a recurrent motif in the devotional
imagery of Jodhpur, where the appearance of Śrī Nathji’s footprints were taken as his visiting

11 The chosen word for ‘bee’, ali, is a preferred named in the Sampradāya. One early modern poet of
the sect was called Ananya Ali, so it is possible that there is an obscure reference to him in this
poem.

12 In popular tradition, this is seen in the supplication of Lakṣmī during Divāli through the painting of
her footprints on the path leading to a house’s entrance: the worship of these alponas facilitates the
blending of the divine and human realms. In another poem, the Harikalī Belī, Vrindāvandās
rebuked Krishna for his silence and absence, declaring, ‘We did not get a sign of your feet even in
our dreams’ (26.1).
and legitimizing Man Singh as ruler of Marwar (Diamond et al. 2008: 195). In one painted illustration of the Nāth Purāṇa, a host of iconic deities (including Viṣṇu and Śiva) are depicted paying homage to Śrī Nāthji as he bequeaths the river Ganges. Nāthji is represented in a higher plane, distinguished from the created order by borders of white and gold squares expanding outwards. He is represented by golden footprints of light (jyoti kundal), representing how Nāthji operates in a higher sphere than that of the other deities, let alone his human devotees.

The central image of the Carahaprataṇḍaṭaka is an exploration of the nineteen symbols located on the soles of the feet. The verses guide the singers through eleven on the left foot (barley-corn, disc, line, lotus, parasol, elephant goad, flag, bangle, flower, creeper, half moon), and then the eight on the right (sacrificial altar, mountain, conch, earring, club, chariot, spear, fish). Vṛindāvandās used this framework to explore a wider repertoire of images associated with Rādhā, and her relationship to Krishna.

\[\text{bāma tau agnāha māla jaba cakra vṛajamāna}\]
\[\text{ardhapada ten tarjamī lau reṣā jū dharana haṁ}\]
\[\text{madhyama tara dhuja au kamala haṁ anūpa bhānti}\]
\[\text{tina tara puhapa-latāṁ ke barana haṁ}\]
\[\text{chiguniyāṁ nikāta ankuśa-balaya channa hai}\]
\[\text{ardha bidhu yendi madhya ye jū sukha bharana haṁ}\]
\[\text{vṛindāvana hita rāpa bandau au dhyāna dharaun}\]
\[\text{rādhikā kuvari jū ko bāma asa carana haṁ}\]

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13 Folio 8, attributed to Śivdās (c. 1825 VS/1768 AD), Mehrangarh Museum Trust. See Diamond, *Garden and Cosmos*, fig. 45, pp. 192–3.
At the base of the left toe, barley-corn and discus shine,

a line extends from the middle of her foot to the pointing toe.

Below the middle toe are unique varieties of banners and lotuses,

beneath them, the colours of flowers and creepers.

Near the little toes the goad, the ring, and parasol,

a half moon inside her heel—these are replete with bliss.

Vrindavan’s Loving Beauty! I bow down and hold them in contemplation,

such is the left foot of Princess Rādhā!

On the right at the heel one finds [Kāma with his] fish-banner,

the symbols of chariot and mountain: the heart is enchanted by them.
Know the might and glory of the club and spear;

at the base of the big toe is the auspicious conch.

An altar shines under her little toe—oh!

under that, how the earring gleams!

Vrindavan’s Loving Beauty! Behold all this on the right:

I declare, how beautiful are Queen Rādhā’s feet!

*(Caranapratapastaka, vv. 5–6)*

The symbols express different connotations, including dominion and power: i.e. the club, chariot, spear, goad, parasol, and flag. The elephant goad, a sign of royal greatness, is traditionally located on the feet of kings. The sacrificial altar is the cleanest orthodox space, so its appearance on the sole of the (conventionally unclean) foot signifies the absolute purity of Rādhā’s body. Other symbols are more specifically vaishava register: the conch, the disc (both symbols of infinity), and the vertical line which is also found on the feet of Viṣṇu *(Rawson 1973: 102, fig. 85)*. Natural images, such as the barley-corn, flower, and creeper, may suggest fertility, especially the fish which is considered a prolific breeder so particularly fertile. Vrindāvana did not simply depict a fish, but ‘the Fish-banneled One’ *(mīna-dhujā)*: a title of Kāma, the god of erotic lust. Placing him under the heel, Vrindāvana related this symbol to a wider theme in Rādhavallabhī imagery: the victory of Rādhā’s pure love in *śṛṅgāra rasa* over the baser desires of Kāma (cf. *Caurāsī Pad*, vv. 16.6, 19.7). Not only is Rādhā more erotically potent than the god of eroticism, she renders that eroticism into a pure space for participation with the divine, ‘devout but non-egoist, non-sexual love and of the “sweetness” *(mādhurya)* on which it is based’ *(Gonda 1977: 85)*.

This particular iconography of the feet is also venerated in the traditions of the Gaudīya Sampradāya, as in the *Śrī Rāpa-cintāmaṇi* of Viṣvanātha Cakravarti Thākura and the *Ananda
The significance of there being specifically nineteen symbols is unclear: there are references in the Gauḍīya corpus to a further thirty-five symbols represented on her hands, which would bring the total to fifty-four (Iṣvara dasa and Raktak dasa 1999: 77). Fifty-four is half of one hundred and eight, an especially auspicious number, particularly for the Gauḍīya Sampradāya, who venerate one hundred and eight names of Rādhā,14 and the same number of gopīs. Given that Krishna is also considered to have symbols on his limbs (including nineteen on his feet, according to these same texts), this tradition could represent the total perfection of the couple together: the fifty-four symbols of Rādhā’s body finding completion in Krishna’s own.

Without some prior knowledge of the iconography, the song would make little sense: in some verses symbols are listed without explanation, juxtaposing elephant hooks, flowers, and parasols. Vrindāvandās anticipated knowledge of the nineteen symbols, even without a physical or visual icon being present at the time of performance: perhaps their meanings were expounded in sermons or discursive portions of a samāj gāyan session. The sonic visualization of the feet is constructed through oral performance, but it is not enough to sing the words without emotional investment and cultivated appreciation. Rosenstein suggests that the notion of Rādhācaraṇa pradhan (the primacy of Rādhā’s feet) has its origins in the Rādhāsudhamidhi of Harivamsa, and was fundamental to the distinctively Rādhāvallabhi attitude of servitude (kiñkara-bhava) (Rosenstein 1998: 5–18). Vrindāvandās stressed that the devotee must be fit for the divine experience:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{hiye saram} & \text{ na basau dhuj} \text{a jana } \text{s} & \text{a lasau} \\
\text{ratha ke patha } \text{lagau mana } \text{p} & \text{a j } \text{a sarana hain} \\
\text{parabata pai ramau citta mora } \text{an} & \text{dita dvai}
\end{align*}
\]

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14 As in the Śrī Śrī Radhika Asottara Sata-Nāma of Śrila Raghunatha Dāsa Gosvāmī.
the banner does not reside in a shameful heart, but in a devotee bright like the moon

the mind that clings to the path of the chariot obtains that refuge

my mind rejoices upon that mountain, delighted by the two

the club batters the burning of my life, cast away and destroyed

(Carana pratāpasta vak v. 8.1–2)

The symbols are both sites of meditation and have felt effects: the club on the right foot destroys the poet’s pains; Vrindavandās is engrossed (ramau) in the mountain as a symbol, to the extent that he is ‘on’ the mountain (parabata pai). This sense of engaged participation with the symbols parallels a passage in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, where meditation on the symbols of Viṣṇu’s feet prepares the devotee:

Thereafter he should meditate upon the lotus-feet of the Reverend One wearing the marks of the Banner (Dhwaja), Thunderbolt (Vajra), the hook (Ankusha) and the lotus (Padma). The nails of the Lord looking shining like the moon with rosy hue dispelling the darkness of His devotees’ hearts, those lotus-feet of the Lord by hearing the excellent stream flowing, from which the Lord Śiva secured the supreme felicity,—and which are like thunderbolt splintering the mountain of mis-deeds towering in the mind of the person that meditates. (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 3.28.21–2. Translation by Sanyal 1952: 130–1)

When we consider samāj gāyan in terms of a musical assemblage, performance and sonic practices can be seen as conversation partners with visual symbols (whether materially represented or imagined), scripture, poetic images, and the larger emotional and spiritual
regime of the *bhakta*. These different components come together in *samaj gayan* in an attempt to fathom the infinite, and sound out the goddess who is beyond matter and sight. Like sonar, music provides a means to bring a ‘sonic image’ into reality. In Vrindāvandās’s poem, the sonic visualization of the feet is not a static image:

\[\text{cakta jana racha \text{pā karau jaba hiye haryau bharyau}}\]

\[\text{ārdha rekha bhalā āpara bhakti bistarana haiṁ}\]

\[\text{dhujā bijai anusarau kamala hrādai roga harau}\]

\[\text{puhupa laita chāyā baihi kāli ko harana haiṁ}\]

\[\text{ākkuśa ara dala nidarau balai chatra sukhani bharau}\]

\[\text{ardha bidhu mahāi mohā ko harana haiṁ}\]

\[\text{vrindāvana hita rūpa jayati jayati sarbesvarī}\]

\[\text{mangala ko kārana rādhā rānī ke carana haiṁ}\]

marks, protect the devotee when he loses heart

devotion spreads like an upright line over his brow

following the banner of victory and lotus, take away the ailment of the heart

sitting in the shade of flower and creeper, mortality is stripped away

the goad and petals destroy my afflictions, the parasol fills me with bliss,

the half-moon strips away my greatness

Vrindavan’s Loving Beauty, hail! hail! Lady of all!

the feet of Queen Rādhā bring good fortune
Conventionally, the devotional significance of feet is underlined through the rhyme of *caraṇa* (feet) with *śaraṇa* (protection, refuge). Here, Vrindāvandās explores the rhyme with *haraṇa* (loss, removal, destruction). When activated in the heart of the devotee, the symbols of the feet are destructive: they strip away mortality (*kāli*), ailments (*roga*), and calamitous afflictions (*balai*). The last object of destruction, in the third line, is the devotee’s ‘greatness’ (*mahāi*), that is his prestige or pride, and the theme of humility unlocks the meaning of the rest of the song. The phrase ‘sitting in the shade of flower and creeper’ at first appears conventional, but the singer knows from an earlier verse that the ‘puhupa latā’ refer specifically to symbols on the left foot. Therefore, the ‘shade’ in which the devotee sits is cast by the foot itself. Reading (or singing) the verse again, it becomes clear that when devotion is spread over his forehead (like the lines of a sectarian mark), the poet is visualizing the foot pressing down upon his brow: the higher symbols—the banner and the lotus—are mentioned first; then the central portion of the foot (marked by flower and creeper) casts its shade; finally, the goddess’ heel presses down upon the poet’s head, and its emblem, the half-moon, is thus the final stamp of his servitude. The foot is fully applied to the head, compelling Vrindāvandās (and subsequent singers) into the position of the subjugated devotee, and his worldly pride vanishes. The song does not merely describe the feet, but allows the singer to personally participate in the experience of Radhā through an active, sung visualization.

4. Conclusion

Music, sound arts, and practices are not merely decorative: they also function as modes of ‘doing’ theology, in terms of how people make sense of another reality and engage with it
meaningfully. Music can be a gift to a god, a bridge to another world, a tool for realigning the self, and many other things besides. By thinking in terms of a musical assemblage, rather than an autonomous musical object, it is possible to consider the social and intellectual relationships that give meaning to a sonic practice, and how a musical event can disrupt quotidian experience.

In the case of samāj gāyan, music is an opportunity to experience and participate in the core reality of the Rādhāvallabhī world. The assemblage involves different forms of participation: the lead singers, the instrumentalists, the gathered assembly, human and divine listeners, and the soundscape beyond the havelī temple’s walls. Participation demands cultivation and expertise, both musicological and practical, but also an informed sense of Rādhāvallabhī aesthetics and emotional theory. The samāj gāyan is especially invested in a sense of place: the historical Vrindavan, where the gods, founding guru, and earlier generations of poets and singers lived, but also the transcendent grove (nikūñj) that exists outside of historical time, yet may be accessed through the musical event. The second core consideration is the voiced text, which translates a literary work into a scriptural and experienced vāṇī. Singing the vāṇī permits the devotee to become emotionally entangled with the divine: words cannot describe the ineffable, but sung lyrics can make it felt. The samājis create the music and flesh out the words with their voices, bodies, and instruments. Through music, the devotees become participants in the generation of the divine experience.

The sonic visualizations are not considered to be merely beautiful words, but have power and their own agency. In the case of the Caraṇāpratāpāstaka, the song text enables the devotee to contact and emotionally engage with an abstract entity. Here the sung worship of the sacred feet is not a straightforward practice, but requires cultivation and accomplishment. Vrindāvandās explored the feet as a synecdoche for the rest of Rādhā, without defining and limiting her through other visual or anthropomorphic restraints. This underlines Rādhā’s
distance from lower reality, yet also brings the goddess down quite literally upon the heads of the singers. The samājī participates in (rather than passively listens to) the reality realized by the vāṇī has a soteriological efficacy of its own, since it is through the performance that the feet of Rādhā grace the bhakta’s forehead, bringing his mind to a still and cultivating the experience of the nikūṭī līlā. The musical performance is the site of religious experience, the communion experienced in music the end goal itself.

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