

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

¹ See, for example, Anna C. Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Manuel, ‘Music, the Media, and Communal Relations in North India, Past and Present’, in David Ludden (ed.), *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1996), pp. 119–39.

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 *vaiṣṇava* poet and lyricist of the Rādhāvallabh Sampradāy, 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 Rādhāvallabhī 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.² From the fifteenth century onwards, when Vrindavan became the dominant *vaiṣṇava* 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

² There are several comprehensive studies of the relationship between Hindu thought and North Indian music. See Selina Thielemann, *Divine Service and the Performing Arts in India* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing, 1993); Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

movements. The Gaudiya 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 *vaiṣṇava* hymns, and the ongoing importance of devotional song (*kīrtan*) in Gaudiya history (McDaniel 1989: 29–85).

While many *vaiṣṇava* performance practices seem distinctive or sectarian, scholars have drawn various connections between temple or *haveli* music and classical, canonical (*śāstriya*) varieties. Genres such as *dhrupad* had a wide range of contexts: assuming sectarian features in some devotional settings, such as the hymnals of the Haridasi Sampradāy, 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 Puṣṭi Mārg (Vallabh Sampradāy) have been integrated into the compositions (*bandis*) of professional *gharaṇas* (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 *vaiṣṇava* 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*, *nasta'liq*, *gurumukhī*, and other scripts—attest to the spread of the language into different social and religious

environments. The reputation of Brajhasha 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 *vaiṣṇava* 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 Brajhasha on canonical music-dance-drama (*saṅgīta śāstra*) proliferated from the seventeenth century onwards, which were produced in a variety of patronage contexts, from *vaiṣṇava* Rajput rulers to Jain bankers.³ The importance of Brajhasha 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 Gaudiya tradition, is an especially striking example of a scholastic musicologist in a temple setting. Buried within the fifth chapter of his *Bhaktiratnākara* is a substantial section on music (1490 *ślokas*, vv.2347–3837), framed by descriptions of the *rāsamaṇḍal*, which installs canonical musical principles into a *vaiṣṇava* universe. This section clearly conformed to the conventional topoi and epistemologies of *saṅgīta śāstra*. Narahari also composed the *Rāgaratnākara*, a practical and theoretical guide for singers; a song anthology, the *Gītacandodaya*, that contained a substantial treatment of rhythm; and a compendium of musicological treatises, the *Saṅgītasārasaṅgraha*. Narahari explicitly cited these scholastic treatise materials (especially the *Saṅgītadamodara*, *Saṅgītaparijata*,

³ E.g. the *Rāgakutūhala* (1796) of Rādhā Krishna, commissioned by Bhim Singh of Uniara, or the *Rāgamālā* (1758) of Yaśodānand Śukla, commissioned by Mahtab Ray Jagat Seth of Murshidabad.

Sāṅgītasāra, 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 *vaiṣṇava* 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 *vaiṣṇava* authors, which is indicative of a larger community of *vaiṣṇava* 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.

⁴ Swami Prajñānānda credits Narahari with portions of the *Anandavṛndāvana-champu* of Kavi Karnapura and the *Govinda-Līlāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāj. See Swami Prajñānānda (ed.), *Sāṅgītasāra-samgraha of Sri Ghanasyamadasa* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1956).

⁵ E.g. Nandalal, *Turra-rāga* (Banaras: Chandraprabha Press, 1883); Kumvar Sen, *Rāgamālā* (Delhi: Gyan Press, 1877). Songbooks that were primarily *bhakti*-orientated include Bhaktraram, *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 Rādhāvallabh Sampradāy

The Rādhāvallabh Sampradāy 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 Caurāsī 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 Rādhāvallabhīs, the Nimbārka and Haridasi Sampradāys are also well known for their congregational singing.⁶ In the

⁶ Selina Thielemann, *Musical Traditions of Vaiṣṇava Temples in Vraja: A Comparative Study of Samāja and the Dhrupada Tradition of North Indian Classical Music* (New Delhi: Sagar, 2002); Takako Tanaka, *Hindō Kyōto No Shūdan Kayō: Kami To Hito Tono Rensa Kōzō* (Kyoto: Sekai Shisoshā, 2008a); Takako Tanaka, ‘The *Samāj-gāyan* Tradition: Transmitting a Musico-Religious System in North India’, *Senri Ethnological Studies* 71, 2008b, pp. 87–101; Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 173–99; Guy L. Beck, ‘Samāj-Gāyan for Rādhā and Krishna: Devotional Music in the Rādhāvallabhā Sampradāya’, *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 7, 1998, pp. 85–100. Beck has also prepared a study and anthology of translations from the modern hymnbook series of the

Rādhāvallabhī context, the *samāj gāyan* ensemble usually consists of the principal singer (*mukhiyā*) and responsive singers (*jhela*); one devotee who will play the *pakhāvaj*, another the harmonium or *sāraṅgī*, and another the cymbals (*jhāñjha*, *mañjira*, *kartal*). Occasionally, a *tānpurā* or drone instrument might also be brought into the ensemble. The *samāj gāyan* 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 tāl* or *cautāl*), and then speed up in later songs (Beck 2012: 175–6). The structure of a *gāyan* 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' (*srñkhlā*) 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).

Samāj gāyan 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' (*vāñī*): the preferred Rādhāvallabhī 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 *samāj gāyan*, then the manuscript or modern pamphlet is no longer a *pustak* ('book'), but is treated reverentially as a vessel of *vāñī*. The treatment of text—both its physical handling and the way it is consumed, read aloud, or sung—fundamentally

Sampradāy, the *Śrī Rādhāvallabhajī kā Varṣotsava*. See Guy L. Beck, *Vaishnava Temple Music in Vrindaban: The Rādhāvallabha Songbook* (Kirkville, MO: Blazing Sapphire Press, 2011).

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 gāyan* expounds and unpacks the latent power of *vānī*, 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 *tāns*, and only sparingly deploys brief *murkhi* 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,⁷ and many *pad* collections will forgo the *rāga* prescriptions altogether (e.g. Khandelval and Khandelval 2009).

The *samāj gāyan* 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*, *khicri caruvā*, and *jaccā-baccā* in relation to birth, and *ghorī*, *vannā*, *cāk bhāt*, *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

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 Rādhāvallabhī 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 Varṣotsav* (Vrindavan: Śrī Rādhāvallabha Mandir Vaiṣṇav Committee, 1994).

female attendants to the goddess Rādhā, who represent the highest aspiration of the devotees. The *sakhīs* are considered to be the original and paradigmatic members of the assembly, the *samājīs*, and to perform *gāyan* is to follow the model set by them (Ali 1998: 409). This form of aspiration and imitation through music indicates the soteriological efficacy of *samāj gāyan*: singing aims at achieving the affective state (*bhāva*) of the *sakhī*; that is, an ‘inner experience of ecstasy’ (Ali 1998: 409). Kishorisharan Ali described the effects of *samāj gāyan* as a driving force, akin to the energy of a warrior in battle, the ‘internal impetus’ (*antahpreraṇā*) of devotees that cultivates an appropriate disposition (*samvardhanśīlā*) (Ali 1998: 409). To participate meaningfully in *samāj gāyan* and to aspire to the authentic *bhāva* 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 (*sahṛday gāyak* and *sahṛday śrotā*) (Ali 1998: 409).

Hit Vrindāvandās (c. 1700–c. 1787) was a prolific poet in the Rādhāvallabh Sampradāy, 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 Rādhākant temple in Vrindavan with his guru, Hit Ruplālji, 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 *vānī*. In the *Basānta Prabandha* (‘Spring Composition’, undated), Vrindāvandās imagined the earliest *samāj gāyan* of the sect, collapsing the distinctions between the historical human assembly and the eternal *samāj* of the *sakhīs*. He chose to capture the energy and emotion of the gathering through the language of Holi:

jana guṇī mile sabahī ju lāra

karaiṅ pañcanāda śravaiṅ sukha

kau sāra

bājenu bajāvain mile tāra kānana maṅgala madhurutu
bihāra
aba raṅga bharani kau bhayau vicāra hita-ājñā lai haraṣe
khilāra
bhājana bhari dhare nahiṅ ganata pāra ghasi bhānti bhānti saurabha su
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

mana iṣṭa jajai cāncari ju deta japa jāpya kiye kau labha leta
rasa buri jāta puni hauṅhi saceta kautika ju dikhāvata hiyani heta
ho ho kahi gainduka karahiṅ māra picakarīnu chūṭīn raṅga dhāra
bhājana sira dhorata deta tāra bhari bātha manāvain tāki hāra
mukha māṅgāin hohi na tana cinhāra aragajā-lepa karaiṅ bāra bāra
ati premi hiya kau karaiṅ hāra bisaraiṅ ju prema basa sudhi
samhāra

hori āi cita barhī cāra

karain rasika bhakta ihi vidhi

sauñlāra

khuli gaiñ nēma kī sahaja āra

sūkhe ura-sara bhari rāga gāra

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.

(*Basanta Prabandha Part I* vv.40–1, 48–51, in [Khandelval 2002](#): 54–5)

Throughout various compositions, Vrindāvandas played with the semantic possibilities of *raṅga*, 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 *raṅga* gestures to the underlying principle of *rasa* as the juicy affect that can be squeezed out of an experience. The hymn (*bhajan*) is wet: it pours over and into the head, filling up the vessel of the *samājī*’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 (*pañcanāda*, perhaps referring to a composition based on five notes), the stringed instruments, the delight in the ears, the Holi song (*cāncari*), the chanting (*japa*), the shouts and exclamations, and the *bhajan* itself are all the means by which the devotee becomes a *rasika* and affectionate with divine love (*saunlāra*). 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 *samāj gāyan* is embodied, like the feel of an embrace, or like squeezing out and smearing (*ghasi*) perfume (*saurabha*, *aragajā*) over the body.

These verses have two implications. In the context of *samāj gāyan*, 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 *sakhīs*, 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

yā bana ghana meṅ kaba mileṅ doṅ parama sukumāra
nila pīta paṭa mukuṭa chabi sīsa candrikā dhāra
sīsa candrikā dhāri bajata muralī ati nīkī
maṅḍala jori samāja phirani cahuṅghān tiya piya ko
caṅga mṛdaṅga upaṅga dhuni parasa aṅga rati pati giranita
racita su līlā lalita gati yā bana ghana bīthini dharani

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, mṛdaṅga, upaṅga their bodies touch, the Lord of Lust is
struck down
crafting their beautiful, charming game, they walk the paths of that deep forest.

jahān rāsa rasa bistāra banitāni jūtha apāra
rāgini rāga ucāra sa ra ga ma pa dha na suhasāra
ye bajahin bīna upaṅga ati tāla tāna tarāṅga

⁸ Kishorisharan Ali has identified thirty-one works by Rasikdās. Though his dates are unknown, he was a disciple of Goswami Dhiradhar (fl.1686–96). See Mital, *Braj ke Dharm-Sampradāyon kā Itihās*, pp. 413–14.

gati parani parata mṛdaṅga bica madhura muralī caṅga

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

vīna and *upaṅga* were played,

great waves of *tālas* and *tānas*

the *mṛdaṅg* dropped a wedding march

amidst the sweet *muralī* and *caṅga*.

(Rasikdās, *Manoratha Latā* vv.73, 103–4. See [Yadav 2002](#): 62, 65)

These poetic tableaux rely upon the evocations of an orchestral range of instruments, from stringed (*vīna*) and woodwind (*upaṅga*),⁹ to the drum (*mṛdaṅg*), the flute (*muralī*), and tambourine (*caṅga*). 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, Vrindāvandās 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

⁹ On the ambiguity of the word *upaṅga*, 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 (*nirviśeṣa*), or form (*nirākāra*), yet, the Rādhāvallabhīs insist, she is nonetheless accessible to experience (*anumavaikagamyā*) (Snatak 1958: 210ff). Through the activation of *vāñī*, 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 *Caranāpratāpāṣṭaka* (‘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 *Caranāpratāpāṣṭaka* 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:

rūpa kidhau sarabara sarada ritu hai hita,

tahāñ phūle arabinda dvai duti ke dharana hain

ali ananya eka lobhī bhṛmai mana matta tahān

bhānvaraiṅ se bharaiṅ takaiṅ tina kī sarana haiṅ

himakara mainnaa tahan ṣilai rahaiṅ aṣṭajāma

bhare chabi parāga āśakti basa karana haiṅ

vṛndāvana hita rūpa bali bali yā kauṅṭika pai

moṅ koṅ bala yeī rādhā rānī ke carana haiṅ

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 Rādhā 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 Rādhā's body, besides the suggestion of a light, borne aloft by the flowers. While 'lotus-feet' is a very common phrase, Vṛndāvandaś' invocation of the image of actual lotuses transforms them into a platform for the abstract being of the goddess,

¹⁰ *Caranaprataṅgīkā*, 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 Rādhā (Rādhā-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. *Citrasutra*), most overtly in *vaiṣṇava* 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 Nāthjī’s footprints were taken as his visiting

¹¹ The chosen word for ‘bee’, *ali*, is a preferred name in the Sampradāy. 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 Divali 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 *Harikalā 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 Purāna*,¹³ a host of iconic deities (including Viṣṇu and Śiva) are depicted paying homage to Śrī Nāthjī as he bequeaths the river Ganges. Nāthjī 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 (*jyotiḥ kundal*), representing how Nāthjī operates in a higher sphere than that of the other deities, let alone his human devotees.

The central image of the *Caranāpratāpāṣṭaka* 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). Vrindāvandās used this framework to explore a wider repertoire of images associated with Rādhā, and her relationship to Krishna.

bāma tau agūṭha mūla jaba cakra vrājamāna
ardhapada teṅ tarjanī lau reṣā jū dharana haiṅ
madhyamā tara dhuja au kamala haiṅ anūpa bhānti
tina tara puhapa-latānī ke barana haiṅ
chiguniyān nikāṭa ankuṣa-balaya channa hai
ardha bidhu yeṅdī madhya ye jū sukha bharana haiṅ
vrindāvana hita rūpa bandau au dhyāna dharaun
rādhikā kuvari jū ko bāma asa carana haiṅ

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!

dakṣiṇa tau yeṇḍī main mīna-dhujā tā pai

ratha parabata ko cinhū tahā mana ko harana haiṅ

gadā au sakti ko mahāi paratāpa jāni

agūthā ke mūla saṅkha maṅgala karana haiṅ

chigunī ke tara bedī jagamagai ahā kahā

tāke tareṅ kundale su chabi yaun parana haiṅ

vṛndāvana hita rūpa dāhine main yete cinha

badau cāru aise rādhā rānī ke carana haiṅ

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!

(*Caranapratāpāstaka*, 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 *vaiṣṇava* 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. Vrindāvandās did not simply depict a fish, but ‘the Fish-bannered One’ (*mina-dhujā*): a title of Kāma, the god of erotic lust. Placing him under the heel, Vrindāvandās related this symbol to a wider theme in Rādhāvallabhī 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 Gauḍīya Sampradāy, as in the *Śrī Rūpa-cintāmaṇi* of Viśvanātha Cakravartī Thākura and the *Ānanda*

Candrikā (Isvara dasa and Raktak dasa 1999: 68–73). The significance of there being specifically nineteen symbols is unclear: there are references in the Gaudīya corpus to a further thirty-five symbols represented on her hands, which would bring the total to fifty-four (Isvara dasa and Raktak dasa 1999: 77). Fifty-four is half of one hundred and eight, an especially auspicious number, particularly for the Gaudīya Sampradāy, 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 pradhāna* (the primacy of Rādhā's feet) has its origins in the *Rādhāsudhānidhi* of Harivamśa, and was fundamental to the distinctively Rādhāvallabhī attitude of servitude (*kīṅkari-bhāva*) (Rosenstein 1998: 5–18). Vrindāvandās stressed that the devotee must be fit for the divine experience:

hīye saramī na basau dhujā jana śiśa lasau
ratha ke patha lāgau mana pāi jū sarana hain
parabata pai ramau citta mora ānāṅdita dvai

¹⁴ As in the *Śrī Śrī Rādhikā Aṣṭottara Sata-Nāma* of Śrīla Raghunatha Dāsa Gosvāmī.

gadā cūrai durita mitai jiya ki jarana haiṅ

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

(*Caranapratāpāṣṭaka* vv. 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; Vrindāvandās 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 Purāna*, 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 Purāna* 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 *samāj gāyan* 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 Vrindāvandas’s poem, the sonic visualization of the feet is not a static image:

cakta jana racha pā karau jaba hiye haryau bharyau
ūrdha rekhā bhāla ūpara bhakti bistarana hain
dhujā bijai anusarau kamala hrdai roga harau
puhupa latā chāyā baithi kāli ko harana hain
aṅkuṣa ara dala nidarau balai chatra sukhani bharau
ardha bidhu mahāi moha ko harana hain
vṛndāvana hita rūpa jayati jayati sarbesvari
māṅgala ko kārana rādha rāni ke carana hain

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 Rādha bring good fortune

(*Caranāpratāpāṣṭaka*, v.7)

Conventionally, the devotional significance of feet is underlined through the rhyme of *caranā* (feet) with *śaranā* (protection, refuge). Here, Vrindāvandas explores the rhyme with *haranā* (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 Vrindāvandas (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 Rādhā 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 (*nikunḥj*) 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 *vānī*. Singing the *vānī* permits the devotee to become emotionally entangled with the divine: words cannot describe the ineffable, but sung lyrics can make it felt. The *samājīs* 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 *Caranapratāpāṣṭaka*, 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 *samāji* participates in (rather than passively listens to) the reality realized by the poem: 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 *nikuñj līlā*. The musical performance is the site of religious experience, the communion experienced in music the end goal itself.

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