CHAPTER 6

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

INTRODUCTION: HEARING THE PLACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHANTING AND REMEMBERING LILAS AMONG GOSWAMIS AND BABAJIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

I learned the most about solitary chanting experiences from Giridhari. Disciple of a Vrindavan babaji, he had been in Vrindavan for a long
time earlier. A serious, middle-aged man, Giridhari did not have children. His wife told me that he did not have much interest in worldly affairs, and for a long time in the day, would sit before his altar-deities, chanting. He would instruct her that no one should disturb him during this time. Giridhari was also a diligent practitioner of manjari sadhana.

When conversing with him it was uncomfortable to see Giridhari speak, but not listen, for he chanted continuously while I spoke. His mouth moved, but the chant was silent. I expressed my discomfort, and he smiled and explained, “My full concentration lies with you. It is like breathing. Do I stop anything while I breathe? Rather, if I stop breathing, I won’t be able to do anything. I can hear chant [nam] resounding from my heartbeat, non-stop.”

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

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

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

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