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Thick Signs: Amplifying God-Sensation in Vrindavan

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Abstract

The divine currency of Radha-Krishna, the couple god, travels across the sacred geography of the Braj in northern India via a robust sign economy. In this article, I draw from my ethnographic narratives to demonstrate three domains of sign-form generation of the name-words of Radha-Krishna: visual, aural/verbal, and ritual/performative. I argue that an elaborate sign economy is required to sustain an intangible God-sensation by translating it into palpable, mundane, earthly forms. Not only does the sign-form thrive as a fusion between the real and the sign, but it also strengthens and comes to mirror the God-intuition in the hearts of the devotee public. This endless, repetitive, creative sign economy constitutes what I call "thick signs": indelible, weighty, dense, sticky sign-forms that imbue the physical world with a significant layer of divine currency that forms a pathway for intensified God-sensation that keeps God alive in the mundane, earthly world.

Keywords: sign; Krishna; Hinduism; sacred geography; God-sensation

1. Introduction

> *The followers of Swami Shri Haridasji sing quietly and in a somewhat nasal tone. They live in the sand-laden compound of Tatiasthan and assemble in song with devotees from the general public every evening. In Vrindavan, this is called samaj gayan.*
>
> *The men have a yellow paste smeared across their faces. Some of them wear a white and black printed headscarf over their shaved heads. They first sing facing the deity and then turn to their teacher—the Maharaj—who arrives at the assembly a little bit later. Monkeys shriek amidst their song which is further accompanied by the tanpura, flute, and the pakhawaj.*
>
> *This place is not in the world I know. It is not only strange in all its strange ingredients—like an exotic dish; it is strange because I am in it.*
>
> *The women sit at a corner. I am yearning to have a sharper listen. An elderly woman, a widow, sits next to me and chides everyone for shifting around to me, and for checking phones. Mobile phones and other technology are strictly forbidden at the premises of Tatiasthan. The woman is the only one among us who seems to know all the songs. She sings in with the male collective in a sharp, nasal voice. I listen to her intently and try to decipher the words. There are no microphones.* (Majumder 2023)

The sound of sacred music animates the evenings at the monastic complex of Tatiasthan in the city of Vrindavan, every day; the musical service ends just as the sun is about to set. In this open-air theatre of sacred music, a mundane, repetitive theatricality keeps divine currency alive and thriving.

The Hindu god Krishna (especially his mythical presence as a young, mischievous lad in the sacred geography of Braj) is made and kept real through the feverish making

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and circulation of signs in the semiotic landscape of the Braj region in northern India. The sacred geography of Vrindavan and the surrounding urban–rural spread of Braj presents the Krishna devotee with a God catalogue. You can see, hear, touch, and experience the God-form in multiple ways. God, so to speak, circulates in loops and binds of an "infinite series" (Keane 2018, p. 77). Webb Keane discusses, in citing Peirce, two infinite series—one back toward the object which gives rise to the sign, and one towards the interpretant (Keane 2018, p. 77). I qualify this twofold axis of infinite series in showing that the journey back to the object is not possible as the historical location of the object (God) is indeterminate. Hence, the series works in loops and binds forward and outward all across the physical, secular world, each loop and bind amplifying and multiplying the God-sensation. God coagulates onto the surface of the earth, by endless making and circulation of signs. Everywhere, all the time. This lively, audio-visual-tactile ecosystem of sign-production and circulation through the God-sensation translates into an ecosystem of **thick signs**, and the God Krishna (Radha-Krishna, that is, Lord Krishna and his primary lover Radha in a coupled form) is sensed on a loop, everywhere, all the time. The sign itself, I argue, with every loop of repetition and amplification, clusters of signs leading to more signs, becomes thicker in weight and impact in making the God-sensation tangible in everyday life.

Predictably, the word "thick" in anthropology is quickly associated with Clifford Geertz's famous 1973 essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Culture," where he likens the work of an anthropologist to an interpreter of complex codes, many of which do not easily meet the naked eye of the observer. He emphasizes, through the example of a wink, that anthropological analysis is targeted at decoding "winks upon winks upon winks" (Geertz 1973, p. 9). He writes (Geertz 1973, p. 10):

> *Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of eclipses, incoherence, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.*

He relies on Max Weber to define culture as "the webs of significance" (Geertz 1973, p. 5) that man spins around himself to fill his world with meaning—thus, culture is a semiotic system. Geertz does not go into too much explanation of the choice of the word "thick", although he cites Gilbert Ryles's earlier use of the term "thick description".

I depend partially on Geertz's use of "thick" as being overloaded with structures of meaning or as heavily loaded semiotic complexes. I do not see thickness as a strategy of writing but rather as a way in which the meaning (of the divine) is produced in the everyday in the sacred geography of the Braj region. I think of "thick signs" as being overly pregnant with meaning and generating divine currency with each repetition and loop in circulation. The semiotic chain or ecosystem is thriving in every possible sensory domain, multiplying itself with the meaning of divine invocation and connection through this repetitive logic, and constantly generating signs that are thick (on the study of signs and semiotics in anthropology, see Mertz 2007; Parmentier 2016). I elaborate on the concept of "thick signs" in a later section in the article.

In this article, I show the production of thick signs through the omniscience of (1) visual sign-stamps of Radha and Krishna on faces, signboards, walls, T-shirts, and the physical environment; (2) aural and verbal announcement of the God's presence in speech and song; and (3) repetition of ritual work in the observance of devotional religion. There is a radical predictability and a repetitive logic in this religious practice of Krishna devotion (often called *Bhakti*). Through the deployment of such repetitive logics, a thick, weighty, indelible presence of the divine is produced. I argue that this sensory experience carries a transfer to and from intangible presence or potential into forms of tangibility through the production and circulation of **thick signs**. The intangible God-sensation and

the tangible God-sign feed each other in an infinite series. God as concept and God as sign become irrevocably coupled, inextricable from each other. I use the term "God-sensation" to denote the subjective, individuated, affective, inward experience of divine presence. I use the term "divine currency" to denote the distributed effect of the thick signs which are produced and circulated across the Braj region.

Speaking of the role of concepts in propping up inward experiences and externalizing them, Michael D Jackson writes of the post facto efficacy of concepts (Jackson 2021, p. 203):

> Functioning as coping mechanisms or post-facto summaries, they foster the consoling illusion that our lives can be comprehended and controlled, and that we can share our experiences with others.

Here, I speak of the *consoling illusion* of acting in faith through the making, sustenance and circulation of signs and sign economies in propping up and feeding the incomprehensibility and sensation of God. Concepts grow out of their abstract armature and come alive in the devotional life of Braj through signs and their animation in formulaic, repetitive logics. This format of deep immersion in an intuition through the diverse acts of making and inhabiting of signs is at the heart of devotional worship in the Braj region.

2. The Braj Mundane

The Braj, a sacred place in the north Indian province of Uttar Pradesh, unfolds as thriving, networked, and alive. It is the sacred geography of Krishna worship, stretching, in popular parlance, across *chaurasi* (eighty four) *kos*[1] from eastern Rajasthan on the west through western UP to the UP–Haryana borders in the east. Its heart is in the city of Vrindavan, where I have struck roots as a devotee-ethnographer (Majumder 2022).

I started my ethnographic research in the Braj region with Vrindavan as its centre in 2019. I was first a devotee here and later an ethnographer. Between 2019 and 2024, I visited the region for short stretches of time—never longer than a month. Between 2024 and 2025, I was able to conduct a ten-month stint of ethnographic research in Vrindavan and the larger Braj region with the support of the Wenner–Gren Foundation Post-PhD Grant. This productive conundrum of being devotee/ethnographer has been at the centre of my journey in this region and with the study of Krishna Bhakti. The material for this article has been collected over the past six years. I described the first journey in 2019 thus (Majumder 2022, p. 538):

> *. . .I had never been to these sites of Krishna-worship before, and had never devoted any attention to Krishna or the religious traditions surrounding his divinity. Predictably, my earthly search for Krishna took me to Vrindavan—the sacred geography of Krishna worship in northern India. By this time, I had read some English translations of the Gita. I knew intellectually about the Bhakti tradition that focused on the Hindu God Vishnu or his ninth avatara (incarnation)—Krishna. But this textual training was not satisfying enough. That first train ride in February 2019 from Delhi to Mathura, and the short taxi ride to Vrindavan, took merely two hours, but I arrived in a different world. I wasn't sure exactly in what capacity I was to approach this town—anthropologist or devotee.*
>
> *I entered Vrindavan as a devotee and as an anthropologist. And I was constantly switching roles. The sensory provocation and associated defeat at the hands of the Godhead went simultaneously with the rational compulsion to study as a researcher—remain constantly aware and watching—until those faculties started failing.*

This switching modality and the ensuing combination of being devotee and being ethnographer have defined and shaped the writing and audiovisual work that has emerged from my research in the Braj region between 2019 and 2025.

The city of Vrindavan has a large spread of urban ambition in its outer boundaries. In the inner chambers lie the crowded walking paths leading into the old temple complexes. The Radha Raman attracts me the most, crowds flock the other big temples like the Radha Damodar, Banke Bihari, the Nidhivan. An hour away is the Shreeji temple on a hilltop in Barsana—popularly known as Radha's abode—that overlooks the Daangarh fort. Old Gokul, Naya Gokul, Nandgaon and nearby areas sport temples dedicated to Krishna and his brother Balaram, his adoptive parents Nanda and Yashoda, many temples of baby Krishna. At these temple sites, Radha is mostly absent. There are a range of stepwell and water bodies in this sacred geography—Premkund, Shyamkund, Radhakund. These are quieter spots than the main city of Vrindavan which attracts thousands of religious devotees who come for long and short visits to the city and its environs. There are the *ghats* (quays) that look down upon the quiet river Yamuna—Shri Yamunaji or Yamunarani, the most famous being the *Keshighat*. In the monsoons, the brown waters come up, submerging the steps of the ghat. In the winters, they subside.

Vrindavan grows into a melancholic geography. I walk in and out of temples, through crowds, constantly self-conscious and wary of monkeys, open drains, and heaps of plastic waste. I am also conscious of name-words of Radha and Krishna written in Devanagari and English and/or their images painted everywhere on surfaces. This is the land of their romantic song and dance, the endless play of union and separation. There are infinite songs and poems about the two—a supreme God and a human woman who attains divinity in such union.

The river Yamuna shines in the post-monsoon period. It grows murky as the water level shrinks at the onset of summer. As I zoom out of the frame of sacred geography, I look around onto the walls pasted with advertisements carrying mobile phone numbers of up-and-coming gurus and their upcoming events. Most are commentary events on the *Shrimadbhagvatam*. Alongside, there are phone numbers of real estate brokers, and then there is the name-sign of Shri Radha or Radharani. The outskirts of Vrindavan are turning rapidly into attractive real estate. It is only a short ride away from Jaipur or NOIDA.

I have walked here consistently amid crowds of devotees, some resident, some visiting, over the last five or six years now. In the first months of 2019–2020, this crowd scared me. My nails digging into my cloth bag are witness. Much of the time in Vrindavan and the Braj region was spent in walking, listening, watching, and occasionally talking. I was fortunate that much of this time was spent listening to live *dhrupad* musical service in temple courtyards. Eating *kachauri* (savoury, fried pastry) by the roadside. Taking photos of the *Radhe Radhe* stamps on the surfaces of walls. Watching people make merry on the ghats. Watching the flames of worship erupt in exhilaration toward the divine conjugation of Radha and Krishna.

Routine consumption continues in the temple outskirts: people buy things necessary for religious offerings—plastic baskets being the most popular to carry one's sacred materials (flowers, small domestic idols and so on) in. *Radhe Radhe* prints on T-shirts, headgear, dupattas, long skirts feature in these shops. Krishna memorabilia—to carry home a trace of Krishna after your visit. The motif of the coupled Radha-Krishna (engaged in loveplay or *leela*) echoes everywhere on the horizon. On sacred stamps on cheeks (the words *Radhe Radhe* marked in sandalwood paste), on the back of e-rickshaws and autos, on shop signboards, and in speech and song. Cymbals and meditation beads feature commonly in this environ. People chant the *mahamantra* (the sacred utterance of the God's name-words) with *tulsi* (sacred basil) beads that they carry in pouches—they carry them everywhere and walk busily about the streets while chanting. Again and again, everywhere, all the time—these are central pivots of devotional engagement in the Braj region.

Radhe Radhe

Stone is the signpost of eternity. It does not die. It survives as fossil, relic, ruin, remain. We leave with all our fragile emotions and writing toolkits. Stone stands alone to tell our stories. Everywhere in Vrindavan, stone speaks. It is continually spitting out time through its cracks. People paint *Shri Radha Shri Radha* on stone exteriors of the ghats. In bright concentric circles. Inlaid within them is a message of love for Priya. From a young man named Manohar. Perhaps, they are incarnations. Life breathes through these inscriptions of love among the ruins.

I watch for cracks and crevices through which light creeps in. Chiaroscuro. The saint Sri Chaitanya from Bengal built this sacred geography in the sixteenth century. His disciples Rupa and Jiva Goswami are in *samadhi* at the *samadhi* complex in the Radha Damodar temple. Devotees circumambulate the temple complex. The various Goswami disciple families still live in Vrindavan. They manage significant temples and other religious initiatives.

Water and sewage infuse each other. Water of the river Yamuna is sacred. It refuses defilement by any external entity (see generally, Haberman 2006). Plastic, human and animal waste, bottles of mineral water or Coca Cola float near the banks. The river Yamuna is heartbroken. Its waters are a subject of governmental concern and debate. Motorboats ply the Yamuna. A boatman on the Yamuna at Mathura tells the story of the *kevat samvad* in the Ramayana. This is the river Lord Ram crossed, he says. By that logic, he is the *kevat*, the mythical boatman who washed the feet of Lord Ram in the Ramayana. I am irritated at his insistence on grandiosity.

Nature—especially rivers, forest, Kadamba trees—feature repeatedly in the poems and songs of *bhakti*. They act as a prop for the devotee's intuitive capacity for Krishna-sensation. Our senses are deployed fully amidst this urban juggernaut to harness a Krishna-quality, a Krishna-texture in our lives. Like stardust, the bodies and minds of devotees are laden with Krishna-ness. People who circumambulate on the *parikrama marg* in Vrindavan, do not mind the dust. They carry a stone in their hands and mark the extremity of their stretched arm. They lie down and stand up and then lie down on the road again where the stone marks their position. Many carry a thermocol sheet to lie down on, in order to protect the body from heat and physical pain.

Birgit Meyer discusses the scholarship of Charles Hirschkind, W J T Mitchell, and Christopher Pinney (anthropologists and historians of the visual and the aural) to construct an argument of the picture or image of God that is not a mundane representation but carries spirits within it and is even vulnerable to capture by Satan (Meyer 2010, pp. 102–3; see also Meyer 2011). I argue, in this article, that the relationship between subjects and objects and between people and things (as Meyer discusses, through the scholarship of Marcel Mauss and Marilyn Strathern) gets complicated even further as God circulates seamlessly and effortlessly in these realms of secular and sacred lives—as toy, as idol, as image, as song, as name-word chanting—an *infinite series* of repetition and spread, infinite rounds of bind and loop. In the discussion of the relationship between subjects and objects, I simply wish to offer the insight that when the divine is taken for granted, nothing—not men and not things—is free and impervious to becoming a screen or vessel for God to descend and reside in, as long as he (and she) wish(es). It is, to quote Meyer (2010, pp. 104–5), an "animated" thing, but it carries the power of spreading the Godness of God everywhere in the secular, physical world. Hence, these things are not totems (Durkheim [1912] 1961) or spirit-possessors, they are the extension of God's presence, power, and energy. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 1961), Emile Durkheim produces a theory of totems—they bear the role of a sign-form that carries the energy of something intangible (like a spirit). I differ both from Birgit-Meyer and Durkheim in making the argument that **thick signs** are neither spirit-image nor totem, rather an

extension of God's presence in tangible terms in the physical world. Each toy, idol, sign, icon loses its thing-ness as it emerges as a conveyor of God's presence. These images, chanted words, affectations, postures, toys, things, and idols are then **thick signs**—weighty, dense, and amplifying in multiplication, the power and spread of divine currency.

It became a routine sight over the years that I lived, across short and long-term visits, in Vrindavan. The Radha-Krishna form gives shape to most temple deities, and to kitsch, toy-like goods for sale, and graffiti art on walls. More frequent are the words *Radhe Radhe* written in the Devanagari script all over the surfaces of the city—auto rickshaws, e-rickshaws, trucks, rear-windows of cars, shop signboards, and walls (see Figures 1 and 2). It is as though the devotee public is screaming out Shri Radha or Radharani's name in a massive echo chamber.



Figure 1. Shri Radha written the walls of a chai shack. Photograph is from Barsana, 2023. Image courtesy of the author.

The other places where such inscription and signage appear are on the faces, bodies and garments of devotees. Children and adolescents pace up and down the streets around the gates of important temples to stamp devotees' faces with *Radhe Radhe* in sandalwood, expecting ten or twenty rupees in return. This economy is mundane. It offers meagre livelihoods, as also a mundane and yet intimate habitation of divine currency. It assumes a surface economy that is waiting to receive and materially convert divine grace into materiality. Grace becomes mundane and yet the mundane remains somewhat extraordinary.



Figure 2. Shri Radha written in repetition across the walls of a ghat. Photograph is from Vrindavan, 2023. Image courtesy of the author.

About twenty to thirty people sing the Radha Raman anthem in unison at 7 pm in the middle of the ruthless summer of 2025. Phones come out for quick videos and selfies. They compete for the attentive field of the devotee. And yet, the gods seem satisfied and at rest after the *raag seva* musical performance is over. In this summer of a bit of slowness, while gods rest in Vrindavan, having some respite from the very world that originates in them, I witness the slow spread of divine energy across the horizons. The river Yamuna breathes in exhaustion under the weight of mundane human waste. A motorboat proudly displays a plaque declaring the message "I love Vrindavan." A column of cement now sits across the width of the river. There are rumours of a Mathura–Vrindavan corridor and associated plans for land acquisition and the eviction of residents in the old town. There are now Best Westerns and Radissons facing the huge Char Dham complex where a giant Shiva and a gigantic Vaishno Devi idols have been offered up into the horizon. This, then, is God's real estate. Vaishno Devi is painted a glistening pink, a colour and texture that mirror Indian aspiration. Inside the old temple town, boats are colourfully decorated, ancient walls carry advertisements for the next *satsang* (devotional gathering) that you must attend. This city draws thousands of devotees each year, and the ecology (especially, the river Yamuna) bears the cost of this footfall and consumer demands in increasing levels of river pollution in the stretch of the river that passes Vrindavan and Mathura.

This range of activity—mundane and specific—forms the circulating sequence of an echo chamber where every stamp or utterance of the God's sacred name is a trigger for several others to be generated. Each is a node in a scattered network of similar, comparable others. There is no central or pure, authentic sign from which copies may emerge. Each is as strong a holder of divine currency as another. They defy the logic of the diminished aura of a copy (Benjamin [1936] 1968).

This endless production and circulation of signs of the divine serves as divine currency and strengthens God-sensation. People do not and cannot easily narrate the interiority of their faith in straightforward ways. I infer the strengthening and cultivation of an

inner domain of faith from the affective dimensions of their earthly, this-worldly life. I cannot provide physical or language-based evidence to ascertain that this ecosystem of thick signs turns back into the interior and strengthens God-sensation. I conducted this ethnographic research simultaneously as a devotee and an ethnographer (a conundrum that I unpack above—see generally Majumder 2022; on interiority and questions of the soul, see Majumder 2024), and this immersion as a fellow devotee enables this inference. I rely on anthropologists like Stefania Pandolfo (Pandolfo 2018), and Amira Mittermaier (Mittermaier 2025) to generate an anthropological confidence that every inference from ethnographic journeys is not written in naked terms in the transcript of an interview. I remain invested in the anthropology of interiority, about which I learn from Pandolfo, who interprets murals and poems written by her interlocutors, who suffer psychosis and perceive religious imagery to get at the nature of their interiority. The everyday performative and semiotic traditions inform my inferences about interiority in this case. I must also remember here Veena Das's interpretation of Asha's silence (Das 2007), where she interprets that silence as a narrative (of an oblique kind) of violence, trauma, and its resultant subjectivity. Faith and its interiority manifest obliquely in the everyday life of the Braj region, as does my attempt to get at the divine which moves obliquely through my occupation of the ethnographer's hat.

3. Play in Speech and Song

The man at the steering wheel exasperatedly reaches out to the driver of an auto rickshaw in front who is not moving quickly enough, shouting at the top of his voice "*Radhe Radhe*".

The message was conveyed effectively and with no difficulty to the person for whom it was intended. The other driver understood the texture of irritation that his dearth of quick movement was causing. The name-word of God, I learnt, in this case, was a conveyor of mundane irritation. Speech in mundane interpellation (like if someone was calling out to you without knowing your name) and in mundane acts of everyday weaving of social life, would break into a *Radhe Radhe* here and a *Radhe Radhe* there.

Alongside the display of the words *Radhe Radhe* on the surfaces of the built environment, there is the additional layer of speaking these name-words and lacing ordinary speech with the citation of God. Shri Radha or Radharani, as she is called with endearment in the Braj region, must lace everyday speech, possession, sensorium, and actions in a way that does not agree with Baudrillard's theory of the sign-value (Baudrillard 1981) as use and exchange value acting in unison. It doubles up as commodity, graffiti and sensorium, all the while lifting the mundane out of itself. As the sign acquires greater and greater speed and texture through circulation, it generates a physical actuality of divine currency. It emerges as a **thick sign**, as I show later in this article. Thickness arises by enlargement, repetition, circulation. It arises in the construction of the presence of the divine in tangible terms. Radha and Krishna become literally present in the physical atmosphere.

Sarbadhikary, in her ethnography of Vaishnava practices in Bengal, writes of the intuitive capacity that is cultivated as a matter of active practice. She writes (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 73):

> *The devotee's imagination follows a predetermined script given by his guru, which describes his perfected spiritual body and personhood in Vrindavan. My interlocutors referred to this body as the antash-chintita deha (inner-felt-thought body). Irrespective of the practitioner's gender and age, the self which inhabits the mind-heart is cultivated and imagined as an ego-effaced, subservient, young girl, who remains enraptured in serving the deities' sexuality. The self's chief predicament is that it must never desire divine*

> *sexuality for itself, while its imagination-as-Vrindavan must manifest the most intensely intimate divine sensuous activities.*

And later on the imaginative capacity (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 75):

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

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

What Sarbadhikary calls the "systematic scripting of the imagination" is what activates the circuit of thick signs. It enables the process of imagination and provides fodder for the imagination of God's habitation of this sacred geography. The nature of the sharpening of the imagination is a register of cultivation of thickness. The divine presence is made tangible, palpable, and physically present.

In this section, I wish to show the world of repetitive musical sound in Vrindavan. There are two concurrent traditions of musical service at temples—*raag seva* (where an expert or a maestro performs for the deities accompanied by musicians, usually a *tanpura*—a string instrument and a *pakhawaj* drum for percussion) and *samaj gayan* (a choral or communal singing tradition where a group of both seasoned and amateur singers sing together, usually along with a *pakhawaj* for percussion). I spent some time in the run-up to Holi, throughout February 2023, singing, or trying to sing, with the group at a Haveli temple (a temple housed inside a residential mansion). This mansion, I was told, had over sixty-four rooms and housed an important family who were descendants of the Gaudiya theologian/saint Raghunath Bhatt Goswami. Their musical service was of repute in the city of Vrindavan. People gathered in a group of about six to eight members between 1:00 and 2.30 pm. It started with an *arati* offering (with a small lamp, flowers, and sweetmeats) to the deity, and the *pakhawaj* player (sometimes a deft teenager) applied flour dough on the tinny end of the drum. The beats pick up as the main singer starts to sing and others follow. I noticed that there were patters of repetition. A line of the *bhajan* or devotional song would be broken into sections—each section would be repeated multiple times in different permutations and combinations of emphasis. I interviewed the priest/lead singer who was

a singer and a classical musician, being usually joined by another younger singer (evidently also classically trained). The both of them created the bedrock of the musical rendition. The patterns were made up on the spot, the senior singer explained. I asked him again and again about the nature of the logic behind these breaks, repetitions, and fragmenting patterns. He persisted with the explanation of it being an improvising logic that the main singer would come up with as he felt disposed on a particular day. How would the others know and catch on? I asked. They just would. They have been singing together for a while, he said. This explanation did not satisfy me, but I decided not to pester him any further.

I would often play the cymbals with a group of singers in temples. Once, I played in unison with four vocalists, two of whom also played the cymbals, one a harmonium, and one the mridangam. I fumbled at the beginning, not keeping time accurately, not producing the right kind of sound. These cymbals, popularly called *jhanjh* in Hindi, are the smaller ones. One of the singers was playing a larger pair of cymbals or clappers, often called *kartaal*. The main difficulty was in listening to the complex singing of the *mahamantra* along with the simple rhythmic repetition of the cymbals—1-1-1-blank or 1-2-1-2. Soon I learnt that one cymbal was to be kept steady and still, the other lifted and dropped on it first lightly, and in the second beat heavily.

Cymbals are a ubiquitous presence across the landscape of this city and the towns surrounding it. People carry them around in their hands everywhere; they make the use of cymbals look very simple. Percussion, I realized, having played the violin alone and only in the presence of my teacher for several years now, is a social instrument. It must make space for other instruments. It must accept being taken for granted. It must retain its own rhythmic discipline but allow for the expanse produced by the vocalist or the *pakhawaj* or other instruments. Its rhythm frames the boxing ring of Krishna-devotion music in the Braj. Its shrillness marks temporal limits but stays at the margins of music. Its simplicity gets complicated by the fact that the person playing it (unlike a newbie such as I) simultaneously inhabits the divergent rhythmic logics of the song and the percussive beats.

They urged me, "sing, sing."

I tried but my attention deviated from the rhythmic discipline of quaver-quaver-crotchet. I have played the violin a couple of times with my friend B, who is a pianist. On those occasions, I found it difficult to parse apart my attention to the two strands of sound. That difficulty was amplified here.

The mysterious logic of musical play began to haunt me over the next year as I sat in on musical performances in this temple as often as I could. Some of my recordings are not very good because of ambient noise from the monkeys jumping across the metal sheets that covered the open courtyard of the temple in order to protect human beings from monkey attacks. Faint sun fell on the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century doors. I took innumerable photos of shadows in this courtyard (See Figure 3). These afternoons were as mysterious as they were pleasurable. The deep sound of the flour-dough-aided *pakhawaj* was the main draw for me.

The later evening musical spot was inevitably the famous Tatiasthan, a monastic complex which housed the monks of the order of Swami Sriharidasji. It had been built as a series of small brick blocks painted in white, over a bed of sand enveloped in very large trees, and the 5 pm Tatiasthan musical service would usually include, besides a *tanpura* and a *pakhawaj*, to my great excitement, a *rudraveena*. The majesty of the instrument was marred slightly by the fact that this musical group was of the order that refused any technological use in their premises. They did not use electricity or mics, and I could not use a sound recorder to record these renditions. A widow sat next to me in the women's section and sang confidently, in a powerful, nasal voice. I complimented her singing once, mustering some courage to walk up to her austere person dressed in a white sari with beads around

her neck. She said, in ambivalence, and perhaps, in a bit of mockery of my attempt at being social, "*sab hi bihariji ki kripa*" (it is all the lord's grace). The shrine inside is dimly lit with oil lamps, with no electricity whatsoever anywhere. The monks of the order wear scarves with black and white checks, with some kind of paste (I am not sure if it is sandalwood) smeared across their faces.



Figure 3. Afternoon shadow on temple floors. Image courtesy of the author.

I wrote about Tatiasthan in a popular essay soon after this encounter (Majumder 2023). Its austerity and quiet and retaliatory disengagement with the wider world formed a lesson to me even as I regretted often not having the opportunity to record their music. It means, for me, that there is no proof of having listened to their experience. I am in partial denial of the many hours that I spent with my head covered (like other women devotees at Tatiasthan) sitting under the tree in the women's section, straining my ears to listen to the *rudraveena* a bit more, a little better. Perhaps, this fragility leading to an insecure devotion is what the making and circulation of speech and sound-based repetitions of the God's name-words tries to accomplish. Ordinary devotees, much like me, are unable to house and remember experience in their heart. The Tatiasthan austerity is a challenge to that insecurity. In other places, one holds up the phone to collect whatever audiovisual residue of the divine one possibly can, so one comes back from the experience with a God-archive.

Amira Mittermaier, in a most powerful recent article titled "Toward an Ethnography of God," says, "God is more than God-talk." (Mittermaier 2025, p. 4). I show through the thickening sign-circuits of *Radhe Radhe* across the horizon of the Braj region that God comes alive in God-signs, God-usages, God-utterances. The God-sensation is felt in the fragile and

precarious realm of inner consciousness, while it is made stable and recurrent and assuring in the constant reproduction, circulation, and repetition of a sign economy.[2] Mittermaier argues that the ethnographic journey is comparable to the journey in search of God, calling her particular method an "apophatic ethnography" (Mittermaier 2025, p. 6). She writes (Mittermaier 2025, p. 4):

> *The Quran says, "There is nothing like Him." What this implies is that human language, the human imagination, the human mind, human-made theology, and also human-produced ethnographic writing all fall short. Ethnographically, this invites a stance that neither writes out God nor claims to be able to accommodate God as yet another character.*

I agree with Mittermaier in so far as both journeys are creative—journeys of the imagination, journeys of surrender of the formats of practical reason belonging to the secular world. But crucially, these are journeys that bring to life something that is otherwise intangible, sensible yet not concrete—the Krishna-sensation (in my case) and the act of ethnographic discovery of scripts of life that are otherwise hidden in social script and make such scripts legible to the world of strangers. This making of the Radha-Krishna sign in diverse formats is, therefore, a way of making the God-sensation stable, concrete, palpable—a way of publicly revealing it.

4. Ritual Repetition

The Krishna-sensation and associated sign-forms lead into ritual routines of devotion in the temples of Vrindavan (on ethnographic examples of ritual routine, and repetitive acts of religiosity especially chanting, see Haeri 2013; Monson 1999). Boredom, regularity, and repetition shape temple life. Cook *bhog*, string garlands, arrange wicks on twigs for *arati*, bring sweets and fruits from the market. Eat, rest, drink sugary tea with biscuits, prepare for evening rituals. Wake up at 4 am the next day. Rinse and repeat.

I witness the morning rituals sometimes, but more often the evening ritual routines. Only rarely, the 5 am rituals. God lives endlessly, across years and decades, through sections of the day marked by dressing, undressing, being bathed, being decorated, being fed, and on special days, coming forward a bit closer to the devotee. I call them temple craftsmen, actually craftswomen, although the actual *seva* or sacred service is done by a male Brahmin priest. The everyday running of a temple strikes me as endless repetition. Much like the pattern of *japa* (chanting the name-words of God), the *mahamantra* is uttered one hundred and eight times—best if chanted sixteen times a day, as I have been told (on repetitive chanting disciplines and their sensory impact, see Abuali 2019; Sarbadhikary 2015; Csordas 1987).

The same logics follow for the *dandamati parikrama*. You lie down on your chest on a rectangular thermocol sheet and mark the distance of the next step with a stone held in your palm with your arm stretched out in front. You get up on your legs, set the thermocol sheet at the place where the stone was placed, and lie down again from that point. Continue this drill until the circumambulation or *parikrama* is complete. I once spotted a child doing it. No one seemed to think this was a difficult thing for a restless child to accomplish. I wake up, make coffee, answer emails, read and write, take the rickshaw, haggle over the price, get off near the ghat, walk past the *bazaar* and Nidhivan, which are popular destinations, and come here to this minor temple. Many tour guides ask me if I want to be shown around, I say I do not and I live here. They do not believe me.

I cannot hold my attention through more than one cycle of a hundred and eight chants. I do not wear the beads around my neck or other sandalwood paste marks on my face. I give myself exemption from these burdens of cyclical boredom. They break time's flow. They gather their energies toward no grand occurrence or culmination. They go from

ekadashi to *purnima* and back. They mark time through the various times of feeding and dressing and bathing *thakurji* (an endearment for Krishna, one among many).

I watch their evening humdrum day after day. Often there is an extended silence in the courtyard. Everyone is chanting. I pull out my phone. Two men come often to break the monotone with their deep yet nasal voices, singing the Gitagovindam[3]—*jaya jaya deva hare, jaya jaya deva hare.* The name-words of God become instruments of song, dance, and bodily affect, they layer onto to the atmosphere and the devotee's body as signs in motion. Dancing, singing, chanting—as endlessly repeating signs.

5. Thick Signs

In examining the ethnographic vignettes that I provide above, in this section, I argue that the tactile, physical, animate universe of circulating signs of divine name-words circulates and thrives in an ecosystem of making, spreading, and becoming thick signs that assist in stabilising, visibilising, and publicising the God-sensation which is otherwise intangible and a matter of interiority. Although this interiority is anterior to the physical production and circulation of signs, the environment of the sign economy helps prop up and resuscitate the interiority of devotees where God-sensation resides. I call this production, sustenance and circulation one of **thick signs. Thick signs** emerge as an environmentality that maintains a relationship of direct give-and-take between the material, physical world and the God-sensation that resides in the devotee's heart. The inner sensation is externalised through **thick signs** which in turn strengthen and extend into the public domain the inner intuition or sensation. I call these **thick signs** as they carry the weight and texture of divine currency and transfer to the artistic and creative form an indelibility of the divine currency. They not only do not dilute with repetition, but increase and become thicker than if they were sparsely produced. The ecosystem of circulation and repetition generates symbolic weight which adds thickness with each successive production of the sign-form of the name-words of God. Each repetition, each loop of circulation, adds density, weight, frequency to the ecosystem of signs.

To set up this argument, let me introduce the arguments about the relationship between signifier and signified in the work of Jean Baudrillard. In his famous essay "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign," Baudrillard derives a signifier-signified relationship between exchange value and use value. Baudrillard shows the co-constitution of the use- and exchange-value categories, crucially introducing the element of the sign. He further writes, shattering a certain earlier understanding of human needs from which the use- and exchange-value distinction stemmed (Baudrillard 1981, p. 68):

> *The code of utility is also a code of abstract equivalence of objects and subjects (for each category in itself and for the two taken together in their relation); hence, it is a combinatory code involving potential calculation (we will return to this point). Furthermore, it is in itself, as system, that use value can be "fetishized," and certainly not as a practical operation. It is always the systematic abstraction that is fetishized. The same goes for exchange value. And it is the two fetishizations, reunited—that of use value and that of exchange value—that constitute commodity fetishism.*

There is no standard-format use value. It is actually fused with exchange value as signifier–signified. Thus, there are two fetishisations, says Baudrillard, radially revisiting the traditional Marxist argument regarding *commodity fetishism*, as laid out in Capital Vol. I. I learn from Baudrillard that use value stems from a *code of equivalence between subject and object*. And in their bilateral fusion and consequent coupling, arises the sign, with its variously arbitrary relationship with the origin of the sign (the signifier). Baudrillard destabilises the "anthropological illusion" of human needs determining the perception of use value (Baudrillard 1981, p. 69):

> *Now, contrary to the anthropological illusion that claims to exhaust the idea of utility in the simple relation of a human need to a useful property of the object, use value is very much a social relation. Just as, in terms of exchange value, the producer does not appear as a creator, but as abstract social labor power, so in the system of use value, the consumer never appears as desire and enjoyment, but as abstract social need power. . .*

This is the beginning of understanding the social relations governed by capital, via *the sign*, one that unites an original and a version or a copy.[4]

Baudrillard attacks the temporal and hierarchical order by which the use and exchange value, or signifier and signified, are understood generally—meaning that one precedes the other, and that exchange value has a derived status while use value is superior and authentic. He writes (Baudrillard 1981, p. 80):

> It is the cunning of form to veil itself continually in the evidence of content. It is the cunning of the code to veil itself and to produce itself in the obviousness of value. It is in the "materiality" of content that form consumes its abstraction and reproduces itself as form. That is its peculiar magic. It simultaneously produces the content and the consciousness to receive it (just as production produces the product and its corresponding need).

The fusion of an original concept/intent and its material expression and the associated dissolution of a hierarchy between them makes Baudrillard's diagnosis of the late capitalist condition apt for analysing my ethnography of the everyday pursuit of a God-sensation in small-town north India. This built environment is not entirely separated from the forces of late capitalism either, where God-signs are endlessly taking commodity forms and the divine currency is amply available in marketplaces for buying. Devotees lift up their cell phones to absorb the first view of Radha-Krishna (*darsan*) as the curtains are pulled aside and are quick to record the experience in the form of selfies and videos. The willingness to absorb the experience of co-presence with the deities in the enactment of some kind of consumption is abundantly evident. In presenting the insights from my ethnographic research, I offer a corrective to Baudrillard. I argue that the conceptual architecture of gods and the intuitive capacity to summon them into daily life already exists, but the production and circulation of sign-forms of various kinds, steeped in capital and/or at its edges, comes to mirror the interiorised position of God-sensation (even as these signs lay themselves open to the economy of kitsch, copy, and simulacra). The sustained practice of devotion needs a "systematic scripting of the imagination" (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 75), which in turn requires this tactile, performative, and physical apparatus that animates a union between the secular, mundane, earthly world and a separate world endowed with divine currency. The peculiar sign-forms that I describe above bring no guarantee of a real god or an authentic representative (in alignment with Baudrillard's diagnosis of life in the milieux of late capitalism), but this routine production and circulation keep God alive in palpable forms amidst the earthly small-town environs of Vrindavan and the Braj region. The form and the content are not only fused together and simultaneous in their animation, their infinite repetition and formulaic nature make for thick sign-reminders of divine presence in the mundane, secular life.

The question of the mimetic form is at the centre of my argument. I asked if an endlessly produced, reproduced, used, circulated sign-form has any relation left at all with a central, original (physical) form. My answer is that it does not. Is the temple deity or any original picture or representative form of Radha-Krishna more original or more able to draw us into some kind of centre in this field of circulating signs? I show, in my pursuit of the sacred sign-circuits in the Braj region, the lack of an original, superior form that everything else might be considered a copy of. The God-sensation with its invisible, intangible divine

currency is what manoeuvres itself into the actualisation of the many tactile, physical forms whether aural, visual, or performative. For ordinary devotees to develop a tactile, textured, personal relationship with their God, the formation and sustenance of tactile, real, tangible subtitles to the God in their heart, becomes important. This takes place through the endless, repetitive cultivation and sustenance of the sign-form in the various domains that I describe above. It further removes the idea of a superior original sign so that the smallest, seemingly insignificant graffiti or sticker on a car rear-window or a mundane pronouncement of the name-words or signing the *mahamantra* by the side of the road directly amounts to an access to God in the devotee's heart—an accentuation of God-sensation.

In the assumption of a referent relation that connects the original (signified) to the signifier, I am confronted with the situation where the original is felt, imagined, intuited, which then drives the devotee to constantly make signs and sign economies out of this psychological labour in making signs in an infinite series. The God in the heart drives one to write, speak, sketch, paint, sing God's name everywhere. The God on the wall or on the tongue in turn feeds the imagination of God in the heart. The "affective loading"[5] work is done by this circuit of amplification, overstatement, repetition, and remindering. My inability to chant the *mahamantra* in a continuous cycle a hundred and eight times, my frustration with sound-synthesising while playing the cymbals, my difficulty in understanding the logics of musical play—all are a route to understanding the crucial role that the repetition and amplification play in reminding the devotee of the name-words of God in sign, speech, song, and other realms of the sensory. This circuit of production, circulation, display and resonance of **thick signs** serves as reinforcement for the devotion that exists in the interior landscapes. Consequently, the physical world and the realm of the senses are saturated with sacred meaning.

This is an ecosystem of **thick signs.** Each sign is distinct and derives its thick quality from membership in this ecosystem. The Radha-Krishna name-words attach a public drama to everything that the devotee publics immerse their everyday lives in, which then generates a private route back to the heart of the devotee. This circular motion keeps the public and the private, the earthly and the other-worldly realms, in constant contact. It allows for the inhabitation of the earthly and the divine in unison, a coupling of the immanent and the transcendent. Although the nurturing, production, and circulation of these signs can appear routine and un-intentional (in the sense of being not *purposeful or intentional*, just mechanical pursuit of convention), it is this routine creativity—through which signs are drawn and re-drawn, photos are taken, videos are recorded, poses are struck, songs are sung, and logics of routine repetition are played with and broken—that bears evidence of their extreme purposefulness and intentionality. Each sign is distinct from another, each rendition of a song is distinct from another, each repetitive ritual performance is creatively unique and separate from another. Yet, together they form an "infinite series". The sigh of the widow and the river and the heaving crowds unite in their daily, hourly invocation of God. It is heightened not only by the human voice but also, significantly, by the physical environment which shows this craving for Radha-Krishna as stamps on walls, and small and large visual depictions of the Radha-Krishna mythology everywhere. It heightens God-sensation, bringing God out into the open, united with the sensorium of the devotee.

While the conversation driven by Baudrillard is about the world dominated by signs as a form of lying, and what its relationship to the "real" is or might be (see generally, Genosko 1994, p. 42), I show the multiplicity and liveliness of the Radha-Krishna sign economy as one that constructs crucially the reality of being and living with God. The reality of God, otherwise, for a devotee is a matter of the heart. It is hidden, intangible, and ensconced in chambers of interiority. The devotee public makes worlds with that

intuitive resource using the psychological and material labour of making and circulating signs. These are linguistic, verbal, aural, visual, ritualistic format-dependent labours that people deploy in whatever work and activity their lives are immersed in. They ceaselessly repeat the name-words of Radha and Krishna, their stories, their songs, the names of their fathers and mothers, their festivals and battles, in an attempt to make God tangible in the physical world. This amplification of the everyday, palpable presence of God—God made obvious in the public domain and stretched out of the hearts of the devotees—is thickness, a daily generation of weight, density, and frequency, and to remember Geertz, a condition of being overloaded with meaning.

6. Coda

To return to Mittermaier's (2025) article, my attempt too has been toward "an ethnography of God", not so much in search of God himself but in showing how devotees cultivate that God-sensation sitting on the inside–outside divide—between the God of their hearts and the God that leaves his trace all over the world—physical, material, and symbolic. This language and practice of performing, uttering, stamping, singing God-name-words is widely legible not least for its shared cultural contexts but, fundamentally, for keeping God tangible, real, domestic, tactile, and available to the senses in the built worlds of human beings.

I show in my ethnographic narrative three domains of sign-form generation of the name-words of Radha-Krishna, the couple god—visual, aural/verbal, ritual/performative. I show that such an elaborate sign economy thrives in the physical and sensory environment of Vrindavan to sustain an intangible, interior God-sensation by translating divine currency across the world in palpable, mundane, earthly forms. In so doing, the sign-form not only produces a fusion between the real and the sign, but also amplifies the quality of the real (that being God, whose reality is an object of mystery). This endless, repetitive, creative sign-circuit, carrying weight and density, keeps the imaginative capacity of the devotee alive in their daily activities and in the wider physical environment. I call this **thick signs**.

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Notes

1 Kos is an indigenous measure of physical distance.
2 For a comparable illustration of signs and their circulation in the case of Coptic religious communities in Egypt, see (Michka 2025).
3 The first long poetic work dedicated to the Radha-Krishna story, written in Sanskrit in the 12th century by Jayadeva, in the Bengal/Orissa region. See generally, the translations by Barbara Stoler Miller (Miller 1997) and Lee Siegel (Jayadeva and Siegel 2009).
4 On Baudrillard's theory of late capitalism and the "copy" and "simulacra", see generally (Baudrillard and Poster 2001, Ch. 7).
5 I am grateful to Reviewer 2 for this term, which captures effectively the work that a sign economy actually does.

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