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Devotee/Ethnographer: My Struggle at the Boundary Walls of Participant Observation

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Abstract: This article demonstrates the difficulty of incorporating within the methodological ambit of 'participant observation', a possibility of the ethnographer herself staking claim in the religious truth claims of the community that constitute the subject of research. In so doing, this article provides a critique of the concept of participant observation to point out that participant observation anticipates the work of the ethnographer in participating in the physical, performative lives of the community that she purports to study, but never the internal life, especially the life of accessing a register of truth. I found myself in a curious situation as a devotee, where I was accessing the truth-claim of the Krishna-worshipping Vaishnava community, even before I could attempt to participate in their communitarian lives of worship. I found, in the coupling of the devotee and ethnographer identities, that participant observation in the traditional anthropological sense became difficult. The article is, thus, a meditation on this difficult journey and the pendulum of my devotee/ethnographer self that it produces.

Keywords: *Bhakti*; devotion; presence; participant observation; autoethnography

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Citation: Majumder, Atreyee. 2022. Devotee/Ethnographer: My Struggle at the Boundary Walls of Participant Observation. *Religions* 13: 538. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060538

Academic Editors: Mike Sosteric, Wendy Bilgen and Gina Ratkovic

Received: 22 March 2022
Accepted: 9 June 2022
Published: 13 June 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

In April to May 2018, while heavily medicated in a hospital, and mostly sleeping or half-awake, I had a series of dreams/hallucinations. A turning point in my stay at the hospital, and in my medical treatment, was a vivid, powerful, and indelible dream[1] featuring the Hindu God Krishna.[2] I retain until this day some memories of that dream (the details of which I will not share here), but it was, in all kinds of ways, a turning point in my life and in my practice of anthropology. To perform a loyalty to this dream, I started going to Krishna temples. I have been an agnostic person until the occurrence of the dream in April 2018. My family are practicing Hindus, and I had always been mildly derisive of the elaborate and ritualistic nature of this practice. In a predictably secular move (see generally, Bhargava 1998; Taylor 2007), I had even derided religion and its prominence in the Indian public sphere, especially because of the rise of the Hindu right (Jaffrelot 2007). In a dramatic turnaround, I became (following this dream) a Krishna-*Bhakt* (devotee). As it happens, I am still unpacking the implications of this turnaround in my personal and political life.

Needless to say, 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. However, 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 was not 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 God-head went simultaneously with the rational compulsion to study as a researcher—remain constantly aware and watching—until those faculties started failing. I started research in

Vrindavan in search of Krishna, the giver of spontaneous *Bhakti*, who I was told, resided as the other-worldly sovereign in the region of Braj—modern Vrindavan, Mathura and surrounding satellite towns.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (Mascaro 2003), I had learnt by now, speaks of three elements of the union with God—*sat*, *cit*, *ananda*—truth, consciousness, bliss. In Vrindavan—the sacred geography of Krishna-worship in northern India—I started learning to experience joy (some version of *Ananda*) at intuiting Krishna's presence. The concomitant act of conducting research, therefore, was complicated by this individual experience of extreme joy or *Ananda* in the presence of the Godhead. I was simultaneously trying to find a way to practice *Bhakti* in my inner, spiritual life while conducting ethnography about the everyday life of *Bhakti* that negotiates competing sovereignties of Krishna and the nation-state. This article, thus, travels through the split subjectivity of the ethnographer as they are trying to gather 'data' on the lives of worship while consuming the ambience of the Godhead as a devotee.[3] This article asks: What does ethnographic research look like when one is simultaneously engaging in doing the thing that one is mandated to watch others doing? What happens when the doing and watching diverge in consequence? I realize this is the primary definition of whatever form 'participant observation' must take. In its actual, literal doing, this kind of 'participant observation' hits upon a real conundrum—whether to immerse in the doing, or the watching, and the inevitable conclusion that the two cannot happen simultaneously. If the two must diverge, I suspect they will deliver two very different ethnographies. This conundrum is mapped onto the simultaneous habitation of the selves of research and devotion. Further, this article reflects on the implied, resultant difficulty of then doing actual 'participant observation' of religious processes if one is in some sense, a devotee of the same faith, and accessing the truth of the faith that one is studying.

1. Bhakti

First, for the unacquainted reader, let me briefly talk about *Bhakti*. *Bhakti* is a movement—with various iterations between the 8th and the 19th centuries—that centered around song and poetry of devotion to the Hindu God Vishnu and his various *Avataras*, especially Krishna. The movement cast aside caste hierarchies, inaugurating a tradition of spontaneous, unscriptured, devotional worship. The movement gained significant momentum during the sixteenth century, especially with the rise of Chaitanya, a saint from the eastern region of Bengal, who is considered to be the unified version of Radha (Krishna's primary consort) and Krishna[4].

Tracy Coleman defined *Bhakti* thus:

> The Sanskrit term *Bhakti* is generally translated as "devotion" and refers to a variety of Hindu traditions in which devotees experience a direct relationship with the divine. Such divinity may be conceptualized as an incarnate personal deity or as the formless metaphysical essence of the cosmos, and modes or moods of devotion thus vary accordingly, ranging from contemplative forms of yoga to outbursts of passionate love. Expressed as loyalty to God incarnate in human form, *Bhakti* in the Sanskrit epics is typically consistent with the demands of Brahmanical dharma, but devotion that defies social and religious norms is widely celebrated in later texts and traditions, with women and low-caste men among the most famous devotees, their poetic verse an enduring inspiration to others seeking salvation without the benefit of orthodox privileges and rituals. Flourishing in diverse linguistic and regional expressions, *Bhakti* traditions reflect a wide variety of religious movements, some conceiving *Bhakti* as intensely personal devotion, others finding in *Bhakti* the power of social and political reform. (italics added). (Coleman 2011)

In Hindu cosmology, *Braj* (the area around the city of Vrindavan in northern India) is a *Tirtha* (sacred geography)[5]. Barbara Holdrege defined *tirtha* thus:

> Tīrthas, as centers of concentrated divine presence associated with particular deities, are variously represented as manifestations of the deity, parts of the deity's body, special abodes (*Dhāmans*) of the deity, or sites of the deity's divine play (*līlā*). (Holdrege 2015, p. 22)

Bhakti is a register of extreme devotion that generally avoids other Hindu/Buddhist religious goals of *moksha* (salvation). Instead of journeying towards shedding all pain and pleasure, *Bhakti* teaches its followers to take sensuous pleasure in watching the world's making as god's (especially Krishna's) playful dance. David Haberman describes *Bhakti* as a taste for watching "purposeless play" (Haberman 1994, p. 26) of life; where one would rather "taste sugar, not become sugar" (Haberman 1994, p. 25). The enjoyment of *Bhakti*, Haberman describes, cannot be contained in an empty center—"the zero point must explode outward into the ever-expanding kaleidoscopic multiplicity of forms—and, in doing so, become pointless". (Haberman 1994, p. 25).

2. Faith and Squeamishness

With this intellectual introduction to *Bhakti*, I traveled to Vrindavan. The ancient, somewhat dilapidated city opened up many challenges that do not make for easy curation in an ethnographic narrative. I watched an evening *Arati* (evening offering) by the banks of the murky Yamuna. I sat, cautiously on the stone steps of the *ghat* before I was invited to join in to hold a plate with a lamp and flowers by the women who were helping the main priest. The main priestly person animating the event lit a massive brass lamp holder (see Figure 1) and slowly started dancing. Another man, who looked like a locally powerful person, stepped forth and took the lamp holder from him. He held the obviously heavy and hot object with an orange cloth and continued the dance. It was a show of masculine power. These men were entitled to lift this massive brass lamp holder in offering homage to *Shri Yamunaji* or the river Yamuna. Stuck to the walls of the *ghat*, there was a massive poster that declared solidarity towards Indian CRPF[6] soldiers who died in the terrorist attack in Pulwama, on the Indo-Pakistan borders, the day before. A huge poster was stuck by the side of the *ghat* declaring allegiance to the Hindu fight for nationhood—this was the evening of the recent Pulwama attack on Indian soldiers by the *Jaish-e-Mohammad* terrorist outfit.

It was Valentine's Day.

Figure 1. Brass-lampholder lit for the evening Yamuna *Arati*. Photo credit: Author (14 February 2019).

This scene was saturated with material provocation for the senses—fire, camphor, flowers, water. This assembly was offering respect to a much ecologically damaged river. This was religion - heady, provocative, and jingoistic, thought I. The declaration of support to the Indian military forces and by association, the strong-arm Indian nation-state, through this idiom of dance, made me squeamish. I was ready to submit myself to the Krishna-worshipping traditions, yes, but the political associations that were being enacted in the performance of the evening *Arati* were unacceptable to me. My faith was born out of the hospital dream. However, accepting the practical dimensions of immersion in a faith-based community was not easy. I was constantly cautious and squeamish in Vrindavan. I was simultaneously overwhelmed with joy in Vrindavan.

Sovereignty was displayed here in the name of Krishna[7]. This was Vrindavan. The sacred territory of Lord Krishna. This is where he is believed to have been raised simply among a community of cowherds—the Yadavas (Hawley 1983). He is worshipped by various sects here in a parental capacity. The devotees take on the mantle of being his parents or parental figures helping raise a mischievous, butter-stealing Kanhaiyya. They chant:

hathi, ghoda, palki, jai kanhaiyya lal ki!

Elephant, horses, and sedans, glory to the child Krishna.

3. Crowd Fellowship

Bhakti demands participation in this public culture of excess[8]—excess that nakedly professes love for the Godhead, among others doing the same, through song and dance. It is a public culture that cannot be likened to the public that we know of in Habermasian scholarship for its interests do not lie in critical, rational debate or argument with the democratic state[9]. It is the emphasis on the irrationality of love that joins together this mass of amorphous humans as some sort of public. It is an empathetic, expressive assembly that calls out to the Godhead in unison—especially in poetry, singing and dancing. This assembly is significant in its absolute absence of state-initiated regulation of public space.

A religious public or assembly fits uncomfortably in this genealogy of 'public'[10]—that is crucially based on the differentiation between state and society. In Vrindavan, it is a gathering made legible through the common contemplation of the Godhead, through singing, chanting, dancing and walking. However, linking the Godhead to the political ambition of a Hindu nation-state lurks at every corner of this public performance in Vrindavan. Yet, its distinctiveness lies in the absolute turning away from the presence of the state. This is an assembly that produces a routine fellowship in the common acknowledgement of the presence of divinity. Its 'crowdness' is not combative, but joyous, even in the chaos and confusion.

Vrindavan sways to the rhythm of the crowds. The devotee offers herself as an indeterminate fraction of an immense, heaving, sweating, chanting crowd that moves from one temple to another. The crowd moves as the devotee-pilgrim pushing, heaving, sweating, chanting as a gelatinous mass of humanity. I move with the crowd hoping to have moments of quiet, private time with Krishna in one of the main temples, but hardly any chance of that on the auspicious day of *Ekadashi*.

The crowd chants *Jai Shri Krishna* and *Radha Rani ki Jai* while on its way in and out of temple sanctuaries and onto cobbled streets. The crowd presents a non-individuated presence of devotion in front of the deity. This breaks down any claim of a special conversation with the supreme power, or any possible attempt to climb a ladder of equality before God. It makes me claustrophobic and uncomfortable at first. I cling on to my belongings as I wade my way through crowds. The crowd breaks down any possible remnants of the ego of a devotee—in this case, my ego that expects particular, private access to the Godhead. My particular claims on God, I realized, were not particular at all. I was visiting the deity for the brief, truncated eros of *Darshan*[11]—locking eyes with the deity in a moment—in presenting my faith, in a vast ocean of dissolved emotion in which each individuated conversation makes no sense. This was the nature of the audience with Krishna, I learnt.

He spoke with me as and when he wanted. Large numbers came for this brief audience in forming an indeterminate population of faith. Faith made sense only in this form. This amorphous, frenetic population was calling out to me to immerse myself in it. I found it difficult. I was scared and cautious. My upper-middle-class, urbane Indian self began generating various kinds of anxiety. Anthropologists are cautioned not to see bounded communities on the field, but this was as sharply defined a community as there could be—sharply defined in terms of space and time (for a detailed genealogy and mapping of community-based ethnographic endeavors and the theoretical insights they yielded, see Brunt (2001)). They were accessing a collective truth. I was trying to access that truth of Krishna's presence in this sacred geography, individually, while being cautious of my interaction with the madness of the crowd. Was ethnography possible at this juncture? I think not, but I was trying anyway.

The anthropologist, Paul Stoller, trained as a sorcerer and had the experience of losing sensation in his lower body. This was interpreted, when he gained sense back again, as a steppingstone in his sorcery learning journey. He describes the commonplace social science understanding that would call it a 'vivid dream', yet for him, it was a 'dream that wasn't a dream' (Stoller 2016, p. 166). Stoller's is an example of taking the immersion part of 'participant observation' quite literally. I was doing so too, in some measure, and found soon that the latter mandate of observation of others becomes difficult when you are neck-deep in your own 'dream that wasn't a dream'.

4. Demand on the Godhead to Play

Krishna is indeed the carrier and declarer of sovereign authority to this day in the sacred territory of Braj—Vrindavan, Mathura, Gokul, Barsana, Nandgaon. In Krishna's name, this land was bestowed with the imagination of simple cowherd life, or loving parents, and *Leela* between the adult Krishna and Radha, surrounded by *Gopis*. *Leela* is a kind of jouissance—Krishna's play (what Haberman calls 'purposeless play') where he deliberately makes himself an innocent child or young cowherd to play with his subject population. His mother Yashoda and his primary lover Radha assert power over him. Thus, they too are interpellated in the *Vaishnava* pantheon in these temples strewn all over the Braj region.

The animation of play and acting in various capacities to the baby or young Krishna forms the core of worship here. A priest at the Banke Behari temple tells me, "we don't follow very rigid procedures for puja or worship. We simply enact *bhava* (essence or mood). We take care of the deity as we would a little child. We pull the curtains over the deity from time to time, just as we would a little child. We wouldn't want everyone to stare at the child. It would bring him *nazar*". The worship thrives in anthropomorphizing divinity to a point of extreme detail. The devotee exercises several roles of extreme gentleness and care—as a parent, villager, neighbor, cousin, lover to Krishna. Yet, the same devotee protects the right of Krishna to rule over his territory with a warlike effect.

In Hindu cosmology, the deity comes to occupy *Prana* (life) at the point of the devotee's locking of eyes with the Godhead. Religious entities such as deities indeed have a social function, explained in the structuralist tradition (Durkheim 2001). I wish to move away from it and ask about what presence does to the devotee once it is constructed in the orchestration of *Bhava* (essence). The priests of the Banke Behari temple construct a daily relationship of parent–child or familial theatricality around the deity. This ritual practice interpellates the deity into the folds of the intimate lives of each devotee. It conjures presence by performance. Krishna is at once god as he is lover, son, mischievous cowherd, a character whose demand for care and love among his devotees makes his enormous, non-human presence (declared explicitly in the *Gita*) palatable within human society.

The land of *Braj* is often referred to as the body of Krishna. Devotees circumambulate and measure this land by moving while lying down on the earth. This is called worship by *dandamati*. It is yet another register of presence that is conjured in the physical milieux of these mundane small towns that come to be known as Braj. Geography translates into

simple materiality. Sarbadhikary wrote of such mythogeographic presence of imagined Vrindavan in Gaud in Bengal in her work on *Gaudiya Vaishnava* practice in West Bengal—an eastern Indian province (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 37). She further wrote of the imagined Vrindavan in the devotee's heart:

> . . . *gupta-Vrindavan* therefore implying a veiled landscape, which can be unveiled through the appropriate spiritual techniques, in this case through the telling of and listening to stories. (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 38)

Gupta-Vrindavan is a hidden, imagined Vrindavan that is unraveled by spiritual techniques of worship by *Gaudiya Vaishnavas* in Bengal. This technique often involves imagining one's body to be that of Radha, the primary lover of Krishna. Storytelling brings alive the presence of the Godhead amidst this mundane landscape of small towns—Mathura, Vrindavan, Nandgaon, Gokul, Barsana. It makes possible the enchantment of the entire region with the presence of the Godhead, not confined only to the physical materiality of the deity in the temple. A priest in Gokul pointed to the gardens surrounding a temple and says, " . . . This is where Krishna danced in the form of a peacock on the request of his followers".[12]

The intuition of Krishna's presence was being enacted at a collective, and for me, an individual scale on the cobbled streets of Vrindavan. Was this public performance of a private emotion, religion? I asked myself. Michael Lambek calls religion a cultural sphere that anchors, more than other spheres, the question of boundaries between immanence and transcendence, in society. He writes:

> . . . Religious traditions are likely to be characterized by diverse practices that overcome or blur any clear distinction between immanence and transcendence. Concomitantly intellectuals in these traditions debate the relations of the immanent and the transcendent, divine presence to absence, the concealed to the revealed, proximity to the everyday, divine truth to common knowledge, ultimate reality to the ordinary and the everyday, and the significance of divine intervention in human affairs and history, and as well as justifications for various practices such as mysticism or devotion to individual saints. Sometimes they emphasize the possibility and significance of direct religious experience; at other times they reject or devalue the lived world relative to the transcendent. One way to conceive of religion, then, is precisely as a sphere of human activity concerned with articulating (in thought and practice) the boundaries and relationship between immanence and transcendence. (Lambek 2016, p. 16)

The question of a special place in society, where people come to contemplate their maker, persists. Transcendence takes diverse forms in different societies. This place stands apart from the various non-human entities such as ghosts, spirits, ancestors that are necessitated as insurers of a good and stable life on earth. I encountered in the *Braj* region, the direct act of calling God into the intimate folds of one's immediate worldly life. Krishna's sovereignty does not follow a direct script. He declares his sovereignty in clear terms only while opining on *Dharma* in the Bhagavad Gita to Arjun, to whom he is a friend and charioteer, in the battle of Kurukshetra. The same Krishna makes himself subservient in the lives of his devotees as lover and friend and beloved cowherd and general merrymaker. He shows his powers intermittently—for instance, by lifting the mountain of Damodar to protect his clan, the Yadavas. It is this switching of God's presence between several versions and diverse materialities that refuse its determination by the social location of the devotee. Krishna is time and again, in the care of and subservient to his devotee. Krishna's presence is orchestrated through a collective sensory alliance, in the words of Sarbadhikary—an 'intuitive capacity'[13]—that Krishna comes alive in everyday life in the Braj region. As much as the transcendence question remains pertinent, it is minimized by intuiting the presence of God through the deity and in other physical, material forms in the practice of devotion or Bhakti. God is alive in the immediate, worldly life, the seeking of him, thus, is not, at least in the practice of *Bhakti*, a distant, alienating journey divorced from the mundane

ensemble of pain and pleasure of the earth and earthly life. This is enchantment, in some form, I suppose. I wish further, to assert that the practice of *Bhakti* in modern-day *Braj* is a socio-cultural complex that casts aside the question of insurance and assurance from non-human entities and bathes the contemplation of the supreme power with a kind of absolute humanity. My humanity kind of doubled up, at this time, as I constantly tried to pay heed to the memory of the hospital dream. Krishna comes alive to all my senses; the distinction between mind and body begins to fade. What happens in the register of the real world that I can take down as notes? Nothing. My limbs do not lose sensation the way Paul Stoller's did. I did not check my psycho-physical statistics at this point, so I cannot say if I was developing new neural networks or if my heartbeat became faster. It is possible that these psychophysical things were occurring. From the ethnographic point of view, this was the scene of a mundane ethnography of religious effervescence—singing, dancing, chanting, crowds, flowers, incense—the stuff that would go into the ethnographer's notebook. Then, there is the messy business of truth (see generally, Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). I can only convey to another believer the quality of this truth. An ethnographer, journalist, travel-writer, or the most empathetic memoirist would not understand it. Here is the crux of the difference between traversing Vrindavan as a believer, and traversing Vrindavan, as an empathetic, ever-watchful ethnographer. I was being both, on different occasions.

Walking all over Vrindavan, split between two registers of subjectivity—mad devotee and calculating, cautious anthropologist, I find participant observation difficult. I consume Krishna with all my senses at public events as *ghats* and temples. The collective effervescence is daunting, frightening and yet exhilarating. I cry at each chant of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*. I cry at the sight of them dancing. I have no time nor opportunity to interview or observe this collective effervescence, as my senses are thoroughly consumed.

Massive crowds were herding me in and out of the *Banke Behari* temple on to the *Radha Vallabh* temple, then to the *Radha Damodar* temple, then to the *Radha Raman* temple. I watch the deity in short glimpses before the crowd maneuvers me out of my viewing spot. I am still an arrogant, individualistic devotee who wants the temple all to herself, wants to have a lavish, private conversation with the Godhead. Everyone looks up at the dais of the Godhead to get one glimpse before the curtains are pulled over him again, and they have to wait till the next display. This is the fleeting, charged moment of *Darshan*. The curtain and the crowd are having a massive flirtation with god's hiding and display in the eyes of the devotee. The devotees' bodies are merging into one mammoth human congealment that comes before the deity, losing its individuation, and with that, its ego.

5. Participant/Observation

ISKCON—the temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness—an international organization that cultivates Krishna worship, established by *Srila Prabhupada* (1896–1977)[14]—emerges as my safe zone. This is a metropolis-class-friendly, somewhat westernized space. I routinely go to the evening *Arati* at ISKCON. The crowds make me anxious and so the *Arati* time at other temples is daunting for me. I sit for hours at the temple courtyard of ISKCON. This is a relatively domesticated space, the energies here are tamer. Here, I do not have to witness a spectacle or be forced to think about the link between the space of worship and the larger ethnonationalist Hindu state.

Large numbers assemble for the *Arati* on the occasion of Ekadashi—an auspicious eleventh day of the month. The singing of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* becomes louder. The dancing becomes more energetic. The gaze of the deity and the chant of the four words make me howl. As an anthropologist, I am supposed to join the energy of the moment and its associated activities or at least, bear witness to it with alertness. However, participant observation fails the mandate of the moment for me. As a devotee, I sit in the corner of the temple courtyard and howl. For I cannot match up to this collective effervescence. I must watch it from my corner of the temple courtyard and consume it as a lesser, more fragile, devotee.

This is *Bhakti*—it expresses itself as devotion that is purely embodied. Barbara Holdrege writes of *Bhakti* discourse and embodiment:

> By "discourse" I mean the manifestation of *Bhakti* not only in performance through song or literacy, but also through all those actions and bodily displays that make up *Bhakti* in the broadest sense, such as . . . pilgrimage, pūjā, darśan, the wearing of signs on the body, and so on. Embodiment, then, is not so much a technique of *bhakti* as its very epicenter: *Bhakti* needs bodies. (Holdrege 2015, p. 24)

It is conquered not in knowing much scriptural knowledge, but in self-surrender, devotion and the collective bodily experience of joy. A Caucasian woman, dressed in a *sari*, with its tail end drawn over her head, the way the local women wear the *sari*—has been dancing throughout the day in the courtyard. Everyone joins her intermittently. I watch her and cry. I inhabit a body that is different and separate from my gross, earthly body (Sarbadhikary marks the difference between *Sthhula* and *Shukkha Shorir*—gross and subtle body). Is it possible, at this stage, to get across to the equivalent of this subtle-body-cognition in other bodies that surround me?

Sarbadhikary wrote:

> How can the body be thought about or cognized? How can the cognized and emotional body be the same? Is the spiritual body separate or different from the physical body? When a body is interiorized, how is it different from the mind? Is an imagined body a body at all, or an expression of cognitive capacities? Does such a body inhabit space? If not, can it still be a body? How can action be interiorized? Simply, how should one identify and represent the 'mind' and 'body' in Asian religious contexts? (Sarbadhikary 2018, p. 2082)

The Vaishnava conception of the body is as an instrument capable of cognition. I experience this, as I merge uncomfortably into the heaving, chanting, dancing crowd—even as I remain distinct from the crowd as one that is not dancing but crying profusely. Each bodily state, in its unique iteration in each human being, seems distinct. Here, the mandate of participant observation fails. It cannot gather the interiority of the movement of each body between several bodily states. I can only document the experience of moving to the state of the subtle body, intuiting presence of the Godhead, through my own bodily experience. In Vrindavan, I breathed into a different body, and lost, frequently, the faculty of performing 'participant observation' of the bodies around me.

6. Devotee/Ethnographer: My Struggle at the Boundary Walls of Participant Observation

This experience of my early fieldwork in Vrindavan got me thinking of the commonly used stock phrase "participant observation" that anthropologists are taught to bandy about to tell the world what it is they do. It involves many practical stages such as journeying to a distant place, finding a place to stay, making formal contacts, beginning with structured interviews, slowly creating enough rapport to break into the inner interstices of a society and finally getting to see things the way the members of the researched society themselves do. Thus, participant observation comes to privilege the 'emic' point of view rather than 'etic' point of view (see generally, Pike 1999). So, the end-product of fieldwork—an ethnographic monograph or film—emerges to tell the story of society not only as the fieldworker saw it, but as the research subjects, situated in their society, narrated itself. A close mirror-image of a society. Ethnography is aimed at unpacking a point of view about points of view. The ethnographer constantly straddles the inside/outside boundaries of society, sometimes being a friend of the society, sometimes being an objective scholar.[15]

Maurice Bloch wrote about the acts "from the inside stance" and "from the outside stance" the ensue in ethnography (Bloch 2017, p. 34). She wrote:

> The "from the outside" stance involves ultimately seeing things in terms of the general life of our species as it exists and has existed on our planet. The "from the inside" stance involves sharing as much as possible the point of view of those we write about in the way that we try to do in any intimate relation. (Bloch 2017, p. 34)

Bloch pointed out an obvious contradiction of the anthropologist's job—looking inside out and outside in at the same time. She further explicated that the "from the inside" stance is predicated upon participating in the lives of those who are being studied. She said:

> This means that the anthropologist has no other choice in order to get and convey the point of view of those she studies, than participating in their lives rather than listening to explicit statements. It is through this participation—often very long-term participation—that anthropologists intuit what life in those places is like "from the inside".
>
> This method is usually called "participant observation". (Bloch 2017, p. 37)

In this unpacking of participant observation, one is watching and doing to an extent the things a society is immersed in doing. For instance, one may participate in farming practice, one may drink rice wine at a ceremony with members of the society, one may watch a play that is put up as part of festivities. There is, through and through, in the understanding of participant observation, an assumption of an obvious discrepancy between the meanings of the events held by the anthropologist as a person and the meanings they learn from this participation to ascribe to these events—the ones that she is taught by members of the society she studies. What happens, I began asking in the course of my research in Vrindavan, when the set of meanings are similar if not the same—when you are dancing at a community festival not because you want to participate in another's meaning-making, but because you are immersed in the set of truth-meanings that the community that you are studying is making? Then, participation becomes rather difficult. Participation, in this sense, assumes a disjuncture in the shape of cognition about a situation. I do not personally know the members of the *Vaishnava* devotee public in Vrindavan, but I am present in these temple spaces and *ghats* by the same logic that justifies their presence. In the doing of devotion at a personal level, I experience intimacy with God. If you are immersed in such intimacy, then you will be writing about nothing but this intimacy. The simultaneous outsider-watching of another's experience will become difficult. This is nature of the difficulty I experience through my split subjectivity as ethnographer–devotee.

Here, a question about ethnographic sincerity must be asked though not the usual one. I am, of course, sincere towards my research and the questions and people who populate it. Can I possibly, simultaneously, practice sincerity towards my own religious experience and conducting participant observation at the same time? Jackson, Jr. refuted the easy mandate of ethnographic sincerity as a kind of political solidarity with those that one studies. He wrote:

> To talk about the politics of ethnographic writing in terms of authenticity alone, I want to argue, is akin to dehumanizing and thingifying the ethnographic project/subject. It debases and vulgarizes the ethnographic encounter itself, concocting an occult intersubjectivity wherein the denied coevalness that characterizes our field's traditional discursive offerings ironically functions as a more accurate temporal architecture for a form of vampirism that would deny the mutually cathected ethnographic moment its due. This reduces the people we work with—sometimes even as political allies—into political objects no less inert for their ventriloquized placeholding as reflections of others' ethnographic and ideological interests. (Jackson 2010, p. S283)

I agree with Jackson Jr. that the ethnographic moment is more complex than an easy assumption of authenticity would allow for. I wish to take a step back and ask—what shape of personhood does the ethnographer assume while on the field? Collins and Gallinat

(2010, p. 4) referred to the 'dialogical nature' of ethnographic writing and fieldwork, as they remembered texts such as Crapanzano's *Tuhami* (Crapanzano 1980) or Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Rabinow 2007). I read them as meaning that the self is not stable on the field; needless to say, the self might not be stable anywhere, not just on the field, and might need a number of resources to produce a semblance of stability. Alpa Shah (2017) also called ethnographic research "dialectical", and "participant observation" a "revolutionary praxis" (Shah 2017, p. 47). Shah reminded us that those who see ethnographic research from the outside, as activists or as members of cognate disciplines, might see the potential of anthropology as producing deeply detailed case studies. However, that is not the only aim of ethnographic research. Shah wrote:

> Participant observation is potentially revolutionary because it forces one to question one's theoretical presuppositions about the world by an intimate long-term engagement with, and participation in, the lives of strangers. It makes us recognize that our theoretical conceptions of the world come from a particular historical, social, and spatial location. (Shah 2017, p. 49)

And on the key components of participant observation:

> Participant observation centers a long-term intimate engagement with a group of people that were once strangers to us in order to know and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as holistic a way as possible. For short, I will refer to these four core aspects that are the basis of participation observation as long duration (long-term engagement), revealing social relations of a group of people (understanding a group of people and their social processes), holism (studying all aspects of social life, marking its fundamental democracy), and the dialectical relationship between intimacy and estrangement (befriending strangers). (Shah 2017, p. 51)

I wish to draw out this tussle in the journey of participant observation between 'intimacy' and 'estrangement'.

The assumption in the discussion on the role ethnography in anthropology (in the 2017 HAU Special Issue) and Shah's comments are that the intimacy to be struck is with the community. In my case, I find that the first intimacy I have struck is with the organizing principle of the geography of Braj—the Godhead Krishna. So, like Paul Stoller, I believe the magic. I had arrived in Vrindavan primarily in search of Krishna's presence. Now that I believe in Krishna, especially that he exists on this sacred geography, my relationship with the space and its people activates as a devotee. I hustle in the crowd with other devotees, in a competitive spirit, to get a longer, more private *Darshan*. What happens if you come to the field having shared in a fundamental truth-claim of that community—the belief in the sacrality of the geography, in the endless reality of Krishna and his presence in the sacred land? Then you cannot participate in a ritual or sing-song event as an ethnographic event. You are too busy tasting the truth to watch patiently another's tasting. Can you savor food while eating and simultaneously watch others eat? You can watch others eat while eating your own food if you are not primarily interested in the eating. I am primarily immersed in accessing the truth of Krishna's presence on this land. I end up following my own emotional journey that detects its presence, which diverts my attention from watching and doing things with the community. The ethnographer, following this logic, must necessarily follow her participant observation path with a certain detachment from the fundamental truths of the community. I usually do not see the heaving crowd of Vrindavan as research subjects, I see them as fellow consumers of the elixir. Then again, I see them as subjects of my research, when I am made deeply uncomfortable by the powers of the crowd, cautiously walking along the cobbled paths of Vrindavan, clutching at my cloth bag.

Michael D. Jackson wrote on the truth claims of divination rituals in Sierra Leone:

> I maintain that Kuranko beliefs in divination are of the same order: quiescent most of the time, activated in crisis, but having notable or intrinsic truth values that can be defined outside of contexts of use. Second, beliefs are in most cultures

> often simulated or feigned, and the strength of commitment is highly variable, yet this does not necessarily undermine the potential utility and efficacy of the beliefs. In other words, the relationship between the espoused or manifest belief (dogma) and individual experience is indeterminate. We cannot infer the experience from the belief or vice versa with complete certainty. Third, to investigate beliefs or "belief systems" apart from actual human activity is absurd. (Jackson 2013, pp. 46–47)

My belief, and that of the other Krishna-worshippers, is contextual—I admit. However, Jackson watched the arrangement of pebbles by diviners to foretell the future in the capacity of the researcher of belief. Watching the dancing and singing masses of Vrindavan is not easy for me to do from the epistemic distance practiced by Jackson. I watch the heaving public of Vrindavan, simultaneously experiencing an inward euphoria that propels me to cry.

I concede to Jackson that like our truths, their truths are contingent. Yes, like other devotees, I do not contemplate its implications when I go to a doctor or pay my taxes. I am able to weed out the various actors in Vrindavan who try to manipulate my faith to get me to follow this or that sect or pay money at the temples. However, the finality and clarity of belief mark my straddling of the worlds of knowledge-making, universities and the sacred geography of the *Braj* region. So, to that extent my truth and supposedly, their truth of faith is not contingent.

7. Pendulum of Being

I wish to mark emphatically the duality of my devotee–ethnographer status. The experience of the presence of the Godhead marks a place for large numbers of Krishna-worshippers. This interaction with divinity, through *Darshan*, is scarcely mediated by the authority of religious leaders. This place of direct conversations and invocations of divinity play a significant role in the life of the devotee. This register of the extremely public yet private practice of seeking out divinity in a shrine is not something ethnography can easily capture.

If the ethnographer experiences the same truth that the worshipping community, they are studying, are accessing in their act of worship, it must automatically mean that the ethnographer is undergoing a transformation of the self through immersion in this set of truths. This would make doing what is traditionally called 'participant observation' difficult. I am, unlike Paul Stoller, not accessing the truth paradigm of the community of *Vaishnavas* through participation in the authoritative hierarchy of the community, that is, through the tutelage of a shaman or priest. I came to Vrindavan, already a convert. This conversion is indeed conflicted, as I try to leave behind my secular credentials and walk a tightrope towards faith in my physical journey to Vrindavan. My difficulty in finding fellowship with the various *Vaishnava* communities that I encountered in the sacred geography of Vrindavan, unfolds through my urbane, secular persona and associated discomfort about vegetarianism, ethnonationalism, the rise of the Hindu right political factions and so on. However, as a devotee, in a Krishna temple, I am one among a million devotees competing for a private audience with the Godhead. There is no opportunity for participant observation here, I conclude. I wade through crowds, watching sandalwood paste marks on the bodies of devotees, merge with the chanting voices, and observe the minutiae of this process of collective worship. The worship is of a collective nature if seen from the outside, and yet, it carries a private, individuated journey for every devotee.

My ethnographic notes would say very different things if I was not simultaneously worshipping the Godhead Krishna, actively trying to immerse in a complex process of self-surrender in the practice of *Bhakti*. The truth-potential, if one begins to access it, is so overwhelming that one must follow its diktat outside of the performance of insertion of oneself in a theatre of social events concerning another. My secular discomfort with the tones of Hindu nationalism at the *Arati* on the banks of the Yamuna, my squeamishness and cautious steps through the crowds of Vrindavan—are all evidence of this partially successful

act of surrender. I continue to worship Krishna but cannot withhold my difficulty in finding complete fellowship in the various communities that come to worship at Krishna's altar in Vrindavan. Participant observation and religious devotion orchestrate a pendulum of being within me. I offer this article as a troubled celebration of my research and practice of Vaishnavism, at the borders of the ethnographic agenda.

Funding: Faculty Research Grant, O P Jindal Global University, 2019–2020. Grant no. 004.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Research Ethics Review Board, O P Jindal Global University granted clearance to this research in 2019.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgments: The first phase of ethnographic research that resulted in this article was supported by the O P Jindal Global University Faculty Research Grant (2019–2020). I am grateful for the opportunities to present versions of this material at the *Liberalism and its Others* workshop at O P Jindal Global University (October 2019) and the East Coast regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion (April 2019), and the encouraging feedback at both venues. This feedback empowered me to write in the autoethnographic mode. I remain grateful for comments on the manuscript, at various stages, to R Krishnaswamy. I would further like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose feedback greatly enriched the manuscript. Lastly, thanks are due to Sandeep Banerjee for his relentless intellectual and emotional support through this journey of search, research, and writing.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The theorization of this original experience that led me to Vrindavan in search of a tangible attachment to Krishna, is beyond the ambit of this paper. I have avoided theorizing dreams and dreamlike experiences here. On the anthropology of dreams, see generally, Mittermaier (2010).

2 I had had hallucinations before, but never had they been this vivid, and the presence of a God had never been this unambiguous. Psychology and psychoanalysis have sometimes paid attention to mystical/religious experience (see generally, (Meissner 1986; Lacan 1998), and within anthropology/sociology, see (Obeysekere 2012; Pandolfo 2019; Sosteric 2017)). In this conversation, Bhrigupati Singh's comment on the encounter between anthropology and psychiatry from his fieldwork in collaboration with psychiatrists in Delhi, is most significant (Singh 2017). Acknowledging the presence of such debates about religious/mystical experience within the psychological sciences, this article veers towards to experiential register, paying close attention to the quality of being in the earthly world, while intuiting the presence of other worlds within it.

3 An attempt at understanding this split subjectivity led to an autoethnographic poem (Majumder 2022). A version of this paragraph is reproduced as the ethnographic note to the poem.

Is this article a work of autoethnography? It is, though only in part. I offer here a reading of my own subjectivity as it has emerged through the governance of western medicine and religious studies of *Bhakti*. I offer here my witnessing of faith and faith-based practice, while learning to practice faith myself. This simultaneity renders an ethnography that flips its character, over and over again. On autoethnography, see generally, (Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2011; Spry 2011). On production of diverse forms of narrative through ethnography, especially the "confessional tale", see generally, (Van Maanen 2011).

4 For a detailed historical account of the Bhakti movement, see Hawley (2007), and on its archive of song and poetry, see Hawley (2015).

5 Although David Haberman refuted the *Tirtha* status of Braj (Haberman 1994, pp. 72–73), he said:

> There is no need to search for a passageway out of this world, there is no need for radical change, for this very world is itself divine . . . Several Vaishnavas in Braj have told me that from philosophical perspective (Siddhant) there is no difference between the image and any other thing in the material world; from this perspective all things are nondifferent, as everything is Krishna.

6 Central Reserve Police Force.

7 Otherwise, spelt as Krsna. In the *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, Coleman defined Krsna (Coleman 2008) thus:

> . . . Krsna is depicted in three major forms throughout his long and diverse history in Indian religions: (1) as the warrior prince, Vasudeva and Madhava, advisor to the Papdavas in the Mahabharara battle and benevolent ruler of Dviiraku; (2) as the playful child and adolescent lover Gopala and Govinda in the Sanskrit Puranas and vernacular poetry, celebrated throughout India in popular expressions of devotion; and (3) as the Supreme Lord, Narayana, Visnu and Bhagavan, who creates the entire cosmos and grants moksa (liberation) to those devotees who unconditionally adore him.

[8] Scholars have variously discussed the experience of excess in the practice of Bhakti through historical biographies of saints such as Mirabai and Andal (Venkatesan 2007; Sangari 1990; Hawley 2005).

[9] See generally, Calhoun (1992).

[10] See generally, (Novetzke 2007; Novetzke 2017), on the history of public cultures of emancipation that rode on the waves of *Bhakti*. Further, see the important work by Nusrat Chowdhury—the ethnography of crowds and political protest in contemporary Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2020). I found essays in the volume *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Butler 2011) to be an important intervention in the specific question I am asking about the religious public. But these, including those of Judith Butler and Jurgen Habermas (Butler 2011; Habermas 2011) do not unpack this register of public excess, the experience of excess in the public domain, and its role in the shaping of the individual self. These essays invoke the category of 'religion' in public sphere debates, but cannot seem to divorce from the assumed threat that religion poses to the stability of the democratic public. See generally, Habermas (2006), religion's survival as a category within the rights-based discourse of democracy and modernity.

[11] See generally, Eck (1998).

[12] Elsewhere, I relate this ethnographic anecdote to unpack my own selective disbelief. I believe in Krishna's presence in Vrindavan, but I find the peacock-dancing story amusing, refusing to take it seriously (Majumder, forthcoming).

[13] I asked Sarbadhikary, in an interview about her book *Place of Devotion*, about the 'critical faculty of intuition' in imagining the presence of Krishna in the everyday. Sarbadhikary responded: "I extend ideas of imagination developed by Edward Casey, when I try to think about its apodictic, eidetic capacities of manifesting reality. And I am mostly influenced by Merleau–Ponty in thinking about intuition as a mid-ground between cognition and perception. Simply, intuition as a process of making apparent establishes an immediate sensory relation between the process of thought and the object of thinking" (Majumder 2019).

[14] For a history of ISKCON's travel to the West and return to India, see (Fahy 2020).

[15] Paul Stoller wrote about the varied writing genres in which ethnography can express itself (Stoller 2007). There have been debates on insider/outsider problem in the ethnographic study of religion (especially, belief) (see generally, McCutcheon 1999). The difficulty of entering a sphere of belief, especially one that initiates the loosening of the tight reins of self-governance, is discussed by Jessica Johnson in her provocative ethnography *Biblical Porn* (Johnson 2018). Johnson writes of the 'affective labor' (Johnson 2018, p. 9) as a form of biopower exerted over the believers, through an analysis of discomfort from the ethnographer who inserts herself into an economy of religious conviction harnessed by sexual sermons in Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church. Johnson would have written a different account of these church services that demand this 'affective labor' had she been an active believer herself. My partial discomfort is thus different from Johnson's and is complicated by the fact that I insert myself in this domain with an active desire to surrender to the domination of the Godhead Krishna, and walk in the fellowship of other believers. I want to surrender entirely, and my secular, individuated self (so to speak) pulls me in some discomfort.

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