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Of Speech and Song in the Shadow of Krishna

By: Atreyee Majumder

“Vrindavan devotee publics seem to have relegated desire and descended fully into the sadness of Radha.”

I can't for the life of me decipher the words. I listen and I listen. All I hear is *He was here, He was here, He was here*. 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 *samaaj gaayan*.

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.

Between the afternoon light, the *samadhis* of Swami Shri Haridas and his disciples from the same tradition, the widow's sharp, nasal voice, and the monkeys shrieking from time to time, I am in a dream. 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. God descends onto the world in this fleeting, utterly strange moment.

The mourning nature of this moment is accentuated by the devotee women who are signalling to their husbands sitting across the compound to get up to leave now – the family has had their *darsan* and also done their bit by listening to the *samaaj gaayan*. Now it's time to go.

And the quiet, collective singing continues.

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Biraha grows acute in shaping this moment.

Biraha - not the rasa that captures pangs of separation between Radhika and Krishna, but the *biraha* of separation between the devotee and the Godhead.

|| The atmosphere repeatedly cries out Shri Radha, Shri Radha – in a quiet echo chamber of pain.

Vrindavan grows into an ethereal place that marks everywhere the presence of absence. Traces and shards of the divinity are held on to in speech and song and visual iconography. The atmosphere repeatedly cries out *Shri Radha, Shri Radha* – in a quiet echo chamber of pain. *Radha* or *Radhe* – the words are marked on faces, shop-signboards, rickshaws, and in speech.

In this predictable, urban juggernaut of dirt, narrow alleyways, monkeys swinging from electric wires, and abandoned railway lines, a small house appears with a ferocious dog tied to its gate. In an inner room, on a mat laid out on the floor, a man sings out loud, in the dhrupad tradition, the words of Surdas: *neh lagyo mero shyam sunder son/Aayo basant sab hi ban phoolein/khetan phoolein sarson/Main piri bhai piya ke biraha son*. In all of the blooming forests and mustard fields of the *basant* season, Radha grows yellow with the pangs of separation. Her life flows out of her lips as she roams around the alleys of Mathura. The song likewise is in stark contrast with the ugliness of the singer's surround, as the singer climbs out of this city and inhabits eternity in the rasa of *biraha*.

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Vrindavan signifies the necessary beauty of pain. Its pain is displayed significantly in the repetitive technique in speech and song, where the tropes of play or *leela* are rendered time and time and again. Krishna emerges as an unplotted feeling – a *rasa* himself. His butter-stealing, his mother-love, his shepherd life, his play with the *gopis*, his *shringara* with Radha – none of it is sequential. There is *no* linear progression in his story. There are ingredients of his early life as a baby and a young adult that are thrown up in various, random permutations and sung and spoken, lingering on to the taste of each element and hoping for a bit more of pleasure in such rendition.

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Radha is a central character in such rendition. Through her, the collectives of devotees not only seek access to the Godhead - through her, they tell their own story. It's a story of pain and disarray. It's a story of being in the world and yet, not of the world. In both the quiet singing at Tatiasthan and the loud rendition of Surdas's *biraha*, amidst the broken alleyways of Vrindavan, a modern trauma is evoked. A material apathy is expressed everywhere. The *sadhus* and widows who live on alms are the first to declare their distaste for worldly well-being. Priests and theologians are quick to provide the corrective that nothing is achieved in world without the *rajas* (passion) element of being. To live and strive, one must have thirst and hunger and desire. Without desire, nothing.

And yet, Vrindavan seems to have deserted care and concern for its material surround. Vrindavan devotee publics seem to have relegated desire and descended fully into the sadness of Radha. The joy in their song is laden with a particular pain of being out-of-sync. They watch kirtans on whatsapp forwards all right. And the majority of devotees are likely to take out their phones at the point of *darsan*. But a continuity with longtime is broken.

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When I tell people that research is about music and soundscapes of *Bhakti*, they tell me that the first step to accessing the divine is *shravanam* – to listen. And I am desperately trying to listen myself out of an echo chamber – literal and metaphorical. I came to Vrindavan to experience a *bhakta*'s joy at locking eyes with the deity. I found the devotee public locked in an echo chamber crying out in pain. Somewhere, in the midst of this ramshackle town, everyone is joined in the expression of a common *biraha*.

I tell the widow at Tatiasthan that she sings very nicely. “*Sab hi bihariji kripa,*” she says, and walks slowly out of the temple premises, in a peculiar ambivalence to the world at large.

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