

Banāras – City of Sound: Reflections on the aesthetics of religion and spaces of cultural perception

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The Banāras conference ventured an innovative approach within the field of Indology and the study of religions by requesting the contributors to present not only their recent research, but also share personal views on how their stay in Vārāṇasī was formative for their research, including methodology and method. In my case it was indeed formative, in fact from the first day onwards. It was in the early 1990s when I had a scholarship at the Banāras Hindu University (BHU)¹ that was my first time in India. Luckily I found myself at a pleasant guesthouse at Assī Ghāṭ where I spent a week or two before moving to a Brahmin family at Assī. The first week of my stay was already a kind of initiation – a revelation of the rich performance culture of India and its sensory aesthetics. My days started with hearing loud chanting from the loudspeakers of a nearby ashram, which penetrated to the very marrow. I did little more than sit on the balcony of the guesthouse, partly because I was scared of the crowded roads, but primarily because I was so overwhelmed, confused, and fascinated by the many sights, sounds, colors, and smells at Assī Ghāṭ. I remember well early in the morning of the second day watching women do their *pūjā* at the different shrines, taking out petals and powders from their plastic baskets, lighting camphor and waving incense sticks in front of the icon, and moving quickly to the next way-side shrine to repeat their worship. It appeared to me their actions were a natural part of their daily routine, like brushing their teeth or buying vegetables, and it was a religious style completely different from that of the Advaita Vedānta *bhāṣyas* of Śaṅkara which I had studied exhaustively up to this point and which had shaped my mental map of India.

At that time, I did not yet know the profound changes in my research that the stay in Banāras would trigger off – with regard to both contents and methods. My initial plan to study the apocryphal Śaṅkara tradition for a doctoral thesis turned

1 I am grateful to the Government of India for having granted the scholarship (Reciprocal Scholarship Scheme) during the years 1991–2 and also to the society of Swiss female academics for extra allowance. I want to thank Prof. Mishra, my supervisor at the BHU, for his ever helpful support, and also Prof. Tripathi who introduced me into texts of the non-dual Kashmir Śaivism. Moreover, I had the great chance to study with Pandit Hemendra Chakravarti part of Lakṣmīdhara's famous commentary of the *Saundaryalaharī* (a goddess hymn of the Śrīvidyā lore ascribed to Śaṅkara) and Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Lalitātrīṣati*. I express my particular gratitude to him.

into various post-doctoral projects that extend to the present day. Little was I aware initially how far my stay would lead me into the devotional *stotra* and *sahasranāma* traditions, goddess worship and Tantric studies, particularly the Śrīvidyā – the right-handed and later the left-handed one, both of which left traces in Vārāṇasī. Various forms of goddess worship occupied my academic attention from the first days in the city onwards. When arriving I was annoyed to find the doors of the BHU closed and nobody working, but I indeed rejoiced in the reason: it was holiday time because of Durgāpūjā. I watched the quiet preparations of installing colorful *paṇḍāls*, the lonely *mantra* consecrations of the clay images, the reading of the Durgā myth in goddess temples, and the swelling crowds and dense festival atmosphere during the last three nights with continuous worship, prayer, song, and dance. Later on, the more traditional way to celebrate Navarātrī in Vārāṇasī by visiting a specific Devī temple on each of the nine days became a research topic (Wilke 2006).

To cut a long story short: the two years of scholarship in Vārāṇasī and the succeeding fieldwork in the city and beyond (particularly in Tamil Nadu) expanded and changed my whole approach to the study of Hinduism – and religion in general. I made a move from mere textual studies and Advaita Vedānta philosophy to ritual studies, Tantra, and fieldwork in the living popular religion, in particular goddess worship. It also impacted on my approach to method and theory and sharpened my sense for the necessity of cultural hermeneutics, i.e. looking at the whole of culture and not forgetting the material and sensory expressions of religion, and instead of merely studying texts and teachings being open to vastly different ways of living and understanding the world. Increasingly, ‘ethno-Indology’ became a favored research method, a combination (and comparison) of text-based philological-historical research and fieldwork studies, and participant observation of present-day religious life. In the last decade also the ‘aesthetics of religion’ have become a prominent research area. This approach emerged in the late 1990s in Germany among a group of scholars of religion as a powerful new paradigm by which to analyze religions.² It is concerned with everything about religion that can be perceived by the senses as well as the whole range of religious media and symbolic representation, focusing on spaces of perception, the sensory mediation of religious ideas, and the cultural hierarchies of perception.

Hindu traditions are particularly rich in multi-sensory representation and the synaesthetic experience of religion. My first days in Banāras made me very aware of this fact and set the track for my future studies. Diane Eck’s *Darśan* (1981) and *Banāras – City of Light* (1982) focused primarily on visual culture. However, it was not only visuality and synaesthetics which I found very pronounced, but also the spoken word and how it sounds. The dominance of phonocentric communication systems and sonic perception spaces has a long history. A rich ritual and textual

2 A primary research survey is to be found in Wilke 2008. See also Meyer and Verrips 2008, who suggest sensory-aesthetic mediation to be the most fundamental issue in accessing religion and religious experience.

tradition reflecting this in ever new ways is found everywhere in India. I wish to present some of the major theses and themes of my latest monograph *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism*, co-authored by the Sanskritist and musician Oliver Moebus.³ In mapping Sanskrit Hinduism as a highly sound-based culture, it was our hope to make a productive contribution to the understanding of other cultures and the mediating of Brahmanic Indian and Eurocentric views of the world. Incidentally, my co-author was also living and studying for some time in Vārāṇasī, so it is not by chance that we start therefore with the mapping of the soundscape of the sacred city – which in turn inspired the title of this article *Banāras – City of Sound*. My major objectives, however, will be the methodology and method and the presentation of some basic ideas in a book of more than a thousand pages, which goes far beyond studies of Banāras. In this treatise on text, communication, and sound we propose a new way of accessing Indian cultural history and an expanded method of interpreting text. While doing so we exemplify the field of aesthetics of religion and explore sonic perception in religious contexts and beyond. Thus the condensed presentation in this article covers four parts and a summary:

1. the data: the sonic cosmos of Vārāṇasī and Hinduism as a culture of sound;
2. the consequences: methodology and method of studying Sanskrit texts;
3. the theory: an applied aesthetics of religion;
4. an example of sonic worldviews: the *mantra* contemplation of the Śrīvidyā scholar Bhāskaraṛāya in seventeenth-century Banāras; and
5. a summary: eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism.

The sonic cosmos of Vārāṇasī and Hinduism as a culture of sound

For many an age Banāras has been a cosmos of Indian religions – it owes its fame as ‘the’ sacred city of Hinduism partly to this fact. The attraction for pilgrims, tourists, and students of Hinduism is largely due to its traditionalism and legendary holiness. However, they will probably all experience Vārāṇasī also as a cosmos of profane and sacred sounds as described in the initial paragraph of *Sound and Communication*:

If you visit the holy city of Banāras you will not need an alarm clock to get up early in the morning. It is quite sufficient to take a lodging close to the Mumukshu Bhavan, between Assi Ghat and Lanka. At 5 a.m. precisely, any chance of sleep is dispelled by the loud calls of ‘Rām Rām Rām’ emanating from the loudspeakers of the Ashram, and for the next half hour a man’s voice enthusiastically sings God’s praise, while no-one in the vicinity can possibly get away from the sound. Should you step out onto the Lanka Road after breakfast, you will witness another pan-Hinduistic phenomenon. Even if the roads are not completely blocked with the usual congestion, the cars drive through the streets sounding their horns, and as for the numerous cyclists, you would

³ Wilke and Moebus 2011. Unfortunately, Moebus had to cease working on the project a few years before the book took on its present form.

be forgiven for thinking that Indian bicycles were powered solely by their bells. Even Indian street life appears to prove the widespread Tantric philosopheme of the connection between sound and cosmic Dynamis. In the alleys that have hitherto been quiet in the district of Godawlia, the traders have now appeared. Just like birds in the forest, they mark out their territories with long, drawn-out and piercing calls and try to attract custom by means of constantly repeated calls such as ‘steeeel plate.’ ... Religious sounds, too, are not limited to the early morning, but also occur throughout the day ... [I leave out the day] ... If finally you take a walk at dusk, when the streets have become quieter again, to the ghats along the banks of the Ganges, or through the narrow alleyways of the town center, it will not take long to find a temple, for you will certainly hear one before you see it. The intense ringing of bells announces the evening ritual and even more vigorous bell ringing, small gongs, hand-drums and cymbals mark its climax. After sunset loudspeakers start to broadcast religious singing, or else groups gather spontaneously in the temples to enthusiastically and unceasingly intone ‘Rāma Rāja jay Sītā Rām’ to a simple melody, accompanied by the sounds of cymbals and a harmonium. At 10 p.m. quietness descends ... However, it is quite possible that a pious neighbor will be fulfilling an oath by intoning the call ‘Rām Rām Sīyā Rām’ at regular intervals throughout the night ... A single day in India illustrates just how much a cosmos of sounds pervades the whole of everyday activity and religious life. (Wilke and Moebus, 2011: 1–2)

There is some justification in calling Hindu India a highly sound-based culture. And this goes back to the Veda, which was transmitted merely as an oral canon through the centuries, and has remained the very paradigm of sacred sound even in modern-day Bollywood movies. But the high valuation put on the spoken and sounding word did not stop with the Veda. It extended into post-Vedic sacred scriptures that were written down. Hinduism – in all its manifold and diverse regional and ‘sectarian’ strands – has always been a performance culture, where the holy literatures are ‘sounded out’ and embodied, i.e. recited, sung, staged, played, and danced. This feature had an amazing constancy until the present day. Every Banāras scholar will concede that the cult of Rām, so widespread in northern India, lives almost exclusively in sound rituals, recitatives, and texts performed for the senses – from the uninterrupted repetition of the god’s name, ‘Rām Rām,’ to Rām songs (*bhajan*) in simple rhythms, to public recitation and dramatic performances of the vernacular epic *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās. Above all, in the devotional traditions of *bhakti* (‘loving participation’) with its emphasis on emotional religiosity, music plays a central role. These traditions have often drawn on the vernacular and not standard Sanskrit. *Sound and Communication* deals only with Sanskrit culture and this is doubtless a restriction of the topic. However, the restriction is well-founded, since it is precisely Sanskrit Hinduism that provides the richest source of material on language and sound. We find a very extensive spectrum of recited and sung sacred texts dating from earliest times.

It is important to be aware that both orality *and* sonality have enjoyed great cultural significance and this has had a distinct influence on how people approach

texts and how texts are composed – in metric forms, using alliterations, etc. Texts are primarily there to be heard, even when they are written down, and readings are performances. Unlike in modern Europe, sacred texts are hardly ever ‘read’ in our sense, i.e. received purely mentally, nor are they read out in a normal, everyday voice. Even if a text is not sung, the ‘reading’ is always a semi-musical recitation, a *pāṭha*. ‘Reading’ out a religious text in Sanskrit means ‘reciting’ it in a musically pleasing way and often with the utmost care regarding correct pronunciation.⁴ In turn, simply listening to the sound of a religious text is held already to be auspicious and purifying. Therefore semantics may not even be the primary issue. Texts are always also sound events, and sometimes the sonic aspect is more important than the meaning.

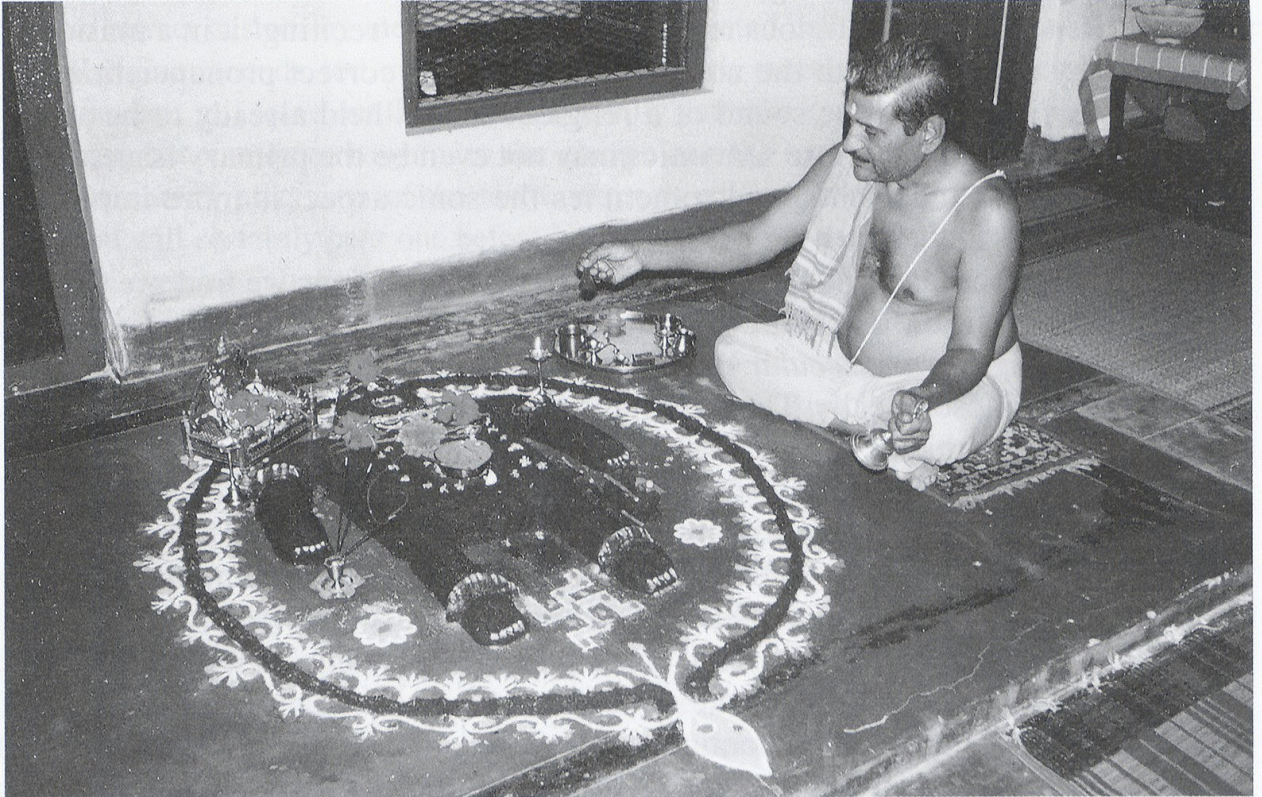
Not only in everyday life, but also in the scholarly traditions we find great focus on the sonic dimension. There are not only complete sound rites, but also an exceptionally rich religious *and secular* literature that uses language and sound poetically and reflects it philosophically. The importance of sound and its perception has led to rites, models of cosmic order, and abstract formulas, and sound serves both to stimulate religious feelings and to give them a sensory form and embody them. This preoccupation with language and sound generated hyperbolic symbolic forms such as the Tantric *mantra* deities, as well as highly sophisticated scientific linguistics which anticipated modern Western studies. The definition of a ‘word’ (*śabda*) in popular and scholarly discourse includes very consciously the phonetic aspect: a word is a sound to which meaning is attached.

It is noteworthy that the predominance of sensing the world through sounds in Hindu India and Sanskrit culture is not confined to religious life only, but pervades even the most complex symbolic representations in the arts and sciences.⁵ Sound may function as an organizing principle in such abstract conceptualizations as are found in grammar, mathematics, and astronomy. At the core of Pāṇini’s ingenious grammar lie certain sound codes that rearrange the Sanskrit alphabet. The sonic paradigm expressed and trained in this case formalistic thought. Pāṇini’s algebra-like sonic formulas constitute a meta-language that regulates all grammatical operations. The alphabet being structured according to the corporal places of articulation in a strictly phonetic and highly rational order inspired likewise the numeric code systems used by astronomers. Instead of conspectuses and diagrams we find sound codes, memorizing systems, and poetic verses full of alliterations. This ensured easier memorization and also a more emotive incorporation of the abstract subjects by giving them a sensory and pleasing form. Here we observe scientific styles completely different to those of Western culture and having a stronger aesthetic appeal. The same predominance of sound is also seen in metaphysics where sound becomes a means of interpreting and understanding the world. The sophisticated cosmologies

4 This is very much like Quran recitation. On comparative perspectives see Wilke and Moebus 2011: ix, 130–79.

5 On the following aspects see Wilke and Moebus 2011: 225–50, 477–92.

of the Āgamas and Tantras are based moreover on the letters of the alphabet – which are not only written signs, but rather mysterious sound codes serving as models to explain the coming about of the world and physical language. Writing in India often even reinforced the sonic paradigm.



Govardhan-Pūjā in a Brahmin Family, Assī

From all this, a first important conclusion can be drawn. In spite of a great literary tradition, Hindu India is not a ‘book culture’ and Hinduism not a ‘book religion.’ Although in modern times there have been efforts to convert it into one, a predilection for the spoken and sounding word continues. The performative-sensory approach to text generated as the most important communication channels memorizing, recital, public readings, ritual staging, devotional song, dramatic performance, and oral transmission from teacher to disciple. It had an impact on habitus forms, on cognition and emotion, and also inspired a deep reflexive concern with language and sound that led to highly developed linguistics at an early age. It generated quite special symbolic forms – metonymic-mythical forms like the goddess speech and highly abstract and scientific forms like Pāṇini’s sonic meta-language. Naturally, this sensing of the world through sounds also left traces on the perceiving of the world as a whole and the divine sphere transcending the world. It shaped the ways of world-making and was a good ‘biotope’ for holistic worldviews. To mention only one of the most striking examples, the ‘Sound-Brahman’ (Nāda-Brahman) of the thirteenth-century musicologist Śārṅgadeva: He argued that the whole world is pervaded by sound and held music to be a pleasant form of yoga for everybody.

The consequences: methodology and method of studying Sanskrit texts

The highly oral dimension of Hindu traditions has been observed increasingly in recent times by a number of scholars, but the sonic dimension and a life full of sounds and its impact on perceiving the world and the divine has not been given the systematic credit it deserves. It is true that Guy Beck's *Sonic Theology* (1993) leans in this direction. His book contains a relevant and rich collection of material. Many of the examples are also to be found in *Sound and Communication*, but unlike Beck, the historical material is set in a broader contextual framework, and questions congruent with cultural studies are tackled, such as the historical fluidity of texts, the meaning of rituals, the forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, and culture-specific aspects of basic world orientations and hierarchies of perception.

In spite of recent Indologists' attention to the unparalleled focus on orality in the transmission of the Veda in particular and in Sanskrit scholarship in general, still no methodological and methodical consequences have been drawn for the actual study of texts. Access to texts remains non-sensory and poorly sensitive to sound. There has been a concentration on the literary sources and their semantic content, although archaeological sources and depictions have also been used. This hierarchizing of the media corresponds exactly to Western expectations. However, anyone attempting to understand Hinduism solely through philology, epigraphy, archaeology, and art history will miss out on precisely those media channels that are frequently the most central to the Hindus themselves. As a die-hard philologist one elects to forego an important source of information if one insists on reading their literary sources as books in the Western sense, i.e. only as discursive bodies of data without any audible form or any aesthetic effect. Texts cannot be stripped of their embodiment in sounds, voice, and performances. To include these sensuous aspects, *Sound and Communication* proposes an extended form of text hermeneutics. To give just one example of our method of working, it is certainly unusual to investigate the sung realization of a hymn to the beautiful goddess Lalitā as a framework for the interpretation of precisely this text. The medium belongs to the message, and sometimes also adds extra meaning to it. The approach is certainly not an indigenous one, but more compatible with the Indians' approach to their own texts than is the standard range of instruments for text critique classically prescribed by the European history of research. One could even say that the philologist's 'text' does not exist as a text type in the Indian tradition. In the past this tradition never resulted in 'texts just for reading,' but always attached great importance to a careful audible realization, and was often also very sensitive to the emotive content of texts and the communication of moods.

It is therefore preferable to speak of 'audible texts' rather than 'oral literature,' and there is a need to distinguish orality and sonality for three reasons. The first is the coexistence of writing and orality. In Indological studies the apparent orality has sometimes been overemphasized. One may debate the acquaintance with and the role of writing in the very early literature. But at least from Pāṇini (fifth to fourth century BC) onwards the Brahminical tradition has probably always used a com-

bination of oral and written transmission systems.⁶ While there was a tendency to memorize the Veda even to the exclusion of scripturalization, there was no restriction on writing down secondary and post-Vedic texts – and yet the spoken and audible word retained primacy. As a rule of thumb one could say that the more sacred a text, the more the need was felt to memorize it and to transmit it orally. But we should not forget that Sanskrit Hinduism has been a highly literate culture. It does not represent an oral culture in the strict sense. We find instead a complex coexistence of written and oral forms of expression, with an exceptionally strong inclination to oral-aural communication systems. Writing and the introduction of book printing and binding did not have the sweeping effects found in European culture.

The second reason to prefer sonality is that orality is too exclusive in referring only to transmission, while sound connotes also the sensory emotive aspects and the expressivity of literary production. Not only is the spoken word important, but also the sounding word and the media of the voice, and this has left its mark on perception and social practices. Among other things, ‘acoustic piety’ is very widely spread, comprising religious forms in which the act of recitation itself or the devotional attitude come first, whereas the semantic meaning is not necessarily important or known. Rather, practitioners may see the religious text as an icon of the divine charged with special power, an animate reality. The popular knowledge that hearing is already purifying and auspicious is in fact rooted in sophisticated theologies. When I speak of ‘sonic culture,’ this refers to a phonocentric life-world that exhibited special forms of practice, habitus and conceptions (and still does today), and also stimulated linguistic, poetic, philosophical and theological reflection. Sonality encapsulates better these cognitive and epistemic aspects – from sophisticated linguistics to sacralizing tendencies, all the way to a deification of language and cosmologically hypostasized sound.

The latter refer to a third reason why sonality has its own domains of sense extending orality. Sonic awareness obviously left traces on the perception and interpretation of the universe and that which transcends daily life. There have been very many symbolic forms centering on sound that express religious ideas, worldviews and the comprehension of the divine, ranging from the Vedic ‘Goddess Speech’ to the Lord God Śiva who created the world through the rhythms of his hand-drum and dance.

Both the persistence of the spoken and sounding word and the expressive and reflexive evidence on language and sound indicate the great value of sonality in the hierarchy of perception through the centuries and across different bodies of texts, ritual performances, and knowledge cultures. The research design of *Sound and Communication* therefore combines a historical long-term perspective with questions of cultural theory and historical anthropology. Of guiding interest was the question: what are a culture’s vision(s) and interpretation(s) of the world like, when the culture is so strongly characterized by the spoken language and sound perception? And also: what negotiation processes and transformations have they been subject to and, in

6 For arguments on this view see Wilke and Moebus, op. cit., pp. 11 fn. 27, 191–7.

view of all the historical changes, how can the persistence of live communication systems be explained? The thesis is that sound is one of the key media of cultural representation and reproduction, and thus a key to Indian culture and to Sanskrit Hinduism in particular. A ‘sonic cultural history’ therefore promises to expose ongoing themes and common patterns in a highly diversified culture and at the same time to record diversity and socio-religious change in a cultural continuum.

An applied aesthetics of religion

For far too long, religion has been equated with doctrine, especially with those systematized doctrines known as ‘theologies’ ... in many cases disregarding the lived, physical, components of those traditions.⁷

These words summarize well the starting point of the research program of ‘Aesthetics of Religion.’ The term ‘aesthetics’ is somewhat misleading if one starts from a modern, Western everyday comprehension of aesthetics relating to art and beauty. The aesthetics of religion relates to an older tradition, the Greek *aisthesis*, which refers to any sensory perception. This approach is based on the insight that religions create networks of relationships between heaven and earth, not only through doctrines, but also via visual, acoustic, motoric, and rhetorical media, and affective ties. The focus on the sensory dimension does not exclude cognition, as all sensory perception is not just a natural representation of things out there, but coded by our cultural knowledge systems and interpretations of the world. Perception is always culturally determined. So sound, for instance, may be of great religious significance in one culture – such as India – whereas in another culture it is not. Religious spaces of perception can vastly differ. An increase in or reduction of stimuli will have an impact on different kinds of sensory and bodily awareness. This is why the aesthetics of religion pays very close attention to expressive media, symbolic forms, and cultural hierarchies of perception. If language and sound in India are deified, we find an essential idea of the modern academic aesthetics of religion put into practice: the ability of physical and material media to communicate immaterial things.

A key aspect of the religious aesthetics approach is the recognition that religions – if they be social facts – need materialization, embodiment, and sensualization to have lasting effects, to touch, and to bind. Such materializations may be rites, texts, religious images, buildings, dress codes, etc. In such sensory media there is a special force creating bodily knowledge of religion to stimulate the senses, imagination, and feelings. They invoke motivations and collective thought patterns, and also discipline and channel behavior. It is essential that religious ideas are not limited solely to internal knowledge, nor are they merely subjective. They must form a collective knowledge to be socially effective. Religious concepts are effective only as ‘social facts’ and must consequently be communicated and staged. It is necessary

⁷ Thomassen and Benavides 2007: 371 (Foreword by the editors of this special volume). The present chapter on aesthetics is based on Wilke and Moebus 2011: 25–38.

that religious symbols and their meanings can be perceived and experienced so that they can exert their social effects as regulatory systems with worldviews providing sense. The translation of ideas, values and concepts into perceptible forms is therefore a constitutive element for establishing public space for perceiving the religious and creating social effervescence. The inclusion of the aesthetic dimension when studying religion is particularly important regarding a culture so strongly oriented on performance and sonic awareness as Sanskrit Hinduism.



Govardhan-Pūjā of women in the neighbourhood of Laṅkā crossing

Sound and Communication may be called an inductively developed and applied aesthetics of religion. We started with experiences in the field and text studies, and this resulted in a way of accessing religion as theoretically required by the aesthetics of religion. At the same time, the study introduces a correction. Due to the strong criticism of mere textual study, the aesthetics of religion initially paid little attention to texts and more to the non-verbal means and material and visual culture. However, texts also have a material aspect and exert their impact not only via content, but also to a great extent via their embodiment in rites and their physical presence in sounds. Therefore texts can also be seen as a source of data on people's use of the senses and as a key to culturally determined perception. It was important to *Sound and Communication* to include not only evidence from the educated elites, but also popularizations, folk narratives, and religious everyday practice.

Texts remain vital for the study of religions. They are not static entities with a fixed meaning, nor is their meaning exhausted in their semantic sense. This ap-

plies particularly to religious texts. In libraries and the studies of academics they may well be the object of rational analysis, and when bound between the covers of a book they may suggest closed (or complete) systems. During transmission and reception, however, they are exceptionally fluid constructions, being the subject of cultural discourses and new codings, and when read out, they are aesthetic events. Language as expressive sound has its own independent validity of meaning, its own ability to communicate, and its own aura. It unfolds its effects not only in the sphere of the terminological and logical, but also in the sphere of the sensory and emotive. It is therefore necessary to focus on the event character of religious texts in a double sense: on the one hand relating to their potential ability to produce sense in an unfinished, ever new, fashion, and on the other relating to their aesthetic quality, i.e. audible physical nature.

Both aesthetics and fluidity are illustrated well as early as the Veda, the sonic paradigm par excellence and the most important ‘myth’ in the sense of a guiding cultural image. In previous studies Veda memorization was too often only viewed as a rule-governed activity. Books on phonetics, however, do not only communicate rules, but also use highly poetic metaphors to communicate the subtleties of recitation. Implicitly they communicate the Brahmins’ love for their holy text and explicitly impart a tangible aesthetic-emotional flavor. In the wider sphere of culture, already the sound of the Veda imparts a meaning associated with one particular cultural ‘habitus’: when a Hindu hears the characteristic three intervals of a Veda performance, this transports him to the peaceful, pure, and strictly vegetarian world of ideal Brahminhood. At the same time, the Veda exhibits the fluidity of texts particularly well. Whereas the Vedic hymns were still evocative calls to the gods and magic poetry at the time that they were composed, in late Vedic times they became sacred language material in which one no longer tried to find a visionary meaning, but rather mysterious numeric combinations. In epic times, the mere recitation of the holy text acquired an importance equal to that of the late Vedic fire sacrifice. The *Rāmāyaṇa* depiction of the ‘holy noise’ (*brahma-ghoṣa*) of the resonant three-tone Veda recitation, as it emanates from the simple straw huts of modest-living Brahmins, already suggests completely the Vedic aura and solemn sacredness which even today is linked to Veda recitation. The Veda kept its sacred power although it has altered substantially in its reception over the course of time. One and the same text initially was understood as a ‘normal semantic text,’ then as an esoteric secret formula, and finally, in essence, as sacred sound substance.

More than anything else, the inherent validity of sounds, as expressed in phenomena such as the ‘holy noise,’ has left its mark on Indian understanding of texts even today. When in a South Indian temple, against a background of bells and the all-pervading notes from the *nādasvaram* (a reed pipe), the priests declaim whole telephone directories of numinous names from memory by calling on the temple deities using their traditional one hundred and eight or one thousand names, or when itinerant monks put themselves into a blissful trance by singing to their god Śiva ‘praise, praise, praise’ to the incessant chirruping sound of their *ektars*

(one-stringed drone instruments), it becomes clear just how far the category ‘text’ stretches here. The total disappearance of language in music as we find in many of today’s *bhakti* traditions, is merely one of the most radical forms in which the validity of sound is expressed.

The wide popularity of *mantra* practice illustrates perhaps most clearly that not only semantically comprehensible texts make up the textual lore of Hindu traditions, but also non-semantic sounds, even mere phonemes and the letters of the alphabet. This experiential field is hard to capture with merely formalistic theories like those of Frits Staal.⁸ We have to take into account the cognitive and emotive associations and the highly symbolic value connected with the *mantras* and Tantric alphabet rites. The idea of the alphabet as the ‘mother of the universe’ (*māṭṛkā*) and the sonic cosmologies of the Āgamas and Tantras do not only view the world as a structured cosmos, but also ground it in a pre-terminological language sphere, an energetic field of cosmic sound and light and a sphere where language and consciousness merge. The conception of four language levels (audible language, discursive thought, intuitive synthetic vision, and pure consciousness) outlines a field in which senses and spirit are not separated (as in Western aesthetics since Aristotle). Audible language and consciousness form an unbroken continuum. This central aspect of Tantric philosophy is not only conceptual, but a field that can be sensed and experienced, as I will show in the next chapter. In the Tantra and beyond, sound functioned as a natural holistic symbol and a perfect connector of exterior and interior space. It was a very powerful means of self-sacralization, direct access to the divine sphere, and embodied experience of the deity – be it by experimenting with sound resonance or simple *bhajan* singing. Some things suggest that the Indian predilection for holistic worldviews correlates directly with the sound-centered life-world and was promoted and intensified by the paradigm of sonic perception. In Sanskrit Hinduism, language and sound are among the most significant holistic symbols of non-duality and cosmic unity – a non-duality that can even be perceived in this case by the senses.

An example from Banāras: Bhāskararāya’s sonic worldview

One of many examples of how non-duality can be perceived by the senses and realized in the body is found in Bhāskararāya’s *Varivasyā Rahasya* (seventeenth–eighteenth centuries).⁹ The Maharasthrian Brahmin who settled in Banāras is known as the most eminent Śrīvidyā commentator and theorist. His major treatise *Varivasyā Rahasya* deals in a very reflexive way with the school’s root *mantra*, and also shows how it is used as a contemplative instrument. The treatise is an interesting source

8 Staal 1979: 2–22, and other publications of the author. For a critical discussion of his approach see Wilke and Moebus 2011: 61, 89–91, 98f., 222f., 280–5.

9 *Varivasyā-Rahasya and its commentary Prakāśa*, ed. Subrahmanya Sastri. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1934. Despite its importance, the *Varivasyā Rahasya* has barely been subject to academic study and the auto-commentary has not been translated. All succeeding translations are taken from Wilke and Moebus 2011: 754–62, on which the text above is based.

on the creative ways to find ever new meaning in the non-semantic *mantras*' sounds. Bhāskararāya was well aware that language is effective in both its terminological, logical and meaning-bearing aspects and its sensory and emotive appeal and embodied presence. Sense takes place on a very great number of levels, both semantic and non-semantic. Bhāskararāya ultimately favors the non-semantic dimensions as many others did – from simple practitioners to scholarly interpreters. Bhāskararāya belonged to the latter.

There is a nice anecdote about this master of 'mantra science' (*mantra-sāstra*) who – in good Kaula-Tantra manner – apparently also knew how to appreciate a good glass of wine and a pretty girl in the ritual context, which of course is enough to horrify an orthodox Hindu. Bhāskararāya belonged to a Śrīvidyā strand wherein such practices were viewed as manifesting the bliss of Brahman in the body and wherein Vedic orthodoxy and Tantric heterodoxy were not conceived as opposites.¹⁰ The anecdote¹¹ tells that the pandits of Banāras wanted to bring Bhāskararāya, who had been denounced for being a 'left-handed' Tantric, back onto the 'right path.' They involved him in a debate about the science of *mantras* to make a fool out of him and win him over to their ways, but Bhāskararāya countered all their arguments. Finally, a mendicant monk advised the pandits to give up, as it was going to be impossible to beat Bhāskararāya in a dispute because the goddess herself was speaking through his mouth. Naturally, the pandits did not believe a word. So the monk took some of the water that Bhāskararāya had used to bathe his image of the goddess and rubbed it on the eyes of the pandits' spokesman – and lo and behold, the man now saw the goddess sitting on Bhāskararāya shoulders and speaking out of his mouth.

This narrative tells something about rivalries within the pluralist religious field. It lends not only authority to a Tantric practitioner, but also communicates how much language is viewed as a source of authority, power, and creativity. The *Varivasyā Rahasya* is solely concerned with the Śrīvidyā *mantra* (Ka E Ī La HRĪṀ – Ha Sa Ka Ha La HRĪṀ – Sa Ka La HRĪṀ) and is known today as Bhāskararāya's most prominent work. He likely saw it himself that way, since he added an auto-commentary. The auto-commentary from the outset in Chapter One discusses sound cosmology and practice, while the main body of the text deals with the non-semantic *mantra* sounds in a deliberately polysemantic way – by working it into different backgrounds of thought, mystical analyses of the numbers, acrophonic interpretations of the individual sounds, and building up a large number of semantic, etymological, symbolic, and literary relations for the threefold sound composition. In this way Bhāskararāya unifies the *mantra* not only with various Śaiva Tantra theologies, astrological numbers, and popular deities of his time, but also with the ritual part and the gnostic part of the Veda, and gives the impression that there is nothing that the *mantra* could not mean.

10 See *Paraśurāma-Kalpasūtra* 1.12, on which Bhāskararāya is believed to have written a commentary that is lost today.

11 Cf. Sastri's introduction to the *Varivasyā-Rahasya*, 18–19.

Alongside the quasi-semantic content given to the non-semantic *mantra* syllables, the first chapter of the auto-commentary emphasizes the yoga aspect of the Śrīvidyā *mantra*. The three groups of puzzle sounds (1. KaEīLa; 2. HaSaKaHaLa; 3. SaKaLa) are the exoteric part of the *mantra*, and HRĪṀ is the esoteric part. During actual recitation the last HRĪṀ functions as a gateway to transcendency. Here the nasalized final sound of Candrabindu/Anusvāra – just like all seed *mantras* that are terminally nasalized – has more or less the same psycho-acoustic effect as the reverberations of a gong or a church bell. The vibrating continuation of the note after it has been struck keeps it present psychologically, even though it has already stopped ringing out. Obviously as a result of his own *mantra* practice and in the manner of a natural scientist, Bhāskararāya divides up the nasal sound of the final HRĪṀ into nine distinguishable graded vibrations, i.e. increasingly subtle after-sounds, which continue successively via the crown of the head, and thus beyond the physical body: *bindu* (1) (forehead), *ardhacandra* (2), *rodhinī* (3), *nāda* (4), *nādānta* (5), *śakti* (6), *vyāpikā* (7), *samanā* (8) (fontanelle at the crown), *unmanā* (9) (above the crown in the thousand-petaled lotus). These nine phases of the reverberation of the *mantra*, which are all termed ‘pure’ sound (*nāda*, *śuddha-nāda*), become shorter and shorter in terms of time and more and more intangible in terms of their sound quality – the penultimate sound in this series is no longer than 1/256 *mātrā*, which corresponds to about 4 milliseconds. The last sound, *unmanā*, lasts for no time at all. *Unmanā* can be translated as ‘going beyond (actual) thought,’¹² ‘trance’ or ‘ecstasy.’ Here the practitioner experiences something like timelessness, since in this state cognition of time phenomenologically ceases to exist at all and he genuinely experiences a moment of eternity. So contemplation of the *mantra* is about sensory experience of eternity within the temporal and abolishing the temporal by transforming it into eternity.

The Tantric interpretation of this technique and its psychological effects are very closely related to ontology and cosmogony: by following up the sound resonances one reverses the creational process and arrives at the source of everything. The sonic theory of world emanation is not only a cognitive model, but also something that can be ‘felt’ via the senses and the body. Contemplative recitation of the *mantra* that is assimilated into one’s own body returns language to its virtual pre-creational state, and at the same time language continues to be experienced as manifest. We find a central principle of philosophical mystic Tantrism being applied here: that which appears in the world in manifold form is a unity within the deity – and yogic *mantra* practice can make this mystery accessible through experience.

Bhāskararāya deals with this experiential dimension in a highly reflexive way by building on the axiom of four language levels. The main point of argumentation is that all the preceding, more subtle, levels are still inherent in the physical language sounds that we can articulate and hear. The perfect medium via which the practitioner can go back to the pre-linguistic form of language – and the supreme state of being or cosmic consciousness – is physical sound (*nāda*). Every letter contains pure sound both in a transcendental form and as immanent substance:

12 See Bhāskararāya’s auto-commentary *Prakāśa* on verse 26.

And in this way [the pure sound] is [i.e. remains] woven [into the language sounds]. [We come to this conclusion] on the one hand owing to [the existence] of the subjective perception (*anubhava*) of a [phonetic] characteristic (*dharman*) and an [acoustic] characteristic [in the same language sound] – as if, in the [recited] syllable ‘ka,’ the letter K and [at the same time] the note C [were heard]. [And we come to this conclusion] on the other hand owing to the observation that the substance [remains always] woven into its product, like the clay in a clay pot ... This means that *between* two letters pure sound exists in the same way as the bare thread between the pearls of a string of pearls. *Within* the letters, however, it appears not only like the clay in a clay pot, but also – since every language sound is in its turn pure sound as well – like the threads from which a fabric is woven, in this fabric itself. Here the simile of the string of pearls no longer holds, for the thread in the string of pearls itself is *not* a pearl.¹³

On the one hand, sound is the material of the language sounds, just as clay is the material of a clay pot. At the same time, sound is also what gives letters their structures and form, just as the thread makes the pearls into a chain. In contrast to the thread, however, which separates the pearls from one another but is not a pearl itself, the situation is different with sounds: the individual sound phenomena acquire their structures only in relation to the continuum of all sounds. The entire sound cosmos is both a sonic whole (*samaṣṭi*) and a collection of individual sounds (*vyāṣṭi*). Meditation on the 15-syllabled Śrīvidyā mantra consists of the embodied realization of this philosophical insight:

The letters should be envisaged on top of one another in the body, threaded like pearls on a string. And one should imagine that the sound (*nāda*) that rises out of the Mūlādhāra is [immanent] in the letters like the thread [in a fabric].¹⁴

Bhāskararāya names several *mantra* exercises (1.37–52) for creating this experiential knowledge. The cycles in the body space (e.g. breaths, nerve impulses (*nādi*), and yogic *cakras*) should be united with the recited *mantra* and its letters by means of resonance. The best exercise, however, is to experience all *mantra* letters thus incorporated and also the body itself as pure sound. The transformation of the whole body into a resonant *mantra* or ‘sounding-board’ is, according to Bhāskararāya, the gateway for transcending the ordinary human limits and finding the secret of cosmic consciousness:

13 [... vaikharyākhyā mātṛkā jātā, vai niścayena spaṣṭataratvāt khaṃ karṇavivaravartinabhorūpaśrotendriyaṃ rāti gacchati,] tajjanyaññānaviṣayo bhavatīti vyutpatterityādyanyato vistaraḥ | evaṃ ca kakārādau katvādivarṇadharmāṇāṃ ṣaḍjādidhvanidharmāṇāṃ cānubhūyatvāt pariṇāme pariṇāmino ‘nusyūtātāyā mṛdghaṭe darśanāc ca varṇeṣu nādo ‘nusyūtaḥ | ... ayam bhāvaḥ – dvayor varṇayor madhyabhāge maṇidvayamadhyabhāgasthaśuddhasūtravacchud-dhanādasya bhānam, varṇaśarīrāntarbhāge tu paṭābhedenā saṃvalitatantuvadghaṭāntarmṛd-vacca tattadvarṇābhedenāiva nādasya bhānam, na punas tatra maṇyantargatasūtradrṣṭāntaḥ, tasya maṇito ‘tyantabhinnatvād iti || (*Varivasyā Rahasya*, *Prakāśa* 1.21, p. 17).

14 mālāmaṇivad varṇaḥ krameṇa bhāvya uparyupari || ādhārotthitanādo guṇa iva paribhāti varṇamadhyagataḥ | (*Varivasyā Rahasya*, 1.21b–22a).

If the individual syllables of the Śrīvidyā from the lowest cakra (*akula*) to the thousand-petaled lotus (*unmanā*), and from the letter ‘ka’ to the most subtle *nāda* (*unmanā*), are all [present] for the whole duration of 1103.3 milliseconds¹⁵ [and one] articulates [them only] as [pure] sound (*nāda*), in the end one will experience truth. And this is the hidden treasure of the manifestation of the (cosmic) consciousness.¹⁶

In an almost modern scientific way, Bhāskararāya unfolds his sonic mysticism and *mantra* practice as a sensory experience of infinity, eternity, and non-dual cosmic consciousness. His exposition makes clear that not only the forbidden substances of the Kaula, but also sonic contemplation can generate an embodied knowledge of the divine. This may be the reason why *mantras* were at the core of Tantric traditions, whereas sexual rites were never practiced by all. The material and immaterial (infra- and supersonic) aspects of sound make it a very complete and holistic symbol that can mediate non-dual worldviews and divine presences particularly well, because sound creates immediate participation and absorption.

Summary: eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism

It was neither my intention, nor was there enough space, to present all the contents of *Sound and Communication*. The objective was to elaborate on just a few of the major topics and theses found in the book, and to give an idea of the book’s expanded text hermeneutics. Not only Bhāskararāya’s sonic mysticism illustrates the necessity for such an expansion and a stronger emphasis on the sonic-aesthetic dimension. The following eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism summarize the reasons:

1. The fundamental thesis is that texts in Sanskrit Hinduism – whether they occur in everyday religious culture or in the traditions of scholars – are always texts to be heard, and this aspect should be incorporated into the hermeneutics itself – the hermeneutics of texts and the hermeneutics of culture.
2. As the focus in India remained on the spoken and sounding word, even after the introduction of writing, a purely philological approach relating only to semantics misses important information. In India one can only speak of texts at all in a sense that includes audible words. One could even say that the philologist’s ‘text’ does not exist as a text type in the Indian tradition. Traditional works of literature fall neither quite into the category of literature nor into

15 In the original: 317 *truṭis* (= 300ths of a second) and three and a half *nimeṣas* (= 75ths of a second).

16 śrīvidyākūṭāvayaveṣu kakārādiṣūnmanānteṣu || akulādikonmanāntapradeśasaṃstheṣu sakaleṣu | adhyuṣṭanimeṣottarasaptadaśādhikasatrayatruṭibhiḥ || uccarite nāde sati tasyānte tattvavedanaṃ bhavati | tadidaṃ caitanyābhivyaktinidānaṃ tu tattvaviṣuvākhyam || (*Varivasyā Rahasya* 1.49–51)

See also the commentary *Prakāśa* (ed. Sastri, 33), which glosses the final achievement with ‘tattvasya saṃvid abhedasya.’

that of music. The texts cannot be stripped of their sonic character and their embodiment in performance. Many discourses in the past attached great importance to a careful audible realization, and were often also very sensitive to the emotive contents, the communication of moods, and other non-semantic aspects of language.

3. This means there is need of an expanded method for text interpretation which includes the sensory aesthetic dimensions – such as sound patterns and rhythms of language, poetic diction, and the intonations, pitches, and colors of the voice. By including the self-communicating message of the medium text (like rhymes and so on) at the same time its (illocutionary and perlocutionary) performativity is included.
4. The aesthetic approach automatically implies an orientation towards actual practice, i.e. the ritual dimension and the performance contexts, as well as the poetic function or performative nature of texts.
5. Furthermore, in addition to ritual staging and literary text performances, there definitely must be an interest in content: the meanings that are ascribed to language, sound, and the voice, and their religious coding. There is a need to contextualize the role of language and sound in the cultural system of symbols and the multidimensional constitution of meaning.
6. A very important axiom of this approach is that language is effective both in its terminological, discursive, and logical aspect, and in its sensory, emotive aspect. The main function of language is the creation of sense and this takes place on a very great number of levels, both semantic and non-semantic. In fact, non-semantic sounds are also media of utmost importance to communication in India. In the religious field they are often considered particularly sacred. I recall the Veda as an oral canon, the Tantric *mantras*, the role of music in devotional traditions, and cosmologies that view sound as the very basis of the universe. In Hindu India, there seems to be a much more participatory orientation towards world and language than Westerners are used to. Just as orality and literacy have not been broken apart, there was never really a split between mythos and logos.
7. As in the case of language, we have to expand our understanding of communication. Anyone speaking about communication – at least in today's Western cultural area – will not necessarily think of sound as an independent medium of expression and communication, and anyone studying texts is interested in the content and hardly aware that texts also always have a material quality – their sound – and can be perceived in a sensuous and emotional way. But this is precisely what is different in Hinduistic India, because the life-world is full of sounds and acoustic piety is a major way to relate to the divine.
8. The inclusion of the emic perspective is fundamental. Sound and music have not only been a very effective means of tuning into the deity and melding with the divine, but also a means to structure and organize abstract ideas in the traditional sciences and to train formalistic thinking.

So my first day in Vārāṇasī had a long-lasting effect, making me aware of a sonic culture that was productive of quite distinct social practices, symbolic forms, and aesthetic styles. In various ways sound and its subtle yet very physical quality has been a powerful medium of communication, chosen to invoke ordered relationships and structures, to bring about ritual effectiveness and generate sources of power and value, and not least to construct ‘the sacred,’ to embody assumptions about people’s place in a larger order of things, and to produce emotional absorption.

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