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Research Article

With and Within Mind: Visualising (With) Materiality in *Bhakti* Practices

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How does materiality matter and function in the absence of its physical existence? This question guides my textual study of structured devotional visualisation, called *manasi* (with and within the mind). In Hindu *bhakti* (devotion), *manasi* is a highly creative yet structured process of imagining and visualising—of creating with thoughts and beholding in mind—interactions with objects, humans, and deities. It involves engaging with materiality *within* for effects experienced cognitively and viscerally as wholly real, often to access a metaphysical reality within the mind and therein experience singular cognitive engagement with the divine. Drawing on Hindu discourses on *manasi*, I argue that materials pulsate with meanings even in their non-material existence, as in the form of a thought, because of the complex devotional-discursive contexts within which devotees, materials, and material engagements are embedded. I propose a conception of matter that emphasises the interplay of materiality and non-materiality of humans and objects as both become inter-relationally meaningful through thoughts structured by theological-practical knowledge. Simultaneously, I propose to consider a network of affects, a *bhakti* assemblage, to identify the contexts that shape devotional desires for cognitive engagements with matter.

visualisation, bhakti, manasi, vibrancy, assemblage, materiality, Vaishnava, Swaminarayan

Introduction: The Non-material Material

The *bhakti* oeuvre abounds in stories, songs, and sermons in which both the devotee and the deity treat materially unreal matter—that which is imagined but does not exist physically—as real and transformative. Take the following two stories as examples. The first is of a poor Brahmin, retold from the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in the Gaudiya teacher Bhaktivedanta Swami's summary of the *Bhaktirasamritasindhu*, a key sectarian text describing aspects of pure devotion. This devotee would first fix his mind on Vishnu's embodied form through yoga and then imagine serving him by adorning him in expensive clothing,[1] cleaning the deity's temple, and so forth. Once, the devotee made a rice, milk, and sugar pudding in his mind and decided to check its temperature before offering it to Vishnu. No sooner had he imagined touching the freshly prepared pudding than he *felt* his finger burn. This visceral experience abruptly stopped his visualisation. Although his actions of preparing the sweet rice and checking its temperature were cognitive, the burn on his finger was perceived as real.[2] The pudding's material unreal-ness is rendered irrelevant in this story because, following the devotional treatment of the imagined pudding, it has the capacity to cause discernible effects on the devotee's physical body. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1970: 93-94) narrates this story to

[1] Bhaktivedanta Swami nominally replaces Vishnu with Krishna in his retelling of this story.
[2] Sukanya Sarbadhikary (2015: 102-103) notes similar anecdotes popular among her Gaudiya Vaishnava interlocuters.

emphasise a view from the *Padma Purana* that by constantly serving God through the mind, with objects similarly produced in the mind, some devotees have attained God's direct vision even though God is unattainable by words or mind (Haberman 2003: 59). Within his didactic, a sincere devotional cognitive engagement with God, although through ordinary matter, is potentially powerful to gain the highly desirable goal of experiencing God. For my purposes in this article, this story also shows a devotional understanding of materiality: even as imagined, it enables Hindu devotees to have a visceral experience of God.

The second story is of Pusal (also Pucal/ Pucalar) from the 12th century Tamil text, the *Periya Puranam*, which encompasses a lyrical account of Shiva's 63 exemplary devotees. Pusal, although not wealthy, greatly wished to build a place of worship that would also serve other devotees. He tried to gather necessary funds and resources, but when that failed, he decided to build this place with his thoughts instead. In his mind, he sought the right builders and artisans, and procured the materials and tools that were needed for construction. Still within his mind, he "lovingly, attentively" laid down the foundation and, "working steadily, not even closing his eyes at night," he built a precisely designed temple (Shulman 2012: 4). From the plinth and its moulding to the towering spire, he built the structure with his thoughts, painted it white, and situated it in a complex where he also dug a well and built a water tank, smaller shrines, and an outer wall to surround the complex. With the construction complete, he set a day for the consecration ritual to establish Shiva in the temple. What happens next in the story constitutes an important detail that formulates the devotional logic for imagination-based worship. It so happened that while Pusal was building a temple in his mind, a Pallava king was building Shiva a grand physical stone temple, with the consecration date overlapping with that for Pusal's mentally-constructed temple. Shiva, then, appeared in the king's dream to inform him that since he would be busy that day, the king should postpone his consecration ceremony. Shiva said to the king: "I have to enter into the magnificent temple that a certain Pucal from Ninravur, a man who loves me, has thoughtfully built over many days" (ibid: 5). Entering Pusal's temple, Shiva accepted all of his offerings. Shiva, thus, acknowledged the devotee's temple that was made from his thoughts as real and worthy, prioritising it over the Pallava king's stone temple. Tamil devotional retellings of this story regard Pusal's thought-temple to be "incomparably better" than the king's physical temple even though Shiva resides in both temples (ibid: 7). Pusal's construction of the temple *within*—or rather, the process that led to the transformation of his interiority into a temple—is efficacious through its disciplined, meticulous, yet creative effort, guided by a trained awareness of knowledge as opposed to mere "external…discursive knowing" (ibid: 6). David Shulman's analysis of this story indicates that Pusal is considered exemplary in the *Periya Puranam* and in its later retellings precisely for his complex thought-work. Both of these examples show the devotional emphasis on considering mental creations as real and as well as the effects of engaging with them. After all, the deities also regard these creations as real. Shulman (2012) references Pusal's story as an entry-point for tracing the intellectual histories of terms and practices that collectively demonstrate imagination as a nested concept in the trajectory of South Asian philosophical literature. Through textual analysis, he demonstrates discursive contexts that produce imagination as normative, making "mind-born" material creations like Pusal's temple possible and real in South Asian perspectives (ibid: 3).

I draw on Shulman's study and that of others that explore classical Indian conceptions of imagination (Timalsina 2013, 2015; Ram-Prasad 2020) to discuss devotional engagements with materiality *within*, for its effects that are cognitively and viscerally experienced as wholly real. As such, this article is a study of materiality in devotional visualisation, called *manasi*, with both materiality and visualisation being approached analytically as two, among other, interdependent aspects of what I propose we consider a *bhakti* assemblage. Through this consideration of an affectively formed and sustained network of discrete elements, I emphasise

the interplay of materiality and non-materiality of humans and objects as both become inter-relationally meaningful through thoughts that are structured by knowledge. I examine the perception of and engagement with materiality in *manasi* as a practice relevant across three *bhakti* traditions: the Swaminarayan tradition, wherein *manasi* is one, albeit a required practice of mentally associating with God; and the Pushtimarg and Gaudiya traditions, wherein *manasi* is the highest way of serving God and the only way of accessing God's presence and proximity. I do not ground my discussion in analysing any specific object but on the phenomenon of engaging with objects as part of *manasi* itself to show patterns of perceiving matter in *bhakti*. Afterall, the material content of *manasi* is irrelevant within these traditions in most cases. Their didactics emphasise the association formed between matter, regardless of its mundanity, and the deity. As suggested by the above example of the devotee burning his finger in the milk pudding, the devotional attention on Krishna facilitated through the preparation of the food and the act of checking its temperature, i.e., the material aspects of the food, makes the imagined matter real and the story didactic. Even if we substituted the pudding with another object, the story would retain its didactic utility for Krishna devotees, provided the object were to continue to serve as a conduit of imagining and experiencing their interaction with the deity. Attending to cognitive engagements with matter, I argue that materials pulsate with meaning even in their non-material existence in the form of a thought because of the complex devotional and discursive contexts within which devotees, materials, and material engagements are individually and collectively embedded. Guided by sectarian didactics, liberative goals, and histories of devotional practices, devotees engage with matter both intentionally and specifically. They acknowledge or seek the presence of matter even when or, in some cases, especially when it is imagined and sensorially imperceptible. Moreover, drawing on discursive contexts of visualisation and pure, sincere, or exemplary devotion—such as the didactic narrations of the two stories referenced earlier—devotees desire to be affected or, in other words, be transformed by their meaningful, intentional cognitive encounters with matter. Such relationship with matter suggests that devotees acknowledge materiality's vibrancy despite its physical absence.

In the following sections, I first discuss the meanings of *manasi* and then the theoretical concepts of material vibrancy and *bhakti* assemblage that guide my analytical approach to examining materiality in *manasi*. Next, I discuss the practice of *manasi* and the *bhakti* logic of cognitively engaging with materiality in the three traditions mentioned above to illustrate overlapping devotional conceptions of matter. I conclude this article by reflecting on the productive promise of mapping *bhakti* assemblages to further understand the logics and outcomes of cognitive devotional engagements with and through matter.

Manasi as Real and Transformative

Manasi is a devotional concept that means "with or within the mind (*manas*)." As a practice, it refers to imagination or visualisation as a mode of contemplation that constitutes a fundamental aspect of devotional praxis within several Hindu traditions. It is a cognitive-devotional practice among others, that includes *smruti*[3] or, relatedly, *smarana* and *sumirana*,[4] and *chintana*.[5] *Smruti* specifically, and *chintana* in some contexts, involve engaging with the living embodiment of the transcendent through memory rather than imagination based on applied knowledge.[6] Nevertheless, these cognitive practices all involve active and planned mental

[3] *Smriti*: reminiscing.
[4] Remembrance: meditation by repetition of recalling name or qualities of God or guru.
[5] Mental repetition: contemplation.
[6] I engage with *smruti* and *chintana* as prescribed and practiced within the Swaminarayan tradition in my current book-length project, *Thinking Matters: Mind, Senses, and Selfhood in Swaminarayan Bhakti Assemblages*. Expanding on my dissertation (2020) on this topic, I also discuss structured thinking

interactions with materiality, whether these be objects, spaces, human bodies, or the embodied forms of the divine. Called *manasa* in Sanskrit literature, *manasi* within Yoga, Tantra, and other Hindu practices requires an active use of the creative and intellectual domain, the *manas*, (Timalsina 2013, Smith 2019, Ram-Prasad 2020). Religious imagination is a mental action and even a ritual of sorts, something that is systematically done and for its capacity to transform an individual's knowledge and experience of an object, a deity, a concept, or their mind, self, plane of existence, or material existence itself (Timalsina 2015: 32-36).[7] *Manasa or manasi* inevitably entails visualising conceptual or metaphysical realities as concrete material forms to perceive a cognised element—such as God or cosmic realms—within oneself in recognisable material forms—such as a human-like form, *mandalas* (meaningfully patterned sketches), temples, or geographical spaces. Likewise, it also entails imaginatively engaging with ubiquitous material forms like a *mandala* sketch or dirt to perceive them as something significantly more. Pushtimarg and Gaudiya Krishna devotees routinely seek to interact with ordinary things, albeit in the theologically significant Braj, to gain access to a realm where the divine is present, visible, and interactive (Haberman 1994: 53). The Bengali Vaishnavas interact with Chaitanya's birthplace, Nabadwip in West Bengal, to create and access within themselves a Vrindavan, the otherworldly divine playground of Radha and Krishna (Sarbadhikary 2015). These devotees interact with physical matter, such as the land of Nabadwip, with an investment of emotions and imagination that are shaped by theological beliefs, resultantly perceiving the land as its sensorially unavailable counterpart—the transcendental Vrindavan (Haberman 1994: 169-170). The latter, typically imperceptible through human senses, is potentially perceptible, but only through imaginative devotional engagement with relevant matter.

Manasi as a *bhakti* practice is thus inherently creative but it is also located within the bounds of theological knowledge. In other words, Krishna devotees are highly creative in their mental interactions with him, but they would also not take creative liberties and visualise Krishna as a formless entity. Doing so would contradict discursive knowledge about Krishna as a being with a form, resulting in an engagement with an entity that is essentially not Krishna. In the logics of *bhakti*, therefore, *manasi* is imaginative, yet not make-believe, fantastical or revelling in the unreal in an effort to make the unreal real. It is a means of experiencing direct engagement with God, whose presence is actualised within the mind through sustained thought-work comprising, among other thoughts, reflections about God's attributes and God's grace. Moreover, imaginative acts involving God are also regarded as real because of the belief that what is created cognitively comes into being in the mind, resulting in real experiences (see Timalsina 2015; Smith 2019). Theologically, significant texts like the *Bhagavata Purana* (11.27.12, 15)—and also the *Vachanamrut*, in the case of the Swaminarayan tradition (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 1. 68),—list *manomaya* or mental as one of the eight forms into which God enters and resides, and from within which accepts mental material offerings.[8]

about, due to, and despite the animating aspect of materiality to sustain cognitive engagement with manifest God or living embodiments of God.

[7] For a detailed analysis of examples from Tantrism on the material creation of the conceptual and the transformation of one's experiences through mental ritualistic practices, see Timalsina (2015: 41-111; 125-141).

[8] The *Vachanamrut* is a compilation of philosophical and spiritual discussions between Swaminarayan (1781-1830), the eponymous founder of Swaminarayan Hinduism, and his disciples, who revered him as God. In the above cited sermon, Swaminarayan accepts the eight forms listed in the *Bhagavata*—stone, wood, metal, pastes (or earth or sandalwood), engraved or drawn, sand, gems, and mental—but adds one more: "In the same way, God also resides in the heart of the Sant", an eternally liberated being and the ideal devotee.

Material Vibrancy and Agency

As devotees visualise spaces and scenarios in which they participate and foster interactions with objects, places, persons, and deities, they also evoke, acknowledge, or create the vibrancy of the material forms, vibrancy here being a conceptual term from Jane Bennett's theory of materiality. Bennett conceives of the "vital materialism" theory as a "dogged resistance to anthropocentrism" (2010: xvi). She argues that materiality should be seen as affect, as the catalyst with "thing power," a "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" on and within human bodies (ibid: xiii, 6). This "thing power" alludes to "liveliness" and "vibrancy" as intrinsic aspects of matter; they are independent, even a little, from their discursive, mechanistic, or divine creation, and from their effects on humans (ibid: xiii-ix). Bennett repeatedly argues that even inorganic matter has an intrinsic capacity to be vibrant, such as the free atoms in an iron rod that "quiver" when the rod is heated. The atoms would not move more, or less, upon external stimuli if they did not possess the capacity for vibrancy. Bennett posits that this vitality inherent within matter, the hint of liveliness that makes them actants, also makes possible a range of interactions between humans and materials. Joyce Flueckiger (2020) builds on Bennett's theory to acknowledge material agency, its capacity to "act, to cause an effect," (ibid: 12) and to attend to "what materiality does [to humans and deities] that may go beyond human intention, agency, and discourse" (ibid: 8). She does not dismiss the fact that these three aspects factor into people's material engagements. Instead, she seeks to understand everyday Hindu thinking and actions by examining the presence of materials in their lives. Through a series of examples from various Indian contexts, she demonstrates that materials have presence regardless of their external visibility and have effects often independent of human activity. For example, since South Indian wedding pendants or *talis*, should not typically be seen, are not only invisible but so is their "work". Despite this invisibility, they perform regional, caste, sectarian, and familial identities and create a woman's auspiciousness as a bride (Flueckiger 2020: 25-29). Flueckiger's other example of a stone-carved male figure in a posture of prostration on a path leading up to a Venkateshwara temple in Andhra Pradesh shows how pilgrims to the temple interact with the stone figure, and even prostrate themselves alongside it, without knowing whom the statue represents or why it is there (ibid: 2-3). In Bennett's and Flueckiger's views, materials have agency because they can make others do something; they have the capacity to cause an effect.

I draw especially on Flueckiger's methodology of ascertaining an 'Indian theory of materiality' by examining Indian phenomena, such as what Indians say and do in accordance with their knowledge that materials can cause effects. I, therefore, specifically take note of materials that appear in the cognitive, discursive, and practical contexts of *manasi* to discuss a Hindu devotional conception of materiality that extends Flueckiger's theoretical work.[9] In accounting for cognitive *bhakti* ways of engaging with materiality, I attend to the profound transformative potential of even mundane matter when treated within structured thought exercises. Dirt, pebbles, leaves, streams, cots, flutes, foods, streets, and other material forms, all contain Bennett's material vitality. They can be affected and will have effect on other material forms that are in their close proximity. However, in the religious milieu, they are also 'lively' in particular ways. Devotional attention to them animates their materiality by reinforcing or conferring on them certain high-value meanings. For example, the ways in which Krishna devotees engage with the flute through rhetorics, emotions, art, and performance reinforces

[9] Leah Comeau (2020, 2022) makes a methodological case in her studies of Tamil religious sensibilities to see texts as a context for examining relationships between humans, things, and the material world because they have embedded within them "sensory experiences and objects—the mainstays of material analysis" (2022: 436). Such an approach to texts and materiality enables her to trace the movement of religious beliefs and practices between traditions, texts, private religious domains, and public spaces.

their evaluation of the flute as an object that is dear and in close physical proximity to Krishna, and, therefore, significant for devotional practice. The devotees desire to be affected by thinking about the flute and its sounds in the flute's association with Krishna.[10] In turn, even a generic flute becomes vibrant for Krishna devotees, but in specific ways. The flute becomes differently animated than it may have been in another context and, therefore, it causes the Krishna devotee to become animated differently and specifically. Within the contexts of devotional imagination, affectively connected humans and objects have an effect on the deity as well, as can be seen in the following example. In Gujarati religious songs, one finds reference to an anecdote of Krishna's cow-maiden devotees, the *gopi*, going door-to-door with their pots of dairy, and telling everyone that they are selling Krishna, the flute-bearer. The 15th century Gujarati Vaishnava poet Narsinh Mehta writes (Rajyaguru 2010: 144-145):

> The naive cow-maiden has gone off to sell God,
> stuffing the lord of sixteen thousand *gopi* into her small pot;
> that cowherd's woman sells the lord of those without a lord,
> calling out in each lane, "Come buy *Murari*, the flute bearer!"
> The other women of Vraj ask, "What's inside? We hear a melodious flute."
> On lowering the pots and looking inside, they faint.[11]

So engrossed are the *gopi* in their imaginative interaction with Krishna that they perceive him even in matter. They see Krishna in their milk and curd pots, so when out selling dairy, instead of calling out to women to buy milk and curd, they ask them to come and buy Krishna. Krishna, presumably moved—affected—by their devotional attention on him, is compelled to manifest within these earthen pots, turning the *gopi's* cognitive activity into a perceivable reality. The women who come out to buy the dairy hear his flute and, upon looking inside the pots, see him. The transformed dairy stuns the buyers, rendering them unconscious. In Narsinh Mehta's song, the *gopi's* sustained cognitive interactions with Krishna transform their sensory perception of the material world, including the dairy they sell, and cause the dairy and Krishna to be affected.[12] My approach to matter alludes to a similar agency of thought and matter—the capacity of thought to produce effects within the material and the divine world, a transformation that is sometimes independent of human activity. At the same time, my approach does not

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[10] While Dimock and Levertov (1967) discuss a collection of songs from Bengal on the theme of devotional adoration for Krishna's flute, Hawley (1981) discusses the devotional rhetoric around the flute's capacity to agitate the *gopi* in the annual "Theft of the Flute" play in Vrindavan. Shukla-Bhatt (2015: 49-69; 139-141) also discusses songs from Gujarat to demonstrate the effect of Krishna's flute on the *gopi* in poetic imagination.

[11] All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise stated.
Narbheram (1768-1852) writes a similar song where the speaker wonders: "Odha (Uddhava), what has happened to the women of Vraj that they're out selling the flute-bearer?" (Rajyaguru 2010: 135). The Swaminarayan poet Nishkulanand Swami (1777-1848) also refers to this story in his lyric text, the *Hrudayprakash* or 'Enlightening the Mind-Heart' (10, 10.23), when instructing his audience about becoming a devotee. In his example, the *gopi* model perfects dispassion that has resulted from intense affection for God alone, as opposed to affection for God shared with that for the material world. They love God exclusively and with all of their senses while losing their sense of their bodily self:

> Like the cow-maidens,
> who forget their body-sense while selling milk,
> forgetting to sell milk products,
> they say "Women, come take Krishna.

For a visual rendering of the sight of a flute-bearing Krishna in *gopi*'s pots, see the following production of Narsinh Mehta's song: Soor Mandir, "Bhodi Re Bharvaran Hari ne, Hemant Chauhan Prabhatiya": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBGuHU0igpI (accessed, 08.08.2023).

[12] See Shukla-Bhatt (2015: 65-66) for a discussion of this song, in which she sees the meeting of *bhakti* and *lila*, of a devotee's devotion and a deity's divine action.

displace human intentions and desires to regulate how they are affected by others and how they affect others. Hindu devotee-practitioners encompass the epistemological locus of my study as I consider the following: the vibrancy of the embodied selves and other material forms as they act upon each other in and through imagined or visualised interactions; and the inevitable, albeit often desired and planned, transformation as the result of multiple vibrant forms interacting in imagination.

A *Bhakti* Assemblage

An assemblage, a theoretically conceived model of interaction between affectively associated entities, is useful here to understand what accounts for different potentially-vibrant forms coming close enough to each other to interact and cause mutual effects as well as fluctuations in the vibrancy potential of an object or a body, or even a deity. For Bennett (2010: 25-38), an assemblage is an ad hoc fluctuating network of interactions without any permanently fixed defining features. It is dynamic but can appear stable while its constituents remain in proximity to one another. In *bhakti* traditions, *manasi* requires an interplay of physical and visualised matter, discourses of *bhakti*, and investments of logic and emotion in mental praxis (*sadhana*) to produce desired streams of consciousness. Devotees observe their mental creations as a bystander or experience themselves participating in their visualised interactions, but they strive and train to be affected by their imagined encounters. In interrogating contexts that shape these desires and cause devotees to be affected, I propose to consider an assemblage of *bhakti*, an open-ended yet identifiable formation of discrete, unrelated, entities that coalesce together through a mutually effecting relationship. A *bhakti* assemblage—and arguably there are many *bhakti* assemblages—is a specific network of relations of mutual effect between specific objects, humans, devotional prescriptions, personal goals, discursive histories, practices, the ubiquity of everyday life, and the presence of deities or God in stories and in imagination, among other variables. It is a specific articulation of two or more of these components. Although ad hoc and dynamic, it, nonetheless, is less fluctuating and more stable owing to the intentional investments in the devotional self and in relevant matters of knowledge, emotion, discourse, and practice. A *bhakti* assemblage reflects what (deities, practices, or beliefs) affects whom (devotees, other individuals, institutions, or even deities) within the collective, how it is able to cause these effects, and how individuals determine ways in which, and the degree to which they are affected through their relationships.

Additionally, components of an assemblage do not act uniformly on all the other components of this affective network. Vibrancy, or rather the potential to cause and experience effects, is based on the objects' and the individuals' particular location within the assemblage. All constituents of the assemblage are inherently vibrant due to their affective associations, which underlies their being part of it. But they are vibrant in different and specific ways. Continual assessment and re-affirmation of their vibrancy is based on devotees' continued affective investment in the assemblage. Attention or lack thereof, through use, disuse, emphasis, or de-emphasis, would maintain, increase, or decrease the vibrancy of an individual themself (how they invest in or divest from their identity, convictions, and practice), and of texts (discourse), materials, practices, and human or divine entities. Some aspects of a *bhakti* assemblage, such as the continued circulation and use of certain stories and songs within devotional practice, the reminders of the devotional logics of engaging with certain objects, although ordinary, in certain required ways, and the sustained desire to retain the mind in God's service, produce mutual effect between individuals and materials even when the two interact in an imaginary realm.

Manasi and Materiality in *Bhakti* Traditions

The three sectarian *bhakti* perspectives discussed below show the traditions' emphasis on cognitive encounters with matter for three reasons: (1) Their philosophical valuation of materiality as a source of attachment and ontological identification with the material world full of objects, persons, and places. While there's the risk of developing desire for matter and becoming further mired in material existence, material engagements are unavoidable, nonetheless. Therefore, devotees seek to engage with matter in relation to divine figures to change the effects matter can have on them. (2) Although physical matter serves as an ideal starting point for devotional imagination, or functions as a necessary tool for the conception of, and to gain access to a transcendental reality, it is also unreliable. In addition to the risk of attachment, like Pusal, Parvatbhai, or the poor brahmin, a devotee may not always have access to physical matter or the ability to perform physical tasks. (3) The strongest argument for mental engagement with materiality over singularly physical ones comes from the *bhakti* traditions' emphasis on transforming a devotee's interiority from a space of material enjoyment to one of exclusively devotional enjoyment.

In Swaminarayan Practice

Within the Swaminarayan liberative praxis, gaining control over one's mind so that it remains continuously focussed on God's form is the "most difficult of all endeavours" and the "greatest of all spiritual attainments" (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 1.1). Such control over one's mind and, in turn, an unceasing, exclusive focus on God is possible only through continual engagement in acts of sincere devotion (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 2.63). *Manasi puja* or mental offering constitutes an essential devotional practice, along with *smruti* (reminiscing), that keeps the devotee's mind occupied with God rather than with the material world even through cognitive engagement with materiality. Ideally, Swaminarayan devotees do *manasi* five times a day to mentally offer devotion to Swaminarayan amidst their daily routine in an effort to focus their mind and attention on him at all times.[13] In doing so, they also seek to associate various forms of matter, including some from their daily life, with God. Moreover, as the sectarian poet Nishkulanand Swami writes in his lyric-text *Hrudayaprakash* (Enlightening the Mind-Heart), a devotee must (re-)conceptualise materiality to always perceive it in relation to God—in terms of its proximity, association, or contact with God. Only then does materiality become a source of devotional joy. Otherwise, it remains a fundamental source of suffering. The poet states that devotees find delight in this mental exercise due to the opportunity it presents them to focus on God by changing their perception of matter.

> There are seven types of metals,
> which appear in countless forms;
> when remembered for their contact with God
> they become sources of all kinds of joy (14.26).
>
> Be they gems, jewellery, utensils,
> or countless tools, or weapons,
> if these objects remind you of God
> then instantly they become joy-giving (14.27).
>
> Speech, touch, form,
> taste, and smell, too,

[13] "Mansi": https://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living/Hindu-Practices/Meditation/Mansi.aspx
"Mansi Pooja." https://www.swaminarayan.faith/articles/mansi-pooja (accessed, 12.02.2024).

> with God's contact, are joyous;
> without it, a source of suffering (15.28).

The poet argues in this text that sensory encounters with even mundane matter become a way to ensure devotionally desirable outcomes if it is perceived solely in terms of its relationship to God. These outcomes include engendering God and devotional joy within, changing sensory inclinations toward the material world to eventually result in dispassionate involvement in it, and transforming the interior space—'enlightening the heart' (*hrudaya prakash*)—with God's presence. Devotees who perceive matter only in reference to God certainly engage with objects but are neither attached to nor dependent on them, even for devotional services (Vachanamrut Loya 10). In other words, sensory interactions with objects do not cease within *bhakti* practice. Objects get cognitively processed differently such that they are thought of only in their association with God and are not desired for material enjoyment. *Manasi* becomes a way to enable this association between objects and God. Swaminarayan begins his sermon dated 22.10.1828 (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 3.23) by saying that "a devotee of God daily performs the *manasi puja* of God", and further provides details of a template for *manasi puja*. Devotees should visualise God being seated in a space, appropriate for the imagined or external weather, wearing the clothes of one's liking that, too, are weather-suitable. They should visualize offering incense, oil lamps, and other objects as appropriate to the season and for God, as well as offering foods of personal preference; "even if God does not like such foods…one should still visualize only those items that are relished by oneself." Swaminarayan elaborates on the seasonally relevant details to visualise in *manasi* (ibid). For example, in summer:

> First, bathe God with clean, cool, fragrant, pure water. Next, offer a washed, white *khes*[14] of beautiful thin and sturdy weave to wear. After seating God on a beautiful seat, apply fragrant sandalwood from the Malay mountains, which has been collected in a bowl after forming it into a paste, on God's body. One should smear it on his forehead and observe [the forehead] closely. Then smear his hands observe them closely…Then, one should apply beautiful *kumkum* (vermillion powder) on his lotus-like feet and on the soles of his lotus-like feet. These, too, should be observed. After that, garlands of fragrant flowers such as *mogra*, *chameli*, *champa*, and roses, and various ornaments made of flowers, such as a cap, armlets, and wristlets should be offered…Then one should embrace God once, or twice, or more according to the degree of one's love…The sandalwood paste and *kumkum* on God's body may stick to one's own body from embracing God and touching God's lotus feet to one's own chest and head. The flowers from the garland may also leave imprints on one's body. All of this should be visualized; meaning, one should feel: "sandalwood paste, *kumkum,* and garlands consecrated by God have touched my body!"

Swaminarayan concludes his sermon with an instruction: "Therefore, whoever has heard this talk should internalise it and perform the *manasi puja* of God daily" (ibid). The emphasis here, as we have seen previously in Shulman's analysis of Pusal's story, is on internalising sectarian knowledge, the logics for why and how to do this practice, to guide, through perfect intuition, ideal mental offerings and realise their benefits within. Visualisation in Swaminarayan's sermon is a multi-sensory mental activity, meant to increase a devotee's time spent with God and to enjoy this time. It also involves periodically pausing one's actions to observe the divine recipient of this activity: God as adorned with sandalwood paste, flower ornaments, or dressed in a delicate fabric. Within Swaminarayan logics of devotional material engagement, to be

[14] A loose fabric draped over shoulders or used to cover the upper body.

affected by God-associated matter is to be affected by God, even if that matter is encountered in non-material forms. As devotees visualise touching and seeing God's body, they are asked to recognise the gravitas of this sensory, proximate interaction with God, as facilitated by imagined objects—of being touched in *manasi* by materials that have been in contact with God's visualised body. The "sandalwood paste, *kumkum,* and garlands consecrated by God" thus, become awe-generating—vibrant and lively and agentive—for a devotee, due to their contact with God, who is vibrant and agentive. Swaminarayan says in this sermon that through detailed *manasi*, a devotee increases love for God and accrues benefits to their embodied self (*jiva*). Love, a specific type of devotional attention on God and all things associated with God, appears essential in making *manasi* efficacious. When asked by a disciple who among the two devotees—one who worships with physical offerings or the other with mental ones—is superior, Swaminarayan replies (Vachanamrut Sarangpur 3):

> One who makes an offering with intense love, with extreme delight and hair-raising sentiments, and an emotional voice, whether physically or through *manasi puja*, is superior. Conversely, one who does *puja* with inferior thoughts and without delight or hair-raising sentiments borne of love, is making an inferior offering, whether physical or mental.

From this perspective, *manasi* is desirable and transformative only in the presence of intense love for God and when done a certain way, with mental-emotional sincerity. Additionally, when efficacious, *manasi* shapes the interiority of a devotee into a space in which devotional interactions take place regularly at first, and, eventually, at all times, with sustained practice. A devotionally trained mind becomes a temple of sorts, a site for devotional interactions with an interactive god. And, as the following example shows, the conceptual separation between the interior and exterior and the imagined and real dissolves for a devotee whose interiority is transformed. An early 19th century Swaminarayan devotee called Parvatbhai offered Swaminarayan lunch in *manasi* every day from his farm. Once, while doing so, an employee assumed that Parvatbhai had fallen asleep while ploughing the field, and so he shook the devotee. And, "from his apparently empty hands, curd rolled down on the plough as well as on the ground" (Swaminarayan Aksharpith 2009 [1979]: 72). The fellow farmer was surprised and when he asked Parvatbhai about the curd, the devotee replied that he was mentally offering *rotlo* (pearl millet bread) and curd to Swaminarayan when interrupted.[15] Parvatbhai's perfected *manasi* and transformed interiority rendered the question of which offering—physical or mental—was more real, irrelevant. His experience formed a prominent didactic message for the community on the efficacy of a sincerely imagined engagement with Swaminarayan through matter that is as ubiquitous as *rotlo* and curd.

In Pushtimarg and Gaudiya Practice

Manasi is the most significant devotional practice in the Pushtimarg and the Gaudiya (Bengali Vaishnava) traditions, wherein it refers to two sets of activities: the first is cognitive engagement with Krishna through the daily routine of waking him, feeding him meals, making garlands for him, having him play, and so on. The second is to philosophically understand the material

[15] This anecdote appears repeatedly in sectarian discussions of *manasi puja* and biographical sketches of Parvatbhai. "Nitya Puja: A Divine Experience, Part 1": https://www.baps.org/EnlighteningEssays/2019/Nitya-Puja---A-Divine-Experience-(Part-1)-15144.aspx (accessed, 12.02.2024). "Bhaktaraj Parvatbhai," *Satsang Reader Part 3* (Swaminarayan Aksharpith: Ahmedabad, 2009 [1979]): https://download.baps.org/books/SatsangReaderPart3-eng.pdf (accessed, 12.02.2024). "Shree Parvatbhai": https://www.swaminarayan.wales/our-sampraday/great-devotees/36-swaminarayan-sampraday/great-devotees/hari-bhaktos/72-shree-parvatbhai (accessed, 12,02.2024). Also see "Mansi Pooja." https://www.swaminarayan.faith/articles/mansi-pooja (accessed, 12.02.2024).

world as created from an attribute of Krishna—its beingness as truth (*sat*). In other words, the material world is real, and it is infused with Krishna; it is a sphere of Krishna's activity. This philosophical conception of materiality shapes the concept of devotional worship (*puja*) and service (*seva*). If the material world and, therefore, the matter of this world "is viewed as nothing but illusion, or consisting of elements (*anu*), then *seva* becomes a false drama", it becomes meaningless (Smith 2016: 131). Devotional service comprises the means not just to know but also to perceive the divinity in and through matter. In this logic, *manasi* is both imagination—creating scenarios in which one is waking up Krishna in his embodied form and so forth—and visualisation—perceiving the external and the metaphysical reality within oneself.[16]

Vallabha (c. 1479-1531), the founder-philosopher of the Pushtimarg tradition of Krishna devotion, calls the *manasi* way of offering service to God superior to any offering done through physical objects (Smith 2016). According to his *Siddhantamuktavali* (The Necklace of Correct Views), a principal text of this community, devotees first perform *tanu-vittaja-seva*, worship through physical body and material resources, to train their mind to remain focused internally on Krishna. Vallabha defines *seva* in this text as consciousness—the entirety of the mental corpus, called *antahkarana* (inner chamber) and comprising four related cognitive faculties—that is directed solely on Krishna's form, divine attributes, and divine actions (Smith 2016: 128-129). It is "the total immersion of the mind" on Krishna (ibid: 128). External objects only serve as aids in mental training. Once the mind is trained to remain continuously focused on Krishna, a devotee becomes eligible to receive Krishna's grace. Having attained the grace, a devotee is able to perform this mental service effectively. At this stage, the use of physical matter becomes unnecessary, although the devotee may use it because of its association with Krishna. The devotee's perception of physical matter also changes. What was before a representation, becomes equated in *manasi* with the devotional sense of that object—its beingness as an attribute of Krishna and an extension of Krishna's beingness (Haberman 1994: 169-170). The binary between the materially real form and the devotional essence of that object collapses; the act of imagining becomes an act of knowing that the object, person, interaction, or experience is real. In other words, imagining the offering of an apple to a visualised presence of Krishna comes to be experienced cognitively, emotionally, and sensorially as an act of offering Krishna himself an actual apple. Or, what before devotees would have perceived as a rock representing Krishna's footprint, they would now perceive as a footprint itself. Moreover, upon single-minded attention to Krishna, the god begins to interact with the devotee. He accepts the devotee's service and indicates to the devotee his likes and dislikes, further helping to refine the devotee's service of Krishna in *manasi* using appropriate objects.[17]

[16] One popular Gujarati song that Pushtimarg devotees sing to practice their mental service includes a series of actions beginning with bathing Krishna in saffron-infused water from the Yamuna River, while rubbing his limbs with gentle hands and adoring him (*Yamuna Jalma kesar gholi lad ladavu Shyamala*). The song takes a devotee through the process of adorning Krishna with clothes and jewels and offering him a bowl of milk. The anonymous poet intersperses the description—the imagined content—with the devotional beholding and enjoying. For example, after imagining applying *kohl* in Krishna's eyes and before placing black beauty marks on his face to avert anyone's jealous "evil gaze" at Krishna's beautiful face, the narrator declares that "she" laughs at this and that and begins twirling in ecstasy. Presented as spontaneous actions, they indicate the devotional joy of a devotee engrossed in adoring and adorning her beloved in imagination. See Falguni Pathak's musical rendition of this song: "Yamuna Jal Ma Kesar (Manasi Seva)": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0ko_dRq3go (accessed, 12.02.2024).

[17] I am grateful to Dr. Aditya Chaturvedi for sharing his insights on *manasi seva* in Pushtimarg texts and practice. He shares his research on the concept and the practice of physical devotional service in his dissertation titled "*Bhakti* is *Sevā*: A Genealogy of *Bhakti* in the Puṣṭimārga." (08.08.2024).

Different in practice from Pushtimarg, Gaudiya (Bengali) Vaishnavism nevertheless shares a similar conception of matter. Matter, or the material world, is created from Krishna's attributes, specifically his "extrinsic energy" (Chilcott 2015). It constitutes an aspect of Krishna's divine play and playground. However, individuals are prone to desiring the objects of the world and in pursuing those desires, they reinforce their identification with the material world. Gaudiya practice requires that the initial stage, the *Vaidhi bhakti*, entail a "reappraising" of objects as not worthy of mundane (non-devotional) desire. Gaudiya devotees internalise sectarian knowledge about material attachment and, in doing so, increase their capacity to prevent "theologically unwanted desires from arising and more efficiently weaken those that do." (ibid: 174). Once objects become undesirable for material pleasure, all subsequent use of materiality, such as musical instruments, becomes a devotional offering that can manifest events and emotions of a transcendental realm (Sarbadhikary 2015: 205). In the second, superior stage of Gaudiya practice (*Raganuga bhakti*), imagination enables devotees to empathise and emulate Radha and, thereby, attain the fruits of their devotional effort: Experiencing the transcendental abode of Krishna within the *manas*, the "mind-heart geography," (Sarbadhikary 2015) or, for some Bengali Vaishnavas, within the entirety of their body. In other words, they experience the emotional effects of their imagined interactions with and between Radha and Krishna in and on their body as if these were the effects of actual interactions in the transcendental realm (Haberman 1988, Holdrege 2015). Sukanya Sarbadhikary's Gaudiya interlocutors "assert that intense imagination often impacts the body, the cognized self transforming the physical self" (2015: 101). Like an insect, which, when consumed with fearful thoughts of the *kumor-poka* insect, turns into a *kumor poka*, "constant thought leads to physical transformation" of the devotees' body and their perception of physical space (ibid: 102). Through ritual imagination, the transcendental Vrindavan becomes superimposed onto the geographical Vrindavan, which devotees experience as the *manas*-Vrindavan—the sphere of Radha-Krishna's activities in the mind-heart space. This conception of conflated geography that devotees can navigate through their cognitive practice makes possible the scenarios where an event takes place in one realm—whether physical, cognitive, or metaphysical—but the effects are experienced in another. For example, Gaudiya devotees share an example of a practitioner, a *manjari*,[18] who imagined an event around the object of an anklet. In her imagination, the devotee noticed her lineage of *gurus* (spiritual guides) searching for an anklet that Radha had lost in a pond. The devotee joined her teachers and found the anklet. Pleased with her, Radha, from the devotee's cognitive realm of existence, graced the devotee by touching the anklet to her forehead. The result was an actual *tilak*, a marking, in the shape of the anklet drawn on the devotee's forehead. The devotee and her disciples regarded this experience so significantly that they changed the shape of the forehead marking for their spiritual lineage to reflect Radha's gracing of the *manjari* (Sarbadhikary 2015: 102).

The examples discussed in this article show that as a *bhakti* practice, "imagination is…not only embodied but also intensely affective" (Sarbadhikary 2015: 105). It makes obsolete boundaries between the sentient and the insentient, the material and the non-material, the imagined and the physical, and the imaginer and the content (experiences) of imagination. These examples show that in *bhakti* discourses, materiality is real and concrete, yet malleable; regardless of its physical or imagined form, it is as prone to being affected as it is prone to affecting other material forms, particularly humans. Lastly, they show how a devotee is

[18] The reference here is to a male devotee who, through systematic cognitive-emotional practice, imagines himself to be Radha's female handmaiden-friend and often presents himself as such in order to empathize with Radha and experience Radha's affective amorous or sexual encounters with Krishna. This practice is called *Manjari sadhana*, and the male and female devotees who perform it are called *manjari*, with a feminine name and pronoun (Sarbadhikary 2015: 87).

potentially affectively connected to all kinds of matter. However, the specifics of which devotee and which object, when, and how they became constituents of a particular *bhakti* assemblage would be determined by the deliberate, sustained attention a devotee gives to something specific in *manasi* despite other competing avenues for attention. As the Swaminarayan poet Nishkulanand Swami notes in the stanzas cited above, the specific type of devotional attention determines the affective contours of the *bhakti* assemblage and, therefore, the planes of mutual effects. Depending on how a devotee perceives gems or utensils, the object could specifically animate a devotee resulting in experiences of either joy or suffering, among other possible affective outcomes.

Conclusion: Reflections on *Bhakti* Assemblages

The interplay of humans and objects, physical and cognitive, discursive and symbolic seen in the examples discussed in this article happens within what the cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 398) calls a "mattering map", "a socially determined structure of affect, which defines things that do and can matter to those living within the map." This structure, called an articulation, is shaped and marked by (1) relationships of effect—how something matters and how it came to matter to whom—that have to be sustained through continual investments of energy, will, and emotion (concern, care, passion, so forth) (ibid: 81-82); and (2) the continual fluctuations in the energy, will, and emotion produced by everyday living for all who make up the map and the continual efforts individuals put into minimising or stabilising these fluctuations to reestablish the structure. An individual's location within a mattering map is predicated upon their identification of what matters to them and why it matters. A mattering map, therefore, also shows the production of an individual and a collective identity—or desires, in my study here—as it relates to this structure.

A *bhakti* assemblage is an example of an articulation that is at once personal and individual and also social and communal. As such, a *bhakti* assemblage primarily determines the effects of itself on individuals who are within it because of a shared, although of varying degrees, affective sensibility and an affective alliance among all constituents of the assemblage (ibid: 71-73, 82). The former is individually cultivated but collectively shared and reinforced. This sensibility determines what (in our case, deities, practices, or beliefs) affects those who are within the collective, in what manner they are affected, and by which logic the individuals determine how and to which extent they are affected.[19] The latter—the affective alliance—is a specific configuration of texts, practices, people, spaces, and objects in their relation to each other. Each element of an assemblage may be a part of multiple alliances wherein it simultaneously means and functions differently. Affective sensibility determines the strength of an alliance, and together they give shape and durability to an assemblage. Because imagination or visualisation are not bounded by the limitations of physical objects and bodies, a devotee's creative mental activity has profound implications on what comes to comprise, and what potentially could comprise and sustain the *bhakti* assemblages. The practice of devotional imagination opens up several investigative domains: about the types of ethical affective alliances that are possible between devotional bodies, other bodies, and animate or inanimate matter; the imagined material forms that are evoked through discourse; the conventional or interpretive physical material forms that appear on our landscapes following their discursive construction; and the specific or ambiguous meanings that materiality, devotional self-becoming(s) and, consequently, a *bhakti* assemblage can take on or lose. The potential makeup of a *bhakti* assemblage also indicates the productive promise of identifying

[19] Referring to the collective nature of visualization, Timalsina (2015: 28) reminds us that it is immensely creative but not individualistic or idiosyncratic; rather, it is shaped by well-established conventions and discourse.

and studying a *bhakti* assemblage as constituted by, among other elements, devotional imagination and visualisation. Mapping this assemblage, or in Grossberg's terms, identifying a mattering map, enables us to see and study the logics, affect, and effects that routinely escape our attention but determine what or who does and can matter to those within the assemblage. It further helps us to trace the ways in which the descriptions of the conceptual and the transcendental in devotional discourse become "products of and for visualization" (Haberman 1994: xiii). As demonstrated in this article, visualisation makes available comprehensible imagery for what is typically not visible or graspable. But it also results in the production of new material forms amid overlapping commitments, interests, and discourse. Our landscape is replete with material forms, including posters, artwork, *murti*s (deity idols), temples, *linga* (Shiva-symbol-idols), gardens, and assorted objects, that are the results of visualising the conceptual and rendering mental creations in comprehensible, perceptible forms, often through metonymic substitutions. That not all images of Krishna or Swaminarayan, or any other Hindu deity for that matter, are identical even within the same sect, nor their shrines, is one example of the potential of visualisation to create new material forms and different discourses related to these forms. A *bhakti* assemblage lets us see the factors and relations that determine the possibility and the specificity of these new forms. Investigating, as I do in this article, the particular type of devotional articulation that a *bhakti* assemblage is, contributes to the interdisciplinary studies on Hindu *bhakti* as located at the nexus of three factors: the invisible yet effecting cognitive actions, the visibly static yet potentially vibrant inanimate matter, and the discourse that builds or reinforces desires to create and be affected by visualised and physical matter.

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