Rediscovering the Center: Religious Striving in two Hindu Institutions

# 1. Mathura: a Meditation on the Center

Throughout my fieldwork, several friends, advisers, and other interlocutors asked with some skepticism: “why Mathura?” Their doubts about the city rested on its status as a marginal place – it is anything but the center of attention. Although one of the *sapta dhām*, Mathura is less the site of Krishna’s birth than it is the city he left behind: arguably since the time of Chaitanya, the real heart of Braj has been several kilometers north in Vrindavan. Despite its ancient prominence as a trade hub and its importance as a colonial railway junction, Mathura has not kept pace as a metropolitan development after Indian independence. Even its pollution and its militant Hinduism are overshadowed by more prominent neighbors such as Delhi and Ayodhya. In this chapter I persist in turning attention to Mathura precisely because of its propensity to be overlooked. Three case studies exemplify attempts to “re-center” the city.

I first pair an account of the Krishna Janmsthan Complex, the figurative heart of Mathura, with an examination of its place on the Parikrama Marg, a route which no longer inscribes the city’s geographical middle. Doing so will reveal how Mathura is still a vibrant pilgrimage center for many Hindus. Next, I detail the historical development and current practices of the Gayatri Tapobhumi on the northern edge of town. At one time the headquarters of the Gayatri Pariwar, the Tapobhumi has had to rediscover its purpose after its founder relocated his base of operations to Haridwar in the 1960s. Third, I introduce a series of Brahma Kumaris “centers,” located throughout Mathura. These coexist in sometimes uneasy relationships with one another, even though they share a common mission to create a robust Brahma Kumaris community in the city. In sum, this chapter is a meditation on “the center” as an urban or architectural place. Through it, I aim to show how such spaces can continue to thrive in the shadows cast by their counterparts in the limelight.[[1]](#footnote-21)

# 2. Retreats and Excursions: or, Rediscovering the Center

This chapter opens with an auto-ethnographic examination of my attempt to undertake a nine-day retreat at the Mathura Tapobhumi, which ultimately resulted in a trip to Shantikunj, the Gayatri Pariwar headquarters in Haridwar. My stay allowed me to meet a handful of Indian and foreign visitors including a German woman, two teenage boys from out of state, several Indian expats, two full-time Shantikunj volunteers, a woman completing her PhD in Psychology, and a man eager to take me to the campus of a Gayatri Pariwar breakaway group less than five kilometers away. Each of these people interacted with Shantikunj in their own ways, corresponding to their individual conceptions of meaningful religious experience. I next turn to Madhuban, the collective name given to a series of Brahma Kumaris campuses on Mount Abu and at its base. The second half of the chapter details two conferences that I attended at Madhuban during the course of my fieldwork: the first was a retreat meant for allopathic doctors, and the second was the annual World Peace Summit cum Expo. In similar manner to my treatment of those I met at Shantikunj, I consider the experiences of the small groups I accompanied during these conferences so that their varying investments and conceptions of what is central to a meaningful religious experience can come into focus.

Through such considerations, this chapter casts into relief the religious centers explored in the prior chapter by shedding light on the comparatively largescale institutional headquarters of the Gayatri Pariwar and Brahma Kumaris. These campuses serve as important pilgrimage sites for the followers of each institution, and descriptions of their grounds will give way to sustained analyses of the time people spend in and around them. This accomplishes two tasks. First, it contributes to a content-driven aim of the dissertation by detailing the particularities of Gayatri Pariwar and Brahma Kumaris infrastructure. Second, it allows me to begin to tease out the relationship between the “religious center” as a built space and the pursuit of what is “central” to the followers of the Brahma Kumaris and the Gayatri Pariwar.

# 3. The Buzz in the Honey Forests: Vibrations, Production, and Hindu Striving

This chapter continues to investigate the interplay between built religious centers and what is held to be central to religious life and practice. Many of the activities which take place at the Gayatri Pariwar and Brahma Kumaris centers outlined in chapters one and two were explained and justified through reference to “vibrations” and/or “energy.” I make a second pass over many of these places and the people associated with them in order to connect the operations of vibrations and energy with the ritual practices and societal projects of both organizations. I then turn to the role of institutionally manufactured goods as important accessories to religious practice within both the Gayatri Pariwar and the Brahma Kumaris. In the case of the former, especially, both the production and consumption of manufactured goods make up important ways to contribute to the organization’s welfare and participate in its larger societal mission. Yet both institutions use their manufactured goods as instruments to purify and create vibrations and energy. Of particular note in this regard are the efforts and struggles of Vinod, a member of the Brahma Kumaris who has for the past several years attempted to convert his home into an officially recognized Brahma Kumaris center. I close the chapter with a discussion of the role of gender, class, and caste in both institutions. It is in the contexts of the production and consumption of institutional goods where inequalities along these fault lines remain operative, despite “official” assurances that gender, caste, and class discrimination have no place in either organization.

# 4. Metabolizing COVID-19: Health and Continuity between Hindu and Institutional Bodies

Commonly understood as a physiological system, the metabolism has recently been used by scholars as an analytical lens through which to understand cities as dynamic entities that ingest, digest, and absorb.[[2]](#footnote-25) It is also a fitting metaphor with which to think about institutional bodies alongside the bodies of their constituents, since both have to manage the intrusion of the unexpected and perhaps unwelcome into their routines. During the emergence of COVID-19 as a threat to global public health, both the Gayatri Pariwar and its members took in information about the spreading disease, processed it, and adjusted themselves so as to mitigate its potential consequences. This chapter is an investigation of their early responses to the pandemic, and in it I consider occasions when the human body becomes the central concern of the followers of the Gayatri Pariwar and Brahma Kumaris. It is divided into three parts.

First, a consideration of institutional responses to the coronavirus such as WhatsApp-circulated missives and YouTube broadcasts by institutional leaders, read alongside Facebook posts and face-to-face conversations with Gayatri Pariwar members, enables an analysis of efforts to establish continuity between “official” and lay interpretations of and responses to COVID-19. Second, conversations with Gayatri Pariwar members, citations of institutional literature, and observations of routine practices are marshaled in order to identify overlapping aspirations to bodily health, moral rectitude, and a particular brand of Hindu future as the substance of that continuity. Third, thick descriptions of fieldwork done at a Gayatri Pariwar campus in Anwalkheda, U.P., during which I was accompanied by Vinod (see chapter three), facilitate a discussion of the use of common sense as an argumentative tool to secure that continuity, as well as a weapon to condemn those understood to endanger it.

# Works Cited:

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1. My scholarly interlocutors for this chapter include Smriti Srinivas, “Highways for Healing: Contemporaneous ‘Temples’ and Religious Movements in an Indian City,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 2 (May 2018): 473–96 and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), who write about decentered spaces or those otherwise “left behind,” as well as William Hollingsworth Whyte, *City : Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), whose observations about ways to enliven urban spaces resemble the tactics taken by my interlocutors in their efforts to “re-center” Mathura. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. See Hannah Landecker, “Postindustrial Metabolism: Fat Knowledge,” *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (71) (September 2013): 495–522, Harris Solomon, *Metabolic Living: Food, Fat and the Absorption of Illness in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), and the ongoing *Somatosphere* series “Decentering Metabolism: Peripheral and Southern Diffractions.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)