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Biraha

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POETRY

Biraha

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The pekhawaj channels my booming father
and the flute my mother.
The fluted Krishna descends
in the warm twilight
touching the sands of this sanctuary.
Behind their painted faces,
You see eyes of delight.
He is here, he is here, he is here.
Govinda Damodar Madhaveti
Govinda Damodar Madhaveti

This flute plays across the stretch of the skies
as I fidget in my tears and
the widow sings next to me.
The tale of her lonely life merges with
that of the God's loneliness
as she sings in the sharp, nasal tone.
The tanpura comes alive.
The Pekhawaj drums into my heart.
The three sing together
The name of the lord.

Biraha—the pang of separation
Biraha— the ache that shapes Radha's wanders
along the alleyways of Mathura.
In search of Krishna
as we all are. She wanders all around.
But he is here, he is here, he is here.
Biraha—that I drown in
sitting in this courtyard.
Biraha—that is not only our preoccupation.

The Lord himself suffers
 From separation from his beloved
 As the evening traffic thickens
 And monkeys shriek across the tall trees.

ETHNOGRAPHIC STATEMENT

The followers of Swami Shri Haridasji live in the sand-laden compound of Tatiasthan and assemble in song with devotees from the general public every evening. This musical tradition is called *samaaj gaayan*. They first sing facing the deity and then turn to their teacher, who arrives at the assembly a little later. Mobile phones and other technology are strictly forbidden.

This poem is an out-take from my ongoing ethnographic research in Vrindavan—the sacred geography of Krishna worship in the Bhakti tradition in northern India. This poem came from the evenings spent in the Tatiasthan shrine watching evening musical performances, trying to access the somber musical moment through active listening, in a sensory ethnographic move (Pink 2015).

In my research, I ask how devotees contemplate the presence and absence of their god Krishna in the sacred urban milieu of Vrindavan shaped by postcolonial modernity? The research moves along three axes: the narrative deployment of the Radha-Krishna trope in the everyday, the expression of Krishna's absence as melancholia across the region, and the cultivation of spatial selves accessing this emotional spectrum. It combines ethnographic methods and semiotic analysis to produce an account of sacred geography imbued by sadness caused by a sense of separation (*biraba*) from the divine. I explore the palpable sensation of the absence of Krishna, typically narrated in the Braj region as someone who was once here. This is captured by the Braj/Hindi word *biraba* (literally, “separation”)—a mood through which I perceive the devotee-God relationship to be practiced in the region. Furthermore, *biraba* is the mood through which Radha's anxious waiting for Krishna's return is imagined in the renditions of their love story. In my research, I interpret the modern disconnect between the Godhead and the devotee through a secular rendition of the trope of *biraba*. Krishna seems to have left the geography of Braj where the devotee today appears to live and narrate a constant pain of separation. This perception arises from the observation of sadness and melancholia expressed in lonely corners of shrines where devotees express, usually in song, a yearning and nostalgia for a more enchanted time. The word *biraba* translates badly in the registers of loneliness and separation. It is meant, in the poem, to indicate an aporia. This poem is thus located in the space of untranslatability.

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Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.

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