

3 Aural Auras of Inner Sounds

Conch Shells, Ritual Instruments, and Devotional Bodies

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Abstract

Situated at the interface of anthropological fieldwork and philosophical scrutiny, this chapter explores relations among sounds, bodies, and texts through the prism of an internal sonic physiognomy. Analyzing texts of Indian philosophy and ritual, and descriptions of lived experiences of religious sounds by sonic meditators, instrument craftsmen, and players, the chapter describes complex methods of constructing and experiencing the body. The body emerges as an auditory vessel, its inner space of breath paths and listening acumen embodying a distinctive religious capacity: to mirror and indeed become the devotional instrument. The author explores rare discourses of cultivation of the sound-perfect, meditative, tantric/yogic body and its relations to three instruments of substantial importance: the flute, the clay drum, and the conch.

Keywords: affect, religion, materiality, Tantra, Yoga, Bengal

This chapter studies discursive constructions and affective experiences of yogic bodies and musical instruments, as mirror echoes of one another, and as reflecting the primordial buzz of macrocosmic creation. Ethnographically situated among instrument craftsmen, musicians, and sacred sound meditators in Bengal, this essay analyzes the relationship between religion and sound, through the relatively unexplored prisms of bodily interiority and Hindu devotional instruments, thus highlighting connections between the inner experience of sounds and divinity.

The essay makes three theoretical contributions to the analyses of religious sounds in the book. Beyond questions of sacred music, it thinks about the domain of the sheer materiality of instrumental sounds and the

effects they have on the religiously cultivated body. Through this, it tries to understand Hindu “acoustemology” (Feld 1996)—an essentially sonic means of conceptualizing sacred existence, and inhabiting the body and the world. The essay moves beyond external soundscapes to empathetically encounter the insides of devotional viscera of bodies and instruments.

The essay addresses the book’s central understanding about sounds as bridges between the human and other-than-human, material and spiritual spheres, by demonstrating sympathetic relations between artefact acoustics and the inner body. Such an acoustemology has been present in Bengal for several centuries, encoded both in religious texts and practiced traditions; and hence my ethnography is constituted by the interlacing of text and experience.

Sounds, bodies, and texts are analyzed here as nodes of an “internal sonic physiognomy” (Beck 1995). Guy Beck’s (1995) work has been influential in advancing these conceptual possibilities for South Asian religiosity. Analyzing texts of Indian philosophy and narratives of lived experiences of religious sounds, I describe complex methods of constructing the body itself as an auditory instrument, its inner space embodying breath paths which transform to divine sounds. I understand “aura” as the ambience of a breathing, vibrating continuum of body-vessels, both human and instrumental, and analyze the effect of texts and experiences in manifesting the continuum.

Sonic sacrality has been recognized as critical to Hinduism. But musical instruments and their theological import have not been adequately understood. However, Bengal’s devotional groups have strong esoteric traditions of acoustic metaphysics, in which, alongside uttered *mantras*, instrumental sounds are significant (Sarbadhikary 2015, 205–13). Beck claimed that the relation between what musicians play externally and hear internally—the link between instrumental sounds and sonic meditation—has not been addressed (1995, 110). Thus, I explore rare discourses of cultivation of the tuned, meditative, tantric-yogic body and its relations to three instruments: the flute (*bamshi*), clay drum (*khol*), and conch (*shankh*). Based on fieldwork conducted among artefact collectors, instrument craftsmen, players, sound meditators, and other local specialists of religious sound, spread across multiple villages in West Bengal’s districts, I discuss claims about practitioners’ cultivation of the body and instruments as mirror echoes. Their exegeses suggest that the conch, flute, and *khol* become devotional bodies, and the devotee’s entire vibrational skin interiority, in turn, becomes the instrument. The aura of aural vibration, however, affects both individual meditative realizations and deep sonic communities and textual traditions.

I give texts utmost importance as both sources and objects of the field. Complex textual understandings about embodied sound have percolated to

people's everyday lives, and were ethnographically available in the form of metaphors, myths, poetry, songs, etymologies, diagrams, and even specific material practices of making and playing instruments, and sounding their rhythms. Many practitioners have undergone several years of training in both their music as well as yogic, tantric, and devotional (sonic) philosophies, from gurus, in their hometowns or other significant pilgrimage places. Devotees also have defined contexts of text discussions: during public musical recitals (*kirtans*) when singers provide explanations of esoteric songs, and regular exegetical discussions by gurus in temples. People's contemporary exegesis, sonic meditation practices, and even the production of material instrumental sounds, are thus mediated by cultural texts, and I intend both the explicitly textual/philosophical narratives and people's voiced experiences to be understood as simultaneous ethnographic practices of sonic devotion in Bengal.

Influenced by Hirschkind's (2006) understanding of aural aesthetics as a deeply affective visceral conditioning that engages with the world and time through both fit and excess, I argue that inner sounds and corporeal devotion resist discursive bracketings into specific timeframes like the pre-modern or the historical secular. Although contextually shaped, and never outside of history and politics, these sounds and their onto-cosmology have longstanding affective endurance. They represent post-secular remainders of religiosity in their devotional existence through bodies and texts.

The "interiority" of devotional bodies needs qualification. While influenced by literature which suggests the intrinsic interiorizing potential of sound experience, and its penetrating and thereby most emotionally intimate and ecstatic quality compared to other bodily senses (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 468; Gell 1995, 235; Ingold 2000, 155–6, 268; Rodaway 1994, 95), I also suggest that the sounds analyzed here are not devoid of conditioning by the external world. The instrumental acoustics are produced in the outer world and communicated among listening communities who gather for collective religious musical sessions, or during regular evenings of domestic togetherness; whence these sounds are internalized by the devotional listener/player, and also meditated upon to be simultaneously generated from within the body.

The sounds thus have the peculiar characteristic of belonging to both outer and inner worlds of aural perception. Further, these sounds are informed by highly perceptive abilities of sound creators/listeners and yogic meditators, and also a rich world of texts—in the separate yet overlapping literary traditions of Tantra, yogic treatises, and *bhakti* poetics—which sensitively theorize the religious sounds practitioners hear in their attuned

bodies. It is impossible to discern temporal priority—whether the inner material sound experiences propelled the world of texts and external instrumental creations or the external sounds and textual descriptions impacted sensory meditation. Sounds supersede text-practice, word-experience, and literacy-orality/aurality binaries. Finally, these sounds, while generated in the body's interstices, are considered as simultaneous mirrors of the transcendental cosmos.

Thus, instrumental sounds are literally inhabited by the body's habitual matrix: at the junctures of centuries-old religious texts, sedimented practice of yogic methods learned from gurus through generations, and sheer sensory realizations. This devotional sonic ability is thus "poised between ... the rational and the affective, the discursive and the embodied" (Erlmann 2004, 13). Such an *extimate* relation, in between the intimate and external worlds, is a "mimetic archive" that perpetuates the residues of sacred aural excesses in the "concrete history of the senses, and in the habits of our shared environment" (see Mazzarella 2017, 8).

These sounds are however entangled with socially regulated affect in ways that escape the conventional archives of historians and philologists. Affect, although discursive, involves non-linguistic, pre-verbal, powerfully reactive sensory states, which, like lightning flashes, apprehend sensations which the subject cannot always grasp cognitively. They are intense ineffable excesses, running across the viscera like instantaneous gushes. While definitely influenced by the world of texts, affect thus also retains a supra-historical ontological "autonomy" from language and time (Massumi 2002).

The sonic dimensions of the material body discussed in this chapter, while particularly about inner levels of skin, are simultaneously situated beyond the inside-outside dyad, impacting all levels of the habitual body. While arising within corporeal interiors, these sounds overflow and merge with the resonance of physical instruments. Informed by tantric sonic ideologies, they embody acoustic cosmic wholes which include different pulsating vessels—human and instrumental bodies, and macrocosmic aural expressions of sounds and speech—generated by the same vibrating divine potential. I argue that the world of (instrumental) devotional sounds has endured through generations, in written words, in the hands of makers and players, and as inner hums and beats of meditators.

Methodologically, I contend, therefore, that the question of religious sounds finds some very potent answers in the analysis of affective dimensions, since they explain the century-long persistence of practices and the texts they influence and are impacted by. In line with the book's general temperament, I argue that studies of religion, when addressed through the

filter of sound, better apprehend notions of the embodied, sensory divine. And studies of sound, when sensitive to religiosity, can conceptualize specific cultural constructions of acoustic experience: in this case, as manifesting divinity in the insides of the cultivated body, and more generally, South Asian religions' rich aural traditions embodied by practices of aesthetic devotion.

Textual representations of instrumental bodies

The phenomenological basis of the relationship between external and internal sounds, or instruments and bodies, is established in Indian philosophical discussions on corporeal cavities, breath routines or *pranayama*, and sonic meditation techniques. These discussions claim, for instance, that yogis with perfected breathing hear sounds of the ocean, conch, gong, drums, flute, bells, humming bees, anklets, thunder, stringed instruments like the *veena*, etc., as arising from their bodily contours. Critical Yoga texts such as the *Hathayoga Pradipika* (15th century) and *Nada-Bindu Upanishad* (17th century), mention these sounds as ringing in the hollows of ears, chest, and back of the head (see Muktibodhananda 1993, 508, 561–81; Aiyar n.d.). Some of my interlocutors, musicians acutely aware of sound meditation practices, similarly explained that controlled breath transforms to bass percussion sounds at lower body-levels, and subtle flute melodies with breath-dependent lightness, in the spacious cranium.

The key embodied factor connecting the human body with sacred instruments is the presence of resonating interiors: their holes with carefully crafted air/breath-passages acting as sound media. The *Kaushitaki Upanishad* (1000–500 BC) posits breath (*pran*) and sound/speech (*vak*) as reflections: in silent breath, speech/sound lurks as potentiality, and vice versa (see Srimad Anirban 1992, 23–41, 96–127). Further, in tantric/yogic *naad* (divine sound vibration) traditions, the body's journey from still breath to sound/speech vibrations is a passage through four openings: anus, navel, heart, and tongue; and practitioners may also hear in those cavities, mantric syllables, and natural sounds fusing into instrument acoustics (see Briggs 1989, 258–83, 322–47; Gold 1999, Hess 2009; Padoux 1992, 133–44, 166–222; Sarbadhikary 2015). The classical poetics text *Natyashastra* considers the human skin as essentially toned, and the yogic body as the first stretched and stringed vessel, *veena*, which transforms into the wooden *veena*, which in turn impacts imaginations of the harmonic drum, and all instruments are said to subsequently emanate therefrom (Bandopadhyay 1995: 164–5). Taken together, these texts relate the perforated, spacious, and melodious human

body with sacred musical instruments, connected through their breathing and vibrating lives of rhythm and tune. In making or playing musical instruments, one is therefore extending one's own body-sonics through an intuitive ear-mind-hand aesthetic. The *Natyashastra* also describes how a sage intently hears drops of rainwater on lotus leaves, to then instruct how to craft a percussion which reproduces those acoustics (Pande 1996, 302). This too exemplifies the innate translations among natural sounds, cognitive intuition, embodied mimesis, and finally, instrumental sounds. The yogic body and sound instrument are thus mirror-echoes: the body itself, as instrument, resounds interiorly, and the instrument is a yogic body too.

Breath/air and their mediation of sound connects bodies and instruments. The *Yoga Vashishtha* (9th century) understands *akash* (ether, or empty space) as a conscious agent (Bhaduri 1975), capable of uniting vessels through their spacious/breathing virtues. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (1000–500 BC) further views the heart space itself as *akash*, with sound as its ether's main feature (Olivelle 1998). The *Mahabharata* (1st century) mentions two further properties of such *akash*/sound: “unstruckness” and presence in the body's apertures (Sinha 1987, 793). In textual (and lived) *naad* traditions, sonic vibration is indeed life's first tremor, uncaused and unstruck. It is indistinguishable from the first cosmic moment of divine male-female union. This primordial *akash*/sound constitutes an eternal “unstruck” buzz in the body: *anahata naad*, which when struck by vibrating breath, produces speech. The same *naad* also gives life to instrument sounds through human hands. The discursive sound world of South Asian auditory cultures thus preempts connections among universal sound, the body buzz, speech, and instruments. The textual web, spanning centuries, forms an insistent ideational presence, and its insights are interlaced with affective ethnographic practices.

Sensate instruments and audible anatomies

1. Drum and flute

Vaishnavas, a devotional sect of Bengal, worship the deities Krishna, his consort Radha, and the medieval saint, Chaitanya. Collective singing of the deities' names and pastimes (*kirtan*) is a major devotional practice of Bengal-Vaishnavas. The *khol* (clay drum) and *kartaal* (cymbals) accompany the ecstatic singing. However, rather than being an accompaniment only, the

khol is itself also propitiated as a deity (with a yogic body), and worshipped on the altar by musicians before *kirtan* sessions begin.¹

I have worked with senior percussionists, many of whom are also trained in meditating on percussion sounds, in Kolkata, Nadia, Murshidabad, Bankura, and Birbhum districts of Bengal, for over a decade. *Khol* making techniques, players' knowledge about rhythms, and meditators' detailed diagrammatic understandings of body-*khol* similitudes— all materialize abstract textual knowledge concerning body-sonic divinity. They played these rhythms, sang esoteric songs, narrated orally transmitted poems from memory, alluded to several popular myths and legends, and referred to both classical philosophical texts and vernacular ones with simplified discourses, to explain difficult theological concepts to me. Practitioners explain that *khol-kartaal*'s material sounds embody Radha-Krishna's sacred erotics, and their sincere audition is a musician's supreme religious practice. They stress further that a practitioner knows methods of realizing his own body too as a *khol*: the inner skin echoing subtle rhythms of divine eros in its breathing cavities.

The making and playing of *kholes* are complex processes, and their sophisticated acoustic theology a domain of greater expertise. This theology comes down as oral explanations to generations of musician-meditators. *Kholes* are asymmetrical membranophones, made of mud and covered with cowskin; their tuning is dependent on stretching 32 leather straps over the body-surface. A small hole is finally punched on an edge, and sounds are produced by the inner air space. Practitioners associate the 32 strings with 32 uttered syllables of Radha-Krishna's names.

Eben Graves identified the *khol*'s "affecting presence" in Bengal's devotional life, and argued that religious discourses and material sonic efficacy together constitute its significance (2009a, 105; 2009b, 4). In various isomorphic imaginations, the *khol*'s material sounds are associated with the yogic body's aurality. Advanced meditators explained that the body-as-instrument needs ultimate awakening, such that one cultivates processes of tuning intently to minute *khol* rhythms arising from inside one's own body, while listening to the physical instrument, and indeed even after it stops playing.

During musical sessions, *khol-kartaal* sounds bang loudly in the chest. A renowned female *kirtan* singer offered a unique explanation of this phenomenon. She said that the body's *chakras* (secret energy centers) have hidden phonemes, which identify with *khol*'s rhythms, and get excited.

1 For detailed discussion see Sarbadhikary (2015, 179–213) and (2019).

These homophonic/syllabic identities between instrument rhythm sounds and bodily energy acoustics constitute their similitude. I realized further that the chest center is literally known as the *anahata* (unstruck/uncaused) *chakra*, which she meant is struck when the *khol* plays.

In Vaishnava understandings, Radha and Krishna reincarnated as a united physical form in Chaitanya's body. Since Krishna's flute and Radha's anklet bells are imagined to sound together during their love encounters, they are believed to have incarnated as drums and cymbals for Chaitanya's *kirtan* music. Krishna's flute is a divine embodiment of seductive charm: its sound considered to be the exact counterpart of penetrative eros. Innumerable poems also compare the devotee's body to the flute body, both characterized by air/breath channels and orifices. They describe Krishna's exhalation into the flute pores as a sensation akin to the devotee's receiving his warm breath in the body's interstices.

As passionate flute sounds become attuned to the breathing body, breath turns to melody. An elderly Nadia villager once discussed that one of Krishna's flutes has nine openings, just like our bodies: a pair of eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, genitals, and anus. Through *pranayama*, as breath is withheld, yogic balance ensues, just as a most beautiful tone (*panchama*) flows from the flute when all its pores are shut and (Krishna's) breath exhaled, drawing his lovers erotically close (see also Saraswati 1975, 430–41).

In the *Bhaktirasamrta Sindhu*, the 16th-century Bengal-Vaishnava theological-aesthetic treatise by Rupa Gosvami, the links of the breathing body and flute metaphysics, which the elderly practitioner intuitively invoked, are subtly analyzed. The text mentions Krishna's three flutes: the *venu* with six holes (corresponding to the body's six *chakras*: in the anus, genitals, navel, chest, throat, and center of eyebrows); *murali*, with five (corresponding to the senses), and *vamsika*, with nine (the body's "nine doors", or openings) (see Haberman 2003, 217). These varied discursive and affective traditions essentially correlate the breathing bodily interstices and throbbing flute melodies, with the understanding that inner corporeal aurality and instrumental acoustics are mirroring echoes.

Just as mythically, the flute reincarnated as the sacred drum, in practicing ontological traditions too, yogic breath and the flute are related to the *khol*: air and sound fusing with calculated rhythms. In this, significant yogic schedules bridge external and internal soundscapes. In a yoga meditative posture called *bhramar* (honeybee) *asana* (posture), one introjects breath, shuts body openings, and simultaneously generates inside the reverberation of the adenoidal vibrating sound with which the cosmic hum, AUM, tapers. Krishna's flute sound (*panchama*) also produces the same nasal tone (Beck 1995, 81–91). In *nada-yoga*

traditions, “the word nada signifies the reverberating tone of vocal sound, especially the buzzing nasal sound with which the word AUM fades away” (Beck 1995, 82). This humming tone, considered as indistinct from the primeval universal drone, then interiorizes from the mouth cavity towards the chest cavity. A practitioner explained, “When the honeybee hums, this is the same nagging sound. Krishna, as honeybee, savors the interior space of the tantric body-lotus Krishna breathes into the body, and it sounds the flute/*khol*”

It is noteworthy that the body’s nasal phonetics, such as the prolonged *n* and *m* sounds, are also reproduced in the vocabulary of *khol* rhythms (*bols*), which have nasal acoustic tones with syllabic representations such as: *jhna, jhni, najhi, nako, jhini*, etc. This oozing sense of the buzz, practitioners explain, emanates from the primordial AUM or *anahata naad*, flows through the yogic body, fuses with its breath, stills in the central nerve along the spine, and translates into nasal drum rhythm sounds which the percussionist plays. The buzz also affects the musician’s hands, and after sustained drumming, he thus senses a tingling, granular, lazy feel in his palms. The sensation has a nasal name itself: *jh(n)ijh(n)i*, and is understood by musicians as a sonic-tactile yogic blessing.

Practitioners also discuss conceptualizations about the instrument’s essential corporeality: just as there is an instrumentality/musicality to the body, there is also a body-in-the-*khol*. It is figured as a precise counterpart of the *khol*-in-the-body. For example, a percussionist interlocutor explained that like we breathe, the instrument breathes through a small hole punched on its edge. Similarly, our navel maintains bodily balance, while the *khol*’s middle portion maintains sonic balance.

The *khol*’s acoustic figuration also has mythical representations. Musicians say that the black patch on *khol*’s right side is Krishna, the white left patch, Radha; when the player strikes on both sides together, Radha-Krishna enter in erotic vibration, causing the cosmic tremor which produces the primordial AUM sound. The instrument’s affective body-space then *becomes* the primeval echo of the yogic body, which, in the corresponding *chakra* imagination, navel downwards embodies feminine vitality (Radha), and upwards, masculine energy (Krishna), together resonating *anahata naad* or AUM (Beck 1995, 101).

Further, practitioners divide the instrument’s body into *chakras* too, aligned below and above the middle portion. When the practitioner pulls up yogic breath via the body’s central nerve, the lotus-like-*chakras* blossom with corresponding unfurling of secret sounds nestled in them. Musicians explained that they can play the equivalent alphabet combinations on the *khol*’s *chakras*, and the same cosmic vibration then reverberates as aural auras inside the body and instrument.

2. Conch

Like the flute and *khol*, the conch (*shankh*) sound also has deep connections with corporeal metaphysics.

The esoteric connection of the body and conch is discursively established through the tantric imagery of *kundalini*, the coiled serpentine feminine force lying dormant at the spinal base. Practitioners sang songs to describe the difficult terrains through which Radha crosses to meet her lover, Krishna, at the banks of the Yamuna river; as the direct analogy of the *kundalini*, rising with yogic breath, through the six *chakras*, to meet her lover, the masculine energy, at the cranial center. In the cranium, the erotic concentrate of Radha-Krishna's love, the flute, is then said to be heard. Similarly, the twirled conch is compared to the sleeping, coiled *kundalini*, aroused through perfected breathing, to sound the primordial *anahata naad* (AUM), the first buzz accompanying divine male-female union.

The *shankh* is imagined to carry inside it the primordial AUM sound, an acoustic similar to the deep oceanic murmur. Visually, the conch has distinct twists twirling inside, forming a secured interior cocoon, while its audition loosens towards the outside when it is blown upon. This particular rhetoric is also evident in corporeal phenomenology, with the body's tantric serpent essence at the bottom of the spine, either remaining coiled interiorly or spaciouly swelling its breathing capacity towards the yogic, expansive cranium; hissing up with its primordial murmur to unite with her transcendental lover, situated in the uppermost *chakra* (Silburn 1988, 124–33).

An analysis of the etymology of the term *shankha* also tells a similar story of contradictory energies nestled within it: *sham* (implying interior peace) + *kha* (signifying emptiness). So, the *shankha*, its name, and twirled folds embody a life of both interiority and infinity, which correlates with the *kundalini*'s coiled location in the body's spine and subsequent full-breath expansiveness in its upward journey to the cranium's yogic eternity.

Ananda Coomaraswamy (1934) explains that “kha” is *akash* or space/void/cavity. While this void represents a hole or zero, it simultaneously also implies potentiality, spiraling its way to fullness (*ibid.*, 490, 493). *Kha* also correlates with *nabhi*, or the human navel (*ibid.*, 487). As discussed earlier, in yogic/tantric traditions the body, with its various apertures, holds the key to *akash*: its breathing hollows throbbing with vibrations of the first, unstruck *anahata naad*, generated from the *kundalini*. So, the conch, as a metaphorical extension of the human body, alludes to an expansive spatiality which sounds fully through the serpentine energy swelling its force through bodily interiority.

The Bengali lower caste community who collect conches from the sea, clean them, craft conch products utilizing significant parts of the object, and sell conches and conch-derived products, are known as *shankharis*. There are prominent *shankhari* settlements in Bengal's Barrackpore and Bishnupur towns, and I have worked with them, focusing on complex phases of conch-related activities, and popular mythical lore concerning the artefact. These myths relate the conch to the tantric deity consort, Shiva and Parvati, and Shiva's ascetic devotee, Agastya, who *shankharis* worship as their caste ancestor. *Shankharis* consistently allude to stories about Shiva-Parvati's sacred/sexual union, symbolized both in the conch's original vibration and in Shiva's gift of conch bangles to Parvati; and explain how therefore all Hindu Bengali women adorn these bangles as signs of a procreative marriage. Beyond these everyday narratives, they also invoke the conch's esoteric tantricity, and these discourses are tied to ways in which they craft the object.

The conch's inside is sacralized by both *shankharis* and those procuring them. As a metonym of the sea, it is understood as bestowing fertility, peace, and cooling virtues. The conch's parts are thus variously used in astrology, Ayurveda, and as fertile food for fish, cattle, etc. However, the conch's univocally important role is sonic, and most Bengali Hindus blow on the conch every dusk, at home, since they believe that the primordial sound regenerates domestic goodness. *Shankharis* explained further that sounding the conch reunites the conch-body with the body-conch: that is, through inhaling-exhaling rhythms, the mouth, breath cavity, and body-interior become extensions of the twirled conch. Sounding the conch is thus considered therapeutic, since it involves a sophisticated process of breath control. These isomorphic continuums stem from notions of interior depth, and especially hinge on craftsmen's discourses about twists inside the conch. The terms they use for the conch twirls which become evident when they scoop and clean the conches are *pyanch/g(n)it/guli/gnyara*, meaning coil/knot. They refer to the conch navel literally as *pran* (life breath). Herein too, corporeal metaphorization is evident, since the human navel, coiled similarly, is a significant body *chakra*—*manipura*—a carrier of essential breath and a potent symbol of empty space (*kha*) breathing with *naad*.

Most *shankharis* agree that there are $3\frac{1}{2}$ conch-folds. This numerical approximation is especially telling, since in the tantric discourse, critical formations have $3\frac{1}{2}$ spirals. They are: the conch, the cosmic sonic congealment (AUM), and the *kundalini*. Once again, the body cosmos, sonic universe, and a material instrument are drawn together as geometrical and ontological extensions.

The much-regarded 11th-century text, *Kubjika Tantra*, says, “*Nadacchaiva Samutpanna Ardhavindurmaheshwari, Sardhatritayvindubhyo bhujangi kulakundali*” (Das 2018, 11), meaning, “The nasal buzz after AUM emanated with AUM itself [A+U+M+half-sound]. It is the concentrate of divine power. AUM remains coiled 3½ times, as a serpentine force, the *kundalini*.”

Other texts refer to the *kundalini* simply as *shankhini* or the female conch (Silburn 1988, 28, 124, 129). Since childhood, as part of my own empathetic, immersive listening habitus, I have heard Bengali women blow on the conch, three times, the number three being considered auspicious. Beyond this however, there is also always a nasal echo which resonates the three sounds with an extra, like the buzz after AUM sound, also replicated in *khol* rhythms, and experienced on musicians’ tingling hands. This hum emanates from and fuses the cavities of the navel, chest, throat, ears, and head. This blending is imagined precisely as connected cavities of the *kundalini*’s twirls.

Another verse, from the *Guru Gita* (part of *Viswasara Tantra*) text, referring to the power of *kundalini*, says:

She dances in the yogi’s heart. Her form engulfing all creation, she manifests like the flash of a lightning. She remains coiled around Shiva like a beautiful serpent, resembling and becoming the coils of the conch. As Shiva’s energy, she is the source of all knowledge and mantras. She is subtler than the subtle, enlightened like the moon When aroused, her breath enlivens all sounds, and the entire cosmos is constructed. (Omkarnathdev 2012, 60; translation by the author)

As per the yogic regimen, the practitioner’s breath travels through the body’s subtle middle path (*shushumna*), the dozing serpent (feminine energy, *kundalini*) is then aroused, uncoils, travels up the spine to the cranium (to unite with the male principle), while throughout the body senses the vibration of primordial male-female union, the hum of *anahata naad* (AUM). Subsequently, this cosmic breath finds new life as lettered and unlettered sounds, through the body’s openings. The body’s subterranean *anahata naad*, the nasal drone, then gives life breath to other sounds, including *khol* rhythm alphabets, and the conch’s droning pulsation.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together discursive and affective inner lifeworlds of instruments and human bodies of the Bengali devotional context. It has

discussed both tantric and yogic texts of Indian sonic metaphysics, as well as ethnographic voices of crafters and sounders of sacred instruments, notably the flute, percussion, and conch. I argue that textual and living traditions together demonstrate how the abstract interior spaces of the human body and musical instruments become homologous divine reflections through the experience of breath and sound. The body becomes the conch, any one of Krishna's perforated flutes, or the beating *khol*. These instruments not only have an effect *on the body*, but indeed are yogic bodies in their own right. Bodies, texts, and instruments together constitute aural auras, critical to the experience of sonic devotion. This essay has hopefully demonstrated that the "sonic turn" does not always need to turn *away* from texts towards bodies. We have rather dealt here with thoroughly embodied texts and entextualized bodies (Flood 2006). What is sensed here is an intense acoustemology involving the deep visceral habitus of auditory communities, located at the interface of perduring cultural texts of Indian philosophy, attuned sensibilities, and affective interiors of adept listeners.

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