The single-pointed mind: theorising attention from South Asia

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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I declare that my thesis consists of 99536 words.

Abstract

This thesis takes as its primary site of engagement a pervasive concept: *attention*. As an implicit analytic, attention has long been used by anthropologists to explain various arenas of socio-cultural life pointing to its centrality in our formation as human subjects. Yet, anthropologists have also tended not to pay attention to attention itself – it has infrequently featured explicitly as a point of theoretical and ethnographic exploration. As part of an attempt to explicitly engage with this psycho-bodily capacity, I argue for a move away from the treatment of attention only as a self-evident aspect of experience, as is the case in much extant scholarship. Instead, I contend that a mature anthropology of attention should also focus on the ideological constitution of this psycho-bodily capacity – that is as a major site of emic theorisation and moral concern. This recognises more fully the importance of attention as a crucial ground of valorisation, contestation and anxiety through which diverse cultures and groups attempt to make up the self in particular ways.

As proof of the value of this approach, the following account offers an *attentionalist* reading of north Indian culture and history. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Banaras as well as archival research, a number of well-worn areas of South Asian anthropology – colonial history, ritual, aesthetics and theories of self – are re-interpreted through an attentional lens. In each case, I explore how a particular ideology of attention – built around single-pointedness – is vital to how different social actors in Banaras attempt to shape their lives and their interiority. This reflects in part longstanding religious and ethical positions as well as the fact that since the colonial period, single-pointed attention, has provided a centralising value for an idealised conception of national subjectivity, offering a basis for an imaginary of Indian superiority grounded in introspective capacity.

To Ruma Bose, who guided me here

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Note on style

As far as possible, I have aimed for phonetic transcription of Hindi words to best reproduce vernacular speech. I have altered some names and locations, where necessary, to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

Prologue

At the very start of my fieldwork in the pilgrimage city of Banaras I discovered the existence of a laboratory which I returned to again and again over the course of my research. What drew me to the lab was a confluence of intellectual interest – like the psychologists working there, I was also researching 'attention', although our methods and theoretical lineages diverged. Filled with the accoutrements of psychic science – eye-tracking instruments, computers, and various devices for measuring imperceptible physiological changes – the lab, at least in its outward presentation, appeared cut off from the surrounding spiritualised culture of Banaras, which is often called the holiest city in India. Its sober scientific atmosphere was accentuated by decorative choice – photos of besuited scholars collecting awards lined the walls, including one of Michael Posner, who is among the among the most well-known psychologists to have studied attention.[1] Over some months, I became fairly well acquainted with the psychologists working there. One of them, owing to the requirements of Indian visa regulations which I will not go into here, eventually served as my local academic supervisor. However, my relationship with him, Professor Pandey, initially did not extend beyond respectful formality and occasional meetings. I spent most of my time in hostel rooms, narrow *galis* and bustling chai shops, a world away from the controlled, air-conditioned calm of the lab.

Then COVID-19 came, and after some two months in lockdown where I was unable to leave my residence, I returned to London on a government repatriation flight. When I came back to Banaras somewhat under two years later to resume my fieldwork, I encountered a different Professor Pandey. This difference was not perceptible at first – I felt a sense of welcome familiarity when I first returned to the lab, finding Professor Pandey dressed in similar attire surrounded by the same equipment as before. In London, while waiting to return to India as newspaper reports emerged of mass funeral pyres, I had often wondered whether my fieldsite would still exist as it had before the pandemic. It was a relief then to find the lab seemingly unchanged. However, even if the lab appeared at first glance familiar, the mood and content of my post-pandemic

[1] A plaque outside the laboratory states that Posner inaugurated the Cognitive Science Lab of Banaras Hindu University in the early 1990s. In an interview with Posner, he told me that he visited Banaras Hindu University at least twice on the encouragement of Raja Parasuraman, a prominent Indian-heritage psychologist based in the United States who has worked closely with several scholars from the university. However, during the interview, Posner indicated that these trips to Banaras were brief and he seemed to have limited recollection of Banaras Hindu University itself.

meetings with Professor Pandey were entirely different. We talked, as before, of attention but the reference points were new, not the theories of western psychology, but yoga, meditation and esoteric aspects of Hindu philosophy. Professor Pandey – a naturally quiet and diffident man (unlike most teachers in Banaras) – now presented a more passionate and vigorous demeanour. It was as if the shift in conversation away from experimental psychology towards matters of spirituality and Hindu philosophy, allowed him to leave the cold, formal world of work, and enter the warm, alluring realm of vocation and passion.

What had changed? Part of the shift in our relationship can be attributed to me – in the interceding period in London, I had read widely on Hindu philosophy, exploring the writings of major Indian religious thinkers. Yet, if my expanded knowledge base provided favourable conditions for a new type of conversation and relationship to develop, the impetus for this shift came more firmly from Professor Pandey himself. Approaching retirement at sixty-five, he had begun to turn away from academic psychology, which had been his central preoccupation for several decades. For him, it failed to capture something fundamental. "I had been wondering for a long time whether these experiments were a waste of time," he confessed. "We humans are more than just brains. There is more to consciousness, more to attention than [gross] matter." Professor Pandey, freed from the demands of formal academic work as his retirement approached, had begun reading widely, procuring books by contemporary scholars on the history of Hinduism, as well as works by western philosophers, orientalists and ancient yogic and Buddhist seers. Ostensibly, this work was part of an ambitious book project – a history of ideas about attention in ancient Indian thought – but it reflected a wider shift in other areas of his life: he had taken to meditating daily, something which he confessed to finding both invigorating and frustrating. When visiting his home in a well-to-do apartment block in Banaras, away from the formality of the department, I got a sense of an individual overtaken by excited intellectual fervour. His bed was un-made and his beard of silvery stubble un-shaven. Papers were scattered around the apartment. Talking in hushed, urgent tones, Professor Pandey, pulled book after book off his shelves, encouraging me to delve further into the complex and elaborate theories of attention and psychology to be found in ancient Indian texts.

The psychologists that I met in Banaras will not be recurring points of reference in this thesis – their extreme specialisation sits uneasily with the broad, more generalised

account of north Indian culture that I would like to present. Yet, they offer a useful frame with which to begin my account – it is precisely because a culturally-specific ideology of attention is interwoven so intimately with diverse aspects of life in north India, that something felt always incomplete and lacking in the sober, western-centric world that occupied much of Professor Pandey's professional life. This thesis will attempt to trace the historical and cultural contours of this particular ideology of attention – which has long lurked at the margins of the South Asian ethnographic record – as well as its intersection with the social and political realities of people's everyday lives. In doing so, I hope to provide a novel template for how anthropologists might approach attention; a psycho-bodily capacity that is decisive to socio-cultural life yet often little heeded by ethnographically-inclined scholars.

Introduction

This thesis takes as its primary site of engagement a pervasive concept, which in its commonness is perhaps easily ignored: *attention*. As an implicit analytic, attention has been employed by anthropologists to explain various important categories of activity – ritual, religious learning, language socialisation, the acquisition of culture itself – pointing to its centrality in our formation as human subjects (Pedersen et al. 2021). Yet, anthropologists have tended not to turn their attention to attention itself – it has rarely featured as a central point of theoretical and ethnographic exploration, despite being often present in a subterranean way. In the last few years this has begun to change with a series of workshops and panels in the US and Europe[2], as well as a growing, yet still incipient, body of articles taking attention as their explicit point of focus. It is perhaps too early to talk of a mature anthropology of attention, yet it seems likely that this will emerge as a distinct area of enquiry in the next few years.

The first objective of the following account then is a general one – to provide one possible answer to the question: *What should an anthropology of attention look like?* I argue for a move away from the treatment of attention only as a self-evident aspect of experience, as is the case in much extant anthropological scholarship. Instead, I contend that a mature anthropology of attention should also focus on attention's constitution in discourse – that is as a major site of emic theorisation and moral concern around which different groups attempt to make up the self. Attention provides a fundamental source for constituting the normative subject with numerous traditions globally taking the formation of attention in culturally specific ways as the central end to which they aim. I label these: *attentionalist* theories and traditions of the self. They stand in contrast to other idealised vantages on the self that take divergent capacities and processes as their primary point of concern, whether analytic thought and rationality or inner depth and authentic emotion. These attentionalist vantages on the subject are fundamentally concerned with the structuring of experience - the issue of how experience ought to be formed, and, so, what kinds of selves we should be (as persons defined by what we experience). The anxieties that all too often characterise attentional discourse stem

[2] This includes: an interdisciplinary event at the 2019 4S conference in New Orleans; a panel at the 2021 conference of the Society for Psychological Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association; a large interdisciplinary workshop at the London School of Economics in 2022; a three-part panel at the 2023 conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK; and a two-day workshop in 2024 at the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters bringing together over twenty anthropologists. I was involved in co-organising the latter three events.

fundamentally from the contradictions and potentialities of this psycho-bodily capacity, which offers innumerable possibilities for how our experience might be constituted; as something volitional, something externally organised, or, as the case may be, something formed at the interstices of these two extremes.

The value of this discursive approach will be substantiated through ethnographic and historical particularity marshalled in aid of answering a second, yet interlinked question: *What role does attention play, as a site of moral concern, practical intervention and discursive elaboration, in the formation of self in north India?* In relation to this, I contend that a particular ideology of attention serves a central pillar of normative and ethical subjectivity in north India, one that intersects with religion, art and authority, and how the self is formed in relation to these domains. In exploring how a diverse group of social actors in the pilgrimage city of Banaras attempt to shape their lives and their interiority in relation to certain culturally specific ideals of attention, I hope to show how an attentional lens can serve to reinvigorate and reimagine well-studied topics within the anthropology of South Asia: spirituality, aesthetics, ritual, and, of course, subject formation. Through South Asia's rich and longstanding traditions and discourses of attention, I will turn outwards also, employing them as an exemplary vantage from which to challenge orthodox intellectual trajectories, particularly: influential, largely elitist and western-centred, narratives by historians concerning the emergence of the 'modern' subject; and dominant theories of agency and self in anthropology. This thesis then can be read as an attentionalist project, one that seeks to demonstrate the value of what Joanna Cook (Cook 2018) calls "paying attention to attention", reading it as a compelling site of discursive formation that is axiomatic to nearly all areas of socio-cultural life, and yet which, as something so plain and seemingly self-evident, has all too often escaped the ethnographic gaze.

The origins of this project are deeply imbricated in the particular moment in which 'we' – in the narrow sense of people residing in Europe and America – live; one saturated with anxieties about attention and its seeming capture by digital and algorithmic technologies. This vantage on attention, which is so prevalent at present, has served to make clear to numerous anthropologists the importance of attention as a symbolic and discursive site. Yet, it speaks also to a certain parochialism in the way that attention is often approached. So, forceful are these anxieties about machines and their effect on our subjectivity that discussions of attention often appear trapped by this frame, as

evidenced by an explosion of scholarship in innumerable disciplines that take a sense technologically-mediated attentional crisis as their point of departure, including, but not limited to: literary criticism (Hayles 2007), philosophy (Stiegler 2010), history (Crary 2001), and media and critical theory (Beller 2003; Harsin 2015). In choosing Banaras as a fieldsite, I want to unsettle the preoccupations of this growing inter-disciplinary domain of scholarly enquiry by attempting to explore attention as something that while inevitably imbricated with technology, also circulates much more widely than this.

As a city of well over 1 million people, located on the mid-Ganga (Ganges) plains of north India, Banaras is an eminently 'modern' metropolis, meant in the conventional and perhaps problematic sense of this term; a place of where, just as in the west, attentionally-inflected anxieties about technology and the overwhelming pace of contemporary life also circulate. The city forms a centre of Hindu nationalist activity, serving as the parliamentary seat of the present prime minister Narendra Modi. In addition, it is an important commercial and educational hub where young people, armed with soaring aspirations yet facing harsh socio-economic realities, come from neighbouring regions to study at universities, schools and innumerable private coaching institutions. Yet, the city is also one of the most sacred Indian sites, daily attracting crowds of pilgrims and tourists, as well as preserving artisanal, ritual and artistic cultures that have ebbed in other parts of the country. It is for this reason – as a place of rich aesthetic and spiritual activity enmeshed within a vibrant political and commercial environment – that scholars and interested foreigners, but particularly anthropologists, have traditionally used the city as a vantage through which to explore the complexities of north Indian life. In adopting a multi-sited approach, I have sought to take advantage of Banaras's rich diversity, employing it as a platform through which to explore how attention exceeds limitation to any one domain, serving, instead, as something which intersects broadly with many, paradigmatic aspects of north Indian socio-cultural life. Each of my chosen sites – whether students, musicians, or ritual specialists – illustrates how attention is implicated in different aspects of the city. Yet, as the ensuing account will show, each are bound together also by a broadly cohesive, culturally-specific ideology of attention and its relation to self.

What makes up this diffuse ideology of attention? It inheres in the simple idea that the mind and body should first be made calm and peaceful, and then attached to a single object. This serves as a centralising motif recurring in a variety of Indic and *Banarasi*

contexts, underpinning disparate projects of ethical cultivation. The attainment of this single-pointed attentional state is the pinnacle to which certain traditions of self-formation aim – Indian classical music, yoga, *bhakti*, *avadhana* (literally the art of 'attentiveness')[3] – and a necessary and vital component of others, including: worship (*puja*), mantra repetition (*japa*), specific forms of Brahmanical ritual, wrestling, and sculpture making. As a supremely valorised state, single-pointed attention underpins, in largely un-examined ways, pervasive north Indian social and cultural categories and arenas of activity. For some of my interlocutors in Banaras, it served as a general principle for how one should organise one's life and aspiration, as striving towards a singular end. This reflects in part the fact that since the colonial period, single-pointed attention, has provided a centralising value for an idealised conceptualisation of national subjectivity, offering an imaginary of Indian superiority grounded in introspective capacity standing often in contrast to a hazily defined and distracted western other. In the present of Banaras, the specific authority of certain groups – most notably high caste Hindu males – is often specifically rooted in their projected capacity for attaining this valorised state. In a general sense then, value – understood variously in relation to beauty, power, truth and spiritual transcendence – is intimately tied in a multitude of *Banarasi* and north Indian contexts to a particular attentional ideology.

One can find traces of this centrality in the South Asian ethnographic record. If one reads carefully through anthropological accounts of India, one will find regular references to remarkable acts of single-pointed concentration and popular traditions that understand heightened attention as fundamental to their practice. However, for the most part such references are brief, usually never exceeding a page or two (for full discussion see chapter 3). The brevity of these references stands in marked contrast to numerous other paradigmatic aspects of interiority that often form the explicit analytic centrepiece of rich scholarly accounts. Scholars of South Asia have written extensively on emotion, both in the present and historically (Chatterjee et al. 2017; Derné 1995; Fahy 2019; Lynch 1990; Pernau 2021; Trawick 1992); elucidated various culturally-inflected

[3] I did not encounter *avadhana* during fieldwork. However, since returning from the field I have come across a number of scholars, largely outside of anthropology, who have written about this practice, which has a long history in South Asia stretching back to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, likely flourishing as part of Indian courtly tradition. As part of this popular tradition, performers showcase supreme poetic, mnemonic and cognitive feats by completing complex improvised tasks in front of audiences. This practice, which is geographically diffuse but particularly prominent in South India, is understood to rest above all on the performer's mastery of concentration. A practitioner of this art is known as 'one who possesses concentration', an *avadhani*. Further information about this practice can be found in the scholarship of Hermina Cielas (2021, 2023, 2024), and Sudyka and Galewicz (2012).

models of mind (Ecks 2014; Kohrt & Harper 2008; Pandian 2010; Parish 1991); and provided detailed accounts of Indic conceptions and experiences of: imagination (Biernacki 2017; Timalsina 2013), desire (Bhattacharyya 1984; Nakassis & Dean 2007), distress (Veena Das 2007; Nichter 1981; Simpson 2023), and the senses, including, but not limited to taste (Pinard 1991), touch (Alex 2008; Gregory 2011) and smell (Dey 2021; Lee 2017). These bodies of literature have tended to follow established theoretical pathways within wider anthropology – debates on emotion, the sensory turn, interest in suffering and idioms of distress, along with broader phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions long extant in ethnographically-informed writing about self in South Asia. The poverty of research on attention in the Indian context reflects, more generally, a lack of a wider analytic engagement with attention in the discipline as a whole.[4] In drawing out the centrality of attention then as a site of moral concern and discursive elaboration, I hope to trace its ethical, historical and cultural dimensions in order to argue that it should be treated, on par with emotion, the senses and desire, as central to the formation of normative subjectivity in north India.

Theoretical framings: a novel approach to the anthropological study of attention

Before returning to a discussion of north India and the ethnographic particularity of my fieldsite, I would like presently to explore more fully the particular approach to attention that I propose to take in this thesis, and how it offers to build on existing anthropological treatments of this important psycho-bodily capacity.

As mentioned, while anthropologists have invested attention with a decisive explanatory role in a range of sub-fields – ritual, phenomenology, language socialisation, and so forth – it has tended, with some notable exceptions[5], to circulate as an etic concept, as a universal aspect of experience that might be organised and cultivated differently in

[4] A lone article by Christine Guillebaud (2017), is, as far as I am aware, the only attempt within South Asian anthropology to place attention at the explicit centre of analysis – she examines the soundscape of a bus stand in Kerala, exploring how what might seem like a cacophony of noise pollution to an external observer actually constitutes a layered set of aural techniques designed to regulate the attention of multitudinous crowds.

[5] Certain classic anthropological studies contain often brief discussions of *emic* attentional terms, such as the Ilongot's *'upug* (focus, collection, concentration) (Rosaldo 1993: 49-50); the Javanese *éling* (to be conscious) and *ngahmun* (mindless) (Keeler 2017: 219-22); and the Tibetan Yolmo valorisation of 'hereness' (Desjarlais 1992: 78-80) (see also: Marlovits 2013; Palsson 1994: 124). Similarly, anthropological work on Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Nielsen 2017), mindfulness (Cassaniti 2021) and Islamic ethical practices, such as *zekr* (Varzi 2006: 32-3) and cassette sermon listening (Hirschkind 2006), also sometimes examine how people talk about and conceptualise attention, although this is rarely rises to the central point of analysis.

divergent communities, but which is not itself a point of discursive and emic interest; that is a subject of anxiety and cultural elaboration. There is little attempt in much older scholarship to analyse how different groups might think about and theorise attention – as attention as an overarching category is taken in these treatments to be self-evident. This is in part because while attention has often played an important role in anthropological analyses, its function is often a subsidiary one with theoretical interest aimed more acutely at unsettling some other aspect of the socio-cultural world, leaving attention as a category to be filled up with suppositions largely drawn from interlinked Euro-American folk and scientific registers. A central contention of this thesis then, is that anthropologists should engage more robustly with this category's discursive constitution – how it is made up in socially and culturally specific ways through text, image and practice. Such an approach more fully recognises the often crucial importance of attention as a matter of deep concern (Pedersen et al. 2021: 310) around which different communities attempt to form subjectivity.

A recognition of the importance of attention as a site of discursive constitution for producing the self can be found more firmly in history than anthropology. In the former field a number of scholars have approached 'attention' as site of, largely bourgeois, theorising, practice and technical elaboration, one through which a novel conception of the human subject was actively produced in nineteenth and early twentieth century Euro-America (Burnett & Smith 2023; Crary 2001; Hagner 2003; Schmidt 2013). Within anthropology, a weak engagement with attention's discursive aspects is perhaps surprising as moral discourse valorising this psycho-bodily capacity saturates the discipline, featuring prominently in both discussions of how to do 'good' fieldwork as well as theoretical debates in which scholars chastise one another for failing to attend to salient themes (Seaver, forthcoming).

Perhaps the absence of engagement with attention's importance as a matter of explicit emic concern lies in the particular semantic associations of this psycho-bodily capacity in the west which in its commonness (as a seemingly constant aspect of human experience) appears almost morally and symbolically neutral, falling outside of the mythical, political and interpretive registers that have traditionally occupied anthropological analysis. As the historian Benjamin Schmidt notes: "The way we take heed of the world around us is so central to human experience that we sometimes ignore it altogether" (2013: 11). The philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels similarly comments on

the seeming ordinariness of attention, which in its apparent cold neutrality invites forms of scholarly inattention:

It might be that attention has been treated so casually and negligently…in many ways up to the present day, because it so insistently escapes the spectacular polarities of true and false, of good and evil, of justice and injustice, of utility and uselessness, of freedom and dependency – which in no way rules out [the possibility] that it is at work precisely there in a subterranean and behind-the-back way (Waldenfels in Hannah 2013: 236).

Indeed, that attention is foundational to modern psychology, but comparatively understudied (until recently) in other disciplines of the human subject, such as analytic philosophy (Mole 2011: vi), geography (Hannah 2013) and anthropology, stems perhaps also from this very same apparent quality of moral neutrality. It as if attention belongs more firmly to certain autonomic registers of the human subject that fall more decidedly within the purview of materialist science than humanistic inquiry. As Christopher Mole notes, psychologists have long used attention as a seemingly sanitised and 'objective' stand-in for the surreptitious discussion of philosophical and moral topics, particularly questions of free will, that would otherwise fall outside the remit of a discipline with pretensions to materialist science.

In turning to how different groups of people in Banaras attempt to form attention through a variety of discursive registers, I hope to show how this psycho-bodily category, despite its often-seeming plainness, is never far from matters of moral concern, being deeply implicated in local conceptions of agency, authority and ethics. In doing so, the present account forms part of a broader incipient trend in anthropology as part of which scholars have begun to treat 'attention' in just this way – not only as an aspect of experience, which is plain and self-evident if culturally variable in its patterning, but as a site of reflection and discursive work. That my project comes now just as other anthropologists have begun to consider attention in this new light is inseparable from the particular social and technological conditions of the metropole in which most western anthropologists operate – I speak here of certain, previously touched upon, anxieties about attention; and in particular our capacity to freely attend as human subjects in the face of new, digital technologies that aim towards the capture of human psychic capacity for sale to advertisers. While anxieties about attention are nothing new, in recent years, as Morten Pedersen and colleagues (Pedersen et al. 2021: 310) point out, there seems have been a significant shift in the salience of such concerns in the west, reflected in a dizzying array of books (Carr 2020; Hari 2023), articles

(Chamorro-Premuzic 2014), campaign groups and popular films (*The Social Dilemma* 2020) calling for action to combat a rising tide of technological distraction. In reaction to the increased salience of attention in the west as a point of moral concern, a series of anthropological projects began seeking to study attention at roughly the same time in the late 2010s – nearly all of them cite a desire to explore the present moment's seemingly pervasive sense of attentional crisis as their initial point of departure, even if they have travelled in different directions subsequently.[6] In these works, attention is treated in a way that stands apart from most previous approaches – rather than being understood only as an aspect of human experience, these more recent accounts also display an interest in attention's elaboration in cultural ideology, tracing the anxieties as well as technical and linguistic registers that constitute it as a site of concern.

As with these other projects, the seed of the present account was also sown after witnessing a glut of articles and videos largely by western writers and campaigners warning that the present so-called crisis of attention represents perhaps the central problem facing humanity. These works were strongly suggestive to me of the way in which what it is to be 'human' is often constructed in fundamentally attentional terms. Yet while other incipient anthropological investigations of attention as a point of discursive elaboration have remained bound by the limits of what is a localised moral panic, the present project has sought to travel more broadly, to a region whose rich spiritual traditions have been a global centre for the production of attentional framings of the human subject, that is South Asia. In doing so, I seek to challenge the Euro-American focus of the small, but growing anthropological scholarship on attention as a point of discursive concern. Instead, I attempt to show how the genealogy of attention as a fundamental aspect of the human subject can be told from the perspective of a global history, one that takes in transnational flows between Asia, Europe and America. At the same time, this project also challenges the tendency to confine the discursive constitution of attention to a relationship with technology, a dyadic nexus that bears the imprimatur of the present attentional moral panic. Attention – as a point of intense discursive elaboration around which groups attempt to form the self – is read here as something that extends well beyond a dyadic technical imbrication, being instead

[6] In the University of Copenhagen, a group of anthropologists and data scientists have combined to study distraction as it intersects with complex computational infrastructures (Breslin et al 2020; Otto et al 2023; Pedersen et al 2021), while others have sought to analyse the growing centrality of attention as a matter of public and personal concern (Jablonsky et al 2022; Locke 2023; Schüll 2022, 2023; Seaver 2023; Sutton 2017; Yuan 2023), suggesting this as a fruitful site for further research (Cook 2018).

implicated holistically in all the major categories of socio-cultural life. This more accurately reflects the decisive role that attention plays as a point of concern in variegated aspects of human activity, something reflected in previous anthropological scholarship which has turned to attention repeatedly, if implicitly, to explain innumerable facets of socio-cultural life.

Before moving away from this theoretical framing section, it is important to make one final comment relating to terminology. The reader will likely notice that I often employ two terms throughout this thesis – 'discourses' and 'ideologies' of attention. My employment of these terms does not arise from a fierce theoretical or terminological commitment, but rather each phrase is meant to convey the fact that different cultures and sub-groups represent, reflect upon and practically elaborate attention in specific ways. Each of these terms further captures a sense of how the constitution of attention in culture often concerns power, whether in the diffuse Foucauldian sense, as implied by discourse, or being linked to the strategies and authority of a specific social group, as ideology sometimes suggests. While these terms carry the theoretical resonances of previous scholarly debates and interventions, they are not intended to specify a hard theoretical commitment, either to a resolute Foucauldian approach, or a Marxist conception of ideology as a form of distortion (see also: Woolard 1998: 5-9).

The attentionalist self

The strand of north Indian culture under examination in this thesis can be fruitfully labelled as an instance of attentionalism. This term refers broadly to those discourses of the self that position attention – however defined – as pivotal to what it is to be a proper human subject. Attentionalism is not restricted to any single culture, but rather represents one axis for conceptualising the self, something which recurs in disparate contexts. The sense of attentional crisis that hovers over much of Europe and America presently is in many of its articulations an instance of attentionalism. The anthropologist Nick Seaver suggests that we call the understanding of the self circulating in attention crisis discourse, *Homo attentus*, serving as one prominent contemporary variation of the "standard liberal Enlightenment humanist subject" (Seaver in Schüll 2022: 361). If we are to believe the historian Jonathan Crary (2001), this particular rendering of a technologically-mediated subject in attentional terms represents one instantiation of a much longer tendency in elite western discourse towards conceptualising the normative

self in terms of attentive capacity, a trend whose origin he traces to the late nineteenth century, particularly to the emergence of psychology.

Discourse around the concept of 'flow', which circulates as both a major research stream as well as a vernacular theory of happiness, similarly provides another popular rendering of attentionalism. Here conceptions of what it is to be a flourishing subject are tied intimately to certain states of deep, self-negating absorption achieved during the performance of challenging tasks, which researchers have linked to diverse developments in history, including the emergence of capitalism and the French revolution (Csikszentmihalyi 2014: 235). Schüll (2014) in her influential ethnography of slot machine users in Las Vegas contends that the allure of absorptive flow states serves as the primary motivation for these gamblers' often life destroying behaviours (rather than a desire for monetary gain as would be expected in a common capitalist understanding of self). Contemporary popular discourse around attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) similarly places attention at the centre of what it is to be human, as evidenced by the ethnographic work of Toby Locke with technology users who "deploy and utilise the category of ADHD to better understand their humanity" (2023: 24). From another vantage the exacting philosophy of Simone Weil provides a Christian-infused understanding of ethics where attentional cultivation and human potential are intimately bound together, allowing her to assert that: "The authentic and pure values… in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object" (Weil 2005: 234).

Attentionalism then offers one vantage on what an ethical self should be, a frame that is separable from other idealised self-conceptions. As debates in anthropology and history suggest (Hofman 2021: 9-11; Porter 2002), there are many axes along which the self may be constructed, yet two in particular serve as illustrative counterpoints to attentionalist framings. In the west, rational self-control, on the one hand, and authentic expression of experience and feeling, on the other, offer divergent sources for the formulation of self-hood, ones which feature prominently in anthropological analyses. Charles Taylor (2001) in his magisterial *Sources of the Self*, traces the emergence of each of these domains as wellsprings for the formation of idealised interiority. In his reading, the seventeenth century is the central period for the emergence of an ethical self-conception ruled by the operation of rational reflexivity. In contrast to the ancients, such as Plato, reason in this reformulation does not inhere in a capacity for insight into a

meaningful external cosmic order. Rather it is internalised, functioning as an aspect of thinking, that is "a proper way for assembling or constructing thoughts" (2001: 163) free from custom and tradition, a process that requires us to step back from experience, our passions and the external world, to treat them as objects that can be scrutinised and mastered. This rational and instrumental relation to the external world and one's own interiority sits at the source of numerous ideologies of the self that have often been the target of critique by anthropologists – the neoliberal subject, the disengaged scientific positivist as well as, if we are to follow Taylor (174), Freud's conception of the ego. What might be termed 'expressivist' conceptions of the individual provide an equally compelling contemporary vantage on ethical subjectivity, yet one that, in contrast to rationalist framings, is wary of reason, instead investing sentiment, feeling and inner depth with positive value, treating these as the true wellspring of the authentic self. Rather than instrumentalising and objectifying our nature, this vantage encourages self-exploration of feeling, treating each individual as unique, their being comprising an "unrepeatable difference" (182), an inner natural force that is only fully manifested through expression, that is articulation in language and other media. Expression here is understood in the modern western sense not as revealing something already extant, but as actual creation, the realisation of something inner yet previously inchoate. This conception of the ethical self, one rooted in romantic thought among other traditions, often lies at the root of contemporary stances within anthropology where practitioners seek to give voice to the experiences and feelings of the dispossessed, treating agency and expression as intimately linked.

Both of these vantages take language as central to what it is to be an ethical subject – according to Taylor (197-8), our ability to make truth is achieved in these framings through the aid of language especially, but also other representative media. In the rationalist conception of self, language helps the ethical subject to master and collect thought. Similarly, in the expressivist tradition, language and other symbolic mediums, such as visual art, offers an ability to manifest our true identity. Foucault (1988) makes a similar point, yet plotting a divergent intellectual genealogy – specifically, he traces an emphasis in the west on coming to know the self and, so, liberating it through disclosure in discourse (such as in confession or therapy session) to fourth and fifth century Christian asceticism. In contrast to these language-based or discursive understandings of idealised self-hood, attentionalist framings, while not necessarily mutually exclusive, give decidedly more prominence to the selectivity of our experience

as well as the factors that cause this selectivity. Rather than discursive expression or rational thought, they are fundamentally concerned with what occupies the centre of our experience and how this might be regulated and modulated, often through careful control over the self or external impinging factors. This is often taken to an extreme in mystical traditions that view states of heightened attention as their ultimate end. The Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst (2012) notes that in many mystical traditions states of extreme absorption are central to conceptions of ethical fulfilment precisely because they offer the possibility of temporarily halting linguistic aspects of cognition that normally dominate our daily lives, instead allowing for the experience of non-symbolic psycho-bodily states and, so, a sense of negation of the ordinary symbolic self. It is perhaps because – and I speculate here – attentionalist understandings of idealised self-hood stand in contrast to other dominant sources of symbolic, language-based subjectivity that attention as a moral end in itself has tended not to feature prominently in contemporary discussions of ethics within anthropology.[7] As, one influential figure in anthropology's ethical turn was moved to note: "attentiveness and inattentiveness are not the sources of ethics" (Keane 2014: 11).

Philosophical and religious traditions originating in South Asia have over history, stretching into the present, provided a particularly rich source of attentionalist self-conceptions. Anthropologists have diligently traced the spread of mindfulness, emerging from Buddhist awareness-training practice, to diverse parts of the world – workplaces, scientific literatures, therapeutic cultures – where cultivation of focus is held to lie at the centre of what it is to be an ethical human subject (Cassaniti 2018; Cook 2010, 2016; Pagis & Tal 2022). Indeed, it is notable that in the west people often turn to philosophical and practical traditions originating ultimately in South Asia when they feel in some sense that their self is faulty and that this faultiness resides in atrophied attentional habits – the global popularity of both yoga as well as Buddhist conceptions self and meditation are in part evidence of this.

My use of the term attentionalism itself draws inspiration from a text steeped in South Asian intellectual history: the philosopher Jonardon Ganeri's influential *Attention, Not Self*. This book, which coins the term attentionalism, draws on South Asia's rich intellectual tradition, but particularly the influential fifth century CE thinker

[7] An notable exception is Mattingly (2010) which shows how intentional moral work often involves the reorientation of attention.

Buddhaghosa, to unsettle longstanding theoretical positions in contemporary western scholarly thought, arguing that attention rather than 'self' should be given priority in explaining what it is to be human. Ganeri writes: [T]he conception of human beings as endowed with the capacity for attention provides an alternative both to strident individualism and to impersonal holism. Attention precedes self in the explanation of what it is to be human, and if there is anything defensible in the concept of self… then it itself must be understood in terms of its relationship to attention" (2017: 4). Unlike Ganeri, the present account does not attempt to make categorical claims about what a human *is*, and whether this is best understood in terms of attention, but rather seeks to explore how humans, or more specifically a diverse group of people residing in Banaras, conceptualise their lives in relation to attention.

In line with this, the data on which the present study is based is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in Banaras over two stints divided by the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic – six months between November 2019 and April 2020, and a further five months carried out between January and May of 2022. In the interceding period of lockdowns and semi-lockdowns I also carried out archival and text-based research into the history of attentional ideas in both India and the west. As mentioned, the ethnographic framework utilised is a multi-sited one, tracing how ideologies and practices of attention intersect in contextually specific ways with peoples' experience of the world and their particular socio-economic conditions. University students and professors, classically trained musicians, as well as ritual specialists form the core sites of investigation, although they are supplemented with research carried out with a number of other groups, including wrestlers, psychologists, yoga practitioners, and cooks and cleaners in a local school. Together this broad range of ethnographic sites and sources has allowed me to produce a more generalised picture of how attention as a value circulates in the city.

Banaras is the holiest of cities for millions of Hindus, many of whom will visit at some point in their life to bathe in the Ganga and take *darshan* at the famed Vishwanath Temple. Sitting on the left-bank of the river in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the city feels ancient and holy, especially its centre of narrow winding lanes leading towards grand stone steps (*ghats*) flanking the majestic Ganga. As one walks along the river, the sights and smells that present themselves are distinct from major metropolises, like Delhi and Mumbai: the oddly sweet smell of cremation pyres; pandits sitting cross-

legged ready to receive passing custom, as well as youthful, glistening bodies bathing in the river in the hope that the water will wash away their sins. Travelling west from the river, one will find communities and occupational groups – well studied by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and curious travellers – living between innumerable temples, small shrines and mosques: Muslim artisans famed for their silk weaving; musicians whose early morning practice fills the still air; and men and women who come daily to perform spiritualised activity: ritual specialists, wrestlers, earnest pilgrims and local devotees. The essentially religious character of the city is reproduced in scholarly accounts, which offer interested readers among the most well-known treatments of South Asia in a range of disciplines – historical investigations of chaste Hindu merchant-banking families (Bayly 1988); anthropological studies of funerary rites (Parry 1994); as well as explorations of the city's sacred geography by religious scholars (Eck 1983).

Yet if Banaras *seems* sacral, a fitting home for a cultivated, concentrated subjectivity, this is punctured by the sheer velocity of city life that unfolds. The packed lines of Banaras offer up a cornucopia of simulations. Horns, hawkers and temple bells fill the city air from morning to dusk. Sporadically they are drowned out by processions for weddings and festivals, their mobile loudspeakers causing the glass of nearby windows to shake. In commercial areas, a multitude of adverts crawl up the side of buildings as the traffic below weaves perilously with scooters often riding at speed along narrow lanes harrying idling pedestrians. These aspects of Banaras, offer another vantage on the city, one of thronging economic activity as well as *mauj* (fun) and a certain earthy carefreeness – the latter is represented in the city's rich scholarly literature through accounts of its particularly pleasurable Holi festival, and numerous genres of artistic performance (Cohen 1995; Kumar 1986; Misra 1993).

Within the rich culture of Banaras, the tradition that can most forcefully be labelled as *attentionalist* is yoga, a philosophy and set of techniques for understanding the self which over the course of the twentieth century has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place within Indic conceptualisations of normative subjectivity. While, as numerous scholars have pointed out, yoga is a diverse and multi-faceted tradition, in the present of Banaras, as in other parts of India, its core is often reduced to eight sequential steps leading towards states of heightened concentration and absorption that constitute its ultimate ethical end. The eight steps of Patanjali's *ashtangayoga* schema begin with

the cultivation of certain ethical precepts and practices of self-discipline (*yama* and *niyama*), and are followed by postural exercises (*asana*) as well as control of breath (*pranayama*). These lay the foundations for the control of consciousness itself - first the restraint and withdrawal of the senses from external objects (*pratyahara*), then intense forms of single-pointed concentration (*dharna* and *dhyana*), and finally, for those lucky few, total absorption in ultimate reality (*samadhi*). The imbrication of ordinary understandings of attention and yogic disciplines of the self is such that perhaps the most commonly used word for attention in Hindi – *dhyan* – also means meditation, such that discussions of attentional capacity, even in mundane contexts, often carry spiritualised echoes.

Schmidt (2013: 46-7) observes that previously in the nineteenth century, the English language term meditation had similar associations, but in more recent times, it has come to mean something exceptional, entirely separate from 'normal' practices of mental discipline. This forms part of a broader shift since the nineteenth century towards an increasingly material and scientised understanding of the subject in elite western discourse, a transformation underpinned by a de-spiritualised understanding of attention as a central normative psychic capacity. In contrast to this, the enmeshment of the spiritual and the everyday in popular north Indian understandings of attention is pronounced, something evidenced in the everyday linguistic registers of Banaras. My interlocutors often stated, indeed again and again over the course of fieldwork, that any activity, however mundane, could count as a form of yogic meditation, whether reading a book or exercising vigorously, if it is done with total concentration. This speaks forcefully to the circulation of yoga as a template in Banaras for understanding diverse forms of activity – whether musical practice or wrestling – as instantiations of spiritual discipline, as they share in at least some of Patanjali's eight limbs, but especially its practices of intense attentional cultivation.

However, while yoga circulates as a centralising point of interest in this thesis, north Indian attentional ideology cannot be reduced to this framing, being spread much more widely. One aim of the ensuing account then will be trace the cultural reproduction of attentional ideology, which tends to coalesce in no one place. It appears in image and stone, reproduced in temple courtyards as well as the posters with which students decorate their rooms. It is also replicated through a range of different textual genres – poetry, Hindu scriptures, cheaply-made nationalist pamphlets sold on the roadside, as

well as self-help books consumed by students. Collectively these valorise certain attentional traits – self-control, extreme selectivity of consciousness and volitional focus – through a multiplicity of registers (mythic, literary, scientific and neoliberal) offering a set of familiar recurring attentional tropes: rishis awakened in anger from meditation, overfull pitchers of water as evocative representations of concentrated minds, choice quotes from the *Gita*, and heartfelt nationalist pleas to Indian youth to forgo restlessness. These textual registers are supplemented by commonplace proverb as well as the statements of popular political, spiritual and business figures – Prime Minister Modi, the internet personality Sadh Guru and the Hindu right darling Baba Ramdev, to name a few – who each offer patient advice on the cultivation of concentration to their followers, as well as attempting to embody this ideal in their projected public self-image.

In tracing the broad circulation of attention as a value, I hope to explore how it is interwoven with the overarching culture of Banaras contouring the production of basic social categories in the city, particularly: aesthetics, truth, and conceptions of agency. Let me now take each of these categories in turn. In a range of contexts, conceptions of beauty are understood in fundamentally *attentionalist* terms. For north Indian classical musicians working in Banaras, *dhyan* or heightened meditative attention circulates as an exalted aesthetic category, which is used to ascribe value to certain genres of musical style as well as specific, particularly valorised, sections of performance. Similarly, for certain types of visual production, including some temple sculpture as well as cheaply-produced pictures of famed historical figures, the artist's skill centres in part on their ability to capture in aesthetic form states of deep absorption – these constitute the overarching mood that the artist seeks to express. Indeed, within numerous traditions, aesthetic production is itself dependent on the artist's ability to enter into states of deep singular absorption that are often conceptualised as akin to yogic meditation, allowing mediation between performance and a divine sphere of aesthetic essence. The practice regimens of *Banarasi* musicians will be utilised as an ethnographic vantage from which to explore these *attentionalist* themes within north Indian aesthetics.

Attentional cultivation is also inseparable from conceptions of epistemology within certain religious and ascetic strands of Banaras culture. This reflects a widely circulating epistemic stance that holds truth to inhere not primarily in an external reality 'out there', but within consciousness itself. Luhrmann (2020: 21) has suggested that the

degree to which reality is ascribed to internal states – particularly imagination – functions as a major point of cultural variance in how people understand mind and interiority. An ephemeral nature is often ascribed to mental states in certain western post-enlightenment traditions where thoughts and visualisations are understood as mere representations – rather than instantiations – of reality. In contrast, within numerous Banaras contexts, mental states rather than merely representing an external reality, are held themselves, if properly cultivated, to be approximations of a higher, divine essence. Attentional cultivation becomes paradigmatic in these settings as both a *means* (through which consciousness is controlled to access this reality), and an *end* (with states of heightened concentration and absorption serving to instantiate divine reality within a given person's interiority). The popular statement by the monk Vivekananda – "the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts" – makes sense only once considered in relation to this culturally-specific epistemic stance. In the ensuing account, I explore how ritual specialists working in Banaras, known as *karmkandi,* attempt to approach an approximation of divine reality through careful attentional control. This involves bringing all of one's psycho-bodily faculties – imagination, senses, emotion – onto a particular deified form to create transcendent reality within the stream of consciousness.

These preceding discussions of aesthetics and epistemology, point towards a broader conception of human flourishing in *attentionalist* terms. In many contexts in Banaras, localised models of agency stand fundamentally apart from prevalent understandings of this concept within anthropology where volition is often implicitly taken to involve strivings against wider, external structures. Instead, in Banaras, agency is in many contexts formulated in fundamentally *attentionalist* terms as an aspect of internal experiential cultivation involving the successful overcoming of barriers to volition that reside ultimately within the self (with external structures, impingements and events being comparatively de-emphasised). This is encoded, I argue, in the very cultural categories, metaphors and conceptual structures through which Banaras residents interpret experience – that is particular models for understanding 'mind', broadly construed. The dominant conception of mind that circulates in north India is a fundamentally divided one, being organised into different clusters. One of these clusters is concerned with activities of regulation – discriminatory intelligence, morality and restraint. The other, represents the inverse – it is fundamentally unruly and restless, replete with desire. Together these two clusters – one regulatory and the other unruly –

serve as a basic structure for interpreting consciousness, contouring how attention is understood, conceptualised as a fundamental relation between two, often opposed, aspects of self. States of attention and focus then are above all instances of self-restraint in which one aspect of the individual, concerned with regulation and discrimination, constrains and controls another internal aspect, which is prone to desire and unruly wandering. Here, both restlessness and its attentional inverse – focus – both primarily arise internally, that is within the self. Through analysis of common attentional metaphors as well as exploration of pedagogic contexts where individuals are trained to control their consciousness, I argue that a range of registers in Banaras offer 'cultural invitations' (Luhrmann 2020: 16) to individuals encouraging them to dwell on interior factors shaping experience with external constraints coming to be treated in certain contexts as ultimately ephemeral.

Situating attention: strategy, genealogy and practice

At the very end of my fieldwork in Banaras, I attended a talk given by a local, but very popular chemistry teacher, to a sizeable group of university students. The speaker, one Rajesh Kumar, was dressed in a neat blue suit, but unbeknownst to most of the audience in addition to his job at large coaching centre he also served as a monk in a local spiritual order. The talk seemed remarkable to me as it condensed many of the attentional tropes and metaphors that I had encountered over the preceding years into a sixty-minute presentation. Speaking to a group of young men and women facing extreme pressure to pass competitive exams, Rajesh began with the following observation: "You would not have found a psychiatrist in Banaras ten years go. But now there are many," he told the audience. "In the most advanced countries they have the best scientists, the best engineers, but depression, drug use and suicide are more. It is because people cannot control their minds… They have lost the power of concentration [*ekagrata*]."

He then proceeded, mic in hand roaming at the front of the hall, to encourage the assembled students to take up one *laksh* (aim) in life, and give all their energies, time and thoughts to this. This point was bolstered through a rich variety of exemplars and exercises: quotes from the *Gita* on the importance of taming the inherent restlessness of the mind; stories from the lives of focused men, like the former president Abdul Kalam; as well as a concluding activity in which he asked each student to focus for a minute on

a spot on their palm. While most of the audience listened intently, nodding often in agreement, what Rajesh had to say was not to the liking of all. At the end of the talk, one student raised her hand to question the soundness of his advice. “What about friends, family, *maast* [enjoyment]?” she asked, not in irritation, but puzzlement at the idea that focusing on only one thing might be desirable way to live life, which with its incessant pressures and webs of social relations seems always to exceed well-intentioned singularity of purpose. Yet her queries were summarily dismissed by Rajesh, who quickly moved onto another topic. If other students had similar reservations, this was not the place to express them.

The fact that Rajesh’s advice was not universally accepted by the assembled audience of students is important to note – it speaks to the contingency of north Indian idealisations of attention. That is to say – while such attentional ideology is diffuse, it cannot be assumed to be uniform in its pull, circulating instead as a set of ideals and ethical precepts that are drawn upon, negotiated, and reckoned with as part of situated contexts and personal strategies. From the recognition that cultural ideas about attention cannot be separated from the contingent social, ethical and political contexts in which they circulate, a series of interrelated questions arise that are central to subsequent discussions: How does attentional ideology intersect with the socio-economic conditions of persons, defined by caste, gender, age and occupational group? And, in what ways are ideologies of the self centring on attention drawn upon by individuals and social groups with particular strategic aims? Does the cultural valorisation of certain mental states – extreme selectivity, self-control, peacefulness of mind – actually affect how people experience the world, or attempt to experience it? Through a multi-sited and archival approach, I attempt to investigate these questions via the exploration of three interrelated registers: techniques or practices of the self, genealogy, and socio-economic strategy.

The last of these registers is examined in relation to certain socio-economic and occupational groups in Banaras who advance particular claims about attentivity as part of their status-making strategies. This can be seen most acutely in the strategies of north Indian classical musicians living in Banaras, particularly the Kathak-Mishras, an endogamous kin group who dominate the city’s musical scene. I explore how partly through specific claims about their capacity for attentional cultivation – the ability to enter into deep states of ascetic absorption during musical practice – Banaras classical

musicians have effectively consolidated their status as spiritualised figures functioning in accordance with broader pious middle-class sensibilities. Access to heightened states of absorption as well as a broader asceticised framing are leveraged by these musicians in public statements and performative behaviours as part of attempts at social differentiation in relation to an allegedly disreputable past as well as a generalised western and Islamic other. This has allowed these musicians over the second half of the twentieth century to achieve a remarkable shift in status from musical accompanists deeply implicated in a sensuous world of courtesans and patrons to a position of middle-class Hinduised respectability, occupying sought after teaching and performance roles as well as being courted by major political figures.

For other occupational groups too claims to heightened attentivity are inseparable from the type of selfhood that individuals seek to publicly project as part of their aspirational and economic strategies. As will be explored, ritual specialists working for clients in Banaras understand themselves often as akin to quasi-ascetic figures with a capacity to enter heightened emotional and attentional states. Along with deep ritual knowledge, this projected self-image stands at the core of their appeal as economic actors, able to attract paying clients in return for their capacity for the cultivation of heightened internal states. In a less formalised manner, some students also draw upon north Indian attentional ideology to organise their aspirations and behaviours. For certain, often deeply ambitious, students, the narrowing of aspiration to a point, the conceptualisation of life as aiming towards a singular aim, provides an effective strategy that mirrors and mediates the particular socio-economic conditions in which they dwell. In a precarious world where 'good' government jobs are vanishingly few, and competition for them vast, attentional ideology, drawn from older ascetic conceptions of life course, offers a useful resource for conceptualising youthful futurity and for arranging one's psycho-bodily energies to cope with harsh social and economic conditions. These various attempts to inhabit and project attentivity, variously practised by musicians, students and ritual specialists, reflect a broader understanding of power and status through the vector of attentional capacity. In Banaras, as will be traced subsequently, the diminished status of certain groups, particularly women, is often justified by their attenuated attentional capacity. They stand always in opposition to the high caste, Hindu male whose position is inseparable from his possession of a particular normative subjectivity to which self-control and attentional capacity is paradigmatic.

Yet, if the aforementioned attentional ideology, centring on peacefulness of mind and single-pointedness, offers a compelling resource through which to elaborate particular status-making and socio-economic strategies, this tells us less about how it might contour peoples' experience of the world. During fieldwork, I was often preoccupied by the question of whether cultural ideas about attention, articulated so forcefully during conversations with interlocutors, actually influenced how people experience the world or attempted to experience it.

At first glance there appears to be only a very slim connection between the two in Banaras. Valorised states of single-pointed attention are only very weakly expected in a variety of everyday Banaras social contexts. To give but a few examples, which will be developed in greater detail in subsequent chapters: in classical music concerts, audience members are relatively free to attend as they see fit – while some sit deeply absorbed, still others talk, use their phones openly, or take the opportunity, especially during all-night events, to sleep. In the offices of professors, sofas and chairs are arranged for discussion and conversation, such that these spaces are less often used for solipsistic study than social interaction and lively debate. In Hindu ritual too, such as weddings, there is little expectation that the audience sit in concentrated silence as one might expect in a Church or a similarly pious venue. In these spaces, the circulating values are often socially oriented such that particular ideas about attention, found in religious text and broadly ascetic contexts, are of diminished relevance.

However, while in many Banaras contexts single-pointed attention was not expected nor tightly socially regulated, I found during research that these ideals were often powerful influences on experience, yet usually only in certain delimited settings and milieus where the mind is trained through ritualised practice to operate in non-normal ways. As an experiential state, single-pointedness and heightened attentivity is precisely important as it offers an opportunity for many Banaras residents to dwell outside the intense and sometimes overwhelming pull of sociality and urban stimulation. In its offer of relief, the cultivation of singular attention is for many Banaras residents intimately tied to understandings of contentment and happiness as well as conceptions of the good life.

A number of chapters deal with the popular ritualised and embodied practices that Banaras residents engage with to specifically cultivate valorised states of consciousness.

These practices are read as forms of ideological codification that mediate between the realm of cultural valorisation – idealisations of certain attentional and experiential states as paradigmatic to ethical subjectivity – and embodied experience. Some of these practices form part of occupational responsibilities, such as musical practice and mantra repetition performed by priests while others are less formal, performed daily as part of people's ethical repertoires: a brief period of concentration during ritual worship (*puja*), or a snatch of meditation in the morning. They are often performed in a-social contexts that involve the temporary suspension of social bonds: by musicians early in the morning, by ritual specialists in temple courtyards away from their wives and children, or more casually by students during meditative breaks from studying. While normally the mind is restless, caught up in the world of objects and interpersonal relations, ritualised practices offer the possibility of the inverse, a temporary experience of the world where the usual causation of consciousness is inverted – rather than being produced by the world of things and sociality, it is determined by the self. This speaks to how dominant valorisations of single-pointed attention in north India, which ritualised practices seek to reproduce within the stream of consciousness, are broadly renunciatory and a-social in their orientation, functioning as a counterpoint to broader socially-oriented values that predominate in most contexts.

While an analysis of socio-economic strategy as well as ritualised practice helps to explain how idealisations of attentiveness function within the everyday lives of diverse groups within Banaras, this perspective speaks less forcefully to the particular conditions through which specific ideas about attention have come to figure so prominently within present-day north Indian conceptions of normative subjectivity. Viewed from one vantage, the cultural elaborations of attention that form the analytic centrepiece of this thesis are longstanding currents within the religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions of South Asia. Yet, the fact these particular idealisations, rather than countless others which have sunk into cultural oblivion, appear compelling and salient in the present cannot be assumed as the inevitable transmission of textual and oral precedent – rather, their constitution as a compelling socio-cultural ideology in relation to which people seek form experience and make claims to authority are read here as the product of contingent historical processes contouring the production of the self in South Asia.

The historical argument that I advance is a complex one that is difficult to do justice to in an introductory chapter, taking in a range of different discourses and political actors: European orientalists, Indian freedom fighters, Hindu religious reformers, as well as esoteric practitioners and Victorian scientists. In tracing the entanglement of these different discursive positions over the course of the nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth, I aim to show how the constitution of singular concentration as a central aspect of an emergent Indian national subjectivity, which appears so forcefully in the ethnographic present of Banaras, developed from a series of deep shifts in both the conception of the subject within Euro-American thought as well as certain reformulations of Hindu tradition as it confronted the colonial predicament.

Numerous historical accounts, most notably the influential work of Jonathan Crary, emphasise the nineteenth century as the crucial period in which 'modern' conceptions of attention emerged. During this period, a modernisation of subjectivity took place, wrought chiefly by new labour, urban and machinic arrangements as well as scientific knowledge practices that fragmented the classical transcendence of the person, the effect of which was evidenced in new forms of artistic, advertorial and literary discourse. As part of this new, fragmented conception of the subject, attention gained prominence as a, if not the, chief normative psychic trait, offering a fragile recuperation of a prior stability. Operating within this new discursive space in which attentional control was invested with novel prominence, I explore how a network of actors and intellectual currents combined during the late colonial period to ground a sense of incipient Indic national exceptionality in hereditary psychological substrate, asserting that Indians were naturally pre-disposed towards states of heightened attention. The marking out of attentional capacity as central to Indian national subjectivity is read as inseparable from the aforementioned nineteenth century transformations of science and European intellectual tradition.

This attentional rendering of incipient Indian superiority emerged in part through a reformulation of orientalist and Indological ideas that had previously constituted Indian subjectivity in terms of introspective tendency. It also represented a reaction to colonial discourse, which singled out bodily regimens and psychological capacities as a justification for the rule of imperial subjects. The figuration of Indian subjectivity in terms of superior attentional capacity is explored through the writings of political, religious and educational reformers who sought through a re-imagination of attention to

constitute a new national imaginary. The popularisation of yoga in particular is read as central to this reformist project. This was also aided also by milieus and discursive registers that extended well beyond the cartographic boundaries of India, including certain forms of western self-help literature as well as the prodigious publications of esoteric practitioners, who also turned to attentional control as a way to reformulate their tradition within the intellectual space of an advancing modernity. In providing this genealogical account, I hope to move away from the idea of present-day north Indian attentional ideology as a simple recapitulation of ancient Hindu philosophical tradition, instead showing how its forceful circulation in the present is deeply contingent and inseparable from broader, global shifts that have invested this psycho-bodily trait in the present with a marked prominence in a range of fields well beyond the borders of north India. The genealogical account advanced shows both how traditional historical accounts of India can be invigorated by a closer engagement with 'attention', and how the existing historical scholarship on attention is itself in need of expansion, as it ignores at present both global history and a range of relevant sources outside the ken of largely western, elitist intellectual tradition.

Attention: between agency and the socio-cultural constitution of the self

A final problematic to consider, one that remains central to both the forgoing discussion as well as the subsequent chapters, is the question - *why exactly attention recurs – in Banaras but also further afield than this – as a point of deep moral concern and discursive elaboration*? I believe an answer to this question can be found in how anthropologists have previously, albeit often implicitly, treated attention, approaching it as a psycho-bodily capacity that is central for both the external organisation and intentional cultivation of experience. Before turning to this, however, it is necessary to say a little about what attention *is*. In attempting to provide definitional clarity, I do not wish to demarcate attention in a categorical sense as a specific neural mechanism (as psychologists have attempted) or a definite organising structure of the mind (as some philosophers have attempted e.g. Watzl 2017) – but rather only to point to certain regularities in the way that social actors use attentional terms in discourse to understand their experience of the world.

Questions about the nature of attention constitute a matter of intense debate in both psychology and philosophy. Over the course of the twentieth century numerous

theoretical paradigms have provided divergent answers to this question in psychology with proposals including: a filtering mechanism, a feature binding process, and a general purpose resource. Philosophers have recently attempted to move away from these models of attention as an underlying mechanism or process, instead understanding it more as an aspect of the individual human subject – yet debate still persists in philosophical scholarship as to the exact nature of attention. Due to persistent definitional uncertainty, a number of prominent psychologists working in this area, have called for an abandonment of the quest for the discovery of a unitary process of attention, claiming controversially that "no one knows what attention is" (Hommel et al. 2019; see also Anderson 2011). In the humanities and social sciences, certain scholars have drawn on this state of scientific and philosophical ambiguity to suggest that the very value of attention lies in its vagueness, a semantic capriciousness that makes it conceptually and symbolically potent (Seaver 2023: 223; Spiegel 2023: 29-31). While I find this latter idea appealing in some respects – attention as a concept certainly does much work in a plurality of different contexts – it fails to take account of the fact that in many cases attention's prominence, as a discourse used in social life, is grounded in a very specific set of properties. This is different from saying that attention, as philosophers and psychologists have attempted, refers to a specific neural process or can be precisely defined in relation to some particular behavioural mechanism or overarching mental structure – I remain agnostic on this matter. Rather, for the type of data that this account in primarily interested in – everyday discourse – I am suggesting that attention usually refers cross-culturally to a specific set of properties. Put precisely, it *refers to the selectivity of experience, as well as what causes this selectivity.* I make this assertion based on fieldwork in India as well as in the UK (data for which is not included in this thesis apart from occasional references) – although I remain receptive to the possibility that different settings and sites may yield divergent discursive conceptions of attention.

Selectivity is perhaps the more intuitive aspect of attentional discourse – such language is often employed to refer to the foregrounding of some specific thing from a plurality of different stimuli, behaviours, feelings and thoughts that always exceed the self. However, attentional terms also often describe what factors are responsible for this selectivity – whether an external object that *captures* the mind; a volitional aspect of the self that *directs* the centre of consciousness to some specific object; or an unruly part of interiority that *causes* one's thoughts to wander restlessly. Attentional language, as

such, tends to fuse selectivity and causation. To say, for example, that "I was concentrating on the lecture, so I didn't hear the alarm ring" indicates what thing is selected for (a lecture) as well as telling us something about what caused this selectivity (some volitional aspect of the person in question). It is not that attentional language is always straightforward. In the preceding example, the assertion about attention might be interpreted as an excuse or even a lie – perhaps the person in question was not concentrating on the lecture, and, in fact, they wilfully ignored the alarm, but under questioning are loathe to admit this fact. Yet, even if social actors do use attentional language in varying and often strategic and performative ways, these tend to build on certain semantic affordances encoded in such discourse relating to the selectivity and causation of experience.

Asserting that attentional discourse has certain regularities in its cross-cultural usage is not to dismiss variance. While attentional language often refers to selectivity and causation, what types of selectivity and causation are culturally emphasised will tend to vary from context to context. A central contention of this thesis is that in north India, the discursive constitution of attention through a range of texts, traditions and practices emphasises particular kinds of experiential selectivity and causation: an extreme singular form of selectivity (i.e. single-pointedness) as well as specific causal factors arising in the self (an unruly mind and a regulatory self rather than external elements, such as technologies and salient stimuli). This amounts in effect to an argument for perennialism in relation to human discourses of attention – conceptions of attention centring on selectivity and causation recur everywhere in each group and historical period, but they are only ever encountered and made up in culturally specific ways, meaning its universal and culturally contingent aspects are inseparable rather than opposed (see also: Langlitz 2013: 245-252).

One striking feature of attentional discourse in English is that it is often conceptually organised around two causative polarities – there is *focus* or *concentration*, in which experience is directed by the volitional self – and then there is *distraction*, which often implies the proposition 'by' suggesting the diversion of the mind by some external object. This binary is reflected in the scientised registers of academic psychology where researchers employ a range of terms to encapsulate this causative division: voluntary and involuntary attention; bottom-up and top-down attention; and endogenous and

exogenous attention.[8] These divisions reflect two extremes in the formation of experience – at one pole experience is determined by external factors, and at the other it is produced internally, often in accordance with goals, ambitions and intentions.[9] Between these two polarities, various intermediate forms of attention exist on a spectrum, formed neither totally by the self or by external conditions, but by interaction between the two – *heeding*, *awareness*, *vigilance*, *alertness* are some of the terms that can be used in lay English to describe these intermediate states.

Much prior anthropological work on attention has been interested in this causative aspect; that is, in examining the particular factors that are responsible for the selectivity of experience. Attention in some anthropological works, particularly in studies of religious learning and ethical development, is taken as an internal site of skill and work through which individuals carefully shape and cultivate their experience – here attention often, although not always, represents an instantiation of volition, that is an agency to shape what one experiences (Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2014: 992-5; Luhrmann 2012; Mahmood 2005; Mattingly 2010; Mezzenzana 2018; Noll 1985).[10] In other works, attention is read primarily as a site of external socio-cultural production through which wider conditions organise experience, making humans up as 'proper' normative subjects. This includes: technologies (Gell 1998; Taussig 1991); ritual (Halloy 2015); organisations and professional disciplines (Broadbent 2016; Goodwin 1994); the dynamics of interaction (Goffman 1990; Lempert 2013: 373-4); social structure (Douglas 2003); and language and other forms of socialisation (Gaskins & Paradise 2010; Ochs & Schieffelin 2009). In fact, the modulation of attention has been suggested as a, if not the, primary route for the acquisition of culture itself (Throop & Duranti 2015: 1059; Veissière et al. 2020). A much smaller body of anthropological scholarship,

[8] It should be noted that there is some potential divergence between specialist and everyday English language attentional binaries. Arguably mind wandering can be included in the category of endogenous or internally-caused attention (Watzl 2011: 346), which otherwise in everyday language is considered separate to focus and concentration.

[9] Certain anthropologists writing about attention have commented on its binary constitution as a site of intentional cultivation and external organisation. Pedersen and colleagues (2021) conceptualise this dichotomy in terms of attention-as-technique and attention-as-technology, while Larkin (2014) posits a distinction in terms of attention as produced by cultivated religious discipline versus as an effect of media and political economy.

[10] In addition to works on religious learning, anthropologists have also explored how social actors form what might be termed 'attentional strategies' as a way to navigate complex and difficult environments (Diggins 2023; Laursen 2023). Such scholarship has tended to focus on stimuli-rich settings, particularly large cities, where individuals ignore certain objects and attend to others as a way to reclaim agency in environments that otherwise threaten to overwhelm the self (Larkin 2014: 1006-1008; Lou 2022; Varzi 2006: 126-30; see also: Milgram 1970; Simmel 1903).

often taking a phenomenologically inclined standpoint, has sought to move beyond the idea of an attentional binary, suggesting instead that what it is to be human resides in forms of attention that emerge from an intermingling of self and the surrounding environment, producing us as subjects that are open to acting upon the world as well as liable to being acted upon. The work of Tim Ingold (2001, 2017, 2023) and those influenced by him (Gatt 2013; Kilian 2021) in particular explores the centrality of attentional states of openness to human life, states where one learns patiently to anticipate and be guided by the surrounding world (see also: Lewin 2014).

In these anthropological works, attention has tended to be treated implicitly, that is as an etic concept employed in the explanation of some separable facet of human life, whether ethical cultivation, infant socialisation or ritual efficacy (Pedersen et al. 2021: 312). Yet these works are instructive for the present purposes as the repeated turn to attention by anthropologists in studies of diverse spheres of human life points to its systematic implication in the formation of experience and our production as particular kinds of subjects. What is important to recognise is that the moral concerns, anxieties and discourses that often accompany attention arise from this precise point – they are fundamentally occupied with the normative and ethical problematic of how experience *should* be formed, and, so, what kinds of selves we ought to be (as persons defined by what we experience). Different causative conditions – whether internal, external or intermediate variations – offer the possibility of divergent kinds of subjects, ones made up primarily by socio-cultural structures, wilful agents in control of experience, or, as it may be, something between the two.

In particular, it is the constitution of attention, as something existing between extremes of volition and external determination, that often renders this psycho-bodily capacity as a problem site, something which groups and individuals worry about, think on and attempt to regulate. As something liable to organisation by wider conditions, attention is central to our constitution as normative socio-cultural subjects, individuals whose experience is determined by external factors in specific ways such that particular thoughts, stimuli and sensations come to occupy the centre of our consciousness, while others deemed less important give way to oblivion. Yet attention also offers the inverse, serving also as a primary arena of agency – the ability to control our experiences despite the threat of socio-cultural (over)determination. It represents then perhaps the fundamental base of human volition, which resides often first and foremost in a sense of

control over those most intimate aspects of the self. It is the tension between these two aspects of attention – as a site of socio-cultural production yet also a route to volition and agency – that often problematises this psycho-bodily capacity, rendering it a site of moral concern deep within the self, a slim citadel of volition yet also a primary route for its extinguishment.

Questions over how attention should be formed recur in nearly every context – it is hard to find a human tradition that does not have some underlying theory of attention and how it should be constituted. In this thesis I take one cultural area – north India – and one specific site – Banaras – to show how concerns about the formation of attention are never far from the central arenas of subjective formation, whether spirituality, aesthetics or ethics. Here, an attentional frame offers a reinvigoration of a well-worn area of anthropological study and historical investigation: South Asia in general, and the ethnographically much-studied city of Banaras in particular. Yet the overarching emphasis on attention as a point of moral and discursive concern is generally applicable, and similar studies could be carried out in other regions and places where also attention circulates as a paradigmatic, yet unexamined, site of anxiety and practical intervention. This remains the as of yet incomplete task of an anthropology of attention, a field of emergent enquiry which is growing swiftly with new studies arriving yearly at a pace incomparable to previous periods.

Outline of chapters

Chapter 1 offers an overview of my fieldsite as well as an account of the different methods used. It begins with a description of the different strains of *Banarasi* culture, its currents of pleasure, spirituality and globalised modernity, and then explores how the rich ethnographic literature on the city has treated each of these inter-linked areas. Having offered this background, the chapter proceeds to describe each of my main fieldsites as well as a series of 'mini' sites that I used to investigate whether my findings drawn from interactions with specialist interlocutors had broader applicability. These various sites, and the variety of methods used in each setting, are situated in relation to an overarching methodological framework, which takes practice, ecology and discourse as central to understanding the organisation and construction of attention within a given culture.

Chapter two is historical in its focus, exploring how various global currents – materialist science, esoteric networks of spirituality and Indian political and religious reform movements – coalesced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to tie certain ideals of heightened attentivity to nascent conceptions of national Indian selfhood. The subsequent sections of the thesis investigate how this attentionalist rendering of subjectivity continues to inform the ethnographic present of Banaras. **Chapter three** sets out the particular type of attentional state – single-pointed attention – that is most valorised in north India, exploring how it is co-constituted with other important socio-cultural categories, including: time, cosmology, gender and caste. The chapter considers how Indian thinkers, contemporary philosophers and anthropologists have previously approached attention in the South Asian context, and, further, uses the ethnographic material presented as a springboard to offer a broader theoretical framework for categorising a wide variety of attentional states. **Chapter four** continues with an examination of discourses of single-pointed attention in north India, tracing how this psycho-bodily ideal comes to be valorised through a range of mediums. It then examines how the valorisation of single-pointed attention relates to the actual experiences of *Banarasi* residents, exploring how it is, depending on context within the city, sometimes encoded and at other times inhibited, by particular practices and ecological arrangements of space, bodies and social relations. This provides the basis of a broader reading of how attention in north India is conceptualised in a culturally specific way as the psycho-bodily recapitulation of broader sociological schemas (notably described by Dumont) – specifically the division between the man-in-the-world and the renunciate. **Chapter five** then continues to investigate the theme of how attentional discourse comes to be embodied in experience by examining how popular framings of mind in circulation in India invite people to interpret their interiority in particular ways. I argue that the dominant north Indian model of mind fosters an attentionalist conception of agency centring on control over experience, standing in contrast to more prevalent expressivist and resistance-based conceptions of this term in anthropology.

The final two chapters are less general in focus, taking two specific sites as their central subject matter. **Chapter six** explores some of the political resonances of attentional ideology in north India. It looks the practice habits, sociology and public statements of musicians in Banaras, examining in particular how they present themselves as akin to *yogis* who are able to enter into states of exquisite absorption. This self-presentation

forms part of a broader status-making strategy through which hereditary musicians appeal to attentional ideology to cement their middle-class position as well as separate themselves from a past that seems questionable from the vantage of present-day pious morality. The final empirical section, **chapter seven**, takes Brahman ritual specialists as its central point of focus, investigating their performance of a popular ceremony for clients involving mantra repetition and fire sacrifice. This ritual serves to highlight a general relation to mind widespread in much Hindu thought in which mental states are taken to be more real than external material objects. It is this relation to mind which explains in part the particular importance of attention in Hindu ritual, and which, in its divergence from dominant representationalist conceptions of interiority in western thought, has led to repeated scholarly mischaracterisations of Indian religious practice.

Chapter 1 | Background and research methodology

There are many names for Banaras. There is the spiritual name, Kashi; the city's present official name, Varanasi; the name preferred by anthropologists and some residents, Banaras; and the colonial spelling, Benares. Following anthropological tradition, I have chosen to use Banaras in this thesis. For anyone first encountering the city, the river and its surrounding architecture appear immediately striking and picturesque. The Ganga's western bank is densely populated with palaces, temples and increasingly hotels and cafes lining a vast, sparkling current of water, while on the eastern bank lies a sparse uninhabited stretch of sand, referred to as *us paar* (the other side). Banaras's older residential neighbourhoods lie directly behind the western bank's grand facades. These areas are dense with multi-story residences, forming narrow strips that follow the course of the river – first come largely Hindu neighbourhoods, then slightly further out going west primarily Muslim locales (Cohen 1998: 41). Here one will find a large concentration of *theth Banarasi* residents, those who live in accordance with a certain city-wide ethic that comprises, among other things: taking pleasure in musical or artistic pursuit, religious practice without dogmatic adherence, river bathing and relaxed enjoyment of local delicacies, such as *paan* and *kachori-sabzi*. Further out, lie a sprawl of spacious middle-class neighbourhoods, slums as well as busy commercial areas and educational institutions (including Banaras Hindu University, which lies towards the south of the city).

Just as Banaras has many names, the city also has multiple aspects, each one of which a given visitor or resident may encounter depending on their particular position. There is the spiritual city – often said to be perceptible only to those with divine sight – which is perched on the *trishul* (trident) of the great deity Shiva and exists outside of space and time, totally pure and immune from degradation. This is the city of Sanskrit texts, like the *Kashi khanda*; the city proclaimed by pandits keen to burnish the reputation of their workplace, and the sacred place known to certain religious seekers, including those who come to Banaras to have a 'good' death in the knowledge that expiring in Kashi automatically brings *mukti* (liberation) (*cf* Parry 1994: 26-27). This grand spiritual mythos informs another aspect on the city – it is an exemplary place for Brahmanical ritual activity, which offers purification as well as forming a significant commercial industry. Daily thousands of visitors come to enlist the services of priests to perform various yearly, daily and life cycle rituals.

This Hindu aspect of the Banaras, largely enclosed within the *Panch-kosi* pilgrimage route that marks the outer boundary of the city's sacred core, has traditionally been the focus of anthropological and scholarly enquiry, including: ritual observances carried out by women (Pearson 1996), sacred geography (Eck 1983) and accounts of multitudinous neighbourhood deities (Coccari 1992). This aspect has also served as the basis of Banaras's orientalist construction as a place of timeless tradition, the essence of Hinduism and of India itself. Other scholarly works provide a different vantage on Banaras, one which spans the city's Hindu and Muslim communities. Nita Kumar's (1986, 2017) work has been critical here in highlighting a diffuse and reflexive culture of Banaras-ness, which centres on a desire for pleasure and gaiety – *mauj*, *maasti* – rather than orthodox religious identities. It is from this city-wide culture that many of Banaras's rich artistic traditions spring; its innumerable musical genres, *melas* and celebrations (see also: Lutgendorf 1991). In more recent years, anthropologists working on Banaras have begun to look beyond tradition and localised culture, to examine the influence of globalising and modernising processes. These accounts emplace the city within broader trends that are re-fashioning contemporary India and the world at large. This includes explorations of international tourism (Huberman 2012), the effects of smart phones (Doron 2012), mass modern education (LaDousa 2007), and the forceful circulation of biomedical discourses (Alley 2002; Cohen 1998; Singh 2022). This speaks to a different aspect of the city, as a place of western backpackers, well-heeled Indian tourists and shopping malls; scientists and NGOs; as well as innumerable private coaching centres, colleges and various universities to which thousands stream yearly from the surrounding regions which are among the poorest in India.

This diversity makes Banaras a good site to study attention, one which brings together in a compact geography many of the arenas of activity that have previously interested scholars investigating this psycho-bodily capacity: religion, education, technology and art. In attempting to trace the circulation and transformation of attention as it moves between these different arenas of activity, I have adopted a multi-sited approach. In what follows, I give an account of these different sites (see fig. 1), and the methods employed to explore divergent facets of attention – its discursive, experiential and ecological aspects. Some background is also given on Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which while important for many parts of this thesis, is not the subject of a standalone chapter (unlike my other major fieldsites).

Methodology, research journey and fieldwork sites

During my first stint of fieldwork in Banaras between 2019 and 2020, most of my time and attention was focused upon BHU in the south of the city. I had wanted to stay inside the university campus, sharing hostel accommodation with students. But despite letters of recommendation and numerous meetings with senior university officials, I wasn't able to secure a hostel place. I settled for second best, which was to live close to Lanka, near a busy stretch of road just outside the university's main gate. Unusually for Banaras, Lanka has pavements, which are a boon for local vendors. Shops and eateries spread out onto the street with tables of second-hand books jostling for space with snack stands displaying local delicacies.

Much of my initial few weeks of fieldwork was spent hanging out, or as Craig Jeffrey (2010) suggests, *timepassing*, with young male students in the chai shops and the street side eateries of Lanka. As I got to know a large network of students, spread between different disciplines but especially drawn from the social sciences and arts, I began to spend time in their hostel rooms, which were usually shared between two and four young men. Sometimes I slept over on a spare bed, or at other times we shared dinner cooked with surprising skill on small hot plates. While in the beginning of my fieldwork, I sought out one-on-one conversations, thinking this would allow for franker discussion, I soon realised the folly of such an approach, as it often introduced a sense of unease – conversations flowed much more freely in large groups, which were anyway inevitable in the highly social world of the hostel where students came and went from one another's room.

The vast majority of BHU students come from nearby rural districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, and many are the offspring of farmers, often landowning but of modest means. The beneficiaries of significant parental investment in their education, many of these students are trapped in a bind – they are unable to return to the agrarian profession of their forefathers, which is poorly paid and attracts little respect, and yet equally, the alluring future promised by a university education remains tantalisingly out of reach. This is because there are very few good jobs available, and those that do exist are so few and pursued by so many others that BHU students have a slim chance of securing such employment. For arts, humanities and social science students, who make

up just over a third of the student population of 32,288, there are really only two viable options: to become a teacher, preferably at a government-run university, or even better to enter into employment in the state or national government institution, such as the civil service or police.

As a central university, which is administered by the national rather than regional government, BHU, has a good reputation, but still one below the reputed universities of Delhi. Established in 1915 by nationalist reformers as well as loyalist princes, the university's initial aim was to give young Indians a western education yet one mixed with the best of high Hindu culture – it is for this reason that the institution contains certain faculties, courses and centres focused on spirituality and religion that are absent on other more secular campuses. It is also partly for this reason that the university, especially in recent times, has become a centre of Hindu nationalist activities with leading political leaders, like Modi and the Home Minister Amit Shah coming to speak and inaugurate new buildings. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that the overarching impulse of the university is religious – most students are primarily concerned with the securement of employment. If you ask a student what they are doing – some will reply with the subject of their degree course, but many others will simply say: "IAS" (Indian Administrative Service), indicating that their main preoccupation is preparation for exams that determine entry into government administration. BHU provides a good environment for preparation. Its peaceful, spacious campus of tree-lined roads and colonial-era buildings offer solitude away from the heightened sociality of home.

The make-up of the university's student body accords broadly, although not perfectly, with the central government-mandated caste reservations.[11] However, the senior rungs of the academic hierarchy are dominated by upper castes, particularly Brahmins, Bumihars, Rajputs and Kayasths **(**Singh 2004). Some 40 percent of the student body are women, yet while I developed close relations with certain female students, the majority of my deepest contacts were male. This speaks in part to issues of access – many of the

[11] As per the Annual Report 2019-20, 51.1 percent of students are general category (a technical term that refers to those groups who are not protected by caste reservation), while scheduled caste students make up 12.5%, scheduled tribes 5.4%, and other backward classes 31%. This roughly – although not perfectly – corresponds to central government reservation proportions: general category (51.5%), scheduled tribes (7.5%), scheduled caste (15%), other backward classes (27%). BHU has not yet started providing data on recently introduced "economically weaker section" reservations which cover those in the general category with available income below a fixed amount.

female students live in hostels that men cannot enter – but also to my own anxiety that intensive fieldwork with young women would be looked upon unfavourably, a fear that as my research progressed I found to be mostly, although not entirely, unfounded. BHU provided a good initial starting point for my fieldwork in two ways. Unlike the specialist sites that took up more of my time during the latter months of fieldwork, the university offered a more mundane vantage on attention as I spent time with students as they crammed for exams, became absorbed intermittently in their phones, or socialised with friends. However, as a place too of great scholarly diversity, one where musicians train and Brahman ritual specialists receive education, the university also mirrored in many ways the spiritual and artistic diversity of Banaras, offering an entry point into some of the more specialist sub-cultures that increasingly came to occupy my later months of fieldwork. In particular, I spent a good deal of time in Rewa Kothi hostel, a small residence near the Ganga where music students live and practice their craft. I also, as mentioned in the prologue, spent time with psychologists studying attention largely from the standpoint of empirical western science.

While most of my fieldwork with students consisted of conversations and careful observation of daily life, I also carried out semi-structured interviews to collate commonly used terms for attention as well as concepts and metaphors that people employed to describe their interiority. After collecting a large list of such terms, I carried out further interviews with Hindi and Sansksrit professors at BHU as well as a Hindi-English translator who works on meditation texts – this allowed me to situate the terms I was collecting both etymologically and in relation to longstanding Indic philosophical traditions and texts. In addition, I paid careful attention to the kinds of self-help books, social media posts, and videos that students consumed in order to carry out discourse analysis of the ideas and concepts about attention circulating in popular media. As part of this, I developed acquaintance with Lanka booksellers frequented by students as well as a vendor of cheap booklets published by the Ramakrishna Mission – this allowed me to gain a better idea of the kinds of books that students were buying, and to amass a sizeable collection of titles for further analysis. Such discourse-based analysis was supplemented by observational methods, inspired by Erving Goffman, involving sitting for prolonged periods in different settings – libraries, professor's offices, chai shops and the busy ghats – examining how space and sequences of behaviours and interactions are ordered to produce particular patterns of attention.

The coming of COVID-19 in the spring of 2019 irrevocably changed the course of my research. As the virus spread rapidly in Europe, yet was largely absent in India, at least according to official statistics, my position as a foreigner, once a sign of status offering access, became a reason for suspicion – fieldwork became demonstrably harder. Then in March the whole country entered into an ultra-strict lockdown, and I was confined to my residence for some two months, only able to venture outside on several occasions to buy provisions. Yet, while my movement was constricted, in another way this turn of events opened a new vantage – living in a residential complex attached to a school in Lanka, I was thrown into a new community of people, vastly different from those who I had previously spent time with. Now my days were spent with guardsmen and teachers as well as poor female cleaners and cooks who continued to live in and frequent the school. I heard of their hardships as they faced reduced salaries, harsh punishment from the police when they ventured outside during the lockdown and deep anxieties about the coming of mass illness. During this period, it was difficult to continue researching attention, as this seemed wholly inappropriate to the moment, yet I was graciously given access to another lifeworld at a time of extreme distress. I have written about this period, and especially the deification of COVID-19 as a divine form, Corona Mata elsewhere (Rose 2022). However, it remains largely outside the scope of this thesis, although as background offering insight into a different more precarious aspect of the city, it has greatly influenced my thinking.

I returned to London, after some two months of lockdown, on a government repatriation flight. As commercial flights to India as well as research visas were suspended, I was unable to return for nearly two years. In this interim period, I initially continued research with my Banaras interlocutors through conversations and interviews over WhatsApp building on a sense of deep connection having shared collectively in an event of great crisis. However, overtime a sense of distance emerged with digital channels proving an inadequate replacement for face-to-face contact, and in reaction to this, I decided to embark on an eight-month comparative project with students living in London, exploring their practices and discourses of attention and how this related to their particular socio-economic conditions. This research was also beset with interruptions as the UK entered into a rolling sequence of lockdowns and semi-lockdowns – however, as restrictions eased I was able to spend an extended period living with students in a commercial accommodation complex in London. Initially, I

planned to write a comparative PhD, but this has proved too difficult.[12] In particular, the demand of present-day anthropology for ethnographic particularity does not lend itself easily to comparative analysis. My London research does not feature as a standalone chapter in this thesis, but numerous references to ideas about attention to be found among UK students pepper the text. While most anthropological projects offer points of contrast based on the researcher's knowledge of their home culture, my comparative references are drawn more from extended fieldwork – I believe this has greatly assisted in giving weight and precision to these assertions, as well as helping me to understand what is deeply specific or possibly universal about *Banarasi* understandings of attention.

In addition to fieldwork with students in the UK, this interim period also afforded an opportunity for extended archival and historical research. I visited the archives of two UK universities (Queen Mary and Brunel) as well as those of the British Library's India Office Records. This built upon earlier, albeit brief, archival research in India at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi and the Karavalya Sanskriti Vibhaag in Banaras. However, while these more traditional sites of inquiry were the starting point of my historical research, the internet ultimately proved a much more fruitful source of information. The majority of the sources that make up the historical chapter of this thesis are drawn from the extensive repositories of nineteenth and early twentieth century digitised material available online, particularly, but not limited to: the Internet Archive and The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals. Through these various sources, I was able to trace the development of historical ideas and practices of attention as they travelled along global currents, moving between India, Europe and America.

This period in London, while fraught with uncertainty, was useful as it allowed me to reflect upon my project, refine my ideas and develop conceptual links that otherwise would have remained occluded. When I returned to Banaras at the very start of 2022, I came with a new sense of urgency spurred by the knowledge that I might only have a short window for fieldwork before another lockdown put an end to my research. In this

[12] In addition to participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I carried out focus groups, free listing exercises and Thematic Apperception Tests with London university students. With a comparative method in mind, I conducted the same exercises with students in Banaras. These were designed to illicit the basic attentional categories in circulation in both sites as well as perceptions of distraction technology.

second period of fieldwork, I did not return to live in Lanka – although I continued to meet with students. Instead, I took a room in the sacred centre of the city near the southern *ghats* of the river. This sacred central area is characterised by sloping stone steps leading down to the river and mazes of winding lanes rising above that are wide enough only for pedestrians and the occasional scooter. It is here that holy sites of vast cosmological importance are densely packed, including where the world itself is said to have been created and where it will come to be destroyed at the end of time (Eck 1983: 238-243). It also here that the scholarly and literary imaginary of the city coalesces. As a researcher in Banaras, it is difficult to escape the words and ideas of those who have written about the city before. Per square kilometre it is perhaps the most studied city in all of India, and if you look up a small neighbourhood or temple, it is not uncommon to find that it has been the mentioned in numerous articles and books.

In many ways the move to a new part of the city was serendipitous as it opened a new vantage, bringing me closer to the ritual specialists and musicians whose life worlds take up a significant proportion of this thesis. The house in which I stayed was a stone's throws from Tulsi Ghat, named after its famous former resident, the poet Tulsi Das who composed a vernacular version of the *Ramayana* epic, perhaps the most popular text of Hindi-speaking India. The narrow stone lane onto which my room faced is lined with shrines, and from 5.30am to 9.30pm at night temple bells ring out at regular intervals. Sometimes in the early morning from my room I could hear an impassioned call of *Mahadev* – meaning 'great God', one of Shiva's many names – uttered by devotees gazing at the Amarnath Lingam housed in an underground shrine on the lane. It is said that those who visit this lingam will receive the same benefit as those who travel much further away to Amarnath, a famous pilgrimage site which is difficult to access being situated in a mountainous region of northern India. This speaks to how the whole of Hinduism's sacred cosmos, its various holy sites and cities, are reproduced within the compact sacred geography of Banaras. A few metres away from the Amarnath Lingam, another temple houses a *murti* (statue) of the goddess Mahish Asura Mardini, the slayer of a powerful demon. Covered in layers of garlands, only the deity's face is visible, and carved from black stone with red lips her countenance is beautiful and striking.

In the vicinity of this powerful *murti*, daily groups of Brahmin ritual specialists came to perform mantras as well as sacrifices using fire on behalf of paying clients facing hardship, whether illness or business trouble. These specialists, or *karmkandi*, who

perform the important *japa-havan* ritual, which is basically absent from the South Asian ethnographic record, came to be an important site of investigation for me. At first, I sat with these priests as they entered into states of deep concentration while reciting mantras, asking questions when they took breaks from their arduous spiritual labours. However, as I got to know them more intimately, I spent time with them outside of this ritual setting, visiting their homes and meeting their families. One *karmkandi* in particular, Kameshwar Mishra was of great help. As a senior ritual specialist, coming from a long line of priests, he served as a generous point of access, arranging meetings with others, as well as patiently answering detailed questions about the intricacies of ritual procedure. Through my connections at BHU, I also became acquainted with priests in training, who receive years' long education at a specialised religious faculty in the university. I supplemented this with a week of research at two *vidyalaya* where young Brahman boys learn to recite the Veda and receive instruction on correct ritual procedure. In carrying out fieldwork in these three sites, I was able to trace the life course of ritual specialists from boyhood into adulthood, so obtaining a better understanding of the social, pedagogic and economic conditions that mark their formation as particular kinds of subjects.

Aside from ritual specialists, I sought out other sites in the city where individuals engaged in practices of explicit attentional cultivation. In the mornings, for exercise I sometimes visited an *akhara*, where wrestlers trained just a few metres from my residence using weights, *gadas* (maces) and calisthenics bars. While not a major site of research, this offered a relaxed environment for casual conversation and observation, the cool earth underfoot and shade of a tree offering respite from the intense Banaras summer. More substantially, during this second period of fieldwork, I also carried out extensive research with vocalists, tabla players and sitarists working in a broadly north Indian classical tradition. My fieldwork here began by learning the sitar to a rudimentary level through lessons, three to four times a week, with a musician hailing from a long line of performers. This was perhaps the most difficult part of my fieldwork, as having scant prior musical knowledge, I felt a certain trepidation entering this new culture. Yet knowledge of the sitar gave me a technical base with which to engage in discussions with other musicians, as well as the possibility of auto-ethnography, allowing me to experience states of deeply replenishing focus and absorption as I practiced daily.

My teacher's house, where I spent extended periods each day, provided insight into the intimate world of Banaras hereditary musicians. Deobrat Mishra, who came from an endogamous caste group of performers (Kathak Mishra) which dominate the musical culture of Banaras, lived with his son, father and wife, all skilled performers in their own right, along with a rotating cast of *chelas*, or disciples. The basement of the house also contained a small school for training aspiring musicians. This setting provided an exemplary context in which to observe cultures of musical pedagogy and socialisation, as well as a vantage onto the often hierarchical, and sometimes fraught, social relations that underpin musical education, with disciples performing large amounts of menial labour for their masters (watering plants, cleaning and so forth). In other ways, however, my teacher served as a bad starting point from which to begin building contacts with the wider musical community of Banaras – he had fallen out with many of his kin, a not uncommon occurrence in the musical world of Banaras where competition is intense. As such, to develop a broader range of connections, I visited the houses of numerous musicians who live close together in Kabir Nagar, an area of Banaras famed for Kathak Mishra performers; as well as observing classes in the music department of Banaras Hindu University. This allowed me to build a wider network of musical contacts, some belonging to the Kathak Mishra kin group, but others having come from neighbouring towns and cities to learn with a guru or study at a university. Regular music concerts, ranging from several days' long all-night musical festivals in temples to gatherings in small rooms spread throughout the city, also offered opportunities for easy conversation and observation, which I followed up later with semi-structured interviews. These concerts were deeply pleasurable experiences, one's whose appeal increased as my musical knowledge grew, transforming a previously opaque genre into something compelling and even spiritual.

In addition to my three major sites of enquiry, I also used a number of 'mini' fieldsites, for want of a better term, to trace the circulation of attentional ideas as they traversed the city, and to investigate whether the ideas and concepts to be found in specialist sites were contained or shared more broadly. As well as taking opportunity wherever it arose to speak with a broad range of people, whether cooks, autorickshaw drivers or shopkeepers, these mini sites included: multiple visits to the Ramakrishna Mission and Krishnamurti centre in Banaras; one-on-one yoga lessons and observation of group classes at a yoga centre in BHU; visits to three schools; interviews with sculptors (*silpas*) of religious objects; a series of interviews with women about the performance

of *vrata* rituals; and four-days of research over Ramadan with Muslim residents of Banaras to understand how ideas and practices of attention inform their daily lives during this period. My short period of research during Ramadan was suggestive of a rich attentional culture amongst Muslim interlocutors, including practices of Sufi interior cultivation that parallel but are separate to yoga – if I was afforded more time, this would have been an interesting and fruitful avenue for further research. Indeed, while a number of my interlocutors were Muslim – including certain musicians, students, as well as cooks and cleaners in the aforementioned school in Lanka – it remains true that the majority of my research was focused on Hinduised aspects of the city. This reflects in part conditions of spatial segregation in which different communities live in distinct areas, as well as my particular choice of sites, such as Banaras Hindu University and Brahmin ritual specialists, which are deeply Hindu in their orientation.

Approach to studying attention

Having provided a survey of my different sites and methods, I would now like to explain how these were used to investigate 'attention', which served as the thematic anchoring point of my fieldwork. In a narrow sense attention is difficult for an anthropologist to study using traditional methods of participant observation. As Gilbert Ryle (1949: 133) notes, even when an individual seems to be concentrating with knitted brow and intent gaze, this may not be the case, perhaps their mind is wandering or such facial expressions are a mere simulation of focus. It is true that attention is perhaps more readily observable than other psychic categories of interest to anthropologists – such as memory or imagination – as it often involves external orientation of head and body to the object of interest, yet still the question of what occupies a given mind at a given moment is difficult to ascertain with certitude. These well documented problems in the study of attention – in relation to which psychologists have developed innumerable tests and techniques – were of less importance to my project which centres more firmly on the social and cultural constitution of this psycho-bodily category. In taking attention not only as a property of individual experience, as a cognitive psychologist might, but also as something that divergent groups and traditions attempt to reflect upon, form and organise in specific ways, a wider array of empirical sites become available for study. These include: formalised practices through which people attempt to cultivate specific attentional states; texts, images and norms through which

particular traditions discursively construct attention; and ecologies, involving particular arrangements of space, objects and people, through which groups seek to form attention. These different elements are represented in the following diagram (fig. 1), depicting how particular discursive ideas about this psycho-bodily state become encoded within divergent aspects of the experiential, ecological and practical world. The sticky reality of how attention comes to be formed is inevitably more complex than this depiction, but it gives a good idea of the working conceptual model that I applied during fieldwork.

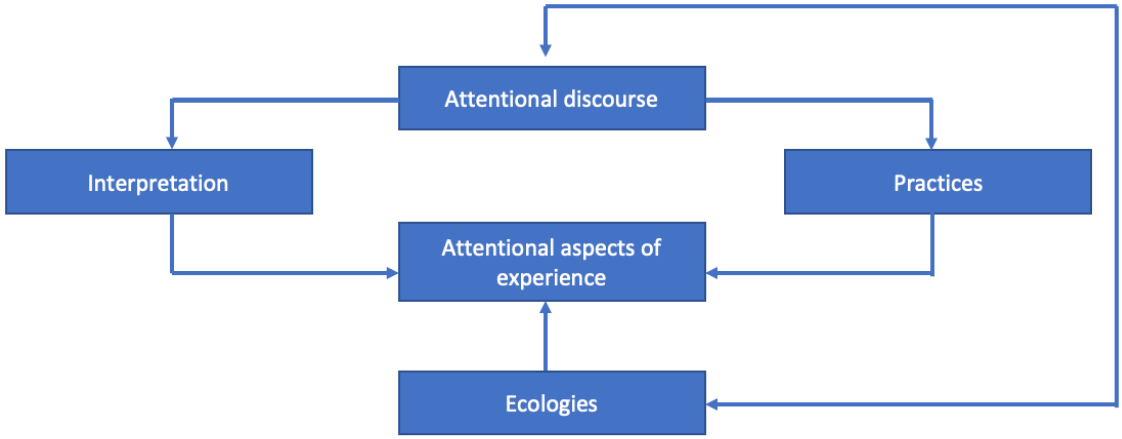

Fig. 1

As I indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the discursive aspects of attention's constitution formed a primary site of enquiry during fieldwork. Language-based methods offered my main point of access to this domain – chiefly conversations and semi-structured interviews, but also analysis of large amounts of texts and images, both contemporary and archival, which together gave clues as to how my interlocutors constructed attention, valorising certain states and making up attention in contextually specific ways as a site of moral concern, ethics and deep anxiety. The question of how attentional discourse relates to people's everyday lives – in specific ways marked by contingent socio-economic conditions – was a major preoccupation during fieldwork. By observing practices, such as musical training, I was able to investigate how people use particular arrangements of space, objects and the body to reproduce valorised attentional states, particularly single-pointed concentration and absorption, within their stream of consciousness. In addition, I carefully examined and collated the metaphors, terms and theories of interiority that people used to describe their experience. This

allowed me to better understand how culturally-elaborated conceptions of attention influence how people parse their consciousness, emphasising certain aspects of experience while de-emphasising others. This reflects Mishchel's (1977: 21) insight that "our descriptions of our experience are, in part, constitutive of what we experience… If people raised in different cultures or sub-cultures come to internalize different ways of describing their experience, this may make what they experience different." Anthropological work on schemas, hypo-cognition and cultural invitations (Levy 1973; Luhrmann 2020; Throop 2005), also recognises this importance, that is the significance of culturally-specific concepts and models in giving a particular pattern to experience, and, so, subjectivity itself. The formation of space, objects and time within defined ecologies provided a further site through which to explore the relation of the discursive constitution of attention to everyday experience. Objects and ecologies are designed to afford particular states of attention – a classroom, for example, with its arrangement of desks and bodies encourages, although does not determine, certain states of focus. This insight is a recurring staple of investigations into attention, ranging from more contemporary works (Citton 2017), to classic studies by Goffman (2022 [1953]: 114-118) and the Frankfurt School (Benjamin 1969 [1935]: 18). In spending prolonged periods observing the movement of people through specific spaces, such as offices, chai shops and music concerts, I built a picture during fieldwork of how environments were formed, often intentionally, to facilitate particular attentional states, so mediating between cultural theories of normative attention and individual experience. This data is explored largely in chapter five, although I more fully examine these ecological aspects of attention in my work with UK students. Together – through engagement with ecology, practice, experience and discourse – I have attempted to build a holistic map of the socio-cultural constitution of attention in Banaras, one which cannot be restricted to any singular domain.

Chapter 2 | The introspective Indian: A global history of attention

One reason perhaps that attentional ideology has not formed a central point of analysis in anthropological treatments of South Asia is that it seems timeless and therefore unremarkable, with certain ideas about single-pointedness and concentration appearing as the inevitable consequence of Hindu philosophical currents long circulating in the subcontinent. Indeed, despite the centrality of attention to conceptions of spirituality, aesthetics and epistemology in South Asia, there has been little attempt to trace its historical trajectory in relation to changing social-cultural and political conditions. The Indologist David Shulman (2012: 138) notes that "a systematic study of attention in classical Indian sources has never been attempted", although his own work on South India (identifying a radical shift emerging in the fifteenth century in which imagination came to define what it is to be a proper human subject) can be read, from a certain vantage, also as an attempt to trace the emergence of novel ideas about attention during this period. The historical ark that I explore in this chapter takes a different starting point: the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was during this period that certain ideologies of heightened attentivity came to feature as a central pillar of new conceptions of an idealised *national* Indian subjectivity. As subsequent chapters explore, the importance of this period can be seen in fragments and traces in the ethnographic present of Banaras where images of the nineteenth-century monk Vivekananda in deep concentration circulate widely, and bookstores continue to sell early twentieth-century New Thought self-help texts on mental cultivation.

In exploring attention's history in India, I aim to offer a new vantage on the trajectory of South Asian nationalism, one which traces hitherto unexamined linkages between an incipient anti-colonial movement and novel ideas about the 'mind' circulating in the laboratories, séance rooms and cities of Euro-America. Further, I hope to show how Indian religious reformers were also important players in changing western ideas about psychology and attention, especially among esoteric practitioners who served as the *avant-garde* of *fin de siècle* nineteenth-century Euro-American metropolitan culture. This provides an important intervention against dominant historical accounts of attention, which have tended to treat this psycho-bodily capacity as a matter of concern only for the elites of metropolitan European and American culture. The ensuing account can be fruitfully read as both an extension and critique of the highly influential work of the art historian Jonathan Crary, who over two monumental books traces the

disintegration of the classical subject in the face of new forms of scientific knowledge and materialist doctrine. For Crary, 'attention' emerged in the late nineteenth century as a solution to this process of fragmentation – an Archimedean point of stabilisation that came to centrally occupy emergent disciplines of the self, particularly psychology. Crary's sources, like those of numerous historians following him, are marked by a certain narrowness, restricted to elite traditions of western culture, particularly psychology, but also philosophy, literature and art. In contrast, by turning my attention to India, I hope to tell a global history, one which shows how well-observed attentional trends in Euro-America are intimately linked to South Asian politico-religious history. In doing so, I have been able to explore currents, central to the formulation of subjectivity and attention in this period, that have largely been occluded in prior accounts. That is, rather than re-articulating a well-trodden trajectory of attention, as it becomes snared in emergent physiological and materially-oriented scientific conceptions of the self, leading to anxiety about attentional finitude, I explore how simultaneously a different conception of the subject circulated, one marked by the possibility of transcendence and a conception of spirituality grounded in attentional potential. This transcendent conception of attention was central to the political and ethical projects of both esoteric practitioners, who stretched globally between the cities of Europe, South Asia and America, as well as their natural bedfellows, Indian nationalist and religious reformers seeking to articulate a new vision of the Indian subject.

In the following section, I provide a brief examination of how ideas about self-control figured in early Indian nationalist discourse, before turning to the specific role of attention within this emergent culture.

Control of self and body in late colonial India

As has been widely observed, colonial discourse enacted a fierce assault on the psyche, body and culture of India. Climatological determinism and, then, later, germ theory, rendered the Indian body as inevitably degenerate and disease prone, while prevailing colonial medical discourse positioned indigenous healing and purification practices as irrational and dangerous (Evans 2018: 17; Prakash 1999: 128-30). Simultaneously, repeated invectives by Christian missionaries emphasised the superstitious and monstrous basis of Hinduism, claims, which as Partha Mitter (1992) shows, had been

circulating in Europe since the medieval period.[13] Racial theories categorised large swathes of the Indian population as effete, sparing certain groups deemed loyal and unsophisticated, but relegating others to impotency, especially high-caste Bengali males (Alter 1994: 55-56; Mitra 2021; Rosselli 1980). The shift in the early nineteenth century from an orientalist outlook more favourably inclined to Indian culture to an austere Anglicanism saw the dismissal of much indigenous knowledge as essentially useless. This was reflected in the English Education Act of 1835 which re-directed government funding to western styles of education, and, in doing so, sought to create a class of "mimic men" (Bhabha 1984: 128) capable of filling the lower rungs of colonial bureaucracy. The various racial hierarchies and stratified employment policies of the imperial government were justified by theories of innate capacity which elevated the British middle classes, grounding their destiny to rule in their superior pedigree and moral habits, which were held to be decidedly sober and abstemious in nature (Bear 2007: 26-31).

This assault on the Indian subject, which I cover in only the briefest detail as it has been dealt with comprehensively elsewhere, marked out moral habits and bodily regimens as sites of justification for the servitude of Indian subjects. This accentuation of the intimate bodily and biomoral domain was internalised by early religious reformers and nationalist figures, who often accepted claims as to the effeminacy, superstition and immorality of Indians, asserting that the country's present represented a degeneration from a golden past. However, simultaneously they invested this intimate domain with new subversive potential – diverse nationalist figures sought to recover ascetic regimens, often from an idealised Indian past, as a way of transforming the colonial subject's body and mind into a site of supreme self-control and sovereignty. Programmes of wrestling, gymnastics and physical exercise offered the promise of a rejuvenated body, just as nationalist health literature emphasised control over food and semen as routes to practical freedom (Alter 1994; Ecks 2004: 76-8; Prakash 1999:151-2). The marking out of an archaic and pristine Hindu past, uncorrupted by the waywardness of modernity, can be seen particularly in the recovery of archetypal spiritual subject positions, like the traditional celibate student or *brahmachari*, as templates for subversive action in the present. The idealised ascetic figure of the

[13] Partha Mitter (1992: 10) convincingly describes how a classical Greek tradition of understanding India and other eastern regions as places of monstrous races was combined with subsequent Christian demonology to constitute Indian gods as monsters.

nationalist cause was necessarily a reconfigured one, diverging from older conceptions by providing a potential behavioural guide for large segments of the population, rather than being restricted, as was the case previously, to those of particular caste or life stage (Alter 1994: 48).

This marked emphasis on self-control in nationalist discourse arises from the particularities of the colonial predicament – with Indians excluded from state authority, they turned to disciplines of the self as an alternative route to sovereignty. In doing so, they constructed a radical politics that diverged from the tenets of western political philosophy which traditionally separates personal and public spheres and invests the state with supreme authority in matters of sovereignty and power (Kapila and Devji 2010: 72). A valorisation of self-control drawn from older ascetic precepts links together diverse nationalist and proto-nationalist figures, who often had otherwise divergent political approaches. The national network of gurukul schools set up by the Ayra Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati's Hindu reformist organisation, sought to produce an idealised, masculine student subject through continence and sensual restraint mixed with Victorian regimens of physical exercise (Hansen 1999: 73). Similarly, the polymath and fiery activist Sri Aurobindo (Ghose 1921) saw the regeneration of Indian education as lying in a turn to ancient Ayran educational techniques centring on self-control and restraining passionate thoughts and lustful desires, so allowing individuals to accumulate energy, which in his view is the true basis of intelligence. It is in the thought of Gandhi that an articulation of the value of self-control reaches its apotheosis. He took the classical Hindu conception of *brahmacharya*, a life stage and set of precepts regulating the conduct of celibate students in religious learning, and transformed it into a programme of restraint governing all aspects of life, whether eating, the senses or action – in doing so, he turned his body into a site of incipient critique of the supposed superior morality of the colonial order. The type of self-control advocated by Gandhi was entirely different from that valorised in Victorian culture, the latter of which is embodied in certain canonical precepts and situations, such as emotional control on the public school playing field or the idealisation of the gentlemanly stiff upper lip. [14] These British cultures of self-regulation emphasised less

[14] For example, the Victorian educational reformer Annie Besant instructed her students that "[c]ontrol of temper is taught on the playing fields; every good player has to learn to play with good temper, and to curb the passionate uprush of anger that surges through him when he is, perhaps over roughly, pushed or flung aside" (1904: 52).

the control of interiority, instead idealising disciplined public performance in the midst of emotional upheaval. In contrast, Gandhi's conception of self-discipline is far more wide-ranging, insisting on total restraint of interiority first and foremost – to perform properly in public, but internally to have uncontrolled emotions constitutes failure within his regulatory schema.

I will not labour the importance of self-control as a subject-forming tool in nationalist discourse - this has been studied by numerous scholars (Alter 2000; Ecks 2004; Kapila 2007; Prakash 1999; Rudolph 1965; Steger 2000: 111-139). However, it is important to note that much of this literature has tended to emphasise the body as the generative site of sovereignty when in fact much nationalist discourse also fused this preoccupation with a concern for mental/psychic control. This can be seen in Gandhi's conception of *brahmacharya* itself which radically enlarged classical conceptions, traditionally focused on celibacy and restraint in pedagogical contexts, to include, among other things, thought control as a general moral imperative. For Gandhi "perfectly controlled thought is itself power of the highest potency" (1947: 163). In one typical passage, he laments: "So long as thought is not under complete control of the will, *brahmacharya* in its fullness is absent. Involuntary thought is an affection of the mind, and curbing of thought, therefore, means curbing of the mind which is even more difficult to curb than the wind" (Gandhi 2018: 348, emphasis original).

In national educational contexts, a renewed emphasis on control of mind and attention was inculcated in students as a central technique to produce robust citizen subjects. The early-twentieth-century *Sanatana Dharma* series, comprising three religious textbooks for students of varying ages which was used widely in the princely state of Mysore, Banaras Hindu University and other Hindu schools, preached the importance of mental control as a dominant ideal for students to follow. In one particularly emphatic passage, the textbook announces: "Let the student, then, aim at ruling his mind; if it runs to evil things let him call it back; let him allow it to fix itself only on good things. This is the first, the most difficult, the most essential part of self-control" (Besant 1902: 140). These primers emphasised mental control as part of a broader nationalising project aimed at fashioning a pan-Indian Hindu religion from an otherwise immense diversity of spiritual traditions that often defined themselves more by region, sect or lineage than universal precept. As the foreword to the *Sanatana Dharma* primers states: "That which

unites Hindus in a common faith must be clearly and simply taught; all that divides them must be ignored" (*ibid*: v-vi).

In the Central Hindu College, a school in Banaras established at the turn of the twentieth century by figures who would later become prominent in the Indian freedom struggle, students received instruction in 'thought power'. The school's Boarders' Union Club, which commenced meetings with recitations from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharat* epics, aimed towards cultivating, among other things, 'power of thought' and 'moral character' (Lal 1901: 25-26). The school's magazine, which was aimed at a broad national readership of Hindu boys, regularly advertised its founder's book entitled *Thought Power*, which instructs readers on memory, concentration and other aspects of mental culture. Its chapters on concentration begin with the following admission - "Few things more tax the powers of the student who is beginning to train his mind than does concentration" – before giving detailed advice on how heightened attentivity can be obtained through repeated practice (Besant 1901: 78). The foregrounding of attentional control as the foundation of education perhaps finds its most forceful advocate in the nineteenth-century Hindu reformer Vivekananda, who wrote: "To me the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts. If I had to do my education over again, and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment…" (Vivekananda 1921: 36).[15] His assertion contains traces of colonial educational discourse which, as Sanjay Seth (2007: 17-45) observes, held Indian students to be defective owing to their apparent propensity for rote "cramming" of facts. However, in contrast, Vivekananda rejected the solutions proffered by westernised observers that sought a closer emulation of European learning sensibilities, instead turning to asceticised mental culture to produce more effective student subjects.

The attentive Indian subject

Attentional capacity represented an important ground through which reformers and nationalist figures resisted the invectives of colonial discourse which rendered the indigenous psyche infantile. During the late colonial period, an array of prominent

[15] This sentiment – that education revolves around concentration and self-control, not the acquirement of masses of information – is a common refrain by nationalist figures intervening in colonial and post-colonial education discourse. For example, the Hindu right ideologue M.S. Golwalkar states: "Then, during our student life, acquiring knowledge and character, and not merely stuffing our brains with information, has been the constant urge with us [Hindus]. We are not to become mere bookworms. The one key to all learning is concentration of mind" (1968: 57).

figures sought to ground a sense of incipient national exceptionality in hereditary psychological substrate, asserting that Indians were naturally pre-disposed towards states of heightened attention. Keshubh Chandra Sen, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement whose influential Hindu reformism often incorporated Christian theology, projected an image of innate Indian introspective capacity, asserting: "We Hindus are specially endowed with, and distinguished for, the yoga faculty, which is nothing but this power of spiritual communion and absorption" (1881 in De Michelis 2008: 89). One Christian missionary in a book outlining the ideas of Sen, whose Christ-friendly philosophy was often viewed as a staging post for an eventual conversion of Indians to Biblical faith, was even moved to remark: "India has been the most meditative country in the world… The Hindu nature is calm and deep/and loves the stillness of profound thought" (Slater 1884: 73).

During his tours of western countries, Vivekananda enlarged aspects of the introspective vision of India provided by Sen, who served as an early, if fraught, spiritual influence on his ideas. Vivekananda offered powerful images to receptive foreign audiences that portrayed his fellow countrymen as regularly engaged in prolonged concentration. At an event in Los Angeles in 1900, he proclaimed:

In India, they will persevere for ages and ages. You will be astonished to hear that they have no churches, no Common Prayers, or anything of the kind; but they, every day, still practice the breathings and try to concentrate the mind; and that is the chief part of their devotion. These are the main points. Every Hindu must do these. It is the religion of the country… Near the Ganga thousands and thousands of people may be seen daily sitting on its banks breathing and concentrating with closed eyes (1958a: 29).

The concentrated vision of India provided by Vivekananda was in a sense an idealisation – meditative yogic culture had only recently begun a national resurgence from a position of comparative obscurity. Also implicit in his language is the spectre of a western other, diminished in spirituality and struggling to achieve heightened concentration. He chides his American audience at one point: "I am teaching you now about it, but how many of you will practice it? How many days, how many months will it be before you give it up?" (*ibid*.).

Vivekananda, contrary to much contemporary scholarship (e.g. Sharma 2013), should not be read as a proto-Hindu nationalist figure – this constitutes a false inscription, as the historian Ruth Harris (Harris 2022: 4-6) suggests, of the present into a past governed by divergent political and intellectual currents. It also fails to consider his universalist

philosophy, which sought to engage with rather than jettison other faiths. However, that being said, certain key similarities exist between aspects of his thought and subsequent Hindu nationalist discourse, and this extends to a sense of attentional bifurcation between India and the west. This division is present, for example, in the writing of the highly influential Hindu right ideologue M.S. Golwalkar which is generally animated by a central opposition between a material west and a superior spiritual India. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar describes the modern western mind as being "restless" in its constant search for material things, claiming "it always hankers after the objects of the senses" (2000 [1966]: 51). He contrasts this with the traditional Hindu mind which is restrained and tranquil. However, in his reading, control of self is often less a matter of individual effort, and instead primarily a function of a harmonious national social order that curbs erratic impulses (43-54). The restraining power of the ascetic's body is re-imagined here through the frame of the national social body.

The foregrounding of heightened introspection as an almost hereditary character trait by figures like Vivekananda and Sen finds parallels in orientalist conceptions of India, propagated in the writings of certain early East India company administrators, German romantics and later by university professors of Indology. German romantic idealists in particular, as well as their critic Hegel, argued for the psychic disunity of man with different national and racial groups developing specific dispositions – India in contrast to reason and will, came to be defined by a propensity for imagination and abstraction from empirical reality (Inden 2000: 93-6). The romantic Friedrich Schlegel, invested imagination with certain positive aspects that tempered an over-emphasis on cold reason, and this could be seen, for example, in the beauty of Sanskrit poetry. However, generally he held the dominance of imagination in India to have reached a state of excess, evidenced in the region's "peculiar tendency towards mysticism" (von Schlegel 1880: 165). This imaginative mystical propensity produced in Indians certain wayward attentional tendencies, leading to the "total abstraction of thought and feeling" (160) as well as complete absorption in the other worldly. As Schlegel puts it: "[T]his absorption of all thought and all consciousness in God… they [Indians] have carried to a pitch and extreme that may be called a moral and intellectual self-annihilation" (*ibid*.). In corroboration of this, he offers his audience fantastical images of contemporary India where in any pilgrimage site hundreds of "strange" hermits can be found engaged in abstract contemplation, "concentrated on a point" in an "appalling" waste of effort and energy (185-6). Later in the nineteenth century, a replication of the essentially

introspective attention of Indians can be found in the work of orientalists at European universities. The highly influential Oxford don, Max Müller contrasts the inward psychological traits of the Ayran self with those of an expansive west: “not the active, combative and acquisitive, but the passive, meditative and reflective” (Müller 1883: 122).

Inden (2000: 90) observes that like their orientalist counterparts, utilitarian writers, such as James Mill, also sought to characterise Indians in terms of their mystical abstraction, although the utilitarian position is entirely negative, viewing pre-colonial Indian history as being without virtue and marred by despotism (see also: Thapar 1978: 4-5). These various positions on India, little grounded in reality, arose from the particular socio-political imperatives of Europe: with rapid industrialisation in their homeland, orientalists sought utopia in an Indic idyll (Thapar 1978: 3); Germans seeking to carve out a national identity separate from Anglo-French hegemony found ontological difference in India (Hansen 1999: 68); and British officials fell back on utilitarian tropes of a mystical, a-political India to justify ‘practically-minded’ intervention in the country’s administration. Faced with these different conceptions, Indian nationalists and religious reformers tended towards the more favourable aspects of orientalist discourse, as typified by their tendency to liberally quote Müller. However, in doing so, they also turned what was often an ultimately negative appraisal of Indian spirituality into an advantage, asserting that it highlighted a lack of transcendent sensibility in the west. One aspect of this re-figuration, which will be explored more fully subsequently, is a novel constitution of Indic forms of ‘concentration’ as methodical and empirical – so turning the inward introspection of India, so strongly associated with dangerous mysticism in orientalist discourse, into a tool of agency and science, an empirical self-discipline.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the linkage of nascent Indian national identity with a particular capacity for heightened attentionality cannot be separated from the rising prominence of yoga, which, as will be discussed, found new, widespread popularity in the late colonial period. During this time, Hinduism itself came to be increasingly defined by yoga, which was often understood in psychologised terms, centring on meditative practices of attention. The freedom fighter Bipin Chandra Pal in a speech to the Young Mahomedan Association states that there are “two ideals that stand out above the rest in the whole religious culture of Hinduism. These two are the ideal of Yoga or concentration and the ideal of Viraigya or renunciation and

disattachment" (1907: 120). Speaking here in front of an audience of Muslim men, and seeking to clearly define the core of a heterogeneous Hindu tradition in the face of a more tightly demarcated Islamic other, Pal chooses to emphasise Hinduism's tradition of concentration as well as its complementary tradition of dis-attachment from worldly affairs. However, in this turn to yoga, he also seeks a space for commonality – Pal tells his audience that both Hinduism and Islam are alike in their shared "spirit of concentration and meditation" (122).

Thus far, I have concentrated on descriptions of heightened Indian attentional capacity by major political and intellectual figures, but this association was widespread, offering an important, if understudied, perspective on the region's essential psychic character. Even in conservative newspapers, which were generally favourable to the British administration, examples can be found praising India's traditions of concentration. In one article in *The Time's of India*, a conservative newspaper, the author states that while "western learning" must continue to be provided, there are many good things to be admired in India's ancient educational system, particularly its strict religious and mental culture, the latter comprising practices of memorisation and techniques of attention that taught students to concentrate "on any one idea at a time – to the total exclusion of all other ideas" (Metta 1927). The author's turn to ancient religious learning, partly reflects a growing anxiety in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century amongst colonial elites that the earlier cessation of religious education in Indian schools had cut students from the moral compass of their forefathers, leading to youthful anti-imperial political unrest (Seth 2007: 52-4). Similarly, English novels about India from the late colonial period often contain passages concerning some feat of fantastical concentration. In Somerset Maugham's *The Razors Edge*, an American spiritual seeker who finds awakening in India recounts: "I was practicing meditation one night in my little room at the Ashrama as my Indian friends had taught me… I had lit a candle and was concentrating my attention on its flame, and after a time, through the flame, but quite clearly, I saw a long line of figures one behind the other" (1944: 290).

With yoga's spread in America, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, newspapers also began to carry scattered reports of Indic attentional superiority, echoing the message of Vivekananda. This reflects an emergent network of travelling Indian yoga teachers in the US, who gave lectures, classes and public demonstrations of psychic abilities. Deslippe (2018) suggests that during the interwar period yoga was taught throughout the US wherever there was a significant conglomeration of people,

except in the south. In *The Toledo News-Bee* (1907), a newspaper from a modest city in Ohio, a journalist first observes yoga's sudden spread across the country, and next proceeds to comment on differences in psychic ability between 'East' and 'West': "The majority of people [in America] will not take the time to concentrate. The western spirit is different to that of the oriental. In the east men are accustomed to sit on their mats… and dream their time away… They have lived in the mountains for generations and practiced mental concentration." The journalist concludes that Americans busy "chasing the almighty dollar" could learn something from the "contemplative spirit of the east", yet he is ultimately dismissive of the latter's mystic character, asserting that the principles of mental concentration transcend any single philosophy. Here we find a re-statement of orientalist tropes, first promulgated in the preceding centuries, which with one hand valorise the introspective attention of Indians, but with the other render it inert and mystical. Among the large array of early-twentieth-century American self-help literature focusing on mental cultivation similar statements can be found, marking Indians out for their exceptional attentional skills, but dismissing their psychic superiority as ultimately morally degenerate. This early-twentieth-century literature is drawn from what Catherine Albanese calls "American Metaphysical Religion", a vast current of demotic Christian, esoteric and occult traditions many of which turned to Asia for inspiration, pre-figuring subsequent counter-cultural movements. As one self-help author notes in his book, *Secret of Concentration*:

A great many persons complain that they cannot concentrate; that when they try to hold a thought the mind wanders or they fall asleep. This is a universal experience. What infants we are in mental development compared with the metaphysical Hindu when even the least of the Yogins can concentrate upon a nail until the vibrations of his thought force disintegrate its form… But it is not for us to try to emulate the Hindu phenomena producers. There lies before us a greater development than Karma-bound believers could grasp… (Devoe 1906: 2)

Concentration and the modernisation of subjectivity

The idealisation of concentration in Indian nationalist and yogic discourse was not peculiar to these politico-religious currents, but instead shared in a common valorisation of attention across colonial society, encompassing educators, scientists and other loci of moral regulation. This can be seen, for example, in moral textbooks, sometimes written by British colonial figures to address anxieties concerning the ethical degeneration of educated Indians following their sudden exposure to secular schooling (Seth 2007: 52-

4). Claims about the importance of controlled attention are repeated in these texts, as typified by the missionary John Murdoch's *The Indian Student's Manual* which states: "Learn to command your attention – There are some young students whose thoughts are diverted from their books by the most trifling circumstance… even the buzzing of a fly… It is a valuable acquirement for a student to be able to give his undivided attention to his books." (Murdoch 1875: 17). By way of example, Murdoch cites the remarkable "power of concentrating thought" possessed by major scientific figures, like Newton. The very same scientific luminary is also cited by yogic popularisers, such as Vivekananda and Sivananda Saraswati, as a paragon of attentional and introspective power.

The shared valorisation of attention as a chief moral attribute across disparate spheres of elite colonial culture, often drawing on similar exemplar and vocabulary, speaks to the widespread circulation of this ideal. A central contention of this chapter is that Indian nationalists along with many others – whether moralising colonial educationalists or occult spiritual seekers – were operating in a shared conceptual field, which had been radically transformed over the course of the nineteenth century, giving new prominence to attentional control as an anchoring aspect of subjectivity. A number of historians have marked out the nineteenth century (a periodisation sometimes extended into the early twentieth century) as the time during which attention was fundamentally reformulated coming to occupy a new role within a re-constituted, yet more pessimistic understanding of the human subject (Burnett & Smith 2023; Crary 2001; Hagner 2003; Schmidt 2013).[16] The British-born psychologist Edward Titchener famously claimed in 1908 that attention had only recently been 'discovered' by psychology, an over-confident claim, but one that illustrates the sense of novelty associated with this re-configured concept.

The reformulation of attention during the nineteenth century is registered in shifting metaphoric registers, which display an increasing concern with mental control. During the nineteenth century 'concentration' – which had longstanding applications in chemistry and other contexts – grew in usage as a metaphor through which to conceptualise attention as the controlled centring of mind so that it converges on some specific object. The Google Ngram corpus of texts shows a set of related terms –

[16] For example, Schmidt (2013: 11) writes: "'Only in the late nineteenth century did [attention] become in any way the target of professional expertise, and only in the late twentieth did it emerge as a cultural touchstone."

‘concentration of attention’, ‘concentrate attention’, ‘concentration of mind’ – rising from obscurity in the mid-nineteenth century, and subsequently growing in popularity well into the first half of the twentieth century (fig. 2). Over time, concentration becomes so closely associated with attention that the terms ‘concentrate on’ and ‘concentration’ come to apply to attention often without any further specification. The increasing imbrication of concentration and attention explains the twentieth-century decline of terms like ‘concentration of mind’ – it no longer becomes necessary in many contexts to specify what concentration applies to, it is taken for granted. Similarly, the usage of ‘focus’ (which had earlier applications to geometry and optics) to describe attentional control emerges during the nineteenth century – the Oxford English Dictionary gives 1832 as its first recorded usage. Although, it is just after 1900 that its use in this manner begins to accelerate rapidly. A similar metaphoric shift may also have occurred in Hindi, although I do not have access to relevant databases to substantiate this position – anecdotally, the term *dhyan kendrit*, which literally means to centre attention, is used in Hindi but not Sanskrit.

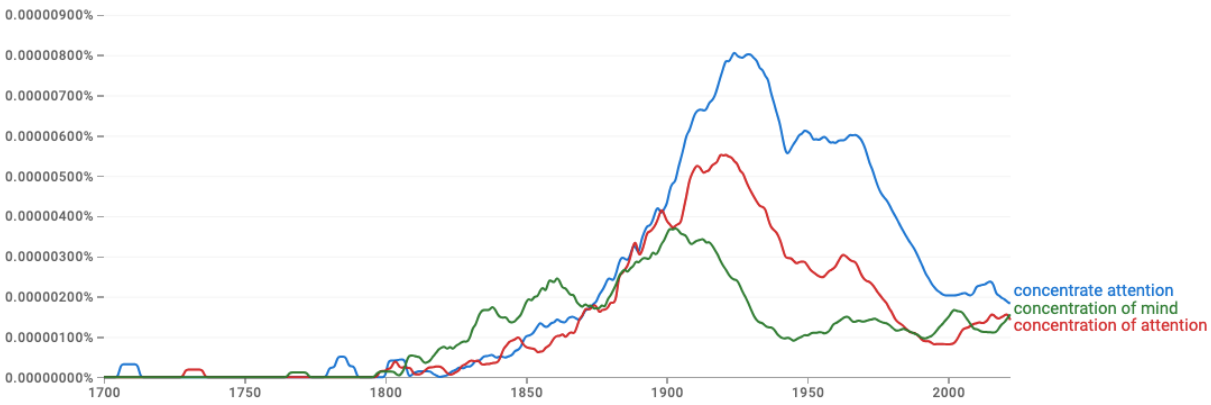

Fig. 2 Graph provided by Google Books Ngram Viewer

Through re-indexing Google Ngram data and creating his own database of just under one million books, the historian Benjamin Schmidt (2013: 34-54) has comprehensively analysed this shift towards an emphasis on attentional control evidenced in the rise of new metaphoric registers. He suggests that similar shifts also occurred in French and German, and he also shows that the term ‘concentrate attention’ (and similar derivations) emerge first in books classified under ‘psychology’ (BF) in libraries (49-50). It is here that new concentric attentional terminology is pioneered by specialists who sought for the first time to measure attention, drawing on then-novel mechanistic camera-like technologies to conceptualise mental process in terms of aperture and focus (*ibid*.).

However, the label ‘psychology’ used by Schmidt is somewhat misleading – the category ‘BF’ while nominally shelved under the broad term ‘psychology’ by the Library of Congress Classification system is actually a heterogenous category. In addition to sober science, it includes a range of esoteric, metaphysical and occult genres - New Thought, mesmerism, spiritualism and so forth – which often draw heavily from Indian sources, and which contributed greatly to the reformulation of attention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something which has thus far been ignored in historical accounts. Before turning to this esoteric culture, however, I would like first to sketch some of the contours of how exactly attention came in the late nineteenth century to play a new, more important role in elite conceptions of subjectivity.

Attention’s particular constitution in this period can be linked to certain well-worn trends, which converged to provide, a novel, disenchanted subject, bound by problematic physiology. Faced with a destabilisation of long-nurtured religious conceptions of human transcendence, attention offered a point of stabilisation allowing for a continuance of at least some aspects of the sacred within a new pessimistic and materially-overdetermined framing of the subject. Evolutionary theory, especially following the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), slowly eroded over several decades the notion of living organisms as special sacred creations, first bringing ‘lower’ species under natural law, then the human body, and finally the mind (Ellegård 1990). Some of the very same figures who most forcefully advanced evolutionary theories of self, like the polymath George Henry Lewes, also sought to ground the mind in the material workings of the body, and particularly the brain. Earlier in the century, phrenologists, among others, had popularised the idea that the mind was dependent on the brain (Smith 2004: 89) – Robert Young (Young 1985: 64) notes that it was said that British homes containing only the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progess* chose as their third title Combe’s *Constitution of Man*, an international bestseller in the phrenological tradition. Later in the century, medical specialists, like the physiologist William Carpenter, offered a material account of mind grounded in novel understandings of the of the nervous system, and in doing so, opened up a new field, psycho-physiology.

The re-conceptualisation of the human subject in terms of materiality was wide-ranging. Dixon (2003) describes how it entrenched processes begun earlier in the century whereby older affective terms grounded in Christian psychology – appetites, passions and affections, often elaborated in relation to the soul – were replaced by the new category of ‘emotions’, understood largely in bodily and materialist terms. Psycho-

physiological ideas spread outwards, influencing wide-ranging areas of European cultural life, including literature and aesthetics. As with other spheres of Victorian science, psycho-physiological theories were reductive, mechanistic and determinist, so undermining aspects of the mental domain that had long been held to be inalienable to the sacred aspect of the subject, namely its volitional core (Daston 1978). Psycho-physiologists, like Thomas Laylock, extended reflex action, which had initially been restricted to spinal cord and brain stem, to higher regions of the brain, so making behaviours that had previously understood as intentional, accountable through theories of automatic and mechanical process instigated by external stimuli (Danzinger 1982: 124-7).

This attenuated framing of the human subject found parallel in other popular ideas circulating during this period, such as hypnosis, crowd psychology and advertising, which produced a picture of human behaviour as governed by suggestibility and reflexive action (Schmidt 2013; Stäheli 2013: 123-128). Conceptual currents of this kind occurred, according to Jonathan Crary, within a newly shaped discursive field which first emerged between 1810 and 1840, forging a novel conception of the subject and perception. In *Techniques of the Observer* (1992), Crary marshals a broad array of evidence to argue that the nineteenth century's novel envisioning of the perceiving subject diverged from prior Enlightenment conceptions of vision which revolved around a camera obscura model. The camera obscura – a device consisting of a small hole through which light passes into a dark enclosed interior producing an inverted representation of the exterior world – was held to be analogous to vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The vision-as-camera-obscura model offers the possibility of a mechanical and perfect internal representation of a slice of a pre-given objective world, which the self, as a kind of disembodied spirit witness, inspects and reviews. In this conception, the exterior world is ordered and the self – as disembodied – does not impinge upon it (1992: 55).

However, following a broadly Foucauldian periodisation, a marked shift materialised in the early nineteenth century whereby vision, rather than being the activity of a disembodied observer, becomes reformulated as something deeply subjective, dependent on faulty and contingent physiology, grounded in the thickness of the body, the specificities of the retina. Within this new conceptual space, vision, rather than entailing knowledge of a transcendent mechanical process, became intertwined with the particular physicality of the observer, so precluding the possibility of an objective order

separate from the body of the perceiver. As this physiology was found through scientific investigation to be inherently unstable, relating to mysterious cerebral systems and prone to optical illusion, a sense of the primal unity of perception and consciousness was lost; it was rendered fragmentary.

The valorisation of attention in the second half of the nineteenth century in elite western culture can be read as a, if not *the*, central attempt to manage the shift outlined above (by which the previous transcendental classical subject becomes attenuated, bounded by the contingencies of determinist law and the capriciousness of physiology). Crary's later work, *Suspensions of Perception* (2001) – an exhaustive piece of scholarship that has influenced a number of subsequent studies of subjectivity including the present – treats the conception of attention that emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century as "radically alien" compared to the preceding century.[17] For Crary, attention takes on a new role as a makeshift solution to the problem identified in his earlier work: the fragmentation in the first decades of the nineteenth century of the coherence of enlightenment models of vision and experience. As he puts it: "Within the general epistemological crisis of the late nineteenth century, attention became a makeshift and inadequate simulation of an Archimedean point of stability from which consciousness could know the world" (2001: 65). With the dissolution Kantian transcendental unity along with a realisation that perception is dependent upon a faulty physiology, attention provides a solution, a kind of ordering principle which offers to bind perceptions which would otherwise crowd in upon the soul. This in part explains the explosion of interest in attention within late-nineteenth-century psychology. However, the perceptual order offered by attention, which operates through selectivity, implies always a fragmentation of the experiential field – as such, it gives only a phantom of the coherence found in earlier enlightenment models of vision.

Part of the persuasiveness of Crary's account lies in his identification of a double bind that renders attention perpetually in a state of crisis – attention was invested with

[17] While I agree that 'attention' comes to take on new resonances in the second half of the nineteenth century, some of the novelty attributed to the term by Crary appears overdone. Crary underplays the centrality of attention to enlightenment conceptions of the normative subject. Google Ngram suggests that the term 'attention', despite being in use earlier, explodes in popularity in texts between 1750-1790 becoming one of the most popular words in the English language (so, earlier than the period highlighted by Crary). A number of scholars have shown that norms of attentivity were central to older conceptions of the human subject (Hagner 2003; Spiegel 2023). In particular, Hagner notes that: "In the eighteenth century… attention became the most celebrated mental ability. Attention helped to bring dark and unclear things into bright light…" (2003: 678).

normative authority, and yet simultaneously intensive investigation revealed it as fragile, prone to external determination. Experimental tests demonstrated the presence of uncontrollable movement in what was assumed to be the domain of intentional concentration; and states of intent focus associated with productive attention were shown also to produce hypnosis (Crary 2001; Hagner 2003: 679-80). Simultaneously, the reconfiguration of social and aesthetic life – rapid urbanisation, new modes of transportation and factory labour, and the mass circulation of moving images – rendered attention, as the Frankfurt School have shown, both central for its capacity to discriminate, necessary for new forms of work and technological consumption, and yet problematic, unable to cope with novel environments replete with stimulation.

While not the central subject of this chapter, it should be noted that the constitution of attention in the late nineteenth century – as an almost sacred anchoring point of subjectivity and yet also vulnerable to capricious physiology and excessive stimulation – provides in some key regards a template for its present-day conception in Euro-America, which continues to be contoured by anxieties over material determination, yet faced by new challenges: the effects of over-abundant digital information. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the effects of attention's reformulation can be discerned across a range of cultural spaces. The emergent industry of advertising sought to mine psychological expertise, coming to conceptualise potential consumers as akin to experimental subjects each defined by a limited attention (Schmidt 2013). Theories of novel reading and the formal content of works of Victorian literature have also been shown by Nicholas Dames (2007), to be profoundly influenced by psycho-physiology, which offered framings of the literary consumer delimited by attention span and the autonomic nervous system. Similarly, new forms of art, such as impressionism and post-impressionism, which present a radical rupture with Renaissance traditions, can be interpreted as epiphenomenal effects of a wider re-conceptualisation of the observing subject, attempts at capturing a shifting perceptual field centring on attention (Crary 1992; 2001). In each space, actors exhibited an interest in exploring the contours of attention, often with a view to its control and cultivation.

A turn to the esoteric and occult

The work of historians tracing the wider effects of the reformulation of subjectivity and the foregrounding of attention over the course of the nineteenth century has tended to

tell a familiar tale of disenchantment, of the self becoming encased within material ideology.[18] This narrative ark reflects the sources that historians examining attention have tended to consult – eminent psychologists, literary critics, philosophers, and pioneers of advertising and education. However, while it is true that this period is marked, in Britain at least, by a well-documented decline in church attendance and a flourishing of doubt in orthodox religiosity (Owen 2004: 11), it also witnessed a proliferation of new forms of spirituality that sought to mediate between a crisis of conventional religious theology and novel materialist scientific discourse. Often called the nineteenth century occult revival, this period saw a marked turn towards diverse forms of esoteric, magical and metaphysical practice, a large number of which centred on control of the mind and attention: astral travel, ritual magic, spiritualism, clairvoyance, positive thinking, mesmerism and hypnotism, among many others. The neglect by scholars interested in attention of this rich seam of *fin de siècle* culture reflects a wider diminished engagement amongst historians with this enchanted world, perhaps as its currents seem, at first blush at least, so inimical to the worldview that has come to be associated with 'modernity' (Owen 2004: 6).

These cultures, which encompass genres of self-help, American Metaphysical Christianity, as well as occult and other spiritual traditions operated within the wider conceptual field described by Crary. Yet while drawing from its scientific vocabulary, they actively resisted the implications of this framing, asserting the ultimate transcendence of self over biological substrate. Within this, control of attention – drawing on its salience in wider culture and particularly psychology – was understood to offer a central route to preserving sacred and transcendent aspects of the self, to realising the resplendent possibilities of the human subject, as evidenced by innumerable books, courses and articles in this period providing exercises and drills to allow individuals to train concentration as a route to unlock potential, whether business success, perfect health or access to spiritual spheres that exist separately to the material world. One article in *The Psychic Digest and Occult Review of Reviews* (a publication which draws together work from different corners of this polyglot metaphysical culture) notes:

Probably no subject in the line of Mental Science at this time is attracting so much attention or is the theme for more articles than that of "Concentration." Nearly every

[18] A notable exception to this is the work of Caleb Smith (2023) which looks at how an array of American nineteenth-century figures turned to Christian moral regimens of attentional cultivation in response to changes in social and economic life wrought by industrialisation and capitalism.

one of our exchanges has something to say about it. The vast importance of learning all there is to know about it will be better appreciated when it is considered that no great act in life was ever achieved that did not have for its basis the concentration of the thought forces (Sheerin 1901: 48).

Before going further, it is necessary to say something about what constitutes this broad spiritualised culture. Together, the practices and movements under examination formed a global network, spanning America, Britain, South Asia and many other countries, which can be reduced to no one specific site. Esoteric culture is a pervasive, yet understudied strain of western culture, as Hanegraaff (2013: 2) points out, stretching from late antiquity to the present, yet in the second half of the nineteenth century it entered public discourse in a way not seen since the sixteenth century (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 13), and, further, it began to exhibit new tenets, incorporating ideas from the then-novel mind sciences.

The revival of interest in this area gathered momentum with the emergence of modern spiritualism beginning with the Fox sisters' claim in 1848 that they had communicated with a spirit in their upstate New York home (Ferguson 2018: 2). If its earlier phase was democratic, taking in a wide-ranging popular interest in mediumship spanning different social classes, much of its late nineteenth century instantiation, spurred by the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875, was more elitist, emphasising studious learning, often of 'Eastern' philosophy, and attracting largely middle-class practitioners (Owen 2004: 4-5). The Theosophical Society in particular combined popular interest in spiritualism with a turn to 'eastern' spirituality, drawing from the religious traditions of South Asia (van der Veer 2001: 56). The membership of elite organisations, such as the aforementioned Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was usually low, but the practices advocated – spiritualism, hypnotism, crystal gazing, forms of meditation and visualisation – spread much more widely (Ferguson 2019). It is difficult to over-emphasise the influence of these movements, which sparked great public interest, including in the tabloid press, and shaped literature (Ferguson 2019), art (Ferguson 2018: 2), Asian religious traditions (Sinha 2010), anti-colonial politics (van der Veer 2001) as well as science where numerous eminent figures practised psychical research (Coon 1992).

Albanese (2007) in an influential study argues that esoteric spirituality, which she terms 'metaphysical religion', constitutes the third pillar of American religiosity, along with evangelism and establishment state-church Christianity. Many of its traditions, such as

New Thought and Christian Science, displayed little of the secrecy or elitism of other esoteric movements, operating under the bask of US religious sunshine law and attracting millions of adherents usually drawn from the urban and semi-urban middle class. Of particular interest for the present study is the New Thought tradition, which began in the nineteenth century as a Christian healing movement asserting that the mind could cure bodily illness, and which later transformed into a wealth-oriented gospel preaching the power of controlled thought to bring prosperity (Haller 2012). Its best-selling self-help books, such as *The Power of Positive Thinking*, as well as its concepts, like 'manifesting', continue to exert a strong, yet little studied, influence over popular culture – they are bound by a central doctrine which ties together the New Thought tradition, a belief in the primacy of mind over matter, such that correct belief and controlled attention can create the physical world, bringing health and wealth.

van der Veer (2001: 58-61) suggests that esoteric and occult currents, in their turn away from orthodox religion, represented a reaction against evangelical Christianity which had grown in influence in the first half of the nineteenth century, eventually coming to underpin notions of racial superiority and national imperial mission. He argues that esoteric traditions, such as theosophy, constituted the central internal western opposition to the imperial project, rather than liberalism, which in certain key regards shared in the outlook of evangelical Christianity. This is reflected in the fact that many esoteric movements, which were often led by women, grew from left-wing radical milieus, with the Theosophical Society in particular contributing greatly to South Asian anti-colonial activities, including the establishment of nationalist education, the Indian Home Rule movement, and, as Obeyesekere (1991) documents, Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism.[19]

The particular interchange of people and ideas between India and esoteric milieus underlines the specific interest of this culture to the present study. In contrast to the cold dismissal of evangelical Christianity, the experimental impulse of these movements propelled them towards Indian spirituality, from which they borrowed practices and ideas, often seeing their activities as ancient 'eastern' wisdom's true realisation. Magicians meditated on *Tattwas*, just as New Thought practitioners borrowed liberally from yogic traditions of spirituality. In turn, this embrace of Indian spirituality also formed a site of cultural and nationalist production which shaped the development of a pan-Indian Hindu religious tradition – many of the texts now seen as the central

[19] It should be noted that while Theosophy represented a radical alternative to the imperial vision of state and church, it was not free of racial and patriarchal ideology as Strube (2021) shows.

scriptures of Hinduism, such as *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras*, owe much in terms of their current popularity to Theosophical publishing efforts (Sinha 2010; White 2014). Similarly, the particular psychologised vocabulary of New Thought exerted a strong influence on Hindu popularisers and reformers, including Vivekananda (De Michelis 2008; Singleton 2010). Of particular interest to the present, is the fact that the salience of 'concentration', as a defining aspect of an emergent Indian national subjectivity, owes much to the specific constitution and valorisation of this concept within globalised esoteric culture.

In what follows, I draw my account largely from books, periodicals and journals of New Thought and Theosophy, although I also make reference to sources drawn from other corners of esoteric culture. My interest in these two traditions stems from their particular influence on the development of Indian conceptions of spirituality, yoga and attention. However, it is important to stress that intense valorisation of attention – in common with wider society – was diffuse across *fin de siècle* esoteric culture, and can be found, for example, in discussions of clairvoyance as well as the ritual magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (e.g. Owen 2004: 150). I am particularly interested in tracing how attention – in a way not dissimilar to its role in contemporaneous scientific theorising of the mind – functioned as a point of mediation in esoteric discourse between sacred conceptions of self and materialist ideology, preserving the former within the disenchanted frame of the latter. This in turn created germane conditions for a psychologisation of Indic spiritual culture; allowing for a positioning of longstanding traditions of mental control within a novel scientific vocabulary of attention, and linking a spiritualised conception of Indian national character not with other-worldly mysticism as in orientalist discourse but with Victorian conceptions of normative character and empirical epistemology.

Nineteenth-century esoteric culture was marked by scientism, with practitioners drawing on *a la mode* concepts from the mental and physical sciences to distinguish their culture from orthodox religiosity and its seemingly unsavoury doctrines of damnation. However, simultaneously they sought to counter what they perceived as the excesses of contemporary scientific discourse, its tendency to make all aspects of the world, even the mind, an epiphenomena of material causation. Esoteric texts are replete with proclamations about the absurdity of reducing consciousness to physical substance, instructing readers that they can go "beyond the vicissitudes of the physical existence"

(Croshie 1921: 38) and achieve feats "beyond anything imaginable in the cramping limitations of the brain" (Wood 1923: 4).

This particular relation to scientific culture is reflected in how the human body is described in New Thought, theosophical and other esoteric texts on mental cultivation. Spiritual experts and self-help writers employed a highly medicalised vocabulary – "cells", "grey areas of the brain", "motor centres", "nerves" – often also referring to reflexive bodily responses. However, this recognition of physiological limit was only ever partial – with conscious effort it was held that even these seemingly incontrovertible bodily restraints could be transcended. Books and magazines offering advice on mental training provided details of "static exercises" for practitioners to follow in which parts of the body are made still for extended periods to bring "nerves" and "motor faculties" under perfect control. One author asserts that in this way even parts of the body, like eyelids, normally subject to reflex action, can be brought under control: "He should sit like a statue, two, five, ten, fifteen, thirty minutes at a time. He should control his eye-lids, his fingers and his feet, and he should, by all means, control his tongue" (Rocine 1905: 169). In the writings of some popular New Thought authors the body is rendered not only within the grasp of perfect control, but as something plastic that can be transformed through mental effort. Christian Larson (1914), whose self-help writing mixes New Thought with phrenology, divides the brain into different areas (fig. 3) – one section for business acumen, another for imagination and so forth – asserting that by brining regular willed concentration to a particular region the brain cells there can be multiplied, in some cases leading the skull to expand. This represents one instantiation of the general principle of New Thought and Christian science – that the mind has the potential to determine and create matter. It represents the direct inverse of psycho-physiological views of mind, which often conceptualised mental states as a bodily effect, a position popularised by Thomas Huxley who asserted that consciousness is a mere epiphenomena of underlying material causation.

Fig. 3: From *Brains and how to get them* by Christian Larson

As the example of Larson suggests, 'concentration' was often understood by New Thought and theosophic practitioners as a central route to transcendence over material substrate. However, this mental capacity has received little attention from scholars who have tended to explore the centrality of 'imagination' within the esoteric tradition (e.g. Faivre 1994; Ferguson & Radford 2018). The exact meaning of concentration was often variable – in particular contexts it could mean: a directed chain of mental associations on a particular theme (Wood 1923: 9-13); the effortless attraction of a peaceful, loving mind to truth (Militz 1918: 19-21); or, most often, the exercise of the will such that the mind is held for extended periods on a single object. While overly strenuous concentration was sometimes held to be injurious to health and troublingly similar to

hypnosis and sleep, in general this mental state was widely valorised. At the most basic level it was held to be the defining character trait, the foundation on which all worldly success is built, as evidenced by self-help books, especially in the New Thought tradition, with titles like *Concentration: The Secret of Success* (Sears 2007 [1909]), as well as adverts promising audiences great prosperity in business through learning concentration (fig. 4). However, its value extended beyond this, linking the worldly understanding of concentration as the foundation of a successful personality with a range of supra-material possibilities, including: the ability to become one with objects of intense contemplation, so coming to know their essence; access to realms beyond the material world; and the capacity to change matter through the mind.[20]

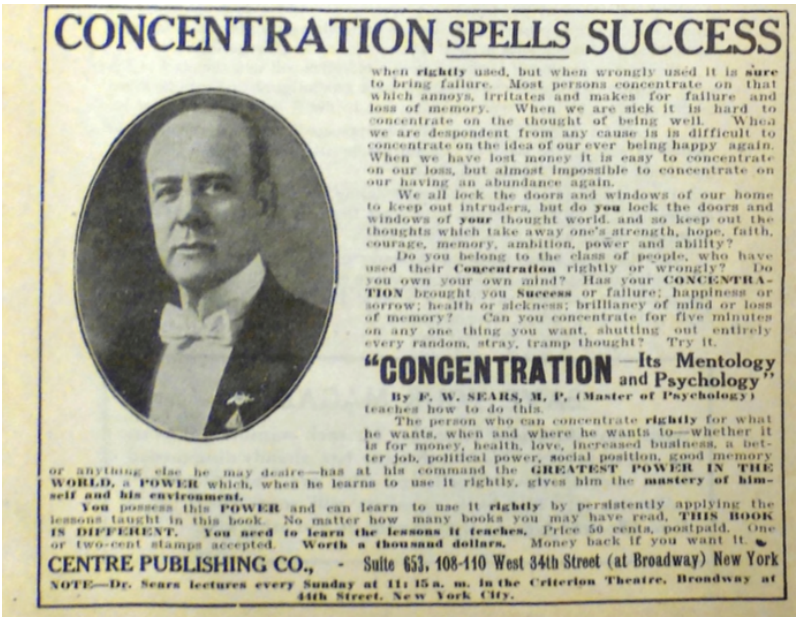

Fig. 4: Advert taken from *Advanced Thought* (Sep 1916), a journal edited by William Walker Atkinson

The number of esoteric journals offering regular discussion on 'concentration' is striking (e.g. *The Star of the East*; *Realization*; *Advanced Thought*; *Weltmer's Magazine*) as is the steady stream of self-help books about this topic. It circulated as a kind of advanced, secret mental practice which rather than just being a plain feature of ordinary minds had to be learnt to realise untold benefits. Self-styled spiritual and self-development experts pitched their credibility on having understood the true secret of

[20] Generally, scholars interested in attention have engaged largely with its economic metaphoric register, commenting on the prevalence of the term 'pay' as a way to conceptualise the giving of attention and its commodification within capitalist economies (e.g. Citton 2017). However, attentional language also contains a rich seam of magical metaphors: entranced, spell bound, mesmerised, and so forth. This speaks to the close imbrication of attention with esoteric cultural currents, something which deserves further exploration.

concentration, advertising their mastery of this mental faculty in subscription magazines and journals as a way to attract commercial interest in their books and courses. This is particularly true of New Thought practitioners who were part of a vast commercial network of readers, reviewers, endorsers and publishers, the latter of whom employed careful marketing strategies and produced a continual supply of re-prints to ensure profitability (Haller 2012: 13-14). Yet even if 'concentration' was often marketed as a secret, its central features and practices circulated widely within esoteric books and magazines which often repeated the same drills and exercises, employing a strikingly similar vocabulary. Books often began with a statement about the fact that many readers complain of being unable to control their minds before providing techniques aimed at attentional cultivation, beginning with exercises for regulating breath and static exercises for nerve and motor control, before discussing more advanced methods of concentration, including visualising positive states of affairs in order to make them into a reality, and meditating in order to reach higher states of consciousness.

The conception of 'attention' in esoteric culture is strikingly different to that outlined by historians like Crary examining a broadly similar period, but relying on different sources drawn often from psychology. In *fin de siècle* psychology, attention – in line with a broader pessimistic conception of the human subject – is understood as always strictly finite and fragile, bound by the facts of a restrictive physiology. This is typified by Oswald Külpe, the father of the Würzburg School of psychology, when he observes: "the energy of attention is limited and approximately constant in its limitation" (1902: 57). However, within esoteric culture attention is cut free from physiology, forming the centrepiece of an unbounded self – it is conceived less as a finite mental faculty than as a plastic power that can be grown through practice to infinite proportions. The underlying energetics is the complete inverse to that implicit in psychology – concentration rather than expending energy multiplies it. As one journal puts it – your resources for concentration "are inexhaustible, and you have but to drink of its crystal waters to be illumined with the fulfillment [*sic*] of every ambition" (Sheerin 1901: 48).

And yet, the esoteric conception of attention did not escape the imprimatur of materialist science. In turning to attention – that central subject of interest in contemporaneous sciences of the mind – esoteric practitioners enacted a psychologisation of the occult. The transcendental was understood as a retreat into interiority. In turn, this inner space was conceptualised through psychology's normative vocabulary taking on its constitution of the self in terms of mind and its understanding

of mind as organised around the operations of attention. This formed part of a broader turn in esoteric culture in which aspects of the world, such as secret sympathies and correspondences, once thought in older occult philosophies to exist out there in the world as signs of God's hand, were oftentimes reconceptualised as aspects of interiority, constituting, as Wouter Hanegraaff (2003) puts it, a psychologisation of the sacred and a sacralisation of the psychological. This disenchanted enchantment can be seen in attempts by esoteric practitioners to divide the world into different spheres, one material and another separate, higher and psychological, the latter being immune from the sceptical encroachment of physicalist science. The theosophist Ernest Wood (1923: 7-8), for example, held that there exists a higher "inner world", separable from the "outer world" in which the body lives – this former realm is one where ideas constitute real objects and they can be apprehended and explored through the mind via control of attention.

Faced with implicit critique from the materialist ideology of mainstream science, attention in particular provided esoteric culture with a palatable conception of spirituality, suitably rationalised through the conceptual repertoire of psychology. As such, attention was sometimes ascribed a deflationary role – one journal article, for example, instructs readers on the ordinariness of attentional control: "[W]hen you are seeking that which you desire through the medium of thought concentration, you must not get the idea that you are drawing upon some mysterious force for your supplies, located in an unseen and impenetrable realm" (Sheerin 1901: 48). Others drew directly on contemporary psychological theories of attention to invest this category with the methodical and precise authority of science. The highly popular American New Thought author Frank Channing Haddock (1914: 197-9) when giving advice on attentional training drew directly on the theories of psychologists, like William James and James Sully, to precisely define attention as the intensification of some limited objects of consciousness resulting in wider perceptual exclusion. Others drew implicitly on contemporary psychological theorising to give accounts of attention in terms of a constantly moving stream of consciousness, while still more adopted camera analogies popular in mental science (e.g. Seton 2020 [1909]; Wood 1923).[21]

[21] In a certain limited regard, the esoteric conception of attention, as an instrument of transcendence within a rationalised self-conception, mirrors its position in nineteenth century psychology. Here too

The yoga revival

As the preceding section outlines, esoteric culture drew upon an emergent *fin de siècle* discourse of 'concentration', shot through with the normative vocabulary of mental science, to produce a psychologised conception of transcendental subjectivity centring on attentional control. Yet, while the discipline of psychology was often appealed to as a source of authority for this conceptual move, esoteric practitioners also sought to unmoor this form of knowledge from its western centres of dissemination, repositioning it as something ancient and typically Indian. The *yogis* and spiritual practitioners of the subcontinent were often portrayed as the true possessors of psychological knowledge with contemporary scientists merely staging a rediscovery of ancient Indic insights. It is based on this understanding of India that Annie Besant (1935 [1889]: 83) confidently asserts, "psychology should become in the West, as it is in the East, an experimental science", and the New Thought leader Annie Rix Militz (1918: 32) observes: "The Hindu philosophers are among the deepest students of psychology, understanding the subjective nature so well, that we can take their description… as sufficiently reliable for our inquiry into concentration."

It is the books and magazines of theosophy and New Thought that are among the most forceful sites for the emergence of a conception of Indians as defined by their mastery of concentration. These texts are replete with statements about the deep knowledge of concentration possessed by Indian spiritual practitioners compared to lay westerners. As the influential scientific populariser and astronomer Garrett Putnam Serviss (Gumbrine n.d.: 5-6) observes in the foreword to a New Thought book: westerners are liable to think of material things, like chemical dyes, when they hear the word "concentration", but for the Indian it signifies an "insistent mental attitude" that all seek to cultivate. This move to conceptualise India as a fount of psychological knowledge was accompanied

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'attention' was also often called upon to preserve sacral aspects of the self while simultaneously accommodating materialist ideology. This is recognised by William James when he writes:

When we reflect that the turnings of our attention form the nucleus of our inner self; when we see… that volition is nothing but attention; when we believe that our autonomy in the midst of nature depends on our not being pure effect, but a cause - we must admit that the question whether attention involve such a principle of spiritual activity or not is metaphysical as well as psychological, and is well worthy of all the pains we can bestow on its solution. It is in fact the pivotal question of metaphysics, the very hinge on which our picture of the world shall swing from materialism, fatalism, monism, towards spiritualism, freedom, pluralism, - or else the other way (James 1927 [1890]: 447-8).

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by attempts to recover the subcontinent's longstanding spiritual traditions of attentional and bodily control. From the 1880s onwards, the Theosophical Society, which had by this point relocated its headquarters from New York to Adyar near Madras, disseminated a steady stream of yogic texts in India, releasing translations and interpretations of a good number of Sanskrit works, extending beyond Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* to the medieval Hatha Yoga corpus, including *Hathayoga Pradipika* and *Shiva Samhita*. In doing so, they served not simply as passive receivers of Indian spiritual culture, but as active agents in its creation, helping to popularise texts about attentional control, such as the *Yoga Sutra*, which had largely fallen into abeyance in South Asia, and offering novel interpretations that portrayed ancient philosophies through the lens of popular psychological and esoteric concepts, such as mesmerism, concentration and astral light.

Yoga in particular was often portrayed as a pre-eminent science of concentration discovered by Indian sages and popularised by esoteric practitioners. The co-founder of the Theosophical Society, William Quan Judge saw yoga as a "culture of concentration" (1905 [1888]) interpreting it in relation to the dominant concepts of esoteric discourse and Victorian psychology, including the 'Will', which he himself admitted finds no mention in ancient scriptural sources (1920 [1888]: xiv). For Judge and other theosophists, yogic practices of concentration served as empirical tools for the acquirement of knowledge (providing, for example, insight into the properties of matter as well as evolutionary histories) that were far superior to 'modern science' (ibid.: xvii-xviii). In doing so, theosophists drew on romantic orientalist notion of Indians as defined by introspective capacity, but broke firmly from earlier inert renderings of this capacity in relation to mysticism, instead positioning Hindu attentional culture as resolutely empirical, a superior competitor to western science.

India-based Theosophists (and to a lesser degree New Thought practitioners) were operating in a shared intellectual ecology with Hindu religious reformers, sharing ideas and sometimes organisational space. Theosophy, for example, briefly joined with the sober Hindu reformist organisation, the Ayra Samaj in the late 1870s before major doctrinal differences led to a split (van der Veer 2001: 55). It is not useful to conceive of one group – either esoteric practitioners or Hindu religious reformers – as a first cause from which the ideas of the other emerged, but rather both were entangled in a dialectic interchange. Indeed, it should be noted that the Theosophical Society contained

within its ranks many middle-class and elite Indians, such as the country's first prime minister Nehru, the Banaras-based educationalist Bhagwan Das, and the chemistry professor and yoga scholar I.K. Tamini. I would like in this final section to examine the role of Hindu religious reformers and esoteric practitioners in the popularisation of yoga in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of an emergent national sphere. The popularisation and revival of yoga during this period, from a position of comparative obscurity, presented 'concentration' – that centrepiece of new models of western subjectivity – as the *summum bonum* of Hindu tradition, as well as one foundation for an emergent national subjectivity. In the account that follows, I will pay particular attention to life and ideas of the Hindu reformer Vivekananda, who is among the most important figures in the modern refashioning of yoga as well as for the positioning of attentional control as a normative trait that defines idealised conceptions of the Indian national subject.

The idea of yoga as something 'modern' with a contingent history rather than simply an articulation of ancient precept has only relatively recently become a major topic of scholarly interest. Starting in the 1990s, scholars, such as Norman Sjoman (1996) and Karl Baier (1998), began examining the passage of yoga to the west as well as exploring the quite recent historical incorporation of certain physical exercises drawn from gymnastics, among other sources. The publication in 2004 of two influential books – Joseph Alter's *Yoga in Modern India* (2009 [2004]) and Elizabeth De Michelis's *A History of Modern Yoga* (2008 [2004]) – spurred further interest in modern yogic practice's historical roots. The former examined contemporary and historical articulations between yoga and science, positioning the white-lab-coat-wearing figure of yoga researcher Swami Kuvalayananda as a central player in the emergence of a modern, transnational conception of yoga, while De Michelis's study explored the development of the Brahmo Samaj and its influence, along with esoteric currents, on Vivekananda's important reformulation of yoga. More recent works have continued this historicising trend, including US-based Indologist David Gordon White's (2014) biography of the *Yoga Sutra* and Mark Singleton's (2010) account of international yoga's present emphasis on bodily posture despite a distinctly cerebral orientation at the turn of the twentieth century. From these works and many others, a flourishing field of Yoga Studies – combining expertise from anthropologists, historians and religious studies scholars – has emerged, producing a steady stream of literature charting the milieu's development in diverse regions of the world, its links to neoliberalism and its

centrality to Indian nationalism (Deslippe 2018; Godrej 2017; Gupta & Copeman 2019; Hauser 2013; Jain 2014; Newcombe & O'Brien-Kop 2021).

A central contention of historical work in this area is that by the late colonial period yoga, as a practice and philosophy, had to a large degree fallen out of the purview of respectability and mainstream Hindu orthodoxy. White notes that: "Yoga philosophy had been effectively dropped from the traditional north Indian brahmanic curriculum by no later than the sixteenth century." (2014: 100). The text that presently has come most closely to be associated with the tradition – Pantanjali's *Yoga Sutra* – was no longer being copied by scribes (16). The erudite polymath Rajendralal Mitra (1883: XC) in attempting an early English translation of the *Yoga Sutra* sought to find a "professional yogi" to aid in his endeavours, but was disappointed in this regard, being unable to locate a single pandit in all of Bengal who specialised in yoga. He fared little better in Banaras where he encountered only one relevant specialist who proved an unsuitable source of information as he demanded that Mitra live with him before revealing his knowledge, terms which were too exacting for the cosmopolitan Bengali scholar. Attempts to introduce yogic practices into schools were often met with scepticism. Kumar (2000) describes how the theosophist Annie Besant's endeavours to set up a school in Banaras, which included then-peculiar activities like evening meditation sessions, was met with scepticism by members of the city's orthodox Hindu community.

Even if yoga was not central to expressions of Hindu orthodoxy, it was in the late colonial period being practised by groups of ascetics, including the *Naths* of north-western India who self-identified as *yogis*. During this period, the term *yogi* was often employed loosely to refer to a plethora of ascetics, Muslim fakirs, contortionists, street performers and magicians, many of whom did not actually practice yoga (Singleton 2010: 4). In an influential book, *Yoga Body*, Mark Singleton examines how negative attitudes towards yoga in the late nineteenth century – shared alike by colonial figures and educated Indians – arose from a particular presentation of the *yogi*, across a diverse array of sources, as a symbol of all that was wrong with Hinduism. Starting from the sixteenth-century letters of François Bernier, Singleton traces how *yogis* were portrayed as dangerous and licentious figures whose physical feats were emblematic of Indian spirituality's perversion. These negative attitudes partly arose from the particular economic and social status of *yogis*. Ascetics were difficult to regulate, often forming,

between the fifteenth and early decades of the nineteenth century, large militarised groupings that controlled money lending as well as martial and trading networks that for a long period threatened the hegemony of the East India Company (*ibid*.: 39). With the consolidation of British power, however, the ascetic's position of economic and martial power began to wane – in 1773 the governor-general of India enforced a ban in Bengal on wandering *yogis* as part of an attempt to encourage sedentary forms of religious lifestyle (*ibid*.: 41). Unable to practice their itinerant and martial lifestyle, ascetics were forced to reside in villages, practising yogic showmanship to survive, so taking on a new lowly social position in caste-based society and entrenching their status as a voyeuristic point of revulsion for visiting foreigners and travel writers.

What is significant for the present argument is that the *yogi* became associated with raw physicality, forms of contortion and showmanship. The term *Hatha Yoga*, most closely associated with *Nath* ascetics, was used to signify a degeneration of yogic philosophy and practice into a concern with mere physicality and supernatural bodily powers rather than spiritual awakening. In Theosophical Society publications, a repeated distinction is made between a superior *Raja Yoga*, a spiritual and meditational practice, and a merely physical *Hatha Yoga*, often practised by wayward ascetics. As the aforementioned William Judge, observed, "the greatest objection" to *Hatha Yoga* is that, unlike *Raja Yoga,* with its emphasis on concentration and the psychological, the former "pertains to the material and semi-material man,—roughly speaking, to the body, and what is gained through it is lost at death" (1905: 6). Attempts to position the 'true' yoga as essentially psychological could also be found in the works of numerous late-nineteenth-century European scholars. They sought to portray yoga as originally concerned with the admirable task of cultivating concentration, a tradition degraded in modern times by *yogis*. Wilkins in *Modern Hinduism*, a book which claims to offer an overview of Hindu lifestyle, reserves praise for ancient *yogis*, whose object "was to concentrate his attention until he had come to regard himself as one with the supreme spirit" (1987 [1887]: 86-7). However, he concludes that the high pretensions of the past aimed at "perfect concentration" had presently become corrupted by contemporary *yogis*: "Nowadays these men go about the country as fortune-tellers and conjurors, and often impose upon the ignorance and credulity of the people" (87). In a similar vein, the celebrity orientalist Max Müller warns his readers not to scoff at yoga despite the fact that presently it has become an "absurd by exaggeration" as evidenced by the "self-imposed disciplines and tortures of the Yogins" (1919 [1899]: 311). He contends that

counter to its present corrupted form, yoga's original intentions were noble, centring on a set of techniques "to counteract the distractions of the senses" in aid of concentration.

The foregoing account is suggestive of a simple conclusion: by the late nineteenth century a diverse group of figures – esoteric popularisers, Indian religious reformers and establishment Indologists – had coalesced to present the essence of yoga as residing in psychology rather than the body, centring particularly on the cultivation of concentration. The appeal of concentration, which underpinned attempts to recover and popularise 'true' yoga, occurred within a newly constituted discursive field in which attentional control was foregrounded in normative conceptions of the subject. Across a broad spectrum of areas – from the development of psychology, changing metaphoric registers to the preoccupations of esoteric culture – mastery of attention was valorised as central to what it means to be a good subject. This invested attention with a set of properties associated with methodical empiricism as well as residual sacral aspects of the self that provided a vocabulary for the reformulation of Hindu spirituality in accordance with governing scientific and moral precepts.

My contention is not that yoga was historically unconcerned with concentration. Fixation on a single-point and control of mind are central and longstanding themes in Hinduism, a value which is repeated across diverse scriptural sources, from meditational procedures outlined in the *Gita* to techniques of concentration provided in the *Skanda Purana*, *Vigyan Bhairav Tantra* and *Hatha Yoga* texts – to name a few of near limitless reference points. However, yoga in its long history has been more than a set of techniques of attentional control aimed at perfect concentration. *Neti* (cleansing of nasal passages), *basti* (a form of enema), controlled usage of opium and cannabis (Green 2008: 311-2), sexual techniques aimed at sucking semen and vaginal fluids into the penis (*vajroli mudra*), as well as magical and alchemical practices (Alter 2005) – together form a small selection of numerous possible examples of a diverse yogic culture. Further, terms that today have supremely attentional connotations often carried different pre-modern valences – as Pinch (2012: 13-5) notes, *samadhi*, which is presently commonly understood as a state of perfect concentration or absorption, meant for late eighteenth century *gosains* (warrior ascetics) something quite different, the achievement of a state of deathlessness, that is immortality. To draw up the psychologised aspect of a heterogenous yogic culture and invest it with primacy, is necessarily an act of occlusion, one which sanitises yoga in accordance with the

dominant moral imperatives of a global *fin de siècle* culture, a culture shared alike by colonial figures and educated Indians.

It is in the figure of Vivekananda (1863-1902) that the various aspects of late colonial attentional culture are most forcefully brought together – its valorisation in esotericism, its centrality to mental science and its longstanding importance in Hinduism – to provide a reconstituted vision of Indian spirituality with a scientised conception of concentration at its centre. Vivekananda's book *Raja Yoga* is sometimes[22] credited as marking the beginning of modern yoga, setting the parameters of the practice-based yoga to come and positioning the tradition as central to Indian conceptions of nationality (De Michelis 2004). As Singleton puts it: "Vivekananda rescued yoga from the merely philosophical or philological… and presented it as the *summum bonum* of the (authentic, practical) Indian spiritual tradition. Largely thanks to his efforts, yoga was refashioned as a cultural symbol, in harmony with the religious and intellectual aspirations of educated Indians" (2010: 169).

Vivekananda wrote *Raja Yoga* over a few months while abroad, and large parts of the book are based on speeches delivered in America where he attracted a sizeable following, especially among educated women. Unlike his famous guru the mystical saint Ramakrishna, Vivekananda forsook a strictly ascetic life aimed at spiritual liberation for more worldly aims, seeking through education and religious reform to bring about the uplift of India then suffering under imperial rule. With the hope of raising funds to aid in this mission, something which had eluded him in India, he sailed to America in 1893, where he would stay for nearly three years before spending eight months in Europe (White 2014: 121). Able to speak in perfect English with marked charisma on the highest matters of philosophy and spirituality, Vivekananda became something of a celebrity while in America. Media reports from his trip regularly pronounce on his "eloquence" and striking attire of turban and resplendent orange robes. Building on a popular interest in his speeches, Vivekananda initially joined an American lecture bureau, which billed him as "An Orator by Divine Right; A Model Representative of his Race" (Harris 2022: 167). However, growing tired of attempts to commercialise his mission, he quit the bureau going to the Green Acre conferences in

[22] Numerous scholars have critiqued a tendency to over-emphasise Vivekananda's influence on the modernisation of yoga. I do not intend to position Vivekananda as the sole ancestor of modern yoga. However, I document his ideas about concentration and spirituality here as they are particularly relevant to the specific historical and ethnographic currents relating to attention that I deal with in this thesis.

Maine in 1894 where he delivered a series of lectures. At Green Acre, a genteel summer retreat of spiritual seekers that sought to bring together advocates of different faiths and traditions as part of a pluralistic atmosphere, Vivekananda met a broad array of people practising New Thought (ibid.: 189-90). Indeed, throughout his trip it was those aligned to esoteric strains of American culture, whether Boston spiritualists or leading women in the New Thought movement, who were the most welcoming of the monk. Although he was sometimes critical of these currents, once ridiculing Christian Science as a "shopkeeper's religion" (ibid.: 182), he began adapting his message to the particular interests of esoterically oriented western audiences, incorporating ideas about the ether and mesmerism, into his developing ideas about yoga. At Green Acre, Vivekananda also became acquainted with the eminent psychologist William James – at one point James was invited to write the foreword to *Raja Yoga*, while James in turn asked Vivekananda to chair Harvard's new department of Eastern Philosophy (White 2014: 122). Neither invitation was ultimately taken up. During his time abroad, Vivekananda also became acquainted with the polymath and psychologist Frederick Myers, who had an interest in psychical research into spiritual phenomena – as we will see, contemporary psychological ideas had a decided influence on the particular formulation of yoga that Vivekananda presented. The last years of Vivekananda's American venture were spent on the East Coast and it is in New York that he formulated the ideas and speeches that came to form the body of *Raja Yoga*, published in 1896.

The great success of *Raja Yoga* was foundational to the formation of modern yoga, establishing the *Yoga Sutra* as the tradition's central text and ushering in a new practice-oriented yogic tradition. The text mixes different currents of Hindu spirituality – combining elements from the *Yoga Sutra* with aspects of Tantric Yoga – along with various scientific and esoteric ideas. A large part of the text is devoted to the cultivation of *prana*, a kind of animating force that pervades the universe, which De Michelis (2004: 151) and others (Baier 2009; Zoehrer 2021) read as deeply influenced by nineteenth-century mesmeric beliefs. However, the defining leitmotif of the text is the cultivation of concentration, drawing heavily from a small set of aphorisms in the *Yoga Sutras* that outline eight sequential practices aiming towards heightened states of attentivity and spiritual liberation. Vivekananda declares "the goal of all [*Raja Yoga's*] teaching is how to concentrate the mind" (Vivekananda 1920 [1896]: 9). At the outset of the book, Vivekananda recognises the prevalence of widespread religious doubt at the turn of the century, locating the root of this predicament in the fact that most

people's faith is founded on "belief" – sets of theories that devotees must take on authority. He contends, instead, that true religion is based on inferential observation and "direct experience" – it is this that yoga offers by teaching "concentration". Yoga is positioned as a kind of science, which is comparable in its method to both chemistry and astronomy, both of which provides incontrovertible knowledge about the world through diligent concentration. He declares: "How has all this knowledge in the world been gained but by the concentration of the powers of the mind?" (8). However, while the method of yoga is comparable to other sciences, its object is different – it seeks to illumine the mind rather than the external world, aiming to use concentration to empirically reveal its deepest truths:

The science of Raja Yoga, in the first place, proposes to give men such a means – of observing the internal states... The power of attention of mind, when properly guided, and directed towards the internal world, will analyse the mind, and illumine facts for us. The powers of the mind are like rays of light being dissipated; when they are concentrated they illumine everything (6-7).

The empirical vision of yoga outlined is strikingly different to that contained in the ostensible source text, the *Yoga Sutra*. In the latter treatise, yogic control of mind and attention is a technique aimed towards the cessation of mental activity, while here it appears as a kind of inductive tool, offering adepts the capacity to observe mental states and reactions. This scientised rendering of yoga is compounded by several allusions to the then-novel discipline of psychology – Vivekananda refers to yogic practitioners as "psychologists", noting: "…for the psychologist, this minute observation which the scientific man can throw upon the external world, will have to be thrown on the internal world, and this requires a great deal of practice" (7). This conception of yogic practitioners as psychologists makes little sense within the parameters of the present day where the latter group perform experiments on the minds of others. However, in the late nineteenth century, before the hegemony of behaviourism, psychologists relied on introspection – for Wilhelm Wundt, who established the first experimental psychology laboratory[23], investigators had to undergo arduous training, particularly of attention, to be able to diligently observe their own consciousness. Vivekananda's interlocutor, William James, who himself relied on self-observation, defined introspection as follows, in a way reminiscent of a modernised yogic investigator: "Introspective Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. The word

[23] William James established a laboratory earlier than Wundt, but it was only used for teaching purposes.

introspection needs hardly to be defined—it means, of course, looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (1890 in Boring 1953: 170, emphasis in original). Here attention is rendered central in dual sense – it is the foundational subject matter of psychological investigation and the subjective norm that the scientist must cultivate in order to obtain empirical findings. In casting, yogic practitioners as introspective investigators, Vivekananda invests Hindu spirituality with the authority of Victorian science, both sharing in their methodical cultivation of attention. He describes yogic concentration as allowing adepts to distinguish between different aspects of mental events – ethereal vibration, nerve movements and mental reaction – in a language that mixes esoteric concepts with formal psychological introspection, which also aimed at methodically parsing out different aspects of mental activity (Vivekananda 1920: 8).

The way in which Vivekananda describes concentration also echoes its valorisation in wider esoteric culture, and particularly in New Thought, where it is often portrayed as a "secret", invested with the power to bring worldly success. At one point in *Raja Yoga*, he observes "There is no limit to the power of the human mind. The more concentrated it is, the more power is brought to bear on one point, and that is the secret" (6). In another speech given to an American audience he states: "perfect concentration" brings "whatever one wants" (Vivekananda 1958b: 226). Generally, his writings and speeches are suffused with ideas that would have been appealing to an audience inclined to New Thought, including repeated assertions that the mind is the first cause, which determines matter. In turn, the influence of Vivekananda's rendering of yoga on New Thought was significant – numerous books in the tradition cite him as an authority (e.g. Gumbrine n.d.; Haddock 1914) as part of a broader conception of yoga as the ancient counterpart to New Thought's modern wisdom. After meeting with Vivekananda in Chicago, the New Thought leader, Annie Rix Militz, who had a sizeable following, turned increasingly towards Indian spirituality which features prominently in her own concentration-focused practice, Christian Yoga (Haller 2012: 113-16).

The centrality of concentration to Vivekananda's philosophy is not restricted to meditative yogic practices. It circulates as a prominent theme throughout his collected speeches and writings, coming to define his views on education and other aspects of Indian spirituality, including his influential articulation of the work-based philosophy of *karma yoga*. Vivekananda often disambiguated concentration from purely spiritual

contexts aimed at self-liberation, making it a generalised trait that all should aim for, and positioning it as central to emergent conceptions of the Indian national subject. In one particularly emphatic passage he declares:

The main difference between men and the animals is the difference in their power of concentration. All success in any line of work is the result of this. Everybody knows something about concentration. We see its results every day. High achievements in art, music, etc., are the results of concentration… The difference in their power of concentration also constitutes the difference between man and man. Compare the lowest with the highest man. (Vivekananda 1921: 37).

A conception of concentration as the primal feature of humans as something that distinguishes different individuals is reminiscent of New Thought philosophy where this capacity is often portrayed as a hereditary trait, serving to differentiate races and persons. The prominent New Thought writer Julia Seton speaks of "inherited concentration" as determining why some nations and persons are successful and others not: "When we wish to know the difference between the physical, mental or psychical development of nations, races, countries or individuals, we can easily determine it if we look at the difference in their power of concentration" (2020 [1909]: 16).

The continuing importance of attention: music, art and Vivekananda's legacy

Popularising at the end of the nineteenth century, before robust political claims to Indian sovereignty were asserted, Vivekananda in many ways provided a conceptual framework for others to follow, placing Indian traditions of attentional control at the centre of national tradition. In replacing the dreamlike Indic introspection of the European romantics with something more scientific and methodical, he provided a framing of Indian spirituality and its psychological inclination that could serve as a basis for more confident articulations of national tradition. In the first half of twentieth century, some of the most influential Indian art historians and anthropologists emphasised a "spirit of *dhyan*" or heightened introspective attention, whether as an aesthetic quality (Chanda 1936) or artistic technique (Coomaraswamy 1909), as a central theme linking South Asian art over millennia and diverse communities. This often formed part of a wider turn in Indian art during this period away from the dominance of European naturalism towards what Partha Mitter (1994: 9) describes as the *swadeshi* doctrine of art aimed at recovering 'pure' traditional creative expressions as part of an emergent Hindu identity. During the first part of the twentieth century, in music a turn to yoga and introspective attention can also be seen as part of an attempt to

constitute an emergent Hinduised national tradition, explicitly seeking to separate itself from both Muslim hereditary musicians and dominant forms of western harmony. In 1921, at a conference bringing together various eminent figures with the express purpose of forming a national classical tradition, the chairman's address forcefully articulates this theme, arguing that Indian music should be classed as a kind of yoga aiming towards – just like a *yogi* – the supreme focusing of the mind (Music in India: An Indian University 1921, no author given). This conception of Indian classical music as a form of yoga, linked to yogic culture through a shared emphasis on heightened attention, continues in Banaras to this day, forming the basis of claims to spiritual authority for artists living there (see chapter 6).

It is true that by the 1920s (continuing into the present) yoga had, as numerous scholars have shown, begun to take a physicalised and postural turn, incorporating numerous energetic *asana* from western gymnastics and other traditions. However, within India at least, the positioning of states of exquisite concentration as the acme of yogic tradition remains prevalent. In Banaras Hindu University, a popular yoga centre offers degrees and diplomas in the subject, largely to youths – an emphasis on postural instruction is predominant, yet meditation and attentional control is also taught, and all there that I spoke to asserted that this latter aspect provides the pinnacle to which yoga aims (even if knowledge of *asana* is more lucrative, offering the possibility of teaching wealthy westernised audiences). Over the course of the twentieth century, yogic popularisers, following in Vivekananda's mould, continued to position concentration as a central aspect of normativity subjectivity. In the writings and speeches of these popularisers, the unmooring of concentration from spiritual yogic contexts and its positioning as a generalised character trait central to worldly conceptions of successful individuals becomes more pronounced. Swami Sivananda, who served as perhaps the most prominent populariser of Vivekananda's message in the twentieth century and a central figure in the spread of yoga, tells his followers: "Concentration helps a man in his material progress also. He will have a very good outturn of work in his office or business house.... You can achieve anything through concentration. Nothing is impossible to a man who practises regular concentration" (Sivananda 2011 [1945]: 72).

As the examples drawn from music, art and elsewhere show, throughout the twentieth century yoga increasingly served as a generalised template for reconstituting diverse forms of activity as elements of Hindu spiritual tradition, linked together by a shared

emphasis on heightened attentivity. As such, yogic techniques of mental control were disaggregated from a strictly spiritual milieu, being no longer tightly tied to a specific psycho-bodily regimens delineated by guru and scripture. M.S. Golwalkar – the aforementioned Hindu right leader – advised aspiring nationalists to sit in solitude daily to probe the mind until every thought of an unworthy and distracting nature is analysed and removed. The purpose of such an exercise was not the purification of the mind for spiritual awakening, but rather the complete devotion of consciousness to the nation: "By such a constant and conscious application of his will a worker can attain the state of complete concentration on his chosen path of national resurgence in spite of worldly distractions" (Golwalkar 2000: 705). The implicit image in Golwalkar's description is of the *yogi* who through meditation has become free of worldly distractions, but the divergence from the spiritual ideal of total concentration is significant – in nationalist discourse the primary transformation that occurs through sustained attention is not a transformation of the self *per se*, but of the nation.

It is in the popular pamphlets and booklets of the Ramakrishna Monastery and Mission that a conception of 'concentration' as a central trait of an idealised national subjectivity reaches perhaps its most forceful articulation. The organisation, which has branches spread throughout India was founded by Vivekananda and aims to carry out educational and religious reform work for the uplift of the Indian nation. Through specialised bookshops in major Indian cities as well as independent vendors, the organisation presently offers a large array of cheaply made, popular booklets. These publications, which often blend nationalism and spiritual themes with self-help and productivity discourse, are aimed at Indian youth, beseeching them to rise out of their present wayward stupor through learning control of mind, self-confidence and singular concentration. As I deal with this literature in more detail in chapter four, I offer only one quote here to give a sense of the message and high-sounding tone of these booklets: "The secret of success, health, and happiness lie in the power of concentration. And nowhere is this need felt more keenly than in the Western world today… It is the lack of proper control over mind and body which at present is killing everyone little by little" (Paramananda 2018: 24).

Within Ramakrishna Mission literature ideas about psycho-bodily control are often removed from their original sites of ascetic and spiritual articulation and emplaced within a broader horizon of self-development and worldly aspiration. This can be seen

also in the particular ways in which the image and memory of Vivekananda circulates more widely in north India today. As perhaps the central historical figure from the colonial period, recently eclipsing (in the Hindi belt at least) even Gandhi in his popularity, Vivekananda's image and quotes are endlessly reproduced on social media as well as being cited by politicians. Passages that originally appeared in a circumscribed yogic context as guidance on how to achieve spiritual liberation now circulate in disaggregated form as inspirational quotes emphasising the importance of singular concentration as part of a general striving for largely worldly ambitions. In *Raja Yoga*, Vivekananda offers the following advice to spiritual seekers:

Those who really want to be Yogis must give up, once for all, this nibbling at things. Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life; dream of it; think of it; live on that idea. Let the brain, the body, muscles, nerves, every part of your body be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, and this is the way great spiritual giants are produced (1920: 70).

On social media the same passage often appears, but in altered form with references to *yogis* and spirituality removed, functioning as a general call to singular striving towards personal goals (fig. 5). Here the memory of Vivekananda, as someone who died young in service of national regeneration, provides a kind of a model template of concentrated subjectivity which others are called upon to follow with quotes of this kind often being posted on National Youth Day, which also marks the monk's birthday owing to his association with youthful excellence.

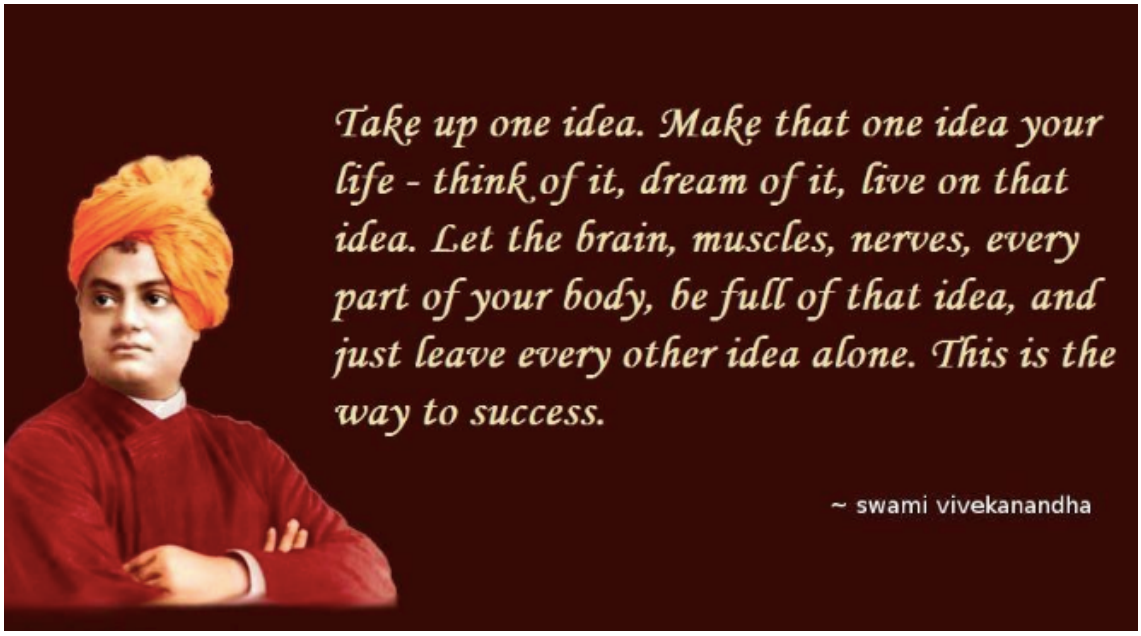


Fig. *5*: Posted on Facebook during National Youth Day

Conclusion

Hinduism has for thousands of years emphasised the importance of attentional cultivation. In emphasising a particular moment at the turn of the century when disparate currents valorising mastery of attention coalesced, I do not wish to suggest that 'concentration' was invented as a point of concern. However, engagement with this theme in esoteric and Indian history – which is lacking in the wider historiography on attention and South Asia – provides one route to understanding why these longstanding traditions of mental control have come to figure so prominently in present-day Indian conceptions of idealised subjectivity. While other aspects of Indian religious tradition have been cast aside, placed outside the ken of respectable national tradition, spiritually-infused regimens of attentional control remain a central concern, linking together otherwise disparate spheres of activity, such as musical practice, ritual orthodoxy and student life. The particular formulation of 'attention' that exists in these contexts owes much to their imbrication with modernised notions of Indian spirituality, an imbrication intensified and made central by the currents of the late colonial period.

In many of the subsequent chapters, the outlined intellectual currents of the late nineteenth century re-appear as fragments of the past that point back to this fertile period of Indian history. This can be seen, for example, in the New Thought self-help books sold in Banaras or the posters of Vivekananda that adorn student rooms. Yet, it is in chapter six that these historical themes are returned to most forcefully and explicitly. Here, I examine the reformulation of Indian classical music over the course of the twentieth century as a process of *yogisation* centring on a conception of Hindu spirituality defined primarily by the cultivation of heightened attentivity.

Chapter 3 | The valorisation of single-pointed attention in north India

The previous chapter looked at some of the historical conditions through which longstanding elements of South Asian spiritual tradition built around attentional mastery came to be foregrounded as central aspects of what makes up a normative, national Indian subject. This present chapter seeks to explore how these same themes – a concern with control over interiority as an index of idealised character – circulate within the ethnographic present of north India. Across a diversity of different groups in Banaras, whether priests, musicians or wrestlers, heightened attentivity was a subject that provoked excitement and lengthy discussion amongst my interlocutors. Yet attention was not valorised in a general sense, but rather people articulated their conceptions of the good mind in relation to a very specific kind of psychic state, which I label 'single-pointed attention'. This label reflects the extreme selectivity of consciousness that underpins popular north Indian attentional ideology, the idea that the mind and body should be given over to one thing rather than many. As an idealised psycho-bodily state, single-pointedness stands in contrast to other culturally-specific attentional ideologies, such as the "evenly hovering attention" that is fundamental to psychic normativity in northern Thailand, a place where, unlike in South Asia, a mind focused on one thing is considered undesirable (Cassaniti & Luhrmann 2011: 41).

For nearly all of my interlocutors, a good mind is one that is still, cool and peaceful, yet its full potential is only realised upon being attached firmly to an object. While in most *Banarasi* contexts this corresponds to an eminently practical state of singular concentration, defined by a surfeit of self-restraint, sometimes – albeit only in specific settings – a more intense attentional state was given prominence, one which might best be termed as singular absorption, characterised by a loss of self, but also intentionality and control. The points of continuity and divergence between these two aspects of single-pointedness – that is singular concentration and singular absorption – offer a productive vantage, I argue, from which to analyse and theorise the category of attention itself, a point that I will return to towards the end of this chapter.

In exploring the centrality of attentional cultivation to *Banarasi* conceptions of normative subjectivity, this chapter aims to draw out a single-pointed ideal that has long existed at the margins of South Asia's ethnographic record. Unlike in Buddhist

contexts, where *attentionalist* understandings of self have featured more prominently in scholarly accounts (Braun 2013; Cook 2010), single-pointedness, despite being equally axiomatic to Hinduised conceptions of the proper subject, has remained only a thread running through diverse anthropological treatments of South Asia, yet one never fully elaborated. Reading carefully through the region's ethnographic corpus, one will find frequent references to individuals that enter states of single-pointed attention, whether wrestlers, housewives or middle-class Kolkatans. They appear for a paragraph or a page and then recede from the reader's sight. Through bringing out this ideal and submitting it to examination, this chapter explores its intersection with important socio-cultural categories – whether biomoral substance, caste or gender – showing how attentional ideology reproduces wider hierarchies. This offers a novel perspective then on how overarching aspects of the cultural order in north India, which have long been the subject of anthropological analysis, come to be embodied and represented within the intimate domain of the psyche.

The ideal *man*: stable, peaceful and single-pointed

One concept that I will return to often in this thesis is the north Indian psycho-bodily idea of *man*, which is sometimes translated as heart-mind. I analyse *man* (as well as other emic theories of mind) mainly in chapter 5, but it is necessary to provide some elaboration here as the concept is central to north Indian understandings of attention. While the *man* is in some senses intimately associated with the self, functioning as a repository of one's wishes and desires, it is also in another sense separate. It is independent, defined by its restless (*chanchal*) nature, which seeks to incessantly roam. Incapable of discrimination between right and wrong, an unrestrained *man* can lead one to immorality, and it is the role of a number of overlapping, psycho-bodily organs and capacities to control it: *buddhi*, *dimaag*, *vivek*, *brain, mind*. If working well, these organs and capacities - as centres of intellect and moral discrimination - serve to provide guidance, restraining the *man* so that rather than flickering between many sensory objects, it comes to rest on one. Within this framework, attention is understood to be chiefly a form of self-restraint – it is the control of the restless *man* such that it is brought into a state of stability and peace. The diffuseness of the attention-as-self-restraint schema is reflected in everyday language. Most notably, the widely accepted Hindi translation of attention is *dhyan*, which means both attention in a broadly English language sense as well as meditation, the prototypical act of self-control.

A widespread understanding of the *man* as essentially restless also underpins its inverse, the normative conception of what a good mind should look like. In its idealised and perfected form, the *man* is defined by a set of qualities that are essentially the negation of its inherent restless potential. During fieldwork, a cluster of words recurred in descriptions of what constitutes a good *man*: peaceful (*shaant*), stable (*sthir*), at ease (*chain*), centred (*kendrit*), cold (*thand*), as well as singularly concentrated (*ekagrit*). Many of these terms have overlapping semantic resonances, and together they imply a reduction in the mind's activity and movement.

Shaant is probably the most common adjective used to describe the normative mind, and higher-order attributes, such as single-pointedness, are dependent upon first achieving this quality. When *shaant* is used to describe a mind, it implies something slightly different to English language phrase 'peace of mind'. In her study of the ritual observances of women living in Banaras, Pearson notes that while her interlocutors often seek 'peace of mind', the word has a deeper meaning than first meets the eye. She writes: "peace of mind is more than moments of peace or quiet reflection" and corresponds to a state of equanimity in which the mind has been steadied (Pearson 1992: 407-8). I would add that it also implies a lack of mental tension. People repeatedly emphasised to me that this quality of peacefulness is a necessary pre-requisite for concentration, but not synonymous with it. The *man* is peaceful during sleep, but it is not concentrated, as was often pointed out. During sitar lessons in Banaras, my teacher would often diagnose lapses in my playing as the result of a lack of concentration. However, rather than telling me simply focus, my teacher encouraged me first to make my mind peaceful: "First the mind should be *shaant*, then *dhyan* [focus] will come. Without being *shaant* any noise will disturb you."

The set of qualities associated with a peaceful mind, such as stability and lack of tension, were also sometimes conceptualised through the idiom of coolness. The north Indian conception of hot/cold, which is formally elaborated in Ayurvedic medicine and has been dealt with extensively in prior scholarship (Foster 1994; Pool 1987), should not be reduced to temperature, although often the two frameworks overlap. Certain substances, such as milk and particular fruits, are held to be cold, while others, such as onions and garlic are hot - these categorisations do not correspond to variations in thermal energy. Rather, hotness and coldness function as a quality that certain

substances possess and one which can be passed between foods, persons and other physical entities. Heating often implies stimulation and activity. For example, in Hindu weddings, the bride and groom are rubbed with turmeric, an archetypal hot substance, with the hope that this will induce fertility and activity in the marital bed. Generally, balance is taken to be ideal – one does not want the body to become either too hot or cold – and, as such, in extreme environments even very hot/cold substances may be permissible. For example, even though alcohol is widely seen as dangerous, immoral and an overly hot substance, I sometimes heard teetotal Banaras residents making an exception for mountainous people who must deal with very cold weather. However, despite a general desire for balance, in the context of the mind, coolness is considered preferable. This is likely because a hot mind is suggestive of too much activity, while coolness as a quality bears more similarity to the ideal of the *man* as something stable and without an excess of movement. Notably, heating does not necessarily imply an increase in energy – a cool, stable mind is generally held to have more energy (*urja*) and power (*shakti*) than a hot and overly active one.

A peaceful mind that is stable, is highly valued, and something that is often sought from deities during worship. However, it is only with the application of this steadied mind – its attachment to an object – that its full potential is realised. Ideally, the *man* will be concentrated, and, what's more, this concentration should be single-pointed, meaning only one object is focused upon. The Hindi word for concentration is suggestive of single-pointedness: *ekagrata*. The root of this term is *ek*, meaning one, and, it speaks to an idealised psycho-bodily state in which the mind is controlled and brought to focus on a point. This is codified in certain forms of popular meditation in which the practitioner trains the mind to focus on a point, such as the tip of an incense stick burning in a dark room.

In popular north Indian ideologies of attention there is a further highly valorised state beyond even that of the peaceful mind concentrated firmly on a single object. This more intense attentional state is perhaps best translated as 'singular absorption', and it describes a total loss of self as captured poetically by its associated popular metaphoric registers of drowning (*dubna*) and immersion (*vilin hona*). As with *ekagrata*, this intense absorptive state is characterised by singularity, the mind becoming totally merged with some specific divine object. However, it should be noted that singular absorption is exceedingly difficult to obtain except for the most skilled and passionate

adept, and, so, unlike the category of single-pointed concentration, this attentional state features less prominently in the life of ordinary Banaras residents, circulating often as a far-off mystical ideal that represents union of self and divine. As such, it is the ideal of single-pointed concentration that takes up the bulk of this chapter, being something that intervenes more forcefully in ordinary life. However, later sections of the thesis, especially those concerning musicians (chapter six), do deal more explicitly with singular absorption, and towards the end of this present chapter I will also attempt to unpack some of the divergences but also essential points of continuity between singular absorption and concentration, something which has tended to be glossed over by scholars writing about states of heightened attention.

Single-pointed concentration: a widely circulating ideal

Whether conversing with wrestlers, students, musicians, sculptors or priests, single-pointed concentration was a topic that greatly interested people, and one which often prompted long, enthusiastic responses. This reflects its role as a crucial aspect of the idealised subject as articulated in divergent settings within Banaras and wider north India. Take, for example, students at BHU. Upon hearing that I was researching attention, many told me to study yoga, and then remarked that *ekagrata* is fundamental to all aspects of human life. As Dhruv, a first-year geography student who had only recently come to Banaras from a village in Bihar, eagerly told me: "Yes. *Ekagrata* is the basic raw material for what you want in life. It is as important as food [*bhojan*]." To justify the particular importance of single-pointed concentration to the life of someone at university, I was often directed to a popular Sanskrit shloka (verse) which lists the five qualities required of a student, one of which is singular focus just like a crane searching for prey[24]:

The student's five aims are to persevere like a crow, concentrate like a crane, sleep lightly like a dog, eat little and renounce household affairs.

The enthusiasm of students in talking about attention and its framing through a Hinduised vocabulary and set of references was not in any way exceptional – I encountered it again and again in different contexts. Some mornings when the heat was not too much, I went to exercise in an *akhara* near my home, a small compound with a

[24] Students told me that a crane, while standing on one leg, peers intently into water for long periods looking to catch a fish passing below.

shrine and cool soil upon which wrestlers train. Unfamiliar with the equipment, such as the *gada* (mace), which generally requires flowing continuous movement rather than the staccato pulls and pushes of the western gym, wrestlers would sometimes come to assist me. One man, named Krishan, offered particularly patient guidance. He had given up wrestling long ago, and now spent his time instructing younger men. On one occasion, a group of journalists from a Banaras newspaper had come to take photos of the *akhara*. Some of the younger wrestlers became distracted, gazing at the photographers rather than concentrating on their training. Krishan on several occasions called out: "*Dhyan dijie*! [Pay attention!]. Give all of your *man*!" Later when I asked Krishan why he had called out repeatedly, he gave the following reply, which I relay here to provide a sense of the tone, language and detail with which people in Banaras often talked about attention:

I teach that whatever work you are doing, stop your mind on that. If you are reading a book, then only read a book, whether for two minutes or one hour. When eating food, then do nothing else. I tell the boys here that when they are training, their mind should not roam here and there, they must give full force, full attention to their work. Otherwise, they will not get success.

An *akhara* is a very masculine environment, and incidents such as the one related above often made me wonder whether the idealisation of single-pointed concentration was gendered, something articulated more forcefully by men. This hypothesis seemed plausible as sustained concentration – such as during prolonged studying – is often dependent on the temporary suspension of social relations, something which one would assume is more permissible for men in north India. However, generally I found that an idealisation of single-pointed concentration was equally strong among my female interlocutors, whom I met in two settings in Banaras – to a limited extent among the mostly male-dominated world of Banaras Indian classical music, and to a greater degree at BHU, which has a sizeable female student contingent. Indeed, among the latter group, the ideal was often elaborated with more seriousness and passion than among male interlocutors, with one student even asserting that through training concentration daily one could learn to bend steel. This reflects the findings of Pearson (1992: 28-29; 405-8, 426-8), whose study of ordinary female worshippers in Banaras contains a number of references to women cultivating broadly ascetic states built around self-control and singular concentration. Other groups who also fall outside the dominant category of the high caste Hindu male, such as boatmen as well as low caste cooks and cleaners in the school in which I stayed, similarly emphasised the importance of a peaceful and single-

pointed mind pointing to how this attentional ideology is not restricted to any one group, but instead circulates widely.

Attentional ideology's intersection with caste, gender, time and food

However, even if heightened singular concentration as a feted capacity and value is drawn upon by a diversity of groups, this does not mean that it is understood to be distributed equally. As will be discussed below, north Indian attentional ideology maps onto and co-constitutes other major socio-cultural categories through which people come to order the world, including caste, gender, age, and food. As such, the dominant imaginaries of attention in Banaras tend to reproduce rather than subvert the hierarchical distinctions implicit in broader social and metaphysical schemas. The consequence of this is that the high caste adult Hindu male and the ascetic come to be defined by their heightened attentive capacity with all other groups being marked by a comparative deficiency in this area. In exploring this, I hope to show how attentional ideology serves as a significant category through which social stratification and distinction is produced and conceptualised – yet, one that remains un-studied in extant accounts of caste, gender and hierarchy in South Asian anthropology. Further, the present consideration of how attention *as ideology* intersects with wider hierarchies stands apart from previous limited anthropological treatments of attention and its relation to distributions of power. These accounts have tended to emphasise attention *as experience*, that is as a selective psycho-bodily process which occludes certain things and foregrounds others in accordance with broader socio-cultural and political structures and strategies (e.g. Goodwin 1994; Ochs & Schieffelin 2009; Zerubavel 2015).

An examination of how attentional ideology intersects with wider socio-cultural categories can be illumined by considering *Samkhya* metaphysics, a school of Hindu philosophy that provides a salient cultural resource that is often drawn on to explain behaviour, criticise others and conceptualise basic socio-cultural elements of the universe. According to this doctrine, the world is pervaded by three *gunas* (qualities): *sattva* (lightness, purity, beauty, truth); *rajas* (force, action, passion); *tamas* (inaction, lethargy, dullness, impurity) (Alter 1999: 46-7). Foods, animals, persons contain these moral qualities, yet in varying relations, and they exist as part of a fluid cosmology in which qualities can flow with ease from one substance to another, making the policing

of diet and contact with undesirable persons, bodily excretions and other coded substances of paramount importance. As has often been pointed out in the anthropology of South Asia, this *tri guna* system produces a series of interconnected hierarchies. The highest castes, particularly Brahmans, are held to be marked by a predominance of the *sattvic* quality while in the lowest caste *tamas* is ascendant. Similarly, certain foods – especially those consumed in ritual contexts and those associated with a strict Brahmanical or ascetic diet, such as milk and fruits – are considered particularly *sattvic*. As the subtle body, which includes the mind, is also suffused with *gunas*, these qualities similarly underly the cultivation of attentional states. A mind dominated by *sattva* is peaceful and single-pointed; by *rajas* is restlessness; and by *tamas* is dull and listless. Similarly, those times of day considered particularly germane for the cultivation of a peaceful, single-pointed mind are governed by *sattva* – this applies particularly to the very early morning before sunrise, *Brahma Muhurta*, which my interlocutors, whether musicians, students and religious adherents, stated was an exemplarily period for activities requiring heightened attention, including meditation and musical practice. It is often during this time that particular musical modes, *ragas*, such as *Jogiya*, which have a meditative mood are considered appropriate.

In effect, this nested set of hierarchies, which asserts that the highest of mental states, castes and foods are each ruled by the same ascendent *sattvic* quality, invests a certain naturalness in the idea that Brahmans possess a heightened capacity for single-pointed concentration, something which is lacking in the lower castes. This association was occasionally reproduced in the statements of my interlocutors. For example, a Brahman student, Arun, who was known on campus for his intellectual prowess, once remarked that the lowest castes have diminished psychic capacity: “If you take a Dalit and put him in a Sanskrit school at age five, he will not learn as well as a Brahman. We [Brahmans] can remember a Sanskrit *shloka* (verse) with ease and stay concentrated for longer.” Arun cut his explanation short when his friend Akash, himself a low caste Dalit, came within earshot, saying “we’ll talk of this another time”. However, Arun avoided my questions on this topic in future conversations, speaking to a wider unwillingness in Banaras, as in other parts of India, to talk openly about caste. Indeed, while normally people were more than happy to talk at length with me on a variety of topics, caste was one subject that engendered annoyance and irritation with a few

interlocutors accusing me of being 'casetist'[25] for asking to know their *jaati* (occupational caste grouping). As such, while I occasionally heard statements asserting the attentive superiority of Brahmans, the general sensitivity around this topic made spontaneous public comments of this kind rare. Further, my lower caste interlocutors never articulated an association between caste and a capacity for single-pointed concentration, which is indicative of the fact that while certain overarching metaphysical doctrines make this connection culturally plausible, it is only selectively drawn upon.

As the preceding discussion suggests, diet and psychic states are intimately intertwined as moral qualities inherent in food influence the consumer's mental composition. This is typified by variations of the phrase – 'as you eat, so your heart-mind will be' (*jaise khaenge vaise man hoga*) – which were commonly deployed to illustrate the intimate connection of these two domains. My interlocutors usually described the diet associated with a stable, single-pointed mind and other desirable interior qualities as *shudh* (pure) and simple, sometimes explaining its beneficial effects in terms of its *sattvic* properties or its lack of hot substances. A pure, simple diet was generally understood to be synonymous with the archetypal ingredients and dishes of north Indian vegetarian home cooking, such as *daal* and *sabzi*, preferably made with a minimum of oil.[26] Meat consumption in particular was seen to have deleterious consequences for attention, making the mind *vichalit* (disturbed) and restless. While this effect was sometimes explained in terms of meat's excessively hot properties, often a different quality – *bhaav* or emotional essence – was cited. A variety of people, whether musicians, students or ritual specialists, stated that the agitated emotional state of the animal at the time of slaughter remains as an inherent property of the meat, which the carnivorous consumer ingests inevitably making their mind also agitated and restless. More generally, this speaks to a highly relational conception of emotion in north India, which rather than being the internal property of a bounded individual that can be obliquely discerned by observation of facial expression and behaviour, flows outward from spaces, foods and other sentient beings (who are themselves defined by their particular emotional character, *svabhaav*). Those spaces considered particularly conducive for the purposeful cultivation of a peaceful, single-pointed mind were said to have *shaant*

[25] Casteist refers to discrimination based on caste.
[26] Unlike in the west where caffeinated drinks are often understood to aid concentration, tea and coffee were not generally consumed to help focus.

bhaav (peaceful emotional quality), and these tended to be places of seclusion away from sociality (*ekaant*) or quiet corners of sacred complexes.

As the ideal diet for the cultivation of single-pointed concentration is synonymous with the ethical positions of the Hindi belt's dominant high caste Hinduised culture, this lends plausibility to the idea that the eating habits of other groups are not conducive for obtaining heightened attentivity. While during fieldwork no single person spontaneously and explicitly said that Muslims had less peaceful and concentrated minds, inferences to this effect occasionally followed from my interlocutors' statements. For example, in one conversation Rakesh, a skilled flute player, said the following: "You cannot cultivate *dhyan* [meditative attention] if you eat meat. My whole family is vegetarian, but most musicians are non-veg." As most hereditary musicians in India are Muslim, this statement implicitly ties heightened attentive capacity to Hinduised habit, taking as a counterpoint an Islamic other defined by meat consumption. Stereotyped western eating habits were more forcefully and explicitly linked to a tendency towards restlessness, with a large category of substances associated with westernised modernity – chemicals, fast food, pizzas, burgers – being seen as barriers to a stable, single-pointed mind.

This association of modern, westernised eating habits with restlessness is indicative of the more general role of attention as an index for conceptualising time as degradation. While there are numerous narratives of the fall in Banaras, as documented in the city's ethnographic corpus (Cohen 1998 103-6; Huberman 2012; Parry 1994: 19), attention provides one compelling symbolic register for conceptualising temporality-as-decline with an idealised Hindu past characterised by heightened attentional capacity standing in contrast to a restless present. In Banaras, nearly all of my interlocutors articulated a variation of this narrative, whether musicians stating that previously performers could enter into states of deep meditative absorption for longer; Brahman ritual specialists talking wistfully of a past time when the Vedas were learned without books owing to people's heightened concentrative and mental capacity; and students who sometimes spoke excitedly of a mythic epoch of rishis and *munis* when states of heightened attention were often and prolonged. After having carried out fieldwork in two cities as well as doing historical and discourse analysis, it seems plausible to me that attentional anxieties and associated declinist narratives are universal – nearly every interlocutor in my London fieldsite (as in Banaras) articulated statements of this kind, while anxieties

about attentional degradation are recurrent in a variety of historical periods (Stadolink 2023). This points to the salience of attention as a potent symbol for conceptualising the effects of novel ruptures and transformations on the self, whether processes of consumerism, technological change or shifting conceptions of space-time and sociality. However, while anxieties and narratives of attentional decline are seemingly ubiquitous they necessarily take culturally specific forms reflecting localised discursive, social and economic trajectories. In Banaras, comments about the deleterious effects of phones and social media on concentration were common, yet they were less prominent than in London, and almost never coupled with anxieties about persuasive design and corporate manipulation – the idea that companies through software design are purposefully capturing attention was basically absent. Instead, in Banaras restlessness was often understood as the effect of a westernised modernity characterised by multiplicity and materialism. In this figuration, the plurality of material goods offered by consumerism – 'fast food', 'Shakira', '*pant-suits'* being some of numerous examples cited – as well as the diversity of new careers available in India's newly liberalised economy stands always in contrast to the singularity of the past where people focused on one occupation, having no other option (*vikalp*), and the mind, rather than being restless, turning to a multiplicity of alluring objects, was concentrated, focused on internal and spiritual matters. As Sachin, a student who juggled university work with a job in a hotel, remarked: "The way of *paschimta* [the west] is to do one thing, another thing, many different things. Now people follow the western way, so *ekagrata ki schamta* (capacity for single-pointed concentration) has fallen."

Attentional ideology also maps onto other socio-cultural categories and binaries that organise the dominant *Banarasi* worldview, including conceptions of human development and gender. It was universally asserted that children have a particularly *chanchal* mind, being prone to restlessness and fickleness of thought, something that they learn to restrain with age. This same trait of *chanchalata* – that is restlessness, whimsy and mercuriality – was also strongly associated with women regardless of age. Many of my male interlocutors asserted that women are naturally more *chanchal* than men, sometimes citing vague scriptural precedent as justification, or at other times noting that as their daily chores – cooking, cleaning, child rearing – are numerous and varied rather than singular, a restless mind suits their working life. One of my neighbours during my second period of fieldwork was particularly forceful in this regard, regularly and loudly complaining of his wife's whimsical and restless nature –

"She has showers in the middle of the night! Her *man* wanders here and there, so she lets the kedgeree burn!" His overbearing mother sometimes joined these criticisms, although she was less ready to comment on her son's own apparent ineptitudes – he had recently given up a promising career in the navy for a meagre job manufacturing cardboard boxes for sweet delicacies (*mithai*), leading to austerity at home and little money for a good education for his sons.

As in the case of caste, certain fundamental ideas in Hindu cosmology lend a seeming plausibility to these gendered associations, while not necessarily determining them. The aforementioned *gunas* form part of a larger cosmic substance, *prakriti*, which in its worldly form is active, constantly fluctuating and changing with its constituent qualities interacting and vying for dominance. *Prakriti* is feminine, while the other aspect of the world in dualistic *Samkhya* metaphysics is masculine, that is *purusha*, or pure consciousness, which is without qualities, unchanging and totally stable. This understanding of the feminine in terms of activity and the male principle in terms of stability can be seen in other aspects of Hindu cosmology also. The following is a commonly asserted phrase, "*Shakti ke bina Shiva shav hai*", meaning the great male deity Shiva is like a corpse – totally still and inactive – until contact is made with his energetic feminine counterpart, Shakti. This active, fluctuating cosmological conception of the feminine, which is not negative in its overarching connotations, gives symbolic plausibility to popular associations of the female mind with activity and restlessness, which invariably carry pejorative implications. Of course, the feminine as well as being pre-disposed towards restlessness, is also understood to be a major source of external distraction, inhibiting male cultivation of mental restraint and single-pointedness. This is attested to by numerous mythological stories of sages, like Vishwamitra, being disturbed from deep single-pointed meditation by alluring divine feminine forms, as well as the practice of *brahmacharya* which holds that vitality and energy can be attained through preservation of semen and restraint of sexual desire, an exacting feat that requires careful control of attention, diet and action. I found that while outside of specialist contexts, such as Sanskrit schools, *brahmacharya* is infrequently practised in Banaras, it continues to exert attraction for many as an ideal, yet one that young male students in particular recognise is hard to follow in the present day. At a more mundane level, people often cited "girls" as a major source of unwelcome distraction with, for example, one parent complaining that his son stops paying attention to his books every time an "American *ladki* (girl)" messages him online.

Collectively then attention as an ideological construct stands not in a relation of separateness of to the overarching categories that order north Indian life, but instead inter-penetrates these dominant hierarchical domains (see fig. 6). The effect of this is that a particular category of person – the high caste, adult Hindu male – comes to be invested with a special capacity for heightened single-pointed attention with other groups standing often in a marked relation to his psychic pre-eminence. Of course, the simplicity of this narrative is fractured by the reality of cultural diversity – figures like Kabir or the pan-Hindu-Muslim musical tradition of Banaras, discussed in chapter six, point towards north Indian attentional traditions that draw from polyglot sources. Yet, this diversity of origin tends to be played down in dominant Hinduised imaginaries of this psych-bodily capacity.[27]

[27] Despite the significant Muslim population of Banaras, most of my research was carried out in Hindu sites. However, I conducted some, largely interview-based, fieldwork with Muslim residents of the city during Ramadan. Attentional cultivation was an aspect of the activities associated with this special period, but it did not generally serve as an ultimate end in itself as say it does in Yoga. My interviewees emphasised the importance of proper Islamic and ritual behaviour during this period – *roza* (fasting), reading and listening to the Qur'an and *namaz* (prayer) as well as correct thought and behaviour, all of which will lead to amplified benefit (*faida*). In doing these things, the selfish and desiring tendencies of the *nafs* (the bodily soul) comes to be controlled (*kabu*) and purified, and, so, the mind goes to Allah. While most of the people that I spoke to were Sunni, a minority engaged in Sufi practices that were more explicitly attentional, including control of breath, but these interlocutors were less willing to talk publicly as their practices fell outside the dominant Islamic culture of the city.

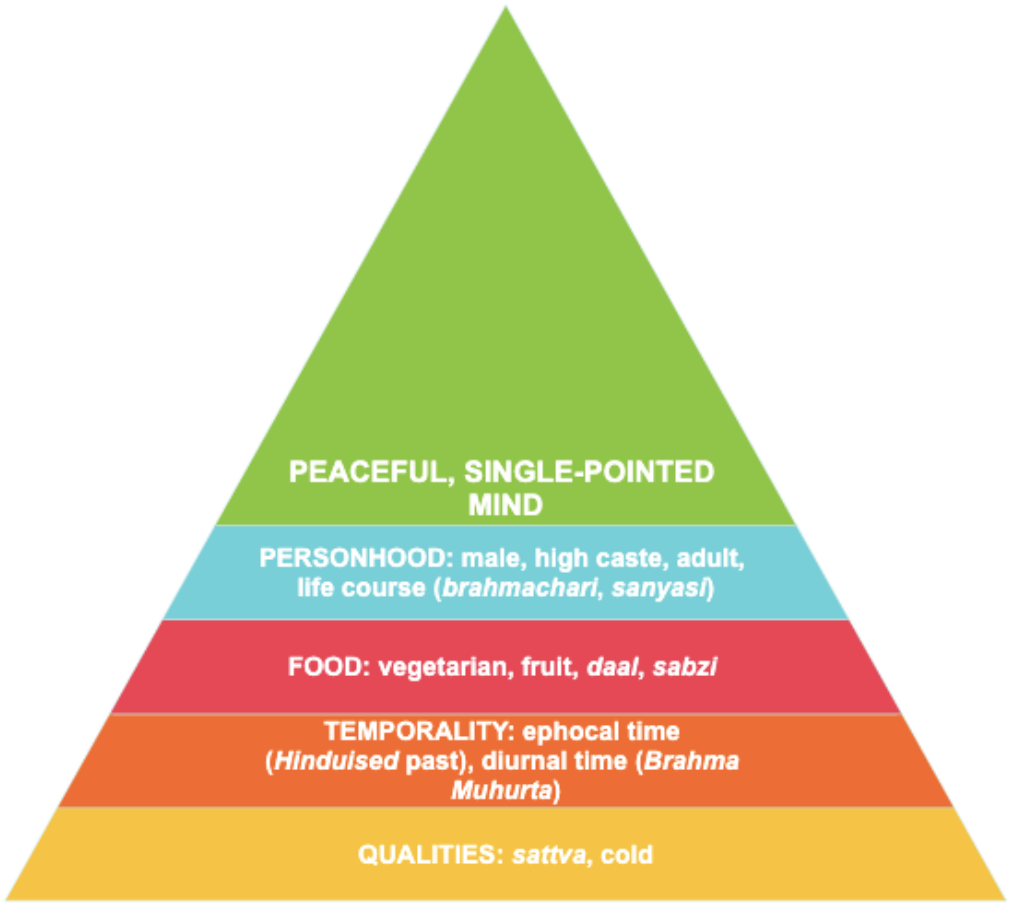


Fig. 6

Single-pointedness: aspiration and economic precarity

In Banaras, single-pointedness was not only idealised as a psycho-bodily state, but also as a general principle for how one should organise one's aspirations.[28] To have a single goal in life, which one tirelessly dedicates oneself to, is generally highly valued across a range of different settings in the city. Indeed, a number of popular proverbs attest to its importance. The saying 'you should not ride in two boats' (*do navo me ki savari nahi karni chahie*) conveys the importance of following one aim, and it is in many ways the inverse of the popular English proverb, 'don't keep all your eggs in one basket'. Other sayings are more direct, such as the following: 'with singular pursuit, you will achieve all (i.e. total fulfilment)' (*ekai sadhai sab sadhai*). I examined this ideal of single-pointed aspiration most closely in relation to students, roughly three quarters of whom answered affirmatively to question: Is it advisable or not to have only one *laksh* (goal)

[28] The scaling up of attentional states can be found in English too, with *focus* sometimes referring to a momentary perceptual process and at other times being deployed to describe someone's general disposition.

in life? Many students conceptualised their life in singular terms, placing into the category of 'distraction' a broad range of things – *ladkiya* (girls), sports, friends, phones, even on occasion family – such that nothing constitutes focus but studying, preferably for competitive exams necessary to secure a sought-after state-sector job.

However, only for a minority of students did the ideal of singular aspiration come to figure forcefully in their day-to-day life. During my time in Banaras, I used to visit a private hostel which offered three meals a day as well as cheap rooms for students, some of whom were studying at the city's numerous coaching centres that assist in preparation for competitive exams. It was here that I came to know one student, Balraj, who not only theoretically advocated pursuing only one aim, but also arranged his life around this principle. Balraj grew up in a village in western Bihar, but when he entered his teenage years he was forced to come to Banaras as the quality of schooling available near his natal home was poor. His ambition is to become a doctor, but to do so he must first find a university place to study undergraduate medicine. This is one of the most competitive course options in India, each year attracting millions of applicants. His parents often sought to persuade him during phone calls to take a *chotti motti* (little) job near their village, which would allow him to remain close to them. However, Balraj wanted more than this. "Should I settle for a *chotti motti* job?" All through his youth he had seen the difficulties of having little money. His parents once owned land, but the government took it from them as part of plans to build a new section of railway track. The compensation received in return was meagre, and ever since Balraj's parents have been seeking recompense in the courts. But to no avail – the case continues to languish in Bihar's serpentine legal system.

The government's decision has had a powerful influence on the course of Balraj's life. As he told me once in a moment of distress: "If my parents had money, they could have sent me to an English medium school when I was younger. Coming to Banaras would not have been so hard." Upon arriving in the city, he was forced to start learning in a new language – the better schools give instruction in English, still in India the language of aspiration. However, despite having left his home when young to come to Banaras, a large city where he had few friends, he is glad did so. "I cannot focus at home. My parents call me to do this or that. Here I can give everything to my *laksh* [aim]." His goal of becoming a doctor takes up all of time. He rises at 3.30am, and after brushing his teeth and gargling warm water, he begins to study, stopping only later in the

morning to do some exercises as otherwise his body becomes sore from sitting. In the afternoon, he rests a little taking a nap when the heat is most intense, and then resumes work again until ten at night. Seeing the intensity of his work schedule, I asked him once if it might help to take Sunday off, which is the one day of rest that many in India take. He replied: "On YouTube people say it is good to relax on Sunday. It is good to sleep eight hours. I cannot do these things. It is a problem. I have to work this hard as there is only one option for me. Others have land, maybe they can manage doing such things. But for me there is one thing."

Balraj's conception of life in single-pointed terms reflects not only Hinduised cultural ideology, but also material economic conditions that narrow aspiration to a dot. As is often highlighted in anthropological studies of young people in India, the availability of good jobs and desirable university courses is intensely limited, forcing people to commit many years of studying for ultra-competitive exams in the hope that one day, likely after numerous failed attempts, they will pass. Many university students, especially those not studying 'professional' courses, like medicine, have only very limited options if they want a good job, often a choice between becoming a civil servant or a university teacher. This dearth of choice was reflected in the answers of many students. When asked - *What do you intend to do after your studies?* – they often replied: *There is only ekhi (one) option to become X* (a professor or civil servant). However, while students often sought to conceptualise life as arranged in relation to a singular aim, the lived reality for most was different. This was sometimes even revealed within a space of a single conversation, at the start of which the importance of having one goal was asserted, and by the end of which the student in question revealed they were pursuing a multiplicity of 'backups'. Others spoke of the importance of *toda maast* (a little enjoyment), and romance, *timepass* and socialising were for many as or more important than their studies. Some students made jokes about this shadow between the ideal and the reality: 'students here are actually: if not this then that' (meaning they constantly flicker between different aims), or 'students are more *kaamacharya* [pursuers of pleasure] than *brahmacharya* [chaste, focused pupils]'.

This shadow between ideal and reality, should not detract from the fact that having a single aim *is* an ideal, albeit a difficult one to follow. A comparison to the UK is instructive. During fieldwork in London with university students, I also asked: is it advisable or not to have only one goal in life? With the exception of one student, who

had come to London from South Korea, students said it was better to have multiple goals, often citing the importance of 'balance'. In fact, generally, while students in the UK recognised the importance of focus and saw this as a desirable quality, they avoided giving lyrical expositions on the importance of concentration. This discrepancy may in part be accounted for by my particular position in Banaras. I was a visitor to a city in which foreigners have long come to seek knowledge about Hinduism, and where many residents are very happy to provide this information, enjoying the opportunity to offer up lengthy spiritualised elucidation. So common is this relation of foreign seeker and spiritual pontificator that popular films set in Banaras, like *Masaan* and *Mohalla Assi*, contain depictions of anthropologists researching on the *ghats* or tourist guides waxing lyrical about the greatness of the city. Indeed, some of the scholarly literature on Banaras, adopts a hagiographic tone, one which likely in part reflects the pandits and religious texts that served as sources of information (e.g. Eck 1983).

However, while it is true that my research topic – attention – led some interlocutors to pontificate, extolling at length the importance of meditation and asceticism, it would be wrong to categorise the diffuse idealisation of single-pointed concentration (and absorption) as mere performance. The enthusiasm and oftentimes passion that people displayed when talking about attention, its elaboration in myth, proverb and art, as well as the prevalence of practices built around the cultivation of this state, such as meditation and mantra repetition, all point towards the deep value attached to the spiritualised ideal of single-pointedness. As the reader will see, this ideal is reproduced through multiple Hindu spiritual traditions, textual bodies, aesthetic schools and pedagogic contexts such that it coalesces in no one setting exclusively, but instead is spread widely across north Indian culture, both high and low.

Emerging from the margins: the single-pointed figure

My elaboration of this psycho-bodily ideal is in part an attempt to draw out and make explicit a theme, or perhaps more accurately, a figure, that lies latent at the margins of the South Asian ethnographic record. In many anthropological accounts of India there is a short reference to an individual or social type that regularly enters into heightened states of single-pointed concentrated or absorptive attention (Alter 1997; Bose 2020: 296; Eck 1998: 45, 52; Ecks 2003; Kinsley 1974: 297; McDaniel 1989: 44; Pearson 1992: 426-8; van der Veer 2020: 121). However, taking up usually not more than a

paragraph, or in rare instances a page or two – the single-pointed figure, once mentioned, recedes as the author moves off in a different direction to make their argument, one which touches on attention, but which is ultimately concerned with something else. Take, for example, Ruma Bose's study of the popular north Indian Kanwar pilgrimage. Amidst her wider ethnographic account of this religious phenomena, she records the amazing physical feats of *dak* runners, who unlike the millions of regular Kanwar pilgrims, run the 105 km route during the sweltering Indian summer without stopping and all the while carry an offering of water drawn from the sacred river Ganga. What is remarkable, is that these runners, who often hail from the poor villages of Bihar and Jharkhand and who do little in the way of special training, understand their performance to be dependent on a capacity for singular concentration. Bose recounts the viewpoint of one runner, Mukesh:

…[T]o be a successful dak runner, aside from physical fitness, one must at all times have one's mind on Shiva and never lose himmat (courage). Doubts and deviation of one's attention from Shiva, leads to sudden loss of strength (shakti). [Mukesh] described the tirtha of dak bams as a form of Hatha yoga, in which the mind concentrates on Shiva using every ounce of one's breath and physical strength (2020:296)

After a page or so, Mukesh disappears, leaving a tantalising thread unexplored. The noted scholar of popular religion, Diana Eck makes an even more fleeting reference to single-pointed concentration in an influential book on the visual culture of Hinduism: "For the Indian artist, the *śilpin*, the creation of an image is, in part, a religious discipline. Entering into a state of concentration by means of yoga, the *śilpin* is to visualize the completed image in the mind's eye. According to the *śāstras*, the *śilpin*, before beginning a new work, undergoes a ritual purification and prays that he may successfully bring to form the divine image he has seen" (1998: 52). Here aesthetic form is revealed through heightened attention, and, so, the reference invites speculation on the possible centrality of single-pointed focus for conceptions of creativity within Hindu artistic traditions.

While in Bose's and Eck's accounts single-pointed concentration makes a brief appearance, in other works it serves as a thread that appears and re-appears without ever fully being elaborated. Joseph Alter's wonderful account of wrestlers in Banaras is replete with references to concentration, including wrestlers entering into a meditational state as they repeat the same vigorous exercise again and again with their eyes fixed on

an imaginary point (e.g. 1992: 95-7; 104-7; 129-30). Alter states that as there is not a pronounced mind-body duality in Indian thought, disciplining the body necessarily entails a disciplining of the mind (92-3). This can be seen, for example, in the assertion by one commentator on Indian wrestling that unless during exercise the mind is focused on the specific physical movement at hand, one will not become strong. He adds that a labourer toils all day, but does not become strong like a wrestler as his mind is on other things (97). Somewhat surprisingly, Pearson's study of the female-dominated Hindu ritual of *vrata*, is, as previously mentioned, equally replete with references to states of self-control and single-pointed concentration. Her interlocutors were women, often high-caste housewives, and, as such, the study points towards the diffuse idealisation of single-pointedness even outside specialist traditions, like wrestling or pilgrimage.

Of course, not all references to single-pointed attention are restricted to north India, but, instead, they appear in a variety of different regions. Phillip Zarrilli describes witnessing and experiencing states of supreme single-pointed concentration in Kerala during practice of *kalarippayattu*, a martial art, as well as meditational and healing system from south-western India. After seeing one particularly powerful performance of two men in combat, he writes: "I had experienced a practice so concentrated with 'mental power', and so 'single-minded' [*ekagrata*] and manifest in the master's eyes and entire body, that as an observer I felt the 'terror' of a state of [transformative] 'fury' that *would have done* terrible harm, but at the same time was completely 'controlled'…" (Zarrilli 2000: 43, emphasis original). Ecks (2003, 2014) work on health and eating in Bengal provides the most sustained anthropological engagement that I have come across on the subject of single-pointed concentration. In Bengal, as in north India, a single-pointed, peaceful *mon* (Bengali variation of *man*) is a fundamental aspect of what constitutes good health. As Ecks writes: "A peaceful and controlled *mon* is generally seen as the best precondition for a healthy life. The basic principle is: When you are not worried about anything, when you keep your mind concentrated on one point, you will always be healthy" (2014: 22).[29] A disturbed *mon* can lead to fever, diabetes and high blood pressure, although in Ecks' reading, it is the belly rather than the mind that is the central source of instability and disorder within the Bengali conception of the self – it is hot and greedy with an insatiable desire for food.

[29] *Swastha*, which is the Hindi word for health, means "swa" (I) + "astha" (stable) (Kakar 2004: 33).

In English-speaking academia, among the most sustained engagements with South Asian understandings of attention come not in anthropology, but in the philosophy of mind where scholars have critiqued, developed and taken inspiration from the subtle attentional theories of Hindu and Buddhist texts (Connolly et al. 2013; Das 2020; Ganeri 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Maitra 2022; Watson 2018). This dialogue has been spurred both by a burgeoning interest in attention within philosophy of mind in recent years, but also by a desire within the discipline as a whole for a more cross-cultural approach to fundamental problematics, one that takes nourishment from the world's cornucopia of analytical traditions rather than opting for intellectual provincialism. Jonardon Ganeri's work on attention has been particularly ambitious, attempting to bring into dialogue contemporary developments in cognitive science with South Asian philosophies to develop a novel account of mind that diverges from dominant Euro-American understandings of self that are defined by the idea that the individual has authorship over willed actions. In particular, Ganeri draws from the 5th century CE Buddhist philosopher Buddhaghosa, to place attention rather than 'self' at the centre of what it is to be human. He notes: "…South Asia has developed deep and insightful frameworks of theoretical explanation of its own. I have dubbed one philosophical stance Attentionalism, and have argued that, considered as a stance, it is importantly distinct from the stances of Phenomenology and Analytical Philosophy" (2017: 346).

Ganeri's project sheds light upon the centrality of attention to South Asia's philosophical traditions. It also challenges the common assumption that South Asian investigations of attention are restricted to meditation and, so, only experiential rather than scholarly. One thing that emerges from Ganeri's work is the deep interest of both South Asian Buddhist and Hindu thinkers in documenting and categorising the diversity of attentional states that humans experience. This ranges from "attentional retraction" described in the *Laws of Manu* (2018b: 443), to perhaps the first mention of the now-influential bottleneck theory of attention (Adamson and Ganeri 2020: 192), to the various attentional taxonomies proposed Buddhist thinkers (Ganeri 2017).

In more recent times too, Indian thinkers have been deeply concerned with documenting and distinguishing different attentional types. Central to the philosophical project of the twentieth-century spiritual figure and thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti is a distinction between states of self-controlled concentration and 'choiceless awareness'. For Kirshnamurti, in order to experience reality, one must cease to produce thoughts so that

one's experience is not a production of the self. This cessation of mental activity can be achieved through adopting passive awareness, which is a non-reactive observation of experience. Self-directed concentration, by comparison, involves effort and choice and so strengthens rather than dissolves the self, precluding experience of true reality (Krishnamurti 2012 [1948]: 33-4). Krishnamurti proposed passive awareness as a solution to the world's problems after the second world war, following other figures, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who offered up Indian philosophies as an alternative to a western modernity beset by global conflict and the perceived threat of atomic weapons and extreme nationalism (Bayly 2010; Krishnamurti 2012a). That Krishnamurti sought specifically to distance his conception of ideal attention from self-directed concentration is significant, as it was in part an attempt - by a figure whose intellectual career is marked by dissent - to separate his project from dominant Hindu idealisations of single-pointed focus. This can be seen in his conversations with Banaras students, whom he often gave advice to during his visits to the city where his followers established a school in the 1930s. In one of numerous discussions about attention, a student from BHU asks Krishnamurti to give the assembled audience his views on Hindu practices of concentration, such as focusing on the sacred *Om* sound. In reply, Krishnamurti embarks on a lengthy elucidation about the folly of attempting to cultivate singular focus for spiritual purposes, eventually concluding: "There are so many methods of concentration advocated by others, but they are all bound to lead nowhere" (Krishnamurti 2012b [1954]: 191-3).[30]

[30] As the example of Krishnamurti shows, debates about attention – that is granular discussions about which types and forms of attention should be cultivated – are a common feature of the intellectual and religious history of South Asia and neighbouring regions. These contestations point towards the fact that attentional ideology is not an incidental aspect of the region's culture, but rather of central importance, with particular kinds of attention being understood as fundamental to ethical projects that seek to make the self up in specific ways. It is remarkable that at roughly the same time that Vivekananda was advocating for concentrated yogic attentional practices, the reformer Ledi Sayadaw in neighbouring Myanmar was also popularising mass meditation which at that time was not a major part of mainstream lay or monk Buddhist practice in the country or nearby Theravada cultures. His efforts, which, as with Vivekananda were a reaction to the perceived degradation of indigenous spiritual tradition by colonial influence, served to valorise and give prominence to certain types of attention while downplaying others. Specifically, he de-emphasised practices of singular concentration and absorption (*samadhi*, *jhana*), which some scholars suggest were historically the dominant form of Buddhist meditation (Braun 2013), and instead made insight meditation (*vipassana*) "plausible, appealing, and even patriotic". That is - he valorised the open awareness of what is often termed mindfulness, which partly through his efforts, has come to be associated with Buddhism globally.

Given the variety of attentional states explored and elaborated upon within the rich religious and philosophical traditions of South Asia, my focus in this thesis on single-pointed attention may appear to the reader somewhat narrow. However, my interest in this specific state stems from the same fact that motivated Krishnamurti to distance himself from it. Namely, it is that which is *valorised* in contemporary north India. It is the specific variety of attention, in a culture particularly concerned with the cultivation of heightened consciousness, that is most strongly idealised.

Single-pointed attention: absorption and concentration

At this stage, it is important to say a little more about what exactly constitutes 'single-pointed attention'. Thus far, I have described single-pointed attention largely in the context of concentration and self-control. However, sometimes, although much more rarely, people also spoke of idealised psycho-bodily states that correspond more closely to what in English one might call singular absorption. These absorptive states were often described through a divergent metaphorical register. At first glance, it may seem misleading then to include both of these seemingly distinct psycho-bodily categories under the label of single-pointed attention, yet as I hope to show they are essentially continuous, one being an intensification of the other. However, before exploring their underlying continuity, let me first consider their apparent divergence.

Within certain north Indian artistic and religious traditions, there is an emphasis on states of attention that involve a total immersion of the self in something divine. Phrases that capture a sense of one's consciousness becoming absorbed into something vaster are regularly deployed in these contexts: *dubna* (to drown), *vilin hona* (immersion), *lupt hona* (to extinguish oneself), *khona* (to lose oneself). In both Hindi and English there is metaphoric and grammatical similarity in how states of absorption are conceptualised. *Is me lin ho gaya* translates as "I became absorbed in this". Crucially, in each sentence the pre/post-position 'in' is used and there is a sense of grammatical passivity, of the individual being taken in by something else. Gilbert Ryle (Ryle & Gallie 1954: 143-4) notes that the English term 'absorbed' has a partly metaphorical force applying both to physical processes, such as a sponge taking in liquid and psychological processes, such as the absorption of a child in a game. These dormant metaphorical underpinnings, whether the idea of sponges taking in water in the English context or the idea of drowning [*dubna*] in the Hindi context, point towards a loss of agency. This sense of a

loss of self-control is divergent from the dominant associations of single-pointed concentration, which instead describes consciousness as being carefully channelled through restraint and intention. Idealised states of single-pointed absorption in north India, often take this aspect of diminished self-control to an extreme, with the individual becoming so totally consumed that all sense of self is extinguished.

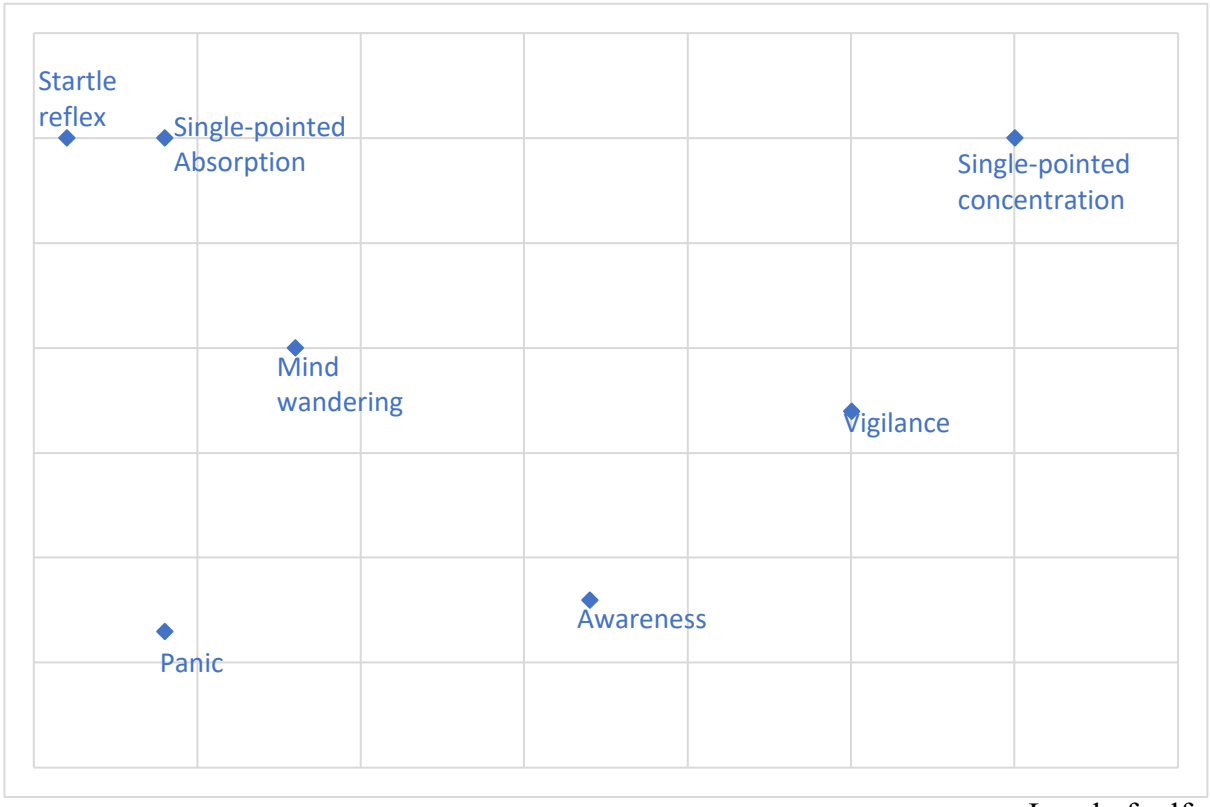
North Indian classical musicians aim during practice towards achieving total absorption in their music, a state so singular that there is awareness of nothing else. It is rarely achieved, but as an ideal it circulates widely, allowing musicians to conceptualise themselves as high-status *yogis* theoretically capable of exquisite absorptive states. A sitarist from a prominent group of hereditary musicians within Banaras describes this state as such: "Sometimes I sit at night and it happens, but not always. I am not aware of anything, even my body – whether there is a light on or off has no meaning. Where I am I do not know. I am in the music. At that time everything becomes finished, the *duniya* [world] has no meaning." Singular absorption in the transcendent is also the pinnacle of *bhakti*, a highly popular strain of Hinduism that sometimes eschews the internal self-restraint of the *yogi* in favour of overflowing emotion and immersion in material manifestations of the divine. The ultimate goal of *bhakti* is such extreme immersion in the divine that union is achieved, as typified by the story of the celebrated saint Mirabai who is said to have ended her worldly life by being absorbed by a statue of the deity Krishna. Kinsley observes that saints in the *bhakti* tradition are often depicted as mad due to their extreme absorption:

> *…[T]he madness of the saints, particularly the bhakta saints, suggests their total absorption in the divine. Nearly every example of madness among the bhakta saints underlines the fact that extreme or total devotion to God is so completely distracting, all-consuming, and passionate that the devotee, characterized by such single-pointed absorption, can barely cope with mundane reality and seems mad in his extreme infatuation.* (1974: 297)

Unlike the restrained *yogi* who is often portrayed as having perfect psycho-bodily control due to intense spiritual labour (*tapasya*), the mad *bhakti* saint is in fact often unable to regulate their attention being totally consumed by the divine. As one telling of the life of the Bengali saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu recounts: "He came back dazed, falling into trances and calling out for Krishna. He tried to teach his classes, but could not concentrate on the lessons. After several months of effort, he gave up teaching" (McDaniel 1989: 34).

As such, the ideal pinnacle of absorption found in north Indian classical music and *bhakti*, as typified by the metaphor of drowning, is so powerful, requiring such total self-negation, that it is a barrier to instrumental activity within the prosaic sphere. This contrasts with *ekagrata*, or single-pointed concentration, which maintains a similar singularity of focus, but emphasises effortful restraint of self. The graph below illustrates the preceding point in visual form, showing how numerous attentional states can be ordered by the breadth/narrowness of their focus (y-axis) as well as the level of self-control they entail (x-axis).

Selectivity of attention



Level of self-control

Fig. 7

Explanation of graph

- Single-pointed concentration and absorption share in their singularity of focus, but are inversely related as to how much self-control they involve.
- A startle reflex engenders an attentional state that in its emotional resonance and duration is very different from singular absorption, but in certain other senses is similar. Specifically, it involves the entirety of one's consciousness momentarily being taken up by a single, sudden stimuli, and, further, this state is necessarily without control being an involuntary response. In its immediacy, it leads to a sudden and temporary interruption of the normal self.
- Awareness involves a low level of selectivity. In such a state, one's mind is led by the environment, but simultaneously there is a degree of self-control so as to avoid mind wandering and rumination.
- Vigilance involves attending to the environment only for certain stimuli for extended periods, and, as such, requires maintenance of a high level of self-control. The watchful guard is alert for signs of intruders, but she may be oblivious to the fragrance of flowers that the night air carries.
- It should be noted that the attentional states displayed on the graph are not exhaustive, and some of those states plotted (vigilance, mind wandering etc) have been included as they are the subject of significant bodies of research related to attention. In comparison, 'panic' is less precise, but is meant to capture a generalised state – distinct from a startle reflex – in which a person is unable to focus on any single stimuli or thing being in a state of significant distress inhibiting measured self-control. A state of being 'dazed and confused' might occupy a roughly similar position.

The differences outlined between single-pointed absorption and concentration suggest that these are two distinct states and that my usage of 'single-pointed attention' really refers therefore to not something coherent, but an opposed binary. However, this position of discontinuity was not supported by the statements of my interlocutors. In interviews with musicians, I sometimes asked if there is a difference between becoming totally immersed in something (*dubna*) and becoming single-pointed in one's concentration (*ekagrata*). The answer was nearly always that they are the same (*ekhi hai*). This apparent continuity between absorption and singular concentration is seen also in scholarly literature on attention which often treats these two states as essentially synonymous. For example, Kirmayer and Seligman write: "Absorption [is] defined as the profound narrowing or concentration of attention and focused deployment of cognitive resources" (2008: 34). Scholars working on flow state research and trait absorption research (using the Tellegen Absorption Scale) – the largest bodies of scholarship on absorption (broadly defined) in psychology – often use these terms interchangeably, employing phrases like "absorbed concentration" (Marty-Dugas and Smilek 2019: 1764; Tellegen and Atkinson 1974: 275). The elision of absorption and concentration speaks to the general imprecision of attentional nomenclature even in academic contexts, yet often what emerges, albeit implicitly, from the statements of

scholars working on these heightened attentional states is that absorption constitutes a form of concentration, but a particular intense modality. This understanding of absorption as an intensification of concentration can be seen in the following statement: "[Flow] is a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity" (Jackson et al. 2001: 18). Popular Indic attentional taxonomies, particularly in yoga, support this position. The *Yoga Sutras*, the canonical text of modern yoga, is generally interpreted by educated Banaras residents, such as BHU professors, as teaching eight sequential steps towards spiritual liberation, the last three of which are states of heightened attention – fixed concentration of mind on an object leading eventually to *samadhi*, a kind of absorptive union in which subject-object divisions dissolve. In this conceptual schema, singular concentration and singular absorption are not distinct but exist as part of a progressive continuum, the former providing a foundation for the latter.

Yet, if single-pointed concentration and absorption are to be understood as essentially continuous, the latter being an intensification of the former, how to explain their divergent experiential properties? Johannes Bronkhorst's work on absorption provides one possible answer to this question. He also conceptualises absorption as an intensification of concentration, asserting that when this attentional capacity is under "ordinary conscious control" it is concentration, and in more extreme cases, such as those accompanying mystical experience, "absorption is to be preferred" (2012: 29). Concentration (through focusing on one thing to the exclusion of all else) involves some reduction in what Bronkhorst terms 'associations' – these are the webs of connections that characterise symbolic[31], language-based cognition, as well as linkages between present experiences and past events (30). In its extreme cases – that is instances of totalising absorption – these associative connections are almost completely, extinguished, with categorisations, a sense of time and symbolic linkages being interrupted. This produces the sense of immediacy often associated with absorptive mystical experience in which one perceives 'directly' without symbolic mediation. Further, in doing so, one's sense of self – that aspect of interiority tied to language and symbolic association – is also interrupted. As such, the seeds of the loss of self that feature so prominently in intense experiences of singular absorption are contained already within less intense forms of concentration. This explanation seems plausible to

[31] Bronkhorst (2012: 10) uses 'symbolic' in a special sense as signs referring not only to their objects, but also to one another. Language, as such, is highly associative comprising a dense web of connections.

me, especially as common north Indian practices of single-pointed concentration involve to some degree a reduction in the activity of the conscious self and its ability to make connections – the mind is fixed to a point, and its tendency to wander and make linkages is curtailed.

Of course, states of extreme single-pointed absorption were rarely, if ever, experienced by most of my interlocutors. Instead, they circulated in myth and story as potent representations of human perfection. During fieldwork, I met one *bhakti* devotee who claimed to have attained such a state some years ago while meditating, repeating the name of Shiva all through the night until finally the great deity appeared. Some musicians also claimed to have experienced *samadhi*-like states, although for many performers such states existed only as a far-off ideal. Indeed, the general rarity of intense states of single-pointed absorption speaks to the fact that most people in Banaras do not possess the skill, time and social authority to cultivate them. It is partly for this reason that ideals of less intense single-pointed concentration figure more prominently in their lives – social, life course and economic conditions make these states of self-controlled attention useful, but also culturally appropriate. This can be seen in BHU where students talked often about the importance of single-pointed concentration – as the raw psychological substrate of aspiration – but entirely absent was imagery of drowning.

The enmeshment of the divine and everyday

As discussed, Banaras residents' concerns are largely not related to lofty, spiritual objectives. I do not want to give the impression of a city engrossed constantly in states of exquisite attention. However, despite this, in north India there exists a certain semantic enmeshment of the spiritual and mundane such that discourse about attention carries with it, even in everyday contexts, echoes of potential religious application. As mentioned, the Hindi equivalent of 'attention' is *dhyan*, which also means meditation. Similarly, people employ the Sankritised term for single-pointedness, *ekagrata*, to mean concentration, but also sometimes meditation. During fieldwork, this easy semantic slippage between mundane and spiritual meanings led to much confusion. People often asked – 'So, what is your research about?' – to which I would reply: 'I am researching *dhyan*'. Upon hearing this, the person with whom I was speaking usually inferred that my research is solely concerned with yoga and meditation. Eventually, I began using the

clunky phrase *manovygyanik dhyan* (psychological attention) to make clear that I was not a spiritual seeker who had come to Banaras primarily to gain yogic knowledge.

The enmeshment of everyday attention – for want of a better term – and spiritual methods of concentration afford a certain generative potential, allowing the divine to become infused in the mundane rather than being held separate. People sometimes conceptualised mundane activities through a spiritual frame precisely since they were done with full attention. Upon hearing of my research topic, my Hindi teacher, a middle-age man from a Bengali family that has been living in the *galis* of Banaras for generations, asked me to define meditation. Still early in my research, I gave an answer that corresponds to the stereotypical image of a meditator in the west: someone sitting in a secluded space focusing hard. On hearing this, my teacher laughed a little, and then replied – 'Yes I suppose it is that. But actually, Rahul, anything can be meditation as long as it is done with *pura man* (full mind). Work, reading, cooking." His answer reflects the teachings of a broad range of popular spiritual figures, from the *Banarasi* medieval mystic poet Kabir to the controversial guru Osho,[32] who each advise giving full attention to even the most mundane activities. For the monist Kabir, as the divine is in everything, even in dirt and excrement, one should give total focus to all aspects of life.

That the cultivation of attention can be both practical and spiritual, sometimes simultaneously, is a specific instantiation of a broader theme in Hinduism. Ariel Glucklich observes that many Hindu traditions refuse to differentiate between spiritual and instrumental techniques. He writes that: "Another way of putting the matter is that the techniques most closely associated with *mukti* (liberation) — namely concentration, austerities, self-control, recitation — are also conducive to *bhukti* (enjoyment): long life, health, power, children, and wealth" (2005: 5590). The divine is often very much present in the world, and this is suggestive of the poverty of Enlightenment Christian-influenced conceptions of religion, coalescing around the idea of belief in a distant god, for understanding much popular Hindu practice. The "dualist understanding of God as A Thing Apart", to borrow a phrase from the historian of South Asia William R. Pinch (2006: 11), fails to capture the close interweaving of the divine within the flow of

[32] In the west, for many Osho reputation is severely tainted with his movement associated with numerous scandals. However, among a large cross-section of people in Banaras, he remains a popular spiritual figure, especially among young adults. In fact, during fieldwork people referred to and recommended Osho more than any other spiritual figures from the last fifty years.

intimate experience in much Hindu thought. Through careful control of experience - restraint of the flow of consciousness and the flux of sensory impressions - the divine can be indexed within the individual, made intimate rather than something held apart (*cf.* Luhrmann 2012). As Patton Burchett puts it, Indian religious practice is often "expressive of the conviction that humans and the divine interact intimately in the ordinary sensory experience of the world" (Burchett 2008: 831). For a student in Banaras, attentional cultivation is so vigorously and animatedly idealised precisely because it simultaneously offers spiritual potential at the same time as serving as the fundamental substrate of practical aspiration. The two are not easily disentangled.

Conclusion

Attention has largely circulated in anthropology as an etic concept, often employed as part of analyses in which the full force of the ethnographic method is trained on some separate aspect of the socio-cultural world. In contrast, this chapter, through explicit engagement with attentional ideology, has sought to illustrate how attention, rather than being an incidental aspect of north Indian culture, circulates as an important socio-cultural category. It is deeply imbricated with overarching conceptions of time, food and biomoral qualities, yet it is also distinct, serving as an influence upon diverse domains, whether understandings of ethics, aspiration or hierarchy. Within Banaras, a clear cultural schema marks out a continuous spectrum of attentional states as central to conceptions of the idealised subject. The mind should first be made peaceful, then attached in controlled concentration to a single object, and after this, albeit only for a determined minority, rendered into a state of self-negating absorption. This conception of single-pointed attention not only contours understandings of how interiority and consciousness should be formed, but similarly influences how certain individuals, such as students, seek to organise their life course, seeing aspiration as pursuit of a singular aim in reaction to harsh socio-economic conditions.

The ideal of single-pointed attention elaborated here will remain a recurrent point of reference throughout this thesis as I trace its movement between different sites and settings. In the following chapter, I explore how this single-pointed ideal comes to appear compelling through examining its constitution in multiple textual and visual registers, including cheaply made posters, myth and self-help discourse. This provides a firm basis for a broader exploration of how north Indian attentional ideology, as

something reproduced in a variety of contexts, relates to the more intimate aspects of my interlocutors' lives, that is their experience of the world.

Chapter 4 | The reproduction of single-pointedness in culture and experience

Whatever a given society's form may be, one of its most distinctive features is the way in which it forms attention

- Bernard Stiegler (2010: 19)

The issue of how attentional ideology intersects with everyday life is a central concern of this thesis. This chapter addresses this problematic in two interrelated ways. It asks, first – How is it that a particular ideology of attention comes to seem persuasive, salient and plausible within a given culture? It then asks: How and in what ways might the valorisation of a given attentional ideology actually influence peoples' experience of the world? Each of these questions are addressed in relation to the ethnographic present of Banaras. To investigate the first question, I examine a variety of spheres and domains within *Banarasi* culture. In Banaras, a particular attentional ideology – that is one valorising single-pointedness as well as control and peacefulness of mind – is invested with persuasiveness and salience, I argue, through its ubiquitous reproduction at multiple cultural levels. At higher levels attentional ideology is produced through cosmology; the aesthetic categories and styles that contour music and visual arts; as well as tropes that recur in popular mythic and scriptural narratives. These same themes are repeated also at lower, oftentimes less encompassing, aspects of *Banarasi* culture. That is in the posters with which students decorate their rooms; the stories of long-dead historical figures that circulate in the city; advice given by popular political and spiritual-cum-business figures; and the plethora of self-help books on offer in the city's shops which meld scientific, neoliberal and spiritual discourse. While no single Banaras resident will partake in all of these diverse areas of cultural activity, each will at some point interact with some part of this larger totality, dependent on their particular position and strategies. Collectively they serve to invest a specific subjective ideal of mental stability and single-pointedness with an ideological and practical priority that is fundamental to north Indian understandings of the self.

Yet – as the latter part of this chapter explores in an attempt to address the second of the two questions outlined – the salience and desirability of an ideal, especially one so

difficult to realise as single-pointedness, is a poor determinant by itself of psycho-bodily experience. For attentional ideology to be realised in particular experiential habits it requires some form of mediation, that is specific arrangements of space, objects and bodies to allow for the attainment of valorised, and often difficult to obtain, attentional states. A classroom, for instance, offers a particular ordering of desks, chairs and bodies that facilitates, albeit not always successfully, states of focus. At first glance, Banaras does not offer such ecologies to any great degree. To give but a few of the examples that I explore in this chapter: attention is loosely regulated at music concerts where sleeping, talking and phone use is common; in professors' offices desks, chairs and sometimes televisions are arranged for sociality and conversation rather than solipsistic focus; while the streets outside are replete with horns, adverts and relentless commotion. This speaks to the fact that for the most part people in Banaras are not concerned with single-pointed attention, which is often a highly a-social ideal. Instead, they are occupied with relationality, that is the pull of the social world.

This fact might lead the reader to the conclusion that single-pointedness, despite its pervasive valorisation, bears little relation to experience. Yet such an analysis would be premature, being based on the assumption that a given society's value system is harmonious and coherent, rather than plural and potentially contradictory. While in most cases relational and social values remain pre-eminent in Banaras, there are certain contexts and ecologies where people through particular arrangements of space, body and practice attempt to embody single-pointedness, cultivating states in which the mind – rather than being attracted to the relational world of objects, people and desire – is brought inwards. These are necessarily a-social contexts that offer time outside the often-exhausting thrust of sociality that normally pre-dominates – perhaps a period of mantra repetition in the early morning, or musical practice away from family and friends. The desire to carve out such periods of attentional cultivation is an important motivation for many Banaras residents who live within the packed lines of the city. Such contexts can be understood as states of exception, corresponding, I argue drawing on Dumont, to ascetic and renunciatory sources of value within north Indian culture. Indeed, the conception of the mind in north India as existing between two binary states, one of self-control and transcendence over the worldly, and the other comprising restlessness in which the psyche is caught up in the relational world of people and things maps onto the wider renunciate-householder division, providing an overarching, yet culturally-specific rendering of an attentional dichotomy that exists universally.

The multiple reproduction of attention as an ideal in diverse spheres of north Indian life

The plausibility of attentional ideology in Banaras is a function of its ubiquity, being reproduced repeatedly in different cultural milieus. At the most fundamental level, it is an expression of certain Hindu cosmological principles that give the universe overarching temporal order. I dealt with *Samkhya* cosmology in the previous chapter, so I will return to it here only briefly to analyse one further point about its relation to understandings of Indic understandings of attention. As per *Samkhya* cosmogony, the primordial state of the universe was one of perfect equilibrium and stillness, a condition of inactivity without differentiation in the material world. However, for some unknown reason the two principle aspects of the universe, *pakriti*, which is material, and *purusha*, which is consciousness, came into proximity, sparking activity, disturbance and differentiation, so producing the world as we currently know it – the mind, the senses, persons, and so forth (Gowans 2021: 63-4) – but also suffering and delusion.

In reproducing this formal cosmogony here, I do not wish to suggest that there is a unified Hindu mode of thought, as Sudhir Kakar or McKim Marriott and certain of his students have previously asserted. Rather, I contend only that the *Samkhya* conception of cosmic creation and development provides one persuasive schema, among others, through which people in Banaras come to understand time as a kind of movement from a condition of stillness, undifferentiation and inactivity to a state of distinction, disturbance and movement (see also: Daniel 1987: 3-6). What is of significance for the present analysis is that the principles of this cosmogenic schema are recapitulated also in specific cultural construction of attention. Just as the universe is inherently prone to disturbance, becoming active for unknown reason, so too is the *man chanchal* and restless by nature. The myriad techniques of attentional cultivation that people undertake seek to return the mind to a state of stillness, stability and peacefulness, where it comes to rest on one rather than many things. In other words, idealised perfect stillness and one-pointedness recapitulates the primordial state of the cosmos. Perfect absorption takes this to its extreme being a state of union in which subject and object are not distinct – it is the perfect psychological correlate of the original undifferentiated primordial state. As such, the popular ideal of stable, one-pointedness is one manifestation of what Gavin Flood highlights as a general tendency in Hindu thought:

"correlation between psychology and cosmology" (2004: 78). Of course, the Indic conviction that psyche recapitulates cosmos is not in any way remarkable, being a feature of many other culturally-specific conceptions of the mind – it only appears distinctive from the disenchanted perspective of certain currents in elite western discourse which treats the self as perfectly unique and un-reproducible, with the rest of the universe being ruled by mechanical law (Porter 2002: 4). A microcosmic-macrocosmic relation is more generally a defining aspect of Banaras's cultural imaginary where – at least in formal ritual and sacred contexts – space, time and action is often presented as proceeding in a broadly fractal pattern. The famous cremation ghats of Banaras through their funerary fires re-enact daily the creation and destruction of the cosmos (Parry 1994), just as the various temples and sites of the city centre render in miniature the vast sacred geography of India (Eck 1983). In fact, even BHU, which was perhaps my main site of fieldwork, has at its centre a Viswanath Temple, so reproducing at its core the famous temple that lies at the heart of the larger city's sacred geography. Everywhere the microcosm reproduces the macrocosm.

The felicitous correlation of the stable, single-pointed mind and conceptions of primordial cosmic order invest the former with a certain normative naturalness, even if a given individual would be unlikely to express this relation explicitly. However, its idealisation is produced also at lower levels of cultural activity. In art, the valorisation of these psychological states can be seen in the circulation of specific aesthetic categories. North Indian classical musicians in Banaras often describe *raga* – the melodic modes or personalities that form the core of this musical tradition – as being *dhyan* (meditative), *shaant* (peaceful) or *chanchal*, the latter of which indicates a playful, frolicking, active mood. While none of these aesthetic categories carry pejorative connotations, the most high-status and valorised musical sections are usually those suffused with a peaceful, meditative mood. Just as *shaant* is seen as a necessary pre-requisite for the heightened attentivity of *dhyan* in the sphere of the mind, so too is the latter often considered by musicians separate to and higher than the former in the domain of music.

Often single-pointedness is not rendered through analytic distinction, but made real through presence and stone. In nearly every Hindu temple in the city there is a sculpture of the bull Nandi staring with singular, constant and fixed concentration at an aniconic representation of the great deity of Banaras, Shiva. It serves as a constant reminder of

the importance of single-pointed and total devotion, recurring again and again in the city's multitude of temples. While mostly Shiva appears in aniconic form as a vertical stone *lingam*, sometimes he is represented in human form sitting cross-legged deep in meditation. As the presiding deity of the city, he goes by many names – Bole Baba, Bole Nath, Mahadev, Vishwanath, Bhairav, Rudra, Shankar ji – and many guises, sometimes amorous, sometimes musical, at other times destructive and fierce, and still more often serene and meditative. In the latter form, he represents the ultimate ascetic, the *adiyogi*, or original *yogi*, who first discovered the powers of yoga and meditation.

As the preceding examples drawn from music and religious image making show, Indian art is often deeply concerned with rendering in aesthetic form states of deep, single-pointed attention. Carvings of figures in serene absorption with eyes fixed on the tip of the nose or half-closed in meditation were a dominant feature of Indian religious art historically, becoming particularly defined during the Gupta Period (4^{th}–6^{th} century CE), and continue to be produced in the present. In Banaras, people encounter these images in temples – although rarely as the central *murti* (statue) – as well as in school textbooks, replicas sold at archaeological and religious sites, and museums, such as that at nearby Sarnath, where the Budhha taught his first sermon, a place which nearly everyone in the city will have visited at least once. As mentioned in chapter two, some of the most influential Indian art historians and archaeologists of the late colonial period emphasised this "spirit of *dhyan*", whether as an aesthetic quality (Chanda 1936) or artistic technique (Coomaraswamy 1909), positing it as a central theme linking South Asian art over millennia and diverse communities. In the present-day visual anthropology of India, this absorptive aesthetic has been downplayed with scholars focusing instead on *darshan*, a practice which involves an exchange of gaze between the devotee and a divine image or statue (e.g. Babb 1981; Eck 1998; Gell 1998). Crucially, to give *darshan* the divine figure cannot be in a state of introspective absorption, but instead their eyes must be gazing outwards so that the devotee may catch a glimpse.

Christopher Pinney (2004: 22-3) suggests that the British colonial state attempted to export to India a western 'absorptive' aesthetic, drawn from late eighteenth-century French painting, in which figures are depicted ensconced in internal dramas, as if on an imaginary stage, so ignoring the presence of the beholder. Ordinary Indian consumers, according to Pinney, rejected this absorptive aesthetic, demanding instead frontal

images that gazed outwards and recognised the beholder's corporeal presence. This trend reaches its apotheosis amongst the central Indian villagers studied by Pinney who have a preference for "the non-absorptive and theatrical… The turn away from colonial absorption is here absolute" (194). The point that Pinney makes is an important one, and it reflects the fact that much of India's popular imagistic cornucopia consists of frontal depictions that interact with the viewer with almost tactile force. But simultaneously there is a failure perhaps to capture the diversity of India's image making styles, and this reflects a wider over-enthusiasm in some South Asian scholarship that theorises *darshan* as - to paraphrase Denis Vidal (2015) – a kind of Indian way of seeing.

Depictions of figures in deep absorption, seemingly uninterested in the presence of potential beholders, form an important part of the Indian aesthetic canon, signifying the accrual of deep spiritual knowledge, energy and power. To take but one of numerous possible examples – on the campus of BHU as well as schools in Banaras, images of Vivekananda, the late nineteenth century reformer and spiritual figure abound, adorning the doors of student rooms, appearing on flyers pasted haphazardly onto walls, and taking centre stage in colourful advertisements. As the most popular historical figure in BHU as in other parts of north India, a symbol of Hinduism's muscularity and global appeal, his image has also been adopted as an emblem by the largest student union, the Hindu-right, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). In all depictions on campus, Vivekananda appears in a state of deep meditation, or, more often (see fig. 9-10), gazing with single-pointed concentration into the distance. This turning outward of the ascetic's normally introspective attention, represents in visual form the enduring legacy of Vivekananda who was among the first figures to position formerly individual spiritual discipline within a new, collective national horizon, a template later followed by Gandhi and others.

Fig. 8: Image of Vivekananda placed at centre of BHU campus as part of advertisement for a government-scheme (Rashtriya Seva Yojana) encouraging young people to engage in community service. (Government of India, circa 2022)

Fig. 9: Image of Vivekananda used to advertise a coaching centre that provides tuition to students preparing for ultra-competitive exams (S.N. Coaching, circa 2020). Among other things, the poster advises students to keep all of their concentration on their chosen goal.

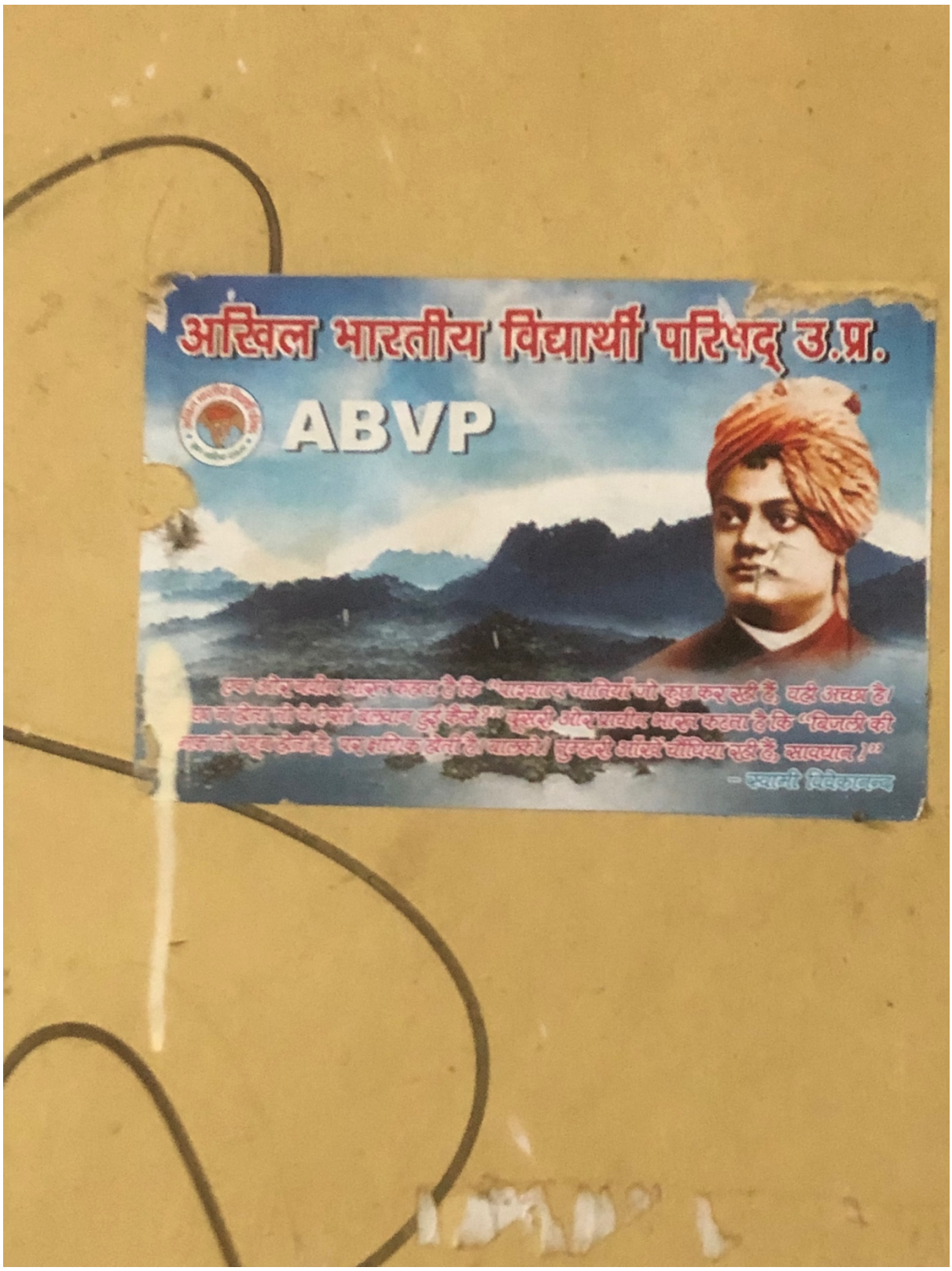


Fig. 10: A sticker placed on a student's door advertising the main student union on campus, ABVP. (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, circa 2022)

Fig. 11: The bedroom of a PhD candidate which also doubles up as an office where the student provides online tuition to people aspiring to undertake further doctoral studies.

Fig. 12: The specific *mahapurush* (great mean) shown in the previous image are given here in more detail. On the far top left is an image of former president, Abdul Kalam. Next to this is a picture of the architect of Indian constitution, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, and to the right of this an image of Gandhi. Below this is a picture of Vivekananda and another of baby Krishna stealing from a large pot of his beloved ghee. Notice how Krishna looks directly at the viewer unlike the images of the *mahapurush*.

The marked presence of Vivekananda on campus is one example of a broader idealisation of *mahapurush* (great men), largely historical figures drawn from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century during which the seeds of the Indian freedom struggle from British rule were sown and came to fruition. These great men, who are generally celebrated in Banaras but figure with particular significance in the lives of students, each signify different values, but collectively they embody the ideal of single-pointedness, marked out by their unwavering devotion to the goal of national regeneration. Framed pictures of *mahapurush*, along with maps and images of deities, are among the most common decorations within student rooms, which are usually occupied by between two and four people (see fig. 11-12). "For motivation" was a common answer given by students as to why they hung these historical pictures on their bedroom walls, although in their visibility to others, these images also served as instruments of projection, communicating a given student's discipline and ambition to his peers. Such images are also to be found throughout Banaras where shopkeepers often keep a picture of Madan Mohan Malaviya, the founder of BHU, hanging behind their counter, and small stores, which largely sell religious paraphernalia, newspapers and Hindu calendars (*panchanga*), also stock books about these historical figures. The convergence of student decorations and those of wider society, speaks to a desire not for subversive, youthful differentiation, but rather emulation of adult norms of respectability. During fieldwork, I could not but help draw comparisons to my own youth in London where people sought the opposite through their bedroom posters, signifying separation from middle-class adult morality through posters of androgynous musicians, rappers and films that played on themes of violence, sex, or drug taking.[33]

The historian Christopher Moffat (2019) has written persuasively on the enduring significance of the firebrand, atheist freedom fighter Bhagat Singh in the politics and artistic life of contemporary South Asia where he serves as a spectral presence that is not merely drawn upon by people, but actively demands and intervenes in the contemporary moment, calling for specific courses of action. I find Moffat's argument entirely applicable to BHU where long dead, great men serve as active spectral presences in the political dramas of the campus. Bhagat Singh, a subversive revolutionary deeply influenced by Marx who was hanged after carrying out politically-

[33] See, for example, the artist Adrienne Salinger's photo book *In My Room: Teenagers in their Bedrooms*, which documents how western teenagers decorate their rooms, treating them as spaces of private sanctuary, personal expression and often subversive identity experimentation.

motivated attacks on the imperial state, is particularly favoured by left-leaning students, who see themselves as standing apart from the dominant conservative and Hindu-right culture of BHU. However, it is the figure of Malaviya that features most prominently in wider campus politics, serving as a demanding and authoritative presence. His stone bust sits prominently in many of the university's grandest rooms ready to be garlanded at the beginning of events, and a common refrain, repeated again and again by students and faculty, asserts his near divinity: "He is like a God to us" / "*hamare lie bhagwan ke barabar hai*". The spectral intentions of Malaviya hang over the intermittent stream of protests that characterise student life at BHU. During one particularly notorious protest against the appointment of a Muslim professor to teach Sanskrit literature in a part of the university where Hindu priests are also trained in ritual procedure and Vedic recitation, students and senior administrators on both sides of the debate cited the imagined wishes of the long-dead Malaviya to advance their particular position. His grandson, a former high court judge who at the time was BHU's chancellor, declared that the appointment accorded with his relative's wishes, while many student protestors asserted the inverse.

Malaviya, who promoted the revival of 'proper' Hindu values in the colonial period, embodies a chaste, conservative Hindu identity. He was known for keeping a cow nearby at all times and supporting a range of religious issues from Hindi promotion to cow protection. In the present he represents Hindu authority and orthodoxy, and, as such, some lower caste students have an ambivalent relation to him. This can be seen in the actions of Prakash, a Dalit student studying for a PhD on the thought and philosophy of Gandhi. On one occasion, he touched the feet of Malaviya's statue in a sign of respect, encouraging me to also do so: "Without Malaviya, I would not have been able to come to BHU." However, at other times, Prakash was keen to emphasise Malaviya's "narrowness", asserting that he was opposed to giving robust electoral rights to Dalits. As a figure of establishment orthodoxy, Malaviya features less markedly in the aspirational horizons of students – this space is occupied by two *mahapurush* in particular: the former president of India A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and the aforementioned Vivekananda. Kalam rose from humble beginnings – "a middle-class Tamil family" with a father who "had neither much formal education nor much wealth" (Kalam 2002: 1) – to become one of India's leading scientists, pioneering the country's nuclear and missile building programme. He figures as one of the most enduringly popular figures of modern India, a Muslim who is adored by all sides of the political spectrum,

including those falling on the Hindu right. For many students, especially for those studying to pass tough exams, a task in which they are competing against countless thousands of others, Abdul Kalam represents the promise of singular focus and strong-willed determination. The aforementioned Balraj is typical – an 18-year-old student who has moved to Banaras from a village in Bihar to prepare for medical entrance exams that, if passed, will allow him to study to be a doctor at university. Balraj, who sees medicine as a route to financial security, has an image of Abdul Kalam on the lock screen of his phone. When I asked him why he had chosen Kalam, he gave the following answer:

If have doubts sometimes… Can I crack NEET [medical entrance test]? Can I become a doctor? Abdul Kalam's biography says, yes – if you really want something, from your 'dil' [heart], do "mahanat" [hard work], apply your full mind, then you will get it. Problems will come throughout your life, but it will be ok if you give full focus to your work.

In popularity amongst students, Abdul Kalam is surpassed only by Vivekananda. I asked fifty students, which figure most inspires them, and Vivekananda was the answer most often returned. A polymorphous mass of different associations, students regularly commented on his youthfulness (he died in his thirties), his supreme cognitive abilities, especially his amazing capacity for concentration, and his tireless work spreading Hindu ideals around the world.[34] The latter association was perhaps the most dominant, and could be conjured quickly in conversation simply by saying "Chicago speech", a shorthand immediately understood by all to refer to Vivekananda's famed American address to the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, an event now largely forgotten in Europe and America but seen by many Indians as introducing the true promise of Hindu philosophy to the west. Details of Vivekananda's supreme cognitive ability circulate on campus through stories that recount his superhuman mental attributes – reading vast quantities of books in a short period to the amazement of a sceptical librarian, or firing a hunting gun with perfect focus to hit a moving target again, and again, and again. Seen by many as the central figure in the popularisation of yogic meditation globally, as well as a tireless national servant who died young

[34] Students regularly commented that Vivekananda cultivated great cognitive skills through eating *sattvic* food, meaning a pure, vegetarian diet, as well as adhering to strict *brahmacharya* (refraining from sex, masturbation and lustful thoughts). Some students also suggested that he spoke Hindi (despite being a native of Bengal). This points to the recasting of Vivekananda in Banaras as a chaste paragon of Hindi belt virtue. In Bengal, Vivekananda's associations are very different to those in Banaras – he is often pictured next to the mystic Ramakrishna in images, and this speaks to the fact that he is primarily interpreted not as a standalone figure, but as a disciple of his great guru.

pursuing with singular focus the aim of national revival, he embodies fully the value of single-pointedness. This is signified by the quote that most often accompanies his image, one which nearly every student can recite by heart: "Arise awake and stop not till the goal is reached" (*utho, jago aur tab tak nahin ruko jab tak lakshy na praapt ho jae*). This quote, which was adapted by Vivekananda from the *Katha Upanishad*, circulates widely on social media and in conversation, and is sometimes shortened simply to "*utho jago*" in recognition of its well-worn familiarity.

The popularity of Vivekananda is attributable to a number of factors. With the ascendency of Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, there has been a search for historical figures who fall outside the central thrust of the opposition Congress Party, which dominated the independence movement over many years. Modi, whose appeal lies in part in his cultivation of an ascetic image, publicly casts himself as an avowed follower of Vivekananda, and in interviews and biographies his youthful visits to monasteries and ashrams associated with the social reformer are emphasised (Jaffrelot 2021: 35). Many BHU students said that they first encountered Vivekananda in school where during assemblies held on his birthday, which is marked as National Youth Day, speeches about his life are delivered. In preparation for Youth Day, children are also encouraged to engage in celebratory activities, such as painting pictures of Vivekananda's likeness. I visited three schools in Banaras – two where the language of instruction is English and one poorer Hindi medium institution – to investigate how young students are taught about Vivekananda. The teachers whom I met told me that while Vivekananda is not specifically included in the formal syllabus, during lessons they sometimes draw upon notable episodes from his life or use his quotations to illustrate certain points, often of a moral nature.

Singular attention in north Indian text

In the preceding section, I considered the reproduction of attention as an ideal in relation to various artistic traditions, as well as exploring the spectral presence of long-dead men who haunt Banaras and BHU in particular. Presently, I aim to extend this line of analysis further by considering the varied textual traditions circulating in Banaras, many of which also serve to constitute singular attention as an ideal. This is achieved not only through reliance on Hinduised discourse, but also by drawing on diverse currents that are re-shaping north India at large: neoliberalism, nationalism and

American-influenced entrepreneurialism. Again, the legacy of Vivekananda is often a key element in the textual reproduction of singular attention as an important ideal.

The Ramakrishna Monastery and Mission, a large global network of institutions founded by Vivekananda that carries out educational and charitable work as well as spreading Hindu philosophical ideas, publishes vast quantities of cheap booklets, many aimed at young people. In Banaras these booklets are sold at the mission's centre in the city, as well as by a small bookseller working on Assi Ghat, a large area on the banks of the river Ganga in the South of the city that is particularly popular with students who also form the vendor's central customer base. These booklets – many of which have sold hundred of thousands of copies across India and cost just 15 to 25 rupees (less than 25 pence) – meld self-help and productivity discourse with nationalism and Hindu spirituality. Nearly all the booklets are marketed with bold titles, such as: *The Mind and its Control*, *Effective Life Management*, *Secret of Concentration*, *Youth of India Arise*, and *How the Modern Youth can Confront their Problems*. A central theme is the present degraded state of India's youth, beset by suicide, western materialism and a lack of spirituality. The authors, usually senior monks from the Ramakrishna organisation, offer a clear solution for India's troubled youth – they must build their character, including, among other things, developing self-confidence, powers of concentration and stiving towards a singular goal. In *Youth! Arise Awake And Know Your Strength*, which has sold well over 400,000 copies, the author tells his reader:

Will you call him a youth who is chickenhearted, with a pale and long face, sickly in appearance, indisciplined senses [sic], restless mind, dull intellect and an incarnation of laziness? Never, never! We want the youth of Swami Vivekananda's dreams. He said "Arise, awake, for your country needs this tremendous sacrifice… (Srikantananda 2020: 4).

Other booklets take a similarly declamatory tone. In one, the author asserts that "non-control of mind" can lead to the "downfall of an entire civilisation" (Budhananda 2019: 17). However, some others are perhaps more pragmatic in their advice, such as *Secret of Concentration* by Swami Purushottamanaanda, who is well known within the Ramakrishna organisation for his work inspiring youth. Swami Purushottamanaanda gives patient counsel on how exactly to achieve focus during studies, including securing a good desk and developing a love for what one pursues. He begins his booklet in typical Ramakrishna Mission fashion, following in Vivekananda's legacy, by melding the techniques of the ascetic with the life aspirations of the householder: "To think that

it is only the yogis who need concentration is a gross mistake. Concentration is essential for everyone, whatever his vocation may be" (Purushottamanaanda 2019: 4).

Of course, Ramakrishna Mission booklets form just a small part of the self-development literature available to students. Outside of the formal textbooks used by BHU students in their courses, the self-help genre, along with bestselling non-fiction books, including biographies of successful men like Abdul Kalam and Elon Musk, are among the most popular type of literature consumed by students. Aside from a small store in the centre of the campus, most vendors of these books can be found on a long strip of road directly in front the university's main gate. This busy commercial area, known as Lanka, is visited by thousands of students daily, who come in the evenings when the weather has cooled to drink chai and eat fried snacks. The strip is lined with bookstores, which often place a table of popular novels, biographies and self-help titles on the pavement (a rare urban feature in Banaras) to entice passers-by. Vendors tend to keep dryer fare inside their stores, such as thick textbooks, booklets of questions from past government exams, and current affairs magazines, like *Pratiyogita Darpan*, aimed at aspiring students hoping to brush on their general knowledge in preparation for civil service tests.

Over a number of months, I catalogued the self-help books on offer, although, unfortunately, despite promises from Lanka's largest bookstore, I was unable to secure access to a set of accounts to see definitively which books sell best. While it is not feasible, for reasons of space, to give a full description of the diversity of different self-help books on offer, it is possible to outline three major genres: western self-help and productivity books; titles that promise to reveal ancient Hindu and spiritual wisdom in a manner applicable to modern life; and New Thought and manifesting literature. Many of these books devote at least a few pages to the topic of attentional cultivation, while some are specifically about this topic. Melissa Gregg (2018) interprets much productivity literature as fundamentally being an attempt to control and master time, which in capitalist economies is often rendered problematic, being experienced and imagined as fundamentally scarce. It seems to me that self-help and productivity literature can also equally be interpreted through an attentional lens, as an attempt to master and control attention, something which this genre shares with ascetic discourses on the self. In reality perhaps, both attempts at mastery are proposed solutions to the same broader problematic which is human finitude in the face of a world that feels excessive, marked by a proliferation of objects, things and tasks. This feeling of lack

can equally be situated in the finite structure of time or treated as a function of limited cognitive faculties, the two often being deployed interchangeably, as evidenced in English where time and attention can in certain contexts be used as synonyms (e.g. “this took up a lot of my time/attention”).

The first aforementioned genre, western self-help and productivity books, often draw on the authority of science, offering insights which authors claim are based on incisive reviews of the relevant empirical literature. Among the most popular in Banaras are: *Atomic Habits*, a scientific guide to cultivating improved habits that through small, repeated actions build over time towards great life changes; *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*, a deflationary book which aims to counter what the author sees as the mindless positivity of much self-help literature; and Daniel Goleman’s *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, which draws from a broad review of the scientific attention research, to offer advice on how to strengthen this varied cognitive faculty, “this vital muscle of the mind”. Many of these scientistic books include techniques which are designed to improve the distribution and intensity of the reader’s attention, such as: consistently prioritising those small percentage of available tasks that are likely to yield the greatest benefit (an application of the so-called Pareto Principle), or creating a schedule that allows for long periods of ‘deep work’ that involve high levels of distraction-free concentration given over to cognitively demanding tasks (Newport 2016).

While the aforementioned books base their insights on the authority of science, those falling into the second category draw on age-old spiritual wisdom to make their claims, and, in doing so, they reformulate Hinduism in such a way that it converges with the values of productivity, managerial and entrepreneurial discourse, a confluence which has been described elsewhere by Nandini Gooptu (2016). Some of these books, such as Jay Shetty’s *Think Like a Monk*, are written by individuals who grew up in the west but travelled to India where they found in spiritual wisdom solutions to the adversities of modern life which is understood to be beset by stress and imbalance. Others take ancient Indian texts and thinkers, extracting their insights and applying them to contemporary life. Radhakrishnan Pillai’s (2018) *Chanakya in the Classroom: Life Lessons for students*, which several of my BHU interlocutors kept in their room, and B. Bhattacharyya’s (2018) *Myths, Mythology and Management* are fairly typical. Both books devote a section to the development of concentration as a skill necessary for

success, illustrating its importance by elaborating a well-known episode from the *Mahabharata*, a Hindu epic poem, in which the archer Arjuna demonstrates his supreme focus by becoming totally unaware of anything but his arrow's narrow target.

Many of the bookstands in Lanka also carry a range of titles by figures from the New Thought movement. These books are striking because of their age – many were first published over a hundred years ago. A central theme in this self-help genre is a permeable mind-world barrier, such that if one is able to fix one's attention on something positive – such as health or wealth – and dispel thoughts to the contrary, then that thing will become a reality. In chapter 2, I explored how during the early twentieth century a transnational culture of attentional cultivation existed, which included much interchange of ideas between New Thought and Yoga. In the present, New Thought ideas have gained renewed global exposure, often repackaged under a novel name – *manifesting* – and marketed through slick films and books, particularly Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, which has sold more than 35 million copies. Napolean Hill's 1937 bestselling *Think and Grow Rich* is the most widely available New Thought title in Banaras, often appearing next to a few other books of a similar ilk, such as Wallace D. Wattles' *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910). The latter book, which is marketed by its Indian publishers as 'The Secret behind the Secret', in infused with the spirit of American individualism. Wattles instructs his readers: "Get rich; that is the best way you can help the poor. And you cannot hold the mental image which is to make you rich if you fill your mind with pictures of poverty" (1910: 86). Wattles asserts in the book's preface – like many other New Thought authors – that the ultimate authority for what he says comes from Hindu philosophy.

Online, often through short videos posted on social media, India's most popular Hindu spiritual figures, such as the guru-cum-businessman Baba Ramdev and the motorcycle-riding commercial mystic Sadhguru, offer advice on the cultivation of attention, sometimes aimed at students, and often mixing in popular self-help themes, like manifesting. Similarly, Modi in his annual televised talks with students (*Parkisha pe Charcha*) as well as his highly popular book *Exam Warriors* (2018) offers specific advice on focus and concentration, although he often takes an avuncular tone encouraging India's youth to relish life rather than feeling weighed down by overbearing societal pressures. In detailing these varied mediums through which the value of concentration is conveyed to BHU students, I hope to illustrate the multiple

production of attention as a value, something variously constituted through productivity, neoliberal, and spiritual discourse, which are often intertwined with one another. It is not that any one student will consume all of these mediums, but each is likely to be exposed to one or more sections of the larger totality.

For example, I found that those students who sit outside the Hinduised, right-leaning thrust of mainstream BHU, were more likely to read scientistic productivity literature written by American and European authors. Amitesh, a South Indian student who saw himself as secular and westernised, and, as such, separate to the dominant Hindi-speaking, vegetarian culture on campus, responded enthusiastically to the ideas of Cal Newport, a Georgetown University professor and productivity author, who writes persuasively about the importance 'deep work' for success. Amitesh said he found it difficult to focus when he first arrived on BHU's campus as he struggled sharing a room with a nocturnal student who slept in the day and worked late into the night. He told me: "Sharing the room pushed me to look into Cal Newport. I found his ideas useful. But in the end the thing that helped the most was learning to sleep with the light on." In a similar vein, New Thought and manifesting books were also consumed by a minority of students – I met ten people during the course of fieldwork who read from this genre. Those that took to New Thought ideas and books most seriously, tended to embody a certain entrepreneurial and aspirational character, one marked by extreme positivity. Their conversations were often peppered with references to senior figures in the world of US technology and business. Mansi, an undergraduate student from Delhi University who grew up in Banaras, often cited Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking as her dual idols. Inspired by reading copious New Thought literature, she daily meditated on attaining affluence and professional success. "My dream is to be an inventor and scientist. I must not think differently!" Figures like Mansi are extreme instances of the wider diffusion of entrepreneurial and neoliberal subjectivities among north Indian youth, something that is often attributed by researchers to conditions of entrenched economic adversity that mandate new forms of enterprise and improvisation (Deuchar & Dyson 2020; Poonam 2018).

While self-help and productivity discourse proved popular among some students, the most enduring text that touches on attentional themes, the one most often referred to by a broad cross-section of the Banaras population, whether professors, students, cooks or shop owners, was the *Bhagavad Gita*. This short discourse between Arjuna and

Krishna, which rose to global pre-eminence during the late nineteenth century (Kapila and Devji 2010; Bayly 2010), offers a range of divergent spiritual paths and messages without fully committing to any single one. Throughout the *Gita* there are proclamations on the nature of the mind as well as exalted descriptions of states of singular concentration. Indeed, more generally, the skilled archer Arjuna, perhaps more than any other figure in the Hindu epic corpus, is popularly associated with single-pointed focus. Sometimes in conversations, people would quote a line or two from the text to illustrate a point about psychology, and when I asked questions about the mind and north Indian mental categories, I was often directed to the *Gita* as the ultimate source of the information that I sought. "The *man* is more difficult to control than the wind", was commonly asserted, a paraphrase of the following section from the *Gita* spoken by the despondent Arjuna to his wise charioteer, the deity Krishna:

The mind is restless, turbulent, obstinate and very strong, O Krishna, and to subdue it, I think, is more difficult than controlling the wind (6.34)

Crucially, compared to the *Vedas* and certain other ancient scriptures, the *Gita* is understood by many to be more readily applicable to contemporary life. As a result, some turned to it in times of need and personal distress, such as Piyush, a student of vocal music at BHU. I first met Piyush in middle of the hot Banaras summer on Assi Ghat in front of the aforementioned makeshift stall stocked with Ramakrishna Mission booklets. He had in his hands a copy of *Man aur uska nigrah* (*The mind and its control*), which he was inspecting intently, turning it over repeatedly. Seeing his interest in the booklet, I quickly tried to start a conversation, leading with a first line of dubious quality: 'Looks good doesn't it?' Piyush replied, that he had bought the same booklet a week ago, but that he hadn't got beyond the first few pages. "The *Gita* is better," he added pointing to the Ramakrishna booklets arrayed next to him. "All the knowledge here, you will find first in the *Gita*. And more."

Piyush's grand assertion was based on reputation rather than intimate knowledge of the *Gita* – he had when I first met him, only started reading the short discourse. After our first conversation, we began to meet in chai shops, and also spent time talking in his hostel room. He would often arrive wearing round spectacles and a long strip of cotton cloth (*gumcha*) wrapped elegantly around his shoulders. He appeared, sartorially at least, to be a budding student intellectual, although this was undercut by his voice, which was listless and downbeat. A series of recent events had, to borrow Piyush's

phrase, “disturbed” him. His beloved music teacher, or *guru*, had died in a car crash, his girlfriend had left him, and his parents were angry as he had chosen to study music rather than a more employable and respectable subject. “Everything feels ruined,” he told me. Piyush couldn’t stop his *man* returning again and again to his guru’s death, uncontrolled ruminations taking up much of his waking consciousness. But worse still, his mind in its disturbed state had begun to dwell on thoughts of a sexual nature – lustful phantasies about his former girlfriend, but also other women. It was this feeling of profound mental disturbance that prompted him to start reading the *Gita* as well as buy Ramakrishna Mission booklets through which he hoped to learn to control his mind better. However, after some weeks, the feeling of mental disturbance became less intense, the passage of time serving as a soothing balm, and with this, Piyush began to lost interest in these texts. He didn’t manage to finish the *Gita*, concluding that it was too difficult for someone of his age (18 years). “The *Gita* is about understanding yourself, your mind. I am not ready now. But I will come back to it later. I know this.”

As the example of Piyush of illustrates, engagement with scripture is occasional for many. I found during fieldwork that ideas and tropes that had their origin in ancient scripture travelled more readily through vernacular modes. In particular, the importance of single-pointed concentration is stressed repeatedly in Hindu scripture, but epic, mythic and scriptural elaborations of this ideal circulated not primarily through ancient text, but, instead, were woven into conversation, or depicted in television serials and other popular media. A number of attentional tropes recur across myriad mythic narratives and their vernacular renderings, serving to convey the great potential of singular concentration. Sages and deities are often depicted as engaging in great feats of concentration and austerity, sometimes lasting over superhumanly long timeframes, and in return for which they are granted powers and boons. This mythic trope underscores attentional cultivation as something deeply generative in a practical sense, a technique that will yield great power in the instrumental world of worldly pursuit. Other tropes are more pious. Imagery of overflowing vessels appears in a number of different religious narratives to illustrate the difficulty of giving supreme attention on the divine. In one such popular story, the sage Narada walks around a mountain carrying a cup of oil on his head, but so intent is he not to spill a drop that he forgets to think of his beloved deity Vishnu during the journey[35]. It is an apt illustration of difficulty giving attention to

[35] Similarly, I came across a number of different stories of Sukadeva who is instructed by his guru King Janaka to take a full cup of milk and walk around his palace as great festivities take place. While the

the divine while engaged in the engrossing affairs of daily life. In many other mythic narratives, the dire consequences of disturbing prolonged states of meditative absorption are illustrated forcefully through tales of destruction and death. Shiva opens his third eye and burns the deity of desire Kamadeva to ashes for distracting him from his meditations, just as the great sage Kapil fatally curses the 60,000 sons of King Sagara for breaking his deep state of absorption.

Banaras: no place for single-pointedness?

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to sketch in some detail the varied ways through which single-pointed attention is valorised. As something emphasised through various cultural mediums, it forms a central aspect of the normative conception of subjectivity in north India. However, despite lengthy elaboration on its valorisation in the cultural sphere, I have not thus far considered in any great detail how people relate to this ideal and, in particular, how it might come to manifest in particular experiential patterns and habits. This relation can be posed as a question: Does the cultural valorisation of certain mental states – extreme selectivity, self-control, peacefulness of mind – affect how people actually experience the world, or attempt to experience it? It seems that if such a relation were to exist it would need to be mediated by other social, ritual, or spatio-temporal forms – the desirability of a value alone, especially one as difficult to realise as single-pointedness, is a weak determinant of psycho-bodily experience. The relation between attentional ideology and experience then is partly a matter of what might be termed 'ecology'. Particular ecologies are designed in part to allow for specific attentional states – a living room might be designed, for example, through arrangements of seating and space to facilitate focus on a television, while much architecture, as Walter Benjamin (1969: 18) famously observes, is made to be consumed in a state of distraction (a banister, even one beautifully constructed, is meant to be experienced through touch and sight in an incidental and habitual fashion rather than with rapt attention). Following from this insight, if north Indian attentional ideology were to manifest in particular psychological habits, we might expect to see particular orderings of space, time, and social relations in Banaras that are conducive to the regular attainment of states of single-pointedness.

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specifics of the story often varied, the ability to walk around the palace without spilling a drop of milk was taken as a demonstration of the level of heightened attention that one needs for the truly spiritual path. Further, Kabir in his poetry uses imagery of a woman balancing a pot of water on her head as an illustration of heightened attention.

In a loose sense, such orderings exist in the city – libraries, classrooms and other such spaces are arranged to ensure states of focus. However, in a more general sense, as the dazed newly-arrived tourists wandering along Assi Ghat will attest, Banaras does not immediately reveal itself as a place that is conducive to states of prolonged, single-pointed attention. Social interaction is intense and constant, and a thicket of sounds and visual stimulations on the streets and ghats all too often prevent the mind from coming to rest for prolonged periods on any one thing. Compared to even India's major metropolises like Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi, the streets of Banaras are overflowing with stimuli. In commercial areas, adverts crowd in upon one another, climbing in their multitude up the sides of walls and buildings. The calls of hawkers and workers are interspersed by the steady, staccato pulse of horns. Even on sporadic stretches of pavements, or narrow lanes in the old part of town, pedestrians are liable to be met with sharp, loud beeps sounded by impatient motorcyclists crawling behind them. While this thesis focuses on the ascetic and spiritual, it should not be forgotten that Banaras is just as much reputed for *mauj* and *masti* (fun and leisure); a certain carefree pursuit of enjoyment and gaiety is integral to the identity of the city (Cohen 1995; Kumar 2017). Wedding processions, famously energetic festivals, impassioned chai shop debates, and youth dancing inebriated on *bhang* are as central to the street life of the city, probably more so, than pilgrims engrossed in high-minded spiritual activity.

In specific urban ecologies, there is an emphasis on sociality and interaction rather than solipsistic states of attention. Despite a more forceful valorisation of single-pointedness in north India than in the UK, it is notable that many equivalent urban spaces are associated with a stronger normative expectation for asocial states of focus in London compared to Banaras. This can be seen, for instance, in the arrangement of space in professors' offices in BHU, a university where departmental life is governed by politics, bureaucracy and alliance building with often less emphasis placed on academic research. Often the professor's desk faced multiple sofas and rows of chairs, a testament to how the space of the university office is intended for social interaction rather than states of asocial, focused study. I have lost count of how many times I entered an office in BHU to find groups of postdocs, PhDs, clerks or visiting businessmen and officials engaged in high-spirited discussion about some pressing concern, sometimes multiple conversations taking place simultaneously. On one or two occasions, the conversation was accompanied by the murmur of a television playing idly in the background,

offering up the day's news to nobody in particular. One senior professor in the psychology department, who spent time in the US, confessed that while he often worked in his office in America, he did not attempt to do so in Banaras. "Much better to wait until I get home, I know I will not be disturbed there." Hostel rooms in BHU are also often deeply social spaces with up to four students living together. I often found one student studying as a group of his peers talked nearby, or a boy putting a blanket over his head so that he could sleep as others conversed. Some students kept their objects in the rooms of friends as though the whole hostel were one communal space. As Anish, a first year humanities student, told me: "I keep my trousers in one friend's room, and my slippers in another. We are all friends here." Certainly, some students preferred solitude, but in general the intensity of sociality stood in contrast to the London student accommodation in which I also carried out fieldwork where my fellow residents insisted that even sponges for washing dishes should not be shared.

Outside of the campus too, I also found that attention was only loosely regulated in a number of settings. In classical Indian music concerts, some people talk during performances, others sit engrossed in their phones, while still more seem intently absorbed in the performance. There is no sense that one *must* appear attentive. In some of the larger all-night classical music festivals, hawkers wander in from the street, people sleep at the back of the venue, and there is always a steady trickle of people coming in and out. It is only in the more plush, elite venues where a stronger expectation of attentiveness exists, and even here it is far weaker than in comparable events in London. During the major Indian classical music events in London there a strong expectation of attentiveness, or at least its simulation, such that even when the musicians are tuning their instruments a hushed silence sometimes descends on the auditorium. Similarly, chai shops in Banaras arrange their benches to facilitate social interaction, with some famous institutions, such as Pappu's tea stall, offering a space for men to discuss the political matters of the day. Again, it is only in the upmarket, westernised coffee shops – more recent additions to the city and few in number – that one finds the occasional well-off student or foreigner working alone on a laptop. In Hindu ritual too, there is no expectation for onlookers to remain in pious attentive silence, as one might expect for an equivalent event, such as a wedding, in a church in London.

In fact, I found most often that attention was determined most strongly by power and authority. Students listened with beatific smiles and intent facial expressions as professors elaborated on points of moral import, often continuing without break or visual aid for long periods. There was no comparative expectation that professors should be attentive to their students. Most kept their phones on during classes, and would sometimes take multiple calls during lessons. On one occasion, a professor invited a therapist from Switzerland, who had come to stay for a few weeks in Banaras, to lecture his students on meditation and mindfulness. During the talk, the professor, who sat on a sofa near to the speaker, marked papers and even discretely took a phone call. These actions passed without comment from the hundred or so assembled students, an indication perhaps of its normalcy. In a similar manner, my music teacher would often read the newspaper, listen to short videos or take phone calls as I played for him. However, his students, including myself, were always careful to pay close attention as he held forth on matters of musical theory or politics.

What the preceding paragraphs illustrate I hope is that the life of Banaras residents is not for the most part characterised by a surfeit of single-pointed attention, and nor is there an expectation that things should be otherwise. I concede here that I cannot make this point with definitive certainty – one cannot observe internal states, the only data I have is the statements of my interlocutors about these interior processes, as well as outward behavioural signs of attentiveness. The latter, of course, can be simulated, or simply be perfunctory and habitual.

Divergent value systems: the ascetic and the worldly

It seems to me that the absence of an expectation for single-pointed attention in many social settings is a natural corollary of the fact that value systems are not harmonious. In Banaras, as elsewhere, people pursue a multiplicity of values, many of which are in tension with ideals of single-pointedness. As Joel Robbins (2013) points out, drawing from a close reading of Dumont that counters some dominant anthropological interpretations of his writings, different values are pre-eminent in particular social contexts and there is inevitably opposition and conflict between the plurality of values circulating within a given culture.[36] Lucia Michelutti's (2008: 138-147) ethnography of

[36] Robbins reads Dumont as asserting that the values of a given society are both monist and pluralist with certain values within a hierarchy being preeminent at particular levels (social contexts), but with

cow-herding *Yadavs* in the north Indian town of Mathura is a good example of this – her informants profess to be vegetarian, yet in select settings they consume meat and alcohol. This is not because they are hypocritical but because in specific contexts they draw upon different sources of value in north Indian society – the pious *vaishya* on the one hand, and on the other the energetic, masculine *kshatriya* – that mandate divergent forms of behaviour.

A concentrated, single-pointed mind in a state of peace, is, at least in its extreme instantiations, a deeply a-social psycho-bodily ideal, something that requires the temporary suspension of social ties and duties. It is inappropriate in most contexts, which are taken up by socially-oriented values that push individuals towards the world of people, objects and mundane desire. Indeed, to return to Dumont again, it seems plausible that single-pointedness is in a certain sense the psychological correlate of renunciatory value, which is characterised by a rejection of the social order. Dumont (1960) argues that the institution of renunciation in India cannot be understood in and of itself, but instead should be analysed in a relational manner, defined in opposition to the man-in-the world who is enmeshed in the social order. The independent renunciate who stands apart is, in the words of Patrick Olivelle: "an antithetical category defined more by its negation of social structures than by any internal structure or property of its own" (2011: 44). The conceptualisation of attention in north India in binary terms, as two polarities of experience: one restless, and the other still and single-pointed, reproduces in psycho-bodily terms the duality of the ascetic and the worldly. When the mind is restless or *chanchal*, it is caught up in the world, attracted to objects and people, as well as driven by desires for wealth, sex and power. This is not always negative – as the aforementioned aesthetic categorisation of north Indian classical music shows. This speaks more generally to how relationality can be a source of power, authority and value. The inverse state of single-pointed attention manifests the ascetic impulse within the psyche – it is the transcendence of the self over the world of objects, social relations and desires. It is a state in which the causation of consciousness – rather than being bound up in the world – is totally self-determined, something which counterintuitively in its most extreme cases leads eventually even to a negation of the intentional self. I do not mean to say that such an ideal psycho-bodily state is regularly experienced in

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the possibility of encompassment allowing for singularity also. The specifics of this complex argument are not relevant to the point which I seek to make, except for the observation that a certain degree of plurality exists.

Banaras, but as an ideal pole of experiential potentiality it helps to organise conceptions of consciousness, just as *moksha* (liberation), which is defined in opposition to worldly attachment (*samsara*), circulates as a schema that has conceptual influence in India.

The work of Dumont has in more recent decades come under much scrutiny and criticism (Appadurai 1986; Dirks 2002; Inden 2000), as well as some calls for re-appraisal (Hausner 2007: 197; Parry 2020; Robbins 2013: 103). Appadurai (2020: 389), for example, recently characterised the Dumontian position as a "highly abstract view of Indic ideology" based on patchy material "replete with contradictions and gaps", which is of little use to most serious Indologists. One strand of critical engagement with Dumont's scholarship has, rather than rejecting his ideological categories outright, sought instead to illustrate how they are subject to reformulation and alteration, often existing as divergent elements within the life worlds of specific categories of person (Burghart 1983; Veer 1989). In doing so, the category of the man-in-the-world and the individual-outside-the-world comes not to figure as neatly separable, but as categories that a single person might simultaneously embody. Scholars have sought to show how the Brahman (as well as the renunciate) is bound irredeemably by a contradiction being both dependent on the social order for livelihood and yet simultaneously seeking to transcend it (Parry 1980; Heesterman 1971: 46), while in a similar vein Veena Das (1977) has explored how in Puranic myth the Brahman's position is contextual and relational, and, as such, he can be depicted variously as a householder or a renunciate. The enmeshment of these divergent categories within the life worlds of specific individuals is born out by the *Banarasi* ethnographic corpus, as well as that of India at large, which depicts numerous categories of person (whether housewife, priest, middle-class social reformer or wrestler) that draw on the ascetic ideal while also being engaged in the social world (Alter 1992; Parry 1980; Pearson 1992). As Alter observes: "For the wrestler, *sannyas* is an iconic category of person against which he can measure his own sense of self" (1992: 316).

Conversely, others have given empirical attention to the life worlds of actual renunciates, and, in doing, so they have explored the many ways in which they are in reality enmeshed within the social world, often forming their own alternative communities, families and social bonds (Burghart 1983; Denton 2004; Hausner 2007). Patrick Olivelle (2011: 28-32), drawing on Geoffrey Harpham, has more recently argued that asceticism – defined by restriction of desire and self-control – is an

ideological strand within the mainstream of all cultures, including in deeply domestic and social spaces. Olivelle sees the ascetic impulse of restraint as productive of culture itself, just as the *id* in Freudian thought must be managed in order to allow for the development of civilisation. Collectively, I think these works speak to the contradictory potential of the ascetic impulse which offers practices of self-control that are productive of the social world, and yet which simultaneously seek to transcend it. The work of individuals like Vivekananda, and the popularisation of yoga by nationalist figures in the previous century (see chapter 2), is an attempt to harness the socially generative potential of the ascetic impulse.

In grounding the worldly and the ascetic within the conceptual structure of consciousness, I hope to show how this duality which is central to Indian culture in various modulations and forms generally, is also an organising principle of experience. The pull between the social world and its simultaneous transcendence plays out in the two polarities of attention: the restless *man* and its inverse, the self-controlled, single-pointed self.[37] It speaks to two different possibilities of how consciousness might be formed. However, these possibilities are not in a strict sense particular to India – the duality of the self-controlled mind and the mind which is scattered, unrestrained, or captured by the material/social world appears ubiquitous (at least in the cultures and sub-cultures that I am acquainted with). The preceding paragraphs seek only to outline the particular social and cultural form that this duality takes in north India. In English too the duality of *attention* and *distraction* speaks to a binary conception of consciousness in which the mind exists between two poles of causation, one self-controlled and one in which the self is taken over by a world that exceeds it. This binary is prevalent also in experimental psychology where researchers distinguish between wilful, internally driven top-down attention and contrast this to bottom-up attention. Crucially, many other intermediate states of attention exist in which consciousness is caused by a complex interplay of factors, but there is a persistent tendency to conceptualise attentional experience in binary terms, as existing between two poles. Attention is either on or off.

[37] Valorised states of absorption that involve a loss of self-directedness appear at first glance to complicate this binary. However, as discussed in chapter 3, such absorptive states are intensifications of self-controlled concentration taken to such an extreme that eventually even a sense of self is lost. This then speaks fundamentally to potential of single-pointed concentration, its offer in extremity of complete transcendence.

Let me return now to the problematic posed earlier – how might the valorisation of a particular conception of normative subjectivity, affect how people actually experience the world, or attempt to experience it? As the dominant psycho-bodily value of self-control and extreme selectivity is asocial (although paradoxically also socially generative), something that stands in tension with other more socially-oriented values, it seems likely that it will find its most forceful expression in specific contexts, rather than being generally diffuse. This is indeed what I found during fieldwork – in Banaras, single-pointedness as a value is encoded in specific ritual practices that mediate its attainment. These ritual technologies – of which there are many: *vrata*, *japa*, *riaz*, meditation, pilgrimage, a wrestler's training, prayer – make the attainment of a single-pointed mind possible through particular psycho-bodily arrangements and repetitions. They are necessarily states of exception, performed only occasionally, in which one attempts to form consciousness in a way that goes against psycho-bodily nature, requiring also a temporary suspension of normal social bonds. The mind, which has an inherent desire is to be in the world, is temporarily restrained or channelled to some specific divine object. We will see in subsequent chapters, that those who inhabit these states often see them precisely in terms of social exception: the musician ideally practices late at night or in the early morning when others are asleep; or the Brahman ritual specialist declares that in order to repeat a necessary mantra thousands of times he must forget his wife and children temporarily. In the following concluding section, I hope to explore how these states of exception are carved out by individuals through specific mediating practices precisely because they dwell in a world of heightened sociality, limited space and sensorial stimulation. Such practices offer an opportunity, temporarily at least, to dwell outside the world of objects, people and things.

A state of exception

As the foregoing discussion alludes to, Banaras is not a peaceful city per se. And yet, it offers up moments of great serenity that are invested with that quality due to their juxtaposition to the normal bustle of the city. I found during my time in the city that certain parks, spots and times of day offered up a feeling of intense peacefulness, a brief oasis from the activity of the busy street. Upon returning to London, I was struck by the abundance of silence, which initially at least, seemed oppressive in its diffuseness. Without the contrast to the sound and bustle to which I had grown used, it spoke more to an absence of human activity than peaceful respite. In Nita Kumar's (2017) study of

Banarasi culture, many pages are devoted to a detailed description of the practice of *bahri alang*, a trip to some peaceful spot with a natural water source, often on the edge of the city, where one engages in certain enjoyable activities: bathing, leisurely washing of clothes, grinding of *bhang* (cannabis preparation). These trips, which were highly popular in Banaras although declining even at the time of Kumar's research in the 1980s, offer up moments of solitude in a space that exists outside of the city's busy streets. As Kumar notes: "*Bahri alang* trips are essentially individualistic activities, performed in solitude, with the premium on peace. It is when a person has had enough of being alone that he goes to *bahri alang* with friends" (2017: 98).

The desire to carve out a space of peace and solitude amid the normal flux of activity and social interaction is an important motivation for many *Banarasi* residents. There are particular times of day that provide solitude, particularly *brahma mahart*, the very early morning, which many students talked of as particularly appropriate period for study, musical practice or other solitary activities. Certain spaces also offer pockets of peace within the packed lines of the city, whether a small temple courtyard, specific *ghats* that become quiet at particular times of day, or small parks, such as Madhuban in the leafy BHU campus, where young couples go to talk away from prying eyes. On occasion, however, space must be carved out more forcefully. One particularly bookish student wrote the following words above his bed to make space for reading amongst the heavy press of hostel life: "If I am studying, Fuck Off." Others talked of having special routes to navigate the city, ones that specifically avoid the busiest traffic where sound and smog is most intense.

Everyone that I met – whether priest, musician, cleaner, clerk or student – also engaged in some ritual practice that gave them time outside the stimulations and activity of the city. The most common of these is ritual worship (*puja*) and temple visits, which are incomplete without the fixing of the mind on the deity, at least for some short period and ideally for longer. Other practices encode states of single-pointed attention more forcefully. The majority of students said that they engage in some kind of yogic practice to steady and concentrate the mind, whether for a few minutes in the morning, a way to replenish one's energy in breaks from studying, or as part of a regular, elaborate daily practice. What exactly constitutes meditation varies – it may be focusing on the tip of an incense stick in a dark room, listening intently to Sufi music or controlling one's breath as part of *pranayama*. However, in all cases an emphasis is put on controlling the mind,

such that one's consciousness is not pulled between many things, but instead comes to rest on one. Musicians – ideally daily, although this can be difficult to maintain – engage in *riaz* (practice), aiming to becoming totally absorbed in their art, something which they consider equivalent to yogic meditation. Others read scripture or repeat mantra silently in their mind with intent concentration. This may be a skilled Brahmin priest who daily says the powerful *Gayatri Mantra* to cleanse the self and concentrate the mind, or a boatman who reads the devotional hymn, *Hanuman Chalisa* after bathing to make his *man* peaceful and *kush* (happy).

In all cases, there is an emphasis on using a specific ritual or spiritual technology to train the mind to exist temporarily in a state of exception where the causation of consciousness is inverted – rather than being produced by the world of objects, social relations and things, it is determined by the self. An asocial space is carved in which the self can exist briefly outside the flux of the city and proceed separately to the pull of socially-oriented values. Through encoding a particular ideology of consciousness, these practices encourage individuals to interpret their experience in non-ordinary ways. This is particularly true in specialist settings where through repetition the mind is more acutely trained. On a number of occasions, I witnessed music students become disturbed by an external sound during practice, prompting them to stop and complain about the distraction. In each case, they were told by their teacher that the problem lay not in the external surroundings, but in the student's lack of self-control. Here the student is encouraged to interpret their consciousness as ultimately internally produced, which is also the effect that their specific attentional practice of choice – *riaz* – seeks to bring about.

Through training, certain individuals were able to achieve a control of their consciousness that appeared remarkable. In the *akhara* that I visited, sometimes I saw young men sitting cross-legged in meditation on the side of the wrestling pit as others sparred less than a metre away from them. In the temple closest to my house, during the festival of *Chaitra Navratri* in celebration of the goddess Durga, loud concerts took place such that wall of my room vibrated as the singer reached his crescendo. In the midst of this, ritual specialists continued in their mantra repetition, arranged around the perimeter of the temple courtyard, sitting cross-legged and saying the same Sanskrit verses again and again in their mind over many hours. It is to these specialist practices of single-pointed attention that I turn in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. In doing

so, I hope to explore how through their cultivation they offer not only psycho-bodily peace and time away from the city's flux, but also in certain instances power, status and connection with divine reality.

Conclusion

The issue of how the self should relate to society is a universal problematic that no group has solved, as Richard Shweder observes. The particular construction of attention in north India seems fundamentally to address itself to the tensions of this relation. The mind is understood to be repeatedly drawn to the relational and social world of objects and people, and this is its normal state (as reflected in the widely held cultural belief that the *man* is inherently *chanchal*). Yet, this state of normalcy can be inverted, albeit in exceptional circumstances and involving specific practices and arrangements of the body and space. In such cases, the normal flow of consciousness is reversed, being determined by the self rather than the surrounding world, and practices encoding this state give many in Banaras time outside the often exhausting and relentless pull of sociality. The attraction and generative potential of this non-normal and exceptional single-pointed attentional state is something that is emphasised and elaborated at length in diverse aspects of north Indian culture, whether aesthetics or self-help literature.

In elaborating these points, I have aimed to address a broader issue too, which runs throughout this thesis – that is the question of how exactly attentional ideology comes to feature in everyday life. As something that is reproduced at a diversity of levels – whether the peaks of cosmology or the seemingly inconsequential decorations that adorn student bedrooms – attentional ideology emerges in this analysis as something axiomatic rather than incidental to a given society's activities of cultural production. Yet, in considering too how attentional ideology intersects with intimate states of subject formation, the foregoing discussion is suggestive of the fact that particular ideas, elaborations and valorisations of attention are also deeply practical, offering a resource to be drawn upon by individuals encountering fundamental contradictions and tensions. In the cases discussed above, through control over the selectivity and causation of experience, individuals in Banaras negotiate the fundamental tensions, probably ubiquitous everywhere, between 'self' and an overbearing relational world that always exceeds it.

Chapter 5 | Between the restless mind and restraining self: a north Indian theory of agency

They sit waiting. Thousands of students in crisp school uniforms arranged over neat rows. The girls sport pleated ponytails bound by colourful ribbons. When India's prime minister Narendra Modi finally enters the stadium, dressed in a spotless white kurta complementing his snowy beard, the mass of students rise to their feet to give a standing ovation, something offered enthusiastically before even a word has been uttered. After some time, the prime minister walks onto the stage, but he chooses not to take the seat placed there for him. Instead, he paces up and down, sometimes putting his hands in the pockets of his Nehru jacket. It is a casual posture that befits the informal atmosphere of the event, *Pariksha Pe Charcha* (Exam Talk), an annual televised 'interaction' between Modi and selected students during which the latter, as part of a Q&A format, ask the prime minister for advice on how best to cope with the stresses of studying.

Some students ask about how to deal with nerves when studying, others seek counsel on the best course of action to take when one's parents are disappointed. At one point, a group of pupils ask for advice on how to deal with the numerous distractions that inevitably arise when studying online. As one student from Karnataka enquires in his best public speaking voice:

Sir, how can a student focus while studying online? Because there are so many distractions like YouTube, WhatsApp and other social media. It is very difficult to study online without disturbance. Sir is there any solution for this? Thank you, Sir.

Most of the audience wear white face masks – the COVID-19 pandemic has been ongoing for two years, and many students continue to learn online rather than in the classroom. For Modi there is something humorous in these queries about online distraction. Pausing before speaking, he declares: "A question comes to mind… when you say you are studying online, are you really studying online or watching reels?" A murmur of laughter ripples through the audience, turning gradually into applause. Smiling, Modi continues: "You understand that I have caught you out!" Taking a more sombre tone, the prime minister then observes that distraction can happen offline in the classroom as well – a student's eyes may be on the teacher, but they hear nothing of what has been said because the mind is somewhere else. He concludes: "The meaning

of this is that the medium is not the problem, it is the *man* [heart-mind] that is the problem". Again, this statement is met with applause – although this time laughter is absent. Later, Modi's statements are covered in the press, with media outlets running bold headlines, such as: *PM Modi gets candid, asks students 'You study online or watch reels?'* (Jha 2022).

This opening vignette speaks fundamentally to the fact that what is at stake when we talk about and reflect upon attention often relates to matters of experiential causation. Attention is concerned most often with the selectivity of experience, but also, perhaps less intuitively, with the question of what *causes* this selectivity. This can be seen in basic terms for attention in English which designate both selectivity and causation – the term 'focus', for example, suggests that one's experience is internally caused, while distraction often implies the opposite. Modi and his student interlocutor each offer different vantages on experiential causation. The student implies that external technologies play the dominant role in determining experience (at least in the context of COVID-19-era studying). In doing so, he partakes in certain globalised anxieties about digital technologies, which place a marked emphasis on the importance of external constraints (phones and other devices) in over-determining our experience to the pointed detriment of human agency, which in this framing resides primarily in the ability to freely control consciousness. In contrast to this, Modi suggests that external factors shaping experience are actually of less importance. Rather, the ultimate responsibility for what we experience, and, so, the fundamental base of our agency, lies not out there, but within the self.

The applause that rose to meet Modi's statements was not, I believe, only a function of his appeal as a populist leader, but speaks instead more forcefully to the fact that his words expressed certain culturally salient assumptions about the self and attention that are widespread in north India. A central contention of this chapter is that a broad range of factors in north India – metaphorical registers, pedagogical cultures and specific framings of self – invite people to interpret experience and attention as ultimately internally caused. Above all, this tendency to emphasise interior rather than external factors as ultimate causes of experience arises from a specific divided conception of interiority common in north India. The analysis of this self-conception will make up the central ethnographic focus of this chapter. This framing of interiority centres fundamentally on two opposed clusters of interiority. One cluster is unruly, desiring and

replete with feeling – its inherent restlessness represents *the* paradigmatic barrier in north Indian culture to control over experience, consciousness and, in certain contexts, agency itself. The other cluster represents the inverse, a locus of discriminatory intelligence, morality and restraint. The interaction of these two clusters provides the basic structure of consciousness, and it contours fundamentally how attention is often understood: as an internal relation between two, often opposed, aspects of self. States of attention and focus then are above all instances of interior self-restraint in which one aspect of the person, concerned with morality and discrimination, controls and reins in another aspect of self, which is prone to desire and restlessness. Here, both focus and its attentional inverse, restlessness, both primarily arise internally, that is within the self – so de-emphasising the importance of external constraints in the formation of experience.

This understanding of self, I contend, forms the basis of a specific attentionalist conception of agency that is widespread in north India, but particularly prominent in certain ritual, ascetic and artistic contexts where freedom is viewed to lie first and foremost in experiential control. In its emphasis on internal experiential factors and particularly attentional control, this attentionalist framing fits uneasily with dominant formulations of the agency concept in anthropology. Rather than emphasising interior restraint of experience, these latter conceptions of agency, popular in anthropology, have tended to give relatively more significance to external constraints and their resistance as well as the importance of the expression of interiority in outward discourse. While I mainly consider the aforementioned attentionalist conception of agency, with its emphasis on internal work rather than exterior constraint, in relation to north India, I also argue that it provides a salient framing of volition and action that extends well beyond the confines of South Asia, being found globally yet always grounded in localised conceptions of the self.

A tripartite conception of self

What might it mean to attend like a north Indian? If any commonality can be drawn across an area so diverse in caste, class and culture, I think the concept of the *man*, a psycho-bodily organ that exists as something between the western conception of heart and mind, is likely to be central. From the very start of my fieldwork, the *man* emerged as a fundamental point of interest as interlocutors explained their behaviour, intentions and feelings through this psycho-bodily organ. If someone's mood was low, the phrase

"*man nahin lag raha hai"* might be employed, meaning literally: my *man* is not attaching to (i.e. finding interest in) the world around it. Or if someone desired something, this too would be expressed through the *man*. I often heard my student friends, as we approached Lanka where various delicacies and drinks are sold, say some variation of: "*mera chai pine ka man kar raha hai*" (my *man* feels like drinking chai).

During fieldwork, I was surprised by how easily, I came to parse experience through the *man*. I began to experience thoughts and emotions arising in the chest.[38] When late in the evening I felt tired and restless while writing fieldnotes, this came to be accompanied by novel images and sensations, previously unknown – a sense of a grasping entity near the heart that needed to be restrained in order to work. When observing the behaviour of acquaintances – both in Banaras and over the phone with friends from London – I sometimes found myself instinctively appraising their actions in terms of the quality of their *man*. "So and so has a very *chancal* [restless] *man*. They seem incapable of letting go of such and such a thing."

It is difficult to say whether these feelings were always there and the acquisition of a new cultural vocabulary allowed me to articulate them better, or whether this vocabulary facilitated the constitution of new experiences. Regardless, my psycho-bodily recalibration provided a better understanding of the often-subtle ground of embodied difference which serves to distinguish a Banaras resident's experience of consciousness and attention. During fieldwork, I paid special attention to the different ways in which people used cultural conceptions of 'mind' (broadly understood) and interiority to describe their experience. This includes *man*, but is not limited to it – other psycho-bodily qualities and entities will be discussed in this chapter. This empirical process began in earnest when my Hindi became adequately proficient to listen to how people used these terms in casual conversation. I devoted special pages in my fieldnotes to documenting the various idioms and phrases that people employed to discuss aspects of interiority. I subsequently supplemented this with examination of certain popular Hindu scriptures, epics and texts, as well as the poetry of spiritual figures like the mystic Kabir, to find canonical references to different psycho-bodily entities. Finally, during the last months of research I carried out specially designed interviews to elicit

[38] While I experienced these feelings in the chest region, I came later in fieldwork to understand that this was my own idiosyncratic interpretation, as more often the *man* is conceived as without fixed, permanent location.

the breadth of different categories of 'mind' in circulation in north India and how people understood them to relate to one another.

D'Andrade (1989: 114) notes that a given culture's 'theory of mind' is necessarily procedural knowledge, which, like riding a bicycle, is tacitly known, but difficult, if not impossible, to formally articulate. This was born out to a degree in interviews. I found that rickshaw drivers, cleaners and others without extended education were often unable or unwilling to articulate differences that I had observed in common speech. If, for example, I asked how two different popular conceptions of 'mind' – *chitt* on one hand, and *man* on the other – relate to one another, this was often met with a dismissive sweep of the hands, and a comment along the lines: they are the same. In contrast, others with formal education and heightened social position, especially those with degrees or specialities in various forms of Hindu knowledge, such as priests, were able to give extended formal typologies of different mental entities. However, as these descriptions were often drawn from specific religious texts or relayed via formal schooling, it was sometimes difficult to ascertain to what degree these ossified taxonomies related to people's everyday linguistic habits and experiences of interiority.

Indeed, in general, these interviews were initially more confusing than clarifying. The term 'interview' gives these interactions a certain formality – in reality, they often took place in a student's room or at a chai shop stall with multiple people proffering their views, and each opinion differing slightly or even drastically from those of others. This reflects a certain degree of variability in how 'mind' categories circulate in north India, a situation produced by the fact that numerous religious and cultural traditions each contribute in their own distinct way to popular north Indian conceptions of interiority. Different schools of Hindu philosophy each assert divergent conceptions of what might be termed 'mind', while Persian-Arabic sources as well as more recent Euro-American vernacular and biomedical additions intensify this situation of plurality.[39]

[39] What might be called 'mind' in English comprises three parts in *Samkhyan* philosophy (*buddhi*, *ahamkara*, *manas*) collectively termed *citta* (Misra & Paranjpe 2012: 890), in *Advaita Vedanta* it consists of four aspects, and in the doctrine of *Pancha Kosha*, the mind is one of five sheaths (*manomaya kosha*), and intellect another (*vijnanamaya kosha*) (Kuppuswamy 1990: 20). In Hindu Tantrism mind may be translated as a number of terms, including *citta*, *manas* and *vijnana* (Flood 2021), while the *chakras*, which is one of numerous ways of mapping the cosmos onto the body in Tantra more broadly (Flood 2006: 157), are also popularly associated with cognitive functions, such as attention. Further, the influence of Persio-Arabic concepts and medical ideas, the latter of which is in turn influenced by ancient Greek medicine, means many of the most common Hindi health-related terms draw from this milieu - *tabiyat* (health), *bimaar* (illness), *dava* (medicine), *dard* (pain), *mariz* (patient), *ilaj* (treatment) (Kuczkiewicz-Fraś 2003) – as do common conceptualisations of interiority, such as *khud* (self), *dil*

I try to preserve some of this diversity in the following account, detailing how tantric, western, vernacular and other conceptions of interiority circulate in Banaras. However, despite a commitment to highlighting plurality, I am also conscious that certain regularities and underlying structures of consciousness must also be present to allow for a culturally coherent conception of interiority, one that rises beyond points of divergence to allow people to talk about and share in culturally common experiences of self. A central contention of this chapter is that many north Indian psycho-bodily categories coalesce around three broad functional clusters, producing a tripartite conception of self. Crucially, states of attention are in many contexts understood as being produced by the interrelation of these different clusters (see fig. 13). This cluster-based approach allows for a certain degree of interpretive flexibility as while interlocutors sometimes diverged from one another in their exact conceptualisation and employment of psycho-bodily qualities and entities, a tripartite structure tended to undergird people's overall framing of interiority.

One cluster comprises of psychological categories associated with desire, feeling and emotion, usually including *dil*/*hrday* (heart) and *man*. Another cluster includes psychological categories concerned with processes of self-restraint, discrimination between right and wrong and intellect, and this normally includes *buddhi* (intellect), *dimaag* and *mashtik* (often translated as brain), *vivek* (moral discriminatory capacity), as well as certain English language terms: *brain* and *mind*. These two interior poles – the desiring, feeling aspect, on the one hand, and the restraining intellect on the other – together provide the fundamental structure of consciousness. As such, attention and much experience fundamentally comes to be understood often through the idiom of self-restraint with the desiring, emotional aspect of the self prone to restlessness and movement, and the more discerning pole of interiority responsible for curbing these fickle predilections, so producing states of focus. A situation in which the two aspects are aligned is regarded as a supremely felicitous condition with desire perfectly conditioned by discerning moral intellect.

(heart), *dimaag* (loosely meaning brain). Indeed, scholars have noted broad similarities between understandings in psychological and somatic illness between South Asian and Iranian populations (Krause 1989: 572). English language terms, which are often more materially oriented, are in circulation too, including "neuro" and "brain", and this extends also to attentional terms with "focus", "distract", "disturb" being widely used.

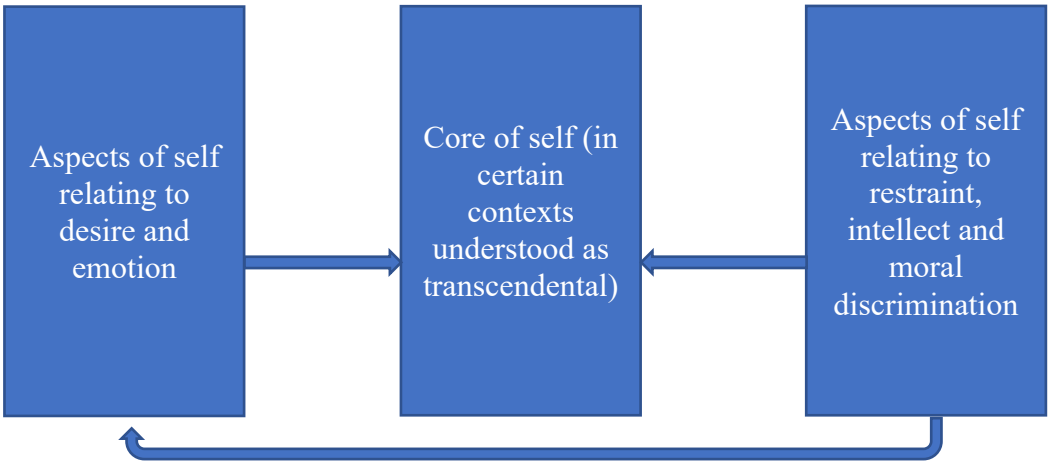

Fig. 13: Tripartite conception of self

Thus far, I have described two clusters of interiority, which will form the bulk of discussion in this chapter – but there is a third aspect, which is largely implicit. This third cluster is best understood as the self's central core, and it can be inferred through the way in which people talk about other psychic faculties. People conceptualised the desiring aspect of the self, such as the *man,* as well as discriminatory faculties, like *buddhi* and *dimaag*, as speaking and instructing some third aspect of the self on what action to take. This can be seen clearly in the below statements from Sita, a chemistry student at BHU, who describes her difficulties studying for an exam:

Today I had a desire to study. I wanted to study. But my 'man' started saying: 'Go for a leisurely wander ['ghumna']. Enjoy yourself.' So, my 'man' was distracting me. But at the same time, my 'dimaag' [brain] was telling me: "Please study! Studying is important!' But my 'man' didn't want me to do that.

In this example the *man* and *dimaag* are invested with a degree of independence from the self's core. They instruct the self on what to do, but remain distinct. This core of interiority was most often implicit, not specifically designated with a precise name, and, as such, it has to be inferred from the grammatical construction of sentences. In the sentence – "*Man kahe rahe hai: 'thoda ghum len. Todha enjoy kar le'."* (The *man* is saying go for a leisurely wander. Enjoy yourself a little) – the *man* is speaking to

something. This unspecified grammatical object is the self. As something always implicit and without terminological classification, this implicit core of the self often goes unrecognised in other scholarly accounts of vernacular South Asian interiority (e.g. Kohrt & Harper 2008; Pandian 2010). However, it seems perhaps to relate loosely to the category of the spirit, or transcendental self (often termed *atma*), in several canonical Hindu scriptural accounts of self. Generally, in a range of traditions a division is drawn between the true self, which is an impermanent, passive observer composed of spirit, and other aspects of the individual, including the mind, which is always in flux and materially constituted. In *Samkhya* philosophy, higher mental aspects, such as *buddhi* and *manas*, evolve from *prakriti*, the material aspect of the universe which is separate from *purusha*, the pure consciousness that is resident in all individuals and separable from bodily needs. In various scriptural and philosophical traditions, the mind (broadly construed) is understood as a sense – within the Naya-Vaiseshika philosophical system, *manas* (mind) serves as an inner sense instrument which conveys impressions from external sense organs and internal experience to the self, while in the *Gita* the mind is said to function as a subtle sensory organ and is of material rather than transcendental basis (Rao 2022). Contesting monist interpretations of Indian culture by McKim Marriot and others, Sondra Hausner (2007: 203-5) argues that there is a fundamental soul-matter dualism in many aspects of Hindu thought. This, however, is distinct from cartesian dualism as in this Indic conception, the mind shares in the body's material constitution. Rao asserts that the demotion of the mind to a subsidiary aspect of the individual, separable from true self, forms a central point of difference between Hindu and western psychological conceptions:

"Mind can lead up to the self but not into self itself... At this point Indian philosophical concept of mind deviates from the Western. In the latter school the self is dispensed with and all importance is accorded to the mind beyond which nothing like self is postulated" (2002: 316).

Scriptural and philosophical models tend to offer a systematic formality that is not evidenced in vernacular interiority conceptions. While in English, mind is more closely fused with self than in north India, this imbrication is still not perfect – during research in the UK, I noted some examples of people using statements along the lines of: 'My mind/brain keeps telling me X…'. Similarly, in BHU, as in wider Banaras, the *atma* – the transcendental aspect of the self – was sometimes conceptualised as an inner

faculty, that like the *man*, provided instruction as to the best course of action, although its advice was always morally unassailable. This implicitly makes the *atma* separable from the core of the self, although explicitly this position was never articulated, not least because it would violate the axiomatic principles of popular Hindu thought.

Having outlined the three clusters that undergird north Indian conceptions of interiority, I will now explore two of them in more detail, namely those aspects relating to restraint and discrimination on the one hand, and emotion and desire on the other. The *man* is perhaps the central pyscho-bodily faculty associated with this latter aspect of interiority – it is to this entity that I now turn.

The restless *man*: more difficult to subdue than the wind

A controlled, concentrated *man* is a highly sought-after psycho-bodily state, strongly associated with heightened spirituality and worldly achievement. As Ecks notes: "A peaceful, cool, unmoving *mon* [Bengali variation of *man*] is the best precondition for the person achieving whatever she or he sets out to do, be it staying healthy, passing an exam, or becoming one with God" (2003: 125). However, in general this state is the exception, achieved by individuals willing to engage in rigorous training. The default state of the untrained *man* is one marked by desire and worldly attachment, and it is here that the 'six enemies' of the self are said to reside: *kaam* (desire, often lustful); *krodh* (anger); *lobh* (greed); *moha* (attachment); *matsarya* (jealousy); and *mada* (ego)**.** The *man* - which figures in many of the languages of upper South Asia including Bengali, Bhojpuri, Maithili and Nepali (Ecks 2003; Kohrt and Harper 2008: 468) – is conceptualised as an entity that is always desiring and wanting. Numerous popular Hindi constructions capture this sense of the *man* as an independent entity with its own desires. This includes: *man chahata hai* (mind wants); *man karega* (mind wants [literally mind will do]); *man nahin hai* (mind doesn't want). Such phrases are commonly employed to express desires in a range of everyday situations. For example, while I was sitting with a *Banarasi* NGO worker Diya in her natal home talking idly, her mother called out – "Do you want food?" – to which the reply came back swiftly, "*man nahin hai*", meaning simply: no, my *man* isn't in the mood for eating.

In its constant grasping for worldly things the *man* is fundamentally restless, something captured by some of the most common adjectives associated with this psycho-bodily

entity: *behchen* (restless), *chanchal* (unsteady, fickle), *vichalit* (inconstant, agitated). People often cited the *Gita* as ultimate authority on the *man's* restless nature, quoting a well-known line from the scripture that asserts the *man* is more difficult to subdue than the wind (*Bhagvad Gita* 6.34). This restlessness is associated with the *man's* tendency to travel and move – it *roams* (*bhatakna*), and sometimes wanders (*ghumna*) and occasionally runs (*daurega*). People often expressed states of suffering and general discontentedness through the idiom of the *man's* increased movement and roaming, so providing a localised 'idiom of distress' (Nichter 1981).

Its usage as a culturally-specific frame through which to articulate difficult experiences is illustrated well by Zafar, an elderly Muslim businessman who had fallen on hard times working night shifts at a hotel in the city centre. I first met Zafar during one particularly strenuous day of fieldwork in the intense Banaras summer. He approached me while I was wandering on the streets, lost as I tried to find the Theosopical Society's (Indian Section) headquarters, a once influential intellectual centre in the city, now fallen into peaceful oblivion. Being of a deeply helpful nature, Zafar escorted me to the centre, and as we talked on the way, he began to speak openly about his troubles with a candidness that would seem overly frank in London for two comparative strangers. Zafar complained on several occasions that as his *man* had become prone to incessant travelling, reeling off a list of cities that it visited: Kolkata, Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi, Mumbai. Zafar's wife and friends variously advised him to pray and do yoga to steady his *man*, but these had little discernible effect. In subsequent meetings at his place of work, I became aware that what Zafar initially expressed as a problem of the *man* was grounded in certain objective life conditions. Once a successful business owner, he now worked in his mid-sixties for a miserly boss who encouraged his staff to cheat unsuspecting customers, pressuring them to sell fake mineral water and offer up reserved rooms to those willing to pay a higher price. Zafar didn't need to work – his son who lived in Dubai sent money regularly – but he felt compelled to, driven by the slim possibility of reclaiming success late in life, something which retirement would preclude. These conditions expressed themselves in embodied form through the vector of Zafar's *man*, which in its agitated roaming refused stability.

The act of framing distress and discontentedness through the idiom of restless mind wandering is salient as it is grounded within broader cosmological and symbolic structures that order wider aspects of north Indian culture. At the grandest level,

samsara (the cycle of worldly attachment, rebirth and ultimate suffering) is conceived of as a kind of restless roaming of the soul. The term *samsara* is thus often translated as 'wandering' (e.g. Desjarlais 1992: 107). At more proximate levels also the action of wandering serves as an embodiment of discontent. In popular stories of spirits and souls who are unable to find release owing to some terrible event that led to their bodily demise, distress is symbolised through descriptions of restlessness. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I lived for some months with a group of cleaners, teachers, drivers and cooks in the compound of a school in Banaras. One cleaner with a particularly fertile mind, Fatima, concluded that the virus was being spread by the *atma* (soul) of a woman from China who had died after eating bats that appeared deceptively as if fruits hanging on a tree. Distraught at having to leave her beloved children behind, the soul spread the virus as it restlessly wandered from place to place. A tendency to express discontent and distress through the idiom of wandering was less marked amongst the UK-born students studying in London with whom I carried out fieldwork. In particular, while mind wandering was often considered a negative state that sometimes hindered productive work, at other times people invested it with positive connotations, linking it to creativity, an association basically absent in Banaras. However, it should be pointed out that in the latter place, Banaras, a restless, *chanchal man* in certain contexts carried neutral associations – for children in particular, who are not assumed to have learnt full psycho-bodily restraint, a certain lively restlessness of mind was considered appropriate, yet not desirable.

It was generally unclear to me during fieldwork whether the *man's* wandering was considered literal or metaphoric (as in the case of English language mind wandering) – interlocutors seemed to oscillate between both positions.[40] While some stated that the *man* does not really travel, others asserted that it was the fastest thing in the universe. Students would often justify the statement by stating that one can think of the sun or another distant object immediately, far quicker than light can travel. At other times, people pointed to textual authority, citing the following assertion from Yudhishthira, the eldest of five brothers whose story is told in the *Mahabharata* epic: "The mind is faster even than the wind" (see also *Rig Veda*, hymn 9: "among all things that fly the mind is swiftest"). In certain schools of Hindu philosophy the mind is described as travelling

[40] Desjarlais encountered a similar oscillation in his Nepali interlocutors' descriptions of the related psycho-bodily concept of *sems*. He writes: "As I understand it, the heartmind's flight of fancy occasionally appears as a metaphoric journey…, but it also exists for villagers as an ontic reality, with the heartmind traveling to the space-time imagined" (1992: 56).

out of the body to encompass objects in order to perceive them. There are possible traces of such theories of perception in present-day Hindi taking the form of dead metaphors. For example, the phrase *man lagna* literally means 'to attach the mind', and it is perhaps the most common term used to describe states of interest and attention. (States of psychic distress are often conceptualised through the idea of the *man* not attaching to things, indicating a general lack of interest).

In fact, many north Indian mental categories, such as the *man*, do not have a precise anatomical locations. This accords with a conception of the universe as consisting of gross and subtle, non-physicalised aspects with the latter often relating to mental domains. My interlocutors generally asserted that the *man* is not confined to any particular region of the body, but is diffuse throughout the self. There was also a sense of the *man* as not being fixed to single place, but rather moving to the site of one's interest, and this is congruent with understandings of attention as produced by the attachment of the mind to objects. This diffuse and movable conception co-existed sometimes with a more precise spatialised understanding. During casual conversations, people often pointed to the heart when referring to the *man*, and this accords with understandings in numerous other cultures where the mind is situated in this region (Lebra 1993: 64; Lewis 2014: 79; Rosaldo 1993: 36). However, in general there was a resistance to giving the *man* a definite anatomical location. This came across quite strongly in early interviews when I inadvertently pushed interlocutors towards a physicalist understanding of mind, one according with my own conception of interiority that associates this entity with a specific location (head/brain region). During interviews, I sometimes asked – "Where is the *man*?" And when this was met with blank stares, I would shift to – "If the feet are here, and the hands here, where is the *man*?" Only after many lengthy pauses of incomprehension from my interviewees, did I start to understand the folly of this line of questioning which started from an axiomatic presumption not shared by most of my interlocutors. One student summarised the position of many in Banaras quite pithily: "The *man* is on whatever you want. If there is food in front of you and you are hungry, it will be there."

In general, this conception of the *man* as movable and often restless, something that roams according to casual interests, was central to the constitution of this psycho-bodily entity as a site of moral danger deep within the individual. The *man* is generally understood to be unable to morally discriminate between right (*sahi*) and wrong (*galat*).

This came across strongly in statements from students who saw the *man* – if unrestrained – as the source of morally questionable behaviour. Sushil, a first year Sanskrit student, gave the following explanation: "The *man* can do something dangerous. It might want to cut a tree down. You must control the man, not let the *man* control you."

The idea of the mind controlling the self would sound odd in English as it would imply an untenable division between self and mind. Other phrases, commonly employed in Hindi, also indicate a sense of separation between self and *man.* For example, on several occasions, I observed people saying a variation of: "*man mujhe distract kar raha hai*", which literally translates as: my *man* is distracting me. However, it is important not to overstate the division between *man* and self. What may be a stark bifurcation in certain contexts, is more fluid in others. Comments about a person's *man* are also comments about a given individual's character. Phrases like '*uska man aisa hai*' (her *man* is like that) or '*uska man kharab hai*' (her *man* is bad) were employed as appraisals of the individual in their totality rather than being restricted evaluations of a given person's mind. In popular parlance then, the *man* is separable and volitional, a multitude of wants, feelings and desires, constantly grasping outwards into the world, but, simultaneously this entity holds close to the individual, who is, of course, defined by their yearnings and longings. One's deepest ambitions in life as well as personal predilections reside in the *man*. The heart or *dil* is also viewed as an emotional centre within the individual, although in contrast to the *man*, only higher and purer emotions tend to reside here. Similarly, people also sometimes used the term *chitt* rather than *man*, although this conception of 'mind' tends to be more still and stable, and more associated with deliberation and thought.[41]

The discriminating self

A division of labour exists between the *dimaag*, an entity responsible for discrimination as well as calculative and logical thought, and the *man* which is associated with emotion and desire. During a sitar lesson in Banaras, I made the mistake once of saying that I was counting the tabla's drumbeats in my *man*, which drew an amused laugh from my

[41] Many interlocutors struggled to formally articulate how *man* and *chitt* differed, and some saw *chitt* as part of the *man*. In conversation both terms were sometimes combined into one conjoined phrase: *man chitt*.

teacher, followed by a correction: "You do not count with your *man*, you count with your *dimaag*!" Both the dimaag and *man* are involved in attentive states, but to pay attention with your *man* (e.g. *man lagakar* [attaching the *man*]) or heart, suggests an emotional perhaps even passionate attention, while to pay attention with the *dimaag* (e.g. *dimaag lagakar* [attaching the *dimaag*]) suggests the diligent performance of some practical task that requires concentration but perhaps not an investment of deep feeling. In keeping with the practical and logical nature of the *dimaag* it is sometimes conceptualised through mechanical metaphors – just like a machine, the *dimaag* 'runs' (*chalta*), and if one is unable to focus, a person might say their *dimaag* is not 'working' (*dimaag kaam nahin kar raha hai*).

As a locus of practical thought, rather than emotion and identity, the *dimaag* plays an important role in regulating the *man*. As one student remarked, highlighting the role of the *dimaag* in ensuring adherence to social norms: "The *dimaag* restrains the *man*. If a beautiful girl appears, then the *man* will want you to propose to her, but the *dimaag* will stop you." Kohrt and Harper (2008: 469-2) note that dysfunction of the *dimaag* results in an inability to act in a controlled socially acceptable manner, resulting in stigmatization. In keeping with this, they interpret the *dimaag* as a regulatory 'social-mind' that acts in accordance with collective norms – this is certainly true, but the *dimaag*'s function cannot be reduced only to this, as a locus of practical intelligence it offers a technical agency beyond the simple reproduction of societal mores. It should also be noted that often, although not always, *dimaag*, a Persio-Arabic origin term, is used interchangeably with the Sanskrit origin word *mastishk*, and both are associated with the brain.

While usually positive in its effect, on occasion the *dimaag* can figure as a negative influence on one's behaviour, curbing the passion and curiosity that sometimes arises in the *man*. Akshay, a student at BHU, often explained his difficulties completing his PhD as arising from a fundamental tension between his *man* and *dimaag*. Akshay saw himself as intellectually curious – on his Facebook profile he proudly described himself as a 'bibliophile' and one of his favourite spots in the city was a bookshop by the banks of the river selling a great array of academic and popular titles. Despite a passion for books in theory, Akshay freely admitted that he only infrequently read, something that proved fatal to the swift completion of his doctoral studies. He would sometimes show me his collection of titles on the bookshelves of his bedroom, offering to lend me texts,

but proclaiming as a qualifier that he hadn't got round to reading them. "You could say it is an ambition of mine to read them." When he sat down to read, his hands invariably reached for his phone to attend to a pressing engagement, or he would suddenly remember some errand that needed to be done. He sometimes framed this failure to realise his deeply held passion for reading as a result of his *dimaag* which directed him always to more practical and socially-oriented activities. "My *man* wants to read, but my *dimaag* doesn't want to."

The *dimaag* is accompanied by other psycho-bodily capacities that similarly play an important role in regulating the *man*. This includes the *buddhi*, which in Hindu scriptural sources constitutes a separable psycho-bodily entity, but in the present is sometimes understood as a capacity or quality, similar to intelligence/intellect. The *buddhi* offers a discriminatory intellect that curbs the mind's fickle impulses.[42] To be intelligent is to be *buddhimaan*, and a person with *buddhi* has a sharp (*tez*) and powerful mind. However, this does not necessarily entail that someone is moral (although the two are often quietly closely correlated). Chandra, a professor at BHU, explained the difference as follows: "Someone who has *buddhi* can still do bad things. A terrorist may have *buddhi*." The capacity for moral discrimination is generally attributed to the quality of *vivek*, which stops one from doing *galat* (wrong) things and advocates for ethically immaculate behaviour (*cf* Parish 1991: 322-3). Often interlocutors were unable to distinguish between the *buddhi* and *vivek*, eliding the two categories, although others firmly distinguished them – this variability in interpretation speaks to the flexibility of Indian conceptions of interiority that are often prone to personalistic interpretation.

While attention is closely associated with the *man*, as a centre of curiosity and interest, at other times, especially during discussion of single-pointed concentration, the small space between the eyebrows was understood to be the site of heightened focus. Teachers, when telling students to focus, would sometimes take a flattened palm turned sideways and move it back and forth from the glabella, saying some variation of "*dhyan dijie*" (pay attention), as if to indicate that attention flows forth from this space between the eyebrows. (In the UK, the equivalent action involves tapping the temples while saying "focus" or some similar combination of words, indicative of a belief that

[42] Conceptualising the self as a chariot is a persistent analogy in Hindu scripture (e.g. *Siva Samkalpa* 34, 6). Perhaps the most famous instance of this analogy comes in the *Katha Upanishad* (I, 3, 3-4) where the *buddhi* is conceptualised as a chariot driver who through his reins, representing the mind, restrains the senses which are prone to attachment to worldly things.

attention is associated with the brain-mind). The association of attention with this region constitutes a conceptualisation of the self through subtle Tantric (and yogic) physiology – in these systems the space between the eyebrows is the site of the *aygya chakra*, also known as the third eye, and popularly referred to as the *dhyan chakra* (meditation/attention chakra). Again, this subtle Tantric physiology speaks to how interiority can be conceptualised through multiple frames in north India.

An interiorised conception of experiential causation

I would like now to examine how the conception of interiority outlined undergirds the way in which attention is understood in north India. At the core of my argument is the observation that the dominant conception of interiority in north India centres on a particular understanding of experiential *causation*. As discussed earlier, attention speaks not only to the selectivity of experience – the fact that some things and not others take up the centre of experience – but also concerns what factors cause this selectivity. After carrying out fieldwork across two countries, I have come to the position that the broad causal factors that are commonly understood to shape experience are in fact universal rather than culturally specific. Everywhere people likely experience attention at various points as: being driven by some unruly aspect of self (in English often termed 'mind wandering'); being captured by some external object (distraction, mesmerisation, startle responses); being self-directed (focus, concentration); or relating to certain intermediate states where experience is neither directed by the volitional self or external objects, but rather arises from an interaction between the two (flow, mindfulness, awareness, vigilance). However, what is specific to north India, I contend, is that certain prominent cultural discourses and practices, including, but not limited to, dominant models of self, 'invite' (Lurhmann 2020: 16) individuals to give priority to interior factors shaping experience.

The concept of the *man*, which receives significant elaboration in myth, popular idiom and metaphor, emphasises internal restlessness as a constant causal influence on experience. The *man*, as mentioned previously, holds close to the self (which is of course defined by deeply held emotions and yearnings). Yet, in another sense this psycho-bodily entity is also invested with an unruly agency that separates it from the self. Compared to the English concept of 'mind', which is more closely fused to the self's discriminatory capacities, the *man* often occupies a position of wayward

separateness, one that emphasises internal restlessness as a constant aspect of experience. It is the role of another set of internal faculties and entities – *buddhi*, *dimaag*, *mashtik* and so forth – to restrain and control the *man*, to render it into a state of peace and ideally single-pointed attachment to an object. This framing of interiority gives primacy to internal factors shaping experience, conceptualising attention as ultimately a relation between two interior aspects of the self, one restless and the other regulatory and restraining. This emphasis on internal factors causing experience is particularly pronounced in specialist contexts within Banaras (such as places of musical training, Brahminical learning or yogic instruction) which collectively serve as sites of sensory elaboration where dominant religiously-inflected models of interiority are learnt and reproduced.

It is important to note that I am not claiming that external factors are treated as insignificant experiential influences in Banaras. During fieldwork, I observed people variously interpret their experience as being caused by a range of different exterior factors, whether planets, sound, food, time, space, digital technology or social relations. Students talked about the deleterious effects of phones or the distracting pull of friends; ritual specialists complained of the constant, disturbing sound of the busy Banaras street; while nearly everyone warned against eating meat as it made the mind restless. However, within this matrix of causative factors shaping experience at any given moment, the *man* usually occupied a primary position. The primacy of the *man* can be seen in how external impingements were understood to affect the self – they were often conceptualised as exacerbating the *man's* already entrenched tendency towards restlessness rather than directly occupying, capturing or distracting consciousness. For example, sometimes my interlocutors described the *man* as being 'caused to wander' (*bhatakana*) by phones rather than, as would be common in English, saying one became 'distracted by' the technology in question. Similarly, in other contexts, I heard people describe the *man* as being made 'curious' (*jigyasu*) by a phone or some other alluring external media. In each of these statements, the *man* remains as the enduring source of un-focus, while external factors only serve to intensify its latent qualities.

The practical and discursive priority given to the internal restlessness of the self is reflected also in the attentional vocabulary of Hindi. Specifically, Hindi offers only a small vocabulary to describe states of mental capture. Attention can be pulled (*kinchna*) and attracted (*dhyan akarshit*), but generally there are far fewer words to describe its forceful capture by external objects. This accords with a conception of un-focus that is

primarily internal, conceptualised as kind of persistent roaming and wandering. In English, by way of contrast, there is a developed vocabulary for attentional capture centring on martial, violent and forceful metaphors. Attention can be gripped, drawn, arrested, captured, grabbed, caught, commanded, while the mind can also be occupied and captivated.[43] The category of 'distraction' itself, which is the dominant English-language term for faulty attention, often implies capture by some external object. One is distracted 'by' something – the proposition is always implied.

I do not want to take this linguistic line of reasoning too far. What I am describing is a tendency within the vocabulary of Hindi, but it is not determinative or exhaustive. In Hindi metaphoric registers, *dhyan* (attention) and the *man* are not captured or grabbed by external objects, but other forceful imageries exist. Notably, attention, as in English, can be 'broken' by external objects (e.g. *dhyan torna*; *dhyan bhang karna*). It should also be noted that some of the most popular terms for conceptualising attentional states in Hindi are borrowed from English. The terms 'distraction' and 'disturb' are also commonly employed to describe the impingement of external objects/persons upon consciousness. One hypothesis that I sometimes returned to during fieldwork is that Hindi's small vocabulary to describe states of attentional capture make 'distraction' (and possibly 'disturb') attractive propositions as loan words. Although, it should be noted that the meaning of loan words often subtly shifts after incorporation into Hindi. 'Distraction' in particular while often used in a very similar manner to its English language equivalent, was sometimes understood in a slightly different way with students translating it most commonly as "roaming" (*bhatakna*) or "causing the mind to roam" (*bhatakaana*), a subtle shift in emphasis towards the *man's* restlessness.

In making the fundamental source of faulty attention internal, rather than inhering primarily in external objects, this conception of interiority suggests that interior control over experience is always potentially possible regardless of the outward conditions in which one dwells. If the discriminatory and restraining aspects of the self can subdue the restlessness of the *man*, then singular concentration is possible even if one dwells in objectively difficult circumstances. This offers a particular interiorised framing of agency in terms of attentional control – a point I will return to later – one in which the ultimate barriers to volition and the possibility of their transcendence arise ultimately

[43] Other common attentional metaphors in English are monetary (e.g. to pay attention), or utilise imageries of movement and travel: 'I zoned out', 'I was on another planet', 'I got lost in the moment', 'my mind wandered' etc.

within the self. This interiorised and attentionalised conception of agency flows widely, reproduced in certain metaphoric registers as well as being embedded within myth, poetry, and dominant conceptions of mind. However, it is only forceful and concentrated in certain contexts, particularly those associated with spiritual, ascetic and ritual practice, as well as education. In schools and at home, adults will often tell children that their *man* is *chanchal* (restless) and undisciplined, encouraging them to restrain it. This finds parallel in sites of broadly spiritual and artistic instruction where novices are encouraged to practice inner control regardless of their external environment. As part of my fieldwork with Indian classical musicians in Banaras, I spent time observing numerous classes where junior artists received instruction from their guru. While the setting of instruction often varied – some took place in the houses of well-known *Banarasi* musicians and others in the classrooms of BHU with many novices learning from one professor – certain patterns persisted in how students were encouraged to understand the causation of experience.

In particular, students were invited, and sometimes told, to view their attention as ultimately internally produced, being a function of a given musician's level of psycho-bodily control. This is illustrated well by one incident involving Jayaprakash a teenage musician from a family of famed artists who was practicing sitar in his natal home under the watchful eye of his mother, herself an adept vocalist. As is typical in Banaras, the room in which Jayaprakash was playing was far from quiet, noises entered from adjacent parts of the house where children played, and the familiar calls of the *sabzi walla* (vegetable seller) could also be heard as he made his way down the street outside. Jayaprakash, agitated by the noise, began to fidget, crossing and uncrossing his legs. Eventually he put down his sitar tempestuously and looked towards his mother who sat opposite him. "What's the matter?" she enquired. "You were playing well". Jayaprakash replied: "The noise is too much! How can I concentrate?" His mother shot back – "This means you are not ready! You are not ready within, because you are too focused on the outside world. Your *man* is not peaceful, so, you look for *shanti* [peace] outside." Suitably chastised, Jayaprakash returned to his sitar. He proceeded to play dutifully without complaint.

At other times, musicians often stressed the importance of being able to play in noisy environments, such as temples, saying that if one becomes too used to playing in silent, soundproofed rooms one will find it difficult to achieve absorption on stage. This is not to suggest that Banaras musicians are immune to noise – many times I saw senior

performers close doors to shut out sounds – but rather a certain ideal persists, reproduced through pedagogy, that one should achieve inner restraint and peace to be unperturbed by such disturbances. What was pronounced among musicians can also be seen in the wider Banaras population – when asked, 'What is the best way to achieve focus?', students at BHU most often replied: meditation and/or yoga (i.e. practices of internal attentional cultivation). Compare this to London, where the students that I interviewed tended to give more varied answers to this question, often emphasising external causal influences on attention: listening to music, drinking to coffee, going to the library, staying away from friends, or putting one's phone out of sight. In reality, Banaras students partook in some of these practices also, especially staying away from friends, but in their public articulations they gave special primacy to practices of internal control aimed at subduing interior restlessness.

The reader may have noticed that I have presented the preceding argument with a certain hesitancy, making a number of qualifications. I am wary of offering an overly neat and monolithic account of how interiority is conceptualised in Banaras. While the interiorised conception of experiential causation offered above, emphasising restlessness and restraint, is widespread in Banaras, becoming particularly forceful in certain contexts, other framings of self and attention are also in circulation in the city. This reflects the polyglot sources and cultural flows that inform *Banarasi* culture, a place of western, Islamic, Hindu and many other influences. Anthropological accounts of localised interiority concepts – often termed 'folk' models of mind – have traditionally tended to play down such points of variance, often suggesting that mind categories are shared uniformly by a given culture.[44] To give a sense of variance, I would like now to briefly describe one divergent conception of interiority mainly found in BHU. This divergent framing of the self places marked emphasis on external impingements shaping consciousness, and, so, provides a useful counterpoint to the interiorised understanding of experiential causation outlined above.

[44] This is particularly pronounced in older scholarship in this area from the 1980s and before, reflecting in part deep commitments within Geertzian approaches and early cognitive anthropology to a culture-as-text framework (D'Andrade 1989; Howell 1981; Lebra 1993; Lutz 1985; Ochs 1988. See also: Beatty 2017: 388-9). It continues, however, in more recent scholarship on cultural models of mind (e.g. Ecks 2003; Geurts 2002; Kohrt & Harper 2008; Lewis 2014), albeit barring some notable exceptions, especially work dealing with reformulations of interiority mandated by the adoption of Christianity (Brahinsky 2020; Ng 2020; Pritzker 2011; Robbins 2004).

The overarching culture of BHU is broadly Hinduised emphasising the value of the Hindi belt's dominant religious traditions, and a Hindu right political sensibility is widespread. However, as a dual Hindi-English medium institution, one where yoga and Brahman ritual is taught alongside psychology and allopathic medicine, a number of divergent framings of the human subject circulate. Many students move between English and Hindi in their daily lives, reading English textbooks and answering exam questions on biomedical and scientific topics, and simultaneously conversing with family in Hindi or closely related regional dialects, such as Bhojpuri. Within this diverse student body, a certain small minority of people position themselves largely in relation to broadly western sources of authority, adopting an essentially rebellious subjectivity, one left-leaning and secular liberal in political outlook, aligned more firmly with Euro-American, cosmopolitan Indian and biomedical self-conceptions.

This can be seen in Indroneel, a political science student from Kolkata, who by dint of his Bengali background was often at odds with the broader Hindu right, Hindi-speaking culture of BHU. In sartorial choice he stood apart from the bulk of students, who usually wear shorts and t-shirts while in their hostels, and don jeans with polos or shirts when going to class. Indroneel, by contrast, dressed in cardigans and formal shirts, sweeping back his hair. Most of his reference points came from the west, and he claimed to be a devoted follower of Andrew Huberman, an American neuroscientist and self-help guru who offers advice that claims to be based on scientific research. A self-proclaimed 'liberal', Indroneel resented the marked presence of religious symbolism and spiritualised discourse within the university. "I am a Hindu, but that should be kept in the home", he once remarked. His public proclamations about the human subject, broadly construed, tended to be deeply materialist, denying the possibility of internal transcendence over external conditions. In conversations, he often described behaviour and attention as being caused by external stimuli that affect neurotransmitters in the brain. During one conversation he outlined how one's ability to focus on studies was an effect of exposure to external stimuli, so reducing human agency to raw animal reactivity:

In the brain there is a neurotransmitter called dopamine. It activates the reward system of the brain… In experiments on rats, when dopamine levels are kept low, then they don't even try to get food... Like this, if I get a bad mark in an exam despite hard work, then my dopamine receptors will fail to activate. This then will become part of my brain's memory. Next time I come to study, my mind will remind me that previously I studied, but I didn't get any reward. So, I will flinch from giving attention to my work.

Indroneel offers an essentially behaviourist and monist conception of the self – as everything is material, human attention and action is always inevitably subject to the determinations of physical stimuli. As the mind is governed by material substance – or in Indroneel's phrasing neurotransmitters – it is constituted as effectively continuous with the external world, and, so, made vulnerable to the inevitable effects of material stimuli. There is little space left for an autonomous interior sphere that can transcend its external environment. Experiential causation in this model, rather than emphasising internal restlessness, is decidedly outward in its determination. In drawing on materialist and monist self-conceptions, Indroneel is partaking in discourses that circulate widely, far beyond the confines of Banaras. Contemporary anxieties about the effects of mobile phones on human attention, which are particularly forceful in Europe and America, also often share in this conception of the human subject. My London student interlocutors liberally employed phrases like "cycle", "dependency", "habit", "instant gratification", "craving", to describe phone usage. Some also spoke of phones offering addictive "dopamine hits". The phone in such discourse is conceptualised as akin to a chemical or drug which determines the interiority of the user, robbing the person in question of agency to control experience. Popular activists who campaign against the increasing usage of 'addictive' digital technologies often formalise this perspective, employing explicitly behaviourist and neuroscientific models of human action, particularly operant conditioning (Haidt 2024; Seaver 2019).

It should be noted, however, that while Indroneel often proudly and publicly professed a commitment to a materialist conception of the self in conversations with his peers, his less performative behaviours often betrayed a continuing adherence to popular north Indian framings of interiority. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown, he confessed that he was finding it hard to concentrate, complaining that the monotony of life at home with few trips outside was oppressive. He framed this external change in condition through the vector of his *man*: "My *man* keeps going here and there. It's hard to study these days." Following this, he resolved to take up yogic meditation, and later claimed that focusing on his breathing and holding his body in certain positions, gave him renewed vigour. However, he also pointedly asserted that yoga is "scientifically proven" to be effective, so transforming it into a practice congruent with his broader worldview.

The monist, relational self and the interiorised subject: two complementary vantages

A north Indian self-conception that gives ultimate primacy to internal rather than external factors shaping experience, appears at first glance to sit uneasily with broader, canonical treatments of South Asian personhood, which have tended to stress relationality. In contrast to the valorisation of individualism and equality as ideologies in the west, Dumont characterises Indian society as defined by its heightened emphasis on holism and structured relations of hierarchy (Madan 2001). Similarly, Shweder and Bourne argue that Indian personhood is sociocentric, emphasising context-dependent relations between parts and wholes, compared to the egocentric vantage of the west with its correlate accentuation of autonomy and the socialisation of children towards the inculcation of "deep *intuitions* about the 'indecency' of outside (external) intrusions, regulations, or invasions of our imagined inviolatable self" (Shweder & Bourne 1991: 194, emphasis original). McKim Marriot and Valentine Daniel, as well as other proponents of ethnosociology, ground this perceived general tendency towards relationality in everyday process and "sticky existential dramas" (Kuroda 2018: 12-3). The 'Indian' self is made up, in this view, through constant transactions with others that involve the transmission of coded substances carrying biomoral qualities. As Parry puts it: "By continually giving out and taking in particles of themselves, transactors are endlessly modifying their physical-cum-moral natures" (1994: 5). As in the case of the previously mentioned dopamine-governed subject, this worldview functions as part of a *monist* vantage that eviscerates interiority and a sense of bounded self, as, instead, all is one with "no fixed boundary between the inner and the outer… personhood is *fluid*" (Ecks 2014: 23). Here, food, perhaps the paradigmatic coded substance, is imbued with the moral qualities of others, and, so, always threatens the consumer's composite constitution, constantly re-shaping their consciousness and psycho-bodily tendencies. Marriot (1976: 136) observes that an 'inclusive diet', which includes much exchange of foodstuffs with other social groups, is both the function and cause of a particular emotionally un-controlled character marked by "anger, aggressiveness, eroticism, openness, and liveability", while in contrast, "coolness", often used in north India as a synonym for attentional stability, is the effect of a restricted diet that limits intake of foodstuffs and coded substances from other castes.

These explorations of the fundamentally fluid, relational and sociocentric nature of South Asian personhood have shaped wider debates within anthropology, as well as

furnishing widely used terminology, such as the 'dividual'. Following the broader theoretical thrust of the discipline (Bialecki & Daswani 2015; Hollan 1992; LiPuma 1998), in more recent decades South Asianists have attempted to complicate the overly neat binaries that characterise earlier work on personhood – east and west, sociocentric versus egocentric and so forth. A number of scholars have documented widespread conceptions of the individual and autonomy among the region's various societies, as well as asserting the presence of multiple, shifting self-representations at work in the interiority of any given person (Ewing 1990; McHugh 1989; Mines 1988; Parish 1994; Sökefeld 1999). Others have also sought to emphasise the political aspects of the subject in South Asia, often occluded in the timeless religious perspective of earlier work (Bear 2007; Dirks 1988; Michelutti 2008). However, as James Staples, rightly I believe, points out: notwithstanding these more recent theoretical developments "most anthropologists of India continue to accept that those with a South Asian worldview have at least tended towards relatively more fluid conceptions of personhood than their Western counterparts…" (Staples 2015: 28). This accords with a general position in much contemporary anthropological literature which still tends to emphasise the heightened relationality and permeability of non-western conceptions of the self compared to their bounded western counterparts (e.g. Luhrmann 2011: 6).

How then does the relational, permeable and often monist Indian self-conception tie together, if at all, with the seemingly opposed possibility of interior control over consciousness and thought? Rather than being totally opposed, I believe both aspects exist in a reciprocal relation – an emphasis on the ultimate possibility of internal control over consciousness provides a space for agency and ethical development, albeit difficult to achieve, in the face of entrenched relationality, which threatens always to impinge upon the self. External influences, whether impure foods or the pull of social relations, constantly imperil the sovereignty of the self, accentuating its restless nature, making it unstable and difficult to control. However, this threat, this tendency towards disorder and restlessness, makes the possibility of a certain semblance of control all the more important (*cf* Parry 1994: 5). This semblance of control is provided partly by a localised conception of agency that holds that while one aspect of the self is inherently restless and unruly (an undesirable quality exacerbated greatly by external influences and substances), sovereignty is always possible if one is able, through practice and effort in the face of a manifestly difficult situation, to engage in disciplines of experiential and attentional self-restraint. In this view then, internal control offers continually the

potential, however difficult to realise, of transcending difficulty and obstacle, as the fundamental barrier to agency lies not 'out there', that is in the world, but is internal to the self, embodied in the unruly tendencies of the *man*. It is an attentionalist conception of agency, grounding ethical advancement in the ability to control experience.

How an attentionalist framing of agency compares to other models of action in anthropology

In emphasising the self, albeit its unruly aspect, rather than external determinants as the paradigmatic barrier, this attentionalist north Indian model of agency fits uneasily with dominant theoretical perspectives within anthropology and other social scientific disciplines. Here agency is often conceived, as Laidlaw puts it, as centring on "the creative and assertive capacities of individuals, as against the constraints of what are conceived as 'larger' structures" (2010: 143). Practice theory in particular takes as its point of departure the opposition of external structure and agency, attempting to meld the two into a coherent dialogue – in doing so, it renders this duality as the central problematic for understanding various forms of social action.

An understanding of agency as a form of resistance against wider societal structures, which requires one to act apart from an overbearing culture, has been criticised for smuggling broadly liberal conceptions of freedom into the discipline as universal aspects of human motivation. A number of scholars have sought to show instead how agency stands not apart from culture, but rather is made it up through it, constituted via localised conceptions of personhood and ethics (Ahearn 2001: 113; Cassaniti 2015: 178-180; Chakrabarty 2000; Keane 2007; Long 2023; Mahmood 2005). Building from this body of scholarship, I would like in this final section to explore how conceptions of agency are often dependent on how a given culture theorises 'mind' and interiority. Specifically, I will use the outlined north Indian framing of 'mind' as a vantage to examine how some of the chief facets of the agency concept as sometimes used in anthropology – certain ideas about the value of expression and overcoming of external constraint – are grounded in a very particular, rather than universal, understanding of interiority. Central to my argument is the idea that the dominant north Indian conception of 'mind', that is the unruly category of the *man*, brings into the heart of human interiority aspects that might otherwise be tied to the external, material world. The *man* – in its separateness from the core transcendental self and its movability which means it is often located 'out there' in the world – provides a rendering of 'mind' that is

decidedly more material than a comparative, and perhaps stereotyped, Euro-American understanding of the mental domain. This provides the basis for a localised attentionalist understanding of agency that, in contrast to dominant renderings of this concept in anthropology, is: one, less concerned with overcoming outward constraint (as externality and materiality are paradoxically already more forcefully within the self); and two, gives priority to attentional restraint and control rather than discursive expression of the emotional and affective aspect of the self.

The question of the relation between the self and materiality is central to the argument that I am advancing, so I will take some time to explore it here, drawing on the work of Webb Keane. Modernity, which Keane reads as paralleling the overarching moral narratives of Protestantism, takes as paramount the importance of human emancipation from external material forms. He writes: "[M]ateriality can, in some respects, seem to pose a threat to freedom that demands a serious response. Freedom, in this light, seems to depend on the dematerialization of what is most definitive of humans, whether that be understood as the soul, thoughts, belief, or, say, the meanings of words" (2007: 7). Freedom here inheres in the drawing of a proper distinction between that which is human and nonhuman, subject and object, what Latour calls 'purification'. In Calvinist tradition, according to Keane, the threat of materiality runs deep, even words, mediated in sound and text, may threaten to objectify and, so, take agency from that which is the proper site of the human subject, inner subjectivity. This anxiety about the improper division of humans and material objects also undergirds contemporary anxieties, particularly prominent in the Euro-American metropole, about the prevalence of new digital technologies and their influence on our consciousness. Here attention – that which to borrow a phrase from Keane is "most definitive of humans" – is understood to be improperly and scandalously intertwined with material objects (e.g. James 2018: 46).

The north Indian conception of self is also, I think, equally concerned with the threat of materiality, but the boundaries are drawn differently. As Hausner (2007: 203-4) observes, there is a soul-matter (rather than mind-body) dichotomy in much Indian thought, meaning that large parts of interiority rather than being separate from the material world are fundamentally part of it, precluding the very possibility of a totally dematerialised subjectivity. The conception of materiality in use here is distinctive, comprising of a spectrum of gross and subtle aspects. The *man* tends towards the subtle part of this spectrum, yet it is still continuous with the material world. This fundamental proximity to the material is evidenced in the *man's* previously outlined features – it

resides not always in the self, but often exists 'out there' attached to gross aspects of the world, and it is sometimes conceptualised as a sensory organ. This speaks centrally to the separation of large parts of interiority – desire, want, emotion, all embodied in the *man* – from the transcendental core of the self. In its separation from the transcendent self, the *man* then comes to figure as a site moral danger deep within, a reminder of the fact that the threat of materiality is always internal to the subject, rather than only being a matter of externality. As such, the central division between an internal self and an external material world, which for Keane underpins the moral thrust of modernity and which seems to underlie externally oriented conceptions of agency more generally, applies less readily here. Instead, the fundamental threat to agency lies within, as materiality extends much further into the self, so inviting forms of internal work as a route to human flourishing, that is most prominently attentional control.

Those aspects of personalistic interiority that are often treated as the source of the authentic self in certain western vernacular and intellectual traditions – desire, want, emotion – come to figure within this framework as aspects of the materially oriented *man*, and, so, become necessary targets of restraint and curtailment. Not only then does this curtailing relationship to the self stand in opposition to notions of agency arranged against outward constraint and external materiality, but it also significantly diverges from the expressivist tendencies that underpin certain understandings of human flourishing. While anthropologists have often resisted simple equations of self-expression and voice – in the sense of 'having a voice' – with agency (Weidman 2014) (Weidman 2014), the capacity to speak and forcefully articulate one's inner depths remains something often associated with political agency in a range of scholarly traditions. This speaks to wider conceptions of human ethical advancement as inhering in the ability to give expression to inner feeling and emotion, an idealised relation to the self codified in numerous techniques and practices widely circulating in Euro-America: diary, novel, confession, therapeutic session. Charles Taylor (2001) traces this wellspring of the self to romantic European traditions that invested each individual with unique inner natural force that becomes only fully manifested through expression. Here expression in language and art do not bind the individual in webs of materiality contra Keane (Wilf 2011), but rather such acts of mediation and articulation serve as instances of creation, giving form to something inside, yet previously inchoate. In contrast to the idea of the authentic self cohering in emotional depth, something which must be given discursive form, the particular understanding of the *man*, as independent from the true

centre of the subject and proximate to the material, invites a very different relation to the affective and desiring aspects of interiority. One does not attempt to explore the *man*, nor give it discursive expression, but rather through control of attention one aims towards its pacification and it is in this venture that ethical advancement lies. This can fruitfully labelled as a divergence between expressivist and attentionalist relations to the affective core of subjectivity.

I would like to (re)emphasise that this attentionalist relation to interiority, built around inner control over experience, is only one conception of human flourishing in circulation in north India. It travels widely, but is most forceful only in particular settings, such as sites of musical training and religious instruction. Expressivist relations to the self, of course, also circulate in India (although I do not think they are as prevalent as in Euro-America). Indeed, the South Asian historical and ethnographic record contains numerous examples of expressivist tendencies, whether attempts by late colonial Bengali novelists drawing on newly imported discourses of interiority to re-interpret widows as "expressivist subject[s] clamoring for (self-) recognition" (Chakrabarty 2000: 133), or understandings of mobile phones in contemporary Banaras as like twenty-first century versions of writing desks that allow subjects to document "thoughts, dreams and desires" (Doron 2012: 420). However, it should also be noted that just as expressivist relations to the self travel globally, so to do attentionalist conceptions of human flourishing extend far beyond the confines of Banaras. This speaks to the fact that an emphasis on attentional control, emphasising internal regulation of experience rather than outward resistance or discursive expression, provides a salient grammar of agency, one that while always grounded in local models of personhood, is recurrent and globally ubiquitous.

In other parts of Asia, the ethnographic record points towards widespread conceptions of self and agency that valorise internal attentional control. Sarah Lewis, who worked with Tibetan refugees living in India notes that for her interlocutors external, sometimes catastrophic, events are not in themselves taken as of primary importance rather emphasis is placed on mastery over internal reactions, and, in particular, the cultivation of a controlled, attentionally stable, flexible mind. She writes:

While imprisonment, torture and displacement are more severe in degree, they are understood to be just like any other potential disturbance (e.g. bad food, bad weather), which can make it difficult to control the mind. The extent to which one experiences

mental distress depends on the reaction to the event; in other words, suffering can only come from within (2014: 82).

Similarly, Julia Cassaniti (2015) describes how her Thai interlocutors do not emphasise affective expression or public action in defiance of external structures. Instead, they practice – often aided through meditational practice – the value of internal control in the face of objectively difficult conditions, preaching the importance of "letting go" and keeping a cool, calm heart (*jai yen*) rather than becoming emotionally attached to a world that is ultimately impermanent. These pan-Asian conceptions of self grounded in Buddhist thought, while in certain significant senses divergent from north Indian models of subjectivity, share in an overarching similarity, arising ultimately from an intertwined historical trajectory, and often partaking in convergent vocabularies of the self. However, examples of attentionalist relations to the self can be found outside of these pan-Asian contexts also. Mattingly (2010), for example, describes the volition of her African American interlocutors, who have sick and disabled children, as predominantly revolving around inner psycho-bodily work – including the re-orientation of attention – rather than public acts in defiance of wider structures. Attentionalist conceptions of agency then provide a compelling idiom of action that circulate alongside more familiar models of freedom that in their compatibility with well-worn western sources of self-hood continue to undergird anthropological accounts.

Conclusion

Human conceptions of freedom in a diversity of traditions and contexts are often intimately tied to attention and questions of experiential causation. The ability to shape one's consciousness, thoughts and feelings in a particular fashion, represents in many regards the first and most fundamental base of volition, over and above other more outward elements of agency. The psychologist William James (1927) makes this connection plain, noting that "volition is nothing but attention". In this chapter, I have attempted explore how this articulation between attention and agency is framed in north India by a particular model of mind that makes the ultimate source of suffering and moral danger interior, embodied in the restlessness of the *man*. Agency here inheres in the actions of another set of internal capacities, defined by their discriminatory and moral intelligence, which serve to curtail attentional waywardness. As this conception of agency centres on internal restlessness and its restraint, that is the interior modulation of experience, I have labelled this an attentionalist model of action. It stands in contrast

to dominant models of agency in anthropology which tend to take external constraint as the ultimate barrier to human flourishing.

The vignette with which I began this chapter is suggestive of the political resonances of this conception of agency, which remain mostly unexplored thus far in this thesis. Modi in expressing the importance of internal attentional cultivation to a large, televised audience seeks not only to offer advice to his youthful audience, but also to publicly align himself with a particular kind of idealised subjectivity. This can be seen more forcefully in other contexts in which he ostentatiously performs heightened attentivity – after each national election he has chosen to sit in *dhyan* (meditation) for extended periods, in one case doing so for 45 hours to much media fanfare and some derision. This speaks fundamentally to how the cultivation of attention offers not only a salient grammar of agency, but also allows for the projection of authority and spiritualised status. It is to these essentially political resonances of attention that I turn in the next chapter where I explore the importance of attentional cultivation in the status-making strategies of Banaras musicians.

Chapter 6 | Music as yoga: exquisite absorption and ascetic authority in the life of *Banarasi* performers

This is the first of two specialist chapters in this thesis. It takes as its main empirical focus a group of hereditary musicians living in Banaras, examining the particular role of attentional ideology in their lives. The Kathak-Mishras musicians of Banaras seek through practice and performance to regularly enter heightened states of absorption, which are highly valorised for the epistemological insights that they offer as well as the positive emotions and sense of spiritual transcendence that they yield. In their most extreme form, these absorptive states are described as akin to *samadhi*, the pinnacle to which yoga aims, and they involve a total loss of consciousness of the body and surrounding world.

In their particular relation to heightened absorption, these classical Indian performers seem to stand apart from the experiential discourses of certain other musicians described in wider scholarship (Berger 1999; Høffding 2018; Høffding et al. 2024). A fruitful comparison can be made to the Danish string quartet exhaustively studied by Høffding (2018), who set out to specifically investigate states of absorption in musical performance and practice. Høffding's classically trained western interlocutors were often hesitant in their descriptions of states of heightened absorption, lacking specific terms to designate these experiences. When asked explicitly in interviews, they spoke of states that appear akin to what a Banaras musician might call *samadhi*, involving a loss of consciousness of self, but they also described other heightened absorptive experiences, particularly a kind of general awareness in which one stands apart from musical performance as a masterful observer. This latter category of experience was never formally articulated by my *Banarasi* interlocutors, and, unlike their Danish counterparts, they possessed a rich vocabulary for describing *samadhi*, which they employed regularly in speech replete with mythic and spiritual tropes.

Why does *samadhi* and other less intense, but broadly commensurate states of singular absorption, feature so prominently in the statements and vocabulary of these Banaras hereditary musicians? I contend that in part it is the result of the reformulation of Indian classical music over the course of the twentieth century as a form of yoga, which has led to a marked discursive emphasis on absorptive cultivation. While a significant body of literature has emerged, written by anthropologists, historians and musicologists, which

seeks to understand the spiritualisation and Hinduisation of Indian music during the twentieth century, little explicit attention has been paid to the specific role of yoga in this process. This chapter attempts to address this gap. In doing so, I also seek to explore the specific sociological and political resonances of attentional ideology, here embodied in yogic ideas and precepts. In particular, I argue that the public projection of heightened yogic attentivity is one of the ways that Banaras musicians have managed to refashion themselves as respectable, higher status figures concordant with middle-class pious sensibilities, despite a past that by the standards of present-day north Indian morality is eminently disreputable.

In search of a teacher: an encounter with a *Nada Yogi*

During my first research trip to Banaras in 2019, I stumbled upon a BHU hostel that lay near the sandstone *ghats* in the sacred core of the city some two kilometres from the main university campus. The hostel, which is now reserved largely for music students, once formed part of a *kothi, or grand home,* built by the Maharaja of Rewa. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru used to send curious foreign visitors to stay in the *kothi*, believing that it provided the best vantage on the 'real India' (Dasgupta 2008: 55). The building's ornate façade with arched windows and balconied turrets looks onto the Ganga which shimmers in the morning as it is hit by the sun's rays. Below on the *ghats* pandas sit cross-legged ready to preform rituals for clients, men with shaved heads walk by having come to do the last rites of a dead relative, and tourists idly wander, phones in hand primed to take photos.

The part of the former *kothi* that has been turned into a hostel is somewhat less grand than the river-facing façade, and it sits behind on a quiet lane. Arranged around a courtyard, its numerous rooms are blessed with thick stone walls and, so, remain cool in the hot months. The music students that I met there were extremely helpful during the early stages of my research, and we would often sit talking in the courtyard of the hostel. During these conversations, the students were keen to impress upon me their theories of North Indian classical music, or *shastriya sangeet.* They talked often and repeatedly of how daily musical practice, *riaz*, was like meditation, which if done right could lead to a state of total and utter spiritual absorption. I found these conversations exciting, not least because it offered a unique and little explored vantage on how particular states of heightened attention might be cultivated, but also because I had long

had a particular fascination with North Indian classical music. During my childhood in London, when a famous artist had come to town, whether the great Banaras shehnai player Bismillah Khan or the wickedly talented sitarist Vilayat Khan, my mother had insisted on going to see them as a way to educate her children about the land she considers home. While I did not become an adept listener let alone a player, these trips provided an insight into a musical world that seemed somehow magical. The glide of the sitar as it moves from one note to another through various microtones, or the quivering voice of the singer oscillating around a single pitch, seemed somehow spiritual, a world away from European classical music.

During subsequent trips to Banaras, while juggling research across multiple fieldsites, I always made a special effort to return to Rewa Kothi hostel. However, over time I came to realise that there were limitations to doing research with students – their understanding of the exquisite states of absorption that are held to comprise the pinnacle of music were hesitant and hypothetical. While some professed to have experienced such states, others readily admitted that in fact when playing they were more focused on the technical aspects of performance, such as where to place the fingers on the sitar or how to hold the head correctly when singing. It soon became apparent that total immersion is very difficult if these bodily comportments are not automatic and unthinking. What's more, university music students are tasked with learning multiple ragas (melodic mode or personality) and compositions each year as well as theory for exams, and, as such, their training is considered imperfect by the accomplished *Banarasi* musicians who undertake their training through the *guru-shishya* (guru-disciple) system. Under this system, students learn from a single guru and their initial training consists of a single raga, often the evening raga Yaman, practised over many years.

My first encounter with a student learning in the *guru-shishya* system was a South Indian man, Narayan, who had come to Banaras to learn sitar from a *pandit* (maestro) who hailed from a Banaras family of musicians going back many generations. I initially asked Narayan to teach me the basics of playing the sitar, but he demurred saying that he could not do so without asking permission from his guru. Such deference I came to learn was an important aspect of Narayan's role as a *shishya*. Daily he carried out small tasks for his guru – whether watering plants or massaging his master's feet – and in the extreme he even refused to clap for other sitarists at concerts, reasoning that to do so

would undermine his relation to his teacher. After spending some time with Narayan, he informed me one day that his guru, Chandrashekar *ji*, was willing to meet with me. I was instructed to come to his house the next day.

The exterior of Chandrashekhar's house was unassuming, lying at the bottom of a narrow lane of uneven paving stones along which cows meandered. I rang the doorbell with some apprehension having never played the sitar before, nor any instrument, unless one counts a brief dalliance with a drum kit many years ago. Narayan opened the door and led me down to the building's basement which had been converted into a small concert venue. There was a stage, cushions on the floor for the audience, and sofas at the back for more distinguished guests. Along the walls pictures of Chandrashekhar's ancestors stared solemnly down, illustrious tabla players as well as singers and dancers of generations' past. Bouquets of flowers lay piled upon chests, tables and drawers. Chandrashekhar's father, a skilled sitarist known for his rapid-fire style of play, had recently won a prestigious national government award. Well-wishers, admirers and the good and great of the Banaras elite had come in recent days to pay their respects. In a week's time, Chandrashekhar planned to accompany his father, who is now in his eighties and frail, to the Indian president's residence in Delhi for a grand award ceremony.

For now though, the house was empty of guests. Narayan, led me to a sofa, and asked me to wait until Chandrashekhar was ready. After some time, I was taken upstairs to a large living room. Chandrashekhar, who was dressed in charcoal grey adidas sweatpants, greeted me, asking me to take a seat. He cut a different, more casual figure compared to the framed photos on the living room wall where he was dressed in traditional *kurta-pyjamas*, proudly holding an ornately carved sitar. However, even now his large round expressive eyes and mane of thick black hair meant that he maintained a certain majesty in his sportswear.

The power dynamic was palpable. While I initially took time to explain my project, my role was largely to ask questions. Narayan, who sat on the floor beside his guru, would also occasionally interject to concur with some statement made by Chandrashekhar. After some minutes of talking, Chandrashekhar's voice took a more solemn tone. "It's good that you've come to me. They're many musicians who play for money, but their sound is mechanical. You won't learn properly from them." He then picked up his sitar,

bowing his head before it in a sign of respect. “A dollar man plays like this. It can be technically very good, but the *bhaav* [feeling] isn’t right.” He proceeded to play in an impressive, virtuoso style, the notes coming one after the other in rapid succession. “How do you feel?” I hesitated at this question, not sure as to the right answer. “It’s exciting,” I proffered. “Yes exactly. You will enjoy this music, but you will not close your eyes when you listen to it. You will not get lost in it.” This was a sentiment that I heard often in subsequent fieldwork. Musicians often remarked that the spiritual and emotional core of a raga lay not in fast, technically proficient playing, but in the slow sections of performances dense with feeling.

Chandrashekhar put his sitar down, and turned to face me, looking into my eyes. “My sound is not mechanical. I cannot be bought!” I felt self-conscious upon hearing this, and in subsequent days I wondered whether Chandrashekhar was chiding me as a foreigner, presumed to be wealthy. “You mean you don’t charge for performances?” I asked. “It’s not that. I do not play for free. Would you ask anyone to work for free?” He went onto explain that his actions were not dictated by money, pointing to how Narayan came to him one day, and he took him on as a student as he had the right *bhaav* (emotional character) even though he was unable to pay. Chandrashekhar then proceeded to relate a series of incidents in which patrons had offered thousands of dollars for a performance but he had declined. He was asked to play in Europe over dinner before the head of the United Nations, but he turned down the offer knowing that the assembled dignitaries would be more focused on their food than the music. In other contexts, Banaras musicians often expressed their unwillingness to play at weddings and other ceremonies, complaining that at such events their performance would only be a pleasant background to the festivities.

Throughout our initial meeting, Chandrashekhar was keen to impress upon me the spiritual nature of his life as a musician. He described his daily musical practice in highly spiritualised terms as “*dhyan*” (meditation), “*sadhana*” (spiritual striving) and “*tapasya*” (ascetic spiritual labour). At one point, he picked up his sitar to demonstrate, asking me to switch off my phone so there would be no distractions. Closing his eyes, he played beautifully for several minutes, plucking long notes that twanged and vibrated, hanging in the air. A slight smile lingered on his face, a visual demonstration for me that he was in a state of bliss, unaware of anything apart from the music, just like a meditator who had achieved a state of transcendental absorption. “I am a *Nada Yogi*

[ascetic of sound]", he exclaimed following the demonstration, explaining that in the past he had twice, while playing, reached a state of *samadhi*, or transcendental yogic absorption in which he lost consciousness of the world around him becoming completely immersed in sound.

He said that as a *Nada Yogi* he has accrued certain powers. "I can show you. Narayan, you have not done this before, but you will see something. Bring me a pen." Narayan obeyed and began searching for a pen, opening the drawer beside him, looking on a tabletop. The delay punctured the drama of the moment, and eventually Chandrashekhar lost him temper, scolding Narayan: "Why didn't you keep the pen where I told you to?" To ease the tension, I drew a pen from my bag handing it to the apologising Narayan. Chandrashekhar then readied himself, sitting upright. He began to sing *Sa*, the base note and first in each of the three main octaves of North Indian classical music. He delivered the note in a long, stable rolling vibration, and upon finishing, he asked Narayan to do the same. Narayan sang in return, but, unlike what had come before, his delivery was imperfect, wavering slightly. "*Phir se karo* [do it again]", Chandrashekhar instructed, taking notes on a piece of paper. Narayan sang again, and Chandrashekhar being satisfied moved to the next note in the octave, *Re*, singing this in another low drawn-out vibration. Eyes firmly closed, Narayan sang the note in return to the satisfaction of his guru. Chandrashekhar then sang the subsequent note in the octave, *Ga* and Narayan sang in return, but again there was a slight off quality to his voice. It did not match the stable vibration of his guru, being infused with a slight hesitancy, an almost imperceptible waiver. "*Phir se karo*", Chandrashekhar said, in response to which Narayan returned the note to his guru's satisfaction.

Chandrashekhar: "Is anything is troubling you Narayan? Your *Sa* is disturbed." Narayan paused, seeming slightly embarrassed, and after some hesitation said: "Yes sometimes I think of my parents as they are old. I left them to come here." Whether or not Narayan had such thoughts, there was a sense in which he had to offer some admission, as to proffer nothing would be to nullify the demonstration and undermine his guru's authority. Chandrashekhar nodded. "How is your genitourinary system?", he then asked, explaining that that the *Re* note is connected to this part of the body. Narayan replied that all is fine, and so Chandrashekhar moved on, asking finally whether there was something wrong with his stomach as his *Ga* note was slightly disturbed. Narayan nodded slightly embarrassed: "Yes – last night my stomach was a bit upset." "You see,"

Chandrashekhar responded emphatically. “I didn’t know that his stomach was upset before this!” I nodded in amazement, and a slight feeling of unease appeared in my own body knowing that in the coming days I myself would likely be spending time with Narayan, someone who possessed the ability to discern the inner workings of my mind and stomach.

The meeting continued for nearly two hours, and at the end Narayan informed me that he was happy to take me as a student. I later came to realise that I and other foreign students were valuable sources of money, offering handsome fees at a time when, due to the spread of COVID-19, there were scant opportunities for paid performances. However, despite a need for money, Narayan remained keen to impress upon me that he was not dependant on it, that he remained a spiritual figure who was in a sense superior to lowly monetary transactions. In our lessons – we would come to meet every second day – Narayan never let me place money in his hand, only ever on the table, as if such a transaction threatened to reduce our relation to something purely financial. At other times, albeit very occasionally, he would refuse payment for a lesson altogether, remarking: “Money is not everything Rahul!”

Background: classical music in Banaras

I will return again to Chandrashekhar Mishra and my time learning sitar with him, but before doing so it is important to give some background information to shed light on the context within which he operates. Chandrashekhar Mishra learnt sitar from his father, and his son has just begun his performance career. Among Banaras’s Kathak-Mishras, the caste grouping or *biradari* (brotherhood of musicians) to which the family belongs, sitar players are a relatively uncommon and recent phenomenon. However, they are not completely unheard of. Notably, the respected sitarist Dhruvnath Mishra performs and teaches presently in the city, and he was trained by Amarnath Mishra who in turn was a disciple of Shrichand Mishra. Generally though, the Kathak-Mishras, who dominate Banaras’s musical scene, specialise in musical traditions other than sitar, namely: tabla (twin drums), singing, sarangi (bowed instrument) and dance. They are Brahmans, forming an endogamous group which stretches over a swathe of northern India. Within Banaras they largely live in the Kabir Chaura neighbourhood and to a lesser extent in Ramapura and Piyari. There are communities of Kathak-Mishras in urban areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, including Prayagraj, Darbanga, Bagulpur and Lucknow, and in the

latter city members of the group are associated with the renowned Lucknow *gharana* (stylistic school) of Kathak, a form of Indian classical dance (Shepherd 1976: 15-17).

While female members of the community in Banaras are often musically skilled, they do not generally perform on stage, although in recent years this has started to change (Walker 2014: 19). Performance is traditionally reserved for male members, who receive their training from a kin relation, such as a father or uncle. Those men who attain a leadership position within the community sometimes take the name 'Maharaj' or 'Sahai' although the majority of the community in Banaras use the surname Mishra. Despite being kin relations, there is a good deal of competitiveness between Kathak-Mishras living in Banaras as they jockey for the same work. This is reflected in rumours and stories circulating in the city about jealous musicians using poison or black magic to ruin the playing ability of competitors. In recent decades, Kathak-Mishras in Banaras have taken to higher education with children being encouraged to pursue university degrees after finishing school even if they will likely pursue a career as a performer. This speaks in part towards a shift towards a more middle-class orientation, which will be discussed in more detail later.

The Mishras of Banaras have had a significant impact on north Indian music, producing notable *gharanas*, such as the Banaras *baaj* of Tabla; renowned musicians, from the tabla player Kishan Maharaj to the vocalists Rajan and Sajan Mishra; and influencing the development of musical genres, like north India's most popular light classical song form *Thumri*. In many ways the community is distinctive. They are Hindu and claim to be high caste, while the vast majority of hereditary musicians in north India are Muslim. This anomalous position means that a degree of scepticism accompanies their claims to pure high caste status, and, as such, other musicians sometimes refer to them as *mishrit*, meaning 'mixed' – a play on their on their Mishra surname and an allusion to doubts about the purity of their social status. Member of the community also diverge from social norms in another sense too – they dance and perform a range of instruments, and this runs counter to ethnographic descriptions of other hereditary musician groups in north India. These groups, as described by Neuman (1990), tend to specialise in particular instruments and also draw sharp social and status divisions, including marriage prohibitions, between those communities or lineages that produce low-ranking accompanists, such as tabla specialists, and those that produce only soloists, such as sarod and sitar players or singers.

It is important to note that there are other classical musicians in Banaras who do not take the Mishra name. The city has attracted many Bengali performers over the years, the most famous of whom is Ravi Shankar. Others range from the noted tabla player Ashutosh Battacharya to the dhrupad vocalist Ritwik Sanyal and the sitarists Rabindra Goswami and Ram Das Chakravarty. A family originally from Maharashtra, who take the name Kewale, have also risen to prominence within the city's classical music scene, and since the 1970s they have run a music centre. Now called the International Music Ashram, the centre provides musical training and concerts aimed at foreigners who can pay higher fees. Historically, there have also been numerous Muslim classical musicians in the city. The most famous of recent decades is undoubtedly Bismillah Khan, who popularised the shehnai, a reeded woodwind instrument, elevating it from a folk tradition to a classical concert favourite. In the past the city has produced highly-rated Muslim sarangi players, such as Zakan Khan and Chanda Khan, as well as feted sitarists, like Mushtaq Ali Khan who was, according to ethnomusicologist Gerry Farrell (2002: 38), India's leading proponent of the instrument for a period during the mid-twentieth century. However, in recent decades the number of Muslim musicians in Banaras has declined in part due to an inability to get paid work in a city increasingly dominated by Hindu artists who are also often also kin relations. The majority of Bismillah Khan's descendants have opted for non-musical professions, and those few who continue to seek a performance career, like the tabla player Nazim Hussain, struggle to find work.

Even for those musicians who are Mishras, money is often hard to come by. Musicians in the city can generally earn from two main sources: concert performances and offering lessons to paying students, some of whom come from upper- and middle-class families within Banaras, and others who come from outside, including from other parts of India and from abroad. Indian students can be expected to pay around 500 rupees (£5) per lesson, while foreigners pay more, around 1000 rupees (£10), although this depends on context. The broad range of students in the city speaks to both the growing importance of classical music for middle-class Indians (who, unlike the Mishras, do not come from hereditary lineages), and for foreigners, many of whom are drawn to Indian music as an alternative to western traditions that are deemed insufficiently spiritual. The government encourages the association of the city with music, and, for example, advertises at a popular tourist site by the river, various attractions, including the place in which

Bismillah Khan used to practice his instrument. In Kabir Chaura, the area of Banaras associated with the Mishras, there are paintings on the walls of musical notes and instruments with plaques on the front of houses listing the notable musicians who have lived inside.

Compared to Delhi or Mumbai, opportunities for well-paid concert performances in Banaras are relatively sparse. While the former offers salubrious concert halls, performances in Banaras still sometimes take place in temples, which provide a spiritual atmosphere but little in the way of financial renumeration. The city's most famous concert of this variety is the Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh, a festival that takes place annually in a temple devoted to the deity Hanuman, and which attracts top talent from all over India. The crowd for this event is remarkable, bringing together the city's elites and ordinary folk dressed in dhotis and colourful saris. For the most part, Banaras's concert scene is active with events taking place regularly in auditoriums, halls, hotels and makeshift structures dotted around the city. Some attract well-heeled audiences and others bring together a more diverse audience of in-the-know foreigners, music connoisseurs and even, in the case of the annual Dhrupad Mela (festival), a few tired workers who come to the late-night event to sleep on the cushioned floor. Musicians also sometimes put on special performances for small groups of tourists, charging around 5,000 rupees (£50) for this privilege. Aside from concerts, universities and schools also offer a limited number of jobs in music and performing arts departments. The most notable of these is BHU's Faculty of Performing Arts, which attracts a large number of female students, an anomaly for a university that is male dominated. While universities may attract skilled musicians as professors, the standard of education is not deemed of high quality, even by those providing it. Those few university students who manage to become proficient performers have generally also sought instruction from a guru outside the formal education system.

Music as a form of yoga

The day-to-day life of musicians in Banaras is often worldly, with concerns of money and livelihood taking up much time. Marriages, funerals, concert opportunities, booking fees, politics were all topics of conversation that came up often as musicians sat idly talking. However, in contrast to this, musicians conceptualise their art and present it publicly in highly spiritual terms. During interviews, musicians would often take

particular pleasure in explaining the spiritual nature of their tradition. What follows is a quote from an interview with the distinguished *Banarasi* singer, Chhannulal Mishra, but similarly spiritualised statements were made repeatedly during conversations with other musicians:

The main aim of music is to obtain Ishwar [God]. The aim of human life is to obtain Ishwar…You can get success in this path of obtaining Ishwar through music. Through music you can see the form of Ishwar.

Chhannulal Mishra's personal website states that while he draws upon pre-existing stylistic schools (*gharanas*) of Indian classical music, he has also transcended them and "has brought into his singing a streak of spirituality".

The predominant way in which classical music is framed in spiritual terms is through reference to ascetic modes of Hinduism. The same vocabulary that is used to describe an ascetic who in pursuit of a spiritual goal isolates themselves and engages in severe austerities is commonly employed by musicians in Banaras to describe their art. As alluded to in the earlier description of my initial meeting with Chandrashekhar Mishra, *sadhana* (spiritual striving towards a goal) and *tapasya* (ascetic spiritual labour) are often used as synonyms by musicians for daily musical practice. An ascetic vocabulary was also deployed in public concerts and meetings. In one ceremony to mark a senior vocalist in Banaras receiving a government award, his son attributed the musician's success to his daily *tapasya*. Similarly, at a concert a kathak dancer remarked to the audience before beginning her performance: "[The deity] Shiva is the great *yogi*, the lord of meditation. In dance, like Lord Shiva we to go into a state of meditation". During conversations, relatives often sought to cast senior musicians in their family as ascetic figures who transcended the material world. Bismillah Khan's son, referred repeatedly to the late maestro's encounters with God, who he had multiple divine sights of while playing the shehnai with great concentration in a temple near the Ganga. These narratives were told as we sat in a room filled with pictures of Bismillah Khan, a room in which he once practised and where crowds gathered to hear him. From this thicket of images and stories, the musician emerges a saintly figure, not quite of this world.

As the above references to meditation and *yogis* suggest, the dominant ascetic paradigm through which music is conceptualised is a yogic one centring on attentional cultivation. A widespread statement – made alike by performers, university professors and novice

students – is that music and yoga are *ekhi* (one) usually followed by a clarification that while they are in essence the same, they represent different methods (*vidha*) or routes (*rasta*). It should be noted that it is *yoga* and not *bhakti* that is a central, if not *the* central, frame through which most classical musicians in Banaras conceptualise their art. This is despite *bhakti*, a popular devotional form of Hinduism, being commonly associated with music in other contexts in north India.

Banaras musicians' use of the term 'yoga' is not limited, as often is the case in the west, to elaborate bodily postures. Instead, the term used by musicians also encompasses a broad set of practices, including control of breath (*pranayama*), awakening of dormant sources of spiritual energy in the body, and control of mind and attention in meditation (*dhyan*). How each of these practices are understood to relate to music will be explored in detail later in this chapter, but it should be emphasised that it is above all *dhyan* (meditation, singular absorption) that is seen to link music and yoga. When I asked classical musicians in Banaras how their practice is a form of yoga, the most common reply was that *dhyan* can be found in both. For example, Prem Kishor Mishra, a sitarist who comes from the Kathak-Mishra *biradari* and who works as an assistant professor in BHU's Faculty of Performing Arts, put it succinctly when he said: "Without *dhyan*, music is impossible, and likewise without *dhyan*, yoga cannot be done." Of course, this answer, in separating yoga and music, implies in reality there is some difference, but simultaneously it emphasises that they are in essence the same, linked by a joint aim of heightened attentional cultivation.

Many interlocutors stressed that as musicians who regularly achieve states of heightened attention during practice, there is no need to perform "extra" *dhyan*, by which they mean the type of meditation that is commonly done by non-musical specialists. Kush, a first-year BHU student of singing who lives in the aforementioned Rewa Kothi hostel but hails originally from Kashmir, said: "You will see other students getting stressed by exams, family pressures, the need to find a job, and so they think: 'Today I should do some yoga!' Maybe they do it once or twice, and then stop. But we [music students] rarely get such tensions as we do *dhyan* daily during practice. We have no need for extra *dhyan*."

It is important to consider carefully what exactly musicians mean by '*dhyan*'. For musicians, the term conveys the method by which one brings the mind to rest, making it

peaceful (*shaant*) and stable so that it may become absorbed within musical sound. The emphasis is on becoming totally absorbed in sound to the exclusion of all else. This is revealed by the types of metaphors used by musicians to describe valorised attentional states: *Dub jana* (to drown), *vilinta* (immersion), *khona* (to lose oneself). Each of these metaphors implies a state of attention in which the self is in some sense passive being taken in and surrounded by something vaster. This is most forcefully conveyed by the metaphor of drowning, but it is also implied by the English term 'absorption' in which the individual in question becomes a passive object being taken in by something, just as a sponge absorbs water. These metaphors are of course not restricted to music, and can be found in other contexts too. The death of a saint is sometimes described using the term *vilinta* (e.g. *vey vilin ho gae*), indicating that the revered individual has become absorbed into the divine. Very occasionally, I also heard musicians refer to singular absorption using the imagery of sleep, describing such a state through the metaphor of falling into a deep sleep (*so jana*). Other metaphors used by musicians emphasised more a sense of travelling into sound with some talking of going into music (e.g. *raga me jana*) during practice, often accompanied by the adjective *gahara* (deep) to emphasise journeying far within. In one lesson, Chandrashekhar Mishra told me that to understand a *raga*, I need to go deep within it, just as diving beneath the surface of water reveals hidden things, like fish and plants.

The centrality of deep absorption to Banaras musicians in part depends a specific understanding of epistemology, what might be termed an 'absorptive epistemology'. Musicians repeatedly asserted that to know something, to experience its essence, one has to become immersed in it. Musicians put particular emphasis on the fact that the true nature of notes (*svar*) can only be understood through immersion, with singers during practice often repeatedly producing and meditating on a single note in order to come to know its subtleties and complexities. This widespread emphasis on coming to know musical sound, which is held to be divine, through absorption brings music into correspondence with Hindu spiritual traditions, such as *yoga* and *bhakti*, in which epistemology, that is knowledge of transcendental reality, also relies fundamentally on the idea that knowledge is obtained through heightened attention (rather than reason, faith or some other faculty/trait).

The centrality of an absorptive epistemology is evidenced in how musicians understand ragas, the melodic personalities that form the core of the Indian classical tradition. The

musician must draw on extemporisation to perform the raga, and in doing so she aims to express its emotional character, which may be happy, romantic, spiritual and so on. Certain attributes define each *raga*. It will be appropriate for a particular time of day or season, and when played, the musician will take care to follow certain conventions, such as, for example, using only a fixed set of at least five notes, and within these stressing particular ones (*vadi* and *samvadi*), while also perhaps repeatedly employing a distinctive sequence of notes known as a *pakad* (melodic 'catch phrase'). However, the raga is more than all of this, and, indeed, some of these conventions are not always adhered to by the musician. How then does the musician come to know the *swaroop* (form) of a given raga? Here absorption is crucial, as the musician aims towards total immersion in the raga to experience and know its true form, which is understood as an emotional essence or *bhaav*. It is only once the musician has experienced the *bhaav* of the raga, that she can then present it to the audience to relish. Interestingly, the musician's role is not conceptualised as expressing personal feeling, but rather expressing the formalised *bhaav* of the raga.[45]

Achieving a heightened absorptive state is accompanied by positive emotion, with musicians describing experiencing *anand* (bliss) or simply that they feel good (*achha lagta*). In the extreme, the absorption can be so total that musicians view it as a form of *samadhi*, the final state of yoga in which subject-object distinctions dissolve. While some musicians claimed to have experienced it, many say that they have not, but that certain past spiritual figures entered *samadhi* regularly. Often the historical figure cited was Swami Haridas, the great mystical musician who was guru to Tansen, the famed instrumentalist of Mughal emperor Akhbar's court. However, others cited more recent musicians, such as elder relatives or teachers, known for their great abilities. Ritu, a skilled musician who comes to Banaras from Agra yearly to learn sitar from her guru, claims that her previous master regularly experienced *samadhi* while playing. She often talked of him, who she considers her true guru rather than her present teacher, in deeply spiritual terms, describing how he gave up a well-paid job and the trappings of a worldly life to pursue music. Such stories are indicative of how in Banaras those musicians who are most highly esteemed are not performers who play for money, but

[45] Readers conversant in Indian aesthetics will see similarities between this approach to *raga* and *rasa-bhava* theory. However, it should be noted that musicians in Banaras (with the exception of dancers) rarely talked about *rasa*, instead understanding aesthetic experience almost exclusively in terms of *bhaav*, which serves simultaneously as the essence of the raga, the thing the musician experiences as well as that which the audience relishes.

spiritual figures who transcend the worldly, and this status is intimately tied to attentional capacity.

In reality, those interlocutors who claimed to have obtained *samadhi* seemed often to be talking of a state of extreme and total absorption, which while rare and potentially transcendental did not rise to the level of a spiritual experience that completely alters the course of one's life. The aforementioned sitarist and BHU teacher Prem Kishor Mishra described such experiences in vivid detail:

'Samadhi' comes after much, much, practice. One becomes drowned in bliss. Sometimes I sit at night and it happens. I am not aware of anything, even my body – whether the light is on or off has no meaning. Where I am I don't know. I'm in the music. At that time everything becomes finished, the 'duniya' [world] has no meaning, the only thing is the raga, the 'svar' [notes], 'mir' [glide between notes obtained by pulling string laterally]. In that I am 'ek dam dub gaya' [totally drowned]. Even if a dog barks, I will not be disturbed.

Others have stories of practising and losing consciousness of the world, only to suddenly come back to awareness to find a person or animal having entered the room. For Chandrashekhar such states are like intoxication, and after becoming deeply absorbed he would sometimes ask me to look at the whites of his eyes, remarking how they had become bloodshot like those of someone who has been drinking. As mentioned, he claims to have experienced *samadhi* twice while playing, detailing one of these times to me:

I started playing late at night at one or two in the morning, and I entered into a state of sleep. I was conscious of nothing. My mother, wondering why I was playing so late, called out to me. But I didn't hear her calls. I only awoke when I played the wrong note. This was 'samadhi'.

These descriptions of states of total absorption exist as an ideal to which the musician strives but may not always achieve in daily practice. Crucially, these narratives encode a particular relation to the body and material world as things that the musician seeks to negate and transcend. This can be seen in the description offered by Prem Kishor Mishra: "I am not aware of anything, even my body – whether there is a light on or off has no meaning". The musician is rendered as inhabiting an ideal realm, one predicated on bodily and material denial, just as the ascetic denies and transcends their desiring, appetitive self.

However, while the musician strives towards this ascetic ideal, there was also a recognition that its realisation is difficult in the present age. Narratives of decline were widespread amongst musicians, paralleling a feeling of decay documented elsewhere in the anthropological literature on Banaras (Cohen 1998; Huberman 2012). Decline narratives in the context of music often coalesced around attention and time. The complaints of musicians included: peoples' inability to practice their instrument for long periods; audiences' diminished attention spans; and a reduced interest in slow, meditative, spiritual music in favour of fast, rhythmic compositions. Normally the unfavourable condition of the present was compared to some idealised age, whether the youth of the musician in question, the time of princely courts, or a long past mythic period in which *rishis* (sages) sung and played instruments. Of course, such narratives of decline are not novel. As the musicologist Pichu Sambamoorthy, who worked for a period at BHU, noted in the 1960s: "Forty years ago, knowledge of music had not spread widely but audiences sat for five hours and listened to the music in a concert with great interest and attention… The position has now changed and deserves to be remedied" (1964: 18).

Chandrashekhar Mishra called the present crop of Indian musicians those of the "pizza, burger generation", adding that obtaining *dhyan* during practice is harder now in this age of distraction compared to the time of his father and other great sitarists. This comment was made during a session in which Chandrashekhar Mishra was practising for an upcoming concert with his father and a seasoned tabla player. A few minutes after the session concluded, he turned to me and said – "*Chala gaya* (gone)! I was on the plane to London", indicating that he was so absorbed in the music during practice that he was no longer present in the room. At this point, the tabla player chipped in, asking: "Why didn't you play this well yesterday?" In reply, Chandrashekhar remarked that he was unable to concentrate fully yesterday. "I always play better outside of Banaras. There are too many worries here, too many tensions."

Indeed, Chandrashekhar Mishra often cut a restless figure. In private, he admitted that the burden of arranging ceremonies and media appearances in the wake of his father's award had fallen heavily on him. "My father has been a musician all his life," he said. "He doesn't know about these things, so I have to make sure everything goes fine." However, even after the excitement surrounding his father's award had subsided, he continued to complain of distraction and *tension*. Plans for a new house, a new car, a

room by the river where he could practice, as well as arranging travel abroad for concerts meant that there were always preoccupations crowding his mind. During our lessons, his phone rung often, whether the secretary of a government official wanting to meet, or a student seeking guidance on some matter. In private, Chandrashekhar was often sweet and hesitant, a world away from the imperious figure who had claimed in our first meeting that he was a *yogi* endowed with special powers by dint of his musical knowledge. However, this ascetic public figure, the one he first presented to me, loomed ever large, a paragon of meditative absorption, which meant the present always fell short of this yogic ideal.

Absorption and the meditative in the daily lives of musicians

Chandrashekhar Mishra's complaints about being unable to consistently achieve states of deep meditative absorption often centred on not having enough time for *riaz* (practice). Such states are much more likely to occur during *riaz* in the musician's home than during public performance. During concerts, the musician must be aware of their accompanists and the audience, modifying their playing style in accordance with feedback. This can come in the form of applause or, in the case of more seasoned listeners, hand gestures and choice comments – such as '*Kya bat hai*!' (What a good thing!) – offered at the appropriate moment in the rhythmic cycle of beats. The need to be aware of one's surrounding precludes entering absorptive states premised on a loss of consciousness of the world around you.

It should also be noted that in Banaras performance venues are often not sequestered from the outside world, sometimes taking place in temples or other spaces that are easily accessible from the street. During concerts, I witnessed all manner of disturbances from a scampering monkey on stage to the shouts of an eccentric man who had wandered in late at night. While musicians are trained to maintain concentration despite external distraction, this is not always possible. In one instance, the famous Dhrupad singer Faiyaz Wasifuddin Dagar was performing at 3am in the morning to an intent audience of music connoisseurs (*rasikas*) during which time there were six power cuts interfering with the lighting and the amplification system. After the sixth interruption, Faiyaz Wasifuddin Dagar turned to a section of the audience to the left of the stage, where patrons and senior musicians traditionally sit, to complain that his concentration had been affected, adding that his ability to improvise was impeded: "My

mind [*dimaag*] has turned bad. I sing from inspiration! This isn't something that has been written down!"

What makes *riaz* rather than public performance more suited to obtaining absorption? Part of the reason lies in the spaces and times of *riaz*. The musician will often seek to practice alone in spaces, particularly the home, and at times when there is little chance of being disturbed. The ideal time for practice is widely agreed to be the very early morning before sunrise, a period referred to as *Brahma Muhurta*, which is held to be a particularly pure and sacred time. Namrata, who teaches singing in a college and hails from a long line of famous *Banarasi* vocalists, performs *riaz* in the early morning when possible. For her, it is easier to become absorbed during the early morning: "The *mahaul* [atmosphere] of the early morning has more *shanti* [serenity] so in *riaz* during this time one's attention will immediately attach [*dhyan turant lag jaega*]... However, in the evening it takes more effort to concentrate as more things are in the atmosphere."

On occasion, musicians used the term *dhyan* as a synonym for *riaz*, underlining the latter's framing as a form of musical meditation. Indeed, generally the ability to maintain heightened attention and absorption over extended periods is at the core what defines successful *riaz*, as well as regularity and extreme discipline – the musician ideally, although this is not always feasible, practises each day for an extended period of many hours at the same time. The highly spiritualised framing of *riaz* is indicative of the inadequacy of the English word *practice* as a translation. As Neuman (1990: 32) notes in his seminal ethnography of North Indian classical musicians, the amount of attention in discourse that musicians give to *riaz* is striking for something which is after all only preparation and not actual performance. Possessing the discipline to regularly practice for extended periods is seen as indicative of the inner development of the musician, and often the greatness of an artist is discussed not in terms of their performance ability, which is assumed, but through how many hours of *riaz* they undertake daily (*ibid*.: 31-2). During fieldwork, I often heard musicians remark upon the exceedingly long period of time that certain notable musicians devoted to *riaz*, sometimes accompanied by a lament that people nowadays do not practice enough. Dhruvnath Mishra, a respected performer of sitar, said the following when I attended a music lesson at his home in which he was giving instruction to a group of students: "Great *sangitkars* [musicians] used to do 12 hours of practice. Now the situation is *ulta* [opposite]. *Bacche log* [students] think that they can practice for thirty minutes, and

then perform on the stage." The comment had a didactic quality being made within earshot of his assembled students.

Typically, towards the start of practice, before beginning to play in earnest, the musician will engage in certain activities to concentrate the mind and/or attune the ear to pitch. Depending on the musician in question, this can include: playing the relevant scale for the raga in question, listening at length to the tanpura (drone), and/or repeatedly singing or playing the foundational *Sa* note over an extended period. In the latter activity, which I found to be particularly popular amongst singers and players of wind instruments, such as the *bansari* (flute), the musician repeatedly produced the *Sa* note in a long drawn-out vibration, attempting to achieve stability and correct pitch while also becoming totally absorbed in the sound. This in part speaks to the importance of *Sa* in Indian classical music, which is always the first note in the octave. *Sa* is movable, meaning it can be placed at any pitch and the other six notes in the scale will follow from it in a pre-determined, fixed ratio of frequency, ensuring concordance. The other notes are conceptualised as being born from *Sa*, and musicians see it as the foundation (*adhar*) measuring other notes in terms of distance (*dur*) from this base.

Musicians understand *Sa* to be essentially the same as *Om*, the primordial sound that is the essence of the whole universe and which is chanted in Hindu rituals as well as uttered and focused upon during meditation. The two sounds have conceptual symmetry – just as *Om* is the primordial sound from which the universe originates, so too is *Sa* the foundation from which other notes are born. When asked to explain the symmetry of the two sounds, musicians would often provide an aural demonstration, first singing *Sa* and then *Om*, producing both in the exact same low sonorous vibration. In conceptualising *Om* as *Sa* - which is then repeatedly sung, played, or listened to during *riaz* - musical practice comes itself to be configured as a form of meditation. The musician emerges as analogous to the millions of meditators who each day chant *Om*, feeling its vibrations in their body as they focus upon its low reverberating sound.

In addition to heightened absorption being more easily achievable during *riaz*, such a state was also specifically associated with particular sections of a raga. Musicians agreed that it is usually easier to achieve states of deep absorption during the *alap*, which is the slow section at the start of a performance produced without rhythmic accompaniment. During this section the musician presents and develops the main

elements and subtleties of the *raga*, including its essential notes, establishing its mood and personality for the audience. As the *alap* is slower and without rhythmic accompaniment from another instrument, such as the tabla, the musician is free to develop the *raga* at a more leisurely pace. This affords greater opportunity for absorption which becomes harder when the performance picks up speed as it progresses and notes have to be tied to rhythmic cycles of beats that can be complex and rapid. It is of note that the *alap* is also often the most prized part of a performance for musicians and connoisseur audience members, while subsequent fast rhythmic sections, virtuoso feats and musical duels are often preferred by less seasoned listeners (Alaghband-Zadeh 2017). In part this speaks to the particular role of the *alap* – it is the section where the most prestigious aspect of Indian classical music, the *raga* is developed – but it is also indicative of a general aesthetic hierarchy in which those things deemed meditative and absorptive are considered most esteemed. Dhrupad was often cited by my interlocutors as the most 'authentically Hindu' and spiritually superior form of Indian classical music, and it is known for its extensive *alaps* as well as a general meditative and absorptive ethic.

Indeed, the meditative exists as a clear aesthetic category within Indian classical music. Certain ragas are understood to have a mood and emotional flavour associated with *dhyan*, indicating their spiritual, peaceful, serious (*gambhir*) character. This speaks to how *dhyan* is sometimes, although not always, understood more as a feeling than a mental process with musicians often using the terms "*dhyan bhaav*" (feeling of *dhyan*) and "*dhyan ras*" (emotional flavour of *dhyan*). Chetan, a tabla player originally from Madhya Pradesh who is undertaking a masters at BHU and establishing himself as a performer at small events in Banaras, emphasised the emotional aspect: "*Dhyan* is not something you can consciously think. You can't think I will do *dhyan* now. Rather, it is a thing that you can feel [*feel kar sakte hai*]. When you sit down for *riaz*, after a little while it starts to come." Certain ragas, considered peaceful and serious, are thought to infused with the mood of *dhyan*, like Raga Bhairav and Raga Todi. These ragas are usually played in the morning, a time associated with the meditative. In contrast to such ragas, some others, like Raga Yaman, are considered *chanchal* in reference to their spritely, playful mood. When this adjective is applied to an individual's character it generally indicates a restless mind, but in the musical context such pejorative connotations are reduced, and usually the term indicates a happy, upbeat mood. It is interesting, however, that two of the major aesthetic categories in North Indian classical

music correspond to opposed mental states: the concentrated/absorbed/at rest mind (*dhyan*) and the restless/active/spritely mind (*chanchal*). Ragas with a mood associated with *dhyan* or *chanchalta* are thought to affect the mind of the listener, with each thought to produce a peaceful/meditative or active mental state respectively.

The correspondence of ragas and mental states is part of a more general reciprocal relation between the musician and the sound they produce. *Ragas* through their particular vibrations (t*aranga*) are thought to be able to induce certain mental states, affect the body (such as reducing blood pressure or ridding disease), and even, although this was generally only referred to cursorily, produce shifts in the environment, like changing the weather. However, just as a *raga* can induce certain mental-bodily conditions in the player or listener, so too is the particular sound and emotional flavour of the *raga* dependent on the internal state of the musician. The ability of a musician to produce a particular sound is understood to depend on their mental state/character, with a pleasing emotional mood only possible if one's mental condition is felicitous. In turn, one's character and mental condition is understood to reflect how one lives with a pure mind thought to be a function of ethical behaviour as well as eating correctly, particularly avoiding meat which is thought to make one's mental condition restless. As such, a unified cosmology exists in which ethics, sound and mind-body each co-constitute one another, such that no one part of the musicians' life can be separated. This is evidenced by the plethora of stock phrases that emphasise the deep interlinkage of different aspects of the musicians' world: "*jaisa khate hai, sochte hai*" (just as one eats, one will think); "*jaisa sochte hai vaisa bante hai*" (just as one thinks, one will be); "*aisa man vaisa sangeet*" (just as the mind is, so it the music).

Music as yoga: *pranayama*, *chakras* and *asana*

Thus far, musical practice and performance as a form of yoga has been considered in relation to meditation and states of deep absorption, but, in fact, musicians also regularly sought to frame other parts of their tradition in yogic terms. As mentioned previously, yoga has several aspects other than *dhyan*, including control of breath and elaborate bodily postures. Together the various elements of yoga provide a variegated framework of practices that can be used to re-conceptualise nearly any aspect of music in spiritualised yogic terms. The position in which the musician sits on the ground when performing, often with crossed legs, is sometimes referred to as an *asana* (yogic bodily

posture). Further, musicians sought to frame control of breath involved in singing (and playing wind instruments) as an instance of *pranayama* (yogic breathing techniques). In an interview in his ancestral home in Kabir Chaura, Sajan Mishra, who is perhaps Banaras's most famous present-day musician, said the taking in and releasing of long breaths during singing is a form of *Anulom Vilom*, a yogic exercise in which one slowly inhales and exhales through alternating nostrils.

In addition to breath control, musicians also sought to frame their practice in tantric terms as a form of Kundalini Yoga. In this system, (usually) seven chakras, or centres of energy, run vertically in the body aligned with the spine. These chakras are awakened (*jagrit*) when a powerful energy, Kundalini Shakti, which is depicted as a dormant coiled serpent lying at the base of the spine, is aroused and rises up the spinal column. Musicians sometimes diverged on the number of chakras, some positing three, others five, and still more seven. However, it was near universally asserted that these centres could be aroused through singing as this involves air rising up from the base of the upper body through the various chakras. Each note is also conceptualised as corresponding to a chakra, with the foundational note *Sa* mapping onto the root chakra at the base of the spine, *muladhara chakra*. It is evident that many of the similarities between yoga and musical practice cited by interlocutors involve control of breath, and so only really apply to singing (and the playing of wind instruments). This is indicative of the foundational role of singing in North Indian classical music, with instruments conceptualised as imitating and emulating voice. However, the restriction of breath control parallels to singing, also means that the central, unifying point of correspondence between yoga and music remains deep meditative absorption. No other aspect of yoga corresponds to each and every musical tradition, whether instrumental or vocal.

The music-as-yoga paradigm: a wider perspective

The statements that musicians made about the similarity of yoga and their art possessed a formulaic aspect. Statements were often delivered with similar phrasing, each pointing to the same points of congruence, particularly the presence of meditative attention in both traditions. This well worked out theoretical framework is indicative of the dissemination of these ideas through educational institutions. Masters and undergraduate courses in the performing arts include instruction on the history of Indian

classical music where students are taught about this artistic form's purported yogic roots. Students subsequently reproduce this information during written exams. There are also a variety of books on the topic. One such booklet, written by a former student of BHU, informs its readers: "Yoga and Music [*sic*] not only enable a person to keep his body and mind healthy but also help him to achieve divine powers" (Das 2007: no pagination). Further, certain musicians teach *Nada Yoga* (yoga of sound), often to foreign visitors, instructing them on how to use sonic vibrations to relieve bodily ailments and concentrate the mind.

It is important to emphasise at this point that not all musicians asserted the congruence of yoga and music with the same vigour. One BHU student, who hails from Assam but has come to the university to learn singing, warned me to stay away from spiritual topics as "people in Banaras will talk a lot about these things, but they live differently [i.e. not spiritually]." Another senior sitarist in the city confirmed, upon being asked directly, that yoga and music are similar, but unlike most of his peers, he took no interest in the topic, quickly moving the conversation onto other things. However, such encounters were exceedingly rare and on the whole I found the music-as-yoga paradigm was quite dominant. And, of course, this framework stretches well beyond Banaras. Indeed, the most important Indian classical music event in London, the annual Darbar Festival, has in recent years taken an increasingly yogic turn, offering sessions entitled "Yogabliss to Live Music" and "Music, Mantra and Guided Meditation", among others. Given the importance of yoga to present day configurations of Indian classical music, it is surprising that the topic has not received more attention from musicologists and anthropologists. Critical scholars sometimes recognise the usage of yogic tropes in modern Indian classical music as part of its recent spiritualisation (see below), but they tend not to dwell on it in any significant detail (e.g. Beck 1995: 111; O'Brien 2014: 60-1; Subramanian 2006: 4649).

The influence of yogic ideas on music is longstanding, and its presence can be seen in the 8th century C.E. musicological treatise, *Brhaddesi* and 13th century *Sangita-Ratnakara* (Beck 1995: 108; Rowell 1992: 20). However, the position of yoga as a totalising paradigm, dominating present-day understandings of musical practice, appears more recent, and can be linked to the historical conditions outlined in chapter two, which examined the emergence of yoga and certain ideas about heightened attentivity as part of late colonial reformist and nationalist currents. As such, the early to

mid-twentieth century is the more relevant period for understanding how yoga has come to occupy such a pre-eminent conceptual space in modern musical ideology.

In the late colonial period and the decades immediately after 1947, a concerted effort was made by a broad range of actors – ranging from skilled organisers and educationalists to government officials – to reconfigure music as a national tradition, something firmly democratic, Hindu and spiritual rather than confined to often secretive lineages of largely Muslim hereditary musicians. While this reconfiguration has been examined extensively by scholars of South Asia (Bakhle 2005; Lelyveld 1994; Subramanian 2011; Walker 2014; Weidman 2006), as mentioned, the specific use of yoga and its attendant attentional ideology to re-imagine music as a Hinduised national spiritual tradition remains largely unexplored by scholars. The importance of the music-as-yoga framework can be seen in regular musical conferences attended by major figures involved in the 'modernisation' and 'Hinduisation' of Indian classical music. During these events, yoga was sometimes proposed as a template through which to invest the artform with spiritual status. At the 1921 Gandharva Maha Vidhyala Musical Conference, the chairman, for example, argued pointedly that music should be classed as a special form of yoga, "*Swar Yoga*", drawing parallels between musicians and *yogis* who each engage in feats of prolonged concentration.

This attempt to explicitly reformulate Indian art through a yogic lens can be seen in other influential figures from the late colonial period. The intellectual proselytiser Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was perhaps the central figure in the twentieth-century popularisation of South Asian artistic traditions in the west, was key in this regard. Over numerous works (Coomaraswamy 1909, 1918: 26-29), he proposed yoga as the core of India's variegated artistic traditions, a foundation that distinguished them from the more materially-oriented aesthetic practices of the west. Drawing on a psychologised understanding of yoga-as-concentration, Coomaraswamy stated that the Indian artist uses yogic techniques of concentration to access an ideal divine realm from which pre-existing aesthetic forms can be accessed, whether images or musical compositions. He contrasts this to a western tradition, which in its quest for realism, seeks to mirror the material world rather than transcend it. Crucially then, here art-as-yoga serves as a way to transcend the bodily and material plane.

The music-as-yoga paradigm can also be found in the ideas of musicologists, historians and *yogis* broadly influenced by Vivekananda. Swami Prajnanananda of the Ramakrishna Mission established by Vivekananda, writing some decades later in the 1960s similarly asserts that Indian music incorporates yogic ideas, separating it from the worldly preoccupations of western aesthetic traditions that are concerned with "fleeting material and intellectual pleasures" (1960: 404). He contends that Indian music's "principal objective is to dissociate the mind from the worries and anxieties and sordid selfish interests of this transient world, and to help the artists and audiences to concentrate their minds and thereby attain spiritual consciousness" (*ibid*.).

Sivananda Saraswati, who established the Divine Life Society and had an outsized influence on the twentieth-century spread of yoga in India, developed over numerous speeches and writings a more bhakti-influenced yogic framework for understanding Indian music. In *Music as Yoga* (Sivananda 2011b [1956]), he informs his readers that the easiest way to realise the divine is through singing *kirtan*, devotional songs popularised by the *bhakti* movement, noting that: "Just as a deer is entrapped by music, so also the mind which is also as restless and wandering as the deer, is steadied by the music and made to dissolve in Brahman [ultimate divine reality]" (12). Like Coomaraswamy and Swami Prajnanananda, he is quick to distinguish Indian music from the material world, saying it is "not a mere system of pleasing the sensuous part of man" and should be firmly distinguished from "the dancing that accompanies vulgar music and obscene songs" (7). Omkarnath Thakur, a feted vocalist who later became a senior educationalist serving as the first dean of BHU's Music College in the 1950s, similarly located the distinctiveness of Indian music in its ability to transcend the bodily and sensual. According to Thakur (1964: 35), the ideal towards which Indian music aims is essentially yogic, built around overcoming and forgetting the body, and standing in contrast to western classical vocal traditions which have a more physiological orientation emphasising awareness of muscle movements.

The rise of middle-class morality and ascetic authority

The early and mid-twentieth century music-as-yoga framework outlined exhibits a strong moralising undertone. Through a process of *ascetisation* and *yogisation*, music is reconfigured as a tradition that negates the erotic, the bodily, and the sensual, and in doing so it is transformed into something which is altogether more transcendental and

pious, centring on absorptive states in which the material world is forgotten. This attempt to negate the bodily and sensual should be set within the context of the specific upheavals that served to reconstitute Indian music in the twentieth century. In the early parts of this century, classical music in north India was strongly associated with a set of institutions and social roles that by the 1950s were diminished in influence. Earlier in the century, most top performers were Muslim coming from hereditary stylistic lineages or *gharanas*, while *tawaifs*, courtesans and entertainers often versed in etiquette, sensual dance and singing, also carried north India's musical tradition, skilled in light classical forms, such as *thumri*. The chief patrons of these arts were the nobility and upper classes, drawn from princely courts and the landowning elites. However, a transformation occurred that went hand in hand with the development of Indian nationalism which saw classical forms divorced from these contexts, and increasingly performed, listened to and patronised by an emergent elite, comprising largely middle- and upper-class Hindus as well as financial backers drawn from state institutions and India's bourgeoning post-independence industries and business interests. While Muslim musicians still comprise many of north India's top performers they have been joined by a multitude of Hindu professional musicians. In the years after independence, artists associated with the *tawaif* tradition, like Banaras's Rasoolan Bai and Siddheshwari Devi, were also forced to bury their sensual past to achieve success on a nascent national stage.

This transformation was brought about by a cast of actors. Scholars have given a great deal of attention to the efforts of two Maharashtrian Brahmin men Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936) and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931) (Bakhle 2005; Meer 1980). Bhatkhande was the more scholarly of the two, spearheading efforts to formalise knowledge of Indian classical music, developing the *thaat* taxonomy for classifying *ragas*, and making public a vast array of *ragas* in a monumental compendium (Bakhle 2005). In doing so, Bhatkhande brought out into the open knowledge that had previously been kept hidden within the secretive oral traditions of hereditary musicians, allowing interested middle class Indians to acquire previously inaccessible expertise. While Bhatkhande also attempted to institute this newly public knowledge through the setting up of music colleges, it was Paluskar who made the more lasting organisational contribution to national music education. He set up a network of music colleges around India, *Gandharva Mahavidyalaya*, which served to promote a spiritualised *Bhakti*-influenced form of music (*ibid*.). These colleges, along with a range

of competitor institutions that arose over the course of the twentieth century, served to bring musical knowledge to a new public, often comprising middle-class Hindu women for whom musical expertise provided an increased chance of making a good marriage.

Paluskar's influence can be seen particularly in the development of performing arts at BHU. Two of his disciples, Omkarnath Thakur and B.R. Deodhar, served as heads of the university's music department during the 1950s and 1960s. The university opened music education to new populations, drawing students from non-musical families in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and further afield, and it was also responsible for the promotion of an orthodox high Hindu understanding of music. Thakur and his student, the gifted musicologist, Prem Lata Sharma, prepared and translated a range of Sanskrit texts in an effort to provide a Hindu scriptural basis for India's present-day musical traditions. University staff also took steps towards classicising Banaras's music scene, setting up the Dhrupad Mela in 1970s, a pure classical music festival which was seen by its organisers as spearheading a revival of a great, yet presently diminished, Hindu tradition of vocal music (Sanyal 1986: 116-8).

Educational projects aside, a new middle-class musical orientation was also promoted by music societies, which sprang up in large numbers in urban areas with the aim of promoting music awareness and concerts. These organisations, which were largely set up by high-caste well-to-do Hindus, drew support from the urban business elite. However, the single largest patron of classical music was the government in the form of All India Radio, which, as of 1961, employed 10,000 musicians at its various stations up and down the country (Neuman 1990: 172). The radio network introduced a series of procedures and regulations that served to open its state patronage to the middle classes while also preserving their moral sensibilities. Following independence, for example, the Minister of Broadcasting, Sardar Patel barred anyone "whose private life was a public scandal", so restricting musicians and artists associated with courtesan culture (Lelyveld 1994: 119).

This transformation of music into a national tradition, more suited to middle-class sensibilities, was accompanied by particular temporal narratives which mirrored calls in other contexts, such as yoga, education and science, for the revival of once great but presently corrupted Hindu traditions. Reformers held that Indian music was once pure and resplendent, a divine art rooted in Hindu ideals, but one that had become corrupted

by its more recent patrons, being turned into a playground for sensate pleasure by the princely courts and their favoured courtesans. Sometimes these narratives specifically blamed the influence of Islamic culture from west and central Asia, often praising the comparatively 'pure' Carnatic tradition of South India (e.g. Coomaraswamy 1909; Keskar 1967). Although, there was complexity here too with some inveighing against Islamic influence on the one hand, but simultaneously holding Muslim musicians and Muslim-influenced compositions in high regard (Dasgupta 2006). B.C. Deva in an introduction to Indian Music, first published in the 1970s, offers a fairly typical rendering of this revival narrative:

For some centuries now this divine art was the handmaid of mere sensate pleasure. It was a constant companion of some of the most unhealthy sections of society... Consequently a class of musicians was in existence that was illiterate and uncouth… Five decades ago, to be a musician, in most parts of the country, was to be ostracized (1986: 4).

The *yogisation* of music was in part a reaction to such narratives. *Yogisation* provided a way of removing music from the realm of the erotic, bodily and sensual and making it pious and chaste. The ideal musician was rendered in psychologised garb, aiming towards absorption of mind, freed from bodily consciousness. This parallels the popularisation of yoga in the late nineteenth century, which also in reaction to moralising Victorian discourse about the bodily contortions of *yogis*, sought to remove yoga from the realm of the body and transform it into a science of the mind. Indeed, as with the early modernisation of yoga, musical reformers were partly reacting to the criticisms of British missionaries who often censured the supposed licentious tendencies of Indian performers (e.g. Sherring 2001 [1868]: 185)

The foregoing exposition provides some of the historical factors which produced the music-as-yoga framework as an India-wide phenomenon. However, aspects of it do not fit neatly with the specific sociological and historical trajectory of Banaras. Much of the historical literature reads the nationalisation of Indian music as a process of Hinduisation in which artistic traditions associated with Muslim hereditary musicians were spiritualised and brought out into the open. However, in contrast, in Banaras many of the hereditary musicians were Hindu, and performances, including by Muslim *tawaifs*, often took place in religious contexts, namely temples. With the decline of the Mughal empire the city had flourished, becoming home to displaced courtiers and aristocrats who patronised artistic and architectural traditions (Misra 1993: 2450). Later,

after the fall of Awadh in 1856, which in the wake of declining Mughal influence had become north India's major centre for musical and artistic culture, Banaras also benefited from an influx of *tawaifs* in search of new patrons (Sampath 2023: 12). Nita Kumar (2017) describes how a public culture, which persisted into the 1950s, existed in Banaras that was partaken of equally by the elites and poor, although patronised by the former. This culture was characterised by a great desire for *maasti* (gaiety) and *mauj* (joy, abandonment), with festivities (*melas, sringars*) associated with temples and religious sites drawing popular *tawaif* performers to the delight of assembled crowds.

The Kathak-Mishras, as experts in tabla and sarangi, were an important part of this cultural order, working as accompanists for the vocal and dancing performances of *tawaifs*, but also often serving as their business managers and gurus instructing them on the delights of Banaras's rich musical traditions. Kippen (1988: 23) underlines the central importance of *tawaifs* to musicians – it would often be the courtesan who provided introductions to wealthy patrons on behalf of accompanists. Colonial ethnographies and census reports in the late nineteenth century recorded the Kathaks as performing and teaching 'dancing girls', and, as in the present, there existed a certain uncertainty over their caste status, with the group variously being categorised as low-caste *shudra*, high-caste Brahman, or people who claim to be Brahman, the latter implying a certain degree of scepticism from colonial administrators (Walker 2014: 75-80). Surveying a broad geographical area inhabited by Kathaks ranging from Rajasthan to UP, Walker seeks to move away from the taxonomical fixity of colonial caste censuses, asserting that the Kathaks formed part of a "a very fluid social layer of musicians and dancers who have continually migrated, adapted, shifted, adopted identities and had yet other identities thrust upon them" (84). In the twentieth century the Kathaks effected another shift, moving from central players in a cultural order shaped by tawaifs, elite patrons, the lower classes and a certain desire for pleasure and *maasti*, to becoming classical artists, who project themselves as quasi-ascetic figures capable of meditative absorption, an image concordant with the pious values of middle-class respectability.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the public culture of Banaras, defined by its unification of the high and low classes, began to fracture, and in the present fairs and festivities defined by their *maasti* have become the preserve of the city's workers and lower sections (Kumar 2017). Today, Banaras's numerous classical concert venues

attract a respectable audience of foreign visitors, well-heeled folk and music students, although some events, such as the aforementioned Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh, still bring in a more mixed crowd. An air of rarefied solemnity often pervades, as typified by the Dhrupad Mela where the atmosphere is serious and spiritual, rather than exuberant and joyful. The *tawaifs* have also receded from public view. In May of 1958 a law was passed against "the immoral trade in women" and by the end of the year, Dalmandi, the street of courtesans, was vacated (Kumar 2017: 143). This move came on the back of persistent efforts from reformers and caste-based merchant groups, including members of the influential Aggarwal community, many of whom promoted a chaste Brahmanical Hindu culture (Bayly 1988; Kumar 2017).

With the decline of courtesan culture in the city, the musical niches that the Mishras occupy have also shifted. Notably, Mishras populate teaching positions in BHU as well as local schools and colleges where they instruct middle-class students. There has also been a rise of skilled sitarists, such as Shivnath Mishra and Amarnath Mishra, and an increasing number of prominent solo singers, epitomised by the feted Rajan and Sajan Mishra. However, simultaneously the performance of the sarangi has declined. With the rise of a new middle class moral order, the sarangi, which is beautifully emotional and vocal, became tarnished due to its association with courtesan culture (Magriel 2001).[46] Well-known performers today, such as Rajan-Sajan Mishra and the sitarist Dhruvnath Mishra, gained success through carving out musical careers that diverged from the tradition of their fathers who were sarangi players.

This shift to middle-class respectability is underlined by the particular imaginaries through which the Mishras seek to produce their identity. In conveying their art as a form of ascetism and yoga, they specifically transcend those aspects of their past that are presently deemed immoral and licentious. Cast as artists in pursuit of exquisite absorption, they precisely transcend that thing with which the courtesan is most closely associated: the sensual and bodily realm.

This ascetic identity is paired with a particular construction of the past that is marked by silences and lacunae. Mishra musicians are uniquely historically oriented – their living rooms are replete with photos of famed musical kinfolk from decades past, while on the

[46] While the sarangi, as Magriel explores, was tarnished by courtesan association, I found that in more recent years there has been some revival of interest in this instrument in Banaras.

front of their houses they display their illustrious genealogy, carved in stone (fig. 14-15). Similarly, musicians sought to justify their prominence and deservingness as performers through reference to pedigree and "blood *sanskar*" (inherited habits), often dropping into conversation long and well-practised lists of past illustrious performers from their family. Sometimes the historical lineages sketched took on a mythic aspect as musicians sought to portray themselves as inheritors of a tradition first promulgated by *rishis* and *yogis*. On numerous occasions, Mishra musicians also related stories of a distant kinfolk who had obtained states of extreme heightened absorption or *samadhi* while playing, asserting that these states brought deep musical knowledge. Chandrashekar Mishra twice spontaneously recounted the tale of his ancestor's trips to a temple outside Banaras where he sat in meditation for days until finally he achieved a state of exquisite absorption. In all cases, the charting of this historical lineage of absorptive states served to emphasise the status and skill of present-day kinfolk, who stand as inheritors of this spiritualised past. Yet, these mythic constructions of past absorptive states and illustrious genealogies were always silent on certain aspects of recent history, that of courtesans and sensuality. On asking about this recent past directly, I was often initially met with embarrassed smiles, and questions of how I came to know about such things. However, while in the wider middle-class mainstream, courtesans circulate only as degraded figures, explicit conversations with Kathak-Mishra about their recent familial past often revealed a more complex and ambivalent stance. Courtesans were often spoken of as guardians of musical tradition and great artists, yet these views were never to my knowledge publicly expressed.

In reconfiguring themselves as quasi-spiritual figures capable of meditative absorption, musicians in Banaras are able to draw upon a rich vein of authority, which exists separately to ritualistic Brahmanical, governmental, and commercial sources of power. Symbolically at least, the ascetic exists independently from traditional formations of authority, being a-social, residing away from society and accruing supernormal powers through control of attention. Of course, this is an ideal, constructed through Hindu myth and narrative, but, as Thapar (1987: 8) points out, in the popular mind it is a powerful form of alternative authority and symbolism, which continues to animate protest, dissent and Indian political movements presently. Through drawing on ascetic authority musicians are able to position themselves as superior and separate to the commercial and political patrons on whom they are financially dependent. Chandrashekhar Mishra's outward presentation as a *yogi* who has forgone large sums of money refusing to play in

front of UN officials speaks to the particular appeal of ascetic authority – it allows musicians to claim a moral status, one which separates and elevates them above commercial groups on whom in many other contexts they are totally dependent.

In recent years, the ruling Hindu right dispensation has sought to co-opt ascetic sources of symbolic authority with leaders of the RSS projecting themselves as ascetic servants of the nation and Prime Minister Modi grounding his right to rule precisely in his credentials as a renunciate figure who is estranged from his wife and without children, and, so, not swayed by personal interest. In Banaras, which is the prime minister's parliamentary constituency, musicians, as quasi-spiritual figures, offer an avenue through which politicians can solidify their authority. Modi is photographed often with leading musicians, such as Chhannulal Mishra, seeking to gain through proximity to these quasi-ascetic figures. During the 2022 Uttar Pradesh state elections, prominent Banaras musicians were heavily courted, receiving personal invitations to political rallies, and being asked to attend political meetings. Priyanka Gandhi, who led the opposition Congress Party's election bid in the state, stayed while campaigning in Kabir Chaura, the main neighbourhood of the Kathak-Mishra *biradari*. In turn, musicians too gain from this political relationship with favoured performers, receiving prestigious awards and patronage in the form of concerts. These awards are proudly displayed in the living rooms of musicians, and appended to musicians' names like a title.

Fig. 14: Musical genealogy on façade of Kathak-Mishra house

Fig. 15: Kathak-Mishra living room wall

Conclusion

The process of *yogisation* and *ascetisation* found amongst north Indian classical musicians in Banaras is not unique. There are numerous other examples within the anthropological literature on the city of people drawing on ascetic modalities to conceptualise their lives. This includes wrestlers understood as *sanyasis* (Alter 1997) and women who draw on ascetic practices to gain a sense of control amongst the vicissitudes of life (Pearson 1996). During fieldwork, on numerous occasions I encountered people who sought to frame their daily activities as forms of yoga, whether runners or cooks working in a kitchen. Sometimes this analogy rested on the presence of bodily movement and posture in both yoga and the target activity, but often the specific linkage was grounded in a shared aim of heightened attentivity. The pervasiveness of yoga as a framework for conceptualising life speaks to its power as a paradigm, connecting one to respectable sources of spiritual authority as well as offering a set of techniques through which to order and control one's psycho-bodily experiences.

Chapter 7 | Attention in Hindu ritual: mantra and sacrifice amongst the Banaras priesthood

What you look for / is the god in you. / What you see / is the god out there. / God is what you have in your mind

- Telugu *padam* poem (Shulman 2012: 147)

The preceding chapters provide numerous examples of ritualised activity that takes heightened attention as central to proper performance. Indeed, this speaks to the general point that nearly all Hindu ritual involves at some stage the cultivation of controlled concentration. This can be seen in the most basic worship ritual, the *puja*, in which the devotee will at some point close their eyes and turn their mind inward to concentrate on the deity. It can be seen also in *vrata* – ritual observances requiring variably fasting, bathing and storytelling – which are often performed by women as a way to make the mind peaceful and attain a state of singular concentration (Pearson 1992). Pilgrims too will attempt to concentrate their mind, believing that a good pilgrimage is one done with sole focus on the deity for whom the journey is being undertaken (Bose 2020: 316-7). Similarly, numerous scholars have written about how *silpins*, or artists, treat image making as a ritualised religious discipline, one which requires deep, meditative concentration to visualise the completed image before it is created (Coomaraswamy 1991: 26-29; Eck 1998: 52; Timalsina 2013: 55-56). In line with this, I found in present-day Banaras, during interviews with sculptors of religious images, that some of them employ techniques of yogic concentration in the making of their art.

That an emphasis on careful attentional cultivation recurs in disparate ritual contexts will not seem surprising to the reader given discussion in previous chapters concerning the intimate linkage of concentration to localised conceptions of agency, contentment as well as social status and authority. However, a full account cannot be given without a fuller consideration of how attention in ritual and other religious contexts is also embedded within a distinctive epistemological frame, one which itself turns on a specific Hindu cosmology. What is crucial here is the question of how the 'mind' is understood to relate to reality in Hindu cosmology. This relation can fruitfully be termed a particular 'epistemic stance', a phrase introduced by Tanya Luhrmann (2011,

2020) to describe the epistemological status different cultures and sub-groups ascribe to imagination and phantasy – the question of whether such mental phenomena are understood as 'real' or 'mere' imaginings? In this chapter, I employ the term 'epistemic stance' somewhat more broadly than Luhrmann to refer to how a particular group, tradition and so forth understands the relationship between mental states generally – not just imagination – and reality. Three possible epistemic stances are as follows – mental states ideally represent a reality that exists externally to them; mental states are as real as the external world rendering a distinction between the two problematic; or mental states stand in a superior epistemological position to the exterior world, that is they are closer to reality.

Within post-enlightenment rationalist western traditions, thoughts and certain other mental states are held ideally to stand in a representative relation to reality, accurately mapping the external world. Crucially, a representation stands in for something, but is not that thing. As Peirce puts it, a representation "stands for another [object] so that an experience of the former affords us a knowledge of the latter" (1986: 62). For Peirce, representations address themselves to the mind and there is also a causal relation between the representation and the object it stands for – that is, the representation is to some degree at least determined by the object, as a weathercock is influenced by the direction of the wind. A number of scholars have asserted that an idealised representational understanding of the relation of mental life to external reality was pivotal to the emergence of a westernised modernity.[47]

While a representational conception of the relation between mental states and the external world is readily present in Banaras, in certain ritual and religious contexts especially it is supplanted by a Hindu cosmology that offers a radically different epistemic stance. Within this cosmology, the world is understood as suffused with gross and subtle aspects, the latter being held to be closer to divine reality. As the interior aspects of the self are more subtle than the gross external world, they too are seen to be closer to reality, invested with a superior epistemic status. What's more, when carefully controlled and cultivated, interior states can actually serve as instantiations of divine reality. Such, an understanding of interiority inverts the distancing logic of a

[47] Taylor describes the emergence of a particular understanding of self in the seventeenth century in which proper knowledge inheres in the correct, rational ordering of inner mental representations of an external reality, which in turn affords control and dominion over the outer world. "To know reality is to have a correct representation of things – a correct picture within of outer reality," Taylor (2001: 144) writes in exposition of this viewpoint.

representational epistemic stance – here mental states are held, if properly controlled, not to stand in for a wider, external reality, but to manifest reality themselves. It is within the logic of this epistemic stance that attention becomes highly important, serving as both a *means* (through which interiority is controlled to access reality), and an *end* (with states of heightened concentration and absorption serving to instantiate divine reality within a given person's interiority). In this framing, a mental 'image', cultivated through sustained concentration, is not an image at all as this would imply a distance – rather such cultivated visualisations obliterate the gap always implicit in semiosis between sign and object.

In this chapter, I will explore this particular epistemic stance, and the role of attention within it, in relation to one particular popular Hindu ritual: *japa-havan*. This composite ritual, despite its prevalence across north India (and likely also in the South of the country and amongst Hindu diaspora) has received no ethnographic attention, as far as I am aware. It consists of two steps. First a Brahman ritual specialist will recite a fixed number of mantras in his mind. As the mantras are not said out loud, but rather 'uttered' mentally, this activity constitutes a feat of concentration rather than outward expression. After the completion of these recitations, usually consisting of many thousands of mantra repetitions, the Brahman will then perform the next stage of the ritual: a series of sacrifices that entail throwing small offerings into a fire. This two-step ritual is usually carried out on the behest of a paying client, who hopes that its completion will bring about some fortuitous outcome in his life, such as a swift return to health.

The structure of *japa-havan*, which I will describe in more detail subsequently, suggests an equivalence between external fire sacrifice on the one hand, and the totally internal and de-materialised repetition of mantras on the other. Crucially, I argue that the particular epistemic stance of Hindu cosmology, which invests interiority with heightened value and status, is central to understanding the logic of equivalence that orders this composite ritual. Specifically, while the internal repetition of mantras entails no physical offering, it is understood as effectively sacrificial as it requires the offering up of the self, but in un-objectified form manifested in attention and consciousness, which the priest cultivates assiduously. This form of un-objectified sacrifice is befitting of Hindu metaphysics, yet it also sits uneasily with many widely circulating theories of sacrifice in the anthropological corpus, which each in their own way take material objectification as central to sacrificial efficacy.

In emphasising the interior aspects of Hindu ritual in this chapter, I seek to break from certain Indological and anthropological accounts of ritual in South Asia, which have tended to conceptualise such activity as correct performance of outer behaviour rather than something that centres on internal mental states. It has become something of a truism, one repeated by significant figures in South Asian anthropology and Indology that the essential prescriptive core of popular Hinduism coalesces in orthopraxy, that is correct outward behaviour especially in ritual contexts, rather than the interior orthodoxy most readily associated with Christianity (which emphasises sincere internal states, particularly belief). This builds on a widely asserted contention that Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, places a peculiar emphasis on inwardness (Luhrmann 2020; Taylor 2001), one that stands in marked contrast to the behavioural and ritualistic bent of numerous other traditions. Yet, the ethnographic data presented here is suggestive of the fact that Brahmanical Hindu ritual, that thing most readily associated with correct outward behaviour, is often deeply concerned with interior cultivation – yet, it is an interiority that diverges radically from that emphasised in Protestant traditions, which remain in disparate scholarly fields the yardstick for understanding what counts as inwardness in religious contexts. Belief, which is paradigmatic to Christian orthodoxy, is representational and propositional, emphasising the provision of sincere assent to some set of statements about a distant transcendent reality. In contrast, the kinds of interior states that are often required in Hindu ritual do not stand in a representational relation to reality, but rather they serve as attempts at actual instantiation, foregrounding intense attention and faculties of imagination which offer the possibility of divine manifestation within the self.

Fieldwork with priests: coming to know the *karmkandi* of Banaras

Before going further, it will be useful to say a few words about nomenclature. The ritual specialists under examination refer to themselves and their peers by a plethora of names – *pandit*, *karmkandi* and *Brahman*, the latter of which refers to their Brahmin caste status. In this chapter, for the purpose of clarity I have chosen largely to use *karmkandi*, a broad term which covers any individual who performs *karmkand*, a noun that technically refers to all ritual activity that a Brahman priest might carry out. As the previous sentence suggests, sometimes I will also use the English word “priest”, which is a poor translation on account of its Christian connotations, but helps avoid clunky prose overburdened by unfamiliar words. While over time a given *karmkandi* is likely to perform a range of different rituals, this chapter focuses on only one of the rituals that

they undertake – *japa-havan*. Here *japa* refers to the meditative repetition of mantras, while *havan* describes sacrificial offering involving fire.

My coming to know about the *japa-havan* ritual was a stroke of serendipity. During my second period of fieldwork, I took a room in a family home behind the southernmost *ghats* of Banaras. The house was surrounded by temples and shrines, some underground, others large with ornate rooves and still more nestled in alcoves. A stone paved courtyard lay next to one of these temples. In the day, the courtyard was filled with devotees coming to worship the adjacent temple's chief deity Mahish Asura Mardini, a powerful goddess and slayer of demons. Families also congregated there to cook food in large pots which they consumed following *mundan*, an important ceremony in which the first hair of one's child is tonsured. In the midst of this passing traffic of families and temple devotees, I often saw men of varying ages sitting cross legged on mats in the shade offered by a covered section of the courtyard. These men sat still for long stretches, their right hand concealed by a cloth bag – they took no notice of those who milled around them. Sometimes I discerned a slight movement of their lips, as if muttering something, but mostly they remained perfectly motionless. As I passed them daily on my way to various engagements, I grew used to their sight, initially mistaking them for meditators engaged in personal spiritual activity. Occasionally, groups of men also performed sacrifices, pouring clarified butter and other choice ingredients, such as uncooked rice, into the licking flames of a fire.

Curious about the sacrifices and meditation that were taking place a few metres from my room, I began to sit in the courtyard, and when the groups of men were breaking from their work, talk with them. My fieldwork in this setting served as a useful starting point to learn about the technical details of the *japa-havan* ritual, affording an opportunity not only to observe for long stretches, but to also ask a rotating cast of priests about a plethora of new and unfamiliar objects, words and concepts. Many of these conversations were marked by a certain brevity. As each *karmkandi* had to perform thousands of mantras on a given day, they often had limited time to spare for conversation. As such, I couldn't help but feel that what they told in these conversations was an idealised version of the ritual, an account of how it should be performed, one appropriate for a curious foreign observer, yet one stripped of the emotional complexities and idiosyncratic proclivities that tend to inflect lived experience.

It was only after my first few months of fieldwork, that I began to develop closer relationships with certain *karmkandi*, and this revealed a shadow between assured public statements and the strains that ritual work often entails. As will be discussed subsequently, a certain degree of anxiety and unease often results from the specific economic and cosmological position of priests – their labour is repetitive and unvaried just as any work can be in a waged economy, and yet despite these conditions of capitalist monotony, they must also manage to cultivate essentially meditative and spiritual states, facing grave cosmological consequences if they are unable to do so. Two *karmkandi* in particular were of great help in understanding more about the realities, rather than the normative ideals, of ritual work. One was my next-door neighbour, Kameshwar Mishra, whose living room was always preternaturally cool, even in the height of the Banaras summer, providing an excellent place to sit and talk. In many senses, Kameshwar conformed to the archetype of a Banaras Brahman – assiduously policing what enters his body, always dressed in a traditional dhoti, and deeply knowledgeable about ritual procedure after many decades of work. He came from a long line of Banaras priests some of considerable fame, and his position as a senior *karmkandi* who often organised large rituals involving many junior priests meant he spoke with an assured authority on religious matters and was often critical of his younger colleagues for their lack discipline. Yet, he was also candid, encouraged by his plainspoken wife Saraswati, who had little time for the performative assertion of priests, often reminding her husband of the worries and anxieties that he faced during his ritual work, especially as a youth struggling with uncontrolled desires.

This aspect of a priest's life – the anxieties and trepidations – came out even more forcefully with Harsh, a young *karmkandi* that I first met at a music concert, and who was my most intimate confidant during this period of fieldwork. Harsh had long held concerns about whether a life of assiduous ritual work was for him, and he spoke frankly over many meals and meetings about the often intense emotional difficulties of performing daily repetitive rituals for paying clients, an experience that ultimately led him to leave his priestly profession. Absent in Harsh was the bullish confident manner of many other *karmkandi* – he was thoughtful in his disposition and hesitant in his speech, and, as such, he made a good research assistant, accompanying me to *vidyalaya* where young priests are trained. Through observing the life course of *karmkandi* with Harsh – seeing their training in youth and, later, through my extensive connections in the hostels of BHU, their study for university degrees, I was able to build a good picture

of the socio-economic conditions that contour a typical priest's life. It is to this socio-economic background that I turn in the following section.

Background: the *karmkandi* of Banaras

The typical route to becoming a *karmkandi* involves enrolling at a special educational institution, known variously as *vidyalaya* or *ved patshala*. Invariably those students coming to study at *vidyalaya* in Banaras come from poor rural Brahman families in the economically weak states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Madhya Pradesh, although some hail from further afield, including Nepal. For poor Brahman parents who are unable to afford private school fees, *vidyalaya* are a boon as the accommodation and food of students is provided for by the institution, and often additional money is given to students in aid of their education. In particular, the central government funds a network of *vidyalaya* called Maharshi Sandipani Rashtriya Ved Vidya Pratishthan, which deposits 1,000 rupees into the accounts of students each month, and provides food and accommodation.

Students, who arrive at *vidyalaya* aged just seven or eight, are expected over the course of five to seven years to learn how to recite an entire *Veda* from memory with correct cadence and pitch. The most popular *Veda* is undoubtedly, the *Shukla Yajurveda* as verses from this scripture are used during Hindu rituals in north India. In addition to learning Vedic recitation, students are also taught proper Brahmanical habits. Multiple times a day the student is expected to perform *sandhyavandanam*, a complex sequence of mantras, purifications and breathing exercises, which is thought to increase concentration capacity and protect priests from *sin* accumulated during ritual performance. While the focus of education at *vidyalaya* is Vedic recitation, students also learn *adhunik vishay* (modern subjects), including Hindi, English and "computer". Generally, *vidyalaya* do not teach practical ritual knowledge (*karmkand*) during the initial years of the students' education. It is feared that if pupils are taught how to undertake rituals too early in their education, they will abandon their Vedic learning, and instead start performing rites in return for money. If *karmkand* is taught at a given *vidyalaya,* instruction will only be given once the student has entered his final years. At this time, students will also begin to apprentice with older priests, learning on site how to perform rituals.

Once sufficiently trained, the Brahman in question can start carrying out ritual work in earnest for clients. Many *karmkandi* will also go to university, usually Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, a Sanskrit educational institution set up by the East India Company, or BHU's Sanskrit faculty. While these institutions teach 'Sanskrit', the term covers more than just language, including instruction in astrology, philosophy, ritual knowledge, among other subjects. This is indicative of how the term 'Sanskrit' is broad, encompassing civilised Brahmancial culture in general, such that correct behaviour is termed *Sanskrit sanskar*. BHU and Sampurnanand provide their students with a slightly awkward mix of bookish knowledge and practical ritual instruction. In particular, BHU's Sanskrit faculty has its own department of *karamkand* which all students must attend in addition to their main subject of study. As such, while students are studying towards their bachelor's degrees in academic subjects, they will also receive instruction in how to be a priest, including learning how to do *japa*, *havan* and life cycle rites. That priestly learning is so firmly enmeshed in the formal education system, speaks to the importance of qualifications, exams and degrees in contemporary north India. Indeed, priests during fieldwork would often introduce themselves by first enumerating their various degrees and qualifications.

While studying at university, Sanskrit students will continue to work as priests undertaking ritual work for clients. It provides a handy source of income, but no young priest desires to become a full-time *karmkandi* working for private clients – it is not a profession held in high regard. Invariably, Sanskrit students desire to become teachers in schools, university professors, civil servants, or priests in the army providing ritual services and counselling for military personnel. All of these professions share in the fact that they are government jobs (*sarkari naukri*) offering security and a good salary. As such, the ambitions of young *karmkandi* are no different from other young residents of Banaras – they desire secure government employment. Of course, competition for these positions is immense, and, so, in time most young priests settle permanently for *karamkand* work which provides a decent, if sometimes irregular, salary.

Japa-havan: priest-client relations and motivations for performing the ritual

The Malinowskian analysis of magical action as alleviating anxiety seems pertinent to the case of *japa-havan*. It is generally in times of crisis or uncertainty that a *jajman* (client) instructs a *karmkandi* to perform the ritual. The main motivations for a *jajman*

to seek out the ritual tend to reflect the central preoccupations of Banaras residents: health, family and wealth. Some *jajman* come in times of illness or following accidents, desiring a return to health, while others turn to the ritual to in periods of economic hardship. Less commonly, a *jajman* may use the ritual to bring misfortune to another, such as a foe or adversary. Often the effect of *japa-havan* is understood in oblique terms – for example, it is not that it will immediately cure illness, but rather that the deity being pleased may allow one's doctors to identify the relevant disease and, so, prescribe appropriate medicine.

The word used to conceptualise the needs of the *jajman* seeking *japa-havan* is "desire" (*kamanaen*), speaking to how the client comes to a *karmkandi* with a specific worldly desire in mind. For each *jajman's* specific desire, a suitable deity and their associated mantra will be selected. The goddess of home and prosperity, Laxmi, is the focus of *japa-havan* performed for issues of wealth, while for those hoping to bring misfortune to an enemy, the martial tantric deity Bagalamukhi is considered appropriate. For matters of health, the great god Shiva is often beseeched to help, with *karmkandi* reciting a verse from the *Rig Veda* associated with the deity. This Sanskrit mantra, *Mahamrityunjaya*, is particularly poetic and was performed with increased regularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. A translation of the Vedic part of the mantra is given below[48]:

> *We sacrifice to Tryambaka*[49] *the fragrant, increaser of prosperity.*
> *Like a cucumber from its stem, might I be freed from death, not from deathlessness (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 953-4)*

Relations between *jajman* and *karmandi* in the case of *japa-havan* are not determined by hereditary rights. For *japa-havan*, *karmkandi* do not have rights to *jajman* hailing from particular regions of India, nor do they have monopolies over clients who arrive at particular times, as typified by the *pari* and *pachchh* system described by Jonathan Parry (1980) in his account funerary rituals in Banaras. In place of fixity is a certain degree of fluidity – *karmkandi* assert that clients come to them on the basis of prior familiarity, word-of-mouth and recommendation. Of course, this informal system of recommendation, which *karmkandi* were keen to emphasise in conversations, masks the

[48] The mantra also contains powerful, esoteric *beej* (seed) parts, which, unlike the Vedic section, are not to be recited out loud. These *beej* parts come before and after the Vedic section (only the latter of which is reproduced in this chapter).
[49] Tryambaka is a name associated with with Rudra, a fearsome form of the deity Shiva.

importance of sociological forces in structuring client-priest relations. As the method of carrying out *japa-havan,* while in essence the same, varies a little from community to community, clients tend to prefer priests who come from the same socio-ethnic region as them. For example, a resident of Banaras hailing originally from the Maithila region of Bihar-Jharkand-Nepal will seek out a Maithil *karmkandi*. However, the influence of this should not be taken too far – for *jajman* it is often a preference to have a *karmkandi* from one's own socio-cultural background, but not a necessity.

While many *jajman* for *japa-havan* are resident in Banaras, a good proportion of business comes from further afield**.** As the exemplary *tirtha* or pilgrimage site, *jajman* residing elsewhere specifically seek to have *japa-havan* performed in Banaras believing that on account of its special location, the ritual will yield greater fruits. The city's spiritual power, as well as its associations with Brahmanical learning, mean that *karmkandi* working or educated in Banaras also benefit from reputational prestige. This is often drawn upon on websites and *karmkandi*'s own social media profiles. As one website notes, using the city's alternative sacred name Kashi: "[We] have a team of highly qualified M.A., PhD (Sanskrit) priests and most distinguished Brahmins… These priests have post graduated from Kashi and are well trained..." Websites and social media profiles allow *karmkandi* to perform ritual work for clients from many miles away, including wealthy diasporic Hindus residing in America and Europe. The language on these websites, many of which are in English to appeal to diasporic Hindus, are often highly commercial in nature, drawing on a consumerist vocabulary. Glowing customer reviews displayed prominently along with the lexicon of internet commerce - "product description", "terms and conditions" and "customised services" – are suggestive of a client-priest relation that is at least in part grounded in neoliberal transactionalism. However, it is a market in which consumer rights are mixed with magical forces. As a *karmkandi* is likely to possess their client's birth chart, there is a certain peril in leaving one's priest for another, lest one risks being cursed.

A *karmkandi* can expect to earn around 1,200 rupees (£12) per day for *japa-havan* work. To put this into context – I spent some time living in the grounds of a fee-paying school in Banaras and there cooks took home around 5,000 rupees monthly, and drivers, considered a more skilled (and male) profession, around 10,000 rupees. The mantra volume that a *karmkandi* can perform in a day will depend on the length of the mantra in question as well as the priest's skill. For *Mahamrityunjaya*, which is comparatively

lengthy, a typical *karmkandi* can manage 3,500-4,000 repetitions daily. Normally, the number of mantras that a single Brahman can repeat daily will be well under the total number of recitations required, and, as such, multiple ritual specialists will be instructed to expedite the process which still may stretch over numerous days. The size of the total fee (*dakshina*) for a given *japa-havan* ritual taking place over numerous days will depend on a number of factors – the wealth of the client, the number of mantras to be said, the length of the mantra in question as well as the number of sacrificial offerings. Many mantras require a fixed number of repetitions – for *Mahamrityunjaya Mantra*, which is usually prescribed for issues of health, 125,000 repetitions (*sava lakh*) are done. For other mantras, the number of recitations is calculated according to the *jajman's* birth chart.

Normally, a *jajman* will contact a familiar or recommended *karmkandi* to organise the ritual, and this individual will usually become the *acharya*, that is the chief priest overseeing the *japa-havan*. The *acharya* is responsible for putting together the group of *karmkandi* tasked with performing the ritual. Invariably, these will be people with whom the *acharya* is familiar – often kinsmen or friends from university or *vidyalaya*. The *acharya* will take home a larger fee**.** He will also likely ask the client to provide an additional gift (*dana*) for each *karmkandi*, whether food, ritual implements, or clothing, such as shawls in times of cold weather. Technically, the *acharya* is meant to be the most knowledgeable and senior member of the group, but, as mentioned, often the role is assumed by the person who is the client's point of contact. This can lead to arguments with older and more learned priests resenting the superior position of a younger upstart.

Japa: outline of ritual structure

On the days that a *karmkandi* performs *japa-havan*, he will strictly limit what enters his body. Some priests refrain from eating altogether during the day, drinking only water and breaking fast in the evening. Others restrict their diet to *phalahar*, a category of pure substances that encompasses fruit, wild vegetables and rice as well as other crops not cultivated by the plough (Parry 1985). At the start of the ritual a number of preliminary steps are performed, including purification of surroundings and self (*shuddhi*), the worship (*puja*) of various deities, particularly Ganesh and the goddess Gauri, and the lighting of an oil lamp flame (*dipak*), which serves as a divine witness to the proceedings. However, it is only once the client puts *tikka* (a mark) on the forehead

of each priest and gives them gifts (*dana*), such as clothing, that a connection is created between *karmkandi* and *jajman* for whose benefit the former's ritual labours are intended.

Following the creation of this bond, the *karmkandi* will use water to ritually purify himself (*achmana*), and then perform a *sankalp*, a statement of intent which binds the priest before the gods to carry out certain ritual actions. During the *sankalp*, the priest places water in his palm. He then identifies his client, giving his name and *gotra* (lineage), as well as his specific desire, such as recovery from illness. Crucially, the *sankalp* binds the priest to say a certain number of mantra repetitions.[50] The client should ideally be present for this, either in person or over video call, and he will have made his own *sankalps* earlier. The *sankalp* is integral to Hindu ritual activity with pilgrimages, *sandhya vandanam*, *vratas*, *havans*, and many other rituals requiring a resolution of intent. Within the overall sequence of *japa-havan*, many other *sankalp* will also be performed for different ritual steps. As a solemn resolution uttered before the deities, the sequence of *sankalps* has the effect of tightly binding the *karmkandi* to his intended programme of ritual action and mantra repetitions – to break the *sankalp* is perilous, exposing the priest to the accumulation of sin.

Having completed the preliminary steps, the priest is ready to start the core of the ritual – the performance of *japa.* In the temple beside my house, priests sat cross-legged, dressed in a traditional *dhoti* with their backs resting against the wall (see fig. 16). In their right hand they held a *mala,* a loop of 108 beads, although this cannot be seen as it is covered by a cloth bag (*gomukhi*) which protects the device from impurities and prying eyes. The type of *mala* used will depend on the deity in question, with each having certain preferred substances and materials. Red sandalwood is used for the goddess Durga, while for Shiva a *mala* made from the seeds of a stone fruit (*rudraksha*) is employed.

[50] Note the priest does not necessarily need to explicitly state the number of repetitions he intends to do as this is often implicit in the choice of mantra – for example, as stated earlier, *Mahamrityunjaya* is always recited 125,000 times.

Fig. 16: *Karmkandi* performing *japa* in the courtyard beside my residence.

Fig. 17: A group of *karmkandi* performing *japa* at a different temple, Renuka Mandir.

The *mala* serves as a counting device, and the *karmkandi* always begins counting from the *sumeru* bead, considered the highest point on the loop and which is often marked by a tassel. Each time a single mantra is said, the *karmkandi* turns one bead. After 108 mantras, the *karmkandi* will have completed the *mala*, having turned each bead once (apart from the *sumeru* which should not be crossed). At this point, he places a small item in front of him, such as a coin, beetle nut, or rice that has only been subjected to minimal heat (*akshat* rice). The items used tend to be hard and considered un-cooked meaning they are resistant to accumulating impurities – there is a risk that through cooking the person preparing the food will pass on their impure biomoral substance. Each item represents one completed *mala*, and through this system the *karmkandi* is able to keep track of how many mantras he has said. At the end of the day, the priest will count the small items before him and record his tally of completed mantras in a book.

Despite having 108 beads, each mala and its corresponding grain of rice is only counted as 100 mantra repetitions. So, for example, if 10 mala are completed, the priest will have said 1,080 mantra, but this will be recorded as only 1,000 repetitions. The priest having taken a *sankalp* to say at least a fixed number of mantras is anxious not to break his resolution lest he face negative cosmological consequences, whether illness or loss of money, and, so, he purposefully undercounts. By doing this, he ensures that any mistakes, whether a slip in concentration, missing a bead or failing to pronounce the mantra correctly, do not prevent him from completing the divinely ordained resolution set out in the *sankalp*.

Some confusion is likely entailed by my use of the word "say" – it is actually imperative that *japa* is done without any sound being emitted. There are three types of *japa*. The first is called *mansik* or mental *japa*, and this involves no part of the physical body – the mantra is uttered internally in the mind. The lips should not move, and the tongue should be held still. This is said to be the hardest method of *japa*, and it is the one that yields the greatest fruit. For those who are unable to do *mansik japa*, there is a second method which also involves no sound being emitted, but which indulges the natural inclination to move the body. In this method, the lips move ever so slightly, and it is thought to yield fruit, yet not as much as that obtained from totally mental *japa*. In the third and least effective method of *japa*, sound is released, but it is light and quiet, and, so, the words of the mantra cannot be distinguished. This form of *japa* is called

"*vaachak*" (speaking) and it is thought to be *adharm*, meaning immoral and unrighteous. That another person might hear your mantras is said to extinguish their power, and this form of *japa* is held to bear no fruits (*nishfal*). This hierarchy of different styles of *japa* speaks to the particular epistemic stance of Hindu cosmology, which invests the subtle interior world with the highest value standing over and above that which takes a material and external form.

Ajay Upadhyay, a *karmkandi* in his forties who often performs *japa* for high-caste Brahman clients from California, emphasised to me that *mansik japa* is difficult precisely because the mind has a tendency to wander:

Some will try 'mansik japa'. But after ten minutes a feeling of restlessness comes inside... They cannot cope with this suffering ['kasht']. They get up and move around. Those few who can do 'mansik japa' are truly doing 'sadhana' [hard spiritual striving].

Mansik japa maintained over numerous hours is an act of supreme concentration. If one says a mantra out loud then the tongue moves as do the lips, and, so, it is possible that even if one's mind drifts the habitual physical act that produces the sound can continue largely unaffected. As such, in spoken *japa*, the mantra can be said without the mind being focused (although this is best avoided). When *japa* is done mentally this possibility is reduced – high levels of concentration have to be maintained as a necessary perquisite because internal focus is not incidental, but the very instrument through which the mantra is produced.

Japa is one of a number of Hindu rituals that can be transformed from an external procedure into an internal attentional one, including mental ritual bathing (*manasa-snan*), and mental offerings and worship (*manasa puja*) (Buhnemann 1988: 53-6). Indeed, these *mansik* or mental forms of the rituals are often thought to be superior to their physical analogues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I overhead one temple priest instructing devotees to refrain from offering flowers to deities (as they might spread the virus), and instead do *mansik puja* which he asserted was "the highest form" of worship. There are of course devotional approaches in popular Hinduism that emphasise materiality, such as auspicious sight of images of gods (*darshan*) and the *bhakti* devotee's understanding of images as actual embodiments of the divine (Eck 1998: 45-46). However, often these approaches go hand in hand also with an understanding of the universe as suffused with gross and subtle aspects, the latter being higher, closer to

divine reality. Kashi is thought to have a gross, earthly form that can be seen, while the subtle, sacred city can only be experienced by the spiritually adept (Eck 1983: 282), and likewise the Hindu self is often held to be composed of sheaths each more subtle than the last – just as food has gross and subtle aspects (Khare 1992: 203-4). *Mansik Japa* by stilling the gross, physical body allows the *karmkandi* to inhabit an internal world cultivated through attentional control, one that is more subtle and closer to divine reality.

Interiority in *japa*: attention, anxiety and ritual mistakes

For the priest, who can correctly pronounce but not understand archaic Vedic Sanskrit, the mantra which he utters serves as a manifestation of the deity in question. *Karmkandi* often referred to the mantra as the "*shabd roop*" or "sound form" of the deity. As such, the sounds of the mantra should not be understood as language in the traditional sense of conveying meaning, which implies always a distance between the word and the object to which it seeks to give expression. Instead, as the actual form of the deity, the mantra coheres to a logic that allows intimate aspects of human cognition and communication to become instantiations of divine reality. By concentrating upon the mantra, carefully uttering it in his mind with perfect pronunciation again and again, the *karmkandi* aims to become absorbed in a mental sound form of the deity. In addition to this, he also aims to bring his other psycho-bodily faculties to focus on the deity. In his mind, as he repeats the mantra, he creates a mental image of the deity, focusing on it intently. Further, his emotions (*bhavana*), extend towards the deity. The cumulative effect is that – ideally at least – the priest's consciousness is totally taken up by the deity, who comes to consume his mind, his vision, and his heart. It is a transformation in which one forsakes the ordinary world – thoughts of family, friends and money – and comes instead to be absorbed in the divine. The aforementioned Kameshwar Mishra outlined the correct method for performing *japa* as follows:

The mantra will be going. The deity's feet will be in front of you, and your attention will be given to that. You will be filled with her 'bhaav' [emotional essence]- there will be no thoughts of your children or wife. This is excellent 'japa'. If you can be totally absorbed in the goddess, like this, even for five minutes, then there is no need to do jap for the whole day. She will be pleased, and your desire will be fulfilled.

Implicit in this description is a logic of reciprocal exchange – the priest gives something to the deity, and, the deity being pleased, provides something in return, fulfilling the

desire of the client. It is not reciprocity in a material sense as the priest offers no physical object. Rather, what he offers is himself, or rather the subtle part of it: his emotion and attention as he holds a mental image and mantra of the deity in his mind. This reciprocal logic was implicit in many other descriptions that *karmkandi* gave of how *japa* works. For example, the aforementioned priest Ajay Upadhyay, while explaining why his clients always come back to him, said: "I become totally absorbed in the goddess, so she gives my mantras power (*shakti*). For this reason, my clients' suffering will lessen, and they are happy."

There was, of course, variation in how exactly priests understood *japa* to work. While some priests explicitly said *japa* involves a process of reciprocity with the divine, others emphasised a process of personal metamorphosis, holding that the Brahman in question actually comes to be like the deity as his attention comes to be filled with her presence. Some also emphasised proximity – the ritual specialist approaches the deity through mental *japa*, and her divine presence is simultaneously invoked through arduous attentional labour. This variability points towards the heterogeneity of popular Hinduism – it is not a science with singular explanations. However, the variability of different explanations in the case of *japa* is undergirded by a certain degree of similarity. In particular, each account assumes that the priest gives over his mind and attention to the deity, and through this some relationship is established with the divine, which it is hoped will lead to something good in return. Conspicuously absent from explanations was the idea of coercion, and explanations tended to emphasise the supplicative and intercessory nature of *japa* (*cf*. Parry 2003: 207). These two categories – mantra as effectively magical and, so, revolving around coercion of divine forces, and mantra as religious and, so, involving supplication of gods – represent two long-standing opposing interpretations of how mantra works (Burchett 2008: 829-31). The idea of mantra-as-magic in particular has been much critiqued, including for importing Protestant reformation-era theological qualms about the mechanical efficacy of Catholic ritual into scholarly interpretations of Indic religion (Burchett 2008; see also: Tambiah 1990). Even the idea of supplication, while more appropriate to the practice of *japa* in Banaras, is also somewhat lacking as it is suggestive of a distant relationship between the devotee and the deity, with the divine being firmly separated from the self. It fails to capture a sense in *japa* of the priest reproducing the deity within his own stream of experience, using his attentional and sensory faculties as an index of the divine (see also: Burchett 2008: 131).

It is important to note that such states of elevated consciousness are difficult to achieve, let alone maintain over the course of a day. As the *man*, or heart-mind, is restless, having a natural inclination to become disturbed and roam, priests recognised that bringing one's consciousness to rest on the deity for long periods is exceedingly challenging. The ritual environment is specifically designed to counter this tendency towards mind wandering. Some priests light incense as well keeping in front of them a statue of the deity and a text of the mantra in bolded letters. Through doing so, different senses are repeatedly reminded of the deity, and if the mind wanders it is swiftly brought back to her. In addition to this, some of the priest's cognitive functions are externally distributed, coming to be performed through external ritual implements, so freeing mental space for focus. An 'extended mind' (Clark & Chalmers 1998), or the extension of cognitive processes into external objects, can be seen in the complex counting system used in *japa*. As previously outlined, this system involves hands, *mala* beads, and grains of rice or some other small object. It efficiently externalises counting as the only action required by the priest is the movement of the thumb at the end of each completed repetition, so freeing the mind to become absorbed. As one priest put it succinctly: "The rice and the *mala* are so I do not forget [the tally], so that I may give my mind to the deity."

For *karmkandi*, focus is not a desirable, yet incidental aspect of *japa*. Rather, it is included in the definition of *japa* – without concentration the activity does not count as *japa*. As such, if concentration breaks as one utters a mantra, this voids it, meaning the attempt is considered failed. *Karmkandi* were very weary of faulty attention, with all claiming that they discard their entire *mala* when their focus breaks, and start counting again, even if on the 107th bead of the 108-bead loop. As will be discussed shortly, there is probably a degree of exaggeration as to the frequency with which the *mala* is stopped and started again – especially if the slippage of concentration is small it is unlikely – but generally such assertions point towards a deep concern with faulty attention.

This anxiety is, of course, also encoded in the counting system which assumes that around one in 13 of all attempts to do *japa* are failed – of 108 beads only 100 are counted. Of course, faulty attention is not the only type of mistake that hinders the performance of *japa*. A given *japa* repetition attempt is voided if the pronunciation (*uchcharan*) of the mantra is incorrect. In such cases, the *japa* is called *kandhit*,

meaning broken. There are also other more mechanical mistakes, such as when one's thumb skips forward inadvertently missing a bead. The English word *mistake* is suggestive of mere slippages that hinder performance, but this conceals the fact that such faults are conceptualised by priests in explicitly moral terms, carrying the risk of grave cosmological consequences.

The anxiety surrounding mistakes arises from the *sankalp*. The priest has made a series of vows before the gods, to perform a fixed number of mantras, usually a very large amount, and each mistake increases the prospect of the *sankalp* not being met. Not meeting this solemn vow, means the priest accumulates sin (*paap/dosh/galti/prati phal*), a term which in this context revolves around incorrect ritual behaviour. As a consequence of the accumulation of sin, the priest may become ill, lose money, or suffer a fall in reputation. Often negative consequences were understood as a precise reaction in which one gets the inverse of what one has gained. Here is one hypothetical example provided by Kameshwar Mishra – if a priest gets 5,000 rupees to do *japa* to help a client recover from illness, but the priest fails to fulfil his *sankalp*, then as a result in the future he may suffer from ill health, and have to spend 4,500 rupees on medicine. Presumably, in this example the net gain of 500 rupees is a recognition of the fact, that at least some ritual labour was carried out even if of a poor quality. Those mantras, such as *Bagalamukhi* and *Mahamrityunjaya*, that are the most powerful and offer the greatest potential benefit, are also the ones that result in gravest consequences if performed improperly. *Bagalamukhi japa*, which offers the possibility of severely injuring one's enemies, is said, if incorrectly performed, to turn the body of the priest yellow. In all cases, the threat of cosmological punishment performs an important regulatory function, which is especially important with *japa* where the labour of the priest is internal, and so cannot be surveyed. Indeed, I observed that it is usually the *acharya* and other senior *karmkandi*, that is those most invested in the ascetic productivity of their colleagues, who most forcefully emphasised the soteriological dangers of improper ritual performance.

The possibility of ritual mistakes was a significant source of anxiety for priests and their families. This can be illustrated well through the case of my neighbour Kameshwar Mishra. One evening, while sitting in his living room, he informed me that his wife of many years, Saraswati, had recently forbade him to perform *Bagalmukhi* and *Mahamrityunjaya japa* for clients. I was surprised to hear this as Kameshwar at sixty

years' of age was a senior priest and so, I presumed, capable of handling even the most dangerous of mantras. A few days later, I bumped into Saraswati in the lane outside our houses, and I took the opportunity to ask her about what Kameshwar had told me. "It is not something new Rahul! I've always told him not to! But he doesn't listen. For a few thousand rupees, he shouldn't be taking such risks." Saraswati admitted that her requests for him to stop had grown more forceful recently as on account of COVID-19 there were more sick clients coming to Kameshwar asking for the healing *Mahamrityunjaya japa* to be performed. But, her attempts to get her husband to stop performing potentially dangerous mantras fell on deaf ears. Kameshwar ignored them, claiming that as an priest he was able to maintain sufficient concentration during *japa*, and, so, nothing would go wrong.

However, while in the present, as a sixty-year old, he was confident in his ability to do *japa* properly and avoid sin, this was not always the case. In his youth, Kameshwar, like his wife some decades later, also suffered from bouts of worry about his ability to perform *japa*. In his twenties, he recalls going regularly to the temple courtyard beside his house to do *japa*. At that time young women would come to the courtyard after having visited a nearby sacred pool said to help with fertility problems. Kameshwar found it difficult to focus when they walked past. "I couldn't control my senses," he said. "Even if I was deep in *japa*, my attention would break when I heard the sound of their anklets." He added: "Even the [great sage] Vishvamitra was disturbed from his deep meditation by [the beautiful celestial being] Menaka. For a young man, it is difficult to control the mind!" After struggling for a week or so to perform his *japa* without his mind becoming disturbed, he resolved to find a quieter spot to undertake his ritual activities, choosing instead to work at home. Since that time, he has performed *japa* in a special room in his house.

The troubles faced by Kameshwar speak to a certain tensions that lie at the heart of *japa* between its circulation as an effectively spiritual, meditational practice demanding elevated consciousness, and its role as a form of waged work undertaken by *karmkandi*. If you were to ask someone on the street to explain what *japa* is, the examples that they would give would likely not be of priests engaged in paid ritual labour. *Japa* is first and foremost a form of meditation that individuals engage in privately. It is a core practice in devotional *bhakti* movements, as well as being advocated by numerous religious organisations, like Hare Krishna. A certain incongruity arises then from the fact that the

normally personal, ethical practice of *japa* has in contemporary Banaras been inserted into a spiritualised capitalist economy in which priests are expected to work for clients, often many thousands of miles away, day after day in return for money. There is a certain repetitiveness to the work, coming to the same spot day in day out to perform the same ritual action, not for personal spiritual transformation but for the benefit of another. To maintain the heightened concentration and emotion of a meditational tradition in waged working conditions – in which one is inevitably alienated from the fruits of one's arduous spiritual labour – is highly challenging.

All the more so as *karmkandi* come to do *japa-havan* less out of choice than necessity. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, many come from poor families and were sent to Banaras at a young age to learn Sanskrit. When they grow older and require funds, they turn to priestly work as it is an easy way to make money. As such, young *karamkandi* see such work for private clients as something temporary, and certainly not what they aspire to do when they are older. To add to this, even those who are more established do not tend to have large patrons who fund their ritual activities, and instead they work for numerous small clients. Some know their clients only minimally, especially those who work for agents who send work and take a commission for themselves.

As mentioned, during the initial part of my fieldwork with priests, my interlocutors did not give the impression that any such challenges existed. Emphatic statements were common: "Whether one does *japa* for ten minutes or one hour, one must remain concentrated throughout". All stated that if their attention broke they started counting again from the first bead of the *mala*, so as to avoid any possibility of not meeting the *sankalp*. However, as fieldwork progressed a shadow emerged between action and speech. From observing priests performing *japa* over long periods, it became obvious that breaks in concentration occurred quite frequently as someone rushed by, an eccentric interloper inappropriately came to ask a question, or simply the mind began to drift leading to a wandering eye. Later when I came to know certain priests more closely, they revealed that while in the ideal the *mala* should be re-started, this only really happens if the break in attention is grave – one drifts into sleep say, or gets up to take a phone call. Others, especially senior priests, also complained about the lax attentional discipline of their colleagues, who they felt had become overly distracted

with the coming of a technologically-mediated modernity. As one senior priest remarked angrily to me:

Nowadays times have changed, pandits have become very practical. Pandits keep looking at their phones, it cannot be controlled. I find it worrying when I see that a pandit is doing puja and a call comes. If you ask them to turn off the mobile, they won't do that. The pandit will get the consequence of doing this.

These comments appear not dissimilar in tone to that of a manager in a corporate office, where, just as in the Banaras priesthood, phones are a convenient focal point for generalised anxieties about the attention of workers.

The aforementioned priest Harsh, who I came to know particularly well during fieldwork, was especially candid about the difficulties he faced – I will describe his story as it provides a vivid insight into the turmoil that often accompanies ritual work.[51] When still a child, Harsh came to Banaras from a village near Pokhara in Nepal. His father wanted him to work as a priest in their village, and so thought it best that he first receive an education in *karmkhand* and Vedic recitation in Banaras. Harsh spoke of finding it difficult coming to the city at the age of eleven. "The way we lived at home was different. We didn't keep Sanskrit behaviours [*sanskar*]. We ate mutton, chicken, fish," he told me. "Suddenly everything changed. I was taught that eating meat was sinful. Everyday I had to perform *japa* and *sandhyavandhan*." He talked of missing his family dearly, but as the years progressed, he, while never being a particularly promising student, grew accustomed to his *vidyalaya's* programme of daily Vedic recitation and ritual activity.

After leaving the *vidyalaya*, he studied Sanskrit at a university in Banaras, and then took up work as a priest in a temple in the south of the city. He performed ritual duties at the temple, such as bathing the sacred aniconic lingam in milk, and to earn extra money he also took on work from private clients, performing *japa-havan* and other rites. In his first year he approached this work with vigour and enthusiasm, but as time wore on a

[51] My findings significantly diverge from the influential work of Jonathan Parry (1980, 1986, 1994). He also identifies significant concern about sin amongst priests in Banaras, but diagnoses the source of this anxiety differently. It arises primarily, he argues, from worries about accepting ritual gifts (*dana*) that are said to contain the sin of the giver. I believe that Parry's account, rather than applying to all Brahmans in the city as he suggests (1980: 89, 102), reflects the specific degraded social and ritual conditions of the specific sub-set of priests that he primarily studied - *Mahabrahmans* - who on account of their funerary work are particularly exposed to polluting and sin-saturated gifts. Generally, my interlocutors did not express any great anxiety about accepting ritual gifts.

certain drudgery crept in. “When I was in the *vidyalaya* my feeling for god was very high. It was like this too after I became a priest, but then after a year it started to become like work. I became a little distant, and my feelings started to change.” Each morning he woke at 5.30am, took a cold shower, performed *sandhyavandhanan* and *japa* to protect himself against the accumulation of sin, and then proceeded to his ritual work. He often wanted to stay in bed for longer, but would have to force himself to rise. When I got to know him towards the end of his time at the temple, he talked often about a feeling of unease. Harsh saw himself a deceiving god as his *bhavana*, his interior affective state, had become diminished. This was affecting his ability to perform rituals, including *japa*, correctly. As he put it to me: “I do *japa*, but for the first few *mala* only I am focused. But then after that it is difficult, the emotion isn’t there. I have to force myself. I did it once like this and I felt bad, but then it became a habit. Now it is normal. Normal to lie to *Bhagwan* [god].”

Harsh’s concern was not only that he was deceiving god through improper ritual performance, but that there would be serious consequences for his actions. He reasoned that as he was not performing the rituals correctly with sufficient attention, emotional intensity and correct pronunciation he was liable to face illness, loss of property or perhaps something even worse. Eventually, he grew tired of the priesthood, especially the demanding schedule of work as well as the fear of accumulating sin, and this pushed him to look for another profession. He had recently started learning the sitar again, something which he had practised assiduously as a child in Nepal. On account of his swift progress with the instrument, his friends encouraged him to take up a bachelor’s degree in music at BHU. After becoming involved in a brawl, Harsh concluded that something should change - when we last spoke he had left the priestly profession and he was in his first year of studying music.

My point in highlighting a certain discrepancy between the intimate experiences of *karmkandi* and their more casual public statements, is not to imply a propensity for deception. Rather, I am interested in the conditions which necessitate that priests (publicly at least) must appear to be focused and highly concentrated, even if unrealistically so. A comparison can be drawn to the UK students with whom I carried out fieldwork, and who readily admitted lapses in concentration, and even sometimes boasted about being hopelessly distracted. For some of these students in London, such public statements provided a useful cover, one that allowed troubling private

experiences and mental states, to be glossed in public as socially acceptable "distraction". In comparison, in Banaras admissions of faulty attention were generally rarer – not only amongst priests, but also students and musicians (although, of course, not completely infrequent). This general unwillingness to publicly profess to un-focus speaks to the particular signification of states of inattention in Banaras where a restless mind, especially for adults, points towards a deeper biomoral imbalance indicating anything from inner disturbance, spiritual waywardness, or an accumulation of impurities, especially from eating meat. It is the inverse of the fact that single-pointed concentration and a stable mind are central aspects of normative subjectivity in the city. For priests, the moral aspect of attention is made particularly explicit. Failure to achieve the psycho-bodily ideal of single-pointed attention during ritual – an ideal which is taught through mythic story, artistic traditions, and proverb – is bound to cosmological consequences and the accumulation of sin. This diverges from the attendant morality of distraction amongst students in London which was tied more closely to concerns about productivity, and which sometimes pointed more to the captivating allure of digital technologies than any serious internal lack.

Going beyond an orthodox, representative understanding of interiority

The concerns of priests about their attentional state, and the more general emphasis of priests during *japa* on cultivating an elevated internal condition, provide a useful vantage for exploring the often under-examined role of interiority in Hindu, and especially Brahmanical, ritual. That Hindu ritual is primarily understood in behavioural rather than interior terms can be seen in the long-standing conceptualisation of popular Hinduism as a religion of *orthopraxy*, or fidelity to correct practice often of ritual variety, in contrast to the internal *orthodoxy* of Christianity defined by proper belief. According to the noted scholar of Hinduism Christopher Fuller (1976: 64), the first articulation of this binary nomenclature in print was by E.B. Harper in 1964, and since then it has regularly been repeated by leading figures in Indology and South Asian anthropology (Doniger 2009; Dumont 1974: 192; Fuller 1976; Nayar 2015: 441; Staal 1996: 389-91), keen to disentangle Hindu practice from a Christian theology that since anthropology's inception has made up the category of religion in doctrinal terms (Asad 1993: 38-48; Tambiah 1990: 5).[52] The division is so commonly asserted in the South

[52] Although, as Harper (1964: 151) states in a footnote, his inclusion of the orthopraxy-orthodoxy division only came following a suggestion by McKim Marriot to do so.

Asian context that it often circulates as a taken for granted truth, a situation which is not shared in other regional anthropologies where the validity of the binary has sometimes been the subject of intense debate (e.g. Watson 2007).

By most measures it is an extremely useful dichotomy, helping to explain how a coherent Hindu identity emerges from a thicket of innumerable, shifting beliefs through marked emphasis on adherence to certain behavioural and ritual prescriptions. However, while useful, the division rests upon an implied inner-outer division that is in certain regards misleading.

Christianity comes to be defined by a set of interior states – belief and faith chiefly – while Hindu adherents in their emphasis on ritual fidelity, seem more concerned with correct performance of outward acts. It is precisely this division that reformation-era Protestant theology partly rests upon (Burchett 2008: 830), except instead of the 'Hindu', it is the Catholic that is the locus of ritual action. Central to the reformation was an attempt to reposition the core of religious tradition as internal, residing in faith and belief, rendering Protestantism as distinct from a perceived Catholic emphasis on outer ritual efficacy as well as in subsequent centuries preserving it from increasingly assertive scientific discourse that laid claim to the outward, material world (Asad 1993: 39; Keane 2007: 61-5). Ritual circulates in this reformulation, which continues to contour how the term is understood in the present, always under the sign of the outer.

In line with this, an emphasis on ritual fidelity in the Hindu context is often understood as an absence of interiority, and this particularly applies to Brahmanical ritual, which often carries the pejorative connotation of being mechanically performed in accordance with arcane rules. Frits Staal, without imputing any such negative connotation, develops his influential – if much-critiqued – theory of ritual as essentially meaningless action from Vedic source material, coming to define Indian religion by its emphasis on action not thought. He writes: "Ritual, then, is primarily activity. It is an activity governed by explicit rules. The important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or say. In India, this has become a basic feature of all religion, so that we should refer, not to the faithful or orthodox, but to the orthoprax…" (1979: 4). Valentine Daniel, commenting some decades later makes a similar point coming to define South Indian marriage rituals as effectively 'mindless' as they focus on proper ritual performance and not its meaning and symbolic content. Again, as with Staal, the intention is not criticise Hinduism, but

rather highlight a divergence from a Christian faith concerned with interiority, as defined by belief and interest in the meaning of things:

[A]t the weddings in South India, priests and participants considered the recitations and the rituals significant but meaningless. If you press me to hazard a characterization of these rituals, I would have to call them, in all retrospective honesty, mindless. This is because meaning, in the dominant Western epistemologies, has been and remains a mental phenomenon (Daniel 2000: 174-5).

The division between Hinduism coalescing around a performance-centred ritual core, and a belief-based Christianity maps onto a wider thought-action dichotomy. According to Catherine Bell, this is the very dichotomy through which ritual itself sometimes comes to be defined, treated as a form of action, which is separated from thought and the "conceptual aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myths" (2009: 19). What emerges from the accounts of Staal, Daniel and others is an understanding of Hindu orthopraxy – especially in its Brahmanical ritual instantiations – that places a diminished emphasis on internal states. However, this characterisation relies on an understanding of interiority that is heavily indebted to the very protestant theology that it is seeking to distance itself from. It is an intellectualist interiority defined by the provision of assent to propositional statements which seek to accurately represent a distant divine reality, one that remains separate from the everyday human world. That even in contexts where scholars seek to extricate Hindu practice from Christian theology a broadly Protestant conception of interiority remains implicit, speaks more broadly to the dominance of Christianity, and particularly Protestantism, for understandings of inwardness and the self in anthropology. Mauss, Foucault, Weber, Charles Taylor and more recently Tanya Luhrmann each in their own way assert that there is something peculiar about the emphasis placed on interiority and inwardness in the west and seek to ground this in the particular religious history of Europe. Yet, the conception of inwardness that circulates in many of these accounts is of one kind – a marked emphasis on inwardness circulates outside this constrained domain, but it appears absent only once measured against the yardstick of a historically and culturally specific Protestant worldview.

As *japa* shows, Hindu ritual is often anything but "mindless", to use Daniel's term, with the ritual action taking place internally with no outward physical action. In the case of *japa*, the internal state cultivated is characterised by intense concentration, emotional intensity (*bhaav*), and the perfect mental reproduction of mantra, the power of which

lies not in its symbolic capacity, but correctly pronounced sound. These mental processes are (clearly) not propositions about the divine – that is, they are not attempts to represent the divine, which would be symbolic and imply a distance from the deity. Instead, the priest, by giving over his consciousness to the deity, attempts to actually manifest the divine within himself. These are non-representational mental actions that aim to bring about effects in the world. This speaks to a particular epistemic stance, one that centres on a specific understanding of the relation between divine reality and the self. Rather, than the divine existing distantly outside the world – producing a sense of separation that is a source of struggle in much Christian faith (Cannell 2006: 14-18) – it is understood to be directly immanent in the self. In this conception, one does not primarily seek to represent a divine reality that is separate, but rather the intimate aspects of interiority – attention in particular – if properly controlled serve as real instantiations of the transcendent. That many Hindu rituals are not considered complete without some act of cultivated concentration while others can be carried out mentally, and are often considered superior, is a distinct effect of this epistemic stance. Their very appeal perhaps lies in the fact that they overcome the distancing logic inherent in representative and symbolic modes of cognition that normally characterise life, which imply always a gap between self and reality (Bronkhorst 2012). This, among other factors, helps explains the centrality of concentration to Hindu practice – it functions often as part of a non-symbolic conception of interiority where cognitive states in certain instances do not stand for anything as they are superior 'things in themselves'.

Havan: outline of ritual structure

The preceding sections deal with the performance of *japa*, but this is only the first part of the composite ritual sequence known as *japa-havan*. Having completed the requisite number of *japa* repetitions, the *karmandi* must next turn to the *havan*, the sacrificial fire ritual. While the first part of the ritual sequence, *japa*, is internal, the second part is performative and highly visible. The Vedic forms of this fire ritual are extensively written about, being studied by major scholars of sacrifice (Girard 1977; Hubert & Mauss 1964) and Indology (Heesterman 1993; Smith & Doniger 1989), and this in part can be attributed to the fact that Vedic ritual is in the words of Frits Staal (1979: 2) "the largest, most elaborate and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among the rituals of man". In the present day, large-scale, highly complex Vedic sacrificial rituals are rarely performed with great fidelity to ancient scriptural

antecedent, although there are exceptions, such as the Nambudiri Brahmans in Kerala (Gerety 2017), as documented famously by Frits Staal and visual anthropologist Robert Gardener in their 1976 film "Altar of Fire". Most modern-day sacrificial fire practices preserve some Vedic elements, but are in other respects transformed, taking a variety of different forms, including: *homa*, *havan*, *yagya* and *mahayagya*. They are among the most widespread of Hindu rituals and can be found in Vedic, Tantric, Hindu and Buddhist contexts across Asia (Michaels 2016: 237). The present-day linkage of fire sacrifice to internal *japa* has historical antecedent, with, for example, a ritual structure similar to present-day *japa-havan* finding mention in the *Bhavishya Purana* (3.2.24). As the internal, attentional practice of *japa* rather than the *havan* is the central focus of this chapter, I provide only a brief account of the latter ritual below – a fuller exploration of this sacrificial rite can be found in appendix A.

On the day on which the *havan* is to take place, the priests tasked with carrying out the sacrifice carefully prepare the ritual setting, decorating a square fire pit made of bricks with vermillion paste, purifying the surrounding area and igniting the sacred flame. As the fire licks upwards, fuelled by wood felled from mango trees, a slight acrid smell of smoke permeates the air. The priests carefully arrange themselves around the fire pit, beads of sweat rolling down their brow as they sit cross-legged before an open flame in the intense heat of the Banaras summer. Each makes sure to have a plate piled with food stuffs (*samagri*) beside him. While the exact food stuffs will vary depending on the deity being worshipped, usually sesame seed (*til*), uncooked rice, barley (*job*), and jaggery (*gur*) are included. Everything in place, the scene is now set for the main body of the sacrifice. First, the *acharya,* who leads the ritual, chants the very same mantra that was previously recited during *japa,* and then each of the assembled priests take a pinch of foodstuff and throws it into the fire, all exclaiming in unison, "*svaha*" in a long drawn-out sonorous tone. This constitutes the basic sacrificial act, and it is repeated again and again until the requisite number of offerings are made. In the ideal, a unison is achieved with each *karmkandi* exclaiming and throwing with perfect simultaneity, but in reality a certain disjointedness often creeps in. Through Agni, the fire deity, the food offered is carried to the gods, giving them strength and sustenance.

I served as the *jajman* for a *havan* (as well as the preceding *japa*), one that aimed to make the nine planets stable to bring prosperity and peace to my family. It was a powerful multi-sensorial experience, the smell of smoke filling the nostrils, the deep

humming vibration of chants pleasing the ears, and the sight of an open fire bringing food to the gods arousing the symbolic faculties of the mind. As a paying client – unlike an inquisitive fieldworker – I was treated with the utmost deference and respect, flanked by a retinue of priests attentive to my needs, and feeling perhaps as a nobleman might of in bygone centuries. For the *jajman* then, through sensorial stimulation and the sight of those around him labouring specifically for his benefit, a sense is created of a significant ritual and divine architecture being moulded to his needs, an experience that invests the client with a strong feeling that even the uncertainty of the future can be subdued.

During the sacrifice, no physical representation of the chief deity being worshipped is present. Rather, as in *japa*, the mantra which is recited is held to be an actual manifestation of the deity. Crucially, while a section of the mantra is chanted out loud during each sacrificial act, part of it – the powerful, esoteric *beej* (seed) component – cannot be uttered audibly, and, so, is recited internally, that is in the mind, by the *acharya*. The ratio of *havan* sacrifices to *japa* recitations should be one tenth, but there is a certain flexibility. If a large number of *japa* are performed, say 125,000, it is in practice unlikely that the set number of associated sacrificial fire offerings will also be made (in this example 12,500). The reasons as to why this is the case will be explored shortly, but for now it suffices to note that instead of each fire sacrifice the priest will do one extra *japa*.[53] However, there is one further complication – the client may be somewhat dissatisfied by the possibility of only *japa* being performed, and, so, he might order some sacrificial fire offerings to be made, but in a much smaller quantity than a one tenth ratio would require. The exact number of *havan* will be according to the wish of the client – perhaps one or two *malas* worth of sacrificial offerings. That the amount of *havan* in this context is decided by the wish of the client and not clearly mandated by precise ritual calculation is because it does not strictly matter how many are done. The actual ritual work will already have been completed in the form of *japa*, and, so, the *havan* has become in this instance purely ceremonial, its performative spectacle offering the client something that the internal repetition of mantras cannot. In effect then, *japa* often comes to totally replace the ritual work of *havan*. This fact - that *japa* can be

[53] Additional *japa* will also be done to replace other key ritual steps, that is the *marjan* and *tarpan* rites performed after *havan* is complete (see appendix A). So, if 125,000 *japa*, 12,500 havan, 1,250 *tarpan*, and 125 *marjan* are prescribed, each being one tenth of the quantity of ritual action in the prior ritual step, then this can all be done as *japa*, or to be specific: a total of 138,875 mantra repetitions. In fact, this will be rounded up to 140,000 to be on the safe side and to guard against the possibility of the Brahman making a litany of mistakes and failing to meet his desired target.

substituted for *havan* on a one-to-one basis – suggests that the rituals are considered in some sense commensurate.

This raises an interesting question. How is it that *japa*, a purely internal and essentially attentional practice, can come to totally replace the canonical Hindu ritual, the fire sacrifice? In answer to this, it is to the much-theorised logic of sacrifice that I propose to turn. The nub of my thesis is that *japa* can be interpreted as a form of internal sacrifice, one which offers heightened attention in place of material substances. Here again, it is the specific epistemic stance of Hindu cosmology that is crucial. As internal mental states, cultivated assiduously through control of attention, are held to stand in superior relation to the external world, instantiating rather than representing a wider reality, they are able to replace the outer objects normally offered in sacrifice (which themselves within sacrificial logic are normally understood as manifesting the essence of the self and the divine).

This conclusion finds support in scriptural sources. In a range of texts, *japa* is conceptualised as a form of sacrifice, or linked closely with a sacrificial ritual, including in: *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtr*a (circa 2nd century BCE); the *Laws of Manu*; the *Mahabharata;* and *Vashistha Dharmasutra* (circa 1st century BCE –1st century CE). Compound words are used in these texts to conceptualise *japa* as linked to sacrifice: *japahavan*, *japahoma*, *japayajña*[54] (*havan*, *homa* and *yagya* are three forms of sacrificial fire ritual). For example, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is written that: "Of the sacrifices, I am the sacrifice of *japa*" (25.10). Texts also sometimes assert the superiority of *japa* compared to physical sacrifice – the *Laws of Manu* (2.85) state that mental *japa* is one thousand times more effective than sacrifice performed according to the rules of the *Vedas*. This again highlights the importance of an epistemic stance that holds the internal to be closer to divine reality, and, so, superior to the external material world.

That *japa* can be conceptualised through the idiom of sacrifice is perhaps unsurprising. Indologists have often noted that sacrifice serves as a schema through which a broad range of activities are understood (e.g. Malamoud 1996: 2; Smith & Doniger 1989:

[54] In the following places references are made to compounds: *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtr*a (2.15.5; 4.5.25); the *Mahabharata* (1.64.38c[iic], 3.222.6d, 5.140.8c[iic]), 7.124.12c, 12.103.4b); the *Laws of Manu* (10.111; 11.34); the *Mahabharata;* and *Vashistha Dharmasutra* (26.9; 26.10). With thanks to Patrick Olivelle for assistance in putting this list together, as well as John Brockington (2012: 86).

208). In particular, sacrifice has long served as a template through which to conceptualise interior ascetic practice. During the centuries leading up to the start of the common era, a shift can be discerned with the arrival in South Asia of philosophical and ascetic approaches that defined themselves in opposition to the earlier Vedic emphasis on ritual, and sacrifice in particular. These approaches, which are documented in the Upanishadic literature, but which also still exert heavy influence on present-day popular Hinduism, hold that spiritual knowledge is ethical, deriving "from intuition, observation and analysis", as typified by the innovations of meditation and yoga (Thapar 2000: 810-13). As part of this shift, external ritual action was often re-interpreted as interior process, and, in particular, sacrifice was born anew as an internal rite. The ritual taken by renouncers to mark their shift to fully-fledged asceticism involved one final external sacrifice, after which the fire was said to continue internally (Olivelle 2011: 22). In texts dating from this period and in subsequent centuries, the presentation of *japa* as a form of interior sacrifice, would have established continuity with the earlier Vedic tradition at the same time as asserting the superiority of this internal ethical practice over the external ritual.

But in what sense exactly does *japa* in present-day Banaras function as a form of sacrifice? Afterall, no object is offered, while in most accounts of sacrifice material oblations are central. Indeed, more generally, in present-day popular Hinduism many practices are sometimes conceptualised as forms of sacrifice (*yagya*), whether meditation or *vrata* (Pearson 1996), despite involving no material oblation. I propose that in *japa* what is given is not a material thing that carries the essence of a subject, but rather the self is given in unsubstituted form, albeit its subtle part embodied primarily in heightened attention. It is un-objectified giving. This fits awkwardly with many existing scholarly theories of sacrifice that tend to emphasise the importance of objectification in the ritual process. Approaches to sacrifice often fall into one of four broad theoretical camps: sacrifice as form of exchange, sacrifice as instance of communion, sacrifice as cathartic act, and sacrifice as form of representation (Valeri 1985). A common thread that ties each of these theoretical approaches together is the importance of substitution; the idea that the thing sacrificed comes to instantiate something more fundamental.

In the cathartic model, sacrifice is often interpreted as a mythic sleight of hand, a forceful ritual act that in its origins stands in for and replaces endemic violence within a society. For René Girard (1977), the violent psycho-social impulses of a community,

their sin and impurity, is transferred to an external object, a scapegoat, who can then be expunged from the group through sacrifice. Walter Burkert (1983), who is often paired with Girard, similarly sees sacrifice as a culturally-elaborated reaction to violent impulses deep in human nature in which a tendency for intraspecific violence is displaced onto a sacrificial victim. In contrast, influential communion models of sacrifice, treat the ritual offering not as objectifying essentially anti-social aspects of the human subject, but rather the oblation comes to embody a deep bond. The genesis and core of sacrifice, according to Robertson Smith, lies in an effort to repair a perceived distance between the deity and their devotees in times of crisis. In a communal meal, the divine totemic animal of a group is consumed, so producing a union between deity and community in material form.

For Smith, the notion of sacrifice-as-gift is a later evolutionary development, so undermining Edward Tylor's claim that the phenomenon originated as a form of ritualised exchange. It was left to Hubert and Mauss, to take Smith's idea of communion and meld it with Tylor's otherwise overly utilitarian notion of sacrificial exchange, although this fusion lies only implicitly in their essay on sacrifice (Valeri 1985: 64-5). In their reading, the victim is an intermediary between the sacred and profane, coming to represent in objective form both the deity and the *sacrificer*, so effecting communication and communion between the two. They write: "Through this proximity the victim, who already represents the gods, comes to represent the sacrifier [i.e. sacrificer] also. Indeed, it is not enough to say that it represents him: it is merged in him. The two personalities are fused together" (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 32). Although Mauss did not explicitly tie his work on sacrifice to his essay on the gift, the parallels are clear – in both the essence of the giver is embodied in material form in the thing offered (Parry 1986: 461). An emphasis on material objectification is also carried through to theories that treat ritual and sacrifice as forms of efficacious representation (Lienhardt 1961; Valeri 1985). For Valeri, the codes, principles and concepts on which a given social order are based are reproduced through ritual in objective form, and in doing so, participants are able to experience them as truth. He applies this model to sacrifice in Hawaii, which he interprets as an "objectified process of consciousness" that reproduces the culture's codes and concepts through ritual action involving the interrelation of the divine, the sacrificer, the audience and signifiers (offerings and images) (Valeri 2006: 319-321).

An emphasis on material objectification is readily apparent in Hindu scriptural sources. Smith and Doniger (1989) note that in Vedic texts, such as the *Brahmana*, the material offering is often taken to represent the sacrificer himself. "[T]he sacrificial ritual functions as a kind of representation of the very life of the sacrificer; the ritual substitutes for the real life of the one who offers it" (*ibid*.: 198). Certainly, those things typically offered in *havan* – rice, grain, clarified butter – are also those materials that are thought to produce the vitality and life of the householder more generally. Smith and Doniger point to an underlying "contoured homological mode of thought" in Vedic ritualism, which relies on chains of substitution with cosmic sacrifice having counterpart in the sacrifice of man, which can be substituted in turn for the sacrifice of an animal, and, so on, until vegetable oblations are reached. Indeed, ritual efficacy is dependent on this homological principle as it allows for the reproduction in diminished form of the otherwise inaccessible divine cosmic sacrifice of the creator god.

The chains of substitutions outlined by Smith and Doniger always end in the minimally acceptable, often a simple vegetable – the objective material aspect of the sacrifice becoming increasingly diminished. This trend towards material diminishment can be discerned also in Evans-Pritchard's account of sacrifice amongst the Nuer. Evans-Pritchard notes that as everything in the world already belongs to God, he gains nothing from sacrifice, and, so, rather than the objective materiality of the offering being of great significance, it is often the internal state of the individual that is of importance. He writes:

…Nuer themselves freely explain that it is not so much what is sacrificed that is important as the intention of those who sacrifice… We should fix our attention on the suppliant as well as on what he offers, ***for what he offers is not only whatever it may happen to be but also the expression of an interior state*** (Evans-Pritchard 1954: 27, emphasis mine).

The offering of tokens, small effigies, or morsels in other sacrificial contexts (Tylor 2006 [1874]) speaks further to the fact that the greater part of what is given often resides less in the material object than the internal disposition of the individual. In *japa*, this movement towards material diminishment is taken to its extreme, and it is on this that the equivalence of *japa* and *havan*, of internal practice and outer sacrificial ritual, turns. The priest in *japa* offers himself to the deity, yet it is not an act of suicide, as what is given is the subtle part of himself, that highest aspect of the self in the Hindu conception of the person. In focusing his mind on the image of the deity, becoming

filled with her emotional essence, and reproducing her sound form mentally again and again he gives all of his consciousness and attention to the deity. It is a form of sacrifice, yet one in which the efficacy of the ritual act rests not on material substitution, but on the un-objectified giving of the self. If sacrifice arises in part from the central problem of not being able to offer one's self to the divine mandating a solution in the form of material objectification, then *japa* offers another way out, to give the actual self, albeit its subtle interior part. This interpretation is supported by the fact that a number of *karmkandi* stated a variation of the following - "I give my *dhyan* [attention] *man* [mind] *bhaav* [emotion], so that she [the deity] will be pleased" – so asserting explicitly that what the priest offers is the interior part of himself.

Within sacrificial logic, the thing offered is often not a representation which stands for something else, but instead is an actual objectification of that thing. The particular epistemic stance of Hindu cosmology that holds the mental, if properly cultivated, to inhabit a non-representative relation to reality, that is one of actual instantiation, similarly affords the possibility of interiority partaking in a sacrificial logic. The heightened mental states that the priest offers – his intense attention – stand not in a symbolic relation, but instantiate the ritual specialist's being, albeit its highest and most subtle part. It is a conception of sacrifice befitting Hindu metaphysics in which the world is suffused with material and subtle aspects, and value and reality coalesces in the latter. Just as various Hindu rituals can be carried out mentally and be considered superior to their material analogues, so too can sacrifice in the case of *japa*, using the same mantra as used in *havan*, be carried out internally and be considered efficacious – in all cases, the heightened value and reality invested in interiority undergirds this internalising logic.

Of course, offerings that are materially unmanifest are also economically advantageous, having the benefit of using no resources other than the priest's psychological labour. As *karmkandi* often pointed out, *havan* is expensive for the client, involving the purchasing of choice ingredients and wood. What is often presented as an equivalency of ritual efficacy, is also, it should be recognised, substantially an exercise in economy and expediency. Priests freely stated that the decision to replace *havan* with *japa* was invariably an economic decision taken by a client unwilling to pay more to carry out thousands of sacrificial fire offerings. As most clients are middle class, professionals or medium-size businessmen, with money to spend on modest rituals, they are unable to

fund larger sacrifices associated in previous times with princely rulers. The rise of the internet as a forum to buy and sell priestly work has also exacerbated certain points of tension between clients and *karmkandi,* so acting as a counterweight against investing large amounts of money in sacrificial fire rituals. In particular, there is a degree of mistrust on the part of the client as to whether the priest is performing the ritual correctly, or whether, in the worst case, he is cheating and pocketing the money without doing any work. This is exacerbated in the case of internet-based clients as they are not physically present during the *japa-havan* ritual. This mistrust is encoded in new forms of ritual practice. To provide documentary evidence to clients, priests will take photos and videos of key parts of the ritual, particularly the binding *sankalp*. Faced with nagging doubts about fidelity to ritual rules as well as concerns about cost, the equivalency between *japa* and *havan* offered by Hinduism's particular epistemic stance, which holds the mental in superior relation to the gross, offers then an apt solution to certain well-worn practical problems.

Conclusion

Each of the constituent parts of *japa* – its use of mantra, its employment of visualisation and its intense cultivation of attention – represent an attempt to step away from the dominant mode of symbolic cognition in which a gap always separates the self from the object of experience. Instead, as a practice it encourages the ritual specialist to inhabit a state of non-symbolic experiential immediacy in which the contents of mind – its images, points of focus and linguistic utterances – stand for nothing but themselves, being reality manifest. This is dependent itself on a culturally-specific conception of where reality primarily resides – not in the gross material world or a distant transcendent God, but immanently within the intimate processes of the subtle self, its potential for assiduously cultivated emotion, attention and imagination. That the often intense inwardness of Brahmanical ritual and its attendant anxieties about internal cultivation go regularly uncommented upon, circulating instead under the sign of the outer – associated paradigmatically with correct outward performance – speaks forcefully to its radically different conception of interiority. This conception diverges from the type of interiority typically associated with Christian, and especially Protestant traditions, which is implicitly representational and which continues to influence how the very category of inwardness is understood in a range of scholarly disciplines, especially in religious contexts.

The historical conditions behind the emergence of this particular Hinduised conception of interiority are beyond the scope this chapter, and indeed thesis. However, certain connections may be drawn to Shulman's innovative work on South India where he identifies a radical shift emerging in the fifteenth century, not dissimilar to the Renaissance, in which imagination comes to figure as a defining feature of what it is to be human, serving as "a cause, possibly the main cause, of what passes for reality" (2012: 27). The particular epistemic stance associated with this conception of interiority, one found historically but also in present-day Banaras, more than anything speaks to the often remarkable value placed upon attention in a range of north Indian religious traditions. While attention in my London fieldsite, as in many other parts of elite European and American tradition, is vitally important to conceptions of the normative self, it often functions as part of a disenchanted cosmology, one in which attentional cultivation serves as a *means* for controlling experience and, so, making up the self, but is not an ultimate *end* in itself, that is a manifestation and cause of transcendent reality.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters can be read as an attempt to extract attention from the 'common sense' of anthropology. While attention has played an important role in numerous previous anthropological analyses of human social and cultural life, it has tended largely, barring some exceptions, to circulate as a self-evident category, a universal aspect of human experience, which despite being variable in its cross-cultural patterning, remains largely an etic point of interest. This extant approach is a valuable one, and it could, if more fully developed, form the basis of a unifying anthropological account of how cognition comes to be socially produced (see Evans-Pritchard 1934: 50-54 for a tentative step in this direction), but it also occludes certain vital facts about attention that become readily apparent if one begins to trace its circulation in culture and history. Attention is not only the preoccupation of psychologists (and anthropologists interested in psychology), but rather a site of significant moral concern, ideological intervention and discursive elaboration around which different groups seek to make up the self. Indeed, sometimes an ideology of attention may rise to constitute the fundamental, defining aspect of what a proper subject should be in which case we might fruitfully talk of an *attentionalist* conception of the self. As attention very often relates to *selectivity* (the question of, what takes up the centre of experience?), and *causation* (the question of, what kinds of things cause me to experience what I experience?), recurrent concern about this psycho-bodily category speaks centrally to a desire to control and organise experience in particular ways – a recognition of the fact that we, as humans, are constituted perhaps first and foremost by our experiences.

Certain anthropologists have begun in the last few years to treat attention as a site of emic theorisation – often in reaction to widespread anxieties in the west and elsewhere about the creeping effects of new digital technologies on the mind – but there has not yet been an attempt to systematically investigate how attentional ideology and discourse informs the production of major categories of socio-cultural life, such as ritual, hierarchy, and art. This thesis has attempted to provide just such an analysis by offering an attentionalist reading of north Indian culture and history. At the heart of the account presented was a simple observation, which would be familiar to most ethnographers acquainted with South Asia: in a variety of domains, whether arenas of self-cultivation, pedagogical contexts or religious traditions, the self is formed in relation to a specific

ideology of attention, consisting of the ideal that first the mind should be made peaceful, and then it should be attached to a single object, preferably excluding all else. By engaging with this attentionalist strain of north Indian culture, this thesis has made a number of theoretical interventions of interest to both South Asianists and a more general readership. In each case, attention provided a novel frame through which to re-visit and re-theorise numerous topics of longstanding anthropological engagement, including cultural models of mind, ritual, agency and the genealogy of the subject. In what follows, I provide a summary of some of the thesis's key findings, before turning outwards to offer some broader reflections.

Chapter two, which serves as the first substantive section of the thesis, documented some of the contingent historical conditions that have made singular concentration and other forms of heightened attentivity plausible as central pillars of idealised subjectivity in present-day north India. The chapter attempted to chart a genealogy of attention, tracing how a longstanding pre-occupation with singular concentration in South Asian religious tradition came in the late colonial period to figure forcefully in attempts to define a newly nationalised subjectivity produced at the intersection of wide-ranging scientific, reformist and esoteric currents. This was not a history chapter in a traditional sense, in that it did not seek to chronicle the archival record of my Banaras fieldsite, but rather attempted a global intellectual history which leaves a surplus that cannot be contained within a single city. Its starting point was the observation – drawn from the pioneering work of Jonathan Crary – that attention was fundamentally re-constituted during the latter part of the nineteenth century by newly emergent scientific discourses to figure as a, if not *the*, defining aspect of the normative subject, at least in elite western intellectual tradition. This reformulation, which offered controlled forms of attention as a solution to the materialisation of the self by modernising discourse, had diverse consequences which have thus far been ignored by historians who have largely treated the genealogy of attention as a matter of elite Euro-American tradition rather than global history. To rectify this gap, my historical investigation examined how a range of figures, operating within this new global discursive space – such as, self-help writers, esoteric practitioners and Indian religious reformers, particularly the monk Vivekananda – sought to utilise attention as part of their projects of political and subject formation. One effect of this shift was the grounding of an incipient sense Indian national subjectivity and superiority in a heightened capacity for singular concentration,

with the popularisation of yoga in the early twentieth century serving as a central vehicle for this new self-imaginary.

Chapters three and four, which come together as a pair linked by common theme, shifted away from the genealogical emphasis of the previous section, seeking to examine how discourses of singular attention continue to animate Banaras's ethnographic present. Taking in a broad number of actors, including wrestlers, students and musicians, they examined how 'single-pointed attention', the idea that the mind-body should be given over to one thing rather than many, offers a widespread subjective ideal which stands in contrast to other culturally-specific attentional ideologies. It is something that coalesces in no one cultural site, but instead is constituted through a plethora of north Indian cultural spheres. This includes, but is not limited to: different self-help literatures; religious sculptures; popular proverbs, poems and mythic tropes; and overarching cosmological schemas. However, as I take time to detail, while single-pointed attention is widespread in its valorisation, its social imaginary is decidedly hierarchical with only certain groups being invested with a special capacity for heightened attentivity, namely the ascetic and the high-caste Hindu male. This is suggestive of the fact that north Indian attentional ideology co-constitutes rather than subverts overarching metaphysical and sociological schemas which otherwise hierarchically order north Indian life, including theories of cosmology, time, caste and food.

The circulation of single-pointed attention as a pervasive ideal is not totalising, and, in fact, a seeming paradox persists, one explored in chapter four. In most Banaras contexts, whether the roadside, university offices, or musical concerts, orderings of space-time and social relations – what I term 'ecologies' – do not facilitate singular attentional states. Indeed, often quite the opposite – this speaks to the fact that for the most part people in Banaras are not concerned with cultivating single-pointedness, which is often a highly a-social ideal. Instead, they are occupied by relationality, that is the attractions of the social world. This might lead the reader to conclude that single-pointedness, despite its diffuse valorisation, bears little relation to experience. Yet, as I have argued, such a conclusion is premature as it assumes that a given society's value system is monolithic. In most contexts, social-relational values remain dominant, but there are certain *Banarasi* settings – facilitated by particular arrangements of body, practice and space – where people attempt to cultivate single-pointedness, involving a specific kind

of exceptional interiority in which the mind rather than being caught in the relational world of people and objects is brought inwards. These are necessarily a-social contexts in which attention is formed in non-normal ways offering time outside the often-relentless pull of relationality. The desire to carve out such periods of attentional cultivation is an important motivation for many Banaras residents. Drawing on Dumont, I have argued that single-pointedness is in a certain sense the psychological correlate of renunciatory value, which is characterised by a rejection of the social order, while the inverse attentional state of restlessness embodies the opposite, that is the self being caught up in the world, attracted to objects and people. This dichotomy of renunciatory single-pointedness, on the one hand, and, restlessness on the other, provides a culturally-specific rendering of a likely universal experiential binary, that is a contrast between a state of attention in-the-world and transcending it.

Chapter five sought to build on this binary understanding of consciousness formed between two polarities, by exploring how in certain traditions and settings within India there exists an attentionalist conception of agency. As opposed to certain models of agency in circulation in Euro-American vernacular and anthropological theorisation, which hold resistance to external structure and the expression of interior depth in discourse to be central to freedom, this attentionalist framing of agency is more fundamentally concerned with interior experiential control. This attentional framing of agency is likely universal, recurring in certain Asian and western contexts for example. However, chapter five considered its constitution in relation to a culturally-specific conception of mind circulating in north India. This conception centres on a tripartite division of interiority with two opposed internal clusters in particular (faculties of restraint and discrimination on the one hand, and desire, emotion and unruliness on the other) foregrounding an understanding of agency that suggests the central barrier to action lies not externally but is resolutely within the self, inviting practices of inner experiential control. This relation to the self is taught both through common Hindi metaphor and linguistic registers, as well as in certain pedagogic settings, particularly in ritual, ascetic and musical contexts, which serve as centres of sensory elaboration where people learn to understand human flourishing in terms of attentional cultivation.

While the initial chapters of the thesis were general in their focus, the final two were more specific looking at the circulation of attention in two particular fieldsites. **Chapter six** examined the politics of attention, that is the question of how attentional ideology,

as something central to imaginaries of idealised subjectivity, serves as a resource through which people make claims to status. It took as its subject the lives, beliefs and practices of an endogamous kin group of musical performers, the Kathak Mishras, who have shaped the history of Indian classical music. The chapter argued that over the course of the twentieth century these Banaras musicians enacted a shift in status from musical accompanists, entangled in a world of courtesans and sensual performance, to spiritualised and respectable middle-class artists by presenting themselves as *yogis*, a claim dependent on their ability to access heightened states of singular absorptive attention. This shift parallels a general re-organisation of Indian classical music during the twentieth century in terms of yoga – something little commented upon in the significant literature on this genre of music, which remains globally the paradigmatic example of 'non-western' classicism. This change can be read as a consequence of the discursive reformulations described in the history chapter – that is the emergence during the late colonial period of yoga, centring primarily on the cultivation of a heightened capacity for attention, as a grounding point for emergent imaginaries of a respectable, nationalised subjectivity.

Chapter seven concluded the empirical arc of the thesis with an examination of *Banarasi* ritual specialists or *karmkandi*, who repeat large numbers of mantras mentally using singular concentration. These *karmkandi* offered an empirical base from which to make a number of conceptual interventions about epistemology, ritualism and sacrifice. I argued that much Hindu practice is characterised by a particular epistemic stance that holds the mental realm to be more real than the external, material world, a position that stands in contrast to the representational interiority associated with modernising discourses of the self. This epistemic stance explains in part the recurrence of heightened attentional cultivation in numerous Hindu ritual contexts, and it also fosters a particular understanding of interiority, which is non-representative and built around intense experiential cultivation, one often missed by scholars who have sometimes sought to measure north Indian religious practice against a subjectivity indebted implicitly to Protestant ideas of mind centring on propositional states.

What ties together the multitude of different assumptions, reflections and concerns about attention expressed by my interlocutors and documented on the pages of this thesis? This is a difficult question to answer, and perhaps the sheer variability of social life refuses the kind of coherency necessary for a simple conclusion. Yet, it seems to me

that in many *Banarasi* contexts attention circulates as an important index of the relationship between the self and the surrounding world. At one attentional extreme the experiential self is made up by outward or material factors – whether the relationality of the social world or the attractions of material pleasures embodied in the *man* – while at the other extreme the possibility of a certain transcendence exists, a self whose experience is freed from entanglement. The various characters who populate this thesis – *Banarasi* residents seeking time outside the pull of the city through states of cultivated single-pointed attention; ritual specialists who enter into a purely mental world proximate to the divine; and musicians who attempt to obtain states of absorption in which the body is forgotten – each speak to a desire for transcendence and dematerialisation despite everyday reality making this exceedingly difficult. I think the charge of attentional discourse and ideology, the fact that it is so often a site of anxiety and sustained intentional effort, arises often, although not always, from this implicit tension at the heart of attention. It is a psycho-bodily faculty that seems to offer both the horror of material entanglement and the resplendent possibility of transcendence, the self as both subject and object – this is apparent in concerns about attention that extend far beyond the confines of Banaras. The spiritualised framing of *Banarasi* attentional practices and discourses may make them seem far from the Euro-American anxieties about phones and digital technologies that have provided recurrent points of comparison in this thesis – yet, I think in both instances attentional discourse centres on the same points of tension. The self determined by the constant pings of notifications and the persuasive effects of algorithmic design represents a certain horror at the possibility of subjectivity being unduly materialised, but this very anxiety also suggests a sense that things should be otherwise, a desire for a coherent subject who is not fragmented by its entanglement in a capricious world. Viewed from this light, the offer of transcendence so readily apparent in *Banarasi* attentional discourse – embodied in the very Hindi word for attention itself, *dhyan*, which carries both enchanted and mundane resonances – is only a more acute and richly elaborated rendering of the essentially spiritual value that 'we' too in the west invest in attention as a resplendent anchoring point of human potential.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the overarching theoretical frame of this thesis, centring on attention ideologies and discourses, while largely examined in the South Asian context, has much broader applicability. Like language ideologies (Irvine 2022) and semiotic ideologies (Keane 2007), attentional ideology serves as a persistent point

of intervention and cultural reflection, something not restricted to any one place but which instead circulates as a recurrent feature of socio-cultural life. This becomes readily apparent, for example, when one considers present-day digital economies, which are underpinned by attempts to reflect upon, conceptualise and measure attention. What is crucial to note is that attention here is not a straightforward thing-in-itself, but rather something discursively constituted by innumerable concepts and indexes – whether hovering cursors, time, or eye movements – which seek to measure and render complex interiority into a quantifiable unit that can be exchanged and sold, an abstraction on which the possibility of the internet-as-economy depends. This familiar internet-based illustration of an important set of attentional ideologies is but one of many possible examples – the ethnographic method of anthropology itself takes as central certain discourses of attentional valorisation, as Nick Seaver has recently argued, and similarly attention ideologies can be found as important causal factors in numerous institutional and political contexts, such as the construction of the psychoanalyst around the ideal of a 'freely floating attention' (Epstein 1984), and the nationalisation of Buddhist tradition through the valorisation of certain mindful forms of attentivity at the expense of longstanding practices of concentration (Braun 2013; Tresch 2023). Collectively these examples speak to attentional ideologies as diffuse and culturally variable forms, which recurrently shape attempts to make up the self in relation to wider socio-economic, institutional and political projects. This demands fuller scholarly investigation, and, as the present thesis demonstrates I hope, such an approach can also provide a foundation for novel empirical and theoretical contributions even in sites, such as Banaras, which are well-worn and oft-trodden places of anthropological inquiry.

Appendix A: An account of the *havan* ritual

This appendix is designed to give interested readers an account of the *havan* ritual, outlined briefly in chapter 7. First the steps involved in the performance of *havan* are detailed, and this is then followed by a brief analysis of the ritual and its relation to other types of Hindu sacrifice involving fire. It should be noted that the exact structure of a given *havan* will vary depending on the principle deity in question. As such, what I present below is an ideal type that glosses over some points of variance to provide an overall picture of the ritual, one not unnecessarily hindered by excessive attention to points of difference.

Before the main ceremony can begin, the sacred area of the ritual must be established by the *karmkandi* who marks a perimeter and then lays *kusha* grass over this border. *Kusha* grass is important as it keeps out negative energy (*urja*) and power (*shakti*). As such, all ritual implements, including water vessels, should be kept within this sacred area. Using water, the *karmkandi* purifies the ground of the place where the *havan* is to take place. In the case of the temple courtyard where I carried out most of my fieldwork, the place in question is a specially designed square fire pit (*havan kund*) made of rectangular bricks. At this preliminary stage, ideally a Brahman should also be called to observe the sacrifice and ensure that everything is performed in the correct manner without any wrongdoing or impure action. However, in reality, a real Brahman of flesh and bone is not usually called, but rather a small figure with torso and limbs is made from sacred *kusha* grass. This small figure or *kusha* Brahman, which is worn on the finger of the *karmkandi*, serves as witness to the ritual.

After these preliminary steps, Agni the fire god is invited through special mantras, and he becomes manifest when a fire is lit in the aforementioned pit (*Agni staphana*). Next, the assembled *karmkandi* recite mantras for the deities Ganesh and Vishnu, and then they make four separate offerings (*ahuti*) to Agni by pouring clarified butter (*ghee*) into the fire. Subsequently, the priests throw offerings into the flames for Ganesh and the goddess Gauri, and this is accompanied by the recitation of specific mantras. Usually, at this stage special offerings will also be made to the principle deity or deities for whom the ritual is being carried out – so, for example, in the case of *Nav Graha Shanti havan* nine different types of wood will be placed in the fire, one for each of the nine planets that the ritual aims to make stable and peaceful. These initial stages are accompanied by

a series of *sankalp* in which the Brahman states their intention to carry out various ritual actions, carefully specifying how many sacrificial offerings they will make as well as vowing to invite and establish the presence of the fire god. As with *japa*, these *sankalp* bind the *karmkandi* to perform the ritual correctly with the gods as witness.

The scene is now set for the main body of the ritual to begin. Normally, by this point flames will be licking upwards reaching the summit of the fire pit, and a slight acrid taste of smoke permeates the air. Most often mango wood is used to fuel the flame, although the exact wood used depends on the preference of the main deity who is being worshipped during the *havan*. The group of *karmkandi* tasked with performing the sacrifice will be arranged around the fire pit, each sitting cross-legged. Next to them will be plates piled with various ingredients (*samagri*) mixed with clarified butter (*ghee*). The exact ingredients will vary depending on the main deity being worshipped, but usually sesame seed (*til*), uncooked rice (*akshat chaval*), barley (*job*), and jaggery (*gur*) will be offered. Each ingredient is mixed in exact proportion: the amount of rice should be half that of sesame seed, and the amount of barley should be half that of rice, and so on. This points to a relational logic that underlies the ritual process – everything is defined in relation to, that is as a proportion of, something else, just as each sacrifice is a smaller reproduction of the cosmic sacrifice from which the universe is born.

In the main body of the *havan* ritual, the priests make a large number of offerings consisting of small pinches of the food stuffs taken from the aforementioned plates. Crucially, the priests make the *ahuti*, or offerings, to the mantra that was previously recited during *japa*. Here, the mantra serves as an actual manifestation – rather than representation – of the primary deity in question. The *acharya*, who leads the ritual, will chant part of the mantra out loud – this is the Vedic part – but the powerful and esoteric seed (*beej*) section of the mantra cannot be uttered audibly, and, so, is recited internally, without any emission of sound. After each mantra is recited, each *karmkandi* will throw a small pinch of foodstuff into the fire with each then exclaiming in unison, "*svaha*" in a long drawn out sonorous tone. The ingredients must be taken from the plate in a prescribed manner; a pinch of the mixture is held firmly between the middle, ring finger and thumb of the right hand. At intervals, the client for whom the ritual is being performed will offer clarified butter, and this ensures that the flames continue to burn energetically throughout. The ideal that the *karmkandi* aspires to is a kind of unison (*mil*) in which the assembled priests perform each ritual act with a high degree of

simultaneity. In reality, such a rhythm is difficult to achieve and a certain disjointedness often creeps in with a small time-lag separating the individual actions of each *karmkandi*.

After each offering is given, the *acharya* will turn a bead of the *mala* which he holds in his hand. As the *havan* is normally performed by a group of *karmkandi*, each making offerings, every bead will represent multiple oblations. As with *japa*, while all 108 beads in the *mala* will be turned, only 100 will be counted to protect the *karmkandi* from the possibility of mistakes and lapses. So, if a *mala* is completed in a *havan* being performed by three *karmkandi*, this will be recorded as 300 offerings. To complete this many offerings, and often many, many more, is arduous ritual labour. I often saw sweat rolling down the brow of *karmkandi* as they extended their arms to throw oblations again and again sitting before an open fire in the immense heat of the Banaras summer.

After completing the large number of offerings to the principle deity who is manifest as the mantra, the assembled *karmkandi* proceed to make a series of special oblations. The priests first make offerings to the *shakti* (force) of the mantra, and then make four oblations using ghee to four other deities. Next, the *jajman* performs the offering of *purn ahuti* by placing into the fire a coconut filled with ghee and wrapped in cloth. Subsequently, the *jajman* pours a stream of ghee into the fire, a step called *vasudhara* which ensures that any mistakes (*bhul chuk*) in the performance of the preceding ritual are forgiven. Following this, the elaborate sequence of fire offerings is now complete.

The *karmkandi* will then bid farewell to the *kusha* Brahman who has been closely observing the ritual activity. The *kusha* Brahman is given a fee (*dakshina*) for his ritual labour in the form of an offering of uncooked rice. After this, the *jajman* will take the sacred ashes of the now extinguished fire, and rub it against his forehead and shoulders. He then performs the rite of *tarpan* in which an offering of water (*jal*) is made multiple times to the deity who is the chief object of the *havan* and *japa*. Often the offering of water will also be accompanied by uncooked rice, sesame seed or flowers. In accordance with the proportional logic of the ritual sequence, the number of *tarpan* offerings will be one tenth of the number of *havan* offerings. This special rite aims to ensure the full satisfaction (*tripti*) of the deities who were called and, so, were present at the preceding *havan*. The *jajman* will subsequently perform *marjan* by sprinkling water onto the heads of the assembled Brahmans. The water is taken from a small metal vessel

(*panchpatra*) using a spoon, or if this implement is not available the leaf of the sacred *peepal* tree can be used. By doing this the *jajman* obtains the blessings of the deities who are by this point satisfied by the preceding rites, and, as such, they remove any impurities and imperfections faced by the client. The number of times water is sprinkled as part of *marjan* should be one tenth of the amount of *tarpan* offered. As such, although *karmkandi* do not conceptualise it in this way, the amount of *marjan*, which comes at the end of the ritual sequence, is one thousandth of the amount of *japa* performed at the start.[55]

The ritual sequence concludes with a series of final steps: worship with a flame (*arti*), the offering of flowers in the temple in which the *havan* takes place (*pushpanjali*), and *visarjan* (immersion). Through the latter rite the deities who were previously welcomed take their departure. Crucially, *ashirwbad* (receiving of blessings) also takes place towards the end of the ritual sequence – as part of this, each *karmkandi* places uncooked grains of rice onto a plate held by the *jajman,* and recites a mantra stating that the fruit (phal) of the preceding ritual should be given to the client. Later, the *jajman* will make *kheer* (a desert flavoured with spices and nuts) using the rice, and then consume it. Through consumption of the rice, the *jajman* receives the benefits and fruits of the ritual which he has paid for with his money.

The underlying logic of the *havan* is one of consumption. The various food offerings after being thrown into the fire are taken in the form of smoke to the deities. As such, *karmkandi* sometimes refer to offerings as the "food of the gods" (*devtaon ka bhojan*).[56] The food that is burnt in the *havan* fire is thought to give the deities strength. The reverse logic is also sometimes applied with certain *karmkandi* noting that without such

[55] The description provided above of *tarpan* and *marjan* is an ideal type. In reality, there is some variation. For example, in *japa-havan* performed to make the nine planets peaceful and stable, the client makes only one *tarpan* and *marjan*. Further, in this case each of the *tarpan* and *marjan* rites take a distinct form. For *tarpan*, the client takes *durva* grass (Bermuda grass), dips it in ghee, smells it, and then throws it over his shoulder. During the *marjan,* the client takes a flower, smells it, and then throws it backwards.

[56] These foodstuffs were often explicitly tied to the client by karmkandi, as they were purchased with his money. When asked what role the often distant client played in the sacrifice, priests often replied that the ritual and its arrangements are the product of their patron's "*mehanat ki kamae*" [earnings through hardwork]. As one priest put it: "He worked hard for two months. He avoided spending on other things, but he spent on this [ritual arrangements]." As such, the offerings are conceived of as part of the client's sacrifice, defined by his reduced consumption – they are the fruits of his labour and, so, inextricably linked to him. It is a distinctly capitalist model of objectification in which the essence of the client is manifested and transferred through chains of exchange involving the products of consumption and labour.

food the gods grow weak. Aditya Pandey, who comes from a long line of *karmkandi*, blamed the spread of COVID-19 on a decline in the practice of fire sacrifice:

When the gods and 'asuras' (anti-gods) used to do battle, victory would only come once 'havan' was performed. The offering gives them strength. If you don't get food, then you become 'kamzoor' [weak]. So, if you don't do 'havan', then the gods lose their strength, then the demons take over and trouble everybody. For four or five hundred years, 'havan' has decreased in India, so corona has come.

The effect of *havan* was not only explained in terms of divine sustenance – sometimes *karmkandi* and clients emphasised its purificatory aspect. The smoke and mantra vibrations released during *havan* are thought to make the surrounding atmosphere pure (*shuddh*). However, generally this aspect of fire sacrifice was not stressed in relation to *havan,* which tends to be a smaller ritual performed to meet the personal needs of a client rather than to bring about atmospheric purity. This purificatory aspect was more often highlighted during explanations of *yagya* and *mahayagya*, which are larger, more public fire sacrifices that tend to be performed for community-oriented rather than personal aims. Between 2020 and 2022 when anxiety about COVID-19 was at its peak, *yagyas* were carried out across Banaras with the aim of purifying the atmosphere to prevent the spread of the virus, often understood in this context as a form of pollution (*pradushan*). I also witnessed a vast *mahayagya* or great sacrifice in February 2022, with some hundred fire pits and crowds of priests seeking to achieve lofty and nationalistic aims, including: improving world welfare, extinguishing COVID-19, aiding the development of India and stopping 'anti-national' Maoist revolutionaries. Widely reported in the media, the event took on the form of a spectacle, drawing crowds of poorer folk as well as well-to-do locals, and even a central government minister who arrived in a convoy of cars.[57]

[57] While *mahayagyas* were often commended for their role in environmental purification, they served other purposes too. Unlike *havans*, which are small and performed for personal reasons, *mahayagyas* as large public sacrifices play a role in what Valeri (1985) calls efficacious representation, that is the objective reproduction of the codes, principles and concepts on which a given social order are based. This can be seen in the organisation of the *mahayagya* that I attended. Each of the hundred fires was surrounded by multiple priests as well as a patron sitting beside his wife with her hair typically covered in a show of modesty. The sacrificial arena (*yagyashala*) was enveloped by representations of the pantheon of Vedic deities and around this, hundreds of ordinary devotees streamed, observing and circambulating. The sacrifice which aimed to bring about the Indian nation's development and strength efficaciously represented this objective in the reality of the ritual's material arrangements. Attendees were able to experience the (normative) national socio-political harmony that the sacrifice aimed to bring about through its objective manifestation in the symbolic interrelation of different ritual elements – the dyadic social core of husband and demure wife flanked by the Brahmanical priesthood in commune with the divine cosmology mapped around them, as well as circambulating devotees who figure collectively as the Indian public.

The language surrounding fire sacrifices is often heavily scientised. This in part can be attributed to the reformist religious organisation *Ayra Samaj*, who in attempting to reorder Hinduism along monotheistic and rationalistic lines during the colonial period elevated fire sacrifice as *the* central ritual and positioned it as an eminently scientific procedure. One recent newspaper report notes a speech by a German scientist at BHU who claims that Vedic fire sacrifice "nourishes plant life and neutralizes harmful radiation and pathogenic bacteria" (Singh 2023). The technical vocabulary that often accompanies descriptions of fire sacrifices masks a fundamental disjuncture between how environmental science and scientised understandings of Hindu fire sacrifice conceptualise "purity". What for a practitioner of such sacrifices purifies the atmosphere, eliminating pollution, is from the perspective of environmental science highly polluting, the combustion of wood, releasing particles that are injurious to health and environment. These divergent interpretations draw from distinct, possibly incommensurable, conceptual domains, paralleling Kelly Alley's (2002) insight about the Ganga which is at once hopelessly polluted but, also, in a ritual sense, perfectly pure, capable of removing all pollution.

Sacrifice as a mode of efficacious representation applies less readily to the ritual of *havan* performed after *japa*. Not least because the sacrifice was often carried out swiftly following lengthy mantra repetition with no audience, carried out for personal rather than collective reasons. However, in *havan,* in common with canonical theories of sacrifice - as exchange, communion, carthasis and representation – an element of objectification is clearly apparent.

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