

## Intellectual Exchange with Hands Materiality and Cosmology in Manual Sharing Practices of an Asian Sacred Drum

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### Hands: The Exchange Problem

If money is the elementary unit of exchange in the market's imagination, then an even more basic, if not primordial conceptual unit of all exchange is the pair of human hands. This chapter re-examines the notion of exchange itself, by demonstrating ways in which hands become simultaneously material and intellectual agents, exchanging not only objects but also ideas. Distinctive developments in Western and precolonial Indian philosophical thought, together with anthropological theory, show that hands are peculiar organs with motor (action), sensory (feeling) and cognitive (thought) functions. Hands operate equally as sensory and cerebral representatives: in being both physiological conduits of stimuli response, and giving material life to cultural and intellectual intent through varied motor activities such as craftsmanship, ritual gestures, machinic activity, writing and so on. The precise intellectual import of hands involves both their cognitive/neurophysiological functions, and cultural/discursive agency; and both these intellectual dimensions of cognition and discourse play significant roles during exchange through hands. Thus, the anthropology of exchange (with hands) is inextricably connected with the anthropology of senses and cognition. Further, precisely due to hands' original features as being both intensely sensory-embodied and motor-intentional organs, philosophical debates relate them to immanent experiences and distinct human abstractions like the transcendental consciousness, soul and so on.

This chapter studies the functions and meanings of hands of distinct exchanging subjects: craftsmen (producers) and musicians (consumers) of the sacred percussion instrument, the *mridanga*, in eastern India, particularly West Bengal. It analyses practitioners' philosophy behind making, playing and

meditating upon the instrument's sounds, all materialized through exchanging the object. The ethnographic context is particularly distinctive, because not only do hands here embody both materiality and cognitive and discursive intent in their acts of producing, exchanging and consuming the *object*, the *mridanga*, but following understandings in manual phenomenology, hands also materialize and exchange intellectual *ideas*. These ideas are specifically about hands being linked to a transcendental cosmos, as is also the very object (*mridanga*) that hands create/sound. The bodies and hands of the drum's makers, players, listeners, and even the object (*mridanga*) they make, exchange, play and hear, are essentially imagined as constituted of the same primordial cosmic substances, earth and clay; and material, sensory and ideational exchange among these parties is basically conjured as the transmission of equivalent spiritual potential. We thus have a most characteristic phenomenon of a seamless intellectual and affective exchange of the corporeal/cosmic potential of the exchanging subjects and object.

### *Context*

I have been intensely engaged with my ethnographic context of religious percussion makers, musicians and a community of sound meditators knowledgeable in texts and practices of sacred sound for more than a decade, throughout the districts of rural Bengal. A popular devotional (*bhakti*) movement (*Bengal-Vaishnavism*) absorbed Bengal since the sixteenth century, led by the saint Chaitanya, and understood as passionate devotion to the deity couple, Radha-Krishna. Such ecstatic *bhakti* was extended to all castes, genders and sects. The movement's chief and most popular devotional expression was public, collective and ecstatic singing of *kirtan* (devotional music). The *mridanga* is *kirtan*'s indispensable drum accompaniment. This asymmetrical percussion instrument, with loud, grave and yet melodic rhythms, is hung from drummers' shoulders, and has the capacity to generate intense rhythmic emotions among large *kirtan* gatherings (Graves 2009, 2022). The *mridanga*, also known colloquially as the *khol*, is held as a most sacred object among devotees, its pulsing ecstasies believed to transport aesthete listeners to the sensuous cosmic abode of the divine couple.

Almost all *khol* makers and percussionists are strictly religious, and vegetarian, *tulsi*-necklace-wearing *Vaishnavas*. However, despite *Vaishnavism*'s (and *kirtan*'s) overtly expressed caste-indiscriminate devotion, caste relations have had an ambivalent presence among devotees. Thus, on one hand, Chaitanya's movement was vehemently anti-caste, and the saint especially considered sacred sound (of chants, and the *mridanga*) as an equalizer among people. On the other hand, caste remained a persistent lived experience since precolonial times (see Bayly 1999: 1–3), with 'upper'-caste *mridanga* players, for instance, never touching leather, the 'defiling' yet indispensable raw material used in the drum's construction and reserved unequivocally for 'untouchable' *mridanga*

makers. Bengal's devotional/sonic philosophy indeed produces a distinctive contingency in caste relations: while being caste-differentiated in production and consumption, the drum's body and sound also potentially unite these exchanging populations. Further, *Vaishnava* philosophy infuses the instrument with yogic connotations, its instrumentalists being practitioners of meditative acoustics, such that the subjects (producers-consumers) and object (*mridanga*) of exchange are eventually drawn into relations of esoteric equivalence of their manual corporeal substance, as we shall see. Thus, bodies which are hierarchically differentiated before the process of exchange are rendered transmissible and equal – both between themselves and with the object exchanged – through specific intellectual understandings of exchange in this context.

The percussion instrument, the *mridanga*, and the hand-worlds it implicates are associated with long traditions of spiritual aesthetics. In distinctive philosophical constructions, practitioners conceptualize the human body, hands and *mridanga* as equivalent sacred reflections of a transcendental origin. This divine origin is believed to be constituted of primeval earth and sound; and the body, hands and drum too are essentially made of the same substances, it is imagined. All these vessels, therefore, when cultivated, are able to apprehend the same transcendence through their vibrations. In human hands crafting the drum, the maker's body-self (made by divine hands) viscerally extends its own earth-sound cosmic potential, externalizing through motor activity the inner sensory world of spiritual origin. The *mridanga* is then exchanged for money in the market economy. Such exchange, however, is not considered as empty of symbolic meaning, but rather as transferring/sharing spiritual potential between the exchanging agents and the object exchanged. Thus again, subsequently, in playing the instrument, the sounds shivering on the musician's hands travel in turn from the object, through the musician's inner body, to the interior causal buzz of creation. Sounds and meaning are thus exchanged seamlessly among the maker to object to player. Hands thus exchange not only the object, but also intellectual discourses which connect the external world of creation to the inner life of mediative realization.

I have learnt about the rich plethora of craftsmen's and percussionists' origin myths, oral poems, songs, construction and playing techniques, and the instrument's esoteric aurality from *kirtan*-gurus, *mridanga* makers and percussionists. There are strong cultural practices associated with the mirroring of the maker's/player's spiritual body and their instrument, through hands. These intellectual discourses are practised during *kirtan* sessions: singers pause to explain esoteric songs, and provide audiences with philosophical clarifications. Makers, players, meditators and ordinary listeners, although of different castes and orientation levels, thus internalize the same intellectual culture. The Indian philosophical concepts I discuss in this chapter, therefore, are conceptually apprehended and manually embodied by these communities through orally transmitted and practised hand-traditions.

My ethnography includes details of *mridanga* making, playing and sound meditation – all essentially mediated by hands – and readings of vernacular

texts, which people internalize through vibrant oral traditions. Exchange is rendered a complex intellectual and ontological phenomenon through these descriptions: as a continuous flow between the body-mind while making, playing and listening to the drum, and as a sharing of material skin and thought among the exchanging subjects and object. Such simultaneously affective and intellectual exchange richly complicates ideas of pure economic exchange, as well as divisions in sensory and cognitive exchange, and also traditional hierarchized caste exchange where thought is reserved for upper castes and immersed corporeal activity for untouchables.

People's narratives, my own listening experiences and texts together animate the ethnography. As Bayly (1999: 12) suggests, ethnographic analyses of caste (and other everyday phenomenological experiences) have much to gain through close readings of normative cultural texts. Taken together, the material exchange of the drum between the maker and player, the exchange of ideas about the drum's philosophical significance, and the sensory exchange of the drum's skin and sounds between the craftsman, instrumentalist and listener render the exchanging bodies and even the object exchanged as equivalent cultural agents: a distinctive philosophy or intellectual exchange enabled by hands.

### **Contributions to Understandings of Intellectual Exchange**

This chapter seeks to extend the idea of exchange itself, by arguing that its immediate (and prototypical) prerequisite, the pair of embodied hands, also conducts abstract cognitive and cultural concerns, such that material and intellectual exchange are not separable concepts. Hands, as bodily matter, always also work as agents of the mind, and manual work is thus laden with strong intellectual faculties in two senses: as cognitive mechanisms, and as discursive representatives. Hands carry cultural messages through cognitive intent, and viscerally communicate them through their manual labour and objects produced, to other social bodies. Simply, therefore, exchange (with hands) becomes both an embodied and intellectual exercise. Further, while any hand-crafted object exchanged in the market carries both material and discursive meanings, hands' simultaneous intellectual and sensory charge becomes even more immediately palpable in the case of the *mridanga's* exchange. This is because the hand-made *mridanga* is also subsequently hand-played by the instrumentalist. The entire corpus of spiritual discourses about the drum, and cognitive workings of body-minds, are thus literally sensitively passed on and shared between the hands of the maker and player.

Thus, while intellectual exchange is generally strictly imagined as dialogues of ideas and speech, and hands imagined as conduits of material work, phenomenologically understood, hands may embody sensory/material affects and discursive/cognitive dimensions together. They thus become the most affective instances of intellectual exchange. Intellectual exchange is treated in this chapter as an always already embodied phenomenon, brought to life particularly through

the sensitive experience of hands. In exchanging the drum, people also exchange intellectual ideas surrounding it, and these ideas themselves are sensory, and are enacted as crafting, sounding and transmitting by hypersensitive hands. Finally, since the discourses are materialized by charged affective and cognitive hands, they become intensely entrenched in corporeal memory, persisting therefore as strong religious traditions for over five centuries. I argue that hands' cultural roles as agents of intellectual exchange are particularly enabled by their peculiar phenomenology as simultaneously sensory and cognitive. When cultural discourses find life through hands, their intellectual exchanges embed in the material body and become more permanent.

Intellectual exchange through hands transforms aesthetic and ethical worlds, and this is evident in the primary ethnographic problem here. Traditionally, there are deft craftsmen in Bengal who manually work with clay and leather to produce drums for devotional music, and specialist drummers who buy the objects from them. However, this simplistic market exchange is located within intellectual understandings shared among the hands, bodies and minds of the drum maker, player and listener. Simply, spiritually cultivated hands are philosophically understood as also made of (cosmic) clay and sound, like the human body and the *mridanga* drum. Thus, makers believe that they manually produce or externalize their own spiritual-aesthetic embodied capacity in the form of drums, and hand them over to players, who again, through particular hand-techniques, sound the drum, interiorize its acoustic potential, conflating the drum's clay-sound body with their own, and thus realize the instrument as their embodied mirror. Techniques of making, playing, touching and sounding the drum thus enable the exchange not only of the object (and its sounds), but also of embodied ideas which draw the exchanging parties and even the object exchanged into a peculiar relation of perfect equivalence. The maker-instrument-player become seamless surrogates, sharing the vibrations of skin/sound through their hands. This is significant because makers belong to 'untouchable' castes, players to higher ones; and while the upper-caste players would never physically touch 'defiling' construction substances like leather with which makers work, when it comes to the devotional drumming universe as such, makers' and players' hands tie them as correspondent agents in the exchange of the thought and sensations of a cosmology.

This very specific emic Asian philosophy of exchange has resonances across centuries-old community practices, cosmological systems and even modern scientific discussions by the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Science, C.V. Raman: all ideas centrally concerning hands, the essential organs of human exchange. Further, these ideas about hands also enable etic comparisons with Western philosophical constructions. Thus, the particular kinds of sensory/intellectual exchanges discussed in this chapter are between the hands of the drum maker and player, between the player and listener, and between Western and Asian systems of manual philosophy. In this specific ethnographic context, the pair of exchanging hands are conceptualized as sites of both initial caste differentiation and eventual corporeal levelling based on a system of religious metaphysics. The

*mridanga's* social exchange 'contingencies' (Widlok 2017: xx), such as ostensibly hierarchical caste-mediations of instrumental relations, are thus situated within highly nuanced moral sensory cultures positing equal spiritual transmissibility among the bodies of the *mridanga's* makers, players, listeners and the *mridanga* itself. Such radical thinking in the philosophy of exchange is enabled by hands' own phenomenology as a leveller between affect-intellect, self-other, and immanence-transcendence. In this case, therefore, the philosophical spirit of an ideal exchange is finally embodied, such that the people/categories which transfer the object/meaning between them (such as the maker-player, player-listener, body-mind and so on) are rendered absolute equivalents, since their social and epistemological differences are immaculately dissolved. In other words, through understandings of the eventual bodily substitutability among the exchanging subjects, exchange becomes a revolutionary equalizing ideal; and in the further corporeal equivalence of the subjects and the object, exchange dissolves even the material dimensions of the self-other divide.

Pure instrumentality has been questioned in the anthropology of exchange. Appadurai (1986: 3), following Simmel, defines economic exchange essentially as a person sacrificing some object towards the desire of another. Drum exchange, in our context, is not purely economic at all, since the object becomes a shared leveller of affect for both parties, and there is ultimately no experience 'at the cost of' another. The generally diverse contexts of production (with technical knowledge) and consumption (with ideological motivations) (ibid.: 41) are not sustained here, with understandings of a spiritual corporeality tying the hands of producers, consumers and the object's skin: all essentially imagined as made of the same cosmic substances.

Bayly (2009) shows that international relations in the socialist ecumene surpass profit or interest-driven exchange to include relational hierarchies as well as beneficent affect and friendship. Kapferer (1976: 7) also argued that exchange can be non-transactional. Further, 'sharing of ideas' and symbolic modes among relational groups may not result from, but indeed define what exchange entails. Such non-transactional reciprocity of ideas is also embodied in the drum's acoustic universe, and Widlok's (2017) notion of 'sharing' becomes apposite for us, to argue that intellectual and affective sharing may even *inform* market exchange. Widlok argues that cultural personhoods, especially in non-Western worlds, may embody exchange experiences as immediate sharing, including pre-reflexive inter-corporeal bodily co-presence. Further, the materiality of shared objects engenders particular forms of social relatedness, and the exchanging agents and objects then form a 'community of practice' (2017: xvii, xx, 72–77). The maker-player-listener-drum are also similar exchanging corporeal agents of longstanding affective communities, whose 'sharing' of their sounding hands/skins both surpass and define market exchange.

Exchange is also organically enabled by the materiality of the object exchanged, and through such exchange itself the object becomes meaningful (Appadurai 1986: 56). The particular ideological politics in our case renders the maker-player-object as direct philosophical homologues, and the

'objectification of persons' and 'personification of objects' thus do not remain separable ideas (ibid.: 12, 57). As the drum 'moves though different hands', it acquires a specific 'cultural biography' (ibid.: 34) of exchange, which dissolves caste and other differentiations. The fluid sharings, corporeal transformations and skin-sound transactions of makers'-players' hands and drum come closest to Marriott's ethnosociological view about Hindu personhoods as dividual and unbounded, with essential substances (skin and sound) exchanged through interpersonal and inter-intellectual contacts. Further, such biomoral orderings dissolving distinctions between subject-object, morality-materiality, mind-sensation and self-other, define the meanings of market exchange strategies in the Hindu world (1976, 1989: 2–17).

Marriott thus proposes the need for ethnosociologies of Hindu 'monist' thought, and this chapter makes an attempt in that direction. Further, the essential organs of exchange, human hands, although immediately embodied, are also analysed as intellectual actors: indispensable conduits of cognitive circuits and discursive imaginations. I show throughout that hands melt boundaries of the body-mind, habit-intention, sensorimotor functions, and self-oriented inner worlds and other-directed outer ones, extending Marriott's notions of simultaneous corporeal and moral-intellectual exchange.

In doing this, the chapter ties the anthropology of exchange with the anthropology of senses/cognition. The market exchange that follows between the craftsman who makes the *mridanga* and the drum's specialist musician implicates deeper senses of intellectual exchange – as ontological sharing – among their sonically tuned selves. Contemporary anthropology has shown that individual senses work through intersensory/synesthetic and cognitive associations (Classen 1997; Gell 1995; Marchand 2010; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Anthropological debates have also established that senses operate in culturally mediated contexts (Howes 2005). The peculiar phenomenology of hands extends these two understandings. While the entire skin-surface is the sense organ of touch, only hands reach out to the external world. It is the only sensorimotor organ: as sensory organ of tactility it receives external stimuli, and as motor organ of kinesthesia it goes outward from the body. It is the only sense, therefore, which can act upon purposive intention, including cognitive thought and cultural motivations. In this, hands' critical activity is craftsmanship, mediating/exchanging between the body (self) and world (other), habitus and intellect. In addition to physical capacities of touch and moulding, in craftsmanship, kinesthesia involves intellectual faculties of memory, intuition, calculation and anticipation. Thus hands, as synesthetic sensorimotor organs, are also intellectual conduits, and make/externalize objects we can sense, cognize and intellectually make sense of within a discursive culture, in addition to exchanging them in the market. Thus, hands become analytical subjects of exchange (both sensory/material and cognitive/intellectual), representing particular cultural imaginations.

In this chapter I provide an anthropological analysis of hands, the exchanging organs, for the first time, within a vernacular philosophical context, through

(manual) theories of senses and embodiment alternative to dominant Western ones. It is critical to engage with 'indigenous theories of perception' (Howes 2005: 6), which hold radical potential in complicating dominant anthropological understandings. Thus, while in the first issue of *American Anthropologist* Frank Baker (1888) analysed the ubiquitous human and sacred role of hands as savagely fetishist, my chapter rather unravels the strong intellectual foundations of such apparently 'savage' manual constructions. The primordial means of exchange, hands, are posited here as intensely sensory as well as deeply intellectual; exchange itself imagined as material, fully embodied, as well as densely philosophical.

### Acting-Feeling-Thinking Hands

Hands' phenomenology serves both material and intellectual functions. This is evident in discursive constructions about hands and their exchange potential in Bengal's sacred percussion context.

The archetypal narrative about the first *mridanga*, imagined to accompany deity Shiva's cosmic dance, is provided in the third-century BC classical Sanskrit magnum opus of Indian aesthetics, *Natyashastra* (33.4–12). A sage is bathing in a pond, when sudden rains begin. The lashing small and big raindrops pouring on different levels, textures and sizes of lotus leaves populating the water-body produce three kinds of sounds, of high, medium and low pitches. The meditating sage is captured by the vibrating variation, and envisions reproducing those tonal pitches with hands. He rushes to his ashrama, and describes the sounds to the lord of cosmic construction, Vishwakarma, who manually crafts a clay percussion instrument, its edges plaited with three differentially stretched leather surfaces, replicating the natural tonal rhythms (Bandopadhyay 1995: 164–65; Beck 2013; Pande 1996: 285–92, 301). In this narrative, aquatic sounds are viscerally soaked in with cognitive imprints in aural-imaginative memory, to finally externally replicate the toned rhythms through tactile manoeuvring.

Bare hands, which feel from the wrists through the palms to the fingertips, 'grasp' sensory images, remember or 'hold' them mentally, 'grope' for abstracted sensory concepts, develop 'grip' over intricate manual knowledge, and construct a fine drum, to finally 'hand over' – or exchange in lieu of money – the constructed percussion instrument to expert musicians, who 'strike' its different parts, producing an inimitable range of sonic affects. Such an array of nuanced manual verbs demonstrate that hands simultaneously do, feel and think; they are imbued with both sensory and intellectual potential.

Hands are thus both casts (of mind/concept) and matter (of body/percept). As the human body's most flexible motor part, they simultaneously constitute and embody the form and content of processes ranging from the most abstract to the concrete: perception, intuition and memory, to carving, striking and sensory awakening. Further, in this case, hand-as-matter does not fill some

other cast, but the hand itself; and some other matter (instrument) does not fill the hand-as-cast, since the hand itself *is* the instrument with which to make the drum. When hands craft the *mridanga* and exchange it in the market, they impart and communicate both materiality and discursive meanings through it; they directly transmit their affective and intellectual energy to the hands of the receiver-musician. The exchanging parties thus share the constructed instrument, the *mridanga*, as well as its creation vessel – the total sensory, cognitive and discursive hand-instrument.

*Mridanga* artisans' and artists' hand histories fascinated the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Science, C.V. Raman.<sup>1</sup> According to Raman (1920, 1922, 1935), *mrdangam* makers rival expert acoustic-physicists, since in his time it was the only percussion instrument to produce harmonic melodies. The *mridanga*'s sonic meditators expressed the same phenomenon to me in their own idiom, by emphasizing that it is a divine construction, whose tuned rhythms, set only once during construction, can thus accompany any vocal pitch.

Hands thus are crafters of the myth and science of sound vibrations, the most valued sense in Hindu civilizational sensoria, whose cosmology asserts that acoustic energy created first life. *Bengal-Vaishnavism* borrows this epistemological premise to specifically argue that sacred sound reverberates in human bodies, and these bodies realize their transcendental potential especially when listening to *kirtan* and meditating on the *mridanga*'s sounds, as the *mridanga* is the exact cosmic homologue of the cultivated devotional body. *Mridanga* making is thus like making life, and exchanging it, like transferring hands' life-energy along with the instrument. The apparently disparate life-worlds of philosophical and scientific 'high concept', manual practice and intuitive experience, the spectrum of 'ancient texts to everyday moments of lived religion' (Mann 2014: 271), are thus tied to a deep-seated cultural habitus, where practised traditions and lexical worlds form embodied fittings hinging on the primary exchanging agents, hands. Hands as 'thing-concepts' (Holbraad 2007 cited in Chua and Salmond 2012: 110) transcend dichotomies of matter-discourse, sensation-intellect.

Marchand (2012: 263) argues that hands, despite defining essential embodied humanness and intentionality, have largely been overlooked in anthropology. I critically address this absence, and also argue that hands may even be analysed through etic exchanges of Western and Indian philosophical-anthropological perspectives (see Kleinman et al. 2014). I find two vernacular categories significant for my hand phenomenology. They are: *karan* (variously translated as sense organ, tool, instrument of knowledge, action),<sup>2</sup> and *indriya* (sensory energy). The ethnophilosophical category, *karan*, translatable as 'sense instrument', in tandem with the anthropology of senses, poses unique complexities mediating between: sense organ-motor organ, thought-action, subject-object, and experience-exchange. As the simultaneous tool of creation and the organ of exchange, hands dissolve boundaries between the giver (maker) and receiver (player), and also between the intellectual, feeling and acting human subject and the material object (*mridanga*).

In the context of the *mridanga*, hands are linked by practitioners to a causal source/origin. Indian philosophy posits sound-energy as the first creative force, constituting also the core of human spiritual anatomy. Practitioners also describe God as a potter, and the human body as essentially crafted of primordial earth. *Mridanga* [*mrit* (mud) + *anga* (body)] thus represents the ‘first’ instrumental life: made of earth and reflecting cosmic sound. Craftsmen and musicians further argue that the human body and the *mridanga* are thus mirror reflections. While carving, experiencing and exchanging the sound/touch of *mridanga*, hands thus mediate cause-effect in a distinctive way: the making hands extend outward to reproduce a spiritual mirror of the body, the object, the *mridanga*; exchange it with the musician; who conversely realizes the external object as his own transcendental potential, through playing it. A significant debate in Indian philosophy states that the effect (*karya*) always pre-exists in the cause (*kaaran*), and the instrument of construction/knowledge/experience (*karan*) thus both creates the effect and realizes the cause (Nicholson 2010: 57, 101). Similarly, in cosmic sound flowing among the hands of the maker and player, and in the object, transcendental cause (*kaaran*) makes itself known in the effect (*karya*), all through manual sensations. *Mridanga* hands therefore mediate immanence-transcendence: hands, as instruments made of cosmic earth/sound, craft the object of material earth/sound, the vessel’s vibrations then realized on playing hands as constituting the transcendental cause of all existence again as universal earth/sound.

Exchange is thus rendered a radical ideal in this context, since the subjects exchanging and the object exchanged are essentially understood as equivalents. This discourse is founded upon the phenomenology of the exchanging agents, hands, as mediating between mind and matter, cognition and senses, thought and action. Hands enable the most sensitive intellectual exchange among the maker, musician and matter of sound experience, by alerting them – while making, playing and vibrating as skin – to discourses which intrinsically associate them, and posit their equivalence.

### Original Hands

In this section, I discuss the specific intellectual ideas informing the *mridanga*’s exchange practices. The body-analogical notion of the *mridanga* as mirroring a cultivated human body comes alive through understandings of the originary nature of clay, the eternal sonic buzz, craftsmen’s caste genealogies, and mythical beliefs about deities. The human body, percussionists say, is also a *mrit* + *anga* (*mridanga*), a clay vessel which eventually dissolves into earth. Therefore, the *mridanga* is also known as *khol*, literally meaning the body/shell. The body making/playing the *mridanga* is thus perfectly exchangeable with the object’s corpus.

In Indian epistemology, earth is of two kinds: indestructible (atom-like, and with causal potential), and destructible (of the nature of effect). The latter

includes the bodily organism (and hands), the smell-related sense organ and material objects (Bhattacharya 2015: 42). In the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.1.4), a major Hindu meditation text, the father of Svetaketu (the archetypal knowledge seeker) tells him that all clay objects are transformations of one essential reality: original clay; and perfect knowledge about any object (here, the *mridanga*) leads to the cosmic origin (Lokeswarananda 1998). This episode is considered the 'locus classicus' of the thesis that all effect pre-exists in the cause (Nicholson 2010: 57), and God himself is posited as the first potter, crafting the perfect human body with his hands (ibid.: 101). This divine body in turn has the ability to apprehend its own originary clay-nature through meditation on any other clay object. Similarly, the *mridanga* practitioner can realize spiritual transcendence by immersing himself in constructing a clay drum.

Further, matter (clay) and consciousness are conjoined in Indian causation. Just as a lump of passive clay requires a potter's intelligent intervention, a super-intending intellectual consciousness is also imagined to enable material life. Such consciousness is conceptualized as the male principle (*purusha*), and matter as the feminine principle (*prakriti*) (Gosling 2012: 577–78, 584). Like in understandings of original clay, notions of the united form of consciousness (male) and matter (female) are evident also in theorizations of cosmic sound. Following a sophisticated tradition of sonic theology (Beck 1995), *mridanga* musicians often sang esoteric songs, and explained what they call *dehatattva* (body theory): that the cosmic male (consciousness) and female (matter) principles, represented also by the tantric deities Shiva and Parvati, united in a sexual embrace, and that vibration resulted in the originary acoustic buzz, sensed within the cultivated human body's space as the uncaused, unstruck first sound (*anahata-naad*). *Vaishnava* practitioners also learn breathing/meditative techniques from gurus, which enable such primordial auditory vibrations to rise through an 'esoteric physiology' (Beck 1995: 97) of nerves and energy centres, including through their buzzing, rippling hands, towards the cranium.

*Mridanga* gurus also cited innumerable poems, received through a rich oral tradition, to explain this acoustemology (Feld 1996). They stressed that these sonic-conceptual realizations flow through their hands when they craft/play their drums. They say that the drum's left side is feminine, its right side male, and the two when struck in erotic friction sound a loving melodic rhythm. This is directly associated with the spiritually cultivated human body as constituted of male-female energies (in upper and lower bodies respectively), whose united hum resounds through its corporeal centres as the first uncaused cosmic sound. Further, instrumentalists state that just like the drum-as-body, the body-as-drum also beats original truth. Thus, trained musicians linguistically represent the *mridanga's* mathematical beats as phonetic combinations (*bols*), and in their imagery of 'inner senses' (Csordas 1994: 89) the human body too is divided into six circular energy centres, with hidden sounds, which reverberate the same phonetics when the practitioner strikes the drum. Both the player and listener are then able to hear the same drum-*bols* inside themselves, as well as in the percussion being played outside. The player-listener-mediator, through

yogic breath techniques, then claims to realize the *mridanga* within: the earth-sound body and earth-sound instrument becoming homologues. The musician's hands thus fuse the effect and cause – instrument and body – in the original buzz (Sarbadhikary 2015: 205–13).

Thus, all participants of the *mridanga's* lifeworld, despite differences of caste for instance, internalize the same discursive understandings about the identity of their bodies and instrument. These bodies share the spiritual elements of clay-sound vibrations, and hands cause a seamless exchange among the instrument's maker, player, listener and drum. This exchange is intensely sensory, and through such visceral materiality the intellectual exchange about essential equivalence among the drum sounders is constantly regenerated.

The right and left hands have been interpreted in Western anthropology as representing 'organically asymmetrical' moral polarities: of the good and bad, sacred and profane (Hertz 2013). Mines (1982) suggested that this hierarchy is also present in Indian life. I argue, however, that such hand pre-eminence is not universal. In Indian metaphysics, the right hand represents male energy, the left female energy (Chakrabarty 2020: 59–62), and the two together – equal in moral-aesthetic significance – in crafting and striking the *mridanga* unwrap the ontology of cosmic sound, and a radically alternative intellectual ideal of exchange among otherwise differentiated/marked bodies and objects.

These conceptual deployments are also active in communities' myths and caste genealogies. The story of a popular poem among percussionists, titled *Sri Badyar Bani* ('The Drum's Syllables'), repeated to me in several villages, goes as follows. Once Parvati asked Shiva to explain passion. Unable to explain the true meaning to her in any other way, Shiva united with her. The *mridanga* then vibrated for the first time, and the couple danced to its rhythms. The *mridanga* was thus born literally as the material embodiment of divine male-female sexual union. Practitioners further explained that from Shiva (the right hand), the *mridanga* borrowed its rhythms, and from Parvati (the left hand), its sensuous melody, thereby becoming the embodied exchange of toned rhythm and consciousness-matter. In the musician's right and left hands deftly striking the instrument together, the body and drum buzz with primordial cosmic sounds.

Two castes craft Bengal's *mridanga* with their bare hands: *kumbhokaars* (potters), with the Pal surname, make the earthen body, and *muchis/chamars* (leatherworkers), the Das-s, attach the leather strings. *Kumbhokaars* claim to be the first people on earth, reminding us of clay's originality. *Muchis* have a complex genealogical narrative. In a remote drummers' village in Bengal's Murshidabad district, a leatherworker percussionist family showed me their first caste ancestor, Muchiram Das's picture. The printed name, however, was Ravidas, a leatherworker and devotional poet-singer from medieval North India. This demonstrates caste imaginations with an extant Indian network (see Bayly 1999: 4–5), with identities based on leather hand-labour and percussion/music traditions. The family elder narrated a poem from his notebook, titled *Muchir Jonmo Ba Jontrer Utpatti* (Birth of the Leatherworker or Percussion), the coeval birth narrative of the caste bodies and instrument being significant.

The poem has passed orally down caste generations. According to its story, Shiva, after defeating many demons, began an ecstatic dance. But without any rhythm accompaniment, he lost his beat, and half his body. Seeing this, the deity Vishnu became tense, and sweated profusely. From the sweat of his forehead, Muchiram Das was born. Earth then offered her clay, the divine cow, Kapila, her skin, music offered her *ragas*, and Muchiram crafted the first *mridanga* to enable Shiva's perfected dance. Percussionists state further that Chaitanya had instructed that only Das-s should make *mridangas*, since other castes would acquire sins if they used their hands to flay sacred cow skin.

These caste genealogies conjure the *mridanga's* synesthetic lifeworld through hands. Sweat (from which Muchiram was born) represents smell, associated in Indian epistemology with earth; smell and touch are related through the skin; and the leatherworker's hand-touch and eye coordination, *darshan* (sight) and *sparshan* (touch) – phenomenological homologues in apprehending material form (Chakrabarty 2020: 56) – produce the *mridanga's* cosmic sound. Further, while players belong to higher castes and never touch the raw substances, while exchanging the constructed instrument, along with the object, the maker transfers or 'hands over' the full-bodied sensory energy of his cultivated hands to the player, and the instrumentalist's hands then share the pulsating ontology – equating their clay-sound bodies – with the instrument and its makers.

The apparent caste paradox in the drum's material exchange between producer and consumer is thus liquidated by the intellectual exchange of a corporeal philosophy tying the exchanging agents: the hands of all participants of the *mridanga's* universe. The entire corpus of etymologies, genealogies, anecdotes, myths and explicit theological constructions demonstrate that the untouchable *mridanga* maker, musician, and even the drum, are synesthetic expressions of the same cosmic buzz. Hands materialize this distinctive intellectual exchange of centuries-held ideas about subject-object equivalence.

## Philosophy of Hands

Hands, being agents of material and intellectual exchange among producers, consumers and the instrument in Bengal's devotional sonic universe, may be analysed through their general phenomenological capacities. From emic ethnographic conceptions about hands which enable a very distinctive understanding of exchange, this section compares etic notions (Western and Indian philosophical ideas) about the phenomenology of hands. This cross-epistemological exchange shows that these systems understand hands similarly: as both material and intellectual embodiments, and further, associated with transcendental notions of cosmic causation. These understandings in the philosophy of hands have also impacted anthropological developments.

*Mridanga* craftsmen manually replicate/create sounds which they hear and hold in memory, since ears and hands have particular kinds of sensory

concomitance. Cochlea-like palms are synesthetic and cognitive organs, sounding, touching, smelling, seeing (through measured anticipation), and leading, through rational intuition, towards conceptual clarity about construction. Recent anthropology has also stressed the general synesthetic nature of human and artefact experience. However, these works have generated universal models (Chua and Salmond 2012: 107). Ethnographic and philosophical accounting of 'ontological difference' is imperative in understanding alternative sensorial ideologies/taxonomies (ibid.: 109).

Hands pose unique philosophical problems: as motor organs they act upon the external world, and as sensory organs they internally gather information for the mind. Then, through a synesthetic, intuitive form, these impressions constitute concepts. Thus, many concept-formation metaphors, like grasping, gripping, forming and so on, are manual, and in Bengali too, *dharan* literally means 'to hold; from which derives *dharana*, or clarified concept (Chakrabarty 2020: 52, 61). Again, the term *karan* refers to varied states: action, caste occupation, instrument/means of knowledge, the instrumental case in grammar, sense organ, body, ascetic posture, plastering or spreading with hands, and so on.<sup>3</sup> These meanings form an intricate hand-web in the context of the *mridanga*: particular castes use their hands in a heightened sensory fashion, manipulating material (ablative) to craft an object (accusative), with an ascetic's concentration, caressing clay and leather, to produce a range of harmonic rhythms. Hands are thus agents of both action and knowledge. They mediate between body/percept and mind/concept.

In Indian epistemology, *indriya* (sensory energy) is distinct from Western understandings of physiological sensory organs, and tied to ideas of transcendental cause (*kaaran*) and immanent effect (*karya*). *Indriya* is a condition determining *how* an organ perceives (Bhattacharya 2015: 43, 53–54). It is theorized as life's feminine mobilizer (*prakriti*), which emanates from the cosmic male causal principle (*purusha*); and takes on atomic forms, finally congealing as physical matter. The epistemological imagination is such that the first energy-emanation is sound-potential which generates the ether-atom (penetrability), which combines with matter to produce physical sound; then touch-potential combines with sound particles to generate the air-atom (mechanical pressure); followed by the water-atom (sticky attraction), and the earth-atom (consistent texture) (Dasgupta 1922: 252–54). This synesthetic energy universe which actively coheres consciousness with matter is palpable in the *mridanga*'s constructions. *Karan* or hand-instruments both produce the immanent form of the *mridanga* (*karya*/effect), and through playing it, also contemplate and realize the indestructible, transcendental cause (*kaaran*) of universal life as sonic vibration. Effect and cause are thus tied through hands. *Mridanga* makers' hands fondle moist clay to produce sophisticated sound, both clay and sound understood as primeval cosmic expressions (see also Nicholson 2010: 29–30), and *mridanga* players then sound the material clay-vessel to interiorly understand the drum's-body's spiritually equivalent exchange. The drum's

makers and players thus have related ways of realizing the unity of effect-cause, immanence-transcendence, through their hands.

Intellectual discourses concerning the *mridanga* are exchanged among practitioners as both sensory transmission and cognitive communication. In this, hands' phenomenological capacities as simultaneously affective and conceptual – the latter bearing multilayered significance in giving intuitive tactile and sonic form to perceptive cues, communicating those cues between craftsmen and musicians, and infusing matter with the discursive intent of cultural ideas – play a critical role.

Hands' in-betweenness among mind-body, cognitive-sensory dimensions and transcendence-immanence is also productively analysed in Western philosophy. Just as hands reflect divine consciousness in Indian philosophy, Aristotle asserted in *De Anima* that hands are the sense of all senses, instrument of all instruments, and mirror of the soul (Shorten 1983: 1). He added: '... the soul is a form for forms, just as the hand is a tool for tools' (ibid.). Like hands as meta-tool users essentially determine matter's manipulability, all image forms congeal in the soul's apprehending abilities. Aristotle's mediation between the 'sensible' and 'thinkable' through hands (ibid.: 13) pre-empts Immanuel Kant's (1978) position on sensibility or intuition. Kant argued that touch anticipates form through hands, as senses form imprints through imagination. The abilities to form and sense together constitute rationality, according to Kant, and rationality's most embodied expression, he asserts therefore, are human hands (1978: 42, 240). The immediate medium of exchange, hands, are therefore tools of cognitive, moral and aesthetic rational life for Kant, and these simultaneous capacities fundamentally add to theorizations of exchange in our ethnographic context, as discussed above.

The philosophical thrust on hands has influenced cognitive anthropology, cognitive science of religion, phenomenology, neuropsychology, neurophysiology and so on. Overriding the nature-nurture binary, Marchand (2012: 268) thus argues that the brain, through the spinal cord and nervous system, down to fingertips, forms a single sensorimotor web. Tallis (2003) also proposes a philosophical anthropology binding biology and metaphysics, referring to humans' peculiar agentive evolution as 'handkind'. Wilson (1998) simply states therefore that 'brain is hand and hand is brain' (ibid.: 307), and argues that hands' inimitable structure of sensorimotor and cognitive abilities constitutes human intellect and self-consciousness.

Taken together, therefore, Indian and Western philosophical-anthropological ideas of the hand-mind, hand-brain, hand-body, hand-matter, hand-consciousness and so on provide significant vantage points on hands' sensory and intellectual functions. The essentially tied concerns in cosmology, anthropology and phenomenology have influenced my interpretations of the lifeworld of the *mridanga*, whose makers, players and meditative listeners understand the drum's resonance as the original cosmic buzz, while their exchange of the sacred drum's touch and sounds draws them as equivalent agents of an intellectual universe.

## Producing, Consuming, Sounding Hands

*Mridanga* instrumental techniques involve hand-practices which draw sensory and cognitive correspondences between its makers and players. Similarly, the player's hands produce sympathetic effects in the listener's body. Ethnographic descriptions of making/playing/feeling the *mridanga* are thus simultaneous analyses of hands, and their intellectual and affective exchange of ideas which equate the substantive constitutions of the bodies of the drum's producer, player, sonic consumer, and even the object itself.

The sacred membranophone, the *mridanga*, is a conical clay drum, 23–24 inches in length and 42–45 inches in diameter, its rims and body-straps made of cow skin. The right-hand side, when struck, produces a sharp tune with loud resonance, and the bigger-mouthed left side a grave, bass, hollow thud. The *mridanga* sounds forcefully addictive, with full reverberation between rims, and a subtle echo audible within proximity. Its distinctive acoustic producing tonal sounds essentially depends on minute fine-tuning by stretching with palms its thirty-two longitudinal leather straps. Gripping them tightly, the maker pulls them with thorough, equal tension and distributed force, while also ensuring differential tightness (stretched on the right side and flappier on the left) to produce harmonic rhythms. *Mridanga* makers and players unequivocally told me that they understand the thirty-two leather weaves as thirty-two syllables of the devotional chant popularized by Chaitanya (Ha-re-Krish-na-Ha-re-Krish-na-Krish-na-Krish-na-Ha-re-Ha-re-Ha-re-Ra-ma-Ha-re-Ra-ma-Ra-ma-Ra-ma-Ha-re-Ha-re). These chants, they said, also constitute the devotional human body, once again drawing ontological correspondence between the bodies of the drum and devotees. Manual pulling of the strings is thus interpreted as realizing the instrument and meditative body as equivalent vibrations.

Instrumentalists' knowledge about craftsmanship and playing is linked with cultural understandings of aural meditation. Specialist players are not only experienced in difficult rhythm techniques, but, like makers, are mostly part of an oral sound yogic tradition equating the drum with the body's constitution. The percussion instrument, they emphasized, is not an ordinary musical instrument, but direct embodied divinity (*sakkhat bigroho*), its distinctive tonality therefore not requiring external artificial tuning. Once crafted by the experienced caste maker, the drum is said to acquire sacrality. When the drum is subsequently exchanged in the market, the maker also shares his manual sacrality with the player. Further, being part of the same religious culture, the maker and player conceptualize its metaphysics similarly. Thus, in a peculiar practice for percussion instruments, Sanskrit mantras are offered to the *mridanga* before performances.

I have keenly observed that as the player's hands variously strike, grip and tremble with fingers, thump, produce friction through rubbing with palms, and thud with the wrists on the *mridanga's* body, it produces complicated rhythmic

structures – whose precise mathematics are memorized by players – and also harmonic reverberation which impacts the listening body with a thunderous yet tuneful audition. Through my later discussions with experienced players, I understood that the right side's sharper resonance and left side's hollow echo together produce different tones with congruous relations. Such a rare tuneful timbre which together moves players' and listeners' bodily biorhythms also affects spiritual imaginations, centring the body-instrument. The *mridanga*'s sonic materiality is thus intellectually conceptualized as divinity. This material and spiritual sensibility is exchanged between the hands of the maker-player and the bodies of the player-listener.

Traditionally, the lowest and 'untouchable' castes make the instrument, while players, belonging to upper castes, are not involved in craftsmanship, the stench of leather and clay's immediate skin-touch considered defiling for their hands. Upper-caste players, however, use their hands in the most hyper-sensitized manner to sound the already-crafted instrument. The sensory mind-bodies of both makers and players are indeed trained to be equivalent in expertise, by respective gurus, through decades of intensive teaching. The production of sound thus depends on sedimented skills and exchange between their hands' tactile-auditory capacities. The untouchable maker's mind embodies an empathic manual continuity of exchange with the upper-caste player's body, as it cognitively anticipates all the toned rhythms that the player's hands shall yield, based on his initial manoeuvring of matter. As a craftsman commented about his relationship with a player, who has been a faithful procurer of his *mridangas* for several decades, and whose fathers were also loyal associates in the instrument's market exchange, 'a pair of good hands always identify another'. So, makers' and players' exchange of material and intuitive hand-practices produces synchronous affects in a sonic universe. Their kinaesthetic viscera and synesthetic relations together 'form the auditory membrane' of conceptual exchange (Hirschkind 2006: 27; Wilson 1998: 97).

Alongside economic and ritual/symbolic exchange, makers and players are therefore part of the same philosophical culture of sacred sound, which involves exchange between them at much subtler levels too. Thus, the 'lower'-caste origin narratives and 'upper'-caste playing aesthetics conjure similar ideas about the acoustic universe. The *mridanga* thus mediates between the hand-worlds of the social economy of caste, and sonic philosophy. This offers the possibility of a fundamental reconceptualization of the phenomenon of exchange: different castes and production-consumption vocations are drawn into relations of symphonic equivalence, such that their differences are eventually dissolved through the exchange of intellectual discourses concerning their essential corporeal sameness. Such sameness is uniquely shared between the exchanging parties, as well as the object exchanged. Further, such intellectual exchange is in fact afforded by the phenomenological status of the medium of exchange, hands themselves, as simultaneously material and discursive, immanent and transcendent.

I developed a special rapport with Shyamal Das, a middle-aged, deft *mridanga* craftsman, in southern Kolkata. His *mridangas* are highly sought after by Bengal's urban and rural buyers. I observed his meticulous crafting process sitting on many occasions in his shop. A *mridanga* maker easily works for twelve uninterrupted hours, and each work-stage depends on hereditary corporeal knowledge and skilled cognitive practice. *Mridanga* making is thus about a thorough mind-body exchange for the maker.

Suppliers provide makers with the *mridanga's* clay mould and the cow-hide. Clay (*mati*) is considered fundamentally sacred. I studied a potters' village, Panchmura (Bankura district), where, in the Indian philosophical image of God-as-earthmaker, potters form the *mridanga's* shell (like the human body) through dextrous play of malleable earth and playful fingers. They assess the earthy consistency, thicken it with water and fire it well to make the texture resistant: sound then remains contained, rebounding within the vessel's walls rather than escaping through porous earth texture. Craftsmen used the *poramati* (burnt clay) metaphor and explained that the earth-made human body – heated through spiritual discipline – mirrors processed burnt clay. Both the body and drum, when appropriately cultivated, realize the transcendental sonic buzz of cosmic male-female union within themselves. The hands that make and play the divine drum therefore realize the body-drum's equivalence.

*Mridanga* makers' tactile knowledge includes details about raw-skin portions, and different kinds of hand-pulls. All handwork needs to be moderate, since being made of mud, the instrument can otherwise break. Cow-stomach skin is loose and expandable, and thus excluded, as it cannot produce quality sound. For the *mridanga's* right side, which produces a sharp tone, skin is flayed from the cow's least-stretchable shoulder region; for the left-side hollower mouth, softer calf-skin is chosen. The skin's rough edges are scraped with a knife, then all leather is soaked in water, cleaned, squeezed to drain the water, dried, pencil marks are made on it with specific measurements, and it is cut in perfect circles to fit the circumference. Smashed clay moistly clotted with a glue made of rice-paste is then plastered on the two sides' middle portion symmetrically in concentric circles. Eventually, the skin for the two sides is well processed and acquires paper-like manoeuvrability: soft, swift, smooth, and supple to the touch. Circular pieces of leather are then spirally cut to produce thirty-two long strips, vertically tied to horizontal spherical leather fittings on the two ends. The strings are finger-woven with equal adjacent tension across the circumferences, but differential tightness on the right and left sides. This synchronicity is trying, and involves skilful balancing: feet push the *mridanga*, and hands simultaneously pull the strings. The entire range of craftsmen's manual processes – flaying, assessing flaccidity, scraping, soaking, cleaning, squeezing, drawing, cutting, smashing, clotting, plastering, tying, tautening and scaling – indicate the intense embroilment of sensory hands with intellectual processes of measurement, memory and anticipation.

These work-stages require powerful concentration, sensory nimbleness and immaculate coordination of mind-hands-eyes-feet, through what Shyamal

proudly calls *andaaj* (intuition). Craftsmen's continuous repetition is unfailing, in both cognitive alertness and bodily attention. Similarly, Marchand (2012: 264–66), in describing bimanual coordination, speaks of a 'Zen'-like meditative present-focus balancing mental and sensory practices. Most craftsmen, however, never explained *mridanga's* construction conceptually, but only offered concrete details. This is not because they are steeped in unthinking materiality, but as Shyamal said, 'These matters are ... part of our intuition'. Millroy (1991: 5, 20) similarly argued, while working with geometric concepts in a carpentry workshop, that craftsmen's 'frozen' intellectual mathematics are hidden in *concrete problematics*. Thus, conceptual truths are engraved within material hand-experiences, an intellectual-sensory exchange sedimented as manual habitus.

The details of the maker's construction process enable us to conceptualize how the player's hands produce the drum's divine sounds. This is because, through generations, the maker's (producer's) and player's (consumer's) hands have learnt how to exchange affects, and respond to each other's vocations. Their sharing of the drum's material ontology is the particular form of intellectual exchange here, made sense of by all participants concerned through discourses of a common religious culture.

*Mridanga* learning is complex, and through experienced hands its originality comes to life. C.V. Raman was caught by how *mrdangam* craftsmen's hands design percussion harmonic beats, and players' hands manifest them: acoustic science ingrained in manual exchanges.<sup>4</sup> *Mridanga* beats are mathematically intense, with long intervals and arithmetic formulations of pace and tempo. Thus, alongside the concentrated use of all fingers, including the thumb (rare in other percussion instruments), extensive mental calculations are extant. Exactly like makers, *mridanga* players also display nuanced exchanges of hand-techniques and cognitive assessments. Musicians explained that craftsmen construct three leather parts on the *mridanga's* surfaces, depending upon how much they pull, tauten, rub, tighten or plaster them: a central volatile portion creating undulating soundwaves, a black rice-paste-thickened middle portion flattening the waves, and a hard rim of thick consistency. They explained further that although the *mridanga* has a sharp resonance, its tune, if extremely high, would crack the sound's tonality. The instrument's harmonics thus go up to a certain octave, then become indistinct and fade with a nasal tapering when the edges are played.

*Mridanga* makers demonstrate a mathematically concrete science of this harmony production, achieved by congruously joining/superposing/condensing with their hands the different leather straps (see also Raman 1922: 476; 1935: 457). Similarly, *mridanga* players demonstrated how the drum's tonal experience is produced through their manoeuvrable techniques of placing, striking and releasing fingers on the black, white middle and white edge portions. The central portion produces maximum tonality with finger, palm and wrist placements/movements, the black portion produces a suppressing sound, and the rim a sharp, nasal tone (Raman 1922: 477). Once again, explained

through the science of acoustic production, the drum's efficacy is the result of intellectual and affective manual sharing between the maker and player.

This hand sharing and intellectual exchange about its discursive meaning also transfers to the listener's body. The mathematical loud thuds and tuned feel invariably make the people of *kirtan* collectives clap their hands and sway their bodies. With loud strikes, I always felt the bumpy rhythm beat in the lower abdomen, chest, ears and spine, while the tuneful echoes ring in the eardrums, and the climax reached when a rhythm cycle ends to merge with the higher *mridanga* nasal tones felt at the back of the head as a fading buzz. My head would reel in an ecstatic aftertaste of the intense hollow sounds rumbling inside the body, and the ringing ears would fuse and rest in a cranial humming nasal sensation. I also felt goosebumps and a spinal shudder at this point, and these affects finally culminated in my hands becoming numb. Thus, while the maker's and player's hands are already tied in constructing and sounding harmonic *mridanga* rhythms ending with a distinct nasality, listening intently to the drum while also observing the player's skilful hands makes the listener also literally feel/imprint the player's hands: drumming vicariously and realizing the drum within. The transcendental causal buzz which percussionist meditators explained as being the uniting principle of the body and *mridanga*, then cause the listener's spine to also sense the nasal ring of cosmic sound, ending in the spine's bio-channel: the hands and fingertips.

Thus, hands construct a harmonic percussion instrument, hands manifest resonance in rhythm, and hands intuit the cosmic first hum of existence. Practitioners' sonic meditation practices draw further aesthetic similitudes between the *mridanga's* body and devotee's body-*mridanga*. With religious cultivation, both vessels, they emphasized, experience the universal nasal drone (*naad*). The profound sensory exchange among the hands of the drum maker, player and listener thus materializes within their intellectual exchange of ideas correlating their spiritually cultivated bodies, hands and acoustic universe with the perfectly crafted and sounded *mridanga*. So, craftsmen enable the *mridanga* to sound differently with varied strikes, and musicians believe that these sounds correspond to the *mridanga's* secret alphabet combinations (*bols*) held in its various parts. These hums, while played by *mridanga* instrumentalists, are also exactly replicated through oral mimicking. I have closely observed percussionists' hand-sound mechanics. During any *kirtan* performance, at first the *mridanga* player only accompanies, his hands moving in cadences set by the singer. After some time, the singer literally gives him a free hand, when, musicians explained, rhythming becomes a directly spiritual act: their immanent hands then realize and unite with the transcendental body-instrument. Their meditative posture is then evident: they stand up with the *mridanga* hanging from their shoulders, shut their eyes tight, escalating and relaxing beats at will, jump high with intense rhythms, sometimes shouting the corresponding *bols*, at times stopping the drumming completely, orally narrating animated *bols*, and then returning to play them with their hands, since their hand-mouths echo the same inner vibration (*naad*), and eventually reach a trance-like climactic state. While

I cannot play the *mridanga*, my listening hands exchanged the same sensations with the player, as his do with the maker's.

The player's trance is palpable in the arrested or frozen position of the head and spine, and his transfixed eyes. Unlike other beats in which the two hands move variously, at this point the hands shake on the exact axis along central positions of the left and right sides with the same intensity, caught in a dazed stirring stillness. The nasal climactic sound produced at this point is known as the AUMMMMM... (or *guruguruguruguru...*) sound, which practitioners asserted embodies for the player's-listener's-mediator's inner body the original transcendental hum representing cosmic male-female union. The maker's manual construction thus transfers the *mridanga's* entire sacred potential, including the nasal AUM hum, to the player's hand-capacities, and his playing, in turn, shares it with the listener's body and hands. Participants of the *mridanga* universe exchange not only the material object, but also its sensory and intellectual potential in entirety.

Percussionist meditators specifically explained how they experience the simultaneous transcendence of the body and drum. Harekrishna Haldar grew up in Navadvip, Chaitanya's birthplace, the most important centre of *kirtan* and *mridanga* worship. He clarified sound metaphysics well, as he regularly explains the philosophies during *kirtan* performances. He said: 'Both our body and *mridanga* are produced through vibrations of Radha-Krishna's sexual union, felt as the AUM (alternately *guruguruguruguru...*) buzz. This pleasurable hum is experienced at the hands' contact point of the body-instrument ... and hands attain *siddhi* (spiritual perfection) ... AUM also transforms to different yogic sounds in the body's *chakras* (energy-centres, arranged along the spine and corresponding to the anus, genitalia, navel, chest, throat and head), and fades with the nasal "M" sound in the forehead region'. Similarly, the *mridanga* too is imagined by percussionists as divided into vertical energy centres just like the body, its sounds also merging in the drum's rim as a nasal drone. This rim-sound is alphabetically represented through nasal *bols*, like *jha*, *jhni*, *jhini* and so on.

The sacred drum's metaphysics thus hinges on obsessively shivering hands, the immediate medium of participants' sensory and intellectual exchange. Gourchandra Pal, Navadvip's (and Bengal's) senior percussionist and sound mediator, summarized the final stages of the drum experience: 'Our bodies and instrument are manifestations of AUM ... when playing the *mridanga's* two sides for a long time, our breathing almost stops ... and hands become numb and sensitive. The hands and entire body shake with a buzz (AUMMMMM... sound). This trembling embodies cosmic vibration, and is called *murchon* or *maton* (fainting/ecstasy)'. Gurus instruct players not to stop striking the *mridanga* then, despite the fatigued, lazy hand sensation, since the nasal hand-tin-gling, rather than being understood as neuropathy, is relished as divine grace.

In the intellectual world of the *mridanga* shared among its maker, player and listener, the body/hands and instrument are thus perfect homologues. The harmonic percussion instrument is modelled after the yogic body, and the body

cultivated as a tuneful percussion instrument. This body itself is an exchangeable corpus among the producers, consumers and the instrument itself.

In sum, then, the market exchange of the *mridanga* is situated within much larger discursive contexts of affective and intellectual sharing of sacred sound practices among the makers and players of the sacred drum. Despite caste differences among them, they have intuitive senses about each other's manual experiences. There are also precise sensory and cognitive exchanges in the production and consumption practices of the instrument's sound. Further, there are similar sensory exchanges between the player's and listener's bodies and hands. Material market exchange is thus propelled and continued due to the ingrained memory of sensory exchanges sedimented over generations among *mridanga* makers, players and aesthetes. Such material and intense affective exchanges are made sense of, materialized and actualized through intellectual exchanges of religious ideas merging bodies, hands and percussion.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Exchange with Hands**

An ethnographic and analytical focus on hands – the most immediate and primordial agent of exchange – helps to radically reimagine the question of exchange, since it effectively dissolves boundaries of material, sensory and intellectual sharing. As sensorimotor organs, hands both sense intensely and work with motor intent. Such motor intent implicates both cognitive skill and discursive imaginations. Thus, hands are able to simultaneously engender material exchange in the market, and both sensory and intellectual exchanges among the exchanging agents.

This chapter has demonstrated that the material exchange of the religious percussion instrument, the *mridanga*, in Bengal's markets has a long history, which derives its rationale and impetus from deeply held discursive ideas about nuanced sensory exchanges which take place between the hands of the producers and consumers of the *mridanga*, as well as the drum itself. The *mridanga*'s material and symbolic exchange thus materializes within cultures of an intellectual exchange about hands. Further, intellectual exchange also occurs through and between hands themselves, since hands' affective and cognitive-discursive properties are analysed as organically coeval. The intellectual exchange among the *mridanga*'s participants essentially understands the (differential caste) hands and bodies of 'untouchable' makers, specialized musicians and meditative listeners as ontologically equivalent with each other and even the object exchanged (*mridanga*), since all participants of the exchange process are conceptualized as spiritually cultivated representations of divine sound. Further, such simultaneous affective and intellectual exchange is enabled by the phenomenology of hands themselves, which are transgressing mediums between matter-consciousness, body-mind, sensory-motor skills, action-thought, person-object, self-other, and immanence-transcendence.

Following routes of an ethnophilosophical ethnography, and bringing together discussions in anthropology, (Western and) Indian philosophy, and lived narratives of makers, players and meditators of the *mridanga*, this chapter has analysed craftsmen's and instrumentalists' hands as producers and consumers of an auditory cosmos, experienced equally within the musical instrument and physical body. It has described imaginations about hands as experiencing, understanding, creating and eventually dissolving in a buzzing cosmic origin of sound. In hands making the *mridanga*, the craftsman's body externalizes its own sonic/spiritual potential. Then, as the maker sells/hands over the *mridanga* to the player, he not only exchanges the object, but more significantly shares the instrument's, and thereby his own, corporeal spirituality with the player. Their hand-skins then unite as equivalent reflections of sacred sound, and also the drum. Subsequently, in hands playing the *mridanga*, the player's body internally merges with the instrument sounds. The body-instrument's echoes finally fade in a cosmic ether-buzz, whose nasal tones are sensed on literally tingling hands. Finally, these sensations are exchanged between the player's and listeners' bodies. We thus have a situation of continuous and contiguous affective and intellectual exchanges: for all participants of exchange, between their sensory and cognitive dispositions, between the hands of the maker and player, and the bodies of the player and listener. Affective exchanges of sound are made possible through intellectual exchanges, and these together engender the meaning of the *mridanga's* market exchange.

Ideas of both instrument and exchange have thus been recast: the object or musical instrument, the person's senses (as instruments of knowledge) and hands (as instruments of production, drum playing, as well as exchange) have been established as equivalent agents in a discursive tradition. Such rare experiences of affective equivalence among exchanging persons and objects are understood and propagated through active intellectual exchanges among the people, transmitted over generations, and directly shared through practised cultivations of hands and drum skins.

This chapter's contributions, therefore, are to conceptualize exchange as simultaneously material, sensory and intellectual. All exchange occurs in discursive contexts, and hands, as primary agents of exchange, phenomenologically mediate as sensory organs of cognitive blueprints and motor organs of discursive intent, these dimensions of cognition and discourse making hands critical agents of intellectual exchange. Hands are thus most immediate mediums of discourse and affect sharing. Second, our ethnographic context enables a radical ideal of exchange, wherein differences and hierarchies of the participants of exchange, and the object exchanged, are ultimately undone. Third, it is precisely in the materialization of such a philosophy of exchange with human hands that the intellectual exchange of Bengal's devotional and musical discourse finds revitalized life over centuries.

The powerful Hindu goddess, Kali, wears a waistband of severed human hands, this 'fetish' (Baker 1888) signifying devotees sacrificing their hands, the instruments of knowledge, karmic actions and exchange – what Indian (and

Western) philosophical traditions identify as markers of human supremacy, rationality and feeling – to the dark deity of transcendence. Exchange then does not remain only a matter of the transfer of objects and thoughts, but becomes also the radical potential of undoing immanent differences through material, sensory and intellectual sharing.

**Sukanya Sarbadhikary** works at the interface of the anthropology of religion, anthropology of embodiment, religious studies and philosophy. She tries to locate the body, materials, senses, intuition, experience, imagination and sacrality in the interstices of everyday lives and strong philosophical traditions. Her first work was an intensive ethnography among different kinds of Bengal-Vaishnavas, focusing on diverse experiences of religious place and sensory apprehensions of divine affect. Her book, *The Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism* (University of California Press), was published in 2015. She is also passionately interested in aesthetics and sound, and their relations with sacred embodiment. She is currently working on a range of devotional instruments, communities involved in their making, playing, listening, meditating, and associated traditions of sonic metaphysics in Bengal.

### Notes

1. His theorizations were based on the Carnatic drum, the *mrdangam*, strongly resembling the *mridanga* in its construction and functioning.
2. For details on the discursive uses of the term *karan* in Hindusim, see <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/karana>.
3. For explanations of these various meanings of the term, see <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/karana>.
4. Raman's sound-physics bears distinct parallels with practitioners' narratives (Raman 1920: 500; 1922: 475–77; 1935: 455–58, 460; see also Tarlekar 1991: 165–70).

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