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Beyond Seeing: Embodied Multisensory Performance, Experience, and Practice in Contemporary Transnational Gaudiya Vaishnavism

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Scholarship across disciplines defines darshan as “seeing and being seen” by a deity, most often in Hindu temples. Through ethnographic research of everyday, individual performances of darshan by Gaudiya Vaishnava devotees across the southeastern United States, this project expands this characterization of darshan to explore the practice in its lived expressions within a specific theological context. This project reframes the conversation about everyday practices of darshan across Hindu traditions and proposes that scholars look at context, embodiment, relationships, and actual performances of what devotees refer to as darshan to understand the role and meaning of this practice in their daily lives.

With this reframing, I move away from generalized, static definitions of darshan and propose instead that the practice is one of possibilities for relationships created and performed by a devotee. When contextualized in the case studies of this project, I show that darshan becomes a part of hearing and speaking the names of the divine, that it is critical to creating specific relationships of intimacy and enjoyment between devotee and deity, and that both are done within theological structures unique to the context of this community. Through this contextualization, I argue that we can abstract thematic elements of darshan, representing an analytical category of practices that are intersensorial, are located at the intersection of relationship and aesthetics, and are learned within distinct theological structures of practice and performance.