

*Escape to Outer Limits: An Ethnography of Women and Children Migrating to Utopia in
Mayapur, India*

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Escape to Outer Limits examines how the search for a different world and religious community propels around five thousand people, most of whom arrive in family units, to migrate to the rural countryside in West Bengal to build a Vedic city. I detail the reasons why educated women from across India and around the world, with the largest populations from the US, Russia, and Europe, “opt out” of the mainstream to build a new life in rural West Bengal.

My book begins with an examination of the utopian impulse as a historical concept that informs twenty-first century religious migration and community formations in opposition to late-capitalist modernity. Beginning with the history of utopia in sixteenth-century Europe to its exportation to India in the nineteenth century, I discuss how utopian thought has shaped the Gaudiya Vaishnava religious movement and the creation of Mayapur.

Design is a crucial component in curating an atmosphere of substantive interactions among diverse participants. I argue that architectural forms and spatial arrangements of Mayapur’s housing units, stores, religious center, gardens, and schools are productive mirrors of Mayapur’s religious ideologies that also play a significant role in creating an environment that fosters affective relations and meaningful interactions across ethnic, linguistic, as well as species boundaries.

Through video ethnography and the close analysis of everyday interactions in multilingual children’s peer-groups across different spaces, I discuss the affordances that growing up in such a utopian community has for the development of affect, empathy, and care across ethnic, racial, linguistic, and species boundaries, as well as the reflexive understandings of religious and cultural concepts that children acquire, debate, and transform.

I also discuss cultural changes initiated by the next generation of devotees as an outcome of their cosmopolitan life, especially their frequent geographical mobility, which exposes them to variability and affords contestation of localized values.