



# Listening in to water routes: Soundscapes as cultural systems

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## Abstract

In this article I draw upon ethnographic research in Govindpuri slums in Delhi, capital city of India, to explore the everyday through the politics of sound. Here I highlight the negotiations across space, gender and communities through the *listenings* of the water routes to suggest that soundscapes can be considered as cultural systems. This, I argue, could open ways into the processes of listening(s), its politics and practices – to ‘make sense’ of a place, its culture, and its communities. And through these listenings I emphasize the complexity of experience and everyday life in the Govindpuri slums.

## Keywords

listening, slums, soundscapes

The everyday life in slums is a constant negotiation with limitations. Govindpuri slums in Delhi, the capital city of India, where I conducted ethnographic research over three years, is made up of three slums, known as camps – Nehru, Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen.<sup>1</sup> The cumulative population of the three camps is 500,000 spread over an area of 5 square km, with approximately 600 families living on every hectare of land.<sup>2</sup> The density of population, lack of space, limited or non-existent infrastructure and the poor materials used for construction, are limitations which are negotiated with high levels of ingenuity. The space of Govindpuri slums has a highly porous, fluid and dynamic character.

Water is scarce in Govindpuri. None of the three camps has a regular supply of potable water. Nehru and Bhumhiheen camps have a few taps to meet the needs of the

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residents because of their proximity to the water supply networks which cater to the neighbouring middle-class settlements. The supply to these taps, however, is highly regulated and is only available for an hour early in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. Navjeevan camp has no taps. The residents of this camp have to collect and store water from the other camps or from water tankers. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) supplies water tankers to the Govindpuri camps only when it is considered to be needed – for example in summer when there are particularly severe water shortages. It is primarily the responsibility of the women in the household to arrange and store water. The everyday lives of these women are organized around water. Complex strategies have evolved to meet the water needs of households in the slums. Knowing when and where to go, sometimes travelling to sites where water is available – usually within the slums – sometimes collecting water from the tankers which are periodically summoned, involves the flow of information as well as water. These strategies require negotiations across spatial, social, sensorial, cultural and political frameworks.

### The scope of the article

In this article I will discuss ‘water routes’ – negotiations for acquiring potable water in Govindpuri slums – employing a sensorial approach, with a particular focus on sound and listening as the sensorial trope. I will propose that we might usefully think about soundscapes as cultural systems, through which a variety of social positionings and negotiations is enacted; and which can be effectively employed to explore the nuances of these negotiations. I will explore the manner in which sound is central to making sense of space (Basso and Feld, 1996: 97) in the slums of Govindpuri and plays a significant role in the power politics that unfold in the slums in the context of ‘water routes’ which, in turn, determine the spatial mobilities and engagements of different groups and communities.

By highlighting the social, sensorial, spatial and cultural complexities of everyday life in the slums, in this article I aim to emphasize that slums cannot be considered or imagined as homogenized spaces of experience or identity, as they are popularly represented in the mainstream and middle-class rhetoric. In addition, this article responds to the call by sensorial scholars across different disciplines (Basso and Feld, 1996; Feld, 2004; Howes, 2003, 2004; Classen, 1993, 1997; Smith, 2004; Stoller, 1997) to feel the ‘senses’ while also making a modest effort to fill the notable absence of ‘Third World scholars interested in auditory perception’ (Erlmann, 2004: 4). Even though these explorations are situated in the broader materiality of the slums and its various discourses, the way into ‘making sense’ of this place (Basso and Feld, 1996) is through studying processes of listening, listening politics and practices. It is hoped that the article will thereby also make a contribution to listening as a research methodology itself.<sup>3</sup>

The article is organized in three main sections. In the first section I discuss the way in which sensorial research can contribute to an enriched understanding of the everyday of slums, in general, and Govindpuri, in particular. Here I will also reflect on *listening* as a research methodology, and develop my understanding of soundscapes and their relationship to space through the concepts of acoustemology (Feld, 2004). In the second section, I will describe the soundscapes that surround the collection of water, the sonic

negotiations between individuals, groups and communities within these, and the manner in which soundscapes are used to either reiterate or circumvent one's social position. In the last section I will draw upon this ethnographic research to support my claim that soundscapes can be thought about as cultural systems.

### **Slums as worlds of senses<sup>4</sup>**

The body of work on slums in India is extensive. It variously situates slums within the discursive praxis of postcoloniality (Appadurai, 2002), environmental concerns (Ali, 1998), urban planning and legality (Ghertner, 2008; Ramanathan, 2006), relations with broader state and national politics (Dupont, 2000; Tarlo, 2003) and a developmental perspective (Davis, 2006).<sup>5</sup> These works, though significant, tend not to emphasize the everyday life and voices of slum-dwellers, since their entry point is through the agency of state, nation, legal systems and policies. To these studies, which serve to highlight the construction and 'othering' of slums in historical and urban policies, I aim to add insights into the experiential reality of slum-dwellers at an everyday level.

A strong sensorial language is often employed to delineate slum-dwellers as 'others', with 'lower senses' (Howes, 2004: 11–12), categorizing them as noisy, unsightly, smelly and thereby unwanted in the city. This is part of an effort towards accomplishing an agenda of creating a sanitized experience of the city within state-initiated and middle-class-supported schemes such as the Bhagidari system,<sup>6</sup> 'Clean Delhi, Green Delhi'<sup>7</sup> and the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Through the 'Clean Delhi, Green Delhi' campaign, initiated in 2003,<sup>8</sup> the intention is to transform Delhi into a 'world-class, truly international' city, which offers an aesthetically appealing, sanitized experience of the city to its citizens and visitors. In this scheme, anything that is seen as a pollutant – environmental, social, aesthetic or sensual – has no place in the city. A strong contributor to the Clean Delhi, Green Delhi movement was the fact that in 2003, Delhi won the bid to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games.<sup>9</sup> Thus the agenda emerged in anticipation of international attention to clean the city of all its pollutants – which acquired an urgent, almost violent, impetus to transform Delhi into an environmentally friendly, aesthetically appealing and 'truly international city'. Within this agenda, middle-class concerns around the environment, 'aesthetics, leisure, safety, and health' (Baviskar, 2007) became significant. Within imaginations of a refurbished urban landscape, the relations between slum-dwellers and the middle classes underwent a dramatic transformation. This was revealed through the vocabularies used in mainstream discourses, which further consolidated the position of slum-dwellers not only as 'illegal' but also as a 'nuisance' (Ghertner, 2008). Within this framing, slum-dwellers are also denied a right to the city on account of being 'unpleasant or dangerous' (Howes, 2004: 11–12).

### **Listening in to 'Others'**

The exploration of the everyday in the slums through sensorial frameworks highlights its complex negotiations across space, gender and communities. In this article, even though I investigate the everyday life of the Govindpuri slums through sonic cultures, I do not disregard the importance of other senses – vision, touch, smell and taste (Howes, 2003).

The focus on sound emerged as an important and unresearched category of identity and experience during my fieldwork. The materiality of the Govindpuri slums, the limited 'visual opportunity' (Rice, 2003) there, and the restricted mobility of slum-dwellers – especially women – accentuated the importance of sound as a cultural system and hearing as a sense used to 'make sense of a place' (Basso and Feld, 1996: 97). In my discussions with both middle-class residents from neighbouring areas and slum-dwellers, while their social and cultural interactions were limited, the sonic presence of the 'other' was acutely felt and could not be ignored. All sounds of Govindpuri slums are articulated as *noise* (and thus a 'nuisance') in the middle-class narratives. On an everyday level this often resulted in slum-dwellers being silenced though limiting their sonic performances, for example, by restrictions on their use of loudspeakers during festivals and celebrations, imposed with the help of local authorities. However the exploration of everyday experiences in Govindpuri through the politics of sound revealed that the middle classes are as much a noisy other for the slum-dwellers as the latter are for the former. In fact, the 'sonically ordered sense of self' (Rice, 2003: 8) of the slum-dwellers allows them an agency to identify, construct and negotiate with their own 'other'. Sonically they have an agency that is otherwise mostly denied to them. In the mainstream media, slums and slum-dwellers are represented through a middle-class lens and middle-class vocabularies as homogenized spaces and communities. The complexities of soundscapes in Govindpuri slums reveal otherwise.

## Learning to listen

The research informing this article employed an ethnographic approach. It opened up a dialogic experience, interpretation and insight in the engagement I had with the residents of Govindpuri slums. It was this intimacy I shared with the residents, especially with the women, which emphasized the importance of sound and practices of listening in the everyday life of the slums. However my initial *listening(s)* were limited as my ears were closed (Murray Schaffer, 2003) to a sonic regime, and its nuances, outside of my middle-class construction. Once conscious of my own middle-class informed *listening(s)* into the Govindpuri slums, I was able to raise questions outside of this sensibility – 'Who's listening? What are they listening to? And, what are they ignoring or refusing to listen to?' (Murray Schaffer, 2003: 25). I became aware of my own sonic prejudices and a different way of listening to the space. I listened in to what people listened to and did not listen to, whether consciously, subconsciously, covertly or overtly. I heard them listening in to others. I listened in to what they heard as others. I heard them listening to themselves. And as I succumbed to the humility which Paul Stoller insists is critical to sensuous scholarship, enabling 'the sensuous scholar to confront the terrifying eternity of the social universe with the lightness of a caress, with the smile of humble comprehension' (1997: 137), the soundscape emerged as a cultural system.

By insisting on humbleness as a much-needed perspective and personal trait, Stoller (1997) highlights the phenomenal task that lies ahead in building a robust epistemological, academic and intellectual tradition for sensual scholarship. Senses as *ethnographic objects* are tenuous and delicate. Senses as *ethnographic agendas* are complex and

overlapping (Pink, 2009). It is not merely a matter of ‘describing the way things look or smell in the land of others’ (Stoller, 1997: 9). A sensual scholar needs to surrender to the world of senses – their meanings, their connections, their articulations and aspirations – humbly and patiently, while acknowledging preconceived notions and prejudices. A sensual scholar needs to have the sensibility for the senses as they are sensed in different contexts. In short, making sense of *senses* is not an undertaking without its moment of sensorial-intellectual-methodological numbness, deafness and blindness.

The scope of sensorial scholarship is immense, and has been gaining increased importance. At once, it challenges the legacy of Cartesian, western epistemological tradition, allows avenues to explore different histories and realities, accords a *voice* to silent minorities and forgotten histories, and explodes spaces beyond the cartographic moment into an enriching multi-dimensional experience (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2004).

## Acoustemology

Steven Feld introduced the idea of acoustemology to emphasize the role played by sound, and its socio-cultural translations, to make sense of a place (Basso and Feld, 1997; Feld, 2004). He drew on his work over several years among Kaluli people, who live in the Bosvai region in Papua New Guinea. Through this framework he addresses the treatment of aural cultural practices and auditory senses through the visual–auditory divide, which is often portrayed as an either/or situation and with a detached understanding of the senses other than vision as being relevant only among ‘non-Western cultural “others”’ (Feld, 2004: 184). It also informs the manner in which soundscapes can enrich the understanding of a space and its community’s social, cultural and political negotiations.

Acoustemology is ‘an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth’ (Feld, 2004:185). It is a framework, a way of thinking, a keen hearing into a culture, space and people which highlights the ‘acoustic dimension’ of grounding reality in that context. However, it does not presuppose that this reality is singularly ‘acoustic’ in nature. While acknowledging the importance of hearing in navigating the rainforest, Feld insists on acoustemology as an intersensorial (Howes, 2004, 2006) experience in which ‘audition is always in an interplay with other senses’ (Feld, 2004: 186). By highlighting the engagement of Kaluli people in the rainforest, where the scope of visual engagement is limited on account of the dense vegetation, he demonstrates how information carried in the soundscapes can be significant in making sense of a place. He engages with the materiality of space – the manner in which sound echoes, reverberates and diffuses as it travels in time – as an important factor lending it a specific sonic peculiarity.

The acoustemological conceptualization presents soundscapes as maps through which a space can be decoded; they have information about the space’s materiality by way of echoes and reverbs, the density of the space in its resonances, and profiles of its producers in their sonic variety. If listened in to, it also conveys significant information about the relationship between different producers in its ‘trajectories of ascent, descent, arch, level, or undulation’ (Feld, 2004: 185). This framework provides a relevant reference point for this study of sound in the slums. It allows us to move beyond the either/or ‘visual–auditory’ divide towards a comprehensive ‘and also’ approach while examining

the materiality of the connections and interactions between space and sound. It opens the possibility of exploring soundscapes as cultural systems through which social and cultural ordering is instituted and power structures and hierarchies exercised.

Tom Rice's (2003) acoustemological investigation of sound and self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary not only stretches the scope of Feld's framing, but also reveals the manner in which sound can be central to engagements with a space's culture and materiality as well as the complex interplay of power, identity and control within it. It makes a strong case for hearing being 'privileged as a sensory mode' (Howes, 1991: 84) in certain spaces and contexts, both to exert and subvert control. Rice's insights reveal complex nuances of patients' engagement with the space of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary through its soundscapes – highlighting the manner in which sound can be effectively employed to impose strategic and categorical hierarchies, which are, more often than not, reflective of the corresponding spatial, social, cultural and political positionings. In this setting a strong 'sonically ordered sense of self' (Rice, 2003: 8) emerged. He draws a link between practices of hearing and the 'subtle articulation and exercise of power' (2003: 9). He exemplified it through the accounts of patients who, even though they are intimately involved in the hospital's soundscape, have little, or no, control over it. Many of them felt *disempowered* by the awareness that while they could not listen to everything, they were being constantly *listened to*.

The complexity and negotiations of the space in Govindpuri slums demonstrate how different practices of listening are political acts. The sonic practices and politics, which I will discuss at length in the next section, highlight that listening is not a sonically neutral act. In order to engage with these politics in a nuanced and informed manner I draw a distinction between listeners and hearers. The positions of listener and hearer are politically informed, and thus are significant in determining the permissions of sonic production, performance and articulation available to a group, individual or community. They are, more often than not, extensions of social, cultural and political positions.

The *listener* sonically dominates, owing to their social, cultural and political legitimacy (and choice and power) to keep their 'ear open or closed' (Murray Schaffer, 2003: 25). The listener can keep their 'ears open', proactively engage with a soundscape and allow it multiple articulations. By deliberately closing their ears to a soundscape, the listener can deny it any scope of articulation or engagement whatsoever. Often, this sonic strategy is adopted by dominant groups to identify all sounds of the 'other' as nuisance. The listener dominates a soundscape by having the legitimacy to articulate sound as acceptable sound, as noise or as silence. The listener can dominate a soundscape by determining the nature of audible utterances, the sanctioned time and place for it, and the decibel levels. Alternatively, the listener can extend their control by demanding silence.

Listening is proactive, engaged hearing, while hearing is disempowered listening. The *hearer* does not necessarily possess the social, cultural and political currency to categorize sounds as valid and acceptable in a context. The listener–hearer relationship is a 'monologue of power' (Attali, 1985: 9), where the hearer cannot participate in shaping or altering sonic acts and their articulations.

## Fluid materiality

### *Listening in to the water route*

The water soundscapes play a very important role in the everyday life of the Govindpuri slums. It is around these that everyday life, especially of women, is organized. The soundscapes of the Govindpuri slums witness definite, if not dramatic, sonic transformations with water flows. These involve:

- preparations such as arranging plastic containers, forming queues, announcing the arrival of water;
- movements across the camps to fill water containers;
- filling containers; and
- carrying the water back to homes.

The sounds of water flowing and the filling of plastic and other containers, mingle with footsteps, calls, shouts, fights and whispers. These find a distinct place in the broader soundscape of the Govindpuri slums, populated by amplified music, poorly reverberated sounds and traffic sounds, among others.

Even though the taps in Nehru and Bhumhiheen camps are communal, control is exercised by individuals, groups and communities – particularly if taps are in the vicinity of their houses. In order to use the taps, residents who do not have access to them have to enter into a ‘deal’ with the householder. The successful negotiation of a deal depends on the social-cultural standing of the individual/household in question. It is usually extended as a social favour, though it is not uncommon for certain individuals/households to pay a monthly rent to the ‘owner’. Depending on the position of the *paani bharne whaale*, loosely translated as ‘those who fill water’, their position in the queue is determined.

For most women, the route and routine of fetching water provides the only legitimized mobility available to venture into other camps. They are, however, strictly prohibited from doing so alone, and refrain from ‘hanging around’ for longer than is necessary to fill water containers. There is no fixed hour for the water supply in the afternoons; it can start any time between 1.00 and 4.00 p.m. Under the restrictions within which the main ‘fillers’ – those who fill the water containers – operate, ingenious strategies have to be employed to announce the water supply has begun. The queue for water starts forming around midday. The usual practice for people – depending on their positions – is to leave behind their containers and announce this to the caretaker. The caretaker is usually an individual from the household closest to the tap.

Around midday, taps become the site where multiple soundscapes intersect. Here, groups start forming, slowly and steadily. The women who live in the vicinity gather around hours before the water supply is available. It is around the taps that everyday information is exchanged, gossip relished and fights resolved. The stillness of the mid-morning is slowly and steadily taken over by the melody of pots, containers, conversations, street-criers, music and mobile ring tones. The street becomes the theatre where the performance of the everyday unfolds.



For the non-residents – the fillers – the involvement and participation in the tap soundscape is detached, mediated by diverse networks and technologies. The fillers, as mentioned above, are not sanctioned to ‘hang about’. They are only allowed to reach the taps when the supply has started; however, given that the water supply does not have a fixed timing, alternate ways to announce it are practised. The most common amongst these is recruiting a contingent of children who are sent shouting along the way to announce the supply of water. Others involve shouting across from one area to another, with the residents of that household/shop carrying on the message. This is not a very reliable means, however, as often the location of the tap is misconstrued, leading to confusion with significant effects – no water for many households. Another effective way is to give ‘missed calls’. Calls – especially on a mobile – which are not answered are called ‘missed calls’. Most mobile phones record the details of these calls – number, time of the call, etc. In a few instances, fillers had negotiated arrangements with one of the residents in the vicinity of the tap to give them a ‘missed call’ when the water supply started. However, at the time of my research, this was the least practised method to announce water. The access to technologies – mobiles included – of women in Govindpuri is highly restricted. Even though a lot of households own a mobile phone, the ownership lies with the men. In the afternoons, most men are on jobs outside Govindpuri; this limits the possibility of using mobiles as a method for most women. Those who do receive the missed calls tend to do so on their husband’s, brother’s or friends’ mobiles. It was not considered a very reliable system. On many occasions, the residents supposed to inform the fillers forgot to give missed calls, leading to families spending a day, or sometimes more, without water.

The interactions of the ‘fillers’ with the residents of the tap area are highly regulated. This depends on the social-cultural position the filler enjoys. Rita is a 21-year-old resident of Navjeevan camp. During the course of this research, she was awaiting the finalization of decisions around marriage proposals made to her through her family. Her studies were discontinued after school to help her mother run the household. It is Rita’s job to fetch water for the entire household every day. She has to travel to Bhumhiheen camp. Every day she makes the journey with her neighbour and best friend Rinku. The two of them make elaborate preparations for the trip. For them, Bhumhiheen camp is an adventure. It has shops in the Bengali markets unlike any others in the camps. It sells fashion accessories and romance magazines, and there are eateries. Once in a while, they manage to take a detour into the market.

Rita and Rinku are very meticulous about their appearance when they visit Bhumhiheen camp. They do not want to come across as too ‘loud’, but do not want to be considered ‘shabby’ either. Even though they visit Bhumhiheen camp every day, they do not have any friends among the residents in their tap area. In fact, initially, when I had tried to have a conversation with them in Bhumhiheen camp, they were very reluctant. It was only during a chance meeting with them on their way back home that a conversation took place. All subsequent meetings with them took place in and around their home in Navjeevan camp. Much later, when I inquired about their reluctance, they had this to say:

*R:* <sup>10</sup> Why did you not want to talk to me while filling water in Bhumhiheen camp?

*R&R:* <sup>11</sup> It had nothing to do with you. You know that, don’t you? We did not want to be seen talking to ‘strangers’; the women there – especially Parul – she has a very loose tongue, who knows what she would say about us?



- R:* She seems quite alright to me, actually. She has never said anything about you to me.
- R&R:* You don't know anything about her ... she is not good. Anyway, the women in Bhumhiheen camp are very 'fast'.
- R:* Fast?
- R&R:* They go out with boys, sometimes even alone. We don't want to be like them.

As I intensified my research around the water route in Govindpuri, several anecdotes suggesting Parul's immoral character were narrated to me by the 'fillers' in Navjeevan camp. Post-filling discussions in Navjeevan were dominated by what Parul was wearing, who she was talking to, what she was saying and so on.

### **Water routes as volatile networks**

Parul is a 23-year-old woman. I first met her when she was almost 20 in early 2004. She had assisted me in conducting interviews and questionnaires. Parul belongs to a prominent political family in Bhumhiheen camp. Along the 10 streets around Parul's house, there are only two taps – which her family controls. She is the main caretaker of these taps. Even though the deals are negotiated with her mother, who is the head of the household since Parul lost her father when she was 5, Parul exercises substantial control and influence regarding access to the taps in the afternoons. Most of the residents I interviewed in and around Parul's house stated that they tried to maintain cordial relationships with Parul – sometimes even giving in to her whims – due to the control she exercises.

These narratives offered an insight into the manner in which soundscapes – politics of listening and permissions for speaking – are played out in Govindpuri. Parul evidently exercises significant authority, even to the extent of determining the interactions around the tap area. Just as Parul (like other young, unmarried women) is categorized as immoral in Navjeevan camp, in Bhumhiheen camp the fillers from Navjeevan camp are regarded as uncouth and unworthy. The residents of Bhumhiheen camp exercised caution about what was being discussed in their presence lest they give in to the 'natural tendency of gossiping and make a mountain out of a molehill'. One of the Bhumhiheen camp residents specifically remarked that the 'fillers' from Navjeevan camp smelt strange. When I asked in what way, she said, 'damp, dirty, something wrong about them'. In Bhumhiheen camp, on more than one account, the residents of Navjeevan camps were 'othered'.

An incident involving Parul highlights the intricacies of the sonic politics. One afternoon, while Parul was regulating the tap area, a young man called upon her. They were friendly and chatted for around half an hour, after which he left. Many residents and fillers witnessed this scene. Within a matter of hours, everyone along this water route was aware of the 'meeting' and were abuzz with speculations about the nature of their relationship. Everyone was sure of a romantic involvement and allegations of varying kinds were made about her upbringing, her character and the freedoms available to her. Even before Parul's mother reached home in the evening from the nearby office where she works, she was informed about the meeting as well as the insinuations of romantic possibilities. Without giving Parul an opportunity to explain, her mother lashed out at her – verbally and physically – in public as soon as she arrived home. Finally, when she was

calm, Parul told her that it was a distant family friend's son who had made the visit to pass some message from the village. By the next afternoon, everyone along the water route knew of Parul's predicament. While the residents of Bhumhiheen camp were sympathetic towards her – acknowledging the misunderstanding – the fillers maintained that Parul did have an immoral and illegitimate relationship. The sonic hierarchy limiting the interactions with fillers that is maintained in Govindpuri is circumvented by gossip networks. Fillers play an important role in this; they are the ones who actually make the journey, carry the information, and disseminate it in different sonic networks laden with their articulations and interpretations on their way back.

Gossiping in Govindpuri is not limited to harmless social bantering; it has serious social, cultural and political implications. For months after the aforementioned incident, Parul's family came under intensive scrutiny. Parul's mobility was restricted even further, and she was sidelined from social engagements. It was Parul's mother's political influence that ensured that the family as a whole was not ostracized.

On the water route, tap areas are potent nodes where networks and soundscapes collide. Here sounds – such as song, music, conversations, brawls, weeping, footsteps, street cries – enter into soundscapes other than their own in different ways, uninhibited, depending on their social-cultural-political importance and interpretations. In some instances, they are drowned out by the soundscape; in others, they *become* the soundscape, compelling the competing soundscapes to fall into the background for a moment or so.

### *Silencing voices*

Aruna is a 25-year-old petite, confident woman. I first met her not in Bhumhiheen camp, where she resides, but in the office of a nearby organization that provides free legal counselling to Govindpuri residents. She was seeking advice regarding her divorce and child custody. During the period of my research, I volunteered in this organization once a week to help the counsellor with filing and other administrative tasks. As we discussed her case, it became evident that the separation was acrimonious and on more than one occasion her husband had been physically abusive. Mrs Dave, the counsellor, advised her to take immediate action. A report was filed in the nearby police station and the women's cell. Over the next few weeks, her husband – who did not live in the Govindpuri slums – was restrained from visiting Aruna and their daughter in Bhumhiheen camp. The husband was incensed by this decision. Soon afterwards, unknown to Aruna or her family, he started making visits to the prominent tap areas along Aruna's water route where everyone knew him as Aruna's husband. While spending time at the tap areas, he started telling 'stories' about Aruna, including but not limited to her involvement in prostitution rackets and the ways to solicit her. The multiple conflating soundscapes in the tap areas were exploded by the sonic sensation this information generated. Subsequent events took a very unfortunate turn. Aruna was persistently harassed by rowdy men, who propositioned her when she moved around the camps, making even the most basic of movements unsafe for her. Eventually Aruna's family took serious action and her ex-husband was put behind bars for three months. This did not mean that 'stories' about Aruna stopped circulating in and around her neighbourhood. However,

people started questioning their validity since her husband, the source of the stories, had been jailed. For most, this was a definite sign that he was lying. Aruna was not very optimistic about this turn of events. She expressed her distress about having to shift from the Govindpuri slums in the near future. When I inquired about the reason for the move, considering that her family lived in the slums and she had a strong support network, she said it was on account of her daughter:

Right now she is young, she doesn't understand. There are people who will come outright and say my husband was wrong, he was spreading rumours, etc. but that doesn't stop the rumours and gossip. People will keep talking even years later. I don't want my daughter to grow up listening to stories about how I was abandoned by my husband for being a prostitute. I find peace in the fact that he is in the prison but he will be released soon. I, on the other hand, am caught for life in this story he has created.

After their separation, Aruna's husband was well aware that he would not be welcome in Aruna's family home, nor those of neighbours or relatives. However, he managed to tap into the volatile water route and networks, through which he knew he could harm the reputation of Aruna and her family, as it is one of the most important means of transmitting information, gossip and news in the locality. He was aware that here, people – even those who did not approve of him – would listen to his stories.

### *Water routes as sites of sensual ecstasy*

The water routes in the Govindpuri slums are multi-layered, complex and volatile. They strategically intersect with other networks and are sustained by a constant flow of people, for whom it is imperative to make this journey for their everyday water supplies. These factors accord potential to these networks for transmitting/carrying a sound, an utterance, beyond its immediate realm.

When water tankers are summoned, the multiple water routes, networks and nodes conflate into one sonically and visually loud event. The need to summon tankers is indicative of a dire water supply situation in the Govindpuri slums. The desperation levels among the residents regarding meeting even basic water needs are aggravated. Even though those in power try to contain information about the tankers, it percolates through networks in two ways. First, it is very difficult to contain sounds: they can be disguised, they might even shift in their resonances, but they definitely cannot be suppressed. Second, the preparation needed to draw water from the tankers is elaborate – which means it cannot be performed in the privacy of one's house. It requires collecting plastic containers into which water is collected, and pipes through which water is drained, and then carrying them to the main road to the place where the water tanker arrives.

The multiple soundscapes, with their peculiar noises, murmurs, hisses and rumbles, collide into a sonic colossal performance. It is, at once, an instance of several sonic negotiations – indulgence, domination and subversion. Water tankers are called for when the tap supply in the camps consistently falls short. In summer, water tankers are required to meet the demands of the residents at least once a week.

It falls within the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to supply the water tankers to the camps. Officials in the MCD are contacted by local politicians or representatives of organized groups from the camps to dispatch the water tankers. However, only those who share a rapport with the MCD officials are given information regarding the exact time and date of the water tankers' arrival in Govindpuri. This information is disseminated into favoured networks while alienating others, employing surreptitious sonic strategies. Even though it is the responsibility of the women of the household to fetch water, the control over this information is exercised by the men of the community, reiterating the gender hierarchies in Govindpuri soundscape. Ever since mobile phone networks intensified in Govindpuri, they have increasingly become a preferred means to disseminate information about the tankers. However, social-cultural networks remain the most important way in which this information is sonically disseminated, circumvented and negotiated.

Unlike the water routes and networks, where hierarchies can be maintained and movements monitored, the appearance of the water tanker allows for circumventing these hierarchies and for unrestrained movements. However closely the information about a water tanker's arrival is guarded, it percolates into the networks on account of the multiple intersecting networks, mobile nodes, porosity of the space and the performance it demands. While women are critical to the water routes and networks, children hold centre stage with the water tankers. At the specified hour, the water tanker parks along a main road next to the camp to which it is required to provide water. Several hours prior to its arrival, children are sent along with plastic containers and pipes to form a queue. The arrival of the water tanker, however, renders these queues null and void. These water tankers have both a tap and a main inlet on its top. Though the idea is to queue and fill water in turn from the tap, but it is usually the main inlet that is sought after – here the children come in handy. The children are sent to climb over the tank and put a pipe into the main inlet from which the water is transferred into the buckets. Women and young girls are not allowed to climb the top of the tanker, as it is considered indecent, while men are too big to find a grip on the water tanker's sides. While the children climb the tanker to put in the pipe, the men and women coordinate through shouting and calling to fill their containers. As the water in the tanker reduces, the commotion around it gathers momentum – building towards that moment when all hierarchies and restrained movements lose their ground. It is a sensual explosion, in which prescribed codes and decorum of touch, smell, sight and sound collapse. On several occasions when I was in the slums, the intervention of police or local politicians was required to resolve the fights that routinely break out during these times, to restore balance to the sensual order.

## **Conclusion: soundscapes as cultural systems**

Residents in the Govindpuri slums 'hear much that they don't see' (Feld, 2004: 186) and 'sounds are easily confused' (2004: 188) in much the same manner as in the tropical rainforest, owing to its materiality. Most of the materials (plastic, bamboo and wood) used for construction in the slums have very low sound absorption qualities, so most of the sounds reverberate and produce an unarticulated din. In this sonic context, sounds are

easily confused and difficult to decipher. They lose their origin and initial purpose. For instance, the sound of the temple bells, which otherwise evokes associations of 'peace and tranquillity' is also referred to as an 'irritant', even among the residents of the space. This is because, from its space of origin (the temple) to the points of association (camps within a radius of 3 km), this sound echoes and reverberates with other sounds. The walls of homes are literally built within each other and the roofs share an incestuous relationship in the densely populated camps. The architecture has a perplexing unpredictability to it. One never knows when one room will open into another courtyard or kitchen. Everyday, personal lives are constantly performed in the public view. However, this is not to imply that there is no sense of privacy, and no claims or authority over space. The manner in which these are exercised has distinctly evolved within the materiality of the site. The associations with space are not within the strict conceptual framework of property claims, but are constantly negotiated within the existing socio-cultural fabric. The architectural layout of the Govindpuri slums limits the scope of 'visual opportunity' to engage with the space. This lack of 'insight' is replaced by the prospect of 'insound' (Rice, 2003: 6). Sound is thus one of the important sensual references through which space is experienced in the Govindpuri slums.

Sonic articulations are significant in determining social, cultural, sensual and spatial engagements with a space, as the discussions about water routines and routes have highlighted. The sonic practices of space highlight these negotiations. The water route is an important instance of how sounds flow from one network to another, their potentiality and the definite manner in which they limit and permit mobilities; social, cultural, political and spatial. Rita and Rinku, the *fillers*, have to navigate the journey from Navjeevan to Bhumhiheen camp sonically, strictly within the prescribed code of conduct corresponding to their social position vis-a-vis the residents of Bhumhiheen camp. Most of the residents of Navjeevan camp maintain a distinct social, cultural and moral distance from those of Bhumhiheen camp, and this is strongly reflected in their sonic behaviour. Navjeevan camp residents – especially women – are cautioned against adopting the behaviour and sensual practices of the residents of Bhumhiheen camp. The performance and interpretation of sounds become important means to maintain the balance. Parul's and Aruna's experiences expose the manner in which the sensuous, sonic, spatial, social, cultural and political cannot be treated as watertight, exclusive domains of experience. For Parul and Aruna, all these categories collapsed, not without significant implications, to challenge their established social, cultural positions. Aruna categorically stated that as soon as she could she would attempt to shift from the Govindpuri slums on account of the controversy, as a move had the potential to shift her position from being 'single, chaste, and strong' to 'immoral and promiscuous'. Her fear was the detrimental effect on her daughter's life in the camp.

The exploration of sonic practices of space in the Govindpuri slums furthers the embodied, temporal and interconnected understanding of how space is created, consumed and projected. This embodied experience provides a framework to articulate everyday life in the slums (as well as city-slum relations) outside the hegemonic, illegal-legal matrix. A significant aspect of the everyday reality of slums is grounded in its 'acoustic dimension' (Feld, 2004: 186) and 'animated through sound' (Classen, 1993: 121), and reveals a complex interplay and overlap of identity and space which

significantly determines the mobilities and positions within the slums and in mainstream spaces. Acoustemology (Feld, 2004) as a framework to listen in to the negotiations of space, its culture and people, allows the possibility of exploring soundscapes as cultural systems (Howes, 2004: 4). In this article, I have insisted on the production, performance and articulation of sound as an act resounding with the corresponding social-cultural politics and hierarchies (Attali, 1985).

When evaluated through these rubrics, the soundscapes of the Govindpuri slums emphasize the significance of sound ‘in human experience in terms of both knowledge and imagination’ (Rice, 2003: 8). Here then, soundscapes can be *listened in to* to explore the manner in which sounds are articulated, and engaged with, by different individuals, groups and communities to exert their own identity and position. Sounds in the Govindpuri slums are not composed of ‘meaningless scraps of sound’ (Rice, 2003: 8), which their middle-class neighbours insist upon by categorizing all slum sound as *noise*.<sup>12</sup> Rather, their production, performance and interpretation are strongly situated within the position enjoyed by an individual, a group or community in their broader social, cultural and political context. It is also significant in instituting spatial, community and gender identities within the slum settlement. That the experience of space in Govindpuri slums is a highly embodied experience – mobility and movement in this space are sensually ordained, with ‘hearing and interpretation of sounds’ being ‘vital to orientation in a social, as well as a material and spatial sense’ (2009: 9) – highlights the limitation of hegemonic tropes of knowledge production in making sense of a place, and the politics of sensorial *othering*. Finally, sound is experienced, organized, produced and performed to construct and order a strong sense of self.

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### Notes

- 1 I have not anonymized the names of the places, but the identities and names of the respondents have been anonymized.
- 2 This data is based on the 2001 census.
- 3 The special issue of *Continuum* (vol. 23, August 2009) addresses the concerns around listening as practice and methodology from different and diverse backgrounds.
- 4 This heading refers to Constance Classen’s book *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (1993).
- 5 Here I have just selected a few representative instances of studies in these fields. The space available in the article does not allow for an extensive bibliography on the subject.
- 6 See: Government of Delhi, ‘Bhagidari’, <http://delhigovt.nic.in/bhagi.asp>
- 7 See: *Delhi, India: Among the Greenest Capitals in the World*, [http://delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/bd5bc9804eff00e9885bacb60aeecb21/Delhi\\_Booklet.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=1202017102&CACHEID=bd5bc9804eff00e9885bacb60aeecb21](http://delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/bd5bc9804eff00e9885bacb60aeecb21/Delhi_Booklet.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=1202017102&CACHEID=bd5bc9804eff00e9885bacb60aeecb21)
- 8 See: ‘Towards a clean and green Delhi’, <http://delhigovt.nic.in/environment.asp#1>
- 9 See: <http://www.cwgdelhi2010.org/Template3.aspx?pageid=P:1247>
- 10 Researcher.



11 Rita and Rinku.

12 I have discussed these negotiations at length in my doctoral thesis, 'Listening in to Others' ([http://eprints.qut.edu.au/40760/1/Tripta\\_Chandola\\_Thesis.pdf](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/40760/1/Tripta_Chandola_Thesis.pdf)).

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