# How To Use The Book

This book is an invitation to listen into the everyday lives of the Govindpuri slumslistened into over a span of almost two-decades. Slums lie on the margins of the state and society. However, unpacking the casual spatial/geographical reference is integral to locating the position of the slums in the city as it is revealing of the complex materialities and modalities of executing this marginalisation. More often than not, slums do not geographically lie on the margins of the city; in fact, historically, across continents, cities and cultures, the growth and evolution of the slums is intricately linked with the development of the cities, and thus, more often than not, they are located in the heart of the city. And it is precisely this centered-ness of the slums in the city which causes anxiety between the two entities – geographically, historically, theoretically and in the everyday practice. The centrality and visibility of the slums is after all a stark reminder that the 'modern, world-class' city around it is not a result of the fantastic imagination of the precious few, who have access to the glittering city, but rests on the histories of efforts and exploitation of the many who only experience it in its cold, clinical reality of steel and mortar structures.The presence of the slums in the city is undeniable, solid, and typically evokes strong reactions. Most city-dwellers harbour the sentiment that the reality of the everyday of the slums is in ‘any respect unfit for human habitation’ and that slums‘are detrimental to safety, health and morals’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The essays in this book intend to enliven the lives and practices of living in the slumsbeyond these simplistic, distant assertions by undertaking the task of ‘tuning the ears’. These imaginations of the slums, arising from a limited, tenuous and more often than not biased engagement with their reality, is what populates the intellectual and political environment from which issue the multiple institutional investments in the city, including urban development policies, legal actions and political priorities, as well as the social–cultural responses to the slumsand its residents. The protagonists of this book are the residents of the slumsof Govindpuri. The book begins with the assertion and acknowledgment that slums are unsettling sights in the city. In this case the city of New Delhi; but in any city its slums are, metaphorically, testimonies of its unsettlement. Yes, slumsare indeed unsettling sights. They are dirty and congested. The houses, permanent and semi-permanent, appear to have no logic, each being incestuously woven with its neighbours, and the dwellings from a distance seem to be precariously balanced on the edge of a precipice.

The book, however, takes issue with the category of assertions made in expensively produced official reports and by the mainstream media. These are the same assertions made loudly and sanctimoniously by the city's middle classes. To wit, that the living conditions of slums, that make them unsettling sights, are also the making of their inhabitants. The book unveils the ‘anxiety of proximity’ that fundamentally informs where the slums are in the city's present, but also where they will be in its past and future — geographically, politically, philosophically, socially, culturally and imaginatively.[[2]](#footnote-2) Besides the denial of structural and systemic rights, and the othering of their residents, this signification of the slums also denies them a position in the history of the city itself, and thus denies them their own histories.

By insisting on the *listening,* and engaging with the everyday lives in the slumsthrough its soundscapes, the narratives here highlight the creative, contested and political manner in which the marginalized negotiate the multiplicities of urban living, revealing their selves and their others, instead of only being regarded as the other. These experiences reveal that the slums-dwellers not only exercise a strict code of conduct to engage with others within the settlement based on caste, communal, gender and moral, amongst other considerations. Moreover, the slum-dwellers identify the city and its middle classes as their others, using similar vocabularies and frameworks to those used by the mainstream to other slum-dwellers. In doing so, the book inserts parallel and alternative narratives of the engagement of the urban poor with the hegemonic networks. These negotiations highlight the intersections and overlaps of lives on the margins with the existing formal structures and networks.

Whilst a key focus of the book is to insist on the self of the residents of the slumsas it expresses itself in and through sonic assertions, the book critically sets the everyday negotiations of the residents of the Govindpuri slums against the discourse of othering and violence that they encounter. The book begins with the dual premise that slumsare othered spaces and that their residents encounter othering and violence at an everyday and structural level in the city. The disenfranchisement and marginalisation of the residents of the slums*,* and thus their limited claim on the ‘right to the city’, are in fact the starting point for this book. The spectres of precarity, illegality and limitation haunt the past, present and future of slums in the city. Following Judith Butler, the book recognises that the structural and systemic denial of ‘social and economic support, housing, health care, employment, rights of political expression, forms of social recognition, and conditions of political agency’ persist because *slums* are considered ‘un-liveable’ and the lives of its residents ‘un-grievable[[3]](#footnote-3)’. As much as it is the intent of the book to portray the space and every day of the Govindpuri slums, its task is steadfastly to unfold the macro-political, theoretical and intellectual agenda at work around ‘the slum’ and to rehabilitate slums as, in fact, ‘liveable’ spaces where lives are ‘grievable’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The book has been almost two-decades in the making. During this time, I have been immersively embedded in the emotional, political, social, economic and cultural landscapes of the slums*.* At this juncture of reckoning of sorts, the book is as much about the residents as it is about its interlocutor, the ethnographer. During this time, I have spent more afternoons and evenings in the Govindpuri slumsthan any other place in the city. The Govindpuri slumshave at once been a space which made me question assumptions about self, other, being: an ongoing research engagement; the site of my doctoral thesis; but most significantly, a space whose particular and peculiar materiality, enlivened by the lives of those who inhabit it has shaped and refined my politics and poetics. At the risk of compromising objectivity and exposing sentimentality, I have no hesitation in admitting that in the lanes, intersections, corners, roof tops, carefully organised meagre houses and amongst people living precarious lives, I feel at home, a sense of belonging and becoming. It is a matter of deliberation – a political act, if you must – for me, as an ethnographer, to not only remain inserted and immersed in the stories of lives from the slums*,* but also not to retrospectively extend a sophistication of intent and agenda in the engagements that were sustained. But most importantly in retaining the anxiousness, the intent is to insist on the *messiness* of the researcher-researched encounters, especially when this relationship is predicated within the precise mainstream-marginalised [middle-class researcher and slum residents as the researched] positionality which the book questions and attempts to reflect on, if not alternate but simultaneous negotiating possibilities within this praxis.

Following Foucault, I locate transgressions as the enactments of challenging the boundaries.[[5]](#footnote-5) When performed, claimed and enacted on the margins and by the marginalised the *transgressive acts* do not simply remain a matter of furthering one’s horizons, in more ways than one. Here, these *transgressive acts* assume a political and poetic currency as inherent in and to these acts is the possibility of an alternative, or at least a simultaneity, of, with and within the normative discourses and practices. In that, underlying the perusal of the narratives and experiences from the slumsis taking into cognizance the complexities and the upsetting, de-stabilising and disruptive capacities of the *transgressive acts.* Here the intent is to unveil the 'text-ility' of the texts (-those instituting the dominant narratives, others offering critique, alternatives and affirmations, and the lived realities) to attempting a suturing, ‘as in invisible mending’ to weave the multiplicities of the reality of the 'real' and its 'myth' not in a linearly progressing narrative structure culminating in a neat resolution, but precisely to disrupt and displace the epistemological, political and cultural practices which attempt to distil (and thus consolidate) these complexities into a perverse static singularity of a problem to be met with a definite set of solutions.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the meanderings of the essays in the book, whether this ambitious task has even barely achieved its agenda and intent remains to be seen. However in these meanderings, at first intuitively and then with more theoretical and political mandate, the intent has been as outlined by Spivak ‘to make the anthropologist construct her object as a teacher for a different end, learn to learn from below, from the subaltern, rather than only study him(her) [...] Not to study the subaltern, but to learn’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In these essays, I make the point for listening as methodological framework, political intervention and poetic expression to ‘learn to learn from below’ and expose the dense multiplicities and lifeworlds of the subaltern employing the grammar and vocabularies as articulated by them, instead of rendering the experiences from below into explicable phenomenon within the hegemonic narrative.

The essay *In Search of the Never-lost Slums* explores the potential of the transgressive working of the hyphen to actualize the project of ‘learn to learn from below. At the risk of exposing the limitations of my own research practice and praxis, which should not be an embarrassment but an acknowledgement of the learning from below, I discuss at length the anxiety of undertaking research in the slums, outside of my middle-class comfort zones of convenient theories and frameworks. The essay intends to rupture the revered position of the anthropologist and the ethnographer as a neutral, apolitical observer. In the essay, *Listening: An Ethnographic Exploration*, I propose listening as a methodological framework to first and foremost ‘learning’ from below but also to insist on listening as a critical imperative in acknowledging the ‘self’ of the others, here the residents of the slums. I thus listen into the listening of the self from within the interiority of the slums.

The essays *An Obscene Calling* and *The Subaltern as a Political Voyeur* put to task listening as a methodological framework. In the former, the anxiety, perils, tumultuous terrains of the experience, experiencing and expressions of love and loving through the narratives of Baby and Bitiya. Inscribed on their selves – bodily, emotionally, spatially and socially – is the double whammy of othering as woman and as residents of the slums. These inscriptions, I argue, for the subaltern, those on the margins have the consequences of their emotionality and thus the selves remaining unacknowledged. In *The Subaltern as Political Voyeur* I present the listening into the political lifeworlds of the residents of the slums. This essay is dedicated to the memories and learning from Saroj, who passed away a few years back. The conversation with Tom Rice is an attempt to further the disciplinary boundaries and practice of listening as a research framework and the potential of soundscapes to engage with lifeworlds particularly of with those on the margins and whose ‘self’ remains unacknowledged within the hegemonic modalities of knowledge production.

Listening as a methodology necessitates, first and foremost, the muting of the hegemonic self. As a political intervention, it demands the ontological praxis for the o*thers* to listen into their s*elf,* and that this *listening* accrues the validity and veracity of and as robust knowledge-systems within which when the o*ther* speaks, it is not reckoned to be in tongues. The denial of the *listening(s)* onto/into themselves, the hegemonic self intends to ‘neutralize listening within himself, so that he cannot philosophize’ having thus denied the others most fundamental claims to the structure of the self, the hegemonic self then extends its willing ears - insists that it is *all ears* which in fact ‘belongs to a register of philanthropic oversensitivity, where condescension resounds alongside good intentions; thus it often has a pious ring to it’.

In insisting on the *listening(s)* by the others of their other, the essays in the book attempt to engage in the politics and praxis of *othering* as practiced by the identified others. It is in the processes and practices of o*thering* that the self of the other is to be recognised. In the othering, as is evidenced by the manner in which the hegemonic self encapsulates the complexity of the others into a singularity solely premised on the former’s reflexive and referential *listening* of the latter, the others’ landscapes of reflexive and referential of making meaning of the self are to be unveiled.

The book ends with a few provocations towards this mandate. In a displaced dialogue with Jodi Dean and Geert Lovink, I discuss the possibilities of technologically mediated possibilities of ‘equalizing the encounter with the others’ in *Sonic Selfies.* In *I Wail, Thus I am*, the disruption to the hetero-normative, hegemonic narratives, however temporarily, the sonic assertion of wailing women create. In *Revisiting The Housing Questions* and *To Who Do You Beautifully Belong,* I locate the denial of the self and silencing of the slum-dweller in the hegemonic narratives and imaginations as being both strategic and an impediment to actualize the project of the ‘right to the city’. *The Shriek* is a poetic interlude awaiting the presences of the identified others to be listened into.

Thus the essays in the book, recognize and insist that that *slums* are not anathema to the city, whether one speaks of the city’s history or its present or future. Rather, that the *slums* as civic and social spaces are in fact a by-product of the violent, inequitable and exploitative processes of urbanisation. Through these essays the intent then is to act in whatever limited way to encourage the ethics of cohabitation across spaces, communities and ideas between spaces as the slums and its middle-class neighbours. And lastly, to provide a response to the everyday othering of the slum-dwellers by ‘listening to, and recording, the details of the story the other might tell, letting that story become part of an undeniable archive, the enduring trace of loss that compels the ongoing obligations to mourn’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

And thus the sounds of the ethnographic lives, of the *Others* I engaged with and the *Self* as their interlocutor slowly start humming.

From where you are, listen with me.

1. The *Slums Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act* (1956) declares an area as a slum when the buildings: (a) are in any respect unfit for human habitation; or (b) are by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Human Rights and its Discontents: The Logic of the Stalinist Show Trials’, *Olin Auditorium, Bard College,* 16 November, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015*, pp-*198. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Butler further elaborates that within specific constructions “life is established as tenuous, precarious, and in that sense not worthy to be protected from injury or loss, and so not grievable” (198) and raises questions of biopolitical import as, “Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living, or count only ambiguously as alive?” (196). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Donald Bouchard (ed.) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP I977. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular’, *Postcolonial studies* 8.4 (2005):483 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular’, *Postcolonial studies.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)