# 2. Listening: An Ethnographic Exploration

A self is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a self is made of relationship to self, or of a presence to self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity (not just the individual in the current sense of the word, but in him the singular occurrences of a state, a tension, or, precisely, a “sense”)-this referral itself would have to be infinite, and the point of occurence of a subject in the substantial sense would have never taken place except in the referral, thus in spacing and resonance, at the very most as the dimensionless point of the re-of this resonance; the repetition where the sound is amplified and spreads, as well as the turning back [rebroussement] where the echo is made by making itself heard. A subject feels: that is his characteristic and his definition. This means that he hears (himself), sees (himself), touches (himself), tastes (himself), and so on, and that he thinks himself or represents himself and strays from himself, and thus always feels himself feeling a “sels” that escapes or hides as long as it resounds elsewhere as it does in itself, in a world and in the other. To be listening will always, then, be to be straining towards or in an approach to the self (one should say, in a pathological manner, a fit of self: isn’t [sonorous] sense first of all, every time, a crisis of self?).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Listening is a political act. It can only be enacted from a position of power, but it is precisely on this account, that this act is also laden with the possibilities of disrupting, challenging and dismantling the mesh of the intersectionalities of the performative, and eventually insidiously existing, hierarchies of power relationships. In its enacting, the task of listening compels acknowledging and accommodating the grammar, vocabulary and the structures of the s*elves* which constitute the identified *other.* But more fundamentally and significantly, the ‘act’ of listening, as a constitutive practice of the identified o*ther,* and as a philosophical punctum, political rupture, and poetic interruption allows the identified o*ther’s* interiority to resound in its loudness or perform itself in its firm silences. The o*ther* is at once denied ‘silence’ as a state of being and subjected to ‘silencing’ as manner of becoming. The identified o*ther,* across the spectrum and landscape of power negotiations and particular constructions, is always imagined in is hollowness.

This book fundamentally makes a call for *listening* as a methodological praxis and political intervention to engage with the self of the others and acknowledging the others of the identified other. In the act of o*thering,* the essays in the book identify the assertion of extending ‘meaning to oneself’. Whilst the essays, interrogate, highlight and problematizes the strategic manners in which the identified others are otheredalong the axis and intersections of social, cultural, political and emotional, among others, disenfranchisement; in denying the identified o*thers* the capacities of o*thering,* the hegemonic self unleashes (or at least attempts) the ultimate erasure of the ontological Self of the Other. Is the ‘self’, after all, ‘*nothing other than a form or function of referral’?*

Thus: 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.

When two people are conversing with one another, however, a third is always present: Silence is listening. This is what gives breadth to a conversation: when the words are not moving merely within the narrow space occupied by the two speaker, but comes from afar, from the place where silence is listening. That gives the words a new fullness. But not only that: the words are spoken as it were from the silence, from that third person, and the listener receives more than the speaker alone is able to give. Silence is the third speaker in such a conversation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, Max Picard identifies central and critical to the task of a conversation*,* a validation of the act of speaking is silence. Furthermore, Foucault, in drawing out his self-portrait in conversation with Stephen Riggins, insists on ‘silence [as] a specific form of experiencing a relationship with others’, which he ‘believe[s] is really worthwhile cultivating’ and he is in, ‘favor of developing silence as a cultural ethos’*.*[[3]](#footnote-3)In the same interview, Foucault whilst recognizing certain silence for fostering ‘deep friendship, emotional admiration, even love’ also attributes it the potential to imply ‘very sharp hostility’. For Picard whilst silence is the third speaker, if not punctuated with ‘speech’ - an exchange, silence is rendered meaningless retaining its ‘wild pre-human monster’ form. It is through the act of ‘speech’ that silence ‘is transformed into something tame and human’.

In making a call for listening as a methodological framework, political intervention and theoretical praxis, particularly to engage with the identified Other, it is not without deliberation that I begin with a rumination on silences. There is an inherent anxiety in talking about *listening* as an embodied auditory experience and methodological intervention motivated by definite political ambitions. And here lies the tension: unless not compelled by considerations of *paracusis* of varying orders *listening* as a function of a 'healthy' body is an involuntary act. Because: the ears, they don't close. And thus when I make a call for listening with its methodological and political deliberations, is there not implicit an assumption of deafness in these regards, of the closing of the ears, so to say?

Oliver Sacks in *Seeing Voices[[4]](#footnote-4)* meticulously disrupted the notion of ‘world of utter, unbroken soundlessness and silence’ which both the deaf, suffering from the pathological, and deaf, as a cultural symptomatic, live in. The silence I draw attention to, whilst insisting on listening, is the one which in both Picard’s and Foucault’s reckoning is pregnant with possibilities at once of ethical cohabitation - an equitable exchange - and oppressive obliteration of the self. Silence as social, cultural, political and emotional act is denied to the others. The self on the other hand desires and demands *silence* as a revered state of consciousness and a right to inculcate its finer tunings; to nurture its solidness; to have undisrupted reflexiveness; to reverate silence as a meditative path to higher unfurling the higher selves. But silence as a right is denied to the other: however much the self dreads the noise of the other, its silence is even more demonic. The noise of the other is evidencing of its industriousness geared to serve the purpose of the self, to constantly be in service of sustaining the silences which the self insists on. Moreover, even in its persistent humming, even though causing discomfort, the other is accommodated; in doing so, it is after all but a rambling, incoherent entity incapable of ruminations and thus also lack the agency to demand a dialogue. The only silences permissible to the other are in its real and figurative obliteration*.* The denial of silence to the other is a strategic ploy by the hegemonic ideologies, insidiously at play, changing a note here and there, never the entire operatic scale, to evoke the incoherence of the other as a foundational premise to not initiate a dialogue, and in doing so, sustaining the ‘monologue of power’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The listening to the others in the essays in this book is punctuated by silences, ruminations, ramblings and ruptures towards dialogues, not always conciliatory and comforting, but definitely to ever-so-slightly change the notes in the ‘monologue of power’.

## Sonic Strategies of the Self: The Political Instrumentality of Listening

A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices. A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves. What attracts you is the pleasure this voice puts into existing: into existing as voice; but this pleasure leads you to imagine how this person might be different from every other person, as the voice is different.

This is a quote from Italo Calvino's *A King Listens,* a story in which the position of the king, literally and figuratively, depends on ‘listening into’, and here, ‘the palace is the ear of the king’.[[6]](#footnote-6) This ability to hear into the palace, which gives the king his power, also leaves him restricted to his throne – if he moves, even briefly, there is a danger he will miss something significant – maybe sounds of rebellion or deceit. He listens not only because he is ‘condemned to listen’ as ‘we have no ear lids’, but because he has to keep his ‘ears open’ to maintain the status quo and his power.[[7]](#footnote-7) Owing to the inherent disembodied and thus un-containable - *detached from the solidity of things* – of the *voice*, the burden of listening which the King in this tale has to endure, forgoing even his carnal and other sundry pleasures, almost evokes sympathy. But, beyond and besides, the burden, the *listening* is not only integral but essential for the King – and by that extension the State, and those in dominant, hegemonic roles – to maintain their position. And herein lies the real tension, and thus the anxiety: in its inherent *un-containability* the *voice* has the potential to transgress boundaries – of spaces (physical, political and intellectual) – lending it its obscene disruptiveness so dreaded by those in power. I will do so by making a categorical distinction between hearing and listening to specifically identify the sites – the ears, so to say – where the moralising politics and containing of the sounds are enacted.

Hearing is the encounter with the ubiquity and ephemerality of soundscapes; while listening is the experiencing of soundscapes, informed by one’s social, cultural and moral leanings. It is a matter of deliberation to draw this distinction between hearing and listening. I argue that it is between this encounter and experience that the politics of production, performance and articulation of sounds unfolds. While everyone translates the encounters with soundscapes into organised experiences, I further argue that not all and everyone’s experiences – and, thus, listening(s) – accord legitimacy to the organisation of sounds as noise, music and silence. It is in asking questions, such as the following, that these forms of politics can be teased out: whose experiences of soundscapes – that is, listening – are given preference and whose listening is not?; how and where is such listening desired and demanded?; how does the character of space, cultural contexts and soundscapes alter and transform with impositions of certain kinds of listening?; and what are the ways in which non-recognised listening(s) filters in and out of these soundscapes?

Within this framing, the city–slum relationship can be presented as one unfolding within listener – hearer praxis. And within the everyday materiality of the Govindpuri slums, these positionalities are also constantly negotiated. There is a highly paternalistic, moralistic, infantilizing tendency informing the ethnographies on and of the slums, they rarely acknowledge the contestations and negotiations of power as manifest in the hegemonic self (city) - muted others (slums) within the life worlds of the slums. In doing so, these undertakings continue to the task of contributing and consolidating the notion of the other as a rambling, incoherent entity, thus both denying them their silences as also the claims and agency to demand a dialogue.

From within the interiority of the Govindpuri slums, listening into its pulse, here I narrate some of the highly fluid, dynamic, political and contested sonic strategies of obscene, perverse performance of the self vis-a-vis the identified other.

## The ‘Noisy’ Other

The Totas form a prominent community in Nehru camp. This community hails from Maharashtra, and has South Indian lineage. They are fortune-tellers who use parrots as an aide; thereby the name ‘Tota’, which literally translates as parrots. This is their livelihood. P. Nagaraja in *South Asian Folklore*, details the manner in which fortunes are told using parrots by this community:

These fortune-tellers go around the streets announcing their presence, or wait along footpaths or in front yards of busy buildings like temples or offices. Usually wearing a Maharashtrian cap, the parrot astrologer carries a cage of parrots and a bag of cards, a book, and a few remedies for misfortune, such as stones or talismans […] The fortune teller “reads” the figure and the fortune in a peculiar Marathi dialect mixed with syncretic forms of other South Indian languages in a catchy shrill voice and emphatic pronunciation. For “elaboration” upon the reading he “consults” the book he carries with him. Usually clients are offered “remedies” for evil eye or other misfortune, first in the form of a prescription and later from the various objects in the bag.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The interaction of this community with others is limited in Nehru camp. They are uncouth, loud, and immoral in the articulations of the dominant groups. Women and children are not allowed to interact with them. I was also advised to exercise caution when interviewing them. In the dominant narratives, the main reason for their ostracisation was their loud habits, coarse language, and ‘emphatic pronunciation’. These, along with their magical powers, make them highly vulnerable to scrutiny.

Members of the Tota community, aware of these prejudices, have their own reasons for maintaining a distance:

We are fortune-tellers. Whether you believe it or not, we have the ability to predict the future. In some cases, even avert misfortunes. The parrots are not just props. It requires years of practice to master the skill. We are a very close community because we have to pass this knowledge from generation to generation to keep the tradition alive. We cannot compromise with that. We cannot share our secrets with those who are not part of the group. Most people think we do nothing but sing, dance, and drink – yes, we do – but all of this is part of the learning process. We also sing and dance because we want to. There are others in these camps who are involved in far more deplorable activities than us – selling drugs, prostitution, alcohol – but they are not targeted. It’s us. We enjoy what we do and, yes, we do make money. If they don’t want to talk to us neither do we.

The position of the Tota community in Nehru camp, in relation to other dominant communities, is that of the hearer. The Totas are excluded from social and cultural interactions. By eliminating the scope of a dialogue, the Totas are denied a voice. The sonic practices of the Totas, however, complicate this positioning. The dominant groups in the Nehru camp have established a very strict sensorial code of conduct to interact with the Totas. As hearers, any sonic production and performance of Totas is articulated as noise by other dominant groups.

Commenting on noisy Totas, a senior member of the local administrative body for Nehru camp said:

It is irritating. It gives us headaches. Sometimes they continue playing music late into the night as well. But, what can we do except warn them at times? We cannot call the police that Totas are disturbing us […] they will not listen to us anyway. For them, we all are one. And, how can one regulate it? There is no way you can say, there, that is the person who is responsible for it; you cannot keep targeting the entire community. If we can identify one or two persons we might take action. But if it’s the entire community we are against, who we know is not going to single out people, we cannot do much.

The voiceless Tota community in the existing hegemonic structure assumes a ‘loud’ character owing to the peculiarities of sound production, performance and articulation. It is quite a common practice in the Govindpuri slums for communities to play loud music, however, not all music is categorised as noise, nor all its producers regarded as uncouth.

In conversation with the members of the Tota community, I raised the issue of the ‘loud’ music:

We are surely not the only ones who play loud music. We are a very close community. Unlike other communities in the camp we do not tell on each other, fight with each other [...] we are like a big family. We like to do everything together and that includes singing and dancing. Also, some of the music we play is important for our children to learn the trade.

For the members of the Tota community, playing loud music is not only an act of deliberate resistance, it is a community-building exercise. Loud music as *noise* consolidates the position of the Tota community on two accounts: first, the collective production and consumption of music represent a strategy to reiterate the sense of solidarity amongst the community; and second, it allows them to extend their territoriality beyond the social, cultural and moral landscape where their interactions are limited. While the loud music as *noise* gives the Tota community a sense of solidarity, confidence and security, it challenges the authority of the dominant group by compelling them to *hear* the presence of the Totas, even if the dominant group wants to ignore them.

The collectivity of soundscapes from the slums, including those of the Totas, is articulated as noise by the middle classes. The dominant groups in both instances – communities who ostracise the Totas within the Govindpuri slums and the middle classes who ostracise the entire slum settlement – refuse to *listen into* their soundscapes and afford them acceptable sonic meanings. While the sonic production and performance of disempowered groups – in this case, *Totas* and slum-dwellers – allow them to have a distinct sonic presence, its articulation as noise by dominant groups only aggravates the processes of othering through which they are further discriminated against, segregated and excluded.

## Silencing, Silence and Unlistening

Meena is Diya’s sister-in-law. Since 2004, Diya has been living in her paternal home, along with her son, following an altercation with her husband’s family. This eventually led to a breakdown of communication between the two families and any chance of reconciliation between Diya and her husband are slim. Her parents initially supported Diya and acknowledged the mental and physical torture she had to endure in her marital home. However, with the passing of years, her presence is seen as a financial burden and a matter of social shame for the family. This leads to frequent altercations between her, her brothers and parents. Meena is married to Diya’s eldest brother, who constantly abuses Meena, emotionally and physically. Even though both Meena and Diya are sympathetic and supportive of each other’s predicament, they can do little for each other. Neither of them gets any support from the family. Both employ different sonic strategies to negotiate their disempowered position. They both are hearers.

Diya has, over the last few years, assumed a ‘loud’ temperament. She openly criticises her parents, laments their failure to initiate reconciliatory dialogue with her husband, and bemoans the limited resources made available to her. This sonic performance usually happens in the street. In her house, she is denied such permissions. When I first tried establishing an acquaintance with her, I was constantly informed that she was ‘mad’. Every time I would approach her to initiate a conversation, her neighbours – mostly women – would join the conversation, uninvited. They would talk over Diya’s conversation and offer testimonies of her life, totally ignoring her presence. She is consistently silenced. Her sonic productions and performances were denied any validity, and thereby an acceptable articulation, because of her projected madness. Even though she was heard, she was not listened into. Her loud behaviour, which openly challenged the dominant familial roles, was articulated as a sign of definite madness. She has no history of clinical insanity.

Meena, on the other hand, assumed a different sonic strategy to negotiate her position. In the initial years, she tried to engage her in-laws and her neighbours to address her abuse. Her ‘loudness’, she mentioned, would only lead to more abuse. Eventually, she stopped having any sonic interactions with others. By maintaining a silent sonic presence, she not only refuses to acknowledge and engage with the sonic hierarchies established by her family, she does not allow them any scope to either validate or negate her sonic performances. She listens to herself, she said, and finds peace in it as she knows no one else knows what she is listening into. Indeed, her family is much intrigued by her silence, often articulating it as an act of defiance; however, the instances of abuse against her have decreased as her silent demeanour is considered ‘threatening’, according to her mother-in-law.

Slum-dwellers who have sustained engagement with the middle classes, as domestic servants, drivers, guards and gardeners, have to follow a highly prescriptive code of conduct in the extended sensorial realm. Sonically, they are *silenced* and expected to perform *silence.* This is most exaggerated in the case of drivers, who share intimate space with their employers and often overhear their conversations, interactions and engagements. Men from the Govindpuri slums who work as drivers in middle-class households have a sonically dominant position in their immediate sonic realm, yet they are disempowered in their extended sonic realm by their inability to either engage or define sonic practices. Moreover, in this realm they have to take orders from middle-class women, which further challenge their position. In this extended sonic realm, men have to sonically perform *unlistening,* which in their immediate sonic realm women – as hearers – tend to rely on as a sonic strategy.

The soundscape of the Govindpuri slums abounds in its multiplicity. In their sonic interactions with men, specifically, women as hearers do not have the legitimacy to engage or influence sonic practices. Men, enjoying the liberties they have, use abusive language, and discuss sensitive matters of financial, social and moral importance openly and loudly. They rely on *unlistening* as a strategy to negotiate this predicament.

A young woman who moved into the settlement with her husband, after her marriage found the use of abusive language increasingly disconcerting. In her immediate sonic realm, she was not used to men openly expressing abuse in front of women and found it very offensive. When she confronted her husband, he severely reprimanded her for *listening into* his private conversation. She has been in the settlement for the last eight years now, and she can both perform and pretend to perform *unlistening* as the situation demands:

There are times when you just stop listening, you zone out but at other times it is convenient to pretend that you are not listening, especially when financial matters are discussed. This way I can at least keep some tabs on him.

*Unlistening* as a sonic performance is employed by different disempowered groups across the Govindpuri slums to maintain sonic balance, which men working in middle-class households have to assume as well. Even though disempowered groups – women in the immediate sonic realm and men in their extended sonic realm – perform *unlistening* and *silence* and are *silenced,* they attempt to subvert these social hierarchies by relying on gossiping and eavesdropping as sonic strategies.

## Gossiping

*Gossiping* is not harmless, social bantering. It is an effective sonic strategy subvert dominant social and cultural positions. Aruna is a 25-year-old petite, confident woman. I first met her not in Navjeevan camp, where she resides, but in the office of a nearby organisation that provides free legal counselling to Govindpuri residents in Bhumhiheen camp. She was seeking advice regarding her divorce and child custody. During the period of my research, I volunteered in this organisation once a week to help the counsellor with filing and other administrative needs. 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 Navjeevan 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; 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. The events to follow 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 main perpetrator, 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 to transmit 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.

Within the soundscapes of the Govindpuri, gossip allows women as hearers to assert their sonic selves, otherwise denied to them, as most of these networks are controlled by older women. While the younger women in the Govindpuri slums are under constant scrutiny and are required to maintain a strict sensorial decorum, age allows the older women permission to forgo these restrictions. In certain instances, they tend to assume a very ‘masculine’ decorum. Bodily noises, which the younger women have to find ingenious ways to mask, are nonchalantly performed in public by older women. They abuse as obscenely and as loudly – if not more so – than the men. During the day, in the absence of the men, these older women, matriarchs, control the sonic networks. There is usually one matriarch in a community who exercises absolute control. She has an extensive network of *listeners* who inform and update her about the sonic performances of others. These are then articulated – either validated or denied – within the gossip networks.

In one instance, a family settled in Navjeevan camp permitted their daughter ‘unprecedented’ freedoms, including college education and mobile phones. These freedoms implied ‘mobilities’ denied to others. The matriarch did not approve of the freedoms given to this girl, believing it would only encourage other girls also to waver from the path and assume loud, uncouth practices’. This young girl was under constant sonic scrutiny. Not so surprisingly, the girl was apparently *heard* having romantic conversations over the phone. A communal meeting was called for, the girl and her parents were summoned, her phone records were validated, and it was established that the girl was having an ‘affair’. The parents were strictly reprimanded for this digression and threatened ostracisation if they did not impose restrictions on their daughter. She had to give up her education and, obviously, no longer had access to the mobile phone.

The slum-dwellers, men and women, working in middle class households also use *gossiping* as an effective sonic strategy to subvert and challenge their disempowered position in the extended sonic realm. Even though these gossip tactics do not have the same impact as gossip within the slums, on many occasions they have managed to create tensions and rifts amongst middle class families by transferring information from one network to another. The middle class, well aware of these gossiping tactics, try to maintain the sonic distance by conversing in English, a language most slum-dwellers do not understand, in the presence of their domestic servants. These sonic strategies of the self from the interiority of the slums exhibit a strong ‘sonically ordered sense of self’ of the slum dwellers.[[9]](#footnote-9) Second, it highlights the definite sonic strategies employed by dominant and disempowered groups (both within the slums and slum dwellers collectively *vis-à-vis* the middle classes) to reiterate and circumvent social, cultural and political hierarchies.

## The Sounds of Slumming (Or, Matters of Sonically, Slumming)

By *reading* the city as text, where ‘ordinary men’ are scribes, *walkers*, ‘whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it’, Michel de Certeau privileges sight as the sensual anchor to experience as well as produce space and its dynamics.[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, de Certeau’s city is Western, visual and masculine; however, in his readings he resolutely acknowledges the agency vested in the common people – the silent majority – to displace the rationality of urban space, ‘brutally lit by alien reason’. The hierarchical and semantically ordered ‘surface of the city’ transforms into ‘liberated spaces that can be occupied’ by these movements. Beyond its cartographic moment, space transforms into an experience that is not singularly visual in its orientation. It is populated by the calls, murmurings, voices, tastes, smells and touches; in short, it is a sensual experience in which each sense – hearing, smelling, touching, seeing, tasting – defines, broadens or limits the scope of how the space is practised, consumed, articulated, experienced and represented. Space transforms into a ‘social experience’ through the ‘mingling of the modalities of mingling’ of the five senses.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the Indian context, specifically in the case of the Govindpuri slums, it is difficult to articulate space as compartmentalised pockets, each maintaining their own homogeneity. According to the 2001 census, the population of all the three camps together was recorded as 370,665, spread over an area of 41.85 acres. In terms of distribution of space, this means 900 people per acre*.* The density of the space does not allow for segregated spatial entities. Porosity of the city, which Benjamin and Lacis evoked for Naples, defines the essence of everyday reality in the Govindpuri slums.[[12]](#footnote-12) The walls are literally built in each other and the roofs share an incestuous relation with the others of their kind. 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 eye. 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 propertied claims, but are constantly negotiated within the existing socio-cultural fabric. In the popular narratives, a displaced sense of claims to property and its ownership emerge. The ownership is not established in the present, temporally and geographically, but projected in a distant future where the demolition of the existing slum settlement will entitle slum-dwellers to land in a legal resettlement colony.

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 binary. The everyday reality of slums, ‘animated through sound’, reveals a complex interplay and overlap of identity and space which significantly determines the mobilities and positions within the immediate–extended–imagined realm.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is within these theoretical frameworks of understanding space that the slums, in the given context, can be understood as a representative not of the ‘marginalised’ spaces in the city, but rather the *process* of marginalisation of spaces in the city. The lived realities and association of the slum-dwellers cannot be understood simply within the prism of ‘mobility’ and ‘movement’ across ‘one-directed abstraction of time and space’. The cities inhabited, created and consumed by slum-dwellers have to be understood as ‘a site where multiple spatialities and temporalities collide’, and where ‘the city contains living and moving bodies, but they are not bodies moving through space-time, they are performing it and making it’.

The city and the slums constantly evaluate (and pre-empt) trajectories of interaction with each other through similar cultural constructions and categories. From the narratives in the Govindpuri slums, it emerges that the slums’ residents view the city in the same manner as the city represents them: as a space of moral bankruptcy. The residents who venture into the city are advised to exercise caution. If the slums are the other for the city, the city is also the other for the slums. However, as the city dominates and determines the tropes through which city–slum relations are evaluated, slums are denied a sense of self, and the practices by which they exercise a deliberate distance – social, cultural and spatial – from the city are denied vocabularies, and hence an agency. Space in the Govindpuri slums is not only sonically consumed, but sonically constructed and represented as well. The sonic interaction amongst communities is determined by the relative positioning of the self in the immediate–extended–imagined sensorial realms *vis-à-vis* the other. Sonic articulations are significant in determining social, cultural, sensual and spatial engagements with a space. The sonic practices of space highlight these negotiations.

Drawing from these insights, instead of stating a broad hypothesis or a set of main questions, I introduce this essay as a narrative woven around the thematic of o*ther and othering* of the spaces of slums in the discourse of the city and the articulation of sound/soundscapes as an urban experience. In evoking the thematic of ‘other and othering’, there is an inherent danger that this body of work might be approached as consolidating the position of ‘slums’ and ‘sonic experiences’ as an oppositional ‘other’ category vis-à-vis the mainstream, the city, and the visual (an integral referential point to explore the urbane/city). However, it is precisely this oppositional consolidation of these categories, slums and sound, in the everyday experience, mainstream media, and academic discourse that this body of work aims to rework and challenge by exploring the process of ‘othering’ bringing to the forefront the nuances and the lacunae of the same. The intersection of slum and sound studies, both bodies of work which at different occasions find position in urban history, historical accounts, social discourse, media and cultural studies, and the field of sensory perceptions, was by no means an easy one to navigate whilst conducting the study or framing it within a theoretical discussion.

With all their distinctions, slums and sound studies, share the predicament of being on the fringes, so to say, of academic-mainstream discourse as well as experiential articulation. The situation gets further complicated within the Indian, third world and Global South scenario, where the narrativization of and on slums is being reworked in languages suiting to the needs of new middle class sensibilities as well as the burgeoning impetus to sanitize the metropolitan cities to make them amenable for the global-western experience. In regards to sound, the discussion is picking up momentum, albeit only within the framework to implement more effective noise pollution regulation in tune of sanitizing the city, particularly aimed at ‘silencing’ the identified noisy and noises.

In that sense, bodies of work on slums and sound in the Indian context are shrouded in an ominous silence, which pushes them further into the domain of the ‘other’, both academically and experientially. It was this shared predicament of these two bodies of work which allowed for this present work to formulate a theoretical discussion around them within the thematic of ‘other and othering’.  In the Indian context, there is an intellectual gap in the manner in which slums are approached and perceived. The academic tradition leans towards highlighting the lacks at administrative, infrastructural level whilst the everyday middle class narrative is shrouded in the language of moral, social, and cultural decay. In the recent years, there has been some research undertaken which attempts to move beyond these positions but these take into account the national and state level developments, economically, socially, politically and culturally, to enumerate the perception and position of slums within the same. The discourses within the field of social activism calling for better conditions and rights for slums dwellers in the city strongly resonates with the rhetoric of displacement and lacks, which inadvertently further calcifies the position of the slums and its residents as the ‘other’. None of the works, within the field of study, understand to examine the instance of slum settlement in its own right, materiality and politics, and the experience of the space of slum outside this dichotomous position vis-à-vis the state or the city. It is in this regard that this body of work intends to make a departure. At the core of my work lies an attempt to produce an ethnography of lived, everyday, aspirational interactions, insidious and obvious, within the *jhuggis,* and between the city and the slums, in order to locate the slums and their materiality within a larger discursive and experiential scope than it is usually attributed to. Soundscapes and the politics of production, circulation, and articulation of the same, are evoked as the reference point to understand and explore these dynamics. J*huggis* are not anathema to the city, whether one speaks of the city’s history or its present or future. In fact, the dominant reckoning, interventions and reflections on the slums contributes towards obliterating the memory of the slums in the present but also denying them any historicity. The *jhuggis* are civic and social spaces that are a by-product of the violent, inequitable and exploitative processes of urbanisation. Through my 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’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

## Concluding Remarks

By asking the question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ and answering it in the negative, Spivak lend to the recognition of ‘voice’ as a potent political agency for the marginalised.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since then the attempts to extend this ‘voice’ has had overlapping and intersecting implications, variously articulated both in popular and political reckoning in regards to its significance in the rights/identity/space the subaltern can assert and claim. In interventionist initiatives – especially, political and developmental – this inability of the subaltern to ‘speak’ is often translated literally. And thus the sustained efforts to extend a space (real, virtual, mediated by technologies) to the marginalised to ‘speak’ out and thus have a voice.

However: most of these readings, and the subsequent interventions, in fact misread Spivak's evocations, and not surprisingly leapfrog – or completely miss out – on an a stage/situation/modality integral in translating (validating) the act of speaking into voice as a matter of political agency. And that is the consideration of listening. So: we have the matter of the act of speaking translating into affective *voice* with listening as a practice providing the necessary punctum - the turntable, so to say, which when tuned well emanates sounds filled with robustness and *solidity*. And whilst there is a demand, urgent and immediate, to tune into these frequencies of theoretical considerations for definite political actions, there is an equally compelling, perhaps even more so in its practice, task to open our ears, systematically and systemically, to recognise the multiplicity of the acts of speaking.

I argue that the denial of the acts of speaking to the other is deliberated within the logics of sustaining economic, social and political alienation such that the other always remains an ‘unactualized’ self: rambling, incoherent and in need of disciplining. The fate of the other, who only speaks in tongues, is thus relegated to either being silent or silenced. Critical and central to this othering project is the denial of emotionalityto the other firmly situated in the practices of unacknowledging the acts of speaking of the other, and rendering all the utterances of the other as cacophony. I identify the emotional self as the availability of grammar and vocabularies to nurse, cherish, indulge the self, to indeed have reflexive spaces and interlocuting acts of of speaking to call out the pain, anguish, the crushing of the soul, the injustice, violence, marginalization within the broader matrices of class, caste, communal, spatial, gendered negotiations. But also for the self to have the emotional capacities to announce themselves in their full bloom. The other is strategically denied any structures to inhabit and claim their emotionality, and in doing so, they are then denied any structures of defiance. Sans emotions, and emotional capacities - a self which suffers, but also loves, cries in joy, dances in abandon, gives in to desires, makes flippant choices, endures heartbreaks and has poetic inflections - the other is a two-dimensional, cardboard equivalent of merely a receptacle with no depth to evoke reaction and respond.

Deliberating on a distinction between hearing and listening in this essay has been to highlight the manner in which encounters with spaces, cultures and bodies translate into experiences informed by sensorial, social, cultural and moral backgrounds. I argue that it is within, and without, the field of force between the encounter and its translation into an experience that politics of space, identity and gender manifest themselves and abound in multiplicities in everyday materialities of transforming urbanities, especially in the global South. I have also argued that this deliberation does not limit itself to experiencing sounds, but stretches to the body in space and the space of the body. The body of the slum dweller in the city is considered to inhabit illegal space thriving with informal practices. This accords her position in the urban discourse, and her right to the city, an anxiety, on account of either being lamented as a crisis or celebrated as ‘heroic entrepreneurship’.[[16]](#footnote-16) What adds to this anxiety is the agenda of the state to implement its projects and policies, through which these spaces will ‘eventually be integrated into a modern and manageable economy’ , which, in turn, can be a blow to the informality in this economic situation. Informality as an idea, practice and population set has been instituted as anathematic to the projected aspiration of a ‘world-class city’ in the global South.[[17]](#footnote-17) The tensions in the transforming urban materiality of Delhi – a city with ambitions and aspirations to become a world-class city – to accommodate these informalities is further exaggerated by the role these spaces, specifically on account of being informal and illegal, play in wider transformations. They extend the cheap, readily available menial labour necessary to ensure and erect a world-class, international city.

The sensorial and moral regimes of othering, as executed by the deliberate un-listening and silencing, are attempts at fixing the position of slum dwellers as the other – socially, legally, sensorially and morally. This framing allows the state the rhetorical legitimacy to oust them from a formal city structure when deemed appropriate, as also to institute regimes of disciplining their bodies, individually and collectively. Further, within this framing, the predicament of these spaces and their residents as slums that are informal and, thus, ‘un-modern and un-manageable’, is increasingly being framed as a moral limitation of the spaces and the residents themselves. However the potential of the un-containability of sounds – and thus the potency of voice as a political agency – is not completely lost to the residents of the slums, marginalised spaces as the following essays evidence. In these, the subaltern loves, wails, waits, argues, and shrieks; the subaltern indeed does speak, but denied a listening – the validations of its acts of speaking – is caught in the cul-de-sac of sublaternity in perpetuity.

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3. Michel Foucault*, Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984,* Routledge, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oliver Sacks, *Seeing voices: A journey into the world of the deaf,* Pan Macmillan, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Italo Calvino, ‘A king listens’, trans. William Weaver, in *Under the Jaguar Sun,* San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, *1*988, pp 31-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Murray Schafer, ‘Open Ears’, in Michael Bull and Les Back *The auditory culture reader,* New York: Berg, 2003, pp – 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Peter J. Claus, Sarah Diamond, and Margaret Ann Mills, *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka,* Taylor & Francis, 2003, pp – 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tom Rice, ‘Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary’, *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 19, (No. 4, 2003) pp. 4-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Randall, California: University of California Press, 1984, pp 93-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Walter Benjamin and Asja, ‘Journal de Naples’, 1925. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures,* New York: Routledge, 1993, pp -121. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘ Can the subaltern speak?’ in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture,*Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp 271–315. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hernando De Soto, *The mystery of capital: Why capitalism triumphs in the West and fails everywhere else,* Civitas Books, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ananya Roy, ‘Urban informality: toward an epistemology of planning’, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, (Vol. 71, 2005), pp 148. Waquar Ahmed, ‘ Neoliberal utopias and urban realities in Delhi’, *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies,* (10, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)