# 5. Collaborative Listening: On Producing a Radio Documentary in the Govindpuri Slums

With Tom Rice[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was almost midnight when we started our sojourns. We, Tom and I, were going to attend a jagran – a night long event in celebration of one god or another, of the many in the Hindu pantheon, marked by musical and theatrical performances – being held in the park opposite Navjeevan camp and adjacent to Bhumhiheen camp. Jagrans, in any context, are rarely just about evoking the gods; they are about communities coming together and such. In the Govindpuri jhuggis, there significance is elevated on account of several factors. The residents of the three camps - owing to the lack of space and resources - find it difficult to organise such collective events. The jagran, which Tom and I were going to attend, was being sponsored by a prominent politician - Chandraprakash - and not entirely out of altruistic reasons. In hosting and sponsoring such events, he meant to accrue political mileage by allowing for collective cultural indulgence which are few and far between in the jhuggis. This brief background is essential to understand what follows thereafter.

Even though the lane cutting into Bhumhiheen camp to approach the park is not very narrow, the sea of humanity that had descended upon the space made it feel just inches wide. Tom, tallish and white, stood out, and as we were trying to hurdle our way through this densely packed human layering, we encountered drunk young men, who were keen to mark their territory by hurling obscenities and cackling at their performance, especially when it evoked a reaction in the crowds, namely the women. The women were trying to make their way in too, there were young girls - either in groups or accompanied by an elder - equally keen to indulge in the rare occasion of collective, cultural event. However, the space, the experience and performances were essentially masculine in nature.

Tom, who had arrived in Delhi for the first time only hours back, was overwhelmed. And not surprisingly; I did not let it be known then, but even I was. He insisted we go back, and we did. At the corner of the intersection, we stood, his sense of unease apparent. I rolled a smoke, whilst Tom regained his breath. We agreed to make our way back into the park; in retrospect, I am not sure whether Tom remained overwhelmed, but as soon as the tents acting as makeshift entrances into the park opened up, he was at his sonic best: listening, recording, catching sounds as they were hurling about. The expansiveness of the park, replete with all the props for the theatrical night to follow - a stage, children, men and women dressed in the attire of different gods and bright lighting - was a relief; even to me.

And thus wetting his ears in this deep end Govindpuir jhuggis soundscapes, we set out over the period of next three weeks to record for the BBC radio documentary on Govindpuri Sounds.

The next three-weeks were a sonic indulgence at its loudest. Tom soon acquired a fan-following among the residents of particularly Navjeevan camp, especially the children. The association being immediately established on account of the Tom-Jerry cartoon, and Tom was often referred to as Tom Tom. During the three-weeks, we followed the lives of women who had gone through difficult circumstances; we listened into women filling water; we arrived early in the morning to listen into the jhuggis wake up; we often stayed late nights.

It was an exhilarating experience for me; even though I realised how demonic my laugh is when Tom would playback the day’s recording. This was on several accounts. It was the first time that I sharing the ears, so to say, with someone else such that we listened into similar notes and modulations; this practice of collaborative, shared listening which at once validated my own listening but also compelled me to tune into someone else’s as well. Here, a point needs to be made. I did share listenings with the residents of the jhuggis, especially the women. By the time of recording the documentary, almost a decade and so after my initial entries into Govindpuri, we had arrived at our own ‘collaborative’ practice of listening. By now, I was so tuned into Govindpuri that I had almost instinctively learned how to ‘block’ certain sonic manifestations.

The manner in which the lived, almost everyday collaborative listening with the residents of Govindpuri was different from the experiences of sharing the ears, so to say, with Tom was on account of the fact that he was as much an outsider as one can be. We had first met in the quietness of Cambridge where we discussed listening, soundscapes and strange fictions. For me, the collaborative listening with Tom then was a validation of sorts of my own ‘ears’ in that sense. I had pursued my doctoral research in another staid, quietness, that of Brisbane. Though I did not live in Brisbane for prolonged durations whilst conducting the research, I spent almost nine months at a stretch there to finish writing my thesis. The exhausted silence of the city had a very disquieting impact on me. Away from the multiplicities of sonic manifestations of not only Govindpuri, but also the city of Delhi, I would often find myself wondering and worrying whether what I was not ‘making up’ the listenings. This is not only a mere admission of insecurity in oneself (though as a third-world academic one’s work is rarely taken seriously if not validated by one or another ‘first world’ scholars), but is symptomatic of more structural and systemic concerns of production of knowledge when it is relying on modes outside of the established ‘verifiable, legible, visual’ practices.

The collaborative listening, which the recording towards the documentary compelled, thus only lend to further tuning my ears into the considerations of soundscapes as a valid social, cultural, political artefact, particularly for those on the margins? As there are teaching modules to acquaint those eager with nuances of visual cultures, could there be a similar possibility with soundscapes or aural practices? In what ways to think about listening not only as a matter of auditory compulsion or even ‘engaged hearing’ but perhaps ‘privileged hearing’? In what ways to understand, decode, call out these ‘privileges’? Can we think about listening as a valid, without concerning ourselves with its verifiability or not, methodological undertaking? In what ways then do we refine that reckoning?

**Tripta Chandola (TC)**

I listened into the everyday of the slums in Govindpuri. Retrospectively, it is a tempting proposition to posit this ‘intent’ as an intellectually driven project but the fact of the matter is that it was an purely instinctive, responding to an impulse -political, poetic, intellectual and theoretical - to distance myself from the manner in which ‘slums’, its residents were framed in both academic and mainstream discourse. I listened, not because I was either all too familiar with the rich, interdisciplinary theoretical, intellectual contributions to sensorial anthropology, sound studies or even the explosive potential, possibilities which soundscapes allow to engage with the lives, histories and testimonies especially of those on the margins, outside the literate, hegemonic space.

**Tom Rice (TR)**

Yes, I think this an interesting point about the listening being instinctive. I had never been sure when reading your work why you started listening to Govindpuri in the first place, but I think in the end that probably the soundscape made an impression on you, and drew attention to itself (there is a real sense on which sound has an agency of its own in this respect, and theory from STS on non-human agency can be applied to sound quite successfully I think). After the sound environment has made itself noticed, the more intellectual attention, by which I mean ‘deliberate thought about sound and reading relevant literature from the social sciences’, perhaps began to take over in your thought process. I remember you saying that you do not think of yourself as a particularly auditory person, which is interesting. Clearly the sounds of Govindpuri were rich, intriguing and powerful enough to make you devote a very great deal of time and energy to their study (talk about possessing agency!). I myself have always had an interest in sound. I don’t know exactly where this came from, but by the time I went to university I knew I wanted to work in radio and to document life and explore ideas in a sonic medium. In the final year of a degree in Social Anthropology I was given the opportunity to write a dissertation on a subject entirely of my own choosing, I decided that I would write about the radio station at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (situated very close to Edinburgh University and to the flat where I was living at the time). I was working as a volunteer there in order to try to accumulate skills and experience in radio with the aim of applying for a job in radio later on. I was also working in student and community radio around then. My initial intention for the dissertation had been to look at the way the DJ’s on the hospital radio station used music and techniques of speech to try to create a sense of unity among patients, a sort of imagined community of people brought together temporarily in the hospital because of ill health. One of my jobs at the station, which was called Red Dot Radio, was to go around the wards and to gather music requests from the patients which would be played on the evening’s programme. However, many of the patients to whom I spoke drew attention to the sonic environment of the ward and the generally negative ways in which it affected them - preventing them from sleeping, waking them early, provoking feelings of irritation, disgust, exposure, embarrassment and so on. They used the hospital radio as a way of temporarily escaping this unpleasant sound environment. I say temporarily escaping because the fact that they were hospitalised meant that they were unable to escape it fully until they were discharged. They were to a large extent a captive audience, and had little real choice but to exist within the hospital and its soundscape. It was only really at this point, and through the instruction and direction of the patients themselves, that I began to listen to the sound environment of the hospital, noticing its qualities and being surprised by their variety and intensity. This was the start of the project that began with the dissertation and culminated in my monograph which you mention - Hearing and the Hospital. But ever since that listening with patients I have been drawn to researching sonically rich and intense environments.

**TC:** I listened, intently and attentively, first on the account that I as an ethnographer had to ‘mute’ my own position-premised hearings into the jhuggis. This ‘tuning of the ear’, so to say, opened up journeys and experiences of the self and the space of jhuggis as I had never heard in the academic, mainstream discourse, at least not so loudly and definitely not so assertively. Of the aspirations, romances, heartbreaks, deceit, negotiations, politics beyond the narratives of ‘lacks, deprivations, misery and marginality’. I was at once seduced and humbled. And following from this, I listened, even more intently, because it was this un-listened present, past and futures of and from the jhuggis which I wanted to insist on.

**TR:** I think that one thing an ethnographic approach does, or rather, one thing one is aiming to achieve using an ethnographic approach, is to educate oneself as to the way in which others attach meaning or importance to particular sounds in their day to day environment. One then hopes to relay something of that way of listening - be it in a written text, radio programme, audio essay - whatever the medium. It’s not so much about muting one’s own hearings in my experience, but about changing the way one hears and documenting that change. That was what Govindpuri Sound was about I would say. Describing the sound environment but also the way that people live in relation to it.

That expression ‘tuning the ear’ is interesting. One can certainly become more knowledgeable skillful at listening to an environment. One can notice sounds and qualities of sound one didn’t before, and one can become better able to judge the kinds of feelings and associations a sound might evoke in a listener or group of listeners. I guess it’s important from my point of view not to think about ‘the ear’ in a reductive way, but to recognise that ‘the ear’ also involves the integrated brain/mind/body and is bound up with the position one occupies in social and geographical space, with postures, technologies (most obviously the microphone in *Govindpuri Sound*), attention, mood and so on.

I certainly felt while we were making Govindpuri Sound, that, as you say, what one heard was at odds with the mainstream academic and public discourse surrounding the slums. Almost continually there were snatches of romantically charged music drifting out of houses, and people listening and singing along to these. When they saw us walking around with a microphone many people were understandably curious. Often they wanted to sing into the microphone and and be recorded, usually singing romantic or wistful songs. As I say in the programme, people we met were often more ready to sing than be interviewed. There could be interesting political implications to this observation. There seemed to be a convention that the microphone should elicit performance rather than comment. Perhaps this would have applied less to people who understood themselves to occupy a higher place in the social hierarchy and who possessed different levels of education, confidence in the value of their own opinions and so on, though I am speculating here. Negotiations and arguments were also noticeable too: there was a lot of back and forth, sometimes at high energy and volume levels, though didn’t understand the subject matter here so can’t comment as to what it was really about. I was quite surprised by how much laughter I heard, though again, I’m can’t be sure I understood the subtleties of the spirit in which people were laughing. I got the laughter, but I’m not certain I got ‘the joke’.

I relate to what you are saying about aspects of the slum experience not being listened to. Listening in this sense - as a kind of focused and empathetic engagement - is very valuable where it has not been done before and where it occupies a space that has been neglected by more established modes and techniques of attention and attending.

**TC:** I listened because within this ontological engagement with the residents of Govindpuri, I was able to present their lives, sense of spaces, self, negotiations as articulated and claimed by themselves within their own grammar and using their vocabularies. I was allowed possibilities to engage with the everyday of the jhuggis besides/alongside the logic or experiences of poverty, deprivation and marginalities (even though not losing sight of it in a broader, structural sense). The poverty, the deprivations, the limited infrastructural availabilities were not a secret that had to be unraveled. These are obscenely obvious, and from my political, intellectual position, it was a bloody affrontation to the intelligence of the residents to ask them to spell it out. And to overlook the need to ‘verify’, ‘document’ and ‘validate’ these experiences of the marginalities - the seduction of triangulation - which captures the imagination of so many, especially when engaging with the lives of the poor.

**TR:** Yes, I don’t disagree with anything you have said in the paragraph above. It may not be appropriate for me to say this in this piece, but I suppose I tend to encourage people to be realistic about their claims. It’s not as if you spoke to all the slum residents (this would be impracticable) and I don’t think you are claiming to represent all of them. Rather during a very long period of being a researcher in GP on a range of projects, establishing close and long-lasting friendships with particular people there, and speaking to a great many other slum residents over time in a wide variety of contexts, you have developed a detailed and nuanced understanding of life in GP, one which is not present in the impersonal and generalising discourses used by researchers in Development and Urban Studies, for instance. I am just riffing here...

**TC:** In thinking through this exchange, I read your book - *Hearing and the Hospital* - again. I am not sure in what frame or from what vantage point I was engaging with your research earlier, but in this re-reading (whilst thinking about re-listening into Govindpuri), I can draw very definite parallels to my own research.

The position of the patient in your research - particularly those in post-operative and intensive care units - immobile and incapacitated to give their testimonies of their state of well-being within a particular knowledge praxis (here, medical sciences) nevertheless do not cease to be, so to say, asserting themselves through their ‘sonic bodies’. And in the attentive ‘sethoscopic listening’ - I will return to the this conceptual framing, which in the moment I am absolutely titalted and excited by - which these ‘sonic bodies’ demanded, you also locate/identify significant developments in medical sciences, technologies, modalities in making meaning itself.

**TR:** Yes, again I don’t disagree with anything you say in the paragraph above. I guess I’m not sure how to relate it back to GP at this point. I guess we need to remember too that the readers are unlikely to have come across Hearing and the Hospital or to know what is in it.

For me, the position of the patient and the residents of the jhuggis share a certain incapacitated predicament. Is that too much of stretch? In both instances, the ‘body’ in question lacks a definite agency to penetrate the very hegemonic, discursive spaces and knowledge practices which in return locates/ensures its ‘well being’: in the case of the patients within the historiography of medical sciences itself and for the residents of ‘slums’ within the legal, development, urban planning discourse. However the ‘sethoscopic listening’ which extends palpability, evidencing the living which merely the ‘seeing’ might miss, to the patient in the case of the hospital, and listening as a political, methodological tool in the case of Govindpuri which compels engaging with the everyday beyond and besides the framing of ‘poverty, etc’., is potent with the possibilities of accommodating, acknowledging on their own accord the records, histories, experiences of those on the ‘margins’? Here, I am locating the patient’s body (and the agency she can assert) within Sontag’s problematisation in Illness as Metaphor.

I think you have really got to the heart of why, for me, listening is important as an ethnographic technique and also just as a way of being in the world. It’s about ‘evidencing the living which merely the “seeing” might miss’. It’s also about attending to something that is widely dismissed as superficial and unimportant.

To continue that idea, a common attitude I encounter is: “why are you so interested in sound when (in the hospital context) people are undergoing serious operations/need to be protected from hospital acquired infections/there is a funding crisis in the National Health Service” etc. In GP it might be: “Why are you so interested in sound when there are serious problems with things like access to water”. My response to this is to feel: “Well, there is a lot going on in this soundscape that evidences the things you are concerned about (for instance, exposure to noise seems likely to affect patient sleep and rest and so to affect recovery rates, which means longer patient stays in the hospital and makes the hospital less financially efficient, and the busyness of the soundscape reflects the complexity of the contact that is taking place on the ward and so reflects the difficulty of controlling infection), but there is also much going on acoustically in the ward to which you are oblivious because you don’t perceive it (for instance the patients reacting with disgust and embarrassment to their own and other peoples’ body sounds which are audible in the enclosed and densely occupied space of the ward, and which have profound implications for the experience of hospitalisation). In GP you could say, for instance, that the presence of water sounds in the soundscape is reflective of water scarcity and wider scarcity of vital resources, but that, as you suggest in your research, you also miss the gossip, teasing, flirtation, abusing, shaming etc that is going on if you don’t listen, and these kinds of exchange are vital to the experiential fabric of life in GP.

**TC:** As a sound anthropologist, do you think that soundscapes [as social, material, cultural, political artifacts and listening - in different ways - as a methodological praxis] have this inherent ‘disruptive’ potential to disturb the hegemonic practices of knowledge production? Have the possibilities been exhausted? What are the possibilities - methodologically, intellectually, theoretically - of exhausting these potentialities, if in fact these resound with it? Or am I leaning towards romanticisation of positing visuality vis-a-vis aurality as binaries?

**TR:** This is a huge question or set of questions and realistically I probably can’t answer them at all fully. I think on the whole that trying to set up visuality and aurality in a binary is unhelpful and tends not to work. In real life situations where the senses can only be decoupled in very temporary and somewhat artificial ways, and technological is increasingly blurring the boundaries between what is heard and what is visualised (see Ingold and also Sterne on these issues). That said, I think it can be helpful to consciously place emphasis on the aural and de-prioritise the visual at times in order to pursue particular research aims, and that this act can be disruptive to hegemonic practices of knowledge production. I don’t think listening is ‘inherently’ disruptive, but it can be used in disruptive ways. I do not think we are even close to exhausting the disruptive possibilities of listening as a way of producing knowledge, and actually I think that in the social sciences we are only at the beginning of this journey. What the possibilities are ‘methodologically, intellectually, theoretically - of exhausting these potentialities’ is a big question and might need a different article.

**TC:** In your conclusion, whilst taking the Perspective Tour of the permanent collection at the Wellcome Museum in London, you make the point to the attendee of ‘requiring imagination’ to attend to the ‘cacophony’ which would be at the heart of the ‘acoustic archaeology of medicine’. In the similar vein, I would like to stretch this call for ‘imagination’ to engage with the sounds of the everyday of the jhuggis, all relegated to all encompassing and overwhelming ‘noise’. However, what would be the task - as anthropologist/ethnographers invested in listening, in soundscapes - to enliven the imagination of those not so ‘sonically tuned’?.

**TR:** I suppose what’s needed here is a direct provocation to listen to the jhuggis and their history (if one is taking an acoustic archaeology approach). I remember when we were making GP sound you took me to what is now a rather nice public park, a large green space near Nehru place. You pointed out that this had once been a very large slum settlement, set up by people who came to work on the buildings that became Nehru place itself, and catering for the needs of all the workers. Then, to cut a long story short, once the building project was finished the slum was cleared and replaced with the park. I have good audio of you, actually sounding quite emotional, as you explain that there is no longer any trace of the slum and that no one in the years to come will know that a slum ever existed there. You can hear the sense of loss and anger in your voice about all the traces of human life that are now gone. This would be a good point at which to provoke people to reimagine what that place might have sounded like. You could even do an installation in that park where you urge people to remember these people whom you suggest public discourse does not regard as worth remembering. Or you could gather interviews from people who lived there and then play them to visitors to the park over headphones as part of a site specific installation. That could be interesting and, as you suggest, enlivening to the imagination.

I feel that one thing the hours of recording for GP sound we made might do is represent an archive of what sounds could be heard in that particular place at that particular time. This could be very valuable for some GP residents if (and when?) the slum is removed and its inhabitants are ever relocated. Or it could be useful as a sort of public record or cultural resource. Then again, you have to wonder who would want to take the time to listen - but there may well be people one day who would have an interest. The recordings could be catalogued and given to an institution like the British Library Sound Archive (though there might well be an Indian equivalent).

I was speaking to someone recently about the GP sound documentary, and he suggested that the sounds could be edited into a package of ‘sounds from a Delhi slum’ and that permission to use them could then be sold to people who might be interested in making films, audio pieces, video games etc using them. It raises questions as to who really owns these recordings (the people of GP? You as the researcher? Me as the recordist? The production company? The BBC as the commissioning body and funder of the recordings even though not all of them were used in the programme? No one?). It might be an interesting project to consult GP residents on this question and find out what they feel as well as to ascertain the legal position. I doubt the sale of permission to use these recordings would ever make serious money, and it may not be worth the labour of editing the package together, but the idea does raise interesting questions as to who should have what rights over the soundscape and recordings of it.

1. Tom Rice is a Senior Lecturer (Anthropology) at the University of Exeter, http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/sociology/staff/tomrice/. Tom Rice, Govindpuri Sounds, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02hm1rx. The documentary was commissioned by BBC for its The Documentary program and was aired on 2 February 2015. More information here, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/34775/Tom%20Rice%20Govindpuri%20Sound%20REF%20document.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y.

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