# 5. I Wail, Therefore I Am

## The Wall

On 31 March 2008, 1,000 slum dwellings were razed to ground in the GP slums in Kalkaji extension in South Delhi:

Construction of a five-foot wall to divide a slum cluster from neighbouring middle-class colonies is wreaking havoc in south Delhi’s Kalkaji Extension[...]bulldozers razed down more than 1,000 small shops and homes to make way for a wall that will encircle all three camps in the slum cluster: Bhumiheen, Nehru and Navjeevan. Four hundred metres of the proposed 2-km wall are already in place, under construction by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) since December. “We are acting on an order from the High Court”, says DDA’s executive engineer K K Khanna. And the High Court was responding to a petition filed by Arsh Avtaar Singh, former president of Kohinoor Apartments Resident Welfare Association, in May 2005. The petition sought a solution against encroachment of roads and services by slum residents.

Neighbouring middle-class colonies support Singh’s efforts. A flat-owner from nearby Konark Apartments, who does not want to be named, says: “All my life savings have been used to purchase this flat. For 22 years I have lived with the stink from open defecation, and constant over-crowding from blocked roads”.

Residents want slum dwellers to be relocated in pukka housing. “I feel bad for them”, says Singh, whose own domestic help lives in Bhumiheen Camp. “They should be given an alternative home immediately”.

But the DDA claims it needs time to relocate the slum dwellers. “The wall is a temporary arrangement to offer protection to flat owners”, Khanna says. In the interim, Daliwal, a resident of Konark apartment, thinks the wall should be built higher. “It should be at least eight foot high, and built either with bricks, or grills and mesh. There should also be fewer outlets”. The camp’s residents, though, are fuming. “We were given no warning”, says Sagar. She claims to have bought her grocery shop for Rs 20,000 rupees 13 years ago. “I make Rs 50 a day, through which I cook for my family. We have nothing to eat today without my shop”. Trying to salvage broken chairs and cutlery from his former confectionery store, Izhar Ali asks, “What should I do to earn? Can the government give me an alternative?”[...] DDA’s Khanna, meanwhile, insists there will be several entry and exit points in the wall. “There are more than 17 gaps in the 400-metre stretch built so far”, he says.

DDA has a May 21 deadline for building the wall.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A notice of planned demolition was circulated amongst the residents of GP camps through pamphlets and announcements in the last week of March 2008. The scheduled date for the demolition was 3rd April. When the announcements were made, resident groups, political organizations, and NGO’s convened to contemplate a course of action to impede the demolitions. One of the resident groups in collaboration with a leading NGO in the area filed a petition to demand a stay order for the proposed demolitions. The hearing of this petition was scheduled for 2nd April.

On the evening of 30th March, the residents of GP slums began noticing surmounting police presence in the area. When inquired about their presence, the police personnel informed the residents of the demolition scheduled for the next day. Early in the morning on 1st April, an area of three kilometers around GP was cordoned off by police forces including anti-riot squads. For the next few hours, the demolition squad systematically razed the defined slums and shops to the ground.

However, unlike other demolitions, the primary agenda of demolitions carried in GP slums was not to evict illegal squatters. As the local press presents it, through this act of enclosure, the authorities consider that they will be able to curtail the movements of the slum residents on the roads, parks, and other spaces shared by the slums and nearby middle class residents, providing respite to the latter.

The wall is justified by the state authority on the grounds that it will protect the ‘flat owners’ (the middle-class population) in the area. By implication suggesting that slum-dwellers pose a threat to this section of society. The slums have co-existed with the middle-class settlements in this area for over twenty years. There are no recorded incidents of violent outbursts and attacks perpetrated by the slum-dwellers towards the middle-class population, according to a search of police records and media reports. Instead, the middle-class homes offer employment opportunities to slum dwellers as domestic helps, cooks, guards, and drivers.

Following the demolition and prior to the erection of the wall, I conducted interviews with both slum-dwellers and residents of nearby middle class settlements to understand the perception of ‘threat’ in the everyday context.A significant proportion of the slum’s population work in this way, and in discussions it became clear that they would be unlikely to jeopardize their livelihoods by violence or any other form of direct conflict with their employers and vice-versa. The latter simply want to assert their claims and rights to not endure the assault - smell, noise, dirt, filth - which the presence of the *jhuggis* unleashes on them.

The demolitions at GP, the authorities later claimed, were peaceful. In the present, the outlines of the wall are barely visible as it has been innovatively woven into the architectural structures of the jhuggis. The matter of whether the wall could or could not contain the slum-dwellers for the safety of the middle-class neighbours of the apartments is not of consequence, what matters is that the middle-class neighbour’s claims, owing to their position on the social-cultural-political matrix, of desiring sanitized spaces were acknowledged and legitimized by the courts and other state authorities.

## The ‘Noisy’ Other

From where they are, what they hear of GP slums (hereafter, ‘GP’) is only noise. In this reckoning, sounds in GP have no intent or imagination; they emerge out of nowhere, conflate and contradict with other sounds sharing the same predicament, to disappear into another nowhere-ness. To these outside ears, the noisiness of GP has only the singular and absolute purpose to invade and disrupt their deserved silences.

That the heard noisiness of GP from the outside—namely, the middle-class residents—is not a matter of decibel levels, but is a ‘particular trope of experiencing sounds is significant in defining a ‘sense of the self,’ which is effectively employed to create social, moral, and political exclusion[[2]](#footnote-2)’. In the liberties with listenings I evoke here, the politics of production, performance, and articulation of ‘noise’ as a specific instance of sonic engagement to highlight the broader processes of othering in the city as a sonic premise to further complicate the reckoning of noise—politically and philosophically—in itself. In that, the listening attempt here aims to rehabilitate noise within the sonic triad of ‘noise-sound- silence’, wherein sonicity linearly moves from a state of chaos, through certain validations to an absolute state of calm. I will tease out these negotiations by attempting the biography of a sound—wailing—in the immediate context of GP, and then extrapolate it onto the broader materiality of the sonic capacities available to others in the city.

Slums are marginalized spaces in the materiality of a city. And in a city like Delhi, with its hyperbolic transformative agendas to become a ‘world-class, clean and green city’, these spaces, more than ever, represent the perversity of a past desired to be conveniently lost: poverty, violence, unstructured growth, over-population, dirt, filth, and noise[[3]](#footnote-3). Acutely aware of the particular and predicament of the sustained, strategic and everyday violence of the marginalization the slums, and its residents, encounter, the space, its sociality, and cultural politics have their own modalities to internalize this violence; and in that process deliberately define the boundaries of their own margins and locate their own others. One section of society in GP on which this violence of othering and marginalization is inscribed is its women. Gender, however, is not the sole category of othering, and its associative social, cultural, and political disenfranchisement. The considerations of caste, class, communal affiliation, and political loyalties are equally determinant in these processes, however for the sake of the listenings proposed here, it will be the voices — or lack thereof — of the women in GP that will form the focus of our attention.

The soundscapes in the neighbourhood of Govinpuri, including the slums, are dense and intense. It is indeed thick. To be heard here—literally, metaphorically, and politically—necessitates employment of effective sonic, technological, and social interventions. Given the space of GP is highly gendered, the women are denied these techniques of being heard, and thus their entry and assertion into its soundscapes often remain, at best, muted. To then extend masculinity to GP’s soundscape as an over- arching characteristic is not an attempt at simplification of its listenings, but an invitation to hear into it from a gender-specific trope. One sound—more accurately an instance of sonic performance by women in GP—however, has the potential to disrupt the intersecting sonic, spatial, and gendered masculine hierarchies, however temporarily: it is that of a wailing woman.

An emaciated, sickly woman is sought, and quickly found. It is an early, cold, January morning in 2012. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi elections are a few weeks away. I am accompanying, listening to, and interviewing a group of women mobilized from the three camps in support of a local candidate contesting the elections. On the said day, there is a scheduled rally in support of the candidate. The atmosphere in the room where the women congregate is tense, only easing when the required—emaciated, sickly—woman is identified. Preparations are in order—often hasty, tense, and leading to heated exchanges. I am told these are for the rally due in a few hours, but the specifics of the plan are not discussed and there is no room for interrogation of that sort. The emaciated, sickly woman is the hero of the moment; deliberations about her attire, where to get the desired at such a short notice, and assuring, and hushed consultations with her are taking place in a corner. I continue to listen. Eventually we set out.

The stage for this setting is an intersection leading from the camps to the main road. The intent by now is obvious; the group of women intends to block this intersection so that the visit of the opposing candidate into the camps can be stalled. The execution of the intent— the plan, now in motion—is not without its ingenuity and strategic planning. The emaciated, sickly woman, dressed in white, is laid down in the middle of the road on a bamboo plaque usually reserved to carry the dead to the cremation ground. She is covered with a white sheet with her face partially covered. It is evident by now that the role assigned to the emaciated, sickly woman in this planning is to play dead. And she does it quite convincingly. The women congregate around her in semi-circle, completely blocking the intersection. The imminent arrival of the opposing candidate is anticipated, and the women surrounding the un-dead dead woman start wailing in a collective, synchronized and sincere manner. It is not a cry, it is not a shriek, it is simply a ‘prolonged high-pitched cry of pain, grief, or anger’; it is indeed an inarticulate ‘high-pitched sound’. And, this sonic intervention has its desired effect. The candidate from the opposing party, and his cohorts, try to circumvent this sonic blockade, so to speak: they try to initiate a conversation with the group of wailing women; they try to placate them; they extend promises of justice delivered—without really knowing what the act of criminality or the grievance is being mourned over. The women, however, refuse to relent, and continue with the wailing. The threat of seeking police intervention to remove this sonic blockade was unimaginable: an assault on a group of wailing women, apparently mourning the death of one of them, would have ruined any moral respectability for the concerned candidate in the community.

Eventually, the opposing candidate leaves without holding the scheduled rally, and the women disperse as effectively as they had claimed the space, sonically. The undead finally awakens, walks alongside the others to the murmurs of applause and admiration, though not without a hint of envy. She—the emaciated, sickly woman—is after all the silent punctum of the incisive and effective sonic intervention: wailing.

If sound in its singular manifestation is to be reckoned as a particular and peculiar intersection of its spatiality and temporality in the site of its origin, then soundscapes are the simultaneity of these intersections. A spatial-temporal matrix can contain more than one sound, thus complicating not only the Cartesian notionalities of space and time, but also of the sonicities it contains. Thus, a sound is not just a moment of insular and individuated instance of utterance, but derives its momentum from the collusions with the multiplicities that abound these matrices: spatial, temporal, sonic, social, cultural, and political. A listener, not unlike a cartographer, traverses through these matrices to ‘make sense’, to hear, to map not by accompanying each sound (or in the case of a cartographer, venturing into every crevice) but by deliberately, unintentionally, and inadvertently leaving most un-listened into. And thus the ears, as appendages which can never be ‘closed’, become the libraries where these listening intos are archived.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But unlike a library, and an archive, with its robust physicality and Deweyian, almost clinical sensibilities, an ‘ear’ remains a highly individuated, and thus an ambiguous site of production of knowledge. Lending anxiety to this ambiguity and identification of ‘listening(s)’ as a knowledge base is not only the technical matter of ears that cannot be closed, but also sounds that cannot be contained. And thus the individuated hearings are not so much a matter of the ears as itself, but a more insidious and astute question of ‘but whose ears?’. The strategic, systematic, and deliberate privileging of hearings of, and by, certain ears— with political, social, cultural, and moral currencies—then assumes the role of listeners selectively identifying sounds to situate it within the sonic triad of ‘noise-sound-silence’. These listening(s) of course do not (and cannot) contain sounds permeating into ears and spaces; instead, they weave sounds together into logic of those that are contaminated, the ones that are sanctioned and others that are sanctified thus deliberating, and setting limits, to the permissible spatial-temporal-sonic intersections in a space, moment, and its memory. The ears that dare to hear otherwise, and the spaces where sounds, which disrupt the precariously listened-into spatial-temporal sonicity, abound are either silenced, deliberately un- listened into or identified as sites of sonic contamination.

It is within this schematic that the outside listening into of GP is collapsed into a cacophony of contaminated sounds collectively identified as noise. This reckoning has implication both in the real and rarefied imagination of the slums and its residents—the ears and the space: they exist in a perpetual state of chaos, lacking potential and imagination to move towards a validated, and eventually, a state of calm; the chaotic predicament is not conducive to conversations; thus they deserve un-listening and deliberate silencing; they are deemed unfit to participate into the listenings of and in the city; they are all but noise, a distraction; this chaos emerges not out of structural, social, and political marginalization of these ears and spaces, but from its inherent moral and ethical corruptibility; they are beyond redemption, and thus, not unlike an erring child punished to stand out of the classroom, they are denied recognition as citizens of the state.

The slums and its residents therefore perpetually reside in the twilight zone of being un- citizens, loud-uncouth-noisy.

But. However. Nevertheless: the city passes. Listen. The city passes. Lend your ears to the sound that refuses to die, dissolve and indeed disrupts; let us then revisit the sound which got us here in the first place: the women wailing an undead-dead, an existent non-existent. Wailing is a sound that, in its singular utterances, colonizes the spectrum of the triad ‘noise- sound-silence’ triad in its entirety, and thus its highly disruptive potentialities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Crying and shouting as distant cousins of this sonic performance are not without this disruptive potential, however, these acts inherently extend an invitation for a negotiation: either a complicity in the act, situation, or moment responded to by crying or shouting; or, a desire to seek redemption and retribution, and often even an acknowledgement of guilt and penance. Wailing is a non-negotiable sonic performance. Seemingly inarticulate in its “prolonged high-pitched cry of pain, grief, or anger” or just as a ‘high-pitched sound’, it is in fact unapologetic, resilient, and assured. In its so-heard incoherence, it carries the currency of being a contaminated sound, noise; in its effectiveness to demand attention of the ears, it is a validation of an emotion intensely felt, a sound; and, in its transcendental potential to silence by demanding complete hearing, it also manifests the calmness of silence. In that: wailing comes to haunt the hearings, it disrupts the spatial-temporal-sonic matrices as in its sonic performance its potency to contain “noise-sound-silence” all at once. Women as systematically muted agents—historically, politically, and sonically—performing the wailing further lends to the anxiety: if the silenced finally start speaking in tongues that cannot be contained and demand complete reverence, one only wonders the wrathful gods they will evoke. The imagery of a group of women in GP wailing onto the body of an undead-dead uncannily evokes the predicament of the slums in the city, here in the city of Delhi.

Superimposing the masculine/feminine binary to the cartographic reality and imagination of the spaces in the city, slums most definitely embody the *feminine*, and the sustained, systematic, and everyday violence that it entails. Here, the intent of evoking the binary of masculine/ feminine to situate the real, imagined, and desired engagements between the slums and the city is to complicate these reckonings instead of reinforcing them[[6]](#footnote-6). In their encounters with the city in different capacities—for example, as employees, voyeurs, and consumers—the men from the GP feel emasculated, especially in their interactions with middle- class women as employers and objects of desire. In these encounters, it is required of them to perform *femininity*, exaggerated by the *silence* they have to maintain. This silencing is instituted by the expectation of non-negotiable subservience in the case of former, and its almost-negligible possibility of actualization in the latter. These displaced (never disrupted though) masculinities, however, are rehabilitated by its exaggerated, perverse hyperbolic performance within GP’s spatiality and sociality where their position, especially vis-à-vis women, is one of dominance. However this performance, with all its violence, does not dissipate uncontested, remaining an exclusive domain of the men. Women, both as individuals and occasionally, as a collective, challenge it, whilst others (who either by the virtue of their social position—mother-in-law, for instance—or by enjoying a certain political legitimacy) not only embrace and internalize its vocabulary but execute its violence on other women and weaker men. The identified *feminine*, not necessarily a biological entity contained within gendered qualifications, continues to be a site (both in its pathological situation of a space and a body) where the perverse desire to discipline, destabilize, and de- stroy can be melodramatically performed. The anticipation lending tension to the punctum moment accruing the *masculine-feminine* dramatics (in either its rendition of space or body) is not a resigned deliberation of the sustenance of the status quo, but the palpable *dread* of a conversation.

The deliberate compulsion to collapse all and every sound of the slums in its hearing by the dominant ears—namely, the middle classes—as contaminated and relevant only in its noisy manifestation is merely an attempt to deny the potential of mutable sonicities. And thus to keep the slums suspended in perpetuity as un-heard, silenced, un-dead, and un- existent in the circus that makes the city.

However. Nevertheless: *the un-heard do wail; the un-dead do not just cremate themselves into ashes; and the un-existent continue to move across the spatial-temporal-sonic matrices.* In their wailing, they haunt.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Postscript

Saroj, the protagonist of the essay *The Subaltern as a Political Voyeur*, the organic intellectual, was the undead, the hero of the hour. She set her eyes on me as she woke up, commanding a smoke. As we walked into the lanes, she inquired,‘white does not really suit me, does it?’. I wanted to but hesitated in saying it aloud, ‘neither does being dead’.

1. Preeti Jha, ‘Great Wall of Kalkaji’, *Indian Express,* 05 April 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have unpacked the tensions of social and morally determined listening intothe slums in Tripta Chandola, ‘Listening into Others: Moralising the Soundscapes in Delhi’, *International Development Planning Review* 34 (4) (2012): 391–408 and in my doctoral research. Here, I establish the manner in which this listeningnot only affects the everyday interactions between the residents of the slums and their middle-class neighbours, but also the manner in which it frames the slum-dwellers as otherswithin the imagination of the city, and its impact on urban policies that strategically exclude the spaces of slums and its residents. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the Indian context, these constructions have a historical, social, and cultural continuity, deeply embedded as they are in the practice of caste discrimination, which are essentially sensorially ordained. However, the evocation of these categories to justify the transformations of the Delhi into a world-class, global city attempts to neutralize these negotiations by rendering onto them an ahistorical, modernist agenda. This I identify as ‘sensorial re-turn in urban planning policies’ which I argue is, ‘[...]continuation of the elitist agenda to contain bodies and conquer spaces. However, the manner in which it is being executed is outside the praxis of caste, class and religion in the name of progress and development, thereby lending it a secular character, which denies it historical continuity and complexity. The sensorial re-turn is acquiring not only a political rhetoric and mainstream support, but also legal sanction’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aside: is there a technical, clinical and, even perhaps, a cynical term for storing and sorting listening without reliance on a visual paradigm? Its reliance on a doctrine visually inclined? But then Borges was blind after all? The insertion of a blind Borges (a story-teller par excellence, but most fundamentally a custodian of knowledge in his avatar as a librarian) is to at once reveal the visual-centric bias in acknowledging and classifying experiences as knowledge cultures and practices and to emphasise that there are indeed other modalities of experiencing—evolving a ‘sense of self’—arrived at through a melee of sensorial explorations. Alberto Manguel who in his youth read to Borges when he started losing his sight, renders the experience of *experiencing* libraries, stories, and their classification with Borges as ‘memories of memories’, inadvertently displacing the visual bias in *With Borges*. The Western, Cartesian, colonial agenda of the visual bias was not without its deliberation to deny of a ‘sense of self’(by disregarding the knowledge cultures premised on a sensorial reckoning) of the encountered others—the natives. The ‘sensorial re-turn’ is but a particular and peculiar manifestation of this kind of othering. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here, the disruptive potential of wailing as a sonic performance by women in GP is identified as ‘[...] a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other’ suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory’. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble,* London: Routledge, 1990 (1999), pp vii. This performance further displaces the male gaze (and hearing) which Zizek identifies as ‘... endeavors to counter the fundamental hystericity (lie, lack of a firm position of enunciation) of the feminine speech’ by laying claims to the very vocabularies which are reckoned to render them incomprehensible, thus divesting the male gaze (and its hearings) of its autonomy. See Slavoj Zizek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences,* London: Routledge, 2004 (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The reactions in the Indian media and the middle-class rhetoric to the brutal Delhi Gang Rape case of 2012 are symptomatic of these negotiations. The fact that the perpetrators were residents of a slum settlement in the city distracted attention from the fundamental violence and brutality of the act of rape to the specific case being evoked as particular pathology of slumming. The materiality of this space was identified by most commentators as a breeding ground for rape. It is overpopulated; the people uneducated, and by that stretch uncouth; people here do not experience sex as a personal, emotional act, but perform it publicly; men are drunk and women lack morals. And, of course, these spaces are swarmed with those alien things: the migrants. The media was replete with such elaborations, with Sheila Dixit, the Chief Minister of Delhi then, even managing to push her deca- de long agenda of restricting the entry of migrants in the city in the kitty. See also: http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2013/s3683181. htm; http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/07/gang-rape- fear-anger-delhi-slums [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The potential of wailing—as a particular sonic performance and as a more generic manifestation of the gendered, spatial and social negotiations—is identified within its capacities to occupy/claim the position of *trickster*, ‘dispelling the belief that any given social order is absolute and objective,’, who demands an audience, critical and engaged, instead of silencing this performance, potent with possibilities, by a silent reception. See Mary Douglas, *The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception*, *Man (*3.3:1968), pp 361–376. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)