

Tripta Chandola

Listening into others: moralising the soundscapes in Delhi

Slums represent a tense moment in the urban fabric of Delhi. At the most fundamental level their position in the city is determined by their illegal occupation of state land; owing to this peculiar predicament, their entries into mainstream, legitimate network are limited, if not completely restricted, and they operate within an extensive network of informal economy and practices. In this article, drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a prominent slum-settlement in Delhi, India's capital city, I argue that a narrative of immorality has been systemically and systematically constructed to consider the position of slums and slum-dwellers in the city, such that their claims to (and rights in) the city are negotiated within an 'informal-illegal-immoral' matrix. I explore these negotiations through the politics of sound and more specifically the identification of sounds of and from certain spaces as 'noisy'. In this article I situate these negotiations in relation to what is termed as a *sensorial return* in Delhi's urban planning policies and practices.

Keywords: soundscapes, noise, Delhi, slum-dwellers, listening, sensorial return

The ears, they never close. And, thus, we are constantly surrounded by, and submerged in, soundscapes. They evoke different emotions, often helping us to find our bearings and, at other times, making us lose them. Sounds, then, in a rather simplistic articulation, allow us to make sense of self and the space we inhabit, at once (Feld, 2005; Feld and Basso, 1996; Rice, 2003). However, we do not engage with sounds in their quantifiable manifestation of decibel notes; instead, we engage with a multitude of notes, variously organised as silence, music or noise. Given the ubiquitous, and rather ephemeral, experience of soundscapes, not only are the particularities and peculiarities of sounds organised as silence, music and noise, but the preference given to one kind of organisation of sounds over another is also reckoned to be a *de facto* reality, which is thus considered apolitical.

Here, it is a matter of deliberation to speak about the organisation of sounds, though not to impose an artificial, palpable materiality on sounds – as in the case of objects, for instance – but to understand the manner in which ephemeral experience of sounds lends itself to highly structured and technical manifestations – for example, as music or its reckoning as noise, which demands its own legislations – and also as the desire of and for silence, with an insistence on absencing sounds. Central to this interpretation, I argue, is the politics of production, performance and articulation, which accords sound an organised character. These engagements and experiences

Tripta Chandola held a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute, from April 2011 to April 2012. Presently she is an independent urban researcher based in Delhi; email: tripta@gmail.com.

Paper submitted January 2011; revised paper received and accepted January 2012.

of sounds are socially, culturally and morally informed and motivated and, thus, are essentially political in nature.

In this article, I will attempt to tease out the negotiations and politics of the organisation of sounds, specifically as noise, to highlight the manner in which this 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. I will draw on the ethnographic research I conducted in the slum settlement of Govindpuri in Delhi, India, to emphasise how different reckonings of sounds as noise within the settlement manifest politics of space, gender and community. I will then juxtapose these reckonings in the broader context of the everyday relationships between the residents of the slum settlement and their middle-class neighbours, and, through this, I will highlight the manner in which sensorial vocabularies are being employed in refurbishing Delhi's urban materiality, which I identify as a *sensorial re-turn*. Through these sometimes intersecting, and often conflicting, narratives of experiencing sounds as noise, I will draw attention to the manner in which these sensorially experiential understandings are increasingly informing structural undertakings, such as the urban planning practices and policies, in Delhi, the capital of India.

Sensing the city

The fascinations around the fantasies of, and for, the city abound in scholarship across urban studies, geography, planning and design, anthropology and sociology. Often this scholarship has reworked the thinking of the city. However, in recent years, the transformation of cities has necessitated a constant rethinking among scholars of the city. The city, however, prevails with its multiplicities of experiences and identities and never ceases to capture imaginations. These multiplicities evoke celebrations amongst some and fear amongst others, namely, the controlling authorities, which want to tame difference into a monotonous same-ness. In acknowledging the potency of these multiplicities, scholarship around the city confidently and creatively borrows from different fields. The discourse of structural othering and violence on the urban poor and marginalised in the transforming cities of Asia is a key focus of these studies (Ahmad, 2011; Ghertner, 2008; 2011a; 2011b; Baviskar, 2006; 2011; Kundu, 2004). These studies particularly highlight the practice and institution of exclusion as violence, in efforts to make cities 'clean, global, and world-class'.

In this article, I bring together ethnographic research, work in urban studies and planning and the anthropology of the senses to argue that while it is important to highlight structural inadequacies, it is equally significant to engage with how the city is lived, produced, created and contested (Anjara and McFarlane, 2011). Often the urban studies and planning scholarship falls short of this agenda, on account of the *kinds* of sources used to analyse everyday experience. These are, more often than not,

master plans, policy and legal documents and textual analyses located in the media. Such analyses are significant. They situate the sites where violence is exercised on the urban poor. However, inadvertently, they lend to silencing the voices and, thus, experiences and identities of the urban poor, as they rely on sources (policies, master plans, etc.), which systematically operate with that specific agenda of invisibilising the poor (Nandy, 2010). In short, we know enough about what is done to the urban poor, but we know very little about what the urban poor do about what is done to them.

While critically aligning this article with the discourse of othering and violence, I give preference to the voices and experiences of the urban poor, by engaging with the everyday of slum dwellers through its sensorial politics. In doing so, I highlight the creative, contested and political manners in which they negotiate the multiplicities of urban living, revealing their selves and their others, instead of only being regarded as *others*.

That 'the senses are everywhere' and that they 'mediate between mind and body, idea and object, self and environment' have been established across historical, political and cultural contexts (Howes, 1991; 2003; 2004; Classen, 1993; Stoller, 1997). The scope of sensorial studies enlivens scholarship on the city and its cultures, by engaging with these messy everyday materialities and negotiations between the self and the other. In doing so, it also allows access to a body of knowledge which has not been historically and politically taken into account. While there is a significant body of work exploring cities, their cultures, politics and spaces through the everyday life of senses in Western contexts (Cowan and Steward, 2007; Diaconu, Heuberger and Mateusberr, 2011), the potential of sensorial engagements to explore, excavate and enliven the cities in Asia remain untapped (although exceptions include Low, 2009; Chandola, 2012).

Listening into *listenings*

Elsewhere, I have explored the everyday negotiations between residents of a slum settlement in Delhi and their middle-class neighbours through the politics of sound (Chandola, 2010). Collectively and popularly referred to as the Govindpuri slum,¹ the settlement concerned, in fact, comprises of three different 'camps' – the Nehru Camp, the Navjeevan Camp and the Bhumiheen Camp.² The cumulative population of the three camps is 500,000, spread over an area of five square kilometres, with an average

1 Throughout the article, I have anonymised the name of the research respondents. However, the actual names of places, slum settlements and neighbouring areas have been used, in order to avoid the *silencing*, which the article raises a point against.

2 Adjoining the slum settlements is a lower-middle class area, known by the same name, Govindpuri. It is owing to the proximity to this area that the slum settlements acquire their popularly used reference. In this article, unless otherwise mentioned, Govindpuri refers to the three different slum settlements as a collective.

of around 600 families living on every hectare of land.³ It is a densely populated space, with limited infrastructure. These three camps are commonly considered to be one consolidated settlement; indeed, until I undertook my research, I had a similar impression about the area. However, during the course of my research, I gradually came to realise the heterogeneity and diversity of the three camps, in terms of regional, community, gender and religious affiliations. However, the representation of slums in everyday middle-class and mainstream media discourse renders them *de-historicised*. In such representations, the slum dwellers are first and foremost residents of the slums (Sharma, 2005; Baviskar, 2006; Bhan, 2009), precluding other forms of identification. Indeed, slum dwellers are severely disenfranchised and disempowered in the city. They are recognised as informal-illegal occupants of the state land, and this fact limits their 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1974) on more than one account (Roy, 2005).

The spectre of 'informality and illegality' which shrouds the everyday of the slum dwellers, and, thus, their position in the city, is a complex negotiation between state-recognised and extended rights, middle-class articulation of the same, representation in mainstream media and the spaces available to the residents of slums to negotiate these. Govindpuri is not a notified slum area, which, under the Slum Improvement and Clearance Areas Act of 1956, 'are considered to be legal structures and are eligible for benefits under the Act'.⁴ Instead, it is identified as a JJ (Jhuggi & Jhopdi) settlement, which 'are considered as an encroachment on public or private lands. They are therefore seen as illegal'.⁵ However, the residents of the JJ clusters are recognised as citizens of the city, which is validated through extending them 'ration cards' – documents that not only validate their identities, allow access to subsidised food and other household items, but also establish their claims to 'resettlement', in case, and when, the slums are demolished. The state is given the responsibility to extend basic infrastructural, medical and educational facilities in these areas. However, more often than not, these facilities are not made available to the residents. When residents in Govindpuri appropriate, circumvent or subvert the existing networks to avail themselves of these basic facilities – for instance, water and electricity – they are framed as 'freeloaders' and 'thieves' in the popular perception amongst the middle-classes. While the research informing this paper is situated within the discourse of legalities that determine the position of slum dwellers in the city, it identifies the informality and illegality of slums as the complex negotiations – legal, illegal and extra-legal – which inform the everyday perceptions, practices and politics within the middle-class and mainstream media representations.

It is important to emphasise the disempowered and disenfranchised position of slum dwellers (Dupont, 2000; 2004; 2005; 2008; 2011; Ramanathan, 1996; 2004; 2005;

3 This figure is based on data provided by the official 2001 Census of India.

4 http://delhishelter.nic.in/Policies/present_policies_n_strategies.htm (accessed on 30 December 2011)

5 http://delhishelter.nic.in/Policies/present_policies_n_strategies.htm (accessed on 30 December 2011)

2006; Roy, 2005; Sen, 1976) in demanding rightful claims to the city. However, I believe that it is equally significant to engage with the complex historicities and positionalities – gendered, religious and regional, amongst others – which the inhabitants of slums negotiate. In my reckoning, these positionalities not only allow engagement with the everyday of the slums in a more nuanced manner, they also widen the avenues to understand the construction of spaces, identities and notions of citizenship and its negotiations with different structural agencies within broader urban discourses (see, also, Bunnell, 2004). These engagements complicate the relationship between the processes through which the ‘state power ... construct[s] and reconstruct[s] categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy’ (Roy, 2005, 149). Such an undertaking, where the multiplicity of the everyday of the slum dwellers is explored, also responds to the call to reckon ‘informality as a *mode* of urbanization’ (Roy, 2005, 148 [*italics in original*]), instead of its framing either as ‘crisis’ or ‘heroism’. Elsewhere, I have made an attempt to disrupt, if not displace, the homogenised representation of slums and its residents, within the middle-class, mainstream media discourse (Chandola, 2010).

I employed an ethnographic approach to undertake this research and hanging around (Whyte, 1993) was one of the key methodological strategies. Govindpuri is a highly gendered space. Initially, as a woman, it was easier for me to establish relationships with other women. However, owing to my position as an outsider, I also had the opportunity to venture into spaces typically identified as ‘masculine’, such as salons and teashops. However, it soon became evident that I could form a long-term research relationship *either* with women or men as a group, but not with both, as a complex politics of control and subversion mediates the everyday interactions between these groups. Sustained engagements with one group immediately put me under scrutiny from the other. I did not want to breach the trust of any group on personal and methodological grounds. Therefore, it was with women in Govindpuri that I eventually established the strongest research and personal relationships. Of course, I interviewed and engaged with men, too, but the nature of these engagements was, more often than not, structured and mediated by the presence of one of the women.

It was, thus, through the exploration of everyday life in Govindpuri that sound emerged as a significant trope, through which experience and engagements space, gender and communities were articulated. Once I arrived at this reckoning, I decided to examine Govindpuri through its soundscapes. This was done on two main accounts. Firstly, slums are represented as sites and spaces of overwhelming sensorial overload. The dirt, smell and noise of these spaces are affectively evoked to both denounce their presence in the city and demand better facilities for the residents. These are also evoked to justify the slum re-settlement programmes as providing respite from such ‘horrible’ conditions. Sheila Dixit, currently serving a third term as chief minister of Delhi, justified the spate of slum demolitions in Delhi ‘both on humanitarian grounds and in terms of the beautification of the city’. She argued that ‘destroying slums ...

[was] a humane act', as 'the slums that ... [the dwellers] are living in are appalling, really appalling', where '[they] live in inhuman, unhygienic conditions'.⁶ The everyday living conditions in slums is established and taken as 'appalling', both in the rhetoric justifying these cleansings and those defending the right of slum dwellers to the city.

Clearly, the density of population and limitation of space in the slums account for amplified sounds, and the lack of proper sewage systems result in stagnation of water and accumulation of mud. However, while living conditions in Govindpuri, with their sensorial overload, were acknowledged by its residents as not being the 'perfect surroundings to reside', they were rarely articulated as unbearable. The all-encompassing and categorical classification of these conditions as smelly, dirty and noisy in the middle-class framings reveals the prejudices inherent in instituting hierarchies through sensorial ordering and othering (Classen, 1993; Howes, 1991; 2003; 2005; Smith, 2008). Without leaning towards romanticising these spaces through their sensoriality, I have sought to reveal the social, spatial and cultural complexities of everyday life in a slum, through their 'world of senses' (Classen, 1993). The overloaded sensorial experience of slums in middle-class imaginations accords slums an extraordinary, almost dystopian, character. I have highlighted the manner in which sensual experiences play a significant role in grounding reality and negotiating everyday politics in the slums, as in any other space and cultural context. And, thus, the ordinariness of everyday experience in slums is revealed through the 'cultural life of the senses' (Chandola, 2010; Howes, 2005), however dystopic and disturbing they are reckoned to be. I concentrated on soundscapes to engage with the world of senses in Govindpuri, but was also mindful of the politics that unfolds in other sensorial realms. In fact, more often than not, they overlap and intersect, leading to intersensorial regimes (Howes, 2005; 2006).

Secondly, while it was possible for the middle-class residents to exert sensorial distance, with regards to smell, taste and touch, by insisting on guarded social and cultural practices, they expressed emotions akin to 'helplessness' when it came to the soundscapes of Govindpuri. In these narratives, where the middle-class residents articulated their anxieties about the sensorial proximity with the slum dwellers, it was evident that their cheap menial labour (as domestic servants) was desired, only their presence was not (Sharma, 2005; Baviskar, 2006). A member of a nearby middle-class apartment block's resident welfare association (RWA) reflected on this predicament: 'It is not as if we don't want them to work. Obviously, we do. But, do we really deserve to live next to them? They can travel to our places from resettled colonies. We do not mind that'.⁷ The tension, in the narratives of the middle-class neighbours of Govindpuri, between the desire to demand a distance from the sensoriality of slum dwellers and acknowledgement of their constant presence – owing to the ephemeral

6 <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/01/news/delhi.php> (accessed on 30 December 2011)

7 Interview with the member in January, 2008, from researcher's field notes.

and uncontrollable soundscapes of the slum dwellers experienced by the middle-class residents as noise – inadvertently accorded the residents of Govindpuri an agency to exert their identities. This sonic tension, in my reckoning, allowed for rarely available discursive space to map the manner in which the slums *examined* and *engaged* with the city, thus inverting the *listenings*.

Experiencing encounters: hearings into listenings

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, *listenings* – 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? Drawing upon ethnographic materials from my research in Govindpuri and its nearby middle-class settlements, I attempt to unravel some of these politics, by highlighting the social, cultural and moral positions which inform certain listenings. I also highlight the resulting political resonances, specifically, in regard to the relationship between the residents of Govindpuri and their middle-class neighbours, as well as their implications for the broader structural transformation of Delhi.

My initial encounter with soundscapes in Govindpuri reveals the politics of encountering-experiencing and *hearing-listening*. In short, I was listening into these soundscapes through my middle-class sensibilities. In this early phase of my research, I was often tempted to abandon my project, owing to my inability to listen into the listening(s) of Govindpuri. However, I surrendered to the humility, which Stoller (1997) reckons as necessary to conduct sensorial research, and learned to mute my own listening(s). I learned to tune into the encounters of sounds in Govindpuri, as they were encountered, and follow them diligently, which translated into experiences assuming certain legitimacy. This is not to suggest that my listening was no longer informed by my class background, but even though I could not – and, perhaps, did not want to – silence it, I became acutely aware of it. 'Where do these different listenings come from?' and 'what becomes of them?' were questions raised frequently in

the discussions with the residents, especially women, in Govindpuri. I am indebted to these women for such discussions, which were at once exhilarating and exasperating for 'opening my ears' (see Schaffer, 2003).

Noise, *n.* A stench in the ear

To this elucidation on noise by Bierce (1911) – an American satirist in the early twentieth century – I attach a question central to my research: but, whose ears? Bierce's definition of noise provides an entry point in the discussions to follow. He further elaborates noise as '[u]ndomesticated music' and '[t]he chief product and authenticating sign of civilization'. It not only highlights the specific listening of sounds as desirable or dreaded, i.e., music vis-à-vis noise, in its satirical evocation – or, perhaps, because of it – it also succinctly surmises the tension of desiring the cheap labour of slum dwellers, but not their presence. As such, the conclusion seems to be that slum dwellers are necessary for civilisation, but not disciplined enough and, thus, necessitating the regimes to do so.

In this section, I will focus on two narratives – one each from Govindpuri and a nearby middle-class apartment block – to highlight how the articulation of noise in each setting 'is an issue less of tone or decibel than of social temperaments, class background, and cultural desire' (Schwartz, 2004, 51) firmly situated in social, cultural and political hierarchies. These narratives allow an understanding of how social, cultural and moral positions inform the translation of encounters with soundscapes into experiences as organised categories of sounds.

The area that encompasses Govindpuri – the legal lower-middle class settlements and middle-class residential areas – is dense and characterised by a multiplicity of soundscapes. This sonic density renders it impossible to engage with this soundscape either through Schaffer's categorisation of noises as 'sounds we have learned to ignore' (Schaffer, 1994, 3) or Bull's highly demarcated private-public sonic engagements (2000). It would be a matter of 'methodological deafness' (Gell, 1995, 233) to deny the soundscapes of Govindpuri (its slums, lower- and middle-class settlements) their loudness and brazenness.

Noise as a 'function of not noise'

In my ethnographic interactions with the middle-class residents around Govindpuri, the task of researching sonic articulations and engagements was by no means an easy one. The middle-class *listening* of Govindpuri was expressed as a homogenised experience articulated as noise. More often than not, the discussions would steer towards the slum-dwellers' social, cultural and moral bankruptcy. When reminded that Govindpuri constituted both the legal (lower-middle class) and illegal (the three camps of

the slums), the middle-class reaction emphasised that the population density in the area and construction features in their houses blurred the differences between the two lower classes. However, in their refrain regarding noise, 'slum dwellers', as individuals and collectively, were identified as noisy. Instead of inquiring about their perceptions of slum sounds, I started to raise discussions about which slum sounds they noticed at different hours and how they ranked them. 'Loud music', 'crudely amplified music', 'uncouth, loud words' and sonic performances of everyday activities in public, like 'fights', 'animated conversations' and 'calling out' were terms associated with the 'noisiest' sonic behaviour.

I established contacts with a young, working couple in their mid-twenties through a mutual friend. They were eager to participate in the research and invited me over for lunch.⁸ They live in an apartment block close to Govindpuri. The couple's attitude towards living in the vicinity of a slum settlement was ambiguous: their opinions did not resonate with the popular anti-slum sentiment, but they supported the drive of their resident welfare association (RWA) against slums. Anuj and Sarika's engagement with Govindpuri was very superficial, within the prescriptive code defined by their RWA. We talked about their perceptions of, and engagements with, slum sounds. For Anuj, the most 'frustrating, nerve-racking' aspect of the Govindpuri sound was the 'loud, crudely amplified music'. Anuj is passionate about music, especially Indian classical music, old Bollywood songs and rock music from 1960s and 1970s:

Anuj: I will appreciate music anywhere. However, the way they play in the slums, it kills it, man. The speakers are blaring, the amp is not tuned in properly ... for some strange reason; they think bass is the key to music. It angers me so much ...

R: So, it is not particularly the loudness you mind?

Anuj: Not loudness, *per se*, but the particular kind of *loudness* ... which doesn't make sense ...

R: How is this loudness different from Blues?⁹ That is pretty loud and it is very small ...

Anuj: That is music. *This is not.*

R: Maybe, it is for them: this is how they enjoy their music. Maybe, this is a Blues experience for them.

Anuj: How can badly amplified, blaring noise be music for anyone? They totally ruin it ...

Anuj's engagement with the slum sound was through the lens of music. He (like his wife) did not associate social, cultural or moral values, or the lack thereof, with the sound of slums. However, they still categorised it as noise and denied it any musical credibility. Why, when he did identify the sound as *music*, I asked Anuj, could he not think of it as being *musical* enough:

8 Researcher's field notes, August, 2007.

9 A popular club in Delhi, which regularly features rock nights.

Anuj: It is lack of education and exposure. They don't know what real music is ... it is a cheap technology, cheaply used.

Anuj's denial of instances of music in the slums as *musical* may be understood in relation to Hegarty's philosophical ruminations on Industrial Noise Music as a genre. He points to the construction and articulation of noise as 'the overall practice ... playing out power, through challenging institutions, the listeners' moral expectations and, in concert, often establishing a threatening ambience' (Hegarty, 2007, 119). The slum rendition of *music* – through its amplification practices, essentially – is listened to by the middle class as a challenge, a threat to their experiencing sounds organised as music.

Between noise and silence

Until the mid 1990s, the legal Govindpuri settlement had a thriving small-scale industrial area. This provided the main economic base for most families in the adjoining slums, especially in the Nehru Camp, which is across the road from the legal settlement. In the 1995 case in the Supreme Court of India *MC Mehta vs the Union of India*,¹⁰ the 'closure and relocation of polluting industries in Delhi' was ordered.¹¹ The order sought to lessen pollution – air, water and noise – in Delhi. By 1998, most of the industrial units had been closed and relocated from Govindpuri, which was a serious blow to the economic mainstay of many families in Govindpuri. In my conversations with residents of Govindpuri, especially the Nehru Camp, the 'sound of the industries' was constantly referred to:

Before the factories were shut, we awoke and slept with the sounds of machinery. We knew when it was morning, the time to work, the time to take a break and the time to go home [with the sounds of machines]. ... The initial few months, actually a few years, were very disorientating. ... We felt lost in a way. The silence was painful. ... It was like mourning.¹²

The sound of the industries provided an important sonic backdrop for the residents of the Nehru Camp, even for those who did not engage with it. These sounds organised the everyday temporality of the slums; at the same time, referencing a major part of the livelihoods of slum-dwellers. It provided for a sonic reference to make sense of their place in the city and in the slums:

That constant humming of machinery ... that was what it meant living in the city, for me at least. I had left my family, village and friends to earn money. ... When I worked

¹⁰ <http://www.iclrc.org/content/co409.pdf> (accessed on 30 December 2011)

¹¹ http://www.cccia.org/resources/publications/dialogue/2_11/section_2/4451.html (accessed on 30 December 2011).

¹² Anil, 46, male, from Nehru camp. From researcher's field notes, April 2006.

at the factory, I did not miss them so much. I was totally lost; I was making money; and, I was looking forward to getting them here. ... But, when the factories stopped, it was suddenly silent. I felt very alone. I had no job. My being in the city did not make sense. ... The silence was deafening. I took to drinking.¹³

Pankaj still lives in the Nehru Camp, now with his wife and two young children. He works with a private company in Nehru Place, a nearby market complex. In his narrative, silencing of the industrial sounds was *noise* – deafening, emotionally oppressive and nauseating. The industrial sounds were his anchoring and justification in the city. Without them, he lost his bearings. The distinction between the categories of noise and silence as experiences of sound was complicated, and often collapsed, in the narratives from within Govindpuri and about them.

But, whose ears?: in between noise and silence

In the narratives emerging from Govindpuri about the more affluent areas, the middle-class settlements and public parks are articulated as silent, symptomatic of oppression, danger and intimidation. Here silence signifies a lack of movement, community affiliations, social networks and associations. Silence implies social, cultural and moral isolation and independence – it is suggestive of challenging traditional social-cultural values:

When I walk through the apartments [behind the slums], it is always so quiet. Nobody talks to each other; they live in their own worlds, doing what they want to. ... They have no care systems in place for elders [and] children. ... They lead isolated lives.¹⁴

Many families which can exercise the choice of not living in Govindpuri continue to live in the slums for the 'vibrant culture' and 'social and moral cohesiveness' that the 'quiet, isolated lifestyle of middle class is devoid of'. Absence of sounds in this context is an act of social isolation, symptomatic of collapsing social, cultural and moral value systems.

The women in Govindpuri have restricted mobility. Their journeys into the city are permitted only if they are escorted and usually must be for specific purposes. The avenues for voyeuristic indulgence are limited for them. However, on occasions when a group of women has been given permission to venture out of Govindpuri, their experience has been less than enjoyable. I interviewed two groups of women who had visited a nearby shopping mall and a cinema hall and travelled on Delhi Metro on different occasions. Both the groups found the experience disorientating. They were unable to engage with the '*noisy*' soundscapes. It was not a matter of loudness, *per se*, but concerned *language*, which can 'become mere noise or nonsense as one tongue among many' (Bailey, 1998, 24):

¹³ Pankaj, 38, male, from Nehru camp. From researcher's field notes, April 2006.

¹⁴ Aruna, female, 33, from Bhumihecn camp. Researcher's field notes, April 2008.

All the announcements are in English ... and even when they speak in Hindi, they speak so fast. First, we did not realise that it was a computer speaking on the Metro. ... It was strange and funny. For days we kept trying to speak like that: ... '*The next stop is New Delhi*'.¹⁵

The articulation of sound as noise and silence in these narratives complicates this relationship. Noise thus becomes a generic categorisation of unfamiliar soundscapes that does not allow an interface to engage with, or control it, for a group or community. The conceptualisation of 'noise as merriment; noise as embarrassment; noise as terror' (Bailey, 1998, 24) is strongly situated, socially, culturally, morally and politically. Noise is, at once, marginalised sound and sounds of power and resistance.

Noise is not always, and singularly, about loudness, nor is it always about sound. In that, it is 'not always a nuisance, neither is it always loud or excessive' (Bailey, 1998, 24). Noise is a social, cultural and political act – in its production, performance and articulation (Attali, 1985). 'Loudness', as a specific characteristic to identify the *noisy* 'other', is a consistent rhetoric in the narratives of the residents of Govindpuri – the physicality of middle-class residents is 'loud'; uninhibited interaction between men and women is loud as well. For middle-class residents, the public performance of everyday activities of the slum dwellers is *loud*, as is the amplified soundscape. In both instances, noise is a matter of social and cultural specificity and subjectivity (Bailey, 1998; Schwartz, 2004; Smith, 2008). As mentioned earlier, the soundscape of Govindpuri, including its slum and middle-class residential areas, is characteristically loud. However, that does not immediately translate into all loud soundscapes being characterised as *noisy*. Only those soundscapes that do not allow an avenue for sonic engagement – either as coercive action (to impose silent zones) or collaboratively (to have a collective agency to experience sounds as noise or silence and organise music) – are articulated as *noisy*. Other soundscapes are loud and violent, in terms of volume or organisation of sound or its performance, but they are not noise, as is evident from Anuj's experiences of loud soundscapes of slum noise and pub music and Pankaj's experience of, and with, industrial sounds.

The sensorial re-turn

In this section, I juxtapose these *localised* sensorial understandings – here highlighted with a focus on sonic politics – with state-led, middle-class supported campaigns, such as the Bhagidari System, to highlight the manner in which sensorial vocabularies are being systematically employed in refurbishing Delhi's urban materiality. What I term a *sensorial re-turn* is characterised by a narrative of urban-morality, premised on the logic of codifying urban experiences as sensorially high and low (Howes, 2004).

15 Seema, female, 22, from Navjeevan camp. Researcher's field notes, January 2009.

Further, I argue that it is specifically the 'middle-class'¹⁶ morality which dominates these discursive praxes and legislative actions (see, also, Ghertner, 2011a; Bhan, 2009; Srivastava, 2009). Within this rhetoric, the exclusion, demolition and disciplining of dirty and unpleasant – and, thereby, undesirable – spaces and bodies have found yet another legitimising claim in the mainstream media and the middle-class discourse, as well as in legal frameworks.

The premise of the Bhagidari System (literally translated as 'participatory system') is to involve 'citizens' in the processes of governance so as to make it effective, transparent and collaborative. However, the only citizen groups that are presently involved in the Bhagidari System are the RWAs of middle-class, often gated settlements and market traders' associations (MTAs). The Bhagidari System does not have representation and participation from citizen groups from lower-income group areas (which often do not have associations), slum dwellers or the homeless population, amongst other disempowered groups. The Bhagidari System is a strategic targeted intervention by the state to distance itself from the responsibility of extending due rights to disempowered sections of society. By involving 'citizen' groups, whose demographics are suggestive of the kind of citizen the state desires, in governance processes, which include, but are not limited to, addressing the issues of cleanliness, encroachment, slums and crime, amongst others, the state has strategically set out to accentuate the distance between these sections of society. Not surprisingly, the participant citizen groups in the Bhagidari System are the strongest supporters and, in many instances, executors of the 'Clean Delhi, Green Delhi' campaign. The state has allowed the mainstream middle-class discourse around these issues to assume a self-appointed moralistic tonality. The middle classes have taken it upon themselves to refurbish the city as desirable in their own terms, leading to exclusionary policies and practices. The question still to be asked is: what do processes of governance and claims to citizenship have to do with moral order, mobilities and permissible *sensorial* performances in the city? These, more than anything else, normalise the sense of a Self – individual and collective – in the city. And, in doing so, it is in the un-permissible performances that immorality is situated. This, then, becomes a legitimate claim to exclude the immoral not only from rights to the city, but also citizenship. Senses – touch, taste, sound and sight – are everywhere (Bull et al., 2006; Howes, 2004). Their hierarchisation, perception and articulation are socially, culturally, politically and morally constructed. In every context, a different regime of sensual hierarchy exists (Smith, 2004; 2008; Classen, 1993; Howes, 1991; 2005). The importance of the senses to organise, coordinate and regulate societal, cultural, moral and political practices within a community

16 Here, the 'middle class' is identified as the segment of the population which has gained significant prominence socially, culturally and politically since the economic liberalisation, owing to their spending powers. This section of the society constitutes the most important market for consumer goods and, not surprisingly, has benefitted the most from this development.

and with others has been firmly established (Stoller, 1997; Howes, 2005; Classen, 1993; Smith, 2004, 2008). Sensorial hierarchies have been historically instituted to identify the other. The dominant groups have effectively employed sensorial vocabularies to control the body, by instituting disciplining regimes of different sensorial practices of the other, pushing it into the realm of sensorial otherness. In the Indian context, the caste system is premised on similar sensorial hierarchisation. The distinction between the different caste groups is executed through a prescriptive conduct of maintaining sensorial distance, touch being one of the most prominent senses in this schematic. In particular, the touch of lower-caste members is considered impure, and, by extension, the members of this caste group are also deemed to be impure. The prevalence of untouchability in contemporary India, even though it has officially been abolished and its practice deemed as 'an offence punishable in accordance with law',¹⁷ is a deplorable instance of how sensorial regimes are disciplined and regulated to sustain social hierarchies. As such, the *sensorial re-turn* in Delhi's urban planning policies is a 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. There is an urgent need within different discursive praxes to reveal these politics so as to counter and challenge them.

At the core of practices and processes of sensorial hierarchisation is the intent to accentuate distance from the other. Within this framework, others are denied vocabularies to articulate their 'experiential truth' (Feld, 2005; Feld and Basso, 1996) into consolidated bodies of knowledge, which could disrupt, challenge or even coexist with dominant tropes. The mainstream middle class and the state employ similar strategies of sensorial hierarchisation, by evoking the rhetoric of slum dwellers as 'filthy, dirty, and noisy', which is stretched to accord slums a 'congested and dangerous' character for its middle-class neighbours. And, on these accounts, the displacement and demolition of slums finds justification. By denouncing the sensoriality of slum dwellers as an assault on middle-class sensibilities, the slum-dwellers are relegated to a 'lower' sensorial order, limiting their position in the city.

Here, the issue is not solely about two sensorial orders of organising the self – of the slum dwellers and the middle class – coming into conflict. It is the dominance of one over another which is of significance. In this article, I have highlighted these negotiations through the low-ranked sense of hearing within which silence and music, as identified by the dominant group, are accorded legitimacy, while any other sonic performance is regarded as an aberration – that is, noise. The narratives discussed in the previous section provide evidence that a strong moral order informs the

17 <http://indiacode.nic.in/coiweb/fullact1.asp?tfnm=00%2020> (accessed 30 December 2011)

articulation of sounds as noise (regarded as the most immoral of sonic utterances and performances) amongst the slum dwellers and in their engagement with the middle class. However, it is the morality-laden hearing of slum dwellers as *noisy* by the middle class, which socially, culturally and politically gains recognition as a sensorial assault.

The central argument that this article makes is that while sensorial hierarchies and performances in every context have their own codified morality, in the instance of sensorial engagement between the marginalised (here, the slum dwellers) and the dominant group (the middle class), it is the morality and the preferred sensorial order, of the latter which prevails. The illegal status of slum dwellers, as encroachers of public spaces, is now stretched to involve rhetoric of *moral* decadence and depravation. The everyday articulation of slum sounds as *noise* are instances of the effective deployment of the overlapping rhetoric of informality and immorality, invoked to seek legal action to curtail the informal networks of slum dwellers, especially by strategically targeting makeshift markets and shops along the main road (Roy, 2005).

Conclusion

By deliberating on a distinction between hearing and listening in this article, I have highlighted 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' (Soto, 2000). 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' (Roy, 2005, 148), 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 (Ahmed, 2011; Roy, 2005). 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 *sensorial re-turn* in Delhi's urban planning, I conclude, 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, this framing of the informal position of slums in the city or attempts at their development does not absent their presence, even though that is rhetorically desired. The sounds of Govindpuri permeate through the middle-class neighbourhood and evoke a reaction, even in being experienced as noise by middle-class neighbours. The residents of Govindpuri often use sonic amplification strategies to exert their social, cultural and religious identities, making their sounds uncontainable. Without seeking to frame informality as either crisis or heroism, in this article, I have offered a response to Roy's call to engage with informality as 'an important epistemology for planning', which allows us to learn from 'what goes wrong' (Roy, 2005, 156). At the same time, the article has sought to raise the questions, 'What is wrong?' and, perhaps more importantly, 'for whom?' By highlighting the everyday practices and their translations into structural practices of informality, I have stretched the scope of this inquiry, by highlighting the complicated negotiations of the residents of slums and middle-class settlements across considerations of space, gender and class. The evocation of similar vocabularies, by the residents of both spaces, to practice *otherness* highlights the dynamics of multiplicity in these sites where politics and violence of space and identity unfold in the city. An engagement with these multiplicities can contribute to a nuanced understanding of urban practices, discourses and materialities.

Acknowledgements

For the many enriching, *dirty* conversations, many thanks to Jo Tacchi, Sophea Lerner, Ursula Rao and Nishant. Thanks to Tim Bunnell for his unrelenting patience with my *un-clean* writing and ideas. Special thanks to Mike Douglass, for his patience, while I missed one deadline after another for this article, and thanks, also, for his encouragement to celebrate poetics and politics, both in my writing and thinking. Thanks to the engaged comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

References

- AHMAD, W. (2011), 'Neoliberal utopias and urban realities in Delhi', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 10, 163–68.

- ATTALI, J. (1985), *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Brian Massumi (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- ANJARIA, J. and MCFARLANE, C. (2011), *Urban Navigations*, New Delhi and London, Routledge.
- BAILEY, P. (1998), *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BAVISKAR, A. (2006), 'Demolishing Delhi: world-class city in the making', *Mute*, **2**, 88–95.
- BAVISKAR, A. (2011), 'Spectacular events, city spaces and citizenship: the Commonwealth Games in Delhi', in J. Anjaria and C. McFarlane (eds), *Urban Navigations*, New Delhi and London, Routledge, 138–61.
- BIERCE, A. (1911), 'Noise' in *The Devil's Dictionary*, <http://www.thedevilsdictionary.com/?N> (accessed 15 December 2011).
- BHAN, G. (2009), '"This is no longer the city I once knew": evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi', *Environment and Urbanization*, **21**, 127–42.
- BULL, M. (2000), *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*, Oxford, Berg.
- BULL, M., GILROY, P., HOWES, D. and KAHN, D. (eds) (2006), *The Senses and Society*, London, Berg.
- BUNNELL, T. (2004), *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor: A Critical Geography of Intelligent Landscapes*, London, Routledge.
- CLASSEN, C. (ed.) (1993), *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*, London, Routledge.
- COWAN, A. AND STEWARD, J. (2007), *The City and the Senses, Urban Culture Since 1500*, Hampshire, Ashgate.
- CHANDOLA, T. (2010), 'Listening into others: in-between noise and silence' (unpublished thesis), Brisbane, Queensland University of Technology.
- CHANDOLA, T. (2012), 'Listening into water-routes: soundscapes as cultural systems', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, forthcoming.
- DIACONU, M., HEUBERGER, E. and MATEUSBERR, R. (eds) (2011), *Senses and the City. An interdisciplinary approach to urban sensescapes, Austria*, LIT Verlag Reihe.
- DUPONT, V. (ed.) (2000), *Delhi. Urban Space and Human Destinies*, Delhi, Manohar.
- DUPONT, V. (2004), 'Socio-spatial differentiation and residential segregation in Delhi: a question of scale?', *Geoforum*, **35**, 157–75.
- DUPONT, V. (2005), 'The idea of a new chic Delhi through publicity hype', in R. Koshla (ed.), *The Idea of Delhi*, Mumbai, Marg, pp. 78–93.
- DUPONT, V. (2008), 'Slum demolition in Delhi since the 1990s: an appraisal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, **43**, 79–87.
- DUPONT, V. (2011), 'The dream of Delhi as a global city', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, **35**, 533–54.
- FELD, S. (2005), 'Places sensed, senses placed: towards a sensuous epistemology of environments', in D. Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford, Berg, 179–91.
- FELD, S. and BASSO, K. (eds) (1996), *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, CA, School of American Research Press.
- GHERTNER, A. (2008), 'Analysis of new legal discourse behind Delhi's slum demolitions', *Economic and Political Weekly*, **52**, 57–66.

- GHERTNER, A. (2011a), 'Gentrifying the state, gentrifying participation: elite governance programs in Delhi', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, **35**, 504–532.
- GHERTNER, A. (2011b), 'The nuisance of slums: environmental law and the production of slum illegality in India', in J. Anjaria and C. McFarlane (eds), *Urban Navigations*, New Delhi and London, Routledge, 23–49.
- HEGARTY, P. (2007), *Noise/Music*, New York, NY, Continuum.
- HOWES, D. (ed.) (1991), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- HOWES, D. (2003), *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press.
- HOWES, D. (ed.) (2004), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford, Berg.
- KUNDU, A. (2004), 'Land tenure and property rights', *Habitat International*, **28**, 167–79.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1974), *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- LOW, K. (2009), *Scents and Scent-sibilities: Smell and Everyday Life Experiences*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- NANDY, A. (2010), 'Slums as self-confrontation', *Down to Earth*, April 2010, <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/node/1130> (accessed 14th December, 2011).
- RAMANATHAN, U. (1996), 'Displacement and the law', *Economic & Political Weekly*, **31**, 1486–91.
- RAMANATHAN, U. (2004), 'Illegality and Exclusion: Law in the Lives of Slum Dwellers' (Working Paper No. 2), Geneva, International Environmental Law Research Centre.
- RAMANATHAN, U. (2005), 'Demolition drive', *Economic & Political Weekly*, **40**, 2908–12.
- RAMANATHAN, U. (2006), 'Illegality and the urban poor', *Economic & Political Weekly*, **41**, 3193–97.
- RICE, T. (2003), 'Soundselves: an acoustemology of sound and self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary', *Anthropology Today*, **19**, 4–9.
- ROY, A. (2005), 'Urban informality: toward an epistemology of planning', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, **71**, 147–58.
- SCHAFER, MURRAY R. (1994), *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester, Destiny Books.
- SCHAFER, MURRAY R. (2003), 'Open ears', in Michael Bull and Les Back (eds), *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Oxford, Berg, 21–39.
- SEN, J. (1976), 'The unintended city', *Life and Living*, April 1976, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/500/500%20jai%20sen.htm> (accessed 30 December 2011).
- SHARMA, K. (2005), 'Urban reporting: citizens and "others"', in N. Rajan (ed.), *Practising Journalism: Values, Constraints, Implications*, London, Sage, pp. 148–54.
- SMITH, MARK M. (ed.) (2004), *Hearing History: A Reader*, London, University of Georgia Press.
- SMITH, MARK M. (2008), *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- SRIVASTAVA, S. (2009), 'Urban spaces, Disney-divinity and moral middle classes in Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, **44**, 338–45.
- STOLLER, P. (1997), *Sensuous Scholarship*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- WHYTE, W. (1993), *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (4th edn.), Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press.

Copyright of International Development Planning Review is published by Liverpool University Press, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without Liverpool University Press's express written copyright permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.