



# LISTENING INTO OTHERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION IN GOVINDPURI TRIPTA CHANDOLA

**THEORY  
ON  
DEMAND**

A SERIES OF READERS  
PUBLISHED BY THE  
INSTITUTE OF NETWORK CULTURES  
ISSUE NO.:

**36**

**LISTENING INTO  
OTHERS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
EXPLORATION IN  
GOVINDPURI**  
TRIPTA CHANDOLA

Theory on Demand #36

*Listening into Others: An Ethnographic Exploration in Govindpuri*

Tripta Chandola

Editing: Geert Lovink and Sepp Eckenhaussen

Supervision of previous versions: Dr. Jo Tacchi and Dr. Christy Collis

Production: Sepp Eckenhaussen

Cover design: Katja van Stiphout

Publisher: Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2020

ISBN 978-94-92302-63-2

*Contact*

Institute of Network Cultures

Phone: +31 20 5951865

Email: [info@networkcultures.org](mailto:info@networkcultures.org)

Web: <http://www.networkcultures.org>

This publication is available through various print on demand services. EPUB and PDF editions are freely downloadable from our website: <http://networkcultures.org/publications/>.

This publication is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

  
institute of  
network cultures



## CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE: FOR BITIYA</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>HOW TO USE THE BOOK</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>FACT SHEET</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1. IN SEARCH OF THE NEVER-LOST SLUMS: ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN ETHNOGRAPHER</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>2. LISTENING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>3. AN 'OBSCENE' CALLING EMOTIONALITY IN/OF MARGINALIZED SPACES: A LISTENING OF/INTO 'ABUSIVE' WOMEN IN GOVINDPURI</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>4. THE SUBALTERN AS A POLITICAL 'VOYEUR'?</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>5. COLLABORATIVE LISTENING: ON PRODUCING A RADIO DOCUMENTARY IN THE GOVINDPURI SLUMS - WITH TOM RICE</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>6. I WAIL, THEREFORE I AM</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>7. SONIC SELFIES: EQUALIZING THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER - IN CONVERSATION WITH JODI DEAN AND GEERT LOVINK</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>8. REVISITING THE HOUSING QUESTION</b>	<b>123</b>

---

<b>9. TO WHOM DO YOU 'BEAUTIFULLY' BELONG? THE SLUMS' RESPONSE (IF INDEED THEY WERE ALLOWED THE TONGUES): OR, THE RITE OF PASSAGE TO THE RIGHT OF THE CITY: BUT WHERE IS THE SELF OF THE SLUMS?</b>	<b>128</b>
<hr/>	
<b>10. THE SHRIEK: A POETIC INTERLUDE</b>	<b>139</b>
<hr/>	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>142</b>
<hr/>	
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>146</b>
<hr/>	
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>149</b>
<hr/>	

## PREFACE: FOR BITIYA

Things last longer than men. Who can say whether the story ends here; who can say they will never meet again. – J.L. Borges, *The Encounter*.

In a flat city, or flattened by the many who walk it, the hilltop of an illusion allowed for a sense of height and depth. It was a clear, early winter morning, and I was looking at my crisp best, dressed as the jaded travelers are: collar-down coat, black of course, a roll-on case with no untidy edges and a distant look. However I was not yet at the airport. It was not only the look that was distant, but the look that had rendered a distance to everything immediate – as is a tactic with those who spend hours in the in-between spaces (of the airports), dreaming (or obversely, dreading) of faraway lands. The reverie was broken by the announcement of a white van with blaring red lights. I was starkly reminded of where I was; blame it on the cinematographer's abuse, I had imagined a more dramatic setting.

I was at the entrance of the Safdarjung Mortuary awaiting Bitiya to arrive. We had serious business of the dead for the living to resolve. She was always on her way, never on time. And I found myself distracted from the matters at hand to one hot, summer afternoon years back.

In those times I was an earnest researcher in search of the subjects in the lanes of Govindpuri. I was led into a tiny room, thick with darkness. It was a relief, even though it took me a couple of minutes to find my bearings and the faces of the people present. A huge wooden bed was the only furniture occupying most of the space in this six by four feet room. On it lay a young woman about whom the first thing I remember is her hair; they were spread out like sleeping rivers. The presence did not need any announcement. Baby, my companion, introduced me to an older woman who was squatting at one end of the bed. She was the lying young woman's mother, Salma. Between the two of them, mostly the lying woman, there was very little space on the bed to offer me a seat. She was nudged. Her stillness was absolute. Baby in a high pitched tone informed her that I was there to interview people about their lives; that I was interested in hearing it all. A spark struck. She turned around, though still lying, shifting towards the wall to make space for me, reached for my hand, sat me next to her, and without any courtesies of formal introductions or establishing the intent of my so-said questioning, set out on her soliloquy; my hand merely a prop. For the next hour, and then some, she narrated at length, at once despairing and delighted, about her affair with her lover, Bitiya, of last seven years with whom she recently had yet another altercation.

Her performance was relentless. The interruptions of tea being made in one corner of the room, served and partaken; first, Baby and then Salma excusing themselves on account of reaching their respective place of work as domestic workers, did not deter her. Before leaving, both, Baby and Salma, had tried to intervene and disrupt the performance in which they reckoned I was entrapped as an unwilling audience. In continuing to allow her to hold my hand I assured the two departing women that no coercion was being exercised; they had eventually left, slightly bemused. And thus it was the lying young woman, who had by now gathered herself in a squat, her spread out hair and sparkling eyes.

In spite of the agonies of her affair, every once so often she would break into a childlike enthusiasm about the accessories I was carrying: my bag, the pouch in which I carried my rolling tobacco and the perfect cigarette I was rolling. Half an hour later I had to bid her farewell to keep another appointment. It finally dawned upon her that no formal introductions had been made: She introduced herself, Bitiya. And asked the intent of my visits. I told her. Before I departed she once again reached out to my hand and sought a promise: “You are writing the story of this place, right? Will you write about my love story? I want the world to know that no one can love like me”. I told her there were many other stories I had to consider as well, but of course I will. She left me standing at her porch, her hair swaying, loudly announcing after me that I should make my next visit soon; she hadn't told me anything yet.

That afternoon was almost a decade back. But in the now and here, Bitiya had arrived, effervescent, her brown-eyes sparkling ahead of her and slight jump in her walk. Considering the matter at hand, I wanted to reach out to her and seek apology for not having accompanied her here when she had to come the first time: two-years back in the middle of the night and eight-months pregnant. But together we had seen, felt and grown enough to know that such courtesies were not required between us. Of course notwithstanding the situation and the setting, Bitiya remarked on the tardiness of my roll-on case, which she later did take to pack to her satisfaction.

The first time, in the middle of the night, Bitiya was accompanying Dimpy's – the love of her life - brutally stabbed dead-body to the morgue. Having heard her wail on the phone, I had not the courage to be there for her then. But in the now and here, we were at the office which maintained the records to claim what Bitiya reckoned was rightfully hers: the dead-man's name as hers.

As the tales of listening into the others, but not the task of it, folds onto itself, Bitiya and I have a web of the etching of the lanes of the Govindpuri slums, where we laughed, loved, fought, cried, mourned and steadfastly held on to each other, bearing its testimonies on ourselves, poetics and politics. We also have a seven-year old between us, Myshkin, who is putting us to the task of compelling and challenging the practice of our politics, a battle which we had reckoned we had already won. He is our anchor, ensuring that for no seductions and sirens shall we let our politics and poetics of our practice be compromised.

बितिया येह तेरे लिये [Bitiya, this is for you]:

तुमिह मेरी नगमा  
तुमिह मेरी नाज हो।  
कोना और आगार हो।  
सनाटा, शोर और सेहर,  
तुमिह हो।

*Postscript:*

As I shared these recollections with Bitiya, she claimed the book by demanding that an inscription of her own to be inserted for Dimpy, the love of her life, '*I miss you, Dimpy*'.



## INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THE BOOK

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

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

The book, however, takes issue with the category of assertions made in expensively produced official reports and by the mainstream media. These are the same assertions made loudly and sanctimoniously by the city's middle classes. To wit, that the living conditions of slums, that make them unsettling sights, are also the making of their inhabitants. The book unveils the 'anxiety of proximity' that fundamentally informs where the slums are in the city's present,

---

1 The *Slums Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act* (1956) declares an area as a slum when the buildings: (a) are in any respect unfit for human habitation; or (b) are by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals.

but also where they will be in its past and future — geographically, politically, philosophically, socially, culturally and imaginatively.<sup>2</sup> Besides the denial of structural and systemic rights, and the othering of their residents, this signification of the slums also denies them a position in the history of the city itself, and thus denies them their own histories.

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

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

The book has been almost two-decades in the making. During this time, I have been immersively embedded in the emotional, political, social, economic and cultural landscapes of the slums. At this juncture of reckoning of sorts, the book is as much about the residents as it is about its interlocutor, the ethnographer. During this time, I have spent more afternoons and

---

2 Slavoj Žižek, 'Human Rights and its Discontents: The Logic of the Stalinist Show Trials', *Olin Auditorium, Bard College*, 16 November, 1999.

3 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 198.

4 Butler further elaborates that within specific constructions 'life is established as tenuous, precarious, and in that sense not worthy to be protected from injury or loss, and so not grievable' (198) and raises questions of biopolitical import as, 'Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living, or count only ambiguously as alive?' (196).

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

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

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

---

5 Michael Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Donald Bouchard (ed.) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1977.

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular', *Postcolonial studies* 8.4 (2005):483

7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular', *Postcolonial*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From where you are, listen with me.

## References

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular', *Post-colonial Studies* 8.4 (2005): 475-486.

---

8 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp 202.

## FACT SHEET

### The Matters of Definition

The Slum Areas Act, 1956, act declares slums areas as settlements which '[...] by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals'.<sup>1</sup> In Hindi, the slums are translated as *jhuggis* and *jhoparis*. The official departments as the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) and Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) Slum and *Jhuggi Jhopari* Rehabilitation extend the official designation, recognition and nomenclature to slums as such. Collectively and popularly referred to as the Govindpuri *jhuggis*, the settlement I am concerned with in this book is located in South Delhi and consists of three different camps: Jawaharlal Nehru Camp (referred to as abbreviated Nehru Camp in everyday use, and the nomenclature followed in the book), Navjeevan Camp, and Bhumiheen Camp. Adjoining the *jhuggis* is an authorised, legal colony known as Govindpuri, from whose referential location the camps also acquire their name in the popular usage. The three camps fall under the Kalkaji constituency, which is one of the seventy Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly) constituencies of the National Capital Territory.<sup>2</sup> The total area the slums cover is 103896 sq m (Nehru and Navjeevan camp=103896 sq m and Bhumiheen camp =35156 sq m) with 6706 households (Nehru and Navjeevan Camp = 4578 and Bhumiheen camp = 2128) in the three camps, according to the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board List of 675 JJ (Jhuggi Jhopdi) Bastis.<sup>3</sup>

The official definitions of the slums enters the everyday imagination and translations in such a manner that the structural factors are employed to exert practices of othering on the residents of the *jhuggis*, with implications of social, physical, cultural, financial, emotional and political discrimination, denial of agency, and claims and rights as citizens. And thus residing in a *jhuggi* and thus being a *jhuggi-walah*, slum-dweller, significantly limits the spaces, services and rights one can claim in the city. Throughout the course of the essays, particularly when insisting or highlighting the narratives and experiences of the residents, I use the self-identified term which is either *jhuggis* or the specific camps to refer to their homes, which also marks their official addresses. In their usage, *jhuggi*, first and foremost, is the site and space of their settlement, habitation and belonging. When used in singular usage, *jhuggi* refers to

- 
- 1 Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, DUSIB, The Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) act, 1956, [http://delhishelterboard.in/main/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/SLUMACT\\_14FEB17.pdf](http://delhishelterboard.in/main/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/SLUMACT_14FEB17.pdf)
  - 2 Govindpuri's immediate neighbourhoods are Kalkaji Extension, the three camps, and Govindpuri Extension. The nearby middle-class residential areas are Chittaranjan Park, a middle-class, predominantly Bengali, residential settlement, and Alaknanda, an upper-middle class/middle-class residential area with several apartment blocks. In the vicinity of the slums, across the road from Navjeevan camp, are the apartment blocks, Konark and Kohinoor. And Bhumiheen camp shares its boundaries with the neighbourhood of Tuglagabad (and its extension).
  - 3 Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, [http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page\\_id=3644](http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page_id=3644)., List of 675 J Bastis, last updated on (Updated 03-10-2019) <http://delhishelterboard.in/main/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/JJBastisList675.pdf>.

a house, when evoked in the plural, jhuggis, it is in the collective sense of referring to the entire settlement. Whilst I do acknowledge that the inherent othering which the 'naming' is laden which needs to be dissipated, I also remain astutely cognizant of the fact that whilst dealing with the issues of rights (particularly in regards to demanding judicial interventions, by the way of stay order on sudden, and often violent, demolitions and evictions, but also claims to resettlement in case of such a predicament and other services) the evocation of this particular 'naming' - slums, and its associated disenfranchisement, also accrues weight and validity to the arguments.

In the essays, I use the terms of slums and jhuggis interchangeably, without laden prejudices and politics of othering. As deems most suitable to the particular narrating of experience and experiencing, I also either refer to the camps in their specificity or to the collective of the slums, which I often choose to take the liberty of referring to the 'slums of Govindpuri' and for the sake of convenience also abbreviate to GP.

Unless asked or agreed upon threat perceived, the names of individuals, groups and communities in the essays have not been anonymized. The decision to be known, written and referred to by their real names was in deliberation with the residents of the slums, and should be insisted on as a position of self-assertion by the slum-dwellers. Whilst conducting my doctoral research to fulfil the criterion of meeting with all the rules and regulations of the ethics committee, I had to seek consent from the people I was interviewing and hanging about. One of the assurances I had to extend amounted to ensuring that their 'names will be anonymized, and their identities not be revealed so as to not invite any harm towards them'. I always found making introductions or following the intense conversations about one's lives with the clause of anonymity rather trite and lacking in merit of truth. During one of such conversation, when I was repeating the whole consent form for the benefit of the recorder and to record the participant's response as a record of her consent (the verbal, record consent had to be sought as most of the participants were not formally educated and the literate, written compulsions needed to be circumvented), a fiery woman in her 30s lashed out at me, however lovingly, to say, 'we are telling our stories because we want them to be told. What is this nonsense of not writing our real names, I want the world to know this is who I am and this is what I think. And don't worry about our safety, it is my challenge to anyone from, use my name and if you have the gumption, find me in these lanes. And if you do find me, I will be here to take you on'.

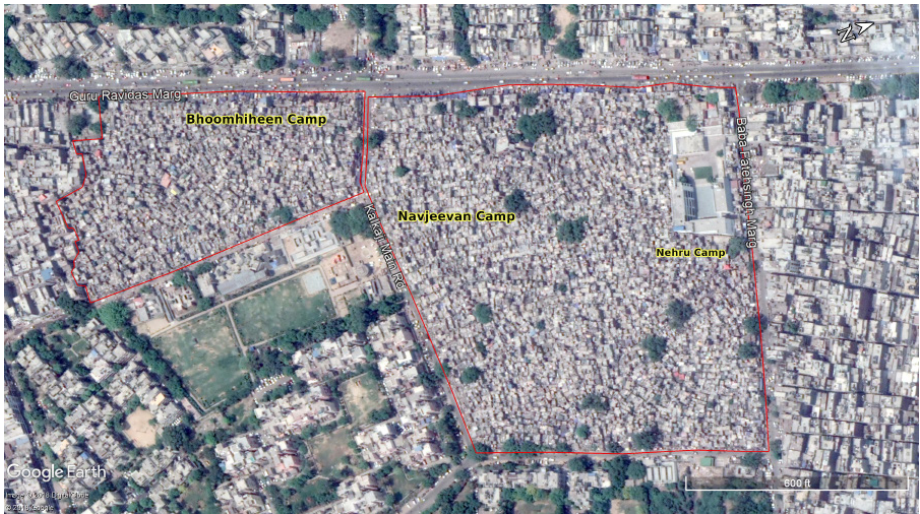
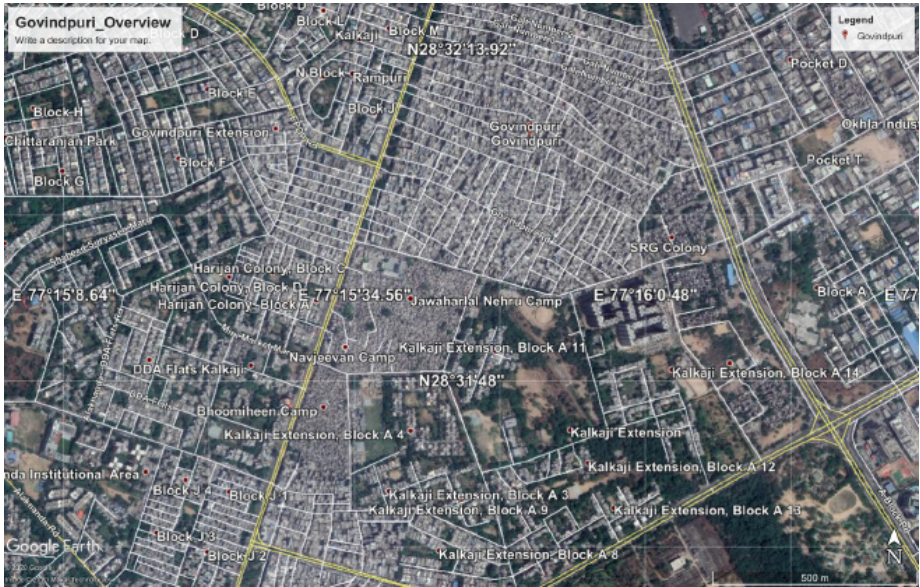
Since then I have followed the wisdom and claiming of not only one's lifeworlds and spaces these are unfolded within and only anonymized names when have been asked for. I do however leave out the address within the lanes of the slums of Govindpuri, almost in perverse pleasure, for someone to take on the fiery woman's challenge of finding them with the name as a maker in these lanes and take her own.

## **The Spread of and around the Slums of Govindpuri**

In the map, the slums of Govindpuri are marked out in red, defining their boundaries. For those venturing into this space via this aerial, zoomed out perspective, if the slums appear like a patch-work pattern weaving into the broader spread of the neighbourhood that is because



they are. GuruRavidas Marg is the main arterial road along which the slums are located, which leads towards Tughlakabad Extension on one end and at the intersection of another main arterial road, Ma Anandmayi Marg, lies the Govindpuri Metro Station. The Govindpuri Metro station was opened in 2010 to coincide with the inauguration of the Commonwealth Games. It falls on the violet line of the coloured-code Delhi Metro Map.



Figures 1 and 2: Overviews of Govindpuri and its three camps.



In my initial years of conducting research in the slums, I rarely used the public transport systems. The buses were erratic and demanded long waits and longer, convoluted routes to where I lived in the city, in its Northern end. I either used auto-rickshaws or made use of my then partner's bartered old red Maruti. In fact it is only in the last few years after the connectivity of Govindpuri Metro with other intersections were operationalized that I have started using the metro service regularly. To avoid making a knee-jerk acquaintance with the slums of Govindpuri, I propose a walk from the Govindpuri Metro Station wading through the neighbourhoods of the slums to insist that in their make, materiality and markets the slums are woven into the spread out the larger settlement, perhaps as a patchwork, but still held together by the fine threads of shared histories, spaces, contestations and alliances.

At the intersection, as one sets about on the GuruRavidas Marg towards the slums, across from the metro station, stands the Masjid Govindpuri. In my initial days of researching, I had created my own mapping of the neighbourhood depending on the availability of and access to toilets, especially if I were on a rare chance was using the public transport system. Adjoining the mosque, facing the main road, is a workshop which specializes in amplifying horns volumes, tunes and sounds for different vehicles. Tom Rice and I interviewed him for the BBC documentary Govindpuri Sounds, and even though it has been years (2013) and I do not recall much of the conversations, but the sounds of the amplified horns and the man's delight in giving us a demonstration and our own pleasure in it seem like an afternoon from yesterday.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the road, on both sides, push-cart eateries offering all kinds of street-food indulgences are offered and of course tea-stalls. Here, I often make pit-stop for the snack, tea and smokes. Next to the metro station, on the GuruRavidas Marg, is a small settlement of about 30 families displaced and evicted from settlements in the city. The main preoccupation is playing drums, *dhol*, at social and cultural events, and are colloquially referred to as the *Dhol Basti*. Considering the eviction and the subsequent settlement here happened fairly recently (post 2010, the exact year is not known to me), the settlement is not registered in the list of slums and JJ clusters and thus not eligible for any resettlement claims.<sup>5</sup> Even though in the few years since the settlement started forming its bearing here, I have interacted with a few of its residents, mostly children, hanging about the roadside and during my snack/smoke/tea breaks I have never conducted deliberate research here.

Giri Nagar is the first marked out residential area which falls on this route. The development of this neighbourhood witnessed sustained growth from the mid-1960s when Okhala Industrial Area for small and medium scale industries operationalized and started drawing traction. At the following intersection, down this road, where an inner road cuts through, starts sprawling the neighbourhood of Govindpuri from whose referential proximity the slums draw their colloquial name as a collective. Govindpuri is a mix of middle-class, lower and working class, and a high migrant labour rental residential population. It is marked out along 16

4 Tom Rice, 'Govindpuri Sounds', *BBC*, <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>.

5 For eligibility criteria, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, Present Policies & Strategies, [http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page\\_id=128](http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page_id=128).

parallel, intersecting *galis* (literally, lanes) with residential quarters and building across the lanes. Govindpuri has witnessed resettlement in phases, first post-1971, India Bangladesh war, and 1984, post the assassination of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and the riots targeting the Sikh community that followed. Owing to its proximity to Okhala Industrial Area and Nehru Place, from the early 70s, Govindpuri emerged as a strong hub and neighbourhood for the emergence of small-scale industries running out semi-residential until 2000 when Supreme Court ordered the closure and relocation of all 'non-conforming industries' operating in the urban area of Delhi.<sup>6</sup> The combined pull factors of availability of jobs and cheap rental arrangements, along with the overwhelming prospect of hacking it out in the city, significantly contributed to drawing migrants from across the country, particularly its northern states – Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan - here.



Figure 3: Pooja Masala.

At the intersection of GuruRavidas and Baba Fatehsingh road, lie the slums of Govindpuri. Opposite the fifteenth street, across the road, is the encroached Govindpuri - slums of Govindpuri, as they are termed in popular usage. Nehru camp is the first camp on this layout, followed by Navjeevan camp and separated by a drain, which in the present day is not easily visible. Across Govindpuri, and its 16 lanes, lies the middle-class settlement, Kalkaji and its extension, leading all the way up to the DDA flats in Kalkaji opposite to Bhumhiheen camp in

6 Aditya Nigam, 'Industrial Closures in Delhi', <https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv7n2/industclos.htm>.

the slums. On that route, pursuing the Ma Anandmayi Road, at the intersection from the DDA flats of Kalkaji on one side and Bhumhiheen camp on the other, the Tuglagabad Extension neighbourhood is marked out.

Amongst the residents of Govindpuri and the slums, more immediate, authorized markers are used to refer to the three camps. While the Nehru camp and Navjeevan camp are the slums of Govindpuri, Bhumhiheen camp is evoked in reference to the slum of Delhi Development Authority (DDA) flats, as this camp is opposite these flats. Pooja Masala, something of a landmark of a grocery store falling along the Kalkaji Extension neighbourhood, is a common reference and meeting point for the residents of the slums and the neighbourhoods. Pooja Masala, as a landmark, is evoked to map spatial, temporal and social markers: *I am 15 minutes away from Pooja Masala; the lane into the jhuggis bank opposite Pooja Masala is where I will be waiting for you; and, she is doing well for herself, now she has rented an apartment only a few lanes away from Pooja Masala.*

Nehru camp was one of the first slums in the area: as mentioned, settlement here started from the early 1970s. Most of the initial settlers were migrant labourers who rented in legal Govindpuri. At that time, the rent was quite reasonable, INR 8–12 per month (Jiyo Devi, Local head) with the development of Okhala Industrial Area offered livelihood options. With the setting up of small-scale and other industrial units here, the rents shot up dramatically from INR 8– to INR 20–25 per month as Govindpuri became the outpost for this industrial area. Thus the migrants started arriving in Govindpuri in the late 1960s to work in Okhala Industrial Area and the upcoming small-scale industries, the land area wherein the slums are now situated was a large, unoccupied, infested with overgrown thorny shrubs. In the MasterPlan for Delhi, 2001 and 2011, this tract of land is marked for residential use. In the Master Plan for 1962, the land area is marked but it is not clear for what purpose. In the shared, local historical recalling by the long-term residents, this was a barren tract of land meant to be a park. Recounting from these narratives, the shift from the lanes of Govindpuri to the barren, shrub infested area was obvious and logical. The rentals in Govindpuri were not proportionate to the earnings as manual labourers, and lacking any social security systems to absorb the simultaneous shift to the city and supporting the families in the villages, the shift to tame the uninhabited, barren, thorny area to save on rents and other overheads was a logical decision. The task of taming this bareness – or as it is reckoned as encroachment in official records and popular reckoning – was by no means an easy feat.

It was then that the people started to move in and set up their makeshift houses in the barren tract of land. The period between the 1970s and the late 1990s was favourable to the current and prospective slum-dwellers and the three camps saw steady inflow of migrants in the camps: government had assured resettled land plots of 12.5 square metres; and the *Olga Tellis* case of 1985 had categorically identified slum-dwellers' right to live, safeguarding them against evictions, which 'contributed to their sense of security'. However, the 'real reassurance for this sense of security [...] came from no major evictions taking place after 1977 until 1997–98'.

In this scenario, most of the initial settlers did not mind shifting their base from legal Govindpuri to the slums, given the economic hardships they could avoid along with the promise of a resettled plot in the future. For this particular group of slum-dwellers, their shift from lower middle-class status to that of slum-dwellers is a testament of the lack of social, financial and allied support and security systems for the urban poor. The majority of this section of the urban population essentially subsidizes the everyday and sustained living of the middle-classes in the city by providing cheap, menial labour and also being critical in value-supply chains where they work in highly exploitative, precarious conditions. Whilst the promise of the resettled plots and a life of dignity in the city, and an urban futures for their families, was a compelling factor, they have to endure loss of social, cultural, political and emotional capital and capacities. During the initial years of the research (2004), the shift from Govindpuri and other parts of the country into the slums was a constant reference on two accounts: I was pursuing the line of questioning and because of the recent closure of the small-scale industries in Govindpuri, which had left a significant section of the population jobless.

The first phase of the research was a humbling experience, during which I had to *learn* how to conduct research in and about sonic cultures. In that sense, the problem was not the inability of the residents to engage with my research questions regarding engagement of the everyday through its soundscapes. It was the limitations of my ability to articulate my research agenda and aims – a methodological concern of sensual scholarship raised by Paul Stoller in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*. By insisting on humbleness as a much-needed perspective and personal trait, Stoller highlights the phenomenal task that lies ahead in building a robust epistemological, academic and intellectual tradition for sensual scholarship. Senses, and here soundscapes, as *ethnographic objects* are tenuous and delicate. Senses as *ethnographic agendas* are complex and overlapping. Senses as ethnographies, not surprisingly, demand humility. It is not merely a matter of ‘describing the way things look or smell in the land of others’.<sup>7</sup> A sensual scholar needs to surrender to the world of senses – their meanings, their connections, their articulations and aspirations – humbly and patiently, without preconceived notions and prejudices. A sensual scholar needs to have the sensibility to sense the senses as they are sensed in its context. In short, making sense of *senses* is not an undertaking without its moment of sensorial-intellectual-methodological numbness, deafness and blindness.

The constant mention of factories and construction sites to recount the Govindpuri slums’ sonic past, which in the initial phase had exasperated me, in fact provided important sonic references for further listening. It was in these factories and construction sites that the residents found their main source of income. The persistent humming of machinery lent a sonic temporality to the everyday. After the factories were relocated in the early 2000s, due to the Delhi government’s drive to curtail sources of pollution – noise amongst others – the residents recalled the place feeling ‘eerily silent’. This silence was not literal, as even without the machineries the soundscape of the Govindpuri neighbourhood and the slums is very dense. This silence was the social and cultural articulation of exasperation at a ‘loss of livelihood’ and the anxieties that surrounded it.

---

7 Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, p. 9.



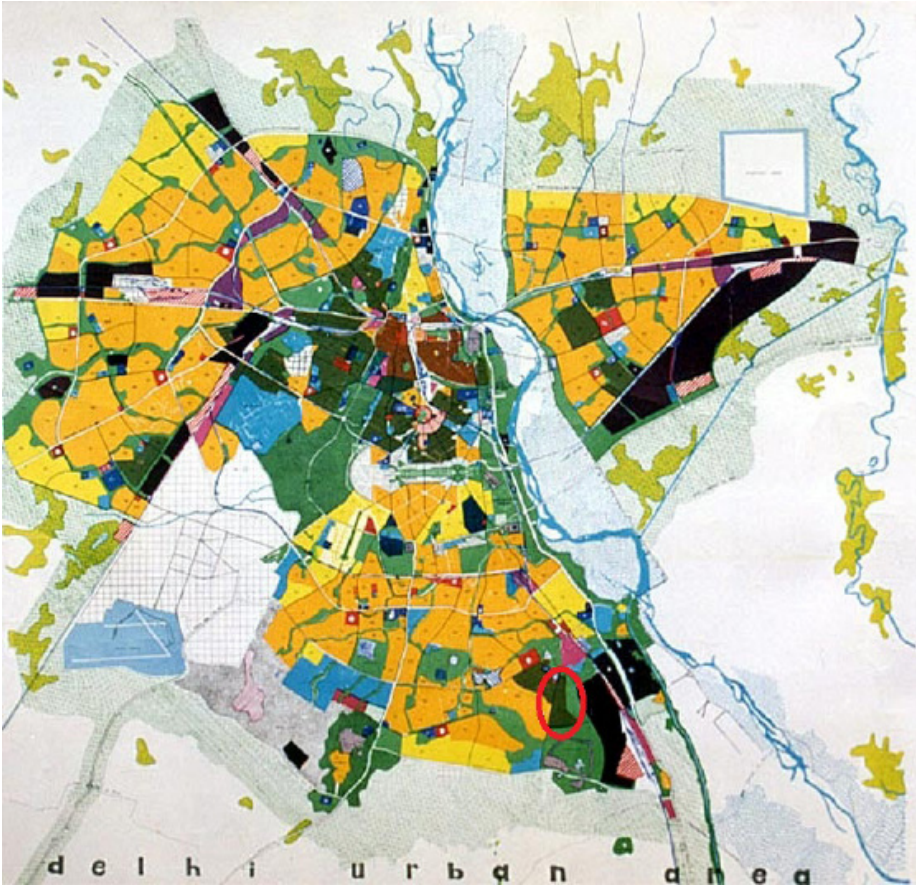
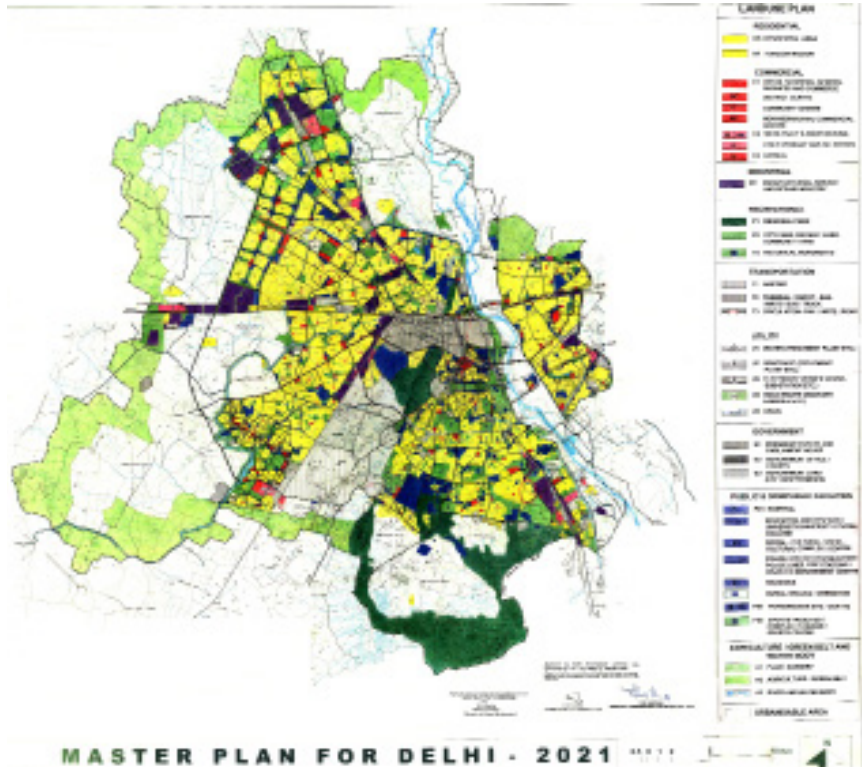
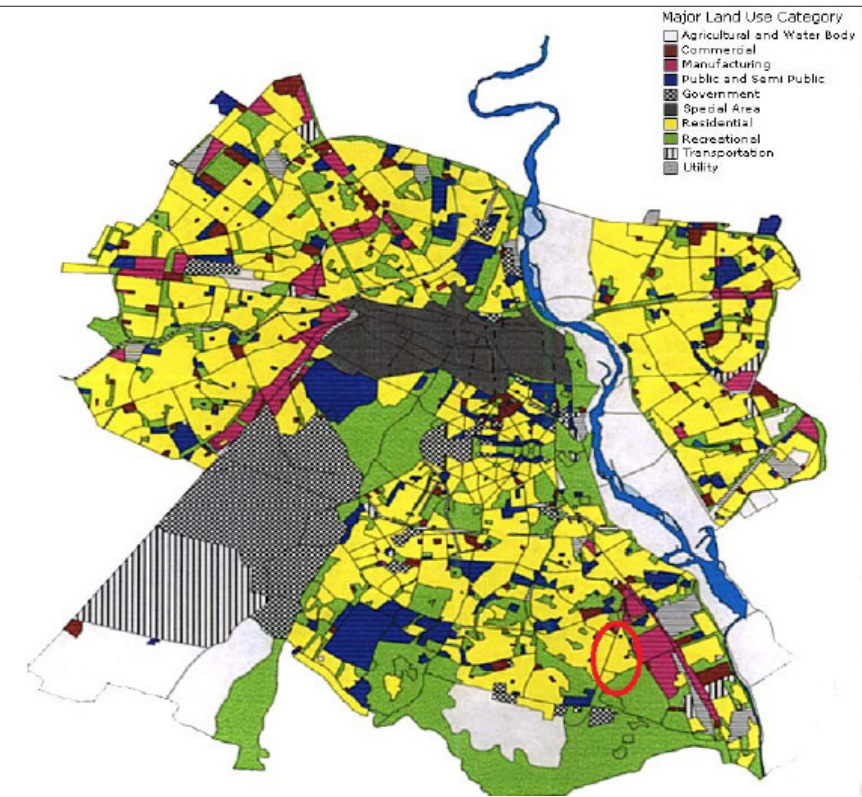


Figure 4: The Dehli Urban Area Master Plan, 1961.

Figure 5 (opposite page, top): The Dehli Urban Area Master Plan, 2001.

Figure 6 (opposite page, bottom): The Dehli Urban Area Master Plan, 2021.



The settlement patterns in the other two camps were similar, except that Navjeevan camp was the last to be settled on account of a lack of basic amenities – water and electricity. Unlike the other two camps, Navjeevan camp does not share close proximity with any Lower Income Group (LIG) -Middle Income Group (MIG) settlements, which made it almost impossible for the residents to tap into their networks for these resources as Nehru and Bhumhiheen camps could. Most of the residents of the Govindpuri slums hail from small towns or villages – primarily from the states of Uttarpradesh, West Bengal, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharastra, where the social, cultural and moral climate is rigid, conservative and restricted, based on strictly demarcated and defined caste, class and gender roles with prescribed responsibilities. As recounted by the residents during the course of my doctoral research, in the context of their villages, it was not possible for men and women to break social and cultural barriers and undertake jobs outside of their prescriptive caste, class and gender roles. Slums, however, offered a possibility to negotiate these barriers and roles. For instance, many residents of the Govindpuri slums – mostly women but also men – work in middle-class households as cleaners or cooks, an economic undertaking they would not have been able to pursue in their hometown or village on account of social-cultural pressures. Also, for many upper-caste men and women, it allows a move beyond caste hierarchies and roles and enables them to take jobs otherwise not allowed; these include, but are not limited to, working in leather factories, or working as cooks and domestic servants. This is not to suggest that Govindpuri slums have no caste, class and gender hierarchies. The compulsion to earn a livelihood, along with the distance, social, spatial, cultural, moral and psychological factors carried from their native homelands, allows the residents of the Govindpuri slums to negotiate around such issues.

In the later years, when the residents of the slums and I had negotiated anxieties and lens of engagement with the *other*, we rarely spoke about the past or evocation of the villages as a reference point. Instead we remained, as we still are, indulged, intrigued and exasperated by the fate of our beloved city, Delhi, and what how its fate and ours our intricately linked and our ambitions, aspirations, desires, dreams and dreads about the collective futures.

## **The Markets and Materiality of the Govindpuri Slum**

The three camps Nehru, Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen, are distinct from each other – though this is not necessarily obvious to an outsider. An open drain separates Nehru camp from Navjeevan camp, while a main road divides Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen camps. One of the key distinctions between the three camps are highlighted by their markets. Each camp specialises in certain markets, which lends it a particular materiality while revealing the community, religious and caste affiliations specific to each camp.

All the camps lie alongside a main road connecting south Delhi to southwest Delhi. Most of the LIG and MIG settlements are located across this road. Most of the local markets of Govindpuri slums are strategically situated alongside this road, as they cater both to the local Govindpuri as well as the LIG-MIG population.

Nehru camp is closest – spatially, socially and culturally – to legal Govindpuri and the Okhala Industrial Area, where ‘sweatshop’-type production houses thrive. These sweatshops provide an important occupational engagement for the residents of this camp. The camp is divided into three communal affiliations: lower caste communities who are professional cleaners/sweepers; fortune tellers from Maharashtra; and fruit sellers from Uttar Pradesh, comprising both Hindus and Muslims. The fruit sellers do not set up their stalls in the camp, but in a daily *haat* – vegetable market – that is held across the road. There are a few tea stalls catering to the workers in the production houses. Within and outside the camp, the two communities of cleaners and fortune tellers are socially and culturally ostracised on the basis of caste, and implied cultural decadence and moral bankruptcy. Even the social workers operating in this space do not venture into these areas until and unless absolutely necessary, evoking ‘alcoholism, crime and dirt’ as the main hindrances. The lack of markets in this camp is attributed to the presence of these communities: ‘Even if we wanted to set up shops, no one would come. It is the better for us to explore into other territories.’ (M, 40, tea stall owner)

Navjeevan camp, on the other hand, has a thriving market specialising in meat products and plastic goods – sheets, containers, and so on. A significant percentage of Navjeevan camp’s population is Muslim, a group that traditionally deals in meat products – which explains the concentration of this business in the area. The density of the plastic market is remarkable to an outsider, middle-class sensibilities; it is an important element of Govindpuri’s materiality.

Two kinds of housing that are prevalent in Govindpuri : *pucca* (concrete) and *kaccha* (make-shift). The materials used for *pucca* houses are bricks, cement and iron. The *kaccha* houses, on the other hand, use bricks, wood, bamboo and plastic sheets, which are used to shield the houses from both the sun and the rain. Plastic is affordable and durable. The plastic containers – usually having the capacity to hold 20 litres as a minimum – are very important aspects of the landscape of the Govindpuri slums. A shortage of running water means residents have to constantly evolve ingenious ways to store water. The plastic containers serve this purpose while also being used for storage of other kinds as well. Each household has at least one, if not more, of these plastic containers. These containers are also often used to hold up a wall or boundary. They are also in demand to serve the needs of the production houses in legal Govindpuri , as well as the storage needs of LIG-MIG residents, as water is scarce in these areas as well.

The plastic market of Navjeevan camp is a very profitable business. Most of these shops, however, are not owned by the residents of the camp,

A few years back all the shops were demolished. Those whose shops were demolished were entitled to resettlement and a lot of them got plots either in Kondli or Narela. However, as the pressure of the authorities started to ease, most of the families came back and once more built their shops. Most of them sold their resettlement plots, bribed officials for fake I-cards [ration cards] to become eligible for resettlement in the next lot of demolition as well. They have shifted out of the slums into legalised colonies but they still want to retain control over this space on two accounts:



first, the business is profitable over here; and second, they will be able to claim resettlement plots yet again. (Male, 32, shopkeeper, Gandhipuri camp)

Bhumhiheen camp is the most prosperous camp in the slum cluster. Its population base is distinctly divided amongst Bengalis (immigrants from West Bengal and Bangladesh after the Bangladesh Liberation war) and non-Bengali settlers. The latter comprise families mainly from Uttar Pradesh, but also from Haryana and Rajasthan. There are limited interactions between the two communities at an everyday level. Bhumhiheen camp has several market pockets specialising in different commodities. On the main road, the vegetable market is held daily. This market caters to the local as well as a significant LIG-MIG population. As the vegetable market shares proximity with the slums, the prices of the vegetable are considerably lower than in other middle-class areas, attracting customers from this area. It is not easy to set up a stall in this area. One has to bribe local police personnel, acquire consent from local politicians and other important parties, and pay rent to the shopkeeper in front of whose shop the stall is set up. These shops alongside the road specialise in bamboo and woodwork. Most of these shops are owned by people from Uttar Pradesh, a northern state in India, where shopkeeping is a traditional professional for many communities. As mentioned earlier, these shops cater to the architectural needs of the local residents, as bamboo is an essential architectural feature of houses in all camps. It also provides bulk orders to other slum areas in the city.

Bhumhiheen camp is also distinct from the other camps in that it has a thriving market *within* the camp. This is called the Bengali Market. It is an organised and formal market controlled by the Bengalis, who form a significant proportion of the population of this camp. This market is further demarcated into specialised units offering specific commodities catering to the needs of Bengalis within and outside the camp. There is a specialised fish, jewellery and cloth market. One of the nearby MIG settlements, Chitranjan Park, has a high population of Bengalis, who patronise this market at an everyday level, contributing to the prosperity level of the Bengali community within Bhumhiheen camp. In 1991 a major outbreak of fire gutted most of jhuggis in Bhumhiheen Camp, and which is often evoked as reference point whilst charting out the camp's history, as following which the camp received both state and non-state investment to construct *pucca* houses.

Each of the camp is popularly referred to and mapped out in individual and collective geographies and memories by its markets. In the initial years, when the lanes of the slums still bewildered me and I had not the confidence to lose myself to find the ways, if Pooja Masla was the landmark for me to keep appointments with the residents of Nehru Camp; the plastic-ware shop at the corner of Kalkaji Main Road in Navjeen and the fish market in Bhumhiheen camp were the rendezvous points. There is significant mobility between the three camps, but community members in each camps have their own biases and marking of socio, cultural, emotional and spatial othering. I have detailed these practices whilst discussing the water routes and other negotiations in my doctoral thesis.

Besides the peculiarity of the markets, the material fabric of the Govindpuri slums is strikingly uniform. Most of the housing types, as mentioned above, vary between the *pucca* and *kaccha*. The construction of these, however, depends on the location. Most of the constructions on the

main road are up to three to four levels, used both for residential and commercial purposes. These are usually *pucca* constructions that use bricks, concrete, plastic, bamboo and wood for framing purposes. The tallest of these constructions, despite having three floors, is no more than 7 metres. As these lie on the main road, which is just over 3 metres wide, though congested with the markets around, they give a sense of space compared to the interiors of the slums.

The inside of Govindpuri is a very different reality. Most of the constructions inside the camps cannot be strictly categorised as *pucca* or *kaccha*, reflecting an ingenious usage of materials and optimisation of space. The streets are narrow, no more than 1 metre to 1.3 metres, in most instances. The tallest of the constructions inside of the camps is just over 3 metres. The houses are not only incestuously woven into each other but are *in* each other. The lack of space and the density of population necessitate architectural innovations, with a house's roof serving as makeshift rooms for others, or several households having to share a common entrance. Drains, flowing or blocked, marked the trajectories on the space. With the exception of Bhumhiheen camp, none of the other camps has a dense concentration of a market, though there are intermittent shops, dealing in a variety of merchandise, spread across the camps.

Unlike other slum settlements in the city, the three camps of Govindpuri have not witnessed spates of demolitions in the heart of the cluster, though there have demolitions on the fringes undertaken by the Delhi Development Authority to clear the passage on the main road. Considering the markets open on to the main arterial road, Guru Ravidas Marg, the clearance drive to move back the push-carts and temporary shops as they extend on the road is still quite common. These clearance drives are piecemeal and not directed at the peripheral roads in the slums. In 2008, the slums of Govindpuri witnessed one of the only coordinated demolitions, though on the fringes, across all the camps. The demolitions however were not towards evictions and clearance of the land area, but in response to the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the members of the Residential Welfare Associations (RWA) to seek 'a solution against encroachment of roads and services by slum residents'. The High Court responded to this demand by the 'construction of a five-foot wall to divide a slum cluster from neighbouring middle-class colonies' as a '[...] a temporary arrangement to offer protection to flat owners'.<sup>8</sup> The demolition is discussed further in the essay, *I Wail, Therefore I Am*.

And thus whilst the narratives of being and belonging are replete with speculations about resettlement prospects, the threat of demolitions is not as pronounced as in other accounts. The slums of Govindpuri also stand apart from most other slum settlements in the city in regards to the proposed in situ resettlement project. In 2008, the Delhi government announced the construction of 14-storey with 3,024 apartments in the same area, about 1.5 Kilometres away from the slum settlement, Nehru camp being the closest. It has been 12 years since the announcement, and the promise of the resettlement in the 'flats' has constantly been evoked in elections manifestos, claimed by every contesting parties.<sup>9</sup> The residents of the

---

8 Preeti Jha, 'Great Wall of Kalkaji', *Indian Express*, 05 April 2008.

9 See: [https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/When-their-aspirations-of-owning-a-home-hit-a-brick-](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/When-their-aspirations-of-owning-a-home-hit-a-brick)



Figure 7: Rehabilitation DDA Flats.

slums remain unconvinced of the promise being actualized, particularly considering there are only 3,024 flats available and no clear idea about on what basis these will be allotted. 'Of course we will apply for the flat, and will shift into it or claim it, if we are the lucky ones', Babu Lal from Navjeevan camp commented, 'but we don't know whether it will ever happen'. A real estate agent from Govindpuri contextualized the future of the resettlement project in mid-2018 by when they were almost ready:

The apartments do not look like in situ or resettlement project. They have the feel of other apartment blocks. My sense is that, even if the jhuggi-walaha are allotted the apartments, they will not be able to afford it as the down payment is estimated to be around 2 lacs. What will happen is that they will sell their allotments to those who can afford it in the black, and along with the apartments, the parking spaces will be really coveted! Even if they can afford the apartments, how are they going to pay for the maintenance of the building, which the residents are supposed to collectively contribute towards...

Whilst discussing the prospect of allotment and living in the apartment block, the concerns of the apartment being 14-storey and the maintenance is constantly raised, 'how are the elderly supposed to climb up the 14-storeys?', 'what if the lift if not working, and who is going to pay for the lifts and for the power-back, if there is no electricity?'. And then more compelling concerns about how the 14-storey apartment living is going to correspond to the lives in the

lanes, [...] the sexual and romantic encounters and affairs are just going to increase; here, at least we have some control, in the apartments, they will be making out in the lifts and on the roof'. The shift from lanes to the 14-storey apartment block is also evoked in apocalyptic predications of the fate that shall befall during violent altercations, 'here, we are still in the lanes, I am telling you, when the same fights break out there [in the apartments], people will be throwing each other from that high!'. The fact that the Govindpuri Police station is adjacent to the apartment site is not appealing to some of the residents, 'right now, there are places to navigate about in the lanes, which we know well, but in the apartments, the cops will know exactly where to find us'.

These are speculative conjunctures of the residents regarding the life in the apartments, however it must be insisted that none of the residents I have spoken to over the years have expressed any desire to continue to live in the slums, perchance their name comes in the allotment list and they have the resources to pay for the downpayment, 'of course, we will like to shift, live in the apartments, not be jhuggi-walahs anymore'.

Across the 14-storey, DDA resettlement site lies the Transit Camp, as is popularly known. In official records, this settlement is called the Shri Rajeev Gandhi Colony. In 1984-85, several slum settlements across the city were demolished and people allotted land as a transit arrangement, and thus the name. In its materiality, the transit lies somewhere between the lower-income class houses of Govindpuri and the slums of Govindpuri. Whilst most of the houses are pucca, they lack the solidity of the houses in Govindpuri. The residents of the Transit camp<sup>10</sup> and also the local politician<sup>11</sup> have made suggestions for DDA to convert the land use marked in the master plan 2021, from 'Green Area/District Park' to Residential Area, which will make their claims for in situ rehabilitation stronger. Whilst there are strong links of mobilities between transit camp and the slums, the residents of the transit camps insist on maintaining a clear distinction lest they are also considered to be jhuggi-walahs also owing the proximity to the slums, sharing the similarities in nomenclature and the material conditions.

Owing to the proximity of the industrial area, the concentration of the migrant labourers to provide subsidised labour for the small-scale industries in Govindpuri, the phases of re-settlement that the neighbourhood went through, even though the slums appear as a patch-work pattern, there are very strong, geographies of everyday, historical, cultural, emotional, financial, cultural, romantic and sexual exchanges, transactions and mobilities between these spaces. I do not intend to romanticize the landscapes of these alliances between the neighbourhoods, of which the slums happen to be one. The relationships are fraught with tensions and contestations which manifest in particular kinds and practices of othering directed at the identified other, for instance, the residents of the slums for the middle-class neighbourhood and the newly arriving migrants and the *kothi-walahas* for the slum-dwellers.<sup>12</sup> However, the dominance of the resettled, migrant population in the neighbourhood, the materiality and the

---

10 See: <https://dda.org.in/planning/suggestions/Dy.%20No.%202790%20DDA%20MPR.pdf>.

11 See: <https://dda.org.in/planning/suggestions/Dy.%20No.%202792%20DDA%20MPR.pdf>.

12 *Kothi*, literally translates as bungalow, however both the houses and apartment blocks in which the residents of the slums work in different capacities are referred to as the same.

spilling out markets of each of their neighbourhoods compels practices of ethical co-habitation between the different groups. And herein lies the promise of political alliances and spaces of ethical co-habitation being actualized, perhaps the accommodation of the identified other emanates from compulsions but the fact that these practices *in fact* exist titillates and excites the possibilities of shared, democratic and equitable political urban futures.

As late as early 2020, when I last visited the slums of Govindpuri to hang around with some of the crew there – Akki, Pooja, Sonia, their kids, partners, lovers – the living conditions of the slums have significantly improved since the early 2004, particularly sanitation, sewage and water facilities. In all of the three camps, both on the fringes and in the insides of the lanes, prominent, robust and well-built religious structures are prominent. The building practices have become more robust with people paying attention to the foundational structures, and the use of marble-flooring and tiling has increased. A few of these houses I have seen transform over the years indeed look very handsome. Baby of Navjeevan camp, who is one of the protagonist in the essays, often teases me about the sale-deed of one of her jhuggi's she was tempting me with and which I was very keen on but for lacking resources (or living off my savings in that moment), reasons I cannot precisely recall now, I could not finalize, 'you should have taken then, now see how it has all developed, and maybe you would have gotten an apartment too'.

After almost two-decades of ins and outs in the lanes, lives, dreams, despair of the residents of the slums of Govindpuri and also spending equal amount of time engaged in discussions about the future of the slums, the best resettlement practices, the deliberations of in situ rehabilitation, it is my political duty and responsibility to summarize what the slum-dwellers really want, and here I present a consolidation of many voices resounding over several years:

We don't go from here, we have created these lanes and this settlement. We don't want to have newer, safer houses to live here, these houses are as safe as they can be, at least three-generations of families have safely grown up here. Earlier, yes, there were issues with water, sanitation, garbage disposal...these have been sorted out, we really have no issues, they could be better. If something is really to be done for us, stop humiliating us, exploiting us, denying us chances because we are jhuggi-walabs. We are proud to be living in the jhuggis, we have after all built these houses, these roads, these buildings, lives here. Just don't treat us like 'kheede-maukede' (insects-spiders) [...] just we because we live in the jhuggis, living and material conditions, which are beyond your experience does not mean we do not feel, we do not have self-respect, we do not desire to be treated to with dignity...all the problems of the jhuggis they keep talking about will vanish – poof – if they stop treating the jhuggi-walabs like sub-humans.

A woman working as a domestic help in the nearby apartments whilst talking about the way her employer treat her and others who work for them was narrating the manner in which these working bodies are reckoned to be beyond pain and hurting (this was specifically in regards to not allowing her to use hot water to do the dishes during the bone-chilling Delhi winters),

'saala, unko lagta hai unka badan mom ka, hamara momjam ka hai. (Bastards, they think that they have wax bodies and ours are made of cheap plastic).

Babu Lal who has been in Navjeevan camp since the early 80s, has worked as a mason and contractor with several builders across the city, is a repository of the history of the Govindpuri's social, political, infrastructural and architectural layout in the slums, and is also keenly involved in the political landscape. Presently he lives with his wife, son, daughter-in-law, a granddaughter and a dog in a three-story, marble -tiled floor house with a resplendent roof in the same lane. His astute analysis, evaluation and resolution for the slum problem, *yeh jhuggi ki samasya*, is as following (if someone in position of power indeed wants to listen, he added):

This land is marked as residential land, and so in some ways we are ahead of the fight which the Transit camp people are fighting about. So, half the battle is won. The only thing that is required of those in power is to just take out the jhuggi-jhopdi reference in the official records. They will have to give us land somewhere, why not this area? I am telling you, once the name is changed in the official records, over a period of things will change. These camps will be like any other settlement, most of the problem is being treated demeaningly as jhuggi-walaha.

These the lived experiences and accrued knowledge of their lifeworlds, aspirations and histories of the urban poor (as articulated by Babu Lal and others), more often than not, fail to find way into policy framing and considerations. I identify this tendency as symptomatic of the 'denial of the self' to the urban poor, slum-dwellers, and those on the city's urban and margins. This 'denial of the self' of the urban poor is strategically imbricated within the capitalist, neo-liberal, hegemonic logics to keep this constituent population bound in exploitative relationships to extract maximum profits from them. By denying them real and active participation, the urban poor within this imagination are thus relegated only as data sets and markings on the maps which need to be cleaned, cleared and tamed towards the beautification and smooth running of the city.

The essays in the book present the fact of the matters as listened into and learned from the lived experiences of the residents of the Govindpuri slums. This task of deep, engaged, and dialogic listening into these realities, experiences and life-world of the residents of the slums is just a modest step towards the ambitious project of 'urgent utopia' and 'right to the city', theoretical, philosophical and political projects which are premised on an ongoing, dialogic interactions and encounters across all citizens of the city, including and especially those on the margins.

## References

Nigam, A. 'Industrial Closures in Delhi', *Revolutionary Democracy*, 7.2 (September 2001): <https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv7n2/industclos.htm>

Stoller, P. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

## 5. COLLABORATIVE LISTENING: ON PRODUCING A RADIO DOCUMENTARY IN THE GOVINDPURI SLUMS

*With Tom Rice<sup>1</sup>*

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, their 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.

---

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', *BBC*, <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>.



And thus wetting his ears in this deep end Govindpur 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 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

titled 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.

## References

Rice, Tom. 'Govindpuri Sounds', *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02hm1rx>. The documentary was commissioned by BBC for its program *The Documentary* 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>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, Waquar. 'Neoliberal Utopias and Urban Realities in Delhi', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 10 (2011).

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Vol. 16. Manchester University Press, 1985.

Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter Later Writings: 1978-1987*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian, edited by Oliver Corpet and François Matheron. New York: Verso, 2006.

Calvino, Italo. 'A King Listens', translated by William Weaver, in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, pp. 31-64. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

Claus, Peter J., Sarah Diamond, and Margaret Ann Mills. *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*. Taylor and Francis, 2003.

Bradbury, Ray. 'The Fog Horn', <https://archive.org/stream/TheFogHorn/TheFogHorn.txt>.

Benjamim, Walter and Asja, *Journal de Naples*, 1925.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Viking, 1998.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge, 1999 (1990).

Butler, Judith. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015.

Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Randall, pp. 93-105. California: University of California Press, 1984.

Chandola, Tripta. 'Listening into Others: Moralising the Soundscapes in Delhi', *International Development Planning Review* 34.4 (2012): 391-408.

Chandola, Tripta. 'Slum in the Time of Politics', *Business Standard*, 21 January 2013, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/slum-in-the-time-of-politics-112030400055\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/slum-in-the-time-of-politics-112030400055_1.html).

Chandola, Tripta. 'Getting a Rise', *Business Standard*, 25 January 2013, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/getting-a-rise-112080500044\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/getting-a-rise-112080500044_1.html).

Chandola, Tripta. 'Dumped Through Technology: A Policy Maker's Guide to Disenfranchising Slum Dwellers', *Journal of Creative Communications*, 8.2-3 (2013): 265-275.



Classen, Constance. *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Connor, Steven. 'Michel Serres's Five Senses', Birkbeck College, May 1999, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/5senses.htm>.

Das Gupta, Moushumi. 'Amenities in the slums match up to urban homes', *Hindustan Times*, 22 March 2013, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/amenities-in-slums-match-up-to-urban-homes/story-krqsZjciIVd7pb7vsCl8iP.html>.

Dean, Jodi. 'Jodi Dean - Selfie Communism', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZv-vH56XqCw>.

Douglas, Mary. 'The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception', *Man*, 3.3 (1968): 361–376.

Engels, Frederick. *The Housing Question*, transcribed by Zodiac, 1995 (1872), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question/>.

Faiz, Ahmed Faiz. 'Don't Ask Me for That Love Again', translated by Agha Shahid Ali, in *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1995, p. 5.

Ferguson, James. *The Anti-politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minnesota UP, 1994.

Fine, Michelle. 'Working the Hyphens' in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. Routledge, 2013.

Gramsci, Antonio. 'The Intellectuals', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, 3-23. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Gentleman, Amelia. 'Poor Lose Homes as Delhi Clean up for Games', *International Herald Tribune*, 2 January 2007.

Gunn, Thom. *Jamesian*, [http://psa.fcny.org/psa/poetry/poetry\\_in\\_motion/atlas/atlanta/jamesian/](http://psa.fcny.org/psa/poetry/poetry_in_motion/atlas/atlanta/jamesian/).

Harvey, David. 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, September-October 2008, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1153/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>.

Marcus, George E., and Michael M.J. Fischer. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

James, Henry. *The High Bid*.

Jha, Preeti. 'Great Wall of Kalkaji', *Indian Express*, 5 April 2008.

Kitamura, Katie. *Gone to the Forest*, UK Edition, Clerkenwell Press, 2013.

Krejci, Jaroslav. 'A New Model of Scientific Atheism', *Concurrence*, 1.1 (1969): 87.

Kumar, Sanjay. 'Interpreting the AAP Win', *The Hindu*, 11 February 2015, <https://www.the-hindu.com/opinion/lead/interpreting-the-aap-win/article6879316.ece>.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 (1974).

Li, Tania M. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Lovink, Geert. 'Narcissus Confirmed: Technologies of the Minimal Selfie' in *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*. Pluto Press, 2019.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*, translated by C. Mandell. New York: Fordham, 2007.

Nigam, A. 'Industrial Closures in Delhi', *Revolutionary Democracy*, 7.2 (September 2001): <https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv7n2/industclos.htm>.

Pandey, Ponam Chandra. 'Sheila Dixit: Architect of Modern Delhi, Wanted to Develop it like Singapore', <https://morningindia.in/sheila-dikshit-architect-of-modern-delhi-wanted-to-develop-it-like-singapore/>.

Picard, Max. *The World of Silence*, vol. 6067, H. Regnery, 1952.

Pirandello, Luigi. 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', translated by John Linstrum. London: Methuen Drama, 1991.

Rancière, Jacques. *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*, translated by John Durr. New York: Verso Trade, 2012.

Rice, Tom. 'Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary', *Anthropology Today*, 19.4 (2003): 4-9.

Rice, Tom. 'Govindpuri Sounds', *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02hm1rx>.

Roy, Ananya. 'Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 71 (2005): 148.

Sacks, Oliver. *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf*. Pan Macmillan, 2009.

Schafer, Murray. 'Open Ears', in Michael Bull and Les Back (eds) *The auditory culture reader*, 25. New York: Berg, 2003.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg', *Public Culture*, 16.3 (2004): 407–429.

Soto, Hernando De. *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. Civitas Books, 2000.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 271-315. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular', *Post-colonial studies* 8.4 (2005): 475-486.

Stoller, P. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

Vishnu, Uma. '34% in Slums Have no Toilet, but 63% Own Mobile', *Indian Express*, 22 March 2013, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/34—in-slums-have-no-toilet-but-63—own-mobile-phone/1091573/>.

Whitman, Walt. 'Song of Myself, 51', in D. McKay, *Leaves of grass*, 1900.

Wikipedia Contributors, 'India Against Corruption', *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India\\_Against\\_Corruption](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India_Against_Corruption), accessed 4 April 2020.

Zizek, Slavoj. 'Human Rights and its Discontents: The Logic of the Stalinist Show Trials', Olin Auditorium, Bard College, 16 November, 1999.

Zizek, Slavoj. 'Capitalism with Asian Values', *Al Jazeera*, 13 November 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2011/10/2011102813360731764.html>.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006).

Zizek, Slavoj. *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. London: Routledge, 2012 (2004).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The task of writing the lives of others demands humility, integrity and honesty. The lives and the spaces I write about are outliers in more ways than one, the temptations to sabotage these lifeworlds for one's own displaced fantasies (of projecting hurt, anger, jealousy) are alluring. I am grateful to the people in my life who, whilst enveloping me in generous love, listening, support, did not let me indulge in my fantasies or encourage my cleverness. Indira Ramesh, the beacon of uncompromising principles and politics, who stood up for me when I had not the courage, and not because of her generosity because it was the matter of principle. Jo Tacchi under whose supervision and with whom I learned to listen, and who has given me the confidence, the courage, and the solidness of celebrating the families which are borne out love, respect and deep caring outside the bounds of shared genetic pools. And who brutally shot down by her one assertive 'nah' any attempts to fictionalize the lives. I am eternally grateful to her for that. Nishant who is equally unwavering in his commitment as a comrade in times of crisis as he is in the pursuit of pure theory and practice of politics and who led me to finally escaping the trappings of the capitalist mode of production of the self. Rishi Raote whose thinking, writing, editing and living have the delicateness and finesse of the finest China is my moral compass, and with the revelries and time spent with the Raote household I am allowed the indulgence of a highly eccentric, loving, respectful gang of people who call themselves a family.

In the recent years, I have been bestowed by love and support from those younger to me by several years, and in and with whom I still can revel in hope and optimism for the collective futures in these dystopic times. Katharina Wischer for her loyalty, keen intellect and pursuit of Proust and Marx, not always at the same time. Seema Sharma for resilient sense of self. Shruthi Chittoor for her commitment to the 'field', an ethnographer par excellence and from whose patient listening of the others I draw inspiration. Adya Thakur for the years she has accumulated with dignity and poise, and for always being with the promise of a fantastic holiday in wayward places. Kunal Bandopodhya with whom talking cricket, politics and shared ideas of love and living follow ceaselessly, and with whom watching the T20 final at Eden Garden was as invigorating as talking to people in rural Bengal about politics.

In my intellectual meanderings, I have had the privilege to find guidance from scholars who in one or another have greatly shaped my writing and thinking. Christy Collis, who patiently bore the grammatical assault I unleashed on her as my co-supervisor, and who gently guided me to be excited about space and geographical imaginations, or thinking beyond them. Ursula Rao for her unrelenting desire and demand for nothing but committed and thorough research practice to be matched with equally rigour theoretical pursuits, and for being the listener who allows me to 'externalize' my crisis; AboudMaliq Simone with whom a walk around Govindpuri and other neighborhoods on a hot Delhi afternoon rejuvenated my loving for the city; Tom Rice with whom I literally shared ears and a sonic extravaganza in Govindpuri; Tania Lewis who is unparalleled in her kindness and generosity to encourage intellectual pursuits; Kathi Kitner for allowing her research practice to be open for scrutiny; Georgina Born with whom the interactions have been few and far between in the last years but who has always encouraged my listening; Christine Guillebaud for shared listening. The essay 'Subaltern as

Political Voyeur' saw its completion with encouragement by Alf Gunvald Nilsen to commit to enliven the lives of the subaltern within their grammar and vocabularies. My special thanks to Jim Skyes and Gavin Steingo for allowing me all the concessions and missed deadlines for my essay to be included in their collection.

In the love and friendship of a few I have learned and held steadfast that warmth of hearth and home can be nurtured in spite of distances and differences. Jinna Tay with whom the love of cities, food, wanderings, stories of love realized and unactualised is acutely shared and felt. Aashish Kaul for the many afternoons and evenings where we measured our lives with the stories we shall tell. Swaroop Dev whose commitment to uncertainties is compelling, almost hopeful. Jonathan Benny for being an outlier of sorts, and thankfully so.

To Zaheer Abbas, Ananya Dasgupta, Abhik Samata with whom conversations left on some courtyard in JNU decades back are picked where they were without hesitation, and to be bemused by and at our younger selves and allowing each other to be archives of each other's younger ways.

To the memory of Alison Milner who made me feel at home whilst I was struggling to finish the thesis, and to Rohan McCarthy in the hope of continued conversations.

A special thanks to Rama and Rosy for accommodating my eccentricities in my endeavors to claim B 44 as my own transient home which includes, but not limited to, stripping the living room of its essentials to turn into a boxing arena. To Abhishek Vasudeva and Gaurav, boxers and trainers passionate and unrelenting about the art form in their own ways, who helped me to sharpen my punches, balance my footwork and make me appreciate the 'sweet science' of it all, again.

To the houses at whose entrance hung a robust green, metal plaque announcing - 'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in' - in colonial settings across the country in which I lived with mother, father, brother, mother's brother's two daughters, books, copious amounts of gin, dogs, little garden, once a cattle, bridge and croquet afternoons was as quintessentially an unhappy family as Tolstoy envisaged. To each of our differences, demons, discords, eccentricities, strange loves and stranger lives, I owe ultimately the unrelenting quest for escape, explorations and seeking solace in and with strangers with whom I've managed to nurture my own families.

I still remain uncertain of my listening, but I owe it to the space and crew at Sarai in the early 2000s where the initial, wayward wanderings in romancing and romanticizing the city were given patient audience, a validation, a license, a legitimacy to continue in these voyages. To Monica, the coolest of them all in her red boots, Shuddha, Jeebesh, Shweta Sarda, Pankaj Kaushal, Parvati Sharma, Ritika Shrimali, Mary and the many others with whom in the glassed walls of the Interface Zone we drank dark rum, wrote bad poetry, typed in 'Hello World' and shared the love of our cities in our own ways. For bearing on me to think, reflect, and mourn about the 'burden of listening', Sadan Jha, who continues to be a distant, but firm intel-

lectual anchor and sounding board in times of of conundrum, which new ideas and experiences throw at me.

In some ways that is where it all started, and most of all I remain indebted to the Interface Zone for the friendship, companionship, confidence and belief of Geert Lovink and Patrice Reimens. They believed in the book even before I could imagine it. It is not a matter of exaggeration but practical realities that this book would not have been possible without Geert Lovink's persistence and refusal to give up on me, even when I had no faith in myself or my listening. Patrice for indulging all my fantasies, stories and always taking seriously my fallen loves and not so sharp punches.

I cannot thank enough for the keen, astute and patient editorial inputs of Sepp Eckenhausen which finally compelled the essays in the book to take the form they have; needless to say, all the shortcomings are solely mine.

Lastly, I asked people in the lanes of Govindpuri, so how do you want to be acknowledged? 'For what?', I was asked. Well for sharing the lives and the book is finally done and so on, people do that. 'So you are thanking us for sharing our lives, is it?' Yes, I think so. 'But that seems like "the end" of sorts, like now we won't anymore or we only did for the book.' Of course not. 'Then don't remember us like that as if we are already forgotten (abhi kyon yaad karna jab bhulaye hi nahin hai).' Thus to the many more afternoons into evenings, loves, lives in the lanes of Govindpuri to whom I owe my political and poetic education, I hope one day those lanes and lives are flowing with the reds, the colour of revolution, *laal salaam!*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tripta Chandola is an ethnographer based in Delhi, India. She completed her doctorate from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, in 2010. She has held research positions at NUS, Singapore and RMIT, Melbourne. She has also worked as a research consultant for several international and national projects. One of her long-term, sustained research engagement has been with the space and its residents of the slums of Govindpuri in Delhi. Her particular focus is on the everyday encounters, social, cultural, political, emotional and sensual, which inform the identity, rights and claims which the residents of the slums can assert in the broader materiality and imagination of the city.

The politics of everyday encounters of marginalisation, disenfranchisement and rights the poor are the key focus of her research. She has published in international peer-review journals and contributed to edited book collections. In 2015, BBC World Service commissioned radio programme based on her doctoral research titled *Listening into Others*.

Tripta Chandola is a Research Fellow at the Digital Ethnography Research Centre, DERC, RMIT, Australia.