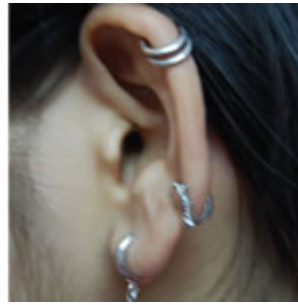


# Acoustic spaces of a Delhi Neighborhood

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by

Joya John



When we think of solitude we associate it with silence. It is in the sounds that we generate that our sociability is located. Voices, speech and other sounds linked with living indicate so much about people. Generating sound is an extension of our socially constituted selves. Luxury is the ability to choose the kind and extent of sounds we hear. It is however a luxury few can exercise in a metropolis. For some the cacophony of other sounds is comforting, the confirmation of community. For others sounds can be 'invasive', 'crude' or just simply 'noise'. Sounds demarcate the public from the private spaces.

My neighborhood is a plethora of sounds and voices. Its middle class status effortlessly strides the uncomfortable gap between the westernized university student tenant and the more conservative Punjabi families, who lease out houses for rent. Houses climb up to four storeys and sounds carry easily from one home to the other. Brawls break out between families over parking place, children's fights taken up by over anxious parents and the highly contentious issue of where garbage gets thrown. Late evenings are often marred by violence behind

closed doors. High pitched voices and shrill screams indicate a marital dispute that assumes catastrophic proportions, sometimes in full view of neighbors. Fake walkouts are staged, while neighbors intervene piously and send women back into the same hell. Loud crying often gives a moral vantage point to the battered wife and generates some embarrassment for the erring husband. The violence abates for sometime until one day- the shrill cry of the woman -and the same cycle begins again.

Indra Vihar also has pretensions to religious fervor. The temple priest commands respect. In the festive season families compete with each other to organize bhajans that can be heard on loudspeakers. Intra familial rivalries are temporarily put aside and the dholak takes precedence. Sound functions to establish a community of listeners all governed by the nucleus of the temple. Religious ceremonies blend into political affiliations, when the local magnates organize a charity function with loud music. For the elderly woman, early evenings are spent in the temple, singing songs of the licentious frolicking of Krishna- A contradiction that nobody seems to notice or mind. Outside the temple, groups of young men listen to music loudly on their cell phones, furtively eyeing young women students, like modern day avatars of Krishna. Bollywood kitsch competes with Enrique singing mournfully somewhere close by.

On Saturdays a wandering ascetic winds way his through the neighborhood, asking for alms to propitiate the vengeful god Shani. Added to this is the plaintive sound of the beggar woman, who pretends to be blind but can be seen counting her earnings in the neighborhood park later in the day. Vegetable vendors have each cultivated a distinct sound to alert potential buyers of their arrival. Hard bargains are driven over the prices of each item between them and the women of the colony. Both lambaste the government and the escalating prices.

Morning is the time for women. Relatively free from the demands of children and husbands, they chat loudly, cajole babies to eat and gossip. As evening approaches they are heard less. The sounds of the returning male folk takes precedence. Ribald jokes along with a generous splattering of swear words can be heard. Words are said with abandon, in front of women or total strangers.

On the other side of noise are those who are the 'outsiders'.

Qualises drive in nosily honking to alert young college students call centre employees, of their arrival. A boisterous party, with drunken students, invites censure from the neighborhood. People gather outside, tempers flare up and often someone has the sense to call the police. Racist undercurrents come out in the open. Loud pronouncements are made on "chinky" students and their rampant immorality. Assumptions about their wealth however make them the most profitable tenants.

This neighborhood has drawn a sharp line between sanctioned and unsanctioned noise. The decision of who makes noise and who doesn't is sometimes challenged however most of the time it is let be. In the meanwhile people get on with the daily processes of living, talking behind paper thin walls, while others listen in, voluntarily or involuntarily.

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