

Gendered Soundscapes of India, an Introduction

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

**This post was co-authored by forum co-editors Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta A note on the collection: Our original Call For Posts was for “Gendered Sounds of South Asia,” as we hoped to use this de-center India and explore terrain beyond cinema.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Asian And Asian American Studies, Class, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound, Film/Movies/Cinema



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A note on the collection: Our original Call For Posts was for “Gendered Sounds of South Asia,” as we hoped to use this de-center India and explore terrain beyond cinema. However, the submissions that we received compelled us to recalibrate the framing of this forum, which will now focus on cinema and sound in India. It occurred to us once we received the pitches that there were structural reasons for the paucity of submissions on both South Asia and sound beyond cinema. The listservs on which the CFP circulated as well as the ways in which the CFP framed sound shaped the submissions. Intersecting sound with gender immediately invokes the female voice, since gender still signals the female. This invocation leads to the next term, “Indian film,” which dominates the region. That said, it is also possible that gender may not be a key lens for analyzing sound in current work on South Asia; noise regulation, caste, religion, ethnicity, and region might be more salient at the moment. We curated the current forum, “Gendered Sounds of India” to expand the terrain of what constitutes sound and voice in India, and through this means, these articles also offer new modes of listening.



Bow Bazar Area, Kolkata, West Bengal, 2011, Image by Flickr user Lorenzo, ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

Praseeda Gopinath: *My childhood is lived soundscapes. It's revelatory to think about memory and self through the paradigm of sound, because it is only now that I realize that some of my abiding memories are shaped by sound, film, and voice. Urban Indian childhood meant inhabiting layers of sound, and learning to separate and parse the various layers in order of situational importance: the call of the ice-cream man from the call of the peanut-seller,*

depending on what you were in the mood for; raucous playful yelling of friends from your mother yelling to check on where you were; and of course, the ubiquitous sound of radios and televisions from various homes in your neighborhood. Your ear heard the professional cadences of the radio announcer or television announcements, but you were waiting for the film's songs you liked, or the dialogue delivery of your favorite actor. If we heard Amitabh Bachchan's distinctive baritone—the undisputed and worshipped Hindi film star of 70s-80s—we immediately stopped whatever we were playing at and listened to his voice as it drifted out on to the aether. He was the gendered voice of power and glamor emanating from invisible radios or televisions and seeping into our childish brains, defining sound, stardom, and most importantly, cool.

Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear is often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality. Today's entry in the forum, **Claire Cooley's** entry on the *The Lor Girl* (1933)—a film collaboration between Iranian expatriates and The Imperial Film Company—unpacks the ways in which the gendered voice and accent of the female protagonist become symptomatic of modernity in Bombay and Tehran. Class and modernity are rendered through the transformation of her voice and accent. In the process, gendered modernity is also produced and circulated through the film's soundscape; *The Lor Girl* offers a lesson in listening, what and how to listen to gendered voice, sound, and accent. It reveals how the ear is trained to identify class, region, and the modern, discourses that continue to shape listening practices in contemporary India.

Similarly, **Pavitra Sundar's** article on Falguni Pathak, a sought-after vocalist for heteronormative and religiously-inflected Navaratri celebrations, reveals how Pathak's vocalic body challenges heteronormative ideas about sexuality and gender and consequentially heteronormative listening practices. Sundar asks us to think about how "queerness" might sound in Indian public culture, and indeed, how this aural queerness might not necessarily align with the "queer timbre" theorized in Euro-American queer theory. Perhaps what seems most intriguing about Sundar's analysis of Pathak is not just her elusive queer voice, but that it is this elusiveness, Pathak's ability to slip between and across heteronormative aural spaces, that makes her vocal queerness both pervasive and difficult to label.



Women's Radio Listening Group, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, Image by Flickr User UK Department for International Development, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Monika Mehta: When I think of sound, an image surfaces of my mama (maternal uncle) reclining on a bed and cradling a transistor by his ear. The time is the late 1970s and the location, Railway Colony, Kishan Ganj, New Delhi, my maternal grandparents' home. Thinking back, the transistor must have provided a sense of privacy, perhaps, even facilitated cultivation of a private self in a middle-class, bustling joint family; in such a family, home was not a private place. For better or worse, most things were shared. These shared objects included the radio, and later, the television, both of which were ensconced in the living room and functional, bulky, and ornamental, signaling middle-class status.

Unlike the radio and television, the transistor and the two-in-one were portable; they could be moved and held. The two-in-one was often transported to a grill-window of a bedroom where another mama (maternal uncle) loved listening to Talat Mahmood songs on it. While most Hindi song aficionados were fans of the playback singer Mohammed Rafi, he preferred Mahmood's voice. For him, the cassette player enabled the cultivation of pleasure and fandom. What appears curious now was that it was mostly, if not exclusively, the male members of the family who were attached to the transistors and the two-in-ones. Similarly, in bazaars, on sidewalks, nears shops, men would cluster around these audio technologies, riveted by a cricket commentary, or at times, enjoying film songs. These technologies produced a sense of male privacy at home, and homosociality outside.

Technology is often imagined as a neutral entity, unaffected and unrelated to socio-economic divisions. **Priva Jaikumar** and **Ronit Ghosh**'s posts challenge this normative assumption by examining the relations amongst sound technology, gender, and the public.



*Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, 2008,
Image by Flickr user Paul Weller (CC
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Jaikumar discusses how the adoption of sync sound recording by Bombay filmmakers in the 1990s generates new forms of labor that are divided along lines of class and gender. Bouncers and sound-security personnel are drawn from lower-class migrant men, whereas the sound artists and engineers are recruited from the middle and upper classes. In both cases, women are excluded from working with or on sound. Ghosh demonstrates how the introduction of new recording technology in India in the 1930s privatizes listening experiences. If the consumption of live music occurred in public spaces, which could only be accessed by male audiences, then this new technology, not only provided a new listening experience, but made music available to middle-class female audiences. Both Ghosh and Jaikumar's posts show that consumption, or the labor of sound in public, is masculinized whereas private sounds, or ones that require private labor, are feminized.

On a closing note, the posts offer snapshots of sound at sites of trans/national production, marketing, filmic and musical texts. Complementing these posts, the accompanying photographs offer glimpses of gendered community formation, homosociality, the pervasiveness of sound technology in India, and the discordant stratified soundscapes of the city. This series opens up for us the question of other contexts in India where sound, gender, and technology might intersect, but more broadly, it demands that we consider how sound exists differently in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. How might we imagine a sonic framework and South Asia from these locations?

To read all of the posts in the forum, click [here](#).

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