

Out of Sync: Gendered Location Sound Work in Bollywood

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Abstract

co-edited by Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Film/Movies/Cinema, Gender, Gendered Soundscapes Of India



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co-edited by Praseeda
Gopinath and Monika
Mehta

Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality. . . This forum, *Gendered Soundscapes of India*, offers 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? —**Guest Editors Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta**

For the full introduction to the forum, click [here](#).

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

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“Indian traffic tends to be one of the noisiest, but that is true of all third world countries...What doesn’t make sense is when you try to remove it from that context. Two people can’t be whispering to one another in the middle of a bench by the sea in Bandra. Will you hear someone sitting next to you on that bench?” asks sound designer [Dileep Subramaniam](#) indignantly. We are discussing the Indian film industry’s norm of looping (or “dubbing”) sound and dialogue at the post-production stage, which has traditionally given India cinema’s sound track an unrealistic degree of clarity. For a loud country, Indian films have been in the habit of incorporating remarkably few ambient sounds into their sound track, until the practice of synchronized sound recording began to infiltrate Hindi film aesthetics in the late 1990s.

The break from post-synchronized sound occurred over a relatively brief period of time in India, as a majority of the commercial films moved away from MOS (motor only sound or no sync sound) to synchronized sound, which refers to the recording of sound alongside image during a film shoot. Industry professionals argue that sound technologies underwent revolutionary changes in

comparison to image technologies in India between 1995 and 2002, as the introduction of digital editing platforms weaned the Bombay film industry away from its reliance on mono-tracks and primitive stereo-tracks, directly to Dolby digital multi-tracks. Hindi cinema almost entirely skipped the intermediary technological stage of stereo ultrasound, used for several years in Hollywood. Today, an amalgam of sync sound and Automated Dialogue Replacement (ADR) characterize Bollywood cinema's soundscapes.

We have been more attuned to Hindi cinema's soundscapes than to the production and pre-production practices of sound recording and the composition of sound crews, which follows a disciplinary habit in film studies of prioritizing film aesthetics over other aspects of film's materiality and production. This lopsided emphasis has meant that we have missed out on the complex ways in which the story of film sound is part of a larger story of social change in India, wherein formal shifts are of a piece with new employment opportunities and a realignment of India's middle class. These social and professional changes have impacted Indian class and gender relations in disparate ways.



On the set of Bhagum Bhag filmed on Brighton Station, image by Flickr User Simon Pielow, (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Based on conversations that I conducted in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 2009 and 2013 with sound professionals working on Bollywood's location shoots, I comment on sociological aspects of Bollywood's increasing adoption of sync sound recording in location shoots, particularly with regard to its implications for class and gender relations within the film industry. My point will be two-fold. One, as the Hindi film form gravitates toward internationally recognizable codes of aural and visual realism, an expanding social range of skilled and unskilled workers are attracted to professions related to location sound recording. Two, despite the diversifying social profile of these professionals, women remain structurally excluded from all levels of the profession.

The change from non-sync to sync sound in Hindi films has created a demand for trained creative technicians and sound engineers, and equally for those who can work as bouncers and sound-security personnel on the field. Security personnel are crucial to recording location sound in a high-decibel country. According to Line Producer [Raj Hate](#) (with commercials and the location-heavy [Miss Lovely](#) to his credit, the practice of “sound lock ups” started with television commercials in India during the late 1990s before it was adopted by film shoots. “Sound lock” is a phrase used by Bollywood professionals to describe the practice of securing an area to ensure silence, in order to get the best location sound. Many of those working in this pool of unskilled labor in Bollywood today come from Mumbai’s economically depressed migrants who have traveled to the city in search of employment.

For instance, Security Provider Narendra Baruah started with security work on the film [Lagaan](#) (2001), the first big-budget film shot with sync sound, although it was preceded by the smaller scale *Bombay Boys* (1998), which also recorded in sync. Baruah created Active Squad Security while working on sound security for the location shoot of *Veer Zaara* (2004). He has provided security protection to stars (such as Madhuri Dixit Nene, Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan and Preity Zinta), but his primary employment is in sync sound security. He retains a small group of men on a monthly salary with additional per diem top-ups during assignments, which may range between INR 5,000 to 10,000 to over 20,000 a day, depending on the nature of the shoot. Additionally, he hires men on a temporary basis from a pool of local Mumbaikars and immigrants seeking employment in the big city. Baruah’s company is in competition with actor Ronit Roy’s security company ACE and movie star Salman Khan’s Tiger Security. Although he lacks their star profile and their facility with English, he has made a name for himself through his entrepreneurial practice and expertise in shooting at “*jhopad pattis*” (slums) for films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Barah Aana* (2009).



Bollywood Film Set, Image by Flickr

User Rhys Tom, ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

Shot in Dharavi, *Barah Aana* required twenty men because of the high sound levels of the urban slum. As Baruah points out, *jhopad pattis* are the hardest places in which to secure sound for location shoots because “A pressure cooker’s whistle goes off somewhere, or a TV starts up, or a child starts crying” (“*Kahien cooker ki seeti bajti hai to kabhi TV chalu hai aur bacchha rota hai.*”). Open locations for films with smaller budgets also do not require ID cards for film crews, so Baruah finds that one of his greatest challenges is teaching his staff to memorize faces and manage crowds with diplomacy rather than violence. The phenomenon of Baruah and his crew working on a contract-basis with a range of films is what philosopher and [sociologist Maurizio Lazaratto discusses](#) as the reconfigured “anthropological realities of work” in the new global work space, where “polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form” of global labor.

The social range of Baruah’s crew reveals a disparity between Bollywood blockbusters’ onscreen transnational and cosmopolitan backgrounds, and the class diversity of those involved in producing them. As Hagen Koo argues in relation to the shrinking middle class in America and Western Europe against the expanding middle class of India and China, representations of the global middle class that narrowly refer to “the upper segments...in developing countries, whose members are affluent and globally oriented in their lifestyle and mobility pattern” are woefully inadequate (“[The Global Middle Class](#)”). Without rendering Bollywood professionals into mere representatives of their class, I can confirm based on my conversations on the field that the assorted workers enabling sync sound shoots in India today come from a range of social classes, which reveals a negotiation and redistribution of work across different classes of professionals, particularly when we consider the work of sound security personnel in conjunction with the work of sound engineers on site. On-the-ground compositions of production crews are more complex and hybrid than what is suggested by a Bollywood blockbuster’s flat image of urbane cosmopolitanism, by Mumbai’s segregated urban spaces, or by the hostile monocultures of Hindutva pushed by Shiv Sena’s divisive politics.



Filming of Bollywood movie “Agent Vinod” on set in Riga, Latvia, August 2010, (CC BY-SA 2.0)

At the other end of the social spectrum and hierarchy of labor among people involved in Bollywood’s revolution in sound are highly skilled sound artists and engineers. Early experimenters in sync and location sound (such as [Shyam Benegal](#) and [Govind Nihlani](#)) provided opportunities to Bollywood’s new generation of creative audio technicians, who have become key players in the industry’s innovations in sync sound recording, digital sound editing and audio mixing. Dileep Subramaniam worked in sync sound for Nihlani’s television features during the 1980s, and for BBC’s Channel 4 nature documentaries, which made it easier for him to work with transnational productions such as Merchant Ivory’s *Deceivers* (1988) and Shekhar Kapoor’s *Bandit Queen* (1995).

Location recordist, production mixer and sound designer [Baylon Fonseca](#) edited sound on the digital workstation Audio Vision from Avid for Nihlani’s *Sanshodhan* (1995) at a time when most Hindi film producers and directors “considered it almost witchcraft.” With *Sanshodhan*, he initiated methods for digital sync sound recording and mixing that are standard practice in India now. The integration of trained sound engineers into the Hindi film industry has made a palpable difference to its cinema’s sound quality, even as Hindi cinema’s increasing social legitimacy with white-collar workers allows Bollywood to seem like a valid career choice for Indians from the middle and upper middle classes. Nevertheless, high net-worth engineers have to buck traditional social norms—ranging from familial expectations to cultural notions of respectability—to consider sound work in the film industry as a valid career path.

All this is assuming that the engineers are men. Indian women face a double burden in entering such a profession: they must work against social prejudice to pursue careers in science and technology, and then apply that training to the field of media production, which does not possess

the social legitimacy of most jobs in engineering. Effectively, new opportunities created by the use of sync sound in Hindi cinema does not bring much promise to women. Women are entirely omitted from the unskilled end of the location sound spectrum because of the incipient threat of violence and aggression against women in India's public spaces. Under the strain of Hindutva's India and Shiv Sena's Mumbai, wherein the concept of protecting women's honor becomes the violent pretext to restrict their freedom of movement, women are presumptively excluded from sound security work. Women are also largely absent from sound engineering because of the gendering of the hard sciences. In proportion to men, few Indian women are encouraged to enter the sciences, and fewer can choose to use it as the path into film work, so that they are structurally sidelined from high-end work in sound technologies.



Bollywood Film Set, Image by Flickr User Dani Venn, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Strong female characters on screen and strong female voices incorporated into the timbre of a film's soundscape can be cause for celebration. But such inclusions rarely change the social and professional make-up of a film's production crew. Further, merely adding women to the ranks of security personnel or sound engineers will not presumptively result in a more feminist or inclusive film text. On-screen representations do not reflect pre-production and production practices in simple ways. Despite these cautionary notes, is worth our while to invest some time and thought to how gender relations are impacted along different tiers of film production, as production practices shift in response to Hindi-cinema's post-globalization aesthetics. Considering the gendered make up of professionals in Hindi cinema's shift to sync sound recording on location shoots reveals several things. It demonstrates that professional opportunities, social norms and political pressures accompany formal changes in cinema. It allows us to consider what

professional shifts in film sound recording in the wake of globalization look like in relation to men as opposed to women, providing an embodied perspective to abstract discussions of social change. And it chastens us against making naïve assumptions about inclusiveness.

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Featured Image: On the set of *Salaami Ish*, filmed on Brighton Station,, image by Flickr User Simon Pielow, ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

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