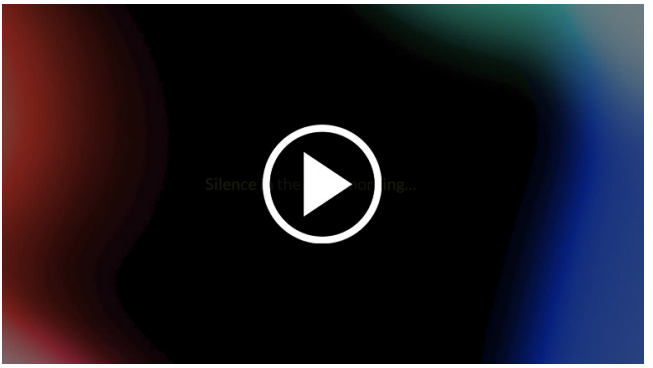
Colloquy

THE CACOPHONY OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN A JJ COLONY IN DELHI: A Sonic Ethnography of the City

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Soundscape. ***The Cacophony of Everyday Life in a JJ Colony in Delhi*****, 6:00.**
By Rashmi Kumar. https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/702q18990t.

The everyday life in clustered neighborhoods in the urban city of Delhi, India, provides overwhelming and intense multi-sensorial experiences of smells, fragrances, engaging sites, being watched or the constant gaze, being heard and continuous noise. The continual cacophony bundles of numerous and simultaneous conversations or interactions in Delhi's Jhuggi Jhopdi (JJ) Colonies, which are slum clusters, evoked this uneasiness due to the piercing noises and a desire for silence and ease. The JJ Colonies

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are intimate neighborhoods of a marginalized population in which different Dalit groups and Muslim communities from lower-income groups coexist. The intimacy of sharing their lives, conditions, and everyday experience of the personal and public spaces can be heard in the form of confessions or public secrets since, in the clustered settings of the houses, people usually get direct or indirect access to each other's private lives (Warner 2002; Das 2010). I draw from Lauren Berlant's (1998) attention to rethinking intimacy to appraise how we live, and how this attention also involves the everyday repetition of an act that is intimate itself. Such acts adhere to their transgressive boundaries of public and private through shared emotions and worldviews (Berlant 1998).

Social engagements in these clustered neighborhoods comprise extended kinship relationships based on the degree of intimacy and the bonds between the neighbors. These relations have been passed down through generations, upholding the neighborhood's intimate sociality. The intimate sociality within these neighborhoods dissolves boundaries between public and private, and this intimacy intensifies through relationships outside the family, metaphorically and literally. The social structures in such neighborhoods amplify patriarchal gender norms and their adverse impact on women's everyday lives in JJ Colonies.

The colonies are overstimulated with noises from outside gatherings of men and kids playing around on the street, often busy with vehicles crossing the street. The sounds, noises, music, and conversations provide a sensory image of these colonies: picture the clustered space with minimal sun exposure of JJ Colonies in Delhi. These houses are just a wall or two apart, close enough for the smells of food to waft into each other's homes. Women shout and talk inside their kitchens and balconies, guessing and discussing "What is cooking today?" The arrival of fruit and vegetable vendors and door sellers also entices the women, generally the housewives, to come out of their houses and gather to buy things while discussing their daily lives. The working women in the JJ Colony often stop by each other's homes, or those of homemakers, on their way back from work. The sonic experience of everyday life in the JJ Colonies provides such conversations between the women inside their homes at louder pitches, exchanging conversations in the middle of the overstimulating sonic environment. Similar to Sarah Pink's (2009) exploration of sensory ethnography in everyday life, listening to this sonic environment, and specifically to women's voices, helps us understand the gendered experience of home in the JJ Colonies.

The cacophony of the JJ Colony is composed of unharmonious noises in the background, creating ruptures within the sensorial and lived experience of JJ Colony residents. While sensory overload can be disruptive, the cacophony also gets perceived as a merriment of the neighborhood, filled with elements of life and human presence, evoked by habitation and the habitual, routinized noises that surround it. The everyday

social life of marginalized women also evokes the feminist understanding of struggle and seeking merriment within the chaos to survive in urban space. I captured the soundscapes during a community immersion in the JJ Colony. I limited myself to a clustered house to account for the experience of living in a confined space as feminist homework. I attempt to bring out the chaos of the cacophony of the clustered colony to enhance a feminist understanding of the lived experience and the epistemological perspective of neighborhoods.

POSITIONALITY AND POSITIONING: A Point of Listening

My extensive exposure to JJ Colonies stems from visits to my relatives, especially my maternal grandmother's house in the JJ Colony in Uttam Nagar. I was born and brought up in the railway quarters in Connaught Place, an elite and bureaucratic area of central Delhi. The residents in elite spaces witness minimal sonic invasions by the constant vehicles or noises around the neighborhood in their everyday life. My extensive and intimate exposure to JJ Colonies' sociality is therefore distant and episodic. However, I witnessed the drastic infrastructural changes in the colonies in the past two decades, which also contributed to the sensorial realities of the city dwellers. Two decades ago, the JJ Colony mostly had duplex houses with open roofs and ample space to access the street safely within their residential boundaries. Eventually, people began building the stacked rooms, and the buildings' increasing height led to no sunlight. Moreover, the streets became congested, as open houses were covered with additional sheds and gates for better security. Yet the constant noise of vehicles cannot be perceived positively from any person's positionality, given the sensorial overwhelm it creates. Silence is a luxury from the perspective of JJ Colony residents, and from my personal experience. The quality of living conditions for urban dwellers is declining as the sonic lived experience of city life has its own limitations and sensorial intrusion.

This positional account draws on Sandra Harding's (1992) idea of "strong objectivity," where knowledge emerges more rigorously by locating the researcher within structures of power rather than claiming neutrality. Moving between elite and JJ Colony spaces, my experiences remain partial yet embodied, offering a grounded lens to understand urban inequalities. In a similar vein, Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledges reminds us that all ways of seeing and listening are shaped by where one stands. Listening, then, becomes a situated practice, informed by social position. This ethnography therefore approaches sonic experience as relational, contingent, and embedded within everyday power structures (Harding 1992; Haraway 1988).

My soundwork is recorded from inside the house as a deliberate attempt to capture the sonic invasion of the city into one's house. I recorded the soundscape while sitting at the window in the house, as these windows or small balconies become the

window to the outer world for the women confined in their houses in the JJ Colony. I grew up listening to my grandmother, who often commented that women or girls frequently visiting other's houses, or simply roaming for leisure, was not considered virtuous for a woman. Despite the domestication of women in the JJ Colony, where women are expected not to be in public, the sonic experience dwells and challenges the binary of public and private. The act of recording the soundscape within the house was a conscious decision to illustrate the sensorial experience of the women living in the difficult and cramped conditions of the city. The loud voices of the JJ Colony women, speaking from their windows, represent their resilience in the face of the hierarchical, structurally oppressive experience of everyday life in the city. Growing up and visiting my grandmother's place led me to gather personal experiences with certain gendered norms that were also reflected during my field immersion. Women in the JJ Colony, especially the housemakers, fence or stand at their windows and balconies as a part of the everyday due to patriarchal notions of domesticity. And I chose the window as my eyes and ears fencing at the window on the silver lining of public and private through the constant cacophony of the street outside and neighbors' houses as well. This is not merely a metaphysical position but also a social positioning of the women living on the shifting grounds at the grassroots and the thin line between public and private space. Standing on shifting ground clarifies that every view is a view from somewhere, and every act of speaking hails from somewhere. The subaltern perspective is needed to understand empirical realities in the history of oppression and to address what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) has referred to as misrepresentations from hegemonic positions.

EVOKING MERRIMENT OR NOISES? Meaning-Making of the Everyday Sonic

Several residents and respondents in my overall doctoral project describe the cacophony as *chahel-pahel* (the hustle and bustle),[1] and they perceive it as the very life or charm of these colonies. Still, the nonstop noises cause a habitual uneasiness for the city dwellers living in the margins, which deserves a critical anthropological inquiry into the sonic. Furthermore, the soundscape evokes the difference between everyday life and the intersectional experience of the city, shaped by the entanglement of class, gender and caste, where silence becomes a luxury for the lower-income neighborhood. The meaning-making and the language of describing the continuous noises as *chahel-pahel* or *Machi Bazaar* (Fish Market) highlight how an individual senses and perceives the cacophony surrounding their social world. The continuous noises in the JJ Colonies run in the background, and they are not mutually exclusive. The trivial and routinized aspect of life characterizes engagements and interactions with people in private and public spaces. Veena Das (2010) argues that attachments to routines and habits are transformed by the experience of the

everyday as a site of meaning. Mundane, routinized interactions carry deeper significance within the broader concepts of the everyday and the sonic social. In other words, viewing the everyday as an analytical category reveals the nuanced ways in which power relations are embedded and experienced both socially and sensorially (Lefebvre 2014).

In contrast, the street has its own sonic experience of traffic and human movement: passersby, vendors, garbage collector vans patrolling, e-rickshaws, auto rickshaws, and small buses like metro feeders, all dominated by men on the streets. The houses have the voice of women as the sonic. Several women in the JJ Colony engaged with their efficient order of domestic chores, often conversing with the neighbors from the windows or balcony, which is audible from within the houses. These conversations range from gossip to complaints and general discussions about food, chores, personal issues, or children. At night, I could hear teenage boys talking and sitting on two-wheelers parked in front of their houses, while teenage girls mostly sat a little more inside, around the entrance or the stairs. I could hear these conversations, television noises, or residents calling for family members inside their houses. The constant cacophony of the busy street or homes puts the private or intimate space of the "home" on a public platter and brings the street into the house through a multi-sensorial reality.

The lived experience of everyday life in a JJ Colony entails sensorial and intersectional experiences of gender, caste, and class. Scholars have highlighted how women from lower-income communities, such as Dalit women in India, negotiate access to domestic and urban space through deeply gendered social structures (Chakravarti 2018; Grover 2011). There are contradictions and tensions in accessing modern urban space, where intimacy is both a source of connection and a site of struggle under conditions of precarity, commodification, and social exclusion (Berlant 1998). Access to public and private spaces for women in clustered and intimate neighborhoods entails a gendered experience of negotiating urban life among lower-income groups of women in India. Women residing in the JJ Colonies are often sexualized and stigmatized; they are characterized as loud, boisterous, and lower-class women, or severely victimized as marginalized city dwellers living in the misery of clustered settings. The sensorial sociality of the neighborhood overstimulates everyday life while simultaneously silencing women's voices through stigma, overcrowding, and acoustic cacophony. As a result, women negotiate visibility and audibility within confined domestic and public spaces by shouting to be heard and acknowledged. The sensorial disruption in everyday life is an urban phenomenon of structural oppression by city dwellers on city dwellers, especially women in intersectional positions. Dalit women are always doubly disadvantaged by the patriarchal forces prevalent within their community (Guru 2009). The humiliation and social exclusion of these women becomes embedded within everyday structures of caste society (Guru and Sarukkai 2020). Brahmanical patriarchy and middle-class morality

places a double burden on Dalit and other Bahujan (literally "majority," rooted in the political solidarity of the majority of marginalized communities in India) women who are subjected to hostility, humiliation, and stigmatization, a triple burden that resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1994) theory of intersectionality.

The intimacy of sharing their lives, conditions, and everyday experiences of personal and public spaces often leads to confessions or public secrets, since in the clustered settings of the houses people often get direct or indirect access to each other's private lives. The bonds between these women can be seen through the collective visits and shopping sprees in the weekly markets. Weekly flea markets called *Shani-bazaar* (Saturday market) are among the important events that provide access to a vast range of household items, affordable apparel, and eateries for lower-income households. A weekly market like this also offers one of the few occasions for working-class women to access public space for leisure. And the women will plan and decide the time to visit the markets in a group and accordingly fulfill their primary duty of preparing dinner for the family to enjoy the experience. On Saturday morning, women working on the balcony or inside the house talk to the women in the next house, speaking loudly to each other and planning the timing to visit the market and discuss their respective chores. It is a common exchange of words as they often discuss dishes to be prepared and how often women cook in larger batches in the afternoon and plan to eat the famous *Shani-bazaar*'s *Chole-Bhature*. *Chole Bhature* (chickpea curry and fried bread) is a popular dish in Delhi, a staple, though a special meal for lower-income households, as well as a highlight of these weekly flea markets across several working-class neighborhoods. The JJ Colonies are intimate Dalit neighborhoods in which different caste groups and religions coexist. These social engagements also involve fictive kinship, based on the degree of intimacy and the close bonds between neighbors.

The merriment of the colony, as described by the residents, presents an intimate experience of living in the clustered neighborhood. The gossip and humor among the women of the JJ Colony become resistance to the domestication of women as a norm. The gender norms restrict women from using public spaces for leisure. Women doing their homework within their clustered houses and shouting to converse with each other present acts of resistance. The cacophony created by the women in the JJ Colony is the source of merriment, engagement, and resistance. The children on the street giggling and shouting offer another source of merriment. The experience of living in a JJ Colony entails the life of the oppressed, which includes living and accessing moments of joy in the moment. Yes, some residents expressed discomfort with the constant cacophony of vehicles crossing and creating noise. While the merriment of familiar voices in an intimate setting provides the foundation for urban community-based relationships, the yearning for silence is undeniable and justifiable.

I conclude that the sensorial unrest in the clustered neighborhood is a consequence of infrastructural disparity within urban spaces. While the elite areas witness all kinds of development and urban conveniences, the lower-income neighborhoods are becoming increasingly difficult to live in. The everyday reality of lower-income neighborhoods is becoming increasingly clustered and narrow. Women in JJ Colonies are bearing the gendered norms of domestication and other intersectional burdens. Yet according to middle-class morality and patriarchal norms, women in clustered neighborhoods are expected to remain confined in their metaphysical and social boundaries. The sonic social of these JJ clusters entails silence as a luxury in everyday life, simultaneously attempting to silence the voices of the suppressed to create the "other" of the cities. The Global South is full of such spatial and infrastructural disparity, and the cacophony of these clustered neighborhoods is a blend of deafening hegemonies. However, the loud voices of women making conversation from within the confines of their houses stand as an act of asserted agency and the negotiation of everyday struggles. And indeed, this soundscape is a feminist homework to counter the silencing and stigmas attached to the women in JJ Colonies.

ABSTRACT

This piece draws on ethnographic engagement in a lower-income neighborhood, Jhuggi Jhopri (JJ) Colonies in Uttam Nagar, West Delhi, to examine the sensorial and intersectional experiences of caste, class, and gender in urban life. Despite their varied categorizations, JJ Colonies are persistently marked as "low-class," unsafe, and socially marginal. Grounded in lived experience and fieldwork, the essay analyzes how women in these spaces are stigmatized as "loud" or hyper-visible, while simultaneously navigating conditions of structural marginality. Focusing on clustered housing, the work explores how dense spatial arrangements produce heightened sensorial environments—noise, proximity, and constant visibility—that blur boundaries between public and private space. These conditions shape gendered negotiations of mobility, respectability, and surveillance within the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy and middle-class modernity. By foregrounding everyday interactions, gossip, and sociality, the essay demonstrates how sensorial life structures self-presentation, social relations, and ethical norms, offering a grounded account of urban marginality and embodied experience. [everyday life; urban; sensory ethnography; soundscape; feminist anthropology]

NOTES

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1. My doctoral project deals with the Dalit feminist ethnography of caste in urban space contextualized in a marginalized *jaati* called the Dhusia caste. My research interests proposed a genealogical study of the Dhusia caste-community in Delhi, and I dwell into auto-ethnographic engagements with the Dhusia *samaj* as a social representative body, and into Dhusia community in general. My research problematizes these two common-sense understandings and representations of caste: first, apparent casteless-ness as a hegemonic discourse that denies the significance of the caste system in urban, contemporary, or "modern" India. Second, the relationship among caste identity, gender, and class and how it plays out in the context of the Dhusia people residing in a JJ Colony or other lower-income neigbhorhoods in Delhi.

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