Categories of noise and calm: A view from India

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ABSTRACT

Noise pollution legislation dates to 2000 in India, where it had previously been managed through separate laws (vehicular regulation, the Environmental Protection Act, and the Police Act). Current noise pollution rules concern the regulation and control of sound by defining zoning uses (divided into industrial, commercial, residential, and silent zones) and ambient air quality standards for noise (in dB (A) Leq) during blocks of time, day and night. Nearly 19 years later, and despite this legislative step, these laws have yet to be implemented. How to explain this gap? The ethnographic approach shows that there are two co-existing conceptions of sound, and that they remain irreconcilable. One is cultural, based on economic, religious and political uses of sound and attributing effective value to sound productions, while the other is normative, consisting of reducing noise according to external criteria and regardless of its specific uses in various everyday activities.

My presentation addresses the ordinary perceptions of users of a park in the city of Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala (India). Vehicular traffic is quite dense in the city, the din of horns deafening, and sidewalks and pedestrian areas nearly non-existent. To what extent can residents avoid or adapt to the ambient noise? This park is one of the rare parts of the city where people say they can move around in 'peace' (*śānta*), the equivalent of the term 'calm'. Using commented walks, with some complementary decibel measurements, I analyse 1) how the noisy / peaceful transition differs according to the individual and the parts of the park they cross; 2) the importance of the multi-sensorial dynamic and a gradual saturation by the park's tones; and 3) users' invitation to associate peace (*śānta*) with extra-sonic dimensions.

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Napier museum Park, Trivandrum (India, 2018). Mobile noise measurements with NoiseCapture. Image: Gwendall Petit (Lab-STICC, noise-planet.org)

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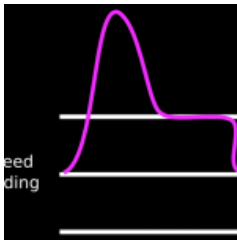
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