

**Jason Kahn**

**“Notes to Unheard Delhi”**

**Wolf Notes #2**

**July 2011**

For the month of November 2011 I was an artist in residence in Delhi with the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and the media research center Sarai. One of my proposed projects for this residency was a continuation of my “Unheard Cities” series of works, which I’ve been realizing since 2002. “Unheard Cities” explores how we perceive urban sound environments in the form of installations, musical performances and, in the case of “Unheard Delhi,” works for radio. In “Unheard Delhi” I interviewed eight people with the question, “What is your favorite sound or sound environment in Delhi?” I recorded all the answers and then went out in the city and recorded the corresponding sounds. The resulting recordings and interviews were then mixed together for an approximately 60-minute long audio portrait of the city. I produced an earlier version of this piece, “Unheard Zürich,” in 2007.

The piece works on several levels, perhaps the first being that the interviewees come to reflect on the sound environments of the city in which they live. Many of the people I interviewed had great difficulty in answering the question. The idea of a “favorite” sound, let alone any sound at all, is fairly alien as this seems to be a topic most people don’t think about, especially in Delhi where the sheer density and volume of sound often makes ignoring the surrounding sounds a prerequisite for getting through the day. If someone does think about the sounds of their city then it is inevitably the sounds which disturb that come to mind. Asking about the sounds which please is therefore a double challenge. On another level, the answers provided by the interviewees creates a kind of sonic map for me to find my way through the city with. These peoples’ sounds lead me through the city, in search of where these sounds occur and on the way I quite naturally encounter other sound environments which I otherwise might have never come across. Finally, the sound of the the interviewees’ voices provides another image of the city in which they live. Not only do the recordings of the sounds they designated but their voices themselves lend a sonic mirror to the greater urban soundscape in which they live. My hope is that people hearing these pieces will also come to reflect on the sounds of the places in which they live, and not just the sounds which disturb them but also the sounds in which they find solace, shelter or joy.

As a side note, it occurred to me much later after finishing the piece that the word “sarai” translates in Hindi to “An enclosed space in a city or beside a highway. Where travelers and caravans can find shelter, companionship and sustenance. A tavern, a public house, a meeting place. A destination and a point of departure. A place to rest in the middle of a journey.” For many of the people I interviewed it was clear to me that the sounds they chose created for them a space of shelter, a sense of companionship or even a place of destination, where they would go for enjoyment or rest. In this sense, “Unheard Delhi” is not just about

sounds but about social spaces and how sound contributes to the creation of these spaces.

In the following texts I give the name of each interviewee, their vocation, an excerpt from their interview and notes about how the recordings of their sounds were made. These texts follow the order of the final version of "Unheard Delhi."

### **1. Alankar (student)**

***"People coming out on the streets marching together, trying to bring out a collective voice, sound."***

Alankar's sound designated a collective space symbolized by the sound of people demonstrating. As such, this meant that I had to find a demonstration in Delhi. In fact, there are often demonstrations in Delhi but, like many things in India, it is not easy to find out when or where they are. As a side note I should mention that I was in Delhi with my partner and three of my children (at that time ages three years, six years and seven months). This made me far less mobile and flexible than if I had been in Delhi alone. We often all trooped out into the city together, the whole family in tow behind me, searching for these sounds. And it was often a matter of pure luck or coincidence that I managed to find the sounds to be recorded. In several cases, the sounds designated by the interviewees were already sounds I had recorded during our previous wanderings through the city, in which case I didn't have to seek these out. But this was seldom the case.

But in Alankar's answer I was presented with a particular challenge. Time was also very short for this project. I was only in Delhi for around one month and I was not just producing "Unheard Delhi" but had given a concert (of recordings made in the city) and exhibited a new installation. Some of the interviews were done near the beginning of my stay, which gave me more time to record the sounds, but some, like Alankar's, were made closer to the end, which put me under additional time pressure to find the sounds. I would've rather had the luxury of many more leisurely wanderings through the city, but this just wasn't possible.

The recording used for Alankar's answer was made one day before our departure, near Connaught Place in the center of New Delhi. We were actually in search of gifts to bring back for family and friends and were on our way to a huge emporium for traditional handcrafts. As we came closer to the emporium, I heard the sound of what seemed to be a demonstration in the distance. The sound was loudest right in front of the emporium but no demonstration was in sight, though police in full riot gear with automatic weapons stood at each corner of the intersection. It finally dawned on me that a demonstration in another part of the city was being transmitted at a blaring loud volume over loudspeakers mounted on each corner of the intersection. It was strange to think that this was the demonstration I had looked so long for, but in fact, it was a demonstration, albeit a disembodied one. The police were there, the traffic was snarled and people stood around on the street, as if waiting for the demonstration to appear around the corner any second.

The best place to record this was right next to a group of police, who kept eying me suspiciously. Although my recording equipment was rather unobtrusive, I still felt a sense of dread. My worst fear was to be questioned and to have my equipment confiscated. Even worse was the idea of losing this recording which I had searched so long for. In the end everything was OK.

## **2. Shweta Upadhyay (journalist)**

***“During that gap between wakefulness and sleep you really feel like you are connected to something beyond.”***

This was a case of me having already recorded a sound which an interviewee had chosen. Shweta Upadhyay responded with the sound of the muezzin's morning call to prayer. Like Alankar, her sound connected her to a specific space. In this case not of protest but a sense of spirituality infusing that place where one is neither awake or asleep.

Near the beginning of my stay I had made an early morning trip to the Jama Masjid, Delhi's main mosque and one of the city's most important cultural and historical sites. I sat on the steps leading up to the main entrance and the muezzin began to sing. For anyone who hasn't experienced this, it certainly does have an otherworldly feel to it, instantly transporting one to another place.

During my time in Delhi I never left the house without my recorder and microphones clipped to the collar of my jacket or shirt. I was constantly recording and on this morning at the Jama Masjid I was able to capture the sound of the muezzin, though I hadn't been planning on recording this.

Many of the sounds chosen by the people I interviewed had a certain clarity to them, the ability to cut through the dense environment of Delhi's sound fields and create a space of their own. The muezzin's call was like a knife, penetrating the relative early morning stillness of Old Delhi. I also experienced this call later during the day and, surprisingly, it still had the same effect, piercing through the city's wall of noise.

## **3. Iram Ghufuran (film maker)**

***“That delicate crackling kind of sound.”***

Iram Ghufuran was responsible for Sarai hosting me and I spent a lot of time speaking with her about her experiences with sound in Delhi. It was initially very hard to interview her as she couldn't think of any sound whatsoever in the city which pleased her. Her initial response to my question was, “The sound of my hard disc when I turn it on each morning,” which I couldn't quite accept as an appropriate answer as this sound could have occurred anywhere in the world where she might have had her hard disc with her. Although another interviewee (Chandrika Grover, see below) gave a similar response about the sound of water flowing from her tap, I considered this as more specific to Delhi and therefore pressed Iram for other

sounds. In the end, she actually gave me more answers than I could use. It was as if once I planted this idea, something which she admittedly never had given much thought to, the trickle became a flood.

Her first answer was then the sound of food frying at a roadside stand. I loved her description of this sound and how it created this sense of intimacy and shared experience with all people who came from Delhi. I just couldn't for the life of me imagine how I would be able to capture this in a recording. Aside from the fact that the city was virtually always too loud to record something this quiet, I couldn't see getting close enough to the frying food to record it even if I did by some miracle find a quiet place with a food stand.

A few days later after her interview I was going through recordings I had already made in the city and stumbled across the very sound she had described! This had been recorded on my early morning trip to the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi (see above). On my way to the mosque I stopped at one of these stands to drink some chai. It was still dark and the city was very quiet. A man was preparing samosas and pakoras in the hot oil. I drank my chai standing very close to the frying food and was thus able to record this sound, though at the time I remember being more entranced with this early morning atmosphere than with the sound of the frying food, which was in fact more a byproduct of the whole recording experience. I think this was one of my favorite recordings of "Unheard Delhi."

#### **4. Chandrika Grover (director of Pro Helvetia New Delhi)**

***"When you turn on the tap in the morning and water flows from it, it's sweet music to my ears."***

Chandrika's answer was at once very simple and for me very understandable. In the short time living in Delhi we had experienced daily water problems. Water came from a reservoir on the roof pumped by an incredibly loud and old water pump, which more often than not did not pump or, rather, only pumped in the mornings, but not in the afternoons. And then only one of our bathrooms in the apartment had water flowing to the toilet and one to the sink, and the water heater wouldn't always fill...and so on. Chandrika's answer made more than perfect sense for me! And, of course, our problems paled in comparison to those many people in Delhi who perhaps didn't have any running water at all.

Living in Zürich, where crystalline rivers gush from the mountains and lakes, one easily takes for granted the value of water. But in Delhi, even in the more affluent parts of the city like the one we were staying in, the availability of water is a daily uncertainty.

The sound of water for Chandrika therefore defined a state of mind and a portent for the day's arrival. I made this recording in our apartment on a day when the water was in fact running. I only had to make sure the water pump was off before starting the recorder!

## **5. Ish Shehrawat (musician)**

***“You can really enjoy these complete moments of silence and complete chaos.”***

Ish was one of the interviewees who I didn't have to prod for an answer. Maybe because he is a musician or maybe because he was born and raised in Delhi, but he seemed to have no problem in connecting with what I was after in my interview.

His first answer referred to the parks in Delhi, which created a context and a contrast to the city's magnificent chaos. For him, it was important to have these quiet places to reactivate the process of hearing again. The city's dense, churning sound environment tends to blot this out. Though I'd have to say that, like Ish, I also found a certain sense of enjoyment in the city's noisiest areas. There was something incredibly invigorating, when not at the same time utterly taxing, of being in the Chawri Bazar Road in Old Delhi on a weekday afternoon with the streets too full to move through, clogged with rickshaws, taxis, the odd cow and this incredible mass of humanity inching its way forward through the dust and exhaust fumes. I felt at times like I was trapped in a television tuned between stations, spewing white noise and an endless flicker pattern of snowy static and abrupt glitches.

Finding a place to record Ish's sound proved to be no problem at all, as right around the corner from where we lived was the Kamla Nehru Ridge Forest, a huge national park full of monkeys and dense clusters of screaming birds. Being somewhat of an anomaly for Delhi, the park was often full with joggers, hikers or people picnicking. It was therefore somewhat difficult finding a quiet spot in the park which could somehow capture what Ish was referring to. During the recording the birds gradually grew in intensity. At first my presence frightened them away, but after a few minutes they seemingly decided I posed no threat and resumed their chorus at full volume. Near the end of the recording you can hear a man in the distance singing on a squeaky swing.

## **6. Iram Ghufuran (film maker)**

***“They go on making the sound and it's dying in all the noise that is around it.”***

In her interview Iram discussed one of the archetypal problems in urban sound environments: the drowning out of small, more subtle sounds. Here she was referring to the bell on the bicycle rickshaws. Although I would tend to agree with her in general about these small sounds getting drowned out, I would in particular disagree with her about the rickshaw wallah's bell. Even in the noisiest depths of a hopelessly traffic-clogged Old Delhi street, these bells always seemed to magically appear, ringing clearly above the din. I began to ask myself if there perhaps wasn't something in the design of these bells which made them specially suited to this most hostile of environments. If anything, I didn't hear them dying in all the noise around them, but ripping this noise asunder in the most subversive of ways, almost,

it seemed, working on a subconscious level. I always knew to get out of the way when I heard the ring of a rickshaw wallah's bell.

As with many of the recordings in “Unheard Delhi,” recording a rickshaw wallah's bell posed a number of problems. I couldn't imagine just recording this on the street, even if it was practically always going on. Registering this on a psychological level was one thing, but somehow transferring this experience to a recording was another. And I didn't feel right just walking up to a rickshaw wallah and trying to explain that I wanted to record his bell. Even if I did feel right about this I still probably couldn't have done it as most of these driver's don't speak much English and I figured it would be near to impossible to get my point across.

In the end, I hit upon a very elegant solution. Every morning different vendors visited the courtyard of our apartment complex. There was a man selling bread, another man came with the milk, and yet another who brought vegetables. The vegetable vendor arrived on a large flatbed bicycle, piled high with all kinds of vegetables. And he had a bell, the same bell that all the rickshaw wallahs had. We had already gotten to know each other over the several weeks that we had been living at the apartment. I just came out one morning with my microphones and recorder and asked him if I could ring his bell a few times. He seemed to understand, or at least not care, and I made the recording. And then I bought our vegetables for the day plus a tip for his bell.

## **7. Priya Sen (film maker)**

***“It becomes like this little communal space.”***

Priya Sen's answer really hit upon my idea of sound defining a social space. She chose not an unique sound but the sound of a place, a small roundabout near her house in Jongpur Extension, a quiet residential neighborhood in southern New Delhi. It was here at this rotunda placed in the intersection of four streets that people in her neighborhood met to sell their wares, wash and dry their clothes or to just relax and talk with the neighbors.

The idea of recording an entire environment, as opposed to going for one particular sound or event really appealed to me. The trek out to her house proved to be another of our Delhi odysseys, consisting of a long train ride, a very long walk and a couple eating stops on the way. When we finally found the roundabout I was a bit disappointed. There was nobody there! No women washing, no people selling anything, not even anyone sitting there. We walked a bit further and found a small playground and let the kids relax and play for a while. I gave the situation some thought and decided to go back to the roundabout and make a recording. Maybe someone would arrive while I was there, maybe we were too early.

I left my family at the playground and went back to the roundabout. It was still empty but I went ahead and took a seat and started the recorder. Almost as if by magic the vendors started to appear from different directions, circling the rotunda and calling out their wares. Neighbors walked by, staring at me curiously. A pack of stray dogs approached me cautiously

and sniffed at my shoes. Nobody actually entered the rotunda but I did get the sense that it was the heart of this neighborhood, that sooner or later everyone converged here. The sounds I recorded represented the vortex of this small community and I felt that the recording, even if it didn't capture Priya's precise description, did impart that sense of this particular place.

## **8. Sajid Akbar (musician)**

***“Like a concentrated wave of sound of these people just enjoying these rides.”***

Sajid Akbar contacted me out of the blue while I was in Delhi. He'd been to my installation at the Bhuta Gallery in the Crafts Museum and had a few questions about this. I asked if he would be interested in doing an interview for “Unheard Delhi,” to which he readily agreed. I only mention this here as one of the great problems facing me in producing this piece was finding enough people to interview, especially when working under such pressing time constraints. I had, in fact, interviewed several other people for the piece but some of their answers, though perhaps very interesting, for various reasons couldn't be recorded. For example, one person liked the sound of a specific truck horn that had actually recently been outlawed in Delhi and which therefore no longer existed. Or some people gave the same sound as others. The sound of trains, either their horns or of the actual train passing by, or of birds singing, were sounds several people mentioned. And then, some sounds I just couldn't track down. So, the more people I could interview, the better. But it was difficult to find enough people and to find the time to interview them. Delhi is huge and it sometimes took me well over an hour to meet someone to make a five-minute interview. I couldn't very well expect people to take time out of their day and come to me. I did manage to make several of the interviews which finally ended up on the piece at Sarai, which, luckily enough, was just a ten-minute walk from our apartment.

Sajid's answer referred to the “World of Wonders,” an amusement park out on the absolute nether reaches of Delhi, in an area devoid of name, only designated as Sector 18. Which all sounded very mysterious to me. The train ride out there was really long, passing through vast swathes of Delhi slums, an incredibly dense landscape of tightly clustered apartment buildings and narrow streets packed solid with people. When we reached the Sector 18 metro station the scene outside was like a riot with this fantastically loud wall of traffic noise echoing between the road and the train station above. It took us around ten minutes just to cross the street to start on our way to the amusement park. Anytime we tried to cross a road in Delhi without traffic lights we were virtually like sitting ducks, but we miraculously always managed to avoid calamity.

We continued on through what seemed like an endless area of shopping plazas and came to another perilous road crossing to a huge, even by Western standards huge, shopping mall. I felt like I was suddenly back in Los Angeles. The only difference was that in Los Angeles they would never have allowed such massive sound leakage from the mall's ventilation system.

Two ten-meter air vents exhaled spent air from the mall's ventilation system. It felt like two jet engines warming up for take off, though the sound itself was much much deeper, fairly rumbling my stomach with its vibrations.

We moved on and finally came to the World of Wonders which, as one might expect, was far from that. It was a rather sad affair. Something like an abandoned carnival attraction in a JG Ballard novel, re-animated by a small group of people who had survived some unspeakable calamity and, yearning for a connection to their decimated world, managed to get some rides and a semblance of wonder running again.

Due to lack of visitors, many of the rides were not running. Luckily enough, though, one pendulum-like affair was working and people were riding it, yelling and screaming in earnest. This provided a great recording, with their peals of laughter panning back and forth across the stereo field. I could very well imagine Sajid's amusement at passing this ride each day on his way to work, which was perhaps the greatest wonder of this sad amusement park.

### **9. Iram Ghufan (film maker)**

***“A sound which is really exciting, fun and just very vibrant.”***

November is the month for weddings in Delhi and there is probably no bigger celebration for a family than having its son or daughter joined in holy matrimony. Iram refers here to the “baraat” procession, which is when the bridegroom travels on a horse to the wedding ceremony at the bride's house, accompanied by his friends and family and a troop of drummers.

I thought to myself, “Great, this will be an amazing recording but where will I find this?” When I asked around the inevitable answer was, “Oh, everywhere. November is the month of weddings.” But “everywhere” was for me nowhere in Delhi, as I couldn't find myself traipsing around the city on an endless search for a wedding procession. But then, as was often the case during our stay in Delhi, the answer came almost as if by magic. Someone from Sarai told me the day after Iram's interview that there would be a wedding right next door that evening. Incredible!

Things started to get going around nightfall. I went back to Sarai with my daughter Josephine and we stood outside the bride's house trying to record the music, which didn't really seem to be happening yet. Suddenly, a huge roar of drums erupted and the procession spilled out on the street with horses, a throng of people in all their finery and several men bringing up the back with generators in tow to power all the lights.

We stood by the side of the road and recorded the procession as it meandered back and forth between the bride's house and a Hindu temple not far away. The drums panned back and forth, receded in the background, pushed to the foreground. It was a pulsing mass of buzzing, snapping snare drums supported by deeper tuned dhol drums. As Iram stated, “just vibrant.”



## **10. Ish Shehrawat (musician)**

***“All the trains going by, taking out different intervals. It's almost like a song.”***

I found it interesting how Ish tuned into environmental sounds as musical statements. It probably should have come as no surprise to me, as Ish is a musician, but then, I seem to know many musicians who wouldn't consider these sounds as musical. For me, though, Delhi proved to be one of the most musical cities I'd ever spent time in. And here Ish came up with a good example of a sound environment which probably only exists in Delhi. He had lived near a train station for some time and became entranced with the incoming and outgoing trains tooting their air horns. The description sounded great but I couldn't really imagine what this actually could sound like nor how I would be able to find this. I'd already been at the Old Delhi train station and, though there were in fact trains sounding their horns there, it lacked the density and clarity of Ish's description.

Several days before going home to Zürich, we made our way to one of Delhi's classic tourist destinations, Humayun's Tomb, the so-called little brother of the Taj Mahal. After having a look at the tomb, we went down to the surrounding park to fly some kites we'd bought for the kids on a trip to Varanasi. It was a warm and windy day. I took a break from kite flying and went over to sit in the shade to cool off. Suddenly I heard in the distance what sounded like a train horn. And then another. I realized that this was the sound Ish had been referring to. The wind carried the sound of these horns over from the Nazrat Nizamuddin railway station, about nine kilometers away from Humayun's Tomb. It was in fact a beautiful sound, like a song and a bit mournful. Perhaps I had been reflecting on the fact that we would soon be leaving Delhi, a city which could in equal parts drive one crazy and be utterly captivating at the same time.

This was another case speaking for never leaving the house without my recording equipment. Given the time constraints I was working under, I most certainly would have never found this sound no matter how hard I had tried.

## **11. Iram Ghufuran (film maker)**

***“Every bell is like somebody praying, somebody asking for something.”***

Iram answered here with one of the most ubiquitous sounds to be heard in India: temple bells. In an intensely spiritually conscious country like India, there are temples everywhere and most of them have bells. Even in the courtyard of our apartment building the neighbors had erected a small Hindu temple, complete with its own priest who spent the days there, sitting in a space not much larger than himself.

And here again, an answer where a sound is appreciated not just for the pleasure of it in and of itself, but as a symbol of something else. As in Shweta Upadhyay's link to the muezzin's morning call to feeling “you are connected to something beyond,” so too do the sound of

these temple bells represent a connection to a place or force beyond, something all powerful, benevolent and nurturing.

Though in her interview Iram referenced this sound to a park near her house, I felt that the real issue here was the sound of the bells and what they represented, not the park near Iram's house where she sometimes heard these. And for this reason I decided to make the recording at a Hindu temple near our apartment. Once again I was amazed at how many of the sounds recorded for "Unheard Delhi" were either found in the neighborhood where we were staying or from sounds which I'd already recorded before the actual interviews had been made.

## **12. Sadaf Raza (projects organizer, Pro Helvetia New Delhi)**

***"You can hear when the city is still not up and awake but it slowly is waking up. And that's when you hear different sounds."***

Sadaf Raza was in fact the first person I interviewed for "Unheard Delhi," and this when she was in Zürich on a trip for the New Delhi office of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. I felt that this recording would be a good way to end the piece, in stark contrast to its beginning with the storming sound of people demonstrating. Sadaf chose not a specific sound but, rather, a time of day where one could hear different sounds at all. Much as Ish spoke about being able to reactivate the process of listening by visiting parks in Delhi, so too did Sadaf find solace in the early morning hours, when the shops were just opening and the day had yet to fall into the vortex of Delhi's mass of nearly 17,000,000 people trying to navigate its way through the city.

Sitting here in Zürich as I write this, the idea of being able to "hear different sounds" seems like nothing remarkable. I can hear the wind blowing through the trees, kids playing down in the courtyard, a street car rolling by, the church bell ringing out the time of day and birds singing. But then I think back to Delhi, to Connaught Place, which is the area Sadaf gave for being able to experience this early morning silence. And I remember now that, really, aside from the occasional rickshaw bell or the piercing, snarling buzz of motorcycle horns, all I really can recall of this place is a dense wave of traffic winding around and around a hub of seven major thoroughfares, all converging on a circle of upscale restaurants, boutiques and tourist traps. I like to think of myself as a "trained listener," which means I've developed a sensibility to listening through years of practice, but in Delhi, and perhaps like no other city I've spent time in, my so-called "trained ears" often came up empty, try as I might. Perhaps, though, "empty" is the wrong word. Maybe overloaded would be more accurate, as the density of this city's sound environment was like no other I'd experienced, just in terms of the sheer amount of different sounds potentially happening at any one moment. Of course, there are places of less sounds or quieter sounds, like the parks, but these are few and far between. When one wants to hear more then, as Sadaf so astutely summed up, one must be up at "the crack of dawn."

Still, I found Connaught Place early in the morning not as she described it. Perhaps I wasn't there early enough, or perhaps the city has already outgrown her memories of it. In any case, I decided to make a recording of this early morning environment not far from the Sisganj Gurudwara, a large Sikh Temple in Old Delhi on Chandni Chowk. I had to make several trips to this area before finding the right time and place to capture what I thought best represented Sadaf's words of being able to "hear different sounds," but when I finally did make the recording I knew that perhaps more than anything else I'd heard in Delhi this was the best. Normally, during the day this knot of winding alleyways and narrow streets is a high pressure zone of every conceivable sound, all at seemingly full volume. Yet in the early morning it almost felt like an abandoned city. This was the time of the day when the cows wandered listlessly through the streets and the snap of door locks clicking open and store shutters being rolled up thundered like explosions, so distinct did they sound out in contrast to the slowly waking city around them. And precisely these were some of the unheard sounds of "Unheard Delhi" which I had been looking for.