

Noise and Other Frequencies of Life: A Study of Online Religious Congregations in India

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Abstract

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a notable increase in online religious gatherings spanning various faiths worldwide. Against this backdrop, a modern religious community in India named Satsang, situated in the city of Deoghar, Jharkhand, has embraced the practice of what they call e-satsang or online satsang whereby the disciples participate in the collective rituals of sound and listening through online live streaming applications. Focusing on the case of e-satsang in Deoghar, the paper investigates how disciples of the Satsang community experience technical disturbances or jaantrik golojog in online meetings. Through an in-depth study of technical disturbance and noise in online satsang, the paper develops the concept of Noisification, which contends that noise is not a preexisting entity in the spiritual world of Satsang. Instead, noise is produced through practices of techno-spiritual disciplining, whereby disciples learn to discipline their environments by silencing the unwanted frequencies of life.

Keywords: *Noise, Noisification, Technical Disturbance, Digital Religion, E-satsang, Deoghar.*

Introduction

Surrounded by the cacophonies of a busy street in South Kolkata on a Monday evening, Jotno pointed his newly bought iPhone towards the sky, in search of a better signal. His frantic footsteps across random directions searched for a quieter place from where he could peacefully deliver his speech. After a few seconds, he located a mango tree in the semi-dark

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corner of an adjacent lane. Taking shelter under the tree, he unmuted his microphone, touched his forehead with the thumbs pointed at the middle of the eyebrows. His lips moved quietly as he chanted mantras, offered regards to his guru – Sree Sree Thakur, and finally began his speech. Meanwhile, Gopal from Dhaka city navigated his way out of the traffic, driving back home to prepare for his performance in the same congregation. Likewise, hundreds and thousands of devotees around the world, everyday, struggle with their devices to orchestrate the online satsang as a pleasurable experience of the divine. In pursuit of carrying the sacred vibrations of devotional melodies, devotees learn to silence the unwanted frequencies of life.

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a notable increase in online religious gatherings across religious traditions worldwide. With the global implementation of ‘social’ distancing measures, communities, both spiritual and otherwise, have turned to online platforms to organise collective gatherings. Against this backdrop, the followers of a modern religious community named Satsang in Deoghar (located in the east Indian state of Jharkhand) have embraced the practice of what they call e-satsang or online satsang. E-satsang is an online congregation whereby devotees virtually participate in the collective rituals of prayer, silent chanting, meditation, sacred recitations, devotional singing, and speeches through online video conferencing and live-streaming applications like Google Meet, Zoom, StreamYard, Facebook, and YouTube. Focusing on the case of e-satsang in Deoghar, I will explain how disciples of the Satsang community experience *jaantrik golojog*, or technical disturbances in online meetings. Through an in-depth examination of technical disturbances and noise in online satsang, I developed the concept of *Noisification*, which contends that noise is not a preexisting entity in the spiritual world of Satsang. Instead, noise is *produced* through practices of techno-spiritual disciplining, whereby disciples learn to discipline their lives by silencing the anomalous vibrations of their surrounding world.

Satsang, Sonic Theology, and New Religious Movements

Satsang emerged as a prominent spiritual and cultural movement in the early 20th-century Indian subcontinent under the tutelage of Anukulchandra Chakravarty (1888 – 1969) – a physician, poet, performer, philanthropist, and spiritual guru. Lovingly known as Sree Sree Thakur Anukulchandra or simply Sree Sree Thakur, Chakravarty

was born in the village of Himaitpur in the Pabna district (now located in Bangladesh). He received training in allopathic medicine at the National Medical School (presently Calcutta National Medical College or CNMC) and returned to his village to serve as a local physician in Pabna. During his medical practice, Chakravarty was utterly perturbed by the rising dependence on medicinal objects, which he believed was adversely affecting patients' mental well-being and hindered optimum cure. Encountering the curative incapacities of allopathic medicine, Chakravarty formed a musical group and conducted *Kirtan* sessions with friends to cultivate the medical benefits of sound.

While Sree Sree Thakur nurtured a persevering conviction over the therapeutic richness of sound, his tryst with sound was beyond the vision of medicine. The wide range of his *baanis* or spoken verses around various topics such as science, politics, philosophy, education, agriculture, economy, health, and spirituality are often anchored around a metaphysical orientation towards sound. Not only did he speak verses in rhythmic meters, but his vocabulary had certain elements that suggest the conscious deployment of sound as both a practical tool for therapeutic experiments and a metaphysical tool for comprehending the philosophy of life. In a compilation of verses titled *Anusruti* or Pursuing the Audible (1962), Sree Sree Thakur offered philosophical reflections on life and spirituality through poetic expressions of sound and listening. Under a thematically curated chapter titled "*Shabdo-Bigyan*" or "The Science of Sound," Sree Sree Thakur's words have been scripted as follows: "*Tomar shottar ekti onu. Ekti shobdo-jhonkar,— Bhor duniyar ortho ahey. Shaadho, dhoró — tuk taar*" (Sree Sree Thakur Anukulchandra, 1962, p. 47). It can be translated as "*The hidden meanings of the whole universe are consolidated in an atom of your being – in the form of a sound-vibration. Pursue and behold the secret workings of that sound, that vibration.*"

Sree Sree Thakur compared a living individual being with an atomic vibration. His affinity towards sound and music manifested through his unique style of "sonic thinking" (Herzogenrath, 2017), whereby he imagined, experienced, analyzed, and described life and the world *through* sound. Amidst the rising political unrest, communal violence, illnesses, poverty, and theft in Himaitpur and neighboring villages in Pabna, Chakravarty and his mesmerizing march of Kirtanic processions on the road gained immense popularity, attracting people from distant villages and towns. Soon, stories of miraculous healings through Kirtan

spread throughout the Bengal province, instilling hope among the masses that “*Anukul mora manush bnachaate paarey*”, which means “Anukul could enliven the dead” (Bhora, 1964).

After migrating from Pabna and settling in Deoghar in the preceding year of the partition in 1947, Chakravarty regularly spent time with his disciples in the ashram. Visitors would gather from different parts of the world with curiosities, doubts, and longing to listen to him. For some, listening to his words of wisdom was merely a source of pleasure. Some sat scribbling notes diligently, keenly and carefully working to capture the sequence of words, with precise rhythmic meters, spontaneously flowing from his lips. These notes were later read to Thakur for approval and rectified accordingly before being sent to the Satsang Publishing House. In addition to listening to the mellifluous words of their beloved Thakur, devotees engaged in daily musical gatherings whereby they participated in the collective rituals of prayer, silent chanting, meditation, devotional songs, and speech. The daily practices of hearing, memorising, scribbling, proof-reading and publishing the sacred sayings of Thakur, as well as singing, humming, and dancing to the myriad frequencies of sacred tales and tunes in the quiet atmosphere of the Deoghar ashram, nurtured a specific craft of listening among the devotees that decisively shaped their perceptions about life and the world in ensuing decades.

Terms such as *dhwani* (sound), *shobdo* (word), *torongo* (vibration), *jhonkar* (resonance), *kompon* (quakes), *spondon* (heartbeats), *chchondo* (rhythm), and others have appeared extensively in the *baanis* of Sree Sree Thakur. Likewise, these words have seamlessly insinuated into the everyday imagination of a Satsangee life-world, whereby the devotees express, articulate, and make sense of their lives *with* creative expressions of sound and *through* sound – cultivating the spiritual pedagogy of “sonic thinking.” at a collective level. (Herzogenrath, 2017). Although developed in the context of media philosophy instead of classical theology, the theory of sonic thinking may not be seamlessly transferable to the world of religious sense-making practices, especially in the Vedic framework of the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, the concept of sonic thinking still stands as a cognate lens through which the sonically animated Satsangee lifeworlds could be grasped. According to the German scholar Bernd Herzogenrath (2017), sonic thinking is a particular mode of thinking whereby sound does not remain a mere object of thought. Instead, it becomes a tool of thinking. Criticising the outright

objectification of sound in sound studies, author Bernd Herzogenrath (2017) suggested this alternative line of argument, which promotes thinking *with* sound and *through* sound instead of thinking simply *about* sound. (Herzogenrath, 2017). Seasoned by the *baanis* of Sree Sree Thakur rooted in the ingrained practices of sonic thinking, the ways in which the modern-day Satsangees on this date tend to imagine, experience, and articulate their relationships with the world through words like “*dhwani*”, “*torongo*”, “*chchondo*”, “*tuning*”, and “*sound waves*”, it seems that the Satsangees have developed a distinct mode of spiritual sensibility driven by sonic thinking whereby they not only think but as well as feel, sense and articulate life *through* sound.

While sound has been the chief architect in the history of the Satsang movement in India, noise remains an eclipsed phenomenon. With regard to the extensive terminologies of sound, the word noise barely appears in the spiritual discourse of Satsang. It is not a coincidence but an epistemic crisis, which will be explained step-by-step throughout the different sections of this article. Interestingly, in Bangla, the native language in which most of Sree Sree Thakur’s verses were written, there is no dedicated term to denote noise as a distinct phenomenon. The cognate Bangla term for noise is *shobdo-dushon*, which means sound pollution. But, surprisingly, in Bangla, there is no vernacular equivalent to the English word Noise, which is originally derived from the Latin word Nausea. This appears as an asymmetry between languages, capable of generating asymmetry of meanings, imaginations, and sensibilities. This asymmetry serves as a crucial vantage point for our study of noise, all the more because the theological pillars of Satsang are erected upon the Vedic concepts of cosmic sound – *shabd-brahman*.

In Hinduism, *Shabd-brahman* depicts the primordial causal sound of the universe. It is the ultimate source of all creations. It is the vibrational force from where all forms of life are believed to have come into origin, often posited in the syllable Aum or Om. As members of a ‘modern’ socio-religious community, on the one hand, the Satsangees are vulnerably exposed to the pervading atmospheres of urban cacophonies. On the other hand, the spiritual discourses of cosmic sound, which design their worldly perceptions of things, do not offer a conceptual frame of noise as a spiritual entity. Therefore, it becomes essential to ask: what happens to a language or a culture that is historically immersed in the ideas of sound and aurality but does not have a term for noise, which it encounters on a daily basis? Furthermore, how do the theological

discourses of sound and listening make sense of a modern invention: noise? I would insist that we look at the emergence of new religious communities in India and South Asia, such as Satsang, that aspired to revive and reorganise the discourses of sonic theology in the age of neo-liberal economy – an era often characterised by the burgeoning wave of industrial noise and auditory hazards (Schafer, 1993).

The emergence of contemporary guru-based movements in India can be traced back to the colonial era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gold, 1987; Juergensmeyer, 1991). This trend gained significant momentum in the twenty-first century with the ascent of the neoliberal state (Warrier, 2004; Srinivas, 2010; Copeman, 2012; Jaffrelot, 2012; Lucia, 2014).

In a neoliberal society, where state responsibilities have gradually been supplemented and surrogated by contemporary guru-led organisations, devotional governance has been pivotal in reshaping collective spaces and identities in an increasingly pluralistic world. Scholars of “guru-governmentality” (Pandya, 2016 and Ikegame, 2012) have explained the innovative methods through which modern gurus and their institutions acquire and wield power while emerging as alternative agents of governance (Ikegame, 2012; Pandya, 2016). These ultramodern “multifarious” gurus (Copeman, 2012) employ artistic techniques of governance (Lucia, 2014) to attract followers from diverse religious, cultural, racial, national, class, and political backgrounds, thus becoming influential agents of control in a decentralised society (Warrier, 2004; Copeman and Ikegame, 2012; Morse, 2012).

Scholars have further delved into the role of the body and the senses in exploring the emergent forms of devotional governance (Ikegame, 2012; Pandya, 2016). They have elucidated how sensorial engagements have vitalized and animated the life of modern guru-based movements in India and beyond (Lucia, 2014). However, despite the rich empirical evidence supporting the significance of sound, listening, and aurality, existing research on the sensorial dimensions of the contemporary guru field in India still needs a comprehensive analysis of the aural and acoustic dimensions of guru governance. This omission is particularly surprising given that guru-worship practices in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India were popularised through sound-oriented rituals, and music served as an alternative source of indigenous healing (Kakar, 2007). Music was deployed for its “religious” potential among twenty-first-century gurus,

as it helped attract followers from diverse cultural and political backgrounds (Gold, 2012). Therefore, the myriad sounds and silences of modern guru-worship in South Asia have remained neglected as illegible noise to the analytic ears of contemporary scholarship on what Lucia (2022) rightfully coined as the “guru field”. The study of online satsang, technical disturbances, and noise in Deoghar-Satsang attempts to bridge this gap by excavating the auditory politics of sacred sound vs. unwanted noise in new religious movements in India.

Noise, Technical Disturbances, and Virtual Meetings

Due to widespread lockdowns and travel restrictions during the pandemic, almost all forms of public gatherings, spiritual and otherwise, have been affected. As a result of this crisis, virtual meetings emerged as a feasible and safer mode of communication. However, besides the advantages, the online mode also posed new challenges. From virtual classrooms (Singh et al., 2022) and offices (Yuliana, 2022) to online rituals (Othman, 2022) and medical consultations, virtual meetings have exhibited a common crisis of human attention, frequently disrupted by technical disturbances and noise. In their study of virtual classrooms, Pulalon et al. (2021) demonstrated how noise and technical disturbances posed challenges to online teaching and learning. According to their findings, online classes hindered effective learning due to the intrusion of weak internet signals and background noise. The sounds of vehicles, dogs barking or television, laughter, and kids playing in the surrounding environment often sounded exhaustive to the participants. These ambient sounds emerged as background noises that distracted the students. According to these students, the noise “distracts” them from the class while causing a disturbance to learning (Pulalon et al. 2021, p. 75). Such noises can be a source of stress and anxiety (Large, 2021). Online classes become complex learning sites because the background noise affects the focus and concentration of the students, which are crucial elements of learning. Muting has been an essential ritual for virtual meetings. It has been noted that, during the meeting, if the participants failed to mute their microphones, the background noises from their surrounding environments caused disturbance to the other participants. People have expressed disdain for hearing commotion sounds from the other end during virtual meetings.

The mute button has emerged as the harbinger of a habit among people lured by the seductive agency of silencing themselves and others. They claim, and I quote: “When individuals fail to mute their microphones, other participants hear only the background noises and not the speaker, losing their ability to listen to speech.” (Karl. et al., 2022, p. 02). When employees work from home, it has been said that they need to be cautious about the background noise around them. Since these sounds are ambient sounds that are inevitable and can’t be done anything about, instead of suppressing and controlling these sounds, one can simply mute their microphones so that others do not face issues of distraction and disturbance. People have gone to the extent of using third-party apps to silence the sound of background noise. Therefore, it is evident that when participants get frustrated in virtual meetings, they adopt innovative techniques to control the noise intrusion (Karl. et al., 2022).

In online rituals, these disturbances also disrupt the pursuit of spiritual attunements, whereby devotees fail to attune their hearts, minds, and bodies to the divine force. Such disturbances must be examined from a cross-cultural lens, which can magnify the transactions of meanings between divergent theological and technological schools of thought. Thus, the *jaantrik golojog*, or the technical disturbance in Deoghar-Satsang, is more than just a technical disturbance. Instead, it indicates a significant crisis in spiritual meaning-making among the Satsangees – a linguistic, philosophical, and epistemological crisis. I will share an ethnographic vignette to portray and engage with the magnitude and depth of this crisis analytically.

Listening to *Jaantrik Golojog* and Distorted Sounds of Devotion

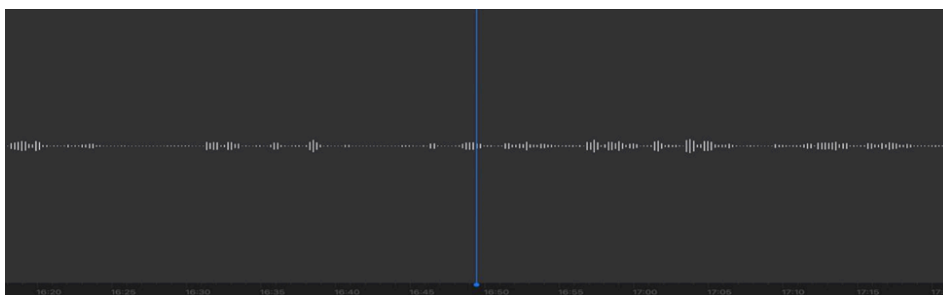
An online congregation was organised by the devotees of a small town in the North 24 Parganas in West Bengal, India, called Singerber. The evening prayer and recitation of sacred texts came to an end. Suranjana was about to sing a song. On this day, the internet connection was extremely poor. Usually, devotees get engrossed and swayed in the enchanting sound of melodies, but there was a lot of technical interruption on this day. It became utterly difficult for many of us to follow the music properly. As a result, the two-hour-long session was a playful symphony of noise and technical interruptions. For the first few seconds of Suranjana’s performance, her voice was distorted. She waited and then resumed. Her voice crackled. It was not audible. The lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic sequences were barely intelligible. Despite

multiple attempts, I could not fathom the music properly. After a few seconds, I recognized that the words were barely intelligible and filled with noise. The audio frequencies of her voice were getting lost, and distorted audio fragments pervaded the entire room where I was seated. Along with one hundred and thirty-five other participants from various parts of the world, we kept our cameras off and microphones muted during the session and kept listening to the sequence of noisy interruptions and distorted audio granules.

At the end of this performance, the host Chandan, while enjoying the Ethiopian green landscape outside his bedroom window, unmuted his microphone and calmly responded: “Joyguru Maa! Due to some technical disturbance, we could not listen (*srobon*) to the song properly. Today, the internet connection is extremely poor. But, despite these interruptions, we have to conduct this session.”

Immediately after this performance, the host (Chandan) announced Gopal Kukri’s name, who was on his way back home. Being on the roads, he could not perform. Gopal unmuted the microphone and requested the host to delay his slot: “Dada! Joyguru! I am currently driving back home. It’s too noisy here. Kindly delay my slot so I can perform after two more songs.” The next song was sung by Kalpana Mondal – a middle-aged female devotee from Bamungachi – a neighbouring town in the North 24 Parganas in West Bengal, India. She began her performance with an introductory note. As soon as the sounds of the harmonium reached my ears, her voice crackled, just like Suranjana. She cleared her throat. The sounds of her voice and the harmonium made a fleeting appearance. Then, the audio withered away. For the next twenty seconds, there was no audio signal.

SILENCE.



The above image is a graphical representation of fluctuating audio frequencies, as captured through a screenshot during this particular online congregation. The gaps here refer to several pauses that devotees experienced as an outcome of the disturbances.

Kalpna inquired: “Dada! Is it audible? Last week, I was performing in another Satsang where the internet (*net*) connection was poor and we faced a lot of technical disturbances (*jantrik golojog*)”

Chandan responded: “Maa! It is not distinctly audible (*kom shona jachche*). Can you change your position and move to another place (*ektu shore jaan okhaan theke*)?”

Kalpna responded: “Should I move somewhere else? Wait! Let me move to another place (*onyo jaygay jaai*)”.

SILENCE for ten more seconds.

Kalpna began her performance and sang the first line on Chandan’s command:

Doyal tomaar leela bojha daay

Oh kind lord! It is difficult to fathom your miracles

At the outset, the lyrics and the melody were distinctly audible. When fluctuations reappeared, a comment immediately popped up on the chat box: “Net Problem.” As she continued singing, the words *Doyal tomar* were audible, but *leela bojha daay* got eclipsed. Precisely, the words *bojha daay* were fragmented into detached audio granules. After the end of the performance, Chandan unmuted his microphone and responded: “Joyguru Maa! The same problem. The sounds were fluctuating (*sound up-down korchilo*)”

Kalpna enquired: “Joyguru dada! I think today, everyone is facing the same problem. There is some issue with the internet connection. Was the music at all intelligible (*bojha geche*)?”

Chandan replied: “It was intelligible (*bojha geche*), but there were lots of fluctuations (*up-down korchilo*)”

Kalpna responded: “I moved to a different location as you suggested. But what can we do? This is probably what *Thakur* wants. Everything happens in accordance with His desire (*ichche*)”.

Noisification: The Techno-spiritual Ritual of Silencing

The above vignette suggests that when technical interruptions occur, the distorted audio granules make it challenging to focus on the music and cause displeasure. They create a lot of noise. At this juncture, let us contemplate for a moment and ask ourselves. In a community with a history of more than one hundred years, where the bodies of practicing disciples are habituated to the daily sounds of enchanting melodies, devotional music, and the plethora of environmental sounds, how would they react or respond to the digital noise? How will the noise of distorted audio in laptops and smartphones affect the lifeworlds that have followed the rigorous routine of morning and evening prayers without these devices? Or, how would noise affect the world of spiritual seekers who have dedicated their lives to the devotional service of their love lord, Sree Sree Thakur, through a strict regime of sonic discipline? However, in my journey to explore the impact of noise among people who are habituated to music, I realised there was no noise at all. The commonsensical understanding of noise that I held on to for so long while growing up as a musician in the proximity of ‘musical’ instruments was least relevant in the spiritual worlds of my interlocutors whose lives are governed by the concept of cosmic sound. After listening to my interlocutors carefully, I realised that the concept of noise does not exist in the spiritual framework of cosmic sound.

Manoj, a 27-year-old disciple of Sree Sree Thakur, comes from the state of Assam in India. For much of his life, Manoj worked as a professional musician (a vocalist) who toured from one part of the country to another part as a singer. In our two-hour-long conversation inside the newly built state-of-the-art ashram studio in Deoghar, Manoj and I discussed the historical transformation of devotional music in Satsang. In his explanation, Manoj probably unconsciously blurred the thin line between music and noise. He said: “If the whole universe belongs to Thakur, then all the sounds in the universe would also belong to Him. If He is the creator of the Universe, then every living being belongs to Him. And the sounds created in this Universe – all belong to Him.” As I kept listening to him, I could place his thoughts in the larger umbrella of the concepts of *Shabd-Brahman* and *Shabd-Guru*. The entire Universe is created out

of the primordial causal sound, and the Guru or the spiritual guide is the living embodiment of that sound. In Manoj's imagination, no sound belongs outside the devotional purview of the sacred sound (*Shabd-Brahma*) or the sonic guru (*Shabd-Guru*). In other words, in the spiritual imagination rooted in the idea of cosmic sound, noise does not exist as a concept. For a moment, as a student of anthropology, I was compelled to think that noise, my object of inquiry, was actually absent in my field. I was wondering what will happen to an anthropological inquiry that encounters the absence of its object of study in the first place.

Anthropologist and sound studies scholar David Novak (2015) states that noise is a relational concept. It is always identified in relation to something else. Novak identified three dimensions – aesthetic, social, and technological. According to the aesthetic dimension, sounds that appear undesirable to the ears appear as noise. For instance, non-musical or non-speech sounds are regarded as noise. This bifurcation is found in the nineteenth-century theories of music and acoustics by the pioneering German scholar Herman Von Helmholtz (1885). According to the social definition, sounds that defy the social normative contexts are defined as noise. For instance, the sounds of music played by the Italian migrant workers in the streets of nineteenth-century London were regarded as noise by the local British residents, who considered quietude and silence as markers of normative aristocratic and orderly behaviour (Cockayne, 2008). Finally, according to the technological definition, sounds that disrupt the process of communication in technological media appear as noise. The sounds of distortion and fuzz in radio and magnetic tapes appear as noise (Novak, 2015). Similarly, the sounds of distorted audio in e-satsang fail to generate the pleasure of experiencing the divine presence of the guru and appear undesirable to the ears of Satsangees. These are also sounds that break the norm of uniting with the divine lord Sree Sree Thakur and disrupt the process of communication with Him. Distortions are undesirable, norm-defying, and disruptive in the spiritual pursuit of sonic discipline. Therefore, they appear as noise in Satsang.

Sound studies scholar Salomé Voegelin (2021) defined noise as a social misfit. According to Voegelin (2021), noise in modernity is considered as the sound that “does not fit into a semantic, musical, artistic or cultural and political regime” and hence “remains unrecognisable and unintelligible” (Voegelin, 2021). The unrecognisability and unintelligibility of distortion prevail in its inability to fit within the semantic, musical, artistic, and cultural regime of Satsang – an

organisation that is founded upon the discourse of sacred sounds, precisely cosmic sound (*Shabd-brahman*). Recently, anthropologist and sound studies scholar Tom Rice has defined noise as “sound out of place” (Rice and Pickering, 2017, p. 01). This theory finds its roots in the theory of dirt by British anthropologist Mary Douglas, who wrote, “dirt is matter out of place.” Douglas wrote, “When something is classified firmly as anomalous, [such as dirt], the outline of the set of which it is *not* a member is clarified” (Douglas 1966, p. 47). In alignment with Douglas's theory, Rice and Pickering proposed that sounds are matters or material components perceived as anomalous and ambiguous. The theory of noise as sounds out of place may find resonance in the work of sound studies scholar Douglas Kahn, who proposed that certain sounds emerge as noises in the first place because they “exist where they shouldn't” (Kahn, 1999, p. 21). Like dirt, they are perceived as unclean and undesired. In the process of being identified as aural dirt, the uninvited sounds delineate the contours of its opposite – what is clean, what is acceptable, and what is desirable. Thus, noise plays a significantly productive role as it creates the boundaries of what it is not and from which it is excluded—noise becomes the excluded Other. It is the undesirable, the unwanted, and the disruptive Other.

However, the concept of noise as an unwanted Other does not fit well in the spiritual imagination of cosmic sound in Satsang. In the English verses of Sree Sree Thakur, it is difficult to find the English word Noise. On the contrary, the word Sound appears extensively. Be it in the topics of science, politics, morality, philosophy, education, and health, the word sound features extensively. Contrastingly, the native language in which Sree Sree Thakur articulated his verses, i.e., Bangla, surprisingly does not have a vernacular equivalent to the English word Noise, originally derived from the Latin word Nausea. It has to be remembered that the disciples barely used the word noise to refer to the sounds of distortion. Instead, they used words like technical disturbance or *jaantrik golojog* to refer to noise.

If we recall Manoj's words, we will find echoes of oneness in Vedic and Sikh discourses of sonic theology. In Hinduism, *Shabd-Brahman* signifies the idea of cosmic sound. Be it music or noise, everything originates from the same source. In Sikhism, *Beejnaam* and *Satnaam* signify the seed name, which is considered the seed of all creations. Be it music or noise, everything is believed to have emanated from the primordial seed sound or the cosmic sound. Hence, the theological

framework of cosmic sound in Satsang does not seem to resonate with the Western theories of acoustics founded on the dualities of desired sounds and unwanted noise. This is not surprising since Novak has already pointed out the presence of cultural disparities in the study of noise. Novak wrote that “[m]any languages do not distinguish noise as a category of sound” (Novak, 2015, p. 125). As a result, the meaning of noise may appear differently in different languages and cultures. Similarly, Satsang, which is an amalgamation of Hindu and Sikh traditions of thought, does not explicitly distinguish noise as a spiritual category of sound. But that does not mean that noise does not feature in the lives of Satsangees at all. As a modern religious community, the members of Satsang are certainly exposed to the urban avatars of noise. From loud music to cacophonies of traffic, roaring engines, and grinding machines, the Satsangees are familiar with the perpetual presence of hazardous sounds that surround their inhabited worlds. Although they can mentally differentiate between desired sounds and unwanted noise, it is impossible to separate these sounds practically in real-life scenarios. However, smartphones, which have become an integral part of their daily lives, can separate desirable sounds from unwanted noise, not only in terms of cognition but also in practice. One of the tools is the mute button. The politics of separation, which can be traced back to the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, theory and practice, discursive and material, and so on, is built into the mechanics of the mute button that sustains the hegemonic binary between desirable sound and unwanted noise. Therefore, the mute button instils the hope, desire, ambition, and agency of silencing unwanted sounds. Thus, the emergent practice of muting engenders the active separation between desired sounds and undesirable noise at a practical and material level. I contend that the ritual of silencing is not delimited to the act of muting; rather, it becomes a disciplinary practice that pertains to all aspects of life. In other words, noise is not delimited to sound as it exists as an undesired element or unwanted component that needs to be censored through devotional practices of self-discipline.

In e-satsang, a subtle but potent form of self-discipline manifests in the act of silencing. To combat *jaantrik golojog* or technical disturbance, disciples like Kalpana, Chandan, Gopal, and others have embraced self-disciplinary measures to prevent noise intrusion into the sacred ambiance of e-satsang. Chandan, for instance, diligently identified the source of technical disruption and advised Kalpana to relocate her physical presence. In response, Kalpana cleared her throat, adjusted her

position, and sought a more signal-friendly location. Gopal, residing amidst the bustling streets of Dhaka, took to his car and drove home, escaping the disruptive traffic noises.

Similarly, Jotno aimed his iPhone skyward in search of a better signal, resorting to wandering in pursuit of a peaceful shelter away from the cacophonous streets of South Kolkata. Meanwhile, nestled in a small room adjacent to the bustling streets of a metropolitan city, Kolkata, I took precautions to ensure that my device remained muted, preventing any inadvertent coughs or sneezes from intruding into the sacred sphere. When technical glitches persisted, I resorted to refreshing my WiFi connection, patiently waiting for the audio quality to improve. Likewise, the organisers take proactive measures by issuing advisory notices on various private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram that explicitly instruct potential participants to mute their microphones and disable their cameras during the satsang. These disciplinary measures can be regarded as “attentional techniques” (Pedersen et al. 2021) or techniques of “attentional learning” (Luhman, 2012), through which disciples not only learn to prevent noise from infiltrating the sacred atmospheres of e-satsang but *discover* noise in the first place.

American anthropologist Tanya Lurhman (2012), in her study of US evangelical congregations, has developed the attentional theory of learning to explain how practitioners learn to experience the presence of God by attending to their minds and emotions through prayer. In online congregation or e-satsang in Deoghar, silencing emerges as a form of “attentional learning” (Lurhman, 2012), through which disciples learn to experience the presence of their beloved guru, Sree Sree Thakur, by attending to and silencing background noise. Activities such as muting devices, disabling cameras, relocating the body from one place to another and relocating the device from one place to another in search for signals, refreshing WiFi connections, utilising high-definition music system with noise-cancellation features, and circulating advisory notices on private messaging platforms are not only mental or cognitive techniques. Instead, these are embodied techniques of attentional learning through which disciples learn to experience the divine presence while rediscovering the mundane sounds of their surrounding environments as noise.

This newly emergent form of attentional learning through silencing entails the act of otherization. Disciples identify noise as a realm of

unwanted and undesirable sound frequencies that must be silenced and disciplined. For instance, when I muted my laptop during the meetings, my intention was to shield the e-satsang from the inadvertent sounds of my own coughs and sneezes. In e-satsang, these sounds were designated as noise—the unwanted Other. What is interesting is that the same coughs and sneezes may not have been classified as noise outside the confines of e-satsang. However, within the sacred confines of e-satsang, a particular type of attentive listening was involved whereby my own body and immediate surroundings were otherised as noise—unwanted and disruptive. I refer to this act as noisification, wherein I otherised my own body and my surrounding environment as an undesirable Other. Similarly, Kalpana’s decision to change her physical location exemplifies this concept of noisification. She relocated her body and device to a different location in her house to rectify the distorted audio signals. By changing her physical position and moving her device, Kalpana treated her own distorted voice and her immediate location as noise or the unwanted Other. In other words, she noisified her body, location, and surroundings, recognizing them as noise that demanded to be silenced. Likewise, when Gopal chose to drive back home and seek the solitude of his house, Chandan postponed his performance slot. Their collective actions aimed to shield the e-satsang from the noisiest city in the world. In this endeavor, Chandan and Gopal noisified the congested streets of Dhaka, designating them as unwanted Others. They prevented the sonic frequencies of Dhaka from encroaching upon the sacred audio vibrations of e-satsang. In the same vein of noisification, hundreds and thousands of Satsangees worldwide endeavor to silence their surrounding environments from infiltrating the e-satsang. This is how silencing becomes a form of techno-spiritual disciplining in the era of e-satsang, whereby practitioners noisify themselves and their surrounding environments by silencing the unruly frequencies of life.

Religion, Noise Pollution, and Public Life

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), noise has emerged as a leading environmental threat that can give birth to a range of short-term and long-term health problems, such as sleep disturbance, cardiovascular effects, poorer work and school performance, hearing impairment, etc. (WHO, 2010). Besides the burgeoning urban cacophonies of airplanes and the honking of cars, religious sermons and loudspeakers have often created disputes by causing noise pollution in public spaces. WHO’s claim suggests that “noise has emerged as a

leading environmental nuisance in the WHO European Region,” but the crisis of noise pollution is not limited to the European province. It is a global environmental threat. According to the Annual Frontier Report, published by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in March 2022, Dhaka has been declared the noisiest city in the world. This fascinating trivia can decode an invisible connection between Satsang and the global crisis of noise pollution if we ask a simple question: Is it a coincidence that the birthplace of the Satsang movement, Bangladesh, which is the world’s noisiest nation, speaks in a language (Bangla) that does not have a vernacular term for noise?

In his book, “Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism” (2014), religious studies scholar Isaac Weiner studied sonic disputes around religious noise among the people of Hamtramck City in Michigan, USA. Weiner’s (2014) account suggests that while the sounds of Azaan played over loudspeakers appeared sacred to the ears of the Islamic practitioners, the same sounds appeared as disturbing noise and civil nuisance to other residents. The American law identified the loud sounds of Azaan as noise since they violated the threshold of legalized decibel limits; the sermon listeners of the city proposed a legal amendment to exempt the prayer sounds under the anti-noise ordinance. Such occurrences are not specific to the American context. There are endless accounts of conflict around the issue of religious noise in Indian metropolitan cities. The Mumbai-based organization, The Awaz Foundation, led by renowned environmental activist Sumaira Abdulali, has been running several awareness and advocacy campaigns on anti-noise in collaboration with local governments and members of religious communities. The public life of religious noise in India and outside is integrally tied to the domain of law, science, and politics. Therefore, what is noise in the eyes of the law may sound musical to the ears of religion. What is defined as noise in the legal and biomedical theories may appear sonorous to an adherent practitioner of devotional music. Therefore, an anthropological inquiry into religious noise is impossible without engaging with other forms of noise – legal, medical, and environmental. Noise is a complicated subject. On the one hand, there is a perceptual heterogeneity of noise, i.e., it can be perceived multifariously depending on respective vantage points of distinct traditions of thought. On the other hand, noise continues to exist as a global environmental threat. The concept of noisification can help us understand the role of religion in mitigating the crisis of noise pollution by demystifying the conundrum of noise as a global and vernacular

concept while drawing our attention toward new methods and techniques of studying religious noise from the global South.

Conclusion

In his seminal book titled *Noise: A Political Economy of Music* (1977), the French economist and cultural theorist Jacques Attali wrote, “[w]ith noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world” (1985: 6). Through the emergent techniques of noisification in e-satsang, a new Satsangee lifeworld comes into the formation through the order of silenced bodies, silenced devices and silenced audio vibrations. Each act is an act of disciplining the otherwise indisciplined vibrations of noise and creating a world of disciplined sounds. In doing so, disciples immerse in a complex nexus of silencing practices that operate across the material, spiritual, and technological realms – a nexus between noisified disciples and their noisified environments.

Noisification in e-satsang offers an insightful path to rethink the *significance* of noise – the productive power of noise in unfolding what Sree Sree Thakur called the “secret workings” (*tuk*) of ensounded lifeworlds. Kahn (1999) argued that noise is often identified as a meaningless and unwanted residual component, but the genesis of its becoming is profoundly rich. That is why emphasis is placed on inquiring into the *becoming* of noise (Graham, 2023). When certain sounds are suppressed, silenced, and censored as noise, they reveal a set of “motives, strategies, gestures... [and] grammars.” that unlocks the encrypted codes of social order (Kahn, 1999, p. 20). Hence the study of noisification in the sacred atmospheres of Deoghar-Satsang promises to unlock new “attentional techniques” (Pedersen, 2021) through which scholars of humanities and social sciences can learn the evolving semantics and grammar of religious spaces and surrounding environments in recent times.

In this essay, the sacred atmospheres of Deoghar in Jharkhand and the techno-spiritually disrupted lifeworlds of Satsangees helped us to understand the linguistic, cultural, and epistemic imbalances in devising a universal methodological tool to study noise. It helped us realize something. As long as there are multiple cultures worldwide, there could be endless meanings of noise. Since noise is perceived, imagined, and expressed differently in different cultures, we must meticulously unpack these differences to understand how they enable new modes of

“attentional learning” (Lurhman, 2012) – new ways of attending to the world and surrounding environments.

The phenomenon of noisification should not be limited to religious lifeworlds. Instead, it operates across distinct fields, such as religion, science, politics, and law, where noise exists in polymorphic avatars. Due to the untamable spirit of noise, it can never be subsumed under a particular lens of inquiry. Across divergent fields of study, such as physics, law, politics, and biomedicine, the meaning of noise is formulated at the intersection of ideas. In a time when noise has become one of the deadliest environmental pollutants of our time, this paper suggests that noise should not be seen as merely an ecological/climatic crisis limited to European lifeworlds. Instead, noisification curves an interdisciplinary stream of inquiry that attends to the existing problem of language and culture whereby noise can't be captured sufficiently within a single framework of disciplinary thought. It is a crisis of language, episteme, imagination, and culture. Noisification focuses on the becoming of distinct trajectories of thought, imagination, perceptions, and sensibilities, where the marginal voices are often noisified in the resounding hierarchies of knowledge. Our responsibility is to listen carefully and attentively.

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