

KCHR OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES | VOL - II

# PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SOUNDS

GANDHI AND THE POLITICS  
OF AMPLIFICATION

LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN



Kerala Council for Historical Research

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Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

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Published by  
The Director, KCHR

Publication Assistant  
Sandhya S. N

Layout and Cover Design  
Jishnu S. Chandran

Copies: 500  
Printed @ Kerala State Centre for  
Advanced Printing & Training (C-APT)  
Thiruvananthapuram

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(2020), *History of India, 1757-1857* (2010) and *New Mansions for Music: Performance, Pedagogy and Criticism* (2008) and has a number of other publications to her credit. Recently, she has been working on two projects on Gandhi and Sonic nationalism in India, and the three Godrej products and their relevance on configuring middle class consuming imagination, respectively.

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ABSTRACT

When does sound become public and how does it alter space and the ways we inhabit it? Is the distinction between private and public tenable when it comes to sonic expression and reception? How does sacral sound complicate the distinction? These are some of the questions that the paper will address in the specific context of Gandhi and his intervention in the ‘Music before Mosques’ controversy in the 1920s. It will explore the ways in which Gandhi viewed sonic practices as part of both satyagrahi practice, an avowedly political activity as well as a seraphic pursuit to cultivate the moral self. Admittedly for Gandhi, the personal was political and ethical and it was therefore, not

always easy to iron out a coherent and consistent discursive position on the issue. However, a close reading of Gandhi's ideas on the subject of sound and sound management offers a useful lens to explore the complexity of the symbolic politics played around sound that was not simply about "the private and the public" but about the redefining of tradition and the constitution of its essential elements that could be safe-guarded by law.

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LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

The affective potential of sound in the production of social spaces in South Asia has remained surprisingly largely undertheorized and understudied. This is surprising given the ubiquity of sound in our everyday landscapes; virtually every occasion, political or ritual, private or public is accompanied by amplified sounds - songs, slogan, recitations accompany blood donation drives, political rallies, community festivals not to speak of marriages. Admittedly sound is difficult to pin down, yet as Paul Simpson notes, sound happens as an event within a specific locality<sup>1</sup>. In colonial India, from about the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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1. Paul Simpson, "Sonic affects and the production of space 'Music by handle' and the politics of street music in Victorian London", *Cultural Geographies*, 24, no.1, (January 2017): 90.

century, sound became a potent agent in marking off spaces and defining a political agenda and simultaneously mediating new experiences and aspirations. The resultant noise that arose from music that spilled into the public domain gave rise to one of the most protracted and contentious issues of communal discord forcing Gandhi to intervene and to grapple with his approach to private-public distinctions. For Gandhi, the private-public binary did not enjoy particular traction – he experimented with his search for the truth, an intensely private pursuit quite publicly and as far as music was concerned, saw no reason to isolate it within a private space especially if it was an aide to prayer. Yet when it came to street music, to music before the mosques or even noisy public singing as part of demonstrations, he was quick to critique it seeing it as an expression of excess, the intent of which was at best dubious. It is worthwhile remembering that sound of music or otherwise does not enter into a vacuum; it is not as if the street is silent and then become an acoustically charged place – rather music enters it and becomes part of an unfolding social and sonic space that actors have subsequently to negotiate. Gandhi was no exception to this unravelling of developments.

Exactly a century ago to the date, parts of India were racked by a spate of communal tensions and rioting over the contested issue of music before mosques, when Gandhi was called upon to intervene and reconcile warring parties. Because the issue involved matters of faith practice, Gandhi would not brook interference and would not invoke the authority of the state that did not have the moral right to determine what was either appropriate ritual music/ or indeed public music with seditious overtones. Here, it needs to be emphasized that the problem as Gandhi saw it was not about private sounds becoming public and

therefore a matter of law and order, but it was about the need to defend faith practices not by aggression but by tolerance and self-sacrifice. The matter revolved around the absolute centrality that Gandhi accorded to what he considered ‘a religious necessity, in which case no prohibition order by a court of law could be obligatory’<sup>2</sup>. This was the underlying and over-riding premise that informed Gandhi’s arguments making co-relation between law, faith practice and community interests a complex one. Moreover, the dispute surfaced at a time when Gandhi was increasingly cognizant about the significance of sonic power as a resource for political mobilization as well as of its value as an aide to prayer.

### **Music for the Congregation: Private or Public?**

For the sake of clarity, let me briefly sketch out the context in which Gandhi framed his ideas on music for the congregation which drew its sources from larger sonic-scape of nineteenth century India. This will help us nuance the distinction between private/congregational music that Gandhi assembled and public auditory articulation that he sought to regulate. It is not my contention that congregational music, or music for the ashram community was private but it is also important to acknowledge that it was not entirely public as say the singing of Vande Mataram in an open Congress session or in a railway station was. Admittedly, there was nothing entirely private as far as Gandhi was concerned - he heard, wrote, read, spoke in public and for a

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2. M.K Gandhi, “Music before Mosoques”, *Gandhi and Communal Problems*, accessed May 10, 2022 [https://www.mkgandhi.org/g\\_communal/chap13.htm#:~:text=He%20said%20with%20a%20sign,on%20the%20part%20of%20Muslims.](https://www.mkgandhi.org/g_communal/chap13.htm#:~:text=He%20said%20with%20a%20sign,on%20the%20part%20of%20Muslims.)

continuing dialogue which makes the private public distinction even more problematic. What he was after was, to finetune every activity and align it to a moral imperative whether in public or in private; thus, every act of prayer and immersive activity had to draw its rationale from the purity of intention which by default had to be non-violent, fearless and tolerant. This necessarily meant that any excess had to be curtailed and intentions behind the singing of songs, the clapping of cymbals or the banging of drums needed to be pure and defensible.

By the time Gandhi came to India from South Africa, music and group singing featured as an important resource in community-building. His community projects, namely the Tolstoy Farm project and the Phoenix settlement integrated music and singing as part of a daily schedule meant to augment moral habits. Whether the music chosen for the purpose was informed by a deep personal aesthetic is hard to say for we are not well informed about the ways in which his personal taste for music evolved. We have some references to his childhood when he was moved by song and melodious voices. Brought up in a Vaishnav household, exposed to ritual songs and sounds, he referred to the soothing effects of the Ramnam and to quotidian sounds of the streets including those of itinerant singers. He speaks for instance of the reading of the Ramayana by Ladha Maharaj, a religious story teller whose performance and melodious voice instilled a deep devotion to the epic and one that never left him<sup>3</sup>. It is likely therefore, that Gandhi saw performance as a valuable tool to feeling devotion and sustaining

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3. Lakshmi Subramanian, *Singing Gandhi's India Music and Sonic Nationalism* (Delhi: Roli Books, 2020), 51.

the same. At the same time, he saw in music practice a deep fidelity to order and exercise (sadhana) that was an invaluable building block to individual and national character. Church music was an equally powerful medium that held a special place convincing Gandhi that a stirring voice and an immersive practice was the key to elevating prayer and to developing a skill that had the added benefit of producing a good habit for the evolving moral subject.

Thus, in the key arrangements that he improvised for the Sabarmati ashram (1915), prayer and expressive communication held a vital place. It was also here that music assumed a very special significance in his writings and musings as a vital accessory to make prayer joyful and effective. Evidently Gandhi discerned the affective potential of music in the Sabarmati ashram, not the product or the artefact but the very process that had the power to shape experiences and animate the spaces with the same moral energy. At a congregational level, there was nothing private about the musical sounds that emanated during prayers sessions in the mornings and evenings where music was part of a regular regimen, there was nothing private about the activity of listening or singing, it was part of a routine intended to cleanse the mind and orient it towards prayer. In fact, within the ashram, he came down quite strongly against those who were found humming a song while doing chores, or listening abstractedly to a hymn – something that would count as private. For Gandhi, it was about and only about the cultivation of the self on the part of the truth seeker and it did not matter whether it was in the ashram, at home or in the street. Consequently, any display of strident excess in public, or careless distraction in private negated the possibility of cultivating a moral habit. At the same time, Gandhi did not overlook

the aesthetic dimensions of music at least for the ashram where he took pains to enlist the services of a trained musician like Narayan Moreshwar Khare and to emphasize the elements of training and rigour in developing the voice and in adhering to musical values. These were essential accessories to prayer and could be easily compromised by callousness in private and by excess in public for what counted was the integrity of intent. Gandhi emphasized repeatedly the power of music as a recursive practice conducive to moral and physical improvement and likened it to spinning.

The emphasis Gandhi placed on assiduous cultivation of personal habits in relation to musical practice in the ashram gives us some insight into his approach to sounds and their affective potential. The immersive quality of sound was not lost on him- either as a vehicle of communicating prayer or as a means of social negotiation. This necessarily meant that more than the private public binary, it was the absence of discipline and contemplation that engendered chaotic noise and aggression that was a matter of concern. His deployment of songs as part of the Ashram service was thus carefully thought out as he persuaded colleagues to select appropriate chants and songs that could create the appropriate atmosphere and prepare residents to embark on a self-conscious transformation. Sung prayer had greater potential to forge a community and clearly here the usefulness of public sounds was self-evident. But musical sound remained an aide to a larger cause and not an end in itself and certainly could never be seen as a substitute for prayer.

Gandhi was not always able to choreograph his moves within the ashram. Often, he encountered dissent from his following who chafed

at his micro-managing techniques and gave expression to their aural expectations. It was therefore not a matter of surprise that Gandhi recoiled at the politics around sound when this spilled right into the public domain creating conditions for extreme tension and violence. His displeasure at the brazen display of aural exuberance even when it was not communally tinged arose from his commitment to moral cultivation not to his strict definition of the idea of the public and private. Musical sound he suggested had the potential to carve out responsible aural habits and to search for order amidst chaos. As he put it in 1919, “our greatest stumbling block is that we have neglected music. Music means rhythm, order. Its effect is electrical. It immediately soothes. I have seen in European countries a resourceful superintendent of police by starting a popular song controlling mischievous tendencies of mobs”<sup>4</sup>.

### **Amplifying sounds: Music before mosques**

What characterized the public sound-scape of India in the 1920’s? The question is neither rhetorical nor intended to help catalogue the sounds one may have heard in city and town. Rather it is to focus on those occasions when sound was defined as noise by either competing groups or by law enforcing authorities whose responsibility it was to safeguard public order from any kind of encroachment and aggression. The intervention of law in the definition of public sounds as noise occurred in the context of the growing aural public sphere where songs and slogans became commonplace accompanying political activity. Gandhi himself responded to this turn quite candidly as he wrote, “from morning till night, one heard through song, talks, slogans and felt such mighty

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4. Subramanian, *Singing Gandhi’s India*, 110.

torrents of hatred that it was sickening to find such a degradation in larger numbers of people”<sup>5</sup>. So, what was Gandhi referring to here and how did the public administration look at the situation? In answering this question, we need to consider two separate but inter-related strands in the making of North India’s public sphere. By the 1920’s thanks to the cultural politics of Swadeshi in Bengal and Maharashtra and of Hindu revivalism under the Arya Samaj in the Punjab and the United Provinces, multiple forms of musical expression mediated through technological diffusion and political rhetoric had contributed to an aural public space. There was for example, a persistent and clarion call for singing devotional songs in public and thereby reclaiming music’s public space for middle class enthusiasts who were keen on investing music especially music that was traditionally associated with court and kotha with new meanings and new social signatures. Thus, the emphasis on bhakti and devotion rather than eroticism and entertainment became prominent. Art music or what came to be designated as classical music in its more public avatar, saw self-professed musicologists and amateur musicians like V.D. Paluskar take up the cause and campaign for greater dissemination among middle class men and women for whom the bhajan became an accessible form for expression<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, there was an increase of processional music accompanying temple ritual and community worship, a development that happened to coincide with what Naveeda Khan has referred to

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5. Subramanian, *Singing Gandhi’s India*, 96.

6. Janaki Bakhle, *Two men and Music: Nationalism in the making of an Indian classical tradition* (New York: O.U.P., 2005).

as the acoustics of Muslim striving<sup>7</sup>. Khan makes the point that it was around the 1920's with itinerant preachers clamoring for a louder azan through amplification, that both the state and public administration as well as the majority community stepped forward to treat the call of Azan as noise which had to be regulated. This ironically enough persuaded the detractors from within the Muslim community to project the divine elements in the amplified azan. Until then, the status of the loudspeakers remained ambivalent, the community elders not quite sure of its permissibility while it did not fall under the rubric of religious insult and therefore to be regulated.

The situation changed dramatically in the 1920's when the amplified azan became important to the Muslims and a point of offence for the Hindus thereby inviting the intervention of the administration. As Khan puts it, "It is no little irony that it was in Muslims' relations with those from whom they sought to differentiate themselves that they came to appreciate the force of the divine in the azan, a force non-Muslims could only regulate by treating it as noise"<sup>8</sup>. "Noise" had thus to be countered by another noise and this found expression in the growing processional music that accompanied festive celebrations – political and otherwise. This is not to suggest that processional music was new, in fact several police commissioners observed that it was but an outlet for tension. However, what seems evident is the growing weaponization of prejudice and using sound to mark off space and an opportunity to

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7. Naveeda Khan, "The Politics of acoustic striving: Loudspeaker use in ritual practice in Pakistan", *Comparative studies in society and history* 53, no.3 (July 2011) : 571- 594.

8. Khan, "The politics of acoustic striving", 574.

assert rights on the part of both communities. Long before Gandhi's appearance we hear of disputes in Madras and Nagpore (1905) when the police prevented the playing of music before mosques and this was seen as an attack on the rights of the Hindus that they had enjoyed since immemorial<sup>9</sup>. For the administration the task at hand was to determine whose rights were more genuine, established and with clear precedent. This was not the position that Gandhi would endorse. For the Hindu activists the issue became key to assertion of their rights and a redressal for past humiliation; this was specially so in the 1920's when Dr. Munje and Hegdewar acted as stormtroopers for Nagpur's Hindu processionists and terrorized the Muslims into giving in.

How did Gandhi react to the situation? How did he envisage a reconciliation between warring communities? It is interesting to note that even while exhorting his co-religionists to eschew violence and unnecessary practices, he chose to frame the debate in terms of the Muslim bully and Hindu coward. It is difficult to deduce what Gandhi meant by this except perhaps with reference to the fact that on most occasions until then, Hindus came second best when it involved administrative resolution of the problem. On the other hand, he was quite resolute in his opinion that what was constituted as essential faith practice was in fact nothing but an excuse to aggress and equally that the administration had no business to regulate even the most trivial of faith practices. Personally, Gandhi was wary about public display that went against norms of civility and friendship and we see him constantly

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9. John Zavos, "Sanghatan : The pursuit of an Hindu idea in colonial India the idea of organization in the emergence of Hindu nationalism 1870-1930"(Doctoral Thesis, University of Bristol, 1977), 173.

ranting against the behavior of crowds and of insensate and unfriendly acts at a time that Muslim prayers began. He linked this disposition to the consequences of rote and mechanical learning as a result of which the subject had never learned to self-consciously strive for the truth. Two of his observations in this connection are worth quoting:

Reacting to a school performance of national songs and expressing his disappointment at what was a mechanical performance, he wrote in 1918, “This is the feeling I have of the struggle- that we are fighting it half-heartedly. If that is really so, we have failed to understand its true import and like the singing of these girls it will be unavailing<sup>10</sup>.” On another occasion, (1919) in a public speech at Baroda, he proceeded to say, ‘We shall not serve the motherland by parading in processions, raising slogans of “Vande Mataram” and shouting Glory to the Motherland! Today our India is aflame with a triple fire. To rescue her from it, what is needed is not procession, nor demonstrations but effective remedies<sup>11</sup>’.

By 1920 sound in ritual had become clearly marked out as noise especially as several riots between 1922-23 broke out over the issue of Music before Mosques and brought the government into the scene with regulations to consider banning music and processions if these were around mosques at the time of prayer. Gandhi was faced with a difficult situation – his distaste for willful public behavior that did not befit a true satygrahi and one that quickly degenerated into mobocracy meant that he could not condone the aural excesses that seemed to characterize

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10. Subramanian, *Singing Gandhi's India*, 107.

11. Subramanian, *Singing Gandhi's India*, 108.

the public situation. On the other hand, faith was deeply personal and the devotee was within her/his rights to defend it to the last breath and not make it over to the state. Defense did not mean aggression, it meant sacrifice and accommodation, tolerance and neighborliness which alone could facilitate truth and reconciliation. Here he expressed his own understanding of truth which in its complete avatar could not be easily comprehended but engagement with which alone, held the key to reconciliation.

For Gandhi the underlying unity of all religions was not easily comprehensible. But even the realization that none was capable of grasping the complete truth of the moral core and unity of all religions was the first essential step. This had to be consolidated by lessons in accommodation and neighborliness. Thus, one of the first pronouncements came in 1921 when he said that a Hindu may not insist on playing music while passing a mosque, and nor must he quote precedents for the sake of playing music and instead should try and appreciate the Musalman sentiment of having solemn silence near a mosque the whole of the twenty-four hours. On the other hand, if the Hindu felt that singing and continuous music was a religious necessity, *no prohibition by a court of law could be obligatory* nor indeed could it be stopped by show of force. Under those circumstances, “Music must be played, arati must be made and Ramanama repeated, cost what it may”<sup>12</sup>. The operative word here was cost which meant bearing punishments on

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12. M.K Gandhi, “Music before Mosoques”, *Gandhi and Communal Problems*, accessed May 14, 2022

[https://www.mkgandhi.org/g\\_communal/chap13.htm#:~:text=He%20said%20with%20a%20sign,on%20the%20part%20of%20Muslims.](https://www.mkgandhi.org/g_communal/chap13.htm#:~:text=He%20said%20with%20a%20sign,on%20the%20part%20of%20Muslims.)

the self and not taking arms to punish the other. In his words, ‘If my formula were accepted, a procession of the meekest men and women, unarmed even with lathis, would march with Ramanama on their lips, supposing that that was the bone of contention, and draw down on their heads the whole of the Musalman’s wrath. But, if they would not accept that formula they would still proceed with the sacred name on their lips and fight every inch of the ground. But to stop music for fear of a row or because of an order of court is to deny one’s religion’<sup>13</sup>.

What are we to make of this apparently contradictory statement? Was Gandhi insisting on public musical sounds as part of religious practice? And that to enforce it, one should embrace the path of passive resistance? Or was he simply dissolving the binary between religion and politics especially since the state in question was a colonial one that had no right to define what religion was and ought to be? For Gandhi, what mattered was intention and once the necessity of an act was demonstrated, then it behoved the community to defend it not by aggression but by sacrifice; in other words, if the issue was worth fighting for then the individual had to overcome all fear and be prepared to lay down life and not take life. As he said, ‘Let no one charge me with ever having advised or encouraged weakness or surrender on matters of principle. But I have said, as I say again, that every trifle must not be dignified into a principle’<sup>14</sup>.

Was the demand for music before mosques a trifle? The question was

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13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

serious given the escalation of communal violence in 1925-26 forcing the government to contemplate regulatory orders. The Congress came up with a resolution (26 December 1927) that prescribed accommodation and exhorted Muslims to spare Hindu sentiment over cow slaughter and Hindus to spare Muslim sensibilities over the question of Music before mosques. For both the issue at stake was faith practice whether it was the qurbani or the aarti. Neither community could take recourse to violence not subject themselves to law on a matter which was an article of religious faith. To yield to any form of violence – community or state threats was tantamount to a surrender of self-respect and conviction. This resolution was clearly predicated on the impossible likelihood of a rapprochement but reflected nonetheless Gandhi's conviction in courteous tolerance and friendship. He also maintained that for him Music before mosques was not on par with cow slaughter but it had acquired an importance which could not be ignored. He followed this up by saying that if complete stoppage of music “will be the only thing that will spare the Musalman feelings, it is the duty of the Hindus to do so without a moment's thought. If we are to reach unity of hearts, we must each be prepared to perform an adequate measure of sacrifice”<sup>15</sup>. It is evident that Gandhi was arguing against the performance of music as an act of needless aggression especially as it had clear communal dimensions. This was not necessarily a stand against public sounds – for him the intention behind the act was of paramount significance evident in his stand on prabhat pheris or morning processions.

### **Morning Songs: In pursuit of duty**

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15. Ibid.

Gandhi's engagement with the politics of amplification assumed a different spin as it resurfaced in the 1930's, when a different sort of aural display became a bone of contention this time with the Government. This was a period when Prabhat pheris or morning processions were taken out in Bombay with a repertoire of songs that were part of national construction agenda. These morning-songs were secular addressing issues of caste, gender and labor and called out volunteers to come to the streets. These grew steadily so much so that the state stepped in to identify them as a law and order situation, describing them as disruptive, disturbing and even seditious. Gandhi exhorted the pheri organizers to carry on the good work as these were nothing but clarion calls to duty to wake the sleeping to the call of constructive work and duty. They reminded men and women to rise from their beds and give thanks to God the first thing in the morning.

Prabhat pheris had evolved through the 30's to become a vehicle of mobilization and dissemination. In Bombay, Ahmedabad and Surat, a medley of forms and styles (Garba, bhajan) was used to craft a repertoire that was used by women in their public activities. In Ahmedabad, for instance, a collection was published by Lilavati Harilal Desai consisting of popular songs to be sung during prabhat pheri processions, another collection issued from Wadhwar designated as lagnana geet but with explicitly political content. The British saw many of them as seditious and it was therefore not surprising that the actual processions came under their scrutiny. In 1930 several musical groups in Bombay organized themselves into the Akhil Bharat Pheri Sangh with its headquarters in Congress House and expanded their operations. Their processions were seen by sections of the population as noisy and this charge was a

convenient excuse for the government to ban some of the processions. Gandhi insisted that these go on and once the pheris turned to singing for the cause of swadeshi, the ban proved redundant. From this point onwards, Gandhi consistently espoused the cause of music and sonic articulations in the service of satyagraha, in the service of constructing program of civic virtue.

From here to the framing of a proper aesthetics was but a small step. The decade of the 1940's saw Gandhi turn to music as a source of solace and of community building especially in the wake of violence. Spinning in private and praying in public became the watchword. He wrote about the sounds of music in more metaphorical terms even as he sought out voices that impressed on him. Music not sound became interchangeable with order and harmony; he heard it in the hum of the spinning wheel and in the silence of prayer and contemplation. It was thus even more urgent to construct an acceptable aesthetic of sounds for public prayer and celebration. In 1945, he went as far as to express his distaste for the raucous nature of the Ganapati and dassera celebrations that had nothing to do with religion. He assembled, however tentatively an aesthetic for public spectacle. He wrote about *artis* that were unrefined and unmusical and noisy and about Dassera celebrations that were crude and distasteful. He emphasized that the Dassera celebrations had nothing to do with religion or aesthetics and that it was important to reconnect with real music, its functions and to align it to everyday life<sup>16</sup>.

Gandhi's views did not have many takers. Practitioners and poets

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16. Subramanian, *Singing India*, 131-132.

could not see eye to eye with such a prescriptive perspective on music production or reception. Ritual enthusiasts would not brook the encroachments on their aural space and aspirations while law makers could not remain impervious to the subversive potential that sound enjoyed. In any case, with sound the distinction between private and public was difficult to sustain, the distinction between private as ritual and public as community even harder to sustain when private practice was performed in public. Herein, lay the root of the problem - at what point did the penetration of sound into a body and into space become a violation? When was it an expression of harmony and affinity? Was it ultimately to do with intention? How did technology complicate and compound matters?

Gandhi's views and understanding did not resolve any of these issues but certainly demonstrated an openness to foreground the conundrum. At a philosophical level, music for Gandhi, lay within and what mattered was the music of life, music of the walk, music of the everyday. At a political level, during his years in active politics, he stopped short of its symbolic deployment and held accommodation of difference as the only way out for eliminating communal tension. At an aesthetic level, he listened to music, appreciated the new standards of emotionalism and refinement that he wished to see replicated in public spectacle. At the very end of his life, he turned to music integrating it as part of his daily public prayer meetings to educate the crowds in emotional self-discipline and in accommodation of difference. On 19 August 1947, he expressed sadness, noting how a Muslim friend had said that Muslims had nothing left but subjection to the Hindu majority and may have to suffer in silence the music blaring before mosques while they offered

their daily prayers. Having battled the cacophony of communal tensions, the ultimate reconciliation for him lay not in acoustic striving but in deep and compassionate interiority. It was not easy to make this a public message then, it is even more impossible now.



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