



## A calming cacophony: Social identity can shape the experience of loud noise



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### ABSTRACT

Environmental Psychology has typically considered noise as pollution and focused upon its negative impact. However, recent research in psychology and anthropology indicates the experience of noise as aversive depends upon the meanings with which it is attributed. Moreover, such meanings seem to be dependent on the social context. Here we extend this research through studying the aural experience of a religious festival in North India which is characterised by loud, continuous and cacophonous noise. Reporting an experiment and semi-structured interviews, we show that loud noise is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant according to the meanings attributed to it. Specifically, the experiment shows the same noise is experienced more positively (and listened to longer) when attributed to the festival rather than to a non-festival source. In turn, the qualitative data show that within the Mela, noises judged as having a religious quality are reported as more positive than noises that are not. Moreover, the qualitative data suggest a key factor in the evaluation of noise is our participants' social identities as pilgrims. This identity provides a framework for interpreting the auditory environment and noises judged as intruding into their religious experience were judged negatively, whereas noises judged as contributing to their religious experience were judged more positively. Our findings therefore point to the ways in which our social identities are implicated in the process of attributing meaning to the auditory environment.

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### 1. Introduction

Typically, noise is conceptualised as a stressor. Certainly, noise pollution adversely affects the lives of millions. Indeed, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that sound which is unwanted because it interferes with such activities as sleeping and conversation causes countless adverse health effects (<http://www.epa.gov/air/noise.html>).

However, is noise always such a stressor? Or are there contexts in which noise may be experienced more positively? And if so why? These are the questions we address through investigating the experience of a loud auditory environment. Specifically, we investigate pilgrims' auditory experiences at the Magh Mela, a month-long Hindu festival. This occurs every year in Allahabad, Northern India. It is a huge event, attended by millions. Some pilgrims (known as *kalpwasis*) attend for the entire month, living in basic

conditions, attending religious meetings, and bathing in the Ganges twice everyday. It is intensely noisy. Loudspeakers across the site pump out sacred music, religious discourses and public service announcements. In most places, one can hear several at once. Mark Tully describes just one such moment: "the loudspeakers blaring the messages of the religious organizations were competing with the public address system broadcasting appeals from pilgrims who were lost" (2001, p. 49). Indeed, such is this mix that the auditory environment is not so different from that of a busy Indian street scene.

Yet, for all this ceaseless cacophony, *kalpwasis* do not report being stressed. In general terms, they talk of being serene and in a state of bliss (Cassidy et al., 2007). What is more, there is evidence that this does not just reflect a norm of speaking no ill of the Mela, but rather that well-being is actually enhanced by participating in the Mela (Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan, & Reicher, 2012). With regards to the noise at the event, there are reports which indicate that *kalpwasis* can experience this in positive terms. This is exemplified in the words of one such pilgrim who draws on the mythical belief that the site of the Mela is at the confluence of not

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just the Ganges and Yamuna, but also of a third invisible stream – the Saraswati – the river of knowledge. He says, referring to the immersive surrounding sounds: “Oh! This is the real Saraswati. We bathe in the river Ganga and Yamuna, but the real Saraswati is this” (cited in Prayag Magh Mela Research Group, 2007, p. 314).

This is the phenomenon we address in this paper. How, and when, can people experience cacophony, as positive? What does this tell us about the importance of considering not only the physical properties of noise but also the social meanings attributed to it?

### 1.1. Noise and meaning

The US EPA's conclusions are rooted in a wealth of empirical evidence. Laboratory studies show exposure to noise leads to lower quantity and quality of sleep, elevated stress-related endocrine secretions (including adrenaline, nor-adrenaline and cortisol), elevated blood pressure, greater levels of self-reported stress, lowered performance on cognitive tasks and the exacerbation of mental illness symptoms (Stansfeld & Matheson, 2003). These various cardio-vascular, endocrine, cognitive and psychopathological effects have also been found amongst those living in community settings subject to high noise, notably amongst children living near airports. What is more, environmental noise degrades social relationships, leading to less helping, more aggression and poorer interpersonal bonds (Evans, 2001).

Yet, it is hard to find a direct relationship between the physical intensity of noise and its impact on well-being. There is considerable individual variability in responses to noise (Job, 1988; Ljungberg & Neely, 2007) and such differences account for more of the variability in outcomes than either the intensity or the duration of noise exposure (Fields, 1993; Job, 1988; Wallenius, 2004). This has led to a focus on the subjective experience of noise – rather than the noise's objective characteristics (Passchier-Vermeer, & Passchier, 2000; Stansfeld, Haines, & Brown, 2000). Critical factors in producing 'noise annoyance' (Guski, Felscher-Suhr, & Schuemer, 1999) include the extent to which ordinary activities are disrupted, the extent to which people have control over the noise source, and the extent to which people are subject to other environmental and personal stressors (Cohen, Evans, Stokols, & Krantz, 1986; Evans & Cohen, 1987; Gidlof-Gunnarsson & Ohrstrom, 2007; Leather, Beale, & Sullivan, 2003; Lepore & Evans, 1996; Wallenius, 2004).

Social factors also affect such experiences. Some of these factors are social-structural – for example, those of lower socio-economic status are more likely to be exposed to high noise levels than others (Evans & Kantowitz, 2002). Others are bound up with the social framings of noise. Thus when people living near airports think in economic terms they are less annoyed by the noise than when they think in environmental terms (Kroesen, Molin, & van Wee, 2011). Elaborating on the insight that 'noise annoyance' depends on how one 'frames' the stimulus, researchers have suggested the meanings attached to noise may be context dependent. For example, drawing upon Mary Douglas's famous observation that dirt can be thought of as “matter out of place”, Bailey (1996: 50) suggests that we can conceptualise “noise” as “sound out of place” This implies our auditory experiences are not simply a reflection of the stimulus's intrinsic properties but vary according to context. For instance, the roar of a crowd at a football match along with the strident blare of loudspeakers playing a team's song, may be judged part and parcel of the footballing experience (and as meaningful 'sound'). Yet, in contrast, the roar of a train or plane passing by the stadium may be experienced as an unwelcome intrusion (and as mere 'noise'). This observation has been developed in social anthropological work which explores the complex relationship between sound and place. Indeed, such work considers how sounds – or rather 'soundscapes'

– serve to constitute meaningful environments (Atkinson, 2007; Bijsterveld, 2008; Erlmann, 2004; Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa, & Porcello, 2010; Thompson, 2002) and are integral to the experience of different spaces (Connell & Gibson, 2004).

Given the importance of attending to the meanings attributed to sounds and to the complex relationship between sounds and space, our research addresses the experience of the soundscape that characterises the Magh Mela. Before elaborating on the precise questions we sought to address and our methodology, there is a need to say more on the Mela's auditory environment.

### 1.2. The Magh Mela at Allahabad

The Magh Mela is on a 12-year cycle. In the twelfth year (the *Maha Kumbh Mela*) it is claimed that up to 50 million people attend and over 10 million can be present on a single bathing day. Every six years (the *Ardh Kumbh Mela*), somewhere in the region of 20 million participate. Yet, even for the 'routine' yearly gatherings – the *Magh Mela* – millions attend, and hundreds of thousands undertake to remain for the full month. It is no exaggeration to dub this event 'the greatest show on earth' (for a history of the event, see Maclean, 2008; for a contemporary description, see Tully, 2001). Kalpwasis seek to attain religious merit and whilst at the Mela attempt to renounce all worldly ways and everyday comforts in order to live a purely spiritual existence. This purpose is expressed in the name 'kalpwasi' itself which is made of two words: *kalpa*, denoting the transformation of the self through inner resolve, and *vas*, denoting the living out of this resolve. Accordingly, kalpwasis' living conditions are basic. Living in canvas tents, they sleep on the ground and eat one meal a day. This is made up of bland foods, eschewing anything spicy (*tamasic*) or which might excite the body and detract from the pursuit of the spiritual. They also eschew any other activities (such as gossip) which might distract them from their devotions.

Yet, for all this concern with the spiritual, life in the Mela is anything but silent. The kalpwasis' tents are grouped into camps. Some are relatively large, run by religious organisations which have daily meetings where speeches are given and religious dramas are performed. These are amplified and broadcast through loudspeakers. Other camps do not have their own amplified events, but are typically interspersed amongst those that do. According to our observations, there are sound systems attached to camps approximately every 80–100 m along the main thoroughfares in the Mela. Many camps are religious and between roughly 14.00 and 18.00 h everyday, broadcast talks ('discourses') by religious leaders. Outside of these hours, the sound systems are generally used to play traditional religious music and the recitation of sacred verses (known as *bhajans*). Other camps are operated by political parties, NGOs and social activist organisations concerned with issues such as child exploitation, AIDS and pollution. These also play a mixture of talks and music. The music is never purely popular, but sometimes well-known Bollywood tunes are adapted, the words changed to incorporate religious themes. Finally, in addition to the above is a separate public address system set up by the Mela authorities, with loudspeakers mounted roughly every 25 m on the main roads of the Mela. Their principal purpose is to convey information about people lost and found. Especially on crowded days, they are almost continuously active. Added to this, are the sounds of car horns, chanting processions, police officers' whistles, and much, much more.

In order to give an idea of the level of noise we took decibel readings on an ordinary day during an ordinary year (Thursday 19th January, 2012) at approximately 17.00 h. Standing by the entrance to one kalpwasi camp, located well away from the busier areas of the Mela, the level was 76 db. Moving to another camp, this time some 60 m off a main thoroughfare, the level was 76–82 db. At a third

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