Sound Memories: In Search of Lost Sounds in Indian Cinema

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That old Chevrolet

My first encounter with Ritwik Ghatak's cinema occurred in a summer afternoon in 1993. It was a screening of *Ajantrik* on television, as part of a retrospective of his films aired on the regional channel. People of the neighbourhood flocked to our house as we had a battery-inverter to solve the problem of recurring power cuts. I remember how the light from television fell on the faces of people sitting in darkness, the screen size shrinking due to the low voltage. And I remember the sound perspective of the old Chevrolet on the roads of Netarhat in south Bihar, the area around where I spent larger part of my childhood.

A recurring sound from that old engine and occasionally from the wind-horn of the car formed an essential element in the soundscape of *Ajantrik*. There was also a recurrent motif of Oraon songs on the soundtrack, suggesting place associations. Both diegetic and non-diegetic mounting of sound helped the film put in place a soundscape of southern Bihar. However, it remains to be seen if this soundtrack represents the demography of Bihar or it merely stems out of the film space. In the eyes of filmmaking, it is a sound reconstruction of any of the 50's small townships around the Bihar coal belt, taken out of sound actuality of that geographical area. Within the dynamic range of this sound field, there are many sounds; but in the film space a selected few remain. To locate the selection, we can mention the music performance in an Oraon village, sound from the market, silence of the landscape, and so on. Each of them is part of the ambience the film creates, to form a specific soundscape. But soundscape of the actual locale is much more detailed and diverse. The film track doesn't take everything but creates its own soundscape reproduced at the screening. With each filmic experience, this reproduction plays on the fringes of memory, invariably shifted from the

aural experience of the actual locale. To me the *Ajantrik* soundtrack is a displaced image from my own aural recollection of south Bihar. Nevertheless, it settles in my memory, rather in my sound memory.

An attempt to define a soundscape: There is a vast space of sound actuality continuously occurring around us. For example, as I write this text, the prevalent sound is from the laptop fan blowing air. In the range of my immediate perspective this is the closest one other than my own breathing and the occasional keyboard hammer. As the depth of the field of hearing goes beyond this proximity, sound from distant traffic is perceived in the silence of this room; but there is no actual silence, as the fan is blowing continuously with a relatively lower frequency than the laptop fan, hiding itself as a sound source. It's a matter of pointing out the sources of sound, to locate them through an active effort; otherwise, they stay off our conscious level of hearing. As I continue listening to more accurate sound fields, there are birds, one airplane moving through the clouds, and so on. In case of a subjective approach to different sounding objects around us, our hearing will lose or pay attention to only some sounds. If an omni-directional microphone replaces this hearing with a given depth of field closer to the ear, it will record all the sources to form a soundscape of this given space. While reproducing, we will be surprised to find the perspective of aural depth; will be able to hear the details from our surrounding sound field. Soundcape is a linear representation of a vast field of environmental sound. Soundscape serves as a selection of sound elements scattered within the active aural space around us. As part of the acoustic ecology, soundscape provides information and ideas about our aural communication with our surrounding space.

We are talking about film-soundscape here, and we have to take account of the fact that doing sound for film still falls under visual domination. In a typical sync (location) sound situation, camera establishes a shot and the sound recording device follows it to capture a limited sound field within a frame, giving attention to the available sounding objects according to the

mise-en-scene. In most cases, the director and the camera person decide locating and selecting sound over the period of a living shot that ultimately determines microphone placements. Spoken dialogue is given ultimate importance if not the performers' movements as source of sync sound effects. Within the given space and time of shot-taking, different sources of sound are scattered, and most of them, which are not related to the sound-script are termed as noise, being unwanted. This way the recording freedom of a microphone is reduced by controlling its directionality, in order to obey the script. Within this limited dynamic range of recording, available sound sources as reproducing agents are also narrowed down. Most elements of the sound field get lost on recorded medium.

In spite of the aural range being limited and suppressed, some stray sound elements intrude into the prescribed soundscape of film, and turn out to be able to carry meaning in the narrative. Let us remember the sequence of Indir Thakrun's death in *Pather Panchali*: the sound of close friction between tree-branches in a low breeze coming from the woods in high and middle frequency. Here the sounding object is off the frame but an unassuming non-diegetic effect of its aural texture adds to the soundscape of her death. In one way it functions as a kind of prayer for the time of death, a sublime dirge to an ending, like a requiem. In another way it signifies nature's indifference to death - dry, non-lyrical and unavoidable. At the time of recording the optical recorder picked up this sound element as stray ambience (stray ambience are ambient sound clips recorded after shot taking gets over, in order to collect the location ambience for future use.) which may be perceived as an environmental noise to some extent, but at the level of design it helped to reconstruct the space and the mood of a death sequence.

How does environmental sound influence our hearing? Its presence is taken for granted: a child gets exposed to sound in the mother's womb much before a visual experience, and then becomes conscious about the visual presence of things keeping away sound in the subconscious level; an aural realization appears on the surface only when it's actually absent in

perception. This is somewhat like a blind person feeling insecure when objects around him are dislocated. But film is a construction, not a replica of our perceived world. In the value system of filmmaking, environmental sounds are in most cases perceived as noise; a film soundtrack decides about inclusion and exclusion of particular sound elements depending on the *story*. If its use is diegetic then the deciding factor is not to disturb audience's subjective attention from the camera focus. In case of non-diegetic usage, it is to underline sounds which may not exist in actuality, but added as tone colours in post-production stages. In this approach some environmental sounds can be used as refrain comparable to musical motifs. In Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, sound of night-crickets was coming back again and again to build up an anticipation of catastrophe, even in daylight.

As far as the logic of hearing goes, the use of environmental sound or the natural location sound in film can reinforce spatial aspects of a frame. In terms of film making, it designs the depth of a shot by establishing psycho-acoustic connections between the viewer and the locale; an individual viewer can relate him/herself to the bio-acoustics of the film space. Environmental sound, if present within the frame, can supply layers of vibrant aural colours in place of a one dimensional flat surface of background score, while the dialogue-background score-sound effect scheme of film sound merely serves the visual authority of the film narrative.

Ghatak's films were not much into location recording. On location, pilot recording was approached in order to get a guide-track, whereas ambience was taken separately as stray sounds. On the editing table, Ghatak himself used to manipulate the available sound to design his soundtrack. On the other hand, Ray's early films were made mostly from location recording. *Pather Panchali* was recorded with a Kinevox optical sound machine. It is quite evident from the quality of sound captured on the film plane: a clear presence of ambient sound layers with available depth of field recorded on location.

There were not many options to sound layers before the late 60's. Until 1954 film sound was mostly direct location recording; sound recorded on location was directly used on the soundtrack. If we follow the history of film sound recording in India, location sound was recorded on optical machines before the magnetic tape emerged around 1970. Magnetic recording de-mystified sound making for film. Recording sound became a democratized affair with the advent of ferrous tapes. The recording machines became portable and it was possible to erase tracks whenever required, creating scope for re-recording. With the emergence of magnetic recording, sound studios became popular for doing post-production sound on a mass scale. As an outcome, film sound became increasingly distanced from recording sound on location.

Gradually, a synthetic technique of film sound design emerged as the dominant mode. Dubbing and Foley recording were major technological advances in sound engineering. The studio system invited more investment in sound post-production. Tools and techniques like loop recording, mixing consoles and track laying opened up possibilities of parallel resource of sound reconstruction other than dependence on location recording. Stock sound became available commercially as a bank of sound object from where one could pick up elements for ambience and sound environment, although, in most cases, ambience was least bothered about in sound design. Films were being shot more and more on pre-designed set inside studios, and film-sound was becoming a mere dialogue-sync effect-background score scheme. To summarize: A practice was brought about by a collective effort of industry-dependent sound practitioners to construct sound environment for a film out of synthetic means of sound sources using rapidly developing technologies, or not giving any attention to it at all, which in a way went closer to sound abstraction of a film locale.

The contemporary location sound engineer and sound designer work with virtually unlimited tracks in the recording and track laying stages, and handle immensely powerful microphones with accurate directionality. In the last ten years or so, film sound has gone through a massive transformation from

analog to the digital domain. It has been perceived as a sea change in reproduction formats, working modes and norms. A new trend of 'sync-sound recording' has become popular and is a glorified term nowadays. In this method, it is expected that sound is recorded on location, and these original recordings, in sync with the visuals, will be used in the post-production stages without any asynchronous mode of sound-making. This requires new technological improvement of the existing set-ups. And sync- sound technology is being supported by recent developments in gadgets like the robust Hard Disc-based location recorders with multi track options, dolly boom recording gear with greater flexibility and access to reach any point of the shooting space, or application software like Pro-Tools with super-precise control over each recorded clip. Post-production techniques also experience a faster technological development in editing, mixing and in projection/reproduction.

However, developments in a given technology do not necessarily imply an improvement in the ability to achieve a creative standard. Often the availability of a number of technological options distracts us into a futile and sterile quest for perfection. Working with unlimited tracks in the digital domain, a sound practitioner gets fascinated but also somewhat confused by the innumerable possibilities of going about a particular task. Technology tries to overpower him while he loses identity as a decision maker. "We liked the restriction of 24 tracks because it forces you to make decisions." This is what sound engineer Robbie Adams said[1] on recording U2's album *Zooropa.*

Within this copy and paste norms of work in film sound design, however, sound elements can be controlled with utmost precision. On location, multiple options of keeping number of tracks of ambient or environmental sounds, sync sound effects and dialogue can open up the scope of recording a larger number of sound elements and working with multiple layer of sound.

Whether it is multilayered or single-layered scheme of sound capturing and designing, Indian cinema has *generally* seemed to be hostile to environmental sound spectrum as ambience on married soundtrack even when a film is shot on location. On a location, sound is usually controlled as it enters film space and in a film set, sound is limited to mere voice and sync effects, making construction of a soundtrack completely dependent on asynchronous means of sound sourcing such as available stock sound. In the process, film sound, instead of representing the established locale, drifts away from documenting the sound of an original space, Sound making goes closer to a synthetic design by a sound operator working under the specter of mechanical craftsmanship; the sound practitioner's religion of open hearing loses validity.

That sound so far has been marginalized by the visual aspects of the cinematic space is no new knowledge to the sound practitioner. Sound has been taken for granted as a mere appendage of the world of experience that cinema produces. It has hardly ever been conceived as having an independent, distinct identity of its own with depth of field, focus, and lensing, which could acquire a separate entity as soundscape. Sound has not carried a parallel narrative, which it can, but has merely played a supportive role to the story-telling. It is rarely a complete aural journey to the listener with closed eyes in the cinema. Right from the beginning of sound-films, sound in Indian cinema has been associated with culture- specific use of songs and orchestral background music. The compulsory song sequences and typical background score take up most of the space of the soundtrack. The remaining layers go to dialogue of the characters. Performed voices and hyper-real sound effects float on the background score, and song sequences are the relief points/punctuation marks within the narrative: this has been the usual structure of soundtrack scheme for Indian cinema since the *talkies* began.

Now, when sync sound recording has found a sort of revival, the location sound technician, with immense power to capture even the micro-sounds,

still depends on the signal of decision makers in the hierarchy of film crew. The whole ambience of shooting is driven by an invariable script that is bound to tell a *story*. From the location recording to post production stages this scheme of 'story telling' has been maintained with utmost loyalty by the film technicians. The practice of sound in Indian cinema developed its own aesthetics of providing a support system to the hundred years of story-telling on celluloid without giving attention to the creative possibilities of ambience or to the task of documenting environmental sound of a location.

A creative use of ambient or environmental sound can now derive a new authenticity in the surround sound syntax of sound mixing and reproduction. In surround sound mixing process different channels of sound are directed to different speakers present at the reproduction end of the projection house. This is made possible by a kind of encoding and subsequent decoding of the channel routing that a surround sound system consists of. There are dialogues, effects and background music (if we forget about songs) as separate channels of sound. A sound technician's job is to send these channels of sound to different speakers according to the wish of the production head of the film. For example, industry norms are bent on sending dialogue to the centre speakers while music moves to the surround speakers. To speak of the viability of a sound practitioner's artistic scope with multi-channel sound let me quote reputed American sound designer David Randall Thom from his entry on 'Sound-Article-List'

> 'A…mono track is always better than a mediocre 5.1 track (if the channels don't hold significance) no matter what kind of movie (film) it is; …some of the filmmakers are using 5.1 channels because they think there is something magic about the technology itself. …More channels don't always equal better art (if they don't have anything to say). If the sound is artfully done, and if the structure of the movie is friendly to sound, then the number of channels almost doesn't matter in the success of the track. Some of the directors I have worked with understand the relationship between images and sound very

> profoundly, much more deeply than I do. On the other hand, most of the directors with lots of films to their credit are approximately as naive about the use of sound in film as the average person on the street'[2].

If ambience or location environmental sound finds its due place within these expanded channels, one could represent a specific locale on film space with depth, details and clarity in a 'surround' image of film experience. In this range of sound design, environmental sound can take on importance, and its depth, spectral colours and contexts can emerge as signifiers, representing a visible and audible world. Film soundscape, done this way, will no more ignore the ambience of a given or intended space, either actual location or plastic film set. In case of location shooting, microphone will pick up distant sound objects outside the hearing range of scripts, and register them. In case of shooting in sets, layers of aural values would be added on the sound track while reconstructing the locale; separate ambience recordings associated with constructed space will be incorporated in the place of stock sound.

But these are as yet mere speculations. Location ambience remains unattended for most of the film productions. A vibrant and vast sound field gets lost on soundtrack in the process of film making. From this perspective, the history of film sound is a history of lost sounds. It is the medium's failure to document aural details of an active sound space within a time that becomes the focus of historical evolution of film sound.

That old Chevrolet, again…

What stands out in the soundscape of *Ajantrik* is the sound from the engine of that old Chevrolet with its fragile body and wind horn. Sound from tree branches in the woods reflects off the *Pather Panchali* soundtrack. The vendors and the palanquin bearers on the street in *Charulata* establish their presence and stay in our memory of the film. They transcend the status of

being mere sounding objects to become sonic images, play a vital role to structure our mental topography of a locale and our associations with it that leave indelible marks in our memory. I have visited *Ajantrik* many a time since my first viewing, but what remains unchanged on every such occasion is the expectation of sound and songs from the Oraon villages. At every viewing of *Pather Panchali* Indir Thakrun's death sequence brings back anticipation of the sound of close friction of tree branches. Sounds that stand out in memory are sounds that strike our hearing with its uncanny-ness; uncanny because they rebel against an otherwise flat and plastic surface of film soundtrack.

They rebel and they die. That Chevrolet is no more a sounding object from our environment; this old model from the 1920's doesn't appear any more on streets. The sound of Oraon songs is almost lost from the landscape of south Bihar. The Oraon community is already forgetting their own tunes, their songs consigned to the status of an endangered oral tradition. Street hawkers from North Kolkata do not any more sound like they do on the *Charulata* soundtrack, the palanquin is gone. On the location of *Pather Panchali*, new multi-storied complexes are coming up; sound from the woods is exiled from suburban Kolkata's changing soundscape.

These are sounds forever lost, no more sounding in the evaporating present. How did the sound die? Is it simply because the object stopped producing sound? Isn't it an inevitable aural gesture that died and went into oblivion? Sounds of hand rickshaw is no more sounding the proletariat's bell and the sound of the heavy DC fan hanging from colonial walls is fading away. The sound of the AM receiver is replaced by evening soap operas and the evening soap operas by FM handsets. Sound changes and it keeps the record of the inevitable transformations occurring around us. Metanarratives like globalization are recorded through their aural associations. A sound that is lost also means a loss of its cultural content. It can be perceived even as a loss of historical value.

The lost sounds should be preserved somewhere (In a dead archive?) Probably, some of them are still alive in the living collective called cinema, because cinema provided the scope to record sound on film. In fact, there was no other medium which could record sound from a landscape so extensively.

In *Pather Panchali* when the sweetmeat vendor Srinivas enters the village the sound of his archaic chime is heard and thus preserved on film; *Meghe Dhaka Tara* has kept for us the sound of steam-engine of 1960. Yet, there are very few examples of this registration. Thousands of films made since *Alam Ara* could have documented the changing sound of our world, but by design they lost much more than what they captured. Sounds are forgotten for this reason in the film age, for our failure to register them.

Film sound *could* become a collective archive of sounds if it could pay attention to the aspect of sound as an independent existence in actuality. Cinema cannot serve as a documentation of a changing society without recording its aural states. Film making with its own compulsion of marginalizing sound's scope over its development in the last hundred years, has by and large missed out the possibility of registering an aural society. Our sound memory does not represent the repository of lost sounds.

Lost sounds gather in our collective unconscious, they strive for representation within a shadowy area of our remembrance. Sounds forgotten should be excavated, to be re-read as cultural history. The lost sounds should appear to us as entities eager to be rescued from an unheard medium of consciousness; they demand the recognition of the eternal return of sounding objects.

References:

1 Paul Tingen: Recording U2, Audio Media (April 1994)

2 David Randall Thom in online forum Sound-Articles-List (13 May 2004). Read his articles at filmsound.org.

Useful essays and websites

Moving pictures that talk: the early history of film sound' by Mark Ulano.

Filmsound.org

The Emergence of German Sound Film

The Early Talkie

Sound recording research at Bells Lab

Steven E. Schoenherr's *Recording Technology History* online resource