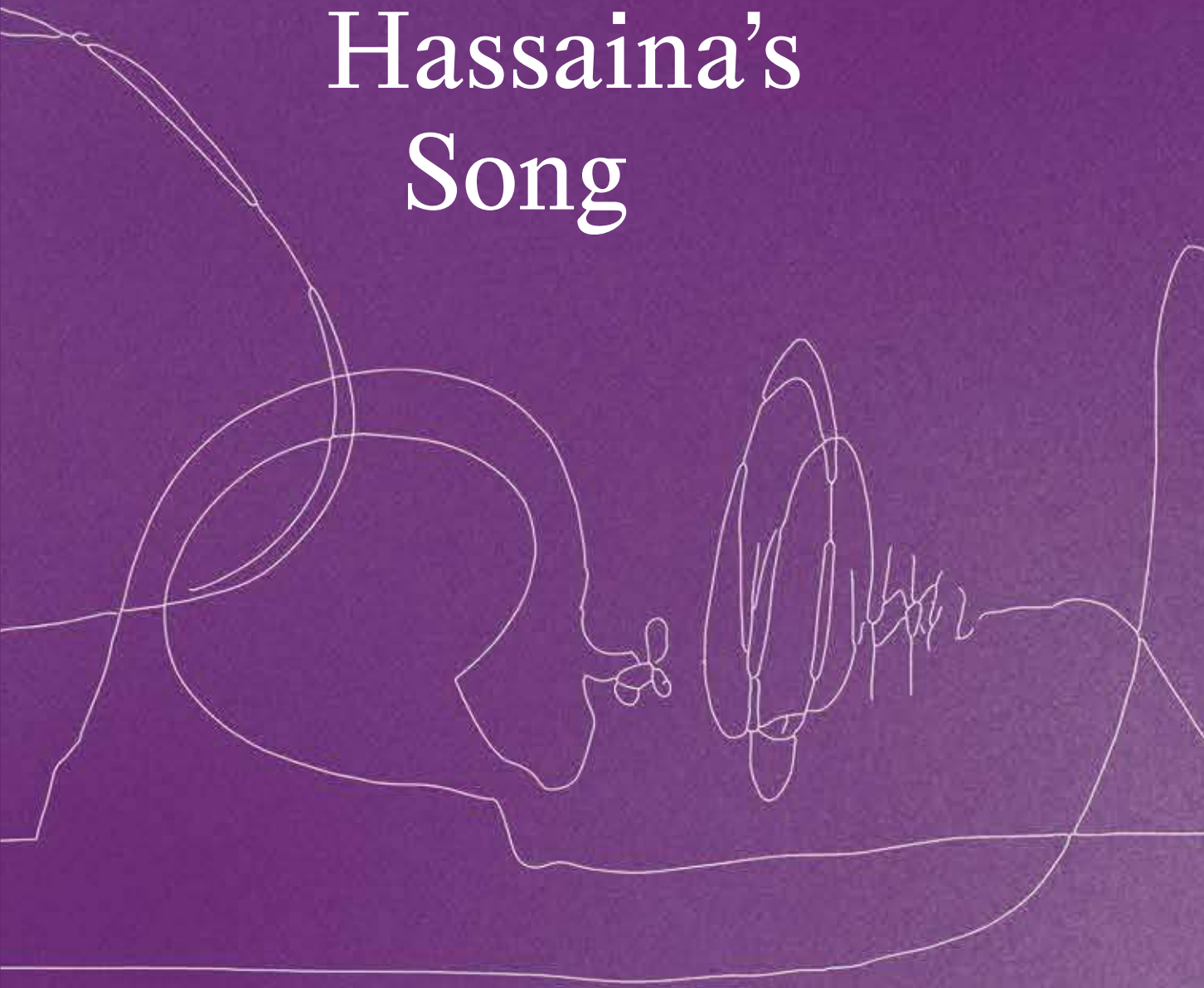


The
Search
for

Suvani Suri

Hassaina's
Song



and
Other
Phonophanies

'In the phonographic realm of the dead, spirits
are always present.'¹

— Friedrich Kittler

LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA



COMPILED AND EDITED BY

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VOL. V.

INDO-ARYAN FAMILY

EASTERN GROUP

PART I.

SPECIMENS OF THE

BENGALI AND ASSAMESE LANGUAGES

Fig 1. Cover of the Linguistic Survey of India, Volume V, Part 1

I first learnt of the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) audio archives through an online news report — a piece I stumbled upon nearly a decade after it was published. ‘Rare audio of Raj-era linguistic survey now just a click away’,² the story announced. Tucked away in a server of the Digital South Asia Library at the University of Chicago, the audio recordings had been digitised from a heap of gramophone discs found in a long-lost and forgotten trunk in the British Library in London. The discovery of the dusty records was purely accidental during the process of shifting the library’s collections to their new premises.

It struck me that alongside the records, there were countless other ‘firsts’ stacked in there. The publication divulged that ‘...it was the first to report in 2006 about the efforts to digitise the archives, which has been put online by the Digital South Asia Library recently’. Rewinding further back in time, I landed at this first news report on the LSI by *The Times of India* — ‘Century-old sounds just a click away’³ it echoed, in anticipation of the headline that was to be, only a few years later. A compressed history of firsts, and a series of chance encounters in speech, reproduced and looped all over again.

The LSI, the inaugural survey of its kind, was an ambitious colonial project spearheaded by George A Grierson, an Irish linguist and administrator in British India. While it was conceptualised as early as 1894, with an intent to capture the diversity of languages and dialects in the subcontinent, the actual process of collection only took off only around 1914. An assortment of voices, sounds, and utterances from all across the subcontinent were captured as a part of the venture. Spanning more than a decade with intermittent halts, pauses, and disruptions, the challenging process of recording, transcription, and cataloguing voices across the territory finally came to a close in 1928. The mammoth project generated a rich collection of language samples in the form of songs, poems, music, tales, folklore, and above all, a multitude of voices.

A sense of wonder and curiosity got the better of me, initiating a preoccupation with the archives — to track their journey across the region, and trace their trails in a bid to hear the voices and stories embedded within them.

Browsing the web archive, I tried to make sense of the list of linguistic classifications, descriptions, sets, and subsets, based on region, year, narrator’s province, and duration.

97 recorded languages and dialects.
11 volumes.
242 gramophone discs.

As I scanned through the list of digitised records from the survey, I wondered — what is an archive of languages? When does it become one? What can it preserve and subsequently unearth? How does it feel, breathe, and sense? From the

1. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 72.
2. Akshaya Mukul, ‘Rare audio of Raj-era linguistic survey now just a click away,’ *The Times of India*, October 15, 2010.
3. Akshaya Mukul, ‘Century old sounds just a click away,’ *The Times of India*, July 19, 2006.



Fig 2. DSAL Wayback Machine

moment of utterance to being seized as material, what does it register and endure? In the process, how does it hold and keep an account of stockpiled, segregated, meta-tagged, and organised languages of labour and bodies, claim and extraction, capture and retrieval?

The very *first time* I entered the archive and played a slice of a sound from it, it swallowed me whole. As I swirled and pirouetted around in it, I could hear the room that the recording took place in. I could smell the shellac in the air, and taste the unease and hesitation of the speaker facing the recording apparatus, perhaps for the very first time. Clenched fists, sweaty palms, gentle tremors in the voice, a fleeting stutter, a light wobble.

The record was titled, *Beauty of the beloved and the longing of the lover* from the Hyderabad district, recorded in 1919.

Recording Number: 5702AK
Play excerpt

In the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, published in 1837, Charles Babbage speculated that spoken words leave permanent impressions in the air,⁴ even though they become inaudible after time, possibly due to the transfer of motion between particles.

The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said, or woman whispered.⁵ There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest as well as with the latest sighs of mortality, stand forever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle the testimony of man's changeful will. But if the air we breathe is the never-failing historian of the sentiments we have uttered, earth, air, and ocean are the eternal witnesses of the acts we have done.

I returned to the cacophony of my questions: whose voices were brought into this massive archive? What about the uninvited excesses that may have trickled in, puncturing their way through and slinking into the material? What were the vocalisations being mined for? Can the process of extracting and canning languages be merely one of preservation? As they stay locked in material archives for decades, do they change? Ripen? Shimmer? Mature? Mutate?

Caught in this tumultuous whirlwind of questions, I played the record once more, and then again. Play, pause, repeat. As the playhead moved, I heard the glimmer of another voice within the crackles of the recording. Further ahead, a faint whisper emerged from the depths of the hisses, fuzz, and static. Snatches of words, mutterings, and susurrations filled

the air. Like wisps of smoke, the fragments appeared and disappeared. In the crackle were murmurs of time, 'unsettling the very distinction between surface and depth, between background and foreground'.⁶ The delayed voices and inchoate remnants of the speakers' desires melted into one another, pulsating, syncopating, and straining to be audible.

With the next dizzying repetition of the many that evening, I was transported back to the room of the recording, and the scene of the captured sound being played back to the speaker of the language or the narrator of the tale. I thought I saw the disc glisten as it caught wet residues of the voices and aleatoric resonances drifting in the air, producing the undulations of a crackle within the joins of its inscriptions. The imprints of a nervous sigh, the impatient clucking of a tongue, a cloaked laugh, bursts of broken babble — it was all impressed on the surface of the disc.

In her essay, 'The Miner's Ear',⁷ Rosalind Morris writes of the significance of overhearing. She says, 'To understand the history and nature of gold mining in South Africa and elsewhere, one must listen for different and false or "accidental" resonances, the mere coincidence of frequencies that amplify each other.'

If one were to attentively listen to the false notes and incidental resonances contained in these multilingual samples, many more stories would tumble out of the crackles in the shellac. These minor tales would tell of the misgivings of the speaker, misadventures of the operator, confusions of the listener(s), entangled with structural violence of a society divided by caste, class, and religious lines while being exploited by the colonial powers.

At times, the resonant impulses of the rooms in which they played, would cancel and tune out certain other frequencies in the recordings themselves. Appearances, emergences, subtractive, and additive processes altered the field of the linguistic data, the capture of which was a promise of supreme administrative power. However, the territorial mapping and mining of the linguistic regions of the subcontinent was to yield not only precious knowledge of the subjugated but also embed the language specimens with communal and ideological charge that would (re)shape future nationalisms.⁸



Fig 3.
Beauty of the beloved and the longing of the lover, LSI archives, Courtesy: DSAL Wayback machine

4. Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, (London: John Murray, 1837) 109-117.

5. *Ibid.*, 112.

6. Mark Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', *Dancecult* 5, No 2 (2013): 42-55.

7. Rosalind C. Morris, 'The Miner's Ear', *Transition*, no. 98 (2008): 96-115.

8. Javed Majeed, 'Grierson and Hindu Nationalism', *Nation and Region in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* (New York: Routledge, 2019) 147.

1. Grierson's Dream

In some ways, by drawing attention to India as a linguistic region per se, the Survey was at odds with the colonial state's conceptualisation of India, in which religious and caste differences were key in its understanding of Indian society. LSI's mapping of Indian languages was also at odds with the colonial state's cartographical imagination.⁹ It complicated the notion of India as a single, coherent, self-referential geography...

It is said that George A Grierson had a dream. In the dream, his voice exploded and expanded in a way that could take on the shape of all possible voices that exist, or that have ever existed, in the subcontinent. Every voice spoke a specific language and belonged to a particular region. As he went around far and wide, encountering, gathering, and emulating all the voices he could find, his appetite to mine for more grew. Until, in his state of hypnagogia, he heard a voice, a singing voice, that he simply couldn't simulate. The song persisted in his dreams, and the urge to locate its source grew stronger. However, his quest also involved the challenging task of being able to synthesise this acousmatic voice — to bring it to life and give it a form, a body.

Recording Number: 5527AK
Play Excerpt

The etymology of both 'survey' and 'surveil' happen to share common origins in the French and Latin root words 'sur': over, and 'veiller': to keep watch.

This ubiquitous voice that resounds through Grierson's dream listens widely and intently, shape-shifts and reproduces all that it hears, harking back to Borges' 'The Library of Babel' — a library that comprises every single book that has ever been written.¹⁰ Borges reinterprets the biblical legend of Babel into a library, a few decades after Grierson attempts to instantiate his dream into the survey.

The origin myth of the Tower of Babel is about the deliberate fragmentation of a common shared language that is spoken by all the people of the world into innumerable distinct ones — a strategy by God to block people from coming together to blasphemously build a tower all the way to heaven. Thus, the people of the world are divided into multiple linguistic groups, and struggle to communicate with one another.

Returning to Borges' library, there is also another story about 'a map of the empire whose size was that of the empire, and which coincided point for point with it.'¹¹ The imagination of this

precise cartography that suffices only insofar as it generates a map of the exact scale as the empire itself, coincides with the voracious colonial appetite to swallow whole and ingest every possible morsel of language that can be heard in the empire. Though the desire to trace out this map of vernacular speech was laden with the promise of the ultimate mastery and control over the people, there were limits to the digestibility and regurgitation of this kind of data. In one of the volumes, Grierson expresses his consternation about the unstable borders of linguistic identities.

What is wanted is definite information regarding a state of affairs which is essentially indefinite, a want which it is manifestly impossible to supply. It is most nearly supplied by selecting fixed points, where, at each, we are certain that a well-defined language is spoken, and, taking these as the foundations of our hypothesis, by drawing arbitrary lines showing the imaginary boundaries which do not exist, but which give the needed definite impression of the approximate area in which each recognised form of speech is spoken.¹²

Consistent with the Borgesian device of the object that attempts to hold and foreclose infinite thought, was Grierson dreaming up an object voice that could speak of all the possible ways in which to chart out new and infinitesimal routes for extending the empire's access and reach? The logic of this voice rests upon the ultimate degree of comprehension, legibility, and reproducibility of far-ranging sonorous territories as a means to arrive at supreme efficiency. But the indefatigable surveyor's impulse to extract, capture and bottle up diverse knowledge(s) and discrete codes of communication gets interrupted by the elusive euphonic song that escapes. Within this cartography of voices constituting this library of languages, the unrecognised territory of the singing voice is an excess that must be classified, lest it cuts through the colonial undertaking and supplants it with another, producing an unstoppable scattering. Is there another anachronistic story of Babel, narrated and hidden somewhere in the oral archives?

The second part is like a reversing dictionary. Here we have languages arranged according to Family and Group, and under each dialect is recorded the name of each Local Area in which it is spoken. In each case the localities in which the dialect is indigenous are distinguished from those in which it is spoken by non-domiciled immigrants.

These Lists are being prepared with as great regard for accuracy as is possible, but they have the defects of their origin. The original returns have been prepared by persons with local knowledge, but who do not pretend to be Philologists. They may be taken as representing what intelligent local people consider to be the languages of their own neighbourhood. They give names, but they are names only. We are told that Hindūstāni is spoken in such and such a place, but we are not told what is meant by the word "Hindūstāni." It may be the language which Europeans call Hindūstāni, but it may be something else.

9. Javed Majeed, *Nation and Region in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 200.



Fig 4. A King's Dream, Record 5527, LSI Archives, Courtesy: Europa

10. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel,' *Collected Fictions*, Trans. Andrew Hurley, (New York: Penguin, 1998) 112-118.

11. *Ibid.*, 325.

12. George A. Grierson, *LSI*, Vol. 5: Indo-Aryan Family (Eastern Group), Pt. 1: Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese Languages, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent, Government Press, 1903) 18.

Fig 5. Screenshot of 'Highlights Introduction section', LSI, VO, (i), Courtesy: archive.org

2. The Search for Hassaina's Song

Each listener, recorded in the archive, is preserved in the surface and depth of the crackles, in the grooves and cavities of the sound objects, in the tessellated soundscapes of the static and the noise.

A few days back, I was watching the documentary *Sisters with Transistors* (2020). As I floated through the narrative, piecing together the radical moves in electronic music by a host of spectacular women composers — the image of Meena Narayanan flashed in my mind. Working as an audio engineer in the first talkie recording studio in Chennai, Sree Srinivasa Cinetone (Sound City), she pioneered experiments in sound and analogue composition as early as the 1930s. Having worked on many films including *Srinivasa Kalayanam* (1934) and *Viswamitra* (1936), she was on the lookout for expanding her field of practice and technical expertise with the limited access to audio technologies available at that time in the region.

The voice of Gauhar Jaan, among the earliest voices to be recorded in early twentieth century India, was one that she would listen to often — her all-time earworm. One afternoon as Meena played her track *Ras ke bhare noore nain* (sparkling eyes that are welled up with a sweet extract), she felt parts of the record mutate into another singing voice that was uncannily similar and yet different in tone and texture from Gauhar Jaan's. To another ear, they might have felt the same. Bits and pieces of the other song kept appearing between the recesses and cracks of Gauhar's thumri and started to ring in Meena's ears. In the wake of this recurring incident, her search for the unidentified song and voice began; a search that would take her to various studios, musicians, technicians, and recordists. The task of digging for the song among the crates and inventories of records filled up her time in between her own commissioned work and explorations. A few months later, as she sat reading her uncle CV Raman's research on whispering galleries,¹³ she came across Golghar, the granary in Bankipore, known for its extraordinary acoustic features due to its circular construction.

Physicist CV Raman, known for his ground-breaking theorisation of the scattering of light, was also thinking through the scattering of sound. In his 1922 paper on whispering galleries, he describes the peculiar acoustic design of the old government granary in Bankipore, India. Built in 1783, it is

shaped like a beehive, and never quite fulfilled its utilitarian function of storing grain owing to the loss from dampness, rats, and insects. Raman notes of the sound inside, 'It is chiefly remarkable for its reverberating echo, which answers to the slightest sound, a whisper at one end being repeated at the other.'¹⁴

The granary had recently been converted to a temporary store house for shellac records that were being produced in Calcutta and were in transit en route to England. Meena's penchant for sonic wonders got the better of her, and she decided to make her way to Patna for a recce. Armed with a journal and the incessant ringing of the song in her ears, she reached Bankipore. Once there, she walked around, exploring the space, and trying to locate the 'accidental resonances and the configuration of the everlasting echo that would appear when the listener stood at the centre and uttered a syllable.'¹⁵ The gloomy and dark space, with its bare brick walls and commanding height, left her feeling dwarfed, and the resounding of her footsteps thronged the otherwise empty space. On hearing about a section of the gallery that was in use for storing phonograph discs, she instantly asked to be guided there. Overcome with curiosity, she browsed through old and damaged shellac discs that may have been lying in storage for years, unclaimed, unclassified, forgotten, perhaps even damaged in a permanent state of transit. Nestled within one of the many vaults, an almost-empty cabinet stared at her. Labelled LSI, the only material it contained was a lone record tagged *Recording Number 6838AK* — Hassaina's song. She requested the technician to play it for her. As the familiar song wafted in and filled up the space, reflecting off the walls in distorted ways, the realisation struck her. She knew the song from the crackles and fissures of Gauhar Jaan's recording. The low undertones of Hassaina's voice were strikingly amplified by the curious acoustics of the granary.

A Song

Language Family: Indo-Aryan central group

Language: Mēwātī

Recording Number: 6838AK

Narrator: Hassaina

Narrator District: Delhi

Narrator Province: Delhi

Year: 1920



Fig 6. Meena Narayanan from News Report – 'India's first woman sound engineer, unsung yet', The Hindu, B. Kolappan, 2019.

13. C.V. Raman, 'On Whispering Galleries,' Bulletin for the Indian Association for Cultivation of Science, 7, 1922, 159-172.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.



Fig 7. Golghar, Himanshu Manne, 2018

3. Palate Tectonics: The Bankipore Episode

A strange event was reported in Patna, during the monsoons of 1921. One day the keeper of the records at the Bankipore archive woke up to a sharp whistling sound. Arose a thick sibilance of the kind that was inescapable, filling up the entire volume of the space. A sheet of hushed murmurs slowly expanded into a cloud of whispers, stretching, contorting, and reflecting off the walls, circular roof, and steep staircases.

The keeper went deep into the burrows of the granary, trying to locate the source of the sounds that clung to the walls and followed him, all the while evading his reach. Just when he sensed he was close to capturing the source, there would be a momentary muffling, causing him to lose the trace, and then from nowhere the susurrations would start to shadow him again. He started to mumble to himself, involuntarily almost, in an attempt to mask, or at best diminish, the murmurs that had enveloped him. With that, the levels and sources of the sibilance multiplied. Canned whispers leaked out into the atmosphere — the voices, songs and spillages from the oral archives mockingly bounced around the room. At times the voices seemed to emanate from within the walls, and at other times spiralling up the staircase or skimming along the floor, only to settle in a quiet, dark corner. Soon he found himself losing control of the movements in his own mouth.

The susurrations aren't digestible anymore. What helps is to not speak, to resist inducing voiced vibrations. He clasped his mouth shut. Tightly clamped. The levels reduced; the sibilance became dimmer. But the voices spread manically, their resonances still floating, origins untraceable. Lists were being read out meticulously. Panic-struck, he exited the space. The sounds ceased. Never again was a record keeper hired.

Many years passed. The record keeper's daughter, while travelling in London, happened to meet with the archaeologist TC Lethbridge, who was postulating the Stone Tape theory for his ongoing research. Taking off from Charles Babbage's speculations that spoken words left permanent traces in air albeit inaudible, Leithbridge was attempting to investigate how natural environments, materials, and architectural features hold or 'record' sonic events and the ways in which these acoustic memories get activated or 'replayed' through the presence of specific human agents and psychic energies.

Finding the hyperlinkages between her father's accounts and the hypothesis in development, she narrated the tale to Lethbridge. A team of audio forensic experts and archaeoacousticians was soon sent to the site for digging and tuning in. Amongst a few remnant records, bags, and papers, what was also found was a set of ear plugs, subsequently shipped off to London along with the rest of the material.

Recently, when I saw images and plans of the granary, it struck me that the architectonics of the space seemed to be constructed like the inside of a mouth. The valleys and ridges, nooks and crannies — all contribute to the sounding, shaping, and amplification of certain phonetics and syllables. Vocalisations that are produced due to the recurrence of lingual notations, in fact, over a period of time, start to alter the internal surfaces and shape of the palate irreversibly. The landscapes of the mouth are both forming and formed by the soundscapes of spoken language. The formulation of Palate Tectonics by DC Barker analysed the voice as the prolonged phylogenetic impact product of the collision between the vertical spinal-axis and the roof of the mouth,¹⁶ in the course of the evolution towards erect posture. In the spatial imitation of the vocal apparatus, and in the presence of the phonograph operator, the granary then became the crash site of the repressed extralingual phonetics, activated, and released from the linguistic records.

16. D.C. Barker, 'Palate Tectonics,' *Plutonics* 10, no. 12, 1992.





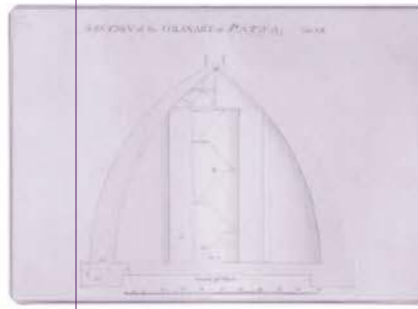
Architexturez South Asia
Golghar at Bankipur | AÇ South Asia



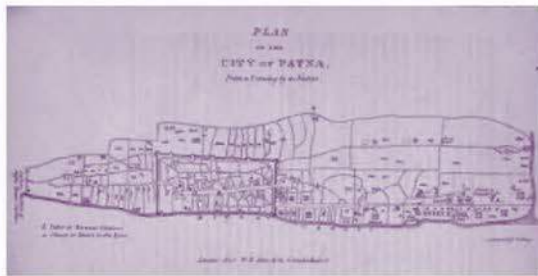
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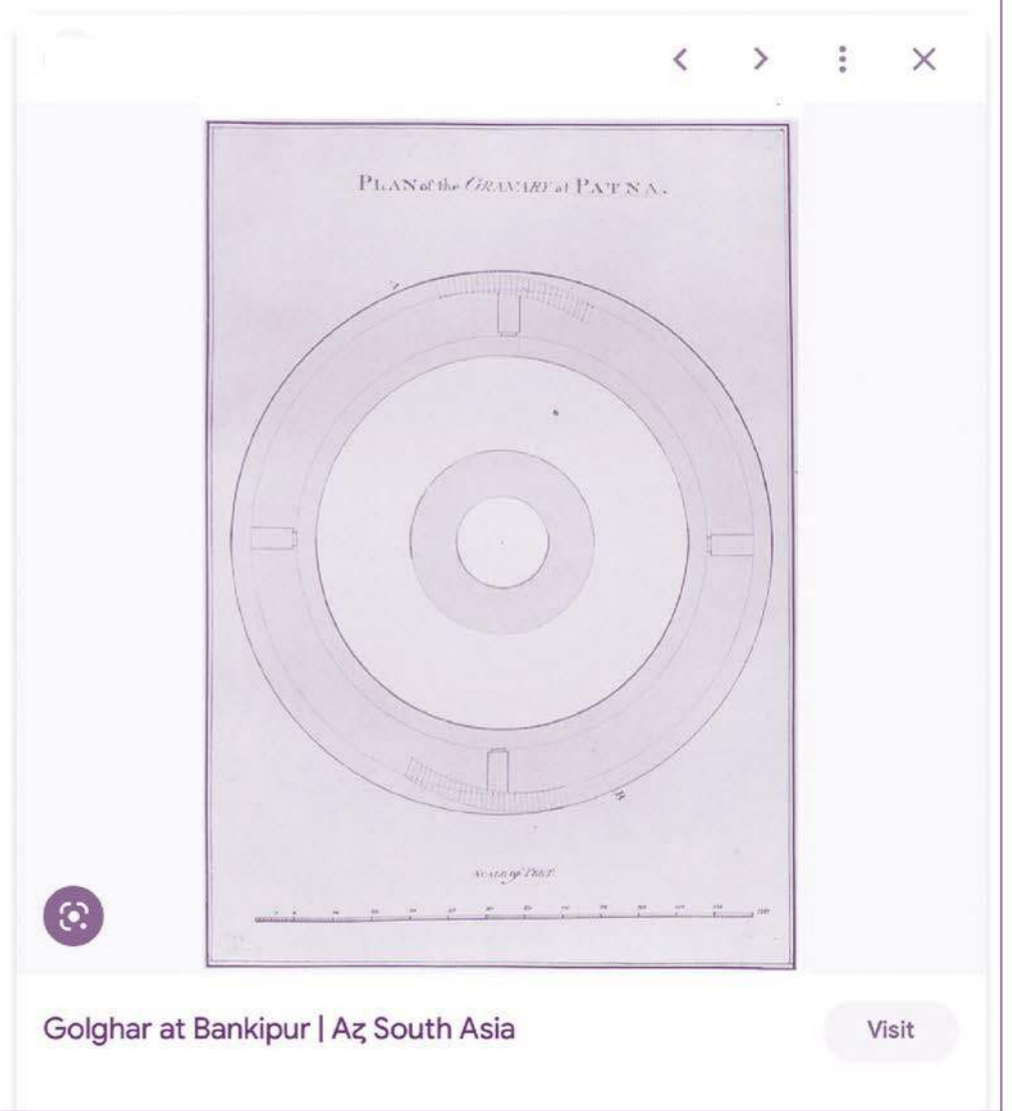
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Visit

4. Lossless Transmissions I: The Errant Ear Plugs



Fig 8.
Bronze Ear Plugs, Arter
Museum Archives, 2022.

What connects the two words *whistle* and *whisper*, other than the fact that etymologically they have a common root...*hwi* — of imitative origin? Aren't both, in a way, summons? Invocations of a kind that slip under the breath and extend beyond the range of audibility permitted by proximity?

In Mark Katz's text, 'Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music', he outlines seven ideas that make up 'phonograph effects',¹⁷ a term he mobilises to describe several of the phonograph's influences evident in musical, cultural, and social life: tangibility, portability, invisibility, repeatability, temporality, manipulability, and receptivity. As explained by Katz, 'A "Phonograph Effect" is any change in musical behaviour — listening, performing, or composing — that has arisen in response to sound-recording technology. In other words, it is any observable manifestation of recording's influence.' For example, temporality refers to how sound is rendered into an object delimiting music into chunks, thus affecting musicians' playing time and giving rise to specific musical genres as a consequence. The typical length of today's pop songs — usually about three minutes — is a phonograph effect of the original records, he explains. Though while developing his catalogue of 'phonograph effects', Mark Katz misses out on the discriminatory predispositions, inequities, and power structures that creep into and reassert themselves through each of these manifestations of capturing sound.

tangibility of consumership
the portability of biases
invisibility of bodies
repeatability of privileges
temporality of resistance
receptivity of hegemony
manipulability of access

An anecdote in an article covering the discovery of the Linguistic Survey of India tuned into the transfer of these divisive truths. Nestled deep within hard-coded social structures engulfing the recorded object, these realities found a way to inscribe themselves into this recording taken by George Grierson:

The scholar Ganganath Jha, who was approached for the Sanskrit reading, was scandalised to learn that a 'mlechha' would be privy to his chaste Sanskrit. A demand was made for a certifiably Brahmin gramophone operator. The Raj, almost as unbending as Brahmins, refused. A compromise was reached: Jha sat in a room and spoke into a large horn-like object that projected his voice into another room where the operator sat. Communication between the two was by means of a complicated system of switches to ensure that the operator didn't physically hear the Sanskrit.¹⁸ And that was enough to assuage the Brahmin guilt about speaking Sanskrit into a device that held the power to broadcast it to the world.

An appendage to the above account was brought to my attention after a little more digging. The source requested to remain anonymous. It turns out that other than being asked to be in a separate room, the operator was also given heavy metallic ear plugs to wear, just to eliminate all possibility of him hearing any bits and parts of a language reserved for only the caste groups at the top of the graded hierarchy. However, the sophisticated arrangement ended up coupling with the metallic alloy in the earplugs to create a corrupt transmission. Like the principle of a diaphonie in which parallel harmonies are interlocked together, or a diaphoneme where dialectical variants can be in tune with one another, the superimposed transfer of phonological units via acoustic signal was a recipe for corrosion, slippages, misrecognition and overhearings.

This unintended synchronicity rendered the tympanic membrane extra sensitive to vibrations beyond the legible range, thus transforming the ear plugs into a pair of extra receivers that could pick the inaudible frequencies and hushed tones from the other room. Whispers that were not transmittable by the apparatus alone could now be heard with utmost clarity. Like Leonora Carrington's *sinuous hearing trumpet*,¹⁹ they could catch utterances that were far away, muffled, bent at the corners, or twisted beyond recognition.

While the actual translation remained inaudible to the operator, what he could overhear was a subdued conversation between Ganganath Jha and George A Grierson. Over the next hour, an intense dialogue unfolded around the tectonics of the colonial language, artistries of voice, geological shifts mapped to thoracic impulses, and the intricacy of vocal arrangements predetermined by Varnas and caste 'purity', as a parameter for lossless transmission into the future. As the gramophone operator tuned into the dialogue by means of the ear plugs, he simultaneously found a way to record this channel separately. Distorting and compressing the surreptitious track over the original, he stacked away the coded cans for posterity.

18. Sohini Chattopadhyay, 'Voices from Colonial India,' OPEN Magazine web, 25 Feb, 2011.

19. Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*, trans. Helen Byatt, (Boston: The Exact Change, 1996).



Fig 9. Illustration of the evolving capabilities of music storage over the years

5. The Lucky Voice

(The Lucky Voice is adapted from the story An Unlucky Face, recording no. 5706AK.)

In the introduction to the LSI digital archive, Professor Shahid Amin notes:

The Survey was primarily to be a collection of specimens, 'a standard passage was to be selected for purposes of comparison'. Its 'foundation' was comprised of three specimens for every language and dialect: the standard translation, the passage collected locally for the full idiomatic range, and a list of words and sentences originally devised by the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1866. The template passage was to be 'a version of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, with slight verbal alterations to avoid Indian prejudices'. The parable was chosen, Grierson coyly remarked in a footnote, because 'it contains the three personal pronouns, most of the cases found in the declension of nouns, and the present, past, and future tenses of the verb'. Specimens of this crucial first passage used for comparative analysis, were then not the writing down of how the 'locals' spontaneously told this biblical tale in their own tongues. 'What was ... aimed at was the acquisition of specimens in the home language of each translator'.²⁰ Those literate in English rendered it in their 'native tongue' from the English Bible. Others accessed it by locating a version which they could read in another Indian language from a volume containing all the known versions of the parable in Indian languages specially printed for this purpose.²¹ In a crucial sense, this monumental, authentic digest of Indian languages was a project of recurring translation by bilingual Indians.

Recently, a friend narrated a rather interesting exchange with a taxi driver in Turkey. Visiting for a brief period, she was struggling to make herself understood in English. One morning, she hailed a taxi to her friend's home. As she attempted to share the location with the driver in a clouded mix of English and the little Turkish she had learnt during her stay, he looked at her bemused and said, 'Don't worry, I speak English. In fact, I speak every language of the world. All of them, you know. I am the lucky voice that you have had the fortune to find this morning.'

With that, he flicked open the complex multi-screen setup rigged to his dashboard. A translation app appeared on one of the screens while the other device displayed navigation in Turkish. The apparatus mediated the conversation between

them, coherently, save for the intermittent interruptions to the network and server.

In the *Dictionary of the Untranslatables*, 'to translate' is explained as:

...in the generally accepted sense of 'passing from one language to another,' derives from a relatively late French adaptation of the Latin verb *traducere*, which literally means 'to lead across' and whose application is both more general and vaguer than translation itself. We do well to keep in mind this initial, indefinite vagueness attached to the verbs we translate as the verb 'to translate,' verbs that always also designate something additional or something other than the passage from one language to another.²²

An afterimage of Grierson's dream appeared as I listened to her account. I imagined myself sitting in the cab. The grin on his face felt oddly comforting as our conversations seamlessly flowed, only momentarily delayed by the app's interface.

'Have you heard of the Parable of the Prodigal Son?' I hear myself asking the driver. Is it not curious that this biblical tale of that which is lost and found again was used as a medium of translation for recording languages and dialects — many of which are not heard anymore?

He pores over the question and then seems to deflect a response by asking me to play a song in my mother tongue. His face lights up as an old disco number fills up the cab. He starts humming along to the song, the words forming themselves as he loses himself. The whispers start to bubble up within the insides of the taxi. The multiple screens go off and the translation system shuts down. The gyrating pulse of the song takes over.

The taxi service is called *Babil*, Turkish for chaos.

Meanwhile, glossolalia, known as speaking in tongues, continues to plague the latest line of GAG conversational voice agents, imparted with the ability to clone, comprehend and speak all languages for supreme efficiency and legibility. The online community help page is flooded with requests on how to get one's voice assistant to speak in reverse.

This is how I heard Hassaina's song once again.

20. George A. Grierson, LSI, Vol. I, Pt. 1, first pub. 1927, reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 17-18.

21. Shahid Amin, Introduction to the LSI Digital Archives, DSAL, University of Chicago, 2008.

22. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, (New York: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1139.



Fig 10. Inside the Babil Taxi, Istanbul, 2022, Courtesy: Alla

6. Parable of the Lost and Found: In translation

'The gramophone recordings from the Linguistic Survey of India are among a few of the Digitised Asiatic Library resources that have been offline following the failure of their central server in 2018. We are still struggling, with limited staff, to make them available again. The situation is complicated.' — said the message response from my inquiries into accessing the archive.

Accessing the online audio archives was not as seamless as I had imagined. The failure of the server was eponymous with the strange events and mishearings unfolding over this time. I was disappointed, but perhaps this was a talisman, or one of many.

The appearance of sound, phonophany, is the face offered to subjectivity of a necessarily lacunar reality. The bridging of this gap, its exploitation, is precisely the function of discourses of authority. Authority acts as a discursive sticking-plaster over a reality that is continually breached. It makes the sensible speak, makes it into a signal.²³

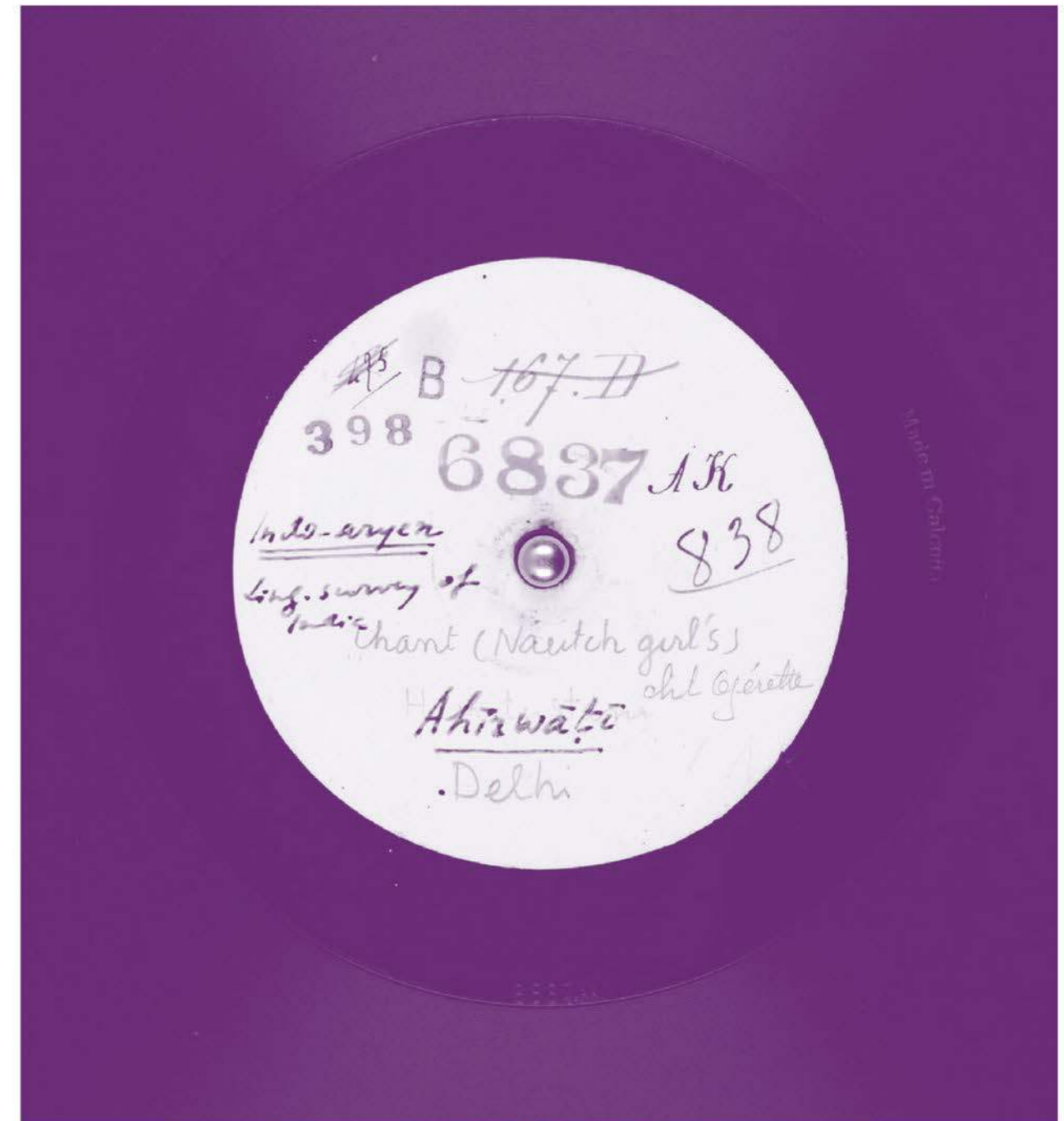
As I drift through these sonorous occurrences, serendipitous encounters, moments of recording, and of reprisal and reproduction yet to come — I try and imagine the operator criss-crossing across the subcontinent, with the apparatus in tow. A checklist of languages, dialects, recordings, archives, and menus.

Unable to stop recording, a restless movement — the uncontrollable chatter of the teeth, ceaseless murmurs, microscopic speech acts being inscribed on the uneven terrain of the sound object.

Sample, play, pause, repeat, rewind, record, restart...

(To be continued...)

23.
François Bonnett, *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago* (London: Urbanomic, 2016), 326.



Audio Sources

- Digital archives, Linguistic survey of India, Gramophone Co., Calcutta, Public domain,
- Europeana sounds, National Library of France, Public domain.
- Tothszabi, "Gauhar Jaan, the very first Indian recording (1904)," YouTube video, October 07, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC9dCdYwizk>

Image Sources

- Digital archives, Linguistic survey of India, Gramophone Co., Calcutta, Public domain
- Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale De France, National Library of France, Public domain.
- Parth Boraniya, 3D Renders

All other images and screenshots by Suvani Suri unless stated otherwise.

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