

Dissertation Project Summary

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Working title

Between Bells and Bhajans: Sound, Place, and Catholic Belonging in Hindi-speaking North India

Project overview

My dissertation examines how listening practices and acoustic environments shape everyday life, identity, and belonging among Indian Catholics living within predominantly Hindu urban settings. I argue that Indian Catholics draw on a combination of Indian and European-derived musical and sonic practices—including bells, hymnody, devotional song forms, amplified worship, and public ritual sound—to establish permeable acoustic boundaries between Hindu and Christian religious soundscapes. Rather than approaching Catholic practice primarily through “syncretism” as a fixed end state, I treat sound as a lived, practical medium through which cultural mediation occurs across different spaces and audiences.

The project focuses on North India’s Hindi belt, with fieldwork centered in and around Delhi, Lucknow, Jaipur, and Agra, particularly the archdioceses and the social ecologies surrounding cathedrals, parishes, seminaries, community centers, and Catholic neighborhoods. While scholarship on Indian Catholicism has often prioritized South India and the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara traditions, Latin Rite communities of North India remain comparatively understudied, especially in relation to music, sound, and everyday urban life.

I develop the dissertation through five interrelated analytic lenses: (1) space, place, and boundaries (how sound marks Catholic presence and negotiates co-presence); (2) sound, architecture, and atmosphere (how built form and technologies of amplification shape devotional experience); (3) interculturalism (how Catholics adapt and debate musical forms across traditions, including Roman Catholic and Charismatic contexts); (4) ritual, liturgy, and pilgrimage (how worship and public movement organize participation, identity, and audibility); and (5) urban anthropology and networks (how parish, school, diocesan, and community networks circulate people, repertoires, resources, and authority across cities).

Methodologically, the dissertation combines ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and interviews with clergy, musicians, and parishioners), soundscape and liturgical recording, soundwalks in and around churches and neighborhoods (including during processions and pilgrimages), and archival and document research on church histories, musical guidelines, and material culture. The broader goal is to show how minority religious communities use sound to make place, sustain cohesion, and negotiate relationships with surrounding religious publics in complex urban environments.