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Article

A Sonic Indofuturism

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Abstract

This article explores an under-discussed and unclaimed conceptualisation of futurity that can be located within historical sound practices and sonic thoughts of the Indian subcontinent. In the 1950s and 1960s, this alternative sonic worldview influenced Western music and its sound pallet without credit. The intervention of this futurism in the Western model of music, sounding and listening was revolutionary, proliferating an alternate aesthesis of time, space and subjectivities in sound practices – with an emergent environmentality, manifesting arguably in the birth of ambient music and sounding arts and remodelling of sensing the world from a relational perspective. Yet, this sonic worldview, knowledge system and a radical sense of non-linear futurity were not recognised then. But the importance of the futurity can be appreciated today on the verge of multiple planetary crises. It is in this time and day that a futurist vision may provide a new sense of surviving for a posterity and generate a possibility of emancipation from the fear and loathing for a dystopian tomorrow, which is construed from a Western perspective entrenched in its rationality. How can we hear possible futures from perspectives of South Asia that have been marginalised in sonic epistemologies by an absence of voices, which could offer new grounds?

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1. Situating Indofuturism

In this intervention, I am trying to help revive an ignored or forgotten narrative of a futurity that emerged after an intensification of post-colonial planetary exchanges from the 1950s onwards and was rooted in a curious re-listening to a decolonising South Asia or the East. This attention can be understood within the context of the *Asian Modern* (Clark 2014, 2021) – a position that tends to disentangle artistic movements and thoughts in Asia and its specific notion of modernity from Euramerican aesthetic lenses and interpretations, advocating for situated discourses. Dismantling the universalist approach of the Euramerican art history by provincialising it (Chakrabarty 2000), discursive spaces open for paying attention to other strands of modernity and alternative worldings – for example, in Asia and Africa – against a teleological concept of modernity of the West. This is where sonic practices and thoughts in South Asia come to the attention of the West in their search for alternative visions for a future ways of listening, aesthesis, tunings and sounds. However, the future-oriented listening attention towards the Indian subcontinent was not recognised *as such* when this inclination was emerging in the 1950s and 1960s. But this might be helpful to find its significance today, especially in the context of complex cross- and intercultural interactions taking place in a rapidly changing world order and multiple planetary crises, such as an environmental crisis, threatening to overwhelm a future of human civilisation and cultures. The sonic futurist vision I try to defend in this article drove a generation of artists, musicians and thinkers to encounter the Indian subcontinent to engage with its soundworlds in various intensities, from John Cage to La Monte Young, from Philip Glass to The Beatles and many others during this spirited orientation to the East. They borrowed from South Asian sonic aesthesis and ways of listening and new hybrid aesthetic forms were born. But these exchanges have not been discussed adequately in music and sound studies. When rarely discussed, they have been described from a skewed extractive approach of the colonialist West in which equity was not a benchmark, and soft cultural appropriation was normalised. I try to unpack the futurity embedded in these historical sonic interactions, and how they matter today, advocating for a sense of equity to be foregrounded in the planetary fields of sonic practices and research. I have argued in my previous work (Chattopadhyay 2022a) that through a self-determination of the Global Souths,[1] a sense of equal exchanges can be established. The futurism that was implicitly explored by 1950s, 1960s and 1970s artists and practitioners from the West eager to engage with the East/South Asia needs retelling and highlighting, especially in the context of an emerging geopolitical importance given to the Indian subcontinent in a new world order, and an Indofuturism discourse is born and establishes itself in the rewriting of (media) art history, in homegrown science fiction, in gaming, in cinema and visual art, and in musical arts and music technologies.

How can we posit these embryonic Indofuturist impulses within other futurisms? The cultures of listening and ways of

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[1]I add a suffix 's' to underscore a plurality that is oppressed in the term *Global South*. More discussion on this intervention can be found in my forthcoming monograph *Sonic Perspectives from the Global Souths* (Chattopadhyay 2025).

sounding have embraced several modernist futurisms and future-oriented movements, with manifestos composed for each to promote and advance such collective actions.

The Italian futurism's place in this realm is marked by a rebellious spirit and an aggressive rhetoric. One of the founders of the movement, poet F. T. Marinetti stated in *The Manifesto of Futurism*:

> We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd. (Marinetti [1909] 2016: 289–91)

In this statement, one can note almost a desperate effort to break away from the status quo in the contemporaneous art, music and literature in Italy by embracing a radical departure into everyday practices, especially everyday sounds and industrial noises. With such intents, composer Francesco Balilla Pratella proposed convincing 'young composers to desert schools, conservatories and musical academies, and to consider free study as the only means of regeneration' (Pratella 1973: 31–7). This provocative and instructive set of ideas emphasised a techno-/noise-aesthetics, largely foreseeing and anticipating an industrial era and a machine society rooted in a sense of forward movement. In *The Art of Noises*, painter turned composer Luigi Russolo proclaimed that 'We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise sounds' (Russolo [1913] 1986). The spirit of experimentation ran through the veins of these collective actions. For these artists and thinkers, futurity was a matter of linear progression from a disposable past to the foreseeable future by means of a violent movement to unshackle from the past and jerky advances to overcome relational temporal entanglements. The self-righteousness, patriarchy and parochial tendencies in Italian Futurism and its proximity to fascism seemed to undermine its historical importance even when other movements were instigated by them. On the other hand, the spirit of experimentation proposed by Russolo did bleed into works of later artists, such as John Cage and Edgard Varèse, and influenced other forms of sonic expressions such as musique concrète and machine-made sounds, as well as radio art experiments (Kahn 1999) and radio-based artistic projects.

Russian futurism emerged roughly between 1912 and 1916 to accommodate diverse artists and practices that rejected conventional artistic methods and languages, primarily focused on visual art and literature. They collectively proposed a new visual and linguistic vocabulary for an essentially modernising project. In their manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912), the Russian futurists announced that 'The past is too tight. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity' (Lawton 1988: 51). With an apparent similarity to the Italian Futurists, the Russian futurism too was an endeavour to disentangle from the feudal and bourgeoisie systems of then Russian arts and culture to embrace modernist visions of a new society signifying what constituted the new, namely the scientific and technological inventions, and a machine-driven acceleration of life. These searches for new pathways might have been short-lived (1912–16), but this led to contributing to a revolutionising Russia and its resurgent arts and culture.

Afrofuturism, on the other hand, primarily emerges from a cultural resistance and through a process of self-determination for African American people in the face of a profoundly unfair social marginalisation and cultural erasure in the West. This embodied and emancipatory reimagination of the past to be projected on the future, aimed to connect the African American diaspora with their forgotten African ancestral roots. As a cultural theorist points out:

> Afrofuturism is the current name for a body of systematic Black speculative thought originating in the 1990s as a response to postmodernity that has blossomed into a global movement the last five years. Although contemporary Black speculative thought has roots at the nexus of 19th century scientific racism, technology, and the struggle for African self-determination and creative expression, it has now matured into an emerging global phenomenon. (Anderson 2016: 230)

When it comes to Afrofuturist sound practices, sound, ecology and memory are imbued with 'temporal dissonance' characterised by the 'disruptions of temporality' that challenges 'linear idea[s] of transformation through teleological progress' (Fleming 2019). Kodwo Eshun relates this to Paul Gilroy's definition of the Afrofuturist conditions as a 'rhizomorphic, fractal structure', a 'transcultural, international formation' (Eshun 1998: -006/13).

Compared to these historically well-established regional and cultural formations of futuristic concepts, there has not been a notion of 'Indofuturism' established in the Indian subcontinental context until very recently. Since the last few years, a certain form of Indofuturism seems to be emerging in the field of design and visual culture, especially in gaming and 3D arts. The gaming platform *Indus Battle Royale* proclaimed Indofutursim as their main inspiration. The game was produced by gaming company SuperGaming, whose co-founder Roby John states: 'Indofuturism is about setting your mind free and imagining a world that is unapologetically Indian' (Chandran 2023).[2] At the core of this new sense of futurism is a decolonial vision of the Indian subcontinent (and South Asia) in which pre-colonial 'folk customs and ancient mythology' (ibid.) help to reimagine an alternative future as if this subcontinent has never been under colonial rules. There is a sense of 'what, if' and naïve wonderment in this vision but that utopic prescience camouflages a confident decolonial move(ment), spearheaded by today's subcontinental youth and its international diasporic communities. Earlier, young designer Priya Bandodkar delineated the contours of this speculative but resurgent Indofuturism in her Master's thesis *Activating Indofuturism* (Bandodkar 2021). She succinctly writes in its abstract, 'the lens of Indofuturism imagines an alternative future for India without a history of colonisation, reclaims aspects of its pre-colonial culture that were lost through colonialism, and highlights pressing social conditions and critiques prejudices prevalent within contemporary Indian communities' (ibid.: i). Drawing on these fragmented and nascent forms of future-oriented decolonial re-visioning of the subcontinent, musician Sarathy Korwar presents his new release *Kalak* (2022) as 'an Indofuturist manifesto'. The title of *Kalak* is an allusion to disintegrating linear sense of time to a cyclic one (Sanskrit/Hindi word *Kal*, meaning time). In this work, a comprovisational[3] technique is explored in which the sounds' beginning and end are indistinguishable. Nyshka Chandran writes, 'In Indofuturism, that means applying localised knowledge to

[2]For more on BBC Culture, see www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230106-the-ancient-indian-myths-resonating-now (accessed 25 February 2025).

[3]A shorthand for context-based composing by improvisation, coined by Sandeep Bhagwati.

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alternative realities. On *Kalak*, Korwar's polyrhythms are informed by India's cyclical understanding of time' (Chandran 2023) manifested in the complex rhythmic cycles performed on South Asian instruments such as *tabla*, or *dholak*. The continuum and a-temporal merging of futurity and lived pasts suggested in Indian music and sound cultures, and their ways of recursive listening operate in the ways in which temporality and spatiality, are left open-ended for perception and intersubjective reconstruction.

Unlike the other cases of futurisms, Indofuturism is yet embryonic and highly speculative. It is mostly a diasporic phenomenon yet – a decolonial attempt to accelerate processes of self-determination for South Asians and their diasporic communities in today's unstable West, confronting a new world order in which the Indian subcontinent's economic growth rate surpassing European giants such as UK and Germany makes headlines. But when it comes to soft power of arts and culture, especially music and sound practices, there were premonitions of things to come following the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As I mentioned earlier in this article, the 1950s to 1970s were times when a solicitated vision for a sociocultural and spiritual anchoring in an alternative futurity attracted artists from the West to the East. These exchanges have had major implications, including new aesthetic formations, for example, ambient music and sound arts, even if these contributions find little or no discussion in the existing literatures and current research. It was neither a one-way process. The West also contributed to the aesthetic formations in the East. The post-colonial India had a reciprocal relationship with the West that enriched this sense of futurity. Paul Purgas's research (Purgas 2024) revealed the far-reaching ramifications of a Moog synthesiser's entry in the newly formed National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India. One of the then students, Jinraj Joshipura, composed a futuristic sound work[4] on this synthesiser with guidance from David Tudor. As Purgas explained in the supplementary book (ibid.), for which this author wrote the Foreword, the sound work was drawn thematically from both Indian classical music and the sonic potentialities of the new technologies that he started to freely experiment with. These experimentations opened a visionary portal for the future sound practices in the Indian subcontinent, including electronic music, noise music, disco and synth-based sounds that took off with the help of such technological interventions, but also as sonic confluences departing from both the modern Western technologies available in the subcontinent mostly via colonial routes, and simultaneously drawing from pre-modern technologies and tunings in South Asia. Such technological convergences, intercultural mélange and creative confluences hint at a possible future – a non-hierarchical playground of sounds reimagined from a planetary, earthbound co-listening. As I have argued earlier (Chattopadhyay 2022b) and elaborated in this article, the pre-modern technologies and tunings in South Asia have had a specific lineage of being natural and grounded, in both material and (micro)-tonal levels compared to its Western counterparts. The futurity I try to describe and defend here is grounded in this alternative relation to natural worlds for a recursive listening that challenged teleological modernity of the West (Vial 2016). In a recent report titled 'Arts and Technologies in India: Reimagining the Future' (Barua et al. 2024) for British Council, the findings hint at how artists in the Indian subcontinent are creatively contextualising technologies, challenging technological biases set in place by Western modernity, declutching away from such models, and amplifying the cultural roots to create inclusive, community-driven, collaborative and representative spaces in future visions.

2. Grounded Sound, Transcendental Listening: Contextualising

South Asia's soundworlds are rooted in an alternative perspective of non-teleological time, non-perspectival space as well as technological systems and tunings closer to the ground, that is, the natural worlds on temporal and spatial, as well as on material and aesthetic levels. There is a predominant sense of transcendental approach in the music of South Asia that is loosely reduced into uncritical words such as *mysticism* (King 2002) and *spirituality* (Bhawuk 2003). For example, while comparing Western and Indian knowledge, Western knowledge is described as 'science of facts' and spirituality as 'the science of the soul, a peculiarly Indian science' (Rolland 1960: 91). What is understood here as 'spirituality' can be expanded and extrapolated on a meditative and transcendental form of engaging the world emphasised in the work and words of the leading religious leaders (i.e., *Gurus*), such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa (Gupta 1942), Swami Vivekananda (Banhatti 1989; Paranjape 2005; Sen 2006) and Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo 1974). Within the remits of this article, it would suffice to note that their preachings did foreground notions of transcendental listening from the ground to the divinities, and from the inner subjectivity to the cosmos. These transcendental epistemologies of South Asian soundworlds may potentially shed light on their knowledge system that appealed to and attracted Western artists and composers towards the East, and how this epistemological intervention is necessary to refer to in addressing the future of a planetary existence, especially given today's environmental crises and conflictual global relations.

My earlier research (Chattopadhyay 2021a, 2022b, 2023c) examined the ancestral, sacred sounding, pre-colonial and pre-modern sound technologies, instruments of sound reproduction and tuning systems in South Asia. This research underscores the ephemeral experiences and esoteric practices of sound and listening in the Global Souths, which are naturally grounded and earthbound. This natural grounding approach to tuning, as well as vernacular sound technologies and instrument design offer a reimagination of sounding and musiking that are natural, ecological and environmentally attuned for sustainable futures. This sense of environmentality was embedded not only in the sonic aesthesis but also in Indian subcontinent's (pre-modern) technological cultures.

The South Asian ancient musical instruments such as *Rudraveena* or the *Tanpura* produces sounds that are as microtonal and multiharmonic as the sounds of natural phenomena such as rains or a storm, or breezes through the fields. They represent a textural complexity and layering that are grounded in and attuned with natural resonances (Dentan 2024; Chatterji 1958). The multilayered grains in the sounds from the strings of these pre-modern instruments are often deemed necessary in traditional performances such as *Dhrupad* and *Khayal*,[5] to provide a situated and grounded sound, as close to

[4]This work can be heard on the project album *The NID Tapes: Electronic Music from India 1969–1972*: https://state51.bandcamp.com/album/the-nid-tapes-electronic-music-from-india-1969-1972 (accessed 25 February 2025).

[5]*Dhrupad* is one of the ancient-most forms of musical sound practice and performance in the Indian subcontinent, starting with an elaborate and free-flowing introduction of the raga in *Alaap* embracing an expanded meditative sense of temporality. *Khayal* is another major form of Hindustani classical musical practice and performance associated with poetic lyrics and sung words based in a raga. In *Khayal*, ragas are extensively ornamented, and the style calls for more technical virtuosity than intellectual rigour.

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natural textures and materials as possible, as well as temporalities, and spatialities. Following the musical practices and knowledge systems of the Indian subcontinent, I have pointed out in my previous research (Chattopadhyay 2021a, 2022b, 2023b, 2023c) how Ragas are reflections of natural temporalities: each Raga is dedicated to a time of the day or season – for instance, Raga *Darbari* is for midnight, and Raga *Bhairavi* for early morning. The court- and devotional music-oriented instruments such as *Surbahar* and *Nadaswaram* are accommodative of intricate and often complex tonal formations derived from natural grains of sound. The outdoor and communal instruments such as *Ektara* or a folk percussion instrument such as *Madal* are also made with earthly materials and tuned to produce sounds close to the ground. As sound-producing technologies, systems and machines, these instruments have gone through innovative design developments and tunings as musicologists such as Alain Daniélou have suggested (Daniélou 1995). As earthly technologies, these instruments use natural materials. The *Rudraveena*'s body is an expanded tubular structure made of bamboo or teak trunk attached to two large tumba resonators made from the Calabash, or bottle gourd. These pre-modern sound-producing instruments and musical interfaces in South Asia, in Africa, and in many parts of the Global Souths, were conceived of and were built using Indigenous ancestral technologies, and pre-modern methods of tuning that were ecologically enmeshed with the earth and natural systems. They tended to destabilise the nature–culture binaries, often upheld in the European modernity, provincial Western values that were imposed on the regions of the Global Souths from the top down as part of the colonial rules. Philosopher Bruno Latour has argued (Latour 1993) that pre-modern communities made no distinctions between nature, culture and society while European modernity was essentially based on this exploitative separation. In the context of current climate crises, the ontological foundation of earth-bound, ecologically regenerative and reciprocal, as well as non-extractive and less-controlling (sound) technologies could show the ways to a sustainable future as argued by the speakers at the 2023 Media Art History conference[6] and the 2024 Politics of the Machines conference.[7]

Another important learning from the South Asian practices of technologies is frugal innovation (Prabhu and Jain 2015), known as *Jugaad* in vernacular language, meaning improvised or makeshift technological solutions re-using or recycling scarce resources as an exercise of Indigenous innovation (Rai 2019; Ananthram and Chan 2021). This frugal and inclusive practice of grounded and regenerative technological repurposing with little or no capital is typical of the Indian subcontinent that grows out of a codependence with natural and ecological systems and a lack of extractive capitalism in this region before the colonisation. For example, many musical instruments and sound-producing objects were made of frugal materials and methods, respecting the natural growth and decay of organic matters as well as providing a reverence to the cyclic movements of life and organisms. This sense of reciprocal connection to earth and inclusive technological innovation based on ecological relationality can teach Western corporations and institutions how to rethink the planetary futures from a sustainable and embodied perspective.

These are some of the future-oriented ideas we learn from South Asian aesthetic practices if we wish to delve into their sonic realms and pay due attention to the plurilogues that are forming on the ground, almost always unheard, or taken for granted in Western institutions and societies. In my fieldwork and research (Chattopadhyay 2022a), I have engaged in long conversations with some of the leading sonic and musical artists and thinkers from the Global Souths regions, including their diasporas in Europe, and situated practitioners working with sound and listening in these regions. This research unpacked the sonic aesthesis of the Global Souths, ways of listening, various pre-modern technological innovations taking place in these regions prior to Western colonisation, and historical exchanges with Europe towards forming a sonic confluence. The conversations endeavoured to trace historical interactions and chart ways to resist colonial power structures ingrained in the Euramerican aesthetic lenses and sonic epistemology and their imposing universalisation through canonisation of (mostly white male) scholarship. The artists taking part in the conversations reimagined an equitable future in which a planetary plurilogue will take form by dismantling imperial-colonial otherings.

3. East–West/North–South Sonic Exchanges: Historicising and Theorising

In an essay 'Re-sounding Souths' for *CTM Magazine* (Chattopadhyay 2023b), I have argued that the historical sonic exchanges between the so-called *Global North* and *Global South* (or the West and the East) often lacked an equity. This perspective was in resonance with decolonial scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, who pointed out (Chakrabarty 2000) how provincial Europe's relations with the colonial subjects in the Global Souths were now and again fraught with tension and conflict due to Europe's imperial and colonial intentionality. These profoundly imbalanced exchanges were ingrained in the colonially built social, cultural, political, and economic hierarchies and extractive power structures. Europe's colonial mindset saw these regions as free lands to conquer, and chose to ignore the possibilities of reciprocal exchanges, even when many ideas of the Souths were taken as central to development of cultures and aesthesis in the West, such as the ones I describe earlier. There have been numerous curious encounters, travels and borrowings, but

> the two-way communication fell through the labyrinthian corridors of power and colonial violence. The West hardly listened carefully to the East and Souths, but never hesitated to take them for granted. There are many instances of cultural appropriation from the East through an unequal distribution of knowledge with little interest in the sonic differences, auditory cultural specificities, acoustic territorialities and the potential of sonic confluences. (Chattopadhyay 2023a: n.p.)

When we think of the conditions through which the cultural flows operate, we may draw from what Arjun Appadurai calls 'disjunctures' (Appadurai 1990), underscoring the inability of fixed (colonial) ideas of geographic, cultural and aesthetic borders to explain cultural ebb and flows. Rather, a premise for a reciprocal exchange may create forms of emergent and surprising encounters. Likewise, it would be worthwhile to unpack moments when some of the fertile exchanges took place. These exchanges are often forgotten in the dominant colonial narratives or are stereotyped when the history of sound and art are written. Credits go to the Western artists, but the subcontinental sources are obscured. Soft cultural appropriation is normalised in a disjunctive interaction. But equity in sonic exchanges can be realised by noting their epistemic reciprocity.

The historical specificities and differences in approaches and methods of sounding and listening between the East and the

[6]See www.resource-media.art/ (accessed 25 February 2025).
[7]See www.pomconference.org/pom-aachen-2024/ (accessed 25 February 2025).

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West – or between Global Souths and Norths – need to be understood to create a premise for gaining insights into an alternative worldview and futurity embedded in these historical exchanges. The perspectives of a reciprocal and equitable sonic confluence may help relating these thoughts on futurities to contemporary discourses around the Indofuturism. If we locate a few fundamental parameters of sounding and listening in South Asian cultures, such as time and space, these specificities are easier to comprehend. For example, the regions and cultures of South Asia traditionally nurtured a measure of time which was not a linear and was not dependent on Western logic (Kaul 2023), but rather tended to imagine a metaphysical world with a profound respect for nature and ethereal divinities (Gerstle and Milner 1998). Likewise, rituals, ceremonies and community practices were developed in constant communication with spirits and deities to whom the sound makers and musicians dedicated their performance to maintain an equilibrium with nature (Dentan 2024). Time was recorded less in writing – that is, written scores or on recorded media – but more understood as an emergent and contingent natural phenomenon. Time-based media, such as sound and music, were perceived as ephemeral, with an ineffable quality that needed to be left open-ended in their everyday practices, and that needed to be disseminated outdoors in natural settings during their performance. In comparison, post-Enlightenment European listening approaches preferred a linear curve of fixed compositional and listening time, consumed inside insular auditoriums and concert halls as settings or territories estranged from nature. Sound scholar Christoph Cox (2018) differentiated between sonic temporalities of the West and East. The Western listening approaches mark a narrative temporal framework of 'beginnings, middles and endings', which he relates to the classical musical composition and performance culture based on a concept of temporality that runs through the musical works intertwined with European modernity. In Western cultures, organised sounds attempt to hegemonise time's elusive flow by making it a measured, closed dramaturgy that follows a linear, narrative development. Understandably, this musical temporality was a thoroughly anthropocentric conception of time – one that accords with the utilitarian, logical and scientific traditions of the West that conceive of time as linear, progressive and aimed at accelerated developments. This sense of time and space permeates in colonial models of understanding the world, enabling a hegemonic and extractive relationship with the East, or today's Global Souths. On the other hand, concepts of time in the East or in many parts of the Global Souths' listening cultures are distinctive, such as a flow of time that is circuitous, digressive, or improvisational. This approach manifests in the traditional ways of storytelling, rituals, songs and folk music, and in the performances of religious or devotional music as well as everyday sound technologies, acoustical practices and instrument design. The richness and time-tested depth of these thoughts from South Asia influenced artists in the West. These exchanges bear the testimonies of the emancipatory futurist visions that were promised.

Today the South Asian diaspora in the West aims to redefine their positionalities with a decolonial spirit. Their reading of history is often radically different, enabling them to project an empowered futurity. But, developing an inclusive and equitable premise of cultural exchanges, critically engaging with Global Souths' cultural practitioners, artist, and thinkers, has not yet been attempted, largely remaining underexplored and yet dominated by Eurocentric views, methodologies and monolithic ideas of social formations. The works that are regularly discussed in sonic research and canonised in the global community of sound and music researchers by sheer volume of citations and reviews have a negligible number of contributions from the Global Souths or from diasporic and Indigenous artists and thinkers. One concerned with this problem of exclusion and marginalisation may lament that sound studies is overwhelmingly Eurocentric in its discourse, publication and dissemination, as well as envisioning its futures. This geologic conservatism is limiting the fields' epistemes and social formations. New perspectives could be generated by engaging with Global Souths and diasporic and Indigenous artists and thinkers regarding their diverse listening cultures, both by attending to their situated discourses and practices and through the increasingly available access to many pertinent works.[8]

Given this lack and a problem of equity, a spirited five-day gathering titled 'Soundings: Assemblies of Listenings and Voices Across the Souths' was organised at Akademie der Künste Berlin from 21 to 25 August 2022, co-initiated by this author (Video Example 1). It was a remarkable congregation of musicians, artists, performers and sound scholars from outside the European canon. Their visions for a co-sounding future were unpacked in this gathering, rooted in self-determination and voicing. 'Soundings' addressed the dearth of critical engagement with artists and thinkers working on the margins of the Eurocentric discourses, to counteract a scant presence of the Global Souths, diasporic and Indigenous music and sound works, and scholarship in the contemporary fields of music and sound arts. The assembly aimed to nurture such artistic and scholarly interventions by bringing into the foreground practices, aesthetic histories, theories and sonic methodologies of artists and thinkers discursively grounded within the Global Souths.

This gathering helped assessing some of the literatures and aesthetic experiences in sound and listening in South Asia, to locate relational worldviews based on alternative readings of time, space, subjectivities and listening positionalities. This gathering brought to the light important treatises, thoughts and knowledge systems – for example, *Rasa Theory* (Barlingay 2007) – that had momentous influences on the works of Western artists such as John Cage and La Monte Young. These epistemologies today may help address some of the unresolved areas in sound studies on the themes of temporality, intersubjectivity and spatiality. No wonder, early figures in sound arts (e.g., Cage and Young) changed the course of their artistic trajectories to redefine sound practices in the West upon engaging with sonic approaches and thoughts from South Asia.

4. Subcontinental Futurity and its Appeal: Case Studies

A well-known US drummer, Paul Grant, who performed with Pink Floyd in the 1960s and 1970s, told me in personal interactions how he was disenchanted with American pop music in the 1960s due to its quick commercialisation after being born out of a counterculture. He was looking for an alternative world of sound. During this search, he came across the sounds of Indian instruments, tanpura, sitar and santoor. He described how the first sound of a plucked string of tanpura stays in the middle of a room like a world in itself. He was haunted by this sustained sound that defied time and space, and provided an altered state of mind, one in which connection with an emancipated self could be possible. He said that this sound

[8]See and listen to the video documentation of 'Soundings: Assemblies of Listenings and Voices Across the Souths' that took place at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, on 21 – 25 August 2022, co-initiated and co-organised by this author: https://www.field-notes.berlin/en/soundings (Accessed February 2025).

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felt like a drop that was bursting out like a flower, filling the room and expanding both inside and outside the listening subject. That sense of expanded temporality and spatiality was otherworldly and was felt as contemplative and transcendental. This sound brought him to India. He left performing for high-profile concerts and studio recordings for labels and moved to India for a closer listening. Eventually, he spent the next 20 years of his life learning the art and craft of Indian instruments and focused on *santoor*, a north Indian instrument with plucked strings horizontally organised. He started to adopt to the design of santoor to make his own in the next several years. This was a remarkable journey, like many others, from the West to the East in search of sounds that ground and offer a transcendental opening to the world, often associated with a mode of spirituality – a more-than-self, intersubjective, cosmic consciousness. For Western music-trained ears, Indian music opened up perception towards sounds suspended in time and space, its grainy micro-tonality attuned to the natural sonic textures, indolent unfolding of its aural architectures without haste, and its inward-looking meditative attention to the processes rather than obsessing about outcomes. These were values missing in contemporaneous Western music, in both classical and popular genres. The re-discovery of an alternative sounding with an altered state of time, space and subjectivity led many musicians and artists to engage with South Asia in search of new grounds, knowledge and sonorities, as mentioned earlier. What was their intention? Was it looking for a new future in sound and listening? Was this emergent interest one-sided and a form of exoticisation from a Western colonial positionality? Did such interest generate an equitable platform for horizontal exchanges, or did this enter another form of extractivism based on epistemic gains and cultural possession? These questions are central to the under-examined East–West (sonic) relationships and potential for non-Western futurism to free practitioners and audiences from the Western dystopic vision.

Researcher on Cage, David Nicholls, revealed that Cage was confronted with a composer's block in the 1940s as he was going through a lack of enthusiasm for communicating his work in public presentations (Nicholls 2002). In this time, his compositions were not appreciated by the audience, which reflected in his dispirited disposition. Likewise, he had a lack of enthusiasm for composing. In the middle of this phase, in 1946, Cage met Gita Sarabhai, an Indian musician who came to the United States and who was concerned about Western influence on the music of South Asia. After the meeting, she started lessons in counterpoint and contemporary music with Cage, while she taught Cage Indian music and sounds in a friendly exchange. As Sarabhai's gurus in India suggested, the purpose of music and performing sound was 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine interventions' (Cage 1991) – opening a composition for chance and contingency (Chattopadhyay 2023b). This alternative world-view of suspended control, and of embracing emergence and contingent situations, underscoring the ephemeral quality of sound, became one of the central philosophies of Cage's view on music, listening and art for the future that impacted his subsequent works. Simultaneously, Cage also began studying South Asian art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's works (Cage 1991). Among the ideas that attracted Cage was Rasa Theory of Indian art and aesthetics that operates based on the emotive moods or subjective states of 'permanent emotions' that are central to this theory (Patterson 2001). In the concept of Rasa, as elaborated in the seminal epic *Natyasastra* – a monumental work by ancient Indian scholar and aesthetician Bharata (1967) – these emotions are divided into the nava-rasas or nine emotive situations. The ninth of the nava-rasas is *santam* or tranquillity, a state that is suggested to be associated with the role of music. In the treatise, it was considered that the purpose of music and art was to quiet the mind, freeing it from the ego, and thus rendering it open to divine or spiritual experiences. These ideas resonated with Cage and helped him come out of the composer's block by imbibing a sense of future sounding that is declutched from the conventional Western compositions and the written score, to go inward for a meditative quietness and inner silence or tranquillity. Cage sensed a future possibility of silence, and eventually a form of sounding arts, what he termed as 'isness' (Hermes 2000). This radical concept of time, space and intersubjectivity helped Cage in his subsequent practices and proliferated in a new series of future works, most notably *4′33″* (1952) and *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–8). Drawing ideas from South Asian aesthetic knowledge systems of sound based on temporal fluidity, Cage eventually developed a new style of performative music based on the ideas of indeterminacy whereby certain compositional elements, such as duration, tempo and other parameters were kept open-ended for chance events to happen. This approach existed for many years in Indian music and sonic traditions, and in listening practices. But it was a novel perspective in Western music dominated by written scores. This intervention was critical to future aesthetic expressions such as sound arts – in the ways in which the form developed through Cage's work with a new sense of temporality and spatiality.

Other canonical figures in the field of music, and the emerging field of sounding arts, such as Pauline Oliveros, Éliane Radigue, Terry Riley, Marion Zazeela and La Monte Young, were deeply influenced by South Asian sound practices and thoughts on suspended time, intention, intersubjectivity and emergent spaces. Oliveros acquired ideas from Buddhist philosophical thoughts and ways of inner listening (Sivanesan 2022), and Radigue converted to Buddhism to work more closely around these themes for her future works (Waschbüsch 2015). Zazeela and Young turned to Indian music to reimagine their imminent practices (Potter 2002; Smith 1978).

La Monte Young studied under Indian sound practitioner Pandit Pran Nath (Potter 2002: 79) for 30 years (Duckworth and Fleming 2009), which fundamentally reshaped his sonic worldview and his future work in terms of conception and methodology, and a redefinition of time, space and subjectivity with a cosmological shift (Boon 2022). This acquired sonic epistemology contributed to the formulation of American musical minimalism's style, which directly influenced the fields of ambient music and sounding arts. At the core of this formation is a signature fascination for the tanpura's drone sounds that, as I mentioned earlier, influenced and motivated many other artists in the West, to experiment with expanded time and emergent space. Young heard a tanpura drone for the first time on the LP *Morning and Evening Ragas* (Ali Akbar Khan 1950). He was immediately captivated by this sustained and suspended sound. Journalist Alexander Keefe (2010) noted that this first hearing of the sound of the tanpura, a typical accompaniment in South Asian music, had a dramatic impact on the young composer, who heard in it the ground on which to build organised sounds around sustained tones and a sublimated, slowed-down rhythm within a flowing drone. It was an inception moment that would change the course of his future work. He eventually became a disciple of Pran Nath to further his interest in Indian music and was profoundly influenced by his style of singing (Potter 2002: 80) using microtonal grains of the voice to form cascading textures suspended in time, duch as in *Dhrupad*. Jeremy

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Grimshaw's biography on Young (Grimshaw 2012) traced his transformation from an enfant terrible to a 'musical mystic'. His gradual shift towards the esoteric, contemplative and transcendental listening was a direct result of his sonic encounter with the Indian subcontinent.

Such reconfigurations of sound found a canonical position in the West, prompting ambient music producer Brian Eno to term La Monte Young as the 'Daddy of us all' (Ramos 2020). With his newfound knowledge acquired from South Asian practices, Young made a rupture in the history of Western music and hinted at a future sonic trajectory. Trained by his Guru Pran Nath, Young further developed his microtonal experiments with voice as part of his minimalist approach to sound and performance. He helped Western music to take a turn to a reformulation of time, space and subjectivity. This minimalist approach to inward listening paved the way for the so-called sonic arts/sound art to emerge in the next decades – particularly through minimalist explorations of drone with an ambient aesthetics. Critically delving into this transcultural sonic meeting point, major influences behind Young's musical minimalism are revealed as his teacher Pran Nath, the emancipatory sounds of Indian music, and South Asian cultures of listening.

These are a few of the instances when South Asian sonic ideas and concepts were borrowed in the Western musical cultures with far-reaching consequences for the future. *The Beatles*' quest for a spiritual connection with sound, and with the audience, and the divinities, led them to take several trips to India – there are highly publicised documentations of these exoticised exchanges; their futurity-driven search often reduced to a notion of spirituality as mentioned earlier. In popular notions, the Indian subcontinent has been understood as a land of spirituality that is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society and encompasses various aspects of life, including rituals, practices and philosophical teachings that may have a futurist potential for a troubled world to slow down, to accept what to come and to be mindful. What is understood with these words are shorthand for seeking inner peace, wisdom and self-realisation, and a contemplative or meditative approach to phenomena. But the worldviews regarding what is understood as 'future' from Western cultures' predominantly progressive and linear perception of time are radically different. In this light, I propose a retro-aesthetic futurism because these sets of values carry potential to imagine a relational, past-or-presentless recursive futurity that may have a currency in the present.

5. Protopic Listening, Reclaiming Futurity: Epilogue

Is there a hopeful future for the human civilisation? In the light of current developments, there is little rationale left for envisioning a prosperous tomorrow. Global warming, several ongoing wars and species extinctions are real. Climate migration is an actuality. Facts and figures are hinting at dystopic realities waiting to unfold. The hints are hyper-realistic to say the least.

Can we imagine a future that is environmentally attuned, grounded and reciprocal, based on a sonic aesthesis by remodelling sensory engagement with the world from a relational perspective? As I have tried to show, the sonic specificities of South Asia are broadly embedded in an idea of owing to natural spatiotemporalities and presences, rather than owning them as in the case of the dominant Western models of teleological modernity with an impulse to conquer and control. This embeddedness to natural systems is central to the (spi)ritual practices, transcendental and transformative traditions of South Asia to be found in their non-linear sound practices and technologies. These were some of the future-driven thoughts that attracted artists eastwards. In the space of this article, I aimed to reclaim the past and gaining authority over South Asian knowledge systems in soundings and listening that faced unequal exchanges, and erasure through soft cultural appropriation. I underscored how in the concepts and context of South Asia, future is not understood from the Western model of linear accelerating progress, but a slowed, cyclical movement envisioned to reread the past, revisit memory and learn to evaluate possible relational pathways to emancipation. The speculative, invoking, but highly revelatory concept of a *Sonic Indofuturism* is an idea of perpetually coalescing futures and pasts in the present moment, for a regenerative flow of lifeforms that may sustain collectively with ears closer to the grounds.

In this critical positionality, a protopic future vision (Kelly 2011) might be helping to explore artistic agency, and role of the artists to resist erasure, marginalisation and the everyday social acoustic injustices (LaBelle 2020) in today's planetary societies. Protopia is a term coined by futurist Kevin Kelly as an activist counter-position to the dystopian. In a dystopia, people are stuck in a pattern of suffering, whereas the protopian society entails a more carefully stated form of societal transformation focused on the shared capacity to move in collectively desirable directions. The technological convergence, intercultural mélange and confluences hint at a possible protopic future. If we think of how that futurity manifests in a non-hierarchical playground of sounds, arts and technology reimagined from a planetary, earthbound listening. But the worldviews regarding what is understood as 'future' from Western cultures' predominantly progressive and linear perception of time (Latour 1993) are radically different. In this light, I propose a non-teleological futurism that can also be retro-aesthetic, because the Indian subcontinental values carry potentialities to envision an eternal, atemporal sense of future that may have a currency in the present. The intercultural exchanges can be read as suggesting a posterity that mitigates today's crises with a groundwork that's emancipatory. Likewise, sound practices in the subcontinent embrace protopic visions for planetary futures in which the artists, storytellers, performers, musicians and instrument makers help advance an activist position.

Such a position can be found in the sound works emerging from South Asia today. A recent gathering of artists from the Indian subcontinent consolidated the sensing of this positioning. The gathering was held under the rubric of the Dystopia Sound Art Biennial 2024, which I had the great pleasure to have contributing to in the role of a curator of its discourse programme.[9] In order to approach the question of currents and future vision in sounding arts from the subcontinent, the participating artists, curators and guest speakers explored an under-discussed conceptualisation of a transcendental futurity in South Asia in the symposium titled *Sonic Futurisms*, particularly in relation to the current sociopolitical-ecological realities: from repressive far-right regimes that constantly violate democratic rights and artistic freedom of expression, to enforced divisions in societies based on racial or casteist discrimination, as well as the intensifying climate catastrophe and related migrations. Contemporary artists working with sound and listening responded to the crises and reimagined possible futures from a critical protopic artistic position.

In this spirit, I self-reflectively engage with my sound practice as a diasporic artist from South Asia and introduce a recent project

[9]The discourse programme of the Dystopia Sound Art Biennial 2024 was held on 12–13 September at Miss Read, Berlin; more information can be found at www.dystopia.berlin/2024/sonic-futurisms/ (accessed 25 February 2025).

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Towards an Amicable End (Chattopadhyay 2024). It is a future-oriented response to the much-avoided angst and fear of an ecological doom and a climatic or civilisational ending.[10] The project is a sympoetic response to this overarching sense of dystopia, and probes into humans' climate avoidance and fear. As an invocation, the project taps into a transcendental idea of fatalism. As mentioned in this article, it is a philosophical doctrine that stresses the subjugation of events or actions to fate or destiny and is commonly associated with an attitude of resignation in the face of future events, which are thought to be inevitable. If we accept the impending doom as a natural course of human condition, such as completion of a life cycle and death, this embodied acceptance of ending opens the door for a future of emancipation from the fear and loathing at present. Fatalism is a much-practiced strand of philosophy in South Asia. A reverence for destiny makes climate migrants in South Asia accept the harsher realities – neocolonialism, economic exploitation, flood, famine and poverty. Their attitude of humble acceptance makes them hospitable, reciprocal and compassionate.

These conceptual impulse shapes the project's method distanced from a conventional Electroacoustic Composition model in which musical and non-musical sounds are processed using electroacoustic techniques and music technology, and are organised with a conventional compositional structure of linear progression, with controlled sense of time and space from the composer's individual positionality. However, my work draws from the listening cultures of South Asia with an attention to community building and togetherness. Nicholas Cook elaborates on the idea of 'Performing Togetherness' in his book *Music, Encounters, Togetherness* (Cook 2024) engaging with transcultural interactions in music between traditions across the globe. An expansive model of performative togetherness informs my work, in which free improvisation helps to suspend controlling time and space, and emergent forms of co-sounding take shape.

Towards an Amicable End emerges from a search for a recursive, reparative future, culminating into a regenerative work involving archival field recordings of climate variables such as water, wind and green, and environmental phenomena transduced in free-form radio receptions, weaved together by improvised double bass and electronics (Sound Example 1). The work draws from the subcontinental thoughts around fate and acceptance of human destiny, manifest in the form of a comprovisation without beginning and end, recurrently performative and situated. The approach to a participatory co-sounding is realised in collaborative listening sessions – in settings for slow listening and slow breathing exercises.[11] The work advocates for an acceptance of human's inevitable fate and destiny by creating an affective premise to counteract today's fear and angst for an emancipatory future involving a non-linear, suspended time and emergent, collaborative space, in circular modes of listening together. The project foreground South Asia's sonic futurist ethos of yielding control to be part of a natural symbiosis, from which humans are estranged.

Instead of drawing a conclusive statement at the end of this article, I invite the readers to rethink the question of audible futures by listening reciprocally to the earth systems while suspending a judgemental attitude. This perspective may nurture contemplative processes of acceptance by slowing down, suspending control and sovereignty, and rethinking the planetary tomorrows.

[10]The project can be heard at: https://petitbardo.bandcamp.com/album/towards-an-amicable-end (accessed 25 February 2025).

[11]One such setting was organised recently at the Listening Academy Hong Kong, on 7 November 2024 at Floating Projects, Soundpocket Hong Kong: www.soundpocket.org.hk/v2/uncategorized/lets-breathe-the-listening-academy-2024-in-hong-kong/ (accessed 25 February 2025).

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