

A Sound Bridge: Listening for the Political in a Digital Age

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This article examines how catchy sounds (“Why This Kolaveri” [“Why This Murderous Rage”]) can function as sonic cues for political participation. Exploring the sonic dimensions and aural imaginaries at play in mediated public spheres, we show how #Kolaveri became a sound bridge that enabled potent encounters among journalists, politicians, and citizens embroiled in heated debates about corruption in India. Tracing #Kolaveri’s movement across media platforms, we analyze three dimensions of the sonic cue—its availability, performativity, and resonance—that gave it a catalytic charge. Suggesting that sound technologies and practices constitute vital cultural and material infrastructures on which a bridge between the popular and the political can be built, we argue that cases like #Kolaveri disclose new ways of listening for the political and new modes of participation—the expression of sonic citizenship—in a digital era.

Keywords: sound studies, digital culture, social media, networked publics, media convergence, television, digital politics

Shouting, chanting, murmuring, whispering, and choosing to remain silent are all ways of making oneself heard. And if we agree that people entertain the political in range of mediated and embodied ways, then surely listening for the political is an important part of the story. However, voice, speech, and representation continue to be privileged over listening when it comes to understanding democratic participation. In the burgeoning scholarship on mediated political cultures in the present moment, we are only now beginning to pay attention to a wider range of sounds, their circulation across media platforms, and varied listening practices that reshape political culture in different parts of the world (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Kheshti, 2015; Kraidy, 2016; Qiu, 2014; Yang, 2009). This article focuses on the circulation of

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a catchy tune from a popular Tamil film song, "Why This Kolaveri" (Sony Music India, 2011), across various media platforms to examine how a sonic cue can spark and sustain debates and, under the right circumstances, transform how we listen for and apprehend the political in a contentious, highly fragmented, and deeply hierarchical public sphere.

Kolaveri was released on YouTube in November 2011 as part of the marketing strategy for a Tamil-language film, *3*. Shot and edited in a "making of" style and featuring the film's lead actors, director, and music director, the song became popular within a few hours of its online release. The quirky "Tanglish" (Tamil and English) lyrics appeared on the screen as hard-coded subtitles, thus making it easy to follow and sing along with and contributing to the song's popularity among non-Tamil-speaking audiences in India and across the world. Over a span of two to three months in late 2011 and early 2012, individuals in different parts of the world uploaded cover versions and remixes. And not unlike the circulation of other global pop hits such as "Gangnam Style," *Kolaveri* also inspired flash mobs in different cities. What was different in this case, however, was how the song—the catchy opening line and the word *kolaveri* (murderous rage) in particular—was redeployed and drawn into a broader and explicitly political arena to make sense of the scale and complexity of corruption and governance. Figure 1 shows one of many tweets that used the refrain of the song to connect *Kolaveri* to ongoing political conversations.

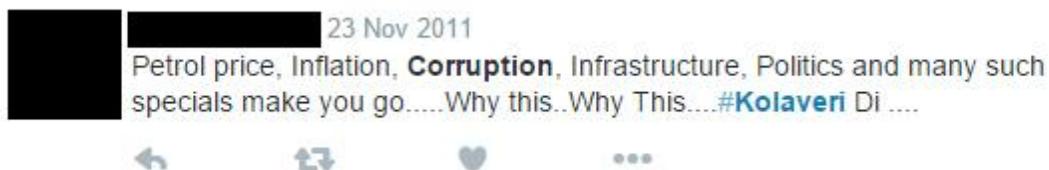


Figure 1. One of the many tweets connecting *Kolaveri* to ongoing political issues.

The song struck a chord with a wide swath of urban and semiurban middle classes across the country whose political imaginations had been stoked by a series of investigative "sting operations"—exposés carried out by various news organizations—that revealed links among political figures, business leaders, and in one particularly damning instance, prominent journalists (#Radiagate; Chadha, 2012). It was not entirely surprising that *Kolaveri* resonated with the anticorruption protests that Anna Hazare launched in April 2011 and that gained immense political traction under the guidance of Arvind Kejriwal, the political and public relations face of the anticorruption movement who has since gone on to launch the mercurial Aam Aadmi Party (Common Man Party).² Moreover, the fact that #Kolaveri is going strong to this day, more than five years after it first captured attention, seems all the more remarkable in a media and political culture marked by networked and mobile publics that shift shape as events unfold (Kraidy, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015; Punathambekar, 2010).

² For an account of the anticorruption movement, the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party, and shifts in political power in India, see Sitapati (2011), and a series of essays published on the influential collaborative blog Kafila (<https://kafila.online/tag/anna-hazare>).

This is, in some respects, a familiar story. We now have a growing body of scholarship on the surprising ways in which symbols and icons from popular culture are at times deployed with great effect in the political sphere (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Kumar, 2015; Yang, 2009). In the Indian context, too, the phenomenal expansion of mobile and digital media infrastructures and platforms since the early 2000s has transformed the ways in which popular culture mediates the political, recasting how political talk and engagement are woven into the rhythms of everyday life. However, scholars have tended to pay attention to the proliferation of screens and the visual dimensions of public political discourse while ignoring the accompanying changes in the soundscape. In fact, even when we consider the auditory experience of politics, our language remains in thrall to visual metaphors (Ihde, 2007). Drawing on recent work in sound studies and digital media studies (Kheshti, 2015; Lacey, 2013; Manoukian, 2010; Stoeber, 2016), this article traces how #Kolaveri was taken up in remix videos, news parodies, political campaigns, Facebook pages, and redeployed on Twitter to make sense of corporate and political corruption over a four- to five-year span.³ Exploring the sonic dimensions and aural imaginaries at play, we argue that #Kolaveri functioned as a sound bridge that enabled a range of potent encounters among journalists, politicians, and citizens embroiled in long-standing and heated debates about citizenship and political participation.

A sound bridge is a familiar media unit and editing technique that is used to smooth transitions between scenes in a film, particularly when setting up expectations that are then immediately confirmed (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). It is, in many respects, the aural equivalent of the cross-fade. However, a sound bridge can also surprise and disorient viewers. As Murch (2004) suggests, unexpected combinations of visuals and sounds can be deployed such that the audience is unable to “relate the sound to the visual except perhaps metaphorically” (p. xiii), thereby inviting them to make deeper and more meaningful connections between sound and visuals than they would otherwise. Creative uses of sound bridges can, in other words, produce a “greater dimensionality of experience” (Murch, 2004, p. xiii). Murch also points out that an untethered sound is particularly potent, seemingly everywhere (p. xiv) and nowhere, in part because audiences cannot place its source. Once it is unmoored from its filmic origins, a catchy sound such as *Kolaveri* has the capacity to connect to diverse contexts. This sense of a sound bridge being connective also encourages us to think about sound in relation to urban spaces and infrastructures. A wealth of recent scholarship in geography and other disciplines has alerted us to the manifold links between sound and space, showing how sounds have the capacity to “mark out territories,” produce “acoustic arenas,” and, more generally, contribute to the “production of space” (Gallagher, Kanngieser, & Prior, 2016). Taking a spatial approach also encourages us to consider the fact that bridges are, in the first instance, designed to overcome divisions in the world. Even though bridges can and do collapse and are often actively destroyed in times of conflict, they are sites of chance and, at times, charged encounters, and they enable and constrain linkages between individual practices, collective rituals, and the built environment (Sabry, 2010). Thus, examining the difference that catchy sounds might make in densely mediated political cultures involves following the links and associations that a sound such as

³ *Kolaveri* also proved effective for bringing up a range of other issues, including caste injustice, sporting scandals, and gender and sexual violence during this time. But in this article, we have chosen to focus on the issue of political corruption.

Kolaveri makes across different private and public spaces, taking into account the relations between media infrastructures, platforms and their affordances, and a range of user practices.

Adopting this expansive perspective, we show how #Kolaveri functioned as a sound bridge that was separated from the filmic context and used in a range of metaphorical and connective ways by journalists, politicians, and citizens coming to terms with a thoroughly mediated anticorruption movement and, more generally, a political culture shaped by new media logics. Far from being a “viral” expression of a senseless, irrational, and fleeting antipolitical rage by angry citizens, sound bridges such as #Kolaveri can be understood as mobile communicative structures that enable political participation—in this case, a deeply felt sentiment of outrage—in the face of technological, political-economic, and sociocultural constraints and transformations. In making room for and gathering all manner of sentiments, expressions, aspirations, and identities, #Kolaveri discloses new ways and locales in which we might listen for the political and discern new modes of participation—the expression of sonic citizenship—in a digital era.

Sound, Politics, and Citizenship: Listening and Looking

The sonic turn in the humanities, particularly in film and media studies, has been long overdue. In the South Asian context as elsewhere, scholarship on media and public culture has been dominated by a focus on visual practices. Although the study of media gradually became a more transnational affair during the 1990s, tracking closely the globalization of media across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, scholarly attention has remained attuned to screen cultures. With “public culture” emerging as an analytic framework for understanding media, consumption, and culture in the postcolonial world in an era of economic and cultural globalization, visual forms (film, television, and advertising, in particular) and a focus on viewers, spectators, and interocular fields came to structure studies of media and mediation throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1995; Kumar, 2006; Mankekar, 1999; Mazzarella, 2003; Pinney, 2001; Rajagopal, 2001). That we have approached the link between media and the political from a visual perspective becomes even more apparent when we consider the very direct connections between cinema and politics in south India, where former film stars mobilized their star image and fan base to run for political office (Pandian, 1992; Srinivas, 2013). Even in the detailed and richly theorized accounts of the performative dimensions of politics in south India, the focus remains on visual symbols and logics. The circulation and impact of songs, dialogues, and varied listening practices that shaped these actors’ star image and the fan cultures and associations that were crucial for electoral mobilization remain understudied. The title of Pandian’s (1992) seminal book on cine-politics, *The Image Trap*, signals a broader theoretical trap that media scholars have only recently begun to undo.

To be sure, there were notable exceptions, including key studies of oratory and language (Bate, 2009), cassette culture in India and Iran (Manuel, 1993; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994), and some focus on music and music videos on satellite television (Kumar & Curtin, 2002; Kvetko, 2004). With the consolidation and gradual institutionalization of film studies in the South Asian context beginning in the 2000s, there has been a surge of interest not just in film music (Booth, 2008; Majumdar, 2001; Sundar, 2014) but also other sites and forms of sound work, voice, and the formation of listener communities. For instance, Jhingan’s (2016) work on how specific media technologies and formats

transformed the circulation of music, music industry logics, and listening practices have been key to an emergent body of scholarship that moves away from a strict focus on cinema.

Furthermore, the link between media and the political has been framed largely in relation to news and the rapid expansion of television infrastructures and the phenomenal growth of 24/7 news channels beginning in the mid-1990s. The impact of television news on the political public sphere has been analyzed predominantly through visual logics—of witnessing, displaying, and making visible being vital to the democratizing possibilities of media infrastructures (Peters, 2001). Also, given the linguistic and regional politics in the Indian context, scholars have also drawn attention to the democratizing potentials of bringing “small-town, non-metropolitan, or provincial actors” (Roy, 2011, p. 761) into a broader visual field. Television news’s impact, moreover, is gauged in relation to the genre of talk TV and debate TV that networks, including NDTV, CNN-IBN, and Times Now, among others, invested in extensively. Programs such as *We the People* (NDTV), *Face the Nation* (IBN), and *News Hour* (Times Now) allowed news networks to make claims about their centrality to the formation of an informed and deliberative public in India. Drawing on global formats, these programs have thrived on a mix of breaking news segments and panel debates involving business, bureaucratic, and political experts to frame issues pertaining to national interest and citizenship that then spill over and continue across other media platforms, including online social networks.

With crowded ticker tapes, flashy graphics, hectoring anchors, and multiple talking heads shouting over each other, the genre of debate TV has come under intense criticism for both its sensationalist impulses and its shrillness. The critique that the visual dimensions of mediated politics has detracted from the act of listening was recently furthered by television news anchor Ravish Kumar, as well in a remarkable telecast produced in February 2016, following agitations at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and threats leveled against journalists who sought to clarify claims about antinational slogans raised during student protests.⁴ In this special broadcast, modeled as an impassioned plea for genuine deliberation, Kumar frames the dream of television news leading to an informed and engaged citizenry as having turned into a nightmare. What is of importance for us here, however, is the darkening of the television screen (or shutting off the visual) as a narrative device to denote India’s plunge into darkness. As Kumar spells out the pressures of the “debate TV” format and its implications on the tenor of discussions about nationhood and citizenship, the screen fades to black rapidly, with his voice-over urging for a return to deliberation based on careful listening. This strand of critique extends to the realm of digital and social media as well, with several scholars pointing out that the democratic potentials of networked and peer-to-peer communication remain bedeviled by many of the same problems associated with other media forms. Kumar’s criticism is also centered on the familiar tropes of the tabloidization of news and decline in civil discourse (Turner, 1999), updated to account for the polarized and abusive nature of online conversations (Udupa, 2015). Listening, as it is used here, is about watching and paying attention, being informed, and thus being an engaged citizen. What critics like Kumar do not consider is the vastly reconfigured soundscape that audiences are immersed in on a daily basis and how that has transformed modes of listening in private and public life.

⁴ For more details on the JNU agitations, see Kawade (2016).

Following Lacey, we situate the #Kolaveri phenomenon as part of a much broader “re-sounding of the public sphere” (Lacey, 2013, p. 11) that accompanied the expansion of media infrastructures, platforms, and practices beginning in the mid- to late 1980s across many postcolonial nations making the transition to neoliberal market economics. In the Indian context, one key milestone in the aural resignification of the public sphere during the 1980s would be the use of cassette tapes during the 1989 elections, which, as Manuel (1993) argues, “provided many of the basic prerequisites for . . . a democratic restructuring of media content and control” (p. xv). Although Manuel’s emphasis on grassroots and participatory dimensions of cassette culture is questionable given the organization of the music industry in India and the uneven spread of technology, we can recognize the advent of cassette technology as having put in place new logics of circulation and uses of sound. Cassette culture remade not just the political domain during, say, campaign season, but quickly became an unobtrusive and taken-for-granted part of public and private spaces across the subcontinent. The take-up and diffusion of cassette technology also transformed a public culture that was, until the mid-1980s, largely tuned in to film music. Within a matter of years, India’s soundscape went from being dominated by state-run broadcasting to a varied musical culture that included various regional, religious, devotional, folk, and pop songs and sounds.

The shift away from a statist media system that cassette culture, among other media technologies and forms including the VCR, inaugurated during the 1980s can now be seen as having set the stage for a series of policy, technology, and media transitions throughout the 1990s and 2000s involving FM radio, cable and satellite television, and mobile and digital platforms (Pavarala & Malik, 2007; Sen, 2014). These transitions, moreover, are marked by audience and user practices such as the routinization of calling in and interacting with radio jockeys and other listeners on FM radio networks, creative uses of caller tunes and ringtones (Gopinath, 2005), the circulation and sharing of music and other sounds via inexpensive SD cards (Mukherjee, 2016), and the emergence of a vibrant new sphere of remixing, fusion, and other kinds of sound performances on platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube.

Quotidian and popular media uses that have proliferated over the past two decades suggest that there is substantive sound work that has been happening alongside Photoshop, remix, and mash-up practices that mark participatory cultures across the world. To be sure, #Kolaveri can be situated within a broader history of sounds and protest cultures. There is a rich archive of religious hymns, marching songs, and catchy slogans in South Asia that scholars are only now beginning to mine from a sound studies standpoint. Although rooted in ethnomusicology, Sherinian’s (2014) account of Tamil folk music, in which she traces how the work of Dalit composer/theologian Rev. Dr. James Theophilus Appavoo “brought about a consciousness of oppression” (p. 242), marks an important start. Tracking the production, circulation, and reception of songs, Sherinian shows how “shared musical relationships” can become a means for people to “create a context for liberation” (p. 4). Damodaran’s (2017) account of the musical repertoire of the left-wing Indian People’s Theatre Association also adds to our understanding of sounds and social movements, particularly in showing how music served as a bridge between various artistic forms, including dance and theater. If the history of progressive social movements is one space to explore the politics of sound, another point of entry would be the fierce debates around what constitutes “noise,” noise control, and abatement policies in different cities around the world (Cardoso, 2012), and how varied sounds and accompanying listening practices come to mark religious, racial, and ethnic identities (Stoeber, 2016). As Zuberi (2017) points out in a trenchant essay on music, race, and religion, listening to

music enables negotiations of Muslim identity even as “speaking as Muslim” has become a fraught affair in a post-9/11 context.

Needless to say, this thumbnail sketch of complex transformations of soundscapes needs careful elaboration and is beyond the scope of this article. It is possible, however, to discern the emergence of varied listening publics and ensure that we situate links between sound, politics, and citizenship in a transnational context as well as a longer historical trajectory. To be clear, we do not privilege the aural as a corrective to the visual. Indeed, our analysis below pays close attention to a wide range of media forms and practices. Rather, our emphasis on the sonic dimensions of #Kolaveri and the movement of this sonic cue across media platforms calls attention to and takes seriously the intersensorial nature of mediated public cultures (Connor, 2004). We amplify the soundscape to suggest that sound technologies and practices constitute a vital cultural and material infrastructure on which a bridge between the popular and the political can be built and, in rare instances, maintained over time. #Kolaveri was one such rare and resonant sound bridge. In what follows, we build on scholarship on mediated activism and the work that cultural symbols do (Schudson, 1989) to argue that a sonic cue must be available, performative, and resonant to become a sound bridge and facilitate connections across cultural and political domains.

#Kolaveri: The Making of a Sound Bridge

Available

“Why This Kolaveri Di” was released on YouTube on November 17, 2011, and made available on a range of media platforms including FM radio programs, television channels, as a caller tune for mobile phones, and as a digital file for download and circulation. As the most searched song on YouTube during that week, featured on MTV that weekend (November 19–20), widely publicized on CNN as the most watched YouTube video of 2011, and global news coverage of a surprising “viral” hit from south India, *Kolaveri* was clearly available as a digital artifact. Not surprisingly, in popular commentary about the song, the focus was predominantly on the question of how this song from a south Indian film could possibly go viral on a global scale. Of the efforts to determine the causes of this viral success, some themes found more circulation than others—the use of Tanglish (a portmanteau of the languages Tamil and English, which were used in the song), the simple rhythmic pattern that allowed the song to serve as a format in which everything from Chipmunks to politics could be transposed, and the clever marketing strategy of releasing a making-of video that decoupled the song from its filmic origins.⁵ However, this marketing-oriented discourse—one that is rehearsed with every instance of a purportedly viral proliferation (e.g., “Gangnam Style”)—repeatedly fails to account for why this particular song and not another captured people’s imaginations. We would point instead to the affective dimensions of *Kolaveri* (i.e., its rootedness in a very specific caste and class-based experience of masculinity, romance, and tragedy, and its cathartic framing of this quotidian experience—of young men coming to terms with the impossibility of some of their desires).

⁵ For a marketing perspective on why *Kolaveri* went viral, see Jack in The Box Worldwide (2011).

In many ways, *Kolaveri* was the breakout example of a Tamil film song featuring a male protagonist singing a song that involves him ruing the act of falling in love and castigating the woman he fell in love with or, as is usually the case, women in general. His angst invariably forms the kernel of such songs, which have then been articulated in various ways over the years. Part lament and part outburst, these songs of failed love condemn the notion of romantic love itself and frequently celebrate male bonding and friendship as the antidote to the ill effects of falling in love with a woman. The male protagonists in these songs see romantic love as an affliction and, subsequently, cast themselves as suffering subjects. Songs about impossible love have been a staple of Tamil cinema and have acquired a particular affective charge as caste and class politics have been transformed under the impact of economic and cultural globalization since the late 1980s. Consider, for instance, the song "Take It Easy, Urvashi," from the 1994 film *Kadhalan* ("Lover"), a song seen as a celebration of the "euphoria of consumption" (Dhareshwar & Niranjana, 2000, pp. 199–200). However, even as the song celebrates commodity culture and youth culture's centrality to global signs and symbols, the song (and the hook—"take it easy policy") also tried to address anxieties about the benefits of economic reforms that would, in the fullness of time, reach them. In one sense, the call to "take it easy" can be seen as the precursor to the rage indexed by #Kolaveri, a rage about corruption and dispossession that animates urban middle-class citizens' concerns and gets channeled through a range of social networking platforms. In other words, the distance traversed from "Take It Easy, Urvashi" (in 1994) to "Why This Kolaveri Di" (in 2012) is a mark of the deep sense of disappointment that the promises of economic and cultural globalization were never delivered.

As Kohli (2012) and other scholars have pointed out in recent analyses of reforms and their impact on poverty, "three decades of economic growth have been accompanied by growing inequality" (p. 2). It is crucial, moreover, to grasp that this frustration with the state of democratic politics that the anticorruption movement mobilized in 2011 had been brewing over a long period of time. Recent expressions of what Roy (2016) calls a "distinctive public form of civic anger" (p. 362) can be located in relation to the profoundly uneven impact of economic reforms through the 1990s and 2000s, and, even further back, in key political economic realignments during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is hardly a surprise, then, that the light-hearted suggestion to a newly emergent youth culture to "take it easy" and wait for the benefits of globalization to reach them could not be sustained or reinvented two decades later.

We situate *Kolaveri* within this longer trajectory of cultural politics to move away from both marketing and academic discourse about virality, and to argue that the tragicomic register on which the song works, coupled with the indeterminacy of *veri* (rage), made the song radically available for appropriation, remixing, and recirculation by a range of actors. In other words, the song's ambivalent affective appeals (let us not forget that the performance in the original video did not signal rage or anger) was a crucial factor in its popularity and circulation. As Papacharissi (2015) has argued, the "affective attunement" at work in music also shapes interactions on social media platforms. And where *Kolaveri* is concerned, in less than a week of the song's release, we began to see numerous "affective gestures" being made across platforms (YouTube-Twitter-TV news) that, in turn, called "networked publics into being" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 24; Yang, 2009). For instance, on November 24, 2011, a week after the release of "Kolaveri," a young man in New Delhi slapped the cricket administrator and veteran politician Sharad Pawar. Within a matter of hours, a number of citizens started using #Kolaveri (and less frequently, #KolaveriDi) and the phrase "Why This Kolaveri" to begin discussing this expression of rage against a

corrupt politician. Some users even uploaded mash-up videos using television footage of the politician being slapped, with their own “take” featuring the *Kolaveri* song as background music. Set to the tune of the song but with lyrics rewritten to address political corruption, and layered with images of Pawar and other politicians’ implication in various scandals, these videos were an early indication of how #Kolaveri became available as a potent sonic cue in a public sphere already structured by deeply felt sentiments of rage and frustration.

Performative

If “Kolaveri’s” availability as a digital artifact and a deeply meaningful sociocultural referent is one dimension of its becoming a sound bridge, the remarkable range of the uses to which it was put rested on the song’s performativity and, in particular, the refrain it offered. Within days of the song being released and #Kolaveri emerging across social media platforms, a range of remixes and mash-ups that were familiar in terms of popular music and memetic culture made their way onto YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.⁶ However, performativity here is about more than being able to sing, dance, and orchestrate a flash mob. It is first about numerous users—from journalists and politicians to everyday citizens—employing the opening line of the song (“Why this Kolaveri”), as is, to express a sense of bewilderment regarding the scale of political corruption. The repetition of this line across media platforms as an insistent question led to #Kolaveri becoming an instantly recognizable sonic cue in a political culture anchored predominantly to visual cues. Consider, for instance, the tweets in Figure 2:

These tweets—performative statements that linked #Kolaveri to a range of political concerns from foreign direct investment in retail to spectrum allocation for mobile telephony—call attention to how a shared and recognizable sonic cues can weave political matters into the rhythms of daily conversations on Twitter and other platforms already sparked by frenetic news media coverage. The continual use of #Kolaveri alongside other hashtags that invoke or name political parties (BJP, Congress, AAP, etc.), key politicians, and events and scandals places the sound within a vibrant and networked intertextual field including jokes, memes, and videos circulated via Facebook and WhatsApp that, on the whole, reveal how citizenship is constituted as much by play and performance as it is by normative understandings of deliberation and participation (Bayat, 2009; Brock, 2012; Jones, 2013).

⁶ There are a number of such instances, from “Gangnam Style” to the use of music in election campaigns and protest cultures in various African contexts (Gunner, 2009; Nyairo & Ogude, 2005).

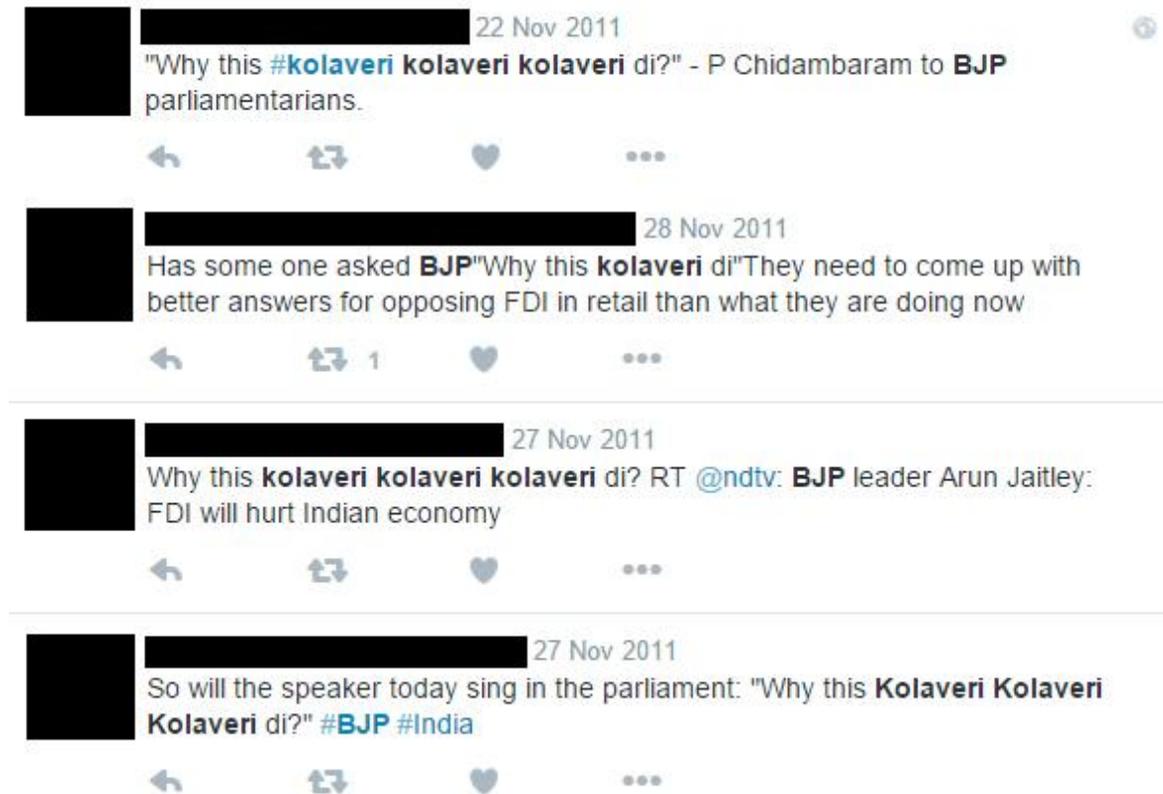


Figure 2. "Why This Kolaveri" as an insistent political question.

Repetition, a crucial dimension of such performances, was thus the first signal of the aural register at which hybrid platforms like Twitter can operate. For a hashtag is not only a "performative statement," as Bruns and Burgess (2011) have argued, but can also be, as Lacey (2013) has pointed out, an invitation to listen rather than read. For what the song offered, beyond a catchy opening line, was also a refrain and rhyme scheme that users could appropriate, rework, and sound out. The key linguistic device employed in the song is the epenthetic "-u" inserted to ensure the flow of the rhyme scheme, signaling both emphasis and a break that allows the song to proceed further. This formal element of the song facilitated creative uses of the refrain that, in turn, gave #Kolaveri a promiscuous and catalytic charge.⁷ For instance, Figure 3 shows a tweet that cannot be read but, in fact, has to be sung or sounded out.

⁷ For another instance of how a formal or structural element in a song enables creative expression, see Nyairo (2005), in the Kenyan context.

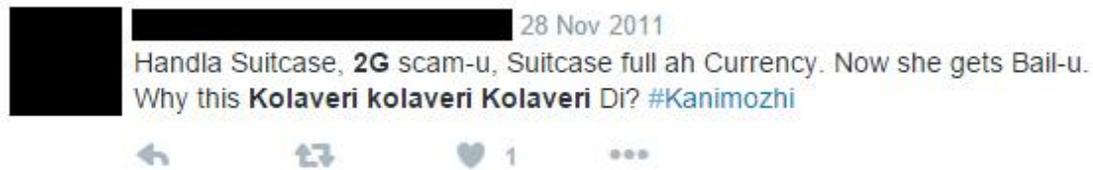


Figure 3. A Kolaveri tweet that has to be sung, not read.

In the tweet featured in Figure 3, it is the refrain premised on the epenthetic *-u* that links different elements of a political scandal—suitcases used to carry cash for bribes, the 2G spectrum allocation scandal, and judicial decisions involving Kanimozhi, a major political figure. Yoking the popular song to an ongoing political issue, #Kolaveri thus works as a powerful refrain—an element in a song that marks a “break” but also has the potential to “break up and break open” (“Resonance,” n.d.). In other words, #Kolaveri moves away from the song’s filmic and seemingly apolitical origin to become a shared cue for conversations in an otherwise fractious political sphere.

This kind of redeployment of a sonic cue is, to be sure, not limited to the Indian context and can be predicated on public performances at the intersection of, say, religion and politics as well. Consider Roshanak Kheshti’s (2015) analysis of the aural dimensions of postelection protests in Iran in 2009. In her account of Iranians expressing dissent against the state, Kheshti draws attention to a video entitled *Inja Kojast* (“Where Is This Place?”). The video is powerful not because of its visuals but rather because of the nightly rooftop chanting that made up the soundtrack—“*All-Ahu-Akbar . . . Inja Kojast?*”—and that was taken up in numerous other anonymous videos circulated via YouTube. Kheshti’s emphasis on the “sonic performative” also draws attention to a refrain. Where #Kolaveri is concerned, if the refrain marked out an acoustic territory that could attract a range of voices, expressions, political statements, and conversations, it was the performance of the refrain that produced a space—a multilane sound bridge—where the popular and the political converged in unpredictable ways. Performativity, more broadly, is what gave a popular and semiotically open sound like *Kolaveri* a political charge.

Resonant

The power that this refrain accrued, however, cannot be understood solely in relation to social media platforms. The territory that #Kolaveri marked out as a site for political performance must account for not just interactions between users but also processes of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Kraidy & Mourad, 2010) that shape how a particular sound moves across media platforms, becomes resonant, and gathers publics over time. In our understanding of how cultural symbols or representations gather force and significance in a given cultural context, we often turn to resonance and relevance. Schudson (1989) is right to point out that the resonance of a given symbol or cultural artifact has to do in part with how well it speaks to audiences and how “a public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience” (p. 170) emerges. This emphasis on relevance and significance becomes even more acute in a context in which a vast majority of digital artifacts that engage the political on a daily and routine basis find limited circulation. To be sure, this is not to reduce participatory culture to a narrow question of short-term

effects. However, in a country where less than 5% of the population actively participated on platforms like Twitter and YouTube, the question of resonance hinges on whether a given digital artifact and its uses—the various remixes and political deployments of “Kolaveri,” in this case—are widely recirculated and discussed in other media channels. In the Indian context, we would point to television’s role, particularly television news, in resounding this sonic cue that was first produced and heard on social networking sites.

Among the many news programs that devoted attention to #Kolaveri, one show stands out for the manner in which the sonic cue was deployed: *Gustakhi Maaf* (“Pardon the Transgression”), a daily satirical puppet show broadcast on the Hindi language channel NDTV.⁸ Launched in 2003 as an official adaptation of the successful French puppet show *Les Guignols de l’info* (“News Puppets”), *Gustakhi Maaf* features a host who introduces short skits that offer comedic interpretations of news and current affairs. Producers have successfully localized the program, as Kumar (2012) outlines, by using popular film songs (from Hindi-language Bollywood films) “to amplify themes of love, betrayal, and loyalty to describe shifts in political coalitions and changes in personal fortunes in Indian politics” (p. 85). Given the long-standing practice of also rewriting song lyrics to fit a particular skit, it is not surprising that *Kolaveri* was also taken up on this program. In one segment, broadcast on November 28, 2011 (less than 10 days after *Kolaveri* was released on YouTube), *Gustakhi Maaf* featured a cast of puppets of major politicians who were all implicated in the corruption scam as well as the anticorruption movement. Echoing tweets that framed south Indian politicians in the 2G spectrum scam in relation to broader discontent involving other corporate and political figures, these skits featured puppets of the sitting prime minister (Manmohan Singh), Sonia Gandhi (President of the Congress Party), Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal (the figurehead and architects of the anticorruption movement), and others singing, to the tune of “Why This Kolaveri,” about their political misfortunes: “Why is Lokpal very, very weak; Government full of goon-u goon-u; Wearing khadi white-u; For public all is night-u, public future black-u.” Again, it is worth noting here the use of the refrain, the rhyme scheme, and the play with words to refer specifically to the demand for a *Jan Lokpal*, an independent investigative body to handle cases of political and bureaucratic corruption.

It goes without saying that these skits had tremendous rhetorical force given the influence that NDTV wields in the Indian political landscape and the fact that television news had focused intensely on the anticorruption movement since April 2011. Moreover, this program had built its reputation to the extent that politicians were eager to be featured as puppets, with some skits even staging conversations between a politician and her or his puppet.⁹ Beyond the issue of news parody, this is a program that reveals how puppetry as a creative form reconfigures, as Kraidy (2016) argues, “the scale between the human body and the body politic” (p. 145). By bringing the issue of corruption into a “humanly portable arena” and using a sonic cue that had already drawn connections between various actors, *Gustakhi Maaf* allowed audiences to grasp the political in its entirety and, in the process, served to consolidate #Kolaveri as a sound bridge on which a televisual public could gather.

⁸ For more on this program’s adaptation (from France) for an Indian audience, see Kumar (2012).

⁹ Prannoy Roy, the founder and CEO of NDTV, recalled in an interview that one politician demanded to know why *Gustakhi Maaf* had not yet made a puppet in his image and that he would even do his own voice-over if needed (see Kaushik, 2015).

Another dimension of “Kolaveri’s” resonance across media spaces is illustrated by its use in support of the anticorruption movement by Dr. Parag Jhaveri, a local politician in Mumbai. Within three weeks of the release of the original track, Jhaveri had capitalized on the song’s availability and performativity (through the refrain and rhyme scheme) to produce a remixed version, what he called a “political song,” to proffer support to the anticorruption protests headed by Anna Hazare in New Delhi. English and Hindi television news channels amplified the reach of Jhaveri’s song by cutting to performances of the remixed version by the politician and his supporters in between their coverage of the protests in the nation’s capital. The voice-overs employed in these news segments are as instructive as the act of the remix itself, with the commentary typically focused on the original *Kolaveri* being on everyone’s tongues. In narrativizing the song’s success using such metaphors, the news reports linked the song’s resonance to both corporeal dimensions (its affect of rage and dispossession) and the linguistic openness enabled by its inventive incorporation of English words with the Tamil epenthetic *-u*. But in building the remixed political song into their coverage of the anticorruption movement, television news outlets also participated in furthering its resonance across a media and political system deeply fractured by long-standing regional and linguistic divisions. The networks of circulation for the remixed song also folded back into social media, as tweets in Figure 4 indicate, with regional chapters of India Against Corruption (IAC) then discussing on Twitter the possibilities of producing more versions of the song to reiterate their key political demand (i.e., the formation of a *Jan Lokpal*).

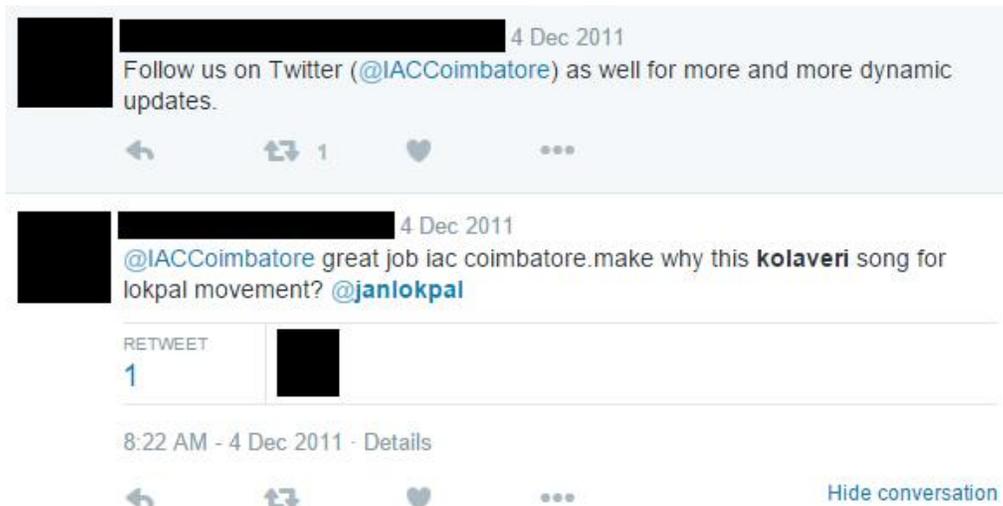


Figure 4. Tweet connecting Kolaveri to the Lokpal movement.

By moving across media platforms and forging links among audiences constituted along linguistic and regional lines, #Kolaveri thus served as a sound bridge between the popular and the political. To be sure, *Kolaveri* was not the only sonic cue that was available in Indian public culture that could have been mobilized during the anticorruption movement. It became a sound bridge because of the half-fortuitous combination of being available, performative, and resonant. We say half-fortuitous to signal the political,

sociocultural, and technological constraints at work, and to acknowledge other sonic cues that are not amplified and are often dampened, muffled, doctored, or silenced. It is also worth noting that there is nothing sacrosanct about “Kolaveri”—the fact that people could be playful¹⁰ and use the song in any way they deemed fit is central to its influence. In sharp contrast to other powerful cues, such as *Azaadi* (“freedom”) and other slogans deployed in protests, “Kolaveri’s” playfulness and attendant wistfulness ensured its circulation. By virtue of not being weighed down by explicit political connotations, #Kolaveri became a sound bridge on which ordinary citizens, seething with rage, as well as journalists, politicians, and other elites could gather and pose the same question—“Why this murderous rage?”

Sound, Listening, and Sonic Citizenship

Suggesting that sound technologies and practices constitute a vital cultural and material infrastructure on which a bridge between the popular and the political can be built, we have traced how a sonic cue (“Kolaveri”) can initiate the making of a sound bridge (#Kolaveri) in a given social and political context. By sound bridge, we mean a particular sound that connects distinct settings/scenes/contexts, but also “sound,” as in sensible, reasonable, grounded, and carefully designed. Moving beyond established notions of sound bridges in film studies, we suggest that sound bridges disclose to us new ways of listening for the political and new modes of participation—the expression of sonic citizenship—in a digital era. In doing so, we have privileged sonic and aural dimensions while accounting for a range of media forms that were crucial to #Kolaveri being available, performative, and resonant. This is not to ignore or downplay the visual. After all, the affective appeals, resonance, and circulation of the sonic cue we have analyzed here rested on a rich set of visual cues including a making-of video with subtitles, television news segments, and, crucially, puppets resembling politicians. However, as Sterne (2003) and other scholars have pointed out, “sonocentrism” is a strategy to analyze an event, a phenomenon, or cultural artifact that takes the sonic as a starting point. Such a move becomes even more crucial, as we have detailed, in global media and communication studies where scholarship has tended to privilege the visual.

This article thus joins the sonic turn in many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to underscore the importance of sound and listening practices in the mediation of politics and citizenship across the world (Gürsel, 2013; Stoeberl, 2016). Citizenship, as Andrisani (2015) contends, “is articulated in sound” as much as it is through other sensory registers. The question, then, is how do we listen for political participation and evaluate claims about citizenship that are increasingly made through creative sound work as much as through textual and visual practices? Within a vast and varied soundscape that characterizes contemporary Indian public culture, we have traced how a sonic cue that emerges from the domain of popular culture can, under the right circumstances, be transformed into a communicative infrastructure, a sound bridge, that makes room for and gathers together a host of political and cultural sentiments, expressions, and aspirations.

In doing so, we also hope to join a broader conversation on how digital infrastructures, platforms, and practices have transformed political cultures worldwide. In an era marked by the relentless corporate

¹⁰ The song also sparked discussions about misogyny in Tamil film music (see Kumar, 2011).

makeover of news media and a concomitant decline in public trust in journalism, the routine creation and circulation of a range of content via mobile and digital networks offers a strikingly different and immensely popular mode of engagement with the political. However, our understanding of emergent logics of digital re-mediation will always have an “analytical deficit,” as Chakravartty and Roy (2015, p. 313) argue, if we continue to emphasize “numerical salience” and focus solely on electoral politics. Framing the link between the popular and the political in terms of effects will only ensure that “the varied institutional shifts and practices of interpretation, interaction, and contestation that generate political agency and social life remain hidden from view” (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, p. 313). We cannot grasp the significance of #Kolaveri either in the power of participatory culture or in its failure to reshape electoral outcomes. Rather, it affords us a glimpse into the shifting cultural foundations of democratic politics. Moving away from thinking about how popular culture can serve as a terrain for learning and practicing skills that can then, in some stagist fashion, be applied to the political, we have tried to capture here the complex interplay between established media institutions (TV news, film industries), digital platforms (Twitter, YouTube, etc.), and user/audience imaginaries and practices. And within this emergent media landscape, apprehending political shifts and transformations involves listening as much as looking and seeing.

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