

Sanctified Hearts and Invisible Purifiers: A Story of Vibration, Tuning, and Sacred Resonance in India

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PRELUDE

Knee-deep water, carrying animal excreta, torn sanitary napkins, abandoned condoms, plastic wrappers, and crushed bottles. In the cold, damp air of a narrow lane in southern Kolkata, where buildings press against one another, 42-year-old Trailakya carries his six-year-old son on his shoulders, carefully avoiding the filth to reach the main road where a school van is waiting. Last night, his neighbor returned drunk and perhaps beat his wife again. Her screams spilled out the window. Nearby, devotional tunes of Shyama Sangeet blare from another house. Every spring, on Saraswati Puja, this same lane vibrates with timeless Bengali melodies by Sudhin Dasgupta and Salil Chowdhury before transitioning to Bhangra beats during immersion processions at night. On other days, the local club hosts blood donation camps and cultural events with passionate slogans of Marxbad Zindabad (Long Live Marxism).

Fifteen years ago, Trailakya, a staunch communist, shocked his comrades by taking spiritual initiation from a Bengali Brahmin guru and turning his home into a devotional congregation centre. His journey began at eleven when he migrated from Dhaka (Bangladesh) to the Bethuadahari town in Nadia district, West Bengal, India. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Kolkata and became a hawker in the streets of Gariahat. Despite years of saving and selling his wife's jewelry, Trailakya could not afford to build a house outside this dingy lane. His wife, Padma, was getting worried about the increasingly unsafe environment. Rampant incidents of drug abuse, theft, and domestic violence left her deeply worried about raising her children in a toxic neighborhood. A devout worshiper of Lord Krishna, Padma quietly held a faith deep inside her heart that if her house became a sacred offering to the Supreme Divine, the sound of devotional prayers would flow through its walls, and its vibrations might cleanse more than just their own lives. Perhaps it could insinuate the hearts of those around them, soften the sedimented corrosion, wash away the filth within it, and eventually transform the entire neighborhood into a sanctuary of peace, health, and well-being.

SPANDAN: THE PULSE OF SPIRITUAL VIBRATION

“Protyek ta jaigar ekta vibration achey. Satsang korle shei jaigar vibration’e poriborton ashey. Kono barite jodi niyomito shokal-shondhye prarthona kora

hoy, taa'te sudhu matro shei barir'i mongol hoy na. Borong, pariparshik shokol baari, onchol ebong poribesher'o mongol hoy, jekhane jekhane shei vibration pouchaye."

"Every place has its own unique vibration. When a satsang adhibesan (devotional congregation) is held in a home, it transforms the vibration of that place. Daily morning and evening prayers not only nurture the well-being of the house but also extend a sense of wellness to neighboring homes, their residents, and the surrounding environment, where their vibrations reach."

In the year 2010, during the autumn months, Dipak (27), a rice seller and a devout member of the Satsang community, made this statement inside the community centre of a South Kolkata neighborhood, in the presence of seven other devotees. They had gathered for an urgent meeting to address recent complaints from neighbours about the rising noise levels during the centre's weekly congregations. This was not the first time Dipak had shared these words; he had voiced them many times before. Recently, the Satsangees I met at the Delhi Satsang Vihar (DSV) shared similar, if not identical, thoughts. They described how the vibrations of their homes underwent a "positive" transformation after conducting a satsang adhibesan. Such statements are widely echoed among Satsangees, who, like Dipak and others, believe deeply that satsang adhibesans can bring *mongol*, or wellness, to the world, by infusing "positive vibrations" and reducing "negative vibrations".

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new religious movements in India and beyond adopted the concept of "vibration" to bridge religion and science, drawing from indigenous traditions and Western scientific discourses (Babb, 1986; Porter, 2005; Srinivas, 2014; Gooptu, 2016; Wilke, 2024). Figures such as Swami Vivekananda proposed the idea of cosmic vibrations that underlie all existence, linking ancient Vedic ideas with emerging scientific paradigms like electromagnetism and wave theory (De Michelis, 2004: 165; Srinivas, 2014: 30). The Theosophical Society, led by Helena Blavatsky, synthesized Hindu and Buddhist teachings with Western esotericism, suggesting that all matter and consciousness are interconnected through vibratory forces (Rudbøg, 2010). This idea was further explored by religious and spiritual movements such as New Thought and Spiritualism, which proposed that vibrations influenced not only phys-

ical reality but also human consciousness and spiritual experiences (Urban, 2011). Historically, this period marked a shift in how communities engaged with modernity, as scholars like Webb Keane (2007) have noted in his work on the materiality of religious experience, highlighting how religious communities used modern technologies and scientific languages, such as telegraphy, radio, and electromagnetism as metaphors for spiritual communication and divine vibrations, showing how technological developments were assimilated into religious worldviews.

The concept of *spandan* or spiritual vibration, as formulated by Satsang's founder Anukulchandra Chakravarty, must be situated within a historical juncture that witnessed the interplay between religious transformations, scientific discourses, and technological innovations in early twentieth-century colonial Bengal. This historical moment was shaped by three crucial developments, namely, (a) the intensification of Hindu-Muslim communal tensions, (b) the rise of eugenic thought and its intersection with Indian religious movements, and (c) the discovery and proliferation of radio technology. The radio's capacity to transmit invisible waves across distant geographies informed Anukulchandra's idea of spiritual connectivity, wherein a disciple must be "tuned" to the guru, much like a receiver aligns with a transmitter, by resonating with the vibrations (*spandan*) of its surrounding environment. This idea of *spandan* frames living beings and objects as composed of vibrational frequencies that shape the moral and spiritual foundation of the universe. Simultaneously, the eugenics movement, with its focus on racial purity and selective propagation, found a spiritual reinterpretation in his teachings, as he emphasized moral refinement and purification of the soul (*shuddho atma*) through the vibrations of *kirtan* or devotional music. Here, vibration was not just an abstract principle but a material and ethical force that can cause moral-cum-genetic refinement, while enabling people to harmonize with a higher, divinely ordained frequency. To address communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, Anukulchandra emphasized tuning and vibration as a means of fostering spiritual resonance. He positioned moral and social purification as a path to transcending sectarian divides and cultivating social harmony. Just as multiple sounds converge to create rhythmic unity in kirtan, he envisioned society as a collective field of vibrations that, when aligned with spiritual ideals, could dissolve discord and generate cohesion. His conception of *spandan* thus stems from the technological, scientific, and socio-religious devel-

opments of colonial and postcolonial India, premised upon the philosophy of tuning or spiritual attunement.

However, the idea of spiritual vibration in Satsang exists both in the discursive realm and comes into presence materially through embodied practices of listening. In practice, the discourse of vibrations, rooted in Thakur's modern scientific-religious vocabulary, intersects with the specific and local histories of places, their built environments, and the lived realities of those who inhabit them. Thus, the question, "What is vibration?" takes on a particular or multiple valences in given contexts. In this paper, I turn to a particular moment in history when the sounds of satsang gatherings influenced relationships among people and their surroundings. To ground this discussion, I employ a retrospective auto-ethnographic lens, reflecting on my experiences as both a devotee and a neighbor, exploring how our modes of listening shaped the environment we inhabited. These auto-ethnographic vignettes from a neighborhood in Calcutta (now Kolkata) illustrate how vibrations operated both as a material force and a symbolic presence. They shaped a community of devotees, influencing their notions of social and spiritual hygiene, binding them together while distinguishing them from the rest of the neighborhood.

NOISE, DIRT, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PURIFICATION

More than one hundred and fifty people had gathered at the *Kendra* to attend the weekly Sunday *adhibesan*. After the evening prayer, it was time for silent chanting and meditation (*naam-dhyan*). As usual, the devotees closed their eyes, sat cross-legged in a yogic posture, and started chanting the seed-name (*beej-naam*) quietly. We all remained quiet, softly chanted, and refrained from generating any distracting sound. After a few seconds of chanting, I could feel subtle sensations in my body created by the soft utterances. The sound was initially generated around the middle of the neck, where the vocal cord is situated. As the chanting continued, the sounds flowed downwards, passing through the chest, belly, and abdomen. Feeble sensations of heat were generated at the tip of my fingers. It was time to stress in the middle of my eyebrows, visualizing Sree Sree Thakur's "*chakra photo*" (holy image) while keeping my eyes closed. I 'saw' a dark spot with a tinge of blurry fluorescent hue encircled around the image. The sensations of utterance could be felt across the body in partial synchrony with

the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. In the quiet and tranquil ambience of the room, I felt calmer and more attentive towards the surrounding sounds, such as birds chirping and dogs barking in the vicinity, which often go unnoticed. This feeling has been reiterated over and over by devotees that *naam-dhyan* makes a person calmer (*shaanto*) and sharper (*teekhno*), making one more "attentive" and "mindful" (*totgotishomponno*). Some believe that mentally blocking out background noise and unwanted thoughts enhances focus, while others argue that staying engaged with one's surroundings fosters greater attunement rather than distraction.

Boom Boom!!! An unexpected stream of loud music entered the room and disrupted the session. It completely destroyed the silence and tranquility we were so carefully trying to nurture. The unbearably loud Bollywood music (popular Hindi film songs) emanated from outside. With this, I could notice a minor increase in my heartbeat. The chest, feet, and thighs could feel the thumping shimmers of thick rhythmic beats; as if the "entire room was vibrating" (*shara ghor kaapchilo*), as articulated later by devotees who could not meditate properly. As they diligently tried to focus on the thoughts of Thakur and experience "His divine presence", the loud sounds "trembled our bodies" (*shorir kaapchilo*). We realized that the music was played by our neighbors, Shyamoli and her family. For the last few weeks, Shyamoli and her family members had been complaining about the excessively loud *kirtan* (devotional music) in Sunday *adhibesans*. They found the kirtan loud, noisy, and intolerable. It increased Shyamoli's heartbeat — "*buk dhorpor korey*", she said. While she complained about feelings of palpitation (*oshwosti*) and throbbing (*dhorpor*) during the kirtan, her husband, who is a professional musician trained in Hindustani Classical music, did not enjoy the music either, finding it to be a form of nuisance (*lompo-jhomo*). Above all, there was a newborn baby in their house, for whom the loud sounds could have caused hearing impairment or chronic illnesses, they feared. Despite repeated complaints, the devotees reluctantly kept their kirtan loud. In a clumsy neighborhood where buildings are almost at a stone's throw distance, issues of noise pollution could be a serious crisis, especially if a residential building transforms into a site of public worship, bringing a louder soundscape in the daily rhythms of the neighborhood. Keeping this in mind, most of the devotees perceived the loud Bollywood music during *naam-dhyan* as a conscious act of "revenge" (*protishodh*) meant to cause disturbance. However, this was not just a simple case of noise pollution; it was

a conflict rooted in deeper sociocultural differences that erupted through the medium of sound.

When this *Kendra* was first established, following the instructions of the spiritual head of Satsang, Sree Sree Acharyadeb, from the Deoghar ashram, it was met with some resistance from local residents. One significant reason for this was that many in the neighborhood were staunch communists, with strong ties to the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPIM). The Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), has left an indelible mark on West Bengal's political and cultural landscape since its inception in 1964. Rising to power in 1977, the party's 34-year rule was characterized by land reforms, advocacy for workers' rights, and more, though it also faced criticism for alleged authoritarian tendencies. In Kolkata, the CPI(M) cultivated a reputation for fostering leftist intellectualism and robust trade union movements, shaping the city's socio-political ethos. The party's influence extended into local neighborhood clubs, where grassroots initiatives like cultural events, blood donation camps, and fundraising efforts for disaster relief highlighted its commitment to community welfare. This fusion of ideology and activism became a hallmark of these neighborhoods. Even after the CPI(M)'s decline in West Bengal following the 2011 assembly elections, when the Trinamool Congress (TMC) came to power, some neighborhood clubs, such as the one near the adhibesan kendra, remained steadfast in their loyalty. In 2015, they turned down financial assistance from the new government for developing gyms within their club, as a gesture of unwavering commitment to their party. Ribhu Da (53), the local secretary of the club, a CPI(M) party worker, and a close friend of Trailakya, held a strong influence over neighborhood affairs between 2005-2010. He was quite upset by Trailakya's decision to set up a devotional center at his residence. This choice was especially contentious given his active involvement in the party's organizational activities. One day, Ribhu Da expressed his disappointment to Trailakya, politely saying:

“Dada, eta ki korlen? Amar bektigoto motamot—ekjon party'r member hishebe eta apnar kora uchit hoy ni. Pujo korun na. Pujo kora toh kharap kaaj na. Amar maa'o baarite pujo koren. Kintu eshob mandir-phandir korar ki dorkar chilo?”

“What did you do, brother? In my opinion, as a party member, this was not

an appropriate move on your part. If you want to worship at home, that's fine. There's nothing wrong with it. Worshiping isn't bad, my mother also worships at home. But did you really have to go as far as setting up a temple?”

Ribhu Da was unhappy with Trailakya, who was not only a friend to him but also a loyal party worker. He meant that, as a party member, it was inappropriate for him to have permitted the *Kendra* to be set up in his house. For a rigid communist like Ribhu Da, perhaps a public display of faith seemed incongruous, even problematic. But for Trailakya, there possibly appeared to be no conflict. Perhaps he didn't see his faith and his political alignment as contradictory or antithetical. People's lives in this neighborhood were interwoven in a complex manner with overlapping identities that coexisted in subtle and unresolved ways.

Amidst everything, a generally cordial, if not completely harmonious, relationship existed between the residents and the devotees, with no major conflicts. Over time, some of the local residents even took initiation or *diksha*, formally becoming disciples who occasionally participated in kirtan sessions. For instance, the 62-year-old widowed Jethima (aunt), Shyamoli's mother and the senior most member of her family (who was the only member in the family to take *diksha* or formal initiation) often sang the Deoghar evening prayer tunes after returning from the sweets and confectioneries shop that she single-handedly ran after her husband's death. Her mellow voice was often audible inside the kendra when she hummed the *Joy Radhey* kirtan into the ears of her granddaughter. It occurred to me while listening to the tone of her voice that she perhaps enjoyed singing the prayer in her granddaughter's company.

Shyamoli, on the other hand, was among the majority of residents who were critical of the kendra as a web of fraudulent activities driven by “blind faith” (*ondho biswas*) in the name of religion. These non-devotee residents, who were highly critical of “religious organizations” (*dhormiyo songothon*), often saw the Satsangees as typical “scammers” (*chitingbaaj*) who “brainwash” (*boka banaye*) ordinary people and spread “superstition” (*kushongoshkar*). Even though residents took *diksha* and embraced discipleship with time, the majority remained suspicious and critical, considering the Satsangees as poisonous or harmful elements (*beesh maal*) of society. On the other hand, the Satsangees harbored a disdainful attitude towards non-devotee residents, who were accused of engaging in promiscuity, do-



Image 1: After a satsang adhibeshan (devotional gathering), devotees have gathered in the narrow lane outside the Kendra, closely surrounded by residential buildings with barely any space between them. Batasha, a sugar-based traditional prasada or sacred food is distributed. This lane, usually used by pedestrians and cyclists, becomes crowded during these gatherings. In this tight space, a chong—a common festival loudspeaker found in West Bengal, is seen mounted on a rickshaw van. Since loudspeakers are banned inside the Mandir, this one is kept outside for the early morning kirtan procession. It remains off in the evening and is only used once the procession moves out of the lane.

mestic abuse, alcohol consumption, and violent altercations—issues already existing in the neighborhood before the Kendra’s establishment. This situation was a matter of grave concern not only for the devotees but for the entire neighborhood, who felt disgusted and annoyed (*tikto-birokto*) by the “uneducated and uncultured” (*oshikkhito-uncultured*) residents earning a disrepute for creating a “bad environment” (*kharap poribesh*). The Satsangees, in particular, regarded this as a crisis of *adhyatmik sadachar*, denoting a lapse in moral and spiritual hygiene. They described these elements as “environmental pollution” (*poribesh dushon*), labeling the people responsible as “polluters” (*dushito maal* or *golaano party*) who “spread immense negativity in the environment” (*poribeshhey prochondo negativity choraye*). In essence, these were rising concerns about pollution and toxicity at a moral and sociocultural level that propelled both devotees and non-devotees to worry about the environmental well-being of the neighborhood.

The Satsangees give immense importance to the idea of *adhyatmik sadachar* or spiritual hygiene. They believe that maintaining a healthy environment (*shustho poribesh*) requires more than just physical cleanliness; it demands the “purification” (*shuddhikaran*) of both the external surroundings and the “inner dirt” (*bhetorer/moner aborjona*) that gathers in people’s hearts. For instance, the omnipresence of the color white in a Satsangee’s life signifies purity and cleanliness. The whitewashed walls of *Satsang Vihars* (temples), the white clothing of sacred shrines, along with the spotless white garments, behold the spirit of purity and cleanliness that seep into every detail of a Satsangee’s life. Mukul Jethu (65), a school teacher in the Deoghar ashram, once explained to me that “It’s not enough to focus on outward cleanliness (*bajjhik porichchonnota*), inner purity (*ontorer porichchonnota*) is just as crucial. While maintaining physical hygiene (*sharirik sadachar*) is important, Thakur (the guru) expects us to preserve our mental and spiritual hygiene (*manushik o adhyatmik sadachar*) as well. Inner purity means keeping the heart clean (*mon porishkar*), clear as crystal (*shochcho*), gentle (*nomro*), and untainted (*nidaag*) by the negative emotions of jealousy (*hingshey*), lust (*kaam*), anger (*krodh*), greed (*lobh*), and fear (*bhoy*). To an ideal Satsangee, spiritual hygiene could not be achieved solely through outer cleanliness. It also requires purging negative thoughts and emotions (*kharap chinta*) to maintain a heart that is clean and pure.”

Therefore, the practice of satsang adhibeshan is a process of purifying the environment (*sustho poribesh bojay raakha*) to keep it inhabitable

for the beloved Supreme. These gatherings are regarded as a means of sanctifying the space, ensuring it upholds the moral and spiritual purity befitting the abode of the revered lord Sree Sree Thakur. Over time, this commitment extended beyond the *Kendra*, as the Satsangees began to clean the neighborhood physically as well. They swept and washed the dirty streets, viewing these activities as an expression of their spiritual dedication to the well-being of the environment (*poribeshar mongol*). These acts of cleaning symbolized the purification of not only physical spaces such as roads and buildings, using soap, water, and broomsticks, but also the cleansing of hearts through kirtan's frequencies, which ultimately aspired to enshrine a spiritually and morally hygienic environment in the neighborhood. In the next section, I look at how the Satsangees use kirtan to maintain spiritual cleanliness and purify their surroundings while discovering vibration as an instrument of purification.

VIBRATION: THE INVISIBLE PURIFIER

On Sunday evenings, the *adhibesan* lasted for about one hundred and twenty minutes. Microphones, harmoniums, guitars, and drums were kept in the front where the performers sit. Three different types of drums: *Dhol*, *Khol*, and *Naal*, were used during the performance, with varying thicknesses and textures capable of generating various rhythmic tones ranging from mid, low, and high frequencies. Small and large cymbals were used to create the high-frequency chimes. Decorative lamps (*prodip*) and burning incense sticks (*dhup kathi*) were placed before the shrine. The flickering flames of the lamps, sandalwood fragrances of incense sticks, fresh bunches of Mexican Tuberose (*Rajanigandha*) sticks, and white garlands pervaded the room with a captivating aura. During performances, devotees often got transported to a “divine world” (*shorgo rajyo*) elevated (*unnito*) by the power of music (*kirtaner shokti*) and flowery fragrance. As the kirtan continued for a few minutes, some of our bodies exhibited a maddening energy when we clapped, tapped, danced, and moved in rhythm. Dynamic playing of instruments with intensified force and pressure, heightened pitch, elevated tempo, and increased volume set the room on a different note altogether. The entire room would “vibrate” with a booming effect—“*gom gom korchey*”, as remarked by a devotee, Pritish Da (52), who, at times, disliked this loudness. According to him, the kirtan was unnecessarily loud and noisy (*shobdokol-*

podroom). In the dominant discourse within Satsang, the sounds of intense kirtan are considered sacred and believed to “elevate” participants to higher states of consciousness. However, for people like Pritish Da, these sounds evoke a different response, where the kirtan is sometimes perceived less as a spiritual experience and more as noise. For devotees like me and many others, it was ecstasy through which we experienced the divine presence of Thakur in the vibrating frequencies of the room. Any negotiation with that performance would disrupt the intimacy we shared with Thakur. As I look at this incident retrospectively, we—the majority of devotees, chose not to listen to our neighbors (as well as some of our own congregation members) as an act of devotional adherence (*nishtha*) towards Thakur on the one hand, and on the other, as an act of fulfilling a holy cause of bringing wellness or *mongol* to the neighborhood.

Shyamoli and her family members went to other non-devotee residents in the locality to seek support. Others in the neighborhood, whose buildings were farther apart, were comparatively less vulnerable to the loudness of kirtan. However, after Shyamoli's call, members of the neighborhood club arrived at Trailakya's house and threatened the devotees, demanding the permanent closure of the *kendra*. In response, the devotees refused and proposed to reduce the loudness of kirtan as a gesture of cooperation. However, the conflict did not end there. After a few weeks, one of the residents arrived at the Kendra, reportedly in a drunken state (*maatlaamo korte korte*), and ended up beating a devotee, leading to head injuries and bleeding. Following the attack, devotees filed complaints at the local police station. Meanwhile, residents also lodged grievances against the loud kirtan and the nuisance. The police officials arrived at the Kendra and facilitated a resolution through a verbal agreement between both parties. After the incident escalated to the Deoghar ashram's higher authority, the spiritual head of Satsang, Sree Sree Acharyadeb, immediately instructed the devotees to be empathetic with the neighbors instead of being oblivious and arrogant towards them. From that day onward, the devotees refrained from using microphones, amplifiers, and speakers. They even abandoned drums and cymbals, adopting a softer, more subdued form of kirtan. Instead of percussion, they relied solely on the harmonium, allowing its melodic strains to accompany their voices. This shift significantly transformed the ambiance of the room, replacing its once-percussive energy with a gentler acoustic tone. The rhythm, which was the backbone of music, was lost. The kirtans



Image 2: Inside the Kendra, female devotees have gathered before the sacred shrine of Sree Sree Thakur (centre-left), Boromaa (centre-right), Borda (left), and Acharyadeb (right). During Ishtaprasanga (sacred discourse), a gurumaa (female devotee) shares personal stories of being blessed by Thakur, while standing with folded hands in reverence. Notably, there are no microphones or speakers in the room, unlike earlier times when amplification devices were used.

were no longer loud. Hence, a substantial proportion of energy and madness in the body language of participants was missing. Following this incident, the Kendra received no further complaints from the neighbors. As a further gesture of goodwill, the devotees distributed sweets and confectioneries throughout the neighborhood to dissipate the lingering tension. They sensed that the sharp frequencies of the kirtan may have unsettled the non-devotees, saturating the neighborhood's atmosphere with an overpowering intensity. Rather than cleansing their inner worlds and dissolving negative emotions, the dense rhythmic beats may have hardened feelings of enmity, violence, and anger, amplifying tensions instead of softening hearts. To dispel the lingering undercurrents of hostility, they sought to recalibrate the neighborhood's vibrational field and thereby turned to concrete actions beyond kirtan to foster "positive vibrations" in the neighborhood.

Vibration, as conceptualized by social scientists, transcends its physical boundaries and becomes a social, cultural, and historical phenomenon. Veit Erlmann (2010) notes that vibrations are not merely mechanical oscillations in the air but form the foundation of social and sensory experiences and shape historical concepts through which listeners make sense of the world around them (Erlmann, 2010: 15). Steve Goodman (2010) further elaborates that vibration is not merely physical, but inherently socio-political, as it has the power to affect bodies, minds, and governments in ways that are often invisible yet profoundly influential. Through his ethnographic study in Israel, Goodman demonstrated how the vibrations of high-frequency sound weapons exert a psycho-physical force that causes material alterations to the body and the physical space, as well as creates "vibrational environments" of fear and dread among the citizens of a war-affected nation (Goodman, 2010: xvii). Julian Henriques (2011) expands on the concept of vibration by highlighting its sociocultural dimensions, particularly in the context of Jamaican reggae musicians. Beyond the material and corporeal aspects, Henriques argues that vibration or "vibe" denotes customs, practices, and perceptions of style, fashion, and the overall reggae lifestyle. This includes a shared understanding of what is socially relevant, as well as a heightened awareness of the dancehall's ambiance and the feelings it evokes (Henriques, 2011: p. xvii). For the reggae musicians, vibration is not just about sound; it plays a crucial role in the collective process of listening, interpreting, and making sense of the emotions and experiences of others in the dancehall. Without these socio-cultural vibrations, the act of listen-

ing and meaning-making would be incomplete. In short, vibrations create a connection between sound, the body, and sociopolitical structures, emphasizing that the sensory experience of vibration is always embedded in broader social, cultural, and historical contexts.

To understand the role of vibration in the lives of Satsangees, it is essential to recognize that vibrations are not just physical or material entities; they are also moral and spiritual signifiers. Vibrations are the matters and metaphors of spiritual hygiene. Satsangees distinguish between negative and positive vibrations, ideas deeply rooted in their collective imagination, which they believe directly affect the *mongol* or well-being of people, places, and environments. Since, for Satsangees, well-being is not limited to physical hygiene and also encompasses mental and spiritual cleanliness, they aim not only to clean the body and physical spaces but to “cleanse the heart” of individuals by fostering positive or sacred vibrations, thereby cultivating a holistic and spiritually hygienic environment. For instance, when the devotees generated loud sounds of kirtan, increasing the volume, accelerating the tempo, and heightening the pitch to set a particular high-frequency tone in the room, they actually were trying to “purify their hearts” (*moner bishuddhikoron*) with the feelings of devotion generated through those sounds. In this case, loudness served as “positive vibrations”—meant to generate sentiments of devotion, faith, and reverence, not only in the hearts of devotees but also the non-devotees outside the kendra who reportedly held sentiments of anger (*krodh*), jealousy (*hingsha*), faithlessness (*biswasheenota*), and suspicion (*shondeho*) against the Satsangees. However, this strategy backfired when the disastrous effects of loud kirtan ended up creating more enmity, hostility, and violence in the neighborhood. At this point, the Satsangees eventually altered the soundscape by adopting a quieter and softer form of kirtan, and the loudness of kirtan emerged as a possible source of “negativity”. They were perceived as “negative vibrations” that must be eliminated. Likewise, when the devotees cultivated quietness during naam-dhyan, it was actually an attempt to “cleanse [themselves] from within” (Amritak, 2024) by clearing the unwanted noise that may have contaminated their inner worlds. In doing so, the Bollywood music that was otherwise part of a leisure routine for many Satsangees was perceived as “negative vibrations”. Hence, the varying degrees of loudness, softness, and quietness are shifting registers of meaning-making across which the Satsangees aimed to purify their hearts and the entire neighborhood.

In this context, vibrations acted as invisible purifiers—cleansing people, places, and environments. Vibrations were not only measured in terms of their loudness-quietness, softness-harshness, noisiness-politeness. The physical quality was certainly an essential marker of difference. But vibrations also signified feelings and emotions of enmity, suspicion, anger, and violence or faith, devotion, and reverence. These sentiments were responsible for determining the spiritual-moral quality of vibrations; negative or positive—that pollute or purify the overall environment of the neighborhood. In the South Indian town of Puttaparhi, Andhra Pradesh, similar perceptions could be noticed among the followers of the Sathya Sai Baba community, where members engage in community singing practices so that the “waves of vibrations [can] purify the polluted atmosphere” (Srinivas, 2014: 70) of the ashram.

In Satsang, I argue that vibrations are perceived as purifiers. They function as material and literary instruments of purification. However, it is important to note that vibrations are not inherently pure or polluted. They become so. The acoustic quality of vibrations and their meanings are not prefixed in the spiritual discourses. As a result, their spiritual or moral significance is assigned to them. This can be understood as a form of “vibrational stitching” (LaBelle, 2019: 180), wherein the Satsangees not only stitch relations among people and places but also stitch the dismantled archives of sacred sound precisely through vibrations. This process of imbuing vibrations with socio-cultural meanings and perceiving them as purifiers or polluters is enacted through an embodied practice of attunement known as tuning. Tuning is central to the lives of Satsangees and is deeply rooted in the history of Satsang. It is a practice of spiritual attunement through vibrations, aiming to create a sense of harmony with the world. In the following section, I examine the concept of tuning to understand how vibrations are imbued with sacred or profane meaning in forging a bond of attunement with the world.

TUNING THE HEART: PURIFYING PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS

Tuning is one of the most frequently used words in Satsang, and it refers to spiritual intimacy between Satsangees—a state of being in harmony or resonance with each other. When devotees can predict the thoughts or feel-

ings of others without explicit communication, they are said to have “tuning” among each other, or they are “in tune”. Often, they attribute tuning as an outcome of “matching wavelengths” or “telepathic connection” between individuals. For instance, when devotees can correctly predict the weather, they are said to be in tune with the place. Likewise, when they are able to make correct guesses about an incoming danger, risk, and accident or anticipate the possibility of an incident before the occurrence of an actual event, they are said to be “in tune” with their surroundings (*poribesher saathe tuning*).

Long before tuning became a buzzword in Satsang, it cropped up several times in the conversations with Sree Sree Thakur. When a devotee named Miss Shimmer asked, “Thakur! How can we perceive the call of the distant world?” (*Durer shaara kibhabe pawa jaaye?*), Sree Sree Thakur responded,

One can perceive anything with which one has a tuning (*ektaanota*). Every creation (*srishti*) sprouts (*gojiye othe*) from a specific vibrational wave (*bishisto spandanatmak torongo*). Behind every creation, every individual thing, object, or living creature’s creation, is this vibrational wave. From individual beings to species, they all have specific vibrational waves. This wave exists in thought, speech, action, and distinct events. When our ego is passive and in tune with the universal heart (*bishwaman*), we can perceive extraordinary things. However, the subtle experiences are not revealed when the ego is manipulative or actively intends to perceive them, just like how the conscious and mindful attempt to sleep hinders falling asleep. If adequate technological prowess can be made, these vibrational waves (*torongo*) could be mechanically produced, and artificial receptors (*jaantrik grohon-jontro*) can be appropriately tuned to catch their frequencies. This is precisely how the radio functions. It can catch specific frequencies if tuned properly (Sree Sree Thakur, 1969: 161).

This quotation by Sree Sree Thakur sheds light on the conceptual relationship between vibration (*spandan*) and tuning (*ektaanota*). According to him, every living being, object, or entity resonates with a unique vibrational wave (*spandanatmak torongo*). To truly perceive these, one must attune oneself to their distinct vibrational frequencies. Thakur’s analogy of tuning



Image 3: This image captures the narrow lane where the Kendra is located, with closely packed buildings and fallen leaves. Over time, the space, on the left, precisely behind the crumbled brick walls, has turned into an informal dumpyard, where locals quietly dispose of household waste, even though it’s not an official garbage site approved by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). In the early years of the Kendra (2008-10), devotees used to clean the lane with soap and water, but eventually they stopped, perhaps after facing criticism from some neighbors.

highlights that our perception of the world and its deeper realities hinges on our ability to attune to the specific vibrational frequencies of objects, places, and living beings. This idea resonates strongly with contemporary satsang adhibesan practices, where collective chanting, meditation, and devotional songs are intended to cultivate a sense of interconnectedness with Thakur and the external world. Through this process of tuning, Satsangees seek to foster attunement (*ektaanota*) with people, places, and environments at a vibrational level. To further illustrate this, I will again return to the satsang adhibesan.

Fifteen years ago, we were at the peak of our youth, filled with boiling enthusiasm, energy, and stamina. Seventeen-year-old Shubho, fifteen-year-old Subir, and nineteen-year-old me all shared a sense of affinity with loud music. Our bodies exuded frenzied energy during musical performances, unlike our parents and senior devotees, who sat calmly and composedly. I felt as if our bodies were filled with the abundance of invisible energies flowing through our bloodstreams that outpour in the forceful beating of drums, cymbals, and dynamic strumming of guitars. Whenever I strummed the guitar, it felt like some sedimented exhaustion was released through the loudness of vibrating strings. Often, strings were torn due to aggressive strumming. It is hard to articulate the inner workings of my body, especially the presence of that invisible energy that I felt psychosomatically during specific moments of the adhibesan.

The tip of my fingers developed a thickness through the constant hammering of bronze-coated steel strings against the wooden fretboard, which often led to minor bleeding. The exterior surface of the guitar exhibited scratches caused by the friction with my nails. Subho and Subir's palms turned red after consistent tapping, beating, and slapping the skinned surface of the khol (drum). Our shining faces reflected the gloss of sweat, which transpired into a strong body odor. It was as if a streak of volcanic waves had been released when I played the guitar, Subho beat the drums, Subir hammered the cymbals, and Roy screamed with his voice at the loudest. This invisible energy we exerted on musical instruments was not restricted to our bodies. It would spread into other bodies inside the room as they swayed in accordance with the rhythm.

In his essay "A World of Attunements" (2020), French sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud explores how sound shapes the sacredness and worship experiences in religious spaces by creating specific atmospheres or ambi-

ance. He argues that sound is not just an incidental aspect but a crucial element that intertwines with the spiritual and atmospheric dimensions of these spaces, fostering a sense of the numinous—an ineffable feeling of divine presence. However, the numinous does not accidentally come into presence. It is brought forth by the systematic process of attunement (Thibaud, 2020). Attunement is defined as a sense of harmony – the "feeling of being at one with another being" (Thibaud, 2020: 05), whereby music plays a vital role. Thibaud states that music conditions and frames the worship experience by immersing individuals in a shared, affective atmosphere that promotes spiritual transformation and a sense of communal harmony or a "common sonic flow in which everyone participates." (Thibaud, 2020: 05). Because music creates "moments of a felt inner sense of deep shared connectivity", it facilitates multiple ways of "being together," precisely through "synchronization, contagion, and imitation." (Thibaud, 2020: 05). This inner sense of shared connectivity is identified as a form of attunement or "collective tuning-in" (Thibaud, 2020: 05).

In *satsang adhibesan*, our eyes mostly remained closed during kirtan; our minds intensely focused on the beloved guru. The exuding heat and sweat of our skin, sensations of prolonged breathing, and the rhythmic movement of our bodies in sync with other bodies exhibited synchronization, imitation, and contagion to some extent. As the sounds penetrated our bodies, they generated a common sonic flow. Gradually, the rhythmically synchronized movements of our bodies created a sense of "harmony" (*shongoti*) among the devotees. We invariably acquired a feeling of "being at one" (*ektaanota*) with other participants as the "inner" flow of "sound-vibrations" (*shobo-jhonkar*) resurfaced in the rhythmic movement of our bodies, and we collectively attuned our movements with one another. These sounds not only generated a sense of harmony among participants but also created a pleasant environment (*anondo-ghono-poribesh*) through powerful sonic atmospheres. Therefore, the satsang adhibesan is a practice of atmospheric attunement whereby disciples engage in collective tuning in through devotional vibrations.

In her essay "Atmospheric Attunements", Kathryn Stewart (2011) defined attunement as a mode of sensing the world. Stewart writes, "Atmospheric attunement is an alerted sense that something is happening and an attachment to sensing out whatever it is." (Stewart, 2011: 03). Stewart's conception of atmospheric attunement refers to the process of

attachment by alertly sensing the nuances of the surrounding world. The Satsangees have a distinct mode of sensing the divine presence of Thakur and developing a sense of “attachment” with Him in the sonic atmospheres of *satsang adhibesan*. In many ways, satsang adhibesan is an atmospheric entity where, according to the devotees, Thakur dwells (*thaaken*). In the adhibesan, the senses are alerted in a specific manner that enables people to perceive the presence of Thakur around them. As far as my own experiences and the experiences of some of my interlocutors are concerned, the smell of incense sticks and fresh flowers feels soothing to the body and always facilitates a relaxed mode of breathing. In addition, the sight of Sree Sree Thakur’s shrine provokes a darshanic alertness (Eck, 1981) in participants, whereby they enjoy the pleasure of seeing Thakur’s “glowing eyes” (*chokh chok chok korche*) and being seen by Thakur’s “gaze” (*Tnini jyano tnaakiye achen amar dikey*—as if He is looking at me) towards them, that eventually engenders the feeling of Thakur’s enlivening (*jibonto*) presence. These experiences are further amplified by the loud and intense beats of kirtan when their bodies “sway” (*jhoom*) in the effulgence of music. Cumulatively, the visual, aural, and olfactory senses facilitate a consolidated experience of Thakur’s “presence among [the devotees] in the satsang adhibesan” (*tini uposthit aachen amader majhe ei satsang’e*). As Stewart writes, in atmospheric attunement, a “sense of something happening becomes tactile” (Stewart, 2011: 01); the *Satsangees* occasionally attribute the sensorially charged ambiance and their psycho-somatic experiences to the tactile presence or the divine touch (*tnaar porosh*) of Thakur.

In her essay “Atmospheric Relations: Theorising Music and Sound as Atmosphere”, Friendlind Riedel (2019) claimed that sound has an affective power through which it can captivate multiple bodies and attune them to a particular mood and ambiance (Riedel, 2019: 85). Patrick Eisenlohr (2018), on the other hand, used the word “force” to describe the affective power of sound that holds a “grip” over the minds and bodies of devotional practitioners of *Na’t Khwan* in Mauritius (Eisenlohr, 2018). In speaking about the captivating power of sonic atmospheres, anthropologist Andrew McGraw (2019), in his study of jail atmospheres, claimed that the experience of music has “great affective power” (McGraw, 2019: 133) through which it could capture the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people, creating liberatory and carceral atmospheres in the jail. In an adhibesan, the power of kirtan (*kirtaner shokti*) lies in its ability to shape immersive sonic atmospheres.

This affective force captivates the listener’s mind, body, and heart (*mon*), drawing them into its vibrational field. Satsangees harness this force as a means of inner purification. It is a cleansing agent believed to elevate human hearts to a morally and spiritually uplifted state (Amritak, 2024: 39). With this intent, the devotees consciously generated a powerful atmosphere through tumult or intense kirtan, allowing its reverberations to envelop the entire neighborhood in its vibratory spell. For the disciples, surrendering to the affective embrace of kirtan was a way to experience the pleasure of “divine touch”, immersing themselves fully in its resonance. Yet, while devotees willingly surrendered to its captivating power, neighbors like Shyamoli vehemently resisted. Despite their resistance, the untamed force of kirtan’s vibrations seeped into their homes, minds, bodies, and hearts—throbbing, trembling, and unsettling their inner equilibrium.

Goodman (2010) explained that it is the vibration that constitutes the affective power of sound. His study of sound weapons in Israel demonstrated the psychophysical impact of sonic booms among the local citizens. Sonic booms are “high-volume, deep-frequency effect of low-flying jets”—an impulsive noise effect, almost similar to the sound of thunder, that moves faster than sound (750 miles per second at sea level). The vibrations created by sonic booms can “throb the chest, constrict the throat, and cause difficulties in breathing” (Goodman, 2008: xiii). It can tremble the entire body balance and constrict the internal organs of an individual by creating a sense of fear among them (Goodman, 2008: xiii). These lethal sound vibrations can break cemented walls and glass windows of buildings, as well as cause nosebleeding, ear pain, sleeplessness, anxiety attacks, and hypertension (Goodman, 2008: xiii). The vibrations of kirtan were certainly less harmful than the sonic booms in Israeli warfare, but were powerful enough to breach the fragile boundaries of private space, asserting their presence deep within homes and bodies alike, while unsettling the senses and inducing a state of inner turbulence.

In his article, “Spiritual Attunement: Pentecostal Radio in the Soundscape of a Favela in Rio de Janeiro” (2008), Martijn Oosterbaan examined the role of evangelical radio and Pentecostalism in Brazilian favelas. In the densely populated favelas, the soundscape is filled with evangelical radio alongside other genres like samba, pagode, and funk music. These louder, competing sounds often disrupt the listeners’ efforts to connect with the divine. Evangelicals criticize funk music, viewing it as morally corrupt

and detrimental to their spiritual practices. Oosterbaan notes that not focusing on disruptive music is as vital as listening to the radio itself, as this music is seen as contaminating the sacred (Oosterbaan, 2008).

For evangelicals, the Pentecostal radio helps bring them closer to God, aligning with the “ideal of sanctification” (Oosterbaan, 2008: 132). They associate funk listeners with negative behaviors such as alcohol use, smoking, and illicit sexual activity. To maintain sanctity, evangelicals avoid these influences, including funk, rap, and pagode, which they believe can corrupt children’s minds. Therefore, the “dangers of contamination of evangelical space” by external music threaten the boundary between the sacred and the profane in the Brazilian Pentecostal lifeworlds (Oosterbaan, 2008: 132). In the congested neighborhood of the Kolkata adhibesan kendra, the soundscape became a “site of power and conflict” (Oosterbaan, 2008: 35), where the neighbors also reciprocated with loud Bollywood music. Some devotees were affected because, to them, Bollywood music carried “negative vibrations” that could disrupt their mental focus, scatter their attention, and ultimately taint (*kolushito*) their hearts. It must be mentioned that devotees do not have an absolute aversion to Bollywood music. They often listen to the same music in their leisure time. It only acquired a negative meaning in the particular context of this satsang adhibesan, where it penetrated through the cemented walls of the kendra, grabbed our bodies, and fractured our mental concentration. At that moment, Bollywood music became a source of “bad vibrations,” contaminating the spiritual environment (*adhyatmik poribesh*) of the kendra.

Therefore, the power of sacred and profane vibrations is not prefixed in the theological discourses, but are constantly discovered through practices of attunement in the sonic atmospheres of satsang adhibesan. For instance, when the devotees synchronized their thoughts and bodily movements in attunement with the kirtan, they cultivated a sense of harmony or resonance with those sounds. The acts of tapping, dancing, and clapping in response to the rhythm created a relationship of synchrony and imitation with sounds. When multiple bodies collectively established a relationship of harmony and resonance with sounds, the rhythm of kirtan and the rhythm of the bodies became synchronous—one. This act of becoming one with the sounds led to a sense of harmony or tuning—with kirtan, among devotees themselves, and finally, with the Supreme Divine. It is this practice of cultivating a sense of harmony, or tuning, that made the kirtan’s loudness



Image 4: About a hundred meters from the Kendra stands the local neighborhood club, painted in red, both in matter and in spirit. Though the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPIM) has not been in power for more than a decade in West Bengal, the residents here remain loyal to its ideals. The red-painted walls, scooter, newsstand, and waving flags, reflect their continued commitment and resilience, glowing quietly under the golden evening sky.

emerge as positive vibrations to those who attuned themselves to it. On the contrary, the Bollywood music that otherwise served as a leisure companion to some of the devotees failed to appear as positive or sacred vibrations precisely because it disrupted the process of tuning with Thakur during meditation. The disruptive effect of Bollywood music made it appear as a negative or profane element to the devotees. For instance, when the devotees refused to move in synchrony with the rhythm of the Bollywood beats or refused to immerse in the tunes and melodies of film music, they developed a particular relationship with those sounds: a relationship of dissonance instead of resonance. Consider devotees like Pritish Da, whose relationship with sounds differed from that of other Satsangees. Although he was a disciple, instead of creating resonance, the kirtan induced a sense of dissonance for him, transforming it into unbearable noise. Despite his awareness of the dominant Satsang discourse that extols kirtan as a means to moral upliftment, the kirtan in the *adhibesan kendra* of this South Kolkata neighborhood failed to generate feelings of resonance. Hence, devotees like Pritish Da advised adjusting the volume. Perhaps he believed that a softer and more balanced form of kirtan would be gentler on the ears, less intrusive, and less likely to cause irritation. Ultimately, he felt this modulation would make the kirtan more effective in touching people's hearts.

In his essay, "Modulating The Excess Of Affect: Morale in a State of 'Total War'", Ben Anderson (2010) explores the nuanced relationship between affect and power. Anderson writes, "affect is modulated and transmitted in forms of power addressed to life" (Anderson, 2010: 161). He also suggests that affect should not be seen merely as an excess that lies outside institutional or disciplinary power; rather, it "intervenes", "directs" and "modulates" (Anderson, 2010: 162) ongoing processes of power formation. In short, affect both shapes and is shaped by different forms of power. The affective power of kirtan inside the *adhibesan kendra* was not solely determined by the discursive axioms of kirtan, rooted in the sacred verses (*baani*) of Sree Sree Thakur; it was equally shaped by each participant's unique way of listening and their distinct affective relationship with their environment. When devotees like Pritish Da or non-devotees like Shyamoli urged a reduction in volume, they were in fact "intervening" in Satsang's discourse on sacred sound and its notion of "positive vibrations". This call for lower volume signaled a disruption to the entrenched belief that historically treated loud kirtan as inherently sacred. For many devotees, the sa-

crality of Satsang discourse may have made it difficult to consider lessening the volume or imagining an alternative soundscape; they perhaps feared that lowering the volume could diminish the power or *shokti* of kirtan, allowing "negative vibrations" to contaminate their lives. Though voices like Pritish Da's were often met with apathy or oblivion, the affective differences and dissonances among people were as much a part of the *adhibesan* as the feelings of resonance or harmony. Over time, the unprecedented accumulation of dissonant feelings in the neighborhood sparked a greater shift within the everyday lifeworld of the devotees, leading to incidents of protest and conflict; events that ultimately reshaped the definition of "positive vibrations" in Satsang. Thus, adjusting the volume of kirtan was not merely an act of acoustic modulation; it was a broader practice of modulating atmospheric relations between people, places, and environments. It was a delicate practice of atmospheric modulation; like adjusting a radio knob to catch unseen frequencies in the air, human hearts, too, were tuned to perceive the subtle vibrations of others, forging a deeper attunement with the world.

CONCLUSION

From the discovery of radio and the rise of the eugenics movement to the escalating communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims in colonial Bengal, the concept of tuning or *ektaanota* in Satsang emerges from a layered genealogy shaped by the intersections of science, technology, and religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contemporary practice, tuning has evolved into a mode of atmospheric attunement, where vibrations serve as matters and metaphors of purification—cleansing people, places, and environments. This purification involves drawing boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the positive and the negative, that ultimately shape social relationships and contested sonic environments. For instance, in purifying the neighborhood, people like Dipak, Trailakya, and others became polluters, as the devotees invariably deemed certain aspects of their surrounding environments as negative vibrations or noise. This process can be called "noisification" (Saha, 2024: 16), wherein the devotees perceive certain elements of their surroundings as noise or undesirable vibrations. The practice of tuning rediscovered Bollywood music as aural dirt, which was not inherently dirty. The leisure tunes of Hindi film songs

were noisified in the sonic atmospheres of kirtan. In other words, purification led to the creation of noise or aural pollutants. By violating privacy and insinuating the living rooms of others, penetrating their skin and trembling their bodies, unsettling their minds, or separating the excess of loud flesh from kirtan's delicate acoustic bones, the devotees not only produced noise for others but for themselves, too. They noisified their own theologies and worship spaces.

Think of the incident when they permanently banned the use of drums and cymbals or stopped using microphones and speakers. This act is highly contentious, given the theological discourses of Satsang that enshrine “*tumul kirtan*” or intense kirtan as a means of attaining higher consciousness. The *Kendra* has knowingly or unknowingly reconstrued the conceptions of sacred and profane, whereby the intensity of kirtan has been attenuated for the first time in history. This is *writing through listening*, wherein listeners infused sacred or profane properties within vibrations, at material and symbolic levels, that not only affected interpersonal relationships between devotees and non-devotees but also shaped their relationship with the world. This act of noisification has permanently created a rupture in the theology of Satsang as the practitioners have aurally rewritten or unwritten the discourse of sacred sound, not necessarily in the form of written inscriptions or marks to be read, but invisible ruptures, cracks, and fissures that pulsate in the vibrations of everyday life.

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