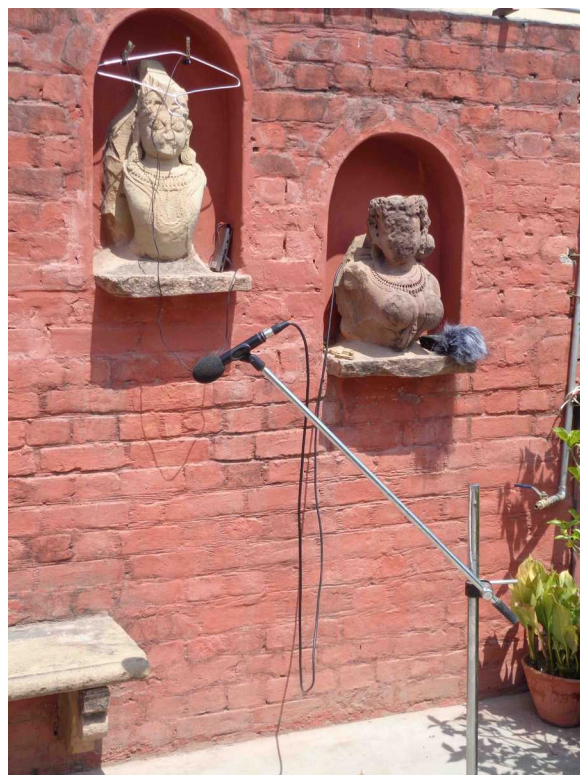


## 9 Traffics, 6 Works and 8 Retreats

In itself, there's no sense to claim categories such as traffics, works and retreats for a town like Varanasi. Everything mingles in an Indian city.

At least assigning them made it easier for me to organise the 30 hours of sound material I had recorded during a residency from January to March 2019 at the Alice Boner Institute. To prevent the intermixing from getting even more out of hand, all the excerpts of the recordings are strung together as a single track. Only in the transition from one fragment to the next can shorter or longer overlaps be heard.



**About the traffic:** Auditory signals, primarily horns and bells, are indispensable for the particular Indian communication system *traffic*. With simple binaural microphones, I move through it or am moved by it. On the 10 kilometres from Varanasi, also known as Benares or Khachi – the centre of Hinduism – to the Buddhist place of worship Sarnath, it is often more the tuk tuk and the route that play the instrument than myself, the passenger. Regardless of its importance for religious tourism, one is transported along a path peppered with potholes and other obstacles {heard at the beginning and towards the end of side B}. Festivals and feasts are celebrated to a good extent on the street. Several brass bands play at the same time, heard once crowded to the side of the road for a wedding {side A} and the other time in the carnivalesque procession of the Hindu Shivaratri {side B}.



**About the work:** Work is done also by the brass players and the tuk tuk drivers. But as I said, everything is mixed and blurred. That concerns also a field or street recording that participates in the exploitation of labour right down to the sound emissions. As a supported European resident, you are automatically on the side of the rich in the war of the rich against the poor, as author Arundhati Roy puts it. Unless you make a choice

like she did: *Walking with the Comrades*.

The focus on labour is first on the stonemasons and sculptors who have made their way from the state of Rajasthan to Varanasi. Here they are carving religious images into the walls of the bank promenade on the Assi Ghat. The project is part of an 'upgrading' ordered by the Hindu nationalist government, which aims to showcase Indian culture more prominently on the banks of the Ganges. Working in the immediate vicinity of the Alice Boner Institute, the stonemasons have become accustomed to my visits. They continue chiseling and milling when I start playing. Despite the lack of a common language, a frisky familiarity has developed, especially with a young man called Prakash {at 28 minutes on side A his singing is heard}. Unobserved by his supervisor, he once borrowed my flute to play while, after terse instructions, he left me his instruments, the hammer and the chisel, to continue crafting.





The men work without suitable protection against noise or dust, only a scarf is wrapped around their face. I wonder what happened to them when Prime Minister Narendra Modi rushed to declare a complete lockdown on 24th March 2020. Thousands and thousands of migrant workers like them were left without income, food and shelter overnight, streaming out of the cities to their remote villages. Furthermore, road construction workers on the holiday of Holi, also at Assi Ghat, can be heard, and in the old winding market mile of Varanasi, gold and silver foil knockers {both on side A}. They sit on the floor in open rooms, using a hammer to beat the foils of the precious metal clamped between a leather folder thinner and thinner. Later, these foils are used to wrap sweets, among other things. Of course, the shiny foils are of no interest in terms of taste. They only serve to demonstrate socio-economic status when buying the more expensive patisserie. The presumably badly paid work of beating the foil is a real Sisyphean task, insofar as its product rolls down the higher throats without end.

**About the retreats:** The work of the yoga instructor at the Assi Ghat is no less monotonous and nerve-racking. His programme, which he reels off over loudspeakers shortly after sunrise, is the same every day. It is also part of the governmental 'upgrading' at the Assi Ghat and cannot be ignored at the Alice Boner Institute. The exercises are especially nerve-racking for a still sleepy resident, less so for the instructor, whose motivation seems indefatigable. The collective laughter with which the early yoga shift concludes became, in my emotions, the most concentrated expression of Indian fascism, strange as that may seem in retrospect.

In spite of everything, I classify the yoga drill as a retreat, because for the manifold crowd of early risers it is an activity – difficult for me to understand – by means of which they escape the hustle and bustle of the city, or prepare themselves for it.

The numerous temples offer places of retreat, with the Monday ritual in the Tilabhāṇḍeśvara temple being celebrated more or less meditatively – the bells and drums producing a tempest of the ears.

More relaxing spots can be found on the outskirts of Varanasi, but also in an abandoned, fallow temple district not far from the centre, where there is a park in which local people gather for cricket, drinking and



smoking. These are places where you can not only see the birds, but even hear them.



My shrill appearance with flute and recorder has mostly been noted with equanimity by the residents of the city. Especially in spiritual centres, they are used to seeing confused Westerners in search of some kind of enlightenment, who usually leave the place even more confused. I was probably counted among this species of traveller to India. Whether rightly or wrongly, I don't want to judge for myself. In any case, I was not granted any enlightenments. Nevertheless, overlaps, frictions and the clash of sounds in the chimerical town of Varanasi caused many of those sparks to fly up that continue down my spine in shivers of happiness.

Alex Riva

