

## Cacophony

<sup>1</sup> At first everyone spoke the same language,  
<sup>2</sup> but after some of them moved from the east and settled in Babylonia,  
<sup>3-4</sup> they said: Let's build a city with a tower that reaches to the sky! We'll use hard bricks and tar instead of stone and mortar. We'll become famous, and we won't be scattered all over the world.  
<sup>5</sup> But when the LORD came down to look at the city and the tower,  
<sup>6</sup> he said: These people are working together because they all speak the same language. This is just the beginning. Soon they will be able to do anything they want.  
<sup>7</sup> Come on! Let's go down and confuse them by making them speak different languages—then they won't be able to understand each other.  
<sup>8-9</sup> So the people had to stop building the city, because the LORD confused their language and scattered them all over the earth. That's how the city of Babel got its name - because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

- The Old Testament

Once upon a time (during our days, actually) there lived a peace-loving gentleman in a big city. He was peace-loving in the sense that since his childhood he abhorred noise and disturbance of any kind. He had no objection to shouting and hullabaloo during a football match, but he intensely disliked any form of disturbance during a musical recital. Whenever, at school, there was a musical performance, he would become extremely angry if someone created noise at the back, and occasionally there had been fisticuffs on this issue. However, while others would growl and yell and throw out raucous challenges during the fighting, he would keep his mouth shut and noiselessly keep on punching.

So it came as no surprise that it fell to his lot to get a job where there was overwhelming noise --- at a printing press! He had to spend the entire day correcting proofs and supervising job-printing, people would come and go all around him, phones ring, typewrites clatter, and through the half open door would sweep in the combined noise of three flat-machines and one monotype-machine to drown out all other sounds. He would hear their sound even while sleeping at night --- *ghatlang ghatlang creet creet creet klak* --- *ghatlang ghatlang creet creet creet klak....*

Now and then he would take headache tablets, drink water and think about the screenplay he planned to write, because he had from a young age been drawn towards the fine arts --- vocal and instrumental music, cinema. But the surrounding cacophony prevents him from developing his ideas, hampers him at every moment. He hates cacophony. He had been pleased to learn that researchers in Europe and America understood the harmful impact of noise and were trying to tackle the problem, specialist doctors at Harley Street were writing erudite and lengthy articles on the deleterious influence of too much exposure to sound on the human nervous system and work-efficiency (in fact, tests conducted on animals had shown that excessive din enhanced the ability of viruses to propagate, especially the Polioma virus which causes cancerous tumour), and in 1933 had formed the "Anti-noise League" under the president-ship of Lord Horder to.....

Noise irritates him. Noise lessens his capacity for work. Noise always keeps him on edge. Noise causes furrows to form on his forehead. Noise prevents him from completing the blueprint of that immortal and wonderful film he had always dreamt of. So he tries to think about that film outside the *ghatlang ghatlang creet creet creet klak* ambience, outside the Press where he works.

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At the end of the day when he emerges exhausted and debilitated from the printing press, he passes a saw-mill where electric hacksaws working at full speed and without pause make an incessant zweet-zweet sound while slicing logs; a welding shop just next to it, where they cut tin-sheets, pneumatic-drills whirl. He gets up on a bus. Shoving and pushing---and cacophony. Each part of each bus loose, nuts, bolts, screws, doors, windows all coming apart, which make *khatlang khatlung ghatlang ghutlung dhang dhing* noises as they trundle over the roads --- cars, cars and cars, screeching as drivers every moment change gears or slams on brakes, rickshaws, scooters, trucks, lorries, uncountable sounds from uncountable engines, innumerable horns going *penh-poohn penh-poohn penh-poohn penh-poohn --- teet teet teet tee-ee-eet*, pipe-lines are being repaired, the tong tong sound of hammering, shaw-shaw noise of welding, film music emanating from transistors, a procession, slogans, a passing band of Hindustani men thumping upon drums, a diesel engine approaching a level crossing and blaring its shrill whistle, endless rows of compartments going *ghat ghat ghat ghat...*

Can one even spend a moment to think a single thought in such a noisy ambience? Doesn't an unwanted and irritating wave of sound change the very direction of one's thoughts? "When a cacophony of sounds suddenly assault the ears" (he remembered reading somewhere) "an individual's heartbeats quicken, the arteries shrivel, the pupils of the eyes dilate, and the stomach, throat and intestines commence to twist .... Irritability, mental fatigue and stress, heightened blood-pressure, paralysis, malfunction of the heart, epilepsy, even impotence ....." Even then we tolerate this cacophony at every moment, increase the volume of the radio and sacrifice ourselves to eardrum-splitting rock-music and consider ourselves fashionable, we forget things moment to moment ....." "Oh, of course you forget it all the next moment, but the body doesn't." When they were children they would go to the bank of the river and sit upon the boulders in search of silence, or to the fields. But nowadays the river bank was clamorous with sounds from transistors and cars and numerous factories as the increasing population had strewn it with the employed and the unemployed; the quietude of rural areas was shattered by the piercing, long whistle of jet aircrafts, gradually civilization was advancing and machines were increasing, in every square metre of earth's atmosphere sound waves were increasing incessantly, cacophony had engulfed the entire planet ---

Previously, total silence used to prevail on the street where they lived, in the quiet of the night they would go and sit on the culvert at the end of the street; they would go on morning-walks savouring the quietude of the early hours. Nowadays, around fifty rickshaw-wallahs sleep on the verandah of the house at the end of the street, sit in groups to converse, radios blare out from all directions, cars come and go late into the night, always around four-thirty in the morning someone's scooter backfires as it moves over the street: *phut phut phrut --- dhoom --- phut phut phrut --- dhoom ---*, at first light, even before the birds would awake, innumerable sounds penetrate through the mosquito-curtain, though half-asleep he would be able to foretell that at this moment a truck would start, or an Ambassador car; now some bureaucrat or the other would "race" the engine of his prehistoric, antiquated Ford car --- those marvelous (?) tunes had percolated into his blood.

And then those women gathered around the municipality water-tap would begin their high-pitched quarrels, the *dhung dhang thang thang* of pitchers, buckets, pails, pots.....

There is mention of a thing call "soul" in the *Gita*, which cannot be killed by arrows, charred by fire, made wet by water, that which the wind --- etc., and that which is all-pervasive, the name of which is *Brahma*, he wanted to give that same description to noise, that which is all-pervasive, that which is *Brahma*. Noise-*Brahma*!

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Is there no oasis for him in this desert? Yes, there is, because fortunately his family life is very happy, his domestic existence very sweet, for his newly wedded wife possesses a honeyed voice. His wife used to sing beautifully, listening to her (merely listening to her?) he had been enchanted, and it was only after that he had made her acquaintance. She no longer sings in public functions, (only in the bathroom, he would wait outside and listen rapt to her singing through the sound of the water), she had to spend her whole day amidst cacophony, worked as a typist. Her fingers would ache due to constant typing, she would feel lethargy descend simultaneously upon her mind and body, people kept coming and going, the telephone would continually ring making a *kring kring* sound, hello, hello, hello -- - and the mind would be constricted by two types of sounds: that of the fan whirring overhead, it's bearings have developed some fault --- *kuon kuon kuon kuon* --- *gharar gharar gharar gharar* --- and that of the typewriter: *khat khat khat khat khatkhatkhat* --- *kling* --- *khat khat khat khat khatkhatkhat* --- *kling* --- *khat khat*---

Thus she could understand her husband's aversion towards cacophony. One day they had gone to a *sitar* recital by Pundit Ravi Shankar (there were a few of his favourite South Indian *ragas* in the programme, picking up the sheet of paper she had said excitedly, "Look, look, that *raga* you'd mentioned the other day ..... singhe ..... ndra, that's also here, would you go?"), they had returned extremely dissatisfied. As if due to the heat and the noise Ravi Shankar could not quite play with mind and soul, people had been coming in even after the *tabla* prelude to the *Bhairavi raga*, searching for their seats, at the slightest pause in the recital noisily opening up *chanachur* packets, popping open soda bottles, girls had taken out their wool-knitting, soft sound of conversation, the ringing of someone's phone, the acoustics of the auditorium had been terrible, even sounds of traffic on the road outside would occasionally seep inside, the microphone was dysfunctional, most probably Ravi Shankar's mood was totally destroyed. After a while he even stopped playing the *aalaps* to the *ragas*, because according to him Indian *aalaps* were totally spiritual and could not be played unless the ambience was peaceful and conducive, he had somehow concluded the recital after "battling with the beats of the *tabla*" ---

Can one not create an environment where all noise would cease, everything unmusical would be erased, only the lilt of music would be heard? Can such a contraption not be invented? She had smiled --- so many ideas playing inside her husband's head, so much imagining!

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However, they also loved certain non-musical moments. When, in the silence of the afternoon, the fronds of the coconut-palm begin to tremble, she listens to the sound as though fascinated; when the *jhumkas* hanging around the animal's neck tinkle, making a *jhun jhun* sound as a horse-carriage passes by, its hooves going clop clop, they would stop talking and listen raptly, and when the sound slowly vanished they would look at each other and smile. These were non-musical sounds, these did not have any specific periodicity (he had read in a magazine article that specific 'periodicity' according to science was the

difference between music and noise: Music versus Music --- Applause of the Backbenchers!), but he tries to explain to her (this too read in a magazine) that the perception of difference between noise and music was cerebral and psychological. There is a periodicity in the tick tick sound of a clock, but that cannot be deemed conventional music; similarly, if late in the night one were made to listen to a *khayal* --- or even a lilting *thumri* -- that would be non-musical, cacophonous.

That Sunday when he was to have made his first visit to her home, she had been unable to do anything the whole of the afternoon, she had spent it sitting at a table and scribbling nonsense on a writing-book. Her father had been seated at the adjacent room reading the newspaper before his afternoon siesta as was his habit, she could remember her being occasionally startled at the scratching noise made by the pen on the paper, she had been fearful that her father may have heard the noise, what might not he be thinking! She could still remember that the sound of his shuffling through the pages of the newspaper had reached her ears so loudly. The fronds of the coconut-palm outside the window were making the *shor shor* sound as the breeze swept through them, a window whose hook had been broken was making a *roi roi ken-ch* screech. Then her father had abruptly folded the newspaper, pushed back his chair and risen, she could remember even today how the seemingly loud sound of the chair scraping against the floor had alarmed her. Even today when she hears in the silence of the afternoon the sound of the coconut-palm fronds tremble in the breeze, the creaking *ken-ch* of a window, she would remember.....

And they would remember how after returning home in the evening they had indulged in some inconsequential chit-chat and then fallen silent, lost their voices, became mute-like and simply stood upon the verandah gazing at each other's faces as though total strangers. They could no longer recall how long they had then stood like this staring at each other, perhaps one minute, perhaps ten minutes, and gradually from far off had come a low *jhun jhun* sound which had grown more distinct the closer it approached. Without turning their head they could comprehend that the sound emanated not from one *jhumka* or even two, but uncountable horses with *jhumkas* around their necks were passing over the road fronting their house, a row of carriages drawn by *jhumka*-adorned horses were moving across the road, yet they could not understand that *jhumkas* were tinkling and horse-drawn carriages were passing, they had merely stood gazing mesmerized at each other's faces.....gradually the sound of *jhumkas* lessened and then died away altogether; it was as if they had awakened from a trance, both of them at the same time had lowered their eyelids and shaken their heads and smiled. It was as if what they had to say to each other had been said even though no words had been uttered, they had no more need to talk to each other, the spell had been broken, and they began again talking to each other in a conventional way ----

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Perhaps there are other oases in many other places in this world: in remote rural regions, where the cacophony created by machines has not yet penetrated --- the farmer of an isolated village in Russia, over eighty years old, strong and active, whose hearing is sharper than a man in New York in his sixties --- the peaceful Maben tribe of Africa, whose keen hearing is a marvel for scientists --- it is said that they do not have any musical instruments, they have very little aphrodisiac content in their food, there are no instances of heart ailments or high blood-pressure amongst them (nothing to be wondered at, for long back German research had proved that excessive noise was correlated to loss of hearing and heart problems) --- but, unfortunately, they cannot go and live in some jungles with the Maben tribe, they would have to find their own oasis within their own environment.....

And, truly, they had had an oasis of their own, a bench in the empty football field in the evening, where they would go and sit since their very first meeting, and he would tell her how the screenplay would start:

"The camera first takes a long-shot of an ascending football as it zooms over the heads of innumerable people (even reaches up to the top of a tall skyscraper in the background) and then follows its descent, and from the sound-track emerges the combined roar of a mammoth cup-final crowd of spectators --- perhaps a goal has been scored, the entire auditorium fills up with sound. The camera goes forward, the cacophony increases, close-up of a section of the shrieking spectators, then the camera retreats, the uproar slowly subsides --- the total fade-out of sound --- cut --- close-up of the gate --- fade-in, with the gate at the foreground a long-shot of the football field, a deserted stadium, silent, evening settles, the shadows of evening, darkness gradually falls, close-shot of the gate, hero and heroine pushes open the gate and enters the stadium (just like you and I), sound: gate opening, fade-in on the sound of cicadas, sound of shoes, the lights shine through the windows of the distant skyscraper, the hero and heroine walks on towards a far off bench (long dolly-shot), close-up: heroine's face, sound: the heroine says ....."

Why? Why does he want to show that football match shot? True, there is no relation of that shot to the film's plot, the main thing being that the hero and heroine are going in the evening to sit in a silent park and talk. Eh --- no, no, no, (he smiled shyly and was surprised as to how she caught on to the notion), he had not thought up the shot himself, a neo-realist Italian film had started that way (of course, the plot of that film was related to the football match shot). No, he simply wanted to insert a contrast to enhance the peace and silence of that stadium in the evening, create a totally different ambience and first fill the football field with discordant cacophony ---

As if this was a symbol (he continued to speak), the existential symbol of the modern man, we are seeking to escape from a life suffused with this all-pervasive cacophony, searching for a brief moment of quietude amongst this all-devouring explosion of noise, a moment of our own, free from any external influences, a placid, silent park at the end of the noisy day, the soft sound of the breeze rustling through the leaves of the trees, peace. The thin sound of music wafting from some lit window of that far off building, the same tune that, emerging distorted during day time through transistors and harsh sounding loudspeakers had been so unbearable now seems almost enjoyable --- but wait:

"(Suddenly) sound: *ghrrr ghrrr geen-geen-geen-glit ghrrr ghrrr* .... Camera pans and stops at the southern corner of the park, some labourers were hanging petromax-lamps on the branches of trees, a small group of people had formed, a man was connecting a battery power-source to a microphone, a labour union leader was catching hold of the microphone-stand in preparation to make a speech, close-up: the round womb of the loudspeaker, sound: *ghrrr ghrrr geen-geen-geen ghrrr* --- friends, you all know why we are gathered here today --- *ghrrr ghrrr geen-geen-geen* --- this capitalist system is *khlit khlit ghrrr ghrrr* ---"

The hero heroine can no longer hear the distant tune, or the rustle of the leaves. She did not like this at all and said, what was the need of destroying the scene of a honeyed moment between the hero and heroine in this way?

He answered that it was not he who had destroyed the moment, the scene was destroyed by modern civilization, if this insufferable instrument was a curse of modern civilisation, then the problems and complaints of the labourers were also the outcome of modern civilisation, you can in no way ignore them. Of course, their problems do not come into my film, but perhaps one character in my film works in a cloth-mill, the wheels turn, electric-

looms run, upon his ears and nerves the constant assault of the infernal noise of machinery, of pistons clashing, shafts rotating, fatigue is slowly descending upon his nervous system, the smile upon his lips gradually pales, there are black spots beneath his eyes, there is tiredness in every sinew of his body and mind, his movements listless, he grows increasingly irritable, as though countless spindles are spinning within his head, his mental faculties are gradually growing numb ..... and the productivity of the manufacturing sector is growing less, the bar-graphs strung to the walls of the managing-director's room are gradually descending (of course, there has now been considerable work on these problems in Europe and America, there has been an effort to create a placid and work-friendly environment, research is on to discover how to reduce the noise of machinery) --- in my film the cacophony of global problems will crash in to break the quiet conversation of my hero and heroine ---

She appears to be worried, although at the same time she wants to break out in laughter. Will the audience like it? Will the film do well at the box-office? There is no dearth of noise, so who would want to pay to listen to more cacophony?

She smiles and says, apparently, in your film the audience would not be able to hear the conversation between the hero and heroine! He shrugs his shoulders and says that was not his fault, he was helpless. What can he do if the world is so filled with noise? Anyway, the audience would be able to see a totally realistic film, for the sake of realism the audience will have to tolerate such difficulties. Let the people comprehend the problem. Listen, listen, let them listen to the non-musical along with the musical. Are people born only to listen to music? His film would be full of real sounds, all sounds would be taken from reality, the sounds within which we grow up through thick and thin, love and parting, the sounds which flow through our veins, the sounds that are inextricably linked to our lives, the sounds that tell us of the dramatic moments in our existence --- the story in his film will begin within those sounds of reality, will develop and end. There will be no background music in his film --- the sounds of reality are the background music of our lives. In actual life does an orchestra always play behind us?

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But the smile in her face dies away, when she sees that he does not come to bed late into the night, and then she goes to the other room and finds him asleep at the table with his head resting upon the screenplay which he had been working on. He had not been satisfied with a single sequence so far, keeps on writing and revising; he could in no way fit the sounds with the story. The sounds were giving him as much trouble as the plotline. Sometimes she smiles and says, instead of filling your film with sounds that you dislike, non-musical sounds which fill you with pain, why don't you cram them somewhere else, just as you had said when we had gone to the recital by Ravi Shankar? Some kind of a machine? But he did not know how to do that, has no idea, he fills up his screenplay with sounds of all kind.

She strokes his hair with her fingers and tries to awaken him, she thinks, perhaps this was what that English word meant, --- that word, which he had once repeated in the course of his conversation. What was that word? Sub --- subli --- oh, sublimation! The poet Goethe as a youth, unable to bear the anguish of love, had contemplated suicide. Finding no other way he had written a fictional story about a suicidal youth: "The Sorrows of Young Werther," and had transferred his own suicidal inclinations to young werther and by killing himself in his imagination had rid himself of such tendencies. Leafing through the pages of the screenplay she thought, perhaps this was "sublimation" of her husband, through it he was attempting to free himself from the burden of sound ..... phut-phut-phrut --- dhum --- phut-phut-phrut

--- dhum --- he wakes up, wipes his eyes and smiles shyly and says, "Is it eleven-thirty already?" and both of them look at each other and smile once.

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But he had a notion, someone could think of how such a machine may be made, and one day such a man came and sat with one leg resting on the other in their drawing-room, and began to speak vociferously, a sound-engineer from the radio-station. He had made acquaintance with this sound-engineer from the South when he had gone to the radio-station to submit a script, acquaintance changed into friendship, and he had invited his friend to his home. As if the man's feet only touched the ground, his head was there amongst the clouds, innumerable ideas played about in his head, he did not dismiss offhand the idea of such a machine. Instead he explained that sound was a form of power, a type of energy, and all energy could be transformed into other kinds of energy. We can transform sound into kinetic energy, thermal energy, magnetic or electrical energy (we are doing just that with the microphone and telephone), so we can surely transform all the noise around us into some other form of energy so that they can no longer be heard as sound. He said it was a beautiful idea, and theoretically not impossible. But the problem was that the energy possessed by sound is so insignificant (despite the powerful impact it makes upon us) that it would be difficult to run the machine only with sound-energy. He said that the power generated by sound during a normal conversation was only around 125 erg per unit (whatever that might be), that generated during a speech at a meeting somewhat more --- around 2500 erg, if one yells one can generate as much as around 20,000 erg. He also said that the amount of noise made by a crowd at a football match, the power generated would be barely enough to heat an amount of water to make a cup of tea. (Oh, listening to the conversation she had forgotten all about tea. She left the sound-engineer to ramble on and went inside to fill up a kettle with water --- what don't these people think! How could one relate the noise made by a crowd at a football match to heating water!)? Although noise might sound loud to our ears, yet in comparison with other power sources its capacity to generate power is minimal. Our ear is a marvellous organ, so sharp, so receptive, that it can distinguish a slight sound with just 10-16 watt specific power per square centimetre --- that is why even such insignificant energy emission makes such impact upon us. (As she was placing some cups upon a tray she heard a snatch of conversation --- watt? Watt? The bulb in our kitchen is 60 watt .....). He also said that the machine must be automated with feedback type instruments, only then will it be profitable to make it. It would be better to close our doors and stuff cotton in our ears if we were to use external power to run the machine. We need to use its own oil to cook the fish, meaning if possible we have to do the job with the energy generated by noise. But how can we manage with such scarce amount of power? "What a pity! What a pity!"

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In the course of time he stopped going to the park with her, a strange sound began to emanate from the attic in their house; creating some space by shifting the old trunks and tins to one side, he along with the sound-engineer began to spend their spare time tinkering in the attic, the whole room began to be cluttered with wires just like a telephone-exchange, the sound-engineer began to bring in weird-looking instruments which made sound --- a microphone here, a tuner (it created waves of the simplest sounds) there, a transmitter, valve, crystal, siren, round-flat-cylindrical things of different shapes, and what not. She had objected at first, the attic could not be used to store such stuff --- but she had been finally, against her wishes, forced by their importunities to give her consent, she even tried to smile at the thought, though the two grown-up little boys were deriving so much pleasure tinkering with their toys, surely they would tire of it after a while.....

But they did not get tired of it in a day or two, on the contrary grew more engrossed with the project that kept them busy in that room. The sound-engineer brought in different types of noises that he had taped, began to experiment by playing and replaying those tapes: sounds of the *tabla* and *mridangam*, the rap of the bow on the strings of a violin, the tinkling of a bicycle-bell, barking of a dog, the firing of a pistol, recording of traffic noises, different male voices, female voices, children's voices, roaring of a tiger, an intimate conversation during a drinking party (what conversation!), the shrill voice of an old woman and a guffaw (by a fat, open-hearted man, most likely), sound of a bomb-blast, the bang of a punctured tire (followed by the *shui-shui-shui* sound as the air wheezed out), the unrestrained whistling of someone .... the growl of a tiger had in fact alarmed the neighbours, there had been complaints from all directions. It's happening, it's happening --- the sound-engineer, taking cup after cup of tea from her hands, would exclaim excitedly --- the machine is showing some results, has been able to absorb a number of different sounds (and secretly has happy dreams about the moment when he would be able to publish a paper on the subject in the "Journal of the Acoustical Society of America" or the "Journale der Acoustic!"). He would bring out a sheaf of paper and say, "Good news, *Didi* --- I have been able to sketch out a rough theory of the machine, it is really wonderful" --- he had even thought out a patent-name for it --- "Sound-minimiser" or "Mininoise" --- perhaps "Mininoise" would be the best, what do you say, *Didi*?" --- But then he laughs uproariously, he says "This is what's meant by the saying writing the Ramayana before Ram is born, putting the cart before the horse" --- the sound-engineer lets out a spontaneous smile and rolls up the sheets of paper and places them in a cabinet at the back of the machine. *Didi* would merely smile and think when this game would end.

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But there were no signs that the game would ever end. His work at the press suffered, the screenplay was in danger of becoming moth-eaten. The sound-engineer's enthusiasm was irrepressible, he began to bring numerous types of books and magazines, even scrounged up a blackboard from somewhere upon which he scrawled formulas with chalk and drew diagrams and tried to explain to him (to *Didi* even, if possible) the principles of sound --- what Pythagoras experimented upon, what had been proven by Lord Raleigh, what had been envisaged by Helmholtz, Seigne and Raman, and the way sound was measured, in bel or decibel. The attic became simultaneously a store-room, classroom and laboratory. The neighbours would hear the sound of a waterfall cascading down on their street, a train would rumble across the road, jazz being played upon a saxophone and amidst these sounds someone suddenly muttering "What a pity!"

"Pity the poor rats....the poor rats...." she would hear from the kitchen. She began to get irritated. Rats? What rats? What rats were these two deranged men who had been twenty four hours sleep and awake obsessed with Mininoise now talking about? The squeak of rats? Fortunately, the kitchen was now free of rats --- (they had been a nuisance till sometime back), one couldn't leave foodstuff outside, they would crawl all over one's body, would scamper through one's legs.... Terribly irritating, (though no longer now) --- the kettle had begun to boil, it was unbearably hot, she had not had the time to wash the crockery, they were so dirty --- where was the houseboy --- how irritating --- the day in the office had been all heat and sweat and work and cacophony, and to return home to this hot kitchen, but they were not bothered by what was happening to her, rapt in their dream-world while she was expected to take tea to them at any moment they demanded, was she a machine, did she not become sad or tired --- she did not feel like doing a thing, she felt a headache coming on, if only she had an aspirin.... if only she could thrust everything aside and sleep in the bed....what a terrible day she had had, there had been nothing new, yet she



throughout had been irritable, had not felt like talking to anyone, would flare into a temper if someone spoke to her, she should not have talked to the head-assistant the way she had, such a considerate man, he had been surprised at how she had flared up at such a small thing..... the heated water in the kettle was making a bubbling sound, steam was coming out.....the handle of this kettle becomes so hot, for days she had been asking him to get a kettle with a cane-wrapped handle .....couldn't he come just once to ask if she was feeling unwell, she had spent an entire day in the office, her face was growing paler with each passing day, doesn't he notice anymore.....previously he would react at the slightest thing that happened to her....and they had to put that partition in the Superintendent's room just on this day, the entire day they had sandpapered the walls, such a wearisome *ghishighishighishi* sound, her teeth would begin to tingle the moment she heard that sound, the entire day they had been scraping with those sandpapers so close to her ears *ghishighishighishi ghishighishighishi*.....suddenly the kettle stopped and began to make a single, whistling sound, instead of coming out in sporadic bursts the steam began to pour out like a long white ribbon in one steady stream, she at once regained her composure, it was as if the heat and the noise in the kitchen had lessened perceptibly and she understood that all this time with a creased forehead she had only heard snatches of the high-pitched discussions emerging from the attic and had not been able to place them in the proper context and, certainly, the infernal sound of scraping sandpaper had impelled her to be so irritated at everyone in the office.....oh, all this time she had only been able to get a broader idea of the conversation (an old discussion among themselves), as though she had been able to imagine only a blurred picture through a haze: a cage, within it a bunch of mice, the sound-engineer is pressing the button of a signal-generator, a thirty seconds long phut-phut sound like that of a motorcycle being started (Aha, says the sound-engineer while scanning a dial, "Almost hundred decibel!"), nothing happened at first, but then the mice began to twitch and then turned over and died.....a pregnant female mouse within the cage, a scientist clad in a long white coat is examining her from outside and raising one finger every now and again, simultaneously the sound-engineer is ringing a bell, the female mouse, as though shocked, is trembling, an X-ray machine is taking pictures of her stomach, the scientist is peering at an X-ray plate against a bright light, he is saying (with supreme delight) "Ah, just as I thought --- foetus damaged --- (the sound-engineer too is peering at the plate and saying in anticipation "Pity! Pity!") --- We know that the same thing happens to women, a maternity-ward should always be kept far away from the noise of the traffic upon the road; there is a rule for that --- towards the end of pregnancy excessive noise causes the mother's heart to beat faster, at the same time the heart beats of the foetus too begins to accelerate increasing the chances of miscarriage....." --- without realizing it she laid her hand against her stomach, suddenly a soft smile played across her lips, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and switched off the stove, suddenly the creases upon her forehead disappeared, her face radiated calmness ---

When, smilingly, she went to them with the tea-tray, the subject for discussion had been closed, both of them sat with their legs stretched out listening to some classical music being played in a low volume upon a tape-recorder, a peaceful ambience.....picking up the cup, he looked up at her and was a little surprised, he could not quite make out why he was surprised, suddenly his eyes fell upon one finger of her pale hand, just the other day it had been scalded by hot water from the kettle, he had quickly put some balm upon the burn, it was now healing.....suddenly he knew why he was surprised. He had had a flitting glimpse of her when she returned from the office, irritation, distaste and tiredness etched upon her face --- but both of them had been too busy to spare her a thought (he felt ashamed now when he thought of it).....and now, within a few minutes her face was so peaceful, so fresh, so tranquil.....he felt more ashamed, the kettle without a cane-wrapped handle, becomes so hot when put on the stove, she had to wrap it with her *chador* or with a piece of paper while holding it, she had been telling him for so many days, a kettle with a cane-wrapped

handle.....irritating, how such ordinary things are so neglected in our country, no one gives a thought as to how one can employ simple ruses to ease our passage through daily life, how much our housewives can be saved from drudgery.....he imagined her cooking in an ultra-modern kitchen with white-panelled walls, wearing a white apron (the kind of bathroom he had seen in magazines and films from the West).....a beautiful fridge to keep the foodstuff fresh, an electric-knife peeling the potatoes, an electric saw cutting the fish and meat, an electric-rotor whipping up the eggs, an electric-mixer heating coffee-powder with water and mixing milk and sugar and stirring the brew, a centrifugal dish-washer cleaning and shaking dry the dishes, she is simply pressing buttons, rotating dials, putting off switches --- and from the adjacent sitting-room and bed-room can be heard the long-drawn whistle of a vacuum-cleaner as it cleans the floor and carpets---and (he abruptly puts down his cup), she is emerging from that Aladdin's genie gifted kitchen as though a stranger, the tranquility vanished from her features, wan and tired, hair in disarray, irritation writ upon her face, black pouches under her eyes, her lips tight-set, one was afraid to go near her..... "Ah, but naturally, naturally," the sound-engineer explained, "Just think of it, what is the noise level in an ultra-modern kitchen.....inside each machine there is a motor rotating in different frequencies and making its own sound, so the kitchen as well as the house is filling up with different sounds at different noise-levels, if we count it we will discover that the strength of this noise-level is around 150-200 decibel --- more than the tolerance-level of the ear --- such a noise-level is higher than that heard close to a large jet-plane or inside a steel-factory.....do you think these machine-demons would not exact their price for lightening the work load of the housewife .....and that is why our domestic life to some extent is so filled with disturbance, tension between couples is so high....."

How fortunate, he thought, that she did not have to enter such an ultra-modern kitchen.....the lilting rise and fall of the classical piece had ended and now rock music (electronic guitar, drums, grand-piano, saxophone) was playing from the tape-recorder, *jhanjhan khatkhat jhinik jhinik lalala lalala wheet wheet jhanjhan jhanjhan* ---

As though once again that sound of sandpaper scraping against the office walls was filling up her head, her forehead was about to grow creased again..... *ghishighishi ghishighishi ghishighishi ghishighishi* ..... drawing him to one side she said in a gentle voice, "we haven't gone for a stroll for a long while --- my head is aching so much today --- come, let's go and sit once more on our bench" --- and the sound-engineer said suddenly, "What's the matter, *Diddi*? Have I made the music too loud? Right, it's somewhat loud --- 114 decibel --- but let's see, how much of it can be subdued by our Mininoise" ---

"Tone it down a little," he said. The sound-engineer smiled softly, went to the other side of the room and lowered the volume, "But 'The Rocking Comets' group plays their music at 100-150 decibel strength---our youthful boys and girls do not like 'weak' type of music--- they want strength, they want power, resounding, ear-splitting beat is what they desire--- they claim that music is not only for the year but also for the soul---this is their soul-music -- of course." The sound-engineer suddenly smiled crookedly, "It is difficult to make them understand that what is good for the soul may not be good for the ear--- it's a pity, but boys will be boys --- Ah, *Diddi*, is the sound level tolerable now? Do you know, *Diddi* thinks these are all play, our toys"---

She whispered in an agitated tone, "Will you go?"

"--- Mere electronic toys --- only toys" ---

Good for the soul, bad for the ears --- how much could Mininoise absorb --- boys will be boys.....toys --- mere toys.....will you go?.....mere toys?.....only toys?"

He said distractedly, "Mininoise."

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After the sound-engineer had left he tried to go through the list of the force and energy-quantity of various sounds, but could not concentrate. That she had wanted to go today to their bench kept playing on his mind and he constantly remembered the disappointment upon her face. His eyes rested on the neglected screenplay (she had always kept it dusted, that was why it had not become moth-eaten yet, he thought), and she drew the manuscript towards himself. After a while he fell asleep with his head resting upon the screenplay. He dreamt that he was correcting proofs in the press, was constantly making errors in his proof-reading, he kept remembering that she had wanted both of them to go our together after such a long time --- and the sound-engineer kept turning round and round measuring sounds with a "noise-meter:" *ghatlang ghatlang creet creet creet --- klak ---* ("the force quantity is 90 decibel," the sound-engineer said) at that moment she suddenly appeared before him, she had brought along the noises of her office: *kuon kuon kuon kuon --- gharar gharar gharar gharar --- kring kring --- hello hello --- khat khat khat khat --- kling --- khat --- khat khat khat khat khatkhatakhat --- kling ---* and the hand of the "noise-meter" shook ("Aha, 50 decibel!"). She dropped the bag on to the proofs and whispered into his ear (20 decibel), get away from him now, come let's leave here now, we have not gone out on a stroll for a long time, come let's go and sit upon our bench. Leaving the sound-engineer there they went out into the busy street (60-70 decibel) and crossed over and entered the football field, bereft of people, it was evening, darkness was descending, the chiaroscuro of evening, the lights in the windows of the far off skyscraper were being switched on, the soft sound of the breeze moving through the leaves of the trees (20 decibel). They sat upon the bench, at one end of the field in the light of petromax-lamps grew clear the image of the labour union leader giving his speech in an excited voice (the sound-energy emitted by him measured around 10,000 ergs per second), and during pauses in the speech the thin tune of a hit song was wafting from the skyscraper (35 decibel) and then, suddenly: silence. Total silence (0 decibel).

"Ha, ha, ha, beautiful, isn't it?" ---someone said close by. He was surprised to find the sound-engineer sitting with one leg upon another between the two of them, he had no idea when he had come, they could also see a familiar machine in front of the bench, in the half-light its dial and buttons were gleaming, a cylindrical object was spinning upon its top: Mininoise. But not the small model of Mininoise of the attic, a huge, expectedly gigantic --- Mininoise!

The sound-engineer got up and circled the Mininoise to examine it and then, striking a pose like a college-professor, stood with his hand on a button of the machine. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began speaking in a supremely self-satisfied voice, "what we are exhibiting today is the first stage working model of Mininoise, the first prototype. Mininoise-One. We have now seen that it has been working nicely during the first trial ---, Eeh, difficult to envisage, she spoke up. Can't believe it, ---

Difficult to envisage? The sound-engineer seemed crestfallen --- can't believe it? *Didi*, you can't believe even after seeing this? We know, whether musical or non-musical (meaning cacophony) both are sounds, both are vibrations, and both types of vibrations have been caught on Mininoise, the sound waves have been absorbed by it, it has not differentiated between musical and non-musical sounds. Thus the hope that the audience would be deaf to all other sounds and hear only the sound of Ravi Shankar's *sitar* has so far not been fulfilled by Mininoise. But we must bear in mind, ladies and gentlemen, that this is only

Mininoise-One. In Mininoise-Two we would surely be able to sieve away all unnecessary vibrations, meaning disturbing noises, to allow only the necessary musical vibrations ---

What's that turning object? --- he intruded into the monologue of the sound-engineer.

What? Oh, this? This is obviously our sound-collector. We know that the waves of sound radiate across all sides from the source, this tube also keeps rotating in all directions to collect as much of the sound-waves as possible, just like the aerial of a radar. Admittedly, this is so far a very crude, basic apparatus. But we also know that it is at the trial stage only. This is Mininoise-One. We are hopeful that in Mininoise-Two rather than this --- What's the matter, *Didi*? Aren't you feeling well?

Even in the half-light they could see the colour drain off her features; looking around helplessly she tried to slowly draw in her breath, she said as though perplexed, how am I feeling --- how am I feeling --- why am I feeling so strange, so strange --- why am I feeling like this --- is this really our field --- and my voice --- why is my voice sounding like this --- why do I feel as if I can't recognize my own voice --- what is happening ---

Oh, that! --- the sound-engineer said shortly --- that's nothing, simply that the Mininoise is filtering away all vibrations below 500 cycles from your voice, that's why. We know, ladies and gentlemen, that though the power of low-frequency noises in the human voice is more, in reality it is the high-frequency vibrations which are essential to understand speech --- we can eliminate the low-frequency vibrations, which will result in the removal of 60 percent strength from the human voice. Our ears are most receptive to sounds between 1000 to 4000 cycles, so there is no loss in removing sounds below 500 cycle frequency, and the ears of the audience need to hear only 40 percent of the sound-energy. Of course ---

What? --- he began screaming --- what? Are you cutting off *Didi's* voice?

Very sorry --- the sound-engineer said. But, according to the theory of Mininoise, we know -  
--

Hang the theory of Mininoise! --- he said, then his voice became apologetically softer, don't you know how avidly I listen to this voice, that even within the cacophony in the press this voice rings in my ears? Haven't you noticed how I watch her lips every time she speaks, how I wait outside the bathroom to hear her sing? You are trying to distort the very voice that I love so much, was this what we had planned, was it for this that we had created the Mininoise with such difficulty? --- then his voice suddenly rose again (but perhaps by then 60 percent of its strength had been filtered away), he shouted --- how disrespectful! How humiliating!

The paleness of her features dissolved and slowly a sweet smile began to light up her face, the sound-engineer, stunned, let go of the Mininoise and retreated a pace. He started protesting, "What, what, listen, listen" --- and she began to speak as though to herself, no, she would no longer like this field, would never like to come here --- in the absence of the familiar sounds it would be no fun to sit here --- you were right, is man born only to listen to music.....

He placed a hand on a lever of the Mininoise, the sound-engineer screamed, what are you doing? What are you doing? Don't press that --- very delicately balanced --- don't press, don't press --- everything will fall apart, Mininoise would break up --- let it go, let it go --- The sound-engineer ran and grabbed him, but he shoved him to the ground --- the sound-engineer, not knowing what to do, simply stared at him. He first touched the lever softly, then with some power pressed upon it, something within Mininoise's innards fell off with a jhun-jhun-jhunat sound, and then in front of their awe-struck eyes as if by magic Mininoise

began to breathe its last: screws-nuts-bolts began to drop off making tung-tung noises, the cylinder gave up its ghost after emitting a last long *ghurr ghurr ghur-r-r-r* sigh and dropped to the ground, wheels-sockets-rings-diaphragms fell off and rolled away across the floor, its veins-arteries-soul-brain groaned with pain and then fell silent, and emitting a ker-ker-keret sounding blinding blue spark its condenser-valve-crystal et al burned into ashes in the matter of a moment, and like its final swansong emerged with a *gulgul-gulgul* sound a column of mercury, which fell in a round lump upon the grass, a bit of light came from somewhere to make its surface glitter.

The sound-engineer tore at his hair and beat his breast and began to wail, what have you done --- what have you done, I shall go mad, I shall die --- Mininoise is dead --- what a tragedy, what a tragedy --- I shall go mad --- I shall go mad ---

From far off came once more the voice of the labour union leader, she slowly stroked his hair and said, get up now, it's late in the night, and then he woke up.

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As if her face had grown lustrous with some great joy, she said, --- get up --- you have begun writing this again? Will you complete it this time? Eeh, I am feeling so happy --- He continued to look at her lips for a while. There was no change in her voice, not even by the thinnest vibration. He closed shut his screenplay, he wanted to say, yes, I shall finish it this time if I can. I shall have to think about the other shots again within the cacophony of the press, as I have done so far. He opened his mouth and stopped, she also seemed about to say something but stopped. From far off was coming a low sound that was gradually growing louder, the *klop klop* of a horse's hooves and the *jhun-jhun* sound of *jhumkas*, in the silence of the deep night a solitary horse-carriage was going over the road. Both of them looked at each other, the sound of *jhumkas* gradually faded and then died away in the distance, and then both of them broke out into a smile.