

## Sounds from the Balconies: Aural Resistance against Covid-19 Pandemic in Italy and India

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to make a comparative study between the balcony performances, which primarily involved the production of sounds (both musical and non-musical), held during the onset of the Covid pandemic in Italy and India to boost public morale and influence community solidarity. This article examines how Indians and Italians generated aural resistance against the pandemic through this novel method of sonic production to cancel the silence of death with the sounds of life, and how a community feeling and a sense of unity were injected through the sounds. This article juxtaposes the Italian and the Indian experiences of musical resistance against the pandemic, revealing similar patterns of response existing between them, by highlighting the multifaceted sides of the balcony performances that celebrated life over death and destruction, which ideationally and phenomenologically connected the two countries separated by geographical distances. Besides, it also discusses the impact and aftermath of the aforementioned performances to highlight different social, cultural, and political modalities generated by them.

**Keywords:** balcony, community, Covid-19, music, pandemic, resistance

### INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic reigned supreme over the planet for nearly two years; starting toward the final lap of the year 2019, it claimed the lives and livelihoods of millions around the world. As scientists desperately searched for a vaccine to check the proliferation of the disease that erupted in China and spread like wildfire around the globe, the entire world went into the largest lockdown ever witnessed in the history of humanity, thanks to the highly contagious nature of the disease. While the medical community, emergency workers, and government officials tried to shield citizens from the onslaught of the pandemic, cultural resistance also kicked in to develop a psychological barrier against it. Sounds, especially music, occasionally emerged as a cultural shield to cultivate and bolster community sentiment and mental resistance in Italy and India, the two countries separated by geographical distance, yet glued together by a disastrous fortune punctuated by the pandemic. In Italy, one of the worst affected countries during the pandemic, people gathered on the balconies in the form of a flashmob and sang their hearts out in order to boost morale during nationwide lockdown. In places like Rome, Naples, and Sicily, citizens gathered on the balconies to interact with each-other through classic folk and patriotic songs like 'Abbracciamme' ('Hug Me'), 'Canto della Verbena' ('And While Sirena Sleeps'), 'Bella Ciao' ('Goodbye Beautiful'), which tethered people in a single cultural bond and inspired them to develop community solidarity and a psychological firewall against death and disease, and this spirit of not bowing down before the pandemic was encapsulated by the slogan of assurance- *Andrà tutto bene*— everything will be all right. Similarly, in India, people came out on the balconies to sing and clap, ring bells, and cling metal vessels to cheer the emergency workers combating the pandemic. Following the request

made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, people gathered to blow conch shells, sing patriotic songs, and even organized balcony concerts to pave way for a community to bond over music and boost morale. This paper would examine how Italians and Indians generated an aural resistance against the pandemic through this novel method of sonic production to cancel the silence of death with the sounds of life; how a community feeling and a sense of unity was injected through the songs; and how this aural enterprise was lambasted from several fronts, especially in India, as critics alleged that this exercise was actually an attempt to subvert the horrifying reality of the pandemic and it was an endeavor to airbrush the governmental failure in tackling it. This article juxtaposes the Italian and the Indian experiences of aural resistance against the pandemic, to reveal similar patterns of responses existing between them, by highlighting the multifaceted sides of the balcony performances that celebrated life over death and destruction. The two aforementioned countries have been selected as case studies primarily for the purpose of contradistinction, given their disparate experiences of the same phenomenon. This article, through the comparative study between Italian and Indian experiences, highlights the common cultural and performative underpinnings existing between the balcony performances in a European and an Asian nation, despite the geographical and cultural distances separating them.

## SETTING THE SCENE: ITALIAN AND INDIAN EXPERIENCES OF BALCONY PERFORMANCES

The accelerated expansion of the empire of Covid-19, spearheaded by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), debilitated society and the economy almost of the entire world, and Italy emerged as one of the worst affected countries in the European theatre of the pandemic. As of 27 March 2020, nearly one hundred and ninety-nine countries and territories had fallen prey to the pandemic, and as of the same date, Italy represented the third country in the world in total number of cases, and topped the global list in the total number of deaths (Ortenzi et al., 2020). Italy reported two cases of Covid-19 toward the end of January 2020, and by February, the pandemic had spread like wildfire across the country, which ranked as “the third country worldwide in terms of total number of cases, after the USA and China, despite its markedly smaller population size. The Northern part of Italy was the most affected part of the country with Lombardia, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto regions had the highest number (and proportion) of cases” (Ortenzi et al., 2020: 1-2). The pandemic soon started to make inroads to the less developed southern portion of the country, and under the direction of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the already imposed quarantine on regions like Lombardy and northern provinces was expanded to encompass the entire country, placing more than sixteen million people under complete lockdown, curtailing public mobility and shutting down non-essential sectors (Lowen, 2020). The pandemic years witnessed a plunge in the Italian economy and a significant number of casualties; to date, Italy has recorded a total 25,488,166 coronavirus cases, with 187,272 deaths, and 25,072,909 recoveries (Worldometer, n.d.).

With the entire country coming to a halt and people confining themselves inside their houses to halt the rapid spread of this highly contagious disease, Italians gathered on the balconies of their houses, singing amidst the nationwide lockdown to boost the morale of the community. Videos of citizens across cities like Rome, Siena, and Naples coming out on their balconies, singing and playing instruments along with occasional twists of dance went viral on social media, and music eventually emerged as a tool to invoke community sentiment and solidarity against the social distancing norms that were alienating and incarcerating people inside their apartments and minimizing interpersonal interactions. Spontaneously described as a ‘flashmob,’ this initiative “was launched on Facebook by Stefania Cammarata di Mango, a singing teacher from Turin, on the 13th of March 2020. From that day, every afternoon at noon people on their balconies/rooftops/windows across the country met to applaud the Italian doctors, nurses, and workers serving on the frontline, and every evening at 18:00 to sing songs together” (Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2022: 8). As the country reeled under the burden of the pandemic, the residents began “impromptu singalongs, flashmobs, musical performances, even dancing, from their windows” (Devane, 2020). The unifying signifier, which connected the multitudinous performances spanning across diverse musical genres like patriotic songs, folk music, and popular music, seems to have been the Italian slogan of reassurance – *Andrà tutto bene* (‘Everything will be alright’); it served as an antidote to the gripping fear of death.

The Italian experiences were replicated in an indigenous form in India, when Indians gathered on their balconies to sing, cling vessels, and blow conch shells to declare solidarity with the emergency workers like doctors and paramedics, and boost public morale, that started with ‘Janata Curfew,’ or the periodic/intermittent cessation of activities across the country to keep the proliferation of the pandemic at bay. The first cases of Covid-19 in India were identified in three towns of Kerala, among three Indian medical students who had returned from China (Narasimhan, 2020). Lockdowns were announced by 25 March 2020, with infection rates rising across the country; with 90,000 cases reported at the peak in mid-September, it slowly nosedived (Safi, 2021), although a much sinister second wave would strike India in the next year. However, the aforementioned performances continued throughout the pandemic, amplifying both musical and non-musical sounds, ranging from Bollywood pop music

to clanging of utensils, from balcony parties and concerts featuring classical, retro, and remixed songs to banging of pots and pans, creating a unique texture of variegated sounds. Just as happened in Italy, Indians, initially instigated by the government, started producing sounds from the balcony spaces in order to overcome the inexorable clause of social distancing and alienation that had been bestowed on them.

## CONSTRUCTING AURAL COMMUNITIES

The balconies across Italy and India became united through performances and shared experiences of pandemic, despite being separated by geographical distances, to form a community of variegated sounds. The pandemic introduced the protocols of social distancing and alienation, especially in populated urban spaces, that led to a near breakdown of people-to-people contact, wherein the practice of balcony singing reinforced the ideas of a community through the creation of a musical nexus among the residents. Modernity and globalization have underscored the dominance of individualism in the public sphere; the individual has become the central unit of social life, where community relationships and wider social relations have largely taken a backseat, becoming “dissolved in the acid bath of competition” (Beck, 1992: 94). The modern world has witnessed a shift in the traditional modes of interpreting communities: from understanding them in terms of factors like family, neighborhoods, and friends, communities are currently interpreted as a set of practices, involving various forms of social relations, as Blokland describes, from “fluid encounters to durable engagements” in communities (2017: 15). This section will try to understand how musical sounds emerged as a medium which facilitated everyday interactions during the pandemic, when individualism was translated into a state of forced seclusion, and intercommunity interactions were reestablished through the balcony performances, alongside and through social media.

Sound is a significant element for assigning symbolic and cultural meanings to spaces; it may reinforce the “sense of community or be interpreted as unwanted and isolating. For example, quietness, or the lack of sound, could be either interpreted as reassuring and pleasant by some residents, or threatening and unsettling by others” (Lewis, 2020: 107). While the available literatures on urban spaces depict how cities have become noisier over the time, thereby triggering anxiety in the residents, an absolute quietness and lack of sound (which reigned supreme during the pandemic) could be appalling, as evident in Camilla Lewis’ study of the aural dimensions of neighboring at the Claremont Court housing scheme in England, which involved Robert, a test subject of Lewis: “The lack of noise signalled that there were no neighbours around to help him [Robert] should a problem arise, which further exacerbated his sense of isolation” and subsequently reinforced his “concern about the demise of community and lack of neighbourly relations in his stairwell” (2020:102). The balcony performances were an indispensable tool to cancel out the monumental anxiety generated by the pandemic, which defamiliarized the bustling soundscape of the urban spaces by introducing a state of perpetual silence; while physical interactions were limited, the interpersonal relationships were mediated by sounds, both musical and non-musical, leading to a creation of an aural community of performers and audiences.

Sound is a pivotal element of embodied experience, “which should be analysed in order to understand how community is constituted in relation to the physical and social environment” (Lewis, 2020: 106). Production of musical sounds by the community during the pandemic was not an unusual occurrence, since music-making is arguably a universal human trait; the prehistoric fossils, dating back to 530,000 years, reveal that the early humans had “the horseshoe-shaped hyoid bone in the throat in a similar position to modern humans, they would have had the physical ability to sing” (Prasad, 2018). The early humans may have produced rhythmic music by clapping their hands or by striking one stone against the other, and this practice later might have given birth to musical instruments. The primary function of music has been bringing people together, as Jeremy Montagu from University of Oxford explained, “Music leads to bonding, such as bonding between mother and child or bonding between groups...Music keeps workers happy when doing repetitive and otherwise boring work, and helps everyone to move together, increasing the force of their work. Dancing or singing together before a hunt or warfare binds participants into a cohesive group” (2017: 4). Musical sounds, therefore, have remained etched to the collective unconscious of the community since time immemorial, and the production of music and non-musical sounds from the balconies tapped that unconscious reservoir of embodied experience of sounds, that instigated people to move out of their isolated state and interact with the rest of the community through sounds, thereby reinforcing the primitive function of music: community building and dissemination of messages and emotions.

Two instances could be given to illustrate how sounds have contributed toward bolstering community feelings in Italy and India. In Turin, Italy, a woman who could not meet her neighbor, involved her in a singing performance, by shouting “Ciao Vittoria, I love you.” (Frida, 2020). When the performer was interviewed, she mentioned that she and her partner started to do the shopping for their older neighbor and to have a daily relationship with her through social media. In exchange, the neighbor supported them with her expertise in cooking traditional food from the South of Italy (where her family is originally from), strengthening their relationship”

(Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2022). Similarly, in India, the balcony sounds paved way for community reconsolidation and injected a sense of togetherness, as Kshitij Narain, a resident of Noida, described the balcony performances following the 'Janata Curfew' as uplifting:

“It felt like a collective resolve to fight a common threat. Though we are all locked inside our homes and isolated from the rest of the world, we are together in facing this crisis. We all owe it to the brave people who are working day in and day out, beyond the call of duty, risking their lives to keep us safe. They need all the encouragement and support, and should know that each one of us is there for them and grateful for everything, for saving our lives.” (Srivastava, 2020).

The balcony performances were characterized by the convergence of a number of musical genres, ranging from classical to folk music, leading to the creation of heterogeneous aural textures in the cities. Different sonic idioms (not limited to songs and melodies, but also incorporating apparently 'non-musical sounds' like clapping, banging, whistling, etc.) contributed to the generation of a common sonic field, connecting different performers from different sectors of a city. While their performative and aesthetic dimensions varied, they were linked together in a aural-symbolic network espousing community solidarity and togetherness, that likely effaced the hierarchy between the so-called highbrow and the other forms of music, thereby creating a decentralized and dehierarchized sonic structure. In Italy, a plethora of songs emanated from the balconies, such as 'Volare' (a folk song), 'Nessun Dorma' (aria from Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot*), 'Canto della Verbana' (traditional song from Sienna, Italy), 'Abbracciamme' (a pop song by the Italian singer Andrea Sannino), to create a perfect blending of diverse genres (Thorpe, 2020). The Indian scenario has not been entirely different, as scores from Bollywood films, recitals of celebrated compositions by western classical musicians, songs by the Indian musical groups, along with applause, ringing of bells, clanging vessels, etc., led to the creation of diverse 'sound patches' across the cities, involving both musical and non-musical sounds, where the latter was absorbed into the rubric of the former in the process of generation of sounds. Though the balcony performances can be described as concerts (the following section of this article further elucidates this idea), a concert is characterized by a performative 'center,' a conductor, lead singer, or a preconceived blue-print of orchestration, that controls and modulates different nodes of performances. But these balcony performances were characterized by the loss of any center, that could organize these diverse sounds emanating from different sections of a city into a harmonious whole, where these individual performances could be clustered together to imagine a pan-city concert against the pandemic terrors. In the absence of a center or an organizing principle, the different sounds should have existed in a state of freeplay. However, this freeplay state, in reality, would be synonymous with chaos, and it would mirror the anarchic state of the globe grappling with the pandemic; the music generated in this context could become a register of meaninglessness and nothingness, rather than emerging as a medium for disseminating positivity and solidarity. Hence, the pandemic could be interpreted as the center that propelled the creation of these diverse sounds, that helped to “orient, balance, and organize the [sonic] structure...but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we may call the freeplay of the structure” (Derrida, 2010: 278).

Although the balcony performances targeted the notion of the carnivalesque and aimed to uplift the spirit and morale of the people, it also aimed at promoting reverence for the social distancing protocols imposed by the government. The balcony spaces, therefore, signified a tension between the desire for a creative and spiritual flight from the stifling condition of the pandemic, and the necessity to comply with the restrictions to ensure self-preservation and security against a highly contagious disease. The balconies during the pandemic largely functioned as liminal spaces, and “their daily arbitrations of both joy and conflict are what knit solitary lives into neighbourhoods” (Krishnamurthy, 2021). The formation of an aural community, connecting citizens from different sections of a locality through sounds, had only been possible because of the presence of the balconies, which performed the “constitutive function of in-between spaces for such community formation” (Krishnamurthy, 2021). During the pandemic, balcony performances emerged as a daily ritual, creating a mechanical solidarity that facilitated “group identification and identity fusion” (Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014: 674). Besides, it also promoted organic solidarity, “that keeps basic functions of society at work. This is exemplified by the substitution of cultural events with balcony performances by celebrities, which keep cultural and artistic functions of society active in exchange for an audience” (Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2022: 9). As a result, this mode of solidarity “provided the opportunity for individual creativity to emerge and functional use of the media to activate social solidarity, oriented to keep society functioning” (Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2022: 9), thereby effacing the boundary separating mechanical and organic solidarity during the time of the pandemic.

## BALCONIES AS CONCERT STAGES

The two years of the pandemic transformed the functional nature of the balconies in Italy and India; from an exterior, protruding space that acts as a hyphen between the intimate space of the 'personal' and the public 'outer' space, balconies emerged as concert stages, where musicians gathered to produce tunes to uplift mass morale. While concert stages are specialized arenas that facilitate the dissemination of music from the performer to the audience, a degree of alienation operates, which distances the audience from the performer, and bestows a magical aura on the latter, who appears to have been occupying a distinct space which remains outside the ambit of the spectators, yet intersects with it. The performer becomes a formidable object who generates awe and veneration from an exotic pedestal punctuated with lights and props, as "[t]he classic props of the music-hall, which are invariably rounded up here, constantly make the unveiled body [of the performer] more remote, and force it back into the all-pervading ease of a well-known rite...the whole spectrum of adornment, constantly makes the living body return to the category of luxurious objects which surround men with a magical decor" (Barthes, 1994: 85). The balcony performances have, however, inverted this practice; the element of alienation and magicity have substituted with proximity and familiarity, where the spectators could easily connect with the performer both socially and spiritually. In Italy, with the closure of prominent concert halls like La Scala and La Fenice, balconies emerged as concert stages, witnessing an intersection of both professional/trained and amateur musicians utilizing their balconies to generate music. These performances were not judged by the yardstick of excellence or musical competence, but by the message of assurance that was transmitted. In many cases, in the absence of musical instruments, people resorted to household objects to produce music: "A pot or a wooden spoon can suffice, if only because their sounds will join those of many other people who, from their balconies and windows, are hoping to create a bond through music" (Taladrid, 2020). A similar pattern was witnessed in India, where professional and amateur musicians performed side by side when the pandemic kicked in. Falguni Pathak, the singer who is famous across the country for her Indi-pop compositions, organized an impromptu balcony concert to wipe out lockdown blues, where she enthralled the neighborhood with her rendition of 'Kahin Door Jab Din Dhale Jaaye', from the classic Hindi film *Anand* (1971), starring Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan (Jain, 2020). Besides professionals like Pathak, amateur musicians like Gurgaon-based Vishal Malik, a corporate employee, or the mother-son duo Sunita and Ronojit Bhuyan, assiduously rendered and played instruments like piano and violin from their balconies for the community and paid tribute to the emergency workers. The performances did not remain localized and constricted to their apartment complex or communities, but garnered massive views online as well, thanks to the digital platform, which acted as an intermediary between the local and global audiences of these concerts taking place in the narrow space of the balconies. As Sunita describes, "Sound waves of music travel throughout the atmosphere and have an impact on all human beings and it is scientific. In fact that's the beauty of music. We really wanted to get people together and the best way to reach out is through home concerts online" (Bhuyan as cited in Kahma, 2020). The digital medium, therefore, expanded the limited spatial margins of the balcony into a virtually global one, and translated separate islands of balconies dotting the globe into a virtual archipelago of performers.

The balcony concerts have also dovetailed into ancillary cultural activities. There has been an advent of balcony parties during the pandemic, that in several cases centered around musical performances, or followed it. At the peak of the pandemic, Italian neighborhoods organized wine parties on the balconies to keep their spirits soaring; videos showing citizens raising a toast and clinking wine glasses, which were transported ingeniously from one balcony to another with sticks with a loop (India Today, 2020). In Palermo, a disk jockey garnered massive attention, who threw a balcony party at night for all their neighborhood to enjoy, as "[c]heers and whistles rang out into the night as the unidentified man bellowed into a microphone and waved his hands in the air" (Hassan, 2020). Similarly, the culture of balcony parties surfaced in the apartment complexes in India, in places like Mumbai, Gurgaon, and Delhi, where invitations forwarded on social media platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram to the community members generated pockets of enthusiasts from their respective private balcony spaces. In the case of the residents of an apartment complex in Gurgaon, an invitation for such a party went out on the community social media group, where they were "urged to don festive clothes, bring their own drinks and snacks and take position in the comfort, privacy and safety of their respective balconies. Emcees were designated for each of the towers to make song playlists featuring an eclectic mix of retro, pop, hip-hop, remixes and cha-cha-cha for a 90-minute extravaganza" (Bahl, 2020). The balcony parties underscored a shift in the idea of traditional spaces; while a balcony acts as the transitional zone between the public/outer and the private/inner spaces, social distancing enforced during the pandemic had divested the public space of its 'public' attributes and transformed it into a barren and depopulated zone, the inner sanctum of the house became a zone of forced seclusion, thereby equalizing the melancholic aesthetics of the inside and the outside. These concerts and parties acting as a tool of community organization transformed the balconies into fountainheads of enjoyment and freedom against a backdrop of pandemic-induced morbidity and seclusion. Therefore, the balconies during the pandemic emerged as the quintessential carnivalesque space, endowed with the aspects of familiarity and proximity.

## RESPONSES TO THE BALCONY PERFORMANCES

The novel practice of balcony singing, which first notably emerged in Italy, seems to have influenced other regions of the world as well, albeit with diverse patterns of responses. While India mimicked the Italian practice of community aural resistance through her indigenous means, people in countries like the United States, Spain, Germany, and Lebanon, to name a few, have underscored a global response to the Italian practice of aural socialization, by taking to the exterior facets of their apartments, like balconies, rooftops, and windows, “to sing to one another, to applaud and show gratitude to their health-care workers, to play music, and to lift one another’s spirits” (Taylor, 2020). The vehicles of inspiration have primarily been the videos of the Italian performances shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. The primary modes of aural communication remained singing, instrumental performance, and applause; the balcony performances, therefore, constituted a juxtaposition of melodic, harmonic, and percussive elements, with the incorporation of multitudinous forms of music, spanning across genres like classical, folk, popular, jazz, electronic, etc. The performances of musicians like Sofia Ceccato in Rio De Janeiro, Tori Sparks in Barcelona, Karina Núñez in Panama City, Beatriz Berodia in Madrid hailing from genres like classical, rock, jazz, and blues molded the pandemic year into a melting pot of different strands of world music to form one global club of impromptu performances, where each singer is the representative of different communities of people of diverse nationalities, united by a common aural-symbolic bond of solidarity and resilience, where differential musical practices emerging as coping mechanisms and instruments of accommodation against the pandemic gained traction. However, balcony performances were not accepted positively in all corners of the globe. In comic turns of events, these performances gained notoriety: a balcony singer was lambasted with expletives hurled at him by neighbors in Wales; an Israeli performance to imitate the Italian way ended up being derided as loud and loathsome; a German’s attempt to sing his heart out irked the neighbors who summoned the police (Alexandra, 2020). Despite such sporadic events, balcony performances gained traction around the globe, as residents of cities like Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Vienna, contributed to the pandemic musicscape with instruments ranging from saxophone to clarinet, from flute to bass guitar.

The socio-political implications of the balcony performances have been strikingly formidable nevertheless. With the proliferation of the pandemic across Italy, balcony singing hit the reverse gear as tensions grew in the relatively impoverished southern part of the country, especially in regions like Campania, Sicily, and Calabria, where food and money dwindled, leaving thousands in crisis. Images of long queues at food banks, small shop owners being intimidated to release food for free, rising graphs of theft and arson became common across the country, as people grappled with the fear of poverty and economic turbulence, with the fear of the pandemic taking a backseat (Giuffrida and Tondo, 2020). Massimiliano Panarari, a professor at LUISS Guido Carli, underscored the shift in mass psychology from the zone of the carnivalesque to the arena of despondency by lambasting the bureaucratic apparatus of Italy: “Bureaucracy is the real enemy of this country and in a crisis situation it’s impossible to solve this problem... People may have tried to keep their spirits up at the beginning of the lockdown, but now their thoughts are returning towards the bitter reality of a terribly fragile country” (Giuffrida and Tondo, 2020). Similar conditions prevailed in India as well, as the country stood witness to rising rates of poverty and closure of business establishments, and mass migration of laborers across the states. The opposition castigated the Narendra Modi Government by pointing out that the ‘Janata Curfew’ and the call to the people to express solidarity with the emergency workers battling the pandemic by clapping, banging on the plates, ringing bells, and blowing conchshells from the balconies, was an attempt by the administration to airbrush the severity of the situation and the government’s ineptitude in handling it. The Janata Curfews of short spans like twelve to fourteen hours were promulgated as an experimental measure to check the proliferation of the pandemic, but critics advocated for a complete lockdown, which was eventually imposed. While some lauded the decision to show solidarity aurally, others opined that the curfew was an attempt at translating the pandemic situation into an event management exercise in the absence of a concrete plan of action, and “the five minutes of organised and popularised noise generation was nothing more than turning the nation into a hysterical collective” (Sinha, 2020). The call to express solidarity brought residents out on their balconies, creating pockets of crowds in the air at the height of social distancing; some even had banners reading ‘Janata Curfew’ hanging from their balconies, which ultimately trivialized the entire enterprise and gave it a color of propaganda, where the Prime Minister Modi desired “to create a ‘mob frenzy’ and engulf the nation into doing the unnecessary” (Sinha, 2020). Though this article has hitherto discussed different dimensions of the balcony performances primarily through the lens of the affirmative, in what follows, it shall focus on the hermeneutics of negativity for the sake of providing a comprehensive view. The juxtaposition of the Italian and Indian responses to the balcony performances shows that though music came to a psychological rescue in the initial stages of the pandemic and acted as a tool to foster community solidarity, one could argue that its effect became diminutive in the face of the sheer aftershocks of the malady, and obliquely reiterated Theodor Adorno’s observation on the impossibility or barbarity of creating art after a cataclysmic event

like the Holocaust (Adorno, 2007: 34). The musical streaks radiating from the balconies, if interpreted in conjunction with the aforementioned scenario, functioned more as elegiac dirges and aural signposts anticipating mass destruction and mayhem, underscoring a country's transition from the arena of normalcy to the chaotic space dubbed the 'new normal' of the pandemic and post-pandemic world. However, the momentary and situational impact these performances had on the common people and the spirit of positivity and solidarity enshrined in them cannot be undermined at any cost.

## CONCLUSION

The balcony performances emerged as one of the most spectacular events during the pandemic, which not only functioned as a beacon of hope for many, but also contributed toward kickstarting cultural activities and community building around the world, after they had come to a state of suspension globally. The balconies emerged as liminal spaces or buffer zones between sound and silence, the home and the world, the chaos of the pandemic and the order of the home, the vitality of life and the listlessness of death, and especially between the individual and the community. The clusters of performances from different balconies in a given city created a mirrorwork of segregated individuals attempting to gravitate toward a metaphoric center, which would reestablish community bonding. Modernity has been lambasted as an era of isolation and fragmentation, where competitiveness among individuals overrides community sentiments, epitomized by the "crushing race against a fast-growing economy and even a faster growth in population that has ripped off individuals of contentment and satisfaction" (Kaushal, 2021), and where the threat of alienation persists menacingly. The balcony performances, therefore, emerged as the medium through which to reorganize and reintegrate individuals against the vacuous competitiveness of modern life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, exposed by the horrors of the pandemic. These performances started as a community practice in the Italian neighborhoods, before emerging as a global phenomenon, which could be described as the 'glocalization' of the balcony performances by borrowing the ideas of Roland Robertson (1995). It was made possible through the mass exchange of videos and recordings on social media, which largely contributed to the dissemination of a local cultural praxis to global citizens. These performances, therefore, operated on two levels: the global and the local, resulting in the simultaneity and the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies (Robertson, 1995). The performances also functioned both as an analgesic and a prophetic device; on the one hand, they emerged as a potent device to boost public morale and as an aural shield against the pandemic, but they also, in a metaphoric manner, prophesied the massive scale of immanent death and destruction to be unleashed by the pandemic in due course. However, for a period of time at least, the aesthetics of pleasure and positivity emanating from these performances reigned supreme with humanity reclaiming agency in the void created by the deadly pandemic.

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