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## COUNTERING THE HEGEMONY OF MUSIC IN TAMIL CINEMA

### Rediscovering the Politics and Aesthetics of Anti-Caste Music

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**Abstract:** In the context of the South Indian music system, Carnatic Sangita (music), synonymous with classical music, had been dominated by Telugu or Sanskrit language-speaking Brahmin musicians. In the context of caste-ridden Carnatic Sangita's hegemony, the non-Brahmin Tamil-speaking musicians began a new music system, dedicated to their mother tongue, called Tamil Isai. According to the leading Tamil music critic Yoshitaka Terada, the contrasting use of Sangita (Sanskrit) and isai (Tamil), both mean music, is an eloquent testimony to a different linguist and caste orientation. This contest was led by the Dravidian ideologues whose agenda was to replace the Brahmin-dominated Sanskrit/Telugu or other foreign language systems with a native non-Brahmin Tamil language system. Over time Dalits who actively participated in the Dravidian movement for the establishment of an egalitarian Tamil society get disappointed with the rise of intermediate caste dominance replicating the same caste pride, styles, and violence across the socio-political and cultural fields. This paper looks into the unfolding of the Dravidian politics-led Tamil Isai movement in the Tamil music system from the Tamil Dalit perspective. The new anti-caste music that emerged post-2010 has been studied as a counter music system to the Carnatic and Tamil Isai. The studies so far treat this anti-caste music as a socio-political tool in opposition to the dominant casteist music system in the Tamil film industry. The horizon of discussion has remained limited to the Tamil state and socio-political aspects. Music is a global cultural phenomenon and anti-caste music aspires to be global music that transcends the boundaries of space, language, caste, and ethnicity. The researcher here finds this anti-caste music a global cultural phenomenon having its eccentric aesthetics and identity of existence. It has transcended the boundaries set up by the traditional Dalit critics and created its distinct stage, instruments, lyrics, music, and musicians which is unique and has global appeal. This research paper presents anti-caste/casteless music as a mainstream global music system.

**Index Terms:** Carnatic Music System, Tamil Isai, Anti-Caste Tamil Music System, Global Music System, Casteless Music.

## INTRODUCTION

The dominance of Brahmin ideology in Tamil society came under attack by the rise of E.V. Ramasami Naicker (popularly known as Periyar) in Tamil politics. The launch of the "Self-Respect" movement/Dravidian movement by Periyar mobilized all non-Brahmins under the same banner of Dravida Kazhagam (DK). The uniting force for them is the language i.e. Tamil. According to them, Hindi along with other languages like Telugu, Sanskrit, and even English were the symbol of Brahminical dominance and acceptance of these languages ensure the submission of Dravidian Tamils to Brahmins. So, Periyar along with non-Brahmin Tamils vehemently opposed the practice of foreign languages in the land and called for Tamil identity. Later on DK got branched into DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam). By looking through the history of Dravidian politics, it is quite apparent their offices were dominated by the intermediate non-Brahmin caste. Since 1967, Dravidian parties replaced the Brahmin-dominated Hindi nationalist Congress with Tamil nationalist non-Brahmin politics, and with time, they consciously or unconsciously adopted the same hegemonic structure and ideas which they have contested against. Similar to Brahmin's narrative of pure Sanskrit/Hindi, Dravidian politics hinges on "pure Tamil" (Centamil). They borrowed the ideology of purity and classic from them and tried to imbibe them in their linguistic politics. In the 1990s there was a complete hegemony of the Dravidian intermediate caste over the cultural, social, and political institutions of Tamil Nadu.

Since cinema was always an integral part of Tamil culture and politics, it is no brainer that Dravidian ideologues used cinema as a tool to establish and propagate their ideology. "The ties between Tamil cinema and politics are no coincidence here, and Pandian (1992) shows how politicians have used their screen image to attract voters and emphasize the importance of honor (mānam) in Tamil life, reinforcing and reinterpreting cultural values in the process" (Gorringe, 2011). With time Dalits who actively participated in the Dravidian movement for the establishment of an egalitarian Tamil society get disappointed with the rise of intermediate caste dominance replicating the same caste pride, working styles, and violence across the socio-political and cultural fields. Dravidian politics also went on to imitate the "kingly models" and established a hierarchical structure between the leader and the followers (Gorringe, 2011). Leaders started to be treated as semi-deities and their words and actions were accepted to be divine. This is similar to what Brahmins' hegemonic politics used to propagate. The only difference was the language (Sanskrit/Telugu/Hindi got replaced by Tamil) and the caste (Brahmins replaced by Intermediate castes like Thevars and Gounders). "Dravidian social radicalism was strictly curtailed. Rather than envisaging inequality in class or caste terms, the Dravidian parties employed the Brahmin/Non-Brahmin divide to suggest a commitment to social change even as its leadership and core constituency was drawn from dominant, landowning Backward Castes (Barnett 1976, Subramanian 1999, Harriss 2002, Ravikumar 2006)" (Gorringe, 2011).

Traditionally, Indian music/Sangita is classified into two broad schools- Hindustani Classical Sangita (North India) and Carnatic Sangita (South India). In the context of south Indian classical tradition, Carnatic Sangita is synonymous with classical music which is prominently dominated by Telugu or Sanskrit language-speaking Brahmin musicians. In the contest of caste-ridden Carnatic Sangita's hegemony, the non-Brahmin Tamil-speaking musicians began a new music system, completely dedicated to their mother tongue, called Tamil Isai. Although these two types of music and competing ideologies are based on language and caste. The contrastive use of sangita (Sanskrit) and isai (Tamil), which have both been translated into English as "music," is an eloquent testimony to the different linguistic and caste orientations" (Terada, 2008). There has been a long history of contention, intrication, and ambivalence in the relationship between caste and languages in the South Indian classical music culture. Telugu has been the language of the King's court while Sanskrit has always been the language of Brahmin religious texts. Thus, they have been inherently the tools of Brahmin/upper-caste dominance in Tamil society. The native non-Brahmins call for Tamil was not only about the language identity but also about breaking the caste hegemony.

Annamalai Chettiar, the most prominent leader of the Tamil Isai movement, started an organized and institutionalized battle against Brahmin classical music. To counter the musical historiography and narrative of the Brahmin musicians through the Music Academy, Chettiar established the Annamalai University and held a music conference to challenge the Musical Trinity (Tyagaraj, Muttusvami Diksitar, and Syama Sastri) who represents the authority and dominance of Sanskrit or Telugu speaking Brahmin music system. Over the centuries, the music-caste relation has resulted in the stigmatization of many

musical and performance styles in India, where mostly the victims were marginalized ones and their cultural products. For example, Gaana music which is traditional folk music played and performed by the outcaste people at funerals has been looked down on by the mainstream popular musical society. And not only the music but the performers and players also faced discrimination.

The majority of Dalits in Tamil Nadu state speak kochai (vulgar) Tamil language, and the folk arts and games they practice are unfortunately categorized as being pre-modern by the hegemonic classicists. Their language was not deemed fit for the music and other creative artworks. Their folk songs and arts remained untouchable just like theirs. Even though Tamil Isai has become popular among Tamil speakers, Dalits still found their voice and identity missing from the music. Like any other social group, they also have their music, dances, and musical instruments which they are carrying from generation to generation and in which their identity and existence are rooted. In the popular music culture of Tamil Nadu, Dalits couldn't relate to the lyrics, musical instruments, performances, presentations, and participation of Tamil music. Their concerns and complaint remained unaddressed amidst the politics of upper-caste Brahmin ideologues and intermediate-caste Dravidians. Thus, they continued to struggle for their cultural space and identity through their music. Although the hegemonic groups didn't allow any space in the mainstream music system, they continued to push forward. In the meantime, a couple of musicians like Illaiyaraaja came to the stage, but they somewhat got appropriated by the Carnatic musical system.

"Recently Pa. Ranjith's radicalism of a "Casteless Musical Collective" in response to the cry and agitation of Carnatic artists who claimed complete ownership of the stage and denied the stage to the Tamil gaana, rap, and other folk-based music patterns, came in for flak. The denial of gaana and kuthu pattu as genres in them is an insult to thousands of Dalits and their future with their art forms. Ranjith's musical performance was in response to the outrage of Dalit music on the haloed kacheri stage. His simple question in response to people accusing him of marking his music as Dalit and not just music was to ask why then was there a hue and cry when it made the classical stage?" (Nehemiah, 2018). Further on, to understand how anti-caste/casteless music by Dalit Tamils is different and counter to both Carnatic as well as Tamil Isai music systems, we must look into its making and its existing significance of it from the Dalit perspective.

### ANTI-CASTE TAMIL MUSIC

In the teaser of Ranjith's mass political action drama movie 'Kaala', "as Rajni does his trademark walk we see Hip hop dancers in the foreground. An art form that originated on the streets and incorporated the dance of the African-American and Latino communities in the US. (Rajendran, 2018). The voice-over (Samuthirakani) explains what the name 'Kaala' means - as Rajini walks with blackened joyous faces behind him, we're told 'Kaala' means 'black' and he's also 'Karikalan', the one who fights to protect." (Rajendran, 2018). Here, Pa Ranjith made western hip hop met with Tamil organic Gaana folk culture and thus created a new anti-caste music genre that has a native feeling with a western touch. Pariyerum Perumal, an anti-caste drama produced by Ranjith has its theme brilliantly complemented by the songs and music by Santosh Narayanan (who also composed music for Kaala and Kabali). The maker blended hip hop with the folk music of Tamil Dalits. In the very opening song "Karuppi", Santosh made it like an amalgamation of oppari (ancient Tamil folk song tradition of lamenting) and rap as the protagonist laments the death of his dog. "Engum Pugazh Thuvanga", another song from the movie is a complete folk number sung by Folk Marley. Here, like pure black rap music, the makers have ensured the purity of the genre of the song without any cinematic pressure by using both musical as well as visual originality. (TNN, Music Review: Pariyerum Perumal, 2018). Ranjith says, "For me, art and music is a political tool. I want to highlight social issues through art and music, issues that have been there for centuries but have failed to bring about a change. Gaana is in the blood of every child who is born in the slums of north Madras, the same locality where I come from. They are so skilled yet so far behind in many aspects of life. I want to change that." (TNN, 2018). Ranjith is very conscious and awake while using the musical performances in his works. He understands that musical performances are not just an art form to entertain, but a sociopolitical and cultural tool to make their identity. He used it for resistance as well as identity-making. Music and dance are liberating forces and Ranjith is using them for the same. He's liberating Dalit Tamils' politics, culture, and identity from the suppression and violence of the upper caste and the shadow and neglect of the intermediate caste. At the same time, he's trying to put forward a new trend of music and musical performances which doesn't only contest against the "pure music" of Carnatic or Tamil Isai but also establishes a distinct modern traditional Dalit Tamil music system. Although it is music engulfed in Dalit consciousness, it's not limited

to caste only. It's the music of pure and honest humane emotions. It's the music of equality, fraternity, and justice for all. It's the music of all oppressed and poor, music of modernity as well as tradition. It's the music of all, by all, and for all. Dalit anti-caste Tamil music comprised of the new imaginations and hopes for a just and free society. It announces the freedom of Dalits from the hegemony of caste.

In the 1990s, a new genre of music i.e. pop music came into India, but here the real purpose of hip hop, rap, and rock music is completely misinterpreted. This American music genre has a long history of politics and history of exploitation. The Indian cinema's savarnas musicians got their hands on the instruments of this music but they lost all the real vigor of it. Although, the upper caste-dominated music industry has declared music a secular and apolitical art, for many centuries they are feeding the population of both savarnas and non-savarnas their own "ideas and tastes of anti-Dalit/Bahujan imaginations of Brahminism. The violence of Indian society has been displaced into these songs, which are replete with fantasies and the romanticization of love. Since the Brahmins have kept music in their custody in India, they were able to present it as sacred. In this way, they have made non-Brahmin people subscribe to their idea of the world. This first mutilated the organic roots of music and subsequently murdered it." (Maitreya, 2020).

"In India, Brahmins from all linguistic regions commoditized and hegemonized music through film, private performances, and, recently, albums. In their music, the Dalit-Bahujan loses their rootedness and their organic association with nature." (Kannadasan, 2019). Tamil Dalit music has been there all the time, but the popular culture has completely forgotten it. It was only in the last decade, with the arrival of filmmakers like Pa Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj and music composers like Santhosh Narayanan that Dalit music has come to the fore. But there is some kind of innovation added to it. The new Dalit music has been molded into anti-caste/casteless music by the fusion of Tamil folk music with modern pop and rap music. In contemporary times in the Tamil Popular music and Cinema industry, the band "the Casteless Collective" has created a revolution. It doesn't only contest the dominant musical narrative of Brahmins and Intermediate Caste, but at the same time generates a new musical narrative and cultural space for the marginalized and oppressed population.

## THE CASTELESS COLLECTIVE



Figure 1. The Casteless Collective

Pic. Source: newsclick.in

This anti-caste musical band came into existence in December 2017 at the behest of filmmaker Pa Ranjith and independent music producer Tenma. The group got its name from one of the leading 19th-century Tamil caste activists Iyothee Thass "who said that one has to be 'casteless' to annihilate caste." (Bhuyan, 2020). The composition of the band includes rappers, beatboxers, rock musicians, and 'gaana' singers. Although it has a mix of hip hop, gaana, folk, and western music, gaana dominates its music. Each product of this musical band is filled with the history and politics of Madras. They collectively sings politically motivated songs and address issues like caste, reservation, quota, poverty, local politics as well as love and romance." We are the flesh and blood of Madras, Ours in the sound of the soil", says Tenma. There's a mixture of the aesthetics of both tradition and technology. Along with that, the musical instruments

comprised of both modern western electronic systems like e-guitar, as well as indigenous folk ones such as satti, kattermolom, parai, and dholak. The most significant aspect of gaana music is its "raw feelings". Arun Ranjan, the co-founder of Madras Records, opines that "All of them perform in Tamil but our motive was to take gaana out of its comfort zone and give it an international treatment. So you will hear gaana, rap, jazz, Latin and South American rhythms, funk, Sufi, folk, and some R&B (rhythm and blues, a term used for several types of postwar African-American popular music). It is music that will make you dance and reflect at the same time," (Kareem, 2018). They see themselves as a global musical outfit.

## CONCLUSION

In his prophetic commentary on music, *NOISE: The Political Economy of Music*, published in 1985 by the University of Minnesota Press, French economic and social theorist Jacques Attali notes that music, "in its ambivalence, in its all-embracing hope, is simultaneously heard, reasoned, and constructed. It brings Power, Science, and Technology together. (Maitreya, 2020). It is a rootedness in the world, an attempt to conceive of human creation as conforming with nature." (Maitreya, 2020). Dalit thinkers and musicians opine that once the stream of music went into the hands of Brahmins, this hope, reason, power, science, and technology, this rootedness, was completely lost. Once, new Dalit-conscious musicians unfolded casteless music, they didn't only retrieve their past folk musical culture and history but also accommodated the global musical culture, especially black American music culture which help them in making it into the mainstream musical culture. Lastly, we need to understand that "The purpose of music is not to set us further adrift from the world but to integrate us with it. The music of the likes of The Casteless Collective might make us uncomfortable, but it wakes us up from the lethargy of romanticism. It is the kind of phenomenon that is certain to help us build an anti-caste sensibility." (Matitreya, 2020).

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