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Performing Dalit Feminist Youth Activism in South India: Rap, *Gaana*, and Street Theater

By Pramila Venkateswaran¹

Abstract

Young Dalit men and women are changing the narrative of casteist oppression in India. Youth activists perform protest songs in the genre of rap and *gaana*, using elements of slam poetry and rap from African American artists and blending them with local musical innovations. The performances have deliberate messaging, signaling particular caste and gender injustices, both current and historical. This paper will analyze Dalit youth performances of rap, *gaana*, and street theater (*koothu*) in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, to understand the poetics of protest against caste and gender oppression. It will look at the notion of space in these performances. Since social space has historically been restricted for marginalized groups such as Dalits, and even private space has never existed for Dalits, more so for women, the performance space—the screen, the theatre, or street—becomes a heterotopia, or a third space for voicing injustice through song. Taboos are tossed aside in this space; transgressive, private-public fused in-your-face musical phrasings appear on every audio and visual device through the globalization of the internet. Rap and *gaana* queer accepted caste and gender narratives. This paper will look at youth rappers, such as Arivu, the latest sensation, *gaana* performer, Isaivani's performances, as well as "The Casteless Collective" and inquire into the reasons for their appeal despite their iconoclasm. Affect is another area of inquiry in the analysis of Dalit performance, since caste and gender oppression meant invisibilizing Dalits and not seeing them as humans with emotions. Examining the value of affect within performances as well as its effect on audiences is important, since both coalesce to make historically restricted speech appealing and far-reaching in effecting change.

Keywords: Dalit; grassroots activism, marginalized music, rap, street theater, youth activism, heterotopia, social space, political space, democracy.

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Introduction

Dalit youth anti-caste activists in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, are vibrant in their powerful feminist messaging, as seen in their multimedia performances. One of their latest music video sensations is *Enjoy Enjaami*, with its powerful amalgam of rap, hip-hop, and indigenous rhythms celebrating the musician Arivu's grandmother, an indentured laborer in Sri Lanka under the British. The video captures the wealth of nature and Dalit women's labor, both of which have been oppressed by the institutions of caste, capitalism and gender. Dalit artists use pop music, marginalized musical forms and *koothu* (theater) to make their statement challenging the burden of caste and gender oppression, a burden that continues to exist even if untouchability is illegal in India. Dalit feminism addresses caste and gender oppression; therefore, Dalit musicians and artists are feminists raising awareness of Dalit oppression. Young Dalit activists today see the power of music and theater to change oppressive social conditions. For example, little did Indians imagine that a provocative song critiquing the denial of women's access to the Sabarimala temple, sung by Isaivani, as part of The Casteless Collective, a grassroots anti-caste collective, would contribute to the Supreme Court upholding the decision in September 2018 to allow women to enter the temple (Supreme Court Observer).

Dalit communities have always expressed themselves in song, drumming and dance. This oral, expressive culture is communal, seasonal, and celebrates rites of passage or community gatherings with song, percussion and dance. Description, wit, and humor characterize these aural and kinesthetic expressions. However, the separation of castes since Vedic times¹, which brought with it the systemic oppression of Dalits by upper castes, coincided with a divide between "high" classical arts populated by Brahmins and the "lower" folk arts of Dalit communities and other lower castes (Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes, as termed officially) (Chanda-Vaz, 2019, para. 13). Dalit arts remained on the fringes of society, both physically and psychologically, since "they have not yet been widely recognized as valuable forms of representative earthy literature" (Singh, 2018, p. 189).

Caste became a wedge issue during India's independence, as we see in the debates between Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (the former known for fighting for India's freedom from British rule, and the latter who questioned national freedom that failed to get rid of the caste system that oppressed millions of Dalit men and women)². The central government's failure to challenge the sacerdotal caste system further invisibilized Dalit arts, while making more visible the young republic's pride in the classical arts, thus privileging "knowledge production" (Ingole, 2020, p. 92). "Popular Dalit folk songs, dramas, and humor are yet to find a respectable place in mainstream Indian academia" (Ingole, 2020, p. 95). Historically, Dalit women singers, dancers, and musicians have kept their art within the private sphere of their community gatherings or their homes. But, during the Nationalist movement for Indian Independence, Dalit women, for example, who participated in the Dalit youth organizations "staged poems, plays and songs based on their experiences . . . which became the key ingredients for the Ambedkar Movement to assert its identity as one driven by rebellion and demand for justice" (Singh, 2019, p. 50).

Dalit songs and *therukoothu* (street theater), (*koothu* for short) barely migrated to upper caste communities; their transmission into urban cultural hubs is recent. Any reference to the songs and dances of the marginalized were introduced as auxiliary acts in concerts and were mainly seen as entertaining rather than having any intrinsic artistic or cultural value. For example, in a classical dance concert such as Bharatanatyam, the *korathi* (gypsy) dance was seen as purely for entertainment rather than as having artistic expertise. Similarly, the folk song which was

introduced at the end of a classical (Carnatik) music repertoire was judged the same way. The prejudice against folk arts is slowly beginning to dissipate in younger generations.

In this paper, I argue that young Dalit lyricists, singer-activists, and theater directors create performance spaces that function as heterotopias,³ which allow for oppressive norms to be reversed. Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as an open space, a “counter-site” to closed spaces in society. Heterotopias are “real sites,” which “are simultaneously represented, contested, and invented...Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it might be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault, 1984, pp. 3-4). In this paper, I use heterotopias to refer to spaces where Dalit women and men create their political identity. For Dalit feminist artists, heterotopias become the spaces where they create their art and feminist expressions to end society’s injustices toward Dalit people. Current rap, hip-hop, *gaana* and *koothu* artists break barriers for women and lower castes by occupying these heterotopian spaces, such as the stage, the studio, cyber networks and music videos to speak out their contested realities.

I also argue that the materialist and rationalist philosophies of Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (popularly known as Periyar) nourish the lyrics produced by Dalit music artists in India. It is important to note that Periyar’s rational and materialist ideology is in opposition to Hindu Vedic spiritual idealism, and so it needs to be understood within the Dravidian culture and the context of Tamil Nadu. It has to be distinguished from European Enlightenment rationalist thinking. Dalit lyrics reflect Periyar’s rationalism, which “invested in the surface materiality of things” (Gajarawala 2013), rather than the metaphysical world, in order to use human imagination and will to bring about change. Dalit feminism takes inspiration from Periyar’s feminism, which addresses, through the use of logic and reason, the origins of women’s enslavement and charts the ways to end it.

Today, young Dalit men and women have changed the narrative of casteist oppression in India. Youth activists perform protest songs in the genre of rap and *gaana*, using elements of slam poetry and rap from African American artists and blending them with local musical innovations and theatrical elements. Their deliberate messages in rap, hip-hop and *gaana*, are earthy, connecting to people’s lived experiences, just as Periyar had expatiated⁴; they address caste and gender injustices, celebrate Dalit leaders, and lampoon current politics and society. Dalit singer-activists break with traditional expectations of their presence in theatrical spaces. They challenge caste restrictions by commandeering public spaces as their stage, such as the theater, the street, and the internet and make them heterotopian spaces where they mirror Dalit reality, challenge assumptions and invent artistic ways to assert their feminist and democratic ideals. Additionally, Dalit youth use musical technology as well as social media to garner the kind of psychological and emotional affect, in both depth and international reach, that previous iterations of protest attempted to capture.

In this paper, I analyze the visual and lyrical language of rap, *gaana*, and *koothu*, which intersect in Dalit youth performances. Such an analysis not only uncovers the poetic and artistic elements used by Dalit artists but also depicts how Dalit feminism is embodied by Dalit performers in heterotopian spaces, such that the audience is affected by the themes of Dalit women’s oppression and Dalit feminist activism. I use intersectionality of gender and caste as a tool in my analysis of Dalit artistic productions.

In the last three decades, rap music performance has spread like wildfire in different Indian languages, particularly among Dalit youth. In Tamil Nadu, rap and *gaana* are popular among youth activists challenging caste oppression. Rap, which originated in Jamaica in the 1960s and spread to the black ghettos of New York in the 1980’s (Baxter, 1988, p. 30), was a form of spoken

word protest, accompanied by beatboxing, that spread among marginalized black youth in the US, and caught fire among youth globally. *Gaana*, a term used by Tamil Nadu youth activist-singers, began in the working-class neighborhoods of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. It is like rap but also uses Dalit song traditions. It is “edgy folk music characterised by a hard-driving rhythm and earthy lyrics” (Deeksha, 2018, para.11). As Isaivani explains, the *gaana* form uses rap, folk, and melody (Aadhan Tamil, 2019). Aspects of *koothu* can also be seen in the staging of rap and *gaana*.

Dalit Feminist Themes in Rap and *Gaana*

Both rap and *gaana* are provocative in their address of feminist themes that queer mainstream notions of feminism. I use the verb form “queer” to denote the unsettling of normative assumptions, and the discourses and practices based on these assumptions (“Queer”). Queering established assumptions helps us discover the blind spots in our theories and practices. In this paper, queering feminist practices in India reveals caste as deliberately invisibilized in discourses about women’s empowerment. Contemporary feminists point out that Indian feminists mainly advocated for Brahminical, middle class, and other upper caste women. Dalit women’s oppression did not enter feminist discourse until intersectionality was used as a tool of analysis in feminism (Arya and Rathore, 2020, p. 5). Caste has only recently entered the gender-class-sexuality nexus. Even today, the media reflects the lack of representation of caste; “only upper-caste women and their issues receive recognition by the media, by the leaders of mainstream movements as well as by ‘mainstream’ feminists, who simply assume they can speak for Dalit women” (Tharu, 2020, p. 184). Dalit rap, *gaana*, and *koothu* play vital roles in articulating caste, gender, and class in their lyrics and performance.

Koothu’s avant garde elements can be seen in women cast as lead singers, the way the stage is populated, the use of lighting, sound effects, props, and visuals offering dramatic effects, such as anticipation, climax, wit and humor, and the musical conversations between singers and percussionists. This intersectionality of musical and theatrical forms is true to Dalit artists’ “transgressive notions: a command over experiences of untouchability that only a person treated as untouchables can express” (Singh, 2019, p. 189).

Dalit songs and music videos on feminist themes intersecting caste and gender critique Brahminical taboos against the eating of beef, lack of Dalit women’s access in temples, pollution taboos for both men and women that keep them out of essential social spaces, caste persecution, land rights, reservation, condemnation of manual scavenging, voting, murder of young couples who transgress caste rules, and gender politics. The lyrics make fun of vegetarians, the hypocrisy of priests and the upper castes. As one of the lyricists of The Casteless Collective, Arivarasu Kalainesan, says, Dalit music and theater “is not only about pain ... but also on their triumphs, their victories.” (Deeksha, 2018, para. 22). He adds, “In Tamil, there are no songs about many crucial matters, like a woman’s preferences in life, liberalism, reservation or casteism. Our songs are about the unsung and the unnoticed people and issues. Yes, we and our songs are political” (Mohandas, 2019, para.3).

Enjoy Enjaami is a feminist statement about caste and ecological violence. This music video offers a view of Dalit past that has been made invisible by institutions of caste, capitalism, and gender. The hero of *Enjoy Enjaami* is the lyricist Arivu’s grandmother who suffered as an indentured laborer in Sri Lanka during British rule. She returns to Tamil Nadu, cut off from her family, and pieces a life together. The *oppari* mourns the losses suffered by the laborers as well as the losses suffered by nature, intersecting feminism, ecology, class, caste, and colonial subjugation. The repeated call “Cuckoo cuckoo” is haunting, as it echoes the pathos of trees lost

to cities and the “civilizing” force of capitalism. Drumbeats of *parai*, a percussive form which originated in Dalit villages, capture the endurance of the oppressed laborers who survive through their faith in nature and their music. A forest of color decorated ancestral women, the figure of a younger woman presented as a queen, and alternately the crone seated on a throne, and the drummers, with Arivu entering with spoken word segments, create a powerful message of reclaiming Dalit identity.

Dalit feminist heterotopias

Dalit music performances are collective heterotopias, where both spectators and the performers have agency and embrace solidarity. The staging of Dalit feminist themes in music and *koothu* is a heterotopian space that represent Dalit suffering and activism, contest accepted norms, invent intersectional indigenous forms to question casteist and sexist customs, and teach anti-oppressive ideas. So, in the interstices of a casteist society, Dalit feminist youth activism in music creates heterotopias that are both symbolic and functional. The Casteless Collective formed by Pa. Ranjith can be seen as a heterotopia that presents music that critiques caste oppression. Their title, “Casteless,” is telling, since the mission of this group is to eradicate caste. This collective, comprised of musicians from different castes, and including men and women, does live performances as well as makes music videos which are distributed via the internet.

In the heterotopian space of the stage, we see women singers breaking taboos of gender boundaries and upper caste restrictions of public space. Isaivani, one of the lead singers in The Casteless Collective, declares that she experiences equality on stage and feels the collective empowers her to be her authentic self. Having resonated with the message of the collective and her love for songs carrying anti-caste and feminist messages, she feels she has found her niche in *gaana* and rap (Aadhan Tamil, 2019). Isaivani’s song on Ambedkar, an example of Dalit feminism, celebrates the leader’s unrelenting work for the freedom of Dalits (Praba, 2019). As one of the architects of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar asserted that Hindu religious literature, or *Shastras*, were directly responsible for upper caste Brahmins continuing to subjugate Dalits. Isaivani’s lyrics, quoting Periyar and Ambedkar, praise Ambedkar’s dress, his education, and his beliefs; the chorus is Ambedkar’s and Periyar’s slogan, *jatiya ozhikatam* (annihilate caste). In this music video, Isaivani dresses in a style similar to Ambedkar; she wears a pair of trousers, a white shirt, a black jacket and sneakers. Her long hair hangs loosely down her back. With no makeup, she represents the professional woman in urban space claiming her daily reality. The video opens with her walking into the center of the screen from down a driveway, showing her comfort in using public space. Walking down a driveway signifies one’s ownership of oneself and one’s destination. Her stance makes a statement about Dalits not having to fear being seen or approaching anyone or any building or space from the front, in contrast to the submissive gestures and body language of ex-untouchables a century ago. Her voice which rises from the belly carries the timbre of power, consistent with *gaana* tradition, as opposed to the high-pitched falsetto of Tamil film singing required for women. *Gaana* singers, particularly female, disrupt this expectation of femininity. Rhythm and melody, accompanied by a percussive dance beat popular in *koothu* and folk-dance offer energy to her voice and match the heavy subject matter of the lyrics.

Dalit feminist heterotopia breaks accepted notions among the elite that music that is not classical is second rate (Deeksha, 2018. para. 11). This is like the division in Tamil literature, between poetry and novel written in literary Tamil, or *cen* Tamil, considered high art and those written in spoken Tamil, considered kitsch. In fact, in common upper caste parlance, non-classical music, particularly that of marginalized communities, is called *dabankoothu*, a derogatory term denoting lack of class and lack of aesthetics of the *koothu* form and its performers. In domestic

scenarios, when there is an argument or a fight, family members usually exclaim, *ena koothu!* referencing derogatorily to the musical forms of the slums as unappetizing as well as the slum dwellers being uncivilized. This societal division between classical and non-classical forms like rap, *therukoothu* and film music is slowly beginning to change as a result of feminist activists such as The Casteless Collective, Isaivani, Padma Mangai, among others. Today, talented artists in the film world and in heterotopian art spaces have diffused the borders between classical and non-classical. Music directors, Pa Ranjith and A.R. Rahman, have taken the music world by storm with their interesting musical innovations. *Enjoy Enjammi* is an example of such an innovation, combining *oppari*, or mourning song, which is the Dalit form of hip-hop, rap, indigenous rhythms, and spoken word, lifting this assemblage into art, thus dissolving the high/low binary, as well as disrupting casteist spaces by performing their feminism.

Transformation of the voice and the body of the performers is also seen in theatrical productions by anti-caste theater activists such as Padma Mangai (Singh, A, 2013) and Ashwini Kasi (Pragati, 2021). Similar to Dalit music activists, Mangai and Kasi have brought art forms within Dalit and other “lower” caste communities onto the stage, making them the center of culture. In their mission to transform society, they have revived *therukoothu* to tell stories that relate to contemporary society and bring awareness of gender and caste oppressions (Pragati, 2021, para.13). They innovate traditional myths and use unconventional spaces, thus subverting age-old caste and gender divisions and separations. Women and marginalized groups are given agency in the democratizing spaces of *therukoothu*, and arts such as *tappattam* traditionally done in Dalit communities are revived in the curriculum of dramatic arts (Nathan, 2018).

Mangai calls the diverse musical and dance forms of Tamil Nadu as “living forms in Tamil Nadu” (Singh, A, 2013, p. 497), discarding casteism and sexism. “Also, if one sees through these forms, a new idiom can evolve. The forms are inherently flexible and have been changing and evolving with the times” (Singh, A, 2013, p. 497). “Mangai traverses boundaries constructed within theatre work, bridging an assortment of forms—*therukoothu*, *isai natakam*, and modern drama. . . . Much of her work is sourced from marginalized aesthetic forms (such as domestic all-female rituals and the colloquial, sociolinguistic practices of the disenfranchised) and is performed in marginal sociocultural spaces (such as the courtyards of housing projects)” (Singh, A, 2013, p. 493). She recasts classical female characters, such as *Avvai* and *Manimekalai*, as agentic, transcending restrictions.

Contrary to men acting women’s roles in traditional productions, activist directors and producers break gender norms. Women now act in *therukoothu* and other plays; issues such as transgender oppression, caste killings, and women leaders make their way into the plays. Isaivani embodying Ambedkar, a Dalit woman playing a male leader’s role, is the intersection of theater and *gaana* to create Dalit feminist heterotopia. Thus, women characters as well as women actors and musicians find voice on stage. The stage, which can be the street, a building, a TV studio or the internet, becomes the political space for the arts activists, whether they are producers, directors, or actors. We can call these spaces, which are sometimes spontaneous, heterotopias of dissent which galvanize awareness in society and bring about policies to protect vulnerable populations.

Dalit Women’s Performance Spaces

The history of Dalit women has consisted of restrictions placed on them by the institutional structures of caste, gender and class, the latter two tightly bound by upper caste Brahmin rules which have spilled across castes. In Dalit women’s singing and *koothu* performances, we see them queering social caste and gender expectations regarding occupying physical space of the stage or the screen, the street corner and home, as well as occupying mental and emotional space. True to

the foundational feminist ideas of Periyar, enunciated in *Why Were Women Enslaved?* (2020), Dalit women's bodies occupying public space is a retort to upper caste restrictions. Since caste and gender proscriptions become internalized, we see Dalit women discarding psychological barriers to their freedom by claiming public space in their performance. They are not only performing their art but are also performing their transgressive act of crossing boundaries. Thus, through their "freeing acts," they traverse "mental and defined moral spaces" (Singh, R., 2019, p. 44).

Isaivani demonstrates her (and her community's) active queering of conventional caste narrative by performing her songs and her activism in her easy movements on stage, often occupying the entirety of the stage, walking to and fro covering its width, or breaking into *koothu* movements. Her voice has audacity or sauciness, a tone of defiance mixed with humor that draws her audience to her. She has a powerful earthy voice emanating from her belly, very unlike the shrill falsetto of the Tamil film voice culture. Her voice, her stride, her gestures, the lift of her head, all produce what she calls "thimir" or audacity (Aadhan Tamil, 2019). For example, in her song, *I'm sorry Ayyappa*, the lyrics delivered in her defiant tone, convey the content of the opening lyrics: "I am sorry Ayyappa/Naan ulla vantha ennappa/bhayam kaatti adakkivaykka/pazhaya kalam allappa [I am sorry Lord Ayyappa / What will happen if I enter your place, mister? / Old times are no more / Don't use fear to suppress us]. The end rhyme with its profane diminution of the god Ayyappa to a casual stranger (appa), followed by the wagging of a finger at the god and the rule makers to discard gender and caste rules and wake up to the times, rouse the audience into consciousness of caste oppression. *Bayam* and *Adakkuthal*—fear and oppression—used in the same line is a lightning rod to rouse the audience into applause. It is interesting that *adakkivaykka* which means "to oppress" has the same root as *adakkam* which means modest and is used as a moral code only for women, to keep them in their place. In one fell swoop, Isaivani discards the rule of *adakkam* and substitutes *thimir* as the code for her and for oppressed communities. She feels it is important to project audacity in order to lend power to the words of the songs, which are songs of protest against restrictions on women and Dalits. Isaivani creates a psychological space for the viewer of her videos to imagine a world where they are indeed free of the shackles of caste. The songs themselves are generated from the freedom of the lyricist in the framework of the page; on stage, the singer experiences the emancipation of the imagination by bringing the song alive to the audience, and the viewers participate in the power of the imagination which opens up mental and emotional avenues for them.

The psychological space that singers like Isaivani clear for performers and the audience simultaneously becomes a political space where performers and the audience experience agency. The stage becomes a heterotopia or alternate space where Dalit performers can "allow for social and cultural norms to be contested or reversed" (Andrews, 2021). Describing a *kummi* song, Roja Singh observes that the character in the song transforms "mud into gold," thus reversing "the idea of polluted fated to further pollute into an agent of purification (2019, p. 206). We can see Isaivani as the agent in the song alchemize the given social dross of women as untouchable into the gold of egalitarianism for all genders and castes to access public worship spaces. As Isaivani says, "When you speak your message through song, it will reach everyone. Music is an easy way to voice social issues" (BBC NewsTamil, 2021). Performers experience the power of self-expression and knowledge in this space, which shapes the socio-political context for both the performers and the audience.

Isaivani expresses her feminist agency in her performance as a Dalit woman, a trained singer, as well as her performance as an activist who desires change for Dalits and for Dalit women.

As viewers, we are energized to participate in change making. The audience as well as the singers “feel and enter untouched and unknown spaces that are life-giving and identity-binding (Singh, 2018, p.211). As Isaivani opines, “A woman speaking out is criticized. A woman speaking out about casteism is criticized. I just keeping doing what I do. Change is the goal” (BBC Tamil).

Dalit musician-activists believe in making any space into their stage. As Arivu says, “If you need to convey a message, you don’t need a stage or a mic. If you don’t have a path, make it!” (Mohandas, 2019, para. 9). Sujata Gidla (2017) describes her uncle, K.G. Satyamuthy, or Satyam as he was called by his family and friends, a Maoist leader in Andhra Pradesh, who organized members of the lowest caste of manual scavengers, the *pakis*, to act in a local dance and music competition. When members of the troupe win the competition, Gidla describes how Satyam’s appeal to the communist association to fund his troupe to perform in the villages was rejected. But Satyam persists in organizing the troupe to put on performances every evening, collecting a fistful of rice in return from each of the households in every village, which the performers would sell to fund their expenses, such as fuel and food. Satyam exposes the hypocrisy of the communist association and inspires his troupe to demonstrate their joined conviction about denouncing oppression of Dalit women and men. In organizing *pakis* to perform in plays that depicted abuse of Dalits by landlords and critiquing antiquated technology such as using men as beasts of burden to pull rickshaws, he created the space for them to find freedom of movement in public space and self-expression that music and *koothu* allow. Gidla shows the feminist expressions of Dalits like Satyam using poetry and theater to subvert caste, gender and class rules. It is this persistent pushback against the forces that restrict space that we see in Dalit youth’s music and theater activism.

Just as contemporary Tamil poets create work that dissolves the high/low, caste and gender binaries, Dalit feminist youth activists use language and form in music that bring marginalized vernaculars into the center. As Arivu, the lyricist of *Enjoy Enjaami*, says, “The language one hears throughout the song is that of people who do not find representation in mainstream media” (Padmanabhan, 2021, para. 9). In one of her interviews, Isaivani gives examples of the idiom of slums, such as *jamma jamnakattu*, which she describes as jolly and without any specific meaning (Aadhan Tamil, 2019). Young people, regardless of caste or creed, enjoy the verbal gymnastics of these idioms, which are witty, musical and humorous, understood within their contexts. The use of the local vernacular is feminist since feminism is iconoclastic and, in this case, breaks the accepted binary of “high” culture and “literary” language, since they stratify society into powerful and powerless. For Dalit performers, bringing their speech into the heterotopian space of the stage is a border-crossing act.

Choice of language and idiom fuel the energy of rap, *gaana*, and *therukoothu*. Periyar’s Self-Respect movement pushed for Tamil to gain ascendancy as the language of the state of Tamil Nadu to counter the British Raj as well as the dominance of Hindi.⁶ Periyar and his party, the Dravida Kazhagam, which later became the DMK (Dravida Munetra Kazhagam), saw Tamil as superior to English and Hindi and unifying all the states in the South. The fight to overthrow English and write in regional languages has been part of the postcolonial argument (Iyer and Zare, 2009, p. x). To this day, *bhasha* (regional language) writers claim their value, while Indian-English writers argue that theirs is a unique language, which historically has used the master’s tools to answer back to empire (Iyer and Zare, 2009, p. xxii). At the same time, ironically, Dalits question non-Dalits’ lack of access to English, whether in education, writing, publication, or work (Iliah, 2020, para 1). Dalits see English as their political choice, in order to challenge the restriction of Dalits in English medium schools. In postcolonial India, English became the currency for jobs.

Dalits were denied education and they were denied literacy in Sanskrit and English, two hegemonic languages. Kancha Ilaiah argues for Dalitization, not Sanskritization (upper caste oppressive domain), so every Dalit person learns English to counter language oppression and spread their message of revolution nationally and internationally (Ilaiah, 2020, para. 1), a radical position that influences Dalit feminism.

Dalit feminists tame hegemonic languages, be it *cen* Tamil or English, and use them to serve their aesthetic and political purposes. Rap and *gaana* videos produced by Dalit music activists show their use of spoken Tamil, folk Tamil, and the blending of idioms heard within *cheri* (slum) and rural communities, with English. They mix idioms and pun on words, with surprising results. For example, in *Enjoy Enjaami*, we hear the double entendre in the title, employing both Tamil and English meanings. *Enjaayi*, which means *mother*, sounds like the English lexicon *enjoy*. The denotation of the English word “enjoy” disrupts the narrative of the mother’s pain enduring the oppression of laboring under imperialism. *Enjaami*, a Tamil phrase which means *my god* and sounds like a name to the non-Tamil speaker, moves the mother god (Arivu’s grandmother) into the center of the musical narrative.

Another rap and *gaana* piece, “I’m sorry, Ayyappa,” inspired by Periyar’s speeches on women’s rights,⁵ addresses the god Ayyappa in the repeated chorus, but the song itself is not about the god, but about women’s rights. Within this song, the apology in English sounds casual. This is deliberate because the serious matter of the song is about women challenging their lack of access to the Sabarimala temple, and a Dalit woman voicing this challenge. Isaivani can achieve this tonal contrast in her rendition, offering the token apology in a high note beginning the song and shifting to the powerful voice and lyrics celebrating herself and all women as Periyar’s granddaughters and debunking rules that keep women down.

Isaivani interweaves idioms used in the slums along with Tamil-inflected English words, such as “taste-la,” “sugar-u,” “power-u” and “housefull-u,” as in her *Beef song*. Different registers of Tamil and English give verve to the lyrics sung in fast tempo, with intricate rhythmic, tongue-twisting phrases alternating with lines sung or spoken in slower tempo. Sometimes, two musicians on stage have conversations, or repartees, mixing languages, which are swift and full of innuendo and humor. The singers’ command of the pace of rap and *gaana* is exhilarating, outwitting the flashing disco lights and visuals on stage. We witness the transformation of Dalit feminist voices that meld the aesthetic and the political in vibrant heterotopian imagination.

Origin of Dalit Feminism in Oral Tradition

It is useful to reflect on the music and poems in Dalit women’s tradition, such as the earliest songs called *Therigatha* composed by the Buddhist nuns in the 6th century, BC (“Therigatha,” 1991). These were songs of protest about a woman’s place in society and the expectations on women sung by Buddhist nuns asserting their need for liberation; they painted images of oppression in the domestic sphere and their longing for freedom from “mortar and pestle” (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991, p. 68). *Bhakti* songs of Chokamela, Kabir and women saints addressed a divine being, but were earthy in their imagery, which portrayed the material reality of people’s suffering and decried caste oppression. *Bhakti* and Buddhism were counter narratives to mainstream Hinduism which was based on the *varna* (caste) system (Kumar, 2019, p. 43). These poets asserted the path to the divine lay through the heart. *Bhakti* poets were able to create *bhakti* or the feeling of devotion that changed conservative Hindus. *Bhakti* or devotional songs opened up a space for non-Brahmin Hindus to declare allegiance with a loving creator who did not see differences in gender or caste. In fact, naked saints who imitated the nakedness of god, (*digambara* or cloud clad) are still celebrated by Hindus, for they don’t see division between people but perceive the highest

unity between spirit and matter realized in the everyday. However, women across caste did not experience this metaphysical truth in their mundane lives. Their space was restricted by caste taboos.

Dalit feminists today, in poetry and music, continue the tradition of Buddhist and *bhakti* poets and musicians. We see in recent decades, feminist musicians delving more into the ancestral spaces of their people, both in exploring their land as well as in learning about the past by listening to the stories from their lineage. They interrogate their history of oppression and their cultural production in order to create music and theater that show creativity, imagination, and insight. Emboldened Dalit feminist voices, as in *Beef song*, *Enjoy Enjaami* and *I am sorry, Ayyappa*, refuse to be cowed down by hegemonic institutions and ideologies. We see in these music videos the performance of Dalit subjectivity. Where Dalits were invisibilized, the youth singer-activists command attention in both physical bearing and voice. As Arivu says, “It’s a world of hypocrisy – a woman who, in popular songs, is depicted as a goddess, is killed for making a choice about her life. *Thaadikkaran pethi*, [also known as *I am sorry, Ayyapa*], is a song in a feminist viewpoint—of a woman’s preferences about job, life partner and the dress she wears. It’s a liberal anthem where the woman speaks her mind” (Mohandas, 2019, para. 7). The theatre, stage, or screen become heterotopian spaces where the once-invisible Dalit women and men move into the center.

While the atrocity on the Dalit body makes their oppression a spectacle where there is no accountability, the stage offers a transgressive space for the oppressed to voice their emotion and show their bodies in action, carried by the aesthetics of song. The theatrical / video production of *Enjoy Enjaami* carries feminist, ecological themes challenging labor oppression and destruction of nature. It begins with the frantic beat of *parai* (Dalit drum), accompanied by ululation and the visual image of a hand lifting a handful of soil from a trembling earth. The tone of the video informed by these images anticipates the music of people of the soil and nature. It is interesting to note the subversion of the musical forms in the video: *parai*, which is perceived by the upper caste as funereal, becomes a music of joy in the video; *oppari*, which is a lament, sung by women, is lifted from the cemetery and placed on the stage to represent the lament of Dalits and is fused with a hip-hop rhythm; ululation which is used to commemorate birth also becomes part of the fabric of this musical creation. The lyrics convey the displacement of Dalit ancestors, their land and forests. This feminist lament is expressed in the grave tones of singer Dhee: “Thottam Sezhiyalum En Thonda Nanaiyalaye, / En Kadale Karaye Vaname Saname, / Nelame Kolame Edame Thadame [my garden is flourishing, yet my throat remains dry / Oh, my sea, bank, forest, people, / land, clan, place, and track]” (Lyricsraag, 2021).

In the video, the younger woman, dressed in full-sleeved shirt and pants and adorned in traditional jewelry and sitting on a throne in the forest, contrasting with the matriarch who is the laboring woman—the grandmother—attuned to nature, calls people to unite and take care of the earth and nourish the people of the soil. The lyrics tell of Dalit youth revisiting their origins when laborers toiled in the fields and forests, which belonged also to the birds and animals. They recall nature offering its energy for their survival. The ecological connection is lucid: “Pattan Poottan Katha Boomi, Atam Pottu Kattum Sami, / Ratinandha Suthi Vandha Seva Koovuchu / Adhu Pottu Vachcha Echamdhane Kada Marichu, / Namma Nada Marichu Indha Veeda Marichu [My ancestors guarded the land. The devotee that dances / As the earth rotates, the rooster’s / excretions fertilized the forests, / transformed into our country, then into our home too]” (Lyricsraag, 2021). The singer, Arivu, asks in the voice of the grandmother “Ena kora, ena kora,” [what more do you want, what more do you want], indicating the fullness of what Dalits had, and now have, in their spiritual and body memory. Thus *Enjoy Enjaami* has a positive message for all people to unite and

become nurturers of the soil and the forests for our survival. “Enjoy” is the operative word in the chorus. The call of cuckoo, which is the chorus, signals sunrise, a metaphor for awakening. The cuckoo, a traditional metaphor for a fair-skinned woman, is deliberately used in the song to subvert casteist aspersions on Dalit women. The ululation and the *parai* (Dalit drum) that begin and end the song are harbingers of life, beauty and joy.

Dalit feminism and democracy in Dalit youth activists’ rap, *gaana*, and *koothu*

The arts have always been a vehicle to awaken people, especially during times of crisis. Although protests against caste and gender oppression have been ongoing, times of crisis give rise to a flood of anti-caste, feminist, artistic and intellectual production. The struggle for Independence was one such moment which sparked major debates and produced a wealth of writings across the country. Increased violence against Dalits in recent years has seen a peak in anti-caste and feminist-themed music and artistic productions. As with earlier historical moments, currently, Dalit allies among upper caste musicians participate in spreading awareness of caste privilege and the socialization of aggression toward lower castes. For example, T.M. Krishna, a famous Carnatik musician, in his book, *Sebastian & Sons*, brings to light the invisibilisation of the talent and expertise of *mridangam* makers who belong to the Dalit caste. Krishna points out the hypocrisy of the Brahmin artists who regard the makers as impure while they *use* the *mridangams* which are made out of cow, buffalo and goat skins. While they maintain their caste through vegetarianism and despotic benevolence, they display their hypocrisy by not admitting that they are in touch with animal skin and keep their instruments in their *puja* or prayer room, which is barred to the makers. Moreover, while the upper caste male artists are celebrated and awarded prestigious prizes, the makers (Dalit men and women) who are a constant presence in the artists’ lives and possess considerable musical knowledge, are invisible. Although threatened with loss of music gigs, T.M. Krishna speaks out against caste injustice that the majority of upper castes would prefer to ignore (2020).

As Dalit scholars reiterate, casteism and gender injustice thwart democratic values. In the casteist economy of space, both the existence and the cultural production of Dalits are invisibilized. “Democracy not only opposes caste, but also provides a space to represent the experience of the excluded subjects” (Ingole, 2020, p. 98). Hugo Gorringer (2016), in his exploration of caste wars as wars to occupy or restrict space, believes that “continued contestation of spaces of exclusion and division is vital to Indian democracy” (p.173). Young activists from across the caste spectrum use the arts to cast out pernicious divisions which restrict spaces for the vulnerable. As Padma Mangai explains, theater by definition is a collective and is democratic (Singh, A, 2013, p. 493). Aswini Kasi, P. Rajagopal, and Padma Mangai are a few among many who innovate newer art forms from marginalized traditions as well as from other cultures (Nathan, 2018).

Unlike much of the music industry in Tamil Nadu which focuses on individual aspiration and fame, Dalit feminist activists see their performance as a collective mission to bring about change. This democratizing principle encompassing feminism, as influenced by Periyar, and Marxist ideology and socialism, informs their lyrics, their choice of language, performance techniques, choice of instruments, technology, and dress in order to augment messages of change. They flout gender and caste norms and reclaim their history, music and *koothu*, thus changing society’s engagement with history and current politics.

In the efforts made by feminist anti-caste art activists to democratize spaces, it is important to distinguish between cultural appropriation and allyship. Unlike cultural appropriation, where a superior group speaks in the voice of the group from which it appropriates, activists in the arts bring men and women from across the caste spectrum to create egalitarian presentations that both

the performers and the audience can relish. Thus, they transgress and transform conventional spaces to make them democratic. Mangai and T.M. Krishna are cultural allies who believe all artists and all arts need to have social and political spaces to thrive.

Music technology plays a role in contesting restriction of space for the marginalized. From the simplicity of using the phone as a recording and broadcasting device, to the complexity of recording songs and videos in a recording studio, music technology has galvanized the production and dissemination of rap and *gaana*. The internet has helped easy exchange and dissemination of the knowledge of both music and music technology. The current generation was born in the age of the internet and its rapid spread of information, thus displacing centuries-old restriction of knowledge to some. This shared epistemology is nowhere more visible than in the widely broadcasted competitions and award-winning shows, such as Behindwoods Gold Mic Awards. Behindwoods' directors unabashedly articulate their support of singers like Arivu and Isaivani on The Casteless Collective, as well as other emerging Dalit artists, thus demonstrating the centrality of anti-caste language, feminist themes, and their reception in urban centers of Tamil Nadu (Behindwoods TV, 2019).

Cyber space keeps information permanent, which makes any imposed restrictions on cultural productions moot. Young Dalit female and male rappers and *koothu* artists find their freedom in the space of technology, and their audiences are whichever corners of the globe airwaves reach. Arivu, who believes this “is an era of cultural renaissance” (Mohandas, 2019, para.7). is committed to fight for a caste-free system and discrimination-free world. He says, “Our songs discuss the ignored facts – the thousands of manual scavengers whose average lifespan is 40 years as they die every day in drainages; those landless farmers who are never there on the list of any government benefits and live in poverty; the IIT washrooms where wash basins are reserved for vegetarians; the common men who speak loud about oppression and discriminate their sisters at their homes...” (Mohandas, 2019, para. 7).

Affect as Resistance

What are the reasons for the appeal of Dalit activist songs, music videos and *koothu*? Is it purely their iconoclasm? Affect is another area of inquiry in the analysis of Dalit feminism, since caste and gender oppression meant invisibilizing Dalits and not seeing them as humans with emotions. Social restrictions when internalized transform into inner walls that keep people oppressed. Examining the value of affect within performances, as well as the effect of performances on audiences, are important, since both coalesce to make historically restricted speech appealing and far-reaching in effecting change.

Emotional affect was very much part of *bhakti* song tradition, which was counter cultural to Brahminic or Vedic Hinduism, both in the recitation and in the reception. The *bhakti* (devotion) *rasa* (taste or emotion) transcends gender (Kumar, 2019, p. 43). One can argue that the same people who may be moved to tears hearing a recitation may not be moved by the murder or rape of a Dalit woman. But the affect that young Dalit performer-activists seek to evoke is through emotional persuasion of social messaging, which is earthy and have no other-worldly themes.

The performance of rap, hip-hop, *gaana*, traditional folk song and *koothu* attest to the emotions felt by the singers, irrespective of their audience. For example, the spontaneous singing at work or in the fields, laments or leisure songs, which created an alternate space of freedom of movement, “were not necessarily sung in a group but were often built into a group session as women chose to join in. These spaces were not performance spaces because there was no specific audience for these songs. Even if all the women did not sing, everyone participated by joining in

the chorus or keeping rhythm with their swaying bodies” (Singh, R., 2019, p.192). Self-expression using voice, tone, and body movements becomes a medium of connection with the audience. As Leslie Kan (“Spectacle,” n.d.) describes, spectacles, such as music performances or even communal parades or festival gatherings, are cathartic for the performers and for the audience.

Dalit folk song, rap, *gaana* and *koothu* expand the psychological space for the marginalized, thus spurring the imagination to create art, as well as expand the topography of the movement of Dalit bodies. Psychologists examining concepts of space and time in the experience of listening to music point out that “our representation of space and time is alterable and malleable. Both entities are a product of conscious and unconscious processing, affected by perceptions, memories, moods and emotions, our interests and current goals, and our physiological condition” (Schafer, Fachner and Smukalla, 2013, para. 1). Rhythm enhances the musician’s and the listener’s perception of space; space can be altered “during intense experiences with music,” such that “attention has turned inward and . . . the representation of the outer world has faded into the background (Schafer, Fachner, and Smukalla, 2013, para. 45). These neurobiological findings about space in music help us understand how Dalit music activists find expressions of rap, *gaana* and *koothu* as positive spatial experiences for the gendered body.

In the case of the spectacle of the stage or YouTube video, Dalit performers, such as The Casteless Collective, create the spectacle of change-making, perfecting the musical art form as well as the social messaging in the lyrics, while paying attention to the technologies of sound. They project a world where gender and caste restrictions can be overcome. This iconoclasm, through the catharsis produced by the emotions of watching and listening, creates the possibility in viewers to imagine themselves as part of change-making. Music performances by young Dalit activists open up the boundaries of activism in the arts, thus broadening political spaces of the marginalized and moving them into the center of feminist activism. They use their talent, imagination, and collaboration to innovate newer forms to appeal to the public. Their didacticism evident in their intersectional feminist messaging is both overt and covert. Their songs are subtle and militant, humorous and hard hitting, witty and argumentative. Their body movements using the beats of *koothu* accompanied by percussion and song are both transgressive and lively. Above all, Dalit performances are fun; the rappers and musicians know how to blend entertainment with their snappy social and feminist messages.

Today, we see young Dalits and non-Dalits in the diaspora perform Dalit musical forms at concerts. For example, musicians have elevated *parai* to its rightful place by teaching it and performing it widely. I saw a *parai* performance in 2019 in New York at the Ward Melville Heritage Organization, where Tamil men and women, as well as children, performed a complete repertoire to much acclaim. Performing once-marginalized art forms is a tongue-in-cheek response to classical *mridangam* and *tabla* players as recognized artists. Similarly, the rap-loving younger generation embraces Dalit performances with gusto, such that Dalit performances move from transgressive acts toward becoming mainstream, which is transformative indeed. In the words of a song by Arivu and Isaivani: “Eppadi, eppadi, eppadi, itha kekalaina eppadi / eppadi eppadi eppadi / itha mathamlaina eppadi” (How, how, how, / how can we not ask this? / How, how, how, / how can we not erase caste?) [translation mine]. For their goal is clear: “nama thambi, thangachi, ellorume sirikanam / nama thambi, thangachi, ellorume padikanam (our brothers and sisters, all need to smile / our brothers and sisters, all need to be educated) [translation mine].

Dalit performers’ concerted effort to dismantle systemic oppression is clear in the moving and catchy rhythms of rap, *gaana*, and the myriad theatrical forms. Their message is to sing with courage and live fearlessly. Dalit activism in music and *koothu* in Tamil Nadu reveals feminism’s

intersectionality as a challenge to hegemonic systems. It casts the spotlight on Dalit feminist imagination as an aesthetics of liberation, with a history and vision for the future of Dalit people. It widens the possibilities of democracy both within literature, theater, and art forms and in the larger society. Tamil and English become modes of richly interwoven, textured communication with the other regions in India and internationally. Society reaps rich dividends from Dalit feminist heterotopias that value creativity and freedom across identity markers.

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Endnotes

¹See Kancha, I. (2020). *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men*. Columbia UP.

²See Roy, A (2014), Ed. "The Annihilation of Caste." Navayana.

³Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia is sometimes used by scholars of immigration, such as Agier, M. (2011/2008) to describe open spaces where stateless people are held in limbo (p. 180). I use the word to denote heterotopia as a space where people who are invisibilized find ways to create active change and promote their self-worth. See Foucault, M. (1984 /1967).

⁴"I am of the earth, earthly, a common gardener man as much as any one of you are," says Periyar. See Guha, R. (2011, p. 148).

⁵In *Why Were Women Enslaved?* (2020), Periyar challenges established gender and caste oppression. He spoke openly against the double standards for women in sexuality and marriage, decried compulsory marriage and reproduction, and advocated for women's education and complete liberation in all areas of life.

⁶See Babu, V. (2020) on Periyar's legacy.