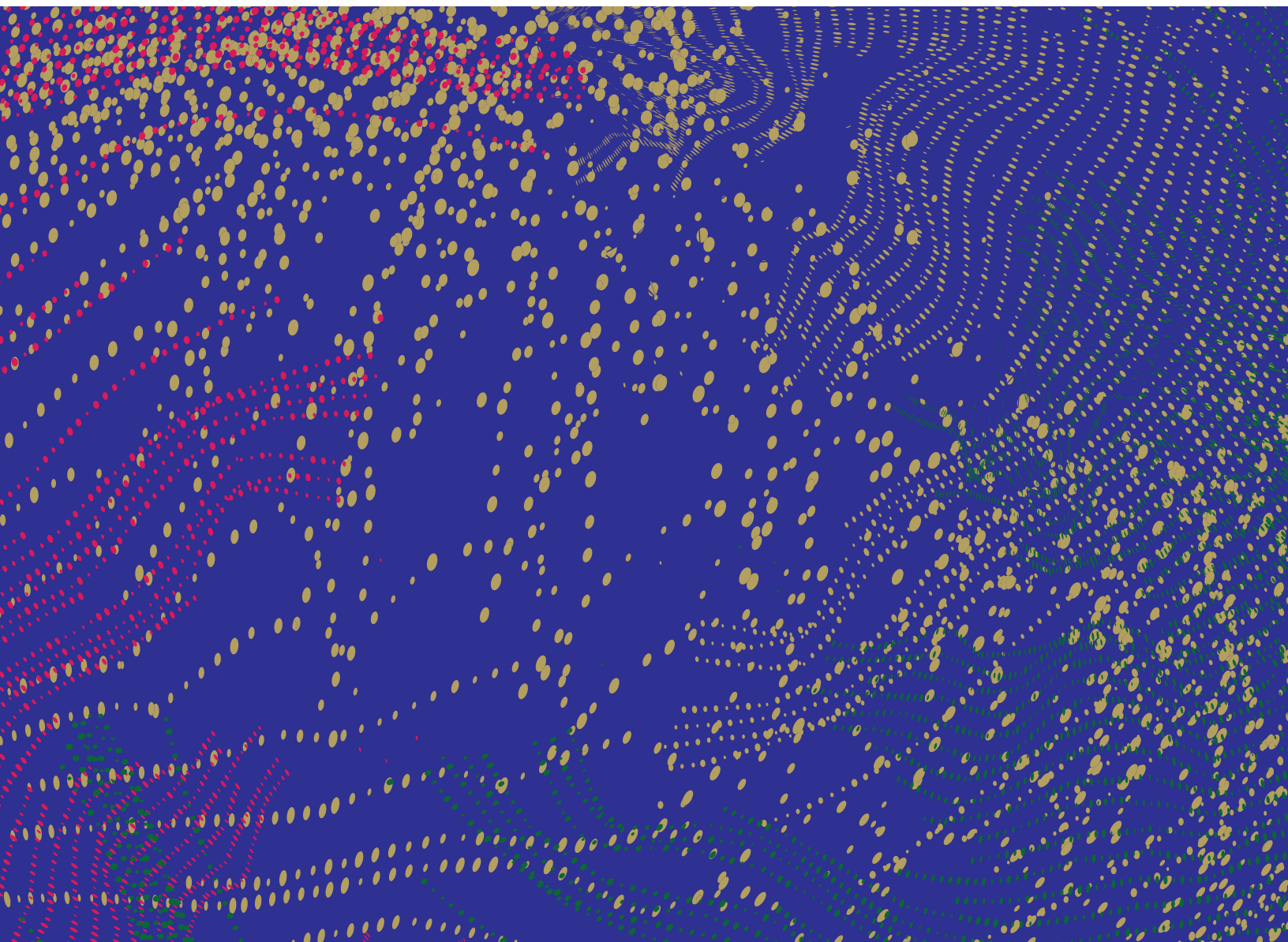


The World Humanities Report
**From Theology to the
Arts: Dalit Resistance
Culture in Tamil Nadu**

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From Theology to the Arts: Dalit Resistance Culture in Tamil Nadu

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Among B. R. Ambedkar's papers is a well-devised plan for setting up a "social center" for the so-called untouchables.¹ Ambedkar envisaged the center along the lines of the settlement houses that had emerged in the United Kingdom and the United States from the late nineteenth century onward and had addressed the economic, social, and cultural needs of urban labor. But these settlement houses were only to be inspiring examples: for one, they emerged out of the goodwill and labor concerns of middle-class women, many of whom were feminists, whereas Ambedkar's center was to be a part of the untouchables' efforts to attain self-reliance in every field. Ambedkar placed this proposed endeavor in the context of his lifelong interest in building a social movement. He hoped that the center would not only promote economic, educational, and social activities that support untouchable lives but also serve as a focal point for "radiating new ideas and coordinating [these] different activities into an organic whole."²

Ambedkar never set up such a center, but his layered sense of social transformation has remained an important aspect of his legacy and continues to inform the social and cultural work of Dalit thinkers and activists across India. Much of their work has emerged out of deep and sustained engagement with ideas pertaining to a good and just society, sometimes from within institutional and academic contexts. Their efforts are testimonies to the power of "traveling" theories to constellate in the public sphere. Ideas and theories travel in complex and

¹ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, pt. 2 (Bombay: Department of Education, Govt. of Maharashtra, 2003), 445–54. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was a radical democrat who challenged the caste order and untouchability. He mobilized the so-called untouchables into political and social movements for economic, political, and spiritual equality. Comparable to W. E. B. Du Bois as well as Martin Luther King Jr., his contribution to modern Indian intellectual life is singular.

² Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, 448.

often unexpected ways and not always as “theories” or “ideas.”³ Just as academic contexts nurture the pursuit of thought in keeping with protocols of teaching and the requirements of both canonical and noncanonical knowledge systems, streets and public sites equally foster the spread of ideas, often through affective means. These affective means are in fact central to how societies receive and make their own complex arguments and theories. In the Indian context, the agora, so to speak, has enabled ideas to live and breathe, often through the modalities of memory, song, dance, art, theater, and the written word. If the humanities and social sciences have helped generate knowledge of structures and social forms, public history and memory—as expressions—have carried this knowledge into a range of social domains.

Ambedkar’s legacy of political, social, and cultural thought has itself been inherited in remarkably different ways. With his formidable intellect, he assembled a thought-world that drew from several disciplines (sociology, political economy, ethnology, history, statistics, law, and economics) and intellectual traditions (American progressives, British Labour Party socialists, British legal and constitutional scholars, colonial and Indian Indologists and historians, and contemporary American and Indian sociologists).⁴ He made a rich world of ideas available to his contemporaries chiefly in the form of English-language texts (though he wrote in his native Marathi as well). His collected writings were not published until two decades after his death, and it took another decade or two for these writings to win academic and scholarly recognition. Meanwhile, Ambedkar’s ideas continued to resonate in the street and other public spaces: through musical performances by *gayan* (singing) parties, which interpret particular episodes from his political life using a mixture of song and argument; in the form of pamphlets, booklets, and other printed ephemera, accompanied by simple drawings or caricatures that elucidate key aspects of his thought; through public statuary; and through literary works and theatrical productions that

³ Edward Said suggested the inherent mobility of theory and that it necessarily shifts ground, moving across disciplines, geographies, histories, and contexts. We use the term “traveling ideas” in a congruent sense to reference the ways in which ideas circulate and prove significant and how this process exceeds textual intent and is shaped, inevitably, by larger contexts of reception, reading, and expression. Said, “Travelling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–47.

⁴ See, in this context, V. Geetha, *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Question of Socialism in India* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

drew their conceptual and moral energies from his worldview.⁵ In each of these instances, Ambedkar's ideas found a new home, a habitation that they helped transform even as they, in turn, were transformed. A musical performance can render a political event or a moment in history immediate and urgent, at the same time that the ideas being conveyed transform the song's beat and rhythm into definition and argument. Mapping how ideas travel and how they are able to straddle diverse worlds has heuristic value and enables us to comprehend how the concepts produced by the humanities come to be through a series of public acts.

This essay examines two efforts at creating cultures of subaltern expression, both of which bear the impress of ideas and arguments, as well as practices, that emerged in the Tamil public sphere from the last quarter of the twentieth century. Although they owe their existence to heterodox thought traditions, they made that thought material through embodied acts of musical and artistic expression.

The first is a cultural festival known as the Dalit Kalai Vizha (Dalit Arts Festival) held in the southern Indian city of Madurai. This annual affair has been devoted to the performing arts that are part of Dalit lifeworlds but that, historically, have been derided and pushed to the margins and stigmatized. The festival is organized by the Dalit Resource Centre, which is part of the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, a top educational institution for training aspirant theologians attached to several Protestant denominations in the country. Begun in 1995, the festival continues to abide by its original mandate to provide a forum for emancipatory aesthetic practices among subaltern folk performers.

The second is an emerging cultural space with its headquarters in the city of Chennai called Neelam Panpaattu Maiyam (hereafter Neelam Cultural Centre or Neelam),⁶ which undertakes a range of activities inspired by Ambedkar's philosophy and politics, including publishing, organizing seminars and music performances, and extending support for documentary films by subaltern directors and for aspiring Dalit and subaltern students pursuing secondary as well as higher education. The center also has a library devoted to cinema and literature on cinema from across the world. Originally conceived in 2017 by Dalit film director, Pa. Ranjith, the Centre's work is

⁵ The late Sharmila Rege had embarked on a project documenting what she termed "Dalit counter-publics" in Maharashtra, which included these and other practices. For a short overview of this sadly unfinished work, see Sharmila Rege and Pravin Chavan, "Resources on Non-Brahmin Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 26–February 1, 2002, 354; Rege, "Interrogating the Thesis of 'Irrational Deification,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 16–22, 2008, 16–20.

⁶ The name translates literally as "blue cultural center," alluding to the color of the flag associated with the political party that Ambedkar founded.

being taken forward by a dedicated team of young writers, activists, and filmmakers.⁷

The Dalit Arts Festival and Neelam's communicative and pedagogic efforts belong to the hybrid zone where knowledge, always already vernacular but not parochial, has proved consequential in a deep cultural and historical sense.

Both projects are examples of how cultural work draws from political and social thought as it pursues specific aims and of how Dalit assertion has taken different forms at different moments in time. The Dalit Arts Festival emerged in the 1990s, when Dalit political and cultural mobilizations flourished across India. The 1991 centenary celebrations of Ambedkar's birth provided the momentum for all that unfolded in these crucial years. The late 1970s and 1980s had been momentous years as well for Dalits, when, along with other citizens, they became active in new social movements for civil rights, peasant rights, environmental justice, and justice for women. Dalits were also present in militant and armed left-wing struggles for land and dignity, which had unfolded in several parts of the country in the mid-1960s. In the 1980s these social movements became the staple of everyday Dalit politics, rather than being associated only with the far Left, especially in Tamil Nadu.⁸

But the 1970s and 1980s were also witness to hostility against Dalit assertion. A spate of violent acts ensued across different parts of India, leaving hundreds of Dalits injured or dead, their homes torched, and their meager possessions destroyed. At the same time, however, because Dalit communities were also sending more and more children to school and more young people were attending university, an articulate and defiant generation of Dalit thinkers, writers, and artists had emerged in the cultural sphere in their respective geographical and linguistic contexts by the 1990s.⁹

⁷ Research on these initiatives was undertaken by V. Senthilselvan (Dalit Arts Festival) and S. Sivalingam (Neelam Panpattu Maiyam). Both researchers reviewed published material on these initiatives and did a series of interviews with individuals associated with them. They wrote up their findings in the form of reports (Senthilselvan) and an essay (Sivalingam). In this essay I draw upon their content while adding my own conceptual framing and additional historical and cultural analysis.

⁸ For a detailed and situated account of this period, see Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994).

⁹ For a comprehensive review of the anti-Dalit riots that took place in Tamil Nadu during the 1990s and after, see S. Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu, 1995–2004* (Delhi: Navayana, 2009).

Neelam is the product of the next generation of Dalit politics in the 2000s and 2010s. Buoyant, confident, and wanting to expand the space of democracy, this politics has provided a fillip to a different kind of resistance culture, one that draws its energy and fire from the new media, as well as from a growing interest, especially on the part of young people (and not necessarily only Dalits), in anticaste politics. In this sense, Neelam is a child of the twenty-first century, and while it continues earlier forms of Dalit resistance culture, it also looks to develop its own path in a more complex social universe that extends beyond Dalit communities.

Both the Dalit Arts Festival and Neelam are best understood in the context of the ideas and worldviews that shaped them and that they in turn sought to transmit through affective expression.

The Dalit Arts Festival: Responding to the Call of Liberation Theology

Originally associated with a militant hermeneutical turn in the Catholic Church, liberation theology is associated largely with the radical call to justice made by globally revered priests such as former Archbishop of El Salvador Óscar Romero (1917–1980). It has proved influential in India as well and was instrumental in aligning Catholic outreach work with social concerns: economic and social injustice, the living conditions in which a majority of Indian laborers found themselves, and the gender question. It also generated a range of eye-opening research and writing, which emerged from theological seminaries in the country. In most of India, this scholarship, concerned with radical notions of justice and peace in a multireligious society, was understood largely in religious rather than political or philosophical terms. However, in Tamil Nadu and in some other parts of the country liberation theology has proved to be consequential to the politics of untouchability and the caste system, implicating a variety of thinkers and actors, not all of whom are Christian.

In Tamil Nadu, as in the rest of India, the call to liberation (in both a social and spiritual sense) came to shape theological and social concerns not only in Catholic institutions but also within the Church of South India and other Protestant forums.¹⁰ The Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS), which was founded in 1969 to meet the theological educational needs of students aspiring to pastorship, proved to be a pioneer in this regard. Most important, the

¹⁰ The Church of South India is the second-largest church in India in terms of membership numbers. It was formed in 1947 through the merger of several Protestant churches in the region.

liberatory aspects of Christ's life and work came to be viewed in terms of their significance for those seeking justice from the stranglehold of untouchability and the caste order. This was not surprising, considering that both Catholic and Protestant churches in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, had to reckon with caste identities, which did not vanish after conversion. Yet in spite of the persistence of caste and the biases that both converts and pastors carried with them, churches have historically been open to ideas and views that challenged untouchability and the caste system.

Thus, the TTS witnessed vigorous arguments on the question of caste in the 1970s, and very soon it developed a syllabus that asserted the centrality of Dalit visions of Christianity and the imperative for pastors from all communities to respond to the call of Dalit emancipation, which was defined, in both theological and political terms, as the *sine qua non* of Christian spirituality and freedom. Taken forward by both Dalit and non-Dalit teachers, the seminary's pedagogy came to shape Christian communication both in the churches and in communities outside it in rather fundamental ways.

An important figure in this context was the Reverend James Theophilus Appavoo (1940–2005), a fifth-generation Dalit Christian from a middle-class family with a penchant for church music. He enrolled at TTS in 1978 and eventually became a teacher there. In his classrooms and musical practice, he carried forth theological arguments that foregrounded suffering and justice into the realm of communication, more specifically, church music.¹¹

Shaped by three centuries of debate about the form of such music—about whether it ought to abide by Western notions of harmony and melody or by the complex tonal and rhythmic expressions of South India's Carnatic music and Tamil Isai traditions—church music in Tamil Nadu today has a hybrid form. Psalms and songs are sung in classical ragas punctuated with Western melodic moments. Paradoxically enough, the music is taught to and heard by a congregation largely from the subaltern and laboring classes, a majority of whom are Dalit. Although such music is viewed as “indigenized,” it reflects the musical taste and expressions of dominant-caste Christians and to this day does not quite answer to the rich musical cultures and specific life experiences that pertain to laboring and Dalit lives.

Appavoo intervened in the ongoing debate about indigenization from the point of view of Dalit liberation. He insisted that theology had to heed the cultures of the poor and that folk music and performance had to be mined for

¹¹ This account of Appavoo's life and work is drawn from Zoe C. Sherinian, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

what they offered to Christian communication, whether in the form of sermons, songs, or even the Nativity and Easter-related performances in churches and communities. He wrote new songs, set them to folk tunes, and, most important, redefined liturgical meanings in some cases. He also called for new community observances that would reenact central acts of the Christian faith. Thus, the quintessential Tamil harvest festival, Pongal, which people of all faiths celebrate, became an occasion for a practice that was termed “Oru Ullai” (one/shared hearth). Given that people seldom cooked or ate together in caste society, to set up a common hearth and cook food that all partook, irrespective of caste differences, rendered Pongal a time when all Christians affirmed their being united in the Eucharist, which now was embodied as much in the commonly cooked food as it was in the traditional host. Appavoo was perhaps influenced by similar moves in the African, Latin American, and Native American church contexts, which had followed intense theological debates and reasoning, as was the case in TTS as well. Appavoo’s work radiated out into the Tamil countryside and brought a host of folk musicians and performers into the domain of worship. Just as important, pastors and catechists also came into contact with non-Christian Dalit performers. Appavoo insisted that the Bible was more than a sectarian text and was in essence available to all; therefore, it could be adapted to different contexts, except that these had to be devoted to peace, goodwill, and justice.

The Dalit Arts Festival came to be within this larger theological and aesthetic context when theology literally became sound. Even as Appavoo and others worked in the classroom, the church, and the community, TTS created the Dalit Resource Centre (DRC), a new space for undertaking research, publication, filmmaking, and organizing lectures, seminars, and workshops on Dalit Christian lives and concerns. The DRC set up an archive comprising Dalit publications, some of which went back nearly a century, oral history tapes featuring interviews with the older generation of Dalit activists and organizers, posters, drawings, and more. It became a space for a younger generation of Dalits to explore Dalit expressions. Furthermore, it brought together not only writers and performers but also artists. It held art workshops, seminars, and exhibitions. It also started publishing materials from its archives and the essays and presentations that emerged out of the many workshops it conducted on Dalit struggles, ideas of liberation, and Dalit feminism. This work of the DRC ran parallel with the more academic discussions and teachings on these subjects taking place in the seminary, and there was a constant flow of ideas from one arena to the other. The DRC sought to “action” ideas by testing them and arguing them out with

activists. This process benefited in turn from the different approaches being taken to common concerns in the seminary's classrooms.

This back and forth did not mean there was a congruence of ideas and practice at all levels. For example, in spite of Appavoo's music being very open to women's participation and his songs addressing gender issues, it is not clear that this translated into consequential practice. Women's invisibility in church committees and other issues they faced having to do with their lack of authority in the family or community were perhaps not addressed as matters that required practical solutions. It is also not evident that the musicians were as convinced about some of these issues as they were about the music. Likewise, although the DRC brought Dalit political activists into the purview of its discussions on a variety of issues, including differences between various Dalit groups and communities, continuity of dialogue across divides did not always result. What matters is not the matching of practice with precept; instead, it is the complex intersection of the models of cultural and intellectual exchange that emerged in the context of the classroom, the community, the seminary, and the streets.

In this sense, the Dalit Arts Festival might be viewed as a crucial point of intersection because it combined all these aspects: dialogue, cultural expression across geographies, and Dalit togetherness. When they first decided to create such a festival, organizers did not set out with a blueprint for action. Their plans emerged rather organically from two developments: first, the reception granted to Appavoo's music at this time and the manner in which he had sought to render performance central to radical, faith-based communication, and second, the popularity of radical culture festivals after 1985 organized under the aegis of cultural forums of both the parliamentary Left (the Communist Party of India [Marxist]) and the nonparliamentary Marxist-Leninist parties, which had emerged across India in the 1960s.

The ideas of "the folk" and of "folk culture" have enjoyed considerable attention in the Tamil context, especially among sections of the cultural Left. One important reason is the adroit and brilliant reading of folk literature, rituals, and observances by pioneering Left-leaning folklorist N. Vanamamalai. Pointing to the centrality of cultural expression in the lives of the working poor, Vanamamalai drew a connection between folk culture and socioeconomic realities: folk culture provided the poor with the means of negotiation and protest and enabled them to come to critical terms with the harsh economic reality they endured. Another reason is that leftist cultural activists looked to folk culture for inspiration and sought to communicate their ideas in and through the idioms of the folk.

To the young men at the DRC, this idea appeared somewhat instrumental. While Dalit performers participated in leftist cultural festivals and shared the stage with other performers, neither their identities nor their traditions were deemed distinct and salient. Rather, they and the cultural forms they performed were assimilated within the broad category of folk culture or viewed as belonging to a generic “people’s culture.” For activists and researchers at the DRC, this assimilation appeared problematic: they wished to highlight and proclaim the “Dalitness” of folk traditions and call attention to the way Dalit lives were intertwined with the arts, be it music, drumming, storytelling, or theater. They wanted to have Dalit performers onstage communicating not only their art but also their Dalitness, the conditions of their life and work that shape and give meaning to their art and are in turn shaped by it.

The first Dalit Arts Festival was held in 1995 in response to several instances of violence against Dalits, in particular, the brutal murder of a Dalit person in a police station and the subsequent violent sexual assault of his spouse.¹² The Communist Party of India (Marxist) went to court over the violence, and the All-India Democratic Women’s Association, which is the Party’s women’s group, lent its support to the afflicted woman. The DRC decided that it would use the occasion to reflect on why such things happen and planned for an all-night festival that would present to the world the defiant energy of Dalit cultural forms. In addition to a discussion and a few speeches, this inaugural festival had several Dalit performances, including a drumming session by an all-women drummers’ group. The event proved hugely successful, and it was decided to make it an annual affair. It was also decided that each year a specific issue would be addressed and that the festival would be a mixture of performance and public addresses; in short, art and thought were to be brought together.

Since 1995 eighteen such festivals have been held. The first eight festivals followed one after the other, but there was a gap between 2003 and 2011, when it was revived. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains to be seen if the festival will take place as before. Although each festival brought to the fore Dalit performers and performance styles, including those on the verge of extinction, it also gestured in the direction of contemporary Dalit performance styles and performers. To be sure, these contemporary performers were not entirely divorced from the folk and, in fact, had carried forward distinctive folk elements into contemporary music and theater. Their work and the work of their non-Dalit fellow travelers came to be featured in the festivals both to

¹² Padmini v. State of Tamil Nadu and Others, Writ Appeal Nos. 970 and 1265 of 1992, Madras High Court (March 18, 1993), <https://www.lawyerservices.in/Padmini-Versus-The-State-Of-Tamil-Nadu-And-Others-1993-03-18>.

demonstrate how traditions sustain themselves and to include in a resistance culture all those who are committed to the annihilation of caste and justice for Dalits.

Over the years, the festival went on to invite performers from the other southern states, Adivasi songsters and artists, contemporary radical poets, artists, and others. Also, the range of themes addressed by the festival widened with time: from looking at the violence and injustice that Dalits had to endure to a consideration of Dalit politics; from showcasing particular traditions to providing a space for argument and interaction between different political groups, all committed to ending caste; from feminism to thinking about land and labor. The festival provided the space and means for political and cultural workers to come together, just as it made available a forum for conversations between theologians, social scientists, literary writers, and feminists. The other activities of the DRC also fed into the festival. For instance, an ardent archivist and filmmaker was responsible for bringing on the festival's stage rare footage of Dalit performance traditions. Likewise, a workshop on feminism and caste became the occasion for issuing not only a book about women's lives and art but also

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audio recordings.

The Dalit Arts Festival is best understood as an “event” that repeatedly and ritually marked an important moment in modern cultural history in the Tamil context, for it captured a decade's worth of dialogue and discussion about the arts: how they relate to the

social worlds in which they are embedded; their relevance and purpose; the persona of the performer; and the value accorded (or not) to an artist's talents and to her or his social and existential being. Such discussions had unfolded in universities, small literary journals, and activist spaces and had witnessed lively and sometimes acrimonious exchanges between scholars, students, activists, performers, men, women, Dalits, and non-Dalits. If not for such public enactments as the Dalit Arts Festival, these discussions would have remained confined to print and its readers. In this sense, the festival has functioned as a sort of public curriculum on the subject of the humanities and the arts—at once pedagogic and political, aesthetic and social.

The Neelam Cultural Centre and Dalit Self-Consciousness

The Neelam Cultural Centre was established with the objective of working “for the equality for all under the sky, and also working on bringing up the culture and lifestyle of the downtrodden into mainstream society.”¹³ Keeping in mind the tradition created by the Dalit Arts Festival, Neelam has followed a worthy lineage. At the same time, it is the product of a different historical moment. The moment of Dalit assertion and political power that unfolded in the early 1990s marked important shifts in Dalit public and cultural lives. Subsequently, we have witnessed an increasing presence of Dalits in both pedagogic and cultural spaces, and it was clear that by the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new cultural politics was in the making. This politics took for granted that Dalit cultures, while subaltern, represent vibrant, dissenting, and creative traditions and therefore went on to elaborate these traditions in complex ways. Neelam’s focus was to be not only on subalternity but also on the right of the subalterns to a common culture, which it hoped to reshape and influence. The focus was thus on how Dalit cultures might be rendered coeval with other cultures and, in that sense, deepen our understanding of culture as such.

This focus was not so much a “new turn” as it was picking up on an earlier impulse and redefining it. In the 1990s Dalit literature had attempted to rethink the “literary” domain, and Dalit critics and literary historians had set out to reset the Tamil literary canon and to rewrite the meanings of classical texts. Dalit writers had expanded the possibilities of literary communication by foregrounding new and unfamiliar lifeworlds and by writing in “caste” dialects that extended the range of Tamil literary expression.¹⁴ Such writing sought to create a layered meaning that was concerned not only with the abject and the oppressed but also with the rich capacity for labor, happiness, and creativity that the subaltern castes possessed in abundance. However, this body of work was not viewed as offering new ways of thinking about literature and society. In other words, it was not granted conceptual salience and came to be folded into a hermetic category of its own as “Dalit literature.”

Neelam has picked up this impulse to resignify culture, and in that sense its cultural work continues the Dalit aesthetic impulse of the 1990s. But the terrain that Neelam has sought to work on is wider, including the arts, film, publishing, and performance, and it has emerged as a site for the proud proclamation of

¹³ Neelam Cultural Centre, “About,” Facebook, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/neelamculturalcentre.thecastelesscollective>.

¹⁴ For an account of Dalit writers on their writing, see David C. Buck and M. Kannan, trans. and eds., *Tamil Dalit Literature: My Own Experience* (Puducherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2011).

worldviews that, while undoubtedly subaltern, also upturn the idea of subalternity. Such views, emerging from social and cultural contexts that had been placed beyond the pale of the human, were reclaimed for demonstrating what it meant to be human, in a universal sense. Dalit political assertion, especially the founding of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party, VCK) in 1982, was the important historical development that propelled this transformative journey from the subaltern to the universal. Modeled after the decade-older Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra, the VCK's cadres fanned out into the countryside, mobilizing young people against local instances of discrimination and atrocity. In some cases, their work fed into existing Ambedkarite groups devoted to education and to the advancing of literacy, while in other cases, they opened up political spaces that hitherto had not been available to Dalits, including their presence—on their own terms—in village and town *panchayats* (village councils).¹⁵

Political self-confidence made for a sharp and defiant self-consciousness, which came to inform cultural production and expression in the twenty-first century. While the Dalit Arts Festival brought in subaltern individual or group performers to sing, dance, and perform theater, the stress was not so much on the individual but on what he or she stood for, communicated, and signified. But in the twenty-first century, the creativity of individual artists and performers is viewed as equally important and as testimony to the richness and resilience of Dalit lives. Neelam itself was the brainchild of one such individual artist, Pa. Ranjith. This does not mean that there has been a wholesale shift of emphasis from collective assertion to individual self-consciousness; rather, individual self-consciousness, too, has been accorded importance based on the argument that a Dalit life is not confined to “atrocity” but is as full of human richness—whether love, laughter, hatred, jealousy, or protest—as other lives. Dalits are not to be viewed as history's victims but as its most resilient makers and actors. The explosion of social media has also made it possible to render Dalit self-consciousness communicative and performative in ways that call attention to its singularity and its will to the universal. The energy of these new forms of communication and the urgency of their use has made this will to the universal possible. Unsurprisingly, Neelam has its own website, a web television channel, and Facebook and Instagram pages.

Artist-turned-film director Pa. Ranjith founded Neelam in 2017. His successful foray into commercial Tamil cinema has been received with astonishment

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the rise of the VCK, see Hugo Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: The Dalit Panthers and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

after he adapted existing genres of popular cinema to his own purpose. His 2012 film *Attakathi* (Cardboard knife) featured youthful romance and the melodramatic angst that haunts it, with a larger-than-life hero and a heroine willing to supplement his vision; *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (Black, 2018) are set in migratory locations (Malaysia and Mumbai, respectively); and *Madras* (2014), a gritty neighborhood tale, features young men devoted to political mobilizing. While echoing the tropes and symbols of popular cinema, these films were subtle in their attention to detail, whether to do with the choice of location or wardrobe, dialogue, songs, and the recurring use of colors and motifs that affirm Dalit resistance, such as the inclusion of Ambedkar's portrait or statue. Rather than being instances of "political" cinema in the way the term is usually understood, Ranjith's films unsettled and reworked the terms of popular cinema itself in subtle ways.

Significantly, Ranjith's production company has supported other young directors looking to work on anticaste themes and documentary films that address the issues of caste, untouchability, and other "transgressive" topics, such as those pertaining to sexuality. Such documentaries have been screened widely and in rural settings as well, thus serving a valuable pedagogic purpose.¹⁶

Not content with his success in the film world, Ranjith went on to imagine a broad cultural movement that would undertake the task of creating new pedagogic and aesthetic spaces. To this end, he and his team of young artists and intellectuals have set up a library and a publishing house and have begun issuing a monthly cultural magazine, both of which bear the name "Neelam." They are also in the process of creating rural study centers that will take the emancipatory potential of Ambedkarite thought forward into Dalit cultural worlds. Neelam's most visible and popular creation is the musical group Casteless Collective,¹⁷ an indie music group that draws on quintessentially Dalit musical forms such as *oppari* (dirge) and *gaana* (urban folk music). Though traditionally associated with Dalit lives and with caste-mandated duties, these musical forms, like the blues and jazz, are able to transcend their original social context. Casteless

¹⁶ Three such documentaries stand out. First, Charles Vinoth's *Dr. Shoe Maker* (2016), which is about the leather industry and caste. Second, Jayakumar's *Mirchpur* (2016), which is about an incident of anti-Dalit violence that took place in Mirchpur, a village near Hisar, in the North Indian state of Haryana. In 2010 a seventy-year-old Dalit man and his young daughter were killed and eighteen Dalit houses were torched because a dog, tethered to one of their homes, had barked at a few persons who belonged to the area's Jat community. Finally, Malini Jeevarathinam's *Ladies and Gentlewomen* (2017), which is about a lesbian couple in rural Rajasthan, whose story is narrated alongside a Tamil folktale featuring two women.

¹⁷ The name Casteless Collective draws on the prominent nineteenth-century anticaste activist Iyothee Thass's characterization of Dalits as *jathi-petham attra Dravidar* (casteless Dravidians).

Collective seeks to tap into this transcendent power. In fact, Ranjith has explicitly drawn comparisons between African American and Dalit musical traditions and pointed to the importance of creating sustained musical cultures that can stand testimony to Dalit lives while creating universal musical genres.¹⁸

The influences that have shaped this set of initiatives are many, and most of them can be traced back to the 1990s, the decade that witnessed the birth of the Dalit Arts Festival in Madurai. This decade also saw the emergence of several Dalit journals, weeklies, monthlies, and occasional publications. One of the longer running of these was *Dalit Murasu* (Dalit drum), which was begun in 1994 and continued for more than a decade until finding it hard to sustain itself.¹⁹ An elegantly produced monthly, it carried political opinion, interviews with Dalit activists (many of whom were called forth into the public realm for the first time), features on Dalit life and culture, and essays on political and social matters that were of common concern to all subalterns. There were other publications, but not many lasted as long as *Dalit Murasu*. Ranjith was a devoted reader of this magazine, which, he has noted, changed his perception of the existing social order and of culture. The 1990s also saw a vigorous updating of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian movement, with one section asserting its anticaste core and the other its commitment to Tamil nationalism. (The latter acquired prominence on account of the civil war in Sri Lanka, particularly Tamil arguments for political self-determination.) The period also witnessed prominent leftist intellectuals rethinking their politics, after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

These debates drew not only upon local and particular histories but also from postcolonial and postmodern debates. For instance, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) became an important text for discussions around nationalism. Western Marxist thinkers, including Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, came to be written about in Tamil, and their writings expanded the worlds of local leftist thought, bringing in ideas that were not familiar to the older generation, which had been raised on Soviet publications. Reading and discussion groups periodically met and reviewed recent writings that helped illuminate particular political issues concerning caste, communalism, gender, the Dravidian movement, Tamil modernity, and the literary histories of Tamil, among others. In fact, postcolonial thought and the poststructuralist critique of

¹⁸ Kavitha Muralidharan, "Pa Ranjith on Why His Art Is Political: 'I Want Dalit Issues to Be Aired in a Common Space,'" *Firstpost*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/pa-ranjith-on-why-his-art-is-political-i-want-dalit-issues-to-be-aired-in-a-common-space-4299485.html>.

¹⁹ For a detailed note on the history of *Dalit Murasu*, see V. Geetha, "Dalit Murasu: Surviving a Difficult Decade," in *21st Century Journalism in India*, ed. Nalini Rajan (New Delhi: Sage, 2007), 78–100.

Left verities found much purchase among these groups, which had been inspired by the new social movements of the time. Dalit writers and intellectuals were a part of these discussions, and it was in this context that the idea of “Dalit literature” became both a literary and a political subject.²⁰

Most important, the decade saw the beginning of a massive project to translate Ambedkar’s writings into Tamil, which would continue into the following decades. For someone entering into adulthood in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these intertwined developments would have proved decisive, and Ranjith has since recalled the ways in which he took to reading and how that instilled in him the sense that one needs to take the time to reflect on books and their content. His contemporaries in the fields of literature and academia would soon join with the spokespersons of the previous generation, often to dramatic effect, as they called into question several truths pertaining to the Dravidian movement and to socialism in Tamil Nadu. In turn, this led young Dalit scholars to unearth their own histories, and as they strove to publish and publicize their research, Neelam supported their efforts.

In a long biographical article where he invokes and addresses Ambedkar as his interlocutor, muse, and inspiration, Ranjith reflects on how he “inherited” his time. He muses over Ambedkar’s presence in Dalit

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lives—in the form of a statue under a village tree, a framed photograph in a cousin’s home, a name on a membership card provided to members of a Dalit organization—and describes the experience of reading him. Reading Ambedkar, he asserts, was an act of defiance that instilled clarity and strength and provided him with a conceptual, affective, and ethical framework of thought and action.²¹ In this sense, the growing visibility of Ambedkar and his thought in public life and the possibility of reading him in various vernaculars made for a potent conjuncture, which in tandem with other region-specific developments enriched Dalit political and cultural self-consciousness. Ranjith’s vocation as an

²⁰ See, in this context, Raj Gauthaman, *Dark Interiors: Essays on Caste and Dalit Culture*, trans. S. Theodore Bhaskaran (New Delhi: Sage, 2021), which features several essays written during the 1990s that draw on poststructuralist ideas and on new literature on critical nationalism.

²¹ Pa. Ranjith, “Will Never Make You My God!,” *Mei Arivu* [True knowledge], April 24, 2020, <http://www.meiarivu.com/2020/04/24/will-never-make-you-my-god/>.

artist—he studied at the famed Chennai College of Art—also shaped his aesthetic. Even when he was a student he was alive to the potential of public communication. Cinema became his medium, and, as he learned, it was a medium that could convey epic history, as well as crime, poverty, and social suffering. Ranjith has recalled how films such as *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *The City of God* (2002) influenced his own understanding of the relationship between political and social concerns and their representation in print, art, theater, or cinema.

In addition, Ranjith’s political and aesthetic perspectives have been shaped in conversation with a new generation of Dalit historians, political critics, and activists. Their research, the manner in which they draw on Ambedkar, and their choice of struggles have made for a capacious anticaste vision that animates the labors of Neelam, whether in publishing or in the educational work it seeks to support. In an ocular sense, this vision has been embodied in the Casteless Collective. It is now common knowledge that Dalit activists, at least since the 1970s, have looked to the politics and culture of the Black Panthers in the United States. Drawing on that history, Neelam has decided to back musical expressions such as rap and hip-hop to carry its message of social justice, opposition to caste and untouchability, and interest in communicating Ambedkar’s ideas because these forms have wide appeal and could be adapted to Indian and Tamil conditions.

Much like Appavoo, Ranjith and his cohorts at Neelam believe that music and art are integral to Dalit life and omnipresent in their homes and villages, accompanying them from birth to death. For this reason, he has insisted that looking to rap or hip-hop is not about imitating their content or even their structure but about being inspired by them. It is not a question of imitation but emulation, and in terms of the music itself, one ought to look to local traditions. In this context, he has singled out the urban folk tradition of *gaana*, which is particular to Chennai. *Gaana*, an amalgam of elegies, narrative songs to do with the death of locally prominent persons, and a genre of death-inspired philosophical music specific to Sufi traditions, has been nurtured by the working poor of North Chennai. *Gaana* singers are mostly daily wage workers, and the form is a legacy passed down through the generations. They are usually called upon to sing at a wake, and while they do draw on a repertoire of songs and tunes, they also constantly improvise and compose anew in keeping with the needs of the contingent moment. This music is viewed with derision by caste society, and some of the lyrics are admittedly misogynistic, but there is great affective power to the elegy and its somber philosophical content, and *gaana* musicians sing with great emotion and feeling. Despite lack of popular acceptance for their music,

small studios in North Chennai have encouraged *gaana* singers to record their own albums. *Gaana* received a boost when it was featured in Tamil cinema as background score and as part of the plot. In the age of social media, it has found its niche on the internet, with individual singers having their own YouTube channels.

Casteless Collective comprises young *gaana* singers, including a young woman. In a sense, it continues the tradition of Dalit music in all its variety and richness. The group includes a large number of Dalits, many of whom are from North Chennai, home to the Dalit working class since the late eighteenth century. Their inclusion in a modern band has helped destigmatize *gaana*. Likewise, a female presence in the collective's has helped break the tradition of only men singing *gaana* in public. It has also helped foreground quintessentially female expressive forms such as the *oppari dirge*.

The group draws on *gaana*, but its lyrics are feisty and transgressive, questioning the caste order, responding to contemporary political concerns, and calling attention to continuing crimes against Dalits. The group has an up-and-coming rapper—Arivu—whose songs go viral from the moment they are aired. He has written most of the collective's iconic lyrics, which address not only contemporary concerns but also long-standing ones, for example, the question of merit and affirmative action for Dalits and the other backward castes. The group also includes trained musicians, guitarists, and band leaders, as well as seasoned traditional percussionists who play at funerals and who have since joined the band with their traditional instruments, the *parai*, *katta molam*, and *satti molam* drums, all of which are considered “impure.”

Neelam's work has thus been occasioned, formed, and shaped by many impulses. The organization is still young, and while it has set out to explore several aspects of culture and politics, it remains to be seen what will prove sustainable in the long term. Supporting the making of films on anticaste themes, on gender and sexuality, and on social justice more generally might be an enduring phenomenon, considering that this is the field that Neelam's founder and associates are most familiar with. On the other hand, the organization's publishing wing might prove just as enduring, given the growing interest in writings on the caste question, on Ambedkar, and on Ambedkarite politics. The initiative to support political education is a worthy one, and one that was close to Ambedkar's heart, and this project is yet to be fully realized.

On the one hand, Neelam has been imagined as the social center that Ambedkar wanted for Dalits, only it is a twenty-first-century interpretation of his vision. On the other hand, it is in line with the tradition of Dalit cultural assertion that

found fruition in the Dalit Arts Festival, even though their constitutive contexts have been different. What unites these two initiatives are the ways in which they have sought to translate ideas into tactile, sensory experiences. In the one instance,

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theology and culture were brought together to create a performance aesthetics that looked not only to the Bible but also to living folk traditions. In the other, politics and culture were brought together, inspired not only by Ambedkar's thought-world but also by a rich and growing Dalit self-consciousness,

as reflected in its many cultural expressions. Further, ideas in both instances have been nurtured by texts as well as by communities, by arguments as well as by activism.

Conclusion

Across the world, serious explorations of thought are believed to unfold in academic spaces, and the university as a site of knowledge production continues to enjoy provenance. The public university remains the model for a free and open culture where dissent is part of the way of life and ideas are to be argued out and lived for. However, as we have seen with respect to the two instances discussed above, ideas travel in public and popular spaces too, and their transmission relies less on actualizing a body of knowledge and more on actively reworking such knowledge as it has emerged in history toward political purposes. Importantly, this politics is as much affective and cultural, drawing on subaltern traditions of song, performance, and expression, as it is about power and subaltern resistance. And the knowledge that is produced in these sites is yet to be grasped and valued for what it signifies and does. Whether we study history, language, religion, ethics, or philosophy, we continue to explore an enactment of thought-worlds in our classrooms, but we have yet to actually grant such enactments heuristic or conceptual value. The challenge is to "read" these thought-worlds in tandem with the world of ideas that the humanities, as a congeries of disciplines, reference.

In fact, the humanities in this so-called digital age are bound to benefit from

such a reading. The digital age has made it possible for ideas from classic university spaces such as the classroom, libraries, and archives to travel outward rather widely and quickly. Such knowledge has come to nest in a variety of digital homes, from blogs to news websites to internet magazines. While there is legitimate fear that this process has brought about a flattening of ideas and made for the easy polarization of views (encouraged by the narcissism of sections of social media), it has also opened up the world of ideas to those who cannot hope to study in a university but still wish to keep their minds alive. We have yet to rethink the boundaries of the academic disciplines that make up the humanities so that we might address this emergent public digital sphere, whose terms of expression and debate are continuously being remade and reimagined.

The possibilities afforded by the digital world may be said to have been anticipated by the cultures of transmission in countries like India, where ideas are processed, reworked, and transmitted not only through formal educational spaces but also in public spaces. Political movements, reading groups, public expressions of various kinds (from the literary to the religious), and performance traditions are all sites where ideas are rife. These sites have produced knowledge by drawing on texts and research, but they have also brought a perspective based on lived experiences and political activism to research. While this does render knowledge instrumental and makes for a culture of easy polemic, it has resulted in very interesting hybrid forms of thought and communication as well. The Dalit Arts Festival and Neelam's communicative and pedagogic efforts belong to this hybrid zone, where knowledge, always already vernacular but not parochial, has proved consequential in a deep cultural and historical sense.

The challenge, therefore, is to comprehend events such as these for what they tell us about the transmission and expression of heterodox ideas and how in the context of an exploding universe of information and communication they provide critical analogies that help us make sense of and address new challenges stemming from knowledge, its production, and its transmission—especially knowledge that has to do with notions of a good, just, and civil society.

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