



**Zoe C. Sherinian, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology***

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. xxxii + 344 pages.  
List of PURL Audio and Video files, 10 b&w illus. Cloth, \$50.00;  
e-book, \$49.99. ISBN: 978-0-253-00233-4 (cloth); 978-0-253-00585-4  
(e-book).

IN THE EARLY days of the Society for Ethnomusicology (founded 1955) the scope of the field was characterized by many scholars as the study of “folk” and “primitive” musics worldwide and of the “classical” art music forms of Asia. As ethnomusicologists began to agitate for tenure track positions in music faculties which had previously focused on European art music, the central presence of Asian art musics in this formulation—and their theoretical sophistication in particular—proved, if categorically confusing, strategically helpful in arguing for the legitimacy of ethnomusicology. Asian music as introduced to the academy was as a result largely circumscribed and presented as classical art music, refined in its structure and, critically, intimately linked in its patronage and dissemination with elite social formations.

With respect to India in particular, the clear majority of ethnomusicological work through the end of the twentieth century focused on one or another aspect of the classical Karnatak (South Indian) or Hindustani (North Indian) systems of music. When the current reviewer first attended the Society for Ethnomusicology conferences in the mid-1980s, virtually all the papers on India were studies of *rāga*, *tāla*, theoretical treatises, composed and improvised genres, *gharāna* and musical lineage, or biographical works on noted composers or performers. Perhaps the first hint of a conceptual shift at a foundational level was Daniel Neuman’s “The Life of Music in North India,” originally published in 1980, which looked at Hindustani music from an anthropological rather than music-theoretical perspective. The intervening time has seen a slow but clear sea change in the focus of scholarly work. For example, over the last decade Zoe Sherinian has been tremendously influential in pushing the envelope on the scholarly study of Indian music towards inclusivity and critical engagement with issues of hegemony, resistance, caste, class, and gender.

Sherinian’s dense interdisciplinary study ushers us into the world of a Dalit (formerly “untouchable”) Christian community in South India and to a range of historical and emergent responses by Dalit theologians, educators, and musicians to endemic discrimination by members of higher castes and, in some cases, by Christian religious institutions themselves. At the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, Sherinian met one key individual agent of change, Rev. J. Theophilus Appavoo, whose life’s work centered on “re-indigenizing” liturgy through use of folk materials—a search for a “singable” theology (xii).

The effects of centuries of Christian missionary involvement in South India are given close attention, and while the numerous sectarian institutional details may be

of more direct interest to a scholar of religious studies than music, much critical contextualization is provided. Sherinian reports that the earliest Jesuit missionaries offered potential high caste converts special accommodation and exemptions to excuse them from interacting with Dalits in ways they considered polluting or demeaning (for example, sharing food, which would become a central component of Appavoo's theology). At the same time, missionaries began promoting to their converts a psychologically destructive hegemonical narrative of Dalit village culture and vernacular Tamil as degraded and shameful. In line with this, the classical Karnatak style was favored over local folk styles in developing music for the Tamil Christian liturgy. Sherinian sees here the roots of a huge problem: "Complicity with the devaluation of folk culture and its association with socially and economically marginalized peoples have been the greatest challenge for Dalit liberation theology" (40).

The book in important ways parallels the evolution of Appavoo's own thinking as he searches for creative and effective ways to empower Dalit Christians. In chapter 1, "How Can the Subaltern Speak," Sherinian introduces Appavoo's central theological tenet of "Oru Olai" ("one pot"), the importance of communal eating and shared labor as a daily lifestyle. In attempting to "re-indigenize" Dalit Christian traditions, Appavoo "chose specific folk genres to encode the meaning of sections of his liturgy" (55) such as *oppari* laments, and most provocatively, he brought the Dalit *parai* drum into the liturgy and into the church. The Dalit drum's "association with the pollution of death typically reinscribes their untouchability" (55) even while the services of Dalit drummers are viewed as absolutely necessary (notably for funerals) by upper caste patrons. In Appavoo's growing theology, the recovery and reframing of their own laments and drumming by Dalit practitioners worked to "reverse that untouchability" (56). Further and critically, Appavoo would revolutionize the concept of sin for Dalits, shifting "from a theology of personal sin as found in the Church of South India (CSI) liturgy, to a corporate sense of responsibility for the social sins of injustice, particularly hunger, slavery, and fear" (56).

Chapter 2, "Sharing the Meal," traces Christianity through five generations of Appavoo's family, documenting the "continuing casteism, veiled by ecumenism" (103) encountered by his forebears, and Appavoo's own theological evolution "from Anglican to Evangelical to Atheist to the Priesthood" (104). When, in his mid-thirties, Appavoo enrolled in the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, he found music there dominated by the Karnatak style, while in the surrounding villages "although people enjoyed Karnatak music if they heard it on the radio or sang Christian kirttanai, it was 'totally useless for communication' of liberating social and theological messages" (112). Appavoo started experimenting with incorporating local tunes, locally meaningful texts and stylistic elements, beginning to evolve a coherent set of practices that is explicated in chapter 3, "Parattai's Theology: Greeting God in the Ceri" (a *ceri* is a village ghetto). Appavoo's theology has three central tenets: "Oru Olai," or "one pot" communal eating; "Universal Family" ("all people are siblings, born of the same parents' womb") (144); and "Strategy of Reversal," confronting entrenched social hierarchy, hegemonic institutional interpretations of the bible, and concepts of inauspiciousness and purity. In Appavoo's theology the strategy of reversal is expressed most powerfully "through

reclaiming the use of folk music as a legitimate source for indigenized Christian liturgy” (146).

Chapter 4, “Ethnography as Transformative Musical Dialogue,” foregrounds a reflexive mode in which Sherinian discusses fieldwork as “an experience of dialogical exchange of music and its values” (170). She came to understand fieldwork as a “means to the creation of social change through transformative musical dialogue,” Appavoo telling her at one point that her “presence at the seminary and [her] interactions with him and his students affected them as a reminder to live up to their progressive feminist values” (171). Chapter 5 shifts the focus of attention from the seminary to report upon how Appavoo’s pedagogical and theological ideas are received in practice in local villages. Sherinian hopes to learn to what extent Appavoo’s village folk music has facilitated development of caste, class, and gender consciousness via “dialogic and transformative relationships” (203). To this end she interviews three former students of Appavoo, who generally find people surprised and pleased to encounter Christian songs composed on folk tunes, and are also pleased that Appavoo’s songs are easy to transmit. One particularly strong positive reaction was noted when a group learned the refrain to one song: “We have no money, we cannot bring candles.” The teacher explains, “They meet their everyday problems in the line of the song. It is more appropriate to the people. It speaks the people’s problems” (227–28). Appavoo’s songs work to counter “the karmic and Christian concept of sin being the result of one’s own action as a poor untouchable” (228). One teacher states: “Wherever you see Appavoo’s song, he never calls these oppressed people as sinners. If you look carefully and ask, ‘who is he saying is the sinner’? (A student responds: “The oppressor.”) “It is those people who are oppressing that he calls sinner. Daringly he will say this.”

While Appavoo’s songs generally receive a very positive reception by villagers, Sherinian finds a split along rural and urban lines regarding the use of village folk music for liturgy. Some urban Christian Dalits find either the vernacular use of Tamil language or the references to practices anchored in a village background, such as slaughtering goats, unfit for a respectable, modern church setting. And some Dalits, once displaced to the urban environment, simply do anything and everything possible to forget the history of oppression in their home villages: “The people also do not want to go back to see their struggles” (241). One teacher reported that he learned from Appavoo that “before singing one of his songs to town or middle-caste congregations, [he] must first teach *about* the song” (240).

Sherinian’s study concludes with a close examination of a performance of Appavoo’s “most universal” song “Nalla Seydi” (“Good News”), in Chapter 6, “Performing Global Dalit Consciousness.” Sherinian’s reading finds Appavoo’s three central tenets all embedded in the text, and folk music genres, folk instruments, and folk stylistic elements referenced throughout the musical arrangement.

*Tamil Folk Music as Liberation Theology* helps us to understand what is at stake for people making a transformative choice to reclaim local folk music in a particular community and liturgical setting. It powerfully and eloquently traces a complicated history of caste oppression, missionary activity, the internalization of hegemonic attitudes, and loss of identity. Equally, it documents the resistance and

“re-indigenization” embodied in a series of interventions by a group of individuals who coalesced around Theophilus Appavoo and committed to rediscovery of local practices. Sherinian’s involvement with Appavoo and the Dalit Christian community has resulted in important new scholarship including, in addition to this book, a documentary film (SHERINIAN 2011, focusing on recuperation of the Dalit *parai* drum by a local performance group).

Sherinian’s narrative evokes a deeply dialogic and professionally productive relationship with Appavoo; clearly they have learned much from each other. She notes that Appavoo embraced a kind of “disheveled trickster” image for himself (see figure 1, after page 193), and that his Tamil nickname “Parattai annan” translates in English as “big brother with messy hair.” The work of the career ethnomusicologist is thus leavened with the perspectives of a man who came to the ministry late—via atheism—as a creative thinker and improviser, a font of ideas and energy, a notable humanist. As Appavoo’s life experiences transformed him “from a proponent of Christian Karnatak classical music to ‘Parattai,’ the most vocal advocate for folk music as the most effective music to facilitate Christian liberation for Dalits” (60–61), Sherinian was also transformed from someone who “had never been moved to action by a sermon” to an activist anthropologist “with a task to transmit a story with an important message of how the oppressed in India accomplish social justice for themselves through musical processes” (xix–xx). This substantial collaborative work deserves to be closely read and welcomed warmly into the literature of twenty-first century ethnomusicology and South Asian studies.

The book is in general a finely produced volume, marred for this reader only by a sometimes aesthetically jarring choice of type fonts for inset quotations, and a sense that more concerted copy editing could trim a number of pages off the volume with no ill effects on its content. The PURL audio and video files available at the publisher’s website (part of the Ethnomusicology Multimedia collaboration between Indiana and Rutgers University presses) constitute a potentially invaluable, if currently largely untapped, resource. The promise is great—in future monographs it is to be hoped that authors will find more substantial ways to incorporate such audio/video resources into their narratives.

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