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The Religion, Politics, and Cultural Activities of Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu: Paraiyattam as a Religio-Political Symbol

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1. Paraiyars and Their Social Status among Dalits in Tamil Nadu

This paper will discuss and explore how the performance of the Paraiyattam, a traditional group dance accompanied on the *parai*, a frame drum also called the *thappu*, has become a paradoxical symbol, within the traditional arts supported by the upper castes and the religio-political practices of the Paraiyars,¹ one of the Dalit communities, in association with growing and revitalizing Dalit liberation movements in Tamil Nadu. Although the Paraiyattam was once an indispensable part of the Hindu funeral ceremony and associated with pollution, today its performance is regarded as a positive practice that expresses Dalit liberation, that is, a symbol related to their fight against caste discrimination.

According to the data of the 2011 Census, the population of Scheduled Castes (SCs or Dalits) accounts for approximately 20% of the 72.15 million of the total population of Tamil Nadu, and 76 names of SCs are listed.² Out of the total SC population of Tamil Nadu, Paraiyars (including so-called Adi Dravidar) account for 62.8%, the largest Dalit group; Pallar (including Devendrakula Vellalar) account for 17.01%; and Arunthathiyar (including Chakkiliyar) account for 14.42%. Thus, these three Dalit caste groups account for more than 94% of the total SC population. I will describe below the three Dalit communities.

The caste name Paraiyar is derived from the *parai*, a frame drum beaten by a pair of sticks, handed down mainly by the Paraiyars. This caste group started the struggle to improve their social status as early as the late nineteenth century. Ayothee Dasa³ (1845-1914), who converted to Buddhism, which he believed to be the original religion of Paraiyars, launched an anti-caste movement (Basu 2011: 162-163). He established the Sakya Buddhist Society, also known as the Indian Buddhist Association, in 1898, calling Paraiyars to convert as he did so. He advocated adoption of the term “Adi Dravidar”

¹ The Tamil name of this particular caste has previously been spelled with the non-honorific “n” ending, “Paraiyan,” or without this ending, “Paraiya” (Pariah), but today, it is spelled with the honorific “r” ending, “Paraiyar.” A similar process widely is adopted by other Tamil caste groups.

² Lopol.org, “List of Tamil Nadu Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)” (<https://www.lopol.org/article/list-of-tamil-nadu-scheduled-castes-sc-and-scheduled-tribes-st> accessed on 30 December 2020).

³ There are several Anglicized spellings of his name, such as Iyothee Thass, C. Ayodhya Dasa, and C. Iyothee Doss.

(original Dravidians) as a kind of umbrella term for members to denote themselves in order to avoid using Paraiyar or Pancham, a stigmatized term that refers to the fifth caste of the Varna system and had been used to denote untouchables (Chettiar 2019). The Madras Legislative Assembly passed a resolution to the effect that the terms Paraiyar and Pancham were not to be used in reference to specific communities and, instead, the term Adi Dravidar should be used. The issue was settled when Adi Dravidar was adopted at the legal and administrative level in 1922 (Aloysius 2010: 260). Nevertheless, the traditional and common term Paraiyar has been used up to the present day, while the term Adi Dravidar is used by 18% of SCs in Tamil Nadu (Census 2011) and has not been widely applied as an umbrella term.

The Pallar (also called Mallar) caste is considered to be the highest among SCs in Tamil Nadu. Pallars assert that they were the great cultivators who engaged in the cultivation of the wetlands of Southern Tamil Nadu and are the descendants of the Pallava dynasty that existed from 275 to 897. Because these qualities, they call themselves “Devendra Kula Vellarar” (the cultivators who are descendants of Devendra, the God Indra). They still try to keep their own community above those of the other SCs, such as Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars, by regarding themselves as a class of agricultural labors, by not eating beef, and by not engaging in polluted occupations such as hunting and drum beating (Ramaiah 2004). The issue of changing their caste name from Pallar to Devendra Kula Vellarar has been a matter of contestation since the 1990s and is still controversial.

The Arunthathiyars, previously called Chakkiliyars, are considered to be a group of leather workers who came from Andhra Pradesh during the Nayakas, originally military governors under the Vijayanagara Empire who ruled in Tamil region from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the umbrella term “Adi Andhra” has sometimes been used to denote these immigrants’ communities. However, Arunthathiyars assert that they are the descendants of the Tamil Velir King Athiyaman Neduman Anji, who ruled the Dharmapuri District, the northern Tamil Nadu, in the ancient Sangam period from around the third century BCE to around the third century CE, and accordingly the caste name Arunthathiyar is derived from Athiyakulathan. The issue of adopting umbrella terms such as Adi Andhra and Adi Tamizhar is still controversial. Since they still work with leather, their social status is almost the lowest among the SCs (Geetha 2014: 136-137).

As I have described above, every Dalit community tries to locate its identity by reconstructing its historiography to support its claim to be original inhabitants, using evidence endorsing their dignified past.

Since the rise of the Dalit movements in the 1990s to improve their social status,

studies on the Paraiyars have appeared with increasing frequency, focusing in particular on their performance of the *parai* (Gorringer 2016; Karunambaram 2015; Lillelund 2009; McGilvray 1983; Rajasekaran and Willis 2004; Sherinian 2014) and on Paraiyar history (Basu 2011; Viswanath 2014). Among these papers, McGilvray focuses on the *parai* drummers in Sri Lanka, Lillelund takes up the problem of disappearing traditional performances, and Rajasekaran and Willis use the term *thappu* rather than *parai*, since their paper was published in 2004, when the term *parai* was less popular. Sherinian discusses the religious relationship with Dalit Christianity. Gorringer and Karunambaram try to explore the role of the *parai* as a symbol of Dalit politics, particularly with regard to questions about “who speaks for a community, whether a symbol of oppression can truly become an icon of resistance and how marginalized communities can construct positive identities when their cultural memories and practice are inescapably associated with their subordination” (Gorringer 2016: 1). This paper basically shares the same questions, and I will reconsider whether the *parai* can be separated from its function as a religio-political icon in wider perspectives. While making reference to its relations not only with Dravidian politics but also Christianity, the Maoist movement, and women’s empowerment, I will explore how the Paraiyattam is interpreted in various ways by different religio-political parties.

2. Paraiyars and Their Tradition

The word *parai* literally means “to speak” or “to announce.” Historically, it is said that the *parai* used to be performed in the courts to announce important messages and the orders of kings as early as the Sangam period. There are several references available in the ancient Tamil literature: the musical instruments *parai* and *sangu* (conch shell) are said to have been played during marriage, according to *Paripadal*,⁴ and some studies mention different types of *parai* listed in the commentary on the *Cilappatikaaram* (The epic of the anklet) written by Atiyaarkkunallaar: *kanapparai*, *ciruparai* (small *parai*?), and *perumparai* (Ramanathan 1979: 53-54 and 168; Jeyalakshmi 2003: 45). Across the Indian subcontinent, the frame drums beaten by sticks or hands are widely called “*daffs*” or a word with phonetic similarity, such as *thappu* in Tamil (Deva 1977: 31; Day 1990: 141-142). I have mentioned that *Sarvadevavilasa*, written around 1800, described a pair of frame drums called *chandraparai* and *suryaparai* accompanying the procession of

⁴ Articles on references to the *parai* in Sangam literature are also available on websites such as Bhageerathi, M. A., “Tamil Literary Works and Music: An Essay on Tamil Literary Works and Music,” at *Tamilizai* (<https://tamizisai.weebly.com/tamil-literary-works-and-music.html> accessed on 30 December 2020).

deities at temple festivals (Inoue 2006: 50-51); these drums are kept in the Government Museum, Madras (Sambamoorthy 1976: 21).⁵

Even though the *parai* is considered to be a traditional musical instrument, which has been widely used on a variety of occasions, including annual village Hindu festivals and the announcement of messages about festivals, meetings, and the deaths of villagers, the social status of *parai* drummers, that is, the Paraiyar, has been at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The main reason is that *parai* drumming was indispensable for holding funeral ceremonies associated with impurity in Tamil Nadu villages, and the *parai* drum itself was considered polluting because it was manufactured from calfskin or goatskin. *Parai* drummers who work especially for funerals, called *Vettiyaars*, also dealt with dead bodies. Today there are few full-time *Vettiyaars* and many Paraiyars are engaged in agricultural labor. The *parai* was played only by men, although women also played it in the Sangam period.

Traditionally, in villages in Tamil Nadu, Paraiyars worshiped mother goddesses, such as Mariyamman and Ellaiyamman, who may have originated in the pre-Vedic period. Today, these goddesses are associated with Hindu goddesses like Parvathi, Durga, and Kali. The common ritual of their worship proceeds as follows: the devotees carry pots of milk on their head by piercing their skin, tongue, or cheeks with skewers or a spear; a group of musical instruments, including the *parai*, the *tavil* (a barrel-shaped and double-headed drum), and the *nadaswaram* (or *nagaswaram*, a double-reeded wind instrument), accompany the procession of devotees to a temple of the goddess; the temple priests pour milk out to an idol of goddess; the devotees put this milk on their body and drink it; and finally the pierced bodies of devotees are treated by the priests and other devotees. Although the village custom of offering chickens and goats to the goddess in worship has commonly been seen, animal sacrifice was prohibited by the Tamil Nadu Animals and Birds Sacrifices Prohibition Act of 1950, although this was repealed in 2004.

The social movement to improve the status and eliminate the discrimination against Paraiyars started during the period of British rule in the late nineteenth century. Paraiyars gradually abandoned playing the *parai* for funerals because they considered this musical instrument to have been stigmatized as a symbol of pollution and impurity associated with funerals. To the best of my recollection, the word *thappu* was commonly used instead of *parai*, the word associated with impure funerals, until the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, the Dalit movement grew significantly after India's independence as the

⁵ In addition to reference articles mentioned here, there are several books on the traditional folk music and musical instruments of Tamil Nadu (Annapoorna 2000; Avtar n.d.; Hardgrave and Slawak 1997; Jeyalakshmi 2003; Krishna 1996; Santhi 1994; Sharma 2004).

repressed classes gained political power owing to the reservation system. Along with the growth in movements led by Paraiyars to raise their status, the *parai* has acquired a positive meaning, becoming a political symbol of caste liberation. Today, the Paraiyattam is widely performed at art festivals and political gatherings, and training classes in the *parai* are available in music academies and schools, as the instrument has become clearly separated from its use in funeral rituals. Consequently, Paraiyars proudly call the drum they play the *parai* instead of the *thappu* and the dance with drumming is called the Paraiyattam instead of Thappattam.

Parai drumming is still an indispensable part of worship of the village goddess, but the number of Paraiyars converting to Christianity has been increasing since the eighteenth century due to the activities of Christian missionaries in the Tamil region. Today, conversions to Buddhism and Islam are also increasing due to the political movement of Dalit liberation. I will discuss these conversions in relation to Dalit political movements in the following sections.

Plate 1. *Parai* drummers.



Plate 2. *Parai*, *tavil*, and *nadaswaram* players.



Plates 1 and 2. The Chittizhai Tiruvizha (Spring Festival): The procession to the Ilankali Amman temple, Tillaisthanam, Tamil Nadu, April 2003, by the author.

3. Paraiyars and Christianity

There are approximately 24 million Christians in India, a religious minority that constitutes about 2.3% of the total population, according to the 2011 census. However, the Christian population of Tamil Nadu is about 6.12%, much larger than that of India, while the Muslim population of Tamil Nadu is about 5.86%, which is much smaller than that of India, at about 14.23%. The Buddhist population of Tamil Nadu is about 0.2% and that of India is about 0.7%. It is said that about 42% of Christians and more than 70% of the Catholic population are Dalit converts (Inoue 2017: 48).

Although those who belong to the Catholic community are formally categorized

under Other Backward Classes in the reservation system of India, many of them actually belong to the Dalits, particularly Tamil Christians. Accordingly, Dalit Christians have lost their rights as SCs preserved by the reservation system because of their conversion from Hinduism. It is an important issue for Dalit Christians, who are appealing to the Indian Government to recognize them as SCs and to continue including them in the targets of the reservation system. However, they are able to preserve their rights as SCs in the reservation scheme of Tamil Nadu State, which the caste-based reservation stands at 69% and applies to about 87% of the population given to four categories: Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. The total reservation percentage is much higher than that of other states except Maharashtra.

The Church Mission Society converted many Paraiyars to Christianity in the nineteenth century, and those admitted to missionary schools and colleges tried to improve their social status and living standards.⁶ In the 1980s, Dalit liberation theology was developed by Arvind P. Nirmal (1936-1995), a Dalit Christian theologian and priest of the Church of North India.⁷ Although he was inspired by Latin American liberation theology, he criticized it as too narrow because its focus was limited to the economic and social realms of life. Nirmal explained that Indian Christian theology was constructed on the “Brahmanic tradition,” under which upper-caste converts were able to preserve the caste hierarchy whereas the pain and pathos of the Dalits stem from the alienation and oppression that has shaped the historical consciousness of the Dalits alongside the “Dalitness” of Jesus Christ (Clarke 2002: 45-46). Sathyanathan Clarke, a priest of the Church of South India, has further developed Dalit liberation theology in the context of the Paraiyars by regarding the *parai* as a symbol of the body of Jesus that was sacrificed for them (Clarke 2002: 179-217):

The (*parai*) drum mediates the Divine presence which empowers them (Paraiyars) to appropriate their human and humane valuation as communicated to them within the nexus of this Divine-human relationship by the symbol of the drum. On the other hand, the Christic presence represented by the drum enables them to assert this human self-affirmation acquired before the Divine in the face of a concerted religious, social, economic and cultural scheme devised and perpetuated by caste communities to value the Dalit as either non-human or less-than-human. (Clarke 2002: 190-191)

⁶ On Paraiyars and Christianity, see Clarke (2002), Jeremiah (2013, 2020), Raj (2014), and Robinson (2010).

⁷ The Church of North India, established in 1970, and the Church of South India, established in 1947, are two ecumenically dominant united Protestant Churches in India that bring together the Protestant churches, such as Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian, working in India.

Serinian (2014) focuses on the life and theology of a composer, James Theophilus Appavoo (1940-2005), Reverend of the Church of South India and Professor of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, who made the *parai* into an instrument of glory and worship by drumming inside church. He used the *parai* in the middle of the liturgy and sang to praise the Lord's prayer and the confession with messages linking Christian theology and critiques of social inequality in the Tamil folk style he composed (Serinian 2014).

In a similar context, we should note that the Paraiyattam also works as a symbol of women's empowerment. Today, the Paraiyattam is widely performed by both men and women, although it used to be practiced only by men, and it was considered a sin for women even to touch the *parai* until the late twentieth century. Sister Chandra, a Catholic nun of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Dindigul, started to use the *parai* as a tool of reclamation and empowerment for young Dalit women in their village. A few young girls joined her, and they received more demands from the villagers, giving rise to an all-female folk team called Sakthi Kalaikuzhu. At her Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre, established in 1990, Sister Chandra uses native folk-art forms to campaign against gender, class, and caste discrimination for the girls (Bathran 2012).

As described above, the performance of the Paraiyattam cannot actually be separated from the religio-politics of Dalit Christians. It seems natural for Dalit Christians to take up their own musical tradition for the expression of their religio-political emotion since music is indispensable to the liturgical tradition. Seminary students are required to study music as a compulsory subject and congregations naturally learn music at church by listening and singing. As a result of such opportunities for familiarization with music, there are a number of famous Dalit or Christian musicians who have engaged with the secular film industry. Gnanathesikan, popularly known as Ilaiyaraaja (b.1943), is the most famous, a Paraiyar music director working predominantly in Tamil and Telugu films, who was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2018 by the Government of India. Immanuel Vasanth Dinakaran, known as D. Imman (b. 1986), is the Christian music director of the Tamil film *Kumki* (Elephant), made in 2012, in which we can enjoy the performance of Paraiyattam in the song "Soi Soi," sung by Magizhini Manimaaran, a female singer and member of the famous Paraiyattam group Buddhar Kalaikuzhu (Buddha Art Group). I will discuss this group in the next section.

4. Paraiyattam as a Symbol of Dalit Movements and Dravidian Politics

The Dalit movements for liberation from their oppressed social status commenced in the

late nineteenth century. However, because Dravidian politics had developed in relation to the caste conflict between Brahmins and comparatively upper-caste non-Brahmins, Paraiyars were unable to draw substantial public attention to their movement until recently. The contribution of Ayothee Dasa has been almost forgotten but he has recently been evaluated as a pioneer of the movement for raising the status of Paraiyars.⁸

The following chronological table shows important events in the history of Dravidian politics:

Table: Chronology of Dravidian Politics

1916	Non-Brahmin Manifesto (Anti-Brahminism, Anti-North India, Anti-Congress Party)
1917	Foundation of Justice Party (Anti-Brahminism)
1925	Self-Respect Movement led by E. V. Ramaswamy, who was also known as Periyar
1944	Foundation of Dravidar Kazhagam by Periyar (Anti-Casteism, Socialism)
1949	Foundation of Dravidar Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK, Dravidianism or Tamil Nationalism)
1967	DMK came to power in Madras State (renamed Tamil Nadu in 1969)
1972	Foundation of All India Anna Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)
1977	AIADMK comes to power in Tamil Nadu
Since then, DMK and AIADMK have held political power alternately in Tamil Nadu	
2016	AIADMK comes to power

The most significant characteristics of Dravidian politics is that caste communities have been highly politicized. Due to the reservation system of Tamil Nadu, caste communities became vote banks. As a result, the number of conflicts between castes, especially between the Most Backward Classes and SCs, are on the increase. In addition, political parties based on particular castes have been founded one after another.⁹ These caste-based parties have constantly formed and broken off alliances with Dravidian parties such as the AIADMK and DMK, in addition to Indian national parties such as the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Parties, in every election of both the State Assembly and the Lok Sabha.¹⁰

⁸ See the following article: N. Muthumohan, N., 2012, "Ayothee Dasa Pandithar: Dalit Consciousness in South India" (<https://nmuthumohan.wordpress.com/2012/09/24/ayothee-dasa-pandithar-dalit-consciousness-in-south-india/> accessed on 20 April 2019).

⁹ For example, Pattali Makkal Katch (Vanniyar), Kamarajar Adithanar Kazhagam (Nadar), and Kongunadu Makkal Desia Katchi. On Wikipedia, 12 caste parties are listed (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_parties_in_Tamil_Nadu#Caste_parties accessed on 30 December 2020).

¹⁰ Many studies have been conducted on Dravidian politics, including on the colonial situation (Aloysius

There are a considerable number of Dalit parties, such as Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (mainly composed of Paraiyars) and Puthiya Tamilagam (Pallars).¹¹ Today, Paraiyattam is regularly performed as a part of the program of political meetings organized by the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK or Liberation Panther Party, formerly known as the Dalit Panthers of India or Dalit Panthers Iyyakkam), the largest Dalit organization and a political party that seeks to combat caste-based discrimination. The organization was founded in 1982 but boycotted elections until Thol. Thirumavalavan, the present leader of the party, contested an election in 1999, later succeeding in being elected as a member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly from 2001 to 2006, and as a member of Parliament, the Lok Sabha, from 2009 to 2014, and from 2019 onward. The party has supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who fight against the Sri Lankan Government, and Tamil Nationalism (Gorringer 2016). With other Dalit parties, the party members also follow B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer who drafted the Indian Constitution and inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement. In 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, initiating mass conversions of Dalits. However, as noted above, Ayothee Dasa was the first notable Dalit leader to embrace Buddhism; Ambedkar is one of inheritors of his legacy. Thus, active party members are substantially Buddhist Paraiyars, although the party seeks to cover the interests of all Dalit communities.

Among the other Dalit parties, Puthiya Tamilagam (New Tamilnadu) was founded by K. Krishnasami in 1997 to protect the rights of the Devendra Kula Vellalar or Pallar. In the election held in 2011, the party won two seats in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly through an alliance with AIADMK. Today, the party demands that Devendra Kula Vellalars should be removed from the SCs list, claiming that this is an “imposed identity,” even though several castes are seeking reservations for jobs and education.¹²

The political and social movements of Arunthathiyar seem to be characterized by schisms and a lack of integration as a community: there are several organizations working today, such as Arunthathi Makkal Katchi (Arunthathi People’s Party), Aathi Thamizhar Peravai (Original Tamilian Federation), Arunthathi Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam

2010; Bergunder 2004; Viswanath 2014a), on the present situation (Gorringer 2005; Harris 2001; Pandian 2007; Vaasanthi 2006), and in particular on the inter-caste relationship between Dalit and Dravidian parties (Gorringer 2011; Ramaiah 2004).

¹¹ Seven Dalit rights parties are listed in Wikipedia, including the Bahujan Samaj Party, a national-level party for deprived communities such as SCs, STs, OBCs, and religious minorities (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_parties_in_Tamil_Nadu#Caste_parties accessed on 30 December 2020).

¹² *The News Minute*, 5 October 2019, “Remove Devendra Kula Vellalars from SC list: Puthiya Tamilagam Reminds TN Govt” (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/remove-devendra-kula-vellalars-sc-list-puthiya-tamilagam-reminds-tn-govt-110034> accessed on 30 August 2020).

(Arunthathi People's Progressive Forum), and Tamil Puligal Katchi (Tamil Tigers Party). Arunthathi Makkal Katchi, led by Valasai E. Ravichandran, has been demanding a 6% reservation against the present 3% reservation, based on their population, from the 18% quota for the SCs.¹³ Aarthi Thamizhar Peravai was founded by Athiyamaan in 1994 and based on the teachings and principles of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Karl Marx.¹⁴ This party also demands a 6% reservation for Arunthathiyars.¹⁵ Arunthathi Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam, led by Thangavel, an pro-Ambedkar and pro-Periyar party, is active around three districts of West Tamil Nadu (Nagappan 2014). In 2020, another group of supporters of Tamil Eelam, Tamil Puligal Katchi, urged Dalits in Coimbatore to convert to Islam because of the prevailing caste injustice and untouchability.¹⁶

Consequently, it is difficult for Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu to construct a unified Dalit identity to consolidate their political movement, even though it was prevalent in the 1920s. The term Adi Dravidar was proposed as an umbrella term including different Dalit communities, but it continues to represent only Paraiyars. Today, each community has its own position: Arunthathiyars demand separate reservations for themselves, and Pallars or Devendra Kula Vellalars even refuse to identify themselves as Dalit or SCs (Geetha 2014: 137-138). These Dalit political parties have also formed and broken off alliances with Dravidian parties and national parties.

As mentioned above, the performance of the Paraiyattam, which symbolizes Dalit liberation and the pride of Paraiyars themselves, has become a regular feature of political gatherings of the VCK. The regular performances are given by one of the most famous Paraiyattam groups in Tamil Nadu, called Buddhar Kalaikuzhu (the Buddha Art Group).¹⁷

¹³ The party continues to demand a special quota for Arunthathiyars in the reservation: *Oneindia*, 26 November 2007 "Arunthathiyars Demand Exclusive Reservation" (<https://www.oneindia.com/2007/11/26/arunthathiyars-demand-exclusive-reservation-1196072328.html> accessed on 30 August 2020); *New India Express*, 16 April 2014 "Arunthathi Makkal Katchi to Support Congress in TN" (<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2014/apr/16/Arunthathi-Makkal-Katchi-to-Support-Congress-in-TN-600549.html> accessed on 30 August 2020).

¹⁴ On Periyar and his socialism, see Rajadurai, Geetha, and Rawat (2016), Sankar (2017), Vaitheespara and Venkatasubramanian (2015), and Vishwanath (2014a).

¹⁵ See their homepage: Aathithamizhar Peravai (<http://www.aathithamizharperavai.com/home.html> accessed on 30 August 2020).

¹⁶ See *India Today*, 12 February 2020 "Over 430 Dalits Convert to Islam in Coimbatore Citing Injustice, More Conversions Underway" (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/dalits-convert-islam-coimbatore-hindu-discrimination-injustice-1645564-2020-02-12> accessed on 30 August 2020).

¹⁷ Articles on Buddhar Kalaikuzhu: *The Indian Express*, 9 January 2021, "Liberating the Parai: An Instrument Played by the Dalits Has Found a Champion, who's Fighting to Take It Mainstream" (<https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/liberating-the-parai/> accessed on 10 January 2021); *The Wire*, 9 June 2017, "How Tamil Artists Are Playing the Parai to a New Beat – of Liberty, Away from Caste" (<https://thewire.in/caste/parai-buddhar-kalai-kuzhu-paraiyar> accessed on 30 August 2020); *The Federal*, 21 February 2020, "Parai attam: Drumming Up Change Is Not Easy, but It's Happening" (<https://thefederal.com/the-eighth-column/parai-attam-drumming-up-change-was-not-easy-but-its-happening-caste-gender/> accessed on 30 August 2020).

This group was formally founded in 2007 by Manimaaran, who was brought up in a family who performed *Gaana*, a music genre for the remembrance of deceased persons and their lives during funerals. It originated particularly in North Chennai and has become a popular genre for expressing various social themes, including the remembrance of famous political leaders, such as Ambedkar and Periyar.

Naturally, Manimaaran learned to play the *parai* in his childhood. He left his home when he was eleven years old, came to Chennai at the age of sixteen, and started to sweep streets and other places. He received his formal training in *parai* drumming, in which made his name as a musician. His first recording was made in 1997, including songs written by himself, and he began to teach music to children—although he struggled financially—and performed the *parai* everywhere, including at funerals. When he and his colleagues performed at a political meeting in 2006, they came to know the tragic story of a Dalit activist, Reddiyar Pandiyan, who had been campaigning to get rid of jobs like burying dead bodies, carrying dead cows, manual scavenging, and performing the *parai*, and who was shot dead during a protest in 1987. Since then, Buddhar Kalaikuzhu has refused to perform at funerals.

Today, Buddhar Kalaikuzhu has become a leading Paraiyattam group. Buddhar Kalaikuzhu conducts a free two-hour class every Sunday morning at the Eliot Beach, Chennai, where a considerable number of people belonging to upper castes, many women, and middle-class people get together to play the *parai*. Manimaaran's wife, Margizhini Manimaaran, who sang in the Tamil film *Kumki* in 2012, is an active member of Buddhar Kalaikuzhu. The group encourages women to join, brings the *parai* to people of other castes, and makes the *parai* an effective tool of social freedom. The Paraiyattam continues to be a symbol of resistance, but the group has not been able to take away the stigma attached to the *parai* as a drum of the Dalits since their strong association with the VCK even though the members want to take it to the masses as one of the traditional folk arts of Tamil Nadu. While the *parai* can be separated from funerals by the refusal to perform on such occasions, it nonetheless cannot help but be associated with religio-political campaigns for Dalit liberation.

Plate 3. Pariyattam by Buddhar Kalaikuzhu.



Plate 4. Joint performance with African Students.



Plates 3 and 4. Radical Student Forum “Graduation Celebration of African, Dalit and Tribal People,” 6 January 2018, Chennai, by the author.

5. Paraiyattam as a Symbol of Militant Leftists

Makkal Kalai Ilakkiya Kazhagam (the People’s Art and Literary Association; PALA) is an organization associated with left-wing political organizations, in particular the New Democratic Labor Front, that advocate Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought by supporting the militant Naxalite parties. PALA is also one of the partner groups in Tamil Nadu belonging to the All India League for Revolutionary Culture, founded in 1983, the purpose of which is to promote “revolutionary culture” through arts and literature, meaning anti-American, anti-Imperialist, and anti-globalization culture in relation to external affairs, anti-central government and anti-economic liberalization in internal affairs, and anti-Brahmanism, anti-state government, and Tamil Nationalism in Tamil Nadu.

The activities of PALA became visible in the 1990s when Tamil Makkal Icai Vizha (the Tamil People’s Music Festival) started up in 1994 in Thanjavur. PALA explains the purpose of holding this festival in the following way. Brahmins attempt to recolonize Tamil Makkal by stealing their heritage and turning Tamil Makkal Isai into Carnatic Music (South Indian Classical Music). Tamil Makkal Icai Vizha is a music festival to fight against recolonization and the fascism of the Brahmins. The program of this festival is characterized by a combination of political agitation and music, including group singing of revolutionary songs and the performance of Paraiyattam (Inoue 2006: 541-542).¹⁸

PALA had to stop holding such a big music festival in 2005 when the Government of Tamil Nadu banned the Communist Party of India (Maoist) for indulging in unlawful activities and asked the Central Government to include the party on the list of terrorist

¹⁸ At that time, the festival organizers called it Thappattam rather than Paraiyattam (Inoue 2006: 542). This fact suggests that the name was changed for performances of this kind.

organizations.¹⁹ The CPI (Maoist) was formed in 2004 with the merger of two banned Naxalite parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), known as the People's War, and the Maoist Communist Centre of India. Nevertheless, PALA has never stopped its activities. In the 2010s, S. Kovan, a Dalit folk singer, became a leading artist of PALA. He composed many songs by himself, sang them while playing the frame drum, a modern form of the traditional *parai*, and uploaded his songs to a website called "vinavu.com" an alternative political YouTube channel in Tamil Nadu. He has been criticizing the state government and has been arrested twice, making him a famous activist. In 2015, he was arrested for sedition because of his songs uploaded to YouTube that criticized the state government for allegedly profiting from state-run liquor shops at the expense of the poor. In 2018, he was again arrested for a song against Prime Minister Narendra Modi for conducting Ram Rajya Ratha Yatra (a political and religious rally organized by the Bharatiya Janata Party). His arrest was criticized by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.²⁰

Although Kovan says that he is an atheist in interviews²¹ and leftist organizations such as PALA have no religious affiliation at all, unlike other organizations, including the VCK, for symbolic reasons Paraiyattam continues to be a part of political campaigns and agitations that unavoidably affiliate with religion and caste.

¹⁹ The detailed activities of this organization in the early twenty-first century are listed in "Refugee Review Tribunal, Australia" (2005), available on the UNHCR's "refworld" website (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe20c0.pdf> accessed on 30 August 2020). I presume that the militant Naxalite parties were banned one by one at that time and that some members tried to leave India to seek refuge abroad. The CPI (Maoist) has been designated a terrorist organisation in India under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act since 2009.

²⁰ Articles on his arrest can be found on several websites: Amnesty International, 31 October 2015 "Dalit Folk Singer Arrested for 'Sedition' Must Be Released," (<https://amnesty.org.in/news-update/dalit-folk-singer-arrested-sedition-must-released/> accessed on 30 August 2020); Human Right Watch, "India: Folk Singer Jailed for Sedition," 3 November 2015 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/03/india-folk-singer-jailed-sedition> accessed on 30 August 2020). Articles on his arrest for reference are also available: *The Wire*, 1 May 2016 "Activists Are Rousing the Tamil Nadu Electorate with Songs about Prohibition," (<https://thewire.in/politics/activists-are-rousing-the-tamil-nadu-electorate-with-songs-about-prohibition> accessed on 30 August 2020); *New India Express*, 13 April 2018 "Cauvery Row: Singer Kovan Arrested for Song against PM Modi, Rath Yatra," (<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/apr/13/cauvery-row-singer-kovan-arrested-for-song-against-pm-modi-rath-yatra-1801196.html> accessed on 30 August 2020).

²¹ An interview is available online: *The Wire*, November 30 2015 "The Tamil Nadu Government Should Learn a Lesson," (<https://thewire.in/culture/the-tamil-nadu-government-should-learn-a-lesson> accessed on 30 August 2020).

Plate 5. The entrance of the festival venue.



Plate 6. Paraiyattam performed onstage.



Plates 5 and 6. Tamil Makkal Isai Vila, February 2004, Thanjavur, by the author.

6. Paraiyattam and Cohabitation: Who Owns the *Parai*?

As this musical instrument is affiliated with diverse political and religious groups, upper-caste politicians of Dravidian parties who support Dalit liberation movements are encouraging children to play the *parai* in public schools and are appealing to the upper-caste public to regard Paraiyattam as a widely approved traditional art form from Tamil Nadu. There are a number of cultural festivals held in Chennai and other places in Tamil Nadu that feature Paraiyattam in their program.

Chennai Sangamam is a Tamil Cultural Festival held at various places in Chennai on the occasion of Pongal, the Tamil harvest season. It is organized by the Tamil Maiyam, a non-governmental organization founded by the Rev. Fr. Gaspal Raj, a Catholic priest, and the Department of Tourism and Culture of the Government of Tamil Nadu. Practically, the idea of organizing this cultural festival was conceived by Member of Parliament Kanimozhi and Gaspal Raj in 2006. A daughter of Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and a long-standing president of the DMK, Kanimozhi has been a chief of the DMK's wing of art and literature. The festival was held annually held from 2007 till 2011 then stopped when the DMK lost power in the 2011 Assembly election. Although the festival apparently seems to have been a secular and purely cultural event, and a few thousand artists from both classical and folk fields performed, the process to organize the festival had a highly politicized purpose.

In the twenty-first century, the Paraiyattam is quite often visible at cultural events held not only in Tamil Nadu but also abroad. In Japan, Paraiyattam has become a regular part of events held by the Japan Tamil Sangam, an organization consisting of Tamil residents in Tokyo, and other cultural festivals, such as Namaste India, the biggest festival promoting Indian culture. Far from the political conditions of Tamil Nadu, Japanese and

Indians—children and adults—who live around Tokyo can learn to perform Paraiyattam, regardless of religion, caste, gender, and ethnicity. The *parai* lessons have been provided by a Japanese artist who learned Paraiyattam from Sister Chandra of Shakti Kalaikuzhu (Inoue 2020: 48-49).

In contrast to Japan, Paraiyattam in India cannot be a mere popular entertainment accessible to everyone for their enjoyment. Whether the *parai* are played by Paraiyars or not, the performance of Paraiyattam has been highly politicized in Tamil Nadu, and the *parai* has become a paradoxical symbol that occupies a space within the arts supported by the upper castes and within the religio-politics practiced by Paraiyars in association with the revitalization of Dalit liberation movements. Paraiyattam has been appropriated as a symbol of religion, caste, and gender politics not only by Dalit parties but also by Ambedkarites, Dalit liberation theologians, and militant Maoists. This political appropriation has helped to strengthen the image of the *parai* as the drum of the oppressed Dalits.

The question “who owns the *parai*?” then arises. If it is supposed that the *parai* is a mere musical instrument that can be played by anyone irrespective of religion, caste, ethnicity, and gender who wishes to learn it, then Paraiyattam can be regarded as an artform for everyone, and nobody can declare themselves the exclusive owner of the *parai*. Then, Paraiyattam will acquire the status of a traditional art and might receive public support from any cultural organization. At the moment, Paraiyattam seems to function as a safety valve for the upper castes, who utilize it as an “excuse” for their political concern for Dalits.

On considering the possibility of “gentle cohabitation,” it seems almost impossible for several Dalit parties to unite under Dravidian party politics, which highlights the differences among castes in the present Tamil Nadu. Gentle cohabitation could be achieved in time by sharing a space for all to reside peacefully with others who have different backgrounds in terms of religion, caste, gender, and ethnicity, and recognizing their right to co-existence. Then, the *parai*, owned exclusively by nobody, might be a pure artform and a symbol of cohabitation rather than a safety valve for the upper castes or a paradoxical symbol of Paraiyar identity politics.

Plate 7. Paraiyattam as a folk art.



Plate 8. Paraiyattam in Japan.



Plate 7. (Left) Paraiyattam at the Salagai Naadam Festival and Craft fair, Thanjavur South Zone Cultural Centre, February 2004, by the author.

Plate 8. (Right) Paraiyattam performed by Japanese and Indians at the Tamil Festival (Vanakkam Tamizhagam) held by the Japan Tamil Sangam, Nishikasai, Tokyo, 7 October 2017, by the author.

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