

Thappu : The Dalit Drum of Destiny in South India

*An Oral History of Caste, Performance,
and Liberation*

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The Drum of Liberation

The *Thappu* is a one-sided circular drum with a rim made of wood that is found in the Dalit communities of South India. Played with two sticks, one made from a forest tree called *purasu* and the other from slender bamboo, this drum is considered *the drum of destiny*. The Thappu is a powerful symbol of social transformation and cultural transmission at work in Tamil Nadu, particularly in the late years of the 20th century and in the early years of the 21st century. The Thappu has undergone a metamorphosis from being a caste and local symbol to one of the liberation and assertion of the Dalit community, *the drum of liberation*.

The word *thappu*, also means “a mistake” in Tamil, much as the word for different in Japanese, “chigau,” also means “wrong” in Japanese society. Both words reflect the marginalization and oppression of those who are not the same as the mainstream in these two respective societies. The Thappu is also called a *Parai*, from which the caste name Paraiyar/Paraiyan also originated. Moreover, with the British and French perception of the degraded caste status of these Dalits, and the subsequent spread of British and French imperialism, came

the now universally established term *pariah*.

Ironically, the drum played by Nataraj, the dancing Shiva, the Lord of the Dance and of the Universe, can also be seen as representing the same functions as the Thappu. Two-sided, with an hourglass-shape, Shiva's drum *Uddukkai* beats the rhythm and time of the universe. The sound it makes is *OM*, the first sound and first element in the universe: sound as the purveyor of speech, of revelation, and of truth. Through it come the notes of the Carnatic and Northern Indian musical octave (*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni*). By this sound Shiva, a favorite god of the Dalits, creates and recreates the universe.

Formerly called Untouchables, then Harijans ("Children of God," seen now as a somewhat disparaging term and invented by Mahatma Gandhi), the Dalits are both the creators of the Thappu and also its drummers. Seemingly forever condemned to the lower reaches of the caste/jati system in India, the various communities which consist of the Dalits have strengthened their voices and actively campaigned for change at the local and national level in recent years.

Dalits have not only been victims of poverty, but as Racine and Racine (1998) and the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (2003) remind us, of historical and continuing acts of extreme violence. The tragedy of Kilvenmani in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, in 1969, drew national attention in India to the situation of the Dalits. In this atrocity, 42 Dalits, including children, were burned alive in their thatched huts, a caste Hindu answer to their strikes for higher wages. This tragedy was personally witnessed by one of our colleagues in India, the great social activist Padmasri Krishnammal, who recently told us that Kilvenmani was the driving force behind her beginning a massive and very successful campaign of land redistribution and the building of housing for Dalit communities. How can we understand the symbol of the Thappu in

this context of violence and oppression?

Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony and how its presentation relates to popular culture may help us to understand the Thappu in the context of South Indian caste society today. This paper thus represents an attempt to employ the powerful explanatory tools of Gramsci to the Thappu and the Dalits through the medium of Oral History, in our case of one Dalit Thappu troupe and its leader, a man named Sangili.

In Gramsci's conception it is important to seriously question hegemony in any social or cultural context. Hegemony, in Gramsci's perspective, means dominant groups in a society providing leadership, sometimes intellectual, sometimes moral, always based on power. This leadership requires as its object the consent and participation of subordinate groups in the society. Gramsci sees struggle as occurring between the forces of resistance of these groups to the leadership of small power cliques which aim to incorporate them into a larger body politic. The Thappu is both a symbol of this incorporation and a symbol of resistance to this hegemony.

Although the Thappu can be seen as an instrument of popular/folk culture, it is important to note that Gramsci does not see popular culture as imposed from above or generated from below so much as he sees it as a terrain of exchange between the two. This terrain is especially marked by resistance/incorporation. Historical processes play a key role: the struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures/classes is the key focus of social activity and transformation, (or at least should be, as it is often intentionally overlooked by power-makers), what Gramsci calls articulation. What is perhaps most important for the present paper is that the Thappu as popular culture is a contested site for social and political constructions of 'the people' here the Dalit community of oppressed castes and their relation to the powers-

that-be.

The reverberating sound of the Thappu was even heard at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa on 29th August 2001, when Rev. Sister A. Chandra, the director of *Shakthi*, an N.G.O for the empowerment of Dalit women through art forms, and her team of twelve young ladies performed in front of almost 18,000 participants from 163 countries. The team highlighted the major issues concerning the Dalits of India outside the main conference hall in Durban.

How might we understand the place of Dalits in South Indian culture today by examining the Thappu, its use, and its power? What place does the Thappu have in a culture that had until recently been degraded and downtrodden? Moreover, what parallels might we draw with the experiences of a similar community in Japan, the Burakumin, who are also the creators and performers of the drum?

The Thappu in South Indian Culture Today

The Thappu has recently found a place in the mainstream culture of Tamil Nadu, South India. Cinemas, TV shows, matriculation (English medium) school's annual celebrations, political party's processions, and Five Star Hotel's tourist entertainment as ethnic shows. Originally it was the job of the lowest castes in villages to go around their villages, beating the Thappu and announcing the latest news. Even today this practice continues, but it has now taken on richer, more finely nuanced, and, yes, more highly politicized dimensions.

Though there are several groups who play Thappu in and around Madurai, a major pilgrimage site and city of half a million people in Tamil Nadu state in South India and the site of our research, a group located in the village of Karumbalai called *Sangili Drum-Set* is the

focus of this oral history and cultural study.

Karumbalai is situated on the southwest corner of K. K. Nagar, a rich suburb of Madurai, and is a housing colony carved out by the Madurai Municipality in 1951 for city workers belonging to Dalit backgrounds. The majority of the people in Karumbalai belong to the Chakkiliar community. The eminent ethnographers of South India Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari have described this community as follows :

The Chakkiliars are the leather workers of the Tamil Districts corresponding to the Madigas of Telugu country. The Chakkiliars appears to be immigrants from Telugu or Canares dts ; from North East and North West of Tamil Nadu. No mention is made of this caste either in the early Tamil inscriptions, or in early Tamil Literature. In social position they occupy the lowest rank. The Chakkiliars are in more contempt than Pariyas, because they use cow leather in making shoes. The Aavaram plant (cassia auri culata) is held in much veneration by them (this plant was used for tanning before chromium became widely used). They worship Madurai Veeran, Mariamma, Muneswara, Draupathi, and Ganga.

Karumbalai, their home community in Madurai, has taken its name from the cane sugar factory that flourished there once upon a time, so one can imagine how fertile this place must have been once. The surrounding area of the colony was later gradually taken over by squatters. The neighborhood, which has the distinct markings of a city slum, has over the years seen some economic growth. Huts have been replaced by small, concrete bungalows, for example, which could be seen as lower middle class homes. Apart from TV entertainment, many of these homes now also have cable television.

Many of the women work as maidservants in K. K. Nagar homes. High school drop-out girls from the community work as salesgirls in



Figure One. Sangili's Home

the city shops. Men work as drivers (cars) and watchmen and at other odd jobs they can find. Basically, they serve the rich and the middle class of the suburbs, reslivating the hegemony and articulation of struggle of years past.

Sangili's Narration : A Dalit Drummer's Story

The leader of the Dalit drumming group we studied is named Sangili. The name itself means a chain, a rich symbol of the bonds of South Indian society as it represents the family and the ties that

bind. Sangili's own society is under the shackles of convention, however, as members of an oppressed community. He was interviewed three times in his house.

Sangili's drumming group is called SANGILI DRUM-SET. When asked why he uses English words for his group, he commented first that he did not realize those are English words. Then he replied, "People who are decent and educated call our group "drum-set," but the actual name is *Thappattai*." It is obvious that whenever he wants to go out of his own cultural sphere and reach out to the mainstream of society that the name SANGILI DRUM-SET fits well.

"I was born in 1968. I learnt to play when I was seven years old. The circular drum is called Thappu. The sticks are called Kuchi. The sticks are made from a tree named purasu, which grows in the forest. I would go around for them in firewood stores. This is as strong as bones. Making Thappu sticks is also my job."

"My guru was Thomas. He came from a village called Pilliyar Natham near Dindigul. He was also the teacher for Vadipatti Boys (*another popular Thappu group*). He lived in Karumbali for some years and taught us. Nowadays, the rim of the drum is made of a neem tree's root. In the past it was made of iron. The rim is called Thappu Kattai. The carpenter makes the rim. It costs 600 rupees. The skin is made of a buffalo calf's hide. I buy the hide for 300 rupees and with one hide two drum heads can be made." (US\$1=Rs. 46 in early 2003)

"My first guru was Savu Raju, then Thomas, and later Siru Murgan. (*All his guru's photographs are decorating the walls of his house.*) My father Samuel never liked me playing Thappu. He was working as a gardener in American College. We often had quarrels. Well, I thought this is what written on my head (*a Tamil Expression meaning one's destiny*), so today with this job I am able to support my



Figure Two. Tanning the Hide

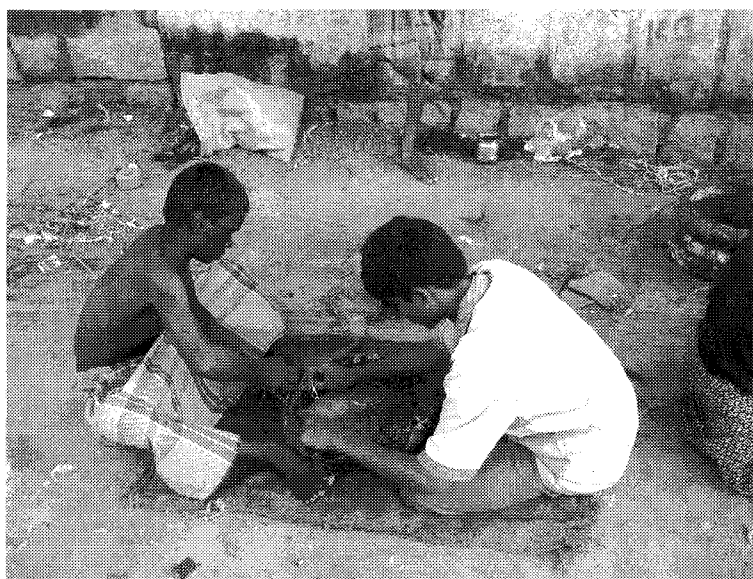


Figure Three. Drum-Making

family of four children.”

“Three daughters and one son. My eldest daughter Indrani (*a Sanskritized name*) in 6th grade is 11 years old. My second daughter Pandi Selvi is 7 years old and is in 7th grade, while my third daughter Muthu Lakshmi is in pre-school and my son Iyaanar (*named after the family deity*), is two and a half years old. I want to send my girls to some boarding school (*he seems to mean a school run by Christian missionaries for the poor and the oppressed*). I can take care of my son.”

“My father-in-law sells beef here. I buy the hides from him. There are three such shops here. The calf that is being skinned in front of you is 18 months old. Tender meat is in high demand. The beef is sold for 40 rupees, four times less than goat and sheep. The cattle are bought from nearby weekly markets. The hide of the cow is suitable for making leather goods so dealers from nearby towns come to buy the hides from my father-in-law.”

“My parents are no more. My brother works at American College replacing my father. Only this job keeps me going.”

“During the Seventies we were getting a lot of work. There was no competition. There were hardly four or five of us. We would have three Thappus and one *Thammukku*, an instrument made of a small brass vessel with a hide tied to its mouth. This instrument is played with two leather straps.”

“People don’t understand the traditional rhythm patterns. Few elderly people can appreciate the original beat. I can also do the traditional dancing of *Thappu Attam*. The hand gestures and leg movements are very close to *Bharatha Nattyam* (classical South Indian dance). The disco and cinematic dance has no place. Nowadays, lots of young men don’t know the real steps of the dance.”

“In the olden times three-fourths of our performances were for



Figure Four. The Band Sangili Drum-Set

death rituals. The Thappu was prominent. Some people prefer us to *Nyandi Melam*. (A *Nyandi Melam* consists of four percussion instruments : *Thavul*, *Pambai*, *Urumi*, *Thammukku*, and two *Nagaswarm* a double reed blowing instrument ; and two couples dressed in costumes. Sometimes instead of women there could be Eunuchs. Engaging a *Nyandi Melam* is therefore expensive). I belong to the Chakkiliar community. But I don't know leatherwork. I learnt making drums from my guru."

"The Thappu accompanies political parties' processions. We also do the Tiger Dance. When a girl comes of age the maternal uncle will bring gifts to her. We lead the procession. We also take part in the *Mullaiparai* (Young shoots of grains and legumes are grown in a decorated pot carried by women on their heads, a fertility ceremony) processions in the Mariamman temples. We don't play for weddings. (This is where a strong stigma is still attached to Tamil sentiments

concerning other castes).”

“The Thappu is very important for death rituals. People could understand from the sound of the Thappu drums that someone has died in the neighborhood. There is a particular rhythmic beat for announcing death. When the dead body enters the cremation ground the dancing will be stopped, and Thappu alone will continue. The dead shall hear the rhythm. This will enable the soul to reach heaven (*Sorgam*).”

“In the Thevar community (*one among many of the so-called backward classes which falls within the varna system, branded by the British as a criminal tribe and now claiming Kshatriya status*) the eunuchs will sing dirges. In our community our women will sing. The kind of dancing does not vary for different occasions. Disco and Cinematic beats are not suitable for the death ritual.”

“For a maternal uncle’s gift procession cinematic beats go well. In those days we were even invited for puberty ceremonies. There was a



Figure Five. The Funeral Parade

unique beat played for this occasion. Nowadays, the disco beat is played. People don't appreciate the old (traditional) beats. There are more and more groups coming up. There is so much competition. In Karumbalai alone there are six groups. No songs for Thappu Attam—only (*cinema*) dance.”

“There are ten members in my group. Eight Thappu drums, one big marching band drum, and one person plays Maraccas. We get an average of ten programs a year from the Government. For a temple festival we are paid 4500/rs, for puberty ceremony 1500, for death 3500/rs from the Thevar community, 2500/rs from the Naicker community (*Telugu is the mother tongue of this community, which migrated from Andhra and Karnataka in 1529 during the Nayak's rule in Madurai ; many sub-castes exist among Naickers*). For funeral drumming only seven players participate. I have registered my group with the State Government as Folk Artists. A number is given by the gov-



Figure Six. Band Leader Sangili and Band Members

ernment. The state government runs a board to support folk arts. The state Governor is the president, the Secretary of State is the vice-president, and it is called *Tamil Nadu Iyal, Isai, Nataka Mandram*. The government is planning a pension scheme for aged folk artists.”

Sangili’s story appears to be a happy one told in a matter of fact tone, yet questions of hegemony and struggle lurk just beneath the surface of his story. It is not the same in the arid lands of Messal Village in Ramnad District, another of our research sites, where a deplorable situation for the Chakkiliars exists. Agricultural laborers there lament the lack of funds even to repair their drums, which would fetch them some earning from their traditional funeral drumming and also playing for other important functions. No land, no job : they are left with nothing but heat and dust.

Dalit Oppression : The Other Side of the Drum Thappu

The Dalit activist Illaya Perumal has called on the Dalits of Tamil Nadu to stop playing Thappu and Parai for the funerals of other communities as a protest against their hegemony and as an articulation of their struggle. Dr K. A. Gunasekaran, a folk-lorist and a Dalit activist, is concerned with the cultural symbols and the cultural power of Dalits being taken over by the mainstream culture through the mass media and their simple transformation into a product of consumer culture.

A barbaric news story hit the headlines of every newspaper in Tamil Nadu on June 31, 2002, describing how two Dalits belonging to the Pariyar community were made to go around the village of Thinniam, beating Thappu as a punishment and begging to be pardoned for their transgression. In the end they were ordered by the village headman to feed each other fecal matter as an additional punishment.

This cruel act was the strategy of a retired village schoolteacher to establish his superiority over these hapless people and also to cover up his own misdeeds, according to later media reports. The only *thappu* (mistake) they committed was to parade around cheering when one of their friends, Karupaiah, beating the Thappu, brought out the corrupt practices of the schoolteacher and his wife, who was the village president, and demanded justice from the villagers, saying that otherwise he would not do his Vettian job (announcing death, grave digging, removing carcasses) for the caste Hindus.

During one of my visits Sangili took me around his neighborhood. He showed me the spot where he dries the water buffalo hide and the whole process of making the drum. It is all happening on the roadside by an old irrigation canal, which lost its use some decades ago. When he took me to his father-in-law's beef shop, I saw a young man around 18 skinning a calf with a surgeon's precision. I could sense they were not thrilled about my presence, probably because a few weeks earlier in Haryana, a province in the northern part of India, five Dalits who were skinning a dead cow by the roadside were lynched by a group of angry, frenzied caste Hindus. Sangili had to convince them about my identity. Later they allowed me to take pictures (which for obvious sensitive reasons are not shown here). They then warmed to me, explaining the ups and downs of the trade.

Kancha Ilaiah, the author of *Why I Am Not a Hindu* and a Dalit scholar, questions the lynching of these five Dalits. For Dalits, skinning dead cows is a major occupation and trade for thousands of years. A community which should be appreciated for keeping the environment clean and reaping economic success for the nation through their hard work and knowledge are unfortunately labeled as untouchables.

While other backward communities are able to find upward mo-

bility within the caste system, such an opportunity is not available to the Dalits. G.S. Ghurye notes, for example, that “A well known Tamil proverb declares that Kallans, Maravans (so-called backward castes who claim *kshatriya* status today) and others gradually turn into Vel-lalas (land-owning peasants).” Shanars and Nadars, like the weavers, are prohibited from living in the *uur* (main village). The Nadars nomadic status helped them to escape the untouchable label. Elsewhere, the ritual purity of the Brahminical ideology crushed the Dalits. They were expected to do all the menial jobs for other castes. The hierarchical caste society and its powerful hegemony indirectly tell the Dalits they can’t have social equality if they want economic stability.

Every day the newspapers carry headlines about the oppressions or the uprisings of Dalits. The more atrocities done to the poor and oppressed, the more they become conscious of their rights. Even as far back as 1920, the Dalit leadership started emerging in the feudal autocratic state of Hyderabad in the southern part of India. In 1930 a depressed classes conference was held in Nagpur under the leadership of S. Ambedkar in the central part of India. Recently in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, a regional meeting of the National Conference of Dalit Organizations (NACDOR) was held. This is a federation of one hundred and fifty organizations spread over fifty states to meet the new challenges created by privatization, globalization, and Hindutvas’s “spiritual and political nationalism,” which accepts the life of a cow as more sacred than that of a human being.

NACDOR has also realized the importance of having an alternative press, and the Center for Alternative Dalit Media (CADAM) was then established. It has also included scheduled castes and nomadic and other tribes under the banner of the Dalits, which naturally means a swelling of the population of Dalits. Another major objective of NACDOR is to bring in Dalit intellectuals, Dalit grass root workers,

and non-Dalit men and women together for discussions. This is a noteworthy departure from Ambedkar's closed agenda and a step closer towards Gandhi's ideal of a Harijan Seva Sangh (Association of Non-Dalits Serving Dalits), which is still running educational institutions all over India.

Among the three Dalit subcastes in Tamil Nadu, the Chakkiliars, to which Sangili belongs, are not represented politically, whereas the Pariyars and Pallars have turned their own caste associations into political parties. These political bases have given them the strength to negotiate with national and regional political parties for election alliances and seat sharing. They have then elected their representatives to the Tamil Nadu State Assembly. This newfound courage has allowed them to have their caste names as suffixes after their personal names. This has long been practiced by the so-called forward and backward communities but not by oppressed castes.

They have also removed the "n" ending of their caste names, the names Pallan and Paraiyan, for instance, being considered as non-honorific in Tamil. Instead, they now end their caste names with the honorific "r" as Pallar and Paraiyar. The recent actions of the Dalit Panthers of India (D.P.I) leader Thirumavalavan have resulted in the renaming of thousands of Dalits, enabling them to give up their caste or outcaste Hindu names for pure Tamil names found in Sangam (Tamil Classical period) poetry. This is a counter to the anti-conversion bill introduced recently by the Tamil Nadu State Government. There are two reasons why Chakkiliars remain powerless, however. One is that their mother tongue is Telugu, while the other is that, when compared to other Dalit communities their population is smaller, which means that they are not a prospective vote bank for politicians. Some Chakkiliars have even recently very willingly given up their language Telugu in order to wipe out their caste identity.

Sorrow and Strength : The Bonds of Drumming in India and Japan

The attempts by Dalit communities in South India to alter or hide their identities are mirrored by the Burakumin outcaste communities of Japan. There are more than three million Burakumin in Japan, comprising various occupations. Heavily discriminated against historically because of their association with so-called impure jobs such as leather tanning, one of the key jobs of Burakumin has been drumming. The *Taiko* drum and other drums can now be heard around the world with the success of *Wa-Daiko* troupes who symbolize Japan for many people (ironically, given the suffering and oppression visited upon them at home). Throughout Japan, too, the sounds of the magical and colorful *Ching-Dong-Ya* marching band troupes also echo Sangili and his band. Much has been written about these drumming activities in Japan as liberatory acts (See Caste Discrimination, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/caste0801-03.htm> ; *Photo Gallery of my Buraku Study Tour in Osaka*, <http://www.geocities.com/gaijindo4dan/Photos2.html> and especially <http://www.geocities.com/gaijindo4dan/Photos6.html> ; Osaka – A People’s Town, <http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/catalog/en/97/jdoc100-3.html> ; SOUL FLOWER MONONOKE SUMMIT (1995), http://www.breast.co.jp/soulflower/sfms/sfms_profile_e.html ; and Scott Schnell, *The Rousing Drum : Ritual Practice in a Japanese Community* (University of Hawai’i Press, 1999) ; see also this account of Dalit drumming at the World Congress Against Racism, 2002, WCAR List Archive Index by Author, <http://www.hrea.org/lists/wcar/markup/author.php>).

The Thappu as a drum of liberation, a weapon in the struggle of

the Dalits against political, caste, and economic oppression, has multiple uses. Not only does the Thappu reveal the kinds of oppression encountered by the likes of Viramma (Viramma, 2000) and Vasant Moon (2000) with a loud beat, it also questions and challenges, with the beat of resistance, the historical hegemony of caste Hindus. The transformation of the Thappu from a symbol of menial and impure work to one of liberation is an active and assertive activity of Dalit communities today. As one Dalit website from Madurai (DACA, a “centre for development and solidarity for Dalits”) has said, “the traditional Dalit drum, the ‘parai’ or ‘thappou’ transforms a musical gift used only for funerary rites into a proudness on feast days” (The DACA, http://indianhope.free.fr/site_eng/daca.php3, January 26, 2003).

The Thappu as popular culture has an expanding economic and social role as well, helping to incorporate Dalits into a society from which they have traditionally been excluded. It is not surprising in this context that large-scale conversions of Dalits to Christianity and Islam have been taking place, seriously challenging the concept of Hindutva even further. Dalit drumming has even been taken up by the likes of active Christian evangelicals like Sir Cliff Richard (in a recent album with Paul Field, 2002, the object of which is clearly Christian liberation for the Dalits).

An historical meeting without precedent between troupes like Sangili’s and Japanese Buraku drummers was held in May 2002 in Madurai, South India. The world-famous Japanese Yamato Troupe, sponsored by the Japan Foundation, held a joint performance with the Arumugam Troupe of Madurai, with the additional sponsorship of the Dalit Resource Center (“Where they are feasted to a generic folk symphony,” Dalit Resource Center, *The Hindu*, May 20, 2002). The drum thus always returns us to the story of community, symbolic of the historical heraldic duty of drummers in numerous societies around the

world who would walk around their home areas, announcing the news while beating their drums.

The Thappu is thus the strength and the weakness, the joy and the sorrow, the promise and the doom for the Dalits of Tamil Nadu. As a community, the Dalits over the years have found new mobility in different social spheres. So, too, has their drum Thappu. What will be the position of the Thappu and the community in the coming years? As one of our informants told us, "There are more questions than answers, my friend."

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