

Renaissance and Empowerment in Dalit Communities of South India : Awakening and Resistance to Traditions

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Abstract

The Dalits of India, seemingly forever condemned to the lower reaches of the caste or jati system in India, have begun resistance activities to tradition during the past twenty years that have generated enormous tensions throughout the subcontinent. The recovery and empowerment of ethnic community can be found in the numerous social, economic, and cultural entrepreneurial activities of these Dalits, activities which have meant an awakening, and then a resistance, to traditions. This paper will examine the context and lives of the members of Dalit communities in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, particularly the traditional temple town of Madurai and in the Cauvery River delta of Thanjavur. It will be particularly concerned with the empowerment and recovery of community which these jati/castes have undertaken, developments which have led to the beginnings of a possible new start in Indian society for these oppressed peoples.

Introduction

The Dalits¹, seemingly forever condemned to the lower reaches of the caste/jati system in India, have begun resistance activities to tradition the past twenty years that have generated enormous tensions throughout India. The various communities which comprise the Dalits

¹ Formerly called Untouchables, then Harijans, "Children of God," a term invented by Mahatma Gandhi and seen now as disparaging.

have strengthened their voices and actively campaigned for change at the local and national level in recent years, creating important waves in the caste system and in local societies. These activities have meant an awakening and resistance to traditions.

Dalit means a breaking or scattering and originates in the Sanskrit and Indo-European root *dal*, meaning burst, split, scattered, crack, open, dispersed, broken, torn as under, destroyed, or crushed. Dalit has the same origin as the English and German words for tailor, tally, and dale (*thal* or cut). The term was first used to describe outcastes and untouchables by the Marathi social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1826–1890) and later by the charismatic Dalit leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (DalitChristians.com, 2004, and Rajshekar, 2004). Active use of the word in Indian society at large began with the Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970s in Maharashtra and from that time gained a more positive, indeed revolutionary, meaning associated with an opening out or liberation.

The recovery and empowerment of community can be especially found in the numerous entrepreneurial activities of these Dalits. This paper will examine the context and activities of the members of some of these Dalit communities in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, particularly in the traditional temple town of Madurai in the far south and in the Cauvery River delta of Thanjavur. It will be particularly concerned with the empowerment and recovery of community which these jati/castes have undertaken, developments which have led to the beginnings of a possible new start in society for these oppressed peoples.

This paper is a preliminary report of cases of community renewal and renaissance through entrepreneurial success stories. These success stories are surprisingly many in Dalit communities when we consider the range of possible activities: business, social, and cultural. Meat, for example, is a lucrative economic enterprise of Dalits, including (surprisingly, for those who still believe the cow is completely sacred in India) beef. This meat is valued not only by lower castes but by Anglo-Indians, foreigners living in India, and the hotel/restaurant

trades catering to tourists. Such economic entrepreneurial activities as the meat trade cross caste and ethnic lines, showing that opportunity is a beacon not only for making a comfortable living but for community power and revival.

At the same time, a successful activist drive concerning land for the landless in the Thanjavur District can be seen largely as the effective work of two distinguished social entrepreneurs. Not only have over 12,000 people received housing and land thanks to this dramatic Gandhian social movement, but the community has been given a fresh boost by the building of these homes, an inspiration to the people themselves, whose own participation in this social movement has empowered them to take actions in other areas, including local politics and with environmental problems.

Finally, the joyful, celebratory side of Dalit communities, as symbolized by the drum *thappu*, reveals to us yet another side of entrepreneurial success: social renaissance through cultural entrepreneurs. The “returns” or “profit” of these activities can be seen as cascading through the community, revitalizing its members psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, and politically.

Ethnic and Social Entrepreneurs

There is considerable scholarship on both ethnic and social entrepreneurship in developed countries, yet the activities of marginalized castes and communities in India have only recently come to the attention of researchers. The small credit operations of Grammeen banks or credit unions in Bangladesh and elsewhere have been of interest, but the attention has largely been on the operations of such institutions as well as their processes. There has been much less concern with entrepreneurship as an ethnic, community-based activity supporting an ethnic or community renaissance. Studies to date have been especially concerned with delineating the existence of ethnic entrepreneurship as either that of middlemen or comprador minorities, as taking place mainly in ethnic enclaves or ghettos, or as reactive/resistant cultural theory (Yoon, 1991, has an excellent review of these

theories).

The theory surrounding middlemen minorities derives mainly from former and continuing colonial contexts. These comprador communities as entrepreneurs have been seen as necessary and profitable buffers to a hostile native population, although the role of language intermediaries should not be underestimated either. Compradors are usually said to be imitative of their colonial overlords, culturally as well as economically, yet still able to move within local native populations. Chinese comprador middlemen, for example, can be found not only throughout China but all over Southeast Asia. These comprador theories usually marginalize the nomadic character of the middlemen, preferring to see them in national, "civilized" (meaning cities) contexts rather than recognizing the transnational character which they often have. As flexible diaspora (Ong, 1999) these communities have had their locus of power and identity tied as much to mobility and movement as to and specific locations of place.

There is a clear power dimension to this middlemen theory, inasmuch as these businesses rely on colonials (European or North American whites usually, though Japanese have been included here, too) for credit and markets, and only secondarily on local native customers. The main resources (financial, emotional, and labor) usually come, however, from family and community members (Bonacich, 1973, 1987). The traders of Omi Hachiman in Japan are famous examples of such middlemen traders, as are the Minangkabau of Sumatra, whose signature Indonesian restaurants can be found throughout the world. In South India the Sindhis or Marwaris are reputed, as they are throughout South Asia, to be clever, efficient business/middlemen.

Ethnic enclave theory is another approach to community recovery and empowerment (early examples include Waldinger, 1989, and Wilson and Portes, 1980). Seen as a self-generating process, with the location of all activities within the community itself, including training, credit and finance, and production as well as consumption, the ethnic enclave supports new and upcoming entrepreneurs, especially through informal communication networks which lead to market opportunities.

Perhaps more important is the role modeling of successful entrepreneurs, which encourages young people to form their own enterprises. We can see this in Dalit communities, too, particularly when it comes to cultural activities and those businesses centered around the provision and sales of meat, traditionally a taboo food for many communities in India but relished by others.

Finally, a third theory has it that these entrepreneurial activities are a result of reactive culture to historic and discriminatory treatment in society and the marketplace (Light, 1972, 1980 ; Nowikowski, 1984). These community members are thus seen as having been forced to adopt marginal niches in the economy, turning only to members of their own communities for help and upward social mobility. While this may be partly true, as a theory it misses the cultural and social richness of interaction between different caste and class groupings in the society, as will be seen in some of the examples which follow.

The Dalit communities that have been examined for this paper reflect each of these theories in part, but they also move beyond each of the approaches, spanning in complex ways not only their own communities but those of other castes with whom they are intimately linked. The ties of persons, despite caste taboos and restrictions, give imaginative venues for surprisingly creative enterprises. Dalits, for example, have traditionally been left out of or isolated from the boundary-spanning activities of comprador middlemen for reasons of caste or poverty. We now see their participation, however, in transnationally-related cultural, economic, and political entrepreneurship such as meat export, music exchange, and anti-apartheid political activities.

Although marginalized, these sub-cultures reveal potential new strategies for entrepreneurial activity as they obtain competitive advantage by seeking new trans-caste niches for their activities. Resources can be found from a number of different sources and more markets are then served by these strategies. Even as the effects of discrimination have an impact on decision-making, creative planning

in response to this discrimination encompasses larger and newer fields of opportunity.

Dalits in South Indian History and Society

The ritual purity of Brahminical ideology, with its emphasis on purity and pollution, traditionally crushed the Dalits, of whom there are over 200 million in India today. They were expected to do all the menial jobs for other castes, with the only return being the building of good karma, which would lead to a better re-birth. The primeval man Manu was depicted as the model for the caste system, with his head (Brahmins), arms (Kshatriya warrior castes), loins (Vaishya merchant castes), and feet (Shudras). In some imaginings the Shudras included the Dalits, but most did not, relegating the Dalits to “below the below.” One of the Dalits traditional duties, doing laundry, for example even lead to a subcaste of Dalit dhobi washermen called “Unseeables,” people who were not allowed to show themselves in the daytime for fear of polluting upper caste people. These “Unseeables” did the laundry for the other dhobis, who were theoretically one rung above them on the caste ladder. Perhaps most importantly for the present study, the hierarchical caste society has until now indirectly given Dalits a strong message that they can’t have social equality if they want economic stability.

While other so-called backward communities are able to find upward mobility within the caste system, such an opportunity is not available to the Dalits. The scholar G. S. Ghurye notes, for example, that, “A well known Tamil proverb declares that Kallans, Maravans (“backward castes” who claim Kshatriya status today) and others gradually turn into Vellalas (land-owning peasants).” Shanars and Nadars, like the weavers who are prohibited from living in the main village (*oor*), have been able to escape from the label of untouchability, too, perhaps because of their formerly nomadic status, whereas the ritual purity of the Brahminical ideology completely oppressed the Dalits who were expected to do menial and unpleasant jobs for other castes.

Among the three Dalit subcastes in the Madurai area, the Chakkiliars, who are traditional sandal makers, 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 elected representatives to the State Assembly, for example. The newfound courage which has come with these successes has allowed them to have their caste names as a suffix after their names. This has been practiced by all “forward” and “backward” castes for some time, but not by oppressed communities.

They have also removed the “n” ending of their caste names, the names Pallan and Parayan being considered non-honorific in Tamil, replacing it with the honorific “r” as Pallar and Parayar. The recent actions of the Dalit Panthers of India (D. P. I) leader Thirumavalavan have also resulted in the renaming of thousands of Dalits, enabling them to give up their caste or Hindu names for pure Tamil names found in Sangam (Tamil Classical period) poetry. This is a counter to the anti-conversion bill brought by the Tamil Nadu State Government recently.

There are two reasons for the Chakkiliars continuing to remain powerless. One is that their mother tongue is Telugu and 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.

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, 43 Dalits, including children, were burned alive in their thatched huts, a caste Hindu answer to their strikes for higher wages. This tragedy personally af-

fectured many Dalits, including one of our colleagues in India, the great social activist Padmasri Krishnammal, who recently told me 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 mentioned above.

This paper will serve as an introduction to the work of Krishnammal, reporting on fieldwork conducted in South India, including interviews with Krishnammal and her husband Jaganathan, also an activist, in the late 1970s, 1980s, and the early years of the 21st century. We can understand the context of violence and oppression which has been traditionally visited upon these communities and some of the ways in which this oppression has been resisted through Krishnammal's life and work. An excellent example of a social entrepreneur (she has also received India's highest civilian award, the Padma Sri), Krishnammal has aimed for a "return or profits" to Dalit society, of activities that will benefit both Dalits and the larger society.

Rights and Atrocities : The Postponing of Community Renaissance and Recovery

Every day newspapers carry headlines about the oppression or the uprisings of Dalits, who are suffering from an internal apartheid in some ways far worse than anything perpetrated in South Africa or the United States. The more atrocities done to the poor and oppressed, the more they become conscious of their rights. Even as far back as 1920, Dalit leadership began emerging in the feudal autocratic state of Hyderabad in the southern part of India. In 1930 a depressed class 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 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, nomadic and other tribes under the banner of 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 idea of Harijan Seva Sangh (Association of Non-Dalits Serving Dalits), which is still running educational institutions all over India.

Barbaric news stories still regularly hit the headlines of newspapers as attacks on Dalits take place. This virtual apartheid in India has led to violent rioting by caste Hindus against Dalits. On June 31, 2002, for instance, a description was carried of how two Dalits belonging to the Pariyar community were made to go around the village of Thinniam, beating the 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* (which also means mistake in Tamil, hence a play on words) they committed was to go around the community cheering and beating the thappu drum when one of their friends, Karupaiah, brought out the corrupt practices of the schoolteacher and his wife, who was the village president, demanding justice from the other villagers, saying that otherwise he would not do his Vettian jobs (announcing death, grave digging, removing carcasses) for the caste Hindus.

Antonio Gramsci's understanding of culture may help us to understand the activities of the Dalits in contexts like these in South Indian caste society today. By employing the powerful explanatory tools of Gramsci in the case of the Dalits through the media of oral history

and archival research we can hope to come to a better understanding of possible future directions for research into community recovery.

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, and 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.

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 (or at least should be, even though it is often intentionally overlooked by the powerful) the key focus of social activity and transformation, what Gramsci calls *articulation*. The symbols of this incorporation as well as the symbols of resistance to this hegemony can be found in the case of Dalit economic, social, and cultural entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial Success: Meat and Music in South India

One of the most successful of all enterprises of Dalits is the sale of meat, especially beef. Not only is leather for drums obtained from what others see as "sacred cows," indicating another successful enterprise (music), but the sale of fresh meat has great appeal to a range of communities. That the price is relatively low compared to other foods makes for exceptional economic opportunities. As one of the Dalits who was interviewed, the thappu band leader Sangili, noted,

"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 for goat and sheep. The cattle is bought from near by 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.”

During one of the fieldwork visits Sangili gave a tour of his neighbourhood, showing the spot on the roadside by an old irrigation canal, which lost its original use some decades ago, where he dries water-buffalo hide as well as the whole process of making the drum. A visit to his father-in-law’s beef shop revealed a young man around 18 skinning a calf with a surgeon’s precision. They were not thrilled with an outsider’s presence, probably because a few weeks earlier in Haryana Province in North 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 the outsider’s identity, and they later allowed pictures to be taken. They then warmed to the researcher, 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 has been a 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. Nevertheless, there is another side to this trade, large profits to be made in regular sales that sustain the community and its members in multiple ways. There are other forms of entrepreneurship in Dalit communities as well, activities which stretch the boundaries of tradition and bring resistance to inequity and poverty.

An Activist Drive : “Land For The Landless”

The Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu, at the mouth of the Cauvery River Delta, an area traditionally lush with paddy fields, has also been the setting of untold oppression and atrocities. It is in this context that the social activists S. Jagannathan and Krishnammal Jagannathan have devoted their lives to Gandhian social activism, a so-

cial entrepreneurialism that has uplifted over 12,000 poor, mostly Dalit families, helping them obtain land and homes.

Their work has been chronicled in *The Color of Freedom* by Laura Coppo and David Albert (2004). Two extraordinary people who have made a real commitment to peace and justice with a simple, powerful approach, Jagannathan and Krishnammal have taught us the true meaning of compassion and social action in our age of corruption and despair. And through the power of their lives, these two direct disciples of Mahatma Gandhi teach us about humility, hard work, self-reliance, and service to the poorest of the poor.

Reminding us of Mother Theresa with their work, charisma, and approach, Jagannathan and Krishnammal have been even more effective in their struggles for change because they have exposed and questioned the roots of poverty, the caste system, and globalization directly, followed quickly by a quest for the most wide ranging solution. Whether rich landlords, multinationals, or the Indian Supreme Court, Jagannathan and Krishnammal have confronted them all when they have perceived social evils. And they have won more than their share of battles. Encompassing the same devotion and love as Mother Theresa, they brought land and homes to tens of thousands, and kept the bright light of freedom burning for all to see.

These two spiritual workers of light and power who have humbly shown the way to a new and more just society have woven the understandings of Gandhi into the fabric of today's needs, in a powerful response to a society more insidious and destructive to the natural environment and to the human spirit than could even have been imagined in the heyday of colonialism. Krishnammal and Jagannathan are fighting an imperialism of the soul and of the belly, a frightening monster of greed and abuse that they know can and will be stopped with the gentle teachings of the Mahatma. Two saints indeed, Jagannathan and Krishnammal have a story to be told that will spread to other movements and places, lighting the way for real revolutionaries people committed to the best of the human spirit and the prospects for change.

Krishnammal and Jagannathan built on Vinoba Bhave's land-grant *bhoodan* movement of the 1950s–1970s. This movement appealed to the religious sensibilities of people who had traditionally given food to monks and the poor as a gift of good faith and the acquisition of *karma* (merit). Seeing the community itself as the locus of social and economic transformation was a key to this movement, but while the movement was able to mobilize landlords to give lands away, it was less successful at organizing the poor to make good use of these lands. Moreover, it was invariably a scene set with upper-caste landlords giving to the upper-caste leaders of the *bhoodan* movement.

This is where Krishnammal and Jagannathan entered the picture, providing transformative activities which organized and empowered the poor. Utilizing Gandhi's *satyagraha* (truth-force) approach, they worked first to build self-confidence in the Dalit communities in which they were working. This movement took on a special force after 1968. As Coppa and Albert (2004) note: "Krishnammal recollects her own dark forebodings, even as the event was taking place: "On Christmas night in 1968, I was sitting by myself in Gandhigram. The moon was shining high in the sky. I could not sleep, and I kept on thinking about how humanity seems not to have understood the importance of Christ and his teachings." That night, though as yet unknown to her, 44 women, children, and infants were being murdered by landlords and their henchmen in the village of Kilvenmani, some 200 kilometers from where Krishnammal and Jagannathan lived, a place where they had never been and knew no one, and which would transform what little remained of something bordering on a normal home life for the rest of their lives. Forty-three people were burned alive. The forty-fourth, a newborn, was stabbed through the heart and found pinned to a tree by a knife.

All of the victims were Dalits. Krishnammal, a Dalit herself, was led to a new and more radical approach to land reform. Krishnammal, decided to work not only for land-gifts but to actually purchase land and build houses. These homes have been built at \$200 each, a frac-

tion of the cost for the same type of house built by Habitat International at \$2000. Her first act was purchasing not only land but a house which became a community center. The symbolic nature of this change, in a community where Dalits were not even allowed to walk on the road in front of this house, cannot be underestimated. They would be killed if so much as their shadow touched the land or walls of this compound.

Through a combination of clever financing and active struggle, Krishnammal thus brought a successful movement for these Dalits to the Cauvery Delta which has resulted in land and houses to over 12,000 families. And this number is rising as these activities grow and spread to other parts of Tamil Nadu. Included in these activities are “the sprouting up of schools and nurseries, house-building projects, orphanages and children’s hostels, women’s self-help associations, farm implement cooperatives and agricultural experiments, small industrial workshops, new cultural groups and events, and campaigns against alcoholism and other social ills besetting the community.” (Coppa and Albert, 2004)

Thappu as Cultural Entrepreneurship : The Joyful Side of Dalit Communities (*The Drum as Active Resistance Calling for Renewal and Change*)

In an earlier paper J. Rajasekaran and I attempted to understand the Dalit drum thappu, an instrument of popular/folk culture. The thappu is an important part of daily popular culture as well as a contested site for imagined social and political constructions of ‘the Dalit people’ and their relation to the powers-that-be. It is also a vehicle of community recovery and entrepreneurial success. It has been transformed recently from a symbol of oppression to a symbol of liberation.

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?

Originally the job of the lowest castes in villages, the beating of

the thappu and broadcasting of the latest news, sometimes funerals or other events, was a familiar routine in South Indian villages. Even today this practice continues, but it has now taken on richer, more finely nuanced, and, yes, more highly politicized dimensions.

The thappu is the strength and the weakness, the joy and the sorrow, the promise and the fate of the Dalits of Tamil Nadu. The drum always returns us to the story of community, symbolic of the heraldic duties of drummers in numerous societies around the world throughout history who have walked around their home villages and towns, announcing the news while beating their drums.² Their announcements have often electrified their communities, bringing revitalization and empowerment.

As a community, the Dalits over the years have found some mobility in different social spheres. Their drum thappu, too, has provided them with newfound mobility as the times have changed. The thappu has recently found a place in the mainstream culture of South India. It can be seen in cinema, on TV shows, at the annual celebrations of matriculation (English medium) schools, in political party processions, and as a part of the ethnic/folk shows presented as tourist entertainment at five-star hotels in Madurai, a major pilgrimage site and city of half a million people.

A group located in the village of Karumbalai near Madurai called

² 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 a thappu or representing the same functions as the thappu. Two-sided, with an hourglass-shape, Shiva's drum 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 Dalits, creates and recreates the universe.

Sangili Drum-Set was the focus of our earlier research into oral history and cultural studies. The leader of the Dalit drumming group, Sangili, is a successful entrepreneur, socially and economically. His name itself means a chain, a rich symbol of the bonds of South Indian society since the *sangili*, a gold chain worn by brides, is used as the symbol of marriage and the family. Sangili's own society is under the shackles of convention, as members of an oppressed community.

His drum troupe 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 as "drum-set," but the actual name is *Thappattai*." Reaching beyond his own cultural sphere to the mainstream of society the name SANGILI DRUM-SET fits well for this cultural entrepreneur. Sangili describes his work as follows :

"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 piece of hide tied to its mouth. The instrument is played by beating with two short, stiff leather straps."

"In the olden times three-fourths of our performances were for death rituals. The thappu was prominent. The thappu also 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 *Mullaipari* processions in Mariamman temples (*young shoots of grains and legumes are grown in a decorated pot and carried by women on their heads in a symbolic fertility ceremony*). We don't play for weddings. (*This is where a strong stigma is still strongly attached to Tamil sentiments concerning caste*)."

"There are ten members in my group. Eight thappu drums, one big marching band drum, and one person who plays Maraccas. We get an average of ten programs a year from the Government. For a temple festival we are paid 4500 rupees, for a puberty ceremony 1500 rupees, for a death ceremony 3500 rupees from the Thevar community

and 2500 rupees from the Naicker community (*Telugu is also 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 the 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 government. The state government runs a board to support folk arts. The state Governor is the president, the secretary of the 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."

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

"For a maternal uncle's gift procession the cinema beats go well. In those days we were even invited for puberty ceremonies. There was a 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."

Sangili's story appears to be a happy one, and the increased competition indicates entrepreneurial success. His story, told in a matter-of-fact tone, is not the same elsewhere. There are still areas awaiting recovery such as the arid lands of Messal Village in Ramnad District, another research site, 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.

The Thappu as a drum of liberation, has multiple uses.³ 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 ; but 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 symbol of Dalit communities today.

These examples of social, cultural, and economic entrepreneurs reveal Dalits as a community of upward mobility, renaissance, and revival. That they have been able to profit from their assigned roles, expanding and challenging them in new ways, even as they are strongly discriminated against as an ethnic or caste group, gives hope and meaning to other ethnic revival movements in India and in other societies where oppression and discrimination have traditionally held people down. An awakening and resistance to traditions can also

³ Dalit identities and lives in South India are mirrored by Burakumin outcaste communities in Japan. There are more than three million Burakumin in Japan, comprising various occupations. Heavily discriminated against historically because of their “impure” association with jobs such as leather tanning, one of the key jobs of Burakumin has also been drumming. The *taiko* and other drums can now be heard around the world with the success of *wa-daiko* troupes like *Ondekoza* 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 resemble Nyandi Melam. 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* (1999) ; see also this account of Dalit drumming at the World Congress Against Racism, 2002, [WCAR List Archive Index by Author](http://www.wcar.org/lists/wcar/markup/author.php), <http://www.hrea.org/lists/wcar/markup/author.php>).

mean a creative utilization of those opportunities, economic, cultural, or social, available in one's own community, giving hope where hope did not exist.

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