

THIS IS A MUSIC: RECLAIMING AN UNTOUCHABLE DRUM
Produced and Directed by Zoe C. Sherinian

If you teach about India in your classes, using this film is a great way to expose students to a variety of Indian folk arts, to teach about the caste system, and as an example of activist ethnomusicological filmmaking. You can accompany it with my article “Activist Ethnomusicology and Marginalized Music of South Asia,” from the *Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*, edited by Pettan and Titon, 2015. The film is available for purchase by emailing me: zsherinian@ou.edu. It will also be available for streaming by mid-2017 with Alexander Street Press.

Synopsis in English

Short:

This documentary is about the psychological and economic processes of transformation for a group of Dalit drummers. As they reclaim their performance as respectable and are positively received at the Chennai Sangamam folk festival, the question becomes, can they sustain these changes in the village context?

Medium:

This documentary narrates the psychological and economic processes of transformation for a group of Dalit drummers from rural India. As they professionalize, reconstructing their performance as “music” and their identity as “worldly,” they participate in the Chennai Sangamam folk festival where their reception by urbanites further transforms their self-understanding. The question then becomes, can they sustain these changes back in the village?

Long

This documentary narrates the economic and psychological transformation of a group of Dalit (outcaste) drummers from Tamil Nadu, South India. In their village they continue to negotiate caste discrimination, which constructs them as polluted because they play for funerals. As they professionalize, reconstructing their performance as “music” and their identity as “worldly,” they participate in the Chennai Sangamam folk festival. Their reception by urbanites in Chennai further transforms their self-understanding. The question then becomes, can they sustain these changes back in the village? Woven throughout are rare images of folk performances along with interviews of the musicians and local activists who tell the story of working for the liberation of the oppressed in India through engaging the folk arts.

Extra Long

This ethnomusicological documentary is about the psychological and economic transformation of a group of untouchable (outcaste) *parai* frame drummers from a village near Paramagudi, Tamil Nadu, South India. The internal shift in the self-perception that these drummers undergo includes three interwoven threads of musical identity: the identity of the drum, of the music they play, and of the status of the drummers.

Through the lens of rarely filmed folk performances and the experience of an American female ethnomusicologist who comes to study with the group Kurinji Malar, we see a group of nine drummers trying to eke out a living while negotiating ongoing caste discrimination in their village. The Hindu caste system constructs parai drummers and their drum as polluted because they play for funerals. As they have professionalized, however, they have reconstructed their performance as “music” and their identity as “worldly.” The film also explores the economic options of these musicians as laborers. Two of the best drummers are tempted to at least limit their “drumset” performances to auspicious festival occasions because they are able to make enough money and gain social status as construction workers. Other members who work as field laborers or shepherd goats are completely dependent on drumming to supplement their income.

The narrative of this film focuses on the cultural debate among these drummers over whether they should reclaim the term *parai* (associated by many with the drummer’s “degraded” caste name *Paraiyar*) or they should continue to use the English term “drumset,” which carries middleclass status. When the drummers get an opportunity to go to the large cosmopolitan city of Chennai to participate in the Chennai Sangamam folk festival, they experience very different treatment at the hands of both the festival organizers and the multi-caste, multi-class urban audience. On their way to the festival they are shocked to find the extensive use of the term “parai attam or parai dance” in all of the festival advertisement. One of the drummers asks, “Why do they still associate us with the ‘Paraiyan’ caste? Why won’t they let us walk freely in society?” When we interview them soon after they arrive and then at the end of their week in Chennai, we see, however, that their overwhelmingly positive reception has greatly shifted their self-perception and value of village based folk artists. Further, they decide to (re)embrace of the term “parai.” It becomes clear that experiencing this appreciation helps the Kurinji Malar drummers reinforce a sense of pride in their drumming as valued music where as previously it was easy for them to internalize these practices as degraded. The question then becomes, can they sustain these changes back in the village?

This film shows that the consideration to change how parai drummers identify their art reflects the process of changing self-identity through musical performance possible for those still considered by many as “untouchables.” However, this case ultimately shows that complete change in presentation of self in the village context is difficult because of the economic dependence of outcaste drummers on the village middle castes who continue to practice castism. Woven throughout the film are dynamic and rare examples of village folk dances like karagattam, kummi and oiyattam, oppari funeral lament, and drumming as well as the voices of the drummers and local activists, who tell the story of the process of working for the economic and social liberation of the oppressed Dalits of India through developing the folk arts.

Reviews:

http://www.aems.illinois.edu/publications/enewsletters/newsandreviews_summerfall2013.html

<http://www.aems.illinois.edu/publications/filmreviews/thisisamusic.html>