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Book Review: Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology

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bodies reverberates through the narrative as a linking device used to narrate the increasing potential that Christianity deploys in bettering the lives of the Jaffna Dalits. The assault of female bodies by upper-caste Hindus has a crucial function: that of raising villains and protectors along caste lines, rendering the female characters helpless and lacking in agency. This is noticeable all through the narrative except when Cinni, now Terici after her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Cimiyon, is developed by the writer as a female character who grows within the embrace of Christianity. The other female characters are the recipients of abuse or minimally employed by the author to further the plot.

Caste and gender therefore come together such that the deliverance from caste atrocities parallels the deliverance from gender atrocities. Christianity however briefly plays deliverer before showing itself as incapable of having complete liberative tools to set the captives free.

So while this is a book that voices a virulent caste critique, it also registers a critique of Christianity. This is a novel which captures the nature of organized religions' failures and the limited hopes that it doles out to the Dalits of Jaffna.

Amitha Santiago

Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College

***Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology.* By Zoe Sherinian. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, xxix + 344 pages.**

ZOE Sherinian, Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Oklahoma, specializes in the intersections of culture, music, religion, caste, and gender studies, particularly in the context of South Asian Christianity and Dalit social life. This, her first monograph, brings to life the sound, power and liberative theological dimensions of understudied forms of Tamil folk music through an intimate and compelling portrait of the Tamil professor, musical composer, theologian and activist Theophilus Appavoo (1940-2005).

The book is not simply a biography, however, but presents Appavoo as a "catalytic node" (61) at the hub of this theoretically-informed, culturally-thick ethnographic study of the practice, values, and contexts of the music, politics, spirituality, and people he championed. The first three chapters (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2) describe the book's theoretical orientations, introduces Tamil folk music, and the context of Dalit

oppression. While the Introduction is grounded in ethnomusicology, it builds on and beyond it to consider "music as . . . the human experience of and relationship to the divine" (3) that enables a "transformative process . . . informed by a commitment to emancipation from caste, gender, and class oppression" (4). Chapter 1 makes clear that high-caste Hindu notions about culture concealed within the history of Dalit conversion to Christianity maintain caste hierarchies in social life, specifically in the form of classical karnatak music in liturgy and, notably, "objective" western ethnomusicology (53-54). Despite this, and contra Mosse (24) and others who question Dalit Christianity's historical liberative role, Sherinian turns to Ortner's "subaltern practice theory" to listen for the subaltern voice via "slippages" within repressive systems (46). Thus, Chapter 2 narrows the focus to examine Appavoo's family history and Dalit Christians' historical

relationship with Christian conversion and music. She stresses how the family's conversion narrative resists the patterns described in previous scholarship, and, moreover, how Dalit mastery of brahmanical music was the first phase of what Bhabha notes as the "mimicry" of resistance.

In Chapters 3-4 Sherinian focuses on Appavoo himself, on his theology and his specific seminary performances, respectively. Slippage may be too weak a word to capture the creative power of Appavoo's own transformation to "Dalit consciousness" and attendant turn to folk music described here. That is, Chapter 3 details not only his rejection of brahmanical classicism but also his constructive praxis of: 1) everyday Eucharistic communal eating and shared labor; 2) a sense of universal family drawing on Dalit village religion and a bi-gendered divine; 3) and strategic reversals that reclaim village art and culture. Sherinian contextualizes these dimensions through fine-grained analysis of Appavoo's songs, lyrics, and rhythms, along with his storytelling and theological learning from years of dialogue with poor, rural Dalits. The chapter ends by placing Appavoo's theology in a global conversation with feminist and womanist theologians, such as bell hooks, foreshadowing the transnational turn by the book's conclusion. Ch. 4 offers the most sustained ethnographic account in the book, describing the liberative focus and dialogic performance process of Appavoo's compositions at the Christmas Carol Service. The reader gets a sense of the dialogical dynamism—including participatory composition and community building—that Appavoo's methodology enables. Sherinian's account includes her own participation in and personal, social transformation through the relationships and dialogue she experienced

through the music, shared meals, and relationships formed during her field work.

Finally, Chapter 5 moves beyond Appavoo and his specific context to examine the experience of rural Dalits through the lens of receptions of Appavoo's music and the broader Dalit activism of three Tamil Theological Seminary graduates. The ways in which Appavoo's vision and Dalit activism have been limited, often among urban, middle-class, Christians, however, are balanced effectively by a number of significant successes. From an Appavoo student helping organize Dalit village women to march and tear down a toddy (hard liquor) shop and work for labor organizing, to a Dalit caste group refusing to play their drums (*parai*) in compliance with brahmanical hierarchy for the first time in history as they sing Appavoo's songs, this chapter demonstrates that the songs and theology analyzed here are not that of an individual, but a "people's theology" (241). Widening the angle still further, Chapter 6 broaches the broader question of the relation of Dalit struggle to the other struggles of the "oppressed" by examining Appavoo's "most universal" song (Chapter 6). More specifically, by including examples such as the performance of a Dalit drumming group at the UN's 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, she makes clear that the questions raised by Appavoo's work are not confined to him or even to his wider South Asian Dalit context, but are a vital part of and thus relevant to emerging global networks of liberation.

In conclusion, Sherinian's book offers a compelling account of Tamil Folk music (complete with transcriptions and links to on-line recordings); its social locations, and broader theological potential—and makes a number of important contributions along the way. In choosing Appavoo, a Dalit Christian

composer and activist as her main example of liberation theology, Sherinian's work makes a specific intervention: illuminating not only a denigrated form of music, but bringing much needed attention to the practice of the arts as vital to political and spiritual liberation. As she points out, the lived performance of music can be experienced as a form of freedom in itself, a point typically overlooked in accounts of liberation theology, yet nonetheless central to James Cone's insight that "to sing the spiritual was *to be free*" (qtd. 59). The centrality of direct experience is also important to this book's second major contribution: its attention to the ethnographer's own impact and subjectivity in the fieldwork context and its clear endorsement of advocacy anthropology. These dimensions of advocacy and self-reflexivity in Sherinian's

ethnographic methodology lead to the work's final major contribution, namely, its attempt to incorporate biography. Though some may question if the book's strategy of focusing on Appavoo doesn't veer too far towards "tribute", in my view at least, and as Sherinian states, the focus on the individual here is itself a necessary corrective to views of Dalit individuals who function mainly to represent a group (59). More theologically, as Appavoo says about his own Christian guru (108), it is only through an embodied human individual that the divine—and thus, this ethnomusicology as theology—can become real.

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***Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India.* By Sarbeswar Sahoo. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xviii + 203 pages.**

PENTECOSTALISM and Politics of Conversion in India draws upon several years of periodic ethnographic fieldwork among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, and particularly among those who have converted to Pentecostal Christianity. The volume opens with chapters on the growth of Pentecostalism in the region, the nature of conversion, and issues of gender, and then concludes with two chapters on Hindu-Christian conflict and anti-Christian violence. Sahoo's thesis, in his own words, is that the "ideological incompatibility and antagonism between Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists provide only a partial explanation for anti-Christian violence in India" (7). A more complete explanation, Sahoo suggests, would include factors such as "competing projects of conversion of both Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists,

the politicization of identity in relation to competitive electoral politics, and the dynamics of the (BJP-led) development state" (7).

That last point, on the dynamics of development, is worth highlighting. One of the things that makes this work particularly rich is the fact that Professor Sahoo's earlier research was on development, and especially on the *competing* development projects of different religious communities among the Bhils. As Sahoo shows in the Bhil context, and as is true elsewhere, development projects are often initiated for the very purpose of securing the loyalty or sympathy of those served. This purpose adds a layer of complexity and competition to interreligious interactions, and contributes, in Sahoo's view, to their volatility.