Musical Politics

Placing Caste: Spatialization, Urban Segregation, and Musical Boundary-Making

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In the face of India's enduring caste inequalities, their entrenchment or resistance is central to social and urban navigation. In this article, I locate music as an important site to investigate how caste comes to be spatialized, where place identity comes to symbolize group difference, with the effect of exacerbating social and spatial segregation. I use ethnographic field notes from attending musical events and 103 interviews with members of two live musical worlds situated in the southern city of Chennai: Carnatic music, which is seen as the preserve of Brahmin, or "upper" caste residents of the city; and Gaana music, which is associated with Dalit, or previously "untouchable" caste urban residents. I argue that for caste elites, symbolic power is constructed and maintained through norms and boundary work, thus producing hegemonic place identity and cultural power. For the caste oppressed, caste discrimination is experienced as stigmatized place identity, which is variously managed, reappropriated, or rejected through a range of strategies. The persistence of place-based stigma to devalue caste identity shapes the experience of caste-based urban inequalities that obstruct marginalized communities' right to the city. In recent years, Gaana musicians are using their music to protest caste-based urban segregation, indexing the rise of a cultural articulation of an anti-caste assertion that challenges the marginalization of urban Dalits. This article advances sociological understandings of the forms that urban segregation can take when layered with caste as an axis of social difference and conceptualizes spatialization of caste as a driver of urban segregation.

Vaa sonnen—Vada Chennai!	Say it with me—North Chennai!
Vada Chennai eppadi irukkum yaarukaachu theriyumaa	Does anybody know the real North Chennai?
Unmaya eduthu sonnaa oruthanukkum puriyuma?	If I spoke the truth, would you understand it?
Irundha azhagai ellam azhichittaanunga Pala unmaigala adiyoda marachittaanunga	They've destroyed all that was beautiful, and they killed and buried the truth.
Ezhandha nelangala namma meettu edukkanum	We must reclaim the lands taken from us;
Irandaam sudhandhiramaa adhuvum irukkanum	Come! Let's fight for a second independence!
Koovanadhi oruthula kudisai nariya irundhuchaan	Tiny huts once lined the banks of the River Cooum;
Makkala adichu police ooravitte verattuchaan	Then the police hit the people living there and made them leave.
Marachaa maranjiduma karupparoda parambara	But try as you might, you can't erase this black tribe!
Chennai mattum dhaan da engaloda karuvara	Chennai is our home, it is our womb.[1]

Introduction: A Protest in Song

On New Year's Eve of 2018, the Vaanam or "Sky" Festival headlined a 16-member ensemble called Casteless Collective. The band performed their song, "Vada Chennai," meaning "North Chennai," to the thousand-strong gathered at this school playground. Despite the suggestion in the song's title, the festival took place, not in North Chennai, but rather, in a South Chennai locality called Mylapore, considered to be the nucleus of "upper" caste, Brahmin residence and cultural activity in the city. The song's twangy guitar riffs are woven with the lyrical dynamism of Gaana, a musical style originating in North Chennai's Dalit, or previously "untouchable" caste communities as a musical accompaniment to the daily acts of labor, mourning, and entertainment. Gaana's association with both Dalit musicianship and its traditional performance site of the funeral on the streets of the "slum" has historically led to its devaluation by the city's more privileged residents, stigmatizing its performance and enjoyment. The performance of this song in the Brahmin bastion of Mylapore to protest North Chennai's segregation was, therefore, a moment of transgression: spatial and cultural boundaries considered to be intractable were symbolically crossed to register dissent.

In the course of singing the song, Muthu cries out, "You cannot erase this black tribe!" This moment promptly reveals the operation of something more than just class-based segregation of the urban poor. Muthu reappropriates the stigma of dark skin that is often used as a coded expression of caste discrimination to

protest the mass evictions of the *Dalit* urban poor in North Chennai. While urban sociological literature understands segregation along the lines of residence-based indicators, like the presence, concentration, or isolation of slums relative to wealthier residences, the primary object of analysis remains relatively limited to *class* and its expression through unequal residence. However, "Vada Chennai" indicates that class and residence-based indicators of segregation alone are not sufficient to understand the processes by which segregation constitutes urban inequality. In Indian cities like Chennai, unequal interactions based on class differences are severely compounded by the persistence of inequalities by *caste* that are made visible in the maintenance of the symbolic and spatial boundaries constructed caste elites.

As "Vada Chennai" implies in its gesturing at the "black tribe" of Dalits, caste identity is rarely stated so baldly and remains interactionally unspoken. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and its capital city of Chennai in particular, a long history of robust non-Brahmin, Dravidian politics has obliged "upper" caste expressions of power to hide just beneath the surface of urban social interactions. Scholarship on urban inequality in cities of the Global South provides evidence of the "compulsory closeness" (Veloso 2010) shared between elite and marginalized urban residences. The proximity between elites and marginalized communities in cities like Rio, Metro Manila, or Chennai is markedly distinct from the social *and* spatial distance often exemplified as the hallmark of segregation in the United States. The compulsory closeness produced by the interspersion of elite and marginalized residences compels elites to employ strategies of separation that secure their social and spatial exclusivity. In this article, I investigate what happens when these strategies of exclusion coincide with processes of caste differentiation in the city, where the relatively anonymized social terrain mobilizes elites to find new strategies to signal caste and mark the exclusivity of their social and geographical spaces. I examine, in turn, the consequences of symbolic boundary-making in the stigmatization of caste oppressed communities, and I explore how they contest their marginalization and stigmatization through symbolic strategies.

Using data from ethnographic research in two of Chennai's live musical scenes, I analyze how spatial segregation intersects with caste politics in the city by turning to cultural processes. Music is an indelible aspect of social life in India, offering possibilities for members of musical scenes to find various strategies to secure cultural power, confer stigma, and manage or resist it. I argue that the accrual of cultural power or stigma for disparate caste groups is enabled by a sociological process I refer to as spatialization of caste, a process by which caste identity comes to be signaled by place identity. In my research study, I find that Brahmins, or "upper" caste residents associated with the city's classicized Carnatic music scene, experience exclusive symbolic power that is maintained through caste-based cultural norms and boundary work, which ultimately becomes tied to hegemonic place identity. In contrast, the historical stigma meted out to Dalit, or previously "untouchable" caste residents of the city, inheres in the negative stereotypes attributed to the neighborhoods historically associated with their places of residence and cultural practices, such

as Gaana music. Caste-oppressed communities, such as Dalits, face negative consequences of caste spatialization such as excessive policing, marginalization of their cultural practices and aesthetics, and the persistence of stigma that follows residents as they navigate the city. Gaana musicians find strategies to manage, reappropriate, or repudiate stigmatized place identities, revealing the operation of an anti-caste resistance that takes a cultural articulation in the city. As caste groups come to be stereotypically identified with certain places in the city, these stereotypical associations enter the public imagination with little regard to the reality of demographic heterogeneity in these places. The tenacity and reproduction of these tropes reveal how caste maps onto place identity for both caste elites who wield outsized symbolic power and for caste-oppressed communities that experience and contest the stigma of place identity. This study contributes to scholarship on urban inequality and segregation by theorizing caste spatialization in Chennai through an ethnographic analysis of musical practices.

Theoretical Framework: Segregation, Caste, and Musical Practices

Urban sociological scholarship on segregation locates the history of racial segregation as a driver of concentrated poverty and ghettoization in US cities. Race-based stereotyping compounds the prevalence of minority group poverty, resulting in spatial segregation that emerges from the interplay between racial prejudices and class inequalities experienced by African-American and Latinx populations (Massey and Denton 1993; Ellen 2001; Small 2004). The importance of racial inequalities to US-based urban sociologists is superseded by a focus on *class* in the context of cities in the Global South, where residential settlements like slums and enclaves are interspersed rather than separated by distance. In studies of Indian cities, the attention to the relationship between urban governance and the urban poor manifests in significant scholarly accounts of housing and urban evictions (Weinstein 2020; Bjorkman 2014; Benjamin 2000) and "world-class" city making that aspires to "global" urban aesthetics and seeks to eradicate the physical markers of urban poverty in the Indian city (Baviskar 2011; Bhan 2009; Arabindoo 2011; Ghertner 2008).

While this scholarship provides compelling evidence that class drives a distinct form of urban inequality in the Global South, evidence from India shows that *caste* drives urban inequality in Indian cities (Gorringe and Karthikeyan 2014; Pandey 2013; Pandian 2002). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a chief architect of India's Constitution and anti-caste leader, located the village as the "Indian ghetto" and believed that moving to the city offered potential emancipation from caste untouchability on account of urban anonymity (Cháirez-Garza 2014). However, in present-day Indian cities, residential segregation by caste surpasses segregation by class identity alone (Vithayathil and Singh 2012). In Tamil Nadu, Dalit settlements on the periphery of villages and urban colonies, known as the *cheri*, are spatially and symbolically segregated from the residences of dominant castes, serving to identify and marginalize Dalits (Gorringe 2016). Wacquant's (2007) concept of territorial stigma extends Goffman's (1963) landmark text that

describes stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (3) by theorizing that marginalized communities experience stigma originating from their residential built environment and housing. However, as stigma from residing in the ghetto or the *cheri* becomes embodied and comes to symbolize group difference, territorial stigma stemming from the site of residence alone cannot indicate the extent of place-based stigma faced by Dalits navigating the relatively anonymized city. In this article, I contend that the persistence of caste discrimination and interspersion of elite and oppressed communities' residences in Indian cities requires us to investigate the symbolic modes through which caste comes to be spatialized. Garrido (2021) refers to spatialization as the process by which groupness is constituted by place identity, where people associated with a specific place or type of place come to be identified with that place. The framework of spatialization of caste enhances urban sociological conceptualizations of segregation by going beyond residence-based indicators and studying the symbolic and cultural processes through which caste discrimination exacerbates urban inequality.

An obstacle to studying caste as a driver of urban segregation is the coded forms by which caste is inscribed and experienced in the city. As Natrajan (2009) observes, the practice of untouchability need not be tied to touch alone: caste discrimination in present-day India has to be reconstrued as the "spatial gap" of separateness that organizes not just housing and urban infrastructural access but also refracts the caste norms of "purity" and "pollution." "Technologies of stigmatization" (*ibid*., 80) reproduce the inflexible place occupied by Dalits in the cognitive and social map of caste. Music provides fertile ground to understand how these technologies of stigmatization operate in the context of cities like Chennai. Here, music has been a key site of caste contestations, and the anti-Brahmin Dravidian movement spurred a Brahminical recasting of group identity around a "classicized" Carnatic musical culture, which was suited to positioning urban Tamil Brahmins as forerunners of urban "modernity" and nationalistic identity (Subramanian 2006; Weidman 2006; Soneji 2012; Allen 1997; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). A study of urban caste in Chennai is therefore incomplete without a consideration of "musicking," which understands music as a social activity composed of "performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, or dancing" (Small 1998, 9). This sociological approach takes music as embedded in social life and relations (Roy and Dowd 2010), and a range of strategies for social interaction mobilize music as a resource to produce "the scenes, routines, assumptions, and occasions that produce social life" (DeNora 2000). In this context, investigating musical activity in relation to caste and urban social life advances understandings of how musicking produces group difference, encodes symbolic boundaries, and confers cultural power or stigma.

In taking musicking as my primary site of analysis, I turn away from urban sociological discourses that frame the urban poor as "criminal," which reproduce the "myth of marginality" (Perlman 1976) and exacerbate urban inequality (Caldeira 2000). Music is an important site for scholars to regain accounts of the agency of the urban poor, or in this case, caste-oppressed communities, as

they reappropriate, subvert, or challenge the singularized stereotypes of crimi-
nality and marginality that aggravate urban inequality. Social movements often
politicize cultural consumption by questioning links between social positioning,
artistic merit, and taken-for-granted frameworks of judgment by creating new
forms of music, performance, and aesthetic principles (Eyerman and Jamison
1998; Lieberman 1995; Roy 2002). Music also provides crucial resources for
diffuse reappropriations of social power (Carter 2003). I embrace this agentic
approach to the study of musicking in Chennai's Carnatic and Gaana musical
scenes to investigate the spatialization of caste and to understand how place
identity affords caste elites cultural power while conferring oppressed com-
munities with stigma. I also study how marginalized communities resist and
reappropriate social and symbolic exclusions through reimagined engagements
with stigmatized place identity.

Data and Methods

I conducted ethnographic research on Carnatic and Gaana musical scenes in
Chennai between December 2018–April 2019, and September 2019–March
2020, totaling eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork comprising partici-
pating observations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The aim of my
research was to learn about these two seemingly disparate musical scenes, which,
I knew from personal experience growing up in Chennai, were both indelibly
linked to the history of the city itself. I am aware that my positionality as
a "middle-class" *savarna* (privileged caste Hindu) studying in an American
university lubricated these interactions and often obliged these Gaana singers
to offer to meet me. I cannot fully grasp the effect my presence had, but I
endeavored to stay open to—and learn from—the gentle criticisms and often
humorous remarks made by my interlocutors in the Gaana musical world that
often opened the door to frank conversations about the wide gulf of social
differences between us. While I feel certain that these conversations helped me
better understand my positionality in doing this research, these social differences
were never more obvious than when we tried to find a place to meet for the
"interview" and often struggled to locate such spaces because of the ways
that caste structures interactions so that the unmarried *savarna* woman in the
company of an unmarried Dalit man draws unwanted attention in ostensibly
"public" spaces such as the beach, a restaurant, or the mall. As a result, we
would meet at the home of the Gaana musician whenever possible.

Of the 103 people that I interviewed, roughly half of them were embedded
in the Carnatic music world as singers, instrumentalists, sound technicians,
patrons and sponsors, arts managers, heads of Carnatic musical institutions,
and fans. The other half were participants in the Gaana music world: singers,
instrumentalists, music producers, sound technicians, and fans. Nearly all of my
respondents were residents of Chennai, except for three Carnatic music fans and
sponsors who traveled from North America to Chennai every year to attend the
December music festival. My native fluency in both Tamil and English helped

me do this research. Most conversations with Carnatic music scene participants were in a mix of English and Tamil, and my interactions with individuals from the Gaana music world were entirely in Tamil. At the invitation of my interlocutors, or through advertisements in the newspaper, I began to attend Carnatic music concerts, lectures, and festivals to take part and observe the interactions, the social composition, and the invisible boundaries that dictated who belonged and who did not. Similarly, I attended a few Gaana concerts and music video shoots at the invitation of my interlocutors, but I only attended a single Gaana music concert in the funeral setting due to the nature of the event and my reluctance to be a voyeur at a moment of grief.

After returning from fieldwork, I coded all interviews and field notes by hand, allowing themes to emerge inductively and organized them into subcodes *after* grouping them thematically (Saldaña 2015; Van Maanen 2011). I wrote analytic memos to combine data excerpts from interviews and field notes and synthesize emerging themes. This approach allowed me to prioritize the narratives of my respondents, first and foremost, while situating them in the contexts of distinct musical, social, and spatial worlds from which they first emerged.

Chennai's Urban History: A Brief Note

Madras, as the city of Chennai was named under British colonial rule, emerged as a crucial node in the trade flows that contributed to the economic and demographic growth that led to the urbanization of Madras in the years following its incorporation in the 17th century. The city of Madras represented disparate possibilities to its colonial overlords, the newly migrant Brahmin communities that flocked here to occupy positions in the colonial administration, and the Dalit communities that migrated to the city in search of employment at the mills and factories that began to emerge in the nascent city's core, what is now referred to as North Chennai. Geetha and Rajadurai (2001) illustrate how Brahmins wielded disproportionate influence in city planning, and the *cheris*—segregated residential settlements of Dalits, separated from dominant caste residences— were ghettoized at the behest of upper castes who blocked the development of routes from the *cheris* to the urban core, operating on the Brahminical view of caste that sought to maintain ritual purity and abhorred the ritual pollution of "lower" caste movement into spaces marked for Brahminical religious activities (Subramanian 2006).

At the turn of the 20th century, "non-Brahmin" assertion gave rise to the Dravidian political movement, which challenged Brahminical hegemony over socioeconomic spheres. Dalit communities were historically excluded from such movements that gave a fillip to the political fortunes of non-Brahmin, "middle-castes." By the 1940s, in response to the Dravidian contestation of Brahminical influence in politics, Tamil Brahmins had reinvented their image through Carnatic musical patronage as a social class that would bridge tradition and modernity in service of the nation-building project. Deindustrialization led Tamil Brahmin lawyers and patrons of Carnatic music to shift to the southern Chennai locality of Mylapore, which continues to be associated with Brahmin

sociocultural activity and residence today. Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) argue that this spatial consolidation of Tamil Brahmin elites lent "critical mass" to their corporate caste identity by providing group cohesion and cultural hegemony despite their being a numerical minority.

In contrast to Brahminical culture that was situated around Carnatic musical activity and residence in Mylapore, Dalit life in Madras revolved around the slum. Shaikh (2021) argues that industrial capitalism under colonial rule birthed a laboring class that could be paid cheaply, as a result of which the "slum" emerged as a space where underpaid laborers could be housed inexpensively. Dalit migrants to the city settled in North Chennai, cordoned off from the rest of the city by Brahminical caste sensibilities that inflected colonial urban planning. Here, they were primarily employed at the nearby British mills and factories (Viswanath 2014). Gaana music emerged from the confluence of Dalit migrants living in informal settlements around the city. The *parai* drums at the rural Tamil funeral were replaced in the Gaana percussive context with everyday objects of urban life—overturned water drums, metal containers, or matchboxes—and instruments like the tabla or dholak, which were borrowed from the Tamil Sufi tradition. Gaana concerts became central to the urban slum funeral as well as other community events that continue to take place at informal settlements around the city.

With Chennai's deindustrialization and the subsequent Information Technology (IT) boom in the 1990s, the city began to shift southward in the wake of factory shutdowns (Hancock 2008). With this residential expansion, Dalit settlements began to mushroom even in southern and western parts of the growing city, following the trend of migration to new outposts in the city by dominant communities. But the association of North Chennai with Dalit residence persists despite drastic demographic transformations all over the city, and South Chennai localities are associated with "upper" caste residence and signifiers despite the wide-ranging demographic variation in caste and class within localities. As the following pages demonstrate, the spatialization of caste has led to the enmeshing of North Chennai's slums with the Dalit, urban poor, thus generating a *place* identity to refer to urban Dalits—an identity that is systematically devalued in contrast to the cultural power enjoyed by Brahmins, who reap the benefits of the cultural power stemming from their place association with South Chennai localities like Mylapore.

Constructing Symbolic Power via Place Identity

The annual Carnatic music festival in December is a long-standing tradition known at least in passing to most residents of Chennai, but its primary constituency remains predominantly limited to Brahmins from Chennai, other states in southern India, the global diaspora, and some European foreigners with an interest in "Indian classical music." For all of December and most of January, a total of nearly 4,000 concerts are hosted from morning until night at around 45 musical venues, known as *sabhas*, all around the city. Chennai's *sabhas* host Carnatic music concerts regularly throughout the year, but the December festival

has come to occupy a crucial role in reproducing the stature of the musical form. Carnatic music's most prestigious *sabhas*, such as the Music Academy, are located in the southern Chennai locality of Mylapore. A Carnatic music fan and festival-goer expressed the importance of this space to him and other Carnatic aficionados: "Music Academy in Mylapore is *the* Mecca for Carnatic music." Together with the exalted status of Carnatic music, Mylapore and its cultural institutions occupy a place of symbolic significance for the making and signaling of Tamil Brahmin identity in the city.

Mylapore has historically been home to the city's wealthiest Brahmins whose houses populated the main streets around the neighborhood temple, echoing in the urban context the caste-segregated enclaves or *agraharams* that were reserved exclusively for Brahmin residence in the village setting. The expansion of the city and the success of non-Brahmin Dravidian politics have led to the decline of these enclaves, and neighborhoods typically associated with Brahmin residence like Mylapore, Nungambakkam, and T. Nagar are no longer exclusively reserved for Brahmin residence (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). Yet, as the city has grown and expanded, a closer look at the religio-cultural institutions of importance to Brahmins reveals the persistence of spatial clustering of Brahmin residences in these and newer neighborhoods. The southward growth of the city in response to the Information Technology (IT) boom has led to the migration of Tamil Brahmins to newer localities. Along with new clusters of Brahmin residences in these areas, new *sabhas* and temples have also been constructed, marking new frontiers of Brahmin cultural geography in the city. T.M. Krishna is a prominent Carnatic musician whose criticism of the caste exclusivity of the Carnatic music world has drawn the ire of the same Carnatic music fans that queue up for his concerts. In an interview, he described the relationship between Brahmin residence and musical institutions in Chennai:

> So you have the same fiefdoms that existed before. That is, the Music Academy, Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Krishna Gana Sabha, these are typical Brahmin hubs and these exist in Mylapore. Then what has happened is you have smaller hubs being created. Where are they created? Nanganallur, Adambakkam... These were at one point where poor Brahmins went and settled. Those who couldn't afford Mylapore or T. Nagar moved to Nanganallur, Adambakkam, Chromepet. Now there you have little *sabhas*. If you go to those *sabhas*, their location is usually within 4–5 streets where I can wager that 90 to 95% of the population is Brahmin. Upper caste populations... So in a way it's the same model that has extended itself once the city grew.

Waghorne's (2004) findings corroborate the coincidence between a rise in new temple constructions and Brahmin migration within the city and beyond. Clusters of Brahmin residences are flanked by institutions like the *sabha* or temple, which offer congregational spaces for Brahmins, whose capacity for overt signaling of caste superiority has diminished in the wake of anti-Brahmin Dravidian politics in the state. At the same time, despite the establishment of newer *sabhas* and the sprawling migration of Brahmins, Mylapore's *sabhas* like the Music Academy are at the pinnacle of a hierarchical Brahminical

cultural geography. The cohesiveness of Brahminical caste status is preserved and reproduced by the shared consecration of such cultural spaces and institutions, which appear to be about things other than caste, but are, in reality, the places where caste affiliations are affirmed and spatial stereotypes of Mylapore as a "Brahmin" locality are produced.

Norms as Boundary Work and Maintenance of Caste Exclusivity

Spaces like the *sabha* are closely guarded by the establishment of cultural norms that are learned through Brahminical caste socialization. The exclusivity of musical spaces is preserved by gatekeeping practices that undertake coded, symbolic forms of boundary maintenance. In the tightly surveilled environment of the Mylapore *sabha*, outsiders are swiftly identified as distinct from the regulars. The food at *sabha* canteens is a draw for "outsiders": a separate canteen space allows visitors to bypass the music hall entirely. But in doing so, they earn the disdain of the predominantly older, self-appointed Brahmin custodians of this space. I overheard a woman perhaps in her late sixties, decked in what was doubtless a handloom silk sari, complaining to a woman who had taken a seat at one of the circular tables under the marquee of the Music Academy canteen. Tilting her head to gesture at a table of Muslim women in *purdah*, she remarked, "They just come for the food, no interest in our culture or anything." The use of "our culture" by this self-proclaimed gatekeeper of the space indicates the degree of ownership claimed by Brahmin audiences over this musical world.

Norms governing Carnatic musical spaces are enmeshed with aspects of everyday life, such as food and marriage, which preserve caste's infinite reproducibility. The canteens at Carnatic *sabhas* advertise their "pure vegetarian" food made according to Brahmanical strictures, and advertisements for exclusive caste-based online matchmaking services are unabashedly displayed at these venues. An advertisement for one such company read: "Matchmaking services available for Brahmins, Mudaliars, and other castes", demonstrating the desire of concert-goers to find intra-caste matrimonial matches—one of the many ways that caste endogamy is maintained. Norms of comportment regulate and order the *sabha* space, but these norms are not easily learned or acquired by those lacking an intimate familiarity with the musical and social content of the Carnatic music world. Songs performed at these concerts tend to be overwhelmingly composed of late medieval religious compositions in classical Sanskrit, Telugu, or Tamil languages. Appreciation for the music entails a knowledge of Sanskritic religious themes—an important feature of Brahminical life—as well as the complex *raaga* or melodic system and the intricate *taala* or rhythmic patterns. Knowledge of such complex musical details is gained from a young age through Carnatic music lessons that children in Brahmin families are obliged to take. Here, rules surrounding comportment, Sanskritic religiosity, and other caste norms are imbibed in addition to musical knowledge. At concerts, performers' melodic improvisations are evaluated by knowledgeable audience members, whose awareness of these unstated details of compositions is demonstrated through subtle codes to indicate to other audience members that

they are in the know. A listener might loudly exclaim, "Besh!" or "Shabaash!" to express their appreciation using these phrases characteristic of the Carnatic music world, but it is in their judgment of when and what to appreciate that they signal to other audience members that they belong to the cadres of the Carnatic cognoscenti. The audience thus co-constitutes and co-consecrates the Carnatic musical performance, playing an active part in the social production of legitimacy for the musical exercise.

As a result, the exclusivity of these spaces is maintained through symbolic barriers to entry. Although "non-Brahmin" elites might drop in for a meal at a Mylapore *sabha* canteen and attend a concert, this social permeability does not extend to those who are poor and *Dalit*, even though a poor *Brahmin* can be seen as a legitimate member of this world with the appropriate embodiment and performance of caste norms. This trumping of caste-based in-group inclusion over class suggests the complex and coded ways in which caste exclusivity is maintained in musical spaces. One afternoon, after attending a concert at the Music Academy in Mylapore, I stepped out of its compound onto the street, where a fleet of auto rickshaws awaited music festival "*sabha* hoppers," or fans trying to get to the next *sabha* on the day's musical itinerary in some other part of the city. I got into the first rickshaw and struck up a conversation with the driver, Daniel, during which I asked if he had ever attended a concert at the Music Academy. As Daniel sped ahead, he turned to me with a look of incredulity. He said by way of explanation, "Have you seen me? You think they will allow me inside? I am from Chintadripet [a north Chennai locality]." I asked if he had ever attempted to walk into the foyer before, to which Daniel responded, "They won't say anything directly, but it's the way they look at you. I was just going to fill my water bottle, but as soon as I entered the lobby, I got scared and walked right out of there. I just *knew* they were thinking, 'Oh, he definitely doesn't belong here'." Daniel's felt experience of out-group status is illustrative of the ways that exclusivity is preserved in the Carnatic music world through symbolic boundary maintenance.

Place Identity Signals Caste and Cultural Power

The Brahminical hegemony of Carnatic music is maintained by a spatial logic that places the Mylapore *sabhas* at the apex of musical merit. Mylapore *sabhas* like the Music Academy tend to charge exorbitantly for festival concert tickets, sometimes even making it impossible for non-members to get tickets without a "season pass," a bonus reserved for the tightly knit thousand-odd members, comprised almost exclusively of wealthy Brahmins who pass on their membership intergenerationally. Other venues subsidize the price of their tickets with the aid of government concessions, which are intended to draw wider audiences. One such auditorium is the Kamarajar Arangam, which has long been associated with political rallies and other non-Carnatic musical events. T.M. Krishna explained how this venue is viewed by in-group Carnatic music world members:

> Carnatic concerts happen in this venue, Kamarajar Arangam. So Kamarajar Arangam has never . . . belonged, you can say, to this *sabha* culture. In a way, it is

just an auditorium, a massive auditorium that seats 1500 people. What happens there is usually spiritual lectures, or you have film song concerts. During the music season and just after it there are concerts, Carnatic concerts, that happen. And I will ask you to kindly go and watch the concerts, just the aesthetic of how it is presented is so different from what happens here. The people who come to concerts there never come for concerts to any *sabha* okay. It's a very interesting set of people. And where do these Kamarajar Arangam people advertise? You'll find posters behind PTC [public] buses. You'll find posters for shows here on walls where people may even urinate. I've heard many musicians complain that their wall posters are in ugly places.

The comment about Kamarajar Arangam being "just an auditorium" indicates that institutional spaces and stages for Carnatic music are not created equal: they are sacralized by its patrons, suggesting that legitimate venues are those which are co-consecrated by the entire cast of characters in the privileged echelons of the Carnatic music world. One evening at the December festival, a Carnatic musician performing at the Kamarajar Arangam told me that he took concerts here less seriously:

At the Music Academy, you know everyone is there for the music. Here, people come to sleep or go straight for the food. It is not a serious crowd. See that guy sleeping over there in the second row! There is even a chocolate covered car in the canteen! What does that even have to do with music?

The musician's contempt for the aesthetic and crowds at this "lesser" venue exposes not only the symbolic significance of engaging with Carnatic music normatively, but also the symbolic power of sacralized spaces and entire neighborhoods in what Subramanian (2006) describes as an exercise of "building a community with exclusivist overtones" (*ibid.*, 43). The sanctioning of Carnatic musical performance is thus not just about what happens onstage, but also the space in which it happens, extending all the way from the *sabha* to the imagined space of the neighborhood, such as Mylapore. It is through such sacralization of space that cultural power comes to be conferred to an entire neighborhood, regardless of its actual demographic variation. At the same time, when someone claims that they are from Mylapore, assessments about caste identity and cultural affiliations are quickly divined by others to triangulate their social positioning. Indeed, when I was traveling to other parts of the city, a question I was often asked was: "Where do you live? Mylapore?" Even though I did not live in Mylapore, this hegemonic *place identity* has come to stand in as a signifier of "upper" caste identity.

The positive externalities of being associated with Mylapore extend far beyond Mylapore, signaling "upper" caste identity regardless of the actual place of residence. Mylapore's slum residents are notably excluded from the benefits of such hegemonic place identity and are often cast as interlopers or squatters. The hegemonic place identity of Mylapore thus exclusively signals "upper" caste status. The neighborhood of Mylapore is, in turn, conferred with "cultural" reputations: epithets like "the soul of Chennai"[2] enable Brahmin

residents to receive funding from private and public sponsors to organize festivals that showcase "the" culture of Mylapore and of Chennai at large. The annual Mylapore Festival comprises several Carnatic music concerts, demonstrating the outsized cultural power of Brahmins, who constitute only 2–3% of the state's population, to elevate musical practices linked with their participation to the status of a cultural symbol. When national and international politicians and celebrities visit the city, they are often treated to a private Carnatic performance, which provides evidence of its exalted status in coming to represent the culture of the city despite only being the preserve of an elite minority. Cultural power not only cements the social prestige of elite caste groups, but its adherence to places—music venues, neighborhoods, and entire swathes of the city—allows place identity to stand in for various indicators of social positioning like caste, class, and cultural capital. It is in this way that caste comes to be spatialized, through the accrual of cultural power made mobile.

Gaana Music: Place Identity and Caste Discrimination

Gaana is everywhere in Chennai and yet remains relatively stigmatized. Many Carnatic musicians I interviewed were barely aware of its existence; even if they had heard some Tamil film songs that used Gaana style, lyrics, humor, or instrumentation, they rarely knew to recognize it as Gaana. But as musician Gaana Vinoth ardently explained, "Gaana is the music of Chennai's people. If you take a bike and roam around the city at night, you will hear it from each and every slum and you will see people dancing to it." When Gaana originated among the Dalit laborers of erstwhile "Black Town" in North Chennai, it grew to fill a variety of social needs for this community: funerals, labor, political messaging, social reform, and entertainment. Despite the expansion of the city and the migration of Dalits to different parts of the city, "North Chennai" has become homogenized and vested with negative stereotypes alluding to its purported criminality and informality. In reality, residential areas in North Chennai—especially in newer areas like Kilpauk, Anna Nagar, and Ambattur—comprise a variety of caste and class groups that have greater social power compared to their counterparts in informal settlements. Yet, the use of "North Chennai" to refer to Dalit identity makes stigma mobile by adhering to the bodies of poor, Dalit, North Chennai residents as they navigate the city. Gaana singer, Muthu, describes the stigma of being from North Chennai's notorious informal settlements:

> North Chennai is just seen as this land of rowdies. We are all seen as good for nothing, and our dark skin means that we will always be spotted out. It doesn't matter that I went to college. The minute that employer from the IT firm sees my dark skin or asks me my address, it's over for me. The government doesn't care about us either. We can't even get to the hospital easily because there's no easy way to get there, and there's only one anyway. At the same time, because of caste discrimination that continues to this day, men in my area die over and over again while cleaning your sewers or picking up waste. That's all we're seen as fit to do.

Muthu's description of place-based stigma illustrates how the place identity of North Chennai, which, despite its extensive demographic range, has been reified and used for caste identification and discrimination in the city in conjunction with pre-existing schema for caste discrimination such as phenotypical features. Sunil, another young Gaana singer in his twenties, says, "All you have to do is say your address, and the minute you say, 'Vyasarpadi, North Chennai', they will lose all interest in hiring you for a job or a role in some film. If you do get hired, you will only be a villain, never the hero." Both Muthu and Sunil point to the operation of stereotypes that not only play up the alleged violence or poverty of men from North Chennai but also lead others to assume and slot them as "Dalit" on account of their place identity, phenotypical features like dark skin, or their "countercultural" sartorial and hair fashion, which instantly bar them simultaneously from both respectability and fame in dominant caste circuits of taste. The conflation of "North Chennai" with the stigmatized Dalit identity is a reflection of the spatialization of caste at work, a process through which place identity comes to stand in for group difference.

Gaana is not limited to North Chennai in the city, and in recent years, it has traveled extensively to other parts of the country and even the world. But at the same time, Gaana remains resolutely tied to the concept of the "local." "Local" is Chennai slang, borrowed from English, that is often used to deride the "low" caste and class status of individuals navigating the city that present in a certain style, or through other bodily markers identify themselves as being from "the slum." North Chennai's conflation with "slum" residents results in other urban Dalit poor also being marked with this stigma, even if they live in other parts of the city. In 2019, a controversy erupted when "pullingo," or Chennai slang for "guy," became used to slur young, Dalit, urban men. A Tamil comedy group called *Erumai Saani*, meaning "Bullshit," created a sketch mocking the "pullingo," young men from "the slum" stereotypically characterized by an affinity for flashy style of clothing, colored highlights, and "Dio" motorbikes preferred by these young men to signal material wealth (see: Nakassis 2016 on "doing style"). Denouncing the usage of "pullingo" as "toxic," Tenma—the band leader of Gaana fusion musical group Casteless Collective—criticized this characterization as reductive and compared it to "a slur like the N-word for Black [people] the C-word for East Asians."[3] He continued, "The word is increasingly being used to mock the self-expression of young people from underprivileged sections, and stereotyping their activities as criminal or dangerous." The slurring of Dalit identity through references to place identity, musical practices, or stylized forms of self-expression all point to the ways that caste stigma in the urban setting has become spatialized.

"Out-of-place": Stigma Management and Rejection

The stigma conferred to members of the Gaana musical world, who are most often young, poor, Dalit, and male, is managed or rejected through various strategies. In some cases, Gaana musicians engage with the negative stereotypes that circulate via mainstream media by reappropriating the stigma, and at other

Ey gumbalaaga suthuvom	We'll roam in our gangs
Naanga ayyo yammanu katthuvom	And we'll shout, "*Ayyo amma*!"
Katthurenu kettaa	If you ask us why we're shouting,
Unna vaayiliye kuthuvom	We'll punch you in the mouth.
Enga pullingo-lam ellaa bayangaram	My *pullingo* are wild—
Engala paartha Tamanna mayangi vizhundhudum!	If [actress] Tamanna saw us, she'd faint!

times, by countering the negative stereotypes and rejecting the stigma. The reappropriation of stigma often mimetically exaggerates negative stereotypes of criminality or marginality attributed to young, Dalit men with the effect of criticizing its circulation. In Gaana music videos, which regularly see millions of views on YouTube, the negative connotation of "local" is reappropriated by these young men who proudly proclaim their "local"-ness as a marker of subaltern and simultaneously "weightu" or "mass" identity—Chennai slang for "cool." The slur of "pullingo" described in the previous section, which refers to Dalit youth perceived as from "the slums" of North Chennai, is reappropriated to subvert the negative connotation of the slur. For example, Gaana Stephen's viral YouTube music video, "Gumbalaaga Suthuvom," which has over 7 million likes, does this by claiming that he and his friends are, indeed, "*pullingo.*"

For the entire duration of the music video, Stephen smiles beatifically into the camera as he threatens to punch those that complain about him and his "area boys" taking up space on Chennai's streets, humorously drawing out the irony of characterizing a group of friends hanging out as criminal or "rowdy." Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996) trace the provenance of this catch-all phrase of "rowdy" to the colonial practice of quashing dissent through the charge of "history-sheeters" who could be arrested for the "disturbance of peace" or "nuisance" (*ibid.*, 205). In contemporary, urban India, the rowdy is a figure that threatens the middle-class imagination of the city by stoking anxieties about rampant criminalization, resulting in fears of the rowdy, who is almost always a "lower" class and caste man and almost never "upper" caste or middle-class.

Gaana musicians often refer to instances of policing and surveillance that result from their stereotyping as "rowdy" or criminal, combined with the persistence of the street as the site of Gaana musical performance. Gaana musicians often describe the music's ascent into popularity as a story of the music's movement from the street to the stage: a few decades ago, concerts would take place on a piece of tarp laid out on the street, but now, makeshift stages on the street have allowed Gaana to be elevated in some respects from its association with the street. Yet, most concerts happen outdoors right on the streets and narrow by-lanes of "slum" areas still, since there are virtually no music halls that would host Gaana artists and their music. Saran once told me half-jokingly, "We don't have those air-conditioned halls with the cushioned seats, right? So we make do with the street because this is where we started from anyway." In the institutional absence and ghettoization of Gaana, even music videos feature

the streets as the stomping grounds of the young men depicted as the "pullingo," who are filmed riding their bikes down wide open roads by the beach. The scenes of young men driving their bikes gleefully down open roads points to a desire to be able to actively navigate the city's streets without fear of surveillance—a desire that is thwarted by the extensive policing that Gaana singers face in occupying streets where they are marked as "out-of-place."

Sunil narrates an incident in which he was hired to sing at a funeral in a slum south of Chennai Central railway station, a landmark which is shorthand for residents' imagined boundary between the northern and southern parts of the city. Gaana funeral concerts usually begin around 7 or 8 in the evening and go until late in the night. At first, bereaved family members and members from the community grieve their loss to mournful numbers, and then as the music becomes more upbeat, they dance as the music coaxes them out of their sadness for a night of fleeting revelry. Sunil sang at a Gaana concert that ended at 2 a.m. and was waiting for a friend with a bike to pick him up since he does not own a vehicle. As he waited on the main street a little further away from this South Chennai slum, a policeman drove up to him and asked him why he was "loitering" on the street. Sunil surmises that it may have been the clothes he was wearing that day—a hoodie, cropped jeans, and sneakers—or the blonde streak in his hair, but the policeman had identified Sunil as being out of place in this part of town. Sunil quickly scrambled to prove that he was not a "rowdy." He explained to the policeman that he was there to sing at the Gaana concert, but Sunil tells me that this does not always spare young men like him from being beaten by the police, especially if the concert is not over yet and the police come to shut it down on account of "noise pollution."

The use of bureaucratic conceptions of "noise" in urban policing points to the ways that the spatialization of caste marks as "out-of-place" both the cultural practices and the physical presence of young, Dalit men on city streets. Social actors in the musical world of Gaana come to be hyper-visible and subject to violent policing even as they reappropriate the negative valuations of slurs like "pullingo." Gaana musician Sunil's friend from North Chennai describes how his sartorial style that is described as "pullingo" style becomes targeted in his navigation of the city:

> I used to have pink highlights in my hair and I would wear this earring in my left ear. But one day, the police beat us up pretty badly on our way back from singing at a funeral. I knew then that my adayaalam [signature] hair and earring would give me respect from the other guys, but it singles me out to the police. My mother cried and pleaded with me to please stay safe, so I cut off that part of my hair and I took out the earring.

Whereas Sunil's friend managed the stigma conferred to young men like him by attempting to remove bodily markers of his caste and place identity, Sunil's Gaana musical group, the "Black Boys," rejects the stigma of place identity through the lyrical register of their music. In their song, "Vyasarpadi," which refers to the neighborhood of North Chennai that the group is based out of,

they mix Gaana lyricism with Tamil language rap to reject the place-based stigma meted out to the poorer residents of Vyasarpadi. The song lyrics argue that Vyasarpadi has been painted in a negative light and challenge the listener to accept a different picture of the area as presented by its own residents. "Vyasarpadi" rejects the framing of its residents as "rowdy," instead choosing to delineate the various landmarks, talents, and historical markers of the neighborhood that its singers claim ought to earn them respect, not stigma. Gaana music thus offers us a lens to understand how members of the purported urban "underclass" view and manage their own stigma, presenting an agentic understanding of how urban inequality is produced, and more importantly, subverted and resisted. The spatialization of caste, which produces harmful stereotypes that are linked to place identity, is thus also drawn into musical self-assertion for Dalit youth who identify with the reified concept of "North Chennai" and change, reappropriate, or challenge its negative valence.

Urban Inequality and Anti-caste Resistance

Gaana music's lyricality has historically reflected the lives of urban Dalit communities residing in "slum" areas, making it inherently political in its engagement with autobiographical stories and themes stemming from the experiences of urban inequality. Urban inequality in Indian cities is reproduced through the spatialization of caste, presenting a view of segregation that goes beyond the US-based model of isolation and concentration of poverty. As caste stigma comes to be spatialized, residents of negatively stereotyped neighborhoods face the consequences of such social and spatial inequality in outcomes like limited urban infrastructure services, fewer opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, housing insecurity, and continued caste discrimination that is linked to their place identity. The promises of formal education have failed to supplant the juggernaut of systemic casteism, a phenomenon which is captured in the analysis of the Gaana musical world.

The disillusionment of Gaana musicians with the promised rewards of formal education and employment is commonly cited as a reason for why they choose to take up this profession that remains stigmatized, even by their own families who recognize that their Gaana-singing sons will be negatively reputed in their own community and society at large. Commercial Gaana musicians are predominantly male, often financially supported by breadwinning female relatives. Junior Nithya is a Gaana singer from North Chennai whose music videos have over 50 million views. He describes his ascent to fame and mobility as shaped by his Gaana musical career after the failure of a "formal" education in securing the socioeconomic mobility promised by "middle-class" markers of success:

> My father was a coolie. He lifted luggage for rich people at Chennai Central railway station, and he would see how they dressed and walked. They would wear suits and go to work in a car. He really wanted that for me too, and so I went to college with the money he saved up. Then when I graduated, I realized that no number of college degrees would guarantee me the kind of job that people in

> South Chennai can get just by being born and having fair skin and going to elite colleges. So I quit trying and made myself famous through Gaana. At first, my father was upset because people look down on Gaana singers for being rowdies. But then he saw that I was able to afford a fancy new bike, I started dressing more stylishly, I got my sister a job as a nurse as a favor from one of my fans. Then he didn't mind so much. He actually became proud of me and I owe all of this success to Gaana.

Nithya's autobiographical telling of his rise to fame suggests that for him and others like him, success is to be found outside the formal structures of education and "respectable" employment. The increased visibility and popularity of a Gaana musician through their viral YouTube music videos and live performances afford some resources and networks that may result in some financial security for the musician's family. But as Gaana singer Saran explained, success in the Gaana musical world is precarious and fleeting, and the Gaana musical world lacks institutions and stages to accommodate everyone who wishes to be a commercial Gaana musician.

The negative stereotypes that hinge upon stigmatized place identity adversely affect communities of the urban, Dalit poor at the structural level by filtering into policy-making and governance. Residents of slum areas are often framed in urban policy as criminal, polluting, or itinerant to justify their displacement and eviction to rehousing complexes at the outskirts of the city. In response, Gaana songs exhort their audiences to prevent politicians from splitting the slum vote by caste and denounce the evictions that displace slum residents to the urban periphery. Other songs lament the precarious working conditions of the manual scavengers of waste, who remain overwhelmingly Dalit and poor despite the pretensions to "world-class" city-making touted by urban governance. In songs about the city, Gaana musicians assert their indigeneity to the city, lamenting that although their ancestors helped construct the city, their descendants are denied access to these same urban spaces. Gaana songs often refer to anti-caste leader, Dr. B.R. "Babasaheb" Ambedkar and his vision for a caste-free society, echoing his call to rid society of urban caste discrimination. Anti-caste messaging in Gaana can take different forms, ranging from recounting autobiographical experiences of caste inequality and discrimination to normative bids to end caste discrimination by launching an anti-caste cultural revolution. This latter strain of anti-caste Gaana has become more pronounced since 2018, when the music group Casteless Collective was formed. Casteless Collective has taken on a range of social inequalities and tackled them in compositions that fuse Gaana with hip-hop, jazz, or rock in order to challenge caste inequality and give a cultural articulation to an anti-caste resistance movement.

As caste continues to striate experiences of urban life, Gaana singers show how caste discrimination creates stigmatized place identities that displace Dalits of their right to the city. At the same time, Gaana affords spaces—whether on streets or in virtual spaces—to transform the exclusions of urban spaces in the city into a "meeting point for building collective life" (Lefebvre 1991). As Gorringe (2016) argues, Dalit assertion arises within the marginalized Dalit *cheris* or Dalit

colonies and slums, indicating the importance of such spaces to sparking anti-caste movements. This article's opening vignette portrayed the social *and* spatial boundary transgressions enabled by new anti-caste expressions that take place through the idiom of Gaana and other cultural practices associated with urban Dalits. The anti-caste messaging of Gaana points uniquely to the structural inequalities experienced by urban Dalits, who echo a refusal to participate in their own oppression, instead choosing to demand dignity for their aesthetics, their right to the city, and social equity.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article on musicking, the spatialization of caste in Chennai enables symbolic boundary construction, maintenance, and resistance. Urban sociological research ought to consider music as a sociological site of inquiry that can help us better understand how social categories become portable in the spatialization of class, race, and in this case, caste. The operation of caste as a multivalent framework for social interactions is far more complex than this article's focus on the polarized Brahmin and Dalit social groups and their musical practices would suggest. In Chennai alone, tens of caste identities jostle for dominance, let alone the rest of Tamil Nadu state or all of India, where thousands of subcaste groups or *jatis* contest for cultural, sociopolitical, and economic power. Similarly, Tamil Nadu is home to hundreds of musical subgenres that are associated with different caste, class, and regional constituencies and serve discrete social and cultural purposes. However, the focus on these two caste groups at polar ends of the spectrum in Chennai and their respective musical worlds of Carnatic and Gaana music reveals crucial insights into the spatialization of caste.

For Tamil Brahmins, symbolic power for caste members is cultivated and maintained through exclusive cultural norms and boundary maintenance, which becomes inextricable from hegemonic place identity. In contrast, the spatialization of caste has negative material consequences for the Dalit, urban poor who have historically been dismissed by the non-Brahmin movement of Dravidian politics that predominantly comprised "middle" castes in Tamil Nadu state. The urban history of Chennai has led to the equation of North Chennai with Dalit identity, indexing a spatialization of caste that uses the place identity of North Chennai to devalue Dalit individuals, style, culture, and imagined places of origin. I show in this article that the negative stereotypes coalesce to follow Dalit men in the city and obstruct their free navigation of the city. At the same time, the present moment of anti-caste assertion taking place in the Gaana musical world—as well as the realms of film, art, and writing more broadly—suggests a new turn in the history of Dalit politics that assumes a cultural articulation in self-assertion and critiques of *urban* caste inequality. By thinking through this case of how musical cultures stand in for social group identities and augment caste spatialization in the city, urban sociologists can broadly understand the spatialization of elite and stigmatized social identities as a modal way in which urban segregation persists globally.

Notes

1. See *Casteless Collective*'s "Vada Chennai" lyric video here: https://www.you tube.com/watch?v=ALAxCEPyj2Q.
2. https://mylaporefestival.com/2020/.
3. https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/pullingo-toxic-tenma-writes-eru mai-saani-s-video-mocking-north-madras-youth-110502.

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