The Other City

Gaana music challenges the singular, homogenising narratives of Chennai city.

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I live in one of the southernmost neighbourhoods in Chennai, and in order to get to the city's opposite end in North Chennai, I have to take four modes of public transport. I make this commute fairly often for my research with practitioners of Gaana music—a distinct musical style that originated in North Chennai from the songs of labourers who came to the city to work in factories and mills during colonial rule. In my discussions with the singers about their art, we often find ourselves speaking about things underlying the practice of their music, like their experiences of navigating the city.

On hot days, when the Chennai sun is harsh on my back and my hair feels as though it might spontaneously combust from the heat, I dread the long commute. I grew up in South Chennai, and throughout my schooling, the orbit of my world was squarely within the radius of things familiar to me. Everyone that I knew lived on this side of the city, and we all went to the same places where we would often bump into each other and think, "What a small city!" It never struck me as odd that I had rarely visited North Chennai in all these years, until my research took me "there."

When I am in North Chennai these days, where I know nobody except recent acquaintances, the city suddenly feels very large and foreign to me. In the course of our interviews,

Gaana artists share their experiences of Chennai—experiences that are starkly different from my own. One of them remarked to me that most people from the southern part of the city think that Chennai ends with Central Railway Station, the impressive and iconic red, Gothic Revival–style building constructed under British rule in 1873. In my research, I also speak with Carnatic musicians, virtually none of whom live in North Chennai. One of them corroborated this Gaana musician's remark when he asked, "Is the area past Central even Chennai? I didn't know that!" Over the years, Central Railway Station has become the unofficial boundary between North and South Chennai, a boundary that orients how we move about within the city.

Sunil, a Gaana artist in his early 20s, lives in North Chennai, but often travels to a neighbourhood south of Central Station to perform Gaana at funerals, which is an important social function that the music continues to serve, even today. Recently, he recounted an incident. He had finished singing at a funeral rather late at night, and as he waited for his friend to pick him up, a policeman approached him and asked why he was "loitering in 'this' [South Chennai] neighbourhood." With just one look, he had calculated that Sunil was from elsewhere, that he did not "belong."

Gaana music weaves the experience and imagination of the city into its lyrical expression. A popular song's refrain proudly declares that Chennai is a city like no other, describing different landmarks important to the history of North Chennai. Another song points to the continuing discrimination against the people that claim a North Chennai address. The area has long been stereotyped as "dangerous," full of rowdies, violence, and filth. Sunil and his friends challenge this trope through their music. The North Chennai address has been an obstacle in college, at work, and in their interactions with people from other parts of the city. Sunil once said to me, "They'll ask where you're from and when you tell them, they'll look at you differently." One of his friends tried to make it in the Tamil film industry as an actor, but colourism is a persistent way in which this discrimination is expressed: "They'll say, 'You're dark-skinned. Go stand in the back.' If one of my friends has coloured hair or a style that's associated with rowdies, he'll be given the villain's role. He's never the hero." This points to a pattern of discrimination that hinges upon denying these young men their sense of personhood by devaluing their self-expression in the conflation of address, skin colour, caste, class, and culture, with discriminatory and ultimately harmful stereotypes.

When I travel across the length of the city, it strikes me that this journey spans an enormous cultural distance and divide. In the way that the city has grown, its neighbourhoods have acquired different and unequal resources, demographics, and privileges. In North Chennai, I am educated about the cultural practices that have persisted here for decades, but are made invisible by the singular association of its residents with violence and poverty.

One evening, Sunil, his friends, and I stand on the rooftop of the Slum Clearance Board building where he lives, and we look up at the overcast sky threatening to burst with rain at any moment. They tell me about a culture that has given birth to many football players, who practise on the streets and on football grounds that dot the landscape of North Chennai. National-level carom board players and boxers live in this area, but without adequate financial or material support from the government, and even less visibility.

As we speak, I am told that it is kite-flying season, and my attention is drawn to the brightly coloured kites that dot the grey sky. In the evenings, people gather on rooftops to watch kite-flying competitions, and kite flyers vie to win the title of the last kite standing. Competitors buy and make their own kites and cut each other's kite strings mid-air by deftly manoeuvring the *maanja* (string)—a practice known colloquially as "dealing." We watch as two kites bob in the distance, almost disappearing into the clouds. I am struck once more by the ways in which the narratives of "culture" in the city are overridden by those of certain groups and areas, to the erasure of cultural traditions and histories in the neighbourhoods that fall prey to the dangers of a singular narrative.

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LAST LINES

YOU DON'T HAVE TO STAND, SON! 'SARAY JAHAN SE ACHA...' IS NOT OUR NATIONAL ANTHEM!

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-PONNAPPA-