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Election day: a *pari* drummer leading a procession of Dalit villagers to the voting booths in Tamil Nadu, India.

place. However, he felt that untouchability was a recent perversion of Hinduism and must be done away with.

Arokiasamy – like his hero, the great Dalit leader Dr Ambedkhar – feels that there will be no end to caste discrimination unless the entire caste system is overturned. Although Arokiasamy works with Hindus, Muslims and Christians from Dalit and other communities, the Pariyars – a caste of funeral drummers – are amongst the most downtrodden. When the British colonialists observed how severely Pariyars were exploited and excluded from the Hindu mainstream, they applied their community name to all in the world who were rejected and despised. They became known as ‘pariahs’.

The Pariyars’ low status is continually emphasized through association with one of the most impure and contaminating phenomena of all in Hinduism – death. Required in the past to clear away dead cattle from the fields of their strictly vegetarian landowners, they were forced through starvation to eat furtively the putrefying carcasses of sacred cows. This intimacy with death perhaps was the factor that compelled Pariyars to develop yet another stigmatizing cultural practice.

During funeral celebrations for other castes Pariyars are expected to play the distinctive *pari* drum of their caste community from which their name derives – its skin of dead cow is ritually impure. Pariyars are required at funerals of all castes to play for hours on end as part of a mourning process that involves processions and public dancing.

‘I think it’s a punishment for our caste. We have been forced to play this drum for other communities. That is why I consider it a punishment. Though they looked down upon us we had to help them with the funeral process. We had to or no-one would dance.’

At a meeting on the grounds of the People’s Multipurpose Development Society, Savera, a master *pari* drummer, holds and beats the instrument to provide a stirring virtuoso performance. The rhythm builds in intensity as the listeners break into a spontaneous dance of Dalit pride as they celebrate the drum’s message – that theirs is a culture and a political force to be reckoned with. Once a symbol of the degradation of the Pariyar, the *pari* drum has become a potent weapon in the

JULIAN SILVERMAN

struggle against casteism. Savera stops and wipes the sweat from his face. ‘In the olden days we were ashamed of performing music in their houses and also our wages were very low... but now our situation has changed. Because they wanted us to play the drum for their funerals we thought badly about our culture but now we are proud... It’s not funeral music any more. It’s a music of our own.’

Many young Pariyar, however, prefer to play modern brass band drums covered with synthetic skins. The deeply internalized shame about the degradation associated with cow skin still remains.

‘There has been hesitation amongst young people to use traditional drums. They use modern drums, but now Dalit leaders make propaganda: “This is our culture, our music; young people should come forward to play the *pari* drum.” Pariyars still use their traditional drums at funerals – a key means for them of earning a living. However, the drums are increasingly used to lead processions of villagers campaigning to win local elections for their own candidates.

Dance of defiance

Sagamarie is a vital woman with a ready laugh. A Dalit and leader of the Liberation Movement for Women, she works closely with Arokiasamy in assisting women through self-help savings groups so that they can start small businesses. Through collective action they attain credit from bank managers, develop small businesses, petition government officials for access to services and even run for local office.

She describes how she mobilized Dalit voters through staging a procession led by Pariyar drummers. Gathering crowds as they travelled through dusty streets and laneways, the procession united Hindu, Muslim and Christian Dalit villagers on the way to the voting booth. As the procession passed by the well-built or ‘pukka’ houses of the rich, upper-caste families of the more salubrious quarters of the village, the musicians, men and boys threw themselves into wild, spontaneous dances in front of the ever-growing crowds. The frenetic dance of defiance was a display of Dalit identity, pride and strength. Excitedly she recounts the triumphal march: ‘A big procession... house to house to collect the votes, then vote time! I

have a feeling inside me that I will win!’

The challenges are great and opposition to Dalit culture and rights means that activists like Arokiasamy, Sagamarie and Savera have a long struggle. For there are many others like Professor Subramanian who resent and inhibit any advances made by Dalits. Many who would agree when the Professor complains: ‘The other castes have taken the upper hand everywhere. Pariyar have got position... they are brought up in immoral ways, illiterate! They don’t know what morals are! Like that, the lower communities want to become leaders!’

Lakshmi, a young Brahmin woman studying singing at the

‘It’s not funeral music any more. It’s a music of our own’

prestigious Music Academy of Madras embodies hope for an India of the next generation where caste and cultural difference is celebrated rather than despised. Standing outside the Academy’s auditorium, her eyes sparkling with pleasure at the music escaping from within, she murmurs: ‘They say this classical music is a divine music.’

I challenge Lakshmi, asking her if classical music is divine for Dalits as well as Brahmins. She laughs in embarrassment.

‘India is like that. Some things we can’t say openly. The people have to change mentalities and get a broader mind. Otherwise we can’t save India. Brahmins have to... we must allow them near us... Brahmins will not accept them to come near... I can’t explain. My parents think they are all backward classes. I am Brahmin but I am not like that.’

I ask her if she can imagine a concert with Dalits and Brahmins playing together. Wistfully she answers: ‘It would be nice...’ ■



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■ The word Dalit can be interpreted to mean ‘oppressed’ but also contains within itself the possibility of an identity based on a drive for liberation. It is therefore the name the people themselves prefer. Listen to an interview with Arokiasamy and a snippet of music from a Pariyar popular theatre performance on the NI website at: www.newint.org/audio/dalit.mp3

Víctor Jara

Bullets of song

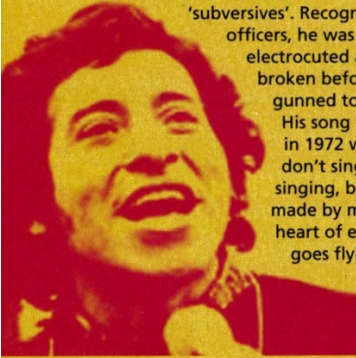
Drawing on the long tradition of the guitar-wielding troubadour, Chilean folksinger Víctor Jara saw the 'guitar as gun', firing-off 'bullets of song' at oppressive military regimes and in support of popular struggles. Jara would play his songs about the plight of landless peasants and factory workers in shanty towns, community centres and street demonstrations.

When Salvador Allende was elected in 1970, Jara and others joined him on stage under a banner which read: 'There can be no revolution without song.' After the military coup led by Augustus Pinochet on 11 September 1973, all music by these artists was declared subversive and possession of such recordings led to arrest.

Jara was carried off to Santiago's stadium where he was held with 5,000 other

'subversives'. Recognized by military officers, he was tortured, beaten, electrocuted and his hands broken before he was machine-gunned to death. He was 38.

His song 'Manifiesto' written in 1972 was prophetic: 'I don't sing just for love of singing, but for the statements made by my guitar, honest, its heart of earth, like the dove it goes flying... Song sung by a man who will die singing, truthfully singing his song.'



Cui Jian

China's rebel maestro

Trained as a classical musician – and former member of the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra – Cui Jian is best known however for his courageous, openly political music. While playing trumpet in the Orchestra in the early 1980s, he was smitten by Western rock-and-roll music smuggled into the country.

Rejecting the syrupy ballads of mainstream

Chinese pop, he became notorious for writing songs which dealt with controversial issues such as individualism and sexuality. In May 1986, during a Beijing concert, Jian climbed on to the stage in peasant clothing and sang 'Nothing to My Name' – which defined him as China's rebel maestro. The song became a democracy-movement anthem, sung by students during the Tiananmen Square uprising.

After he performed on stage wearing a highly symbolic red blindfold, he had his tour cancelled by the Communist Government. In recent years Jian has incorporated rap styles into his music and started singing about money-culture and corruption. But his album *The Power of the Powerless* also reflects hope for change. According to media activist Danny Shechter: 'Cui Jian's music gives you a taste of the struggle that is yet to come in China.'

Dmitri Shostakovich

Coded subversion

The prolific Soviet composer suffered the misfortune of spending his most creative years under the thumb of Joseph Stalin. But he also had a knack for navigating the murky waters of the Soviet state's brutal attempts to censor, destroy and homogenize creative life.

Shostakovich was at times so well liked by the Government that he won two state prizes. However, his later works were derided by cultural authorities who accused him of being 'cosmopolitan', 'formalist', and 'anti-Soviet'. Much has been made of his *Anti-Formalist Rayok* which is widely seen to be a covert jeer at the expense of Stalin and his cronies. Characters in the piece mimic the speaking styles and wordy decrees of Stalin, his chief censor Andrei Zhdanov and others. Indeed, fragments of Zhdanov's infamous decree against Shostakovich's 'bourgeois' music are embedded in the text. The composition of such subversive music, even privately, would have led to certain death had it been spotted. It has also been suggested that his Tenth Symphony, commemorating Stalin's death, was overly light and joyful, conveying the impression of a nation celebrating the death of a ruthless tyrant.

Shostakovich died from lung cancer in August 1975.



Mercedes Sosa

Voice of Latin America

Though less of a songwriter, Mercedes Sosa has seduced millions with her powerful and emotional interpretations of others' songs. Always deeply political, Sosa was one of the founders of the *Nueva Canción* (New Song) movement in Argentina. Together with Armando Tejada Gomez and others, she developed *el nuevo cancionero* – a musical manifesto which sought to respond to 'new agreements and chords in the air' and to preserve and rehabilitate indigenous music forms (she herself is half South American Indian). Sosa has been referred to as 'the voice of a continent'. She was unflinching in her active opposition to the Argentinean *junta* and her huge, rousing voice became a symbol of the struggle against oppression in Latin America.

During a concert performance in 1978 Sosa and much of her audience were arrested by the Argentinean military and she was forced into exile.

MUSICIAN REBELS

Dissident music then and now.

