

## convenor's note

In 2004, Indira Peterson and I convened a conference at Columbia University that resulted in the volume *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford, 2008). This volume brought together, perhaps for the first time, the work of a group of emerging and mid-career scholars who were pursuing critical historical research on the performing arts (music, dance, and theater) in South India. At that time, we were interested the key questions around the reinvention of the arts by elites in the early twentieth century: the tethering of the arts to nationalism, state-endorsed processes of “classicization,” arts institutions and new forms of pedagogy, and questions related to class and gender. By now, many of these themes have become key anchors for the critical study of the performing arts in this region.

Our conference entitled “Caste, Community, Capital” hopes to supplement this earlier work by foregrounding the work of a new generation of emerging scholars who have taken the study of the performing arts in South India in highly generative new directions. The past decade has witnessed a radical expansion of themes and areas of critical inquiry related to the performing arts in this region. Caste and the question of Dalit-Bahujan histories, histories of colonial capitalism and mercantile communities (Muslim/Christian/Hindu) in South India and its diaspora, transoceanic flows of cultural forms, and questions around cultural nationalism, today’s majoritarian politics, and the post-Hindutva public sphere, have been at the heart of many of these important interventions. The scholars invited to this conference work across a range of disciplines (Anthropology, Ethnomusicology, History, History of Science, Religious Studies, and Sociology), and yet their work comes together in its important regional focus and its commitment to the production of socio-political critique and commentary. This conference hopes to de-center earlier nationalist-inflected histories about the arts in South India, and bridge new thinking on performance across diverse forms of knowledge and critical methods.

The work being presented at this conference ranges from analyses of *rāga*-based songs about indentured labor in colonial Mauritius, to nineteenth-century Islamic devotional songs in Tamil and Arabi-Malayalam, to questions around the policing, censorship, and appropriation of Tamil Dalit musical forms in today’s Chennai. Framed around six conceptual and thematic axes, this conference maps some of the complex negotiations and slippages that have led us to the impoverished mainstream histories and forms of cultural amnesia that seem to be endemic to the practice and discourse around the performing arts of South India today. Moving beyond analysis limited to nationalist and colonial frames and elite (so-called “classical”) performance practices, this conference foregrounds the timely issues of caste, community, and the idea of the South Indian performing arts as sites of social, cultural, and economic capital-making.



Davesh Soneji  
University of Pennsylvania  
Conference Convenor

# conference schedule

## Friday September 9, 2022

- 9:30-10:00am      Welcome  
Lisa Mitchell (Chair, Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania)  
Davesh Soneji (Conference Convenor, University of Pennsylvania)
- 10:00-11:30am      **Music, Theater, and Labor in Madras and the Tamil Mascarene**  
Chair: Jim Sykes (University of Pennsylvania)
- Singing a New *Cintu* to the Lord: Two *Rāga*-Based Visions of Early Twentieth-Century Indentured Tamil Communities**  
Marek Ahnee (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [EHESS], Paris)
- Defining the True Stage Artist: Commercial Tamil Drama and Capital in Twentieth-Century Madras**  
Divya Chandramouli (Harvard University)
- 11:30-12:30pm      **Lunch**
- 12:30-2:30pm      **Music Histories and Minority Religious Communities in South India**  
Chair: Daud Ali (University of Pennsylvania)
- Is there Singing in the Time of Crisis?: Sounding the Flood Songs of Coastal and Riverine Malabar in the Indian Ocean**  
Ihsan Ul-Ihthisam (University of Chicago)
- Pastness in Performance: Change and Continuity in the *Margamkali* Tradition of the Syrian Christians of Malabar**  
George Pioustin (University of California-Los Angeles)
- Text, Trace, and Tune: Genealogies of Musical Pluralism in Modern Tamil Nadu**  
Davesh Soneji (University of Pennsylvania)
- 2:30-2:45pm      **Break**

2:45-4:45pm

**Gaana, Film Music, and Urban Space in Contemporary Tamil Nadu**  
Chair: Anna Morcom (University of California-Los Angeles)

**From Cemeteries to Televisual Space: Mapping the Travel  
of *Gaana* Songs as a Form of Protest Culture**  
Karthikeyan Damodaran (University of Göttingen, Germany)

**From Sweet and Ringing to Husky and Raw: The Semiotics of Vocal  
Timbre in Tamil Playback Singing**  
Amanda Weidman (Bryn Mawr College)

**Making Music “Mobile”: The Reconciliations of “Local” and  
“Global” Aesthetics in Carnatic and Gaana Musical Genres**  
Pranathi Diwakar (University of Chicago)

## Saturday, September 10, 2022

- 9:30-10:00am      Welcome  
Davesh Soneji (University of Pennsylvania)
- 10:00am-12:00pm      **New Social, Aesthetic, and Political Histories of the “Icai Vēḷāḷar”**  
Chair: Davesh Soneji (University of Pennsylvania)
- The Impact of Tamil Nationalism and Dravidian Consciousness on the  
Icai Vēḷāḷar Community**  
Angaleswari S. (Holy Cross College, Trichy)
- Nominal and Corporeal Presence: “Icai Vēḷāḷar” Women and Men  
across the Early Tamil Cinema**  
Hari Krishnan (Wesleyan University)
- Selfhood after “Caste Reform”: The Vexed Status of the Icai Vēḷāḷar  
Woman Today**  
Nrithya Pillai (Independent Artist/Scholar/Activist)
- 12:00-1:00pm      **Lunch**
- 1:00-3:00pm      **Tamil Śaivism, Vēḷāḷar Ascension, and the Musical Imagination across  
Tamil India and Sri Lanka**  
Chair: Lisa Mitchell (University of Pennsylvania)
- Performing Tamil Śaiva Community: The Ōtuvār Singer of Tirumuṟai  
Hymns and Modern Tamil Religious Identities**  
Indira Peterson (Mount Holyoke College)
- Casteing the Musical Self as Vēḷāḷar in Tamil Print, 1898-1927**  
Praveen Vijayakumar (University of Pennsylvania)
- Outside the Temple Gate: Nantaṅār’s Story during the 1968 Jaffna  
Temple Entry Movement**  
Janani Mandayam Comar (University of Toronto)
- 3:00-3:15pm      **Break**

3:15-4:45pm

**Materiality, Memory, and Dalit-Bahujan Histories of the Drum**

Chair: Rupali Bansode (University of Pennsylvania)

**Invisible Technicians: Instrument Makers, Musicians, and Inventors  
in Twentieth-Century South India**

Thamarai Selvan Kannan (Indian Institute of Technology, Madras)

**The Changing Economic and Cultural Capital of the *Parai* Drum in  
South Indian History and Contemporary Social Life**

Zoe Sherinian (University of Oklahoma)

4:45-5:30pm

**Concluding Discussion**

# paper abstracts

**Singing a New *Cintu* to the Lord:  
Two *Rāga*-Based Visions of Early Twentieth-Century Indentured Tamil Communities**  
Marek Ahnee (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [EHESS], Paris)

In 1913, Pondicherian poet Nārāyaṇacāmi Kavunṭar publishes from Cuddalore three musical playlets of his compositions. Seemingly intended for a Tamil coastal audience, two of the songbooks address the migration of indentured workers to the Malay Peninsula and Mauritius Island. Cutting across the *cintu* (“news song”) and *nonṭi nāṭakam* (“cripple’s drama”) genres, Kavunṭar heavily satirizes the lives of migrants from South India in plantation colonies. During the same decade in Mauritius, third-generation Tamil Mauritian poet Vaṭivēl “Chellen” Celvam Piḷḷai (1899-1978) oversees the production of *kīrttaṇai* poems at a similar crossroad between *cintu* and *nāṭakam*. Through the medium of Srīvaiṣṇava *bhakti*, Chellen also depicts bonded labor, plantation society, and networks of patronage.

Not much is known about Kavunṭar, whereas the life of Chellen is well-documented. Composed at the time of indenture’s abolition, both textual corpora address the violence of the post-enslavement labor system. Yet, they offer seemingly opposed conclusions on the societies depicted. Kavunṭar’s plantation is a den of perdition, Chellen’s island a promise of emancipation. Using Katherine Schofield’s concept of “stereophony” (2021), I propose a comparison of these coeval works, taking into account their authors’ status, musical-literary economy, and performance contexts across the Indian Ocean. I argue that these primary sources form a consistent “*bhasha* archive” as defined by Charu Gupta, a site “where gender, caste identities and hierarchies are often ubiquitous” (2020). This vernacular archive of colonial servitude signposts a connected cultural history of South Indian indenture and the performing arts.

**The Impact of Tamil Nationalism and Dravidian Consciousness on the *Icai Vēḷāḷar* Community**  
Angaleswari S. (Holy Cross College, Trichy)

The so-called “renaissance” of Tamil literatures and arts at the turn of the twentieth century marked the instigation of a new Dravidian identity consciousness among non-Brahmin communities, which also led to the formation of a unique political identity. A space emerged for a new class of non-Brahmin political leaders from *vēḷāḷar*, *ceṭṭi*, *mutaliyār*, and other caste groups to participate in regional politics. Parallel to these political changes was a new leadership with Dravidian consciousness that emerged among the newly-formed *icai vēḷāḷar* community. Initially, their orientation was towards the regional society that they hoped would offer great opportunities to their caste. Both women and men from the *icai vēḷāḷar* community became pivotal figures in Congress and Dravidian political organizations in the mid-twentieth century. Their entry into local politics likely occurred on account of their literary and artistic skills, and not so much their power or wealth. This paper focuses on the revitalization of Tamil literature by erudite Tamil orators from the performing community, the association of *icai vēḷāḷars* with regional politics and their contribution to the Indian Independence movement and Anti-Hindi agitations. I end the paper with a brief reflection on the connections between *icai vēḷāḷars*, Tamil cinema, and politics.

**Defining the True Stage Artist:  
Commercial Tamil Drama and Capital in Twentieth-Century Madras**  
Divya Chandramouli (Harvard University)

Historiographies of modern Tamil drama separate drama troupes of the twentieth-century Madras Presidency into two categories, or two ‘streams’: one, amateur *sabhas*, founded by Pammal Campanta Mutaliyār (a member of the judicial service), and two, professional drama companies, founded by

Caṅkaratās Cuvāmikaḷ, a salt factory accountant turned drama teacher and composer. This paper traces the emergence of this distinction between amateur *sabhas* and professional companies, tracking discourses produced in periodicals and newspapers about both kinds of troupes, through the period which saw their rise (roughly from 1890-1920). In particular, this paper focuses on a series of discursive maneuvers through which the elite men of Madras – by calling for the ‘reform’ of Tamil drama – positioned amateur *sabhas* and professional companies as distinct and even oppositional entities.

This distinction between *sabhas* and companies rested on one key argument: *sabha* artists and their elite patrons insisted that company actors prioritized making money over any genuine passion for the dramatic arts and were therefore corrupting the art form through their material ambitions. Obscured by this discourse is the fact that *sabha* actors, like company actors, were invested in generating revenue from their performances. Yet the systems of patronage they relied on as well as the nuances of how they channeled these funds through the *sabha*, allowed them to appear uninterested in and unaffected by commercial matters. This paper examines the organizational structures of *sabhas* and companies, and ultimately calls for a more robust understanding of the relationship between Tamil drama, labor, and capital.

**From Cemeteries to Televisual Space:  
Mapping the Travel of *Gaana* Songs as a Form of Protest Culture**  
Karthikeyan Damodaran (University of Göttingen, Germany)

Musical forms not only challenge the dominance of the visual, and question the privileging of language and writing in the articulation of cultural life, but they have a presence and express a politics that can change the course of events and offer a platform for the articulation of dissent. *Gaana* songs emerged as a subculture on the fringes of Chennai’s slums mainly representing through an evocative reflexive rendering by the city’s poorest and marginalized, most of whom are Dalits (former untouchable castes). Drawing upon the musical forms of Afro-American Hip Hop and Rap that lays claim to the lived experience of the marginalized while talking about space and place, this paper seeks to understand *gaana* songs as a subaltern genre that provides opportunities for its practitioners to tell stories about their own life, assert their marginalized identities and resist dominance. *Gaana* songs, originally part of the death rituals either rendered in the house of a dead person or at the *sudukadu* (cemetery) seems to have been influenced by the Tamil music tradition of death rituals like *oppari* (wailing) and dirge or *maradi pattu*. *Gaana*, as a Dalit cultural idiom, despite its emerging acceptance among cross sections of the society, still prioritizes elements of Dalit culture and life and has evolved as a form of political communication. Since the establishment of the ‘Casteless Collective’, *Gaana* has become a part of progressive political agenda addressing issues like ‘right to food’, reservation, and housing and caste discrimination, thus emerging as a significant form of protest culture.

**Making Music “Mobile”:  
The Reconciliations of “Local” and “Global” Aesthetics in Carnatic and *Gaana* Musical Genres**  
Pranathi Diwakar (University of Chicago)

In this article, I investigate the effects of three different social processes that variously make Carnatic and *Gaana* musical genres “mobile”: migration, digitalization, and globalization. I show how these projects of mobility allow members of these genres to construct collective identities as simultaneously “global” and “local”. This analysis comprehends Tamil diasporas as disaggregated by caste, class, and geographic location to develop a nuanced understanding of how members situated in these disparate locations cultivate techniques of cultural belonging for themselves and successive generations. Musical tastes and affinitive genres are transported by members of the diaspora not just through their physical displacement, but also through the use of digital media platforms, which are leveraged to maintain and manage their diasporic identities and connections to the imagined homeland. Since 2014, when India entered a new digital era with increased availability and accessibility to high-speed internet on cheaply available mobile

phones, musical circulation processes have mirrored these changes in production and demand from fans across social and geographical contexts. Both the production and consumption of Gaana and Carnatic musical content are thus increasingly embedded in global circuits of taste, mediated through their discrete diasporas that participate in the construction of their aesthetics. At the same time, digital portrayals of identity in these two scenes reveal differing investments in the production of the “local” through distinct aesthetic modes of identification. This article seeks to intervene in the understanding of how this enhanced mobility of distinct aesthetics have shaped how collective identities are both reproduced and stratified across time and geography for members of the Tamil diaspora.

**Invisible Technicians:  
Instrument Makers, Musicians, and Inventors in Twentieth-Century South India**  
Thamarai Selvan Kannan (Indian Institute of Technology, Madras)

Practitioners of the performing arts were moving between regions in the twentieth century, but the makers of musical instruments did not move to colonial Madras. Instead, they found a place in between the royal court and colonial towns to establish their trade. This new geographical space formed a new community of instrument makers, that included new caste groups (cutting across caste and religious lines) coming into the profession, and also centred around materials (wood and *thol* or animal skin) that contributed to a newfound wealth in these communities. In this paper, I focus primarily on instrument makers in the Tamil-speaking regions known for Thavil drum making. Inventing and innovating on musical instruments and its materials in the colonial period brought together a range of actors -- music scholars, engineers, instrument makers, physicists, plantation workers, *thol* traders, musicians, blacksmiths and many others. Instrument making in the region brings diverse actors, multiple species, countries, spaces and materials into a complex assemblage. This paper is largely based on sources that include vernacular and English journals on industrial arts, music, trade and vocational education, writings of British administrators, industrial arts exhibition reports, district gazetteers, monographs written by colonial officials, travelers’ writings, import and export trade reports. Written records on/by instrument makers are limited so I follow the connections between the actors involved in instrumenting making, from written documents to material knowledge and oral history.

The practice of the performing arts in South India have seen lot of changes in the long twentieth century, especially in terms of geographical transitions the re-population of the arts by a range of communities. This change also indexes the social, economic, and material history of these practices in terms of caste, capital and community. Performers often collaborated with technicians like instrument makers who brought their knowledge and skills on the materiality of making instrument to bear upon performance practices. Instrument makers are barely visible in the archives and in colonial registers more generally, and therefore, neither the scholarly literature on the history of performing arts nor the history of science and technology in India have explored the knowledge practices of instrument making and its connected material histories. This paper begins with this historical understanding and attempts to bring the contributions of instrument makers into conversation with the history of the performing arts in the region. The paper uses sound studies as well as history of science and technology perspectives to understand the complex history and fluid identities of instrument makers, as well as the complex social meaning attached to instrument-making as social, material, and economic process.

**Nominal and Corporeal Presence:  
“Icai Vēḷāḷar” Women and Men across the Early Tamil Cinema**  
Hari Krishnan (Wesleyan University)

Men and women from the *icai vēḷāḷar* community have been an integral presence – in both a real and imagined sense – in the Tamil cinema since its inception. In this paper, I map the complex ways in which this representation operated on screen from roughly the years 1930 to 1950. On the one hand, naming, logophobia, and caste-based slurs and ridicule pervade cinematic invocations of the community. Women



performers in particular, are often depicted as lascivious, money-hungry courtesans, or as exploited victims, while the figure of the male *naṭṭuvaṇṇār* (dance-master) in particular, becomes a comedic trope. On the other hand, individuals from these communities also participated in, and therefore to some degree enabled, such representations. Moreover, while derogatory terms like *tēvaṭṭiya*, *tāci*, *tācikulam*, and others were regularly used to index women from the community, the politically-charged term *icai vēḷāḷar*, which had just been coined in the late 1920s, remained wholly absent in the early cinema, even while it was contemporaneously being mobilized in the public sphere at-large. Indeed, none of the “stars” of the early cinema used this term to refer to their social location, nor did the print ephemera that celebrated their stardom. Using a range of archival materials and films, this paper thinks critically about caste and the social categories through which the early Tamil cinema expresses itself, and about the social habitus in which subaltern representation is given space in this medium.

**Outside the Temple Gate:  
Nantaṇār’s Story during the 1968 Jaffna Temple Entry Movement**  
Janani Mandayam Comar (University of Toronto)

Throughout the twentieth century artists, the popular Tamil Śaiva saint Nantaṇār was the subject of numerous performative and literary works including five films. His legend has served as an entry point for reflecting on caste, ethics, and the body in contemporary society as he is one of few Dalit saints part of the Hindu religious world. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to this saint’s rich narratives outside of India. The well-known Sri Lankan poet R. Murugaiyan (Murukaiyaṇ, 1935- 2009) wrote the verse drama (*kavitaināṭakam*) *Kōpuravācal (The Temple Gate, 1969)* retelling Nantaṇār’s life story for the stage. I use the drama to consider how Nantaṇār’s narrative was a telling choice to heal the internal strife in the Śaiva Jaffna Tamil community. Murugaiyan’s work comes on the heels of the 1968 Temple Entry movement in Jaffna and makes a plea to end ritual-based pollution restrictions on oppressed caste communities. Moreover, the Temple Entry Movement also marked an important moment for performance whereby left-leaning poets and intellectuals wrote several mythological plays to advocate for Dalit and oppressed community rights.

Following the call of Ben-Herut, Keune, and Monius (2019) to pay critical attention to the way identity and its counterpart, the ‘other,’ are constructed in bhakti discourse, I argue that Murukaiyaṇ triangulates three distinct identities, ‘brahmin,’ ‘Dalit,’ and Nantaṇār and attempts to hermeneutically merge them into a single shared Tamil Śaiva identity. Furthermore, I consider the way *The Temple Gate* relates to Tamil Śaivism in the way that it theorizes impurity. Impurity, *pulai*, is not an indelible mark of birth but rather something acquired through poor actions, and Murukaiyaṇ capitalizes on this characterization to argue for access to temples regardless of caste. This understanding of *pulai* is in line with Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy, and I argue that Murukaiyaṇ effectively uses it to create ‘social inclusivity’ (Keune 2021) in opposition to the orthodox Jaffna elites who adhered to the same philosophy.

**Performing Tamil Śaiva Community:  
The Ōtuvār Singer of Tirumuṛai Hymns and Modern Tamil Religious Identities**  
Indira Peterson (Mount Holyoke College)

The *bhakti* hymns to Śiva in Tamil, authored by saint-poets in the 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, are the foundational texts of Tamil Śaiva devotional religion. They form the bulk of the canon of poetic scripture (*tirumuṛai*) of the Tamil Śaiva sect, which centers on temple worship and the Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy, propounded by late-medieval non-brahman teachers and propagated by *maṭam* and *āṭīṇam* monastic institutions. In *Poems to Śiva*, my 1989 book on the *Tēvāram*, I had argued that, for contemporary Tamil Śaiva devotees, listening to the performance of *tirumuṛai* in a unique musical style by male ritual singers called *ōtuvār* was a treasured mode of accessing the powerful devotion of the saint-poets. This paper critically examines the evolving dynamics and implications of new forms and contexts of *ōtuvār* performance from the middle of the twentieth century to the present.

Over the course of the twentieth century, *ōtuvārs* have become scholar-musicologists, teachers of hymns to lay devotees, and, most important of all, performers of *tirumuṛai* music concerts (*kaccēri*) and discourses at public venues. The *ōtuvār* has emerged in Tamil modernity, particularly in the urban milieu of Madras/Chennai, as a public figure – in some cases, as a charismatic exemplar and teacher – mediating a uniquely Tamil Śaiva brand of *bhakti* devotion to large audiences. The elevation of the *ōtuvār* and the proliferation of *tirumuṛai* concerts in the metropolitan soundscape came about as part of the promotion, by various Tamil Śaiva agents (*ātīṇam* institutions, scholars, lay devotees), of a modern identity for their sect, carried out in complex contestations and collaborations with other groups engaged in redefining Tamil cultural and religious identities. Examining the careers and performances of prominent *ōtuvārs*, I argue that, for Tamil Śaivas today, the *ōtuvār* and his public performance function as markers of a distinctive, modern Tamil Śaiva sectarian community. This outcome is in large part due to the new-found status, roles, and agency of *ōtuvārs* themselves, as custodians of tradition as well as engineers of cultural innovation. In contested landscapes of religious and cultural performance dominated by heterogeneous styles of devotional song in influential medial forms (including cinema), *ōtuvār* singers have developed new vocal and musical strategies for performing the very difference and distinction of *tirumuṛai* singing that index it as the authentic performance of Tamil Śaiva devotion. Among other issues, I address here the positioning of modern *ōtuvār* performance in relation to the historically elite non-brahman caste perspective of the Tamil Śaiva sect and to competing religious identitarian discourses in the Tamil public sphere.

**Selfhood after “Caste Reform”: The Vexed Status of the *Icai Vēḷāḷar* Woman Today**  
Nrihya Pillai (Independent Artist/Scholar/Activist)

The reimagined caste name and identity “*icai vēḷāḷar*” are both a direct result of the twin processes of social reform and criminalization that occurred within former hereditary courtesan castes. The sedimentation of this new caste identity not only further enabled the appropriation of art and culture that were part of exclusive performance traditions within these courtesan communities, but also strongly established caste endogamy and marriage as the way for a respectable future for women from these caste locations. As a contemporary woman artist and activist from this community, in this paper I trace what I think of as the deeply vexed predicament of many women in the community. I argue that the emphasis on caste endogamous marriages as “the solution” presented by *icai vēḷāḷar* “caste reform” did little to imagine progressive futures for women. In the field of performance, the caste reinvention enabled ongoing alliances between the new Brahmin women dancers and male dance-masters (*naṭṭuvaṇārs*) from the community. Many young women of my generation remain oblivious of the historical processes of the early twentieth century, and suffer the pain of stigma without a consciousness of issues related to caste, gender and sexuality, or cultural nationalism. I ask if there can be a place for radical feminist anti-caste thought in the lives of modern women from these locations, and why there is such massive resistance to such an idea both from within and outside these communities.

**Pastness in Performance:  
Change and Continuity in the *Margamkali* Tradition of the Syrian Christians of Malabar**  
George Pioustin (University of California-Los Angeles)

*Margamkali*, a round dance for social gatherings with the accompanying sung poetry that narrates the advent of Thomas the Apostle in Malabar Coast is considered as the main performance tradition of the Syrian Christians in Kerala where it has survived for many centuries. This paper is a study on the change and continuity of the performance tradition of *margamkali*, with the objective of reviewing this musical performance at the intersection of religion and politics in Kerala. Arnold Bake’s survey of music throughout the Indian subcontinent in the 1930s and its ‘Restudy’ by Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin in the 1980s provide a significant audio-visual source of information about the tradition of *margamkali*, its survival and transformation. The four decades between these two collections saw some of

the turning points in the sociopolitical life of the Syrian Christian community. By comparing the two collections of 1938 and 1984 and by investigating major events like Indian Independence (1947), Kerala state formation (1956), *Vimochana samaram* translated as liberation struggle (1959) and the Vatican Council (1960-64), I attempt to study the festivalization, Sanskritization, modernization, and institutionalization of *margamkali*. This paper seeks to study the transformation of Kerala society in general and the Syrian Christian community in particular within the span of half a century, by looking at the remodelling of *margamkali* as a cultural re-enactment that showcases the antiquity and heritage of the community. By exploring the past and engaging with the present, my research focuses on the central question:- How has the eventful mid – twentieth century shaped the present form of this age-old tradition?

### **The Changing Economic and Cultural Capital of the *Paṛai* Drum in South Indian History and Contemporary Social Life**

Zoe Sherinian (University of Oklahoma)

This paper addresses the historic and recent changes of the status of the Dalit *paṛai* frame drum and drummers. I examine temple iconography from several periods in Tamil history from the eighth to seventeenth centuries (across Pandiyan, Chola, and Nayak dynastic rule) to consider the changing status of the *paṛai*, its relationship to elite culture as well as parallel changes in the concept of untouchability. I then consider the dynamics of recent economic and social changes for *paṛai/tappu* artists within the context of folklorization through non-ritual stage performances, Tamil cinema recordings, and ideology within political or “awareness” songs. I analyze examples from the experience and compositions of *paṛai* master, A. Manimaran that discuss various struggles of *paṛai* artists. This research contributes to nuancing a complex history of the status of the *paṛai* and *paṛai* drummers using interdisciplinary methods from ethnomusicological and art history as well as extensive changes in the last twenty years through biographical and musical analysis of hereditary *paṛai* artists.

### **Text, Trace, and Tune: Genealogies of Musical Pluralism in Modern Tamil Nadu**

Davesh Soneji (University of Pennsylvania)

Since the mid-nineteenth century, communities of Tamil Muslims and Catholics from southern Tamil Nadu have engaged in the production, performance, and consumption of musical genres such as the *kīrttana* and *patam*, often codified in the form of printed “music chapbooks” (*caṅkīta puttakaṅkaḷ*). In this paper, I examine how these genres are fundamentally mobile and flexible, and cannot be historicized exclusively in relation to upper-caste Hindu social identities and courtly histories. On the one hand, many Islamic and Catholic compositions were wholly innovative and drew from ritual, literary, and philosophical contexts that were independent of upper-caste Brahmanic musical forms. On the other hand, some of these compositions reveal deep, self-conscious interactions between diverse communities of music composers and performers, often linked through the practice or aesthetics of the popular Tamil theatre (*nāṭakam*). Connected through the reproducible sonic trace of the “tune” (*meṭṭu* in Tamil), compositions in these genres moved across a range of aesthetic, social, and religious registers. In shifting our focus from the idea of the “classical *rāga*” onto the popular tune, I demonstrate how these neglected Tamil Muslim and Catholic musical compositions illustrate the normative nature of sonic borrowing or repurposing in the realm of popular music prior to the 1920s. This robust and fundamentally polyvocal musical world was near-completely eclipsed by the 1930s, when music undergoes a radical transformation under the framework of cultural nationalism and “classical Karnāṭak music” emerges in Madras.

**Is there Singing in the Time of Crisis?:  
Sounding the Flood Songs of Coastal and Riverine Malabar in the Indian Ocean**  
Ihsan Ul-Ithisam (University of Chicago)

This study concerns the flood songs of Malabar written as performative literary texts in Arabi-Malayalam language that was prevalent among the Muslims of Malabar. They were written as eye-witness accounts of historical floods that inflicted upon the coastal and hinterlands of monsoon Malabar ashore to the Western Indian Ocean. Flood songs, as a genre, offers a combined understanding of ecology, religion, and performance of the recurrent floods that occurred in the twentieth century Malabar. It also provides details about the importance of collective memorialization, and commemoration strategies adopted to record the seasonal disastrous floods, still unruly in the region. This paper posits two fundamental questions towards flood songs and attempt to answer; firstly, how the flood songs ideologically defined and internalized the origin and cause of environmental disasters? Secondly, how these songs aesthetically expressed the religious experience of the flood, the adaptation, and the management of the risk? This study investigates the unique manifestation of spirituality, music/sound, and the nature/environment in the flood songs of Malabar, which remains unexplored.

**Casteing the Musical Self as *Vēḷāḷar* in Tamil Print, 1898-1927**  
Praveen Vijayakumar (University of Pennsylvania)

This paper examines a single Tamil printed text, entitled *Naṭanāti Vāttiya Rañcaṇam* or “The Pleasing [Sounds of] Dancing and Instrumental Music,” authored by Pacuvantaṇai Kaṅkaimuttu Piḷḷai (1837-1920) and published in 1898. Kaṅkaimuttu belonged to the *ciṅṅamēḷam* community of hereditary performers comprising of *devadāsī* women and *naṭṭuvaṇars*, and lived much of his life in Madurai. I argue that the work illustrates a process in which a male hereditary performer with the surname “Piḷḷai” claimed affinity to the larger *vēḷāḷar* group – a historically socio-economically and culturally dominant landowning caste group from the riverine parts of northern Tamil Nadu – by casteing himself as *vēḷāḷar* in Tamil print by invoking genealogies centred around Śaiva Siddhānta. In some ways, we might consider texts, such as this, as being reflective of a “prehistory” of the *icai vēḷāḷar*. Figures like Kaṅkaimuttu were vying for close identification with the category of *vēḷāḷar* decades before the invention of the caste group “*icai vēḷāḷar*” on the eve of *devadāsī* reform in 1927. The paper will not only elaborate on how a male hereditary performer casted himself as a *vēḷāḷar* but also bring our attention to the burgeoning practice of defining, genealogizing and systematizing caste groups in vernacular print during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The *vēḷāḷar* group was defined, genealogized and systematized in different genres in print during this period. Many of these authors claimed the title of Tamil pundits, for example, the author of *Varuṇa Cintāmaṇi* (1901) Kaṅakapai Piḷḷai, and many who spoke from the standpoint of (or as custodians of) the performing arts were members from the *ciṅṅamēḷam* and *periyamēḷam* community, most of whom were men.

**From Sweet and Ringing to Husky and Raw:  
The Semiotics of Vocal Timbre in Tamil Playback Singing**  
Amanda Weidman (Bryn Mawr College)

This talk will examine the shifting aesthetics and enregistered meanings of singing voices within Tamil cinema between the 1950s and the late 2010s, contrasting the gendered vocal ideals that developed for playback singers in the decades following India’s independence, the 1950s-80s, with those cultivated in the post-liberalization period, the 1990s-2010s. In this earlier period, idealized male voices, associated with heroic and morally upstanding male characters, were described as *ganam* (strong, weighty) and *velli* (bright, ringing). Idealized female voices, associated with female characters within the normative bounds of kinship and marriage, were relatively high in pitch, with a slightly nasal timbre, and produced with a

distinct absence of projection, all characteristics that contributed to their prized *kuralinimai* (voice sweetness). Since the 1990s, this distinctly gendered order of voices has been replaced by two new vocal aesthetics, the “husky” voice, characterized by breathiness and softness, used to voice youthful, cosmopolitan, post-liberalization subjects, and the “raw” voice,” based on a contrasting aesthetic of loudness, roughness or harshness, associated with subalternity and “local” Tamil identity. The admission of these “new voices” since the 1990s is not simply an opening up of the field; rather, previous hierarchies of gendered respectability have been reframed along other axes of difference: caste, class, and racialized/ethnolinguistic identity. I explore this reconfiguration of the semiotic economy of vocal timbre by examining how the qualia of the singing voice gain meaning both from their attachment to particular genres and film-internal features, and from the stance they take toward earlier vocal norms. Finally, I explore how a new set of singers, working both within and beyond Tamil cinema since 2018, have challenged the terms of this semiotic economy.

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