

## Performing Auspiciousness and Inauspiciousness in *Parai Mēlam* Music Culture in Jaffna, Sri Lanka

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background

*Parai mēlam*<sup>1</sup> music occupies a significant position in Jaffna Tamil culture, and has not been discussed much ethnomusicologically and anthropologically in terms of caste purity – pollution and religiosity (Valarmathi 2009; Jeyakantha 2005; Dumont 1980). For two reasons, *parai mēlam* music is identified as an inauspicious type as follows: (1) funeral is an inauspicious ritual in Jaffna Saiva ritual tradition. As *parai mēlam* music takes place in a funeral ritual, this music is recognized as an inauspicious; (2) people consider this music as an inauspicious because performers (*paraiyar*) are from the so-called low caste category and knows as untouchable. Although the performers argue that this music is a part of the Tamil music culture, the dominant caste people in Jaffna always recognize this instrument and its music as inauspicious because the performers belong to a low-caste category in the Jaffna caste system. Also, this drum is seen as a funeral drum. In the Hindu ritual context, funeral ritual is an inauspicious ritual. Even though *parai mēlam* performance contributes to the funeral and religious rituals, it is often called inauspicious. However, there is no intensive ethnomusicological study on Jaffna *parai mēlam* music culture, questioning why it is so? As an ethnomusicological study of Jaffna *parai mēlam* music is a broad area of study, this paper focuses on performing auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in *parai mēlam* music.

#### Aims

This study aims to study the position and placement of *parai mēlam* music in Tamil culture in the context of changing modern Jaffna Tamil Hindu society. How do members of the Jaffna Tamil community decide what is auspicious and inauspicious? How are the music rhythms created, performed, taught, and continued?

#### Method

This study uses ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and key-informant interviews in addition to ethnomusicological perspectives and methods. I gathered qualitative data from the fieldwork conducted among the *paraiyar* community at different villages in Jaffna.

#### Results

*Parai mēlam* music is often identified as an inauspicious as it is, in particular, commonly performed for funeral rituals of high castes in Jaffna. *Parai mēlam* performers are from a low caste, namely the *paraiyar* community. “Structural replication” and “downward displacement” (McGilvray 1983) in addition to “pollution” and “purity” (Dumont 1980) have characterized the nature of inauspiciousness of *parai mēlam* music and performers. Due to the low caste identity, ritual pollution and superior consciousness of *pēriya mēlam* music and karnatic music (South Indian classical music) (Terada 2005; Dumont 1980), this music and its performers are seen as untouchables, despite performance being mandatory for high-caste funeral rites. Unlike wedding or puberty rituals, Jaffna Tamil Hindus identify the funeral as an inauspicious ritual. Thus, Jaffna Tamil Hindu rituals are seen in two folds: auspicious rituals and inauspicious rituals. This categorization influences Jaffna Tamil Hindus to perceive the music with this dichotomy. Uniqueness of this musical tradition acquaints duality of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in composing rhythms. It is the only musical tradition that holds dual positions in religious related and non-religious related fields.

#### Conclusions

People are sometimes not practicing with this drum because it is inauspicious due to the performers being of low caste and its association with the funeral ritual. Symbolic and cultural expression of *parai mēlam* is most significant in caste and religious contexts in Jaffna. In world drum tradition, the *parai mēlam* music has a long history, but unfortunately this performing art is diminishing due to various factors. Different dialogues and perspectives are built on this tradition and some argue the need to discourage learning and performing *parai mēlam* while others wish to encourage it. Reputed temples still maintain this music because it is always mandatory for high-caste funeral rituals.

#### Keywords

auspiciousness; inauspiciousness; *parai mēlam* music; Jaffna Tamil culture; ethnomusicology

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<sup>1</sup>A double headed cylindrical drum played with two sticks.