

# The Conflict of the Subaltern and the Popular in South Indian Indie Music

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## I

The optics of this paper lies in the relationship between the popular and the subaltern and an exercise to further question this association with the help of select South Indian Indie music. The existing enquiries on the nexus between the popular and subaltern have been voiced by scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, Swati Chattopadhyay etc in the Indian context. Their scholarship indisputably challenges the existing normalized mainstream national historiography and thereby proposes alternative models to renegotiate the interconnectedness between the popular and the subaltern. This can be traced back to a single pertinent question, which is, can the popular be the subaltern and vice versa. This paper will progress by taking up some of the propositions made by these scholars and will try to initiate a discussion on the current evolutionary trajectory of the popular and the subaltern, with a sampling of select South Indian Indie music.

South Indian indie music is arguably the latest addition to the cultural, political, and creative restructuring through which the Indian music industry is going through. The popularity of South Indian indie music is contingent to the socio-cultural ecosystem that India is projecting to the global audience. Within the current waves of neo-liberalism, market culture, consumerism, religious nationalism and media forces, South Indian indie music is potent with topical concerns, of which the ones that encompass subaltern issues are of interest to this paper. Although South Indian indie music is gaining popularity in the global front, it is yet to be systematically studied as an academic area of research due to many reasons. The popular and mainstream cultural signifier of Indian music has been Bollywood music, which is paradoxically not a representative genre of the whole of India. Given the fact that a credible and an authentic representation of the whole of India through a singular category of music is an impossible task and due to the topical concerns mentioned above, Bollywood music became the simplified signifier of Indian music.

The interstice of this cultural domain is where South Indian indie music can be located. This indie music narrates local stories of national importance, stories that fall out through the crevices of the mainstream narrative of Bollywood music. The existing polarity between the northern and southern parts of India conveniently exclude the voices of select geographical places while claiming to project a national imaginary. Thus, moving beyond the problematics of nepotism, star culture and celebrity cult status, the South Indian music industry has been witnessing the production of a new trend of independent (indie) music since 2000. Along with the micro-narratives produced by South Indian indie music, it is imperative to interrogate the context and way they propose alternative narratives to destabilise the existing national historiography.

The indulgences of digital technology and the ensuing technological modernity have enabled musicians to self-fashion themselves with the cool culture of music genres across the world. This consumption of music genres from all around the world have helped them reimagine the contours of

music production in India and at the same time, use music as a potent rhetoric of resistance. South Indian indie music has been substantially influenced by the American Rap and Hip-Hop culture. While analysing the Rap in the Indian musical landscape through singers like Mika, Honey Singh, Haze Kay, etc, Bindu Menon suggests the birth of an “emergent modernity which is deeply implicated within the global” (Menon 235). This proliferation and consumption of technologically mediated music both in terms of the medium (internet) and the techniques (mixing and use of electronic rhythms) used for making music is indicative of a youth sub-culture which as contended in this current paper, has evolved into a counter-culture movement during the past five years. While, according to Bindu Menon,

Much of the work of the underground band so far is not a direct political commentary, but critical of mainstream art and music practice in Kerala. Their subsequent productions are tenuous attempts to locate themselves in the global map of urban youth subculture and be at home by reinvigorating Malayalam language. They are equally proclaiming the hip hop artist as a continuum in a long tradition of European as well as other music cultures. (Menon 237)

The South Indian indie music selected for this paper are the music composed by Vedan, Arivu and Adarsh Kumar Aniyal. Even though the existing music binaries sell that classical music is for upper caste and folk music is for the lower caste, young Dalit musicians create a new variant of Indian music to question the existing caste divides and its related provocations. Radhika Kumar’s essay, “Songs of Protest” observes,

Young Dalit musicians and artists like Samos are increasingly using the medium of music to challenge upper-caste hegemony and expose hypocrisy, which finds parallels in the way African American rapper Joyner Lucas uncovers what he calls “closet racism.” (...) The framing of this culture draws on the collective Dalit memory of suffering violence and subordination, which spurred attempts to freshly make and mould an identity that incorporates cultural symbols, practices, and icons. (Kumar np)

The music produced by these select artists have been heavily drawn from Hip-hop and Rap music traditions. At present, its production and circulation are mediated by technological innovations. It has unleashed an entire historical baggage which has been silenced for the longest time, thereby interrogating the existing historiography of the Indian nation-state, and destabilising its political foundations.

## II

Under the aegis of the Subaltern studies group (1982) in India and the Subaltern-Popular Multi-Campus Research Group (2004) at the University of California, several pertinent dialogues on the subaltern and the popular have already taken place. Some of them will be highlighted in this paper. In order to conceptualise a constructive dialogue between the popular and the subaltern, it is relevant to locate the reason and context of the conflict between these two categories.

The history of the ‘popular’ and popular culture can be traced back to cultural studies and to the establishment of the Birmingham School in 1964. In order to further contextualise this, this paper looks at the word ‘culture’ which can be traced back to its Latin roots, ‘*cultura*’ which meant ‘cultivation.’ Therefore, in its first usage, culture stood for something that needs to be cultivated and something that needs refinement. However, with the changing socio-economic conditions and developments in media technology, the word ‘culture’ started incorporating other meanings to its rhetoric so much so that, by the twentieth century it stood for taste, practices, beliefs, habits, and customs of elite communities. However, a collateral side of this dependence on taste, refinement and culture was the distinction between high culture and low culture. Consequently, culture became a marker of social distinction and a site of class negotiations. This distinction discarded or eliminated the culture and cultural practices of the masses while defining the culture of a period or culture of a

country. Alternatively, it reflected the anxiety of the people in power and their need to reinstate their authority over what they wanted to accept as culture. Writers and cultural scholars like Matthew Arnold, F. R Leavis, T. S Eliot, etc were the torchbearers of high culture and elitist aggrandisement. This kind of cultural elitism eventually paved the way to a massive reorganisation of culture, which questioned the existing discriminatory model of culture. The setting up of the Birmingham school facilitated alternative possibilities of making sense of culture and enabled the dismantling of universal standards of artistic value and merit which was accessible only to the elite communities.

Cultural Studies deals with a study of the every day and focuses on the common day experiences and social relations that could define one's identity. With increase in literacy rates and employment opportunities which were enabled through the industrial revolution, popular culture started gaining traction. Here, the boundaries between high and low cultures were broken down. Mass production of consumer goods introduced homogeneity of products while the 'high literature' of the yore days became subjects for adaptations and retellings. Hence, texts and art accessible only to elite sections of the society became popular among the masses. Similarly, the art and texts produced by the working class entered the realm of being called culture.

The possibilities of mass media and the awareness it created among the masses further helped in re-structuring Cultural Studies as a discipline. There also lies a critique that popular culture is a rebranding of the leftovers of high culture. However, it has been taken into consideration that even when popular culture drew inspiration from the high culture that existed, the new culture is undoubtedly a cultural variant which was derived from and produced by the working classes. From the restrictive model of high and low culture, Cultural Studies could re-negotiate with popular culture and make it more accessible and democratic. Therefore, popular culture has its roots in the history of Cultural Studies, collapse of high culture and the democratisation of literary works. To cite an example, the works of William Shakespeare or a painting by Van Gogh which once stood for high culture has been made 'popular' and accessible by mass media and its related stakeholders.

The popular and the subaltern have been influenced foundationally by Marxist social theory, the participation of the masses and the other concurrent movements in critical theory and practice but, the history and context of both these categories are poles apart. If the nature of the popular can be traced back to the resistance against elite culture, art, history, literature and politics, the question of the subaltern can be traced back to the Gramscian notes on hegemony, changes in economic production, dominant political formations, maintenance of subaltern as a category and the formation of a non-inclusive state. This paper will progress by analyzing how our contemporary culture negotiates with this existing conflict between the subaltern and the popular. Gramsci states,

When the subaltern becomes leader and is in charge, the mechanistic conception will sooner or later represent an imminent danger, and there will be a revision of a whole mode of thinking because the mode of existence will have changed. The reach and the ascendancy of the 'force of circumstance' will diminish. Why? Basically, because the 'subaltern' who yesterday was a 'thing' is now no longer a 'thing' but a 'historical person'; whereas yesterday he was not responsible because he was 'resisting' an extraneous will, he is now responsible, no longer a 'resistor' but an active agent. (Gramsci 353)

As contended above, once the subaltern becomes an 'active agent', the subaltern actively transgresses the limits of representation. The subaltern categories who have faced issues of representation in the past could mark their resistance against the state, which is enabled by various social and political processes. The role of social media in enabling subaltern representation is quite substantial. More importantly, the modes chosen for their representation have drawn strategies from indigenous practices, traditional knowledge, and modernized audio-visual communication networks. Vedan's "Voice of Voiceless" (2020) and "Vaa" (2021) holds 4.9 million and 3.1 million views<sup>1</sup> respectively on YouTube. His rap music voices the discrimination based on caste, class, skin colour and religion while it also remarks the power of a single spark that can topple down kingdoms and states. The stage name chosen by the artist is 'Vedan' which means hunter and this is also a political narrative as the

artist and the art stands for those communities that have been oppressed and discriminated against for arbitrary reasons. It is also about his own community of hunters which has been ostracized by the mainstream narratives of the state.

The video of the song “Voice of Voiceless” (2020) follows Hirandas Murali (stage name, Vedan) rapping about different kinds of discrimination, mostly in the form of questions. The song is filled with several subterranean images like the fields prior to irrigation, soil beneath the earth and sun, slaves buried in the earth etc which are reminders of a time before the present. There are several frames that contain faces of young children and in the other frames Vedan himself comes in with a very aggressive face and voice. The rap portions of this song are indicative of a collective angst and annoyance towards caste-based discrimination. Vedan thus becomes a signifier of a young, strong, and rooted rebel through the medium of contemporary indie music.

Similarly, his song “Vaa” (2021) which can be translated as ‘come’, is an outcry to rebellion. The video mostly consists of seafaring communities and he raps against discrimination, calling and mobilising people to revolt against it. On the official YouTube page of both these songs, the English translation of the songs are also published which is indicative of an expected cosmopolitan audience. Aparna Nandakumar in her insightful study on youth as producers of culture observes that popular music and cinema merges with several socio-cultural markers. In her case study she suggests,

- (i) a paradigm shift in the history of alternative (non-film) popular music in Kerala, (ii) the contribution of social networking and media-sharing internet platforms towards this emergence, (iii) the political and cultural potential of the figure of the ‘rebel’ youth, (iv) the cultural production of style, and (v) a cosmopolitanism centred around the ‘native’ or the ‘local.’ (Nandakumar 189-190)

Therefore, this paper argues that the subaltern (as in the case of Vedan and several others) would cross paths with the popular, when mediated by creative and alternative processes of voicing resistance. Popular cultural forms like music and cinema are rechartering the routes to make the subaltern more visible. This new site of engagement through mass media calls for a reconfiguration of culture and community. Simultaneously, the Gramscian take on the subaltern’s lack of representation will be dismantled here. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak’s argument that subalternity is a subject position which is devoid of an identity will be displaced as well. She observes,

If the thinking of subalternity is taken in the general sense, its lack of access to mobility may be a version of singularity. Subalternity cannot be generalised according to hegemonic logic. That is what makes it subaltern. Yet it is a category and therefore repeatable. Since the general sense is always mired in narrow senses, any differentiations between subalternity and the popular must thus concern itself with singular cases. (Spivak 475)

The subaltern becomes the popular through representation. In this modality, the subaltern is not any more the singular and the unverifiable. Subalternity is not a position without identity rather it becomes an assertive entity that holds the potential to challenge the existing historiography. When Vikki Gayakavad utilizes Spivak’s arguments for his study on the social mobility of the subaltern, he argues that in one’s assertion of subalternity, one would be negating one’s own subalternity because, if the subaltern subject is claiming that one is a subaltern, then it implies that one has moved away from the position of being a subaltern. As he points out,

In the quote, ‘I am subaltern’ is a citation. It cites the one who cannot exist (hence, ‘no one’) and hence the citation is an impossible statement, or impossibility of such a statement. Since it is a citation, it does not speak in the voice of the one who is not there (non-being) but is being spoken for. The citation can also be read as a negation of the ‘one’ who becomes ‘no one’ the moment it speaks. (Gayakavad 19)

This process has a bathetic quality to it. If the subaltern becomes the popular, then it marks the demise of the subaltern. This might in fact make us wonder whether the creation of a category called the subaltern was a political act or not? At the heart of the experience of subalternity lies the politics of discrimination. Different machinery that works on this politics of discrimination ensures that the

subaltern will never become the popular as it can otherwise potentially harm the systemic hierarchies and hegemonic opportunism. Undoubtedly, the subaltern can merge with the popular once it loses its essential trait of being a subaltern. In this context, the subaltern will possess an identity which nullifies what a subaltern would otherwise stand for, which according to Ranajit Guha is “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (Guha 44).

Another paradigm of conflict between the popular and the subaltern emerges from the question of agency. ‘Agency’ according to Spivak, “was the name I gave to institutionally validated action, assuming collectivity, distinguished from the formation of the subject, which exceeds the outlines of individual intention.” (Spivak 476). This statement is diametrically opposite to how the subaltern category is otherwise projected. The position of subalternity implicates a lack of agency here as it is institutionally invalid, and lacks subjectivity, and collectivity. If the subaltern claims an agency and a voice, they are no more a subaltern. The shedding of a subordinated position and to claim an agency requires several mediations which as this paper argues transforms the subaltern into the popular garb. The proposed mediations of the subaltern deviate from the existing models where the subaltern had to be represented and spoken for by concerned and resourceful categories, as they cannot represent or speak by themselves. In the context of South Indian Indie music, statistics prove that it is inadequate to speak and represent the subaltern as they have claimed an agency for themselves.

The evolving arena of indie music could be a solution to the problem of infrastructure, which Spivak has mentioned in her essay. The existing infrastructure of the state does not enable the subaltern voices to be heard. The systemic problems control the mobility and existence of the subaltern. Hence, the subaltern must find creative ways to dismantle the existing torn canvas of the state infrastructure and propose a renewed state machinery and infrastructure “so that they can, when necessary, when the public sphere calls for it, synecdochise themselves without identitarian exploitation (sometimes well-meaning but equally destructive), from above”. (Spivak 482) These attempts will be effective only when the alternative infrastructure can identify the specific reasons for inequality that tamper with the subaltern identity and their inclusion in the state narrative. This will rekindle the subaltern’s possibility of being a citizen, the one who will have the right to question, subvert and reject the same rights. Consequently, the politics of the subaltern will intervene with national history and culture. Furthermore, subaltern practices can be posited against the essential national historiography.

Adarsh Kumar Aniyal’s “Raven” (2019) draws inspiration and repeats the style of the popular Malayalam hip-hop music video “Native Bapa” (2013) by the band Mappila Lahala. In “Raven”, the folklore artist Ambujakshan plays the main role of a father as he narrates the story of his missing son. As the video progresses, the actor details about the oppression faced by certain communities in the country, the arrogant negligence of authorities to help those who belong to downtrodden communities and the ostracization that his son had to face when he tried to climb the social ladder. As the frame suddenly shifts into a long shot, the audience will find that the speaker-father of the narrative is not alone. Rather he has an entire group of men who are distressed and fed up with the systemic conditions of the state and are standing behind him. They represent a group and a force; hints at the collective identity. The way the father-speaker is portrayed shows that he is rooted in tradition through his conduct and sartorial identifiers, whereas the son is caricatured as the rebel son stereotype. The son wanted to grow his hair and colour his hair and he is part of the cosmopolitan cool culture. The rebel son stereotype could be an indication of a youth subculture which is showing their distress towards the draconian restrictions and suffocating traditions imposed upon them through different ideological apparatuses like family, law and educational institutions, which eventually curb their creativity and growth as individuals.

As the paper argues, by claiming an agency and an institutionally validated action plan, the subaltern becomes a ‘popular’ force. Within the context of youth subculture, a youth subculture

emerging from the subaltern can be posited against the mainstream national narrative of culture. Moreover, when the cosmopolitan cool culture has been facilitated by the liberalisation policies of India, it has further penetrated the hitherto marginalised regions of the nation as well. This reinvention of culture and cultural symbols are evident in the select South Indian indie music. Therefore, the proposed youth subculture is a cultural transaction with regional histories and subaltern interventions. The subaltern youth subculture can be contested as a space where the subaltern and the popular merge and grapple with each other, echoing the ‘contact zone’ of Mary Louise Pratt<sup>2</sup>. This has been enabled by media technologies and other economic and political processes. For example, the post-liberalisation policies in India facilitated the youth from marginalised sections in India to emulate western markers of modernity in terms of different cultural markers of consumption. It could be in terms of clothing, consumption of alcohol, use of cigarettes, branded products like Coke, jeans culture, break-dancing, hip-hop music and so on and so forth. As Aparna Nandakumar writes, “the figure of Prabhudeva<sup>3</sup> is probably one of the early sites through which South Indian youth started to consume the fashion and break-dancing style associated with urban hip-hop.” (Nandakumar 192). Both Vedan and Aniyal are from the evolving music scene in Kerala whereas Arivu is from the Tamil music industry.

Arivu (Arivarasu Kalainesan) is a Tamil rapper known for his unique mixing of folk and contemporary forms of music. He is a member of the indie band, “The Casteless Collective”, and also has solo releases and co-produced singles. His album *Therukural* (‘Voice of the Street’, 2019) can be treated as a reimagination of *Tirrukural* (extant Tamil classical text or loosely translated as ‘sacred verses’) in which he calls out social hypocrites who try to speak for what is trending without acknowledging the seriousness of the issue in “Kalla Mouni” (‘Sly Silent Fellow’), caste and class based discrimination in “Anti Indian”, a riveting reminder of women who were victims to political and environmental causes in “Snowlin”<sup>4</sup> and a few other songs as well. Arivu’s emphasis on *Gaana* and *Oppari*<sup>5</sup> music styles are blatant cultural positioning to rescript the existing caste sensibilities in India. As the name of their band emphasises, this album stands for a collective that can oust the category called subaltern which according to Guha “is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.” (Guha 35). The South Indian indie music industry has thus provided a visual and aural platform which encompasses the rhetoric of resistance and the voice of dissent.

Noticeably, the lyrics of indie music is generally a blatant questioning of authority and a subversion of the mainstream cultural imaginary. When it is augmented by an upbeat rhythm it can mobilize people and result in a collective experience of frenzy and euphoria. Therefore, it is imperative to locate the politics of rhetoric while analyzing indie music. Arivu’s another popular hit was “Enjoy Enjaami” (‘Enjoy My Dear’ 2021) co-created with Dhee. This also features the *Oppari* style, probably at the heart of this music score while telling the story of a rustic countryside, grandmother’s lore, ancestors’ lands and for uniting the people to form a collective in order to reimagine and rescript their present-day histories. The lyrics of “Enjoy Enjaami” goes as “*the lakes and ponds belong to the dogs, foxes and cats too*”<sup>6</sup> is also a clarion call to dismantle the humanist model of one’s world perception too. Karthik Raja Karuppusamy’s study on the egalitarian outlook of Arivu in “Enjoy Enjaami” states,

It is not merely a product of his individual genius, rather it is an artistic effort to see himself as an extension of the generations that preceded him. The true roots of ‘Enjoy Enjaami’ can be traced back to the untold and uncountable pasts that have been lived by oppressed communities. In more than one way, we need more Arivus to both celebrate the beauty and critique the injustices of our collective humanity. (Karuppusamy np)

The emphasis on a collective identity can be considered as the meeting point of the subaltern and the popular which as the paper has proposed could mark the disintegration of the subaltern or the signification of a subaltern-less community.

## III

When the subaltern and the popular mingle and collude with each other, new sites of engagement are generated. This would be a space that is not restricted and territorialized by the shallow definitions of caste, nation, and community. Rather, it will be a creative space that will essentially deconstruct the existing historiography. Thereby, a new historicization can be revisualized to accommodate subaltern forms of practice and experience into a popular imaginary. As discussed in the cases of South Indian Indie Music, the subaltern has questioned the foundations of the popular. They have effectively displaced the cultural elitism of popular culture. Rather, their upbeat music and avant-garde music renditions have renewed the cultural framework and has reconfigured the entanglement between the popular and the subaltern in the process.

The hip-hop and rap inspired music of Vedan, Aniyal and the folk-inspired renditions of Arivu have attempted to rescript the problems of the existing infrastructure of the state. They are part of the collective force which is trying to plug the issues of representation and the question of agency, which have been preventing various commentators from legitimizing the subaltern as the popular. As this paper has suggested, the popular can be the subaltern with a renewed state machinery and through an exploration of what lies beyond representation. The real potential and future of the subaltern and the popular lies in post-representation, where representation transforms into a constant transgressive presence.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This number is according to the viewer's count in YouTube on January 28, 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> The postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt conceptualises the term 'contact zone' which refers to a social space where previously unknown cultures and languages meet and grapple with each other. This idea has been a key to interrogating the various problematics of postcoloniality with reference to travel writing.
- <sup>3</sup> Prabhu Deva is a Tamil actor who is primarily known for his choreography skills. His acting skills combined with his dancing style has made him a youth icon in the late 1990s. Some of his best-known works are in the movies like *Kadhalan*, *Minsara Kanavu*, *Kaathala Kaathala*, etc.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Snowlin was a young activist who died in the infamous Tuticorin police firing in 2018 at the anti-Sterlite protesters.
- <sup>5</sup> *Gaana* is native to Tamil music and according to A. Mangai *gaana* is the urban version of Dalit music. In more recent times, the band *Casteless Collective* has brought together several *gaana* artists. Whereas, *Oppari* is like an elegy, a mourning song. This is also a folk cultural practice in Tamil Nadu where women sing *oppari* during a funeral to grieve and lament. Both these music traditions have been appropriated by contemporary musicians who have been working against oppression and discrimination in India.
- <sup>6</sup> This is the English translation found on the official YouTube page of Arivu.

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