Zoe Sherinian, director. ***Sakthi Vibrations.*** USA, 2019. Documentary film, 85 minutes, colour, in Tamil and English with English subtitles.

Review

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Zoe Sherinian's documentary film *Sakthi Vibrations*[1] chronicles the one-year residential training programme (2013–2014) for adolescent Dalit women initiated by the NGO, Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, India. Set up by two Tamil Catholic nuns, Sister Escaline and Sister A. Chandra (The Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary – ICM) in 1990, the Centre hosts high school dropouts from poor rural Dalit families (Hindu and Christian) to nurture their "positive self-image" as a pathway to build confidence. As Sister Chandra explains, "Dalits are not allowed to be human", and so, Sakthi as an institution aims to empower young Dalit women and restore their dignity. Trainees and tutors interviewed in the documentary describe "sakthi" as having several meanings, mostly attributed to a woman: a form of power, energy or inner talent in a person that needs to be brought out. The Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre aims to help young Dalit women unearth the "sakthi" within themselves through the use of folk arts traditionally associated with Dalit male performers, particularly *parai* drumming and dance. The opening scene where Sister Chandra plays a bass drum along with the *parai* performers establishes the tone of the film as it highlights the connection between Dalit rights, folk arts and the *parai* drum. She proclaims, "This drum shakes the earth, declaring that the arts of the people are the arts of valour, this *parai*!" The *parai* is considered to be polluting for its association with Dalits and the customary work/service they undertake while playing the drum, for example during death rituals. Sherinian (2011; 2014; 2017) reports that in recent years the *parai* has also become a powerful symbol in movements for Dalit rights. In 1993, the Centre's emphasis on folk

[1] Sakthi Vibrations was part of the official selection of numerous film festivals and was awarded the 2021 "Best Documentary Film or Video Prize" by the ICTM and the "Best Oklahoma Feature Award" from the deadCenter Film Festival, among other prizes.

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arts led to the formation of an all-female professional *parai* group which performed at several national and international venues (Sherinian 2017). Along with drumming and dance, the Centre also conducts workshops to develop several microeconomic skills within the year-long programme to build self-confidence and leadership skills among young Dalit women. Whilst principally focusing on training and performance in *parai* drumming and dance, *Sakthi Vibrations* captures young women's experiences of learning and working as part of a community between 2013 and 2014. Sherinian's long-term involvement with the Centre is evident in the documentary, specifically her initiative to design a participatory video production module as part of the 2013–2014 training programme.

Sherinian's (2011) first documentary film, *This is a Music: Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum* provides the context in which Dalit hereditary musicians and instrument-makers in Tamil Nadu work and make a living as professional music specialists. Along with rehearsals and performance in traditional ritual settings, such as the death ritual and goddess worship, *This is a Music* documents the process of *parai* drum-making, playing techniques, meanings associated with different rhythmic patterns and dance steps and group cohesion. Moreover, it reports how traditional *parai* performance is "reclaimed" by professional ensembles of male performers who present their act at different non-traditional/political events that offer them financial support, respect and dignity. This documentary presents the shifts that have occurred in the spheres of customary work that Dalit male hereditary performers in Tamil Nadu undertake and their experiences adapting to these changes.

On the other hand, *Sakthi Vibrations* focuses on *parai's* significance for "empowerment" in non-traditional settings and among non-traditional performers viz. young Dalit women in an NGO. In doing so, *Sakthi Vibrations* attempts to underline the different potentials in the use of the *parai* drum today with an emphasis on gender, professionalisation and the ritual, symbolic and spiritual aspect of "sakthi" at the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre. For ethnomusicologists, *Sakthi Vibrations* offers an elaborate portrayal of training sequences, dance rehearsals and professional performances of young Dalit women with impeccable camera and sound work. Particularly noteworthy are the training segments – which include drumming techniques, dance steps and synchronisation – where the young trainees are taught by Sakthi trainers or animators[2] along with other senior trainers. The documentary traces the progress of novice drummers over twelve months as it offers a glimpse into the backgrounds of some of the trainees and animators as well as their everyday life in the residential programme. Thus, the film sees a pathway to social change in the way that stigmatised music can be reclaimed to facilitate positive changes in the lives of young disenfranchised Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu.

[2] The filmmaker uses the term "animator" to describe young trainers at the Centre, most of whom are ex-trainees at Sakthi and have joined the professional *parai* troupe after the completion of their one-year training programme. They seem to take on the role of interns who act as immediate mentors of the new trainees.

Unlike Sherinian's first documentary film, however, *Sakthi Vibrations* isolates such recuperative experiments to the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre. It hardly connects them to the broader political landscape of the region or to extant *parai* performance and training in Tamil Nadu, in both traditional (for instance, Kurinji Malar) and non-traditional settings (like political demonstrations, art festivals, in popular anti-caste bands like The Casteless Collective as well as in the ongoing discussions around caste within the Carnatic music sphere). Likewise, cognisant viewers may expect to see analogous musical (e.g. the *halgi* drum of Maharashtra) and literary retrieval undertaken by Dalit poets, songwriters and authors over the 20th and 21st centuries (see Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 2015; Ajotikar 2019; Dangle 1992; Guru 1997; 2009, among others). Given that the film focuses on Tamil Nadu, it is surprising that it isolates the work of the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre from the history of non-Brahmin and Dravidian politics and the way in which they have shaped contemporary political spheres for subaltern communities in Tamil Nadu. Unlike most other Indian states, Tamil Nadu is unique in that all its major political parties have descended from the legacy of the Dravidian movement with a promise to serve subaltern communities. However, despite the long-term influence of these movements and parties, caste-based discrimination and untouchability persist in the state, and consequently, Dalit rights movements and political parties have mobilised in opposition to Dravidianism (see Geetha and Rajadurai 1993; Karthikeyan et al. 2012; Gorringe 2016).[3] The existence of NGOs like the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre which work for young Dalit dropouts and have existed for nearly three decades also testify to this fact. Disregarding this context, the documentary runs the risk of downplaying the problem of caste and poverty as a social issue, and romanticises it as a psychological one that can be resolved on the level of the individual through music-making, NGO-based support and professionalisation. I explicate this observation in the following paragraphs.

In *Sakthi Vibrations*, the *parai* drum facilitates psychological transformation among the trainees. While the drum is still considered to be "polluting" in many (mostly rural) contexts, its recuperation as "a sonic tool of liberation" at the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre is particularly noteworthy according to Sherinian (2017: 64). This is because *parai* drumming and singing is at the heart of daily community-building rituals that help young Dalit women "gain the confidence to learn micro-economic skills like tailoring and to pass their high school exams" (ibid.: 79). From opening day to graduation, *Sakthi Vibrations* highlights the importance of daily rituals at the Centre, which, as Sister Chandra explains, "pool the collective energy that can bring liberation among young Dalit women". Sherinian writes elsewhere that these rituals impart "idealized Dalit values of folklore as communal and working people's art that they believe should be courageously protected, held with esteem, and used to fight for

[3] In both films, Sherinian includes scenes in which professional *parai* troupes perform at public events of the AIADMK and DMK, the two most influential political parties in Tamil Nadu, but the viewer is not offered much explanation about the social and economic situation of professional *parai* troupes or why these performances were staged in these milieus.

equality and justice" (ibid.: 73). They also symbolise a form of syncretism which draws on certain agricultural practices and ideas in Dalit Christian liberation theology: "They give respect to Mother Earth, their teachers, and the *parai* drum, and by extension all folk arts" (ibid.). Similarly, we see dance training, like *kummi*, initiated through circular formations to imbibe values of communality, unity and togetherness – described as "natural" communal relations and values that already exist among Dalit communities. The goal is to make young women "aware of their own individual richness" through these symbolic acts, says Sister Chandra. Thus, we learn that young animators gradually feel confident to train the new batch of pupils at the Centre or when they teach students from nearby villages or elite colleges in cities. Similarly, young women express their initial hesitance and inability to learn the technique of the *parai* drum and dance in the same way as they learn other skills, namely tailoring, basket weaving, using a computer, knitting, taekwondo, stick fighting, and so on. Six months into the programme, they report having improved significantly and express how they feel more confident.

Yet, the documentary remains evasive on tackling some important fundamental questions. For instance, it is not entirely clear why skills training is uniquely suited to building young Dalit women's confidence. Are the trainees aware of what are claimed to be communal values inherent among Dalit communities? It is also unclear how the act of learning and playing the *parai* drum exactly helps young Dalit women to overcome oppression, and how ritual and symbolism translate into meaningful change or "revolution" with regard to the broader issue of caste oppression in contemporary Indian society. Contrary to this claim, Gorringe (2016) reports the divergent functions and meanings around the *parai* and drumming itself as a service in rural Tamil Nadu, particularly in independent Paraiyar villages and traditional hamlets. Whilst acknowledging *parai's* growing valorisation, his study notes instances of Dalits coerced into playing the drum by dominant castes, and a historic case of Dalits from forty villages who set their drums on fire during a big Hindu festival in Pattamangalam village. One of Gorringe's respondents also criticises Christian institutions which encourage those who may have escaped servitude to take up drumming again. Given these varied understandings of caste and oppression, it may be important to reconsider the ways in which we analyse issues of representation as they pertain to social movements (who speaks for whom?) and the political stakes of different social actors in particular regions. Furthermore, the overemphasis on ritual and symbolism – as a means to emancipation – presupposes the notion that it is sufficient for the oppressed to focus on their self-confidence and proudly claim their Dalit identity to fight against "internalised casteism" (Sherinian 2017: 79). Is this not, however, to misconstrue a relational structure embedded in political economy (i.e., caste) for the supposed limitations of individual psychology (i.e., young Dalit women lacking self-confidence)?

As Sherinian further indicates, professional troupes like Sakthi "are distinct in their refusal to play for funerals, as they consider this work a stigma that keeps Dalits and the *parai* degraded. They also demand much higher salaries than the professionalised village groups to play at festivals or rallies and often use choreographed performances

on a raised stage" (ibid.: 72). Sherinian contends that ritual drumming, dancing and community-building are crucial in helping young Dalit women shed the traditional meaning associated with the *parai* and acquire a new dignified meaning for the drum, and by extension, to themselves as performers through professionalisation. However, it is not only troupes like Sakthi that are professionalised, but so are the ensembles in traditional settings of *parai* drumming like Kurinji Malar, which we see in Sherinian's first documentary film. By emphasising the importance of professionalisation, Sherinian (2017: 79) seems to suggest that the economic independence afforded to performers in both settings helps them combat "internalised casteism" and assists in "identity reformation to embrace the anti-caste identity of Dalit" (ibid.: 79). In other words, Dalits are able to claim a dignified identity through professionalisation, but cannot shed their Dalit status.

More importantly, for Sherinian, it is psychological transformation and empowerment, the key outcomes of professionalisation, that enable social transformation. The implication being that the *parai* drum and the drummers secure respect only when they enter the market as professional musicians. Given that caste oppression is relational, that is, not a psychological or personal problem amongst the oppressed and exploited, it would have been helpful if the film had brought to the fore a more complex picture of Dalit struggles and the extent to which efforts to venerate "polluting" symbols would enable real social transformation. Is it not the case that self-affirmation and dignity are a result of professionalisation and not the rituals per se? If professionalisation enabled social transformation, there would be no need for autonomous social movements. Several anti-caste and Dalit rights movements in India contradict such claims and have resisted all forms of oppression and exploitation without essentialising their caste status.

Activists and professional musicians who have been mobilising for almost two decades in contemporary Maharashtra may offer an explanation in this regard (Ajotikar 2019). First, musicians and activists in the anti-caste collective Navayan Mahajalsa recognise that they are part of a long tradition of protest music which has been an important part of social justice movements since the late 19th century. Not all activists and musicians in this collective are Dalits and they do not organise on the basis of caste (or any other) identity. Second, they use music as an affective tool to disseminate ideas and works of leaders from Dalit rights and Left movements, and also draw on the oral song repertoire of the 20th century. At the same time, they compose songs that respond to present-day forms of exploitation and discrimination. Their goal has always been to raise social awareness – *prabodhan* – and critical thinking about different forms of social oppression, inequality and discrimination, and not to change the individual psychology of Dalits and the poor. Hence, one finds the popularity of new genres like *vidrohi shahiri jalsa* – rebellious music gathering – within this tradition. Caste is not an internalised psychological issue that disenfranchises people of their basic rights, but a social one where there are several processes at play that enable and reinforce exploitation. Third, songs performed in hereditary musical genres and with

instruments like the *halgi* (a frame drum associated with religious performances by hereditary musicians subjugated by the temple), allow the performers and listeners to appreciate the use of the drum outside the context of temple servitude. The performances are indeed affective in that the listeners and performers may experience a sense of dignity and self-affirmation and new members are often inspired to join the collective. But that in itself is not necessarily an act of transformation of the unequal social relations in which hereditary musicians and anti-caste activists are embedded and the broader social relations hardly change. And yet, such autonomous cultural movements are impactful in their vision of resisting all forms of injustice, evident in the fact that they are ultimately repressed by the state.

Activists and musicians like Shital Sathe, Sachin Mali and members of another group, Kabir Kala Manch, were under surveillance by the anti-terrorist squad for several years between 2006 and 2013, and were imprisoned under an authoritarian statute, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, in 2013. This law continues to be used today against the Maoist insurgency in India and those seemingly fighting for the rights of tribal and working people over land and resources. These musicians and activists, though out on bail after spending almost three years in confinement, continue this fight against the state and face several restrictions on their movement across the country. It is important to note that Shital Sathe and Sachin Mali's professional music performance did not obstruct their incarceration. Similarly, hereditary musicians like Kadubai Kharat and Meera Umap in the *Bhimgeet* tradition, a sub-genre that honours the work of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, remain on the margins despite professionalisation, not because of "internalised casteism," but owing to their dependence on the music market and broader social relations in the rural agrarian context. It is crucial then that musicians from Maharashtra sing about discarding their Dalit identity, or any caste identity for that matter, and not reclaim it as a matter of pride – it seems that they do not wish to live in a slightly better or more moral caste society, but to overthrow it.

To see radical transformative potential in NGO-based professionalisation of young Dalit women who happen to be dropouts, obscures caste as a solely individual/ psychological issue on the one hand, and on the other, glamorises the microfinance sector. But these are indeed complimentary to one another given that NGO-based work, particularly that focusing on "women's empowerment" thrives on such interventions. *Shakti Vibrations* tends to naively romanticise microeconomic initiatives without contextualising the Centre and the people associated with it. This is exemplified in the scenes following the graduation ceremony of trainees from the 2013–2014 batch, all of whom decide to stay and join the Sakthi cultural troupe, similar to many past trainees. The film documents some noteworthy moments when former trainees share stories of resuming their education and completing their tenth and twelfth standard exams with the help of senior trainers and sisters at the Centre after the completion of their training programme. Although the viewer is not offered a comprehensive survey of the workings and history of the Sakthi Folk Cultural Centre, the film does capture fleeting moments of a political demonstration led by women. Young women from the Centre

are part of this demonstration, but viewers may not always comprehend the purpose of these shots or the connection between the Centre, women's organisations and the broader history of women's movements in India. These excerpts run the risk of drawing attention to the dramatic aspects of political protest that serves to blur the history of the women's movement in India and its advancement into NGO-based work in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, today it is impossible to clearly demarcate the boundaries of social movements focusing on women's rights and NGOs that equate women's empowerment with economic efficiency and professionalisation.

Roy notes how the promise to replace the failure of the state in providing public services enabled NGOs to turn to "practices of self-help that are discursively refashioned as empowerment and exemplified in the practice of microfinance" (2015: 102). Noted across South Asia, such a turn posited the "market as the institution best suited to delivering overall social good and understood women's empowerment as largely a matter of facilitating women's participation in cash-yielding forms of production and consumer life" (Leve 2014: 57). These efforts manage poverty whilst exploiting the same poor women. It is well-established that the expansion and impact of microfinance is driven "not by its effectiveness, but by its ideological function within a broader scheme of neoliberal policy-making and to sustain the large and increasingly corporate technocracy that facilitates its global proliferation" (Taylor 2012: 602; also see Duvendack et al. 2011). The cynicism around microfinance and the NGO/development sector at large in the global South is a consequence of how NGOs add to the obfuscation of the interests of elites, the state and private capital (see Alvarez 1999; Karim 2011).

Most pertinently, as Taylor (2012) suggests, the question is not whether or not microfinance works, but what its workings are. In his study of the 2010 microfinance crisis in Andhra Pradesh, another state in South India, Taylor examines the contrast between the fortunes made by microfinance industry executives and the suicides of about fifty microcredit clients. In doing so, Taylor demonstrates the contradictions and flawed celebration of the "financial inclusion" model within the political economy of agrarian transformation characterised by complex debt relations that challenge simplistic dichotomies of formal/informal and inclusion/exclusion models. While such abuses have not occurred in Tamil Nadu, most probably because of state regulation, as Guérin et al. (2012; 2013) report, the current form of microfinance can hardly be a powerful tool to foster the entrepreneurial creativity of the poor. This is not only because landless rural working populations are most affected by the agrarian crisis, but also because of the persistence of informal debt in rural Tamil Nadu, which reflects deep fragmentation based on caste, social class and locality (Guérin et al. 2012). Dalits in particular are reported to face discrimination through debt – which functions in similar ways as other forms of caste discrimination – and hence do not even try to access formal money-lending sources unlike other non-Dalit castes (ibid.). In underscoring how informal debt is embedded in prevailing social relationships and therefore likely to remain the dominant source of debt, Guérin et al. (2012; 2013) also challenge the assumption that informal debt will naturally disappear with the

development of formal finance. These observations point to the most crucial question: How do we examine the rural contexts and households of those young Dalit dropouts who join the one-year programme at the Sakhti Folk Cultural Centre and what has been/will be their experience viz. debt? Which villages around Dindigul have they come from and what has been the history of financial policy in those regions? Viewers of the film may miss a systematic documentation of the lives of the young women after graduation from the training programme, how/whether they become beneficiaries of microcredit, and their long-term sustenance in rural Tamil Nadu. Similarly, one may have difficulty grasping how the Centre is embedded within the global/national microfinance industry. Instead, the film risks a celebration of Dalit women being offered training in microeconomic skills, concluding that it is inherently "empowering" and proposes this to be a pathway to their "re-humanisation".

The interviews with animators reveal stories of how they took up full-time work at the Centre. Sherinian (2017) writes that some women who return to their villages are equipped with skills they acquire at the centre to make an independent living while some others become community leaders.[4] Marita and Sheila in *Sakthi Vibrations* share how they can avoid male oppression because they have a job, security and independence at the Centre. The microeconomic skills could be helping Dalit women to "avoid the oppressive caste economy of agricultural work" (ibid.: 73) or bonded labour in village settings and move towards a dignified living. However, acquiring skills in microcredit operations does not automatically ensure employment that is free of exploitation or which does not involve precarity. Moreover, the new avenues of employment may very well correspond to prior structures of bondage, now characterised by usurious debt from microfinance. In celebrating Dalit women's professionalisation yet again, Sherinian also seems to imply that caste does not matter outside the agrarian context.

In extending a psychological analysis of caste, *Sakthi Vibration*s also idealises the ritual aspect of *parai* to communal living. Founders of the Centre "indigenize the Christian Trinity by reclaiming the sacred *parai* drum and other folk arts as the Holy Spirit to create an empowered Dalit female identity (*sakthi*) grounded in progressive Tamil cultural politics that combine Dalit liberation theology and non-Brahmin Hindu symbols with feminism and the communal values of Marxism" (ibid.: 79). Sherinian writes how "the members of Sakthi live communally, sharing their work and earnings, much like the early Christian community described in Acts 3:44" (ibid.: 74). Sherinian does not explain how her analysis of this Centre is "feminist" or "Marxist". What we do see, however, are the cleaning, cooking and maintenance procedures of the entire Centre being undertaken by trainees and animators. While no financial aspects are discussed in the film, Sherinian cites certain figures from 2009:

> In 2009 there were 30 full time animators. While trainees have sponsored tuition, a beginning animator receives a salary ranging from 300 to 1000 rupees, with senior

[4] The precise statistics of the number of women graduating from the Centre and taking up employment/becoming community leaders is not known.

> members making Rs.3000 per month. From this, the senior members have to contribute Rs.500 a month for their food. They also contribute Rs.1000 a month to a common interest-free fund from which they can draw up to Rs.10,000 once a year in case of family crisis or need. They typically perform an average of two times a week. By 2009 the group had surpassed 1700 performances (ibid.: 74).

Albeit from 2009, these figures are astonishingly little as payment to the animators and senior members. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the products created out of the skills acquired by women, such as tailoring, basket-weaving and knitting classes are retailed or used for self-sustenance at the Centre, and who receives the funds from the cultural troupe's performances. The ways in which the film venerates communal living as empowerment of women sits awkwardly with the underpaid labour the trainees perform at the Centre.

Sherinian herself contributes to the 2013–2014 curriculum of the programme through her introduction of participatory video training. The viewer is introduced to one of the outputs of this training through a short film titled "Dharshini's Journey" which is scripted, shot, played and edited by the trainees. Dharshini's story is her own reflection on why she dropped out of school and her relationship with the strict teacher and peers who mock and laugh at her failure. The short film closes with Dharshini's return to school with excellent grades after seeking help from a classmate, Devi. This story informs the viewer that Dharshini could have continued her education had she received a little support and encouragement from her mother, teacher and classmates. Sherinian aims to show how

> techniques of storytelling and scene development as well as the phenomenological approach of practicing/acting out an empowered experience through narrative and drumming contribute[d] to the student's developing self-esteem. [The students] embody the empowerment that comes from performing their reclaimed *parai* drum, prescriptively experiencing the performativity or real-life disoriented experience of a new subject liberated from internalized casteism and sexism (2019: 8).

No doubt that the experience of writing, storyboarding, acting, working with cameras and editing must have been stimulating for the trainees. But the interesting claim here is that film-making and storytelling – as psychological and embodied processes – transform the feeling of oppression and result in liberation and empowerment for Dalit students struggling in academic subjects. If merely filming or narrating an alternative story could change Dalit students' circumstances and their academic performance, the reservation system, or any affirmative action policy need not have been necessary in India. The fact that we still find cases like that of Rohith Vemula, Rajini Krish and Payal Tadvi among others who died by suicide owing to oppressive and discriminatory practices in higher education is evidence against such claims and a testimony to the shoddy implementation of the reservation system. Instead, it would have been helpful for the viewers to learn about the circumstances and wider material conditions of the trainees that led them to drop out of school in the first place. *Sakthi Vibrations* diagnoses the problem of caste as its internalisation by Dalits and the solution to be symbolic and psychological (building self-esteem etc.). Since the ideal solution to the problem seems

to be "performative" – a more general/mainstream approach in ethnomusicology – it cannot help us understand cases like that of Vemula or others.

Furthermore, Sherinian (wescfa 2020) interprets Devi, Dharshini's classmate in the short film, to be a metaphor for Shakti Folk Cultural Centre. But could it be that Dharshini was simply looking for a friend to help her? We see that Dharshini is tired and exhausted at school. It is likely that she works tirelessly for the survival of her poor family and is unable to focus. The circumstances under which Dharshini is unable to perform have perhaps a lot to do with her being poor and her mother saving up to pay her fees, which is evident in the very first scene of the short film. This is in fact the real-life experience of one of the animators, Kavitha. In the end, Dharshini wishes to return to school and to have the support of her family, peers and teachers. She probably does not want to be part of the Centre as such. This short film could be Dharshini's hope for real change which will involve proper living conditions under which she will be able to focus in school and would not have to narrate an alternative story of her life. Whether the trainees were asked to incorporate their experience at Shakti in their film scripts is not known, but there could certainly be several interpretations of "Dharshini's Journey" other than the one Sherinian chooses to highlight. In doing so, the filmmaker decontextualises the experiences of Dalit women from the conditions in which they materialise.

While *Sakthi Vibrations* successfully documents the training programme, there are a number of scenes that seem to be staged for the camera but are intended to seamlessly flow into the film's narrative. Among the most memorable of these are two conversations among the trainees after reading about cases of sexual violence on Dalit women in the newspaper. The filmmaker perhaps hoped to capture how trainees have important yet difficult and complex conversations. In a segment involving Sister Felci, a senior trainer, they discuss whether rape perpetrators should be forgiven or not, given that God/Jesus says one should forgive those who commit crimes. Almost all the trainees disagree and reject this solution and suggest several forms of extreme punishments at the hands of the public. The conversation ends abruptly (or is perhaps edited?) and the trainees move on to their tailoring class. In the second instance, all of the trainees discuss the Badaun case in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh where two teenage Dalit girls were gang-raped and murdered in 2014. The trainees seem disturbed by the news and share their frustration about the fact that nothing substantively changes for Dalits, particularly because higher authorities are corrupt. One of the trainees expresses how discrimination is "bad" and humans are treated unequally only because of the word "caste". Another trainee says that women experience different forms of violence on a daily basis everywhere and that this is not a unique case. They discuss solutions to this issue which include protest and electing the right people. They also go on to reflect on different forms of discriminatory practices that exist among caste communities. The scene ends with one of the trainees expressing her vision for everyone to be treated equally. Although these sections seem to be set up for the camera and edited later, and are given relatively less weightage, they are significant instances

that demonstrate that the trainees see starkly different solutions to caste oppression than the ones Sherinian or perhaps the Centre seem to valorise. As I have suggested throughout this piece, Dalits understand their oppression and exploitation as being embedded in the broader social landscape and organise their fight towards equality and social justice, which stands in opposition to the solutions put forward in this documentary film.

Despite its limitations, *Shakti Vibrations* offers an important lens through which scholars and activists can reflect on the ways in which we examine caste, Dalit rights and frameworks of social change. The filmmaker's long-term, genuine commitment to build relationships with the Sakhti Folk Cultural Centre and collaborate with them on initiatives that aim to address the problem of caste and gender is commendable. However, in that effort, the film misses the opportunity to offer a complex picture of the Centre and its activities as part of a wider social, economic and political setting. Caste thus ends up being misconstrued as an issue of identity. Still, *Sakthi Vibrations* is an admirable effort, being one of the very few ethnomusicological documentaries on the lives of Dalit women performers. It presents an opportunity to assess our predispositions involved in working with disenfranchised communities. In that vein, *Sakthi Vibrations* offers several moments that may help ethnomusicologists and anthropologists to re-evaluate the romantic and exoticising tendencies in researching and working with the poor, particularly the racialised poor from the global South.

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