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Book Review

T M Krishna, *Sebastian & Sons: A Brief History of Mrdangam Makers,* (Chennai: Context, 2020), pp 366, Rs 799, Hbk, (ISBN: 9789389152180).

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Sebastian & Sons can be read as an exploration of the everyday and ordinary unfolding of social relations—particularly that of caste—in the process of the production of sound for the primary percussion instrument of the Carnatic stage, Mrdangam.Mrdangam is believed to be *avedavadyam* (Vedic instrument) (p.187), however it is only in the 1920s and 1930s that male brahmins appropriated the instrument into the Carnatic music world and instituted their dominance thereof. The instrument is a cylindrical two-faced drum. The hollow cylinder is made of the wood from a jackfruit tree and the two faces/frames are made of three layers of hides (p.3). The journey of the Mrdangam from the raw materials—collected from forests and slaughterhouses, and assembled at the maker's homes and workshops—to its finished form, in the player's puja room or the stage has been descriptively unpacked in this book. Krishna does this by bringing together narratives of Mrdangam makers from different regions in Southern India but predominantly Thanjavur, "the cultural nerve centre of Tamil Nadu" (p.6) with an extensive focus on Sebastian's family—who are from the Dalit Christian community—and within it the master of makers, the *magical* Parlandu. The modality of collecting the narratives is that of personal—telephonic and face to face—interviews. Krishna has called the book project a documentation of the lives of 'invisible keepers' of the tradition of Mrdangam making and has relied primarily on oral history and memory of the makers and a few players. Through the book, Krishna also provides an intense description of the material process of producing the Mrdangam, and a reader might feel the need to go through the highly skilled process twice over to get a grasp of it.

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When it comes to commodities a certain amount of spatio-temporal distance between the producer and consumer is an accepted norm. Once finished, the commodity does not come back to its producer. However, the case of the Mrdangam is different. There is a peculiar dialectic of distance and closeness that plays out between the player and the maker, the consumer and the producer or as it comes up several times in the book—the benevolent feudal brahmin patriarch (p.24; p.53) and his bonded servant/son. The instrument comes back to the maker time and again after being used/played, for the reapplication of *sadam,* its tuning or to conduct any repairs on parts that can be. This travelling back of the commodity to the producer is particularly interesting as the producer's skillset and knowledge is indispensable. However, the element of distance becomes significant as it spills over to socio-spatial distance exacerbated because of the divinity/reverence enshrined in the instrument and its players—mostly Brahmin menwith a few exceptions like Palani Subramania Pillai—on the one hand, and the contempt for the raw materials used to make the instrument which spills over to the body of the makers on the other hand. The contemptuous object is the hide of the dead (holy) cow for the Hindu social order primarily, although skins of buffalos and goats are also a part of the frames at both the ends of the Mrdangam. The players' casteist (in)sensibilities become prominent in their everyday transactional dealings with the makers.The part of production of sound (fine tuning) that is allowed to take place in the players' house, the restriction of makers to backyards, terraces or specific rooms for Mrdangam work in the players homes, the dishes the latter eat/drink in, being addressed as an inferior irrespective of age (even posthumously), are a few everyday instances of discrimination. On the other hand, Krishna enunciates that in their own neighbourhoods, makers got "special respect" (p.33) for having access to brahmin households.

The maker is quintessential as they "stand(s) at the threshold, keeping the cow and the Brahmin apart" (p.187). However, the maker's is not crucial because they convert raw hide into the finished instrument—transform its impurity to be touched and played by the twice born. What

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is pertinent to note and has been frequently foregrounded by Krishna is the repertoire of knowledge of the production of *nadam* (sound) as well as the mental and manual skills that the makers possess and pass on through apprenticeship to their community members. This includes the kinds of materials—the particular kind of jackfruit tree and wood from a certain part of the trunk, the thin-thickness of the three types of hide required, the specific stones to make the *sadam* paste—and the bringing together of all these disparate elements in its materiality, the aesthetic sensibility and physical labour required for the production of the abstract *nadam*(sound). The aesthetic sensibility required to physically bring together all the raw materials is astounding as even the minutest change in the nature of raw materials—for instance, the right kind of skin from the right place for a particular function—has an enormous impact on the tonality and pitch of the produced *nadam*. Yet, the kind and depth of knowledge the makers have as well as their skills have always been short-shrifted and invisibalized by the brahmin players' who claimto be the *Vidyan*and relegate the producers to executioners.

In a review of the book Sundar Sarukkai puts Krishna's explorations regarding the politics of knowledge production into a pertinent larger theme, asking:

> How do caste practices inhibit the addition of value such that some types of labour remain manual labour and are not elevated to creative and intellectual labour? Since all these forms of labour are socially produced and legitimised, accounts such as the ones in this book must remind us that we are all part of this machine that reproduces these obstacles.[1]

The player and maker dialectic spills over to the researcher/writer and interviewee/maker as well. Although Krishna is reflexive about his own social location and also finds the researcher gaze faltering on two occasions—*visit* to the slaughter house to experience the process of hide selection (p.158) and the interviews in Peruvemba of the Mrdangam makers (pp. 299-230)—there looms an air of authority with which he tells

[1] Sundar Sarukkai, "The Making of Mrdangam", *Economic & Political Weekly*Vol LV, 35 (August 29, 2020): 32.

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the stories. First, although Krishna brings out the politics of knowledge production and the utter disregard for the producers by the brahmin consumers, he himself seems unclear about *what* the producer really is. At various places he usesdifferent terms to refer to the producers—predominantly as maker, but also as craftsmen, architect and artisan—and this semantic gamut confuses the reader regarding Krishna's own ideological position and the implications it has on thesubjectivity of the producers of sound. Second, Krishna seems to take up the task of looking for something that he can categorize as agency or subversionof caste norms on part of the makers. This urge and inquisitiveness run along mostdescriptions of interviews. Most often his conclusion boils down to—the oppressed are complicit in their oppression as Brahmanical caste norms are hegemonic due to which the makers have turned a blind eye to caste inequality (p.49). He goes a step further than his trivial attempts to holding the oppressed accountable for interrogating the system to mocking them when he observes that most makers in Madras have painted their shop blue. He writes with the certainty of someone who has experienced the life of a maker as one— "Having spent so much time with many Mrdangam makers, I would be utterly surprised if this was indeed the blue used as a symbol of Dalit resistance" (p.76).

Third, Krishna provides a nuanced understanding of the gendering of the production of sound and sound in itself with regard to the purity/ temperance of the raw materials used.The hide once limed is considered unauthentic (p.221) and so is the addition of tiny sticks between the hides (p.250). The 'impure'*nadam* that is produced as a result of liming the hide (*sunnambuthol*) or adding sticks between the hides (*kucchi* Mrdangam), the physical effort and mental skills required to produce the material instrument, as well as those required to play these Mrdangams are looked down upon as easy and not masculine.Predominantly *sunnambuthol* and *kucchi* Mrdangams are associated with female singers and the popular aphorism that sums up the derogation is that the players "kurta retains its iron creases" (p.265) after a performance. The *purer* raw hide is associated with the male singer who is the standard by which music is judged (p.221). The discussion regarding the gendering

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of sound, makers and players efforts and skills is particularly interesting. One would expect Krishna to follow up the nuances he explicates to the manner in which he deals with female makers and makers in general. But unfortunately, one fails to see such an engagement.

There is something peculiar in the way he deals with the women makers of Mrdangam. First, their story is one of the smallest chapters in the book and comes right before the conclusion which is on Parlandu—the master maker. Women, undertaking activities as makers, feature infrequently in the book and the chapter on them—Women in Charge—fits into the "adding women and stirring" approach of recording history. Further, there is also a stark contrast in the manner in which Krishna introduces/writes about the female and male makers. It appears as if he is encountering something extraordinary when it comes to the female makers, evident in the way he (sub)titles them— "the hide queen" (p.306), "the rebel maker" (p.308), "the skin expert" (p.317). Moreover, Krishna moves from exceptionalizing the women makers to essentializing the art and skillset of the makers in general. In multiple instances he seeks to find the origins of the caste-based occupation of makers which pigeonholes what they "traditionally" do. From leather workers to wood workers, Krishna attempts to locate the caste-occupation match as far back as the memory of the makers can take. Lastly, when it comes to the *magical* Parlandu, Krishna accepts the predominant belief that has been propagated by the players that he had "natural talent" and "anything he touched turned into gold" (p.324). This mystification of a producer's skills and knowledge has a debilitating effect and ultimately boils down to a disregard for their capabilities as something which is a chance phenomenon and over which they have no control. It takes us back to the politics of knowledge production and the (de)value attached to mental and manual labour.

Finally, although Krishna's attempt and efforts to tell the story of the "invisible keepers of a tradition" need to be acknowledged, it would not be pushing too far to say that a prior reading of the debates regarding experience and theory in the Indian social sciences would have been helpful for this project. While his work is not an anthropological account

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in the strict sense,[2] nevertheless questions regarding the social location of the researcher/writer, their conceptual capabilities, experiences and hence the choice of and approach towards the subject/object of study become relevant.

[2] Ibid, 31.