


Chapter 7

“Tamizha, Tamizha”: Nationalism and Irredentism in Popular Tamil Music

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examined Tamil film music as a vehicle for nationalist message production and intersectional ethnic discrimination. The authors sampled the history of Tamil nationalism in India and Sri Lanka separately and found evidence that converges such territorial nationalistic content on the grounds of a common identity marker—the Tamil language. Taking notes from Tamil film music, the authors critiqued the messages promoted through this medium and applied them to the socio-political state of the ethnic conflict brewing both in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Further, the authors also identified prevalent themes of Tamil nationalism, refugee plight of Eelam Tamils, irredentism, and othering in Tamil film music that contribute towards a broader scholarship of music as an effective medium for political messages.

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INTRODUCTION

The Realization

Driving along one of the roads of rural Ohio, eight thousand miles away from his homeland, the Bengali Indian, seated in the passenger seat, played a carefully curated playlist through the phone. After a few bops, the rousing ballad, *Yeh jo desh hai tera* (this country is your homeland in the movie *Swades*; Gowariker, 2004) blared through the speakers. The Sri Lankan Tamil behind the wheel, recognizing the tune, reminisced on her high school play where the Tamil version of the song was used as the backdrop to highlight the plight of the Tamil refugees in her homeland. In the conversation that ensued, *Unthan thesathhin kural* (is your land’s voice too far? Can you not hear it? —the Tamil version of the song) was compared to the Hindi original. It was in the process of translating the song to English to each other that the authors realized the stark differences in its content. Both songs originated from the same film – the Hindi original, *Swades*, and *Desam*, the Tamil-dubbed version of the original. The Hindi song had a strong nationalistic message that called its audience to heed to the motherland—to India. The Tamil version, however, addressed a specific audience—the Tamils alone and emphasized the Tamil ties to the land. Both songs had nationalistic messages: the Hindi one beseeched all of India, while the other confined its call to the Tamils, contributing to a separate Tamil nationalistic ideology within the larger Indian context.

In view of this, the authors aim to establish a point of inquiry on how nationalistic messages in popular film songs differ from one regional film to another. This chapter, hence, notes that recognizing, acknowledging, and above all, understanding the divergence will lay the foundation for a sensible interpretation of language-based history and politics.

An Ethnic Plight: Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan civil war of almost three decades is often portrayed as a conflict between the Sinhala government and the Tamil minority, leading to the inevitable rhetoric of Tamil nationalism. The beginning of such binary notion and the ethnic lens through which the conflict is often seen, need to be understood to comprehend the roots and growth of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Pre-colonial Sri Lanka, unlike what is now widely assumed, was indifferent to linguistic differences of its constituents (Spencer, 1990). In fact, the concept of the whole island as a unitary state did not exist until 1815 when the British conquered the central hills of Kandy, bringing the island under one rule. Until then, the land was divided into kingdoms, where kings ruled over subjects residing in their territories,

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