



Research Article

Dalit Echoes, Green Stories: Understanding the Caste-Environment Nexus in South Indian Raps

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Abstract

The southernmost Indian state of Kerala has recently experienced a massive engagement with rap music, unlike another region in the global south. These raps have been at the forefront of addressing social, ecological, and political issues. In India, caste is a significant social, political, and ecological issue that greatly hinders cultural sustainability. Caste, a deeply ingrained social hierarchy, significantly influences access to natural resources, living conditions, and environmental health, perpetuating social inequalities. Though caste and nature are interwoven inextricably, their discussions in the academic space are limited. However, discussions on the ecology of caste have found their space in the rap music of Kerala. This paper focuses on how this new-age digital manifestation explores human and intra-human relationships within the context of caste and has generated a discourse of resistance in the process of reclaiming Dalit rights and agency as ecological beings. The theoretical framework of Dalit hip hop ecology devised through the integration of 'hip hop ecologies' and 'Dalit ecologies' aids in conceptualising the relationship between caste, environment, and rap music. This brings in a new dimension of reading Dalit environmental politics through the lens of music, exploring its resistive and transformative potential as these raps not only reflect but also challenge and resist caste-based environmental injustices.

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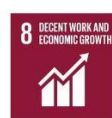
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Introduction

How does one understand the interrelationship between rap and the environment? How does rap music, of African American origin, receive much acceptance and success in the geographically distant global south? How does rap music question the hegemonic relationship between humans and their environment and between intra-human interactions, thereby challenging the idealist notions of the environment? Moreover, how has raps become an important mouthpiece against caste atrocities in South India? Against this short series of broad questions, I will examine one of the multiple points of intersection between hip-hop studies and the environmental humanities. More specifically, this work underscores the importance of raps in conveying an environmentalist discourse through their representation of human-non-human relationships and human-human relationships within the context of caste.

This work stems from the recognition that there has been a growing increase in rap songs from Kerala that deal with issues relating to caste and the environment. These raps weave into them internalised memories, cultural beliefs, and narratives of Dalit relations to their environment, which has generated a discourse of resistance, reclaiming their rights and agency as ecological beings in the process. To make this argument, I will not only provide a careful reading of the songs but also, in the process, develop a new theoretical framework that I call Dalit hip hop ecology that will aid in conceptualising the relationship between caste, environment, and rap music. To do this, I shall integrate Cermak's 'hip hop ecology' with Sharma's 'Dalit ecology' to produce what I call Dalit hip hop ecology. Hip hop ecology defies white environmentalism, as it blends environmental discourses with racialised discourses. This underscores the emerging pairing between the hip hop movement and environmentalism. 'Dalit Ecologies' explores the caste-based ecological segregation and disproportionate impacts of the global ecological crisis on the Dalit communities in India. An attempt to consolidate these brings forth a new framework that questions the caste-environment nexus through green hip-hop, a powerful and diverse movement for sustainability. The paper is structured in two parts. The first part deals with theorising Dalit hip hop ecology against the backdrop of the first two questions posited in the introduction, which explore the connection between rap, environment, and caste in India. The second part of the paper unveils this interrelation between culture and ecology through a careful reading of two raps: Vedan's "Voice of the Voiceless" and Ribin Richard and Nihal Sadiq's "Chekuthan".

Dalit Hip Hop Ecology

Hip hop was born in the South Bronx, in an urban environment, as a result of which people do not usually associate with environmental or ecological issues. This mental separation has rendered discussions on the relationship between hip hop and the environment scarce in the academic field of hip hop studies. However, "hip hop has, from its origins, been concerned with environments, places and spaces, ecologies, and their effect on humans." (Muller & Durand, 2022) For them, hip hop "weaves ecological principles into cultural assemblages" and "predates and expands the new materialist recognition that social structures are enmeshed with and shaped by the material world." Though environmental concerns do not take centre stage in hip hop, a sense of inherent ecological awareness exists in hip hop as an essentially "place-conscious art form" that is well

aware of ecological modes of thinking and environmental (in)justice. (Werbanowska, 2022) Hip hop accomplishes this by offering a different perspective on seeing the natural and concrete worlds, especially when articulating the experiences of racially and socially marginalised groups that are marked by oppression and exclusion in the environments that they belong to. (Cermak, 2012) Hip hop is a genre that is inextricable from race and the politics of oppression and for this reason,

Hip hop ecology is more than just bringing music to environmental education, it is a style that can be used to challenge others and find the organic source of their creativity and blend it with their rational perspective on confronting large problems such as the ecological crisis. (Cermak, 2012)

This urban music form offers an avenue for the voices of the marginalised and oppressed to be heard globally, encouraging us to rethink the boundaries of interdisciplinary environmental discourse.

Mainstream environmentalism, or rather white environmentalism, has devoted its focus solely to saving the planet or saving the species, reducing the different narratives that people of colour, minorities, or different sects have to offer to mere perspectives. This notion of playing the saviour detaches humankind from the ecosystem or being the part of the planet that requires saving. The reduction of alternative narratives of environmentalism as token perspectives endorses environmentalism as “created by white men and dominated by white people.” (Gomez, 2020) The beginning of alternative environmentalism, often described as environmental justice movements, in the 1980s in the United States, was on the same grounds of mainstream environmentalism being “too elite, too white, and too focused on beautiful scenery and charismatic species.” (Purdy, 2016) Purdy points out three major criticisms environmental justice activists and scholars made against mainstream environmentalism. First, it does not recognise the distribution of environmental harms and benefits along the lines of poverty and race. Second, it challenges the very idea of what environmental problems are. Third, it over-emphasises elite forms of advocacy and does relatively little to empower people who suffer the most severe environmental problems. The critiques against the whiteness of the environmental movement prompted the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, in October 1991. As a result, seventeen “Principles of Environmental Justice” were adopted, which have since served as a defining document of the environmental justice movement. The principles emphasise an effort for racial justice and “the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination of all peoples” (Adopted at the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, October 24-27, 1991). Dana Alston, an African American environmentalist and an important delegate at the summit, redefined what environment meant: “The environment, for us is where we live, where we work and where we play.” (Gomez, 2020) This was a shift from mainstream environmentalism, such that the social and the political became ecological.

When the debates surrounding environmentalism and environmental justice began in the 1980s in the US, India witnessed the emergence of issues relating to unequal access to natural resources and ecosystem services in the 1970s. (Guha, 2002, Ranjan 2014) However, the criticality and specificity of caste and Dalits in such discourses have remained on the fringes in India. (Sharma,

2022) Gail Omvedt was one of the first scholars to realise that Dalit ecological connections are mediated through caste. In her essay titled "Why Dalits dislike environmentalists," Omvedt (1997) points out the alienation between the anti-caste and environmental movements in India. Indian environmental politics has been variously defined as 'environmentalism of the poor,' 'Indigenous environmentalism,' 'middle-class environmentalism,' 'elite environmentalism,' 'eco-feminism,' 'red and green,' 'green and saffron,' and much more. Yet, there exists an invisibility of Dalit issues when it comes to mainstream Indian environmentalism. This is because Dalits as a category are usually merged into the definitions of poor, marginalised, vulnerable, displaced, environmental refugees, and migrants. (Sharma, 2012) Consequently, Dalit struggles are usually articulated under the rubric of "social" as opposed to "environmental." (Sharma, 2017)

Sharma (2017) coined 'eco-casteism' to represent the interrelationship between caste and environment. For Sharma, 'nature,' otherwise considered "natural, common, and inherent," is a complex "social and historical product(s)." Sharma points out that understanding the relationship between caste and nature is crucial in deciphering the modes through which particular kinds of cultural representations are affirmed and reaffirmed, how spaces, places, and people are legitimised and delegitimised, how social hierarchies are produced and reproduced, understanding conflicts and violence, and finally, it offers creative arenas for challenging domination. Aligning with black ecologies that challenge eco-racism, Sharma uses the term "Dalit ecologies" as a means to challenge eco-casteism by bringing caste analysis into environmental discourse. Indulata Prasad uses the term "Dalit ecologies" to articulate Dalit experiences of exclusion from nature. She proposes it as a framework that could be used to examine "caste-based segregation, dispossession, dehumanisation, appropriation of Dalit labour and ecological knowledge, and the various ways the global ecological crisis disproportionately impacts Dalit communities in India." (Prasad, 2022) She views "Dalit ecologies" as a corrective measure against Indian environmental scholarship that has invisibilised the existence of Dalit lives.

Hip hop ecology works on the same grounds as Dalit ecology. Hip hop ecology draws attention to unequal access, exploitation, and environmental injustice that often remain invisible or underestimated in mainstream environmental discourse. (Muller & Durand, 2022) Traditionally a voice of the marginalised, hip hop is excellently suited to articulate concerns about environmental justice. It offers a strong commentary on the hegemonic relationship between humans and their environment and between intra-human interactions and challenges the idealist notions of the environment. For this reason, one might affirm that there has been an increase in ecologically creative engagement with rap music in Kerala. Issues relating to the environment and environmental injustice have become a prominent theme in the rap songs of Kerala. One such articulation that has found its place in the rap songs of Kerala is the Dalit relationship with their environment. Such Dalit articulations not only challenge Indian environmentalism but also add to the repertoire of hip hop ecologies, Black ecologies, and Dalit ecologies that challenge mainstream or white environmentalism. This exercise of integrating hip hop ecologies with Dalit ecologies to produce what I call Dalit hip hop ecologies is a "margin-to-margin" approach that creates "bodies of knowledge among those most exploited, excluded, or pushed aside." (Paik, 2014) These bodies of knowledge create performance spaces that function as what Foucault terms heterotopias, a third space for voicing injustice through their songs. Heterotopias function as "counter-sites" to the closed spaces in society since social spaces have historically been restricted

for marginalised groups such as Dalits. Heterotopias are “real sites” that “are simultaneously represented, contested, and invented.” (Foucault, 1984) Current raps occupy these heterotopian spaces through their performances to speak out about their contested realities. The first part of the essay has tried to answer the first two questions posed in the introduction, and the second part of the essay will try to answer the next set of questions through a careful reading of two rap songs from Kerala to delineate the interaction between Dalit narratives, environment, and hip hop music.

Ecological Reading of Raps

Ecomusicologists consider music an important creative tool in raising awareness to combat ecological issues and initiate action regarding such matters. The medium of rap, with its inherent sense of activism, serves as one of the most prospective creative weapons for tackling issues related to environmental injustice. Since 2011, there has been a creative boom in the production and consumption of rap in Kerala. Rap music festivals, protests using raps to voice dissent, and raps having made their way into Malayalam cinema have become an integral part of Kerala culture. These songs have been at the forefront of discussing issues of social, ecological, and political relevance. A discussion of two of the many eco-conscious raps from Kerala, Vedan’s “Voice of the Voiceless” (2020) and Ribin Richard and Nihal Sadiq’s “Chekuthan” (2021), analyses the modes through which cultural representations, internalised beliefs, and narratives of Dalit relations with the environment are challenged. These raps also generate a discourse of resistance that alters the casteist perceptions of human interactions both with the environment and fellow human beings. An ecological reading of raps will help us better understand the interrelationship between culture and ecology.

Vedan released his first rap song, “Voice of the Voiceless,” in 2020 on YouTube. This video has garnered over 7 million views on YouTube. This Malayalam rap is a reminder that social stratification based on caste is important in accessing the environment. Caste regulates our role in society, our access to the earth’s resources and their management, our opportunities as individuals, and our mobility in the material world. While offering a voice to the people who are denied their voice in the name of caste, the rap discusses and defies the conservative Brahmanical structure of Indian environmentalism.

Vedan begins his rap with the question, “Who the slaves and who the lords /of these irrigated fields are? Vedan, while questioning the social hierarchy, explores the environmentalism of caste. Social hierarchy is naturalised through the environment. Conceptions of caste as a natural biological process and casteist constructions of nature, along with cultural representations, images, and metaphors, reinstate the naturalness of caste and caste-based segregation. This supremacy of the “natural order” is often synonymous with a conservative Hindu *savarna* belief. Sharma notes in his work how the caste history has shaped the history of the Indian environment. He writes,

First, caste created a concept of natural and social order where people, place, occupation, and knowledge are characterised by pollution and ritual cleanliness; where bodies, behaviours, situations, and actions are isolated, ‘out of place’, and ‘untouched’ because of

deep-down hierarchical boundaries... Second, caste shaped environmental attitudes and values of both Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Third, caste made it easier possible for Brahmins to appropriate and exploit natural resources by segregating and subordinating certain sections of the population. Fourth, low castes, especially 'untouchables', developed their own understandings of environment and its resources, which were cohabitations of love and sorrow, pain and joy, and alienation and attachment. (Sharma, 2017)

Sharma (2022) notes that even the natural senses of seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing have caste sociality.

In the next line of the song, Vedan asks, "Who fenced them into thousand fragments?" Here, not only is Vedan contumacious, but he also unveils the spatial discrimination that exists under the caste system that has pushed the disenfranchised to the margins. This spatial segregation of Dalits into unfertile, dried-up, or poisoned landscapes and caste-designated occupations has rendered them vulnerable to climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental disasters. (Prasad, 2022) In the lines "You changed countrysides to cities/Cottages to Hi-rises/Soil to Gold/Gold snatched away from you," Vedan sheds light on the appropriation and manipulation of labour in the name of caste. Cities became spaces for the affluent and the elite, whereas the disadvantaged were pushed to the margins. The sweat and blood that made cities were easily displaced in the name of caste. Malini Ranganathan uses the term "environmental unfreedom" to designate this spatial discrimination concerning caste in urban India. She writes, "Caste is an under-recognised marker of conjoined labour, spatial, and ecological disparities in urban India." (Ranganathan, 2022) The criminalisation of Dalit land claims through the figure of "encroacher" and the narrative of slums as breeding grounds of disease, filth, and criminality made Dalit eviction easier and justifiable under the elite environmentalist agenda of cleansing the city. (Ranganathan, 2022) Human freedom, which should be at the heart of environmental justice, is denied to Dalits. Vedan questions this disparity as he sings, "You are born out of this soil, yet/ looked upon with hatred."

Land becomes an important trope in Vedan's rap. He sings, "Yearned for a bit of land/Land that never betrayed you./ A foul play behind the scene/ you knew.../ Justice died long back." This is reminiscent of the long history of exclusion and marginalisation of Dalits when it comes to the question of land ownership. The Janmi-Kudiyam (landlord-tenant) system that existed in Kerala up until the 1950s had pushed the "Adivasis and Dalits into adimai (servitude/slavery), dispossession and displacement, which then compelled them to pawn their dignity and their human rights at the feet of a caste-based society." (George, 2018) However, the Land Reforms Act of 1970 brought the Janmi-Kudiyam system to an end by distributing surplus and revenue forest land to the landless poor, but to date, the act has not been fully implemented, which has resulted in a large number of landless people in Kerala. As a result, Kerala's history is replete with land struggles, often studied under the social and less environmental rubric. The much-ignored casteism of the physical or material world finds a global audience through Vedan's rap. The question of landownership comes up at various places in the rap. "You are born out of this soil, yet looked upon with hatred." ... "Half the land belongs to those who chose the word." As a community, Dalits occupy the lowest level of land ownership in Kerala. Land is the most important means of livelihood for households engaged in agriculture. Access to land and its ownership are significant in India, as agriculture continues to be a major source of income for most of its population. Not only that, but land ownership also facilitates access to formal-sector credit and other productive assets. It determines

the risk-taking capacity of households and shapes the overall balance in the rural economy. Land not only becomes a source of income but also a potential asset that could enable social mobility. Denying land means denying social equality. This abysmal status of land ownership in Kerala is the culmination of three exclusionary processes: historical exclusion, land reform exclusion, and exclusion from land markets (Yadu & Vijayasuryan, 2016). When the first two practices have become a matter of the past, the exclusion from land markets is an ongoing one. "The real estate boom and high land prices in the state exclude this historically marginalised group. It has become difficult for them to own land through any market mechanism." (Yadu & Vijayasuryan, 2016) Not only is owning land a problem, but those who own it fall in the peripheral regions with depreciating land value. The social stigma and societal attitude towards Dalit settlement areas further decrease its value. As a result, even for land-owning Dalits, land does not hold the same potential as it does for non-Dalits.

The rap is rich with signifiers of existing social inequalities and brings into perspective the Dalit relationship with the environment. Historically, socially, economically, politically, and ecologically, Dalits have been denied what is rightfully theirs: the natural world. The rap is strife, with several instances of Vedan questioning the domination of the natural by the upper caste. "In the land of one who plunders forests, The one who stole rice will die." Vedan takes a dig at the existing social order by alluding to the killing of Adivasi youth Madhu by a lynch mob in Attapadi. This incident is juxtaposed with the forest plunder cases that have been on the rise in the state of Kerala. Various such cases of illegal felling and smuggling of wooden logs have been registered by the forest department, yet no major consequence follows. The poetic genius in Vedan juxtaposes these two incidents, calling out a world of social inequalities. Not only does Vedan question the system, but he also subverts it towards the end of the rap as he sings, "A single spark from an ember will do." Here, the action that Vedan refers to is the eradication of a system that has been operating for centuries.

"Chekuthan" was released in 2021 and has more than 19 million views on YouTube. Envisioned as a multiple-genre musical video, the song utilises a diverse set of signs, practices, and musical genres to address the caste-based atrocity that happened in Kerala. Knowing the incident behind the musical movement is imperative to making a fuller sense of the video. It tells the story of Madhu, a 27-year-old Adivasi man who belonged to the Kurumba tribe, who was lynched in February 2018 and accused of stealing provisions from a shop. Madhu was beaten to death by a group of 13 men alleging theft on February 22, 2018. The musical video weaves the nexus of lies, misrepresentations, and manoeuvres of the world that construct the Dalits as thieves and criminals. Historically, under the varna system, Dalits were designated to do menial jobs like scavenging, sweeping the roads, removing the skin of dead animals, and attending to funerals, as a result of which they are considered filthy or polluting and hence treated with contempt by the higher in the hierarchy. The visuals of the song take us through the journey of Madhu, but with an alternative or utopian ending in which he reaches his home safely. However, this utopian alternative is not devoid of caste struggles. The song puts into view the politics of space. As we proceed through the song, Madhu enters the village (upper-caste dwellings, symbolic of culture) from the forest (symbolic of nature), and there is a vertical shot of his feet as he makes his first step. This shot brings into perspective the divide that exists between nature and culture. The dichotomy of nature and culture has found its place in the feminist discourse that associates the

universal subordination of women with nature and men with culture. Suppose one might extend that debate to the caste politics in India. In that case, one can argue that just as nature is exploited to meet the demands of a few, the Dalits in India, too, have been appropriated and manipulated to meet the demands of the upper-caste men. Kumar and Mishra (2022) note, "(t)he supremacy of Brahmanism and its specific interests have been kept dominant over those who have been silenced as the 'other' (nature and Dalits)." They assert that this upper-caste supremacy has led to the casteisation of natural resources. Here, by ' casteisation of natural resources ,'we mean that for Dalits, common pooled resources such as water, land and forests, schools and colleges, socio-cultural spaces and various other public institutions have become a symbol of caste oppression and exploitation." (Kumar & Mishra, 2022) Through storytelling, rap brings into perspective the spatial and social segregation intrinsic to the caste system in India.

The rap starts as an apology to Madhu, representative of all the victims of caste-based atrocities, which then moves on to take the tone of assurance of a "flowery era" that is yet to come with collective action. The next part of the rap is synonymous with a clarion call to start a revolution against the "legions of devils in disguise." The refrain "legion of devils" refers to the upper caste who discriminate, the government that has denied Dalits their existence, and the bureaucracy that has aided in this process of discrimination. Gadgil and Guha call it the "iron triangle"—"an alliance of those favoured by the state (industry, rich farmers, and city dwellers); those who decide on the size and scale of these favours (politicians); and those who implement their delivery (bureaucrats and technocrats)." (Gadgil & Guha, 1995) Such an alliance has managed to concentrate a great deal of power in their own hands, enabling resource capture through manipulating Dalits. This process happens at the cost of the impoverished, or, to say, by making them impoverished. The rap presents a social class dimension of who the victims of ecological problems are. By alluding to the unfortunate incident, an issue of social, political, and ecological relevance, contemporary ecological issues find a global audience through this rap. The rap highlights the violence perpetuated by the caste system and contextualises the ecology of intra-human relationships within the framework of caste.

Conclusion

The study reinstates that caste oppression is not just social but environmental as well. The interaction between Dalit ecologies and hip hop ecologies that I have proposed through this paper brings in a new dimension of reading Dalit environmental politics and adds to the repertoire of Dalit narratives through which a change can be realised. Adopting an Indigenous ecocritical understanding of the raps of Kerala to depict the interconnectedness between nature and culture devised through Dalit hip hop ecology defies not just white environmentalism, which often focuses on race and its environmental intersections, but also critiques elite environmentalism in the Indian context, as caste replaces race in India. These songs are a record and a testament to the ecological issues of the century, in which humanity is both a perpetrator and a victim. As Bill McKibben (2005) notes, "We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?" The growing cultural response to ecological issues, I believe, enables us to understand the gravity of such issues. The deep entanglement between rap and ecological issues offers people a platform

for community building, acting as an 'eco-pedagogical tool' (Cermak, 2012) that promotes collective action towards a socio-ecological change. Both hip hop studies and Dalit ecological readings are relatively scanty in the Indian academic discourse, and this paper, I believe, is a nudge in bringing forth such readings.

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