

Introduction

Soft-Porn 101

I grew up in the Malayalam-speaking state of Kerala in the southwestern tip of India, where gendered expectations dictated everyday social interactions—from the kind of clothes women could wear to how they should behave within the remit of heteronormative femininity. Modern Kerala’s history has been marked by social reform movements, the impact of Christian missionaries, and left-leaning activism initiated by the first democratically elected government in 1957. Over time, Kerala has come to be known for its matrilineal past, seen in some communities like the Nairs and Ezhavas, and for its famous “development model,” which emphasized progressive social development through high levels of literacy, longer life expectancy, low mortality, and higher rates of fertility. But the fruits of such development did not translate equally for marginalized groups, including women, Dalits (caste-oppressed communities), queer people, and tribal communities whose claims to public resources fell outside the neat matrixes of developmentalist discourse.¹ Feminist critiques exposed the rhetorical conceit of selective “development,” which imposed expectations of idealized sexuality and behavior on women, thereby limiting their chances to fruitfully participate in public and political life.² Critical interventions offered by autonomous women’s movements and civil society activism exposed the heteropatriarchal strongholds that underlined family and workspaces.³ While developmentalist feminism and political decentralization brought gender discourses to the mainstream and increased women’s representation in local self-governance, such mainstreaming also diluted the oppositional power of feminism when state interventions co-opted women’s empowerment through the figure of the gender expert.⁴ Amid such developments, social norms and gender relations continued to be fraught, and the state saw several high-profile

cases of sexual abuse, casteist discriminations, and homophobic attacks that reflected the violence in everyday social exchanges. Such interventions mobilized public opinion in critically important ways and fortified oppositional civil society by organizing marginalized groups such as sex workers and the queer community.⁵ Even against this background, young women like myself found ways of exploring our sexuality and discovering that the erotic spectrum of the world was far wider than what heteropatriarchal norms would allow.

During my time in high school in the early 2000s, I would look forward with much anticipation to assisting my father in his convenience store after school. Situated at an intersection between two schools (one for boys, the other for girls) and two hospitals, and adjacent to the Government Secretariat, our shop catered to a varied constituency of patrons and was a sociosexual assemblage in its own right. A vending machine for condoms and a private phone booth-type cubicle stood amid stacks of sensational magazines like *Fire* and *Crime* in full view of our customers, providing me with a chance—while playing the good daughter helping with chores—to observe the innocuous ways customers would indicate their interest in such publications. These magazines—carrying confessional narratives and stories about teenagers; sensational accounts of political scandals; and daring, attention-grabbing covers—were bought by men and women alike, and the placement of women’s magazines, such as *Vanita* and *Grihalakshmi*, next to *Fire* and *Crime* incentivized combo offers. As Shobha, one of the fifty respondents I interviewed for this book between 2011 and 2022 explained: “Seeing women purchasing these magazines was seen as an opportunity by men, who took it as sign to ask us out or imagine a free-sex companion in us, while for suburban working women like myself, this provided a space for liberation.”⁶

Though it was a run-of-the-mill establishment, many variants of which can be found all over India, our shop was the space where I first began to think about the social and spatial configurations that informed public discourses about and private attitudes toward sex in Kerala. My first brush with Malayalam “soft-porn” as an analytical object came a little later when I conducted research on sex education policy in Kerala in 2010. As I soon found out during focus group discussions for this research, soft-porn films were considered “sex education” material by teenage boys. The state government’s sex education program was shelved in 2007, when conservative teachers’ associations disagreed with the safe-sex practices outlined in sex education booklets and demanded morally conservative content to promote “healthy citizenship.”⁷ This move was rooted in debates about the kind of material that could be used by young people to scientifically understand safe-sex practices. Anti-sex education lobbyists flagged as a major concern the influx of *ikkili* (titillating) material that was packaged as sex education and marketed as scientific tracts compiled under the supervision of medical doctors.⁸ For the young men I spoke to in my research, soft-porn became an

unlikely sexual supplement that filled the lacuna created by these developments. In breakout group discussions about how they encountered explicit material, my respondents referred to “Shakeela films” (referring to the name of a popular actress), “soft-porn,” *thundu katha* (vernacular erotic stories), and internet porn as sources of their sexual education. Following up on their comments, I visited the proprietors of shops that sold CDs (compact discs) in Thampanoor and Beemapally (both in the capital city of Trivandrum, the latter an erstwhile hub for pirated CDs), and they confirmed that they were popular with teenagers and middle-aged men who bought the soft-porn films they stocked. In the process, I became aware of the gendered matrices that shaped consumption patterns, as the very same erotic material available for teenage boys who were my age was denied to girls due to codes of ideal feminine values. Seeking out these videos in the CD-turned-DVD shops as a woman was considered taboo, and there were a handful of instances when I was asked to return later because I offended the sensibilities of the “middle-class family customers.” Such gendered discrepancies were built into the way industrial apparatuses of adult media were ingeniously accommodated within quotidian spaces. My interest in such discrepancies was the kernel from which this book has grown.

In *Rated A*, I examine how soft-porn films have shaped media publics in India by improvising industrial models and reshaping representational idioms. These films have been at the center of debates about sex education, censorship, and gender nonconformity. All films in India screened in public spaces must be certified by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), the body constituted according to the provisions laid out by the Cinematograph Act of 1952. The films are rated “U,” “UA,” “A,” and “S” to denote which audiences can attend such screenings: “U” means unrestricted public exhibition; “UA” indicates “unrestricted public exhibition,” with the caution that parental discretion is required for children under twelve years of age; and “S” is “restricted for any special class of persons.” Films rated “A” are meant for adults (18 years and over). They consist of a mix of themes and genres that requires careful and mature handling of images of sex and violence. As per the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act of 2023, the cabinet has approved UA 7+, UA 13+, and UA 16+ ratings based on age to replace the UA labels.⁹ The new ratings are a result of the expansion of internet-distributed television, which demands uniformity of categorization across different platforms. The “A” or “Adult” category was initially used only for foreign films; it was applied to Indian films for the first time in 1978 as part of the revised censorship guidelines, whereby contemporary standards were to be taken as a rule of thumb. Accordingly, the censor board was given permission to judge the film in terms of overall impact, as opposed to individual scenes.¹⁰ Over time, the “A” rating has come to be associated with pornographic content in the collective consciousness. Malayalam soft-porn films are perhaps the most notorious and the most popular constituent of this territory rated A.

Over the years, India's relationship to pornography has been fraught because of multiple and often conflicting notions of permissibility and obscenity. Charu Gupta has shown that laws and regulations proscribing pornography find their origin in nineteenth-century colonial India, when obscenity laws first began to appear. Sections 292, 293, and 294 of the Indian Penal Code made punishable "any form of obscenity . . . any visual or written material that was 'lascivious or appealed to the prurient interest' or which had the 'effect of depraving or corrupting persons exposed to it.'"¹¹ In 1920, examining and certifying boards were instituted in Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, and Rangoon with jurisdiction over films exhibited in all of British India, including British Balochistan (in 1927, a censor board was set up in Lahore as well). After independence, the regional censors were absorbed into the Bombay Board of Film Censors. The Cinematograph Act of 1952 made it the Central Board of Film Censors, and it was made the Central Board of Film Certification in 1983. Periodicals like *filmindia* also performed para-censorial work, demanding uniformity in censorship operations and thereby vying for the cleansing of objectionable materials that were considered inimical to public morality.¹²

In her historical work on the emergence of cinematic publics in India, Manishita Dass identifies the segmentation of class as a crucial feature, hinting at the classed and gendered exclusions that underlie the functioning of media publics.¹³ This exclusionary logic shapes the imagination of cinematic publics as hierarchically organized, creating the category of a "lower-class mass" that is vulnerable to moral corruption from "offending" cinematic representations. In this imagined mass exhibition culture, the spectators' immersive, visceral experience manifests through hooting and whistling in the cinema as they watch these films. William Mazzarella alludes to this through his metaphor of the "pissing man"—the abstract, unruly mass "incapable of the kind of critical reflexivity that was the sine qua non of coolly deliberative public reason."¹⁴

A similar anxiety peppers discourses that support censorship regulations. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by debates about the role of regulatory bodies and the implementation of the cuts recommended by the censor board.¹⁵ The backdrop of Indian cinema's larger censorial climate becomes important in the case of Malayalam soft-porn, as it forms the basis for much of the genre's reception in the public imagination. In the 1980s, reports in the national press singled out Malayalam cinema as the harbinger of "sex films." In such reports, soft-porn film was featured as a constantly mutating, manipulable text because of *thundu*, the splicing of extra reels (usually sexually explicit, but not always) during the projection.¹⁶ Distributors provided English-language titles of Malayalam films that differed significantly from their literal translations—for instance, *Raudy Ramu* (dir. M. Krishnan Nair, 1978) became *Rape Rape Rape, Eeta* (Parsimony; dir. I. V. Sasi, 1978) became *Thirst for Love*, and *Kutumbam Ena Swargam* (Family is heaven; dir. N. Sankaran Nair, 1984) became *Wine and Women* (Fig. 1).



FIGURE 1. Lobby card of *Kutumbam Ena Swargam* showing both Malayalam and English titles, along with the “A” for adult rating. Author’s personal collection.

Activist groups, in turn, rallied against Malayalam soft-porn armed with arguments similar to the anti-pornography camp of Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin that equated pornography with women’s subordination to patriarchal power.¹⁷ In his discussion of the anti-obscenity campaigns of the 1980s, S. V. Srinivas writes about the “Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika” (Anti-Obscenity Forum) that ran a magazine carrying lists of offending sex films. The forum alleged that obscene posters in public places embarrassed “ladies’ and ‘families,” and argued that women’s presence or absence in the cinema hall could be used as evidence for a film’s status as clean or obscene, as good women would avoid frequenting obscene films.¹⁸ In 1981, Janwadi Mahila Samiti, a committee of working women, and Jan Sanskriti, a civil society group, organized protests outside Plaza Cinema in Delhi against a Malayalam film that was advertised as *Sexy Girl*.¹⁹ The protest was led by the Janata Party leader and Member of Parliament Pramila Dandavate, under the auspices of the “Committee on [*sic*] portrayal of women in media,” who demanded

restrictions be placed on the screening of “dubbed films,” which allegedly flouted censorship regulations by inserting pornographic sequences.²⁰ In the 1980s, the Delhi Media Group organized demonstrations outside a theater that was purportedly exhibiting what they alleged to be “pornographic Malayalam films,” while the Forum Against Vulgar Posters advocated for legislative measures against explicit posters and titles and organized protests to raise awareness about dubbed “pornographic” films from South India.²¹ Vimal Balasubramanyam writes that the issue amounted to a “parochial attack by North Indians on South Indian movies.”²² Nina Kapoor, a member of the group, wrote, “None of us could have imagined that protesting porn, whether it came from West, East, North or South could have cause so much communal passion.”²³ These protests provoked the Malayalam Film Society in Delhi to counter the attack on Malayalam cinema by organizing a seminar on “Sex and Violence.”

With the advent of new technologies, such as satellite television, and cyber culture, the changing mediascape of the 1990s brought to the fore a new set of anxieties around the threat of obscene representations, with soft-porn often at the center of debates. A recommendation proposed by the CBFC chairperson Vijay Anand much later in 2002 reflected some of the same tensions from the 1980s. In his review of the Cinematograph Act of 1952, Anand suggested introducing a new category, “XA,” to regularize the exhibition of soft-porn films in adult-only theaters and thereby stem the tide of covert operations.²⁴ Following a disagreement with the government, he resigned from his post in the first year of his three-year term. Interestingly, after his resignation, he stated: “All I said was that there was a suggestion from Kerala to have designated theatres showing adult films. This is a state which makes over 200 films every year. A substantial chunk of it is pornographic films that are shown without certification.”²⁵ Thus, even in the suggestion for a new category of certification and separate adult-only cinemas, Kerala’s exceptional situation of soft-porn film production was pitched as the reason why a policy change at the national level would have to take regional cinemas into account. In 2006, Sharmila Tagore, then chairperson of the CBFC, also mentioned exploring options of “A+” or “X” rating for films so they need not be censored for explicit language or actions. However, she also added that she would not support the screening of pornographic films, which “Indian people” were not ready for due to cultural difference.²⁶

The rift between the pro- and the anti-censorship lobbies reverberated in the film industry. Indeed, filmmakers attempted to use the medium of film as a subversive political tool to resist intolerant attitudes to difference. This was true of soft-porn filmmakers, as they often experimented with the formal aesthetics of film to allude to and comment on contemporary political scandals. Despite working in a seemingly “low” cultural form, soft-porn filmmakers managed to comment on issues such as corruption, the criminalization of politics, and sex scandals. This aligns with the anti-censorship lobby’s claim that a relaxed censorial climate could



FIGURE 2. Artist's impression of a soft-porn shooting floor based on my interviews with industry personnel. Image courtesy S. Radhakrishnan.

allow for multiple viewpoints and diverse forms of representation.²⁷ Thus, taking stock of Malayalam soft-porn's nuanced negotiation of issues of gender, film production and distribution, labor practices, and the intricacies of the soft-porn imaginary in Kerala and India's social fabric requires moving beyond narrow and simplistic accounts of moral decay.

Tracing the informal transactions, precarious labor practices, and fluid regimes of visibility inaugurated by the indigenous production of soft-pornography in India, I explore how soft-porn's emergence as an industrial form is tied equally to the professional aspirations of the lower rungs of production units and to questions of sexual representation and shifting gender relationships. Given its hierarchical and exclusionary structure, the film industry does not offer opportunities for social mobility to below-the-line personnel. Workers in soft-porn acted on their desire to produce films independent of this hierarchy by turning to trust-based and informal labor arrangements. Such arrangements veered away from contractual agreements and solidified an ethical relationality that was built around the identity of "cine-workers"—a term I use to refer to anyone who has been part of the filmmaking apparatus in various stages and schedules—preproduction, production, or postproduction phases, as well as the distribution and exhibition of the films (Fig. 2).

Most filmmakers and technicians who worked in soft-porn migrated from the mainstream Malayalam film industry when it faced a huge financial crisis in the 1990s. The pseudonym-driven nature of the soft-porn industry allowed them to use their creative labor to produce low-budget films that allowed some room for representing nonnormative sexual practices on-screen, sometimes by gaming the censorship machine. The growth and sustenance of the soft-porn film industry was facilitated by revenue-sharing models that gave distributors and exhibitors a chance to negotiate deals based on speculative capital with the cast and crew—a system that relied more on trust and individual contacts than legally binding contracts. I combine a study of the regulatory practices and alternative financial circuits that motivated the soft-porn industry with a reading of the aesthetic lineage and social spaces of its form. Countering popular accounts that tell us that soft-porn films were either mired in questionable casting practices or had degraded aesthetic values, I attend to the negotiations and strategic working relationships that production personnel forged as they worked through questions of representation, female desire, and sexuality.

As a cultural form, Malayalam soft-porn is enmeshed in narratives of struggle and the precarious labor of its workers, especially the women—starlets who dreamed of becoming part of the glamorous world associated with cinema. In adopting a historical lens, I take seriously Arvind Rajagopal's assertion that we need to be "attentive to the historicity of mediatic form and the collision of different temporalities as multiple communication technologies overlap and interact with each other."²⁸ Although it is located in Kerala and flourished as an industrial genre only in the 1990s and early 2000s, Malayalam soft-porn exists on a continuum with earlier forms. Sexually charged print material, both from Kerala and elsewhere in India, provided a repertoire of visual and narrative codes for soft-porn, forming part of an assemblage that Sanjay Srivastava refers to as "footpath pornography."²⁹ The genre also drew inspiration from American exploitation cinema, which was imported to India in the 1970s and 1980s. Malayalam soft-porn is characterized by the desire to explore the lurid underpinnings behind sexual desire as it moves beyond private spaces and is framed for a voyeuristic audience—something it shares with sensational magazines. Important sources of influence on soft-porn include *kambikathakal* (combining *kambi* [erect penis] and *kathakal* [stories]), a genre of vernacular erotic literature featuring graphic descriptions of experiential sexual encounters that circulated among male readers from the 1970s onward. Another offshoot was *rathikathakal* (*rathi* [sex]), confessional columns that appeared in many popular magazines featuring stories of the sex lives of unnamed women. Although many stories were purportedly written by men using female pseudonyms, some featured soft-porn actresses such as Shakeela, Reshma, and Maria, and can be seen as connective links that cross-reference the transactions between soft-porn films and sex work. Soft-porn films also drew from sensational pulp

fiction known as *painkili*, penned by writers like Pamman, Ayyaneth, and Rajan Chinankath, among others. These mostly appeared in serialized form in literary magazines, as well as in film magazines like *Nana*, *Film*, and *Chitrabhumi*. In addition to vivid descriptive metaphors, *painkili* was popular for the line drawings and illustrations that accompanied the stories. *Painkili* and soft-porn cinema were thus imbricated in larger cross-media conversations, with soft-porn films often drawing on *painkili* narratives for their choice of character types and narrative patterning. The “inter-textual relay” between soft-porn cinema and vernacular pornographic literature allowed these films to circumvent established visual and narrative cues.³⁰ Many *painkili* writers had to publicly face questions about their tacit support of *ashleela sahityam* (obscene literature). As the writer Pamman says, “I have never treated sex as *ashleelam* [obscene]. In my works, I have written with a controlled and restricted treatment of sexuality. I have tried to make *sringaram* [eroticism] enjoyable, not to make it *abhasam* [obscene].”³¹ The resulting generic hybridity of soft-porn appealed to the many different imaginations of desire that are culturally encoded in the psyche of the Malayali male audience, the most enthusiastic patrons of these films.

Tracing the history of soft-porn requires, then, simultaneously examining films, magazines, and other popular accounts that circulated in public discourse—what, following Warwick Mules, I call “media publics.”³² Media publics are assemblages of infrastructures, audiences, and meaning-making apparatuses that condition the way discourses operate and define who can legitimately put their claim before others. This encompasses consumers of newspapers, radio, television, internet, cinema, and other mass culture forms. Media publics are constituted by the relationships, formations, and exchanges that media facilitate and that contribute to the organization of everyday life. While Mules broadly defines media publics as the “discursive constitution of the public through media discourse,” his focus, ultimately, is on the shape of democratic societies when media impacts the constitution of public opinion.³³ But what does a media public mean for something like a popular (even, low) cultural form like soft-porn cinema? To account for this question, I conceptualize media publics as event-centric formations that accommodate contradictory viewpoints and opinions, including speculative claims and gossip; their conflictual nature offers us productive opportunities to interrogate codes of sexual and gender normativity that have kept women and other minorities out of public spaces.

I address two forms of media publics in this book: publics formed around events that are reported or represented in and by media; and collectivities formed around certain media forms and practices such as cinema (the *cinematic* public) and literature (the *reading* public). Given the extent to which mass-media forms are overwhelmingly present in the conduct of everyday life and the highly mediated nature of public affairs, the term *media public* at this historical juncture overlaps with the public sphere. This conceptualization challenges Jürgen Habermas’s

condemnation of mass-media publics as “false” public spheres that limit the formation of authentic public opinions by focusing on specific objects and discourses.³⁴ Critics of Habermas, including Craig Calhoun, Nancy Fraser, and Joan Landes, push against the putative “truthfulness” that he associates with print media compared to newer mass media such as television, as well as his argument that the public sphere offers a level playing field, irrespective of differences in class, gender, and race.³⁵ Other scholars, including Geoff Eley and Michael Warner, have suggested that not only can the total “public sphere” imagined by Habermas be exclusionary, but many publics and competing counterpublics can coexist at any time within a given society.³⁶ Warner’s distinction between “*the* public” and “*a* public” is instructive here: “the public” is the social totality, and “a public” is a collective that is spatially and temporally bounded and comes into being as it interacts with an event or an object.³⁷ If one considers the diversity of media forms, their varied target audiences, and the myriad ways in which they use media, we can begin to talk of “*a* media public” in relation to specific media objects and issues. Although “media publics” can refer to a totalizing “the” ingrained in Warner’s definition of “the public,” speaking about specific objects such as soft-porn necessitates thinking in terms of “a public.”

In the context of South Asia, scholars such as Thomas Blom Hansen, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Sandria B. Freitag have addressed the various manifestations of public spaces and the multiple publics that have coexisted, contested dominant and popular forms, and unsettled efforts to universalize a singular public.³⁸ To conceptualize a “public sphere” in the South Asian context, one must attend to the messiness and conflicting publics that have historically coexisted in the region. Aligning with this approach, I draw on Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge’s conception that public culture forms a “*zone of cultural debate . . . where other types, forms and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways.*”³⁹ My conceptualization of soft-porn’s “media publics” in Kerala is indebted to this understanding of forms that encounter and contest each other. In conceptualizing a “media public” in relation to soft-porn in Kerala, one cannot simply speak of an isolated cinematic audience. Instead, various media forms, including pulp fiction, erotic literature, yellow magazines, television news, and the cinema, and their corresponding policies, moralities, and ethicalities collide, contest, and negotiate with each other in this assemblage. In this, media publics are by nature what Aravind Rajagopal calls a “split public.”⁴⁰ Rajagopal envisages this as “a heuristic in thinking about an incomplete modern polity, standing for the relationship between the configuration of political society desired by modernizing elites and its actual historical forms.”⁴¹ Although Rajagopal’s specific focus is on the role of English and Hindi print media in the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s, as a heuristic it offers us ways to think about the sexual-popular and how the imagination of chaste sexuality (seen in censorship mechanisms,

for example), can contrast with the realities of lived sexual experiences and non-normative representations.

MEDIA PUBLICS, SCANDALS,
AND THE POLITICS OF EXPOSURE

In the context of modern Kerala, the public sphere solidified in the second half of the nineteenth century when newspapers and journals began intervening in matters that were of “public interest” to the community.⁴² Udaya Kumar identifies newspapers’ direct address to the people as a performative element that brings into existence *pothujanam*—*pothu*, meaning “the common,” and *janam*, “the people”—the public whose opinions it claims to represent.⁴³ Thus, the public sphere is perceived as constituted by common people who engage with issues that are of shared interest to the community—the commons is delineated as an area of shared responsibility between the media and the society it represents. This idea of “the common” is also central to the proliferation of gossip, rumor, and scandals that are often pitched as publicizing private spaces and affairs—what J. Devika has called “scandal publics.”⁴⁴ In scandal publics, intrusion into the private realm is legitimized under the guise of collective responsibility. An instance that showcases the media’s intrusive gaze can be seen in the footage of a young couple hugging in the Kairali People news channel’s coverage of a 2008 protest supporting a land struggle at Chengara, organized by Dalits and Adivasis to demand ownership of cultivable land. Including this footage was aimed not only at delegitimizing the protests against the government but also at dictating what kinds of bodies and interactions could be scrutinized in a protest space. The very fact that it was a night vigil was used against the couple for having transgressed the codes of protest. After this footage was aired, the women’s wing of Kerala’s left party organized a cleansing ritual against the alleged sexual indiscipline at the event.⁴⁵

Often, as the examples in this book will show, scandal publics overlap with media publics and fold representational and social spaces into each other. The figure of the prostitute connects scandal- and media publics, as the need to control women’s sexuality was the fulcrum around which these debates took shape. An early instance of this enfolding can be seen in the history of the Trivandrum-based daily *Thaniniram* (True color), started by Kalanilayam Krishnan Nair in the 1950s, which soon expanded to include *Thaniniram Film Entertainment Magazine*. The magazine’s logo featured a monkey looking intently at its reflection in a mirror, a symbolic image that refers to the motto of the publisher—“to reveal the true color,” without any dilution of facts. *Thaniniram* framed its exposure narratives as empowering citizens to keep abreast of the latest happenings around them, be they political scandal, crime, marital infidelity, or corruption. Using the phrase *thurannu parachil* (exposure/ confession), which refers to the total revelation of information, *Thaniniram* gave confessional accounts a wide

currency. It featured catchy headlines that stirred the reader's curiosity, and its reporters included a somewhat loose category of "citizen journalists" or stringers, collectively referred to as "the Gestapo" (the "touring Gestapo" and "Madras Gestapo"), who exposed the latest gossip about prominent people's bedroom secrets.⁴⁶ By borrowing the name of the Nazi secret police, *Thaniniram* guarded the identities of the stringers who collected such information while preventing possible defamation suits against them. *Thaniniram* was unofficially "banned" in most family-oriented domestic spaces because of its concentration on salacious news, but it circulated widely in male-dominated public spaces such as salons and teashops. Its accounts spun narrative threads aimed at delaying closure by continuously revealing new potential factors that needed to be accounted for in the context of a crime or scandal, and this signature style sustained *Thaniniram's* readership. This strategy of deferral would later be replicated in obituaries for female stars and starlets in film and yellow magazines, which I explore in the first chapter of this book. *Thaniniram's* content included columns on illicit relationships and prostitution, confessions by film actresses, and erotic stories. It also featured advertisements for sex magazines, extracts from and advertisements for forthcoming sex-related books (e.g., *Seduction Science*, *The Surprising Secret in the Sex World*, *The Sex Plays of Malayali Girls*, *Prostitute's Dairy*, *Nameless Prostitute*, and *Prostitute's Daughter*),⁴⁷ and advertisements for collector's editions of nude photo albums like the one by "Music Book Stall, Kottayam," which featured "bedroom photographs" of young women and men and women engaging in sex acts.⁴⁸

Exceeding the genre of film-based reporting or evening tabloid reportage, such content set the stage for the kind of mix that later films and sensational reportage would feature. Further, the practice of inserting photographs sourced from film shoots alongside content with erotic undertones prefigured soft-porn's culture of splicing in explicit bits during film exhibition. This mixture reveals a field of exchange among politics, news, and cinema in terms of narrative and rhetorical structure. The "media public" in this context is not necessarily created by the media event or object, but already exists in relation to it. In this case, *pothu* is generated at the interstices of common concerns and shared responsibilities, although the language of "responsibility" often disguises voyeuristic formations and erotic sensationalism. This is a key point, because it is impossible to separate debates around soft-porn from wider discourses on obscenity and voyeurism in Kerala.

The Malayalam words *ashleelatha* (obscenity) or *ashleelam* (obscene) point to coarse, vulgar, or indecorous behavior that violates societal proscriptions. Discussions of obscenity in Kerala have a long history in literature in the writings of authors such as Sanjayan (M. R. Nair), Kutti Krishna Marar, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, who were part of the progressive

literature movement, and in art, as seen in public debates about Kanayi Kunhiraman's 30-foot-tall nude female sculpture *Yakshi* (1969). Rajeev Kumaramkandath notes that debates on obscenity were at the forefront of the regulation of literary publics in Kerala in the 1940s.⁴⁹ For instance, Basheer's novella *Sabdangal* (Voices, 1947) caused an uproar in Kerala because the author attempted to deal with themes such as homosexuality and prostitution. Written in the form of a confessional narrative, the novel features an encounter between the author and an unnamed soldier who is discharged from the army. The soldier says: "During my time in the army, my lover was the photograph of an actress. For many bachelors like me, she was our shared lover. The picture had eyes, breasts, navels and thighs and we had our own imaginations . . . kisses, embrace and masturbation."⁵⁰ M. S. Devadas, a communist ideologue, delivered a scathing attack of *Sabdangal* for its explicit sexual referencing. For Devadas, the book imitated the cheap novels from the West that revel in "sexual anarchy."⁵¹ In 1957, the Kerala school curriculum board's inclusion of a short novel *Nteuppuppyaykkoranendarnnu* (My grandfather had an elephant, 1951) by Basheer also had to be recalled at the last minute in the wake of protests against obscenity.⁵²

Crucially for our understanding of soft-porn, such obscenity debates also extend to the sphere of politics, manifesting in a series of political scandals that have centered the figure of the sexualized woman. This includes a 1963 case in which newspapers reported that State Home Minister P. T. Chacko was having an affair with a mysterious, unidentified woman;⁵³ the notorious Suryanelli case of 1996, in which a sixteen-year-old girl was raped by forty-five men in different locations over forty days;⁵⁴ and the 1995 Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) case that charged Mariam Rasheeda, a Maldivian woman, as a *charasundari* (beautiful spy) who was allegedly a CIA agent planted to prevent India's deal with Russia to acquire cryogenic technology.⁵⁵ In each of these cases, women as either victims or conspirators were rhetorically centered as uncontrollable, unreliable, or dangerous agents whose unbridled sexuality was the main driver of the unfolding events. In the Suryanelli case, for instance, the High Court deemed the survivor an untrustworthy witness because of "her past conduct of squandering the amount given by her parents for remitting hostel fees and even daring . . . to pledge her ornaments."⁵⁶ In the Chacko case, newspapers compared the incident with the Profumo affair, the British scandal over the Secretary of State for War John Profumo's affair with Christine Keeler, an aspiring model—"Who's Kerala's Christine Keeler?" ran one of the headlines in a Malayalam daily.⁵⁷ In the ISRO case, Rasheeda was portrayed as a femme fatale who portended disaster to everyone around her. Other newspapers picked up *Thaniniram's* description of Rasheeda as "Kerala's Mata Hari" and the *Mangalam* newspaper likened Rasheeda to "a tuna in bed" in reference to her purported sexual skills. Such reportage and the ensuing public perceptions laid the groundwork for

the cinematic rendering of the *madakarani* (sex siren) as a site of danger and illicit pleasures.

FROM ASHLEELATHA TO SOFT-PORN

In the realm of film, the first major debates about obscene representation emerged in the case of *Avalude Ravukal* (*Her nights*; dir. I. V. Sasi), a 1978 film that is often (and erroneously) cited as the origin of soft-porn.⁵⁸ *Avalude Ravukal* depicted the life of a sex worker, Raji (played by Seema), and her subsequent reintegration into a bourgeois middle-class household. Despite the narrative's underlying social realist impulse, the sensational publicity mechanisms used to promote the film, including a shot of the heroine in silhouette suggesting an erotic premise, gave it the reputation of a "sex film" (Fig. 3). With four daily shows at Besant (Chembur), Capitol Cinema, and Jaihind Cinema, *Her Nights* was advertised in the Bombay edition of *The Times of India* as a "Sexplosive Malayalam Film for Adults" and "Sex-citing hit for Adults only."⁵⁹ Similar journalistic usage—"Sexplosive film"—recurs in *The Indian Express* coverage of the film as well, where the writer wonders "how certain bathing scenes of Seema got through censor's scissors."⁶⁰ Some of the publicity posters had catchy text like "Sex needs no language" and "Tells all! Shows all!" which added to the film's public reputation. A widely publicized poster for *Avalude Ravukal* shows a young woman in a flimsy, clinging white shirt examining a scratch on her thigh. At right, a man with thick-framed glasses—his gaze away from the camera—seethes with conflicted desire for the woman. At the bottom of the poster is a silhouette of a reclining girl, her leg outstretched. The poster also features the title in bold type, with the letter "A" being formed by the legs of the silhouette.

The poster's designer improvised this clever strategy to foreground the "adult content" in response to the film's problems with the censor board. The scene of Seema examining her thigh divided the members of the examining committee. Although the majority of the members voted to remove this scene, the sole woman member, Konniyur Meenakshi Amma, insisted on retaining it, arguing that it had narrative logic. As one film critic recounted to me, the very fact that Raji's dialogue reveals that the scratch was caused by an iron railing and is not a "love bite" speaks to the unadulterated love she has for the hero.⁶¹

A different publicity image for *Avalude Ravukal*, published on the back cover of the magazine *Film*, places a shot from the film in a small circle inset above the much larger image of the actress and her bare back. The text reads, "The story of sleepless nights and dreamful days of a girl who was forced to sacrifice her body in the dark rooms in the hotels, like a burnt sandalwood stick."⁶² The reference to the hotel as a site where Raji was meeting the clients in the film also led to litigation. The Kozhikode Second Additional Subjudge ordered the producer and distributor to pay a compensation of 25,000 rupees (approx. \$3,052) to the owners of the Beach Hotel, Kozhikode, and directed them to exhibit the film after removing the parts



FIGURE 3. Poster of *Avalude Ravukal*. Image courtesy National Film Archive of India.

objected to by the hotel owners, who claimed that the film featuring prostitution was shot in the hotel without their permission and caused them disrepute.⁶³ The CBFC temporarily canceled the film's certification after allegations that film prints distributed outside Kerala featured objectionable scenes. In fact, prints of the film exhibited in a theater in Annamalai, Madras, were seized by the police for incorporating uncensored scenes.⁶⁴ In its ruling on December 6, 1978, the Madras civil court declared that the film "may be screened in Kerala, but not in other areas."⁶⁵ This verdict was taken up at the government level to emphasize that censorship mechanisms should also curb the unauthorized interpolation of reels. It also made it compulsory for the film board to retain a copy of the censored version, along with instructions to film labs that no copies of the film other than the one to be censored should be made until they were furnished with the certificate.⁶⁶

In 1984, *Her Nights* ran for six months at Plaza Cinema in Delhi's Connaught Place. Bhriqupati Singh quotes Munni Raj, who was known as the "porn pasha" (porn king) of Delhi, stating that the morning show became a prominent presence with *Her Night's* circulation in 1984. Interestingly, for a film released in 1978, its popularity only increased after its troubles with censorship.⁶⁷ *Avalude Ravukal* was remade into Kannada as *Kamala* (dir. C. V. Rajendran, 1979) and in Hindi as *Patita* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1980). The controversy around *Avalude Ravukal* also coincided with the revision of censorship guidelines, and the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting L. K. Advani used the controversy to argue for stricter censorship regulations.⁶⁸

Journalistic accounts also pointed to the "daring baring exposure" of Malayalam films as leading to the uncontrolled proliferation of soft-porn films.⁶⁹ In 1978, the Kerala-based state awards committee that reviewed the submissions spoke at length about the Malayalam cinema industry's need to devise mechanisms of self-review to discourage the use of sex as a catalyst for experimentation.⁷⁰ Excerpts of the censor certificate and suggested cuts of *Her Nights* later made their way into the documentary *Censor* (dir. Vinod Ganatra, 2002) made by the state-funded film unit, Films Division, as a part of the mandate to make viewers aware of the regulatory function of the CBFC. The images of the censor certificate show recommendations for suggested cuts. The final recommendation states, "The film deals with adult theme of prostitution and there are many visuals of adult nature; hence recommended for 'A' certificate."

These instances demonstrate the mutual imbrication of the female body and social taboos in *ashleelatha* discourses. Paying attention to this backdrop is a crucial part of *Rated A*, because soft-porn filmmakers incorporated contemporary political controversies, sex scandals, and sensational news items as a part of their films' narratives. *Kalluvathukkal Kathreena* (dir. A. T. Joy, 2000), a soft-porn film starring Shakeela, is a particularly good example of such overlaps between news and sensational film narratives (Fig. 4). The film drew its narrative elements from a tragedy that occurred in 2000 in Kalluvathukkal, a village in southern Kerala, in which forty-one people died and many others lost their eyesight after consuming bootleg liquor made in a hooch den owned by a Muslim woman named Hyrunnisa. The backdrop to the film is a mine that employs daily-wage workers, and the happenings are orchestrated by the liquor don Mathachan to reap profits and build his establishment. The film begins with a sequence in a toddy shop run by Kathreena (Shakeela), Mathachan's business partner, who has a wide network of connections. Prioritizing business interests, Kathreena advises him how to influence government officials by bringing police- and excise officers onto their payrolls to ensure there is no government intervention in their business. Kathreena's range of operations also includes offering and arranging sexual services to officials to get them to agree to her business propositions. Kathreena's toddy shop caters both to mine workers looking for affordable options and richer folk who are served on the first



FIGURE 4. Newspaper cutting of the advertisement of *Kalluvathukkal Kathreena*. Text reads: “Shakeela and Sajini cast together for the first time. The Shakeela film that has broken collection records.” Image courtesy Sarat Chandran.

floor. From the outset the film establishes Kathreena’s and Mathachan’s class differences from the regular consumers. Kathreena moves easily between the lower-class patrons and those with money, and her change of costumes from a *veshti* (an unstitched cloth wrapped around the lower part of the body) and blouse to a *sari* as she welcomes government officials indicates the malleability of her social position.

Overlapping storylines make Kathreena’s path cross with the other lead heroine, Sophie (played by Sajini). Sophie’s father, Joseph, dies after consuming adulterated toddy in Kathreena’s den, and her sister is sexually abused by Mathachan’s son Johnny, pushing her to suicide. Sophie takes a job in Mathachan’s firm and uses her sexual charms to lure both father and son. After killing Mathachan and Johnny, Sophie and her lover Sahadevan leave Kathreena to a violent mob of women who have lost loved ones in the toddy tragedy. Sophie stabs Kathreena, and she and Sahadevan are arrested by the police.

This narrative structure is important insofar it signposts the use of revenge narratives as a common trope in soft-porn films. The film pits Kathreena, who is considered as a collaborator of a morally corrupt social order, against Sophie, who wants to take up the system by eliminating the people responsible for the disintegration of her family. The film also brings together Shakeela and Sajini as co-stars, indicated in the poster as a novelty—a trend that soft-porn films regularly used in promoting multistar productions. The film also has some metatextual moments that foreground Shakeela’s presence as an actress. One of these is the relationship she shares

with Johnny, in which he calls her “aunty” (in English), a term used to refer to some variants of the *madakarani* in soft-porn films. Another metatextual moment is Johnny’s comment to Kathreena that she is “very popular among old men”—a reference to the popularity of soft-porn films among different age groups of male viewers. Although the Muslim identity of the real Hyrunnisa was obscured by the use of a Christian-identifying name (Kathreena) for Shakeela’s character, the film’s references to the real tragedy were substantial enough for the audience to identify it.

Such examples of representational exchanges and thematic commonalities point to the shared space that exists between audiences, media forms (including soft-porn), and the public sphere. Media publics form when audiences, events, and media forms come together, as in the case of *Kalluvathukkal Kathreena*. Conceptualizing soft-porn as a part of this “media public” consolidates a layered understanding of the public and allows us to think beyond simply film texts or current events or audience demands. Malayalam soft-porn’s resonances in the news and elsewhere, and soft-porn films’ real-world references, elicit a zone of contact in which a public as a totality is awakened to issues, themes, and concerns that are historically and spatially specific. The “media public” as it pertains to soft-porn then forms a “force-field, an intersubjective realm in and by which sexual desire is variously aroused, blocked, or violated.”⁷¹

AN ECONOMY OF “SOFTNESS”: THEMATICS, PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND EXHIBITION

Soft-porn films marked themselves as distinct from hardcore pornography in a variety of ways. The narratives incorporated “softness” in direct opposition to “hardcore” porn. Focusing on female sexual desire, soft-porn films used visual and aural tropes to work through the power of suggestion, often avoiding any direct exposure of genitalia.⁷² The softness in soft-porn is defined by the deflection of female sexual pleasure to body parts such as thighs or cleavage. This deflection is a crucial deviation from hardcore pornography, which, as Linda Williams discusses, relies on the phallogocentric climax of the hardcore “money shot” (cum shot).⁷³ In his work on soft-core films, David Andrews argues that soft-core emerged as a self-conscious genre steeped in negation. He defines it as “any feature length narrative whose diegesis is punctuated by periodic moments . . . of simulated, non-explicit sexual spectacle [and] leans on standardized forms of pornographic spectacles such as striptease numbers, tub or shower sequences, modeling scenes, voyeur numbers, girl-girl segments, threesomes, orgies and the like.”⁷⁴ “Spectacle” here serves a visual and affective purpose, with the female breast and thighs emerging as crucial visual signifiers. In Malayalam soft-porn, one encounters most of these features but with certain differences. For instance, the female breast is often (but not always) deflected to an image of cleavage that connotes (often unattainable) sexual desire. Similarly, the thighs assume the role of maximum visibility possible

in soft-porn films, as most of these films steer away from showing female genitals as part of the main narrative, although *thundu* were sometimes sexually explicit.

By incorporating sexually charged moments into the storyline and using extended shots of cleavage and thighs, soft-porn films highlighted female orgasm as their main organizational logic. Williams argues that in pornography, female orgasm cannot be visibly demonstrated like the male orgasm, and “sounds of pleasure . . . seem to out the realist function of anchoring body to image, halfway becoming aural fetishes of the female pleasures we cannot see.”⁷⁵ Eithne Johnson expands William’s idea of female auralization to capture how “sound effects texturize the aural space as a surface of vibrations as if to spatialize the text itself as a responsive ‘body.’”⁷⁶ Soft-porn films, for example, texturize the sonic space by using dubbed-over moaning to convey affective registers that align with the viewer’s expectation of soft-porn as a body-genre. As John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis argue, “female pleasure is better thought in terms of a ‘frenzy of the audible’ than that of the visual.”⁷⁷ The evidentiary proof provided by the aurality of female orgasm to some extent transcends the visual demonstration of male sexual pleasure that is prominently featured through money shots in hardcore films. Here, the melodic fragments used as background music in intimate scenes and during the insertion of “bits” unfold as four-bar phrases, which become eight-bar periods, and develop through an accretion of melodic and harmonic repetition and variation. Such patterning is distinct from American and European film music, which has formal properties that are very irregular, with frequent shifts of tempo and time signature. Not only do the instrumental timbres tend to be on the lighter side, but they are also designed to accommodate the aurality of sexual union. A typical characteristic of contemporary pop music is that a producer creates rhythmic patterns in the arrangement’s bottom end and then asks another artist to “topline” it by adding a melody. In the soft-porn films I examine here, the “topline” is primarily sexual. The instruments seem to float over a rhythmic groove beneath it, with the woman’s moaning forming the most important sonic layer in this arrangement.⁷⁸ Thus, soft-porn films gave female characters ample screen space, as well as aural centrality to assert their agency.

The absence of graphically depicted on-screen sex necessitates a careful arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* to capture female sexual pleasure. This extended to allowing seemingly radical narrative choices, such as depicting, for example, a heroine’s preference for masturbation over heterosexual coitus,⁷⁹ in the process reflecting what Laura Kipnis characterizes as “the oppositional political form” of pornography, which is its power to become “a home for those narratives exiled from sanctioned speech and mainstream political discourse.”⁸⁰

While anti-pornography feminists have also used “softness” as an oppositional term to refer to erotica and to signal its distinction from graphic phallic pornography,⁸¹ Malayalam soft-porn filmmakers have used “soft” to refer to acts of foreplay that can allow them to work without facing legal penalties for depicting graphic

sex. Filmmakers strategically used “soft” to define the genre against the injunctions laid out both by the anti-porn brigade and by the censor board certification clauses, which were becoming increasingly stringent to weed out the spread of sexually explicit content. Soft-porn films not only facilitated a flourishing alternative production and distribution economy, but they also allowed filmmakers to work around the codes of censorship regulations. In her study of censorship in Indian cinema, Monika Mehta examines the diffused networks through which different stakeholders tease out the “productive effects” that censorship can entail.⁸² Malayalam soft-porn is the manifestation of such productive effects; soft-porn as we know it today exists precisely because censorship regulations forced filmmakers to resort to specific visual, narrative, and aural strategies. Thus, the existence of soft-porn points to the loopholes in India’s censorship mechanisms that enabled filmmakers to think creatively and incorporate sequences of masturbation, bathing, and foreplay without drawing too much attention to the censor script.

In addition to the localized vernacular idioms that it borrowed from the threads of *kambikathakal*, *rathikathakal*, and *painkili*, Malayalam soft-porn aligns itself with a larger history of exploitation films. American exploitation films exerted a strong influence on Malayalam soft-porn films when they were imported to India in the 1980s. India’s censorship policies made it necessary for filmmakers to find ways of slipping through the cracks in the system, and “softness” became as much a method of making and distributing these films as a generic indicator. This took different forms, such as bypassing censor-mandated cuts and creating alternative scripts. Filmmakers often employed *randam-ezhuthukar* (second writers) to generate alternate “censor scripts” that would be submitted to the CBFC. As I discuss in chapter 3, second writers knew how to save scripts from being butchered indiscriminately by the censor. Their primary goal was to follow censor regulations in all seriousness and even to think *like* a censor. They flagged possible objections on the script so that the director could strategize about how to circumvent potential problems. Given the riskiness of second writers’ tasks, an unwritten code existed that only the most essential production details of a film would openly circulate. Second writers also produced alternate scripts that were variations of the ones submitted to the censor board. My respondents referred to these as “Plan B and C, in case there are more roadblocks while getting the censoring done.”⁸³ Many of these writers were hopefuls who came to Madras in search of opportunities to write film scripts, but, when life became difficult, they moved to other occupations; some became “mentors” who helped submit scripts for censor certification. Those who were good at handling two languages became script writers for films that were dubbed from other languages. Censor script writers were adept at skimming through scripts and marking parts that were likely to be contentious, and they could even write new scripts that were cleansed of all “impurities.” This group was distinct from “ghost writers,” who wrote film scripts without being credited.

Thus, as much as genre and aesthetics, infrastructures of film production and sites of theatrical exhibition were a significant component of how the soft-porn field negotiated censorship mechanisms. Gaming the censoring machine also included tactics such as using personal contacts to facilitate filming and certification to border towns and the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, which fell under the jurisdiction of different regional censor boards. Some filmmakers also used the government-owned Kerala State Film Development Corporation's (KSFDC) Chitranjali Studio to avail themselves of the subsidies and facilities that were meant to aid the production of films in the state. According to the package scheme of KSFDC, any film project that could furnish a surety of five lakh rupees (\$6,109) as bank guarantee, would be eligible for availing ten lakh rupees (\$12,218) as financial support from KSFDC, which included a four lakh rupee (\$4,887) government subsidy. This put a lot of pressure on KSFDC, and the chair, P. Govinda Pillai, had to respond to the allegation that the government facilities were used to fund blue films—the phrase used to refer to erotica. Pillai said, “The films have become blue between production and censor certification” and hence KSFDC “cannot be blamed if the films ended up as blue films.”⁸⁴

The success of soft-porn films hinged on the role played by single-screen B- and C-circuit theaters that usually perform the bare function of film exhibition and cater to semi-urban and less affluent audiences.⁸⁵ The demarcation of A, B, and C circuits in the exhibition of films in India reflects different scales of manageability that are premised on the location of theaters; ability to procure prints from distributors by paying advance for booking; and amenities provided for patrons, including air conditioning, car parking, snack bars, and reservation provisions. Ticket prices in B- and C-center theaters were comparatively lower due to lower tax rates, allowing exhibitors to negotiate different models of profit sharing with distributors and to make informal transactions that never existed on paper. Whereas B- and C-center theaters had to wait to screen new releases until they had finished their first runs at the A centers, soft-porn films were released at all centers at once. In some ways, this model catered to audiences in the outskirts who wanted to see the film on the “first day, first show.” The runaway success of soft-porn films thus unsettled long-standing distribution patterns that restricted new releases to A-center theaters and thereby demarcated B- and C-center theaters as zones that merely added revenue.

For their part, distributors used ingenious marketing strategies that foregrounded adult content by emblazoning posters with the “A” (for “adult”) and accompanying text that promised viewers that the ticket price was well worth it. Poster text sometime even included details about what the censor had recommended be cut. Phrases from newspaper reports such as “sexplosive” and “saucy” often doubled as publicity.⁸⁶ Soft-porn films used gendered language not only to address their audience but also to identify the narrative importance that these films granted female characters, which was one of their central generic features.

They were often publicized as “gents’ films,” because they were aimed exclusively at adult male audiences, and they were screened in theaters that were all-male spaces. The narrative prominence of the actresses made these films distinct but also alienated the male actors who worked in them. Actresses in soft-porn films used their relative advantage to dictate their sense of comfort in shooting scenes that involved intimacy, and male actors saw that as eating into the availability of screen time and full-fledged roles for them.⁸⁷ Rather than appreciating the narrative prominence of female characters, popular discourse often viewed it as resulting from a power play between actors and actresses, and from actors’ inability to negotiate their own interests.

In addition to availing themselves of the services of second writers, soft-porn filmmakers also avoided the censors’ gaze by splicing in extra reels in the form of *thundu* that were edited out of the original censor print or lifted from completely different source material. Although most of these explicit bits featured relatively new actors, images of identifiable actresses appeared in some footage. Projectionists added these bits during screenings to titillating effect, and each screening was different in the way they were added to the reels. In some instances, projectionists followed directions for which specific bits to add in at specific moments, but in most cases, it was left to the projectionist to add the most effective combination for the desired effect. The “uncontrollable” B-circuit audience, it was imagined, would come to theaters for these kinds of erupting pleasures, a sensibility associated with Tom Gunning’s theorization of “cinema of attractions” in the context of early cinema—“a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.”⁸⁸ B-circuit cinema’s exhibition strategies frame the film-text as an unstable signifier that is constantly reinterpreted based on audience configuration.

Thundu share their organizing logic with “cut-pieces”—“short strips of locally made, uncertified celluloid containing sexual or violent imagery that appeared and disappeared abruptly from the reels of Bangladeshi action films,” as defined by Lotte Hoek.⁸⁹ The cut-piece as “unstable celluloid” thus points to the world spilling outside of the space of the screen.⁹⁰ In Hoek’s reading, the “collective viewing of sexually explicit imagery can destabilize the operation of genre.”⁹¹ In a sense, soft-porn film often *becomes* soft-porn in the process of active exhibition, and softness thus also refers to a malleability and adaptability that is central to this form. Hoek describes cut-pieces as oscillating between temporary availability and invisibility insofar as they are able to bring the dissonance of the social to the attention of the audience. They thus encapsulate many contradictory impulses and hint at the disintegration of the Bangladeshi polity and its filmmaking traditions.⁹² Bits in Malayalam soft-porn share this temporary visibility with cut-pieces in Bangladeshi action cinema.

However, whereas Hoek’s cut-pieces are always explicitly about sex, *thundu* in Malayalam cinema encompass a wider array of cultural insertions. They might

include fragments of footage that were shot separately, featuring female masturbation, lesbian sex, and, in rare instances, shots of male homosociality (not necessarily homosexuality). Sometimes, *thundu* insertion also cashed in on the currency of sensational news and viewers' familiarity with such events. In some instances, news items were used as *thundu* that simulated the titillation offered by sexually explicit sequences.⁹³ Sensational news stories from visual and print media were inserted into soft-porn films to evoke the erotic potential embedded in the collective imagination of the taboo, which ties it very closely to scandal publics and the politics of exposure. One prominent case of this that many of my respondents mentioned was the incorporation of references in many cut-piece eruptions to a 1997 sex scandal involving a state minister that was popularly known as the "ice-cream parlor sex scandal" because it was tied to an ice-cream parlor that doubled as a brothel.⁹⁴ By elevating the viewers as respondents who are entitled to make their stances public, such sensational overtures invited them to become interlocutors in unraveling the mysteries and speculative possibilities laid out before them.

Whereas soft-porn films were processed at prominent labs such as Gemini or Prasad Labs in Chennai, *thundu* were processed separately at Vasant Color Lab or R. K. Labs in Bangalore. My respondents explained that processing the bits in smaller labs allowed more options, especially with coverage shots (the process of filming multiple angles, shots, and performances of a scene), and even access to the lab's library, where they could source additional footage if needed. Additionally, agents in Bangalore mediated deals for "extra footage" (as they were referred to among brokers) between the distributors and the lab for a certain percentage of the cut from both parties. During my interview with field representatives who used to accompany the boxes carrying film prints, some recalled how they assisted projectionists in synchronizing the bits with the "gap"—a term signifying probable sequences that could precede and succeed the cut-piece.⁹⁵ Gaps were physically marked on the celluloid with chalk to enable the projectionist to find the exact points to insert *thundu*. There were also times when they reported ignoring these marks and picking other places for insertion. The addition of bits was in itself a collective, creative act with room for improvisation and spontaneity.

Thundu with recognizable actors were used because viewers could relate to them, but their inclusion raised questions about how such footage was procured and if it had been shot with the consent of the actors. Some bits were video footage of print material about sensational political scandals, and they now function as a kind of temporal stamp that can reveal hidden layers of production history. Footage from Hollywood and European films, referred to as "English bits," also appeared in soft-porn films as an interlude to the sexual scenes, and their usually sudden emergence provided a fetishistic eruption of white female skin amid the localized version of buxom women who were the lead heroines in these films. These cuts suggested intimacy in bedroom, shower, or massage sequences, or with reference to contemporary political and sex scandals. They had a disruptive

logic, especially as they were often inserted at points that did not have a direct narrative connection. “Leaked” content came from various sources, including clips excerpted from “foreign XXX videos” that came from the Gulf. Projectionists were given creative license in exhibiting films, and they would sometimes “edit over” the film by splicing in extra reels with film glue, thereby inserting new narrative threads that were not in the censor’s cut. In fact, the genre’s specificity lay in the act of splicing in *thundu*. This means that even films that did not easily qualify as soft-porn in terms of look or formal qualities could adopt a soft-porn mode simply because the cut-piece functions as a completing appendage to the narrative’s jigsaw.

Indeed, many films that were popularly known as or are now remembered as “soft-porn” could qualify as sexually suggestive melodramas or thrillers. For instance, *Aa Oru Nimisham* (That Moment; dir. U. C. Roshan, 2001) starring Shakeela, Roshni, and Devika, explores the story of love set in the backdrop of a revenge drama. Shakeela (whose character is unnamed in the film) is the stepmother of two teenagers, Deepa and Sudhi; her husband (Pratapachandran) is relatively older, and the age gap is evident in the way the children address her as *cheriyamma* (mother’s sister). Things start to go haywire when Sudhi’s friend Sushil comes to their house for a vacation. Shakeela’s character, the stepmother (henceforth Shakeela), is upset on seeing the interactions between Sushil and her daughter and is quick to warn her husband about the inappropriate behavior she witnesses. While Shakeela tries to stop the marriage alliance between the two, Deepa overhears a conversation between Shakeela and Sushil that reveals Shakeela’s backstory, and the ulterior motives behind Sushil’s attempt to get closer to her becomes evident. It is revealed that in the past, Sushil tried to get a security guard to rape Shakeela, and when Shakeela stabbed the guard, Sushil begins blackmailing her. The film ends with Sushil’s death, Deepa—the daughter—confessing to the murder, and Shakeela committing suicide. The trope of the guest who overstays and takes advantage of the hospitality shown to him, and ultimately Sushil’s murder, signals a moral victory that makes the film a melodrama of sorts. Even though Shakeela kills herself at the end of the story, her death provides moral compensation for her brief affair with Sushil in the past. Through her death and Deepa’s realization of Sushil’s real nature, the film reunites the family members, who realize Shakeela’s dedication to their well-being.

The narrative’s melodramatic overtures are important as they often repeat across the genre of soft-porn and point toward another mode of “revision” that took place when the certifying committee would assign a “thematic classification” to the films.⁹⁶ Although most soft-porn films were categorized under the theme of “melodrama,” the logic of classification remained nebulous. For instance, some of the members who were part of the certifying committee referred to their definition of melodrama as a clash between good and evil, leading to the victory of moral values over desires of the flesh.⁹⁷ This is a crucial reference, as the

question of melodramatic closure places the burden of “evil” on unbridled sexuality. Although soft-porn films purportedly centered around an autonomous female figure, the tendency of melodramatic closure enforced the reinstatement of patriarchal structures within the narrative. Thus, despite the apparent sexual autonomy of the female figure, these films often conclude by showing her as regretting her wayward life, being given a second lease on life by cleansing her past, or sacrificing her life to amend her sins—all ways of containing her sexuality that align with Elena Gorfinkel’s conceptualization of a moralistic tone or “guilty expenditure” that showcases the woman regretting or being punished for her wayward life.⁹⁸

In the case of *Aa Oru Nimisham*, we can also identify the marginal role played by male characters in terms of screen- and narrative space. Crucially, Prathapachandran’s role as an older partner who cannot satisfy the sexual needs of a relatively younger wife (often the catalyst for the sexual adventures of the *madakarani*) reappears in other soft-porn films as well. A mainstream actor who primarily played supporting roles, Prathapachandran took up such roles in soft-porn films during the last stage of his career. Although this was met with a lot of surprise by his co-actors, it also shows the liminal status of the soft-porn form as it blended the mainstream and the underground circuits, as well as provided alternate employment opportunities to a vast spectrum of film workers. In sum, the “liberatory” potentials of soft-porn films varied when it came to narrative and had more to do with their modes of production. These films exerted a counter-hegemonic pressure off-screen, as seen in the repeated assertions of both directors and actresses that the soft-porn industry functioned on an economy of trust, rather than exploitation—that is, based on the crews’ and the actors’ openness and accessibility during the making of the films.⁹⁹

A NOTE ON (IMPURE) METHODS

In conceptualizing Malayalam soft-porn in this way, I align myself with sex- and porn-positive feminists who affirm the need to create inclusive approaches to studying pornographic practices and representations by accounting for the production and labor involved in making pornography.¹⁰⁰ This runs counter to traditional feminist approaches that link pornography to violence in toto, which also stymie efforts to critically study pornography.¹⁰¹ More importantly, these approaches also dismiss the agency of women who live and work in the pornographic industry, projecting them as mute subjects who are exploitatively represented on-screen and who must be redeemed through representation in certain kinds of feminist work. In contrast, feminist porn scholars have asserted the need to remap the terrain of feminism by attending to labor, agency, pleasure, and desire. For instance, Mireille Miller-Young’s scholarship on African American women who work in the porn industry recognizes that they do so for a variety of reasons, including economic sustenance and taking control of their own sexual images.¹⁰² In a similar vein, Jennifer C. Nash’s

work on race and pleasure also pushes us to look at the “paradoxes of pleasures” and spectatorship, thereby shifting the lens to pleasure and desire rather than fixating on “the injuries that racialized pornography engenders.”¹⁰³ Drawing inspiration from such approaches, I postulate that any understanding of Malayalam soft-porn’s underground circuits of production and distribution, and its dependence on trust-based interpersonal networks, necessitates moving out of an “exploitation only” narrative and studying collaborative practices.

Malayalam soft-porn itself does not have a defined feminist politics nor is it necessarily oriented toward gender parity. But a feminist study of its production practices allows us to braid together the ground realities involved in its informal modes of recruiting and sustaining labor such as trust-based and ethical collaborative approaches. The bonds that sustained me during this research were mediated by a trust economy that works on an informal level. I was invited to the domestic spaces of many of my informants who worked in soft-porn, primarily to introduce me to their family members, who they feared would be worried that they were spending time with a female researcher. These invitations always came with a rejoinder that I was not to reveal my *real* research but rather couch it as an interest in “film production.” While I was keen to follow the object of soft-porn as it was being produced, circulated, and exhibited, I was also interested in the social relations, labor, domesticity, and informal exchanges forged between people, institutions, and piracy networks as they partook in this travel. In other words, my work required tapping into the relational networks that defined soft-porn.

The feminist locus of this work is invested in the *madakarani*, the voluptuous lead female character at the center of soft-porn films. While *madakarani* is a colloquial term for a woman who exercises her sexual autonomy and activates a sense of fleeting (male, voyeuristic) sexual pleasure, it also invites an examination of how gendered demarcations, patriarchal mores, and implacable desires enter the space of the cinema. I use the term to imply such noncompliant sex-siren-like figures as well as a discursive concept to examine how many women strategically used their sexual agency to unsettle power relations and advance their own social mobility. In so doing, *Rated A* traces how the *madakarani* becomes more than a filmic trope and consistently emerges in media publics by disrupting normative expectations. Further, not only is the *madakarani* a site of nonnormative femininity, it is also a battleground of caste and body aesthetics. As I demonstrate through the figure of Silk Smitha in chapter 1, caste identity conditions how certain women are more readily read, and their images circulated, as *madakarani*. Caste is an ancient system of social hierarchy on the basis of birth—those born into a particular caste live their entire lives as members of that caste with no possibility of upward mobility. It is a marker of social status and shapes the opportunities they receive on the merit of their birth into a specific caste group. A complex and often hidden category that is made invisible for those who come from upper-caste or *savarna* backgrounds, this identity impacts the lower castes very differently by

shaping their social existence. Not all of the actresses who played *madakarani* were of caste-oppressed backgrounds, and not all *madakarani* characters are explicitly coded as lower caste. However, it is through this filmic trope and figure that caste enters the field of cinema in Kerala (other than the social realist art cinema tradition). As Vijeta Kumar writes, such bodies are a “a site to perform ‘perversions’ that won’t be performed on a ‘purer/fairer’ body or an opportunity to rescue a ‘poor, hypersexualized, lower-caste woman’ who might not know better.”¹⁰⁴ In that sense, this book aligns with the work of scholars such as Jenny Rowena, Manju Edachira, Shyma P., and others who foreground caste as both as issue of representation on screen, as well as something that conditions the structure of the film industry itself.¹⁰⁵

In addition to feminist porn studies, *Rated A* contributes directly to scholarship on production cultures and on South Asian film. Production and industry studies scholars such as Tejaswini Ganti and Clare M. Wilkinson have shown how film personnel negotiate their career prospects in the media and entertainment industries.¹⁰⁶ In *Rated A*, I extend this focus to veritably “illegitimate” media practices that impact how cine-workers navigate work and life. I move away from the landscape of A-list film stars, production sites, and practices that has generally been the focus of production studies and focus instead on B-list films and B- and C-circuit exhibition practices. With a focus on porous industry practices, gendered precarious labor, and adult media forms, *Rated A* locates forms of cine-labor that are largely invisible. The use of fictional names in soft-porn film credits was an effect of the devalued nature of the form—many who worked in this industry also doubled as cine-workers in the mainstream industry. I track the real people behind the fictitious credits often found in soft-porn films to unravel the economic necessities and inequalities that separate above- and below-the-line labor in media industries. This division—one of the very reasons why many below-the-line cine-workers tried their hand at soft-porn films—is theorized by Vicki Mayer as a convention that manifests itself physically and socially. “The line,” as Mayer points out, has “indexed the scarcity or surplus of so-called creativity and professionalism, two competing resources for labor value in industrial capitalism since the late 1800s.”¹⁰⁷ Malayalam soft-porn likewise is structured around an invisible organizing line between the mainstream and the underground that demarcates “professional” above-the-line personnel from ostensibly less creative (even deviant) below-the-line workers.

There is rich scholarship on stardom in South Asia, and scholars such as Neepa Majumdar, Kiranmayi Indraganti, and Usha Iyer have expanded the horizons by including singers and dancers, their voices, and their bodies as forms of labor and stardom.¹⁰⁸ In *Rated A*, I invite readers to think about stardom in the B-list and adult media circuits as forms of embodied, precarious labor. Much of this happens through my focus on the soft-porn star Shakeela. In mainstream Indian cinema, A-list actresses such as Madhuri Dixit were able to undo the vamp/heroine

dichotomy in the 1990s, paving the way for more sexually charged dance sequences to later become part of the regular offerings of the Hindi film industry.¹⁰⁹ This did not hamper Dixit's fame and she remained a major figure whose stardom was not equated only with her sexuality. In contrast, soft-porn actresses such as Shakeela enjoyed a transient stardom—her branding as a poster girl of soft-porn cinema simultaneously symbolized her as the lasting image of the degrading quality of cinema and the unethical practices in the shadow economy of the film industry.

The dispersed nature of this book's cultural objects as well as their malleability across time—from the 1970s to the first decade of the 2000s—necessitated the use of mixed methods, including ethnographic vignettes, archival research, sociological observations, and textual and discourse analysis. Historiographically, *Rated A* moves away from dominant narratives of Indian cinema by focusing on failed schemes and underground practices—topics about which personnel in state institutions such as the CBFC and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) are not keen to disclose many details. My work focuses on the tensions that mark such state institutions, which even when they worked under the mandate of the government were invested in very different focus areas. The 1990s has been associated in Indian cinema with globalization, economic liberalization, family films, and diasporic narratives of return to tradition. However, *Rated A* presents a slightly different slice of that decade, focusing on aspects of liberalization and global flows that run underneath these mainstream narratives, showing how aspirations and desire blossom in the shadow of global flows and policies in the 1990s and early 2000s. I show not only how this impacts forms of cinematic labor, but also how desire and pleasure travel through clandestine global routes, as, for example, in the traffic in Malayalam soft-porn among Indian workers in the Middle East. Observations gleaned from visits to pirate CD markets, theaters exclusively meant for soft-porn exhibition in various parts of India, DVD markets meant for Gulf audiences, and makeshift cinema tents that cater to migrant labor camps inform this investigation. Expanding the scope of South Asian pornographies, *Rated A* uncovers the inclusions and exclusions that take place in the cultural imaginary when Malayalam soft-porn enters the Middle East and comes to coexist with a range of pornographic media, including Bangladeshi cut-piece films and Pakistani *mujra* (a form of sexually suggestive and expressive dance) videos.

As opposed to conventional ethnographies that focus on the present to map the complex currents of everyday life, my project looks at a form that had petered out of circulation in the first decade of the 2000s and is thus oriented toward tracing memories, informal transactions, and production and exhibition patterns that facilitated the proliferation of soft-porn films. As Purnima Mankekar writes, "Ethnographies of mass media require us to expand our repertoire of methodologies and combine participant observation and repeated in-depth interviews with policy analysis, archival research and textual analysis."¹¹⁰ In effect, I had to treat this project like an investigative piece in which I worked as an industry insider,

taking inspiration from Amy Flowers's work on phone sex workers in the United States.¹¹¹ I tried finding jobs, first as an aspiring dubbing artist and later as a production assistant (both between 2010 and 2013, prior to writing this book—both failed attempts, at least partially) in order to decode how the industry operated under the shadow of the fictional identities of my subjects. Part historian, part ethnographer, I had to move, physically and epistemologically, within the minute channels of communication and exchanges within the field, treating people and their memories or accounts as part of the historical archive (and perhaps, for lack of a better term, we can call this a form of ethnographic historiography).

As scholars of adult media have pointed out, in the absence of official archives that preserve such material, adult film historians end up trawling through and collating an array of materials to arrive at conclusions and eventually construct their own personal archives.¹¹² Peter Alilunas describes this as “trace historiography . . . a method to locate evidence where it seemingly no longer exists” by following the smoke rather than fire.¹¹³ Similar to the under-the-radar circulation of soft-core in the American context studied by David Andrews, the distribution and exhibition of soft-porn films in India is marked by a recalcitrance toward bookkeeping.¹¹⁴ In the absence of industry data, we are left with censor scripts held at archives that are cleansed of all “impurities,” newspaper reports or scripts, and ancillary material. Often such material is owned by the filmmakers and personal collectors who collate newspaper cuttings and film weeklies because of their passion for film ephemera. The absence of official archives also enforces a turn to oral narratives and fragmented archival records that include center spreads, announcements about film titles, and production news in the industry weeklies and newspapers. Rummaging through materials left at the scrap dealers and secondhand booksellers, I found lobby cards, film posters, lab receipts, shooting-house booking forms, and continuity albums. A large part of this project is geared toward understanding how audiences engaged with spaces of soft-porn exhibition, how cast and crew negotiated the realities of production, and what role personal recollections and subjective experiences have in recounting the history of Malayalam soft-porn. Drawing on material such as diaries, court cases, novels, letters, news items, videos, and testimonies by and about artists and technicians, I trace soft-porn from its heyday in the late 1990s to its steep decline in the first decade of the 2000s, focusing on its transnational circulation, its local and global aesthetic influences, and the professional and personal networks that powered its production and distribution circuits.

A form such as Malayalam soft-porn thus encourages us to think about what counts as evidence and to acknowledge that evidentiary claims tend to elude the contingent formations that structure the way knowledge systems hierarchize and produce social claims.¹¹⁵ My approach in *Rated A* resonates with what Jane Gaines describes as a speculative “What If?” way of doing feminist historiography. Gaines posits the counterfactual as a way of moving beyond empirical

facts as the only anchor of historical narrative. More than merely filling in gaps, counterfactual speculation demands the historian's and reader's willingness to believe in the plausibility of what may have happened in a "What If?" situation. By 2012, the soft-porn industry had fizzled out completely and the personnel associated with this form had been cast aside as failures. As one of my respondents put it, "We were too early for the sexual revolution which Kerala was not yet ready for. Look at the cammers (online erotic performers) and phone sex folks who are able to make a living taking from what we did earlier. If society was willing to give us a chance, perhaps people would have appreciated the labor and effort that went into the making of these films, than rubbish it as just sex films."¹¹⁶ Like Gaines, I wonder what possibly could have happened if soft-porn films had been able to withstand this industry shift, and if filmmakers and actors who were associated with this form had been able to continue working without having to face the consequences of their alleged moral lapses.