

## Waiting for Kodambakkam

### *Economies of Waiting and Labor in Tinsel Town*

The tendency of starlets of Malayalam cinema to drop off the cinematic map after short stints was a product of the film industry's structure. Informal labor practices, which extended to all levels of the cast and crew, and especially to newcomers and below-the-line labor, shaped the lives of these actresses and their aspirational mobility. Waiting for a break in the industry—what I conceptualize as “cinematic wait-time”—became part and parcel of the affective economy of labor in the Malayalam film industry. Cinematic wait-time is spatially organized and incorporated in the industrial practices in Kodambakkam, a neighborhood in the city of Chennai. Cinematic wait-time refers neither to the time expended in the making, distribution, and exhibition of a film nor to representations of waiting or suspended temporality in film narratives. Most crucially, cinematic wait-time is *not* a “waste of time” in the “political economy of waiting.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is the time spent waiting to enter the film industry—time that must be invested for future returns and opportunities to be employed in film production. In this, cinematic wait-time also involves what Debashree Mukherjee, writing about filmmaking in colonial Bombay, refers to as the “hustle”—“a form of speculative action, a gamble from a site of immediate precarity.”<sup>2</sup> Wait-time does not always involve participation in the labor force, but it is a form of invisible labor that is nonremunerative and involves efforts to make oneself marketable through uncredited work and apprenticeship. Many of my respondents who were aspiring actors and professionals used the idea of wait-time to mean “experience” that counts in a labor market that highly values learning on the job. The political economy of Kodambakkam's production, distribution, and exhibition pathways incorporate waiting as a constitutive part of the system. While waiting for work

is not uncommon in mainstream commercial cinema as well, it takes on distinct contours in the case of soft-porn. For instance, for a still photographer or makeup artist wanting to work as a director making creative choices, advancing through the system was an uphill battle. In most departments, there would be other “waiters”—for instance, associates and assistants under the cinematographer, who were waiting their turn. Soft-porn “hacked” this waiting game; many film personnel could moonlight as soft-porn cine-workers in departments other than their own, while in the process bringing the dwindling audience back to the theaters.

Wait-time is also incorporated into the language of Kodambakkam’s grooming centers or acting prep schools, which promote the idea that waiting is an integral part of a successful career and a sign of sincerity. In my interviews with many film hopefuls who were receiving training in acting schools, there was a recurrent narrative of how being acknowledged for their talent after a long period of struggle is what defines a successful stint; *payatti theliyuka*—to excel after a series of ups and downs—was how one of the members of a grooming school referred to the process of waiting. Ghassan Hage calls this an “endurance test . . . that is referred to in common language as ‘waiting it out.’”<sup>3</sup> Yet whereas Hage refers to waiting out a crisis, wait-time in Kodambakkam’s film circuits has more of an everyday feel to it. Hopefuls waited, but not necessarily through a storm or a crisis. Their waiting was more akin to an athlete’s training during the offseason. It is not passive, but strategic—an “explicit expression of agency” that filters the investment of time through hope.<sup>4</sup> I use the term “wait-time” to account for such informal labor practices that are otherwise ignored within filmmaking’s transactional economy. Due to the premium placed on the commodity’s exchange value, wait-time remains under-theorized in most studies of the political economy of film production.<sup>5</sup> But wait-time is an integral mode of operation in informal and fringe cinematic practices, where above- and below-the-line costs do not exist as distinct foolproof categories.

Accounts of the deaths and disappearances of starlets were the starting point of my investigation, yet many other surprises awaited me as I began to explore the references that led me to Kodambakkam. I entered Chennai following the trails of the brief careers of many aspiring actors and technicians, some who built workable professional relationships and some who left their careers midway. These were not anomalies—rather, disappearing was part of the process of transiting between aspirational dreams and losing hope of finding footing in the industry. The industry’s regulated flow of production was seldom interrupted by such individual hurdles and pitfalls. A constant flow of aspirants was ready to replace actors who departed in these interstitial periods. Cinematic wait-time is a by-product of this demand for labor and the incessant entries and exits of aspiring actors to fill that demand and achieve their own goals.

Cinematic wait-time involves *waiting for* a break as well as *waiting in* anticipation of gigs and job opportunities. Through these two modalities, I track how temporal notions and practices of waiting become central to the imagination of a “tinsel town” and how wait-time etches itself into cinematic history itself. This mapping requires an ethnographic lens, as waiting can only be mapped by *waiting with*. By waiting with my respondents (conceptually and physically), I map the space of Kodambakkam and untangle different layers of remembrances and temporal invocations that connect it to the history of Malayalam cinema. In so doing, I locate diverse cinematic practices that are endemic to low-budget cinemas in southern India. I use the term “tinsel town” to refer to the struggle of the actors and technicians to establish their careers and the contingencies that accompany this process of waiting. The word “tinsel” plays into the imagination of a glitzy, Christmassy artificiality, as well as a datedness, in terms of the studio-based film productions that were produced from different centers in India from the colonial period.

Kodambakkam as a tinsel town highlights the spatiotemporal specificities that define regional cinematic processes. Kodambakkam is arguably the ur-scene for many of the South Indian film industries and later became the center of soft-porn production. Aspiring film actors who came to Madras in the 1960s and 1970s saw Kodambakkam as a hub for potential jobs. Although Tamil Nadu and Kerala are separate states, historically the various southern Indian film industries have overlapped since the silent cinema era. The intersection of these multiple temporalities and regionalities crystallize within Kodambakkam’s heterotopic space and govern its cinematic practice.<sup>6</sup> In her spatial conceptualization of film historiography, Priya Jaikumar explains that separate “physical, mental and social” spaces govern films and filmmaking and their contingent historical processes.<sup>7</sup> Jaikumar refers to cinema’s spatiality as “artifactual,” drawing attention to the craft, labor, art, and politics that help further technology’s mimetic and plastic capacities.<sup>8</sup> I likewise approach my study of Kodambakkam as a search for artifactual histories of film-industrial culture. While the historicity of Kodambakkam is specific to South Indian cinema, my larger theoretical intervention is to think about space *through time*—that is, to consider time not only as the chronological unraveling of historical events and facts, but also as it is lived, managed, and practiced within the film industry. This approach accounts for the ways in which memory, nostalgia, and unremunerated labor contribute to the construction of a tinsel town. As a product of consumption and exchange, cinema involves processes of labor and negotiation that remain unseen in the finished film product. Paying attention to waiting allows us to understand the tension between tangible and more invisible forms of labor. Malayalam soft-porn is marked by informal modes of production and distribution, and the roots of its transactional practices can be traced back to older forms of waiting and aspirational economies that were already at work in Kodambakkam’s cinematic ecology.

In examining Kodambakkam as a tinsel town, my intentions are twofold. First, I historicize the forging of regional affinities in South Indian cinema and the emergence of Kodambakkam as a site of affective encounters that mark the experience of living and working in a tinsel town. Second, I untangle the heterogeneous temporalities that are embedded in this notion of the tinsel town. The terms “tinsel town” and “cinema city” foreground the multiple industrial practices that cinema facilitates. At the same time, they can hide the different experiences of time that go into the making of such spaces. Subjective experiences of time as either fast or slow allow for equally subjective experiences of space to emerge. Thus, to examine the embodied practices associated with Kodambakkam as a space of mnemonic cultural production, I argue for a “sense of space” rather than an idea of fixed, unchanging space. This sense of space is deeply rooted in psycho-geographies of movement in which the act of navigating city-space creates an alternative “itinerary of emotions” that is distinct from the official cartographic representation of places signified through landmarks.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first, historical in focus, situates Kodambakkam as the base of film production for Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu films from the 1950s to today. Kodambakkam’s journey from “studio city” (that housed the major film studios of its time) to a site of B-movie production exposes the contradictory impulses that undergird our present understanding of both Kodambakkam and the rise in the late 1970s of “glamour” films—low-budget movies that dealt with sensationalized and sexualized themes and imagery. Informed by my experiences of observing a production manager in the low-budget film industry in Chennai, the second section examines the labor structures that position the production manager as the fulcrum of film production. The third section focuses on two filmmakers, K. S. Gopalakrishnan and P. Chandrakumar, who helped carve out the genre of glamour films in Malayalam cinema from the 1970s through the 1990s. These films were not necessarily explicit; rather, “glamour” was an industrial code that indicated a range of elements, including erotic dance sequences, illicit relationships, crime, and awakenings of sexuality. In my analysis of these directors’ film practices, I argue that low-budget glamour filmmakers employed specific tactics to reduce wait-time and manage precarity. They provided aspiring actors with opportunities and hands-on experience to build connections in an industry that had traditionally been a multi-tier structure; without these connections, it remained hard for outsiders to enter it. I suggest that Kodambakkam as a tinsel town has been shaped by such temporally motivated practices, which emerge at the confluence of precarious labor and risk management.

In her work on Bombay cinema, Ranjani Mazumdar views the cinematic city as an “archive that is deeply saturated with urban dreams, desires and fears.”<sup>10</sup> Mazumdar complicates ideological readings by emphasizing how cinematic

practices and urban experience inform the cinematic portrayal of city life. For Mazumdar, experiences of loss, nostalgia, pain, community, and anger can be perceived in spaces such as the “footpath”—a mix of “part village community, part cosmopolitan city street.”<sup>11</sup> The tinsel-town economy that I foreground in this chapter taps into the space of the footpath as it intersects with labor and wait-time. In the case of Bombay or Chennai, urban space cannot be divorced from large-scale migration from the rural hinterlands. Footpaths are not only traces of homelessness, but also spaces of negotiation where laborers—both native and migrant—wait to find work. For example, in Kodambakkam, junior artists wait for agents to pick them up outside the junior artists’ union office, and aspiring actors often wait near shooting locations to be introduced to the film directors. Films such as *Annakutty Kodambakkam Vilikunnu* (Annakutty, Kodambakkam is beckoning you; dir. Jagathy Sreekumar, 1989) and *Halo Madras Girl* (dir. J. Williams, 1983) that depict Kodambakkam as a cinematic city regularly show these waiting crowds. This kind of spatial, waiting practice is predicated on a deliberate deployment of hope—what Hirokazu Miyazaki describes as a way of capturing the prospective, future-oriented momentum inherent in the anticipation of “what has not-yet become.”<sup>12</sup> In a tinsel town, the anticipation of prospects renders waiting a mode of buying time to work out career options. Simultaneously, such practices also produce a community of “waiters” who learn from each other’s experiences and collectively negotiate wait-time in the industry.

Many of my interviewees used the word “waiting” in English, as opposed to its Malayalam or Tamil equivalent (*kathiruppu*, in both languages). In response to my questions about what exactly they were waiting *for*, many referred to an “apt time,” “conducive factors,” “right support,” or “god’s graces” that would turn their aspirations into reality. “Waiting for a break is like waiting for the visa to arrive. We all know that it will come but don’t know when. Like the different routes used to get [the] visa, we are all at the mercy of other people,” said Shenoy, who had come to Kodambakkam to be an actor in the 1980s and at the time of the interview worked in an eatery in Vadapalani.<sup>13</sup> Many who came to Kodambakkam in search of a film career and ended up doing odd jobs in the industry expressed a belief that wait-time might guarantee them a break. At the same time, waiting can also point toward reserve labor, which is sought only when there is a deficit in the labor pool, or unutilized labor that is either wasting away or not allowed to realize its potential. This reserve labor is constitutive of the spatial construction of the tinsel town, as waiting through and with hope becomes a mode of connecting with the world of filmmaking.

Tinsel town differs from terms such as “cinematic city” (the city as represented in film) or “film city” (the city where the film is shot). Although cinematic city, film city, and tinsel town all refer to spatial organizations of filmmaking, they are

distinct in their relationship to waiting. If the cinematic city encapsulates urban experience, a film city refers to a simulated one. It is an ensemble of infrastructures that are mobilized in one place to enable the film's production, as, for example, the Ramoji Film City (RFC) in Hyderabad, which Shanti Kumar describes as a coalescence of fantasy space and profit, where the existence of the entire place is meant to reduce the expenditure of time by speeding up processes and linking different segments into one unified space.<sup>14</sup>

Tinsel towns, though, are more closely related to cinema cities—urban spaces that are associated with film production, often drawing in crowds who witness the shooting as part of the experience of film production in the urban space. Unlike the cinematic city and the film city, which exist partly as representation and partly as simulation, cinema cities and tinsel towns are tangible urban spaces that intersect with cinematic practice. In relation to the cinema city, Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik, and Rohan Shivkumar, the authors of the multimedia *Project Cinema City*, map the space of Bombay and its intersection with varied cinematic practices. They write that the relationship between cinema and the city is “imaginary yet tactile, complementary and also ambivalent, momentary and still recyclable—in short it speaks of a form and its apparition as well.”<sup>15</sup> In the context of Indian cinema, Bombay is the cinema-city par excellence—“Bombay” is the city where the Hindi film industry is located, but its modalities of life are dispersed across its different urban locations. The cinema city points to an urban imagination in which the *entire* city is seen as a part of the cinematic industry. This is where tinsel towns differ from cinema cities: the difference between the two is primarily one of scale and relational locality. A tinsel town such as Kodambakkam preexists as a neighborhood or an urban zone within a larger city—Chennai/Madras in this case. It is “Kodambakkam” and not “Chennai” that defines the physical area and the reach of cinematic practice (Fig. 10). Although the term “Bollywood” is regularly used in the case of Bombay, there is no actual place with that name. Unlike Bollywood, Kodambakkam refers to an actual zone marked out within Chennai. This difference between Bombay as a cinematic city and Kodambakkam as a tinsel town also points toward practices of informal urban zoning that mark out specific trades within certain localities.

Kodambakkam intersects with space and wait-time in three significant ways: the representation of Kodambakkam as a cinematic city in filmic references; Kodambakkam as a tinsel town in its everyday workings; and Kodambakkam's intersections with filmic regionality. To use David Harvey's terms, we can approach Kodambakkam as both a represented space (appearing in memorial accounts) and a space of representation (working through signs and signifiers).<sup>16</sup> This latter aspect allows new spatial practices, spaces of representation, and cinematic practices to emerge across Kodambakkam's cartography. Tracing the historical

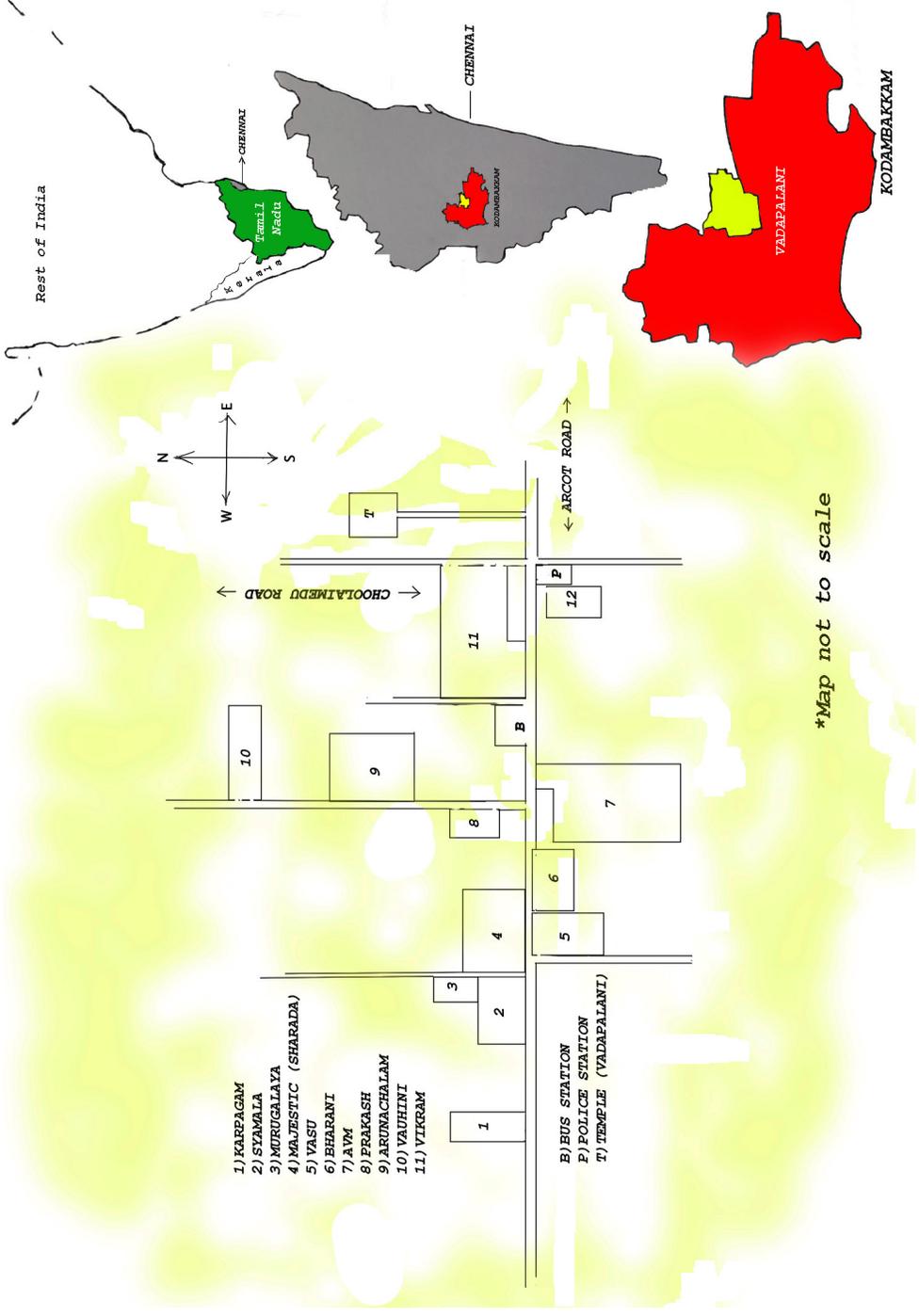


FIGURE 10. Artist's rendition of the map of Kodambakkam showing the location of various film facilities, including studios and labs. Image concept and model by S. Radhakrishnan; composite by Anirban Baishya.

emergence of Kodambakkam as a tinsel town allows us to unpack these two layers of representation.

#### ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF KODAMBAKKAM AS TINSEL TOWN

There are many contesting narratives about the origin of Kodambakkam. In some oral accounts, it forms part of the Shrotrium Village in Puliur Kottam, one of the twenty-four subdivisions of Thondainadu.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Sthalapuranam*, the name Kodambakkam comes from one of the two Siva temples in the area. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the stretch of land that now comprises Kodambakkam and its adjacent localities, Vadapalani and Saligramam, was the fiefdom of the Nawab of Arcot. Until 1964, one footpath extending only as far as Vadapalani was seen as the city limit. The place-name Kodambakkam derives from the Hindi term *Ghoda Bagh*, the name given to the Horse Gardens by the Nawab of Arcot.<sup>18</sup> The gradual development of Kodambakkam as the nerve center for film production in South India began with its incubation of an early film culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the establishment of several studios and theaters in the city of Madras. During the colonial regime, the four states—Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka—were collectively called the Madras Presidency. In the 1950s, Madras was at the center of a dispute between Tamils and Telugus, who both wanted Madras to be included in their state as part of the linguistic reorganization of independent India. Despite this contestation, Madras functioned as a base for the production for South Indian films in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam until the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> These films were colloquially called “Madras” films by distributors and exhibitors based in Hindi-speaking regions of India.

The first studio in Madras, Tower House, was set up in 1917 by Nataraja Mudaliar,<sup>20</sup> and several other studios, such as Star of India Glass-Studio and Sreenivasa Cinetone, were soon built in the same vicinity. Initially, the locality of Purasawalkam was the locus of film production in Madras; this shifted to Kodambakkam in the mid-1940s due to demands for electricity. Kodambakkam was an ideal location because it had a powerhouse built by the Madras Electricity Supply Corporation (MESCO) during World War II.<sup>21</sup> Kodambakkam was a sparsely populated area according to the 1939 census, but by the 1950s it had become the main site of film production for most of the South Indian states. The Kodambakkam Bridge, which connects the rest of the city with the prime area of film production, is a landmark that cannot be missed by anyone traveling to the city’s west side. The bridge was built in 1965 by the Highways Authority of India and the Indian Railways, under the initiative of Minjur Bhaktavatsalam, the last Congress chief minister of Tamil Nadu (1963–67), and during a time when anti-Hindi protests were flaring there.<sup>22</sup> Before the bridge was built, a railway crossing gate known

as “Periye Gate” (also called Rajagopuram Gate) connected the city with the studios in Vadapalani.<sup>23</sup> The term *Periye*, which is derived from the root word *peruma* common to both Tamil and Malayalam, means “famous,” and thus hints at the landmark’s proximity to the star-studded film business. Onlookers were fascinated by the view of actors waiting in their cars for the railway gates to be opened, and there was no scarcity of crowds at the gate.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the spatial imaginary of Kodambakkam mediated its star culture, with each part of the town associated with some aspect of the film industry.

Areas such as Kodambakkam Bridge, Periye Gate, Saligramam, and Vadapalani are anchor points that are crucial for understanding the film production and labor procurement practices that formed its tinsel-town economy. The varied trades and production-related tasks are spread across different localities that are demarcated informally as specialized zones. For instance, home-based business establishments flourished in and around the residential areas of Nungambakkam and Valluvar-kottam in the 1960s, demonstrating how people living in Kodambakkam incorporated filmmaking into their lives, making it into jobs that sustained their families. Huge stretches of the town’s thoroughfares were dotted with shops and businesses related to film, such as accessories suppliers, wig makers, carpenters, costumers, and hairdressers. Women also managed catering units from their homes.<sup>25</sup> Many took up businesses related to film as an extension of the traditional vocations of preceding generations, who mainly catered to the theaters and the mythological cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. The remnants of this film-based culture persist in signboards in Kodambakkam, like that of Hotel Hollywood, which was established in Trustpuram in the 1950s, and Bombay Hollywood, a tailoring and costume firm on Karunanidhi Road established in the 1960s (Fig. 11).

Lodging facilities were arranged in Rohini (T-Nagar), Raj Home (Nungambakkam), Palm Grove (Kodambakkam High Road), Amarawati, and Mosabi, depending on the “grade” of the technicians, production staff, and actors. Raipetta is another site famous for housing prominent actors. Production crews preferred the mess units based in Pandy Bazar, like Shanta Bhawan, Gita Café, and Narayanan Mess, due to their reasonable prices. Initially, most junior artists lived in one-room lodgings around Subarayan Street that charged daily rent, but beginning in the 1970s, they moved to Mosque Street. In a practice that is still followed today, agents frequented these localities to select extras for background and crowd scenes. The residential localities of Saligramam, Dasaradapuram, VOC Street, and Florist Street offered low-cost housing for newcomers. Whereas the area of Sowcarpet was demarcated as the hub for financiers, distributors were mostly based on Meeran Sahib Street near Mount Road. In the 1970s, film labs also began to open shop in Kodambakkam. These included R. K. Labs, Kamal Black and White Lab, Vijaya Black and White Lab, Prasad Labs, Gemini Labs, AVM Lab, Sarada Lab, and Vasu Lab.

Although it is not surprising that businesses providing housing and food thrived in this urban space, perhaps what is unique about Kodambakkam is that



FIGURE 11. Bombay Hollywood Tailors in Kalaingar Karunanidhi Road, Saligramam. Photo by author.

film permeated all aspects of its social life. Consider, for instance, that the Murugan Temple at Vadapalani became another central landmark of film production in Kodambakkam. During the 1970s and 1980s, the performance of prayers outside the temple was an everyday sight for people staying in the locality of S. Perumal Kovil Street. Before sending film reels out for circulation, distributors would mark the cans with sandalwood paste from the temple premises and, regardless of religious beliefs, most distributors and exhibitors would offer the first print to the deity for blessings, in a kind of urban cinematic ritual. Sometimes, reluctant producers who had reservations about the ritual's Hindu nature were made to compromise by shrewd distributors and production managers. As Mathews, a production manager—an agnostic who was raised as a Christian—said during one of our meetings: “Film production is a gamble at the end of the day. So, even though I am an agnostic, I would not mind doing a *puja* (prayer) at the Murugan Temple before sending the cans to the theaters.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, Murugan Temple's growth from a thatched shed built by the devotee Annaswami Nayakar to a full-fledged temple in 1920 owes a lot to Kodambakkam's bustling film production units.

The history of Malayalam cinema was closely associated with Kodambakkam until the 1990s, even though the first Malayalam films were not based in Kodambakkam—the first, *Vigatakumaran* (dir. J. C. Daniel, 1928), was made in a

studio based in Trivandrum, while the second film, *Balan* (dir. S. Nottani, 1938), was made by Modern Theatres, Salem. Studios based in Coimbatore, such as the Pakshiraja and Ratna studios, also contributed to the making of Malayalam films in the initial phase. The establishment of studios like Udaya and Merryland in Kerala in the late 1940s stirred popular interest in cinema, and many migrated to Madras in search of opportunities to work in film.<sup>27</sup> Madras was always thought of as a city that welcomed newcomers to its fold, as the phrase “Vantharai Vazhavaik-kum Tamilagam” (The Tamil land that welcomes everyone with open arms) indicates. With an increase in the number of Malayalam films produced in the 1950s, the influx of migrants to Kodambakkam began to increase substantially. The success of the 1954 Malayalam film *Neelakuyil* (dir. P. Bhaskaran) led to a rush of talent to Madras.<sup>28</sup> Migration was boosted by the informal bonds that supported aspiring film workers during trying times in Kodambakkam, and the shared vocabulary of the Dravidian languages spoken by migrants opened channels of communication.

Cultural and linguistic affinities were boosted through infrastructural support systems such as housing facilities, as well as restaurants that allowed Malayalis to convene and emerge as a substantial presence in Madras. Community spaces such as Poona Home and a cafeteria run by a proprietor known only by the surname Varghese supported employment opportunities for those who migrated to Madras in search of film jobs. P. A. Becker opened Poona Home in 1960 to support aspiring Malayali film workers who had returned to Madras after completing their studies at the Film and Television Institute in Pune (previously known as Poona) in Maharashtra in western India. It gradually developed into a hub for discussions and scripting workshops. Patrons of Poona Home included the likes of John Abraham, K. G. George, M. Asad, Ramachandra Babu, Balu Mahendra, and Vipin Das, who later became iconic figures in Malayalam cinema. Varghese’s establishment was a small, one-hall kitchen set up near the Kodambakkam Powerhouse that was frequented by many aspiring film workers. Film critic P. K. Sreenivasan reminisces of Varghese: “Varghese’s ledger had names of many star figures who would later rule South Indian film industry.”<sup>29</sup> Other popular Malayali establishments included Quality Hotel, run by a Malayali owner; Swamy’s Lodge in Mount Road, which offered cheap accommodations; and Kilpauk’s Malabar Hill, named after a Bombay locality, a popular lodging option for those with a slightly higher budget.

In the 1980s, as part of a larger process of strengthening the regional industries, Malayalam cinema moved its official base back to the state of Kerala, and the Kannada and Telugu industries moved back to their respective states. After this official relocation, however, Kodambakkam began to function as a shadow economy and simultaneously emerged as a significant strand in the imagination of Malayalam cinema. During the 1990s, Kodambakkam was seen as a space for low-budget films and one that held the key to Malayalam cinema’s underbelly. During my initial inquiries about soft-porn films, many prominent Malayalam filmmakers told me to find contacts from Kodambakkam. In the layered imagination of Kodambakkam,

the town was both a place-signifier for Malayalam cinema and a space where cinema's informal and infrastructural practices could be mapped.

#### KODAMBAKKAM AS REMEMBERED SPACE

Autobiographical accounts and memoirs of erstwhile technicians, actors, and production personnel reminiscing on their experiences working in Madras in the 1960s and 1970s paint varied pictures of Kodambakkam. Often partial and fragmentary, these accounts purport to offer a glimpse of people whose voices are lost in official histories. In *Beyond Frames: The Autobiography of a Cinema Still Photographer*, P. David, who worked in the film industry from 1961 to 1978, inflects his account of his struggling phase with the time he shared with film personnel. A preface by P. Zakir Hussain, titled "The Invisible Film Historian," locates David and his book within the rise and fall of many aspiring film workers who had to negotiate the industry's labyrinthine networks. The figure of the invisible historian evoked in this preface is invested with the task of unearthing lost voices. Although the book was promoted as an autobiography, it was in fact a compilation of articles by Hussain, who was a journalist and biographer. Hussain's name appears under the heading "thayarakkuyathu," meaning "prepared by," and the preface refers to the previous publication of some of the material as vignettes in *Mathrubhumi* magazine.<sup>30</sup> Arranged chronologically, the accounts begin with David's entry into Kodambakkam and subsequent chapters center on a specific figure or film. David evocatively narrates how he confronted the experience of waiting in an industry that is keen on time-bound work. In his constant run from pillar to post, he realized that "wait-time" had become a frequent phrase used to refer to the time that hardens one up to face the world. For many film hopefuls, waiting signified a testing time that could make or break their prospects in the industry.

David also writes about Kodambakkam's need-based housing arrangements, which offered low-budget lodging for job seekers who could not afford monthly rent and advance payment. These lodging arrangements were colloquially called "waiting rooms" and allowed job seekers to occupy a space without having to rent it. They were, in a sense, veritable "waiting technologies [that regulate] the compartmentalization of space and the provision of a space dedicated to waiting."<sup>31</sup> The temporary arrangements provided lodgers with a bed to sleep on, and they could leave their belongings at the hotel reception desk when going out.<sup>32</sup> This interim status meant that the lodger's space was marked by the bed they occupied, while the space adjacent to the hotel reception was used as a cloakroom. Sleep time was regulated so that the same bed could be occupied by multiple people at different points in the same day; ownership of the space thus varied over the course of the day. This wait-time arrangement hinted at a practice that distinguished between spatial occupation and spatial belonging as integral parts of negotiating wait-time. Spatial belonging could be earned after traversing wait-time.



FIGURE 12. Artist's impression of a continuity album for a 1996 film shared with me by a director. Image courtesy S. Radhakrishnan.

The spatiotemporal technology of the waiting room is replicated in a different filmic artifact—the continuity album. These albums perform a functional role in documenting the continuity of shots and collating a serialized view of time and space. Whereas publicity photographs are “rehearsed tableaux from the film [that] showcased key dramatic moments and other promised pleasures,”<sup>33</sup> continuity albums are devoid of aesthetic ornamentation. In his memoir, David refers to continuity albums as spatializing time within the “arena managed by a still photographer.”<sup>34</sup> These artifacts not only arrange the sequence of the images in the order of shooting, but they also act as a trace that connects an otherwise dispersed shooting process. Just as the waiting room houses film aspirants who may never meet, the continuity album documents disparate, fragmented segments of the shoot. At the same time, continuity albums also document extras or struggling actors who may have appeared in a scene in the shoot but may not have made it into the final cut of the film. They are not merely nostalgic documents of a film’s making but also a roster of those who waited through its production. They house not just the stars of the film but also the people who may have waited outside production facilities or studio offices to appear in one of the scenes. Continuity albums thus also become a resource for research—one that has helped me spark many a conversation with filmmakers about their experiences in Kodambakkam (Fig. 12).

A contrary picture of Kodambakkam emerges in the 2010 memoir *Chitrath-eruvukal* (Film streets) by the National Award-winning author M. T. Vasudevan Nair, in which he looks back at Kodambakkam in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike that of David, who left the film scene in the 1980s and moved to wedding photography, Nair's presence in Kerala's literary and cinematic publics sustained his privileged status. The book is structured in the form of remembrance columns by Nair focused on people he befriended in his time in Madras. Nair's memoir is woven around the theme of loss—the loss of people whose deaths remain central to his memory of the place and the loss of memory itself, which made him pen the memoir in the first place. Illustrations by the artist Nampoothiri serve as reminders of the spaces that have changed or been reorganized but are reawakened through Nair's narration. Nair returns to the trope of “time-bound writing” and the importance of spatial memory in recollecting moments from the past. Nair recounts that there were days when ideas would flow freely, while on others the process was slower and required time to allow latent ideas to manifest through images.<sup>35</sup> The places he stayed during these writing sessions played a crucial role in germinating his ideas. An idea of space as containing suppressed time emerges in these recollections. Realizing the importance of the spaces of hotel rooms to his “art of waiting” for ideas to emerge, Nair would frequent the same hotels to recreate the mood for literary outpourings, sometimes to find that hotel management had changed and the layout of the rooms had been altered.

Nair's account includes an interesting reference to the perception of Kodambakkam films in the national imagination. He narrates his experience of attending the NFDC's board meeting in Bombay in the 1980s, which discussed proposals for loans submitted by filmmakers. In the meeting, a bureaucrat lamented that the proposals were all “Kodambakkam style,” gesturing to the fact that the offbeat art cinema style that the NFDC was responsible for promoting had been put on the back burner in favor of “low-budget films” from Madras.<sup>36</sup> The presence of stalwarts like the film director L. V. Prasad did not stop the bureaucrat's tirade against seemingly low-quality films from the south. The chair of the NFDC, B. A. Karanjia, decided to resolve this quandary by conducting the next board meeting in Madras and including a tour of a couple of studios to offer a firsthand experience of Kodambakkam film production. As a former editor of film magazines such as *Filmfare*, *Screen*, *Cine Voice*, and *Movie Times*, Karanjia wanted the facts to be supported by evidence and felt that nothing could fall short of field experience for the officials who were in charge of selections for funding programs to support filmmakers. Nair does not mention if visiting the studios changed the bureaucrat's perception of Kodambakkam films, but the chair's insistence on changing the venue of the board meeting from Bombay to Madras indicates the need to actively advocate for a nonjudgmental attitude toward regional film industries. The connotation of “Madras films” as sex films was not uncommon in the 1980s and 1990s, as is evident in news reports on raids in theaters and anti-obscenity marches organized by

South Indian groups based in cities such as Bombay and Delhi.<sup>37</sup> *Madrasi* became a widely (and derogatorily) used term to refer to those hailing from South India, regardless of where they originated in South India. Despite protest from South Indian communities in Bombay and New Delhi who contested the use of this regional marker as a stand-in for taste, class, and linguistic subnationalism, soft-porn films exhibited in B- and C-circuit theaters in Bombay are to this day referred to as Madrasi films.

In contrast to the glossy and glamorous image associated with mainstream cinema production in Madras, K. S. Gopalakrishnan's 1980 film *Goodbye to Kodambakkam* captures Kodambakkam as a space of dirty dealings and compromises. The film begins with the disclaimer that the characters and events portrayed are fictional, but it draws on many real-life stories that the director witnessed over the course of his career.<sup>38</sup> The narrative centers on the trials and tribulations of Nandini, a female scriptwriter from Kerala who moves to Kodambakkam in search of opportunities in film.<sup>39</sup> *Goodbye to Kodambakkam* provides a meta-commentary on the role of informal networking in procuring jobs in the film industry. This includes casting arrangements mediated by brokers or film journalists such as Selvaraj, who offers to introduce Nandini to the top directors. Throughout these meetings with key people, she is addressed as "the girl from Kerala," and the film intersperses Tamil, Malayalam, and English in the dialogue, perhaps as a way of gesturing toward the cosmopolitan nature of Kodambakkam as a space of film production. The film also portrays Nandini's relationship with a much older director and his betrayal when he uses her as a pawn in an industry power play. After multiple rejections and sexual exploitation, Nandini finally gets to pen her own experiences in Kodambakkam in the form of a film script. The film muses philosophically about the futility of sincere labor in a competitive industry in which sexual favors, monetary benefits, or future returns determine support and mentorship. The film concludes with Nandini being conferred the State Award for her script. In her acceptance speech, she talks openly about how her bitter experiences in Kodambakkam strengthened her and her script. She ultimately decides to leave Kodambakkam because it made her compromise her personal beliefs. Her farewell to Kodambakkam is accompanied by a montage of the town's identifying geographical markers. For Nandini, her time in Kodambakkam provides the experience she needs to attain the strength to navigate an industry that promotes a patriarchal value system and would never accommodate a female scriptwriter. *Goodbye to Kodambakkam* is not alone in portraying the figure of a Kerala girl who is led astray in the city of Madras. As the tagline for *Avalude Ravukal* (Her nights) goes: "The story of a girl from a village in Kerala who is waylaid and gets morally corrupted in Madras city."<sup>40</sup>

Like all places, Madras and Kodambakkam simultaneously meant different things to different people. Collectively, accounts such as *Beyond Frames*,

*Chitratheruvukal*, and *Goodbye to Kodambakkam* do not give us a monolithic or “true” view of the space of Kodambakkam; rather, they produce a *sense* of space—a polyvocal understanding that emerges from subjective experience. Such variegated spatialities give birth to an uncanny space that is outside of all spaces, similar to what Foucault calls “heterotopias”—places that are counter-sites, where real sites are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.<sup>41</sup> These accounts invoke a sense of time that is individualized and subjective, and that requires understanding space by working through experiential memories that transcend the boundedness of absolute, abstract space. Spatial practices attain their efficacy only if they are placed within the social relations that condition their existence. P. David’s reference to “wait time” and Nair’s to “time-bound” writing can only be imagined within film production culture and the power relations that structure the interaction between different social actors.

In the context of film production, wait-time assumes the same resonance as the phrases “in the meantime” or “meanwhile,” which denote a kind of waiting that is allied to other happenings. The emphasis is on temporary arrangements that can help individuals upgrade their skills or procure a better job. In my case, it meant waiting *long enough* to gather resources, strengthen my job profile, and look for fresh pastures that could help me with research. The position of helper that I was offered had a very nebulous job description. Its requirement that I work across many departments may have made for tenuous working arrangements had my entire livelihood depended on it, but it was a boon for research as it allowed me to make contacts across a wide field. Shadowing the production manager, then, became an integral part of my method, and shaped the conversations I had during my research.

#### WAIT-TIME ECONOMY AND THE PRODUCTION MANAGER

In the summer of 2013, equipped with limited Tamil, I started living in Trustpuram, a locality adjacent to the Kodambakkam Bridge. While trying to find personnel who worked in soft-porn cinema, I was faced with a conundrum: everyone knew glamour films were produced in Kodambakkam, but no one knew exactly where. I also had to negotiate the significant, related problem of accessing material and people. In laying preliminary groundwork for my project, I had collated a list of possible contacts who might help me explore Kodambakkam’s past—specifically, the era when it flourished as the production site of glamour films, which preceded soft-porn films. Little did I know that I was entering a vortex of fake names and identities. Despite my relentless efforts, my attempt to track down key street names in Kodambakkam came to naught—they simply did not exist on maps of Chennai. The story was the same with people’s names. I received

blank looks from acquaintances in response to my queries about “Joseph Breeze,” a one-time producer who made a handful of sex education films, or about a particular editor who was so adept at splicing the sexually explicit cut-pieces that he was known among his peers as “cut-piece Nanu.”

To decode such fictional identities, I took up temporary jobs that could sustain me and my research in Chennai. My initial industry experience involved figuring out if I had any prospects as a dubbing artist. But in a month’s time I had to give up, after the Dubbing Artistes Union warned me about the membership requirements needed to pursue opportunities. Breaking into its small circle was not easy, and membership conditions were certainly not encouraging for a newcomer. Per the union rules, a one-time deposit of one lakh rupees (approx. \$2,000) was necessary before determining whether I had a future in dubbing. Since that was a luxury I could not afford at the time, I bid adieu to my dubbing career after a series of auditions.

The unionization of twenty-three trade guilds under the Film Employees Federation of South India (FEFSI) meant that membership norms were quite stringent. The minimum guarantee of the wage rate and *bata* (daily wage) was favorable to employees, who would be eligible for payment even if the production stopped midway or for any other contingency that would affect their individual roles in the production. But union membership was also expensive; to join, newcomers had to work in at least three projects and furnish letters from the directors authorizing their status as employees. Such requirements meant that newcomers took whatever jobs they could find, regardless of whether or not they were paid. Most agreed to be part of this unpaid workforce with the consolation that once they gained membership, they could ask for the wage rate stipulated by the union. Membership fees were perceived as a fixed deposit with “returns,” or as insurance in times of emergency. Even during bouts of severe job insecurity, unionization gave workers the power to bargain with producers. This was such a strong lure that nobody wanted to challenge the exorbitant membership fee. The time lag between starting off with unpaid jobs and becoming able to pay for union membership was seen as a compulsory initiation ritual, with a few exceptions. “If you are well-connected or from a family with connections to films, you can bypass the wait-time. If that’s not an option, one would certainly require a strong network of powerful friends who can smooth your risks,” said Raveendran, a production manager, in response to my questions about whether waiting was integral to the tinsel-town economy.<sup>42</sup>

Since insider knowledge and immersive fieldwork were crucial to understanding the production practices of glamour films, I decided to try my luck in the production unit. In the framework of the FEFSI, women are not considered for the job of production assistant, even though for a newcomer like me it would have allowed for an entry without barriers. The regulations were strict and it was a male-only workforce, so without proper accreditation I could only accompany a production manager as an observer who sometimes helped out with odd jobs. The

field experiences of anthropologists such as Tejaswini Ganti and Anand Pandian in film production in Bombay and Chennai were certainly an inspiration;<sup>43</sup> however, lack of previous experience in film production coupled with a rush of aspirants who had been working in the industry scouting for opportunities meant that gaining access to a production unit was not easy for me. For a new hire (a woman, no less!) with no bankable production experience, I was told quite sternly by most of the production managers I approached that it would be nearly impossible for me to get an opening.

In order to negotiate the boredom and anxiety that accompanied waiting for a job, I frequented shooting locations and postproduction facilities like Prasad Lab at Saligramam to get acquainted with prospective contacts who might give me a chance. Prasad Lab soon became a common place where I met with interviewees. As I became a regular face there, no one paid much heed to the purposes of my visits. From the security guard outside who waved when I entered, with his unchanging tone of *vanakkam* (“Good morning”), to the people at the canteen with whom I chatted while I gulped mouthfuls of *sadam* (rice mixed with curry), I was welcomed into the circle of film hopefuls who lingered around the premises. A mixed crowd frequented the lab: some had completed diploma courses from one of the many acting schools that mushroomed in the vicinity of Chennai, while others were assistant directors making strategic moves by socializing in the right circles. My circle of acquaintances increased day by day, but it was still insufficient for digging up the history of glamour films. My acquaintances at the lab provided me with often contradictory descriptions of the “contacts” for whom I should be on the lookout. For example, Partipan, a production executive, described the main production agent for glamour films as “a sturdy man who wears gold rings on all his fingers (with a green stone on his thumb finger!), dressed in white shirt and white pants,” while Raghavan *chettan* (colloquial term for brother), the owner of the tea shop, described the same person as a man in his late forties “carrying a diary under his arms, wearing *mundu* [single-cloth lower garment worn by men in Southern India], chewing betel leaves.”<sup>44</sup> These clues were distressing because so many people could fit these generic descriptions. On one of these days, I was introduced to “Auto” Jayarajan, a film journalist turned “mediator” whose main duty was to obtain distributors on behalf of producers. His frequent weeks-long trips to Chennai on a rented autorickshaw had earned him the name “Auto” Jayarajan, and his presence at a location was announced by the vehicle parked outside. This meeting gave me insight into the world of glamour cinema and led to an introduction to Narasimhan (name changed), a production manager who had been working in low-budgets films for more than forty-five years.

The next day, I got a call at about seven in the morning from Narasimhan, who told me that he had thought over my request for a job and had convinced the producer to allow me to accompany him as an observer and a helper, on the condition that I take my work seriously. Narasimhan and the production unit thus



FIGURE 13. Interior of the workshop of a catering unit that serves film crews in Kodambakkam. Photo by author.

became part of my daily routine for the next four months. I accompanied Narasimhan in his routine business of arranging shooting houses and procuring letters from various places to start production. Accompanying him to the dingy hotel rooms of fly-by-night producers, wig makers' and caterers' workshops (Fig. 13), and even the stable of an animal supplier, I became his "apprentice," as he preferred to introduce me. If there were more questions, he would add *Keralapennu* (the girl from Kerala) to halt them. Narasimhan stressed my secretarial, accounting, and administrative skills as my strengths in his introduction to the producer. All the while, he did not hesitate to point out the major obstacle—my safety—or to express that others suspected that my entry into the unit would upset the normal order of things. I could see his enthusiasm in telling the unit that I was engaged, marking my "unavailability" with the retort "getting married next year."

My attempt to balance being an observer and a researcher (my real job) was not easy, as the on-the-clock hours were as strict as any other job, and perhaps even more demanding because they threw additional challenges at me to see if I was capable of handling a “man’s job.” In the first few days, my inquisitive nature and constant habit of jotting down details in a notebook became a bit of a joke in the unit, but it also encouraged many of the crew members to open up about their experiences of Kodambakkam. Warnings from “Narasimhan Sir” would immediately arrive in the form of text messages instructing me to behave modestly “like a girl” (which included wearing a *dupatta*, a long scarf used to cover the neck and chest) and not invite unwanted attention by attempting to “act smart.”

As time passed, I noticed myself taking extra care in handling receipts for stationery, food, or daily wages; renting utensils in a narrow alley adjacent to the Vadapalani bus; or negotiating with lodges to confirm the dates for bulk booking, almost as if it were my real job. This immersion was not without its perks, though, for it allowed me to effortlessly code-switch in my roles as researcher and helper. By the time I spoke to Narasimhan about my research interests, he had become a confidant. In spite of his initial reservations about my project’s emphasis on “porn,” he agreed to help me to meet the director Gopalakrishnan, who was seen as the improviser of “budget films.” Having worked with “KS” (as Gopalakrishnan was known in film circles), Narasimhan knew people who were part of his productions. With Narasimhan, I would revisit the production histories of some of the films in which he had doubled as production manager and production controller and visit the various shooting locations with him.

Yet even when Narasimhan shared stories with me, he was cautious not to entertain their “sex” aspects. This was a pattern among many of my respondents, who struggled to reconcile conflicting values when I asked them about the production-related aspects of glamour films. Some refused to acknowledge their association with these films outright, but they were willing to share information that they had learned from other sources. Some dictated that there were to be no follow-up questions, while others wanted the interview itself to be kept secret. Some respondents believed that stories about glamour cinema production were hyped, so the anecdotal accounts took on the value of the real only through their repeated circulation and in some cases, a kind of selective amnesia was at play. This became clear when I asked more than three people who were part of a production the whereabouts of the actress who had played the lead role. Although I had seen photographs of these people with her and knew from other sources that my respondents were known to the actress, all of them pretended they did not know her at all. After repeated meetings, some of my respondents did open up with a few details, but only after receiving assurance from the actress that she was comfortable with information about her being shared. This pattern of revealing information that came by after

spending substantial time with the respondents helped me get insights into the production of glamour films in the 1980s and 1990s.

UNCOVERING “GLAMOUR” CINEMA:  
ALTERNATIVE PRODUCTION CIRCUITS

Wait-time became natural to the aspirational economies of Kodambakkam’s cinema-ecology, and my own experience of trying to uncover this history were framed within practices of waiting (for respondents, for events, for clues). Yet there is another way in which wait-time becomes important to our understanding of Kodambakkam. Wait-time was not unique to aspiring actors and those in the lower rungs of the production hierarchy; negotiating wait-time or rather reducing wait-time was also a core concern of the directors I interviewed, although the forms of negotiation were different. Many directors and technicians who ended up working in glamour films and soft-porn worked as assistant directors for a relatively long period of time, with seemingly no prospects of making a film of their own through the regular circuits. Wait-time was an important element, and its negation came to structure the parallel studio systems that these glamour film-makers began to build.

My foray into film production in Kodambakkam was mediated by my interactions with two directors, K. S. Gopalakrishnan and P. Chandrakumar. Both gained currency in the 1980s on account of the “glamour” sequences that were a staple of their film repertoires. Interactions with them allowed me to uncover some pseudonyms and fictitious identities, which were a common practice in Kodambakkam’s low-budget productions. In some cases, cast and crew were credited by name even when they were not a part of the production, while in others, their names were deliberately left out of the credits of films in which they had visibly worked. For instance, the 1989 film *Ayiram Chirakulla Moham* (Hundred-winged desire; dir. Vinayan), which explores the extramarital sexual adventures of a professor-couple in a jungle, later came to be known under the credits of a director by the name of Ashokan, and even IMDb identifies him as such. However, it is unclear whether this is by the same director, as there was another director named Ashokan whose association with glamour films like *Ardharathri* (Midnight, 1986) was quite widely known in the late 1980s.<sup>45</sup>

Unless one has access to insiders who have leads about the production, the journey to find directors remains an arduous task since fictitious names were widely used in soft-porn production. *Ayiram Chirakulla Moham* came back into circulation with the boom of soft-porn in the early 2000s. By then Vinayan had entered the league of mainstream directors, and his directorial debut had been forgotten for some time. But the story of *Ayiram Chirakulla Moham* came back to haunt him in the aftermath of his election as the general secretary of the Malayalam Cine Technicians Association (MACTA), a body comprising nineteen

organizations that represents the collective interests of everyone associated with filmmaking, from directors to drivers to script writers, with the exception of producers and actors. In a closely fought election in 2008, Vinayan, who supported laborers' demands for wage increases, was alleged to have used the support of "low-profile" technicians to rig votes.<sup>46</sup> In the context of this development, Vinayan's credentials as the producer of "good" films came into question. His debut film, which had largely been forgotten in popular memory, was recalled thanks to entries under Vinayan's name in websites like *Malayalanchalachithram*—a Malayalam movie and music database.<sup>47</sup> His rivals strategically used his association with low-budget films to mark his inferior status as the maker of glamour films and to "declass" Vinayan as someone who shared affinities with technicians of lower grade.

It was often alleged that directors and producers of glamour and low-budget movies resorted to shady dealings, like using "open shots" (sexually explicit, reusable shots) to sell their films. Open shots are performed by credited actors and actresses, not dupes. The term also refers to sex scenes shot with a limited crew. These films were colloquially called *orazchapadangal* (one-week films) because they had a very short shelf life of seven days, during which they reaped maximum profits—sometimes twice and thrice the initial investment. These films included *kananacinemakal* (jungle films), set in the wild with the hero and heroine clad in fig leaves, and "revenge films" exploring female sexuality and action sequences, featuring the female lead as a *madakarani*.<sup>48</sup> Many of these films were about women's quest for companionship—some were cautionary tales, while others used revelatory or confessional modes drawn from *kambipustakam* (erotic fiction) to explore youthful sexuality. However, even though these films mobilized sex as one of their central structuring principles, it would be shortsighted to see them as merely sexually explicit pornography with full frontal nudity and acts of penetration. The sexual roles of the *madakarani* were indeed the unique selling point of these films, but that does not necessarily qualify them as aesthetically and technically "poor." To some degree, this generalization was retroactive—a result of the notoriety generated by the production and reception of certain films in the late 1990s, which employed low-budget techniques and were marketed as "soft-porn." In hindsight, it is possible to trace the genealogy of the soft-porn films of the late 1990s and early 2000s to these glamour films. But to call glamour films "soft-porn" would be anachronistic, as the term only came to be used in the late 1990s.

The term "glamour film" has its own historical specificity in the 1980s, when filmmakers themselves used it to refer to their work. When I asked a few of these films' distributors why the label became widely popular, one said, "It was thought to be milder in tone and less 'revealing.'"<sup>49</sup> Made with limited budgets of ten to fifteen lakh rupees (approx. \$14,000–\$20,000), these films were reminiscent of American exploitation cinema of the 1960s. It was a common sentiment that their low budgets and promise of financial gain with minimal investment were the only motive for producing these films. But if these films used *exploitation* (in the sense

of widening the marketing possibilities) as a mode in any way, it was by emphasizing the same sensational overtures featured in the *painkili* stories that were serialized in the magazines of the time. Verging on sentimental excess and exploring mundane lives, *painkili* novels either featured lovelorn couples struggling to consummate their desires or were crime thrillers based on the theme of revenge. They are frequently set in high mountain ranges and feature rubber-tapping laborers and their frustrated attempts to escape the confines of the rural landscape. But literary culture at the time derided these weeklies as smacking of “low brow taste” and their readers as indulging in affective excess.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to *kambikathakal*, the popular perception of *painkili* as consumed mostly by women led to the feminization of the genre. When asked about the audience for *painkili* literature, one of my respondents, a journalist, recounted: “There were times when the *Manorama* weekly editor Padmanabhan Nair was asked to take the submitted manuscripts of the novels to the chief editor’s house. It was the taste of the women servants who were working there that decided what was popular and hence publishable.”<sup>51</sup> The magazines that featured *painkili* literature were called “Ma” magazines, a label popularized by E. V. Sreedharan, a film reporter for the *Kala Kaumudi* weekly, who pointed out that they appeared in publications like *Manorama*, *Malayala Nadu*, *Malayala Rajyam*, *Madiram*, and *Mangalam*, whose titles all coincidentally began with the syllable “Ma.”<sup>52</sup> Stories in these magazines were accompanied by illustrations that used transparent watercolors to render naturalistic color and depth. The full-bodied, buxom female figures in the illustrations were a favorite collectible item. In the Facebook page of the illustrator Mohan Manimala, many fans nostalgically shared their experience of growing up reading the fantasy scenarios portrayed through Manimala’s illustrations.<sup>53</sup> An article in *India Today* on the production of *painkili* literature alleged that “episodes woven into the stories . . . were similar to the sex-tinged moments incorporated in K. S. Gopalakrishnan’s films.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the similarities between *painkili* literature and glamour films came to be discussed in the context of the moral anxieties around the incursion of transgressive desires into familial spaces.

My conversations with Narasimhan about low-budget film production often ended with him reminiscing about his shooting schedules with Gopalakrishnan, the director with whom he worked for the longest period. A soft-spoken man in his sixties, Gopalakrishnan was surprisingly responsive to my questions and agreed to a series of meetings over the next two months. Our discussions sometimes focused on the whereabouts of people who had worked with him or on the backstories on the making of certain films. Even today, Gopalakrishnan remains the primary reference point for ailing cine-workers in Madras who were part of the industry in the 1980s; he writes letters of introduction to recommend beneficiaries for the pension and medical assistance scheme supported by the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, the government body in charge of film and cultural management in Kerala.

Gopalakrishnan gave many hopefuls their breaks, and some, such as Bollywood stars Sridevi and Kamal Hassan, became famous in later years. His crew hired many newcomers who came to Madras looking for jobs, and they often ended up working consistently with him. For instance, Chunakara Ramankutty or Bharanikavu Sreekumar often wrote the lyrics for his films, K. J. Joy composed the music, and Thyagarajan Master or Bheeman Raghu—who also acted in Gopalakrishnan’s films—choreographed the fight sequences. Gopalakrishnan’s heyday was between 1989 and 1991, when he produced more than four films a year. In the late 1980s and 1990s, studios began to lose their charm and outdoor locations were increasingly preferred; the guarantee of permanent work made many turn to Gopalakrishnan for work. This arrangement created a sort of an “alternative studio” system and, in the uncertainties of the time, his budget films were financially profitable. But in the late 1990s, Gopalakrishnan had to contend with a changing film industry, as soft-porn started to eclipse glamour films. Although he attempted a comeback, he had to compete with new contenders in the field. This included his erstwhile still photographer A. T. Joy, who became a sought-after soft-porn director after making several films with Shakeela, the most iconic soft-porn star. Trying to distinguish glamour films from “Shakeela films,” Narasimhan told me, “Low-budget films were never ‘sex’ films. The crew and the production team who associated with the project were quite serious about the work they were engaged in.”<sup>55</sup> This response emerged from a distinction he wanted to maintain between low-budget films and soft-porn, as he felt that Gopalakrishnan was often incorrectly remembered as a soft-porn filmmaker.

P. Chandrakumar was a prominent director of glamour films and a contemporary of Gopalakrishnan. In addition to directing, Chandrakumar managed Kiku Films, a distribution agency for English films founded in 1984. It bought films from agents based in Bombay and Bangalore and sold them to smaller agents in the towns of Kerala. On one of his trips to Bangalore, Chandrakumar conceived the idea for a film based on the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The story was made into the film *Aadyapaapam* (The first sin) in 1988 (Fig. 14).<sup>56</sup> Produced with an investment of approximately twelve lakh rupees (approx. \$14,452) under the banner of R. B. Choudary’s Super Good Films, *Aadyapaapam* was the first Malayalam movie to feature frontal nudity.<sup>57</sup> Chandrakumar told me that his interest in experimenting with a shoe-string budget motivated him to make *Aadyapaapam*. Chandrakumar’s brother, P. Sukumar (who would later appear through his films with the screen name Kiran), was in charge of the camera, while another brother, Vijayakumar, took up the role of production assistant.<sup>58</sup> The film was shot with minimal camera equipment and no track, trolley, or crane shots. Despite its low budget, it became a trendsetter, becoming one of the few films to commercially succeed without a recognizable star cast. Abhilasha, a Telugu starlet who had come to Kodambakkam in search of opportunity, got her break in *Aadyapaapam*. Reminiscing about the film’s production, Chandrakumar recounted that he hired Abhilasha when, after a chance encounter

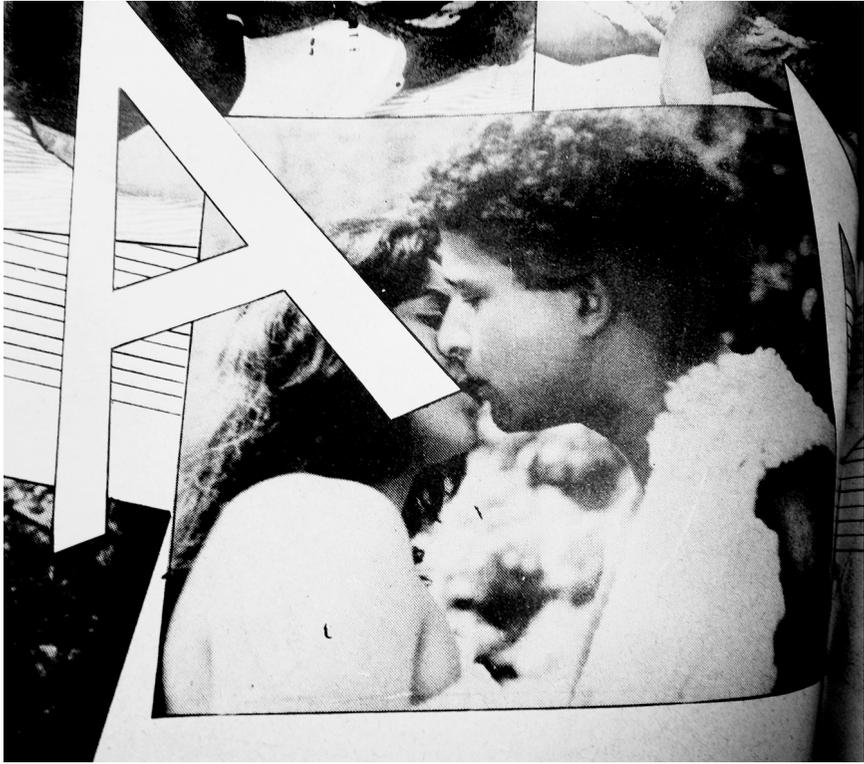


FIGURE 14. Publicity image for *Aadyapaapam*, in 1988, prominently featuring the “A” for adult sign. Author’s personal collection.

in Madras, she expressed an interest in acting in the film despite knowing the theme and the risks.<sup>59</sup>

The production of *Aadyapaapam* mobilized an untapped pool of hopefuls, collectively referred to as “talent-in-waiting,” who hopped from one studio to the other in search of acting opportunities. Advertisements for auditions regularly appeared in film magazines and vernacular newspapers, with details about the studio and specifications for the roles. Chandrakumar’s “package films” (a colloquial term for low-budget films) attracted this crowd. *Aadyapaapam* was released simultaneously in four languages (Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi) and was a huge box-office hit. It had only three scenes with dialogue. Shot in the forests of Karnataka, it also availed itself of a subsidy of one and a half lakh rupees (approx. \$1,200) offered by the Karnataka State Government to encourage film production in the state. Yet Karnataka was selected as the shooting location for another reason: a member of the censor board who had agreed to help the filmmakers with certification had been transferred there. When the film was released, many alleged it was pornographic, with the biblical story being the pretext by

which the filmmakers sidestepped censorship regulations. The censor certification committee included priests who were invited to give their opinion of the film's incorporation of the biblical story. Surprisingly, they deemed the film to be "educational" and found nothing offensive in its depiction of nudity. However, for distribution purposes, the educational label stood in the way of marketing the film. The film consequently had to be sent for re-censoring, and it was finally given an "A" (Adult) certificate.

Gopalakrishnan and Chandrakumar did not invent an alternative film-industrial structure, but they were prominent examples of early experiments in low-budget filmmaking in Malayalam cinema. These experiments were a kind of "wayfinding," or what Jason Pine calls "making do"—a way of coping with the precarity of business and livelihood through multiple acts of innovating, preparing, speculating, and applying instrumental reason.<sup>60</sup> The budgetary improvisations and limited shooting schedules of glamour filmmakers allowed for a system of tactical moves to reduce or bypass wait-time. The arrangement was premised on collective benefits that were not dependent on workers' roles in the film's production or on the magnitude of box-office returns.

The guarantee that the director/producer would support the cast, crew, and technicians, even if the film failed at the box office, allowed for a different kind of patronage, which I refer to as "pastoral filmmaking"—directors such as Gopalakrishnan and Chandrakumar were almost like shepherds who guided and protected their stable of film hopefuls and regular collaborators. In the context of low-budget Malayalam glamour cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, pastoral film-production units such as theirs were based on the principles of reducing risk, ensuring a minimum return, and offering consistent employment to a set of labor-agents. Unlike the unconditional obedience and surrendering of personal will that underlined mainstream studio practices, pastoral forms of low-budget filmmaking based their risk-mitigating practices on a trust-based economy. While the mainstream film industry's practices were deeply hierarchical and internally divided to mark different tiers, including separate dining and accommodation privileges to the main cast, low-budget filmmakers forged a quasi-familial bond. These arrangements were not completely free from hierarchies, but they entailed an ethical code of relationality that connected all labor-agents in the unit as equally integral constituents.

## CONCLUSION

Waiting in and for Kodambakkam entails recognizing the relationality built into the subjectivity of labor-agents whose individuality is subsumed within the waiting crowd. In the face of this erasure, this crowd was united in its shared expectation of getting a break—that luck would favor them at some point in the future. This optimism reflects a unique relationship to time *and* space. In a slightly

different context from northern India, the anthropologist Craig Jeffrey refers to two different kinds of waiting: “timepass” and the “waiting game.” Whereas unemployed youth use the term “timepass” to rationalize their whiling away of time as the process of acquiring skill sets, wealthy farmers used the term “waiting game” to describe their readiness to invest in their children’s future mobility with the expectation that they will support them in their old age.<sup>61</sup> In Kodambakkam’s film economy, wait-time lies somewhere between these two. My respondents thought of their wait period as a process of acquiring skills, but they also equated it with the waiting game.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Kodambakkam’s spatiotemporal arrangement exerted a strong imprint on its labor practices. The quasi-formal and informal nature of these arrangements and the assemblages of making do that glamour filmmakers were forced to build filtered down to the production of soft-porn films in the 1990s and 2000s. Yet whereas the glamour cinema of the 1970s and 1980s is still traceable to some extent, the circuits of soft-porn were assumed to be far more invisible to me as a researcher—for instance, anonymous practices were more rampant in soft-porn production, as were modes of bypassing censorship. More importantly, like glamour films, soft-porn cinema was marked—perhaps even more so—by conditions of precarity. The next chapter follows this thread by exploring precarious labor practices in the era of soft-porn cinema, thus recasting the popular memory of soft-porn cinema, its actors, and its exhibition and consumption practices by attending to their agency. Soft-porn personnel—especially actresses—are remembered through pin-up posters and “known” through channels of gossip, and a feminist history of soft-porn that is attuned to precarious labor reinstates them as equal producers of discourse.