

Embodied Vulnerabilities

Precarity and Body Work

Questions of vulnerability and precarity in the film industry are not merely institutional and economic but are enmeshed within matrices of caste, gender, and class. The management of wait-time is one way in which cine-workers who are entangled in film's infrastructural pathways navigate the rhythms of precarious employment cultures. In this chapter, I extend the theorization of wait-time by examining its effect as a particular kind of precarity that I call "embodied vulnerability," which emerges out of uneven power relations in which some subjects are more precarious than others.¹ Embodied vulnerability inscribes the vagaries of cinema's infrastructural modalities into the bodies and social presence of cine-workers. The survival logic that sustains embodied vulnerability is imbued with what Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan call "hope labor": "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure in the hope that future employment may follow."² Hope labor is a temporal relationship between present and future work that shifts the costs and risks onto the individual.³ Although embodied vulnerability shares hope labor's future-oriented optimism,⁴ it is distinct in its attention to the subject's awareness of the risk and uncertainties that accompany nonstandard and contingent work portfolios in the film industry. Soft-porn cine-workers are doubly disadvantaged by their association with soft-porn films, as the form itself comes with risks related to respectability, reputation, and future work. Workers are aware that they must take calculated risks to succeed in the informal economy.⁵ Informality can open up job opportunities but also reinforces expectations of loyalty and noncombative collegiality as the norm. These stringent yet informal or quasi-formal protocols discipline cine-workers into docile, conforming subjects.⁶

Embodied vulnerability is thus both a shared problem and a condition with potential to forge solidarities between cine-workers as they negotiate “relations of production and quality of social life” in the informal economy.⁷ Although the role of capitalist structures in this is crucial, precarity is not exclusively economic or wage-related; it also impacts affect, emotions, and social mobility. Embodied vulnerability thus resonates with Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.”⁸

I focus on these affective, emotional, and mobility-related conditions to understand the survival strategies employed by soft-porn’s labor force, which includes, but is not limited to, distributors, producers, actresses, and body doubles. Using a hybrid methodology that incorporates media industry studies, textual analysis, and an ethnographic study conducted intermittently between 2012 and 2022, I weave together a cultural history of soft-porn drawn from interviews with technicians, artists, production units, distributors, and exhibitors. In so doing, I explicate how filmmakers use the cultural marginality of soft-porn films as a creative avenue to contest rigid structures of censorship. I also examine how actresses wield stardom in soft-porn as a temporary opportunity. Identifiable as emblems of soft-porn films, these actresses are also rendered ignominious by their hypervisibility. Through the case study of Shakeela, one of the most famous soft-porn actresses in the 2000s, I interrogate general and more specific aspects of precarious film labor, especially as it relates to its female workforce. Finally, I examine “body work”—working as a body double—an example of uncredited, precarious labor and contextualize it within debates about body doubles in the soft-porn industry. In sum, I argue that precarity impacts not just the financial stability of these subjects but also their very subjectivity as cine-workers.

The Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA), a consolidated body that represents more than seventeen trade guilds, has taken up the mantle of arbitrating on behalf of cine-workers. FEFKA was formed after the dissolution of MACTA in 2008. Despite Kerala’s long history of left-wing political culture and trade union mobilization, film labor has not been a core vector for unionizing and a lack of sustained policy-level interventions constricts long-term goals that can support it. Even though FEFKA speaks the language of trade unionism, it and other unions implicitly and explicitly address an abstract cine-worker who implicitly remains a male worker unmarked by class, religion, gender, and caste inequalities. Further, while FEFKA’s actions and policies are ostensibly aimed at improving the quality of its members’ lives, cine-workers’ agency is simultaneously co-opted by the neoliberal system, which puts the onus squarely on the worker’s ability to make themselves employable.⁹ At the level of policy interventions, trade guild formations have limited scope in pursuing proactive measures for supporting inclusivity, gender justice, and worker safety. Because union membership is a precondition for employment (as well as contingency money, pension benefits, and compensation

for work-related death and injury), it also pressures workers to subscribe to their union's stance at all times.

The efforts of soft-porn filmmakers to collectively mobilize resources and make low-budget films during a lull in industrial production becomes important in this context. Most filmmakers who made soft-porn films in the 1990s came from different film-related trades, including still photography, costume, cinematography, production, sound, and editing. With experience in mainstream cinema, many were aware of the barriers that prevented below-the-line workers from becoming directors and producers. Whereas popular discourses associate low production values and sexual exploitation with soft-porn films, these filmmakers approached it as a legitimate form—many of my interviewees noted that these films featured songs penned by prominent lyricists and sung by mainstream artists, thereby framing them as being made with the same commercial impetus as the mainstream industry. In response to questions about labor and the vagaries of luck, they foregrounded the inside workings of an industry where only a very few would end up being successful. While the fictitious names used in soft-porn films underplayed the labor that went into the making, distribution, and exhibition of these films, for many of my respondents the bracketing of these films as *thattikoottu padangal* (trashy films) was tantamount to erasing their association with them. Their willingness to talk openly about these films also stemmed from the need to recuperate their labor in accounts about Indian cinema.¹⁰ With films being produced about B-grade and soft-porn cinema (most recent case in point, Netflix's docuseries *Cinema Marte Dum Tak* [dir. Vasana Bala, 2023]), things have begun to change. Over the past few years, many of my respondents expressed interest in speaking about their films as media material that experimented with sex narratives and transgressive sexual relationships.

THE FORMAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CIRCUITS OF SOFT-PORN

In the 1990s, soft-porn emerged as an industrial form that paralleled mainstream Malayalam cinema after strikes organized by exhibitors and distributors over profit shares brought the film industry to a standstill. The box-office failure of many big mainstream productions starring A-list actors forced exhibitors to forge alternative business arrangements with distributors and producers to stay afloat. Colloquially referred to as *neela chitrangal* (blue films), they bore material traces of their mode of production in things like lack of continuity editing, reliance on stock footage, tight shooting schedules, and repeated use of ensemble casts and crews. Such referential resonances can be seen in some soft-porn film titles as well: *Neela Thadakatile Nizhal Pakshikal* (The shadow birds in the blue lagoon; dir. Venu B Pillai, 2000), for example. Amid the financial slowdown, soft-porn films offered work to lower-rung artists, technicians, below-the-line workers, distributors, and

exhibitors who, facing impending unemployment and debt, worked out distribution deals and profit-sharing arrangements. Most of these films starred newcomers and were often produced with budgets not exceeding twenty-five lakh rupees (approx. \$35,000).¹¹ The year 2001 marked the high point of soft-porn production: of the eighty-nine releases in the Malayalam film industry that year, fifty-seven were soft-porn films.¹² The popular press and the mainstream film industry expressed anxieties that the immense popularity of these low-budget films would spread low-brow taste. An article in *India Today* declared:

Kerala is steaming, and the reasons have nothing to do with the onset of summer. Bare breasts, hairy chests and various other parts of the human anatomy are erupting like a rash across the state's cinema screens and the audience is literally lapping it all up in lascivious delight, unmindful of censors and other sundry guardians of public morality.¹³

Because of such reactions, crew members and distributors who wanted to maintain their status as part of the more “respectable” mainstream film industry had to carefully distance themselves from it. Because these films were produced in Kodambakkam, close to yet at a relative distance from Kerala, clandestine production practices became possible, and anonymity was almost a norm. Although most film crew assumed fictitious names on their credit lines, the actresses remained identifiable by their faces and names and prominent place in publicity posters.¹⁴ The actresses’ hypervisibility in these so-called heroine-oriented narratives also compensated for the limited inclusion of male actors. The prominence of these actresses also led to the popular perception that these films pandered to the commercial market through salacious story templates and skin show.

Although using pseudonyms was not itself an expression of worker dissent, it meant moving away from the mainstream film industry and its alienation of lower rungs of production units. Soft-porn filmmakers were invested in promoting change that would open filmmaking opportunities to those outside what I call “proximate networks” of film production. Proximate networks are powerful, guarded, and close-knit networks that facilitate opportunities through contacts and connections with those in decision-making capacities. Bollywood producers have long been accused of nepotism and allowing only entrants with social capital and familial lineage in the film industry to survive. Such proximate networks are often gendered, caste-ridden, and classed spaces premised on unearned privileges and selective gatekeeping. Membership in proximate networks is highly prized: both cinematic wait-time and precarious labor rely on subjects’ aspirations to gain membership in such exclusive groups, and the risk of failure is higher outside of such proximate connections. Those who entered soft-porn production were largely deemed failures, because without the support of proximate networks, they were not able to translate their talents into jobs in the mainstream film industry. Soft-porn filmmakers consequently formed alternative survival networks

to counter the negativity that surrounded them. By privileging female sexual desire as the fulcrum of their narratives, these films provided a critical look at the power hierarchies and exclusionary practices that structure the film industry as a whole. One recurrent trope that appeared in these films is the open expression of female sexual pleasure: they showed women enjoying sex, as opposed to providing pleasure for their male partners. But despite the recollection of filmmakers, some actresses have stated they were sometimes unhappy with the end result. For instance, Shakeela said in response to her films, "I'd go to the theater and suddenly see myself emerging from nowhere and going into the bedroom with a guy. . . . I could've pursued such matters further, but I needed the money."¹⁵ Thus, even while these filmmakers worked outside mainstream proximate networks, their own use of sexualized images raised questions about compromised ethics.

In addition to the improvisational, flexible, and entrepreneurial qualities associated with soft-porn's economy, the soft-porn wave also brought to the fore questions of risk, insecurity, and unstable work arrangements that are taken for granted as part of the toil of filmmaking. Soft-porn's anonymous circuits permitted slippage between the underground and the mainstream, allowing technicians to move between the two industries. Even though soft-porn filmmakers and crew had links with the larger formal institutions of filmmaking, transactions between personnel within the industry were often based on trust and bypassed the formal routes of trade and censorship institutions. Alongside borrowed capital from private financial institutions with high interest rates, money was pooled from Gulf-based Malayali migrants who took up the role of producers, either individually or collectively.¹⁶ These trust-based systems relied on deferred payment, which ultimately casualized labor. Employees were assured that they would be paid a lump sum after the film recouped costs and was profitable at the box office. Notwithstanding the precarious modes of production through which these films were put together, they proffered a certain degree of bargaining power to the technicians and actors.

Film production was based on credit rather than instant payment for work. Even when producers did not have cash on hand for immediate payment, actors and technicians were promised remuneration as soon as the film was sold by the distributor. In the meantime, they would work in other films by the same director or production manager. When I asked soft-porn filmmaker Thrikkunnappuzha Vijayakumar what motivated personnel to work without contracts or immediate payments, he said:

For this informal monetary arrangement to work, we need complete transparency of the financial situation. We can't give them false promises on when exactly we would repay them. It is seen more as a repayment than a payment because if it were a mainstream production, they wouldn't work with mere assurances. Here, they know us personally and we know that they can trust us, and our reputation matters in these monetary arrangements.¹⁷

Even distributors and exhibitors used soft-porn films to reshape profit-sharing arrangements and informal labor practices. In my conversations with many exhibitors and distributors of soft-porn films, many recalled the sway that soft-porn films had on viewers and their ability to negotiate a crisis that had left the film industry with dwindling audiences. For instance, the film distributor Sreekumar told me, “Many thought these films were nothing but an excuse for showing sex. But it saved us when mainstream Malayalam films of the time flopped in the box office, leaving us in debt. It was the soft-porn boom that helped us to recover the loss.”¹⁸

As a mainstream distributor, Sreekumar’s business was steady until multiple films flopped at the box office during the financial crisis of the 1990s. He then decided to try his luck distributing soft-porn films, and he worked out a suitable profit-sharing model with exhibitors that did not involve much risk. For instance, he used a clause that allocated 65 percent for the distributor and 35 percent for the exhibitor until the film’s run hit the fourth week, when it became a 50–50 flat share for both parties. Sreekumar was able to recoup his losses and, in a short time, he returned to distributing mainstream films. Another strategy was to execute sales immediately after the completion of the project and divide the distribution rights into three territories within Kerala—Travancore, Kochi, and Malabar—for twenty lakh rupees (approx. \$28,436); this was distinct from outside-state rights, which were sold separately. At the peak of the soft-porn success in 2000, each territory could fetch a profit of forty lakh rupees (\$91,872) for the distributor.¹⁹

Beyond such industrial aspects, the conditions of precarious life manifested differently for actors, starlets, and directors, who were each impacted by financial instability, risk-taking, and lack of success. The fact that soft-porn thrived in an economy of fictitious names, rumors, and gossip also posed a methodological challenge for me, especially in separating fact from fiction. Despite the availability of many of these films on DVD format and as digital files on media-sharing sites, YouTube channels, and porn sites, the details of productions, including the technicians and even the shooting locations, were hard to come by. The names in opening credits were mostly fictitious, and the production and distribution companies existed only until business transactions were completed. As soon as outside-state rights, satellite rights, and DVD rights for the films were sold, these companies were dissolved. The picture was further muddled by the fact that production crew members removed identifiable details about themselves from the films, as did technicians who had moved from mainstream film hoping to profit from the windfall and financiers who funneled in money using third-party deals. The only person in the production unit who could link the preproduction, production, and postproduction phases of these films was the production manager, whose job included procuring capital and delivering the prints from the lab to the distributors. Although the function of such negotiated anonymity was to keep the production process going, it also reframes the terms by which we understand film authorship. The substitution of real names with pseudonyms was not aimed

at erasing individual contributions or labor but was a recognition of the precarious production practices at play. The pseudonym-mediated circuit was not a one-off arrangement; many filmmakers and technicians went on to produce, direct, and edit films consistently with the same pseudonym.²⁰

Some respondents in the Gulf (particularly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai) spoke to me about collectively viewing soft-porn films through video cassettes that were brought from India, some with Arabic subtitles. Many of them recounted trying to figure out whether the names in the end credits were real or fake. One of my respondents, Nanda Kumar, a carpenter in his fifties who came to Abu Dhabi in the 1970s, said: "I don't think anyone exists by these names. Seeing names of popular mainstream directors in the credits like Bharatan or Padmarajan is different from Purushan Alappuzha or RDX . . . most of us were quite entertained by the credit sequences."²¹ Unlike prominent directors like Bharatan and Padmarajan, whose larger repertoire of films were marked by their authorial imprint, pseudonyms such as Purushan Alappuzha (literally "the man from Alappuzha") assert the implausibility of attaching genuine personhood to cine-labor. The name Purushan Alappuzha cropped up a few times during my fieldwork in Kodambakkam as well, but it took me another two years to verify that such a person actually existed and that he had produced a handful of soft-porn films. An article in *The Indian Express* in 1978 had a news item on the film *Ponnil Kulicha Rathri* (Gold-bathed night) that mentions his name as the script writer. Similarly, some of the censor scripts that I accessed at the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in Pune also mention him as the director of a few films.²² This indicates that the ecology of soft-porn film production was so steeped in anonymity or pseudonymous practices that even real names were sometimes mistaken as fake ones. And in a context where the crew sought anonymity, the hypervisibility of the female star replaced the filmic author.

Such anonymity, combined with low budgets, the exploitation of "glamour," tailor-made shooting schedules, and hurriedly written dialogue, added to the dismissal of these films in dominant accounts of Malayalam cinema history as *thattikoottu padangal*.²³ In contrast, one of the recurrent ideas that cropped up in conversations with my respondents was an unwritten code of ethics that governed the production of soft-porn. Director A. T. Joy told me, "I am not saying that women were not exploited in soft-porn. But there was a verbal agreement on what actresses were comfortable with and they can work without any external pressure."²⁴ The director Thrikkunnappuzha Vijayakumar similarly recounted: "Even though we had access to many intimate shots of the actresses that could have fetched us a good price in the market, there was a collective consensus on the risk involved in circulating or trading in sexually explicit bits (*thundu*)."²⁵

Although it may be true that some films included extraneously shot and edited erotic sequences that entered different circuits, these films and the one-sided reviews they received were caught in a larger discourse about their notoriety as sexual exploitation. Voicing his criticism of mainstream Indian cinema's portrayal

of soft-porn as nothing short of prostitution, a producer who had made a string of soft-porn films under a fictitious identity said:

It was not like the mainstream cinema where the actresses after being cast are told to agree to “compromise” to retain their roles. Whoever comes to soft-porn enters with the full knowledge of what is involved. . . . In spite of the sex and desire, there was a certain ethics that governed our inter-personal relations. It was not that everything was out there free for all.²⁶

Vijayakumar and others regularly worked with a pool of actresses (a remnant of what I described as K. S. Gopalakrishnan’s “pastoral” style of film production), and nobody wanted to endanger their business by breaching this trust. The soft-porn industry has always been concerned with distinguishing itself from hardcore pornography. The soft-porn filmmakers and production personnel who I interviewed were keen to describe how they used the term “soft-porn” as an oppositional phrase that distinguished their work from “hardcore pornography.” Some even rejected the designation of their work as involving pornography.

The soft-porn film industry’s promotion of relatively unknown female starlets also contributed to anxieties about female stars. The film magazines that showcased these starlets were keen to foreground their willingness to act in roles that required “modern” and “bold” looks—phrases that signify sexually tinged roles—and they thus began to associate this group of ambitious aspiring actresses with the *madakarani* and her sexual autonomy. This sexual politics is not unique to Malayalam soft-porn; as Linda Ruth Williams demonstrates, even film noir incorporates sexual intrigue into its storylines to motivate on-screen softcore sex.²⁷ The foregrounding of female characters in soft-porn cinema’s narrative organization by default implied demasculinizing the figure of the male hero. Journalistic accounts investigated Malayalam soft-porn industry from the vantage point of male actors who were barely visible on the margins. These articles reveal an impulse to *remasculinize* the cinematic screen, which has seemingly been threatened by the upsurge of soft-porn actresses. An *India Today* article writes of male actors who were featured in soft-porn films:

They are heroes, but only in name. For male porn actors of Malayalam and Tamil cinema, life is removed from the affluence and glory associated with reel life. Not only are they overshadowed by porn heroines and paid measly salaries but they also have to contend with the prospect of never making it to mainstream cinema. . . . Even after twenty movies, the assistant director tells them how to grin sheepishly when the heroine reveals her cleavage. Will they ever get to perform? Unlikely as long as the bottom line requires the heroines to be visibly bare and the heroes, well barely visible.²⁸

Conversely, as transient figures, the actresses cast as *madakarani* in soft-porn films were simultaneously seen as a threat and a source of exoticized desire. Most of these actresses came from states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Punjab—that is, from outside the state of Kerala.

Casting actresses like Reshma, Sindhu, Sajini, and Roshni from other linguistic and regional spaces was a deliberate strategy to not have to rely on local, ethnically Malayalam talent for sexualized labor.

These actresses' "stardom" was not the same as that of big-budget, mainstream stars. Instead of appearing on advertising billboards and in television ads, these actresses became the new pin-up girls who fed the fantasies of men in places as varied as B-circuit cinema halls and public toilets, as well as film magazine centerfolds. Their on-screen personas became manifestations of forbidden sexual fantasies, and they were counterpoised to the idea of a morally pure and culturally virtuous Malayali woman. Their personal lives and private interactions were perceived as a continuation of their filmic roles. In fact, a proliferating genre of pulp fiction focused entirely on their sex lives.

The conflation of their on-screen roles and private lives, coupled with the many moral edicts and compunctions around soft-porn film production, meant that these actresses' stardom was figured as a precarious form caught between hyper-visibility and invisibility. Foremost among these new and emerging actresses was Shakeela (Fig. 15), whose impact on the industry was so strong that soft-porn films soon came to be known as "Shakeela films." Shakeela's rise as the beacon of Malayalam soft-porn across the nation and her formidable bodily presence exposed the sexual contradictions of Malayali society. Soft-porn's language of sexual excess allowed figures such as Shakeela to speak to diverse constituencies of desire, yet it also fixed their off-screen lives into the image of the sex siren. Most of them disappeared from the industry after short stints and, for many, working in soft-porn blocked them from ever entering the mainstream film industry. Thus, even as the genre of soft-porn proved ephemeral, fizzling out in the early 2000s, its effects on the careers and lives of certain actresses were longer lasting.

Figures such as Shakeela force us to rethink precarity beyond conditions of economic instability and focus instead on a "set of concerns about relations of production and the quality of social life."²⁹ Although financial insecurity remains part of soft-porn's networks of production, the precarious stardom of Shakeela and other starlets of the Malayalam soft-porn circuit brings us into the arena of gender roles. This kind of precarity comes closer to Richard Dyer's description of the star commodity as something produced "out of their own bodies and psychologies." If soft-porn actresses such as Shakeela were "part of the way films [were] sold," the precarity of their stardom was as much a function of the friction between norms of sexuality and the licentiousness of the films.³⁰ Although the figure of Shakeela is localized in the specific context of one of India's many regional-language film industries, the lessons of this investigation reach further and foreground the need to discuss precarious female labor in the context of disparaged genres such as soft-porn. Following Judith Butler, we can think of this kind of precarity as a "fundamental dependency on anonymous others."³¹ Soft-porn actresses such as Shakeela were caught between the image of sexual autonomy and the realities of social



FIGURE 15. "Who's Afraid of Shakeela?" *Gulf Today*, February 14, 2002, 4. Image courtesy Rajeev.

dependency. This precarious stardom is produced at the confluence of infrastructural routes, censorial regimes, and norms of social acceptance and permissiveness.

SHAKEELA'S PRECARIOUS STARDOM: SAVIOR, SEDUCTRESS, "AUNTY"

In her autobiography, Shakeela writes that her films catered to an audience who found expression for their fantasies in certain parts of her body.³² Shakeela's status as an outsider enabled the public imagination of her as a series of desired body parts that could be zoomed in on and magnified. The mainstream Malayalam industry would never have allowed an "indigenous" actress, so to speak, to

be foregrounded as a sex siren.³³ In fact, the history of Malayalam cinema has been peppered with a slew of “outsider” actresses who emblemized an exotic, desirable, and yet objectified body, for instance Vijayashree in the 1970s and Silk Smitha in the 1980s and early 1990s. Like the prejudices around “Madras films” prevalent in North India, in the public imagination promiscuous actresses from other states were preferred to native Malayali women. Moreover, there were also concerns that identifiable Malayali actors might be sought for sexual services, as opposed to the relative distance that the “outside” actress would wield in public imagination. Thus, the porn-star aura that Shakeela embodied in the late nineties and 2000s was a particular variant of the sex siren enabled by overlapping social and industrial configurations of the time.

Born as Chand Shakeela Begum to a Muslim family of mixed Tamil-Telegu descent, Shakeela hailed from the tinsel town of Kodambakkam in Tamil Nadu. She debuted at the age of seventeen in a supporting role in *Play Girls* (dir. R. D. Sekhar, Tamil, 1994), a “sex education film” where she co-starred with Silk Smitha. Her entry into the film industry was quite accidental, as Shekar, a makeup artist (and Shakeela’s neighbor), offered her a role. As an indication of the low-budget format that soft-porn films would later adopt, Shekar handled the responsibility of story, screenplay, editing, production, and direction. Shakeela went on to act in *Shobhanam* (dir. K. S. Sivachandran, Malayalam, 1997) after *Play Girls*. The media celebrated Shakeela’s success by calling her *sexpuyal*, the “sex tempest,” whose sheer screen presence allowed low-budget films to outpace even mainstream films at the box office.

The B- and C-circuit theaters increased Shakeela’s marketability as a star, especially as they expanded soft-porn films’ reach and scale into the hinterlands and rural spaces, which were removed from the entertainment offered by A-circuit theaters. Shakeela acted in a string of films between 2000 and 2002, including *Thankathoni* (dir. A. T. Joy, 2000), *Rakkilikal* (dir. A. T. Joy, 2000), *Manjukalapakshi* (dir. R. J. Prasad, 2000), *Rasaleela* (dir. K. R. Joshi, 2001), and *Yaamini* (dir. U. C. Roshan, 2002), which allowed her to create a brand value. Some of her older films, like *Swargam* (dir. S. Chandran, 1995) and *Kalluvathukkal Kathreena* (dir. A. T. Joy, 1999), were rereleased as “Shakeela films” during this period. The prefix “Shakeela” was added to identify soft-porn films in general, and theaters that screened Shakeela films were called the “Shakeela Camp.”³⁴ A field representative who had been sent to the Shakeela Camp remembered that theater owners would demand that he confirm whether the film print had the real or the fake Shakeela—“real” and “fake” being operative terms used to identify films in which she acted throughout and those that featured her for a few minutes as a token presence. Films such as *Miss Shakeela* (dir. K. Alexander, 1999) were released to cash in on her presence, and her makeup man, Ravi, even came to be known in the film circles as “Shakeela Ravi.”

The film that cemented Shakeela’s position as an “adult film” actress in Malayalam cinema was *Kinnarathumbikal* (Lovelorn dragonflies; 2000), a debut venture



FIGURE 16. Newspaper advertisement for *Kinnarathumbikal*, prominently displaying the “A” certification. The success and popularity of the film is denoted by the word “housefull,” and the number “2” refers to the second week after the film’s release. Image courtesy Sarat Chandran.

by the hitherto unknown associate cinematographer R. Jay Prasad, who used the pseudonym “R. J. Prasad” in his directorial credit (Fig. 16). As a serious film aficionado who was part of the regular film screenings at the Chitralekha film society, Prasad had long desired to do an independent project, and *Kinnarathumbikal* was it.³⁵ Although the mainstream film he had planned had to be shelved for lack of funds, a low-budget film was planned to funnel in money needed for the main project. The title *Kinnarathumbikal* was derived from *Ammanamkunnile Kinnarathumbikal* (“The dragonflies of the Ammanam Hills”), the original title that he had planned for the mainstream film. The initial money for the project was procured through a loan scheme offered by the Kerala State Financial Enterprises, a state government body that had introduced plans to provide a rotating savings and credit to customers. Reminiscing about those days, Prasad said:

The sweat and hard work that went into the making of the film went down the drain and instead *Kinnarathumbikal* got reduced to a sex-film. My debut film was a nail in my coffin. There were *thundu* that were inserted into the film, and these were interpolations made without my consent.³⁶

Kinnarathumbikal was made with a meager budget of 13.97 lakh rupees (\$29,000) and was shot with an Arri IIC camera that was converted to

Cinemascope by changing the gate and lens.³⁷ In our conversation, Prasad shared the response of T. E. Vasudevan, the producer who headed Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce, where the mandatory title registration of the film was done. “This looks more like a hotel bill of a mainstream film,” Prasad recounted Vasudevan saying to him, a sentiment that clearly reflected the mainstream film industry’s attitude toward soft-porn films as low cost.³⁸ The package scheme offered by the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) through the Trivandrum-based Chitranjali Studio was a boon, as it allowed the filmmaker to acquire film stock, camera, a production unit, and postproduction for a payment of one lakh rupees (approx. \$2,100). *Kinnarathumbikal* went on to gross four crore rupees (approx. \$856,900), capitalizing on what one reviewer described as Shakeela’s “dreamy eyes, puffed-up flesh squeezed within a low-cut blouse and her deep, deep cleavage.”³⁹

Set in a tea plantation, the film explores the conflicts caused by the blossoming of complex desires amid the exploitative labor arrangements underlying the everyday lives of its laborers. Shakeela plays Dakshayini, a tea-plucker who is in a live-in relationship with the plantation supervisor, Sivan, but also has sexual escapades with the teenager Gopu. Gopu desires to be with his elder cousin Revathy, who is the daughter of a tea-plucker, while Sivan also desires Revathy’s hand in marriage. A similar storyline involving intergenerational desire was explored in *Rathinirvedham* (Sexual ecstasy; 1978), starring Jayabharti, and *Layanam* (Dis-solution; dir. Thulasidas, 1989), starring Silk Smitha. But in those films, narrative closure demanded that the female protagonist be punished for her transgressive desire, which resulted in their deaths. In contrast, *Kinnarathumbikal* empowers Dakshayini, who feels betrayed by Sivan’s desire for Revathy. Rejecting Sivan’s advances, she incites Gopu to murder Sivan, thereby helping the cousins to elope.

Shakeela’s oft-quoted line “Is there anyone among us who hasn’t committed sin?” resonates with viewers of the film and is known to many who have heard about the film but not actually seen it. The statement is directed at a heteropatriarchal structure that berates women who are alleged to have multiple sexual partners as warranting social sanctions while giving men a freehand to engage in extramarital relationships. As a strong statement against the double standards and hypocrisy of middle-class moral values, the film’s dialogue now surfaces as memes and quotes shared on fan sites and Twitter, long after the film’s original release and run.⁴⁰ There are even fan-created trailers for the film, with fictitious details of the production addressing Shakeela as “universal star.”⁴¹ The film banner in one of these trailers was inventively phrased as “Kanyaka Films” (Virgin Films), a turn of phrase that was later adopted by the 2013 film *Kanyaka Talkie*, which presents a ficto-critical history of soft-porn films, which I explore in chapter 5. Similarly, The Lost Entertainment, a YouTube channel that creatively edits trailers of older films, curated one for *Kinnarathumbikal* compiling the highlights to evoke the original experience of watching it on-screen.⁴² In the specific context of

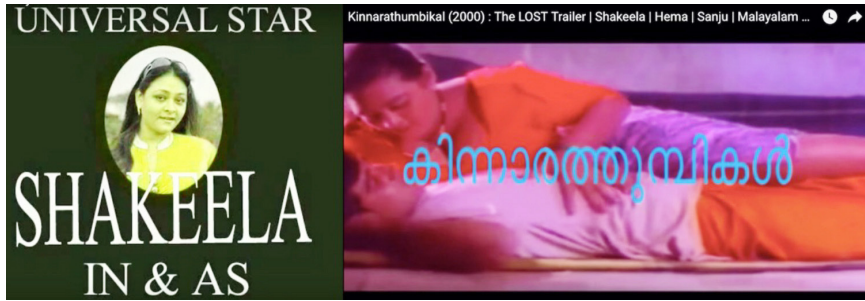


FIGURE 17. Screen grabs from the fan-created teaser for *Kinnarathumbikal* (left) and trailer by The Lost Entertainment (right).

Kinnarathumbikal, this curation reimagines the publicity material and contexts of reception to conjoin different generations of viewers (Fig. 17).

Although soft-porn films were perceived as addressing mostly male viewers, one cannot completely ignore female viewership. Between 2001 and 2002, these films were telecast on cable channels as part of “Midnight Masala”—the late-night segment, which according to David Andrews is “soft-core’s most distinctive habitat.”⁴³ The reference to *masala* (spice) refers to scenes that could not be broadcast during prime time. *Kinnarathumbikal* was also telecast in 2002 on Asianet, a Malayalam-language satellite television channel. The appearance of a soft-porn film during prime time created a huge controversy, unleashing debates about televisuality and obscenity in domestic interiors, and the channel publicly apologized.⁴⁴ This has become common lore in the Malayali televisual public and found reflection in contemporary renderings. For instance, *Perilloor Premier League* (2023), a Malayalam web series streamed on Hulu, begins with the protagonist Sreekuttan looking at a copy of *Nana* film magazine with Shakeela on the cover page showing her cleavage in a classic massage scene. Hiding the magazine within his notebook, he discusses with his schoolmates the impending telecast of *Kinnarathumbikal* on the local cable television channel at 10 p.m. that night. He plans to view the film when his family is asleep, but an unsuccessful robbery attempt wakes his parents, who catch him watching the film. Sreekuttan receives a beating for watching porn, and it becomes public knowledge as the villagers who gather outside the house to catch the thief also learn of his nocturnal adventures. From then on, Sreekuttan is teased by his friends as *thumbi* (dragonfly), in reference to the film *Kinnarathumbikal*. This rendering in *Perilloor Premier League* is fictional but has a real-life basis in the experiences of many young men and women.

Similarly, in a 2017 Facebook post, the literary commentator Deepa Nisanth recollects the surreptitious pleasures the film provided many female viewers. Nishant explains that she watched *Kinnarathumbikal* secretly when it was telecast on Surya TV (another satellite channel that regularly showed late night soft-porn films),



FIGURE 18. Promotional poster of *Maami* (Aunty) directed by U. C. Roshan. The poster features Shakeela and an unknown actor. Shakeela's prominence as a symbol of soft-porn films is indicated by the icon of her next to the title. Image courtesy National Film Archive of India.

knowing all too well that her mother wouldn't approve.⁴⁵ Her curiosity as a teenager was stirred by conversations in her college and the teasing repartee directed at heavy-set girls whom boys teased as "Shakeela." In her deeply personal note, Nishant writes about how Shakeela's autobiography became crucial to understanding the "real" Shakeela and the trials and tribulations that made her into a force to be reckoned with. Nishant's post was widely shared and commented upon by many Facebook users, who also added their own reminiscences of watching the film.

Shakeela's heavy-set body allowed her to fit into the archetype of the amorous "aunty," a recurring figure in both visual and written forms of pornography throughout the country and a stereotype that gave imaginative access to the middle-aged woman next door. Shakeela confirms this in her autobiography: "My large breasts and heavy body was what excited the audience. . . . If I didn't have this body I had, I may not have been able to make my career."⁴⁶ These films often paired Shakeela with young actors, and this stamped her public image as that of a sexually depraved middle-aged woman. Frequent use of the word *chechi*, not only in *Kinnarathumbikal* but in other films and erotic pulp fiction, suggested her "cougar-like" figure. In Malayalam, *chechi* literally means "elder sister," but colloquially it also connotes an older woman with whom one intends to engage in sex (see Fig. 18).⁴⁷ In relation to this, sex-advice columns published in literary magazines

often speculated that the excessive sexual drive among young boys was due to unwarranted sexual exposure given to them by middle-aged women who trap impressionable boys for sexual satisfaction. In a column titled “What is the Reason for Excessive Sex-Drive?” published in *Chitrakarthika* in 1977, a writer who goes by P. A. G. Nair writes, “it is because they are forced by middle-aged women to have sex with them; moreover, they are being told to prolong the duration of holding off the semen before ejaculation to satisfy the woman, and the deferral of orgasm leads to increase in sex drive.” According to this rhetoric, upon growing up, such men prefer young girls over middle-aged women, and are uninterested in sex workers because any monetary transaction makes them lose interest in sex.⁴⁸ This frames the sexually active middle-aged woman as the causal factor for dysfunctional families—young girls who end up with these men later are subjected to violence, and the young men are also portrayed as victims of this arrangement. Imagined as a sexually deviant but also sexually desirable middle-aged woman in line with such descriptions, Shakeela’s body became a locus of excess that spilled out of the diegetic space of the narratives, spinning off-screen fantasies that circulated in sensational yellow magazines like *Fire* and *Crime*. After the decline of soft-porn films in the early 2000s, this template of intergenerational erotica would become popular in erotic cartoons, especially in popular comic series such as *Savita Bhabhi* and *Velamma*, which regularly featured the sexual extramarital adventures of the eponymous characters.⁴⁹

With the decline of soft-porn by 2005, Shakeela’s success also dwindled and she made only cameo appearances in comic roles. She did have cameos with mainstream actors such as Mohan Lal (*Chotta Mumbai* [Small Mumbai], 2007), Vikram (*Dhool* [Dust], 2003), and Vijay (*Sukran*, 2005) capitalizing on her past glory. But in contrast to her prior heroine-centric roles in soft-porn films, these roles would have been forgotten, were it not for the fact that she shared screen space with mainstream actors from a system that had always disparaged her films. As she was marginalized after 2005, Shakeela’s career began to mirror that of many other starlets who had come from outside and enjoyed a short stint in the industry (Fig. 19). A handful of legal cases were registered against Shakeela for obscenity in different parts of South India, including Nagercoil, Salem, and Tirunelveli (all in Tamil Nadu). In one of her court appearances, Shakeela, a Muslim by birth, arrived clad in a burqa, earning the ire of an Islamic women’s group that went on record as saying: “She doesn’t wear any clothes in films, how dare she choose symbols of Islam?”⁵⁰ Another controversy arose over the Malayalam film *Kadambari* (Wine; dir. Jayadevan, 2002), around which the Dalit activist group Ayyankali Pada (Fighters of Ayyankali) organized a cleansing campaign against the soft-porn wave in Kerala. A group of activists attacked Lata Theatre in Muvatpuzha with locally made bombs and burned a reel of the film in front of the audience.⁵¹ Although the attack was aimed at exposing the culpability of the film industry in the sexualization of women, the action was also driven by respectability



FIGURE 19. A newspaper article in the *New Indian Express* (2004) headlining the decline of soft-porn films, with the image of Shakeela (spelled “Shakila”) standing in for the “dark” state of the industry. Image courtesy A. T. Joy.

politics, as many of the actresses in the film came from caste-oppressed backgrounds. In such narratives, soft-porn films were accused of having extended the violence and sexualization imposed on Dalit women.

Even after the decline of her soft-porn stardom, Shakeela continues to be remembered as a soft-porn actress—in fact, this becomes a selling point in sex education programs in Tamil television such as *Antharangam* (Personal intimacy; 2016, telecast on iTV) and *Samayal Mathiram* (Cooking tricks; 2016, telecast on Captain TV). Following a phone-in, talk-show format, both programs elevated Shakeela to the role of an information expert who mediated sex-related queries for the sexologist. Interestingly, while the sexologist in the program is presented as a peddler of sexual myths who focuses on masculine performance from a strictly heterosexual perspective, Shakeela’s presence as the caller’s initial point of contact allows for a collective sharing of her on-screen roles and their relevance to sex education.⁵² Shakeela’s presence as a visual icon of soft-porn is evoked time and again, as most of the callers are elated to speak with her and show off their knowledge of her films. Thus, Shakeela’s career in soft-porn also enabled her to stand in as a facilitator for the callers to seek out information about sex, as well as share their queries about sex-related concerns. Another sex education program titled *Thitthikkum Iravukal* (Sweet nights, 2016) made Shakeela’s on-screen significance a prominent part of its strategy, devoting substantial airtime to sequences from Shakeela’s films in between the sexologist’s responses to caller queries. Most recently, Shakeela has also been roped in as a sex education expert in a Malayalam

promotional sketch (2023) for the Netflix show *Sex Education*.⁵³ In the sketch, “Shakeela’s Driving School” stands in as a metaphor for sex education itself, her tips about driving being innuendos about sexual intercourse as she tells a couple that she is going to talk to them about an important chapter that may have been skipped by their teachers in school. Shakeela’s words of wisdom range from pointers on intercourse and foreplay, to ethical dictums about consent and slut-shaming, the importance of self-pleasure and protection, and, quite ironically, the importance of finding out each other’s likes and dislikes instead of copying what is shown in porn. Significantly, in one sequence Shakeela tells off the male partner for slut-shaming, and as the man apologizes, Shakeela responds with the lines, “thettu cheyyathavarayi arumilla.” This translates as “there is no one who has not made a mistake” (subtitled by Netflix as “Everyone makes mistakes”), a direct reference to an iconic Shakeela dialogue from *Kinnarathumbikal*. Thus, in a strange way, these sex education programs tapped into Shakeela and her precarious labor for their own instrumental use.

Shakeela’s influence on the industry was phenomenal, but she did not direct any films during the peak of her career. In 2013, a flurry of publicity announced her return to Malayalam films, this time as a director of *Neelakurinji Poothu* (Neelakurinji is in bloom). As part of the film’s promotion, both Shakeela and the producer, Jaffar Kanjirapalli, appeared in many interviews and television shows. Shakeela emphasized that her directorial debut was a new beginning, and this film was in no way connected to the sex films she had previously been part of.⁵⁴ Kanjirapalli, who was also the vice president of FEFKA, was also an erstwhile producer of soft-porn films. Crucially, like Shakeela, Kanjirapalli was not ashamed of his soft-porn phase despite his decision to switch gears to catering for film units in the mid-2000s. However, the project ran into trouble when Shakeela expressed her discomfort with Kanjirapalli’s insistence that she take the lead role as well as direct the film. This disquiet was also partially an effect of print and visual media’s speculations about the film’s plot, even before shooting started. For instance, a *The Times of India* report quoted Kanjirapalli as stating: “The movie will be a complete entertainer with spicy scenes of Shakeela underwater and in the attire of a fish seller. The shots will be taken in such a way that the censor board can never deny us certificate.”⁵⁵ *Neelakurinji Poothu* was shelved halfway into preproduction. Shakeela finally made her directorial debut two years later, in 2015, with the Telugu film *Romantic Target*. In response to an interviewer’s question about its genre, Shakeela described it as dealing with a “lady-oriented subject.”⁵⁶ The film centers on a female vigilante who murders sexual predators who pose a threat to women’s safety and dignity. Despite Shakeela’s cameo role as a police officer, it failed to win over audiences.

Depictions of Shakeela in mainstream films also align with the popular tendency to frame the soft-porn industry as the arena of an exploitative mafia. This occurs in *The Dirty Picture*, which focuses on Silk Smitha but briefly references Shakeela. “Shakeela” appears as Silk’s young, zesty rival who displaces her as the

next sex bomb, but there is some anachronism in this narrative. A song sequence portrays Silk and Shakeela in a competitive relationship and posits a causal relationship between Smitha's decline and Shakeela's rise, even though the industrial configurations they inhabited were different. By situating Silk's character in a narrative of moral and professional decline and associating it with a particular industrial form, *The Dirty Picture* not only vilifies the soft-porn industry but also collapses two temporal moments. This temporal slippage allows all *madakarani* figures to be perceived as soft-porn actresses, no matter that Malayalam soft-porn emerged, strictly speaking, as a genre during Shakeela's reign; Smitha had died by the time Shakeela became a major presence.

Shakeela's autobiographical account and her biopic, *Shakeela*, released in five languages—Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—are part of a recuperative effort to reinstate her voice and performance as important interventions in rethinking sexual politics. Whereas *The Dirty Picture* sparked allegations that it watered down Silk Smitha's life experiences and led to defamation suits from her family, *Shakeela* was endorsed by Shakeela herself. The production house released photographs and news stories showcasing Shakeela as a consultant for the film who helped Richa Chadha prepare for the role. Director Indrajit Lankesh claimed that *Shakeela* would be a "rags-to-riches-to-rags story" that mapped "the hardships and rough phases when she was not getting films and was trying for character roles."⁵⁷ The film's first-look poster presents a complicated picture of Shakeela that both embraces and distances her from the peculiar kind of stardom she inhabited. Under the film's tagline, "Not a Porn Star," the Bollywood actress Richa Chadha, who plays Shakeela, looks defiantly at the camera, the upper half of her body covered in gold jewelry. She stands in front of a wall scribbled with negative comments in Hindi about her skin color, weight, and religion. The Malayalam word *veshya* (prostitute) and a Tamil word that loosely translates to "fuck" appear amid the Hindi words, localizing Shakeela as a South Indian figure, even though her films had a pan-Indian appeal, thanks to the dubbing industry that flourished alongside soft-porn films. The filmmakers drew inspiration for the image from Silk Smitha's film *Miss Pamela* (dir. Kottayam Chellappan, 1989) and this image indeed pays homage to Smitha (Fig. 20).⁵⁸ Chadha shared a photograph of the poster on Twitter with the caption "Bold is Gold," with the filmmakers claiming, "It was Smitha's . . . untimely tragic demise which led to the rise of Shakeela's popularity and had it not been for Silk to pave the way with her unapologetic choices, Shakeela wouldn't have been so popular."⁵⁹

The film's fragmented storyline with episodic narration capitalizes on preexisting narratives about Shakeela's life—being forced into acting in adult films by her mother, being disowned by her family after they benefited from her money, and being left with no financial security and forced to take refuge in the one-bedroom house where she started her life as a junior artist. It opens with a song sequence that gives a glimpse of her career trajectory—photo shoots, dance sequences, protests by activist groups, press conferences by directors' and producers' associations



FIGURE 20. Artist's impressions of the posters for *Miss Pamela* (left) and *Shakeela* (right), inspired by the *Hindustan Times* comparison of the two posters. Image courtesy S. Radhakrishnan.

calling for her films to be banned, and, finally, shots of her film posters defiled by eggs and charcoal. The narrative proper begins with Shakeela visiting the house of a scriptwriter who, despite his initial reluctance, agrees to pen her biopic, provided she agrees to take a narco-test to reveal the truth about her life—a character like Shakeela can only be seen a reliable narrator/witness with recourse to such pseudo-scientific routes. Flashback sequences provide her backstory as the film moves from the ban on her films to her attempts to restore her image through a comeback film. Her plan to work in a “clean film” backfires when the director, in collusion with her “dupe” (body double), Suhana (Ester Noronha), splices explicit bits into the final cut without her knowledge. Egged on by the superstar Salim (Pankaj Tripathi), who feels threatened by Shakeela, a Muslim group attacks Suhana. The film ends with Shakeela facing journalists who have gathered outside the hospital where Suhana has been admitted. In response to their allegation that her films are responsible for an increase in rape and other sexual crimes, Shakeela redirects these allegations to the male audience, producers, and the journalists, who are united in the efforts to isolate her as the cause for all malice.

The era of the 1990s serves as the backdrop for the film's exploration of Shakeela's career, and a sequence involving Silk Smitha and Shakeela repeats some of the problems that the film set out to avoid. The film falls back on a clichéd narrative about Smitha becoming jealous of the younger actress, who, according to industry rumors, might replace her. A dance sequence pitting the two against each other, with Shakeela emerging as the victor, replicates *The Dirty Picture*'s problems. Even though the actress Shakeela was never a dancer (unlike Smitha), the film shows her effortlessly stepping into Smitha's shoes. Although the filmmakers

used “Not a Porn Star” as a rhetorical strategy to outwardly avoid sensationalism, the film rests on Shakeela’s aura as a soft-porn star and sensational stories and rumors about her. Shakeela’s unique selling point was her porn-star status—and its corollary, precarious stardom. Thus, despite Lankesh’s efforts to foreground the “humanitarian” angle of making the film “as truthful as possible,” its sensationalism backfires and weakens its ability to carry the story forward. The fictional Shakeela becomes the poster woman for issues of wage equality, sexual harassment, and unethical practices in the film industry. Although the inclusion of the “actual” Shakeela in the production process was meant to index biographical fact, the film renders the public imagination of Shakeela as incapable of escaping the trappings of popular journalism, rumors, and pulp-fiction sensationalism.

The vicissitudes that followed in the real Shakeela’s life after soft-porn fizzled out as an industrial genre are best understood when contrasted with the trajectory of Bollywood actress Sunny Leone (Karenjit Kaur Vohra). This comparison is not random: both Shakeela and Leone appeared in the trilingual film *Luv U Alia* (dir. Indrajith Lankesh, 2016), leading some in the media to speculate that Leone might be playing the role of Shakeela in her biopic. But there is a marked discrepancy between how Leone is now addressed as part of India’s mainstream film culture and how soft-porn stars such as Shakeela are still made to publicly defend their life choices. Leone, of Canadian, Indian, and American origin, is a former adult film actress who moved to Bollywood and entered the mainstream Indian film industry in 2011. She has since been able to successfully use her porn-star image to carve out a new fanbase. Although Leone has not acted in any porn features since her Bollywood debut, she has strategically used her past association with the adult film industry to self-fashion her identity in Hindi cinema. On the other hand, while Shakeela temporarily enjoyed the limelight as the emblem of soft-porn films, this identity did not give her much momentum on the film production front. Despite her attempts to start afresh in comic roles, the excess associated with her on-screen and off-screen images stalled her opportunities to partake in mainstream films on equal terms. Under the careful supervision of a public relations management team, Leone was able to smooth her entry into Bollywood and successfully negotiate her porn-star image after some initial hurdles. This created a humanizing narrative that emphasized her heterosexual coupledness through marriage and her adoption of a child, making it easy for the film fraternity to welcome her into their fold. Shakeela’s familial connections are different; she has spoken at length about the need to have an adopted family instead of a family in the strict sense of blood relations. She has adopted transgender community members as part of her family and was adopted in turn by trans groups as their ally. In an interview in 2015, Shakeela mentions her relationship with the *thirunangai* (trans women) community in Chennai and the need for support structures that can help them get their due rights and respect in society.⁶⁰ Identifying herself as an ally, Shakeela speaks about the multiple roles in which she doubles as sister, confidante, and friend for community members

and the alternative family she has been able to build. Shakeela says, “The society has considered *thirunangai* and actresses as just bodies. We also have dreams and lives more than just what’s seen on the surface level.”⁶¹ Shakeela’s alliance with the trans community extends the bonds of caring and sharing instantiated in the queering of family. By building an adopted family, Shakeela is also thinking about alternative kinship networks that can sustain her through tough times—a potentiality that challenges the heteronormative ideals that characterize her films.

Shakeela’s and Leone’s experiences are united, however, by the enforced exposure of their pasts on public platforms. Both Leone and Shakeela have also been subjected to hostile treatment in television interviews, with hosts constantly reminding them of their pasts and their need to make amends for the damage their films have done. Leone had to endure offensive remarks from a leading English news anchor, CNN-IBN’s Bhupendra Chaubey.⁶² Shakeela’s talk show, *Janakeeya Kodathi* (People’s court), telecast by the Malayalam channel 24 in 2019, was publicized as *thurannu parachil* (exposure/confession). The show re-created the courtroom format, in which a judge hears the charges from both sides and passes a verdict. However, the anchor, Ranjini Menon, asked prying questions that pushed Shakeela to narrate her experiences of child sexual abuse and sex work, which she had written about in her autobiography. The questions were designed to cross-check details she had already revealed, as well as to elicit her comments on the exposure triggered by the #MeToo movement. Menon subjected Shakeela to a hostile interrogation, questioning her autonomy by holding her culpable for destroying her own career.⁶³ In what seemed like an attack meant to force Shakeela to take responsibility for her association with soft-porn films, she bombarded the actress with allegations that cast her as a cause of moral disarray, including personal questions about her stint with sex work. Shakeela took the questions in stride and responded that no one can judge her for her decisions, as they emerged from a certain set of experiences and her need for survival. The media’s incessant demand that these subjects own up to the repercussions of their choices is nothing less than an invasion into their private lives.

In Kerala though, Leone’s experience is markedly different from the tepid response that Shakeela received from the Malayalam film industry after her stint with soft-porn films. Leone entered Malayalam cinema in 2019, in an item number with the prominent actor Mammooty for the film *Madura Raja* (dir. Vysakh). If in the past, item numbers as a dance form were performed by actors who appeared on-screen solely for spectacular and sensual appeal and exited playing this “marginal role in the narrative without ceremony,” contemporary item dances are often performed by A-list actors.⁶⁴ Leone’s appearance in the same film as Mammooty was ironic, as the actor is often alleged to have spearheaded the campaign to put an end to Malayalam soft-porn films in the early 2000s. With the changed times and crossover of Bollywood stars into regional cinema, it seems only logical that an item dance starring Leone could gather a sizable audience.



FIGURE 21. Screenshot of Sunny Leone's tweet about her Kochi visit.

Even before entering Malayalam films, Leone was stupendously popular among Malayali men. In 2017, when Leone visited Kochi for the inauguration of a retail showroom for phones called Phone 4 Digital Hub, thousands of people gathered on adjacent roads and around nearby buildings to catch a glimpse of her. Chanting "We love Sunny," they blocked the roads, forcing the police to disperse the crowd with batons. An aerial shot from the inauguration showing hordes of people climbing the roofs of moving buses and nearby buildings circulated on social media (Fig. 21), leading the Twitterati to comment that Kerala cannot shed its soft-porn past, or rather cannot reconcile the moral contradictions in the expression of

sexuality. The photograph also gave way to popular memes comparing the crowds gathered in Kerala to those for rallies for former US presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump.⁶⁵ The presence of the All Kerala Sunny Leone Fans Club as a prime player in organizing the event and galvanizing the crowd (especially in a state where male stars and their fan clubs wield enormous power), as well as her contribution of five crore rupees (approx. \$732,475) during the 2017 Kerala floods furnished support for her from women—quite unlike Shakeela, who had to defend herself on television.

While Sunny Leone's Kerala visit was one side of the story, a virally circulating image in 2018 gives us a few more clues. This image includes portraits of current and former porn stars including Mia Khalifa, Keiran Lee, Ava Addams, Johnny Sins, Jordi, and, crucially, Sunny Leone, all painted on a private bus in Kerala. The owner of the bus used this novel strategy to attract young patrons and considered it a statement about the influence of porn stars in Kerala's popular culture. Although decorating buses with painted posters is not new in India, including porn stars is.⁶⁶ This public visibility of porn stars differs from moral qualms associated with the exhibition of soft-porn posters or the broadcast of soft-porn films on television. While Leone's popularity or the bus's painted posters may very well be within the ambit of the permissible, debates about obscenity posit soft-porn as a disruptive, dangerous object. Consider, for example, the telecast of *Kinnara-thumbikal* in 2000, which caused such an uproar that the channel Asianet had to tender its apology in their program in response to readers' letters.⁶⁷ Unlike Leone, figures like Shakeela belong to this register of unsettling objects. Her association with the trans community, her vocal articulation about questions of labor in the industry, and her constant refusal to toe the heteronormative line contribute to the construction of this image. Thus, while Leone becomes acceptable as a glossy, convertible image, the perceived "dirty" nature of Malayalam soft-porn sticks to Shakeela's body. Thus, although soft-porn itself has petered out as an industrial form, its residual effects still mark Shakeela's life and career in the present. Although no longer a porn star in the strictest sense of the term, Shakeela embodies precarious stardom and remains an index of the way the industry works to legitimize or delegitimize gendered (bodily) labor in response to cultural and economic demands.

SO MANY SHAKEELAS

Reading Shakeela's career trajectory as a form of precarious stardom gives insights into the historical formations of gender and sexuality within the film industry and Malayali society at large. In these films, Shakeela's presence as a sexually liberated woman who can give free rein to her desires and ignore hegemonic moral edicts destabilized Kerala's hero-centric, mainstream film industry, leading to what was popularly called "*Shakeela tharangam*"—the wave of Shakeela.⁶⁸ The camera lingered on her buxom, heavy-set figure—an anomaly in the Malayalam film industry

at the time—and this concentrated focus on her face, breasts, and thighs equated the realm of desire with her anatomy. The emphasis on “women-centered” narratives in soft-porn films led to acrimonious debates among feminists and women’s groups, which were quick to furnish the relevant obscenity clauses of censorship regulations.⁶⁹ Even as protests and theater blockades were organized to prevent the screenings of these films, their popularity increased instantaneously. Nevertheless, when obscenity cases were filed against Shakeela, none of the men’s or women’s groups advocating gender equality or sexual liberation lent support, leaving her to wage her own battle. Her location outside the space of conjugal sex also inaugurated Shakeela’s fame as a “porn heroine,” an almost impossibly paradoxical category in a cultural context that associated stardom exclusively with male actors and scripted female roles to foreground the normative codes of conduct expected of the women in a patriarchal society. Her gaze as it was directed at pleasure-seeking male viewers subverted earlier tropes of heterosexual intimacy, in which the male partner and his sexual drives structured scene composition.

If success, popularity, and influence over production decisions are the criteria for stardom, Shakeela was way ahead of many mainstream actresses whose memory faded the moment they left the industry. Many still feel that Shakeela’s image as the veritable signifier of soft-porn films hijacked the successes of other actresses who starred in films but were forgotten in the accounts of the era. An actor who had starred opposite Shakeela recounted how many films that were distributed as “Shakeela films” were recycled from footage from her earlier films, yet they easily managed to break even and even reap profits. This process of recycling included duplicating and editing together small segments that featured Shakeela, and often resulted in films that were a hodgepodge of exploitation films in Hindi and English. Shakeela’s image was the connective tissue binding together fragments that otherwise would have amounted to a random mix of sexploitation shots. Familiarity with Shakeela’s image as a soft-porn icon was fundamental to this fragment economy, the visual dynamics of which both foregrounded the artifice behind the image and invited audiences to break down visual and aural sequences into smaller units. The precariousness of Shakeela’s stardom and the limits of performative labor coalesce here. Speaking about Shakeela’s star value, my respondent added:

Shakeela’s remuneration was on a day-to-day basis, which was beneficial for her in some ways, but proved fatal to her career. There were many producers who were willing to pay her more than Rs. 1 lakh for a day. But what she did not know was that these shots formed part of three to four films which were in the pipeline. There were even agents who helped mediate the selling of “unused” shots to prospective buyers.⁷⁰

If Shakeela’s stardom gave her some visibility, however precarious it may have been, the same cannot be said about other actresses who were part of soft-porn films. Actresses such as Roshni, Maria, Sajini, and Alphonsa disappeared from the film industry after finding little success and were never heard from again. In 2007,

after soft-porn films had lost their initial allure, Reshma, an actress who starred prominently in soft-porn films like *Lovely* (dir. A. T. Joy, 1995) and *Sundari Kutty* (dir. Vinayan, 2003), among others, was arrested by police in Kerala as part of series of raids following a tip-off that “prostitution rackets” were operating in residential areas in the town of Kochi.⁷¹ In keeping with the tendency of institutional and legal systems to view all kinds of sex work as forced human trafficking, a moral panic arose about male visitors frequenting a flat rented out by a few non-Malayali women. Yet the news item that ran the next day focused on Reshma’s public exposure, not the busting of the racket of sex workers and middlemen from states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In contrast with that of Shakeela, Reshma’s film career was mostly limited to soft-porn films, and she remained identifiable to viewers only through her screen roles.

The police inspector manning the station to which Reshma was brought used his mobile phone to illegally shoot and leak video of her interrogation.⁷² The footage circulated widely on MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) and social media sites. The uploaded video received mixed responses, with many viewers pointing to its unwarranted humiliation of the actress. Some even pointed out that the officer’s zooming in and out had a stripping effect. The video was marked by a confessional drive that conjoined Reshma’s personal history with her involvement in soft-porn films. Although the police inspector who was interrogating Reshma is absent from the screen, his presence is apparent in his handling of the mobile phone camera, directing Reshma’s gaze to the center of the frame. Beginning with his use of Malayalam-peppered Hindi to his passing reference to his colleagues about soft-porn films, his looming presence determines Reshma’s humiliation. At the same time, the officer asserts his knowledge of soft-porn films by mentioning his experience of having seen these films and noting that he recently conducted a raid at a CD shop where Reshma’s films were widely distributed. Other media reports on Reshma’s arrest make note of the fact that the other two women arrested with Reshma were also soft-porn actresses—an allegation that one of them refutes in the interrogation video.⁷³ The officer questions Reshma about the details of the soft-porn films she acted in and the whereabouts of other soft-porn actresses, such as Shakeela and Sindhu. By addressing her in broken Hindi and asking how much Malayalam she had learned by acting in soft-porn films, he invokes her outsider status.

The interrogating officer’s framing of Reshma is reflective of the larger discourse on sexuality and the public sphere. The frequent zooming in and out on Reshma’s face, the demand for immediate responses, and the instructions to look straight at the camera all reflect a shift of control. Although Reshma’s presence on-screen in her films was marked by her control over her image, the interrogation video reduces her to a failed actress who turned to prostitution because of her straitened circumstances.⁷⁴ An *India Times* article titled “Tragic Life of Indian Porn Star Reshma” goes so far as to blame the soft-porn industry for her plight: “Reshma never made it big in mainstream cinema, in fact pimps got the better of

her, and she got involved in the dirty business of adult films.”⁷⁵ This exposure video not only constitutes a violation of privacy but also sets up soft-porn as the catalyst in this story of alleged moral decline. Framed as both a perpetrator and a victim of the “flesh trade,” Reshma’s stint as a soft-porn actress is used against her to circulate her interrogation video as a public image.⁷⁶ Here the idea of outing or publicly displaying unauthorized images contributes to a disciplining process that is meant to counter nonnormative modes of conduct. The act of “slut-shaming”—that is, publicly humiliating women perceived to be promiscuous—has become a widely used disciplining strategy, especially on social media, to inscribe codes of morality.⁷⁷ Starlets such as Reshma are refused the right to appeal violations of their privacy because they are already presumed to be morally questionable subjects. This denial of personhood and agency reduces them to the machinations of the camera-wielding institutional apparatus.

SOFT-PORN AND THE PRECARIETY OF BODY-DOUBLING

If the lives and travails of soft-porn starlets expose one form of encoded and embodied precarity, the arena of body-doubling presents a form of labor relations that has been made even more invisible. Whereas dubbing artists have been unionized, people who work as body doubles have yet to enter trade guild discussions. Many soft-porn films, in fact, were dubbed by prominent dubbing artists, who, despite providing the recognizable moans that accompanied sex scenes, had successful careers in the mainstream industry. The same is not true of body doubles. Surayya Bhanu’s autobiographical account *Dupe*, published in 2010, offers an alternative narrative of soft-porn from the vantage point of such invisible labor. As a body double who performed for actresses such as Shakeela, Bhanu incorporates invisibility and failure as the organizing principles of her narration. The book is dedicated to “actresses who were unknown,” like her—a statement she reiterates in the preface and when she writes:

No one who has failed has revealed what happened to them. I think that the readers ought to know the stories of those who have failed as well . . . stories of those who have left their dreams to take up a career in cinema after having gone through unspeakable traumas.⁷⁸

Bhanu’s account corroborates many insider stories that I encountered during my fieldwork in Kodambakkam. In the parlance of the film industry, *body double* signifies an actor or junior artist who performs sequences that are attributable to stars. It is a process of investing labor and time into a role for which one’s name can never be credited. Contractual terms sometimes forbid these actors from identifying themselves as body doubles or giving out any information about the production process. The disconnect between the body and the face means that body-doubling

rests on an attrition of value. Erased of all identifiable features, the double's body is provided for a reduced wage. The double's labor is distinct in its invisibility insofar as it disappears the moment it is associated with someone else's face and credited to their name. The body double thus exists in an economy in which she is doubly disposable: she takes up the scenes left behind by stars and, at the same time, is pushed to the brink of job insecurity given the highly replaceable nature of her task. Bhanu's narrative teases out these complicated meanings of being a body double and provides insight into the actual work of soft-porn production.

The double's work involves consciously giving up ownership over one's on-screen body by allowing it to be edited onto the star's head. This leaves the body double in the precarious position of inhabiting a screen image that they cannot reclaim. The fragmentation of the body into different parts leaves the body double with no agency to make their identity public or to openly assert that the body seen on-screen is theirs. The body double's identity is perched on the precipice of obscurity—neither faciality nor labor can allow her individuation. Body-doubling pays abysmally, and many doubles are primarily motivated by the hope that by being part of the industry they will catch a break. If apprenticeship is the norm in the tinsel-town economy, for the body double it is the willful erasure of one's identity. And whereas apprentices may lay claim to the credits that are rightfully theirs, for body doubles, laying claim is tantamount to exposing the inner workings of the industry.

Bhanu also refers to the disposability and devaluation of labor that is central to doubling. Because bodies ultimately do not bear individual signifiers as strikingly as do faces, many newcomers to Kodambakkam were attracted to the job of doubling (always replaceable by another acceptable body). The job's popularity made it harder for Bhanu to land other roles and effectively cost her bargaining power to negotiate terms. The unacknowledged nature of body-double work means that the immediate impact of her labor and performance are constrained by the need to remain discreet. All throughout her stint in the industry, Bhanu's status was that of someone else's "dupe"—a generic English label that also stands in for cheating, hoodwinking, or deceiving. Shakeela's reluctance to perform topless scenes was known to production personnel who arranged for a body double to perform the sequences she refused to take on. Shakeela also recounts that when she entered into contracts for films, she was very clear that she would not perform any topless shots and these would be filmed separately by a body double or dupe.⁷⁹ This body double performed not only the topless sequences but also any intimate scenes that were shot separately as cut-pieces. These cut-pieces were purportedly circulated as images of Shakeela, blurring the otherwise sharp lines of distinction that separate the star from the double.

Shakeela's use of a body double might seem counterintuitive given her status and iconicity as a soft-porn star. The work of Shakeela and Bhanu demonstrate that body-doubling operates by foregrounding the primacy of the star and the embodied value of her stardom. Shakeela's face and status remained the primary

motivation for doubling. Shakeela's use of what I call "visibility capital" could be leveraged by Bhanu, but Bhanu's body could assume value only when conjoined with Shakeela's face at the editing table. Visibility capital is premised on the recognition of star value. Shakeela's image was used as currency for generic recognition at her peak and in her association with sex education programs after the soft-porn boom. At the same time, Bhanu's bargaining power was curtailed because visibility capital does not entail equal benefits for all parties.⁸⁰ Bhanu writes that she had to be satisfied with what the producer paid her and that she had to discover short- and long-term strategies to manage her resources. Body doubles are the film precariat par excellence, not just in the soft-porn industry but in film at large.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

In attempting to unravel the constitutive roles that precarity plays in soft-porn production cultures, I have examined how Kodambakkam's tinsel-town economy shaped the social life of subjects and impacted tasks such as body-doubling that are often marginalized or made invisible. The soft-porn industry's casualization of labor and transformation of work arrangements had ramifications for how actors, technicians, and body doubles engaged with freelancing. The idea of discontinuous labor that I have elaborated in the case of soft-porn cinema is distinct from the idea of the "new precariat," which conjoins precariousness and the proletariat to signify the emergence of a new political subjectivity that involves forms of collective organizing and modes of expression.⁸² Scholars such as Louise Waite have argued that precarity can offer hope and possibilities for disparate groups that have been marginalized and fragmented to unite.⁸³ At the same time, precarity is an experience without uniform ramifications that can nevertheless contribute to conversations about structural inequalities. Although sparks of organizing took off in soft-porn filmmaking, they were sidelined by backlash from the mainstream film industry and the social stigma that marked the soft-porn industry as a morally reprehensible and socially infectious machine.

My respondents expressed an awareness of the industry's exploitative arrangements, and their accounts suggested they sought to make the best of the given opportunities. Cine-workers in soft-porn film production attempted to reinvent the rules of the game in order to manage contingencies. Be it Shakeela's precarious stardom or the body double's performance, this labor remained hinged on performers' awareness of their own identity as risk takers. Even though many failed to sustain their careers after the soft-porn industry fizzled out in the mid-2000s, they offered resistance to the dominant, exclusionary industrial patterns and networks that were crucial to subsequent discussions in trade guild forums. As one of my respondents put it, "we might have failed miserably, but still we tried to work against the odds and speak about expropriation of our labor."⁸⁴