

The Alternative Transnational

Migration, Media, and Soft-Porn

Malayalam soft-porn emerged through various native and foreign influences, mobilizing transnational circuits and traversing national and regional boundaries. Whereas its native influences included erotic pulp fiction and sex literature that circulated through the formats of *kambikathakal* and *rathikathakal*, among its foreign influences, American exploitation cinema imported into India in the 1970s and 1980s was the most immediate. Similar mechanisms of flow can be seen in Nitin Govil's analysis of American film prints that entered South Asia after successfully transiting other international markets.¹ Transit, then, is central to understanding cinema as a circulating cultural object that has meanings beyond the text and the frame. Further, many Malayalam soft-porn films were financed by expatriate Indians living in the Middle Eastern Gulf, and they, in turn, began to circulate in the Gulf through pirate networks. Thus, Malayalam soft-porn is not an isolated cultural and industrial form, as the specificity of the descriptor "Malayalam" may suggest, but "transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force."² In this formulation, Malayalam soft-porn reflects the potential for "local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas."³ Such regional and local film cultures, as Govil shows, can "provincialize" dominant film cultures (in his analysis, Hollywood). This requires an epistemic reorientation that "defies the grammar of mobility through which the narrative of global domination is most often communicated."⁴ A similar provincialization becomes necessary when discussing Malayalam soft-porn, which, as a filmmaking practice, aligns with all three of these formulations: it transcends the local, it interfaces with other locals in a field of porous exchanges, and it transits through various kinds of markets.

But while it is almost natural to talk about “transnational” cinema in terms of its opposition to national cinemas (i.e., in terms of treaty productions, international distribution, and labor outsourcing),⁵ the uncritical adoption of the idea of transnationalism, as Mette Hjort warns, can often result in treating the concept as a general qualifier that can be made to stick to almost anything in a largely globalized world.⁶ In an era where porous borders and outsourced labor form the general environment for film production, the nation’s boundaries are not the only portals to the transnational. Although such official infrastructures of transnationalism remain important for cinema, I explore the more informal underground circuits of Malayalam soft-porn, their meanings for diasporic populations, and their work in negotiating cultural imaginaries between home and abroad. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal’s postulation that transnationalism is constituted by migration flows, the emergence of alternative identities that are not primarily national, and diasporic formations, is also key.⁷ Accordingly, I approach Malayalam soft-porn through the lens of what I term the “alternative transnational”—a paradigm for understanding media flows that centers regional formations to map transient connections among stakeholders who are situated outside the boundaries of the nation-state.

The process of vernacularizing cinema’s forms and possibilities, as well as tracking its global flows, allows us to reread the region and the ways its diasporic communities use it to consolidate their identities and navigate structures of belonging and ownership under uncertain conditions of citizenship. The dominant perception of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) community, at both a state level and in popular discourse, is that its members connect the home country and its diasporic satellites; further, they are seen as a core constituency for replenishing the home country through remittances.⁸ The unilateral celebration of successful western-bound NRIs in dominant narratives excludes Indian diasporic communities in the Gulf from those in the skilled and semiskilled sectors who are considered beneficiaries of welfare. Kerala’s relationship to the Gulf is marked by this multifaceted and uneven connectivity: as Kerala’s unofficial “satellite” colony, the Gulf is a place of prosperity and vocational mobility, but it is also a location of anxiety in terms of its strained relationship with Kerala’s lower-income group of expatriates.

Tracking these dispersed histories requires a blend of archival research, discourse analysis, and ethnographic observation in sites such as Mumbai, Chennai, and the UAE. Conducting fieldwork among both diasporic Indians and Indian officials on issues such as pornography presented a very particular set of problems. Citing confidentiality clauses, officials at the NFDC in Mumbai were unwilling to entertain questions on the failed NRI scheme that facilitated the import of American exploitation cinema and pushed me to approach retired officials and agents who had imported films to India. On the other hand, questions about pornography often alienated my respondents in the Gulf, who were motivated to portray

themselves as ideal immigrants unsullied by negative stereotypes. This necessitated developing an array of alternative approaches to data collection that included interviewing returned emigrants and circulating a separate questionnaire that emphasized diasporic media consumption practices more broadly. Such methodological conundrums point out that the “object” (soft-porn), as well as its traces and coding, transform as it travels and merges with the varied cultural and social positions of my subjects. Negotiations between regional identities (as “Malayalis”), national identities (as “Indians”), and diasporic identities (as migrant workers in the Gulf) become central both to the status of Malayalam soft-porn as an object and to the subject positions it inaugurates in its audiences.

THE MANY (REGIONAL) LIVES OF MALAYALAM SOFT-PORN

In relation to Indian cinema, the term “regional” is usually affixed to cinemas in languages other than Hindi. The popular Bollywood cinema of India that often stands in as “Indian cinema” outside the country is a significant (and dominant) constituent of India’s cinemascape, but hardly represents the complexities of the country’s diverse linguistic and regional groups, which have their own cinematic traditions. India’s many regional cinemas often have to compete with Bollywood’s overwhelming popularity and financial resources.⁹ Correspondingly, regional cinemas that have distinct and flourishing production and exhibition practices are relatively understudied or discussed as part of the “national cinema” paradigm (although things seem to be changing slightly in the era of streaming networks and the national and global success of south Indian films such as *Pushpa: The Rise* [dir. Sukumar, 2021] and *RRR* [dir. S. S. Rajamouli, 2022]).

Andrew Higson argues that the paradigm of national cinema is “prescriptive rather than descriptive, citing what *ought* to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences.”¹⁰ As a phrase, “Indian cinema” drums up an image of a nation that is territorially bound and unified. But cinema has been at the center of conflict between mainstream India and regions that are marked as ridden with insurgents, as, for instance, in some north-eastern states where separatist groups have unofficially banned Bollywood films.¹¹ Such measures react to the government’s hypersecuritized management of civilian populations in these states under the pretext of curbing militancy—a reflection of Ravi Vasudevan’s postulation that the state “puts together diverse cultural and linguistic formations within a somewhat forced political and administrative integrity.”¹² With this in mind, I turn to what Gayatri Gopinath posits as a “South-South relationality between seemingly discrete regional spaces that in fact bypasses the nation.”¹³ Following her cue, I approach Malayalam soft-porn through the conceptual lens of the alternative transnational, which allows subsumed regional identities to be articulated as simultaneously local and global without being constrained

by the national. Joining “soft-porn” with “Malayalam” affixes a regional qualifier to the cinematic object and mobilizes diverse imaginations of the regional, national, and transnational that are mediated by class and cultural norms.

That said, my use of the phrase “Malayalam soft-porn” elicited discomfort from some respondents, forcing me to rephrase my area of research depending on the interview subject and the institutional frameworks in which they were embedded. Although “soft-porn film” emerged as a generic label in the Malayalam industry only in the 1990s, the history of the term can be traced back to its journalistic use in the 1970s and 1980s to refer to Malayalam films with sexually charged narratives that were distributed outside the state of Kerala. A 1983 article in the *Maharashtra Herald* reported that the screening of the “Malayalam soft-porn” film *Crazy Lady* had to be canceled after demonstrations outside central Delhi’s Odeon cinema hall by women activists from Janawadi Mahila Samiti (People’s Women Group) and Young Women’s Christian Association.¹⁴ The author lists erotic titles such as *Sexy Boy*, *Sexy Night*, *Only One Night*, *Sex and Play*, *Sex and Rape*, *Sex Hungry*, and *Midnight Affairs*. As a result of the protests by women’s groups, South Indian films with English titles were scrutinized to monitor the spread of soft-porn. Section 30 (3) of The Cinematograph (certification) Rules, 1983, requires that the duplicate of the censor certificates (both parts 1 and 11) be exhibited in the cinema halls on the days the film is shown. This was hardly followed by the cinema hall owners, as many of these “films were not always exhibited in the form they were certified.”¹⁵ The use of “erotic titles” in English and not in Malayalam or Hindi parallels the distribution of American exploitation films in India in the 1980s. The demonstrators’ primary demand was for restrictions to be placed on the screening of “dubbed films,” which allegedly flouted censorship regulations by inserting pornographic sequences. The categorization of these films as “dubbed films” positioned them as coming from outside the jurisdiction of the dominant Hindi-language belt and thus hinted at the geographical otherness that was imposed on them. Journalistic reports highlighted this as an example of Malayalam filmmakers’ use of exploitation tactics—an allegation that often contrasted these films with the realist art cinema that was also associated with Kerala’s film culture.

Although New Delhi is a cosmopolitan city with a mix of linguistic communities and migrants from all over the country who have moved there for work, the Malayalam soft-porn controversy put the Kerala-based community on tenterhooks. The Malayalam films that were retitled and circulated with English titles included *Night Duty*, *Evils of Rape*, *Sexy Body*, *Sexy Nights*, *Crazy Nights*, *Sex Life of Heroine*, *Sex Love*, and *Charm*. The debate and protests over obscenity and censorship assigned the Malayali community with the moral responsibility of taking a strong stance to guard their regional cinema from association with sex films. The Delhi Malayalee Association of Mayur Vihar addressed a letter to the Information and Broadcasting minister H. K. L. Bhagat asking for the stoppage of films “that are full of perverted sex scenes added illegally by the distributors and exhibitors” and

noting how they have negatively affected the image and prestige of Keralites.¹⁶ In the aftermath of the protests, a Delhi-based Malayali association organized a film discussion forum to showcase Kerala films in the right perspective and a seminar titled “Sex and Violence in Indian Cinema” that was attended by art cinema proponents like Adoor Gopalakrishnan.¹⁷ In Ambala, in Haryana, the posters for *Private Life*, a Malayalam film, were removed under order of the deputy commissioner to weed out obscene material.¹⁸ The South Indian Chamber of Commerce alleged that these concerns about South Indian films emerged from Bombay cinema’s “step-motherly” treatment of regional cinemas, which did not get the visibility and loan provisions available for “purposeful films” funded by Film Finance Corporation (FFC). It was not just Malayalam films that bore the brunt of allegations that they were pornographic; the South Indian film industry in general received such rebuke. Thus, the circulation of Malayalam soft-porn in other parts of India was always preceded by notoriety—a trend that started with the distribution of *Avalude Ravukal* (Her nights) as a “sex” film because of the way it was marketed outside Kerala.

The term “Malayalam soft-porn” thus raises questions about what constitutes regional cinema in India’s multilingual context. Malayalam cinema’s association with unbridled sex unsettled regional filmmakers, who saw it as licensing both a dismissive attitude toward regional cinemas from South India and a forceful homogenization of all the South Indian film industries as the “other” of mainstream Indian cinema—something encapsulated by the catch-all label “Madras films.” Journalistic reportage of the time gestures to the sexualized imagination of South Indian cinema—Malayalam films, in particular—that peddled the notion that an infectious South was threatening the chaste character of the country. This devalued status partly explains why pseudonyms were so widely used in soft-porn production to guard the identities of the film crew.

This tension was palpable when I interviewed Ravi Kottarakara, chair of the South Indian Chamber of Commerce, during the Indian Cinema Centenary Celebrations in Chennai in 2013. He perceived my work as “delegitimizing” regional cinemas’ rich traditions by appending “Malayalam” to “soft-porn.”¹⁹ For Kottarakara, the combination of “soft-porn” with the regional marker “Malayalam” contributed to the stereotyped depiction of “Madras films” as the harbinger of sex and violence. The perceived “devaluation” of the regional in these responses points to two versions of the area—some of my respondents were specifically speaking about Malayalam films when they uttered the phrase “regional cinema,” whereas others spoke of a larger category of “South Indian cinema” that had to constantly mark its difference from Bollywood.

The region, as it is invoked in these reactions, exposes a built-in boundedness that can elicit protectionist measures to safeguard their interests. Regional cinemas have always tried to protect their distribution-exhibition interests from the influx of content from Hollywood and Hindi cinema. For instance, the South Indian state

of Karnataka had an informal ban on dubbing films from other languages until the Competition Commission of India intervened and passed an order allowing it in 2018.²⁰ The ban, instituted by private, trade-related bodies associated with Kannada film and television in the 1980s, also draws from the pro-Kannada cultural movement.²¹ Intended to support local creativity, the ban paved the way for an alternative culture of remaking films in Karnataka. The remaking protocols meant that films in other languages could not be dubbed into Kannada, but Kannada films could be dubbed into other languages to be distributed outside Karnataka and overseas. This is significant because soft-porn filmmakers took advantage of this arrangement very early on by making original content in Kannada and then dubbing it into other languages. *Aadyapaapam* (The first sin, 1988), a film that is often seen as a direct precursor to the soft-porn wave of the 1990s, was produced in Karnataka. The director of the film, P. Chandrakumar, used a subsidy instituted by the Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce that was originally meant to promote Kannada filmmakers. Curiously, while *Aadyapaapam* went on to become hugely popular as a Malayalam soft-porn film, today it essentially means a version that is dubbed from Kannada. Thus, even when linguistic and regional specificity are invoked, they can unsettle the logic of protectionism that undergird them.

The regional status of soft-porn surfaced in my fieldwork when a handful of my respondents based in the Middle East narrated their experiences of watching soft-porn on video tape—a format that allows for relative safety as it can be watched in the privacy of the home. In different cultural contexts in the 1980s, video was perceived as a “bad” cultural object that was seen as “creatively impoverished” because of its association with porn.²² In the Indian context, video was also the harbinger of piracy; in the 1980s, video was reported to be the format with “the latest releases from Hindi and regional cinema, as well as a reasonable selection of pornography.”²³ Video porn coexisted with celluloid pornography and encouraged the production of direct-to-video films sold through video libraries. Affordable and easy-to-use, magnetic tape allowed pornography to circulate widely and be easily reproduced, which made it a lucrative investment that turned quick profits. U-Matic and Betamax tapes featuring adult content were sold in video libraries in India and Dubai, along with clandestinely sold copies of *Screw* that were passed around among patrons on the lookout for “foreign” magazines. Many of my respondents recounted how they came across Malayalam soft-porn films among the pirated CDs that were sold by door-to-door salesmen in Dubai and Sharjah, and in Dubai’s Karama Market, which was famous for counterfeit goods.²⁴ In Bahrain, Malayalam soft-porn was available for rent in places like Gold Souq, a neighborhood in Manama, where shops that sold phone cards also sold videos.²⁵

Describing his encounter with Malayalam soft-porn in Bahrain, one of my respondents, Narayanan, recounted that erotic magazines such as *Muttuchippi* were available in stationery shops that sold Malayalam newspapers and magazines.²⁶ Sometimes the magazines were published with a Gulf Malayali audience

specifically in mind. *The Sex Education Encyclopedia*, published by Moral Books in 1978, included a separate announcement for Gulf Malayalis that listed the details of book marketers based in the UAE, Kuwait, Doha, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.²⁷ Many adult magazines, such as *Honeymoon Guide*, also advertised soft-porn films and featured catchy quotes and images from the films to directly reach out to prospective viewers in the Gulf. The adult magazine *Crossfire* featured storylines exploring the double lives of Malayali women who were recruited to work as maids in Dubai but ended up performing sex work. Like the narrative tradition of first person used in *Rathikathakal*, many of these stories feature women directly addressing the readers as they write about their experiences in the Gulf.

In the censorial atmosphere of the Middle East, it was common practice to label porn films as “mythological films” or “home videos” to minimize risk if a purchaser were caught by the Mutawa, the special police unit that enforces religious observations and public morality. Recounting an early encounter with soft-porn in Dubai, another respondent, Thampy, stated that when he was approached by a vendor who tried to sell him soft-porn films, he was too scared to even look at the CDs: “It was as if being in Dubai made it seem like soft-porn films were illegal. . . . I have watched these films in theaters in India, but never felt like they were illegal there.”²⁸ Soft-porn DVDs were bought and sold with a sense of trepidation, arranged alongside mainstream films with genre labels such as “melodrama” and “thriller” to hide erotic content from the authorities, while leaving it open for those who possessed the cultural and contextual knowledge to decode them. In contrast to the “backroom” section of American video stores that Dan Herbert describes as cordoning off adult video from the rest of the inventory, Gulf Malayali video rentals hid adult films in plain sight.²⁹ Isaac, a former video library owner who sold soft-porn along with his regular fare of Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam films in Dubai, stated that soft-porn CDs sold in video parlors might look to an outsider like “any other Malayalam film,” except for the text in Malayalam promising juicy elements. Often, cover images would be sanitized, transforming, as Isaac described it, even Shakeela into “a schoolteacher or a middle-aged family woman.”³⁰ Some of my Pakistani informants also spoke of soft-porn films that were available in Karachi’s Rainbow Center in Saddar, one of the hubs of video piracy in Pakistan. For instance, Wahab, a cleaning worker, said:

In the laborer camp that I worked in the industrial area of Mussafeh, I stayed with a group of Indians. I knew of these films from them, but never thought I would find them in a kiosk in Saddar. My immediate response when I found these films stacked with Bollywood was to tell my friend, this is from Kerala, not Bollywood.³¹

Responses like Wahab’s starkly contrast the uneasiness demonstrated by officials such as Kottarakara. For this other set of diasporic respondents, the experience of recognizing “Malayalam soft-porn” was marked by nostalgia for the homeland. Such starkly different responses in conceiving how illicit media objects evoke

different senses of relationality in transnational contexts resonate with Kathryn C. Hardy's argument that the region "is constantly on the move."³² The circulation of soft-porn in the Gulf illustrates how the consolidation of regional identities and diffusion of generic markers create alternative transnational imaginations that are speckled with regional traces. Alternative transnationalism then, is mediated by two contrasting poles of formal and informal networks: first, the formal circuits that national film institutions envisaged as they promoted trade relations by inviting the Indian diaspora to trade in "foreign" made films in India; and second, the specific infrastructures of diasporic media that targeted the Malayali audience in the Gulf.

TRANSNATIONALISM, THE NRI SCHEME, AND THE SEXUAL IMAGINARY

As Sudha Rajagopalan demonstrates in her work on Indian films in the Soviet Union, transnational flows that are initiated and mediated by national institutions often involve adjustments that betray the planned logic of diplomatic treaties and trade exchanges, as more informal networks come into play.³³ The transnational history of Malayalam soft-porn likewise involves the failure of a state-initiated scheme that exceeded its intended purpose and caused a major setback to government policies on importing films. In October 1984, the Indian government initiated the NRI scheme, which allowed emigrant Indians to import foreign films to India with a payment of \$15,000. The emergence of NRIs as an important constituency that could contribute to the home country's overall financial welfare was an important development in the mid-1980s. The NRI scheme was envisioned to increase the flow of foreign exchange into India. The NFDC, the centralized body tasked with promoting Indian cinema, was authorized to manage it, and the administrative officer of the CBFC oversaw it. The profits accrued through the scheme were not repatriable and had to be invested in India. The scheme was a culmination of a tense atmosphere that arose from institutional constraints on bodies such as Indian Motion Pictures Export Corporation (IMPEC) and the CBFC, and was part of the government's attempt to concretize NRIs as a crucial node in India's development.

In the late 1970s, "black money" in the Indian economy became a cause for concern as hoarding and speculation reached an all-time high. In response, the Indian Government introduced the Manufacturing and Other Companies (Auditor's Report) Order, 1975 (MAOCARO), which obligated management to maintain records and auditors to carry out physical verification of same. Interestingly, amid calls to identify hoarders, news reports portrayed the Indian film industry as one of the primary sites bypassing regulations by using black money for transactions ranging from remuneration for stars to advance payments for exhibitors.³⁴ The speculative nature of filmmaking, high rates of interest, and uncertain returns

meant that the calculation of box-office receipts and tax collection did not always lead to a neat figure. Strategies to put black money into circulation included using false vouchers to inflate production costs, forging arrangements with distributors to pilfer the prints directly from labs as a part of the 8 percent permissible waste, and even misusing subsidy schemes such as the one instituted by the Maharashtra government for color films in 1975.³⁵

Issues with the foreign exchange reserves, for which such black money was partially blamed, had loomed large since the 1960s. As Nitin Govil notes, India's reserves were depleted in the 1960s, and this pushed the country to expand the reach of its cinema into the UK and the US in a bid to reach globalized markets.³⁶ This resulted in India issuing a blockade on repatriations of profits accrued from distributing and exhibiting Indian films in the US. In 1964, officers of the Enforcement Directorate of the Reserve Bank of India raided the residences of nine leading film personalities in Bombay and recovered four hundred foreign gold coins, currency worth thirty lakh rupees (\$630,000), and unmanufactured gold.³⁷ The Public Accounts Committee of parliament even suggested opening a databank that could keep tabs on expenditures in film production. In 1957, a proposal was put forth by the Indian government to the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEA) to reduce film imports to 10 percent of the figures from 1947. The quota was later raised to 75 percent under the condition that remittance would be restricted to 12.5 percent and the remaining funds were to be placed in a blocked account in India.³⁸ Called "blocked funds," this arrangement meant that if distributors earned one hundred rupees in India, they could only take back twenty five, and the remaining seventy-five rupees, called the "interest fee," had to be used in India. Consequently, studios blocked funds to finance co-productions and to lease theaters in India. Indian film producers were allowed quotas to spend the foreign exchange abroad to encourage export.

Until the 1980s, the only agencies that could import films to India were the MPEA, NFDC, and Sovetskoyefilm. The responsibility of film export fell on the Film Import Contract Registration Committee, but in 1979, IMPEC, formed in 1963, took on the sole responsibility of exporting feature films from India.³⁹ Because IMPEC sold Indian films to other countries and charged a commission on all export deals, the Indian Film Exporters Association (IFEA) and the All India Film Producer's Council (AIFPC) perceived IMPEC as a monopoly and placed a hold on supplying films to it.⁴⁰ In 1980, IMPEC and FFC merged to form the NFDC. In the 1980s, the Indian economy began to face further fiscal imbalances due to problems in the balance of payments.⁴¹ The quasi-welfare system of Nehruvian socialism coupled with the red tape involved in procuring licenses (referred to as "license-raj") constrained entrepreneurial prospects. Despite increase in exports, interest payments and imports rose faster, leading to an external payment crisis.⁴² The NRI scheme emerged because of the convergence of this history of larger economic forces and film-institutional histories. The move to incorporate

NRIs as stakeholders reflected the Indian government's need to articulate its commitment to acknowledging the economic potential of the emigrant community.

The 1980s also saw the emergence of a consumer economy routed through the diasporic community and their import of foreign goods to India. The popularity of video cassette recorders (VCRs), video cassette players (VCPs), and video cassettes in India allowed for a distinctly transnational imagination to develop. For instance, the Japanese-made Aksai VS-23 was sold in India with a warranty that could be used for service and replacement of parts in Egypt, India, Jordan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Syria, and Thailand. It was advertised with the slogan: "Why settle for the national favorite when you can get the international leader?"⁴³ Locally made video cassettes and cassette players soon followed. In 1984, Pakistan removed the import tax duty for VHS video recorders, which also boosted their importation from the Gulf.⁴⁴

The consumer economy of the 1980s was joined by a shadow economy of smuggling and piracy, as human carriers brought video equipment and computer parts into India from regions such as Southeast Asia (including Hong Kong) and the Gulf.⁴⁵ Along with the usual tactics of using carbonized paper to circumvent X-ray scans and strategically placing contacts at customs offices and checks, carriers brought in dutiable items like VCRs and stereos. Paying the required duties on these items was meant to distract officers from noticing contraband items carried in separate bags, the rationale being that customs personnel would not suspect a person who paid a substantial amount of duty of being a smuggler.⁴⁶ In addition to concerns about smuggling, anxieties about film piracy also became a core concern of the 1980s. In a 1986 statement, the Film Federation of India (FFI) noted that video piracy affected the export of Indian films to the Gulf countries.⁴⁷ The immediate causes of concern included the unlicensed nature of video libraries; the ease of under-the-table transactions, such as renting sex videos; the availability of bootleg copies of newly released films; and the projection of illegally made copies of 35mm films.⁴⁸ The massive spread of video came to be seen as a phenomenon that the law could not keep up with. The state governments, in the meantime, established regulatory mechanisms to check the proliferation of video parlors. By 1986, the number of video libraries had increased to 3,000, while the number of theaters had decreased to 2,400, creating a panic that signaled the invasion of video.⁴⁹ In March 1984, the Cinematograph Act of 1952 was amended to include the provision that all video cassettes must carry a new censor certificate.⁵⁰ Because state governments collected entertainment tax, it was considered their responsibility to ensure that regulatory mechanisms were devised to contain video piracy.⁵¹

In this period of the 1980s, such developments gave rise to new anxieties about culture and industry. The import of American exploitation films into India under the NRI scheme, which directly impacted Malayalam soft-porn films, is one important ramification. The increase in the import of American films was seen as a cause for concern because they were oversaturating the market and depriving

Indian feature films of a fair run in the exhibition circuit. Contrary to the figure of the NRI as the booster of foreign exchange and the upwardly mobile social class envisaged in the film-import scheme, many interested parties based in India used their connections abroad to import foreign films without consideration of aesthetic value or film form. In Madras, the dealers of NRI films included G. B. S. Mani of Kartik Enterprises, Dr. Sreenivasan of Subasri Pictures, Y. M. Elias of Indo-Overseas Films, and J. Jaya Kumar of Metro Film Corporation. At times, their deals were mediated by agents based in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia who would connect the NRIs with procurers based in India.⁵² Many clients who imported these films were based in the UK, Chile, and the Middle East.⁵³ The details of foreign films were handed over to diasporic Indian agents who imported and exported films in Southeast Asia at large. *The Times of India* reports that "Local film distributors with blood brothers, cousins, miscellaneous relatives and friends settled abroad saw this as a whopping business prospect. Films were brought in by the NRI but in many cases sold or co-opted to Indian distributors."⁵⁴ In contrast to foreign films, which were labeled based on the country from which they were being imported, the imported films were publicized as hybrid packages that included a mix of Swedish, Danish, and English films. Despite efforts to prevent unauthorized circulation, many of the films were distributed illegally to theaters and were featured as "English" films. Because import duties were associated with these films, the NFDC issued permits for import in the form of a letter addressed to customs. To facilitate the selection of films, the Indian government recommended the constitution of a Film Imports Committee. The films cleared by the committee were sent to the CBFC. It was during this stage that officials at the CBFC realized the discrepancy between the written scripts and their audiovisual execution. When the CBFC denied certificates to films that were screened by the committee, they were in effect questioning the rationale behind the selection of these films. From 1985 to 1987, 558 films were submitted for clearance, of which only 296 were cleared and imported. Another report puts the number of films submitted for clearance during the same time at 198, of which 45 were refused certificates by the CBFC.⁵⁵ The discarded prints entered distribution networks, and the execution of the import policy was blamed for giving leeway to NRIs to import questionable content without much oversight by the Film Imports Committee.

Questions were raised by institutional bodies like the FFI about the rampant presence of sexually explicit sequences in the films that were cleared by the import committee without any note of disapproval. In raids conducted in the aftermath of the controversy, officials discovered that sex sequences unrelated to the storyline had been interpolated into some of the films. Even editing labs like Vijaya Vauhini were raided to check if the negatives were in order. As Reddi, who managed the lab, said: "If there was any interpolation, the lab wasn't involved. If anyone comes to us with a censor certificate, that's enough. Whether a film is aesthetic or

rubbery is not our look out. It's humanly impossible to keep a quality check."⁵⁶ Similar sentiments were expressed by the Prasad Lab personnel when asked if they had come across *thundu* in their editing of the films.⁵⁷ Moreover, it was common practice to organize secret previews for imported NRI films or screen them from an unexpurgated video print to assure the distributor that the "bits" were included in the package.⁵⁸ In an attempt to clarify the procedures in the certification of NRI films, then CBFC chair Vikram Singh stated: "Our functions end with the recommendation of an "A" or "UA" certificate. We also make physical cuts—the objectionable portions from a film are deleted from the positive and negative prints. There's nothing more we can do by way of censorship."⁵⁹

Voicing the need to set up a "cinema cell" to monitor film screenings and keep interpolation at bay, Singh emphasized that enforcement was the responsibility of state governments—the central government had decided that the state governments should be the ones to step in and seize the illegal prints. While the Ministry of Human Resource Development blamed the exhibitors' and distributors' "distorted publicity" for influencing the public perception of these films as low quality, cinema hall owners turned on the press, alleging that they had exploited the crisis by running magazine stories about the same film posters they had condemned and profiting from the sales.⁶⁰ By 1986, the tug of war between the CBFC and the AIFPC regarding explicit scenes resulted in a temporary pause in sending films for certification. In their memorandum to the Human Resource development minister, the council urged that Singh be replaced by someone "from the film industry itself."⁶¹ At the end of the day, the tussle over censorship boiled down to who oversaw it. Singh was seen as representing the film critics, and he was associated with the institutions he had been part of—namely, *The Times of India* and *Filmfare* magazine. Amid these controversies, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting decided to review the NRI scheme in 1988, and a panel was constituted to vet the films before they went to the censor board. An eleven-member Import Selection Committee (ISC), headed by film producer Kantilal Rathore, was appointed in January 1988, following the new import policy for films. The ISC decided that in order to be imported, films should have run in international film festival circuits or have received "rave reviews" in "prominent film journals."⁶² They should also provide "clean healthy entertainment" and not violate governmental regulations. Reports soon began to circulate that the subcommittee rejected 50 percent of NRI films, emphasizing that the guidelines were in place and arbitrary imports would no longer be entertained.⁶³

Realizing that the NRI scheme had become a quagmire, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting intervened and issued a notification to the censor board that their purview was limited to certification and they need not worry about the quality of imported films. In the absence of any guidelines, the first fifty-seven applications for import passed through the committee without screenings of the films; the only condition was that they were accompanied by a check. In hindsight,

even NFDC officials agreed that quality had never been a priority and that the complaints that these films included sex and violence were valid.⁶⁴ The imported films, some of which the CBFC had objected to, were left at a government warehouse to be destroyed. But these prints reached distributors through scrap dealers and agents and eventually hit the exhibition circuit. The prints were salvaged because the agents had managed to get lab negatives before they sent the films for certification. Many of these films were screened in theaters across Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Delhi. The NFDC could not curb their circulation without acknowledging that the prints that were in the warehouse had been smuggled in by their own people. Statements by NFDC officials expressed their sense of helplessness in streamlining the rejection process. Even during my correspondence with officials, many refused outright to talk about the scheme. Others who were part of the handling of the scheme wanted assurance that they would not be quoted.⁶⁵ The failed scheme exposed the limitations of censorship's regulatory framework. When faced with the allegation that the imported films celebrated sex and violence, some NRI importers met with the joint secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to appeal the scrapping of the scheme. "A miniscule 10 percent of the importers maligned the NRIs as 'nonreliable Indians,'" said Jaya Kumar, an importer based in Madras.⁶⁶

Some of my respondents who imported these films were forthcoming about the varied methods they used to bypass the system: some reduplicated negative prints at the time of import, while others smuggled reels in their hand luggage or paid carriers to smuggle them from abroad. While a film was stuck at the censor board awaiting certification, duplicated copies would be processed and dispatched to distributors.⁶⁷ One importer cleared a film by using Section 126 of the Customs Act, which allows the importer to pay a penalty to customs to clear the objectionable material. Another frequently used technique was changing the title of the film during import. For instance, Puran Chawla of Lord Films imported a film titled *Hot Heir*, but the real film was *My Tutor*, a teen exploitation film.⁶⁸ Similarly, the Greek exploitation film *Revanche* (dir. Nicos Vergitsis, 1983) was retitled *Pyar Phir Ek Baar* (Love once again).⁶⁹ Additionally, many exploitation films were illegally transported to India from the Middle East under the guise that they were waste celluloid headed for bangle factories.⁷⁰ This method of smuggling film prints was not unique to India: in the 1970s in the US, Cosmos Films made 16mm films featuring full nudity of "beaver films" (featuring female frontal nudity but not much sexual activity) and distributed the prints in mailing containers disguised as other kinds of freight.⁷¹

Distributors of soft-porn films were not the only ones who tricked Indian's censorship system by reworking the plot outlines that had been submitted to the NFDC or using the category of "sex education films" to justify their import.⁷² Films from a wide variety of genres were illicitly brought in. One genre that stood out were nature documentaries such as *Sex and Animals* (dir. Harold Hoffman, 1969), which

explored the mating rituals and sexual habits of different animals.⁷³ Exploitation films such as *Adam and Eve* (dir. Enzo Doria and Luigi Russo, Italy, 1983), *Carry on Emmanuelle* (dir. Gerald Thomas, UK, 1978), *Lonely Lady* (dir. Peter Sasdy, US, 1983), and *Daughter of the Jungle* (dir. Umberto Lenzi, Italy, 1982) formed a major category of imported films. Foreign sex education films were also cleared for general viewing in India and met packed audiences. Some of these films also came as a package deal in the form of an anthology, without credits or details of the director or production; this included titles such as *Tomboy* and *Life and Birth*.⁷⁴

Although most of the films imported were unavailable to source for this book, I was fortunate to access a copy of *Main Aur Tum* (You and me; dir. Harihar, 1987), a 16mm film provided to me by its producer. As an indigenized version of sex education films, *Main Aur Tum* sourced footage from *It Could Happen to You* (dir. Stanley A. Long, Australia, 1976), which addressed sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); reels from the British Health Education Society; as well as a blow-up of 16mm film illustrating childbirth from other imported films.⁷⁵ Thus, like the insertion of *thundu* in soft-porn, NRI films allowed for an assemblage of practices whereby fragments of reels could easily transmute from one context to the other, carrying material traces from different source texts. Made in the tradition of educational material aimed at facilitating discussions around sexuality and intimacy, *Main Aur Tum* offers a critique of the conservative upbringing in India that deprives youth of having healthy interactions with the opposite sex. Framed through the figure of the sexologist (Om Shivpuri) and his handling of patients who consult him for treatment and advice, the documentary covers misconceptions around what couples should do on the “first night”—popular parlance for the wedding night, when a couple has sex—the film draws on popular cinematic imaginations, showcasing a series of still photographs from various Hindi films where stars like Randhir Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna, Amol Palekar, Jitendra, and Sanjeev Kumar are shown enacting the first night scene. *Main Aur Tum* received a fair amount of press; one newspaper article referred to it as the “sexyclopedia of the country” and noted the performance of actress Sonika Gill.⁷⁶ Through the figure of the expert, the film attempts to demystify stigmas about premature ejaculation and masculine performance during sex and makes a case for allowing couples to understand each other’s sexual preferences by spending time together and to plan children when they are ready for it. Information about contraceptives, including foreign-brand condoms such as “Bugger,” “Fourex,” and “Sultan,” and Indian-made Nirdodh, were interwoven into the film. Further, the film also offered information on different birthing methods and the need to preserve lactating mothers’ milk so that working mothers can better negotiate their job responsibilities and child-care needs. In its pedagogic drive, the film also highlights the differences between male and female orgasm to show how partners could support each other in pleasurable sexual experiences. In fact, there is a direct takeaway for the audience that is inserted into the text of the film after discussing each phase of the relationship.

Should Sex Education Films Be Banned?

14092/XJ
Our sex education films have been put under a ban for too long. They shot into the limelight when a producer went on a hunger strike. How far is the ban on them justified? Are such films depicting sex suitable for commercial showing?

by FIROZE RANGOONWALLA

BETWEEN 1973 and 1977 lies the short but sensational career of sex education films made in India. Actually, there have been only four such films in Hindi—with their dubbed South Indian versions making a total of eight. But, within their four-year span, these sex education films earned notoriety by either being refused certificates or by being heavily censored before being shown. No sooner did they start drawing crowds than their showings were suspended and the films were banned.

What irks our producers is that the Janata Government has not lifted the "permanent" ban imposed on these films by the former I & B Ministers. Two of the producers concerned (Shree Ram Bohra and Adarah) had openly campaigned for the Janata Party during the elections.

Perhaps the new government fears that clearing these films might result in a spurt of "sex" pictures. For, under cover of education, these films have violated the most cherished norm—of not permitting nudity on the screen. But how and why were they passed in the first place?

A typical Indian-style protest was made by producer H. H. Jagwani through a satyagraha and a hunger strike outside Parliament House. Jagwani's *Stree-Purush*—written and directed by him under the name of Raj Kumar with unknown artists like Rikhi

SEX; THE KEY TO FEMALE ECSTASY—
10 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SEX
A TECHNIQUE TO PROLONG INTERCOURSE—
MULTI ORGASMS FOR MEN.
BUILDING SEX CONFIDENCE IN SEX

BOHRA INTERNATIONAL'S
GUPT SHASTRA
A PERFECT PICTURE ON SEX EDUCATION
PRODUCED BY RAM KUMAR
DIRECTED BY SHREERAM

Oberoi, Monica Patel, Kanti Sanghvi and a cabaret girl Jezbel—deals largely with samplings of "sex" "science"—Kam months after the two other sex education films: *Gupt Gyan* and *Kaam Shashtra*—in October 1975, to be precise. And that after one-third of it had been cut! The truncated film with a running time of less than two hours could not find distributors. It was never shown in Bombay.

In May 1976, when the big clampdown came on sex, violence and liquor in films, all the sex education pictures were suspended. These included *Gupt Gyan*—with its three versions, *Vazhikai Rahasyam* (Tamil), *Dampathya Rahasyam* (Malayalam) and *Gupt Gyanamu* (Telugu)—*Gupt Shashtra* (with its Tamil version *Marnakkalai*), *Kaam Shashtra* and *Stree-Purush*.

Though the suspension order was only for two months, it went on being extended. Nothing could be done in the intervening months of the Emergency. At last, on 19, 1977, the I & B Ministry informed the producers that a permanent ban had been put on their films. The producers have made it out as the last act of vendetta by the outgoing I & B Minister, V. C. Shukla, as two of them had been actively supporting the Janata Party.

Mr Bohra (of *Gupt Shashtra*), who goes about his business in a systematic, cool-headed way, produced a 54-page High Court judgement of the Devendra Goel Case of 1970, challenging the validity of certain aspects of censorship. The judgement clearly says that

RAMESH, SAREENA AND KHURSHID in *Gupt Shashtra*. The film's title sounds a logical follow-up to Adarah's *Gupt Gyan* which, after being shown successfully throughout the country, was suspended during the Emergency, before being placed under a "permanent" ban along with other sex education films. Right: Rikhi Oberoi and Monica Patel in a scene from *Stree-Purush*.



FIGURE 22. A news article on sex education films. Image courtesy National Film Archive of India.

This pedagogic legitimization was also supported by references to sexological tracts, including *Human Sexual Response* (Masters and Johnson), *Women's Experience of Sex* (Sheila Kitzenger), *The Hite Report* (Shere Hite), *Breast Feeding in Practice* (Elizabeth Helsing), and *Love and Sexuality* (Romie Goodchild), right at the beginning of the film. The film interpolates the viewer through direct

address, asking them to partake in the case studies that the sexologist reveals through the discussion of the couples. The film's educational status enabled it to procure tax exemption from the Tamil Nadu Government. Interestingly, even though the film distanced itself from sexual titillation or erotic undertones in the use of nudity or female bodies, there were allegations that it used documentary format to showcase female nudity. News reports were quick to add that the film was produced in Madras, even though it featured a mix of actors from Bombay and Chennai, and then CBFC chief Vikram Singh alleged that the film was censored at Trivandrum (Kerala) and the Bombay office had asked the censor board in Kerala to provide all the requisite files, thus, placing the responsibility of illicit eruptions on the errant region.⁷⁷ Another article lamented that the film was directed by Hariharan (who used the pseudonym Harihar for this film), a product of the Film and Television Institute of India, and speculated that his association with *Main Aur Tum* could perhaps have come from "a weak moment" or "sheer desperation."⁷⁸

Thus, NRI films and their associated sourcing practices provided the commercial impetus for many aspiring filmmakers to try out similar narrative patterns in the form of low-budget films (Fig. 22). The transnational circulation of these films helped fashion vernacular productions as well. Glamour cinema and sex education films were already in circulation by the time the NRI films entered the exhibition circuit. The scheme boosted the local production economy and was a historical precedent for soft-porn films, specifically in terms figuring out what would succeed in the market. One recurrent statement I heard from many soft-porn filmmakers was that they considered their films to be a continuation of the "English film" wave. Such statements also evoke the sense of legitimacy that soft-porn filmmakers were attempting to cultivate through their adoption of already existing practices that allowed exploitation films to circulate in Indian exhibition circuits.⁷⁹

ALTERNATIVE INFRASTRUCTURES: MALAYALI DIASPORIC MEDIASCAPES AND THE GULF

NRI films and their influence on Malayalam filmmakers demonstrate that transnational flows are also at work beyond the perceived centers of national boundaries. The popular imagination of Indian transnationalism has been marked by the dominant presence of westward-bound NRIs. As Madhavi Mallapragada points out, the NRI category emerged in the 1970s and 1990s to become "central to the migrant sensibilities of the diverse communities that are part of the loosely (and problematically) defined 'Indian diaspora in the United States.'"⁸⁰ The problematic preeminence of the West in discourses of Indian transnationalism breaks down in the case of regions such as Kerala, where the movement is not merely *not* from the center of the nation-state but also toward a non-Western location such as the Middle East. While Kerala is part of a "southern" Indian regional formation, it is also

imbricated in a postcolonial “South Asian” formation. This unsettles the imagination of “regionalism” as something bounded within the Indian states and exposes a “transnational” regionalism based on cultural ties and geographical affinities that point toward a “localization” of the transnational imagination.

This localized transnationalism is evident in Kerala’s affinity with the Arabian Sea and its long history of migration and flows with the Middle East (the Gulf) rather than with the West. The Kerala migration survey conducted by the Center for Development Studies (CDS) states that in 2018, 89.2 percent of the total emigrants from Kerala migrated to the Gulf.⁸¹ The oil boom in the late 1960s and the infrastructural developments that followed attracted a substantial amount of migrant blue-collar labor to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. As early as 1978, there were weekly flights from Trivandrum to Dubai, and illicit trade of contraband between Kerala and Dubai was also reported.⁸² This longer history of exchange points to what Inderpal Grewal calls a network of “transnational connectivities,” which are by nature uneven, incomplete, and always in flux.⁸³ Kerala’s relationship to the Gulf is marked by an uneven connectivity where the lower-income group of migrants who form the substantial outmigrant category from Kerala are distinct from the upward mobility and return on investment envisaged in the NRI. In essence, the Gulf stands in as the location of “the dream” for the Malayali community. Similar to the “American Dream,” this imagination of the Gulf is also fraught with internal contradictions that sometimes challenge and unsettle the picture-postcard imagination of a prosperous elsewhere. But the fact that this dreamscape replaces America (and the West, more broadly) with the Gulf challenges the dominant imagination of transnationalism, which upholds the journey to the West as a symbolic movement toward prosperity.

The emergence of diasporic televisual audiences illustrates how such internationalization is reflected in and through the media. In August 1993, Asianet debuted as the first television-on-air cable transmission. Because they needed imported equipment to set up their cable network and studio, Asianet decided to sell connections to NRIs. Asianet also started selling “Asianet Privilege NRI connections” in 1994, which allowed NRIs to gift an Asianet cable connection to their family based in Kerala, with the transaction being paid in foreign currency. To mobilize a dedicated audience base, the Asianet team also met with diasporic organizations and branches of the UAE Exchange, headed by B. R. Shetty, which had many Malayali employees. By the mid-1990s, Asianet became the first non-British broadcaster in Bahrain for the entire Middle East. The same year, Qatar Cablevision also began to telecast Malayalam content, which was delivered as videocassettes by carriers. Kairali TV, which was formed in 2000, also had a substantial shareholder base of Malayali migrants in the Gulf. When Kairali TV expanded its operations to form Kairali Arabia in 2011, it presented its motivation for the new channel as responding to the need to be “closer to our audience and make programmes [that are] interesting to them.”⁸⁴

These developments on the television front had precedents in earlier media history. By the 1980s, "Gulf money" had become a crucial part of the Malayalam cinema circuit. For instance, Abdul Jabbar, a doctor working in the Gulf, financed theaters in Trivandrum, Ernakulam, and Quilon (Kollam), each named after his three daughters.⁸⁵ V. B. K. Menon, the producer who headed Marunadan Films (*marunadan* means "one who belongs to a different place"), also distributed Malayalam films in the Gulf. He produced the 1980 film *Vilkanundu Swapnangal* (Dreams to sell; dir. M. Asad), which included scenes shot in the Gulf. The film's promotional material foregrounded how the Gulf features in the diasporic community's assertion of its identity. The text of one promotional poster reads:

*A fertile land for dreams—
impossible to be numbered
A desert of dreams, for most,
dead and buried
Don't you include among those keeping
ready to go, wishing to mine gold!
Lo! And Behold!
Here comes N.O.C. Sent to you by Malayalees
Abroad.⁸⁶*

Yet the exhibition of Malayalam cinema in the Gulf goes back farther to the 1960s, when film prints were illegally sent from India through carriers. From the 1980s onward, theaters in the Gulf such as Golden Cinema, Galleria Cinema, Dubai Cinema, and Deira Cinema started to screen Malayalam films. Many of these theaters were concentrated in Bur Dubai on the western side of Dubai Creek, a hub for South Asians. Previously known as Plaza Cinema, Golden Cinema was a 1,500-seat family-run business owned by the Galadari brothers. It opened in 1971 and was a popular destination for watching Malayalam, Hindi, and Tamil films.⁸⁷ The theater even held Thursday night world premieres ahead of Friday night openings in India that included the traditional festivities associated with film premieres in India, including *chendamelam*, a percussion ensemble performed in South India.

Malayalam cinema in the Gulf in the 1980s catered to migrants who craved a sense of connection with the homeland. Theaters such as the El Dorado in Abu Dhabi, owned by Gulshan, who was a distributor of both Hollywood and Indian films, provided this connection. As they traveled to and from their worksites, migrants often formed floating crowds that intermittently populated spaces of transit, and cinema itself began to cater to this transitory aspect. For instance, Kalba theater in Sharjah, also known as Station Cinema, was an open-air cinema close to bus and taxi stations that clearly targeted floating populations of migrant workers. Malayalam films were also screened in theaters such as Rusayl Oman (Oman), Al-Hamra Cinema (Sharjah), Granada Cinema, and the Bahrain City Center, which had talkies that were numbered from one to twenty. A quick survey of Gulf-based newspapers from the 1980s reveals that films from Kerala were



FIGURE 23. An example of UAE newspaper advertisements for films from India at the *Cinemas in the U.A.E.* exhibition, curated by Ammar Al Attar at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery in 2018. Image courtesy Ammar Al Attar.

advertised in Malayalam, which indicates that the theaters expected Malayali audiences (Fig. 23).⁸⁸ Distributors from Kerala sent promotional posters, which were stamped with the logo of the theaters where they were screened.

Most of my respondents were nostalgic as they reminisced about what such spaces meant to them. “It was not just the space for socializing with our friends. The space resonated with our experience of watching the films in India,” said Mahesh, who was at the last show at the Golden Cinema before it was shut down.⁸⁹ Another respondent, Unnikrishnan, recalled that the operator of the Al Hamra theater in Sharjah was from Calicut: “He was our contact person to check out when Malayalam films would be screened. In front of the theater, there would be posters in Malayalam of the latest films or the expected films. For us, theater spaces were places to meet other Malayalis.”⁹⁰ Yet another respondent, Sajju, who now runs his own business in the Gold Souk said: “The only connection we had with our dear and near ones were through letters. The films that we saw in VCDs and in theaters were our only source of connecting to the family.”⁹¹ For emigrants like these, cinema—both as film object and theatrical space—offered a connection to home. Thus, cinematic experience, like food and clothing, offers a sensuous, affective link

to the idea of home. In the process, cinema is elevated to a heightened form of sociality, marked by an active awareness of cinema as a sign of home. Malayalam cinema provided both localized entertainment as well as emotional comfort to scores of Malayali workers who stayed and worked in the Gulf, away from Kerala for years on end. Needless to say, “cinema” here includes popular mainstream films as well as B-grade features and soft-porn as popular commodities that traveled through their own unique channels, both official and underground.

SOFT-PORN AS DIASPORIC SOCIALITY

In the early 2000s, many laborer camps in Dubai screened Malayalam soft-porn films to workers as part of their Friday night entertainment. This had precedents in earlier screenings in the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, in the 1970s, *Kaamsastra* (dir. Prem Kapoor, 1975), which was publicized as a “sex-education family romance,” was screened at the Plaza Cinema. *Kaamsastra* was a pedagogic film that advocated an open attitude toward sexuality. The film was not well-received upon its release in India. For instance, a response in *The Times of India*’s reader’s forum accused it of advising married women to emulate prostitutes to satisfy the lust of their perverted husbands, in addition to including depictions of rape and masturbation, leaving the reviewer to wonder, “What else can be shown in blue films which are banned by the government?”⁹² In contrast to reviewers like this who found it “obscene,” my respondents in the Gulf were liberal and open to the film’s message. Reminiscing about film-watching during his early years of unemployment in the Gulf, Saju recounted that watching *Kaamsastra*’s depiction of “tabooed relations and fantasy scenes provided a semblance of normalcy” in an otherwise precarious situation.⁹³ Films that were received in India as trash or as peddling in sensational scenes under the guise of sex education accrued a different value in a diasporic space. Although *Kaamsastra* is not a Malayalam soft-porn film, it set the stage for the kind of all-male diasporic sociality that would later allow such films to thrive.

Sony Betamax and the home video format established a transnational market for porn films that operated largely through rental parlors. *Adult Video News*, published by employees of Movies Unlimited, a Philadelphia-based distributor, was available in video parlors in Dubai and Kerala in the 1980s. The reduced magnification, distortions, “noise,” and progressive deterioration of image quality in videos were not seen as a problem but as encapsulating the very experience of watching porn.⁹⁴ In addition to the availability of sex films on video in the Gulf, agents traded in soft-porn films and expanded their markets beyond India by using an ingenious mode of distribution to reach out to the diasporic Malayali male audience based in the Middle East. The major obstacle in the export of these films was the customs check at airports, which entailed a stringent monitoring system for counterfeit media. In the DVD era that coincided with the rise of soft-porn,

some agents bypassed customs checks by using women who were traveling to join their families as carriers and by using master DVDs that stored the illicit films under home video content.⁹⁵ The women who brought pornographic material to the Gulf were mostly kept in the dark about the content hidden on the DVDs and even about the fact that they were being used to transport illegal media content so that the details were not exposed to anyone outside the close-knit network.

Different distribution systems coexisted with the smuggling of DVDs. Blue films also reached the migrant community through dish-enabled television subscription services, which had sex-specific channels. But the prohibitive prices of these channels deterred many from subscribing to them, even though many respondents mentioned that there were hotels that had pay-per-view options. Sometimes material also made its way accidentally, as when cleaning staff on ships picked up CDs discarded by the sailors. In the late 1990s, at the peak of the soft-porn boom, such films became available on discs sold in areas such as Naif in Deira. These included the streets next to the West Hotel or the now closed Jesco Supermarket, which sold CDs for five dirhams (approx. \$1.36).⁹⁶ As a hub where male migrants sought out female company, Naif was seen as a space of guilty pleasures and clandestine deals, and although the popularity of CDs and DVDs has dwindled with the ubiquity of online streaming, the impact of such soft-porn DVDs can still be seen there in other forms of visual culture. During my field visits, visiting cards for massage parlors left on car windows or strewn on the roadside were a daily sight. Today, these massage parlors still carry traces of soft-porn cinema in more ways than one (Fig. 24).

Although the UAE government has banned suggestive advertisements for massage parlors, and reports about prospective customers being duped into visiting these places and subsequently robbed and assaulted are rife, my call to a parlor in Naif yielded unexpected results. Perched amid coffee parlors run by African migrants, the place was more like a small, one-unit room that arranged services depending on the client's preferences and the sex worker's willingness to meet them. Upon calling, I was asked if I wanted a lesbian escort for my stay in Dubai. When it became clear that what I needed was not a sexual service but to talk about sexual services, my Ethiopian contact was more than happy to oblige. She even introduced me to a few Indian escorts who spoke to me in detail about the sexual fantasies of Indian men in Dubai and their experiences in encountering soft-porn outside the alleys close to their parlor.

Nada, who is in her mid-forties, came to Dubai from Kerala in the early 2000s. She recounted to me that when she started off as a sex worker in 2004, there were days when she was approached by clients not for sex but out of the sheer need for company in an alien land. As in the adult motel rooms that brought adult video into the confines of private space, sexual intimacy was bound up with the experience of sharing space with a stranger. She stated: "The tropes of sexual fantasies they have were mostly spin-offs from the soft-porn films—like using seductive



FIGURE 24. Sample of visiting cards distributed in the Deira and Bur Dubai areas. A card at bottom right features the image of Sunny Leone (see chapter 3). Author's personal collection.

charms to vocalize the masculinity of the man or to enact the *bhabhi* (sister-in-law) fantasy. Some even wanted us to read out Malayalam erotic fiction to help them masturbate.”⁹⁷ My conversations at the laborer camps in Sonapur in the outskirts of Dubai also focused on the unmet sexual needs of the largely South Asian migrant population and the circulation of Bangladeshi and Indian porn films that helped them to come to terms with their repressed sexual needs. Here, ethnic identification and a mutual awareness of their citizenly alterity bring migrants and sex workers together in an unlikely corporeal solidarity, in which the idea of “the pornographic” is distilled into sexual practices and informal spaces that supplement belonging. In this light, media artifacts and the everyday practices and consciousnesses they enable can be understood as vernacular formations that mediate a transnational economy routed through informality.

This informality stands in contrast to—and outside of—the bilateral connections and flows that follow official state agendas, and the NRI imagination of Indian transnationalism that is mainly marked by a westward journey into perceived neoliberal prosperity. Soft-porn’s informal networks of production within Indian territories are paralleled by equally informal and underground channels of

circulation and absorption outside of the country. This traffic in contraband media objects and desires enables Kerala's expatriate population in the Gulf to reconstruct a sense of a home when they are far away from it. If we understand these consumption practices as constituting a media public, then soft-porn's media public can be also said to constitute a "transnational public."

CONCLUSION

Both Gulf migrants and the target NRI community envisioned in the NRI scheme form the larger nonresident Indian community, but they are separated by a significant power differential. Although the NRI scheme was suggested and facilitated through a formalized, institutionalized realm, soft-porn circulated in the Gulf through pirate circuits that developed informally and provided coping mechanisms for migrant communities to survive in precarious labor conditions. In this chapter, I have addressed how the idea of the alternative transnational can help elucidate regional formations and the practices by which different stakeholders who are situated outside the boundaries of the nation-state forge connections with one another.

In vernacularizing cinema's forms and possibilities, and in engendering mutations in the global flows of media and culture, Malayalam soft-porn offers alternative ways of imagining the global. This allows for a reconsideration of the region and the various ways in which it has been used by the diasporic communities to consolidate identities and navigate structures of belonging. This is but one stage in the story; the emergence of digital and internet-enabled media has opened up even more avenues for mediating belonging. Even with its trappings of geolocation and national regulations, the global spatiality of the internet has allowed for different flows and migrations of media objects. Soft-porn, a form that is "dead" in the industrial sense of the term, enjoys an afterlife in the many fragments of audiovisual and textual artifacts floating on the internet.