(Dis)Appearances

Digital Remediations of Soft-Porn in the Contemporary

Although soft-porn fizzled out as a production category by the mid-2000s, its symbolic value as a remnant of the celluloid era persists in the single-screen theater circuit in both provincial and metropolitan cities. This lingering presence mobilizes an affective economy through an array of nostalgic remembrances in filmic representation, art, and digital forms. These manifestations, which I call "(dis)appearances," function as an ensemble of references that present a composite, but hazy re-presentation of soft-porn. Such spectral evocations work through assemblages of memorial work that diffuse soft-porn's affective resonances through fragmented sensorial and temporal registers. In this chapter, I explore the continued re-emergences of soft-porn in cultural objects and public discourse.

The pit stops in this journey include B-circuit film exhibition in Kolkata and Mumbai, soft-porn fragments in pornographic websites, and remediations of soft-porn in online micro-celebrity culture. Tracing both the shift to the digital and the displacement of soft-porn's perceived popularity to other cultural forms, I explain how soft-porn cinema reappears in different guises in contemporary screening practices. Through a study of films and other contemporary digital media, I locate a wide range of artifacts that mobilize the cultural memory of soft-porn as a temporal and generic marker. In so doing, I not only identify a soft-porn stylistic effect in contemporary media, but also a "soft-porn affect" that mobilizes affective, memorial, and sensual registers. Contemporary happenings and objects are sometimes labeled "soft-porn" because they activate a range of affective registers shared with the raw, textural, and somatic qualities of soft-porn cinema.

THE DISPERSED AFTER-PRESENCE OF SOFT-PORN
IN CONTEMPORARY B-CIRCUIT EXHIBITION

Soft-porn film exhibition in India is now mostly limited to B-circuit theaters, which rely on reruns of older films because they cannot afford to purchase new releases and on geographical proximity to transit areas to attract audiences to such theaters. In the era of multiplex theaters and malls that cater to upscale audiences, soft-porn exhibition is often limited to single-screen theaters. In theaters outside Kerala, soft-porn appears as part of discounted package deals of South Indian films dubbed in Hindi. These theaters function as fringe cinematic territories that allow transgressive desires to be channeled through categories that are labeled as coming from elsewhere.

This is evident in the exhibition of these films in single-screen theaters in metropolitan cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata, where they are at once localized as "Madrasi" films and conflated with erotic English films imported from the US and Europe. For example, a Malayalam soft-porn film like *Virgin Lady* could be part of the same billing as an English-language erotic film like *Body* (Fig. 25). Both Mumbai and Kolkata are thriving metropolitan cities that have seen the rise of urban shopping malls, designer boutiques, and multiplexes under the sway of a neoliberal economy. However, older single-screen theaters often exist alongside the shiny objects of new India, evoking a heterotopic world distinct from the pleasures of neoliberal consumption. Many theaters located adjacent to Falkland Road, an erstwhile entertainment district in Mumbai during the British regime, house *dargahs* (shrines) in their premises. As Madhushree Dutta writes, "It is quite a common sight to find an eager audience paying obeisance at the darghas moments before rushing to catch an x-rated film."[1] Located in marketplaces, spaces of bus and train transit, and red-light districts, theaters such as Silver Talkies and New Roshan in Mumbai and Bhawani Theatre and Pradip Cinema in Kolkata routinely show Malayalam soft-porn and erotic cinema. Catering to a mostly working-class audience, these last remnants of the era of single-screen theaters are battling for survival amid depleting profits and reduced viewership.

Located at Tollygunge, Kolkata's Bhawani Theatre does not have a boundary wall and spreads to the main road, which also houses a few roadside eateries. There are four shows—12:15 p.m., 3 p.m., 6 p.m., and 8:45 p.m.—and each seats no more than fifteen or twenty patrons. Spandan, a fellow academic and my Kolkata guide, was my translator for the ticket collectors and managers. When we arrived at Bhawani during my fieldwork in 2018, the theater was screening *Pati Ya Premi* (Husband or lover; dir. V. R. K. Prasad, 1999). My outsider status stood out too much in Kolkata, and the ticket collector at Bhawani initially refused to let me in for the noon show, directing me to come for the 3 p.m. show, as the ones at noon were "not meant for women." I was duly warned by ticket collectors and managers that I could be mistaken for a sex worker, and the theater personnel were worried

FIGURE 25. List of films pasted outside Pradip Cinema, Kolkata.
Photo by author.

about my "safety." After some cajoling, the manager finally gave in, buying
Spandan's description of my "unique research interests," but with the clear instruc-
tion that I would be called and allowed to enter fifteen minutes after the film
started. As I made my way into the cinema hall amid middle-aged men who were
curious about my intentions, Spandan waved at me from one dark side of the
hall. He had been asked to sit close to the exit, as the manager wanted us to leave
the cinema immediately after the show was over. Luckily for us, noon screenings
were mostly soft-porn from South India. The tickets for the balcony seats were
forty rupees (approx. $0.62) and rear stall seats were thirty-five rupees (approx.
$0.54)—substantially lower prices than the 180–250 rupee price (approx. $2.82–
$3.92) range for tickets charged in Kolkata multiplexes. By the time we entered,
the previous screening was over, and the next film, *Naya Gupt Gyan* (New secret
knowledge; dir. D. V. S. Reddy, 1999), a soft-porn rip-off of the highly successful

FIGURE 26. The poster of *Naya Gupt Gyan* at the entrance of Bhawani Theatre in Kolkata. Photo by author.

sex education film *Gupt Gyan* (dir. B. K. Adarsh, 1974), was playing.[2] *Naya Gupt Gyan* turned out to be a remix of footage assembled from Malayalam films starring Silk Smitha that included excerpts of cut-pieces sourced from various time periods, alongside other material, some of which resembled homemade amateur porn. Despite the jerky movements and poor quality that marked the cut-pieces, they were seamlessly edited, and peppy background music provided a connective tissue that brought them together.

The most notable of the exhibition strategies used in Bhawani was the outright redaction of contentious material that could invite disapprobation from the middle-class neighborhood. The poster featured the actress Reshma's upper body had been redacted, in the process removing the explicit sexual parts—in this case, her breasts, which had been colored over with a sharpie (Fig. 26). Such editing leaves a trace of the process on the object: the deleted or blackened portion is surrounded by clear text or images, inviting the viewer to imaginatively hypothesize about the redacted content.[3] In contexts where redaction becomes expected, filmmakers (and, in this instance, exhibitors) voluntarily eliminate sections without doing violence to the meaning of the image by drawing attention to its potential (but suppressed) sexual energy. According to S. V. Srinivas, posters advertising sex

films "turn the act of censorship into a promise," as blackening exposed parts of the body featured in the posters is routinely performed by theatre owners.[4] This conceptualization was clear in the manager's explanation of why the poster had been redacted: "The posters supplied by the distributors were too explicit and we were worried about the negative publicity since the theater is close to residential quarters. So, we toned it down. But it works, doesn't it? See the gaze of the passers-by and how they are stealing a quick glimpse at the actress."[5]

Clearly, redaction aligned with the respectability politics of urban space, where such theaters coexist with middle-class neighborhoods or otherwise public areas. The same respectability politics also impacted my own reception as a female researcher in these spaces, which were, ironically, peddling sexually titillating images of women. During most of my fieldwork, my presence in single-screen theaters screening soft-porn films was met with a mix of curiosity, skepticism, and anxiety. My experience in Kolkata was marked by a sense of déjà vu, because my previous fieldwork in Bombay had led to similar situations. These theaters are marked either as all-male spaces or as spaces where only certain kinds of women could be made visible. When I did my first survey of single-screen theaters in Bombay, I was allowed access to the interior of Silver Talkies with my partner only after convincing the manager that I was married and that if anything happened inside the theater, we would take responsibility for it. Elsewhere, though, policemen on patrol raised concerns about my presence in the sex workers' quarters at Kamathipura. In 2017, this involved being stopped at a police aid post for many hours, until my friend Dipti called the station to furnish surety for me. Interestingly, the inspector had detained me at the station for my own safety.

The red-light district of Kamathipura in Bombay has a unique relationship with theaters that screen soft-porn films. Like Kolkata's Bhawani Theatre and Pradip Cinema, Bombay's Silver Cinema (Fig. 27) has been a regular haunt of migrant laborers and sex workers due to its low ticket prices and proximity to the quarters of construction workers. The shows scheduled for August 27, 2014, were publicized as a "special show" because it was Eid al-Fitr, the day that marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

A poster of a film titled *Miss Dirty* was perched on a wooden board on the sidewalk opposite the quarters where sex workers stayed. Next to the handwritten text "Eid Mubharak" (Eid wishes), the Hindi text on the poster read, "Love doesn't recognize age, caste, class, or social status" (author's translation). Having noted the poster's tag "Top Sexy Drama" and the film's "Adult" certification unambiguously exhibited, I was surprised to see the image of Silk Smitha alongside the title *Miss Dirty* and curious to know if the film had any relationship to Milan Luthria's *The Dirty Picture*. Expecting a good turnout owing to the holiday, the theater management had decided to screen a re-release of a 1990 film starring Silk Smitha, *Reshma Ki Jawani* (Malayalam title: *Layanam*, dir. Thulasidas), but the image used

FIGURE 27. Entrance and box office of Silver Talkies, Mumbai. Photo by author.

was from a different film titled *Ratilayam* (dir. P. Chandra Kumar; Fig. 28), a 1983 film which was re-released in Hindi as *Gumrah Jawani* in 1988. It turned out that Silver Talkies had retitled the promotional poster outside to reference *The Dirty Picture*, hoping to draw in a bigger crowd (Fig. 29), inadvertently creating a Silk Smitha assemblage curated from multiple, almost replaceable images from various films. The manager had ingeniously incorporated references to *The Dirty Picture* to give the Silk Smitha vehicle a new lease on life. He told me, "We don't have enough money to convert the theater to digital format, but we can evoke the same sensations that *The Dirty Picture* evoked in the audience. Why waste time on the fake?"[6]

   This idea of "the fake" is striking and returns us to questions of cinema's virtuality, as Silk Smitha no longer exists as a real living body but only as a cinematic
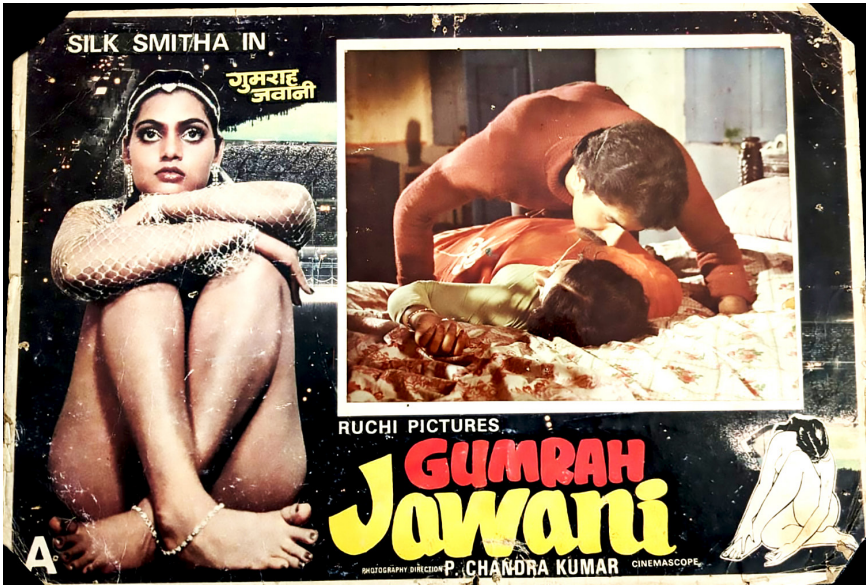
FIGURE 28. Original lobbycard for *Ratilayam*, retitled here as *Gumrah Jawani*. Author's personal collection.

image. As an embodiment of screen pleasures, the *madakarani* of soft-porn cinema is always already virtual—that is, she exists in a cinematic or fantasy space separate from the physical space of the viewer. Thus, even when the real bodies of actresses such as Silk Smitha are gone, they continue to appear in cinematic spaces—film magazines, posters, and theaters such as Silver Talkies—as real, "not fake" bodies. This resurgence is made possible through the technological mediation of the cinematic apparatus, which includes the paraphernal apparatuses of print and digital spaces. In September 2023, Silk Smitha reemerged in a brief snippet in the trailer of the Tamil film *Mark Antony* (dir. Adhik Ravichandran)—not in the flesh, but as a computer-generated body. The move was received harshly, with criticisms ranging from the inappropriate sexualization of women to the use of digital technology and artificial intelligence to objectify the dead.[7] However, both the computer-generated imagery (CGI) and the critical responses to it point toward the continued negotiations between agency, visibility, and control of cinematic bodies. Although not the same as Smitha's reappearance in the Silver Talkies poster, the CGI incident is part of the same cinematic continuum and lends credence to Giuliana Bruno's assertion that cinema resembles cemeteries in that it is "home to residual body images" and "inhabit[s] multiple points in time and collapse[s] multiple places into a single place."[8] By mapping soft-porn's return in such diverse spaces, we can begin to trace the shadowy routes through which its

FIGURE 29. Poster of *Reshma Ki Jawani* at Silver Talkies. Photo by author.

imagination circulates as affect. I turn now to look at additional dispersed sites where these residual images are revived, including contemporary cinematic representation and social media.

SOFT-PORN'S RESURGENCE
IN MAINSTREAM MALAYALAM CINEMA

In the recent past, several mainstream films have reminisced on soft-porn as a marker of the celluloid era. Films such as *Classmates* (dir. Lal Jose, 2006), *Kanyaka Talkies* (dir. K. R. Manoj, 2013), *Ore Mukham* (Same face; dir. Sajith Jagadnathan, 2016), *Pavada* (Skirt; dir. G. Marthandan, 2016), *Parava* (Birds; dir. Soubin Shahir, 2017), *Rosapoo* (Rose; dir. Vinu Joseph, 2018), and *Super Deluxe* (dir. Thiagarajan Kumararaja, Tamil, 2019) evoke a range of themes such as male bonding, teenage

fascination with soft-porn actresses, and soft-porn production practices, in the process activating the interests of soft-porn's original audience base. In this section, I explore four of these films—*Rosapoo, Kanyaka Talkies, Super Deluxe*, and *Pavada*—to show the different tonalities of memory that surface in these films' explorations of soft-porn cinema.

Rosapoo centers on the misadventures of two male protagonists, Shanu (Biju Menon) and Ambrose (Neeraj Madhav), who, after a series of entrepreneurial failures, embark on a career in adult film production and try to make a soft-porn movie titled *Rosapoo*. The film narrativizes the boom in soft-porn as an aftereffect of the financial crisis of the 1990s. Despite the money and labor that go into the film's production, Shanu and Ambrose ultimately end up in debt because the shrewd production executive pockets the profits accrued from the distribution rights. Although a fictional tale, *Rosapoo* draws from and demystifies popular narratives of soft-porn film production (Fig. 30). The film's opening credits are accompanied by a peppy song and intermittent gasps of orgasmic moaning, a popular aural presence in soft-porn films of the 1990s. These references to soft-porn work both at the narrative and affective levels. The introductory scene of the actress Laila, otherwise referred to as "Laila *thatta*" (*thatta* is a term for a middle-aged woman used by the Muslim community), exemplifies the film's involvement of different modalities, including direct references to the real people behind the making and casting of these films. In positioning Laila as the face of soft-porn cinema, the film presents her as an analog for Shakeela. For instance, Laila's refusal to work with the production executive who has "made six films for the price of one" (author's translation) is a reference to the duplication of Shakeela's shots in multiple films, which, as Shakeela told me in one of our interviews, was an "unscrupulous way of discounting labor" that led to the demise of soft-porn.[9] The sequence introducing Laila also invokes the memory of "English soft-porn" films made by the director U. C. Roshan, who worked in the first decade of the 2000s. Roshan penned his films' dialogue in English as a strategy to bypass rigid censorship codes. In response to Ambrose's query about why soft-porn films were made in half-baked English and not in any other Indian language, the production executive explains: "If it is in Malayalam, the censor board will cut everything off. The filmmakers can have an easy go if the films are in English."

Faced with the possibility of being ostracized from his family and community because of his association with soft-porn films, Ambrose is advised to change his name to A. M. Rose—a reference to soft-porn cinema's economy of fictitious names and identities. This specific naming strategy connects back to specific case of A. T. Joy, a soft-porn director in the first decade of the 2000s who had to change his name to Joy Anthony in 2014 to recast his reputation in the industry as a serious filmmaker. *Rosapoo* also pays homage to soft-porn film, making the otherwise eclipsed memory of these films visible. For instance, Shanu and Ambrose appear in a fantasy sequence as Adam and Eve, invoking P. Chandrakumar's *Aadyapaapam*

FIGURE 30. Casting call of *Rosapoo*. The mention of "Good Looking FAT LADY" is a direct reference to the buxom heroines of soft-porn films. Posted on Twitter, July 6, 2017, by Thameens Films (@Thameensfilms), with the caption "#Rosapoo casting call at #Chennai. July 12th @shibuthameens #BijuMenon #SunnyWayne #VinuJoseph."

(1988). Titles of other prominent films are changed, with enough similarities retained to allow identification; for instance, *Kinnarathumbikal* is changed to *Kiloyolathumbikal*, in homage to its status as the harbinger of the soft-porn wave.

In contrast to the stereotype of soft-porn actresses as willing participants in casting-couch arrangements, *Rosapoo* pictures the heroine Reshmi as having to constantly fight the crew's attention and demands for sexual service. *Rosapoo* climaxes with a sequence that shows news reports of Reshmi's arrest following the murder of a director and his friend—an act of self-defense after the director assaults her. An unnamed man emerges from the crowd to protect her; fuming with anger, he urges the crowd not to mistake the actress's screen image with her real self. However, as the film ends, it is revealed to the audience that this sequence is actually the climax of a new film that Ambrose has directed—Reshmi's name being retained in the film within the film. This slippage between the "real" Reshmi of *Rosapoo*'s narrative and the "fictional" Reshmi of the film-within-the-film collapses actress and character. This device evokes very real events in Kerala, especially given that the name Reshmi echoes the name of the real soft-porn starlet Reshma, whose arrest, interrogation, and consequent case of online slut-shaming I examined in chapter 3. If the real Reshma's humiliation at the hands of the police and the crowd that gathered to jeer her was typical of mob mentality, the film's insertion of the fictional Reshmi's life was recuperative, especially given the timing of *Rosapoo*'s release in 2017, a period marked by urgent questions about the gendered nature of the Malayalam film industry.[10] After this scene outside the courthouse, the film's final sequence depicts a film crew celebrating the successful release of their new film. Shanu and Ambrose receive a video clip by text that shows footage of Ambrose directing Reshmi during a foreplay scene, demonstrating what to do. As the two flabbergasted filmmakers stare at each other, the frame freezes and music begins to play. Refusing narrative resolution, this ending leaves the audience wondering whether this footage will now circulate as a scandalous "porn" video, of the variety that is often tagged "Indian" or "MMS" porn on pornographic websites.[11] Rather than being expressed in language, this open-ended conclusion assumes that the audience's public memory is constituted by the raw textural details of media material such as leaked videos, exposés, MMS porn, and fragments extracted from full films that form the topology of India's erotic mediascape.

K. R. Manoj's 2013 film *Kanyaka Talkies* (Virgin talkies) provides an even earlier instance of incorporating soft-porn cinema's memory. Based on P. V. Shajikumar's short story "18+" (originally published in *Madhyamam* in 2011 and then in book form in 2013), *Kanyaka Talkies* looks back at soft-porn exhibition, the cultures of its circulation, and the different modes of interaction it provoked in the marginal space of B- and C-circuit theaters. "18+" drew on the vicissitudes of Kanyaka Talkies, a real theater based in the district of Kasaragod that screened soft-porn films in the 1990s. The film depicts theater culture in the rural hinterlands as strikingly different from the film-viewing experience offered at A-circuit cinema halls. In the

film's narrative, Yakoob, newly returned from the Gulf, decides to set up Kanyaka Talkies in the remote area of Kuyyali in the 1980s. This story references the nouveau riche Gulf emigrants who invested their surplus money in soft-porn films and built a quasi-fictitious mode of film production by hiding their identities as financial backers. Yakoob's initial foray into the film business is portrayed as something innocent, and it is only when the initial prospects of film exhibition give way to heavy financial setbacks that he is forced to turn to soft-porn to make up his losses. Thus, the Kanyaka Talkies theater, which is initially portrayed as screening "family films," becomes a space exclusively for men that draws viewers from all ages. Whereas the theater affords men a sense of male sociality, women look down on it as a sign of moral depravity. After a series of family tragedies resulting from this depravity, Yakoob shuts down the theater and hands it over to the diocese.

A transmedia mode of storytelling undergirds the production of *Kanyaka Talkies* and brings together varied artifacts associated with the memory of soft-porn films. The most immediate is Shaji Kumar's "18+," the short story that inspired the film.[12] In his story, Kumar also reflects on the wider disappearance of theaters that closed or were converted into other spaces. In fact, some of these soft-porn theaters were converted into churches; one in the district of Wayanad serves as a real-life reference for Kanyaka Talkies. Despite this conversion, memories of the theater's soft-porn days refuse to die, and their spectral presence comes to haunt the space. The priest, Father Michael, who is tasked with motivating the believers to strengthen their faith, encounters strange and inexplicable happenings: mass is disrupted by an unseen third party, and moans of lovemaking evoke repressed desires and stir doubts about his capacity to withstand sinful thoughts. Elements of scattered memories associated with soft-porn films resonate in a wide ensemble of stock sounds that suggest seduction and orgasm. This soundtrack creates a parallel world that collapses time as Father Michael hears the actresses whisper from their past into his present. An acknowledgment in the closing credit sequence proclaims that sounds were sampled and layered from preexisting tracks "to create greater awareness about the marginal areas in the history of Indian cinema."

This sonic encounter reanimates the exhibition practices of soft-porn films by using the cut-piece's logic of interruption. The priest's aural hallucinations begin at unexpected moments and venues, just as the cut-piece or *thundu* arrives in the cinematic experience at unanticipated moments. *Kanyaka Talkies*'s reliance on the soundtrack to create the erotic landscape aligns with what Michel Chion calls "audio-vision," a quality that temporalizes the image by creating a "feeling of imminence and expectation."[13] Affirming that sound is more than an additive element, *Kanyaka Talkies* strategically restructures the soundscape to link "the pastness of the recorded event with the presentness of the viewing."[14]

Kanyaka Talkies also mines the liminal space that houses the discarded stuff of the theater—the projection room is retained as a warehouse when the building is renovated. This warehouse reflects what Anthony Vidler calls the "architectural

FIGURE 31. The Silk Smitha image from Lal's installation used in *Kanyaka Talkies*. Image courtesy Priyaranjan Lal.

uncanny"—spaces that blur "the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming."[15] Except for flashback scenes that show its former use as a projection room, the interior of the warehouse is shown only at the end of the film, although shots of its locked doors recur in scenes with the priest. Crucially, Father Michael believes he can achieve closure from his hallucinatory sensations by accessing the abandoned projection room. Like a shaman facilitating contact with the netherworld in an exorcism ritual, Yakoob facilitates this encounter with the past: the doors open after he arrives, and with them the possibility of redemption appears. When they enter, Father Michael and Yakoob find a monumental image of Shakeela projected on the wall. Beams of light are shown projecting out of the actress's visage, such that she appears to be returning the audience's unilateral gaze, like a demigoddess answering her worshipers' prayers.[16] Another shot shows Father Michael's face framed by strips of celluloid, as if to suggest that soft-porn cinema itself has been haunting him all along. A multimedia projection of animated images follows, with Shakeela and the faces of other sex sirens like Silk Smitha, Reshma, Maria, and others alternately appearing on a figure riding a horse—the faces change as the horse gallops along. Evoking Eadweard Muybridge's photography, the galloping horse stands in for the history of cinema while the changing faces allude to soft-porn's forgotten or abandoned female stars (Fig. 31).[17]
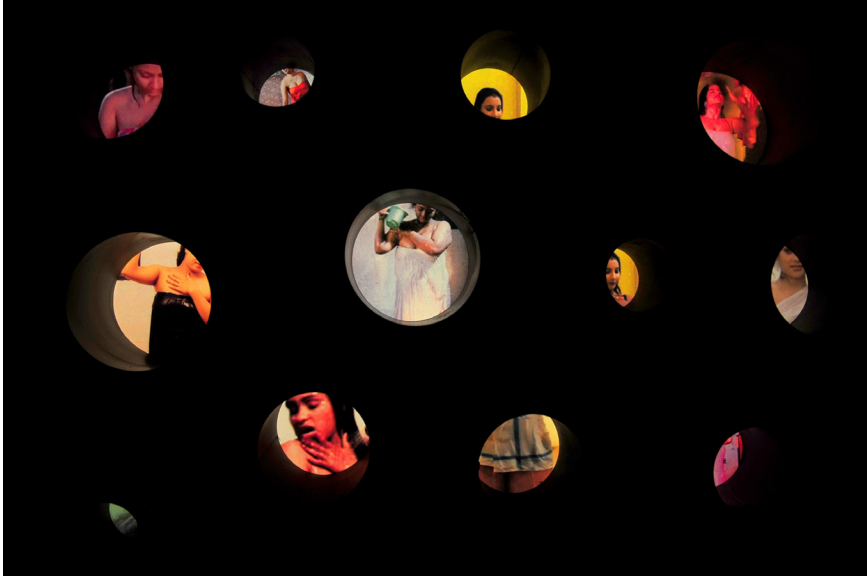
FIGURE 32. The bathing scenes installation used in *Kanyaka Talkies*. Image courtesy Priyaranjan Lal.

Commissioned for the film, this multimedia projection was developed by the graphic designer Priyaranjan Lal as part of a larger project titled *Kuliyum Mattu Scenukalam* (Shower and other scenes) that was part of the 100-Day Artist Cinema section, curated by the film critic C. S. Venkiteswaran and exhibited at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2015. According to Lal, "The installations were conceptualized as a timely intervention to counter the neat narratives which structure the history of Malayalam cinema."[18] Another installation in the project showcases a hundred bath scenes from various soft-porn films that are viewed through peepholes, as if to emphasize the voyeuristic fantasy associated with these films (Fig. 32). The number 100 featured prominently because it was the Indian film centenary, and Lal wanted the installation to serve as a reminder of soft-porn's relegation to the dustbin of cinema history. The exhibition used a large cube with peepholes replicating the form of traveling bioscopes, which were popular in India during the celluloid era.[19] Within the film itself, this sequence forms part of the dreamlike space of the theater where the memories of soft-porn cinema are encountered by the characters.

Along with the scene with the galloping horse, this metapicture—to use W. J. T. Mitchell's term for pictures-within-pictures—parses soft-porn's relationship with star-texts.[20] The actresses associated with these films were hyper-visible (as opposed to the anonymous production and distribution staff), but most had very short shelf lives. By fusing this precarious star image with a peephole effect,

Lal's installation invites the audience to reflect on a film culture that has vanished along with the B-circuit theaters that supported it. Within the film, the image is self-referential. A shot of the central peephole reveals a bathing scene from a soft-porn shoot that appears earlier in the film; the static images in the surrounding peepholes are from other older soft-porn films. As an installation piece, the image is already a separate visual artifact that is nested within the film sequence, and the installation in turns nests other film sequences within itself, forming what Mitchell describes as a special category of metapictures marked by "an inside-outside structure that is continuous, without breaks or demarcations or duplications."[21] Another installation featured the faces of *madakarani* from Malayalam cinema on cylindrical posts that were lit from inside. The multitude of faces peppering the installations—many of starlets like Jyothi Lakshmi and Sadhana who had short stints in the soft-porn industry—suggests a long history of sexualized fantasies related to women actresses, of which Shakeela is only a part. Although the installation was publicized as being commissioned as part of *Kanyaka Talkies*, only parts of it were used in the film. In this sense, Lal's work functions as a complementary artistic conversation with the film—a facet of its ficto-critical and transmedial storytelling, with some passages of *Kuliyum Mattu Scenukalam* punctuating the narrative of *Kanyaka Talkies*. These installations and multimedia images depart from the original short story, in which images of Shakeela and other specific actresses are not so central to the narrative. In "18+," the priest only hears the voices of actresses and the soundtrack of soft-porn films, and the story is not invested in the inner workings of the film industry as such. Contrastingly, the installation's visually disruptive effect works to the narrative's advantage, as it highlights the absurd, dreamlike condition of the theater space. Both within and outside the film, the installation forces viewers to consider the conditions of power and social norms that make up film spectatorship. By functioning as a "double vision . . . a double voice and a double relation between language and visual experience," it forces viewers to see, acknowledge, and remember.[22]

Although *Kanyaka Talkies* sutures its account of the fate of soft-porn theaters through references to many "real" soft-porn theater spaces, including the theater in Wayanad that was later converted to a church, the projection room and equipment of S. P. Theatre in Trivandrum was used in the film to specifically stand in for the soft-porn theater. As in the fictional Kanyaka Talkies, the crisis of the 1990s forced Gladys, the owner, to start screening soft-porn. By June 2014, when I visited, it had been converted first into a venue for Pentecostal prayer services and then into a wedding hall. The real space of S. P. Theatre thus uncannily mirrors the fate of the film's fictional theater, as both became spaces of religious and social congregation.

Gladys had no idea that *Kanyaka Talkies*'s plot closely echoed the history of many theaters of the time, including his own. Shakeela's photograph in the projection room of S. P. Theatre was prominently used as publicity material for *Kanyaka*

FIGURE 33. Shakeela's image in the projection room in S. P. Theatre. Photo by author.

Talkies. Gladys was more than happy to share the photo album that documented the theater's varied phases. One photograph included the same Shakeela image. Referring to this photo as from his "Shakeela phase," Gladys showed it to me as evidence that her image had been part of the theater's topography for a long time (Fig. 33). Thus, the physical space of S. P. Theatre takes the form of a palimpsest, with multiple layers of uses, motivations, and experiences etched into its skin.

Super Deluxe, a 2019 Tamil-language film directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, uses a similar set of strategies to represent soft-porn. The film paints a poignant portrait of a soft-porn actress as she embraces her identity as an actress and refuses to be cowed by the humiliation or exploitation associated soft-porn work. The film explores a group of teenage boys' aborted attempt to watch a porn film and the aftereffects of the revelation that the actress in the film, Leela, is the mother of one of the boys, Sura. Upon seeing his mother on-screen, Sura gets into an aggressive confrontation with the other boys in which he accidentally stabs himself. His main worry is that everyone seems to have known about his mother's involvement in soft-porn and may already have seen intimate images of her. The concluding sequence, in which Leela opens up to Sura about her stint in soft-porn films, is a rare representation of a soft-porn actress speaking about her autonomy and the

need to assert her agential possibilities to explore her desires. When Sura asks if she was duped into acting in these films, Leela says:

> I knew what these films were. I wanted to act . . . and I acted. I acted both in *Amman* films (religious films) as well as porn films. It all depends on how the audience want to see what is in front of them. . . . There are lakhs of people who watch porn, but only four people who act in it. Why do we shun the actors and forgive the viewers?

Leela's assertion of her agency unsettles the sense of victimhood forced upon her. In a joking repartee, Sura's friend tells him that porn stars such as Shakeela and Sunny Leone have normalized their involvement in the industry so much that being a soft-porn actress no longer entails immediate ostracism.

Despite such narratives, some films continue to demonize the soft-porn industry. *Super Deluxe*'s empowering narrative stands in stark contrast to the 2016 film *Pavada*, for example. *Pavada* is about the making of a fictional film, also titled *Pavada*, and castigates soft-porn production practices for delegitimizing the labor of the production unit. After the director suddenly dies in the middle of shooting the film-within-the-film, the production executive reshoots and interpolates it with sexually explicit bits so that it can be circulated as a soft-porn film. Although the film turns out to be a success, the people associated with it endure harsh consequences: faced with constant heckling, the producer quits his vocation as a professor, and the lead actress Sicily leaves the village fearing ostracism. The film explores the producer's meeting with the actress's son years later, when the production executive-turned-producer announces the re-release of *Pavada* as the first adult film in 3D format. In a last-ditch effort to stop its re-release, the producer and the actress's son are forced to retrace the film's history, which includes tracking down the production unit members who were part of the original film. Although they rally in support of the dispersed crew members, they encounter many setbacks as they attempt to secure a legal injunction against the re-release.

A satellite TV channel that is interested in airing the story offers what seems like the only option at salvation: bringing back the dupe (body double) who had acted in these films knowing what it involved. Even though they manage to track her down, on realizing that she has moved on to have a family that is perhaps unaware of her previous work as an extra, they decide not to follow up on the request to clear the air. With no other option, Sicily, the original film's heroine, is forced to seek legal recourse. She appears in a court scene and faces a humiliating cross-examination from the opposing lawyer, who compares her to a profiteer exploiting her victimhood for compensation. Sicily pitches her appeal to stop the re-release as a mother's request not to allow her son to see risqué images of her. In contrast, her lawyer likens Sicily's plight to the kind of forceful exposure that men enact by publicizing female colleagues' phone numbers and drawing nudes of women who have rejected them on the walls of public urinals. In this way, the film situates Sicily's specific violation within a longer history of gendered and sexual

violence. It also presents the exploitative strategies and unscrupulous dealings associated with soft-porn as part of the operative logic of production executives, whose sole motive is to make profitable deals with no consideration for the lives and dignity of the people involved. But in so doing, it ascribes to the stereotype of soft-porn as a negative form that signals the denigration of moral values and societal norms. Unlike *Kanyaka Talkies* or *Rosapoo, Pavada* is moralistic at best, depicting the production executive as the core of everything that is morally wrong about the consumption of sexual media.

"MALLU HOT SEX" (OR MALAYALAM SOFT-PORN GOES DIGITAL)

While mainstream films turn to the soft-porn era for its citational capital, other manifestations of citational practice have emerged in current Malayalam media, used for varying ends. In this section, I explore such noncinematic reverberations of the soft-porn wave in the landscape of digital media production and consumption. During the heyday of the soft-porn wave, incorporating Shakeela's presence could give a film that had tanked at the box office a new lease on life, and many production executives believe that unused shots of her were recycled into other films without her awareness or consent.[23] In a strange way, soft-porn films themselves began to exist as fragments, reflecting the ontology of the cut-piece phenomenon on which they thrived. In 2018, my interest in *thundu* came full circle when I had an opportunity to view some fragments of Malayalam soft-porn films on a Steenbeck at the University of Southern California's Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive. These fragments were brought to the archive by film buff and archivist David Farris, who had been collecting films of all varieties for his now-defunct Shabistan Film Archive project, which sought to preserve film material from across South Asia. Farris had collected the material from distributors and exhibitors in B-circuit theaters in India, many of whom had gone out of business and kept the film cans in storage facilities and old factories. One of the reels that Farris brought with him was labeled "Misc Indian Ladies"—a name Farris himself scrawled on the artifact to describe what he called a cut-piece reel and to distinguish it from other reels that included trailers, newsreels, and dailies (Fig. 34). He had acquired the reel from a distributor based in Karnataka who was willing to sell him the material for 20 rupees (approx. $0.30) per can.

Although I could identify one of the actresses as Reshma, the reel otherwise consisted of diverse fragments from various unidentifiable sources, and included scenes of bathing, female masturbation, foreplay, and so on. Even though it was but a single reel, "Misc Indian Ladies" was marked by the cut-piece's logic of surprise, with each turn on the Steenbeck promising the unannounced eruption of something new to see and hear. The reel also displayed the fragmentary nature of Malayalam soft-porn films, which themselves could become cut-piece

FIGURE 34. The label "Misc Indian Ladies" (on the left) and cut-piece showing an unidentified actress in a bath scene (on the right). Photo by author.

fragments once they were extracted from their parent film and inserted into a different one. The cut-piece's status as a floating sign of "soft-porn-ness" that can attach itself to other narratives and give rise to new meanings is also duplicated in the arena of pornographic websites. Like "Misc Indian Ladies," fragments of soft-porn found on pornographic websites such as Pornhub and XVideos are often anonymous but exude a distinct soft-porn-ness through tags such as "Mallu Sex," "Mallu Hot Aunty," or "Mallu Hot Scene" ("Mallu" being short for "Malayali" or "Malayalam").

Tags and labels such as these function through an imprecise citational practice based on the approximation of the cinematic region whence these bits may have come.[24] Clips of Malayalam soft-porn films on XVideos and Pornhub are routinely misattributed or not attributed at all. For instance, one Shakeela clip uploaded on Pornhub in 2016 appears with the title "Shakeela Uncensored Hot Movie Scene" (Fig. 35).[25] The only identifiable referent here is Shakeela; the film's title is not mentioned and, for all practical purposes, is not even important in the overall scheme of this digital display. What is important, however, are the "related videos" that appear on the side and below the video player, some with film titles included, although most are unattributed. The viewer of the page is presented with an array of short clips with titles such as "Shakeela Enjoing with Young Man hot sence [sic]," "Shakeela With Man in Bedroom," "shakeela mallu aunty," "Mallu Aunty Romantic Bed Hot Scene Reshma Affair," and "Reshma seducing a boy." This placement of videos next to other suggested videos that are related to (or labeled as) Malayalam soft-porn makes the parent film less important than the overall imagination that structures this constellation of videos. The video clip loses its indexical relationship to a particular film and becomes part of an idea of
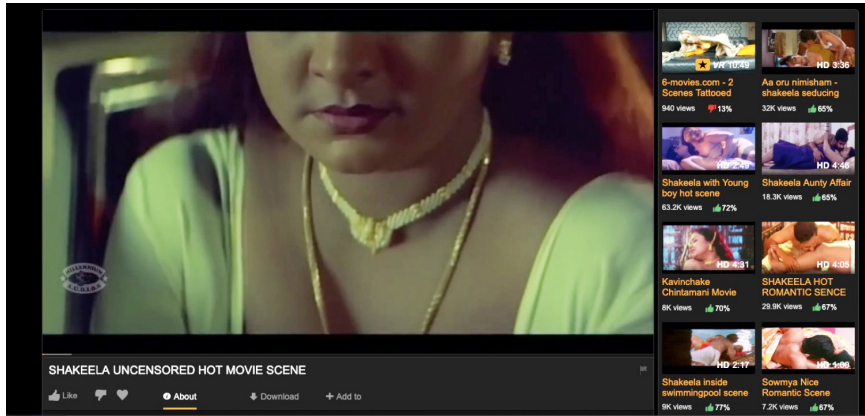
FIGURE 35. A screenshot from an online porn site.

Malayalam soft-porn, manifested here as an algorithmically generated webpage. Each individual video matters less than the endless labyrinth of videos that exist with similar tags,[26] and names such as Shakeela and Reshma pop up in relation to each other without a cohesive narrative about Malayalam soft-porn tying them together. In the universe of tags and metadata, these videos exist in relation to one another prior to being uploaded, and this "offline" knowledge about Malayalam soft-porn informs their online presence without necessarily naming them as such. Searching these pornographic websites with keywords such as "South Indian" or "Mallu" turns up these fragments of Malayalam soft-porn films alongside amateur and homemade porn that is tagged similarly. For instance, on one search result page on XVideos, a fragment from a Reshma film titled "Desi Mallu Indian Porn-Reshma hot" appears next to an amateur video titled "mallu aunty hot blowjob and top riding."[27] Another clip on XVideos is titled "Soumya Full Nude and Other Mallu Sex Scenes Compilation," echoing Farris's "Misc Indian Ladies" reel.[28] Both individual clips and search pages replicate the logic of cut-piece reels such as the one Farris showed me.

Inserting the categorical labels of the "Mallu Aunty bits" or "Hot South Indian bits" into digital space manifests a nostalgic impulse, for these phrases and figures belong to the era of celluloid, and their insertion into the digital playground testifies to their persistence as stubborn residues of the soft-porn era. Their coexistence alongside more recent amateur material—for example, a leaked amateur spy-cam video in a bathroom alongside a Shakeela bathing scene, both shown in a search on XVideos with the term "mallu bath"[29]—further demonstrates that an abstract idea of Malayalam soft-porn informs the uploading and tagging practices of both, and that the nostalgic temporality of Malayalam soft-porn and the contemporariness of amateur porn videos are intrinsically intertwined.

In addition to porn sites, online streaming platforms are another avenue through which soft-porn films circulate in the present, as for instance, on Eros Now, an Indian subscription-based over-the-top platform, owned by Eros International Plc, which was the first VHS distributor in India. Many soft-porn films on the platform—for example, *Aa Oru Nimisham* starring Shakeela and Roshni (see introduction)—are tagged by the platform with the keywords "mature," "mystery," and "romance." Even though I had watched this film as a theatrical release in Kerala and on a DVD, the streaming experience was unique. The emergence of adult platforms like Nueflix and Kooku that cater to sexual content during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to new forms of organizing explicit media. This led to stacking soft-porn films from the 1990s and 2000s as featured content along with mainstream films. Interestingly, the soft-porn films uploaded on streaming platforms offer us a way of analyzing the formal features of soft-porn films, as these films often lack singular, unaltered texts and are mutable depending on the venues in which they are projected.

Most of the soft-porn films on these streaming platforms are between 90 and 110 minutes long, and they feature fantasy sequences that involve foreplay, deep kissing, and rubbing of bodies and thighs that last up to five minutes. These sequences often reappear with slight variations in execution, with a new set of actors. In each repetition, foreplay and sexual stimulation are followed by a bath sequence, which retains the sound of moaning and sexual ecstasy as a sound bridge. Due to the length, and the strategic combination of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups, these sequences can easily be excerpted and exist autonomously as sex clips— indeed, they are designed to do so. The films' editors also mark points of entry and exit for splicing in *thundu* reels. For instance, a sequence from *Aa Oru Nimisham* contains a zoom in and a cutaway to the image of two birds kissing, which then returns to the sex scene. Such strategies are reminiscent of editing techniques in mainstream Indian cinema, as well. For instance, Madhav Prasad writes about how prohibition is negotiated in cinema by showcasing public confirmation of a private act by showing the heroine emerge from outside the frame with a series of visual suggestions confirming sex, as, for example, crumpled clothes.[30] Similarly, Lalitha Gopalan writes that the depiction of the female body in Indian film is equivalent to coitus interruptus—"a cinematic technique that is most visible when the camera withdraws just before we see a sexually explicit scene."[31] However, soft-porn films go a step beyond this. Instead of withdrawing from the sex act and merely suggesting it through interruption and substitution, soft-porn films use similar tactics like mainstream cinema to mark out where sex can be reinstated into visibility. As seen in the example of *Aa Oru Nimisham* (and this can be extended to other soft-porn films), strategic coverage shots are an editor's way of signaling to projectionists that these are sequences where sex shots or *thundu* can be creatively played with.

Whereas pornographic and streaming websites collapse past and present through the operation of tagging and metadata, social media presents a slightly different

manifestation of the soft-porn unconscious. Since the advent of social media in the early 2000s, groups who post adult meme content using an accelerated circulation of sexually suggestive material have appeared online. Many Facebook groups like Kamakeli" (Sex play), "Mace Naughty Trolls," and "Malayalam Naughty Trolls 18+" actively invoke soft-porn films and use images of actresses such as Shakeela or Reshma as their profile pictures, mobilizing thousands of followers with cross-platform reach.[32] Memes are colloquially called "trolls" on these pages. These digital objects are watermarked with the name of the uploader to assert some kind of authorship—an interesting practice given that memes are typically "authorless" and circulate without direct authorial referents. "Trolling" on these pages is quite different from the popular use of the term *troll*, which implies intentionally unsettling or disrupting viewers to elicit a response for the troll's own amusement. Although the "adult trolls" on these fan pages use provocative language, they share more with memes, which place text and image side by side to tease out incongruences. Such adult troll groups are communities of subcultural users who share an investment in the themes and content that populate these groups.[33]

The now-defunct Facebook page Kamakeli described itself as a vibrant interactive space for "Pleasure, Experience, and Enjoyment" (*Anubhuthi, Anubhavam, Asvadanam*), where community members converse through "likes and comments."[34] Kamakeli's tagline on its cover picture—a page catering to "Mallu Non-veg trolls"[35]—played with the binary pure/impure ("non-veg" implying the carnal) to carve out a space to freely express "impure" or socially nonnormative thoughts. Shakeela appeared on the Kamakeli page in two different avatars (Fig. 36). Her image from her debut film *Play Girls* served as the group's profile image for a period—it was changed on August 14, 2019—and an image of her making a thumbs-up sign, a shot featured in many soft-porn films, appeared on a page that lays out community policy.[36] This page featured photographs of legs under "Kamakeli Hot Hotter Hottest." Here, the silhouette of a supine woman was superimposed over the feet. This focus on women's legs recalls the publicity poster of *Avalude Ravukal* (Her nights, 1978), the massive popularity of which triggered a wave of erotic films in the 1980s.

These pages regularly feature activities or "contests," including competitions for *Kamakeli Kamarani* (sex queen), in which group members vote for "contestants" in the form of profiles of mainstream Malayalam actresses. The images are sanitized and the sexual charge is added through written text, which allows pages to bypass Facebook regulations for offensive images (until they are eventually banned). Trolls on such pages tend to use two different inscription modes—one image-dominant and one text-dominant. In the first mode, trolls use images that directly reference soft-porn films or contentious scandals and thereby invite community members to make intertextual connections between the referenced images and the sexual context. In the second mode, trolls take advantage of the disconnect between text and image, drawing visual references from Malayalam cinema
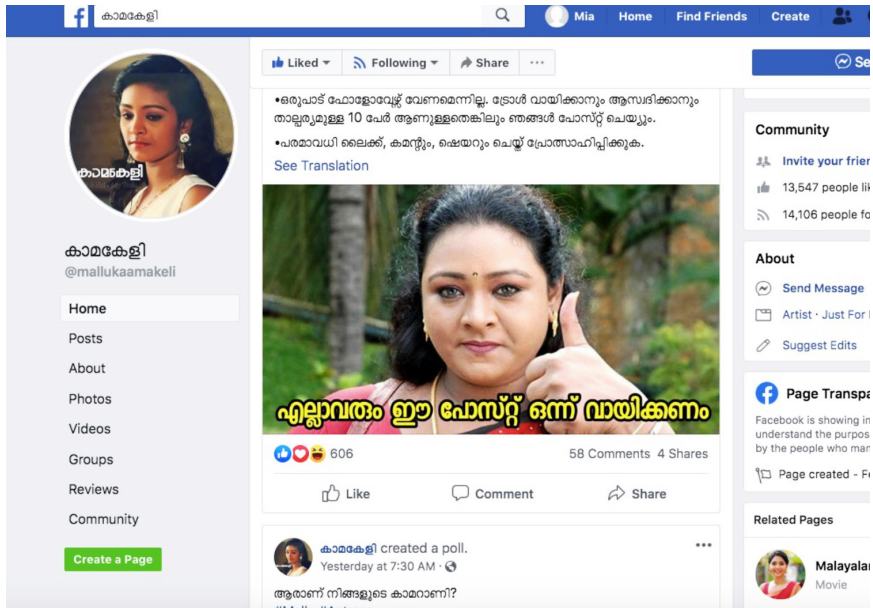
FIGURE 36. Screenshot from *Kamakeli* showing two different images of Shakeela featured on the home page.

or television—often using images that do not have any direct sexual connotation but whose meaning changes drastically when taken out of context and juxtaposed with sexually explicit Malayalam text. This insertion of written text functions like *thundu*, breaking the flow of intended meaning and transforming the object and its meaning by editing. This shock effect exposes the inscription of normative gendered practices and inserts mainstream actors into compromised sexual scenarios that were already part and parcel of the erotic literary tradition. Often, the text is also marked by an asterisk (*) to elide its explicit meanings, in keeping with the use of asterisks in explicit text on social media. Intergenerational love mediated via "Aunty" or *chechi* figures was an oft-repeated theme in the Kamakeli memes. These figures include the "Gulf wife" deprived of conjugal intimacy, female teachers who lure male students into sexual rendezvous, and sexual liberationist female figures who reject marriage. Although these memes ostensibly endow female figures with sexual autonomy, the power invested in these purported figures is transitory—they proclaim a false sense of gender equality by concretizing masculinist modes of performance and misogynistic powers of display.

Adult troll pages coexist with other emergent digital phenomena, including social media micro-celebrities who use such spaces to carve out their fanbases. For instance, California-based Malayali social media influencer Mini Richard, whose

Facebook page has more than 2.5 million followers (as of 2023), strategically mobilizes the demand for sexualized images and markets products that cater to her fans. Richard created the Hugs & Kisses Foundation in 2014 and began using her social media pages to direct her Facebook followers to be prospective patrons of the charity. When she started her profile in Patreon in 2013, the initial pricing tiers were $1, $10 and $25; but she soon found that her users were willing to pay for exclusive package for $25—this was increased first, to $100 and later to $250, for topless pictures.

Richard's social media presence uses the creator-fan relationship as an interface between different platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Patreon, and OnlyFans, with the last two offering subscribers even more direct contact with artists through its tiered levels of access, some of which includes a personal contact number.[37] Her images often emulate the visual and gestural codes of soft-porn films. While some photographs highlight her thighs, navel, and neck, others include performances of role-play (such as dressing up as a schoolgirl or teacher) and even seem to reenact sequences from soft-porn films. She has also curated online photo series that show her in different phases of undress, such as her "pool" or "sexy sari" series, as well as photographs that mark special occasions, such as Independence Day or religious festivals. The fan comments that appear below these images range from appreciations of her efforts to outright declarations of physical violence. While Richard often ignores such trolls, she responds to positive user comments either with a note of thanks for "generous messages" or with her template response, "Hugs and Kisses from California."[38]

In our conversation, Richard spoke at length about how strangers direct message her, requesting "pictures with boobs" and asking how much she charges for a night. She states:

> There is huge sexual frustration among men that I find in Kerala. Since social media offers anonymity, they feel emboldened to send direct messages. That's when I thought that Patreon might be able to capitalize on the hypocrisy around sexuality in Kerala. My experience in Malayalam cinema has also not been great. Since many of photographs on social media were glamorous, many roles that were offered were on the expectation that I was ready for any "adjustment."[39]

During our conversation, Richard stated that there was a substantial interest in her content from Malayali clients based in the Gulf, whose interest in her stemmed from linguistic and ethnic connections. Many seek her for the vicarious female companion of a "a bold Malayali woman," as she puts it. Reflecting on the factors that might be contributing to her popularity, she adds that her situation as a Malayali in the United States and her marriage to an American might have contributed to the interest Malayali clients have in her, "as in the Malayali imagination, a woman who married outside the community, and that too across race, could very well be wild in bed."[40] My interaction with Mini Richards tied up many loose ends I was trying to unpack with the figure of the *madakarani*. Richards gets requests for customized role-playing inflected by tropes from soft-porn. Some

FIGURE 37. Picture of Mini Richard, featured on her Facebook page.
Image courtesy Mini Richard.

clients specifically request her for video performances wearing underskirt, Indian bra, and blouse, referencing the sexualized imagination of rustic women in erotic novels and soft-porn (Fig. 37). Many clients, who appear in the fictitious name on Tango, address her as *chechi*, which again refers to the desire for an older woman, a trend that soft-porn films capitalized on.

While there was pushback against her Patreon and photo series from certain quarters of Malayali society, Richard embraces her bodily agency. She countered a personal attack by filing a defamation suit when moralistic portals such as Karma News alleged that she was "leading an immoral life."[41] She challenges sexual norms by contesting her detractors' focus on her age and their suggestion that middle-aged women should not express their sexuality.[42] Beyond this assertion of individual freedom of sexual expression, what is most interesting about Richard's social media presence is her *mode* of sexual posturing. Platforms do not provide direct bodily access to Richard but rather work through the constant deferral of the possibility of touch. Even in her role-play scenarios, Richard reserves the right to cut off clients if they cross the boundaries to which they have consented. Richard performs as a *madakarani* figure on digital screens in a mode of visual and performative citation that invokes soft-porn cinema's actresses. Her mode of reaching out to fans is a form of constant but palpable "nontouch"—perhaps a digital extension of the screen pleasures offered by the *madakarani*. In this, Richard is not very different from the starlets who formed the core of the soft-porn imaginary, wherein the eroticized body on screen replaced the physical sex act. This replacement of the *act* of sex with *images* of sex in the mediated erotic landscape resonates with Jacques Derrida's proposition that masturbation replaces sex.[43] Even with all their opportunities to comment and chat with her, Richard's fans know that they are physically removed from her. At best, the fans can buy coins on Tango to gift her a crown or a kiss (an emoji that then will be superimposed on her face). Yet despite the impossibility of touch, they not only indulge in but pay for the deferral of touch. In that sense, Richard herself becomes an interface in which soft-porn's fantasies of access and excess resurface. Just as the interface of the cinema screen offers visual and aural pleasure with little direct stimulation of the other senses, Richard's digital body *becomes* the screen. The memory of soft-porn resurfaces through Richard's body as it is rendered by the platform. Simultaneously palpable and distant, this digital body, like the search pages on Pornhub and XVideos, becomes part of a larger assemblage formed by the intersection of different senses, images, and technologies.

CONCLUSION

Thus, even after soft-porn's life cycle as a defined industrial genre is well over, its residual effects stick to media production and consumption practices in the contemporary moment. The *madakarani* of soft-porn cinema slips onto the screens of the present in dispersed and varied ways. What is even more striking is the way that the texts, narratives, and overall public experience of the soft-porn years have led to the rise of a soft-porn unconscious that reproduces the kind of scandalous media publics seen in the *Thaniniram* years (see introduction) within the media formations of the present. Soft-porn, then, lingers as a kind of a bridge that glues

media publics of the print era to the digitally saturated, 24/7 news cycle of the present. This soft-porn unconscious is, in some ways, neutral, and its (gendered) political charge depends on who uses the tropes and vocabulary of soft-porn and to what effect. I conclude *Rated A* by examining some ways in which the soft-porn unconscious has reemerged in public discourse and media formations outside of the direct field of the cinematic.