

Conclusion

In Praise of Bad Women

The pornographic imagination continues to reverberate in Indian media spheres, long after Malayalam soft-porn films fizzled out as an industrial genre. As I have demonstrated throughout this book, media publics are premised on a contentious relationship with normative social and gender codes, such that the information exchanged in this mediated space is necessarily fraught with interruptions, noise, and deferrals. Making sense of such noise is crucial in understanding how politics, social life, sexuality, and normative gender roles overlap. Memories of soft-porn return not just as cinematic renditions, circulating fragments, and forms of posturing, as seen in the previous chapter, but also permeate imaginations of gender negotiations, as well as gossip and scandal in the public sphere. This recirculation is significant for understanding how gender, sexuality, and media impact media publics in South Asia.

In 2013, Kerala's news cycle went into a tizzy about the "Solar Scandal," in which the energy company Team Solar had duped investors of almost seventy lakh rupees (approx. \$117,725) by offering to install solar panels in business and residential buildings. Although financial fraud was at the center of the scandal, more salacious details of the case soon eclipsed it—Saritha S. Nair, one of the entrepreneurs who headed Team Solar, revealed that politicians had demanded sexual services from her in exchange for clearance for the project at various phases. Despite being held without bail and receiving negative publicity for fraud, Nair managed to keep the political establishment and media on tenterhooks. While in prison, she wrote a letter listing the names of the high-profile politicians who sought sexual services from her, categorizing them into abusers and consensual partners. Nair also claimed that she had digital evidence to support her allegations, and Asianet News

later released the letter.¹ Although sex scandals involving politicians are not new to Kerala (see the introduction), the Solar scandal was unique in the way it catapulted Nair to celebrity status. Previously, women involved in sex scandals in Kerala were subjected to humiliation and disapprobation, and there was a concerted effort to do the same in this case as well.

The villification of Nair's character becomes immediately clear in light of the sexually explicit videos of her that were leaked online. These videos had multiple entries on pornographic sites such as XVideos, Pornhub, Xhamster, and Redtube, and were edited to different lengths and given different labels and tags collated from multiple sources. The fragmentary nature of the videos allows them to exist simultaneously as separate clips on the same platforms. For instance, on Pornhub, different iterations of the leaked video (all removed now) were labeled "I am Saritha Nair," "SELFY-2," and "INDIAN-Saritha Bhabhi Saree Stripping."²

Some news sites reported the leak as an instance of "revenge porn" that was meant to silence Nair from calling out the sexual harassment being meted out to her.³ Here the violation occurs not so much in the act of recording but in the act of online, nonconsensual circulation.⁴ Leaks are dispersed processes that move media artifacts out of their intended trajectories of circulation and give way to new sensorial assemblages. According to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland, new networked media are inherently marked by leaking, and leaking media is in turn intricately connected to slut-shaming. They write that the "endemic publicity of the internet . . . blames the user—*her* habits of leaking—for systemic vulnerabilities."⁵ Habits of leaking and cultural anxieties merge in the Indian scenario, such that a woman's very character comes to be defined by her being recorded, whether knowingly or not. In Nair's case, these videos were leaked to sabotage her credibility, but she negotiated public discourse around the leak in a way that makes her case unique. She repeatedly asserted that she had the right to capture intimate images of herself and that the leak was an intrusion into her privacy. In this regard, the leaked videos further supported Nair's allegations that the police, who had access to her mobile phone and laptop, acted in collusion with the politicians she had named to leak the videos to tarnish her image.

Although Nair shot the videos on her mobile phone, capturing intimate moments of herself alone, her use of conventions of the selfie and her gaze at the camera framed the videos in a different light. Devoid of vocal sound, the videos visually frame Nair as a pleasure-seeking subject in the act of recording herself. As opposed to the traces of hidden cameras or coercion evident in rape videos, here the camera-wielding subject is actively in control of the images shot. The personal tone of the videos suggests she sent them to people with whom she was consensually intimate. But when the videos were leaked to the public, their symbolic meaning changed, pitching Nair as a "bad woman"—someone willing to strip for public consumption. J. Devika refers to the media's use of the term *peedhanam* (torture) to refer to sexual crime as a "covering

effect” that shields middle-class sensibilities from the horror of sexual violence while simultaneously leaving room for titillation.⁶ In the case of Nair, however, the media used her claims of sexual abuse as a hook to set up her revelations about the salacious details of the relationships she shared with the politicians she named.

However, although there was a move to portray her in a negative light, Nair was able to turn the tide. She stressed the fact that even though she may have been “unconventional,” consent mattered when it came to intimate relationships. Despite her implication in the fraud scheme, her sheer persistence in voicing her complaints and her skill in challenging lawyers and journalists ended up swaying public opinion in her favor. Although she changed her statements and then recanted them multiple times, her larger argument was that justice had to be served, regardless of one’s political stature or power. In one interview, Nair stated:

People might cast me as a bad woman and I don’t claim that I have too great a reputation among Malayalis. But my point is that when political integrity is bartered for sex, it would certainly discourage more women from entering into the public mainstream, either as entrepreneurs or as influencers of public opinion. Now Saritha S. Nair has become a key word for everything that is rotten with ambitious women, but we need to dig deep to understand what the conditions are that expect women to compromise from the word go.⁷

Nair’s public posturing consolidated her image as a self-made woman capable of withstanding challenges in an unfair patriarchal system. Such posturing aligns with the figure of the *madakarani*, who raises questions about gender and social mobility even as she is steeped in sexual overtones. In press conferences, Nair reiterated the need to consider her not as an *ira* (victim), but as a survivor (*athijeevichaval*). By asserting her identity as the aggrieved party, she used the media’s staging of her as a *sadharana stree* (ordinary woman) who was caught in a political tussle because of her gender. When the media cast doubt on Nair’s allegations, she responded by aligning her exposé with the #MeToo allegations that had just caught worldwide attention. She stated that her revelations are part of the *thurannu parachil* (exposure/confession) that one must succumb to when all other doors are closed.⁸ Throughout the scandal, Nair used *savarna* body aesthetics to her advantage in more ways than one. With her ability to carry herself with the confidence that comes with the symbolic capital afforded by upper-caste origins, Nair was able to mark herself as distinct from previous women who had been caught up in sexual scandals. Further, a Dalit woman would not have had the same access to politicians that Nair had, nor would the media have covered her story in the same way. Her revelations were even likened to those of Kuriyedattu Tatri, a Brahmin woman who named sixty-five men from different castes in her *Smartavicharam* (ritualized trial of a Brahmin women accused of adultery) in 1905.⁹

The Solar scandal was also scripted and produced into a film titled *Solar Swapnam* (Solar dream; dir. Joy Antony, 2014). While the film was not pornographic, it

was still mired in significant controversy due to its content. The film was denied permission for release when Biju Radhakrishnan, an accused in the Solar case, filed an injunction against it, claiming that the villainous character of Kartha was a defamatory reference to him. *Solar Swapnam* was directed by the soft-porn film director A. T. Joy, who worked under the pseudonym Joy Antony so that the public would not pick up on his association with soft-porn films. According to the producer Raju Joseph, the film highlighted Malayali society's discriminatory tendencies against women.¹⁰ The main character, a thinly disguised "Haritha Nair" played by actress Pooja, is an ambitious woman and a survivor of child sexual abuse who is ready to fight for social justice causes close to her heart. She is duped by an entrepreneur, Ajay Kartha, who exploits her charms to win over investors and leaves her to take the blame for financial fraud. Despite the film's opening disclaimer that it was fictitious, there is little doubt that *Solar Swapnam* bore direct and intentional resemblance to the Solar scandal, the only change being that it centered on a real estate firm instead of a solar energy company. The film's narrative grants symbolic reprieve to Saritha Nair by portraying her screen twin, Haritha, as a victim of a political game played by powerful men. They include the influential politician-turned-businessman K. R. P., who sexually assaults Haritha, and Kartha, who knows all along that this project was only a smokescreen to gather money. The film concludes with the death of K. R. P., leaving Haritha with an opportunity to run for and be elected as a member of the parliament. Reel life and real life uncannily coalesce here, as Saritha Nair attempted to contest elections in 2019. Ultimately, her candidacy was canceled because Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act does not allow any person convicted in a criminal case to contest elections before completing six years of punishment.¹¹

In the context of the leak of Saritha Nair's sexually explicit videos, *Solar Swapnam* itself is undergirded by a soft-porn unconscious. Although *Solar Swapnam* is not a soft-porn film, Saritha Nair's extra-textual aura combines with soft-porn's history of incorporating political scandal either in narrative texts or through cut-pieces. The ensuing reaction of this chemistry (with A. T. Joy as a catalyst) recasts the screen pleasures of the *madakarani* through the medium of Nair. Nair, one could argue, is not merely a *madakarani* but also embodies the disruptive power that the cut-piece wields in public discourse. In the wake of the Solar scandal, Nair emerged as a celebrity, appearing on numerous television talk shows and even acting in two short films (not pornographic), *Gulfukarante Bharya* (The wife of the Gulf emigrant; dir. Joshy Medayil, 2015; Fig. 38) and *Anthyakoodasha* (Anointing of the sick; dir. Kiran Anil Kumar, 2015).¹²

Like Mini Richard, the creator discussed in the previous chapter, Saritha Nair's media posturing recalls the figure of the *madakarani*, especially in her negotiation with patriarchy. Her exposé cast doubts on why the political establishment was so unsettled by her revelations. For instance, in an opinion piece on the Solar scandal, Shajahan Madampat writes:



FIGURE 38. Saritha Nair in *Gulfukarante Bharya*. The screenshot is from a fantasy sequence that shows Tom dreaming that he would get a chance at an intimate relationship with Saritha.

A seductress hell-bent on destroying the lives of respectable men, a woman of loose morals who used her body to rise up the social ladder, a habitual liar, a shameless slut—these are some of the epithets usually marshaled to pejoratively describe the woman. . . . But our collective notions of morality are so skewed that we miss the forest for the woods, and mistake the victim for the perpetrator. Whether Saritha Nair used her sexuality to twist the system to her favor or the system with its corrupt ways edged her ever so cunningly into a precipice is not even a legitimate question because of the simple reason that it is she who lost everything in the game.¹³

The examples of Mini Richard and Nair demonstrate that media technologies have become central to the mediation of sex and scandals in Kerala's public sphere. This is a continuation of the practices used by film magazines to weave fragmentary narratives around scandals and build group consensus among readers to justify the circulation of speculative narratives because of the sticky situations that the subjects have landed themselves in. This forceful exposure is tantamount to defamation, as sensational media pieces breach privacy by connecting seemingly implausible scenarios that are never factually verified as news reports. As Richard's and Nair's cases suggest, scandal publics are fueled by partial exposure: the scandal's fragmentary nature allows varied narrative possibilities to coexist, creating a thicket of information. Such publics are always gendered, and men have a distinct advantage in pushing the rhetoric in their favor. Women like Richard and Nair counter this system in distinctly new ways by taking agential control of their information and identity even when subjected to viral scrutiny.

Where does all of this leave soft-porn? The genre and its industrial practices now belong to the past. Yet as my discussion has shown, soft-porn transcends the film screen—its screen pleasures (and the complexities thereof) lend themselves to other discourses about sex and gender. In the process, soft-porn itself has become a *mise en abyme*—it draws from and blends into past forms such as glamour

cinema, *painkili*, and sensational reporting, and, at the same time, informs how we understand the relationship between sex, obscenity, and the new media landscape in the present. There are lessons to be drawn from soft-porn, be it the alternative labor practices that were engendered by filmmakers or the forms of dissident gender posturing that the *madakarani* in soft-porn narratives enabled. As I have shown throughout *Rated A*, such forms are also not without their own problems. It was never soft-porn filmmakers' intention to resolve gender issues or the puritanical repression of sexuality. But like any great churning, soft-porn has generated productive force. Although misogyny and sexual violence continue to be issues in cinema—even mainstream cinema—without the soft-porn years, the turning of the tide seen in the Saritha Nair case might have been well-nigh impossible. Thus, even though Malayalam soft-porn genre emerged almost as out of accident and necessity, we would be well served to pay attention to the latticework of its media publics. Writing from the positionality of a feminist media scholar, I have offered a humanistic understanding of the social lives of film genres and how they impact our mediated understanding of sex and gender in the contemporary world. In the preceding chapters, I have used archival and ethnographic research to map the intricacies of pornography as an industry and as a genre, foregrounding the agency of performers and industry professionals. Acknowledging the West-centered approach in porn studies, I have shed some light on the South Asian context, where the definitional boundaries of the pornographic are nebulous at best. Attitudes toward porn today continue to be shaped by various factors, including the persistence of the colonial past in current legal regimes and conservative social norms that complicate the categories of the obscene and the pornographic.

In mapping these narratives, my work has been invested in examining a genre that emerged outside the framework of national cinema and the imagined national cinematic center—Bollywood. Curiously, as this book has shown, Malayalam soft-porn came to define the imagination of “Indian” pornography across the country and in places such as the Middle Eastern Gulf. This foregrounds the ways in which national and transnational infrastructures, on the one hand, and industrial practices and genres, on the other, allow certain kinds of sexual imaginations to circulate across the globe. Thus, this book also offers alternative ways of imagining the categories of the regional, the national, and the transnational.

The alternative transnational imaginations and circuits traversed by soft-porn films have, in fact, been a core focus of this research. As I have shown in the preceding pages, soft-porn films owe their genealogy to a wide variety of local sources such as pulp fiction, yellow magazines, and erotic illustrations, as well as transnational sources such as the American exploitation cinema that began to enter India via the NRI scheme, a lucrative import program initiated in the 1980s. Thus, this import of new forms of sexual fantasy and expression was mediated by larger infrastructural forces that were at work prior to the soft-porn moment that had a marked influence on its development as a genre and form of film practice. In

turn, Malayalam soft-porn films themselves are carriers of fantasies across borders, especially to the Middle Eastern Gulf, which has a large migrant South Asian population in the oil and service sectors. The popularity of soft-porn films among the Malayali diasporic communities in the Middle East, primarily (but not exclusively) among blue-collar workers, led to the emergence of a clandestine pirate circuit for the distribution of these films, and in the early 2000s, many laborer camps in Dubai used to screen Malayalam soft-porn films to workers as a part of their Friday night entertainment.

Needless to say, there are many gaps in the stories of soft-porn I have tried to tell—partly because of physical constraints and partly due to the paucity of sources. Nonetheless, by locating the tense negotiations between sexuality, import policy, diasporic circulation, labor issues, and censorship in contemporary India, I have offered a model for understanding film genres outside of screen space. As I have shown, such genres constitute not just industrial formations but entire fields of social relations and gendered imaginaries. I fondly remember a meeting with a respondent, Maniappan, in 2013 during one of my initial visits to Kodambakkam. A publicity agent who had been in the industry for more thirty-five years, Maniappan asked me a question that has haunted me throughout the writing of this book:

For a project like this, getting the pattern of production by skimming through the ledgers and trade journals is not “deep” enough. You should know the lives of the people whose daily sustenance was linked to the making of these films. Can you write a history of a factory without addressing the labor that made the factory functional?¹⁴

Although Maniappan may not have been thinking about a mixed-methods approach or about the kind of negotiations between aspirations, hope, and labor that many scholars have written about, his advice was valuable in pushing me to think critically about why this project must be about recovering the narratives of soft-porn personnel as much as it is about mapping the networks that these workers carefully created for sustaining their lives and careers. Although the labor that went into making these films was delegitimized because of the taboos associated with soft-porn, many of these workers were aware that adult film circuits existed elsewhere and that the quest for respectability had driven other adult filmmakers to organize. The founding of the Adult Film Association of America in 1969, which brought distributors and exhibitors together, was a result of the fight against censorship and efforts to cultivate a public that is open to the market these films can provide. I spoke to many soft-porn filmmakers who were familiar with this history of exploitation films and who bemoaned the fact that their efforts to make sexually explicit films would have succeeded had they only been making them elsewhere. Thus, even in the creative freedom with which they experimented, these filmmakers, actors, and technicians constantly remade the genre of soft-porn films as they worked through and improvised regulatory mechanisms to stay afloat in selected distribution platforms. This book is an incomplete but invested story of these changes.