

Circulating Voices: The Gendered Beginnings of Playback

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Introduction

In November 1944, in his regular column entitled “This Month’s Star,” film magazine editor P. R. S. Gopal ended his brief feature on the singing actress N. C. Vasanthakokilam with a prediction. Praising Vasanthakokilam’s classically trained singing voice and capable acting, he wrote that, “even though she hasn’t been given many songs, the ones she has sung are sweet. One may say that her name will rise very quickly. Because of her acting skill and good training, viewers soon will forget that her face is only so-so.” Accompanied by a photo of Vasanthakokilam seated on a bench in a casually draped sari, hands folded in a homely pose, the feature encapsulated a dominant value of these years: that being a film actor or actress meant being a singing star. The ability to sing was the first requirement for appearing onscreen; appearance and their acting skill were less important. The non-glamorous “off-screen” pose of this photo was designed to highlight Vasanthakokilam’s singing ability, rather than her physical allure (*Pēcum Paṭam* November 1944:18–19).

But Gopal’s prediction did not come true. Not only did Vasanthakokilam pass away from tuberculosis in 1951 at the age of 30, but even if she had lived, it is unlikely that her acting career would have continued much into the 1950s. Viewers did not forget about female beauty; indeed, even as the norm of singing actors and actresses persisted, actresses were increasingly discussed in terms of *alaku* (‘beauty’). The ability to sing, it was often noted, rarely went together with beauty. And by the end of the 1940s, the practice of substituting another’s voice for an actress who could not sing well enough, which had been happening since the early 1940s on an occasional basis in South Indian films, had become the norm.

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Known in Tamil as *iraval kural* ('borrowing or lending voices'), the practice of substituting voices was initially viewed with suspicion, as a form of deceit or vaguely illicit "trade" in voices. But by the mid 1950s, it had come to be viewed as a natural and necessary part of making films. Beginning in the early 1950s, "*pinnani patakarkal*" ('background singers') were credited in films, and within a few years those singers were well-known and respected. By the end of the 1950s, with the introduction of the award for Best Playback Singer (Indraganti 2016:xxi), they had achieved full-fledged recognition as singers whose skills, careers, and personae were entirely separate from those of actors and actresses. With a very few exceptions, singing stars had disappeared from Tamil cinema.

Just as playback singing is much more than just a technical process, these developments did not result in any simple way from technological changes; rather, they were the outcome of a combination of social and political factors, including the emergence of a discourse about gender, stardom, and respectability in cinema, and socio-political events including the linguistic reorganization of states, the rise of Dravidian politics, and the ascendance of male hero-stars in Tamil cinema. These broader factors led to a gender asymmetry in the development of playback singing. When the first instances of using one person's body and another's voice began to occur in South Indian films in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was a distinctly gendered phenomenon: a form of experimentation with the combination of *female* body and singing voice. Singing actors continued to be primary throughout the 1940s, even as a hearty trade in female voices was taking place. The first instance of using a male "playback" voice for an actor occurred in 1947, a full decade after the first experiment with using a separate female voice. When the playback system did become the norm for male voices in the 1950s, it was used in the service of producing the star power of a new kind of hero (Weidman 2015). But for most of the 1940s, the male voice and body were not seen as material that could be manipulated. As a cultural historian, speaking to me of this period, put it, "You can play around with actresses, you can do things. But for an actor—You can't sing? Don't come!" (Interview with N. Vamanan, December 2012).

This paper examines the period of transition from singing actors and actresses to the playback system, focusing on its gendered beginnings as a form of experimentation with female voices and bodies, using articles and readers' letters from film magazines of the 1940s, biographical

information about actresses and singers, and selected films from this period. The substitution of female voices, as the practice was originally understood, was bound up with anxiety over the respectability of cinema as embodied in the figure of the actress. Just as earlier discourse about high and low culture had relied on a moral distinction made between singing and acting, so this distinction became central to the way that female voices and bodies were manipulated in cinema. In the 1940s, actresses were increasingly viewed as fragmentable entities, discussed in terms of *naṭippu* ('acting'), *pāṭṭu* ('singing'), *nāṭṭiyam* ('dancing'), and *alaku* ('looks,' 'beauty'). Experimentation with female voices in both cinema and the record industry gave rise to debates about the practice of *iravaḷ kural*. Examining the terms of this discourse provides some insight into how *iravaḷ kural* came to be normalized as female practice, as well as into the anxieties that the circulation of voices it engendered initially produced for those concerned with the respectability of cinema.

In the second part of the paper, I turn to the ways that female voice-body relationships were constructed and managed in films of this period, and to how a system of differentiated female voices accomplished crucial ideological work in these films. This became particularly pronounced in the early 1950s DMK films that relied on these differentiated and typified female voices to evoke images and sounds of "Tamil culture" and to stage the hero's voice. Playback lent itself to the typification of characters, since the character traits of the onscreen body, rather than being voiced by the actress with whatever kind of voice she might have, could be accentuated by the use of a "suitable" playback voice. With its constructed pairing of voices and bodies, playback theoretically makes gender crossings and "cross-dressed" voices possible, but in this context it in fact led to a *greater* regimentation of voice-body relationships and gendered vocal sound—a regimentation that would be realized concretely in the vocal domination of a very few playback singers later in the 1950s.

Attending to scholarship on other contexts in which a play with gendered roles and voices gives way to a more rigidly gender-regimented matching of voices with bodies can clarify the dynamics of the shifts I am describing here. One of these dynamics is the passing of a role and its character associations from one gender to the other. Naomi Andre (2006), for instance, considers the few decades at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Italian opera, when women sang heroic roles. By the 1830s, heroicism had come to be seen as most appropriately and "naturally"

embodied by the tenor voice, but prior to that it had been associated with female and castrati voices. And the passing of the hero role from castrati/female to male voices was accompanied by the re-articulation of gender norms such that a pre-modern one-sex model gave way to the ideology of “separate spheres” and modern formulations of the intrinsic difference between men and women (Andre 2006:46–47). A hundred years later in the American context, as Allison McCracken (2015) describes, the play with gender and sexuality of the 1920s gave way to the articulation of norms of gender and sexuality in the 1930s, particularly the assertion of hetero-masculinity as the norm. This resulted in a narrowing of the range of what was considered acceptable for men to sing. This narrowing of range is another general dynamic at play in the context I am concerned with. As McCracken shows, the voice and figure of the crooner were subjected to regimentation not only through discourse about the “effeminate” crooner and his senseless female fans, but also through the deliberate masculinization of the crooner voice through its matching with an appropriately visually masculinized body in the crooner films of Bing Crosby.

Around the same time in India, as Kathryn Hansen (1999) describes, the popularity of female impersonators in Parsi theater gave way to the idea that, for the sake of “realism” and respectable women’s visibility in theater and in the public sphere, women alone should play female roles. In all of these contexts, as well as the one I am concerned with in this paper, the end of the flexibility and play of gender masquerade in the name of greater realism or “natural”ness, and the socio-political context of a re-articulation of gender norms, constitute a process of “indexical regimentation” (Bucholtz 2011:264): a reduction, rather than an expansion, of possibilities for what kind of characters or roles can be associated with a particular voice. The regimentation, which can happen for singing and speaking voices alike, takes place both at the level of the voice itself, as its range is diminished, and at the level of the associations that are permitted to go with that voice. Moving from the 1940s to the 1950s and beyond, we can see both of these forms of regimentation happening in the shift from singing actors and actresses to the playback system.

The Voice and the Body: Defining High and Low Culture

The prehistory of playback singing begins in the late nineteenth century, with the twin projects of social reform and the “revival” of so-called “classical” arts of music and dance, for it was in these contexts that singing and acting came to be categorized in terms of their differing respectability. During this period, as Sumanta Bannerjee (1990) has shown in the context of Bengal, the policing of women’s performance effected an ideological division between “high” and “low” culture that had not previously existed. Within this new dispensation there was an emphasis on the interiority of the idealized middle-class female subject. These discourses of social reform in Bengal were highly influential on the Tamil elites who saw themselves as the primary agents of artistic reform and revival in South India. Under their sway, performance genres that required a great deal of bodily movement were relegated to the “low” cultural realm, while modes of performance in which the performer engaged in little physical movement came to be considered as “art”: dignified performances worthy of high cultural status. In regard to music, as I have suggested elsewhere, this meant privileging a performance style in which a vocalist moved and gesticulated as little as possible, in which a seeming lack of outward performance was thought to signify a wealth of “inner” musical knowledge and devotional sentiment (Weidman 2006).

The opposition between high and low culture was cast in gendered terms, not primarily as the difference between women and men, but as the difference between *kinds of women*: middle-class women and lower-class women (Banerjee 1990:1998). While middle-class married women, as *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* (“family women”) were shielded by the privacy of the domestic household, lower-class women were associated with publicness and uncontrolled sexuality. This differentiation of social class was mapped onto the female figure, giving rise to an important distinction between the female *voice* and the female *body*, as Neepa Majumdar (2008) has suggested. In this moralizing discourse, whereas the female body is available for consumption by virtue of its visibility and always runs the risk of straying into the realm of materialism and the overly Westernized, the female voice is represented as a “traditional” domain protected from the encroachments of colonialism, materialism, and the West (Majumdar 2008:191).

In South India, those who most represented the opposite of the respectable "*kuṭumpa stri*" were the *devadasis*, hereditary female performers of music and dance who traditionally did not marry, but were dedicated to temple deities and often supported by and had relationships with upper-caste male patrons. In the nineteenth century, women from the devadasi communities were prominent practitioners of the forms of music and dance that would, in the twentieth century, come to be classicized as "Karnatic music" and "Bharata Natyam." As women who lived outside the structures of marriage, devadasis became the targets of a social reform movement in the early twentieth century that aimed to put an end to the structures that supported them, culminating in the Madras Devadasis Act of 1947, which criminalized their lifestyle (Soneji 2012:19). Meanwhile, getting respectable married women to take up music and dance and begin performing them publicly was part of the elite project of "reviving" these arts from their supposedly degenerate state (Weidman 2006:115–121). In response to these pressures, and shut out of the venues and spaces they had previously been able to perform in, some devadasis joined the world of Tamil popular drama (Soneji 2012:22–23). They also found opportunities in the new media taking hold in South India at the time. Quite a few devadasis became recording artists; in fact, between 1905 and 1930, most of the Gramophone Company's production consisted of records by women singers from *devadasi* backgrounds (Kinnear 1994; Indira Menon 1999; Sampath 2010:93–94; Archives of Indian Music n.d.). In the 1930s, they entered cinema; almost all the early female stars of Tamil cinema came from devadasi families, and were usually typecast as whores, vamps, or mistresses (Soneji 2012:22).

As I have suggested elsewhere, the ideological division between the voice and the body had an effect on the ways that female voices could be heard in public, and on the kinds of qualities that were ascribed to them. In the early 1930s, the gramophone, which had earlier provided opportunities to women from devadasi families, along with the radio, enabled the emergence of "respectable family women" into the public sphere as performers—mostly singers—of South Indian classical music. The technological mediation of sound recording or radio provided a way to sing without being seen, of being private-in-public. The female voice was, at the same time, discursively produced as an appealing source of naturalness and purity, compared in many record and concert reviews to the singing of birds. Respectable femininity was associated with naturalness

and an absence of bodily performance, in contrast to the bodily gesture, facial contortions and artifice found in the performances of male singers and courtesans. And crucially, singing and dancing were separated. Whereas devadasis often sang as they danced, the upper-caste women who began to perform the newly classicized Bharata Natyam in the 1940s did not sing (Weidman 2006:121–135), a change which necessitated having others sing for them.

Making Cinema Respectable

The idea of having upper-caste Brahmin women become the primary performers of classical music and dance so as to elevate the level of those arts, to make them respectable, was repeated in uncannily similar terms in the 1940s with regard to cinema. A short story from 1943 by the writer Ku. Pa. Rajagopalan, entitled “*Studio Katai*” (“Studio Story”), portrayed these ideas through the character of Sita, an educated, upper-caste young woman who has newly joined the cinema world.

As soon as she’d done her MA exam, she had decided to join the talkies. She had the desire to uplift the cinema field. In cinema, actors and actresses should act with skill and feeling, she thought. If educated girls acted roles in films and showed the way, the corruptions in actresses’ lives would go away, she thought. Her dream was that if the acting profession was made pure, family girls (*kuṭumpa penkal*) could easily get involved in it. Acting should be without obscene and dirty (*asiṅkamāna*) songs. The songs should be composed with feeling. ... Her goal was to first join the talkies herself and show the way (Rajagopalan 1943:78–79).

The rest of the story describes Sita’s clash with the director as she attempts to act as Parvathi in a scene in which Parvathi feels the pull of wayward desire, of “unexplainable longing” which distracts her from the worship of Lord Siva. Sita is in the midst of portraying Parvathi’s state of mind at this moment, trying to become one with Parvathi and access her interior state, when the director interrupts her, asking her to remove the hip chain that holds her sari tightly over her breast so that it will be “loosened up a bit.” She refuses, finally throwing the hip chain in the director’s face and leaving the studio in a huff.

The sentiments that Rajagopalan portrays through Sita's character in this story are echoed in discourse in film magazines throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. A popular magazine, *Pēcum Paṭam*, featured readers' queries in a question–answer format at the beginning of each issue, often with witty replies from the editor, P. R. S. Gopal. These exchanges, among many, give a sense of the terms of the discourse:

Q: Can *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* enter cinema in the present day?

A: Are you asking about the level of cinema or the level of the *kuṭumpa strikaḷ*? (Quoted in Vamanan, 1938)

Q: I wish to act in cinema. Can I act without doing harm to my chastity (*karpu*)?

A: Chastity and cinema are extreme enemies. Therefore, so as not to cause danger to the cinema industry, our cine directors fire those who hold their chastity in great esteem after the first picture—or even before it is finished! (August 1945)

Q: In the debate about whether *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* should join cinema or not, what have actors, actresses, and *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* said?

A: No debate is needed. Before joining, *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* are not asking anyone if they should or not! (December 1947:28)

This last exchange points to the seeming flood of non-devadasi women entering the cinema by the late 1940s. In response to this seemingly inexorable development, a part of elite discourse on cinema focused on making cinema safe for women, both in the studios and in the theaters. Building his first studio in the early 1940s in Karaikkudi, A. V. Meiyappa (AVM) Chettiar was confronted with the problem of housing actors and actresses coming from Madras. He had separate quarters for actors and actresses built, along with separate bathrooms. And while the actors would go to the canteen and eat *tamashā* ('with sociable commotion'), the actresses would have food sent to their quarters (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:58). A reader's letter to *Pēcum Paṭam* in 1947 suggested that, "family women should have more involvement in cinema. Appropriate safeguards should be put in place to protect actresses' dignity (*kauravam*) and chastity (*karpu*)" (*Pēcum Paṭam* January 1947:82–83). Echoing the political language of the day, another suggested that a *naṭikai saṅkam* ('actresses' association') be established to increase the *suya mariyātai* ('self-respect') of

actresses (*Pēcum Paṭam* April 1947:24). And just as women in the studios needed to be protected, so too it was “a duty” to provide *kuṭumpa strikaḷ* who went to the theaters to see movies with proper conveniences. “It isn’t enough that there is a four-foot wall between the women and men’s section. Men are constantly ogling women, and when vulgar scenes come on screen, they will say obscene things that the women hear. Why would a *kuṭumpa stri* come to such a place? To fix this, there should be no connection between the women’s and men’s sections at all” (*Pēcum Paṭam* June 1945:34).

But making cinema safe meant more than providing such physical and infrastructural conveniences. Even more important to the elite project of “uplifting” cinema in the 1940s was re-imagining what it meant to be an actor or actress. As M. S. S. Pandian (1996:952) has suggested, a central feature of elite discourse on Tamil cinema in this period was the privileging of realism. Realism was invoked to distinguish respectable acting from the loud, declamatory stage performances characteristic of company drama and from the sexually inviting performances of devadasi actresses. Rajagopalan’s story vividly portrays the contrast between Sita’s attempt to act the role of Parvathi by accessing her interior state of mind, and the director’s disregard for her acting efforts, his concern only with the actress’ appearance, body, and dress.

“Realism” was also invoked to emphasize the importance of dialogue over songs (Pandian 1996:952). A common complaint in the writings of film magazine editors and readers alike concerned the excessive number of songs in films which were inserted in unnecessary places and often serving as vehicles for vulgarity and double entendre (*Pēcum Paṭam* July 1945:36). Readers and editors also suggested the need to replace singers who didn’t know how to act—the *sangita vidwans* who had built their careers on the drama stage—with “amateur” actors from the *sabhas*, the upper-caste theatrical alternative to boys company drama.¹ An article in *Silver Screen* from 1938 recommended that *sangita vidwans* undergo acting lessons to make their body movements less artificial. But really, the cinema industry should take advantage of the many “young educated men” who could act with “great skill” in character roles. “If you still want *sangita vidwans* to appear in talkies, do it through music concert scenes,” the author recommended (Shanmugham 1938:35). Another article in the same issue railed against the practice of including songs even when they didn’t fit into the story (Kausikan 1938:12). A letter to *Pēcum Paṭam*

stressed the need for getting actors “suitable to the character parts” instead of the same old singing actors over and over again (June 1945:34–35). “Is it enough if you just know how to sing?,” asked another. “Present day viewers expect more than just a *sangeeta vidwan* who can sing” (*Pēcum Paṭam* February 1947:24).

Importantly though, even as the sidelining of male *sangeeta vidwans* was being recommended in the name of realism and plot continuity, performing classical music and dance became respectable ways for women to appear on screen. Because both Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam had recently been consolidated as “classical” arts, they constituted authorizing frameworks that could shield an actress from being identified as such; being identified as a dancer or singer were more respected. The singing actress Bhanumathi recalled that when she was recruited to act in her first films in the late 1930s, her father laid down two conditions: first, that the hero should not be allowed to hold her hand or touch her, and second, that there should be a *Thyagaraja kriti* or some other Karnatic music song in the film (Vamanan 1999:243; Ramakrishna 2000).

The term *nāṭṭiya naṭikai* (‘dance actress’) came into common use in the 1940s to distinguish actresses who primarily performed classicized dance in films from actresses who did character roles.² A. V. Meiyappa Chettiar recalled that female dance scenes with appropriately classicized movements had become a prime attraction. Making *Vedala Ulagam* (1948), he decided to include a dance scene “that had no connection” to the plot just to “turn this into a successful picture.” He asked the young dancing sisters Lalitha and Padmini, aged seventeen and fifteen at the time, who replied that they would do dance scenes only: “no character roles” (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:77–80). “Dance actresses,” though they often did come from devadasi back-grounds, stood in contrast to devadasi actresses from earlier years who both sang and danced on screen; dance actresses only danced and thus others were required to sing for their dance scenes.³

Like classical music and dance, nationalism constituted another authorizing framework that gave respectable women license to appear and be heard in films. The songs of Tamil “national” poet Subramania Bharathiyar were used as accompaniment to classicized dance scenes and treated as standalone songs that could have little or no connection to the film plot. Nationalism, classical singing, and the emphasis on respectable

womanhood came together in the voice of D. K. Pattammal, a classical singer from an orthodox Brahmin family who became famous for her renditions of Bharathiyar songs in films and on record. The iconography of this respectability is on clear display in Columbia Records' 1945 advertisement for Pattammal's record of songs in memory of Kasturiba Gandhi, the nationalist crusader and then recently deceased wife of Mohandas Gandhi. Inset into the image of an aged Kasturiba Gandhi whose half-closed eyes suggest her abstraction from the world at hand and striving for the nation is a headshot of the young Pattammal whose eyes appear to be looking toward the older woman (*Pēcum Paṭam* May 1945).

The Figure of the Actress

Competing with this emphasis on female respectability was an acknowledgement of the power of female stardom.⁴ Along with, and in spite of, the elite discourse on the uplift of cinema, the elements of *kavarcci* ('seductiveness, sexiness') and *vasikaram* ('attraction, allure'), qualities seen to be embodied in actresses, continued to be part of the calculus of making a film. One reader, apparently fed up with the discourse of uplift, wrote in to *Pēcum Paṭam* in the mid 1940s thus: "Is it ok that on one side we have social reform movies like *Velaikkari* and on the other we have *bhakti* pictures like *Meera*? If we teach our girls to follow a life of *bhakti* from a young age, what will be the plight of men?" (quoted in Vamanan 2012:253).

In her analysis of discourse on stardom in relation to the 1930s and 1940s Bombay film industry, Neepa Majumdar (2008) has shown that both the allure and attraction of the star, as well as the idea of making film respectable, were elaborated with reference to the figure of the female star.⁵ The presentation of the female star as a respectable lady was balanced with carefully placed gossip and innuendo that suggested, indirectly, "another side" of the actress (Majumdar 2008:11–12). The generalized figure of the actress, a trope that ran through Tamil film magazines of this period, was another means through which things could be implied about actresses without having to mention specific names. The actress was often the subject of cartoons that suggested the incompatibility of respectable womanhood with acting in films. For instance,

in one cartoon that appeared in *Gundusi* in 1947, a director exhorts an actor to act with “a little more feeling” in a scene with his wife. “You have to feel that she is your wife while acting.” “But sir,” says the actor with an embarrassed look, “she actually *is* my wife!” (*Gundusi* December 1947:25). In another, a woman is primping at home in front of the mirror. Her son says, “*Ammā* (‘mother’), I want to come to the studio with you!” “Okay *kannā* (‘dear’),” she answers. “But you mustn’t call me *Ammā* (‘mother’) there. You have to call me *akkā* (‘older sister’)” (*Gundusi* December 1950).

The question and answer sections of film magazines from this period were full of jokes and exchanges about the dubious morality of actresses and acting. As this sample from the mid-1940s indicates, actresses were portrayed not only as loose, but also deceitful women. It was implied that actresses misled the public both in their onscreen roles and in their offscreen relations with the public.

Q: Why do actresses change their names?

A: Their business is to cheat *rasikars*! (quoted in Vamanan 2012:192)

Q: Our cinema actresses are attaching “Devi” to their names now—is that a degree?

A: No, no. It used to be the style to add “Lakshmi.” Now the craze is “Devi.” But just because those who call themselves “Devi” are skimpy with their clothes doesn’t mean that “Devi” means ‘thrifty lady’! (ibid:203)

Q: In several films, directors have put women in the role of Naradar—why?

A: Compared to men, women are better at spreading gossip (ibid:214).

Q: I wish to marry a cine actress. Tell me how I can do that.

A: Why do you wish to slide from a *nakara* (‘civilized’) life to a *naraka* (‘hellish, miserable’) life? (ibid:208)

Q: What do you call a woman who gets married to one person, but doesn’t live with him, then goes and has affairs with minors for fun, and then plays the *vēṣam* (‘role’) of a *pattini* (‘chaste wife’)?

A: A *ciranta naṭikai* (‘top actress’)! (ibid:284).

Although T. R. Rajakumari, the singing actress of devadasi background who usually played the role of a courtesan or mistress, was often the named subject of some of these jokes, even a respectable actress like N. C. Vasanthakokilam was not immune to them. Re-purposing the expression *mey marantu* ('to forget oneself'; literally, 'to forget one's body'), often used in the licit context of listening to or singing music, the editor answered the following seemingly innocent reader's question thus:

Q: In *Haridas*, why does Lakshmi's (the heroine) sari change so many times in one song?

A: She has forgotten her body (*mey marantu*) in singing, it seems!
(*Pēcum Paṭam* January 1945:9)

Fragmenting the Actress

Also notable in these exchanges and other writings in these magazines is a particular way of discussing actresses as fragmentable entities. More than actors, actresses were frequently discussed in terms of aspects that were treated as separable: *pāṭṭu* ('singing'), *naṭippu* ('acting'), *nāṭṭiyam* ('dance'), *pēccu* ('speech'), and *aḷaku* ('beauty'). A recurring type of reader's question, for example, in the magazines *Pēcum Paṭam* and *Guntusi*, was one that asked for an evaluation or ranking of actresses or actors in terms of one of these qualities. Here are two that appeared side by side in 1947:

Q: Among M. S. Subbulakshmi, D. K. Pattammal, and N. C. Vasanthakokilam, whose music is the best? Who has the most *kural inimai* ('voice sweetness')?

Q: Among Baby Saroja, Baby Radha, Baby Kamala, and Baby Vijayanti, who is the best in dance? (*Pēcum Paṭam* August 1947:59)

The lists that these questions construct already assume that the actresses and singers named fall into certain types and are thus comparable. Similarly structured questions were sometimes asked about male singing stars, but they were limited to the categories of acting and singing.

Q: Among Thyagaraja Bhagavatar, Honappa Bhagavatar, and Chinappa Bhagavatar, who is best in acting skill? (*Pēcum Paṭam* June 1945:24)

There were also questions that asked for a comparison of actresses in more than one aspect, for instance, this question asking about two popular singing actresses of the day.

Q: Between Rajakumari and Kannumba, who is the best in beauty, song, acting, and dance?

A: In beauty, we must give first place to Rajakumari. But for beautiful dance, Kannumba gets first place. Kannumba is best at portraying *sōkam* ('sadness') and *vīram* ('courage'). Rajakumari will slay your mind with love scenes. In singing, between the two, I prefer Kannumba's (*Pēcum Paṭam* April 1945:20).

A persistent theme that emerges in the answers to such questions is that acting and beauty might go together, but that singing and dancing, which were elevated in the moral scheme of things, rarely went with either acting or beauty. In the same issue, the following exchange appeared:

Q: In dancing, who is best, T. R. Rajakumari or M. S. Sarojini?

A: M. S. Sarojini has learned classical dance. But she doesn't have the beautiful body to show it. Rajakumari has a beautiful appearance, but it's not possible to see any classical dance from her (*Pēcum Paṭam* April 1945:22).

While this division between physical beauty and classical dancing ability was treated as a matter of fact, the difficulty of finding a beautiful face and singing ability in the same person was more persistently remarked upon and lamented. In the midst of providing a life sketch of P. A. Periyanyaki, a singer who had lent her voice to other actresses and had also appeared in films herself, the author launched into this first-person outburst:

I am often angry at Brahma, the creator. Why? Because he will create a very beautiful person. But she won't have a good voice or even be able to speak! It will be without *laya* ('rhythm'). To another he will give a nightingale voice—so sweet—but her facial appearance will not be good. This is the reason that the *iraval kural viyābaram* ('trade in borrowed voices') is entering into the cine world (*Gundusi* September 1948:14–23).

Experimenting with the Female Voice and Body

The optical dubber, which enabled separately recorded sound and image to be mixed onto a single new strip of film, was introduced in the mid 1930s, but it did not immediately lead to the practice of having one person act and another sing. It simply meant that an actor or actress could pre-record a song, concentrating on his or her singing without having to act simultaneously, and then later “the recorded song could be played back on an optical camera, while the actors, now in costume, mimed the lyrics they had previously sung as their actions were recorded on a separate strip of film” (Booth 2008:39). Pioneered in Calcutta’s New Theatres Studios in 1934, the practice of recording song and image separately soon spread to Bombay and to South Indian studios in Madras, Salem, and Coimbatore.

While the male singing stars were at the height of their careers in the late 1930s and 1940s, this technology enabled two forms of experimentation with female voices: post-synchronization, in which a different singing voice was substituted to go with the already filmed actress’ performance, and an early form of playback, in which the visual sequence was re-shot with the actress lip-syncing to another’s voice. This experimentation happened initially with the non-central female roles in the films rather than the heroine roles. The voices used were those of known Karnatic singers or other actresses, and they did not appear in the credits of the films.

The first instance of such experimentation came in 1937, under the auspices of producer A. V. Meiyappan, whose studio, AVM Productions, would be a prominent force in Tamil cinema for the next few decades. In AVM’s third production, *Nandakumar* (1938), a film on the life of Lord Krishna, the singing actor T. R. Mahalingam, whose stentorian voice recalled that of drama actor S. G. Kittappa, had been cast as Krishna, with singing actress T. P. Rajalakshmi as Yashoda, Krishna’s foster mother. However, as the story goes, the film director and producer were unhappy with the singing voice of the actress who played Devaki, Krishna’s mother. They had the idea of re-shooting the song sequence with a different singer, and brought in the well-known Karnatic singer Lalitha Venkataraman to sing the song. The visuals were re-shot with the actress lip-syncing to Lalitha Venkataraman’s voice (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:17; Guy 2007).

In the early 1940s, this experimentation continued as singing actresses “lent” their voices to other actresses, and the practice began to be called *iraval kural* (‘borrowed voice’). The young actress U. R. Jeevarattinam, aged fifteen at the time, acted the minor part of a Jain sadhu in *Kannaki* (1942), but also lent her voice for the character of Madhavi, the courtesan who steals Kovalan’s attention away from his wife, Kannaki. While the singing actress A. Kannamba played the role of the righteous heroine Kannaki and sang her own songs, *iraval kural* was reserved for the less morally upstanding female character. The film credited U. R. Jeevarattinam for her acting role, but it did not credit her for singing Madhavi’s songs. In the following year, Jeevarattinam lent her voice to the actress J. Susheela in *Diwan Bahadur* (1943), but was also uncredited there.⁶

It was only after several years of these types of voice substitution that experimentation with female voice-body combinations involving the main heroine character occurred. In 1945, Meiyappa Chettiar made *Sri Valli*, the story of Valli’s wedding to the god Murugan. AVM had originally envisioned casting K. B. Sunderambal, the singing actress known for her powerful stage voice and stage performances, as Valli. But then he decided on a different strategy, one that was oriented more to the potential visual allure of the film. “I wanted to give importance to Valli’s character. I had to select a girl to act as Valli. I had seen the dance performances of Kumari Rukmini [aged about eighteen at the time]. As soon as I saw her bewitching eyes, I made the decision.” AVM spoke with Rukmini’s father and made the decision to put the actress, who was also an accomplished Bharata Natyam dancer, in the role. He then turned to the question of who to cast as the hero. M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar, the well-known singing actor had performed the role of Murugan in the stage drama version of *Sri Valli*. “Whoever I put for the hero should be equal to M. K. T.,” he recalled thinking. He chose T. R. Mahalingam, a young singing actor who had also made his name on the drama stage, whose voice was felt to be like that of singing actor of the drama stage, S. G. Kittappa. His recollections reveal the differing standards by which he selected actor and actress. Kumari Rukmini, with her youthful beauty, classical dancing ability, and sweet singing voice of modest capabilities in no way evoked the grandmotherly persona or loud, projected voice of K. B. Sunderambal; in fact, part of the reason for choosing her was, as Meiyappa Chettiar said, to present “a new face” to film audiences. T. R.

Mahalingam, on the other hand, AVM's selection for the actor, was deliberately chosen to evoke a premier male singing actor of the drama stage.

Meiyappa Chettiar (1974:36) recalled the attention he and his staff paid to producing the voices in the film. "We wanted to use Mahalingam's voice, which was like Kittappa's, to its fullest extent. I got my sound engineer Raghavan to help out." After months of hard work, they shot the film fully expecting that hero and heroine, who matched each other so well in age and looks, would make the film a success. It was only after they screened the film for the first time for distributors that they realized "a big mistake."

Mahalingam's songs were in a strong, ringing voice (*ganīr*). Valli's songs did not "match" that voice—they were rough and without sweetness. What to do now? . . . The film we had struggled to perfect, that we expected to bring us success, when we watched it now, the songs of Rukmini seemed to us a bit off-tune (*sruti sutṭamillāmal*). How could we release it that way? I thought, and spoke with my audiographer, V. S. Raghavan" (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:39).

Together, the two thought up a solution. Using the voice of P. A. Periyayaki, the classical singer whose records were well-known and who had already made a cameo appearance in AVM's 1941 film *Sabapathy*, they would make a simple substitution in the audio track. The process was arduous ("it is not easy to get a singer to sing exactly in sync with the lip movements of the actress on screen," AVM remarked) and it was taken as an insult by the actress Rukmini, who did not give her agreement and whose contract for two more films had to be broken (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:43–44). The film did not credit P. A. Periyayaki, but the voice substitution was widely mentioned in reviews, and the film was a roaring success. Not only did audiences not mind that the actress herself was not singing, but they relished the combination of Rukmini's onscreen appearance with Periyayaki's voice. Although this wasn't technically playback, but rather post-synchronization, it came closest to the formation that playback would bring into being in the early 1950s: the combination of a beautiful face with what was considered to be an ideal female singing voice that audiences recognized, and not just for a minor female character, but for the heroine herself.

In fact, 1945 marked an upsurge in the use of female singers, most of whom were no more than young girls themselves when they were

brought into the film studios. The use of these girls' voices, whose youthful quality with its desexualized connotation made them distinctly different from those of the established singing actresses, was another form of experimentation. These voices were often combined with novel "picturizations." The cinema world developed a taste for young girl-actresses who danced—the child prodigies "Baby" Rukmini, "Baby" Kamala, "Baby" Saroja—the last of whom was compared to Shirley Temple (Gopal 1976:53). And because these actresses, unlike earlier devadasi actresses, did not sing while they danced, the film industry also had a need for childish-sounding female voices who could sing for their dance scenes. "People were taking all sorts of singers. From All India Radio—this girl can sing? Ok. They would put her. There would be a scene with three girls lighting lamps, and they'd have a chorus song" (Interview with N. Vamanan, December 2012).

While the singularity of the male singing star and his voice were preserved, female voices and bodies were subject to various forms of multiplication. Most female singers got their first chances in child songs or group singing roles before they began to sing for heroine actresses. These "group" or "chorus" song which featured three to five female voices singing in unison, constituted another form of experimentation with female voices and bodies. While male voices, especially the great singing actors, always sang alone, and were usually presented as the voice of the hero himself singing, female group songs where the voices were not necessarily presented as coming from the bodies on screen, were common. Chorus songs were often "picturized" on dance scenes, which had become an attraction in Tamil films by the mid 1940s. Such sequences were visually experimental; for instance, in *Nam Iruvar* (1947), the image of Baby Kamala dancing was doubled to create two dancers; in *Vedala Ullagam* (1948), the dancing sister pair Lalitha and Padmini performed a "snake" dance which was a sensation that caused audiences in the North to throw money at the screen (Meiyappa Chettiar 1974:67, 77, 113).

The girl-singer's voice was also seen as appropriate for cross-dressed roles; though boys had for decades acted female parts in stage dramas, it was a novelty to see a girl cross-dressed as a male character, and to hear her girlish singing voice added to the sensation. Remembering this trend of the 1930s and 1940s, magazine editor P. R. S. Gopal wrote that it started with singing actress K. B. Sunderambal playing the role of

Nandanar in the film of that name in 1935. Although the idea of a woman in male disguise was controversial, it also drew audience interest, and in the following years almost all the other actresses of the day took on the roles of Narada and Krishna (Gopal 1976:51). Apparently, the desexualized girlish voice was considered appropriate for portraying both the ascetic sage Narada and the boyish prankster Krishna. By the late 1940s, for example, several different singing actresses had acted the role of the sage Narada in films, enough to prompt a disgruntled reader to write in to *Pēcum Paṭam* magazine criticizing the seemingly obligatory Naradar *vēṣam* for singing actresses: “God created men and women as two different *jātis*. Why are we messing up God’s creation by putting women in male disguise, when we have suitable male actors to play the role?” (June 1945:37). However, according to Gopal (1976:51), cinema audiences were willing to overlook unsuitable-looking “disguises” as long as the music was good.

The increased demand for female singers, and the opening of pathways to film singing other than through being an actress, produced an important development between 1945 and 1948: the emergence of a class of dedicated female singers who were decidedly not actresses. In these years, female singers who had begun by acting in child roles in the early 1940s essentially gave up acting to become professional playback singers. They included Ravu Balasaraswati Devi, G. Krishnaveni (Jikki) and Jamuna Rani.⁷ Within a short time, other pathways to playback singing opened, allowing a group of professional playback singers who had no prior acting roles to emerge. Some entered the film industry through radio, for example P. Leela and T. S. Bhagavati, who both sang their first film songs in 1947; others were brought to cinema through gramophone notoriety, such as the classical singer M. L. Vasanthakumari, who began singing for films in 1948, or through a parent’s involvement in the cinema industry, for example M. S. Rajeswari, who sang her first film song in 1946. The emergence of a class of dedicated singers was a step toward making the practice of *iraval kural* palatable. It was soon after this shift that singers other than singing actors and actresses began to be credited in films. From being seen as morally dubious or as a negative comment on an actress’ singing ability, being able to borrow another’s voice would come to be seen as a mark of an actress’ worth by the early 1950s (Interview with N. Vamanan, December 2012).

Selling Voices

Paralleling, and partially propelling, these forms of experimentation with female voice–body relationships in film and the emergence of a class of dedicated singers were various forms of voice substitution and the marketing of songs undertaken by the record companies. Record companies existed in a symbiotic relationship with the film industry (Booth 2008:41–42), in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, they capitalized on the detachability of songs from films, and also fed their own practices of production and song marketing back into the film industry (Booth 2008:41–42; Indraganti 2016:50–53). The capacity for separately producing song and image was exploited by record companies, which produced recordings of film songs as stand-alone commodities. Sometimes records were released of songs that had been recorded but not included in films, reinforcing the sense of songs’ independence from films (MKT filmography). It is no coincidence, in fact, that A. V. Meiyappan, the film producer who was behind the early experimentation with substituting different voices in his films, began his career as a founding member of Saraswati Stores, the highly profitable recording company which was a market leader in the 1930s (Hughes 2007:23).

And secondly, records constituted an important form of publicity for singers, just as film songs provided the recording industry with ready-made songs. The record industry had produced a star system by promoting singing drama artists in the 1920s and early 1930s who, through their gramophone stardom, became the singing stars of early Tamil cinema (Hughes 2007:10–15). By the late 1930s and early 1940s, record companies were getting their material mainly from cinema. Recording companies played a critical role in managing the publicity of singers by including—or not including—their names on the records. By the early 1950s, the record industry would be getting its singers from the film industry and would become one of the driving forces behind promoting the name recognition of playback singers.⁸

Even though the possibility of using soundtrack recordings (taking the recording directly from the film’s soundtrack) existed, the large recording companies re-recorded the songs in their studios. The larger, more established recording companies in the 1930s and 1940s maintained their own ensemble of in-house musicians and singers, and also

contracted with singing actors and actresses. In many cases, the same song would be sung by one singer on the film soundtrack and another on the gramophone recording. Sometimes this was done for reasons of perceived quality; a singer's voice was felt to record better than the original actor's or actress' voice, or the song's length needed to be adjusted to fit the time constraints of a gramophone record. It was also done to stay within the terms of the exclusive contracts that singers and actors had signed with recording companies. If a duet song, for instance, had an actor and actress who had signed with different recording companies, the company making the record would substitute a different singer for one of them (Indraganti 2016:51). Sometimes the substitution was made for economic reasons, considering what was most economical to produce and what would bring the greatest profits. Singing stars could demand large sums of money to record, and thus it would be cheaper for a recording company to have one of their own musicians sing for the record.

The decision of whom to credit on the record was also an economic one, made in anticipation of which name would draw the most profits. Records often presented the songs as though they were sung by the singing actor, leaving the actual singer uncredited. For example, when M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar demanded a large sum to record his songs from *Chintamani* (1937), Saraswati Stores, the recording company, had their own music director, T. Rajagopala Sharma sing instead, although his name did not appear on the record. In a crafty maneuver, rather than using the words "singer: M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar," they put "M. K. T. *pāṭiya pāṭalkaḷ*" ('the songs of M. K. T') on the record (Gopal 1976:53). And even when recording companies did use the voices that were actually heard in the films, they made decisions about who to credit on the records based on the prestige of the singer rather than on who was actually singing. For example, in the 1947 film *Nam Iruvar*, the song sequences of dancing prodigy "Baby" Kamala were sung by M. S. Rajeswari, but Baby Kamala's name was put on the record, rather than that of M. S. Rajeswari, who was an unknown monthly paid singer in AVM studios at the time (Interview with V. A. K. Ranga Rao, January 2010). Several other songs on nationalist themes in the film, which were sung by classically trained singer D. K. Pattammal, were marketed with Pattammal's name, which middle-class audiences would recognize and value.

The gramophone industry thus encouraged the form that *iraval kural* took in the 1940s, using singers other than the actors and actresses, but continuing to credit the actors and actresses because doing so would sell the records. A crucial intermediate step in the transition from uncredited *iraval kural* singers to credited “playback” singers was the record companies’ reinforcement of a hierarchy of singing voices. As we can see from the example of the records produced from *Nam Iruvar*, recording companies capitalized on the recognizability and value of “classical” singers, like D. K. Pattammal and M. L. Vasanthakumari, promoting and circulating them through advertising and sales of records, while it kept the names non-classical “borrowed” voices hidden.

Trading Voices: Debates about *Iraval Kural*

This hierarchy of voices is on clear display in the pages of *Filmindia*, a popular English-language magazine published in Bombay by the outspoken editor Baburao Patel beginning in the 1930s. In the Bombay context, those who lent their voices to actors and actresses were called “ghost” singers. “Nearly 1300 songs are sung every year by ‘ghost’ singers—both men and women—more women, of course...The producers spend today Rs. 650,000 annually only on ‘ghost’ voices. It is shocking to realize that this amount is spent annually on about a dozen women and half a dozen men most of whom are rotten singers at best!” (*Filmindia* October 1945:17). “Ghost” singers and the “ghost voice racket” were the subject of vitriolic commentaries from readers and Patel himself. Patel called it an “artistic fraud” that “lends to the crow a cuckoo’s voice” (*Filmindia* December 1944:29), implying that it was like “counterfeit” production (Indraganti 2016:64). He decried the large amounts of money that the ghost singer Amirbai Karnatiki was able to earn by “selling her voice to all and sundry pair of lips seen on the screen” (October 1945:17). The implication that ghost singing was akin to prostitution was a reference to the fact that the female ghost singers came exclusively from courtesan backgrounds (Indraganti 2016:62). But even as Amirbai Karnatiki and other female ghost singers were the subject of frequent complaints, the same issues of this journal featured laudatory representations of singing actors K. L. Saigal (*Filmindia* February 1947:36–37) and

M. S. Subbulakshmi, whose voice was described as “liquid gold and a gift to posterity” (*Filmindia* August 1947:cover).

The term “ghost” captured the uncanny effects of mechanical reproduction with its capacity for repetition and endless copying of sounds and images. Even more specifically, it captured the confusing effect of virtual presence: the fact that while these singers were not credited in the films, they were nevertheless identifiable and present to listeners. In a move interesting because it was so strikingly opposite to what would later become the norm, Patel suggested that it was the very identifiability of the singers that was the problem: the fact that they were not visible and not named, but not entirely anonymous.

Producers forget that a new voice has a new thrill...These wholesale mechanical singing machines like Rajkumari and Amirbai get on people’s nerves when repeated too often. And that is what has happened...Whosoever’s the face, experienced film-goers spot the voice as belonging to one of these two. Once the identification has been done where is the emotional thrill in the music? (*Filmindia* July 1943:11)

In the South Indian context, the discourse was considerably less vitriolic. The Tamil expression that was used, *iraval kural* (literally ‘traded voice’) refers to both the act of borrowing and the act of lending, suggesting the exchange between singers and actresses at this time rather than a stark social separation between actresses and female singers. Actresses could “buy/get” a voice (*iraval vāṅku*), while singers could “give/lend” their voice to an actress (*iraval koṭu*). If the singer was held in high esteem, the use of her singing voice in a film could even be spoken of as a *tānam*, ‘a gift.’ This latter term was used mainly in reference to classical singers such as P. A. Periyayaki and D. K. Pattammal, particularly when the voice was used as the accompaniment for classical dance scenes (*Gundusi* September 1948:14–23).

The early discourse surrounding *iraval kural* in the pages of Tamil film magazines tended to be centered on revealing of the “secret” of who was actually singing. The question–answer sections in the magazines *Pēcum Paṭam* and *Gundusi* were filled with questions about whether an actor himself was actually singing in a film, and questions about “who has given *iraval kural* for” an actress in a particular film. *Iraval kural* was implied to be a means of covering up actors’ and actresses’ imperfections.

“In talking pictures, why is music handled under cover of/behind the screen (*tirai maraiṉu*)?” asked a reader in 1938. “Don’t you know?” replied the editor. “To conceal the *appaswarams* (‘wrong notes’) of the actors!” (quoted in Vamanan 2012:186). The practice of *iraval kural* was described as an obstacle to the recognition of Tamil cinema, because it took away from the status of actors and actresses. In a letter titled “*Iraval Pukal*” (‘Borrowed Praise’), a reader wrote that

In Tamil films to make acting good there must be *naṭippu* (‘acting’), *pāṭṭu* (‘singing’), and *aḷaku* (‘good looks’). Still many more people with all these qualities might be found. That being so, giving first place roles to people who can’t sing, and then buying the music of another (*iraval caṅkṭam*)—what a meaningless practice! With such a practice, neither the actor or actress, nor the world of Tamil cinema, will get recognition (*Pēcum Paṭam* August 1944:27).

Although the fact that actresses were getting *iraval kural* was acknowledged and accepted by the mid-1940s, there was still a stigma attached to being a singer who gave *iraval kural*. It was remarked that loaning out one’s voice could jeopardize one’s career as an actress. U. R. Jeevarattinam, who began acting in films in 1937 at the age of ten, had a very high-pitched voice that appealed to film directors of the time. She was brought to films through Modern Theatres Studio in Salem, mostly on account of her singing ability rather than any acting ability, and given song-laden roles in films. “Jeevarattinam’s body is like a small sparrow,” a magazine article commented about her. “Like a skylark she reaches the highest notes. We expect she’ll get acting skill very soon” (quoted in Vamanan 1999:116). By 1943, she had also lent her voice for two actresses in films. P. R. S. Gopal wrote in 1943 that, “Jeevarattinam’s voice is in high demand. Her voice has been borrowed by M. S. Saroja in *Kannaki* and Susheela in *Diwan Bahadur*. If Jeevarattinam wants to attain true fame, though, she should stop this *iraval viyābaram* (literally, ‘this *iraval* business’)” (quoted in Vamanan 1999:116). The implication was that a singing actress could not afford to have her voice detached from her body and associated with another. Lending one’s voice to other actresses amounted to a kind of promiscuity that an actress needed to avoid.

For P. A. Periyanyaki, Jeevarattinam’s contemporary in the world of singing actresses in these years, the path to cinema was also through her singing, more than her acting, talent. Unlike Jeevarattinam, Periyanyaki

was deeply trained in Karnatic music and had a career giving classical concerts parallel to her career as a singing actress. In 1945, when she lent her voice to be substituted for Kumari Rukmini's in *Sri Valli*, Periyayaki was already a well-known gramophone and concert artist. An article on her published several years later stated that after *Sri Valli*, her songs were "on everyone's lips" and directors "were lined up to get her *iraval*." Apparently taking notice of the negative reaction to Jeevattinam's lending of her voice, and sensing that she had the upper hand, Periyayaki made a bold decision. "From now on, unless directors give me the *katānāyaki* ('heroine') role in a film, I will not lend my voice," she announced. Directors were reluctant to give Periyayaki heroine roles, but they did accede to her demand by giving her important "other" roles in films in the late 1940s and into the early 1950s (*Pēcum Paṭam* September 1948:14–23).

For Periyayaki, whose entry into films preceded that of the classical singers D. K. Pattammal and M. L. Vasanthakumari by a few years, the role of specialized singer was not yet available. Interestingly, Periyayaki did not elect to stop lending her voice, but rather to legitimize the lending of her voice for various characters through her visual presence in the film. In the absence of credits for *iraval kural* singers in films at this time, this was perhaps a way of "crediting" herself. But it also points to ideas about the legitimacy of a singing voice that would soon change. For the specialized female singers who emerged in the late 1940s and came to prominence in the 1950s, it was precisely the fact that they *weren't* on screen, the fact that they *weren't* actresses, that gave them legitimacy.

Acknowledging the gendered prevalence of *iraval kural* for actresses in the late 1940s, film magazine discourse portrayed it as a means of covering up the inability and immorality of actresses. "Why don't actors get *iraval kural* like actresses do?" a reader asked in 1947. "It seems," replied the editor, "that because the directors want to keep the sound of the actresses' voices just for themselves, it is necessary to get *iraval kural*!" (*Pēcum Paṭam* March 1947:65). The implication was that while actresses and directors engaged in nefarious activities in the studio, the respectable *iraval kural* could be a kind of cover presented to the public. An article about the singing actress Kannumba in 1949 remarked on the rarity, by that time, of an actress singing in her own voice. While "sweet" female voices were often praised by referring to the singer as a *kuyil*, or 'nightingale,' this article described actresses' voices as being like the shrill

cry of a peacock, a bird only interested in displaying itself. “Kannumba is not only gifted in acting, but in singing too. In this period, most stars have a *mayil cariram* (‘peacock voice’). Because of the *iraval kural* business only, they are surviving. Without that, these ‘stars’ would have had to retire long ago!” (*Pēcum Paṭam* October 1949:18).

The normalization of *iraval kural* as female practice—as involving actresses and female singers—is illustrated in a cartoon from 1948. The top frame shows an actress lip-syncing and dancing to a song being played back on the set during the film shooting as the director and lights men watch. The bottom frame shows an irritable wife, shouting from inside the house to her husband who is sitting on the verandah to tell the beggar who has come to their doorstep to go away. In revealing the “giver” of the *iraval kural* in the bottom frame, the cartoon plays on the by now normalized identification of *iraval* singers with the domestic sphere. But it also makes a play on gendered power relations, suggesting the “topsy turvy” world that *iraval kural* enables: a world in which voices are separable from bodies and have monetary value, and in which women, by lending their voices, can outearn men; a world in which voices, rather than being controlled by bodies, are behind the scenes controlling bodies as though they are puppets. In the top frame, it is the actress who is controlled by the *iraval* voice, but in the bottom frame, it is the husband who finds himself acting to his wife’s words (*Gundusi* July 1948).

As the 1940s wore on, calls for crediting *iraval kural* singers began to dominate the mentions of *iraval kural* in the pages of film magazines. In response to a reader’s question, “Is it not a disgrace (*kēvalam*) for those who can’t sing to buy the borrowed voices of others?,” P. R. S. Gopal responded: “Even though it would be very good if beauty, song, and acting could be joined in one person, it is not shameful to borrow voices. The shameful thing is that the film directors are trying to hide the fact that they are doing this” (*Pēcum Paṭam* April 1945:21). In 1947, a reader remarked that *iraval kural* was a “public secret” in Tamil cinema and that it would not harm the films to put the names of the singers in the credits (*Gundusi* December 1947:40). There seemed to be a growing consensus that crediting the singers was also essential to being able to appreciate their voice and singing skill. A reader in 1948 suggested that leaving singers uncredited interfered with film-goers’ capacity to recognize their *caṅkīta menmai* (‘musical excellence’). “The cinema directors need to make a decision. Either they need to advertise that a *kural iraval* giver has given

kural iraval, or from now on only those who have both acting and singing skill should be in movies" (*Gundusi* February 1948:45).

"Do you dislike the practice of getting *iraval kural*?" asked a reader in *Pēcum Paṭam*. "No," Gopal responded, "but an actor should get the same *iraval kural* for all his films. And whose voice it is should also be advertised" (*Pēcum Paṭam* January 1947). Gopal's answer, with its specific focus on actors, implied that it was important, once the practice of *iraval kural* was fully embraced, to have consistent singer-actor matches. Here we can note a gendered difference. While *iraval kural* was seen as mainly covering up the harsh voices or unseemly aspects of actresses, this plea for actors to consistently use the same *iraval* voice suggests that a borrowed voice could be seen not as covering up an actor's deficiencies, but rather as positively augmenting—adding value to—the male star.

By the late 1940s, the "playback" system had become widespread enough to be specifically mentioned in a government inquiry into the status of the Indian film industry. In 1949, the Film Enquiry Committee was established by the newly independent government of India. The committee held sittings with film producers and directors in ten different cities, including Madras (Baskaran 2009:8–9), issuing a long list of questions to film producers and audiences, and produced a report in 1951. Among the questions to producers were the following:

Do you use 'play-back' voices for your actors? ... Is it because the actor (or actress) cannot sing at all or cannot sing well enough? ... Do you know of instances where producers have been compelled to use (a) the same voice for different characters, (b) different voices for the same character, all in the same picture? Does the public know of this indiscriminate use of voices? If so, does it mind? (Report of the Film Enquiry Committee 1951:241).

Whether or not the public minded, it was clear that the government committee, who saw themselves as protecting the status of film as "art," did mind. In its findings, the committee included a section on "inappropriate music" which, after criticizing the number and quality of songs included in films, moved onto playback singing, which it attacked on artistic, rather than moral, grounds:

We appreciate that the use of play-back cannot be altogether excluded without an appreciable loss of art and quality in a film; we also

know that in film industry the world over this system is being used but we definitely feel that it is being far too over-exploited in ours. A play-back can never be a real substitute for the competent singer-actor or actress-songstress. He or she cannot faithfully portray the feelings and emotions of a song when somebody else is singing it and he or she is only moving the lips in synchronization ... The system is being extended to such absurd lengths as to be fast bringing such play-back singers into such prominence as only the stars deserve (Report of the Film Enquiry Committee 1951:177–8).

The notion that only those who appeared on screen “deserved” stardom would of course be completely contradicted by the developments of the 1950s, which paid no heed to the anxiously voiced concerns of the committee. Only All-India Radio, which was under the control of the government, took them seriously (Indraganti 2016:69), introducing a radio ban on film songs in 1952 that lasted for most of that decade.

From the initial anxiety over unattached, uncredited voices and the doubts about the morality of vocal substitution, to the acceptance of the practice and calls for crediting the singers, we can see a change in the attitude toward the ‘traded’ (*iraval*) voice. As Neepa Majumdar (2008:192) has suggested, the recognition of the playback singer in the late 1940s was a means of “anchoring” the “ghost” voice within the singer’s respectable and domesticized body, rather than the actress’ public body, thereby accentuating and supporting the moral differentiation between the female body and the female voice. While this explanation certainly captures the anxious desire to manage female cinematic performance and publicity, a consideration of the terms in which vocal substitution was discussed and debated in the Tamil context suggests that this was not the only thing at stake. Rather, the term “*iraval*” and its various configurations—selling, buying, borrowing, lending, trading— points to a concern not with the voice as something that had to be anchored and controlled, but precisely with the productive effects of putting voices into circulation.

Picturizing the Voice

Voice is a visual, not just an aural phenomenon: something that is produced and performed by the body in many ways, none of which are inevitable. The mid-1940s to mid-1950s, a transitional period when singing actors and actresses were gradually replaced by the playback system, was a time when the association of particular kinds of female voices with particular kinds of female bodies was being worked out on the screen. This section examines how female singing voices, both those of actresses and of dedicated singers, were used in some key films of this period. These films were populated by a set of stock female characters: the chaste woman who suffers, the self-sacrificing mother, the scheming courtesan, the woman who devotes herself to god, the “new” woman working for social good, and, beginning later in the 1950s, the spoiled, Westernized rich girl. While the plots of these films tended to be organized around the changeability of the hero’s character, the female characters were starkly differentiated, static types. The recognizability of these characters to the audience, and the seemingly natural division of them into good and bad, depended on a particular acoustic organization that was considerably more complex.⁹

As film theorists have observed, while the addition of sound to cinema introduces the possibility of representing an organically unified body, it also sets up the possibility of multiple matchings of voices and bodies (Doane 1980:34; Chion 1994). At the same time that the introduction of sound makes possible the cinematically unified body, it potentially reveals the constructedness, rather than naturalness, of this body. In order to stave off the fear of fragmentation, Hollywood cinema allows only certain relationships between voice and image (Doane 1980). A strong emphasis is placed on the assumption of an actual match between a body and its voice: the double illusion that the voice belongs to, and emanates from, the body on screen (Siefert 1995:46). But while Hollywood cinema since the 1930s has attempted to deny the fragmentation of body and voice by masking the work of technology in matching image with soundtrack, Tamil cinema embraced this fragmentation—manifested as a division of personnel and labor between singing and acting—as a positive condition that needed to be maintained. The cinema as a medium offered expanded possibilities for representing voice–body relationships. Precisely by highlighting the disjuncture between the singing

voice and the onscreen body, these helped in negotiating the potentially problematic spectacle of the female body performing in public.

The concept of the *acousmetre*, elaborated in Euro-American writing on film sound, captures some of the power of these various ways of aligning and dis-aligning of the female voice with the onscreen female body in Tamil cinema of this time. A term coined to denote sound heard without a source visible on the screen, *acousmetre* is meant to get at the multiple ways that the sources of sounds—most famously, voices—within the film’s diegesis, its story-world, are sometimes removed from view. Acousmatic voices, in Chion’s (2008:192) theorization, are endowed with special powers of omniscience and ubiquity; they “see through” the story-world of the film and, because they are not embodied, are capable of being both nowhere and everywhere. Chion’s theorization of the powers of the acousmatic voice depend on an opposition between diegetic and non-diegetic that is not operative in Tamil cinema, which has always allowed a vigorous traffic between extratextual (non-diegetic) elements and the film’s “story.” However, the concept is useful insofar as it admits of degrees and different kinds of “acousmatization” or “de-acousmatization” (Chion 1994:72–73). With playback singing, the body with which a singing voice might be identified is not only that of the actress onscreen, but that of the singer herself, who may remain “acousmatic” (behind the screen or invisible) or be *presenced*: made visible on screen, or inserted into the story-world of the film.

As we will see, the mediation of cinematic technology enabled a range of ways that the female voice could be aligned with or distanced from the onscreen female body. For instance, it made possible intimate scenes showing a character’s “natural” gestures and movements, as well as the close-ups of the face that were used in scenes of both seduction and devotion. Cinematic technology, of course, also made it possible to match one voice with another’s body or with a different scene entirely, so that a singing voice could stand for the nation rather than be associated with a particular female body. It could multiply the bodies associated with a single voice and, conversely, multiply the voices associated with a single onscreen body. And crucially, cinematic technology enabled the diegetic framing of some scenes as performances before an audience, effectively marking off those scenes from the rest of the film and invoking the singer’s extra-filmic persona as part of the meaning of the scene: a framing device that could work to make such performances either more

and less respectable. In this and the following section, I focus on voice-casting and the picturization of songs as means of differentiating female characters in films of the 1940s and early 1950s.

In 1944, the film *Haridas*, based on a folk tale of a sinner who eventually becomes a saint and devotee of Lord Krishna, set a record as the longest-running film in Madras. It featured the overwhelmingly popular singing actor M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar as Haridas, a young nobleman who is married but falls under the spell of “Rambha Devi,” a scheming courtesan who leads him to drink and eventually lays claim to his property, driving him and his wife away. The actress playing Rambha, T. R. Rajakumari, was in fact a singer/dancer from a devadasi family who had already been cast in four previous films as a court dancer and love interest known for her “seductive walk, her scenes of sporting in a pond, and her sleeveless blouses” (Guy 1997:255). In *Haridas*, Rajakumari’s love scenes were considered daring for the day, and decried as vulgar and obscene by some. The role of Haridas’ wife, Lakshmi, was played by N. C. Vasanthakokilam, the highly accomplished classical singer from a Brahmin background who had been previously cast in several wifely roles.

The audience’s extratextual knowledge of who each of these actresses really were would certainly have helped the film’s thematic contrast between two kinds of women, but an examination of the song scenes themselves is also telling. While almost every one of Rambha’s song scenes is diegetically inserted as a performance in which she dances before an audience, Lakshmi’s songs are accompanied not by dancing, but by simply standing or minimal gesturing, and they are largely introspective scenes in which she is alone, most definitely not singing for an audience. The only part where Lakshmi dances is when she sings the song “Ennadu Manam Tulli Vilayaduve” in her boudoir, gazing at herself in the mirror with her hair down and doing a little dance. But it is important that she is alone here; this is presented as her private fantasy, not a performance, which the other characters and the film’s audience simply happen to witness.

In the film’s major hit song, “Manmada Leelaiyai,” Haridas watches a dance performance by Rambha as he sings about the way the god of lust plays with the human psyche; her dance movements and *abhinaya* (‘facial and gestural movements’) are carefully keyed to his song. At one point, she breaks in to sing a line of her own while continuing to dance; at

another, she delivers an audible kiss to Haridas, scandalizing the male musical accompanists. In a contrasting scene, Lakshmi goes about her household duties—fetching water, milking a cow, tending the *tulasi* plant—as she sings the song “Kadiravan.” Both Lakshmi’s and Rambha’s voices are diegetically contained, but while Rambha’s singing voice is persistently embodied in stylized performance, Lakshmi’s is accompanied by seemingly natural gestures and lack of performance. The film thus establishes the moral difference between these two female characters—Brahmin housewife and devadasi—by managing the relationship between voice and body differently for each.¹⁰

In the following year, 1945, the film *Meera*, starring M. S. Subbulakshmi, was released to much acclaim. It was the last of four films in which Subbulakshmi, who was becoming highly acclaimed as a classical singer, would act in between 1938 and 1945. All of these films featured her in roles that embodied the values of religious and/or wifely devotion. In *Meera*, Subbulakshmi played the role of the 16th-century princess who renounced her status and worldly possessions to become a devotee of Krishna. The film starts with Meera as a young girl who shows prodigious devotion; as a young woman she is persuaded to marry, but after marriage becomes more and more devoted to Krishna. As her sainthood is demonstrated through a number of miraculous events, she develops a following. Finally, she leaves the palace to wander in search of Krishna.

Most of the songs in the film are inserted into the diegesis as Meera singing before Krishna, and these scenes often cut to close-ups of her face. It is notable that these scenes show Subbulakshmi not looking out at the film’s spectators, but rather looking at the deity as she sings, constructing a sense of her singing in her own private space. However, while this pose keeps the song within the film’s diegesis, there are multiple references throughout the film to M. S.’s real life persona, which emphasized her singing as an expression of devotion; she is basically playing herself in the film. The opening credits, which begin with an entire frame devoted to the announcement “M. S. Subbulakshmi acts in *Meera*” before going on to list the other actors, clearly show the importance of M. S.’s extra-filmic persona to the meaning of the film. In another gesture to her extra-filmic persona, the credits prominently announce that gramophone records of the songs are available on the HMV label. Striking an analogy between Meera’s devotion to Krishna and Subbulakshmi’s devotion to music, the film also played a central role in the way that Subbulakshmi was sub-

sequently interpreted as a singer and public performer of South Indian classical music.

This exchange between the singer's extratextual persona and the film's story-world continued even when the singer was offscreen. *Nam Iruvar*, released in 1947, told the story of a man and woman who join the nationalist movement. It was among several films of the 1940s in which the classical singer D. K. Pattammal sang. But Pattammal, who came from an orthodox Brahmin family, maintained her respectable reputation by following certain carefully set conditions: she refused to sing love songs, concentrating instead on patriotic songs, especially those written by the Tamil nationalist poet Subramania Bharatiyar, which she had already recorded on gramophone records and made famous.

The two songs Pattammal sings in *Nam Iruvar* are attached to a performance attended by the hero and heroine, and D. K. Pattammal's name is announced before each song to ensure that the audience knows who is singing, in the same style as singer's performances were announced on All India Radio.¹¹ The placing of the songs and dance as a performance within the film effectively distances them from the film's diegesis—they act more as interludes in which the singer and dancer perform directly for the film's audience. Pattammal's voice accompanies a Bharata Natyam performance in which the well-known child prodigy "Baby" Kamala (whose name is also announced before the scene) dances over an outline of India's map image that contains a representation of Mother India. Matched with the body of "Mother India," and further acousmatized by the suggestion of a radio broadcast, Pattammal's voice could be identified with a national myth of honor, chastity, and ideal womanhood.

The Acoustic Organization of DMK Films

A similar differentiation between female voices continued, and intensified, once films began to use playback singers. The new "social" films of the late 1940s and early 1950s brought in an emphasis on dialogue, written in an oratorical style that was associated with the DMK party. Created by scriptwriters and actors who would play important political roles in DMK politics—C. N. Annadurai, Mu. Karunanidhi, N. S. Krishnan, K. R. Ramaswamy, and M. R. Radha—these films introduced a

certain aestheticization of the male speaking voice, whether that of hero Sivaji Ganesan in *Parasakti* (1952), or anti-hero M. R. Radha in *Rathakkanneer* (1954). The emphasis on talk, the quality of the hero's voice, and the relative visual austerity of these films compared to the mythological films of the previous decade has been noted in critical discussions of these films and their politics (Eswaran Pillai 2015:12–140).

The counterpart to the aestheticized male speaking voice was the complexly differentiated female singing voice. While male speaking voices were aestheticized, male singing voices in these films were left relatively undifferentiated. The films tended to use only one male singer, but always had three or four different female singers, who were carefully casted to different character types. While certain male singers like C. S. Jayaraman or M. M. Mariyappa were used as all-purpose substitutes for the male voices in these films, the majority of the songs in these films were sung by women, chosen from an array of female singers, including classical singers, playback singers, and singing actresses. The clearest division was between the voices of classically trained female singers like M. L. Vasanthakumari and D. K. Pattammal, which were reserved for classicized or “national” dance or music performances that were maximally detachable from the film's characters and events, and those of professional female playback singers. This was a musical differentiation that carried moral weight and could thus be used to show the moral status of a female character in the story.

In *Manamagal* ('The Bride,' 1951), a lecherous music teacher, having already fathered a child with one woman and left her, goes on to seduce the heroine, Kumari and her friend, Vijaya. The film became famous for its Karnatic song sequences in which the heroine and her friend sing together, especially in the songs “Ellam Inba Mayam” and “Chinanchiru Kiliye.” These sequences, later celebrated as stand-alone songs appreciated for their musical content rather than their relation to the film's story, feature M. L. Vasanthakumari singing for Kumari and P. Leela, a playback singer who was noted for her classical training, singing for Vijaya; the visuals show them singing seated on a *pantal* ('stage'), keeping *tāla* ('rhythm, meter') and playing veena. However, when Vijaya gets seduced by the music teacher and turns against Kumari, her Westernized dance sequence is sung by playback singer Jikki, who had no classical training at all. The contrasting non-classical voice in the film is provided by actress T. A. Mathuram, who plays Radha, the first

woman seduced and betrayed by the music teacher. Taken in by the principal of a school for orphans, Radha sings the musical accompaniment to a stage performance in the orphanage. The visuals cut between Radha, seated in a white sari with her mridangam, and the school students dancing as she sings, in an untrained and unadorned voice, the song “Nalla Penmani, Mika Nalla Penmani” (‘A Good Woman, a Very Good Woman’), which enumerates all the things a good woman must do to maintain Tamil culture and her own respectability. In the use of these four female voices, we can see how they are positioned in a kind of continuum of oppositions. At one end, the voice of M. L. Vasanthakumari, who had a parallel career as a classical concert singer, contrasts with that of P. Leela, whose career straddled classical and playback singing. Leela’s voice, in turn, contrasts with that of Jikki, who was only a playback singer and had no classical training. The use of first Leela’s and then Jikki’s voice to represent Vijaya’s character is meant to indicate her moral downturn. Finally, the “simple” and “natural” singing of T. A. Mathuram, a singing actress who played comedy and character roles, contrasts with Jikki’s fast-paced and high-pitched singing, and is used to describe the characteristics and practices of an idealized Tamil housewife.

We can see all of these features—the aestheticization of the male speaking voice and the proliferation of differentiated female singing voices—embodied in *Parasakti* (1952), the most prominent of the early DMK films. The film was a critique of the inequality of Tamil society and the corruption of the Congress Party, symbolized in the struggles of a brother and sister to support themselves and keep their dignity. Gunasekaran, the youngest of three brothers who have been living in Burma, returns to India to attend the wedding of his sister Kalyani, but meets with a series of misfortunes and obstacles along the way. First he is stripped of his money by a scheming prostitute, and then reduced to begging on the streets. In the meantime, Kalyani has lost her husband and struggles to earn a living as a widow with a young child, while attempting to keep her chastity intact despite advances by lecherous moneylenders and temple priests. Driven to desperation and unable to get food, she throws her child into the river and is about to jump in herself when she is dragged away by the police. Gunasekaran is also brought to court for stealing. Eventually, Kalyani and all three brothers are reunited; her child turns out to have been rescued by Vimala, a young woman who is working for social and political reform. The final scenes of

the film show the now reunited family taking up these causes by announcing the opening of a new home for orphans.

Female singing voices are important in this film; eight of the film's eleven songs are sung by women. In a pattern that was repeated in many other films of these years, a single male singer, C. S. Jayaraman, sings the three songs for Gunasekaran's character, but three female singers are heard in the other songs.¹² The female singers represent distinctly different backgrounds and styles. T. S. Bhagavati, a trained classical singer from a Brahmin background who became a well-known radio artist in the 1940s and was brought to films in the late 1940s, became famous for her renditions of "sad" songs. In *Parasakti*, Bhagavati's voice is used for Kalyani's character, mainly in song sequences where Kalyani sings slow, pleading, tearful lullabies to her child. In these sequences, Kalyani's body is always still. The song "Poomalai Niye Puzhuti Manmele Vin Vanten Tavazhntai" is shot almost entirely with close-ups of Kalyani's tearful face as she sits slumped against the post of her house; in her other solo songs she is rocking or walking the streets with her child in her arms.

The voice of M. S. Rajeswari, a singer from a devadasi background whose mother was an actress, represents the new female playback voice, with its fast-paced, lilting quality. Rajeswari began working as a singer on monthly salary with AVM studios in 1947 at the age of fifteen. Notably, in *Parasakti* her voice is used for two different characters. It is the voice of the prostitute/vamp "Jolly" who dances for Gunasekaran in "O Rasikkum Seemane." The fast-paced singing is matched visually with Jolly's sinuous dance moves as she brings out wine glasses with straws, containing an intoxicating drink that will enable her to rob Gunasekaran of his money. M. S. Rajeswari also provides the voice of Vimala, who dreams of marrying Gunasekaran in "Putu Pennin Manatai Tottu" as she dances playfully in a garden. Although Vimala, unlike Jolly, is a "good" female character, both are outside the norms of traditional womanhood; Vimala is unmarried, a "new woman" who goes out alone and will have a love marriage.

M. L. Vasanthakumari's voice, meanwhile, is reserved for two songs that are removed from the diegetic story-world of the film and serve as a kind of frame for the film. Much like D. K. Pattammal's songs in *Nam Iruvar*, the first of these songs, the very first scene of the film, is presented as the musical accompaniment to a dance performance being watched by Kalyani and her husband. The song, "Vaazhkka Vaazhkka," based on

lyrics by the poet Bharatidasan, praises ancient Tamil culture, the fertility of Dravida Nadu, and the chaste goodness of Tamil women (Eswaran Pillai 2015:126–127). The proscenium stage and classicized dance by a pair of girl dance-actresses (Kumari Kamala and Kusala Kumari), along with M. L. Vasanthakumari’s recognizable voice, mark this as a respectable female performance that suits Kalyani’s status as a newly married woman before the misfortunes of the story befall her. The proscenium stage is also a visual device that serves to separate the staged performance from the film; it is the first thing viewers see even before they see Kalyani and her husband. And in the final scene of the film, M. L. Vasanthakumari’s voice features in a chorus of female voices singing of the right of every person to live and prosper, this time visually accompanied by scenes of DMK politicians and party members gathering near the *pantal* (‘stage’) erected for the inauguration of a new home for orphans. The proscenium stage and the political *pantal* alike, as visual framing devices, instruct viewers to hear the classical singing voice of M. L. Vasanthakumari as speaking not for particular characters in the film but to causes—the propagation of classical arts or societal and political reform—that safely remove the voice from particular bodies.

Like other DMK films of this period, *Parasakti* included long, alliterative monologues that showcased the speaking voice of hero-actor Sivaji Ganesan, who made his debut in this film. Writing about audience reactions to the film when it was first shown, M. S. S. Pandian (1991:761) remarks that audiences went to listen to the dialogues, “as if it was a film to be heard, rather than watched.”¹³ The scriptwriter, the young Mu. Karunanidhi, had already achieved fame and his role as the dialogue writer was prominently publicized in advertisements for the film (Eswaran Pillai 2015:125). After the release of the film, Sivaji’s monologues were also released on gramophone records along with the film’s songs (Baskaran 1996:112). In the background, but in fact working crucially to stage this male voice, was the array of female singing voices, carefully differentiated by timbre, style, and extratextual knowledge about the singers themselves. The visuals of these song sequences naturalize the associations with each female voice, offering a kind of instruction to viewers in how these voices should be heard. And while the hero’s spoken monologues with their critique of religion and the Congress Party stirred up controversy, *Parasakti*, and the DMK more generally, did not challenge gender ideologies (Pandian 1991:769; Lakshmi

1990). To the contrary: it in fact relied on them and perpetuated them through the seemingly natural matching of voices with images and bodies.

A Miraculous Resurrection

By the early 1950s, as the role of the playback singer became professionalized and the film world started to be able to support dedicated female playback singers, singing actresses receded from prominence. The singing actress Bhanumathi, who had been a star of Tamil and Telugu films in the 1940s, began to be perceived as arrogant and haughty in the early 1950s and gradually lost her chances in films as producers looked for opportunities to substitute actress-playback singer pairs for her (Interview with “Film News” Anandan, November 2009).¹⁴ T. R. Rajakumari began to use playback singers by the early 1950s instead of singing herself. By the early to mid-1950s, singing actresses were no longer cast in heroine roles; they were limited to character or comedy roles. Among singing actresses, only K. B. Sunderambal, a former stage actress who specialized in devotional roles and had made only two appearances in Tamil films in 1935 and 1940, rose in prominence in the 1950s, and this was not so much a continuation as it was a miraculous resurrection from an earlier time.

In her most famous film, *Avvaiyyar*, released in 1953, Sunderambal was presented as a singular miracle—a unity of voice and body—resurrected from the past. The film tells the story of the Tamil saint-poetess Avvaiyyar, who as a girl shows a preternatural talent for poetry. Although her parents wish to get her married, she prays fervently to Ganesha to transform her into an old lady so that she can avoid marriage and assume the life of a wandering sage. The young Avvai sings before Lord Ganesha, “*Kanniparuvam potum potum, annaiyin uruvam aruḷvai aruḷvai*” (‘Enough of this youth, bless me with a mother’s form’), and the young actress playing the girl Avvai is replaced by K. B. Sunderambal, as the playback voice of M. L. Vasanthakumari suddenly transforms into the embodied voice of K. B. Sunderambal. In the rest of the film, the old woman Avvaiyyar wanders the Tamil country, encountering injustice and righting matters with the power of her singing voice.

Avvaiyyar's miraculous skipping of nubile womanhood and marriage mirrors Sunderambal's long hiatus from films between 1940 and 1953. She was only 45 when *Avvaiyyar* was made, but the film further elided her youth, presenting her as a 60-year old woman. Just as the film was presented as a critical rejoinder to *Parasakti* and the ideology of the DMK (Eswaran Pillai 2015:156–159), the figure of K. B. S., clad in ascetic garb and singing in her powerful, stage-trained voice, represented the very antithesis of the playback system as it was developing in the early 1950s. As an actress who did not trade or borrow voices, but played herself on screen, Sunderambal was an anomaly. The singularity of her persona was emphasized both through casting—she is the only singing actor in the film and the playback singers do not appear in the credits—and thematically by the repeated miraculous effects that her voice has in the story, picturized through cinematic technologies such as cuts, montage, and time-lapse photography. This singularity was further bolstered by her extra-filmic persona as a political activist and a woman of great authority in her interactions with the film world. Her projected voice was a stark contrast to the smooth, nasalized, high-pitched and microphone-dependent voices of the new female playback singers. It awakened a host of chronotopic associations, at once harking back to an idealized ancient Tamil society and land, and to the early twentieth century pre-cinematic world of Tamil stage drama.¹⁵

If Sunderambal's voice carried such power, it was because of its singular difference from what was then becoming the norm. The style in which K. B. S. sang, with its relatively low-pitched chest-voice and Karnatic-based melodies, was becoming progressively more differentiated from the new female playback voice. In the 1950s, film music and classical music underwent a mutual sonic and ideological differentiation. Vocal pitch was one difference between the classical voice and the film voice that became particularly pronounced for female singers; classical music continued to be sung at a lower pitch even as the idealized female film voice ascended to the upper registers.¹⁶ Another major difference was the treatment of *gamaka*, the melismatic slides between notes that are codified, stylized, and aestheticized in Karnatic classical music. The proper execution of these *gamakas* slows down the pace of a song. The film voice borrowed the generalized melismatic style of classical music as a sign of "Indianness" without the *gamakas*, enabling a faster pace. A third difference was in the timbre of the voice; the Karnatic

classical singers tended to produce what is commonly called a “chest” voice, while the playback singers exclusively used their “head” voice.¹⁷

In ideological terms, while classical music was imagined as a conservative, authentically Indian realm, film music came to be seen as a hybrid product of modernity, open to new and foreign influences and reflective of a new democratized society. The differing qualities of the female voice in particular were often cited to illustrate the contrast; the musical differences I have noted above were ideologized in a particular way. By the 1950s, the adjectives “natural” and “artificial” were being used to contrast female voices singing classical music and film songs respectively. Kalki Krishnamoorthy, a journalist and music critic who often raved about M. S. Subbulakshmi’s voice in his music columns, meanwhile wrote disparagingly of the “insipid” and “artificial” sweetness of the playback singer Lata Mangeshkar’s voice, qualities which he claimed were not inherent in her voice but derived from the sugary film tunes she sang. Kalki used the Tamil word *vacikara*, meaning attractive or alluring, with distinct sexual connotations, to describe the film voice, warning readers not to get infatuated with film music lest they forget the natural beauty of classical singing, using positive words like *uṭainta* (‘broken, split, giving way with emotion’) to connote the authenticity and sincerity of classical voices (Kalki 1951). In letters written by film fans in the early 1950s, however, we find the female playback voice favorably described as “high, sweet (*inimai*) and quick,” in contrast to the heavy and loud “*erumai kūccal*” (‘buffalo cries’) of classical singers. The female voice was thus used to symbolize and embody the difference between the lumbering slowness and heaviness of classical tradition and something new, quick, and modern.

The new female playback voice that would come to dominate in the 1950s and 1960s, with its high pitch, was cultivated to be maximally different from male film voices. This was a distinct contrast to earlier decades; in the 1930s and 1940s, most singing actresses sang at a noticeably lower pitch than the first generation of playback singers and there was no appreciable difference in male and female vocal range. Drama tended to privilege male singers with high voices, and this aesthetic (and the actors themselves) initially carried over into films. For instance, M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, the most popular singing actor of the 1930s and 1940s, had a high voice that overlapped in range with that of T. R. Rajakumari, his female co-star in many films. Comparing female

voices of the 1940s—the “sultry” voice of devadasi actress T. R. Rajakumari or the classically trained voices of M. S. Subbulakshmi, D. K. Pattammal, and M. L. Vasanthakumari—with those of the professional playback singers of the 1950s and 1960s—Jikki, Leela, Susheela, Janaki, Easwari—one can hear a distinct rise in pitch.

But even more than its timbre, pitch, or stylistic differences, it was the androgynous character of K. B. Sunderambal’s voice, accentuated by the de-sexualization of her character in *Avvaiyyar* and her extra-filmic persona as a long-widowed woman who had never assumed the role of a *kuṭumpa stri*, that set it apart from the norm in 1953. Earlier decades had permitted a certain play with, and crossing of, gender lines, particularly in the taste for the cross-dressed female voice. Female singing actresses had acted in male roles, most notably K. B. S. as Nandanar (*Nandanar* [1935]) and M. S. Subbulakshmi as Narada (*Savitri* [1941]). As we have seen, the role of Narada became almost obligatory for actresses in the 1940s, and audiences were apparently willing to suspend their visual disbelief because they found the music pleasing and the voices suitable to the role.¹⁸ But this period of gender playfulness had ended by the time *Avvaiyyar* was released, giving way to a strictly gendered differentiation of voices. Even though the playback system theoretically opened up possibilities for matching male bodies with female voices and vice versa, the new female playback voice was never used for male characters. And, as other work of mine shows (Weidman 2015), the new male playback voice also had to become appropriately masculinized. Playback, the system that presented various possibilities for how voices could be put together with bodies, in fact produced a greater regimentation of voice–body matchings.

Notes

- 1 *Sabhas* were clubs, “amateur outfits whose members joined them for the love of theatre, not for making a living. ... The plays staged by these elite associations were mostly from the works of Kalidasa or Shakespeare; unlike the company dramas, spoken words were given importance rather than songs and music. While the company dramas were looked down upon as plebeian entertainment forms ... the *sabhas* commanded respect” by the elite (Baskaran 2009:28).
- 2 A tongue-in-cheek reference to this craze for “*nāṭṭiyam*,” as classicized dance was called, occurs in the film *Ratthakaneer* (1954), but also enables a classicized dance scene to

be inserted into this otherwise grim story. At this point in the film, Mohan, ignoring his wife, has taken up residence at the *dasi* Kantha's salon, but he has squandered all his money and is now ill. Kantha's *dasi* assistant is auditioning two young dancers who dance a classicized Bharata Natyam number sung by M. L. Vasanthakumari. Kantha walks in mid-way, and asks disgustedly, "What is this?" "Nāṭṭiyam!," answers her assistant in a sarcastic voice. "It's the latest rage. Since he [Mohan] has no more money, we need to find a way to attract new gents who have money."

- 3 Looking at song sequences from films between the late 1930s and mid-1940s, one can clearly see a shift from scenes in which a devadasi actress, usually playing a devadasi character, sings and dances in an intimate setting, to the gradual de-intimizing of the dance through the introduction of the proscenium stage, painted backdrops, and faster movements more centered on footwork than *abhinaya*. For example, in a song sequence in *Chintamani* (1937), actress Aswattamma, playing the devadasi Chintamani, sings a slow-paced song while seated on the ground amongst her audience and admirers; the shots are closeups of her facial expressions and upper body gestures. By contrast, in *Sri Valli* (1945), the song-and-dance sequences of Kumari Kamala take place on a stage and P.A. Periyanyaki's voice is used for them.
- 4 Preparing to make his first film in the mid-1930s, A.V. Meiyappa Chettiar (1974:13) noted that making a film meant that a producer had to get a star, who was likely to cost a lot. The names he mentioned were exclusively those of actresses; these were the people around whom everything else had to be arranged.
- 5 In fact, as Majumdar (2008:10) suggests, "the gender of stardom was assumed to be female." It was not simply that those thought to be the big stars were actresses, but that certain "implicit equivalences" were made between femininity and the qualities of being a film star (ibid:10). The female star—who she was, how she was positioned in the film, the extratextual information that circulated about her—was central to a film's ability to attract audiences.
- 6 The first uses of female singers other than the actress to sing songs in Telugu films were in these same years, according to Indraganti (2016:1), who mentions Bezawada Rajaratnam and Ravu Balasaraswati Devi as the first such singers.
- 7 For biographical details on these singers, see Indraganti 2016.
- 8 Eventually, once the true form of "playback" took hold and song recordings started to be produced before the filming of visuals, record companies would begin to market film songs before the films were released.
- 9 I take the concept of "acoustic organization" from the work of Kaja Silverman, whose critique of classic Hollywood cinema examines the ways that voices are placed with regard to the diegetic world of the film, and how they are represented in relation to bodies on and off screen. However, my use of the term as a form of critique is not exactly in line with Silverman's. As Silverman (1988:46) notes, the stakes in keeping the female voice and the female body aligned are particularly high. Through this alignment, women's voices are strictly contained within, or aligned with, visible bodies and therefore contained within the diegesis. They are rarely allowed the position of diegetic exteriority, often afforded to male voices, that is suggestive of authorial control.
- 10 It's notable that the portrayal of Rambha changes drastically at the end of the film, when she has been chastened and repents; she has left the palace and is wandering in

a plain white sari. She sings a song and weeps during it, sorry for the pain she has caused Haridas; she sees Haridas, now a devotee of Krishna, and bows at his feet, but he doesn't recognize her and she wanders off (her last appearance in the film). Note the interesting cinematographic effect: her face, singing, superimposed on the scene of her walking over a barren landscape.

- 11 As Majumdar (2008:183) suggests, radio stardom was considered more respectable than film stardom for women at this time.
- 12 For instance, in *Velaikkari* (1949), the only male singer is M. M. Mariyappa; the female singers are T. V. Rattinam, K. V. Janaki, A. P. Komala, and P. Leela. In *Ratthakkanneer* (1954), the male singer is C. S. Jayaraman and the female singers are T. V. Rattinam, M. L. Vasanthakumari and T. S. Bhagavati.
- 13 Baskaran (1996:112) also comments on the "aural" character of the film.
- 14 For example, in the film *Missiamma* (1955), Bhanumathi was initially hired to play the role of Mary, but after four reels were shot the producer dismissed her, apparently because of her late arrival to the set, and re-started production with actress Savitri/playback singer P. Leela in the heroine's role (Ramakrishna 2000:200).
- 15 Describing these associations to me, the film music historian Vamanan said, "When I see the ecologically devastated Tamil Nadu of today, I think of the long-lost Madras—the trees, the clouds—like a garden of Eden, which used to exist. And K. B. S. carries that garden of Eden on her shoulder. That beauty, and that voice. ... These are voices which become like the Meenakshi temple gopuram, landmarks in the historical scape of Tamil Nadu" (Interview with N. Vamanan, December 2012).
- 16 For male singers, there is no appreciable difference in register (Interview with Chitra).
- 17 Evidently K. B. S.'s singing for films was better received in 1953 than in her earlier days. *Nandanar* (1935) garnered negative reviews in the magazine *Ananda Vikatan*. Kalki wrote that whenever she sang, it was so frightful for him to see her open the mouth wide enough "to make the tonsils visible," that "a shut up would have been better than a close up. ... When Sunderambal sings in the upper octave, producing a screeching sound, it is intolerable. I once went to see *Sarangatharan* drama featuring KBS. As soon as the drama began, the person sitting next to me took out some cotton from his pocket and stuffed his ears...I realized that it was a mistake that I failed to bring some cotton, as he did" (*Ananda Vikatan*, July 21, 1935, quoted in Balakrishnan 2010:77).
- 18 On the drama stage, audiences were still accustomed to seeing actors playing female roles, a practice that had been the norm since the late nineteenth century. In fact, S. Vasam, the producer of *Avvaiyyar*, initially wanted the famed stage actor T. K. Shanmugam, who was known for his stage portrayal of Avvaiyyar, to act in the film, but the practice of actors portraying female characters did not transfer to cinema.

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