

Women as Software Engineers in Indian Tamil Cinema

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 2010 World Classical Tamil Conference¹ in Coimbatore, a music video called “Semmozhiyaan Tamil Mozhiyaan” made its way to television networks across Tamil Nadu. The video was shot by Gautham Menon and had music composed by A. R. Rehman – both leading figures in the Tamil film industry at the time, with lyrics penned by the then chief minister and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) headman Muthuvl Karunanidhi. The song was intended as an anthem for the conference, but soon started being referred to as the state anthem.

The visuals of the music video had an anthem feel, in that they showcased the state and its people, featuring several iconic images from ancient tablets of classical Tamil text to modern urban infrastructure, lush landscape images, and a range of well-known performers making cameo appearances through the song. Images of a harmonious society included a wedding, religious ceremonies, classical performances, and children being taught in school. Outside of the performances themselves, there are only three images of vocations: a farmer, a teacher, and a computer programmer. The selection of the images is deliberate, and captures the political message of DMK through the anthem – earth, knowledge, and modernity.

The computer programmer is shown as a young middle-class woman, awed by the environment in which the company is housed, but instantly content with her surroundings as she settles into her cubicle. As she enters the building, others entering around her are women in salwaar kameezes like her, and around her cubicle we also see women at work. There is then a close-up of her computer screen, and we see her do a search using a Google Tamil interface, which leads her to a Wikipedia page about computing in

Tamil. Further down in the film, we see people use cellphones to send messages, typing in Tamil.

The use of Tamil script on the screen of the computer and phone signify the compatibility of the language and tradition with high technology. The office of the technology firm suggests modernity – a glass tower with computers and spacious modern furnishings – but the woman in the office is pointedly middle-class, as are the others we see in the images. There are no men in suits walking about and the focus is on the accessibility of the space to the average Tamilian. She is a young girl, presumably unmarried – given that the other women in the rest of the video wear sarees, and are probably married – and has a career. Despite the artifacts of modernity all around her, tradition and moral order are not threatened by an important site of relevance – her physical appearance. But the emphasized bottom line is that a young woman's career is not incompatible with the ideal of Tamilness. It also helps that the message is endorsed by the mouthpiece of Tamil establishment of the time.

COMPUTING, CINEMA, AND ASPIRATION IN INDIA

Much recent work has examined the role of technology in career aspirations in India. The young woman in the *Semmozhiyaan* video was one among a large number of mainstream media depictions of women in technology jobs in India. This is part of a larger discourse on technology and development that has captured India since the late 1990s. From special economic zones promoting technology companies to lead characters in movies as software engineers, or politicians promoting themselves as technocrats in the media, the idea of technology as central to an aspirational discourse of development has been ubiquitous in the public sphere. Working in the technology sector, both in India or preferably abroad, has been a central marker of middle-class upward mobility. Indeed, there are few greater markers of the role of technology in Indian development than the prime minister, Narendra Modi, who has crafted an identity for himself as a tech-savvy politician with an eye on a technology-driven vision of Indian development during his tenure.

The *Semmozhiyaan* video is arguably part of a larger belief that the role of technology has been positive overall for issues of gender equity in India. While this is extremely difficult to measure, there are some preliminary measures that may be helpful in approaching gender questions as they relate to the technology industry. Engineering education, for instance, has much greater gender equity in India on par with males at

several levels of post-secondary education compared with the United States (Zweben and Bizot, 2018). This is additionally important because females' access is otherwise significantly less than that of males in the Indian higher education system. Needless to say, not all is entirely positive – for instance, marriage dowries (which are still an important part of the Indian social structure) for software engineers are high among professionals (Biao, 2005), especially if they are global professionals (Yakaboski, 2013).

CINEMA AND MIDDLE-CLASS ASPIRATION IN INDIA

Cinema has long served as a mirror for Indian society's aspirations, prejudices, and fears alike. The largest feature film industry in the world, the Indian film industry produces content in various languages. In the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where this research was conducted, cinema is central to both the political and social lives of people. For more than five decades, the elected heads of government in the state have only been people from the film industry. Film stars from the state routinely transition to mainstream politics, and suffer what has been referred to an "image trap," which is being stuck in playing roles that comply with righteous visions of what is socially desirable (Pandian, 1992).

The existence of this image trap has meant that filmmakers must carefully tread a line between what is interesting narrative and what is aligned with social aspirations of the time, particularly among middle-class Tamil people. This has long meant that despite the presence of women in the workforce, the portrayal of females in the workforce remained a complex issue, such that most film scripts have taken conservative, recidivist positions. With a solid history of protest and manufactured outrage, filmmakers needed to be careful about how they portrayed morality, and actors themselves needed to be careful about choices that led them to typecasting.

In this environment, the turn to depicting women who work in technology in a positive light is a particularly important change in Tamil cinema. In the past, a woman in the workforce was invariably accompanied by the failure of patriarchy – a dead husband, a disabled father, or an irresponsible husband whose actions pushed a virtuous woman into the workforce. Technology changed this. To understand this evolution, we will examine the history of women in the workforce on screen in Tamil cinema and combine depictions into categories with the goal of describing the ways in which this change is significant.

AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD

In 1973, K. Balachander directed *Arangetram*. In the film, the eldest daughter of a rural orthodox Brahmin family moves to the city to get a job. She earns a living as a prostitute, works her family out of poverty, and is eventually rejected by her family. In 2000, Rajiv Menon directed and co-wrote *Kandukondain Kandukondain*. A rural Brahmin family is likewise impoverished, and the eldest daughter must negotiate life in a city to earn a living. She gets a job as a software engineer, and works her family out of poverty. In an interview, Menon noted that he was very deliberate about casting the lead female as a computer engineer, because he saw it as a meritocracy, and as a departure from the dominant “angelic face of rural ethic” that had dominated Indian cinema in the past.

Females have traditionally been part of the workforce throughout South India, irrespective of the cinematic tropes that undermine the legitimacy of a working woman. Gender and film studies scholars have long argued that the notion of a good woman was modeled on the mythical goddess. While she possessed the virtues of love, domesticity, and morals, she was often defined in part by what she did not possess – the corrupting Western influence, of which a Western education was an inherent part (Lakshmi, 2008). A Western education gives women both Western ideas and, when they arrive at the workplace, access to westernized spaces. Thus, both *Kandukondain Kandukondain* and the song “Semmozhiyan” offer an important path away from the traditional lines of what good women were meant to be; the reason “Semmozhiyan” was particularly important was that it was penned by the very politician-writer who wrote the same screenplays that would come to define the good Tamil woman. To contextualize this, we begin by thematically summarizing the woman at work in Tamil cinema throughout the years.

THE GODDESSES

Two key mythological characters, the Tamil folklore character Kannagi and the Hindu goddess Durga/Kali, provide the normative basis for an important female characteristic – anger. In their respective tales, both Kannagi and Durga/Kali have moments of culmination in their characters, where the male companion is diminished or missing, and the woman’s act of righteous aggression brings woe to their antagonists. Durga and Kali are the angry/destructive avatars of Parvathi, Shiva’s consort in Hindu mythology.

This avatar of righteous anger and capability of destructive power was worked into screen characters where the protagonist's righteous anger toward social ills is central to her characterization. These films include crusading journalists (*Niraparaadhi*, 1984; *Moondru Mugam*, 1982; and *Indran Chandran*, 1989), righteous rebels (*Kannathil Muthamittal*, 2002), magistrates or other powerful civil servants (*Vanavil*, 2000, and *Kadhalan*, 1994), and the most frequent character, policewomen (*Citizen*, 2001; *Pen Singam*, 2010; and *Bhavani IPS*, 2011). This avatar was sometimes complicated by both its roots in Western education and its opening of male spaces to female protagonists.

The second goddess prototype derives from the avatars of Parvathi, such as Meenakshi or Sati, that focus on maternal or familial qualities. These include professions that are legitimized by their focus on caregiving – such as nurses (*Paalum Pazhamum*, 1961, and *Deiva Thai*, 1964) and doctors (*Pudhiya Mugam*, 1993 and *Vetri Vizha*, 1989). These professions highlight love, demure behavior, a standardized function in society, and the trappings of modesty including conservative dress, tied-back hair, etc. The vast majority of screen roles featuring nurses or doctors tend to present the work as appropriate, or at least not as explicitly problematic.

The third and perhaps most complex symbolic heroine is the goddess Saraswathi, who represents knowledge and the arts. These jobs include teachers, who represent knowledge but also motherhood, in that the teachers become surrogates for parental influence (*Teacher Amma*, 1968, and *Naane Raja Naane Mandhiri*, 1985). But while the teacher in school presents an extension of a woman's natural role around young children, teachers around grown-ups (such as college students) are often presented as framed within the sexual risks of being around young males (*Namma-var*, 1994). The Saraswathi personification extends to the artist – thus including the Carnatic singer/performer or the Bharatnatyam dancer.

THE ANTI-GODDESSES

The Saraswathi personification is further emphasized by what does not qualify as legitimate art. The “Western” performer, who deviates from tradition, is almost always portrayed in negative light. The woman in a “westernized profession” can also be depicted as a site of sanctioned violence. When a woman is murdered in a Tamil film such as in *Kalaignan* (1993), *Pulan Visaranai* (1990), *Oomai Vizhigal* (1986), or *Tik Tik Tik* (1981), the victim is frequently employed as a model or a dancer. The working woman in *Tik Tik Tik*, for instance, is shown as dressing

suggestively, fantasizing about men while lying on a swing. In Silambarasan's *Manmadhan* (2004), even though the protagonist is a psychopath who murders "westernized women," the tagline of the film is "Only God can judge him" – implying that it is arguable whether or not the women got what they deserved.

Class offers an exception to most rules of acceptable female profession on screen. Since the earliest days of cinema, females have been cast as domestic or farm laborers. While some of these attempted to highlight class inequality (e.g., *Velaikkaari*, 1949), the vast majority of films that have historically cast women in these roles have simply accepted working-class poverty as a justification for women in the workforce.

AT HOME IN THE WORKPLACE

The discussion of women on the screen as a starting point for thinking about gender and technology is best understood through how the office workplace has traditionally been depicted. The office secretary has been a stereotypically gendered occupation, often the starting point of female depictions in the white-collar office. The female office secretary poses no serious threat to the professional supremacy of a man in the workplace, since, typically, she reports to a man. Secretarial jobs have traditionally been sexualized – in *Uthama Purushan* (1989), *Bharatha Vilas* (1973), and *Thodarum* (1999), an attractive office secretary is the starting point for a man's temptation. To emphasize the foreignness of such workplaces, secretaries often had Christian names, to suggest a further separation from authentic Tamilness (e.g., *Ulagam Sutrum Valiban*, 1973).

The vast majority of private sector workplaces were similarly problematic. In films that featured women who replaced men in positions of professional power, such as female managers or owners of businesses, the gender dynamics were invariably problematic for the woman. The focus was not only on the sexual complexity of a woman in the male domain of offices, but also on her neglect of her duties as a wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, or mother if her attention is focused on a professional career. Women in business may be depicted as competent, in which case the characterization is often of arrogance such as the common trope of an heiress (thus not self-made) businesswoman in *Sandai* (2008) or *Arumugam* (2009), who is eventually tamed by being pushed into greater femininity by the hero or, more commonly, of an incompetent, accidental professional who is exposed to exploitation by a crafty male relative (*Vettaikaran*, 1964).

In *Sigappu Rojakkal*, a group of women are waiting to be interviewed, and an administrator comes into the room asking the girls for pre-interview details in a lewd manner. None of the girls is offended at his behaviour, thus implying that such treatment of women in an office space ought not to be seen as surprising. Further, one of the girls is not bothered by the advances, is confident and outspoken, and in the interview comes across as modern and goal-driven. This girl gets the job, but is murdered later on, alongside other women who fit her modern profile.

The consistent theme over the years has been that a professional, private sector office space is outside the realm of the ideal use of a woman's time. While the goddess prototypical jobs are clearly legitimate, those driven by poverty such as labor jobs are to be tolerated, since they are driven by need, while the anti-goddess jobs clearly represent social decay. The office job is a much more problematic space because it represents a fundamental failure of masculinity.

THE GODDESS GOES TO WORK

The turning point of Rajiv Menon's *Kandukondain Kandukondain* was the scene in which the female protagonist goes from being an office secretary to a software engineer. The woman, Sowmya, leaves her village for a city to work as a receptionist at a software company. When her boss discovers that she has been moonlighting, learning programming on the job, he promotes her to a technical position. In the scene when she is promoted, Sowmya can barely hide her excitement, and drops her typically demure and traditional demeanor to reach out and shake hands with her boss. The scene is shot to present the handshake with a man as a transition away from the traditional folded hands. Sowmya, however, remains the demure, talented Brahmin girl, who gives up only as much of her orthodoxy as is needed to support the family with no male heirs.

Sowmya's workplace is not the stereotypical sexualized space of past office space movies. *Kandukondain Kandukondain* was a precursor to the DMK anthem a decade later, and Sowmya was the new age avatar of the goddess Saraswathi. A number of films featured females in tech sector jobs in the decade to follow (*Unnale Unnale*, 2007; *Yaradi Nee Mohini*, 2008; and *Vinnaithandi Varuvaya*, 2010), in which the woman's work was generally a positive force in her life, and where she straddles tradition and modernity effortlessly. Around this time, research on women and careers in Tamil Nadu showed evidence that women and parents alike felt that working in the tech industry was different from working in any other

workplace (Pal, 2010). It helped that the tech sector in India came with some measure of gender-conscious benefits – more women in the workplace, access to safe transportation (since many tech firms offered pick-up and drop-off services for employees), and a work environment that, at least in the popular imagination, involved dealing with machines rather than with people.

Perhaps one of the most significant and successful films in this genre was *Yaradi Nee Mohini* (2008), in which a jobless alcoholic male protagonist turns his life around after falling in love with a female software engineer. The film is loaded with the artifacts of modernity as understood in relation to the tech sector in India – computers, employees wearing lanyards, and foreign trips for young engineers. But most importantly, the film was about an educated, competent woman, who helps turn around a fool.

The idea of a no-good male being “fixed” by a good woman is a fairly common idea in Tamil cinema, but contrary to the past when the care aspects of a woman’s personality were the drivers of what made a man want to be better, in *Yaradi Nee Mohini*, she epitomizes Saraswathi in that she teaches the man to be an engineer, and yet remains modern and also traditional through it. Unlike the screen secretaries of the past whose Western dressing was an expression of their distance from traditional womanhood, the Mohini’s Western dressing alternates with her traditional characteristics and signifies her ability to evolve. The software engineer has evolved to be the newest addition to the Saraswathi character.

CONCLUSION

Much of the change in the portrayal of working women in Tamil Nadu is related to the kinds of opportunities available to middle-class Tamilians. The woman engineer in the urban tech workplace is not an anomalous sight in the real world, though arguably the woman in the urban office was no more an anomalous sight through much of the 1970s and 1980s when the office space was being demonized on screen. The difference is that the barriers to women’s successes in the workplace have been laid open in ways that were less obvious in the past.

What has also changed in India is the nature of male aspiration. The technology office in the “Semmozhiyaan” anthem is part of the larger vision of the future of the Indian workplace and social aspiration. And while the image of women in the economy may be finding new sanction in these images, a paradox of misanthropy lies underneath. At the same time as the prime minister, Narendra Modi, runs a Digital India online

campaign to turn the country to a technology hub, promotes the role of women in these transformations, and runs a prevention campaign called #BetiBachao (save our daughters), he also oversees a culture that includes female infanticide.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does film influence our social perceptions of gender and careers?
2. What is the typical perception of the computing field as portrayed in Indian Tamil film?
3. How are female computing professionals depicted in Indian Tamil film?
4. In what ways is a computing career attractive to women in India?
5. What challenges do women in India face in pursuing a computing career?

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