

## **Female Voices in the Public Sphere: The Changing Sound and Image of Playback Singers in Kollywood**

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In this paper I consider the changing sound and image of female playback singers in Kollywood, Chennai's booming Tamil film industry. I contrast the older figure and vocal aesthetic of the respectable female playback singer, established in the 1950s and 60s, with a newer sound and image that have emerged in the last fifteen years. Within the last fifteen years major changes in the production process of film music, coming with digitization, have led to increased possibilities for manipulating sound. There has been a pronounced opening up of the field of playback singing, with many more singers competing in a field previously dominated at any one time by only two or three. These shifts have occurred against the backdrop of broader economic, political, and cultural shifts, including India's economic liberalization and the rise of a new middle-class aspirational consumerism. The privatization of mass media like TV and radio, and the expansion of the internet have together resulted in an explosion of opportunities for media coverage of cinema and its stars. The question I want to address today is, what has all this meant for the female voice, and the performing personae attached to it?

### **The older aesthetic**

Female playback singers entered the film field in the 1940s and 50s with a greater number of restrictions and expectations than male singers did. Most of these revolved around an opposition between singing and acting that was mapped—as I

have suggested elsewhere—onto different kinds of women. While singing was something that respectable “family women” did, acting or doing anything demonstrative with one’s body was for lower-class women, courtesans, devadasis, or prostitutes.

The first generation of professional female playback singers, entering the field in the early 1950s, needed to make a place for themselves within existing norms of female respectability. They did so by cultivating a distinctly non-glamorous persona that would distinguish them from the actresses for whom they gave their voices, a performance style that dissociated them from the songs they sang, and an immediately recognizable vocal sound that was utterly unlike any existing female vocal traditions.

The first South Indian female singer to attain recognition and fame as a professional playback singer was P. Susheela, who is often described as the “Lata Mangeshkar of South India.” Throughout the 1950s, 60s, and into the 70s, Susheela’s voice, said to be as “sweet” as amudam, or nectar, with its high pitch and open, non-falsetto timbre, was the voice for almost every “good” woman in Tamil cinema. Susheela herself, and many other singers and music directors with whom I spoke, emphasized the constancy of her voice across different characters. As a poem written about her by a Tamil writer and FM radio personality put it, “She is a sparrow who does not know how to change her voice for different stars like T.M.Sounderarajan does [a male singer with whom she was often paired]; for all it is

the same voice only! Even so, without dancing or moving as she stands and sings, it is as if Padmini is singing, as if Savitri is singing... [names of actresses].”

Another singer of Susheela’s generation, S. Janaki, put it to me more bluntly: “Yes,” she said. “I can do a Brahmin voice, a folk voice, whatever voice. But from the first note they still know it’s Janaki.” This notion of voice recognition, so important to singers of this generation, is reflected also in the way Janaki conceptualized and did her work as a playback singer. “You need to do justice to the character, but must not forget who you are,” she said, then repeated several times, “you know who you are.”

### **A new sound and style**

The song “Konjam Nilavu,” from 1993, one of A.R. Rahman’s earliest hits, is widely cited as a turning point for the sound and image of the female playback singer.

PLAY “Konjam Nilavu” film version—youtube

“I’m a total natural singer,” Anupama, the playback singer, told me. “I don’t use my Karnatic training at all. I didn’t grow up listening to other playback singers.

Rahman was looking for something different for his songs, and if I had sounded like Chitra or Susheela I wouldn’t have gotten the chance.” The song itself, with its disco beat, features a female voice that varies widely in timbre, breathy here, cracking there, sometimes grunting, taking audible breaths. This is distinctly unlike the smooth, consistent timbres of earlier female playback singers, which were only

interrupted occasionally by stylized laughing, crying, or sighing that were inserted into songs in the 1950s and 60s as signs of emotion—effects that were kept separate from the singing voice. “It used to be that if there was any grunt in your voice they would say something is wrong,” Anupama told me.

The song is, in the typology often quoted to me, a “Western number,” (a modern version of the older “cabaret” style song) in which the beautiful, rich, mysterious—but not entirely good—dancer Chandralekha’s character is introduced.

Chandralekha describes herself as a play of contrasts: “a little moonlight, a little fire, mix them and that’s my body; a little poison, a little ambrosia, mix them and those are my eyes; a little animal, a little divinity, mix them and that is my heart/soul.”

Not only the timbre of Anupama’s voice, but also her performing style in live renditions of the song set her apart from the older aesthetic of female playback singers. Dressed in a figure-hugging gown, she dances, taking possession of the stage in a way that is still rare for female singers to do. Her singing is even more dramatic, with exaggerated consonants and a voice threatening to go out of control at the end of every phrase.

PLAY youtube video of Anupama live [CAN SKIP IF NEED TO]

“I’m more of an actor when I sing,” she told me. “Very emotional. I use my hands and my whole body.” Whereas earlier female singers rarely spoke during stage

performances, Anupama chats with the audience between songs; performing as a playback singer now is much more about distinguishing oneself through one's "personality."

The thirst for new sounds and new voices, begun by A.R. Rahman but continued by other younger music directors, has changed the field of playback singing structurally. A vast number of new singers, trained in different traditions such as Hindustani or Jazz, have been introduced. Since the same two or three singers are no longer singing all the time, the ideal of voice recognizability, so important to older female singers, has lost its salience. Because voice recognizability is no longer particularly valued, there isn't the same emphasis on consistency as there used to be. The young singer Chinmayi told me with pride that "all my songs sound different—you wouldn't know it was the same singer in all of them." The decline of monopoly in the playback field has changed the aspirations of playback singers as well. Older singers boast of having sung "more than thirty thousand songs," but younger singers can't and don't aspire to what is now negatively viewed as "mass production."

### **The "kuttu" aesthetic**

One of the challenges for young women in the playback field now, according to many young singers, is the rising number of songs with "graphically vulgar lyrics. It used to be that songs had puns or double entendres. Now they just say, 'I want to sleep with you.'" Many young female singers flatly refuse to sing such songs. Part of the

reason is the danger of getting “typecast” as a “kuttu” singer. While it is relatively easy for female singers to move between singing “melody” or “love” songs and “Western” songs, “kuttu”, the other major category, is somewhat set apart—it “carries a moral tag—it is there to appeal to B and C class audiences” (Chinmayi).

Literally, “kuttu” means a folk or street play. Kuttu songs are a compulsory genre in Tamil cinema, often placed in the second half of the film to keep audiences awake. Unlike the visual sequences of “melody” or “Western” songs, which are often shot in foreign locations and filled with signifiers of the global, kuttu song sequences visually evoke the local. Kuttu songs are in fast tempo with a 6/8 beat and a distinctive ‘folk’ sound produced by a “rough” or “raw” voice and a particular pronunciation of the words (open mouth, excessive trilling of R sounds). “For folk songs, the words are very important,” a singer explained to me. “You have to really press them, bite down on them.” Kuttu songs, and the genre of “folk” in film music more generally, have traditionally been the place where alternative female timbres—lower, rougher, throatier-- are found, often attached to older village and/or comic women characters. Kuttu songs have in recent years, become increasingly sexualized; many recent kuttu songs have suggestive lyrics that refer to the body or to food.

Female singers who sing in this genre are rarely called to sing other types of songs. Malathy Lakshman, now known as a kuttu singer, described how her experience of singing with a light music troupe for years had given her the ability to sing in any

style comfortably. Despite her versatility, Malathy has gotten typecast as a kuttu singer. This is not only because of the “open voiced,” high-volume style she is capable of, but also because of her biography: her career as a singer for a light music troupe, and her class background—she is not English-educated like many other young singers.

Malathy’s hit kuttu item number, “En Peru Meenakumari,” was echoing everywhere in Chennai in the fall of 2009. The song features Malathy’s heavily mediated voice, combined with auto-tuner and reverb effects, over a pounding kuttu bass beat. The heavily manipulated visuals are filled with disjointed closeups of Mumaith Khan while she dances suggestively; the first lines Meenakumari sings emerge diegetically from her tongue-studded mouth. The song follows a pattern I observed more generally: the more exposed the female body, the more audibly technologically altered her voice. This is the song’s refrain:

My name is Meenakumari  
I’m from Kanyakumari [a town at the Southern tip of India]  
Shall we go on a horseback ride? [polaamaa kudirai savari]  
Shall we do a combined concert? [seyyalama samban kacceri]  
I, singing singing singing singing [pattu] am the beautiful one [sundari]  
You, touching touching touching touching [tottu] will be thrilled [pullari]

Later in the song, Meenakumari characterizes herself in various ways: “In non-veg food, I’m goat curry, in the Kamasutra, I’m the first way.” Unlike the beautiful and mysterious Chandralekha, who is sonically preceded on screen by operatic vocals and difficult to place—she is has connections to North India—Meenakumari is

“placed” unambiguously, both in terms of locality and class, as a “village” girl from the deep South of Tamil Nadu.

PLAY youtube: ‘EN PERU MEENAKUMARI’ FILM VERSION

### **Conclusion**

The singers who entered the playback field in the 1950s are products of India’s first years as an independent nation, while the young singers who have entered since the early 1990s are children of liberalization. In the playback field, liberalization has manifested itself in the move away from the monopoly of a few singers to a field marked by more variety and competition, and the shift from a production process based on the recording of a rehearsed performance to a process in which the music director and sound engineer choose from, assemble and manipulate separately recorded tracks.

In the older playback singing idiom, the authenticity of the singer’s persona and voice was based on the ideal of voice recognition: not changing one’s voice and not moving around on stage while performing. Now, playback singers are expected to move and gesture (within limits, of course) when they sing, to be able to sing in different styles, and sometimes to dress the part of the characters they sing for. They are positioned between older notions of respectable female performance and new demands for “expressive” performance inspired by Western pop artists. As public figures who inhabit a space between celebrity and ordinariness, their



stardom rests on being accessible in a way that actors and actresses aren't. Much more than their predecessors, they have multiple opportunities to play themselves on stage, TV, and radio. This puts them in a unique position to negotiate images and sounds of public femininity, presenting them with new choices and new vulnerabilities.