

Watching from an Arm's Length: The Foreign Hand in Tamil Cinema

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Abstract

Scholarly work on Tamil cinema has traditionally focused on the construction of Tamil authenticity. Much of this work portrays the foreignness of *the other* Indian — particularly the North Indian — but little work exists on the construction of the non-Indian space or person. We argue that quite often films emphasize Tamil authenticity by constructing an othering-type discourse of foreign spaces and their inhabitants, including the Tamil Diaspora. Through an analysis of 90 films and five in-depth interviews, we demonstrate that Tamil film presents an opportunity to understand how an important regional center of Indian cinema both represents *the foreign* and constructs the Indian Diaspora and its spaces, while differing from the more globally known Hindi-language productions of Bollywood.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, Foreign, Other, Diaspora, Bollywood, Indian cinema, Films

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Hindi films saw a flood of cinematic articulations on the figure of the migrant, the returning migrant, and on foreign geographies post-liberalization in 1991. These economic reforms coincided with the growth of a wealthy western Diaspora, which found its way to the Hindi cinema screen and in turn helped create a niche market, particularly in North America and the UK. With the imagery of upper-class Indians in exotic foreign locations, this phenomenon was an important thematic turn for Hindi cinema. Tamil cinema, in contrast, has historically extended a lower profile and screen presence to the migrant Tamilian, despite the centrality of “Tamilness,” as defined by an affiliation to the land, language, and traditional values in narrative themes (Ravi, 2008; Velayutham, 2008), and the existence of a significant population of diasporic Tamils. As Velayutham (2008) observes, the Diaspora remains caricaturized and stereotyped and serves as little more than embellishment to the main plot of the film.

While recognizing the fundamental validity of this claim, our paper investigates the idea of foreignness. We build on a rich tradition of cultural studies work in South India that has examined the idea of foreignness and authenticity in cinema culture from the perspective of ethnic plurality among film-going populations in large cities and ‘posh’ neighborhoods marked by access to English-language films (Srinivas, 2010). Works examining foreign films that have made it to south Indian theatres have found that a mix of factors, including the viewing of imported films on video, the costs of cinema distribution, and branding have led to the development of audiences for sub-genres of foreign cinema such as Hong Kong martial arts films (Srinivas, 2003). However, little work details how *the foreign* itself is treated in Tamil cinema.

We argue that in order for Tamil films to emphasize and promote the superiority of Tamilness — an amalgam of staying true to a set of cultural values, geographies, and language

— they need to emphasize *the other*, a category into which the migrant is also subsumed. As Velayutham (2008) points out, any attempt to define Tamilness would begin with the language itself. As one of 22 languages officially recognized by the Indian constitution, not only is Tamil the language of the state of Tamil Nadu, but the state has also vehemently resisted attempts to declare Hindi (widely spoken in Northern India) as the official language of India by flying high Tamil's ancient classical language status. The idea of Tamilness has thus progressed from a linguistic marker to a symbolic invocation of cultural pride and identity. Long associated with the politics of the state, Tamil films lend themselves as ready and strong crucibles for the expression and celebration of the Tamil identity. We interrogate how the representation of foreignness vis-à-vis the idea of Tamilness serves as a point of inflection to allow Tamil cinema to comment on distant geographies and the characters that inhabit them and in doing so contributes to Indian cinema's relationship with the Diaspora beyond that of Bollywood.

Diaspora and The Foreign in Popular Cinema

Representations, both of the self and of the other, play a formative meaning-making role in society. Hall (1996) argues that even though the events that are constructed by media and other art forms exist independently of mediated discourses, modes of representation constitute the socio-political reality by raising questions about how the representation is brought into being. The constitution of representation also leads Naficy and Gabriel (1993) to question the representation of the other. They argue that the construction of the difference between the native and the other is often where power relations between the two groups begin to be constructed. The other frequently finds itself in unflattering media representations that Hsia (2007) refers to as a “double-bind narrative.” This narrative sandwiches the other between two contrasting negative images. To contradict one set of images would result in subsumption by the opposing set. Thus,

the construction of the “inferior other” (Hsia, 2007, p. 62) swings between negative stereotypes, leaving the represented people with little room for their own voice. Narratives about the Diaspora revolve around displacement and conflicts about emergent identities, nostalgia, and the re-imagination of the motherland (Gilroy, 1997). Identification of the ethnic subject recognizes the role that history, language, and culture play as codes in privileging one discourse over the other (Hall, 1996). Silverstone (2007) contends that the ways in which media present and represent the other not only reflect the media’s morality, but also shapes the morality of the audience.

As audio-visual expressions of cultures, films everywhere have been a natural host to a range of representations of diasporic issues and boast of a substantial scholarship that deals with various facets of how the foreign and diaspora are treated in transnational cinema (Higbee & Lim, 2010). Closer to home, scholarship on Hindi films is replete with diasporic and foreign themes (Dwyer & Patel, 2002; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Nandy, 1998; Uberoi, 1998). However, similar work on Tamil cinema has been fairly modest. Our agenda in this paper is to interrogate the representations of the foreign when it stems from productions that have historically preserved and privileged the singular ethnicity of the Tamil. Through an examination of 90 films ranging from *Parasakthi* in 1952 to *Tam Arivu* in 2011, we document evolving portrayals of the foreign in Tamil cinema. All of these films deal with foreignness as a theme and the conflict that results when it intersects with Tamilness. Our choice of films is determined through personal knowledge as well as interviews with filmmakers and film scholars.

We supplemented our analysis of the films with interviews with five experts in the industry: filmmaker Rajiv Menon, who had dealt with themes of foreignness in their cinema; faculty at the L.V. Prasad Film & TV Academy, Chennai, including K. Hariharan and Uma Vangal; and

film scholars Theodore Baskaran and Robert Hardgrave. Our choice of interviewees was guided by the accessibility and responsiveness of people from the Tamil film industry.

Scholarly Sightings of Tamil Cinema

Tamil films are unique among Indian cinematic traditions in their connection to populist politics (Hughes, 2010). Dravidian politics, founded on atheism, looked for new and secular means of reaching the masses, and films emerged as a convenient medium. From narratives peppered with political propaganda to the use of film stars as crowd boosters at political rallies, Tamil Nadu became one of the few Indian states where the cinema became an ideological tool to fight politics (Hardgrave, 1973, 1975; Pandian, 1991). The link between Tamil politics and cinema has continued to be one of the primary areas of scholarship in Tamil popular culture (Vijayabaskar and Wyatt, 2007) even as some scholarship seeks to address non-political themes (Nakassis and Dean, 2007; Pandian, 2008; Vasudevan, 2002). Notable examples of recent scholarship on foreignness in Tamil cinema includes Ravi's (2008) reading of *Nala Damayanthi* in Australia; the intertwining of the identities of Malaysian Tamils with cinema (Ravindran, 2006) and an ethnographic account of migrant Tamil workers in Singapore consuming Tamil cinema (Devadas, 2011).

A paradoxical but critical starting point to our discussion is the foreign origin of scholarship on Tamil cinema. Film scholar Theodore Baskaran, who has worked on some of the pioneering monographs on Tamil cinema (Baskaran, 1996, 2009), notes that many of the earliest studies on Tamil cinema were done by foreign scholars from the West. He said,

In the 70s and 80s, they (foreign academics) realized that Tamil films are an important phenomenon to be studied. But, very few of them knew Tamil. So, you saw a lot of work emerging on the peripheral aspects of cinema such as fan clubs, posters, studios etc.

Baskaran noted the irony of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)'s cinematic emphasis on Tamilness over The Other, as he himself was refused an interview by DMK leader M.

Karunanidhi, who was also a scriptwriter. He described the situation:

I had been trying to get an interview with Karunanidhi for a very long time, but he kept dodging. Robert Hardgrave, who had just arrived from the U.S., made a request and was immediately granted an interview. Hardgrave was only a student then, but a newspaper even headlined that a U.S. professor interviews Karunanidhi for a study.

For his part, Hardgrave remembers being warmly welcomed by the Tamil film industry. Unlike Baskaran, who despite his deep knowledge of Tamil film history was trying to get a foothold within the system, Hardgrave navigated it quite easily and forged deep connections with some of the biggest stars of the industry. He says:

I remember that people were always welcoming and went on to form a very close friendship with Sivaji Ganesan. I never found people in awe of my 'foreignness' or made to feel it was an issue. I found all the actors that I interacted with very dignified, and well-traveled, and quite familiar with American culture.

Notwithstanding the path-breaking work of Hardgrave, his ease of access within the system that ironically represented Western men as outsiders on-screen, serves as an interesting point of departure for our analysis. We argue that the construction of the foreign — represented on-screen through geography, person, values, or cultural expression, has historically highlighted the tension between tradition and modernity. However, we find that in the last decade, particularly with the migration of many young Tamilians, this tension has come to the fore with more regularity and with greater problematization.

Our analysis comprises four main themes. First, we examine the historical representation of the foreign and the Diaspora in Tamil films. Second, we trace the flight Tamil films have taken toward different geographies and unearth the contexts of these spaces and the kind of characters that inhabit them. Third, we return homeward and explore the aspirations of the potential migrant. We end with a commentary on how the stay-at-home Tamil responds to the aspirations of the potential migrant and the Diaspora.

Analysis

The Foreign as Inferior

Among the earliest engagements that Tamil cinema had with the foreign was with present-day Myanmar (Burma), which had a significant Tamil-speaking population during the colonial period. Baskaran (1996) and Velayutham (2008) have written about the colonial government's role in pressuring filmmakers to support the British cause in World War II. Consequently, these British war films were often set around themes of (then-Japanese-occupied) Burma, a natural connection for Tamil expatriates. Even after the British left, and war films were no longer decreed, the success of the Burmese themed films led to the making of one of the biggest blockbuster hits in Tamil, *Parasakthi* (The Goddess). The iconic 1952 release launched Sivaji Ganesan into superstardom and serves as a starting point for our discussion on the returning migrant (Velayuthan, 2008). Although *Parasakthi* did not make any meaningful comment about the experience of the Diaspora, it did highlight the alienation of separation from the homeland and, more important, the role of the qualified, talented migrant who brings together his secular and indomitable Tamil spirit to overcome extreme adversity. The film is best remembered for being a masterful promotion of the DMK's ideology in which an element of

secular enlightened modernity is shown as inherent to being Tamil, even as the film remains memorable for the off-screen politics that surrounded its reception (Pandian, 1991).

Two years later in *Ratha Kaneer* (Tears of Blood) the specific issue of a conflict between tradition and westernized modernity was explored vividly. In *Ratha Kaneer*, M.R. Radha played the role of Mohan, who returns home after being educated abroad. Unlike *Parasakthi's* Gunasekaran, whose cosmopolitanism is constantly underlined by his fundamental Tamil values, in *Ratha Kaneer* the foreign influence of the West that corrupts is intensely etched in every aspect of Mohan's behavior — his appearance, his financial carelessness, his sexual debauchery. His long-suffering wife, in contrast, represents native purity with her culture, values and compassion. Although *Ratha Kaneer* remains a landmark film, it was not the first film to deal with the negatives of Western modernity. *Nava Yuvan* (Modern Youth), released in 1937, was the first and for a long time the only Tamil film shot in London. The film was shot on the basic premise of highlighting the superiority of Indian to European culture, emphasized by the return of the expatriate Tamilian from London to his Indian roots. The film was released with an alternate title, *Geethaa Saaram*, underlining the role of the Bhagavad Geeta in the protagonist's reformation (Satagopan, Bikshavathi & Rajamani, 2008).

The corrosive taint of the foreign experience was a frequently repeated theme in early films. The later expansion of Tamil intelligentsia and bureaucratic employment throughout the 19th Century relaxed Brahmanical attitudes toward leaving the homeland for work (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2010). Another DMK classic, the 1954 *Andha Naal* (That Day), also used the theme of foreign travel tainting the individual. Here, the corrupter is not social dissolution, but another seemingly foreign trait — greed. The lead character goes abroad as a scientist and returns as a greedy entrepreneur who will do anything to monetize his inventions. As with *Ratha Kaneer*, the

sin of foreignness is neutralized by a chaste Tamil woman, the virtuous wife. These films in several ways laid the foundation for the way the foreign, particularly the Western migrant Tamilian, would be portrayed on screen, but what about the spaces themselves?

The Geographies of The Foreign

Our students [in Peru] don't have a particularly good perception of Indian cinema.

We showed an Indian film, which had a song shot in Machu Picchu, singing a song in Tamil, with actors wearing Mayan-looking costumes. The biggest irony of it all is that the song is called 'Kilimanjaro.'

— Prof. Eduardo Villanueva Mansilla, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, speaking at the ICTD 2012 Conference in reference to the Rajinikanth film *Enthiran*

Well before the days of international travel budgets, filmmakers used overt elements of modernity — particularly dress and habits — to emphasize westernization of characters. The face of westernization was often occupied by the Anglo Indian wearing western dresses, going ballroom dancing, and holding secretarial jobs. The geographies of westernization, without lacking access to international locations, typically came either through images of urbanity (e.g., the 13-floor Life Insurance Building and the Gemini Flyover, both structural elements of modernity, were commonly featured in movies set in Madras after the 1970s) and hill stations, locales British officers were typically associated with. Commenting on the portrayal of foreignness in Tamil cinema, critic K. Hariharan notes:

The West has always been an illusion in Tamil films. In the older films, it was hill stations within the nation geography as places where the West went to rest. If you see songs of MGR, they would be shot in Ooty, Kodaikanal or Yercaud. They were spaces for the well-dressed, educated, and the liberated Women could be liberated and they

could be what is in a sense called the ‘gay abandon’. Here, they could sing, dance, and hug men. Not only the heroines, but also their mothers could achieve a certain kind of sensuality. They could wear cooling glasses, drive cars, drink tea from cups, and in all of this they would try to mimic the British. Language was also an allusion for the west. You had Major Sundarrajan. He would say one line in Tamil and immediately translate into English. ‘Get Out! Vellila Po!’ he would say.

The trend of using modern geographies has continued to the present day. Architecture, in particular high-rise buildings, is still one of the markers of modernity and is an integral part of any foreign scene. Thirty years after *Nava Yuvan*, Sivaji Ganesan’s *Sivantha Mann* (Red Soil) in 1969 was one of the few big studio releases set in a foreign country, with major sequences shot in Switzerland, France and Italy. The film used extensive shots of architectural landmarks but also featured exotic elements such as neon lights, fancy hotel rooms with leather upholstery, and cabaret dances, and a novel landscape for tropical south India — snow-capped mountains. One of the best-recognized ‘foreign’ films was MG Ramachandran’s 1973 *Ulagam Sutrum Valiban* (World Traveling Bachelor) that was shot at several locations around East Asia. The shooting coincided with the World’s Fair in Japan, and the film exploited the visual quality of its locations with long shots of public space elements of technology and development such as skyscrapers, flyovers, yachts, escalators, electronic wristwatches, and a massive TV screen display of Lenin. Yet the same aspiration and modernity embedded in the modern spaces is contrasted with the moral failure of the individual who inhabits it. Many of the visual elements of foreignness are peripheral to the plot and serve primarily to emphasize MGR’s conquest of the world. He rides speedboats away from international villains, roller-skates in a cowboy suit and

attracts foreign women willing to learn Tamil for his sake. The ultimate Tamil man wins the world, and the audience rejoices at a trip around the Orient.

Foreign locations were typically alluded to without any actual shooting abroad. After the bumper success of *Ulagam Sutrum Valiban*, the value of shooting on location, and using its strangeness as part of the visual narrative, begun to be seen as saleable, leading to a rush of films shot in the East (*Priya*, *Ninaithale Inikkum*, *Varuvan Vadivelan*, *Ullasa Paravaigal*, *Japanil Kalyanaraman*). Uma Vangal observes the box-office value of both the émigré audience and the local awareness of the Tamil connection in South East Asia:

With Singapore and Malaysia, the portrayal was always positive because of the resident Tamil populace there. In *Priya*, Singapore was shown as a multicultural society where everybody lived in harmony. Almost like how today, the Bollywood film *Zindagi na Milegi Dobara* is talked about as being a tourism video for Spain. The shift toward the East happened because filmmakers wanted to tap the audience there.

Sri Lanka and Burma, typically seen as proximate (one needn't even board an aircraft to get there!) did not have the modern status of foreign land, in part because they were part of British India. Right since *Sathi Leelavathi* in 1936, life in Sri Lanka had been depicted as one belonging to lower-class Tamil plantation workers. We see this pecking order of foreign countries repeated across several films. Although *Ulagam Sutrum Valiban* exoticized parts of the Orient, those regions still lacked the brand value of Europe and North America.

In the 1980s, one of the most important foreign-returned characters was that of Kamal Hassan in *Michael Madana Kama Rajan*. Here, the upper-class lead protagonist Madana returns from the London School of Business to run a giant enterprise, while one of his lost, identical quadruplet siblings (Michael, a petty criminal) wants to escape to Singapore. Thus Singapore

represents an attainable option for the lower-class Tamilian while Europe and North America remain restricted to the upper classes. This distinction is made in several films that showed lower-class Tamilians traveling to Malaysia and Singapore. A 1979 superhit starring Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth, *Ninaitthale Inikkum* (Sweet Memories), is a good example of this. Deepak (Rajinikanth) is traveling to Singapore for the first time, trying to strike up a conversation with a seemingly wealthy co-passenger.

Deepak: Singapore?

Co-passenger: (Nods in agreement)

Deepak: (In broken English) "Today flight delay, why?"

Co-passenger: (In Tamil) "You can speak Tamil."

Deepak: "Oh, I am sorry." (In Tamil) "Oh, you don't know how to speak English, is it?"

The portrayal of the young generation of stars in roles that included foreign locations was crafted in the aspirational scope of young urban Tamils. It was distinctly different from how the older generation of MGR and Sivaji Ganesan used the space to emphasize their conquest of everything foreign. The young stars of the 1970s and 1980s were the precursors of the millennial software engineers. While Kamal Haasan danced at the Arc de Triomphe in *Ullasa Paravaigal* in 1980, it would not become commonplace for Tamil films to show foreign locations until the post-liberalization years, with the expansion of cable television and a small but rapidly increasing Diaspora in the West.

Following a rush of Hindi films shot abroad, Tamil films started shooting song sequences in Europe, Mauritius and Oceania (Table 1). From the long standard locations such as Pykara Falls in Ooty or Athirapally Falls, Kerala, shooting moved to new favorites such as New Zealand

and Switzerland. From data compiled on key films shot abroad between 1996 and 2011, we see a gradual but very important shift from the standard foreign locations such as Switzerland and Australia toward more exotic locations by the mid-2000s, including Uzbekistan and Iceland. We see that although foreign locations are critical to the production value of the film, directors and audiences alike moved on from the Swiss Alps or Italian architecture to locations of exploration and increasing novelty. Although younger stars shot for locations like Iceland, Malta and Norway, the big daddy superstar Rajinikanth pulled off the ultimate coup by shooting atop Machu Picchu and Lençóis Maranhenses for his 2010 release *Enthiran*.

Characters Populating The Foreign Space

The 2006 film *Saravana* introduces the female lead Jyothika by taking the audience through her typical day in London. In a perfect case of reverse Orientalism, *Saravana* focuses only on images of foreign life acceptable to the audiences — the fancy car, a modern university, and lots of Caucasians. Jyothika's day in its environment of modern spaces spectacles a simulated reality, one that Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard saw in the way amusement parks had a hold on American imagination. In these representations, we find that though aspirations to wealth and status are socially sanctioned and encouraged, their acquisition problematizes the characters' relationship with the Tamil society they left behind.

Tamil films seldom present a complex or nuanced picture of the experience of the Diaspora and the journey through adopted lands — even in films that have largely been shot abroad, including *London*, *Nootrenbadhu*, *Nala Damayanthi*, and *Achchamundu! Achchamundu!* Instead, the woman who lives abroad and takes on the characteristics of her adopted land is invariably overly westernized or dissolute, for example Damayanthi (Geetu Mohandas) in *Nala Damayanthi*, Divya (Divya Spandana) in *Thoondil*, or Aishwarya (Mumtaj) in *London*.

Alternately, the Indian woman is at sexual risk in the debauched foreign lands, as in *Virudhagiri* and *Nala Damayanthi*, and it typically takes an upright Indian man to rescue her. The foreign-returned woman has often been portrayed in the same terms of nativity versus modernity that the urban woman in rural Tamil Nadu as seen in films like *Pattikada Pattanama*, where a modern foreign-returned Kalpana (Jayalalitha) is tamed by the son-of-the-soil Mookkaiyaan (Sivaji Ganesan) (Kaali, 2000).

Such themes of native masculinity trumping the feminine predisposition to westernization have continued in films like *Nala Damayanthi* (2003) and *Varanam Aayiram* (2008), which deal with the westernized Tamil woman in the foreign space, against a male Tamil protagonist (Ravi, 2008). In these films, the unwavering Tamil hero not only emphasizes a normative victory over the West but does so by showing his ability to be hybrid — compatible with modernity yet morally superior.

Another character that invariably finds his way into films in foreign locations is the lecherous Indian man, trying to hit on the local (almost always white) women, such as Mac (Vivek) in *Thoondil* and Kadhiraavan (Pandiarajan) in *London*. The assumptions for such scenarios are that foreign women are morally loose and readily available, and the Tamil man would serve quite well if needed. And yet a *lead* male character would never have a relationship with a non-Indian woman; that is almost exclusively for the comedian or a character artiste. Through these characters these films emphasize the possibility and the desirability of the Tamil man. A classic case is in *Kadhal Kavithai* (Poem of Love), in which the hero Vishwa (Prashanth) bumps into a Tamilian expatriate, Pandian (Thalaivasal Vijay), at a London restaurant having breakfast with his British wife. A conversation ensues between Vishwa and the wife, in which he

asks her why she married Pandian. She looks at Pandian romantically while answering his questions.

Vishwa: Why did you fall in love with him?

British wife: Because he sends money regularly to his wife in India.

Vishwa: Then why did you marry him?

British wife: Because I want to have an Indian's child. I find them affectionate towards their parents. Vishwa, can I ask you a favor? When you next go back to India can you get his wife to call him back to India?

Vishwa and Pandian then talk about what a wonderful wife she is. The entire conversation is serious. Another film in this genre was *Melnaattu Marumagal* (1975) in which two brothers marry two girls with very different pursuits in life. One marries a Caucasian woman who then becomes increasingly Indian as she falls in love with Indian culture, whereas the other brother marries an Indian woman who is increasingly drawn to Western and debauched ways. This theme of American women falling in love with Tamil ways is repeated in *Goa* (2011).

In all of these representations, the Tamil Diaspora is rarely afforded a point of view, and when characters live abroad they are inevitably defined by their longing for the motherland, such as the young medical professional pining for home in *Nootrenbadhu* (2011). The Tamilian is portrayed as being in a state of disequilibrium while abroad, which can only be resolved by returning home. Another example comes from an important film from 2009, *Achchamundu!* *Achchamundu!* (There is fear! There is fear!). This Tamil film, the first to be shot entirely in the United States, is centered on a non-resident Indian couple and their young child, who is targeted by an American pedophile. The character of an American predator is used to highlight the risk to

the Indian in the foreign culture; it also implies that only a foreigner would be capable of committing such an act of perversion.

The grand narrative of the non-resident Indian (NRI) privileges the position of the native at home, and the NRI is helmed in by suspicion or caricatures. Girded together with gender, caste and labor statements, these themes serve as a commentary on the sociology of both the foreign returned and the foreign bound.

'Local Party' vs. 'Foreign Party'

In matters of the heart, the NRI is always at a disadvantage. The foreign *mapillai* (groom) finds that his status as a foreign-returned groom is undermined by either his villainous intentions, his fundamental inferiority to the values and virile appeal of the local son of the soil, or the comic relief he provides as a misfit in the changed landscape of the society he was once a part of. In short, the foreign-returned groom is frequently the loser in the romantic toss, right from the 1960s with films like *Sarada* (1964), and has typically served to highlight the important qualities of the "local party," who wins the love triangle. Commenting on the untrustworthiness of the NRI groom, filmmaker Menon points out that the privilege of the foreign automatically makes the groom a suspicious person when he comes to bride-hunt. Referring to his 1997 film *Minsara Kanavu*, Menon says:

The foreign *mapillai* is not someone to be trusted. You saw that playing out even in Mani Ratnam's *Alaipayuthey*. In my film, the NRI (Arvind Swamy) was coming in as a guy who was privileged and would take away the girl, and the hero of the film was the guy who was a barber (Prabhu Deva) and belonged to the backward class and who was also trying to get the girl.

The NRI groom often becomes the representation of the foreign influence that the typically self-made son-of-the-soil hero must fight to win a love triangle. However, the NRI does have redeeming qualities. Along the journey he becomes more responsible, less impulsive, more stable groom material. Thus we have characters such as the wayward young man Baskaran played by Arya in the 2010 rom-com *Boss Engira Baskaran* (Boss alias Baskaran) or the local professional up against the well-spoken NRI as was the case in *Mundhinam Partheney*, *Minnale*, *Kanda Naal Mudhal*, *Varushumellam Vasantham*.

The NRI comes into a complex set of relationships that must all balance out with the best possible consequences for the native son. Thus, in *Nenjil Jil Jil* (2006), *Aalayam* (1962) and *Sarada* (1964), even though the foreign returned prospect would be a better option, the lead woman having given her heart to the other option makes such a relationship untenable. This is true even when the local hero demonstrates ethical lapses. In *Minnale*, computer science college topper Rajeev Samuel (Abbas) loses his fiancée to the mechanical engineer college rowdy Rajesh (R. Madhavan), who lies and cheats and unknowingly assumes Rajeev's identity to woo Reena (Reema Sen). Throughout the film, Rajesh's friends refer to Rajeev as the "American party" while Rajesh dons the mantle of the Tamilian, the local party, even while rejecting job offers in closer-to-home Singapore.

Now even though the NRI groom loses, the important question is why he starts off as a likely and even desirable candidate for the Tamil girl. According to Vangal the desirability of the NRI groom is qualified by caste and class of the bride's parents. She says:

The U.S. *mapillai* in Tamil cinema is a Brahmin aspiration. I don't find that obsession majorly succeeding in cinema except perhaps in the very high-class

cinema of Mani Ratnam. NRI grooms succeeding on screen is not a trend that can be singled out.

Social research shows that the American *mapillai* appears to be a sought after prospect in the Tamil Brahmin community. In an ethnographic study of the community, Kalpagam (2005) observes that an alliance with a U.S.-based groom is much sought after, but such an alliance is also spoken about as the America *varan* or America boon. Kalpagam notes that one film in particular was implicated in the imagination of the Tamil Brahmin interviewees — *47 Naatkal* (47 days), a film whose main plot demonstrated the perils of the foreign *varan*, notably infidelity and the desirability of the woman from an Indian village who is expected to serve as a domestic help for the foreign wife and a sexual object for the Indian husband.

The NRI as Hero

When the NRI accepts Indian values and makes India his home, however, he can easily play the hero. In one of Tamil cinema's biggest hits in recent times, Rajinikanth played the titular role of the returning expatriate (*Sivaji*, 2007). As a successful computer engineer, Sivaji represents competence and wealth. He dresses like a metrosexual, has a laptop with futuristic voice recognition, and fights like a martial arts maestro. As a superstar with a cult following, Rajinikanth rarely strays from the script – he plays one of two characters – either a proletarian hero of the masses, such as a cab driver, a laborer, a milkman, or someone that people look up to – a doctor or an industrialist. Rajinikanth playing an NRI is particularly salient because his films have tremendous appeal throughout the state, even among the poorest audiences. Thus both the profession of software engineering as a source of legitimacy, and the specific status of an NRI as being a weapon of positive possibility are pitched in the film to make a social statement of aspiration – the NRI engineer is the quintessential Tamil Hero.

Sivaji's American-learned entrepreneurial do-good spirit clashes with the corrupt bureaucrats and politicians and sets up a scheme to take all the tax-evaded cash of India, launder it using his foreign channels, and bring it back to the country to uplift the poor. Vijayabaskar and Wyatt (2007) comment that with its plot, the film not only serves as a telling reflection of the fast changing Indian economy, but its theme also allows it to resonate with a pan-Indian audience. With Sivaji, the charity no longer only stayed at home. It joined forces with the resurging Indian economy and tried to carve a space for itself by wresting control from the entrenched power centers in the country. Says K.Hariharan,

There is a very symbolic shot of the one rupee flying into the air. So, you see this capital is not American anymore. Shankar (the director) would like to say that why are we looking at money only from the US? There is money all over the world, now. You can draw money from anywhere in the world. So this Sivaji can bring money from anywhere. This is the Indian truth today. We can knock the entrenched corruption with this money. The bureaucrat, who is the feudal patriarch, can now be displaced by the global patriarch of money that Sivaji represents.

Though *Sivaji* is probably one of the most important films in this canon, the good competent foreign returnee is by no means the only one in Tamil cinema. Others include *Anbe Vaa* (1966), *Moondru Mugam* (1983) and *Michael Madana Kama Rajan* (1990). In Rajinikanth's prior film *Chandramukhi*, he plays foreign-returned Dr. Saravanan, a psychiatrist who deals with a woman's haunting using a mix of Western psychology and native mysticism. The ability to switch gears between the traditional and the modern in *Chandramukhi* makes the hero endearing and successful when he appropriately pays homage to traditional knowledge by recognizing the boundaries of Western science.

Perhaps one of the most important foreign returnee films coincided with the start of India's economic liberalization — the churning that accompanied the new agenda for the political economy. *Thevar Magan* (Son of the Thevar) was India's entry to the Best Foreign Language film for the Academy Awards. Released in 1992, the film was emblematic of the value clashes India was experiencing as the new strained to break free of the old even while straddling traditional caste and power equations (Srinivas & Kaali, 1998). As a NRI returnee, the accoutrements that Sakthivel (Kamal Hassan) has gathered from his foreign sojourn include long outlandish, "punk style" hair and equally wild ambitions. He dreams of starting a fast-food restaurant chain in an urban city. He deferentially explains his restaurant plans to his father over dinner served the traditional way, on plantain leaves while seated on the floor. Predictably, his father, the *Periya Thevar*, or village chief (Sivaji Ganesan), is unimpressed with his son's plans.

Not only was the film an instant hit in Tamil, it was also snapped up for a Hindi remake and garnered a more pan-Indian audience in 1997 as *Virasat* (Inheritance). *Thevar Magan* is an important film to understand the new themes of aspiration that were slowly taking root in Tamil Nadu. Caught between feuding relatives and traditions of loyalty to one's village, Sakthi is forced to give up his entrepreneurial ambitions, his dreams of an urban life, and his non-Tamil girlfriend so he can assume responsibility of steering his village through turbulent conflict after the death of his father. In Sakthivel's unrealized ambitions, we see the first traces of economic assertiveness that fully take wing 10 years later in *Sivaji*. For instance, the discourse of entrepreneurship in *Thevar Magan* as shown through the father's dismissal of Sakthivel's restaurant plans is indicative of the dissonance between old-order thinking and new, as well as the static nature of caste — where running a fast-food restaurant was thought to be beneath the

Thevar. The winds of change from the West had begun inspiring a desire to take individual initiative and risks rather than carry on under the mantle of traditions focused on the collective.

The Economic Aspirant

The idea of going abroad began to represent a change in Tamil cinema that was a reflection of a middle-class desire to acquire money and power and subvert the constraints on progress imposed by a life in India. Commenting on the sudden rise of NRIs in Tamil cinema, Rajiv Menon says:

By going abroad, you free the person from gender and caste issues. Success in America is a celebration of the fact that the problems that beset India have been circumvented and money has been made.

The 2008 Tamil remake of the Hindi *Khosla ka Ghosla*, titled *Poi Solla Porom* (We are going to lie) is an illustration of Menon's point. The film details a middle-class family's struggle to prove ownership of a patch of land that has been taken over by mafia squatters. Even as the family, led by father Sathyanathan (Nedumudi Venu), plots, plans and resorts to underhanded means to reclaim their land the promising son of the family, software engineer Uppilinathan (Karthik Kumar), looks for ways to escape the cesspool of rowdy politics and deceit in India and migrate to the United States for a better life.

In *Nala Damayanthi*, Ramji Narayanaswami Iyer (R. Madhavan) is a cook who leaves a perfectly happy life in Tamil Nadu for a job in Australia to pay for his sister's dowry. As Ravi (2008) notes, in this film the foreign shores of Australia become synonymous with wealth for Ramji's relatives in a small village in Palakkad. However, not only did *Nala Damayanthi* vividly illustrate the economic aspirations that push Ramji out of the idyllic life of the village to make sense of the foreign, it also portrayed the extent of personal compromise that the economic rationale demands of him. In Ramji's effort to earn money to ensure his sister's happiness, he

agrees to a marriage of convenience to an already-engaged Sri Lankan Tamil Christian girl in exchange for money to secure legal residency in Australia.

Although *Nala Damayanthi* employed plenty of comic situations to highlight the disparities and conflicts that an uneducated Brahmin cook faces in Australia, such conflicts are not always portrayed with humor. Director Cheran's 2000 directorial venture *Vetri Kodi Kattu* (Raise the Flag of Victory) is a grim story that deals with the aspirations of unemployed young men with little or no education. The film won the National Film Award for Best Film on Other Social Issues in 2000. It opens with the following bleak one-liner: "Dedicated to Indians living and withering in alien nations."

Vetri Kodi Kattu is a sharp comment on unemployed young men who seek labor jobs on foreign shores to escape poverty. The film questions the whole foreign aspiration and concludes by invoking the beauty of the Tamil soil. "This soil lacks nothing. Why should we go abroad and bow down to those foreigners, living like slaves and refugees?"

The Brain Drain Conundrum

In Tamil cinema, the canonical NRI film is that of a wealthy globetrotter, and the lead character's travel abroad is often intertwined with the destiny of that class of society, which can afford to send its children abroad. The new "IT"-migrant, usually portrayed as working in the technology sector in the US, is different in that he is frequently a homegrown boy who makes it abroad based on his skills or hard work, like in *Yaaradi Nee Mohini* (2009). However, the suave foreign-returned fresh MBAs of *Minsara Kanavu* (1998) and *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) are still very much alive in the old Tamil film model of the returning young NRI. However, with the newer breed the knowledge gained abroad is not always useful in the context of home, and often this knowledge has to be reworked to be of any benefit back at home.

Commenting on Ajith's character as the foreign returned Manohar who struggles to become a director in *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, Menon says:

When you show a person who has passed out of REC (Regional Engineering College) or IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) you are endowing him with having competed and won, but when you show a person has studied abroad and has returned, probably his father has paid for it, so it is about privilege. In *Kandukondain* you will find that Ajith has studied abroad but is struggling in the Tamil film industry. The foreign knowledge does not privilege him, and he has to start from zero again.

So, what happens when the educated middle class begins questioning the rationale of going abroad? A couple Tamil films featuring students choosing a Western education have made a statement that there are nobler and more worthwhile things to do at home. Set against the backdrop of student politics, Mani Ratnam's *Ayutha Ezhuthu* (2004) gave voice to both sides of the coin. Notably, it was also released in Hindi with a different set of mainstream Bollywood actors.

In this film Arjun (Siddharth) plays a happy-go-lucky engineering student whose only immediate desire is to secure a U.S. visa to study abroad for a master's degree, while Michael Vasanth (Suriya), a college topper and student leader, rebuffs generous scholarship offers from prestigious U.S. universities to stay home and contest local politics. The two characters are contrasted in important ways. Michael is a rugged homegrown boy who does not shy from a bare-knuckled fist fight, whereas the clean-shaven, t-shirt wearing, discotheque-going Arjun is infantilized as a new-generation kid who matures into a nation-conscious youth and eventually chooses his nation over his foreign dreams. Thus Arjun's entry into student politics is underlined

as particularly important because of his status as a privileged and traditionally apathetic young man who is now bringing top-down change alongside the bottom-up change represented by Michael.

An important sequence in *Ayuthu Ezhuthu* is the visa scene filmed outside the U.S. consulate in Chennai. Arjun is shown sneaking out of turn into a long winding line of visa applicants, where Arjun's friend tells him he has been waiting since 4:30 am. The scene demonstrates an almost frenzied desire to go to the U.S., a concept featured prominently in other films about protagonists trying to go abroad. It is used in the 2011 film *Sollitharava*. Shwetha (Sharmila) is a biotechnology student so desperate for the visa to join her family in the U.S. that she faints outside the consulate after standing so long in the blazing sun. In contrast, her landlady's son, Arun (Sivan), is a college dropout who takes his social responsibilities seriously. As with Michael in *Ayutha Ezhuthu*, Arun persuades Shwetha to stay in India, in part by directly addressing the "brain drain" question — why waste your talents in the U.S. when they're needed here? Another blockbuster hit that took a direct stance on brain drain was the 2011 release *7am Arivu* (7th Sense). In the closing sequence, the protagonist Aravind, played by Suriya, delivers a homily against the brain drain of Tamilians. Although *7am Arivu* sought to very explicitly foreground the glory of Tamil culture and did not overtly address educational aspirations, the climactic dialogues delivered by Aravind demonstrate the way that immigration aspirations of educated youth are slowly being questioned in contemporary Tamil cinema.

In portraying the native Tamil who not only stays but persuades others to stay, Tamil films differ deeply from their Bollywood counterparts. Mainstream Hindi cinema is friendlier to the desires of the middle class to be upwardly mobile and partake in global market, whereas Tamil films portray the benefits of insulation from the foreign.

The theme of foreignness has been dealt with similarly in other South Indian cinema as well. The theme of the foreign-returned software engineer has been more visible in Telugu cinema than in Malayalam or Kannada. Telugu cinema had a higher incidence of mythological themes till the 1960s and a focus on urban male audiences till the late 1990s, which has led to more insular and inward-looking narratives. Kerala has presented a unique take on foreignness in southern cinema since the increase in the expatriate population living and working in the Persian Gulf states in the 1970s. The early phases of the Gulf-related films showed living and working abroad as an aspirational element, especially for urban men. Thus in films like *Akkare Ninnoru Maran* (1985), a suitor pretends to be working in the Gulf to prove his worth to a girl's father; in *Ponn Muttyidunna Tharavu* (1988) a suitor from the Gulf is seen as preferable to the local man, even though the local represents perseverance; and in *Nadodikkattu* (1987), the path out of poverty and unemployment for two young men is to try to get to Dubai. The theme has endured, and much recent Malayalam cinema has focused on life in the Gulf from the perspective of male protagonists who conquer the region by becoming men of means (*Dubai*, 2001; *Balram vs Tharadas*, 2006; *Sagar alias Jacky*, 2009; *Casanova*, 2012) or on the physical glamor of life in the region (*Diamond Necklace*, 2012).

However, unlike the predominantly aspirational element of the films in the 1980s, when the public discourse of the Gulf was associated with bringing back wealth, a darker side has emerged as the class complexity of work in the Gulf has gained greater consciousness in the public sphere. As a result a number of more recent films have focused on the economic conditions of laborers in the region (*Arabikatha*, 2007; *Diamond Necklace*, 2012), social conditions of life in the region (*Garshom*, 1998; *Perumazhakkalam*, 2004) and women in domestic work (*Khadamma*, 2011).

However, at the same time films now focus on second-generation expatriate returnees and their adjustment to life in the mother country. The themes in these films invariably touch upon the temporality of life in foreign lands, with the ultimate call of return to the homeland (*Nandanam*, 2002; *Swapna Sanchari*, 2011; *Usthad Hotel*, 2012).

Conclusion

We traced Tamil film representations of the foreign from the post-independence era to today and found that the emphasis on the purity of the native land trumping the inadequacies of the foreign West, which have slowly decreased in Hindi cinema, continue to be central themes in Tamil cinema. Our analysis shows that although the non-resident is definitely a central part of the new Tamil cinema, he or she remains an object of othering, even when defined in aspirational terms. Unlike Hindi cinema, in which a number of films have dealt with the diasporic experience in foreign lands (e.g., *My Name is Khan*, *Patiala House*), Tamil films deploy the West, its spaces, and the Diaspora in ways that serve to maintain the sanctity of Tamil pride and morality, as observed by Silverstone (2007). Consequently even with a sizable global Diaspora, the reel life of the Tamil migrants is rarely felicitous of them or their viewpoints.

Tamil cinema, in some respects, has remained static within its limited imagination of the foreign. Its newer elements, however, allow the stay-at-home Tamil to watch film stars sing and dance in exotic locations away from the more commonplace screen sets. Tamil cinema allows returned migrants to break the molds of NRI suspicion and caricatures if played by bona fide marquee stars. In these situations the Western experience acts as the savior even as stars maintain the superiority of Tamilness in eventually choosing to return to the homeland.

Thus eventually the salvation of the characters in Tamil films lies within the geographies of Tamil Nadu. The foreign, for all its attractions, rarely serves up a happy ending on-screen. For a

cinema that has traditionally been deeply political in its narratives, the centrality of the tension may have moved from Tamil as superior to Hindi to Tamil as superior to all Western culture. Yet the song fundamentally remains the same. It is a home party, and only the Tamilian who is present in person can do the *koothu* to its tunes.

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Table 1

Sample locations for song shootings for films from mid-1990s to 2011 illustrate an increasingly diverse range of locations.

Film	Location	Year
Indian	Australia	1996
Kaadhal Kavithai	Morocco	1996
Chinna Raja	Mauritius	1997
Ullasam	Switzerland	1997
Jeans	United States	1998
Kadhal Sugamanudhu	Mauritius	1999
Naam Iruvar Nammaku Iruvar	South Africa	1999
Kandukondain Kandukondain	Scotland	2000
Kushi	New Zealand	2000
12B	Jordan	2001
Shahjahan	New Zealand	2001
Hey nee Romba Azhaga Irukke	Syria	2002
Nala Damayanthi	Australia	2003
Ennakku 20 Unnaku 18	Italy	2004
Chandramukhi	Turkey	2005
Pokkiri	Australia	2006
Sivaji	Spain	2007
Dhaam Dhoom	Russia	2008
Jeyam Kondaan	Uzbekistan	2008

Ayan	Namibia	2009
Kandhasamy	Mexico	2009
Aadhavan	Iceland	2009
Singam	Oman	2010
Vinnaithaandi Varuvaya	Malta	2010
Enthiran	Peru & Brazil	2010
Ko	Norway	2011

Note: Table adapted from location searches on imdb.com, wherewasitshot.com and first-hand knowledge of the films.