

The Raw and the Husky

On Timbral Qualia and Ethnolinguistic Belonging

During my fieldwork in Chennai in the 2010s, I often heard the word *husky*. It was used about female and male voices alike to describe a wide variety of timbral and pitch characteristics that differed from the playback voices prized in earlier decades. A young singer, for instance, described her own voice: “Husky means not a clear tone. There will be some bass in my voice, some air. . . . When I was growing up, my mother would be listening to Tamil film songs. I would hear the beautiful thin tones of Susheela, Janaki, Chitra. I would think I could never sing like that because my voice has this huskiness. How would people accept it?”

Another singer described the “thin” voice of Susheela to me as “very nasal, not projected.” The *kuralinimai* (sweetness) of Susheela’s style, she explained, was produced by Susheela’s “striving for only a head voice,” a purified tone that quite literally seemed to come only from the head and nowhere else. The husky voice, by contrast, used elements of a “chest voice.” A voice teacher in Chennai explained it to me in terms of the distinction between “warm” and “bright” voices in Western operatic and popular singing. “Husky,” in letting breath into the tone, was the opposite of an “efficient” mode of vocal production. “Basically any sound that doesn’t have complete clarity is called husky. . . . Husky is if there are pixels in the voice, any reduction of brightness.”¹

The voice teacher’s digital metaphor aptly associates the aesthetic of huskiness with the time of India’s post-liberalization period, which coincided with the switch to digital recording and postproduction technologies. By the 2010s, *husky* had become a catchall term, as well as, according to him, an overused quality. The children he worked with on a reality TV show, he said, were “conditioned” toward husky voice and used it as their default; he saw it as his job to train them out of it. “Back when I was learning,” he said, “if we sang in a husky tone, we’d get whacked.” Many young singers complained that the husky voice had come to be

used indiscriminately; it had become such a desired quality that music directors would ask for “impossible” combinations like “husky and loud” or “husky and high pitch.” Despite these complaints about the overuse of the husky voice, however, its ubiquity, particularly in such aspirational sites as music reality TV shows, indicates that it is positively valued.

Likewise, although the voice teacher complained about the imprecise use of the term *husky*, its wide semantic reach indicates, in fact, both its social salience and conventionalized status. Although the use of the term to describe voice quality has its own history in the American context, it never became as widespread or legitimized a way of describing voice quality as it has in the Tamil film industry.² It was almost always the first word mentioned by young singers when I asked them about terms used to describe voices. And in the recording sessions I observed, “husky” was treated as a quality that any singer could produce on demand. “Do you want it open or husky?” or “Can you make it a little more husky?” were the two phrases I heard the most. In the parlance of young singers and music directors, a husky voice was opposed to a voice they called “raw,” which was marked by qualities such as “open,” “harsh,” or “shouting.” “Husky” was more closely related to qualities like “soft” and “subtle,” both of which demanded a breathiness in the voice.

This chapter examines the reorganization of singing voices and vocal aesthetics in the post-liberalization period. I discuss the ways in which “husky” and “raw,” as vocal aesthetics, are constructed in opposition to the earlier gendered ideals of vocal sound that were dominant in the 1960s. As we saw in chapters 2, 3, and 4, ideal male voices, those associated with heroic and morally upstanding male characters, were described as *ganam* (strong, weighty) and *velli* (bright, ringing). Idealized female voices, associated with female characters within the normative bounds of kinship and marriage, were relatively high in pitch, with a slightly nasal timbre, and produced with a distinct absence of projection, all characteristics that contributed to their *kuralinimai* (voice sweetness). The aesthetics of “husky” and “raw” embody different but still distinctly gendered orientations to Tamil ethnolinguistic belonging and claims to global cosmopolitanism in the post-liberalization context.

I begin this chapter with relatively subtle changes set in motion in the mid-1970s and then move to the more dramatic shifts that occurred later, in the 1990s and early 2000s, as part of the cultural effects of India’s economic liberalization. New possibilities for female singers’ vocal sound emerged as sonic elements previously associated with the vampy role first became dispersed among singers rather than concentrated in one in the 1970s and 1980s, and then were revalued as signifiers of liberation and cosmopolitanism after the 1990s. This process began with the admission of breathiness into the voice and later extended to the use of lower pitch and different timbres and techniques influenced by Western rock, pop, and jazz vocal styles. *Husky* emerged as a generalized descriptor for these voices, to name an alternative to the idealized “clear,” “sweet” voices of heroines of earlier decades. The emergence of “husky” as a voice quality was also tied to the shifting aesthetics of the male voice. As new ideals of “sweetness” and “tenderness” emerged for

the male voice in the 1970s, the mix of Tamilness and heroic masculinity that T. M. Soundararajan's voice had embodied became a specialty role rather than the default. Beginning in the 1990s, huskiness would become a quality that was not only admissible but often desired in male voices, further contrasting with the aesthetic that TMS's voice had exemplified.

The impact of India's economic and cultural liberalization on playback singing has been described by several scholars as an opening up, a lifting of restrictions on the female voice as music directors broke from the model of using the same few singers over and over again and instead sought out new voices in the 1990s (e.g., Sarrazin 2014; Mason 2014; Sundar 2017). Yet as I show, the admission of these new voices has involved a complex politics of class, caste, and ethnic identity. Hierarchies of gendered respectability have not disappeared with the blurring of the virgin/vamp dichotomy but have instead been reframed more intensively along these other axes. The resulting recombination of gender and generic conventions is most apparent in the postmillennial genre of film song known as *kūttu*, which I discuss at the end of this chapter, where sexualized dance performance, raunchy lyrics, and "vulgar" vocal performance are combined with gendered articulations of Tamilness.

QUALITIES, QUALIA, AND QUALISIGNS

A crucial connection between sounds' sensuous qualities and their social meanings can be traced through the linkages between what linguistic anthropologists have identified as primary and secondary indexicality (e.g., Silverstein 2016; Inoue 2002)—that is, between the immediate situation of interaction/voicing and the imagined broader social world. Primary indexicality is generated from the relationships between the speaker and others: the "stance" he or she takes with regard to others in the situation at hand. In this context, as I will show, the primary indexicality of both the husky and the raw voice is a stance that rejects earlier gendered norms of vocal sound. The secondary indexicality, enabled by this diacritic mark of difference, consists of the socially recognized characters, figures, types, and chronotopes to which these new vocal sounds point: the global/cosmopolitan, youthful post-liberalization subject or the local, "Tamil" village folk or urban subaltern. The concepts of primary and secondary indexicality provide a way to connect the sonic, embodied voice with the act of voicing: assuming the voice of or aligning with the perspective of a particular typified, recognizable persona or figure (see table 1).

In what follows, I describe a shift in the kinds of vocal sound that are valued, as well as a shift in the meanings attached to those sounds. For a style or aesthetic to become enregistered, it not only needs to be widely recognized (sometimes, though not necessarily, indicated by the emergence of a label or term) but also integrated into a semiotic economy in which it functions as a register, contrastable with other styles. Once enregistered, particular ways of cultivating the sonic and material voice can function not merely indexically but iconically, their sensuous

TABLE 1. Characteristics and Indexical Associations of Husky and Raw Voice

Commonly Used Metapragmatic Terms Denoting Voice-Type		Husky Voice “husky,” “soft,” “subtle”	Raw Voice “raw,” “open,” “rough”
Qualia of singing voice	Phonation mode	breathy: inefficient, audible friction in vibration of vocal folds	rough (for male voice): aperiodic vibration of vocal folds; creak
	Pitch	low (for female voice)	high (for female voice)
	Phonetic aspects	Westernized accent	clear/exaggerated Tamil enunciation
	Volume/projection	soft, nonprojected	loud, belted, projected
	Other sound characteristics	audible inhales and exhales	harsh sibilants, dry audio quality
Film-internal associations and functions	Musical genres and features	“melody” songs, melismatic vocal lines	küttu, gāna songs, prominent beat/rhythm
	Diegetic content	romantic, love/sentiment, heterosexual coupling	sexual desire, lust/vulgarity, male homosociality
	Characters	hero and heroine	“village aunty,” urban male ruffian, comedic sidekick, item girl, vamp
Primary/first-order indexicality	Immediate stance toward earlier vocal norms	opposition between new and old vocal norms (generational/era distinctions: pre- and post-liberalization)	transgression of earlier norms (along class/caste lines rather than generational axis)
		ambiguously gendered (in opposition to clear gendered norms of <i>kuralinimai</i> , <i>ganam</i>)	clearly gendered (different conventions for producing raw female voice vs. raw male voice)
Secondary/second-order indexicality	Gendered characterological traits	“ordinary” urban youthful masculinity, urban upper/middle-class femininity	subaltern masculinity, folk, lower class femininity
	Chronotopic associations	global, cosmopolitan, liberalized subject; sleek urban spaces, foreign locales	“local,” folk subject; village, illicit spaces of city, <i>purampokku</i> (urban wasteland)
	Ethnolinguistic and racialized indexicalities	English-educated, ethnolinguistically ambiguous, lightness/whiteness	Tamil, darkness/blackness

qualities transferrable across modalities and media and to persons as well (Gal 2013, 32), such that the qualities of a husky voice or a raw voice become powerful tools for indexing socially defined and recognizable types. As Susan Gal has noted, for this iconic function to emerge, the perceived sensuous qualities of any vehicle or mode of expression (e.g., the “softness” of a language or the “harshness” of a way of singing) must be selected and must attain a degree of social reality; that is, they need to be felt as “existentially real” across a group of people (Gal 2013, 32–33). This happens not because the sounds of a language or a way of singing have an inherent meaning but because they become effectively juxtaposed with other languages or ways of singing. Although vocal sound might seem more immediately and unproblematically sensuous than language, the existential reality of its sensuous qualities is nonetheless achieved through processes that are sociohistorical and semiotic in nature.

The emergence of the term *husky* in the 1990s reflects a new articulation of an aesthetic that was previously not abstracted as a general category but was, rather, associated with a specific voice, that of L. R. Eswari. In the 1960s, as we saw in chapter 4, Eswari’s repertoire of vocal techniques, including breathy singing and effects, vibrato, and Western-style singing, was used to animate characters outside the bounds of female respectability. Whereas Susheela’s vocal style was easily spoken about as an example of the larger valorized quality of *kuralinimai*, there was no larger abstract category into which Eswari’s vampish vocal performances could be subsumed. This was not simply because no language had yet developed to describe them. It was that although they could be heard, performed, and used, these vocal techniques could not be spoken of; to do so would be to dignify and generalize them. To be contained, they had to stay particular, grounded in the proper name of Eswari herself.

In Peircean terms, we might say that the qualia of Eswari’s voice, though certainly used to powerful effect, had not yet become generalized as a conventionalized qualisign.³ Peirce’s concept of the qualisign clarifies the relationship between culturally recognized and articulated sensuous categories and the kinds of sounds and acts that are considered to exemplify them. Qualisigns occupy Peirce’s category of thirdness (generality, habit, convention). They arise from qualities that are embodied in things, a bundle or package that itself acts as a sign, that is often lexicalized, and that has “a privileged role within a larger system of value” (Harkness 2013, 14). As Harkness suggests, qualisigns necessarily involve the experience of qualia, “culturally conceptualized sensuous qualit[ies] that people orient to, interact in terms of, and form groups around,” which are often conceptualized in terms of more general abstracted qualities. “The term *quality* refers to abstract attributional categories of qualitative experience (e.g., ‘softness’ or ‘roughness,’ which can transcend specific modalities or sensory channels), while the term *qualia* refers to actual instantiations of sensuous quality, such as the particularly soft give of a pillow or the particular style and decibel level of a performance of music” (Harkness 2013, 14–15).

The “auspiciousness” of a red wedding sari (Daniel 1984, 31), the “lightness” of a body that gives rather than consumes (Munn 1986), and the “huskiness” of a breathy or low-pitched voice are all examples of conventionalized qualisigns. As these examples suggest, the transformation of a quality or set of qualities into a qualisign involves a conventionalization of those qualities in two senses: first, they signify a generalized aesthetic that can be instantiated by multiple different qualia embodied in different modalities and vehicles, and second, a conventionalized and elaborated social meaning is attributed to the sensuous quality. In the process, the association between the sensuous quality, the vehicle of its expression, and its meaning acquires a social facticity that makes it seem existentially real.

VOICING FEMALE DESIRE IN THE 1970S

In the case of the husky voice, this process began with the dispersal of the vampy singing role among various female singers in the 1970s and 1980s. Though sonic elements associated with the vamp could now be performed by different singers, however, there was still no generalized word or category for the aesthetic. It was, instead, only implied by the ways that specific singers or songs were characterized. Consider, for example, this scene from the 1978 film *Aval appadithan* (‘That’s the way she is).

For the better part of the film, the hero, a young and sensitive filmmaker named Arun (actor Kamal Hassan), is attempting to get Manju (actress Srividya), a sophisticated and independent modern woman who works for an advertising agency, to work with him on a documentary film project about the lives of women. He goes to Manju’s house to explain his idea of interviewing the playback singer S. Janaki (then at the height of her fame and ubiquity in Tamil cinema) and ends up talking to Manju’s sister. “Oh, you mean ‘Maccāne pārttīnkālā’ Janaki?” the sister says, immediately identifying the singer with a hit song from the 1976 film *Anakkili*. A bit disconcerted, Arun quickly replies, “Actually I was thinking of ‘Siṅkāravēlanē’ Janaki,” referring to an earlier Janaki song from the 1962 film *Konjum salangai*.

A set of meaningful contrasts is packed into this brief exchange. “Maccāne pārttīnkālā” (Have you seen my man?) is sung by *Anakkili*’s free-spirited heroine, Annam, as an expression of her love and desire as she is pictured dancing alone in the public space of fields and roads. The vocal style prominently features the end-line lilts and voice drops that signal a bawdy “folk” style, while the lyrics and song picturization suggest a female character unafraid to voice and celebrate her own sexual desire. By contrast, “Siṅkāravēlanē tēvā,” a song addressing the Tamil Hindu god Murugan, is sung by the shy and diffident heroine Shanta only after she is prodded repeatedly by the hero. The musical style, constructed as “pure” and “classical” through its doubling by the nagaswaram, the song’s devotional lyrical content, and the picturization, which contrasts Shanta’s resolutely still visage and stationary body as she sings with the mobile faces and bodies of her male

accompanists, all work to locate the song squarely within the “singing frame” that, as I have argued, was so important to the construction of licit vocal femininity in the 1960s (see also chapter 4).

But this quick exchange also registers the blurring, by the mid-1970s, of the division of female vocal labor that had firmly divided songs belonging to the chaste mother or virginal sister/girlfriend characters from those belonging to the vamp characters. Janaki, who came to dominate female singing roles in the 1970s, sang both licit “melody” and “classical” songs, as well as more bawdy, folk-inspired numbers. If Susheela had been known for her pure, “sweet” voice that represented female characters within the bounds of modesty, with Eswari as her foil, Janaki came to be known, in the 1970s and 1980s, for her capacity to sing for many different types of characters.

The initial blurring of the rigid dichotomization of the female voice occurred in the context of a major shift in the landscape of Tamil cinema. By the mid-1970s, the two dominant star-heroes of earlier decades, M. G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan, had passed their prime. It would take another decade for a subsequent pair of “rival” hero-actors, Rajnikanth and Kamal Hassan, to start dominating Tamil cinema as mass heroes, so, for a time, films turned toward more experimental subjects. Prominent in this decade-long interlude were films that centered on unmarried women leading unconventional lives, such as *Apoorva ragangal* (1975) and *Aval appadithan*, as well as the so-called neonativity films that focused on village life and also often revolved around female characters, such as *Anakkili* and *16 Vayadiniley* (1977). In contrast to films produced under the studio system in the previous decade, these new films featured self-consciously experimental cinematography, using close-ups, voice-overs, asynchronous sound, and location shooting. Unlike the classic melodramatic narratives, their narratives refused conventional forms of closure and rarely ended happily. They portrayed strong female characters living outside the bounds of normative kinship; the men in these films, unlike those invincible heroes portrayed by MGR and Sivaji, were fundamentally flawed and inadequate (Kaali 2002; Eswaran Pillai 2012).

The new films, particularly the nativity films, portrayed the heroine as having sexual desires and longings in her own right. Crucially, they did away with that earlier fixture of Tamil films, the vamp character, who had served as a repository for all nonnormative and immodest female behaviors and characteristics, as well as the cabaret or club scenes in which she usually appeared. In the nativity films of the 1970s, the conflicting characteristics of modesty and desire, of girlish innocence and mischievous youth, now had to be combined within the figure of the heroine herself.

Such a heroine could not sing like a vamp, nor could she sound like the chaste heroines of earlier decades. Her new vocal sound emerged along with the rise of a young music director, Illayaraja, in the mid-1970s, and subsequent personnel shifts among prominent playback singers.⁴ Illayaraja became known for his

mixture of Tamil folk instruments, melodies, and rhythms with Western orchestration (Getter and Balasubrahmanian 2008; Eswaran Pillai 2012, 86). The South Indian flute, which he used as a sonic signifier of Tamil villageness and rural sensibility, the lush harmonies of a full orchestral string section, and the voice of S. Janaki were three staples of his music. All of these can be heard in one of the most popular songs from the era, “Sentūra pūvē” from the film *16 Vayadiniley*. The song is a celebration of the sensual beauty of both the Tamil countryside and the sixteen-year-old heroine, Mayil, who, longing for her first romance, skips and runs through meadows and dramatic scenery and drapes herself blissfully on trees and rocks, addressing the flowers and the breeze to ask when she will meet her man. Preceded by the flute and interspersed with it throughout the song, Janaki’s voice alternates between a clear, high tone and a subtle but noticeable breathiness on certain words. The contrast is clear in the very first iteration of the refrain, in which the first two phrases, “Sentūra pūvē sentūra pūvē, jillenra kārrilē” (O colorful flower, o cool breeze) are sung in a pure, high tone and the third, “En mannan enkē en mannan enkē” (Where is my lord, where is my lord), with the hint of breathiness. The breathy quality returns in other words later in the song—*kanavu* (dream) and *sukam* (pleasure)—that suggest female desire.

It is not accidental that so many of Illayaraja’s songs from this period featured the flute, for not only did it serve as a sonic signifier of the village/rural/folk, but its high pitch and the breathy quality of its sound also iconically signified the qualities of the female voice that would be cultivated as heroines in Tamil cinema transitioned from being chaste wives and girlfriends to becoming “pleasurable objects,” women who expressed their own desires but by doing so also became subject to an objectifying/sexualizing gaze (Chinniah 2008). If the nagaswaram, a double-reed instrument whose tone admits absolutely no breathiness, had served as an apt model for Janaki’s voice in the early 1960s, by the mid-1970s, it was the breathy tones of the flute that she now emulated, along with a new generation of female singers who emerged in Tamil cinema in the 1970s and 1980s.

As the division of labor between those who sang for chaste and modest female characters and those who sang for vampy characters broke down, the capacity to insert hints of breathiness into their tone became a requirement for female singers. By the late 1970s, when the vamp reemerged onscreen in Tamil cinema (represented by “sexy” actresses such as “Silk” Smitha and “Disco” Shanti), no singer served exclusively in that role; instead, the vampy singing role was dispersed among various active female singers.⁵ In 1978, a disgruntled reader wrote a letter to Illayaraja in *Bomma* magazine, complaining about the use of Janaki’s voice in a “club dance” song: “Why not give it to a singer accustomed to singing this type of song?” the reader asked, referring in a veiled way to earlier divisions of female vocal labor. In his defense, Illayaraja wrote that his goal was to use both instruments and singers in unaccustomed ways: “If you give chances to the accustomed singers only, new singers cannot come up. And, you would never know that Janaki

could also sing that way!” (Reader’s letter 1978). Breaking down established roles and divisions of vocal labor was precisely the point.

LIKE HONEY AND RASAM

The aesthetics of the male voice also shifted in the 1970s and 1980s. With the decline of invincible hero-stars M. G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan by the early 1970s, Tamil films began increasingly to feature new kinds of male characters—not only the flawed heroes discussed above but a new type of hero, the “angry young man” of the 1980s, who embodied the disillusionment and distrust of the state that had built up since the years of the Emergency (Chinniah 2008; Maderya 2010). In his films of the 1980s, the actor Rajnikanth cultivated an image of subversive charisma and irreverence toward figures of governmental authority, in contrast to the figure of the just ruler-king embodied by MGR in many films of the 1960s. And unlike MGR’s hero characters, whose imperviousness to romantic desire was the foundation of their heroism, or Sivaji’s heroes, who tended more toward protective “sister sentiment” than to romantic love (Prasad 2014), Rajnikanth’s heroes were volatile—by turns violent and romantic, angry and comedic. In addition, unlike MGR and Sivaji, the new hero-actors of the 1980s, Rajnikanth and Kamal Hassan, danced; their physical mobility onscreen was not limited to action but was now also connected to romance, seduction, and the display of the artistic and stylish male body.

As I suggested in chapter 2, T. M. Soundararajan’s voice, with its perceived strength, simplicity, and uniquely Tamil identity, was a crucial part of the construction of heroic Tamil masculinity as embodied in the heroes of MGR and Sivaji Ganesan. The representation in their films of the possibility of a just government embodied by a singular ruler-king was echoed in the reign of a singular male voice during this period. But as his career began to wane in the 1970s, TMS was not replaced by another singular male singer. Instead, as Rajnikanth and Kamal Hassan became prominent hero-actors, their singing voices were provided by a varied group of new male singers, including S. P. Balasubrahmanyam (1946–2020), K. J. Yesudas (b. 1940), and Malaysia Vasudevan (1944–2011).

S. P. Balasubrahmanyam, popularly known as SPB, would go on to become the most ubiquitous male singer in Tamil films for the next three decades. SPB’s voice, in addition to having a wide pitch range, had a lightness and lilt, a mobility and playfulness that TMS’s did not. Initially, in the 1960s, this had worked against SPB. He had struggled to get chances singing for hero-actors but was only given songs for yet-to-be-established heroes, character actors, and comedians. Even though he was ethnolinguistically Telugu, he was not accepted by the Telugu cinema audience as a playback singer for established Telugu hero-actors N. T. Rama Rao and A. Nageswara Rao, since the permanent playback singer for them was Ghantasala, an older playback singer and contemporary of TMS.⁶ SPB got his first break in

Tamil cinema in 1969, singing a song for romantic hero Gemini Ganesan in the film *Shanti nilayam*. In the same year, he sang the song “Āyiram nilavē vā” for MGR in the film *Adimai penn*. It was a soft love song that contrasted with MGR’s other songs in the film, for which TMS’s voice was retained to convey heroic prowess. In the latter half of the 1970s, with the waning of TMS and Ghantasala’s popularity, SPB’s versatility, his capacity to accommodate his voice to different situations and characters, came to be a prized feature, and he became a sought-after playback singer in both Tamil and Telugu cinema.

Once SPB became established, his ability to make his voice light and occasionally breathy came to be valued as part of his expressive gift, a capacity for variety that made his voice like “honey and rasam” (*tēnākavum racamākavum*), as one fan from Sri Lanka put it, or, as another article said, like “a breeze and a storm” (*Bomma* 1979). Words like *kuralinimai* and *kuḷaivu* (tenderness), which had never been used to describe TMS’s voice, were frequently used to describe SPB’s voice.⁷ Tenderness and sweetness were also qualities attributed to the voice of Yesudas, who became second to SPB among the new male singers in Tamil cinema in the 1970s. With extensive Karnatic training, Yesudas often sang melodious songs that used his “honeyed” voice, though he was less known for expressiveness than SPB. Notably, the words that had so often been used to describe TMS’s voice—*ganam* (strong) and *veḷḷi* (shining, with a metallic ring)—were not used about either SPB’s or Yesudas’s voice. Both singers were avowedly influenced more by the crooning style of Mohammed Rafi, the Hindi singer who dominated Bombay cinema in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, than by TMS.

Coincident with these changing vocal aesthetics, this group of new male singers also embodied a distinct shift in the alignment of vocal masculinity and Tamil ethnolinguistic belonging, a shift that had consequences for the post-liberalization aesthetics of the male voice I describe later in this chapter. That is, no voice embodying masculinity and Tamilness emerged to take TMS’s place at the top. The two most popular male singers, SPB and Yesudas, are not, nor were they ever figured as, ethnolinguistically Tamil (they are Telugu and Malayali Christian, respectively), and both have sung extensively, and in the case of Yesudas, even more, in languages other than Tamil. Only Malaysia Vasudevan (himself a Malayali born in Malaysia) took on the role of representing Tamilness vocally, devoting his singing career to Tamil, taking over TMS’s singing for Sivaji in the 1970s, and becoming known for his “folk” songs in Tamil movies in the 1980s and 1990s. But rather than serving as the default masculine voice as TMS’s had, his “Tamil” voice was now only one of several possibilities for what a masculine voice could sound like.

“A LITTLE MOONLIGHT, A LITTLE FIRE”:
LIBERALIZING THE FEMALE VOICE

Although the idealized characteristics of the male or female singing voice have always shifted with the rise of a new music director, prior to the 1990s, the basic

structural setup of having a few playback voices fill all the singing roles remained in place. In the 1990s, however, the combination of economic policies and media privatization that constituted India's economic "liberalization" provided a powerful and captivating new metaphor evoking the idea of opening, of choice, novelty, and multiplicity where there had previously been monopoly. These ideals quickly extended into the field of playback singing in the early 1990s, resulting in not just aesthetic change—a quest for "new voices"—but a structural change to the field itself.

No figure better exemplifies these changes than A. R. Rahman, the South Indian film music director who began as a keyboard sessions player in film studios in Chennai, gained visibility through his advertising jingles and independent albums in the late 1980s, made his mark in Tamil cinema in the early 1990s, achieved national visibility in the late 1990s, and then transcended the role of film music director in the early 2000s, becoming known as an internationally celebrated and Oscar-decorated world music composer (Mathai 2009). A new kind of sound came to dominate Tamil film music in the early 1990s as Rahman gained popularity. The use of Tamil folk and Karnatic classical music and lush string-orchestra sound, which had characterized Ilayaraja's music in the 1970s and 1980s, receded with "new age" music directors, a term frequently used to describe Rahman and those who have come after him. Using digital synthesizing technology instead of relying on the large string orchestra for their basic sound, they sampled new instrumental sounds and vocal styles from around the world and set them to repetitive dance beats. Film songs of this period increasingly began to use nonverbal and non-Tamil vocal expressions, such as vocables, nonsense words, and English (Getter 2014; Sarrazin 2014; Booth 2011; Kvetko 2004, 184). Music directors sought out a wider variety of vocal timbres and capabilities, employing singers with different kinds of training and musical backgrounds, particularly singers experienced in Hindustani classical and Western rock and pop styles. In their structure, too, songs moved away from familiar verse and refrain organization, influenced by the chord- and riff-based structures of Indipop, a genre that became prominent in India after liberalization. Indipop as a category was not only sonically but also ideologically distinct from film song, promoting itself as a genre that valued creativity, independence, individuality, and freedom in contrast to the formulaic, mass-culture-oriented film song (Kvetko 2004; Zuberi 2002).

Partly enabled by the rise of Indipop, a new vocal sound for female playback singers emerged in the 1990s. That new sound was exemplified by singers like Subha, who, though born to Tamil parents, had spent her childhood in Bombay listening to Western rock and pop music and had spent several years singing in hotels with a band before coming to Chennai in the early 1990s and getting jobs as a jingles singer working for the young Dilip Sekar (who would later change his name to A. R. Rahman). Sekar was attracted to the unconventional sound of Subha's voice, and the two worked together on an album called *Set Me Free*, a collection of songs in different Indian languages and English that was released in

1991. Subha explained to me in an interview: “At that time there weren’t too many people who could sing in English and Hindi and in Western style. . . . A set of music directors heard what I’d done in Dilip’s studio. They got excited—this Western voice, this alto range. Because I didn’t know the languages . . . the push I was giving to the syllables was different, and they liked it.”⁸ Subha cited her own voice as an early manifestation of a changing aesthetics of the female voice: “Today you have alto voices. . . . This is the kind of voice timbre you’ll find on the FM channels today. Those days you had this”—here she demonstrated the high, breathy voice associated with Janaki and Chitra—“but now they are more chesty, more throaty.”

The new vocal sound was, as Subha noted, accompanied by a sartorial shift. “In those days, the singers would come in lovely Kanchipuram [silk] saris, and they would put the pallav [end] over their shoulder. That was how it was then. Then in my time, 1991, we started wearing salwar kameez. I’m the salwar kameez generation. . . . Now they wear little spaghetti shoulder tops.” The salwar kameez, a form of dress that spread from North India to the urban centers of the South, marked the singer as a modern, cosmopolitan woman without being Western; it suggested containment and modesty even while inhabiting public spaces (Lukose 2009, 75–79). As Subha said, even though the sound of her voice was suggestive, “I definitely didn’t want a man to feel turned on when he’d see me or more important, when he heard me onstage.” As the sari had been in decades before, the salwar was an essential part of stage appearances, helping to ensure that the voice was heard the right way.

But in the early 1990s, this new female voice was also paired with a brash performance style that broke with the norms of the “salwar generation.” Singers and music directors cited the iconic hit song “Koñcam nilavu” (from *Thiruda Thiruda* 1993), sung by Anupamaa Krishnaswami, as the first manifestation of this trend. Like Subha, Anupamaa entered the field of playback through her work on advertising jingles with the young A. R. Rahman. And like Subha, she had grown up in a Tamil Brahmin family in North India listening to Western pop—Whitney Houston, the Carpenters, and the Beatles—and had only perfunctory training in Karnatic music. In an interview, she recalled Rahman’s quest for new voices: “If I had sounded like Chitra or Susheela, I wouldn’t have gotten the chance.” She described the change in what is allowable in the female voice in terms of increasing freedom: “It used to be that if there was any grunt in your voice they would say something is wrong. Even ‘sexy’ singers like Asha Bhosle and L. R. Eswari could only vary within a small range of what was permitted. Now there are fewer restrictions.”

Anupamaa’s background as primarily a rock/pop singer is audible in “Koñcam nilavu,” which features a female voice varying widely in timbre—breathy here, cracking there, sometimes grunting, with audible inhaled and exhaled breaths, and seeming almost overcome with passion toward the end. Anupamaa also uses vibrato, making her vocal sound distinctly unlike the smooth, consistent, vibratoless timbres of earlier female singers. The song introduces the beautiful, rich heroine,

Chandralekha (played by Hindi film actress Anu Aggarwal). Dancing in a palace before a seemingly international audience,¹⁰ Chandralekha describes herself as a play of contrasts, caressing her body and looking directly at the camera as she sings against a disco beat with operatic female voices floating in the background:

Koñcam nilavu, koñcam neruppu	a little moonlight, a little fire,
Onṛāka sērntāl entan tēkam	mix them and that's my body;
Koñcam nañcu, koñcam amutam	a little poison, a little ambrosia,
Onṛāka sērntāl entan kañkaḷ	mix them and those are my eyes;
Koñcam mirukam, koñcam kaṭavul	a little animal, a little god,
Onṛai sērntāl entan neñcam	mix them and that is my heart/soul.
Chandralekā . . .	Chandralekha . . .

In addition to the timbre of Anupamaa's voice, her performing style in live renditions of the song also set her apart from the older aesthetic cultivated by female playback singers. In her live performance of this song at Rahman's Chennai Unity of Light concert in 2002, Anupamaa wore a spaghetti-strapped, figure-hugging gown and danced as she sang, taking possession of the stage and moving her body in a way that visually evoked the film song sequence. She sang in a dramatic and exaggerated way onstage, popping her *p*'s and grunting out *mirukam*, the word for "animal," in a voice that threatened to go out of control at the end of every phrase.¹¹

Although Subha and Anupamaa were both ethnolinguistically Tamil, they grew up in North India, and their Brahmin caste status further removed them from association with Tamilness. This was not accidental. In order to introduce new female vocal timbres and styles, Rahman purposely picked singers who were from "outside." As Subha put it, part of Rahman's quest for novelty was his preference for singers who "pushed the syllables a different way." Their lack of Tamil education and their orientation toward North Indian or Western rock and pop rather than South Indian classical or film music was an asset rather than a liability. Rahman also sought out singers who had training in Hindustani, rather than Karnatic, music, introducing Hariharan, a singer from Kerala trained in North Indian ghazals and a member of the Indipop duo Colonial Cousins, into Tamil cinema in the early 1990s, and the female singers Sadana Sargam and Sreya Goshal, both trained in Hindustani music and based in Mumbai, into Tamil cinema in the early 2000s.¹²

Hindustani music, with its purely instrumental music traditions and its lesser emphasis on words, seemed closer than Karnatic music in ethos and aesthetics to what Rahman was trying to do: make music for films that would transcend regional boundaries and be pan-Indian, if not global, in its appeal.¹³ Mani Ratnam, the director with whom Rahman worked in the 1990s, described Rahman's music as getting rid of the "clutter" of words and musical ideas that had previously characterized Tamil film music (Aggarwal 2015). "The words have to let the melody happen," a younger music director who had worked with Rahman told me. "They

should be brushed aside and the melody should take precedence.” Thus, it didn’t matter if a singer couldn’t speak Tamil; in fact, this could even be an advantage because the singer would not be distracted by words. In Rahman’s new post-liberalization aesthetic, voices were used more like instruments, for their timbral and rhythmic characteristics. Neither clarity and correctness of pronunciation nor the “grain” of a voice singing in its mother tongue were at stake.

ENREGISTERING HUSKINESS

When I asked singers about terms used to describe voices, *husky* was not generally mentioned by older singers. But it was frequently the first term mentioned by young singers who had come up since the 1990s. Consider, for example, this exchange in an interview with a playback singer who became popular in the late 1970s and 1980s (A), and her daughter (B), who has been active as a playback singer since the 2000s:

AW. Can you tell me about how people describe different kinds of voices and vocal tones?

(A looks puzzled; there is a pause.)

B. Like “husky,” “soft.”

A. Ah.

AW. Like that, are there terms people use often? If you are working with a music director—

B. They would say full throated—

A. —soprano

B. —give us a full tone, a rounded tone.

A. Nammaḷukkē soprano voices t̄an actually [Actually we have soprano voices, only]. I don’t think much that . . . we don’t have that much of voice culture.

B. Ille, nammaḷē t̄an, “husky,” “sing it husky,” iṅke varum—[no, for us, “husky,” “sing it husky,” that is said here].

A. It’s more related to the song, no? The way you use your voice according to the song [demonstrates different ways of singing two songs]. So, it’s the mood of the song. When they choose a singer, they tell you to sing a song, you go with the lyrics, you see the lyrics and they explain to you the mood of the song, the situation. And then you just apply feel or whatever is necessary for that. Other than that there is not much of . . . like Western, they have all these . . . like vibrato and all that . . . not much of relevance here. It is more [related] to the mood of the song.

A’s statement, “we don’t have that much of voice culture,” reflects the fact that for her generation, playback singers’ vocal sound and technique were not generally

discussed. Huskiness possessed the ineffability of a “mood” or “feel” rather than the straightforwardness of a vocal technique; it was not a quality abstracted from the song itself. But, as B’s comments suggest, younger singers are more matter-of-fact about huskiness, treating it as “a color that can be added.” A young male singer described to me how the word *husky* often came up when he was in the studio helping a music director realize his ideas. “Some music directors can’t really communicate what they want. They’ll have something in their mind. I keep trying out a few things, I ask them, do you like this, or more harsh, or more husky . . . like that.”

As male singers explained to me, “husky” was opposed to the “openness” of plain singing, the “distorted,” “gruffy” tone of rock songs, and the “full-throttle,” “belted out” folk style of *küttu* songs. It was specifically associated with the expression of romantic and sexual desire and not, as one singer specified, with other kinds of melody songs that were based on “sorrow” or “mother-sentiment”:

It’s more of a breath voice. You feel that—it’s not just a tone, there’s something more to it. There’s an element to it [demonstrates singing “aah” straight and “aah” with breathy tone]. They call it husky. . . . There’s a song, it goes like [sings] “sollitālē ava kātalai” [she has announced her love]. . . . So sometimes you do like [sings “sollitālē” with husky voice]. The second way has a little more air into it, it’s more subtle.

The level of huskiness, he suggested, could be adjusted to the situation:

They [the music director] give you some gist. . . . They say, this guy likes her, he loves her, but at the same time he’s not very outward about it, and so he’s not drooling over her. So then when I do a song, I cannot do [sings “sollitālē” in husky voice]. That’s more drooly. So you have to contain that and do [sings in less husky voice]—which is more—which is not very drooly.

Huskiness, as a qualisign, involves not just voice quality but other phonological elements as well, “semiotic hitchhikers” that co-occur with the voice quality I have been describing (Mendoza-Denton 2011). The most common of these is the use of a deliberately Westernized pronunciation of Tamil, which has become its own named aesthetic.¹⁴ Here is how a male playback singer (T), in his twenties at the time of our interview in 2012, described it in the context of answering a question I had asked about his work with different music directors and the different kinds of songs he had sung:

aw. Are there specific words they use to describe different kinds of voices?

t. Ok, yeah. Voice tones—husky is one. . . . Apart from that, full throttle, full throated, full chested. There is a range between these two actually. Most of us give a mix. You go from the husk to the open. . . . Change of voices and—ah, the way you pronounce Tamil, how you pronounce certain words, that also changes the way you actually sing it out. So I guess even that makes a difference.

AW. Could you give a small example?

T. Aah . . . Ok. There's this song by [music director] Harris Jayaraj. So, the words are actually [speaks the words] “naṅkai nilāvin taṅkai, maṅkai nī tāne seṅkai.” But this was anglicized a lot, so it was more like [sings in a husky tone], “naṅkāy nilāvin taṅkāy, maṅkāy nī tāne seṅkāy.” So the singer is like “āy.” They're trying all those things.

AW. And they would ask for that kind of pronunciation?

T. Yeah. Whenever I go for a recording I ask them, what kind of language do you want me to use. So they say yah, this is like anglicized, koṅcam Western-ā pātuṅka [sing a little Western], that's how they usually say it, Western-ā pātuṅka, or innum koṅcam Indian pātuṅka [sing a little more Indian], or koṅcam folk-ā [a little folksy], innum koṅcam kiram-mattu [a little more villagey]—so, these are the categories. Koṅcam city character, atanāle koṅcam Tamiḷ irukkaṭṭum, anā koṅcam Western [A little bit of a city character, so there can be a little Tamil, but also a little bit Western].

The lowering and lengthening of the Tamil diphthong *ai* into *āy*, and the stressing of this final sound which is traditionally unstressed in “correct” Tamil pronunciation, are commonly heard in “classy” pronunciations of the name *Chennai* (for example, in advertisements for upscale establishments selling silks or jewelry). In T's musical example, the stressing of the final *āy* is facilitated by the melody, which pauses on the second syllable, rather than the first, for each of the words ending in *-āy*. The difference between T's relatively tense voice quality when speaking the “correct” Tamil words to me, and his relatively lax voice quality when singing the lyrics with this Westernized pronunciation, is notable (see Laver 1980, 154–55). As he demonstrates here, the Westernized pronunciation “goes with” a different, distinctly breathy, vocal timbre.

Another Westernized pronunciation that has become conventionalized is that of the Tamil geminate retroflex *ṛr* (IPA [t:r]). The “correct” Tamil pronunciation of this alveolo-palatal consonant involves a sort of trill, but in many film songs since 2000, this sound is pronounced without a trill as an approximant (IPA [tɻ]), more like the *tr-* in the American English pronunciation of *train*. A voice conductor (VC) with whom I was sitting one afternoon invited N, a young singer who was also present, to explain this to me:

N. We all have our own styles. I do melody songs, but they have a Western tinge.

VC. Anta color avaṅkaḷukku varum. [That color comes to her naturally.]

N. When I do melody, I know there will be that Western tinge for sure. But I think that's the reason they even call us. They want that change.

AW. That Western tinge, what is it exactly?

VC. [hums tune of recent song, “Saṛru munpu”]

- N. That [referring to VC's singing] would be Indian singing. My pronunciation would be more anglicized: sattru, tr, tr-.
- VC. Mixing, different colors.
- N. We all have a style. Another singer might be best at Indian singing.
- AW. How did you come to that style?
- N. It's the way my dad was brought up; he listened to a lot of English music when I was young. So when I started singing movie songs, that influence was there.
- VC. . . . Kuḷantai Tamiḷ paṭiccātavaṅka. [The child has not studied Tamil.]
- N. Ille! [laughter] Ille, Tamiḷ nalla pēcuvēn. [No! No, I speak Tamil well.] Enna problem nna, [the problem is] see, it's the way my dad was brought up, like he used to listen to a lot of English songs, so he made me listen to those English songs.

Though she coyly described it as a “problem” in this half-joking context framed by my strange presence as a Tamil-speaking foreigner, N's education in Western rock and pop is not a problem at all but a source of value in this new dispensation. It is not passably pronouncing Tamil words but, in fact, mispronouncing them in the right ways that is valued because it indicates a higher social class, a social type like N herself, whose mother tongue is Tamil but whose elevated social class has meant her education was in English.¹⁵ N told me in a later interview that she teaches aspiring playback singers who are trying to correct various problems with their voices. A common one, she said, is that “they want to sing Western songs, but they have an Indian accent. I teach them how to have a Western accent.”

As these examples show, it is not just voice quality that makes a voice husky but pronunciation, as well; in fact, the changed pronunciation seems to require a timbral shift away from the conventionally idealized male or female voice. This shift can be toward a breathy timbre or, for female singers, toward an unusually low register. For example, the song “Unakenna nān” (What am I to you?) (from *Kadhalil vizhunden* 2008), which used the melody of Rihanna's “Unfaithful,” featured both conventionalized Westernized pronunciations—the *āy* and the *tr-*. The female singing voice is strikingly low, with audible intakes of breath and glottalized, creaky initial vowels. And note that this unconventional female voice was used not for a vamp role (as it might have been in earlier decades) but for the heroine expressing her feelings of love in a “melody” song.

By describing the type of songs she sings as “melody” songs, N distinguishes them from other categories of songs commonly invoked in singers' and music directors' parlance: “classical” or “semi-classical,” “folk,” or “kūttu.” As a category, “melody” has been used since the 1970s to denote songs that treated themes of romantic love, desire, and heartbreak, for which a classical vocal style would have been deemed too stuffy or rule-bound. At the same time, it served to distinguish such songs from those of vampy characters and the “raw” folk style they often

employed. “Melody” describes not so much the melodic material as the vocal timbre, style, and, by extension, the social standing of both the onscreen character and the playback singer. In earlier decades, of course, a category like “melody songs with a Western tinge” would have been an impossibility; any Western melodic or lyrical material would have placed the song in the domain of cabaret or club songs. Its possibility in the present shows how certain sonic elements previously associated with the vamp role have become revalued and re-enregistered as signs of cosmopolitanism.

THE GENDER POLITICS OF THE HUSKY VOICE

As is clear from the above discussion, huskiness is no longer confined to female voices but has become a widespread part of male vocal production as well. This is correlated with a notable trend in Tamil cinema since the early years of the new millennium, the rise of “realist” films that provided a contrast to the over-the-top heroism of the hegemonic masala film (Nakassis 2009, 218). Rather than featuring known hero-star actors, “realist” films used new and unrecognized actors (“new faces”) to represent their heroes’ ordinariness. Characters wore ordinary clothes and spoke in everyday, colloquial Tamil, unlike the “light-skinned heroes of yesteryear . . . [with their] extended monologues functioning as thinly veiled political speeches in ‘chaste’ literary Tamil” (Nakassis 2009, 221; Nakassis n.d.). Likewise, the singing voices of these new male protagonists were also presented as “ordinary”: not possessing the “metallic” ring of TMS’s voice, the buttery flexibility of SPB’s voice, or the lush melodiousness of Yesudas’s voice. Young male singers stressed to me the importance of their “not sounding like a copy of SPB”; at stake was not only their individuality but, perhaps more important, their ability to voice the ordinariness of the “new face” protagonist.

In addition to the hero’s ordinariness—in fact, shoring it up—was another crucial requirement for the “realism” of these postmillennial films: their explicit representation of female desire outside the normative bounds of family and marriage (Nakassis 2009, 218). Most of these films are stories of frustrated or tragic love, of fraught courtships that do not end in marriage, featuring female characters who openly express desire. Husky voices, in not adhering to previous norms of female or male vocal production, serve as iconic signs of this realm outside the normative. They are “different-sounding” voices, seemingly not bound by training or cultural convention (in which emotion and feeling were, as we have seen, conveyed through stylized, set-apart “effects”) but rather engaged in a nonvirtuosic and seemingly natural expression of feeling in the act of singing itself.

But while the husky voice has come to be associated with “ordinary” youthful masculinity, and with emotionally vulnerable heroes who fall in love, its appropriateness for female characters (and singers) needs to be qualified by a suitably elevated class standing and a Westernized upbringing. In other words, a husky

sound, when gendered masculine, signifies ordinariness, an unmarked male subject, but when gendered feminine, signifies abnormality or foreignness, a marked female subject. This asymmetry derives from the particular exchange, or blurring, of normatively gendered qualities that makes the husky voice an iconic representation of heterosexual romantic love and desire. Thinking again about the range of qualities subsumed under “husky voice”—chestiness, low pitch, breathiness—we find that the first two are normatively gendered male, while the last, breathiness, is normatively gendered female. It is also the one that is most consciously adopted and manipulated by singers of either gender. In borrowing the feminized attribute, the male singer/character shows his vulnerability and ordinariness, but in borrowing the masculine attributes, female singers/characters are distanced from the norm. The masculine qualities of chestiness and low pitch, because they are naturalized attributes of male-sounding voices, are assumed to be not so much consciously adopted stylistic elements as inherent characteristics of a male voice. When these qualities emerge in a female voice, the singer is said to not simply be singing “husky” but to “have a husky voice.” I never heard this latter statement made about any male singer. While huskiness is something a male singer can assume or shed at will, as this locution suggests, it sticks to a female singer’s voice and persona. Entering the realm of the ambiguously gendered husky voice thus has different implications for male and female singers.

It is also important that *husky* is an English word and that when used in a noun phrase, nearly always appears as “husky voice,” retaining the English word *voice* rather than using the Tamil word *kural*; indeed, this retention of foreignness is a primary feature of its circulation as a qualisign.¹⁶ Its linguistic opposition to *kuralinimai* crystallizes the contrast between pre- and post-liberalization aesthetics. While a Tamil phrase describes the “sweet,” “clear” voices of chaste, pre-liberalization Tamil singers and heroines within the bounds of family and marriage, an English phrase describes the husky voices of post-liberalization subjects negotiating the more ambiguous terrain of romantic love. This linguistic contrast, bringing together multiple oppositions, iconically diagrams the gendered politics of ethnolinguistic belonging in the new millennium.

“LET’S LISTEN TO THE RHYTHM OF CHENNAI”

Nowhere are these politics clearer than in the genre of *küttu* songs, which have become a popular and nearly indispensable element of Tamil cinema in the twenty-first century. *Küttu* literally means a folk or street play but is based on a confluence of folk/rural and urban/street influences. The genre takes its name from a type of folk music called *tappānküttu*. *Tappān*, often spelled *dappān*, is an onomatopoeic word, conveying through the voiced sound of its initial syllable and the emphasis on the second syllable the loudness and ringing force of the drum. *Küttu* as a musical genre is distinguished by its driving beat, characteristically in a triplet rhythm

that singers, music directors, and audiences usually refer to as “6/8.” Kūttu also draws influence from gānapāṭṭu, an urban musical genre associated with the slums of North Chennai. Village folk performance and urban street culture both serve as sites for invoking authentic Tamilness. Unlike the visual sequences of “melody” or “Western” songs, which are often shot in foreign locations and filled with signifiers of the global, kūttu song sequences represent the “local,” depicting village or urban scenes that are meant to be recognizable.

Kūttu as a genre is often dismissed as vulgar and musically unsophisticated. For example, young singers and music directors among my interlocutors described how kūttu “carries a moral tag”; that it is overly “commercialized” and that directors demand the inclusion of these songs because they “appeal to B and C class audiences”; that it is musically “simple” or that it “stops all musicality”; that kūttu songs are a perversion of what used to be “decent” folk numbers; that “most of the stuff is sung after having a full bottle of arrack [liquor].” Yet, as one young aspiring music director put it to me, even though he disliked kūttu songs, “that ‘takita takita’ beat is in our blood. We hear it and we can’t help dancing.”

Despite its lowly status, kūttu is in fact a site of verbal virtuosity, a characteristic it takes from gānapāṭṭu, which is often compared to rap or hip-hop, with words that come fast and require an agile tongue. The words are ideally pronounced with a percussive crispness that emphasizes their sound rather than their meaning. For example, the song “Nakku mukku” (from *Kadhali vizhunden* 2008) became iconic of the genre. The song’s refrain played on the alliterative juxtaposition of these two words that simply mean “tongue nose.” Both the refrain and the verses of the song were delivered less in a singing voice than in forceful, heightened, fast-paced speech with a slowly descending pitch, sounding like more of a harangue than a song. When I began my research for this project in 2009, the song had just attained hit status, but it was also roundly condemned by many as a prime example of all that was vulgar, senseless, and unmusical in post-liberalization film songs. Importantly, the “vulgarity” was not just in the lyrics, for a song like “Nakku mukku” contained no outright vulgar language or even double entendre as such, except for the suggestive and repeated juxtaposition of *nakku* and *mukku*. Instead, the vulgarity was felt by many to be in the mode of delivery itself, in the way the words were pronounced and sung without being softened by a “melody.”

As one singer described it to me, the proper kūttu sound comes from “pressing on” and “biting” the words as one sings. According to her, this kind of crisp enunciation was necessary because folk songs so often told a story; that is, the mode of enunciating was in the service of the referential meaning of the song:

Itu partiṅkannā, vārttai rompa mukkiyam. . . . Appaṭi irukkumpōtu vārttai kaṅṭṭipā aḷuttu koṭuttu folk-le. Sātāranamā cinema pāṭṭu koṅcam light-ā pāṭinā pōtum. Light nnā [demonstrates singing without folk style]. Appaṭi pāṭinā, anta style varātu. Vārttai kaṅṭṭi aḷuttu koṭuttu atu pirikkiṛa mātiri pāṭinā, nalla irukkum.

because of their skill but precisely because they are *not* singers and so lend that desirable untrained sound to kütü songs. Like numerous other songs of this type, this one features a scene of drinking among male friends in the “puṛampökku,”¹⁸ and the lyrics themselves are about drinking. The raw quality of the voices is accentuated by the harshness of the sibilants, for example in the word *sarakku* (literally “goods” but also slang for liquor and girls), which occurs frequently in the song, and by the extreme dryness of the sound quality, which makes the voices seem to be very close.

Like many kütü/gāna songs, “Oru puṛampökku” revels in male homosociality, enacted in the public space of the street. At the end of the song, one of the characters even says to the other, “itu tān naṭṭukkaḷaku” (this is a federation of friends). *Gāna pāṭṭu*, in its cinematically appropriated form, quintessentially articulates a male youth perspective, associated with the songs that male college students would sing on their college buses to attract “figures” (attractive girls).¹⁹ Visually, many kütü/gāna songs, like “Oru puṛampökku,” feature a group of young men claiming public space and sporting the signature look of the genre, a folded-up *lungi* with shorts visible underneath, as they perform the pelvic jerks and other moves that have become synonymous with kütü dance. By definition, then, the subject voiced in these songs and the actual voices most often heard are those of male youth, creating a strong association between masculinity and Tamilness. If, in other genres of film song, both classicized and colloquial forms of Tamil have been muted, in kütü, facility with otherwise devalued colloquial Tamil surges back up as a badge of authentic subaltern masculinity across rural and urban contexts, a form of resistance to the hegemony of English.

Where does this leave the women who appear in these songs? At the folk end of the kütü continuum, songs that take place in village settings often feature variants of the “aachi” figure,²⁰ an older female “village aunty” type often represented by the 1960–90s actress “Aachi” Manorama, who represented a comic alternative to the respectability of the heroine. The hitched-up sari or overly traditional dress of the village women who appear in kütü songs connotes their distance from both older ideals of middle-class respectability and newer, post-liberalization ideals of urban female cosmopolitanism, their village innocence eminently confusable with lewd sexual forwardness. But more commonly, at the urban end of the kütü continuum, women appear plainly as objects of lustful desire and ogling. They are often “item” actresses whose characters engage in brazen, sexualized display of their bodies.

Consider, for example, the song “En peru Meenakumari” from the 2009 film *Kandaswamy*. The song occurs in the last fifteen minutes of the film, as the hero, Kandaswamy, a CBI officer, tracks down the villain who has stolen hundreds of millions of rupees. The heavily manipulated visuals are filled with disjointed close-ups of the villain’s hired girlfriend (Bollywood actress Mumaiṭh Khan) as she performs a highly sexualized dance for him on his private bus moving through

the streets of Chennai. The song is her come-on, beginning with a breathy, low-pitched prelude, in which she sings about a “love” (*kātal*) that “burns with intense heat” and says she will make one’s mind/soul helpless with thirst/sexual desire (*manatē tavikka vaippēnē*). The words are barely sung at all, delivered more as a form of heightened speech, punctuated with audible intakes of breath and sighs and sinking into a groan at the end of phrases. Then, with a prolonged “heyyy” as the camera zooms into the tongue-studded mouth of Mumaith Khan, the main part of the song commences. It is delivered in a loud, brash, high-pitched voice. AutoTune effects combine with close-ups of the actress’s tattoos and body piercings, and numerous shots point through her crotch. Here is the refrain:

En pēru Meenakumari	My name is Meenakumari
En ūru Kanyakumari	My town is Kanyakumari
Pōlāmā kutirai savari	Shall we go on a horseback ride?
Sēyalāmā sampan paccatī	Shall we make a paccatī together? ²¹
Nān paṭṭu paṭṭu paṭṭu paṭṭu sundari	I’m silk, silk, silk, silk, the beautiful one
Ennai toṭṭu toṭṭu toṭṭu toṭṭu	Touching, touching, touching, touching
toṭṭu nī pullari	touching me you will be thrilled

Through the lyrics and the raw, folk quality of the voice, Meenakumari is depicted as a village girl from the deep south of Tamil Nadu. But at the same time, she is associated with urban debauchery, signaled visually by her tight and revealing black leather outfit and by the bottles of liquor prominently visible in the frame. The female vocals are interrupted two-thirds of the way through as the villain, in a challenge to the hero, growls, “Ok boss, now let’s listen to the rhythm of Chennai.” At this point, the pounding bass beat comes to the fore and its previously submerged 6/8 quality becomes audible.

While the 6/8 *kūttu* beat constructs the song as a “Tamil” space, audible reverb suggests a female voice reverberating in a public space. Within that strange confluence, a woman can only ever be other, an alien presence both visually and aurally distinct from the assumed “us” of the genre. The sequence accomplishes this visually by using a well-known North Indian “item” actress, Mumaith Khan, whose frontal address to the viewer renders her appearance a kind of cameo. Aurally, the raw sound of the voice constructs it as distinctly different from the sweet female voices of the past or the romantic Western-inflected or breathy female voices of the present. The AutoTune effects not only suggest, but perform, the penetration and alteration of that voice by globally circulating technologies (akin to the visual fragmentation of the item actress’s body through jerky camera movements and abrupt perspective shifts).

While the male voices heard in *kūttu* songs tend to be untrained, “regular” voices, the female voices associated with this genre are “raw”: marked in their timbral difference from what is considered normal or desirable for the female voice. The association of an ethnicized folk sound with sexualized brazenness

is not unique to the Tamil context, of course. As Pavitra Sundar has noted in the context of Hindi cinema, in the 1990s, ethnicized female folk voices such as that of playback singer Ila Arun emerged as the new alternative to the voice of the Westernized vamp (Sundar 2017). As Westernness ceased to be a taint for women, the “ethnic” voice (with all its lower-class and lower-caste connotations) became the new aural sign of female brazenness. What is different in the Tamil context is that this ethnicized voice is heard within the context of a genre figured not as that of the exotic other but as that of the self. *Küttu* is the source, and engine, of a powerful but asymmetrically gendered cultural intimacy, its characteristic rhythm constituting, as Michael Herzfeld has articulated it, the “recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (1997, 7). What is self—the subjectivity conjured by *küttu* songs—comes to be heard as other when voiced by women. The female *küttu* voice is rendered extimate so that it may shore up self-identity (see Mazzarella 2013, 157).

THE VIRTUOSITY OF RAWNESS

As in many songs that combined the *küttu* idiom with the function of an item number in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the voice in “En peru Meenakumari” is that of Malathy Lakshman (b. 1973), who was mentioned often to me during my fieldwork as the “go-to” singer for this type of song.²² Unlike other playback singers of her generation and younger, Malathy was not English-educated or formally trained in Indian classical or Western classical traditions when she was growing up. As she said to me in an interview, “At that time, people in our caste/community didn’t study Karnatic music. Only in the Brahmin side would they learn music [Appō ellām nāmmalē mātiri irukkiravaṅka saṅkītam kattukkalle. Only in the Brahmin side music kattuppuvaṅka.]” Rather than entering the playback field through singing Western pop or advertising jingles, she came to it through being a singer in a light music troupe, where she had spent thirteen years covering the songs of all the well-known female playback singers in live street, temple, wedding, and auditorium concerts. She cited this experience as a valuable period of training that contributed to her versatility as a singer: “If I had learned only one style, and then if I had to sing another style in films, it would be hard. But since I came up through light music, I don’t say ‘I am more comfortable in this or that.’ I am comfortable in all kinds” (enaku ellā vitamāna comfortable).

Malathy traced her development as a singer through a genealogy of what she called the “open” female voice. She had developed by imitating, in her own stage performances, other female singers’ voices: the forceful, declamatory style of K. B. Sunderambal; the daring mobility and high pitch of L. R. Eswari; Subha’s low-pitched voice; the Western style of Anupamaa; the “almost male” voice of female devotional singer Bangalore Ramaniyammal; Usha Uthup’s Western pop and jazz

style; and Manorama, the comic actress of the 1960s–90s who sang many of her own songs in a projected, vibrato-filled voice that was distinctly unlike female playback voices used for heroines during those decades. The common element among this otherwise eclectic group of voices was their difference from the high, “soft,” and “false” voices (as she described them) of earlier playback singers who had sung for good-girl characters. In all of these voices, there was, according to Malathy, an “openness” that contrasted with the soft sound of singers like Sush-eela, Janaki, or Chitra. But it was particularly an older style of female singing, characterized in the voice of K. B. Sunderambal, that Malathy pointed to as a formative influence: “How I got a name in light music was by being a variety singer—it was like mimicry. Not just Susheela, Janaki, Chitra songs, but old voices, like K. B. Sunderambal [KBS]. No one else did this. . . . Everyone sang Janaki songs, but KBS, Bangalore Ramaniyammal, the Tamil singers, no one else did their voices. I’m the one that started it.”

Malathy demonstrated the “full open throat” style that was required to sound like KBS, a capacity to project in the head voice range, that would have served KBS well in her days as a stage actress:

KB Sunderambal vandu, avaṅkalōṭu voice touch paṅṛatē rompa kaṣṭam. General-ā female singers touch paṅṛatu rompa kaṣṭam. Ēnnā, rompa soft-ā pāṭuvaṅka. Ippo, like [demonstrates 3 different songs]. Itellām soft-ā pāṭraṅka. KBS vantu, [demonstrates]. Ippaṭi pāṭratukku niṛaya vityācamirukku. Ivaṅka pāṭumpōtu, pattu pāṭu soft pāṭra strain vantu orē pāṭṭilē irukkum. Atān KB Sunderambal anta heavyyyyyy voice. . . . Ippo nān koṅcam soft-ā tān pāṭinēn. Avaṅkalōṭa innum irukkum. Oru volume irukkum avaṅka voice-le. Atu nān rompa kaṣṭapaṭṭu eṭṭtēn. . . . Starting-ā rompa kaṣṭamā iruntatu enakku. Eppaṭi balance paṅṛatukku. . . . Pāṭi pāṭi pāṭi pāṭi atu oru . . . machine māṭiri set āyirucce. Ippo nān switch on paṅṅiyiruppēn—anta voice vantaṭum. Switch off paṅṅinā, anta soft sound pāṭrēn.

A voice like KBS’s is very difficult to touch. Generally very difficult for most female singers to touch it. Because, they sing very soft. Like, [demonstrates three different songs]. This is all very soft. KBS would be like, [demonstrates]. Singing like this is very different. The way she sings, to sing one song would strain your voice as much as if you sang ten of the soft songs. KBS has that heavyyyyyy voice. . . . Just now I sang softly. Her voice would be even more loud. There’s a volume in her voice. I struggled a lot to get that. . . . Starting out it was very difficult for me. How to balance. . . . After singing and singing, it . . . became set like a machine. Now I can switch it on—that voice will come. If I switch it off, I’ll sing with that soft sound.

As is clear from Malathy’s description of the uniqueness and power of this voice, and the difficulty of attaining it, producing such a voice is a virtuosic act. While the descriptor *raw* connotes an untrained, uncultured voice (“uncooked,” as Levi-Strauss might have had it), in unpacking for me the multiple vocal influences on her sound and style, Malathy made it clear that rawness is a deliberately produced sound that requires training oneself away from a default soft voice systematically

over a period of years. Ironically, the vocal sound now associated with the uncontrolled, available female sexuality of the item girl is at least partially derived from the vocal virtuosity (and the asexual virtuousness it connoted) of K. B. Sunderambal, a singer who was eminently Tamil and whose persona was often conflated with the figure of *Tamiḷttāy*, Mother Tamil (see chapter 1).

TIMBRAL QUALIA AND ETHNOLINGUISTIC BELONGING IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

This chapter has illustrated the way foreignness and Tamilness have come to be intertwined in a complex semiotic economy of vocal timbre in the early decades of the new millennium. Within this economy, huskiness and rawness have become enregistered, their indexical associations derived both from their opposition to each other and from their contrast with previous gendered norms. Husky and raw voices are located in an ambiguous zone between the normatively valued qualities of the male voice and the normatively valued qualities of the female voice. As we have seen, men (both the onscreen characters and the singers) who employ either of these new vocal timbres are positioned as “ordinary.” But women singers’ use of these new timbral “variables”—in a pattern widely noted in sociolinguistic research on language and gender—relegates them to the extremes of the social field, to positions more precariously distant from the center (Eckert 2000).

As I have suggested, *kūttu* has become a site for the articulation of Tamil identity, where the reconfigured values of the post-liberalization era, with their emphasis on the global, the cosmopolitan, the foreign, can be flouted. While men can profit from the covert prestige of *kūttu*’s combination of Tamilness and subaltern masculinity, however, for women, embodying Tamilness is fraught with risk. This is why, even more than for reasons of difficulty, the voices of K. B. Sunderambal or Bangalore Ramaniyammal were “untouchable” for most female singers, as Malathy put it. Approximating their timbral and stylistic qualities through the qualia of her own voice would mark a female singer as lower class and lower caste, undesirably distant from the new timbral norms of cosmopolitan, upper-caste, and upper-class femininity.

But even more to the point, singing in the voice of KBS or Bangalore Ramaniyammal would mark them as *Tamil* and, therefore, as inhabiting a category—(good) Tamil girls who act or sing in cinema—that, in the decades since liberalization, has become increasingly framed as taboo: one that, morally speaking, should not exist. Women’s presence in Tamil cinema has long been regulated by hierarchies of gendered respectability in which respectable femininity has been maintained by the careful management or avoidance of public appearance and bodily display, necessitating the use of “foreign” female bodies and voices if such appearance was called for. But as the “foreign”/Western has come to be valued, and as bodily display has become more normalized since the 1990s, a new division of labor around the female voice has arisen. In adherence to the logic that

states that “our Tamil girls” could not / would not display their bodies onscreen, heroine actresses have increasingly come from non-Tamil backgrounds; not only do they not sing, but they rarely speak Tamil well enough to dub their own speaking voices (Nakassis 2015; Karupiah 2017). Within this starkly gendered politics of ethnolinguistic representation, “femininity either appears onscreen as a mute foreign body—she who is unrelated and can thus be *sighted*—or is heard offscreen as a disembodied Tamil voice (or as a voice from the past)—she who is ‘ours’ and therefore publicly invisible (or no longer existent)” (Nakassis 2015, 173).

According to this logic, a voice like Malathy’s, which is marked as authentically Tamil, can to some extent be legitimized by associating it with a preeminent “Tamil” voice from the past, that of K. B. Sunderambal. But, because it is associated with Malathy’s own persona, and because its timbral qualities are outside the norms of either older kuralinimai or newly valued qualities of “Westernness” or “huskiness,” Malathy’s voice is also rendered not-respectable and therefore must be held at a distance, presented as not quite “ours.” This deliberate othering is accomplished through the onscreen pairing of Malathy’s voice with the dancing body of the item actress, whose foreignness, in the conventions of postmillennial Tamil cinema, has been doubly reinforced by her non-Tamilness and her cameo role within the confines of the “item” song sequence.²³ It is accomplished also through the confinement of Malathy’s voice to *küttu* songs and item numbers. As she remarked in our interview, the strong, loud voice she had developed had become her *muttirai*, her “signature” sound. Though she could in fact easily “switch off” that voice to sound soft or classical if she wanted to, she had been typecast; no music directors would hire her to sing for heroine characters.

Malathy’s predicament maps precisely the dynamics of extimacy, with its tying together of the external and the intimate in ways both contradictory and mutually constitutive. The extimate object must be rendered other, made into an object of both fascination and disavowal, kept at arm’s length. This requirement of unrelatedness/distance demands the ethnolinguistic gap between the onscreen actress and the offscreen singer, a gap that, while now nearly always present in Tamil cinema since heroine actresses are usually non-Tamil speakers, is played up and accentuated in the item number. For while the item actress’s *non-Tamilness* (now often in the guise of North Indianness) is foregrounded, it is by contrast precisely the *Tamilness* of the singer that is played up in item numbers such as “En peru Meenakumari,” through elements such as the *küttu* beat, the singer’s raw delivery and folklike style, and her facility and daring with the language. And because heroines have now become sexualized much like item actresses, the burden falls on the singing voice to distinguish one from the other in moral terms. As we have seen, the heroine’s sexualized appearance onscreen can be appropriately qualified by giving her a husky or Western-sounding voice that reinforces her non-Tamil foreignness. The non-Tamil foreignness of the item actress likewise licenses her brazen appearance onscreen, but by the logic I have described in this chapter, the proof of that brazenness is her “Tamil” voice.