

# Kollywood and the Indian Tamil Diaspora

Representations of overseas Tamil communities by India's Tamil cinema have undergone a significant change since the late 1990s. How is this change from parochialism to consumerist cosmopolitanism evident on screen and what inspired it?

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## *Jeans* and Society in the Diaspora

The decision to send the blockbuster Tamil film *Jeans* (dir. S. Shankar 1998) to the 1999 Academy Awards as an entry under the Best Foreign Film category can be read as a conscious effort by India's intellectual and cultural elite to showcase to the world a new cosmopolitan and globalized image that is concomitant with its rising opulence. The film's foregrounding of the lives of overseas Tamils, specifically those living in the United States of America (U.S.), as part of the collective vicarious experience of the local audience in India calls for critical attention.

*Jeans* became synonymous for hitherto unseen levels of gloss and extravagance in its American setting and song visualizations, highlighting elements of grandeur and spectacle. These elements converge with the carnivalesque in the most peculiar fashion in the first song of the film: *Columbus... Columbus!* Here the main protagonists, a pair of Non-Residential Indian (NRI) twins, Vishwanathan and Ramamoorthy (both played by actor Prasanth) celebrate their weekend getaway partying on the beach together with their father Nacheeppan (played by veteran actor Nasser). Essentially a pastiche of MTV music videos and *Baywatch*, the song includes such components as a summer setting on the beach, bikini-clad models prancing in the background and racecars driving around as the family sings for Christopher Columbus to find new lands for them to party in on weekends. The peculiarity of the music video *Columbus...Columbus!* lies in its mise-en-scène. The entire song segment is interspersed with the random and unnecessary destruction of mobile phones, laptops, televisions and cars to underscore the celebrating family's holiday mood, which stems from their running a fine dining Indian restaurant in Los Angeles. These consumerist products are markers of modernity and their destruction reveals a society of superabundance that euphorically celebrates the

"culture of consumption." "Culture of consumption" is a phrase used to describe "any society in which the acquisition of material goods is viewed as a major defining feature of daily life" (Gordon 2001: 392-393). Yet, it is a consumerist modernity that the Tamil Diaspora family in *Jeans* is comfortable with, as is established in the film's exposition, situated in the characters' suburbia homes and luxury cars. The "culture of consumption," conspicuous and replete throughout the text, thus fashions a focal point of analysis for the shifting modes of representing the Tamil Diaspora by India's Tamil cinema.

The iconicity of *Jeans* lay as much in its immense commercial success, with the chart-busting music by Oscar-winning composer A. R. Rahman and aesthetic extravagance, as in its enunciation of difference in the portrayals of overseas Tamil communities. This is in comparison to other preceding films that showcase the Tamil Diaspora, such as the equally iconic *Ninaithaale Inikkum* ("Sweet Memories," dir. K. Balachander 1979). *Ninaithaale Inikkum* is a campy musical comedy set in Singapore and follows the travails of a rock band on tour from Tamil Nadu. The film registers on celluloid the imagined cultural distance between the indigenous Tamil and his foreign "other" of similar ethno-linguistic stock. The main narrative thrust of the film follows the rock band's lead singer Chandru and lead guitarist Deepak (played by then rising stars and now Tamil screen legends Kamalhaasan and Rajinikanth respectively) in their efforts to find an elusive Singaporean Tamil girl Sonia (played by yesteryear actress Jeyapradha) whom Chandru is in love with. Similarly, the musical romance *Jeans* centers on the struggle of American Tamil Vishwanathan to unite with his Indian Tamil lover Madhumita (played by Miss World Winner 1994 and international film star Aishwarya Rai) against parental opposition from Nacheeppan who insists that his sons marry sisters or another pair of twin girls. These otherwise banal plot descriptions should not obfuscate the fact that both films are rich polysemic texts that open up new vistas in understanding the Tamil Diaspora on film. Thus, the question arises: has there been any discernible change in the depictions of the Diaspora by Tamil cinema from *Ninaithaale Inikkum* to *Jeans*? If so, how is this change evident and what inspired it?

It is clear that contrary to the principle characters in *Jeans*, who are secure in their selfhood as overseas Tamils and who have successfully negotiated their ethnic identity with the entrenched culture of consumption in their adopted homeland, the protagonists of *Ninaithaale Inikkum* appear ill at ease. As such, it is this paper's argument that there has been a significant recoding in the representation of overseas Tamil identity from the idiomatic local/foreign dichotomies to a more cosmopolitan outlook that constitutes the contemporary Tamil Diaspora, while at once subsuming the regional

identity into a larger Indian one in the making of a new cultural narrative. It is imperative to the aims of this discourse is to first situate the reader in the theoretical framework where the studies of popular culture and Diaspora, or transnational movements, converge. This will be followed by an account of these shifts in characterizations to assess their significance to contemporary relations between India and the Diaspora. By identifying the most conspicuous and visible markers of the culture of consumption in *Ninaitthalaale Inikkum* and *Jeans*, one can argue that components of diasporic existence such as identity, culture, gender relations, food and music have shifted away from the insular towards the inclusively hybrid.

## Popular Culture and the Diaspora

The term Diaspora refers to the dispersal of people (voluntarily or involuntarily) from their native land. The word is derived from the Greek words *dia* (“through” or “over”) and *speiro* (“dispersal” or “to sow”) and is most commonly associated with the specific Jewish experience of Diaspora (Lal 2006: 14). For our present discussion, the Indian Diaspora is used in a generic sense to refer to people who can claim the modern republic of India as their common ancestral homeland. *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* segments the departure of Indian emigrants into three distinct periods: “The Age of Merchants” (from antiquity to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century), “The Age of Colonial Capital” (the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century), and “The Age of Globalization” (the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to present) (Lal 2006: 14). It is necessary to establish that while the history of the Tamil Diaspora largely corresponds to the history of Indian Diaspora, the term refers not just to the ethnic Tamils in India but also to the descendants of Jaffna Tamils from present-day Sri Lanka. However, it would become clear through this discussion that Tamil cinema tends to specifically target the Indian-Tamil Diaspora in its hyphenated address, though this has not prevented Tamil cinema from being popular amongst Jaffna Tamils as well. As such, it is pertinent to call upon the term Indian-Tamil Diaspora in identifying the intended recipients of Tamil cinema’s cultural transmissions.

If *Ninaitthalaale Inikkum* and *Jeans* are to be defined as cultural products, one must first consider how the Indian Tamil Diaspora is a form of consciousness. The attempt to read both films as a “type of consciousness” is to extrapolate from these texts “a variety of experience[s], a state of mind, and a sense of identity” in their imagination of the Tamil Diaspora (Toloyan 1996: 14). Thus, the semiotics of identity and existence away from home found in the films becomes significant to map the trajectories taken by these overseas communities. Often the Diaspora trajectories involve an act of active negotiation to create what Steven Vertovec (1997: 290) calls “hybrid

cultural phenomena,” involving the synthesis of elements from various cultural heritages to create new hybrid identities. Hence, to trace such negotiations and trajectories is to view the Diaspora as a mode of cultural production and one in which the medium of cinema plays an active role (Vertovec 1997: 290).

The study of popular cinema as a means of establishing socio-cultural links between the homeland and the Indian Diaspora has been largely focused on Hindi cinema. Known in contemporary parlance as “Bollywood,” the popular Hindi film industry has been conferred the status of “national cinema” in India. However, the research on Bollywood’s global impact appears to have “marginalized the influence of regional cinemas in the making of diasporic consciousness” (Ravi 2003: 46). One such regional cinema subsumed under the hegemony of Bollywood is that of Tamil cinema, or “Kollywood,” based in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup> Though Hindi films enjoy a larger viewership amongst the Diaspora in general, Tamil films have a strong cultural presence amongst the majority Tamil-speaking Indian Diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia, and Dubai (Ravi 2003: 46). The thriving proliferation of Tamil cinema in these regions sees an active operation of the nexus between what Arjun Appadurai (1990: 6) calls “ethnoscapes” and “mediascapes”, where displacement “creates new markets... that thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland”.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Kollywood still maintains its position as a lesser player relative to Bollywood because it has not emulated the latter’s strategy of exploiting the economically significant NRI market. Moreover, as industry insiders claim, Kollywood has a tendency to be more parochial in its marketing, focusing on audiences in Tamil Nadu, whereas Bollywood has been more proactive in seeking out new non-Hindi speaking foreign audiences beyond just the Indian Diaspora communities (Narayanan 2007: 25).

In its engagement with the Indian Diaspora, Kollywood is parochial. Tamil cinema has ventured beyond its shores in search of exotic locales for song and dance sequences since the late 1960s after films like *Sivantha Mann* (“Red Soil”, Dir. C.V.Sridhar 1969) and *Ullagum Sutrum Valibhan* (“Globe Trotting Hero”, Dir. M.G.Ramachandran 1973). Despite this, Selvaraj Velayutham (2008: 117) observes that its relationship with the Tamil Diaspora is “blasé and at times deeply problematic” and Tamil communities outside India do not appear onscreen frequently. Srilata Ravi (2008: 53) asserts that this emanates from the tendency of Tamil cinema to privilege Tamil language and ethnic pride over national integration since its earliest productions. Besides, Kollywood films do not endorse Tamil hybridity, and globalization is only accepted if Tamil ethnic identity and language are valorized; where it does engage with them, Kollywood

imagines overseas Tamils as being “culturally diluted” (Ravi 2008: 53). This idiosyncratic early vision which assumes that those in the Diaspora community have lost their cultural moorings finds ample repository in *Ninaithaalaie Inikkum*, but has since been challenged by *Jeans* which recoded conventions thereafter. These hermeneutical coordinates are important in understanding the Diaspora as a consciousness and a form of cultural production.

## Economics and the Cultural Economy of Kollywood

This paper suggests that the changing representational codes on film are underpinned by the increasing integration of overseas Indians as constituents of the Indian nation in reality. Since the 1990s, a process of economic reforms in the aftermath of a bankruptcy in foreign exchange reserves has been liberalizing the Indian economy to make the best of the opportunities offered by globalization (Kudaisya 2006: 87). In order for India to remain competitive in the global market, it had to “aggressively pull in foreign investments and readily allow for the infusion of new technologies” (Kudaisya 2006: 87). The entrepreneurial drive and specialized knowledge gained by Indian professionals away from home, besides their localized knowledge in Indian languages, culture and social ties to the homeland, offer them a competitive edge over other foreign investors (Lessinger 1999: 71). Many NRIs also speak about their investments in India in terms of a moral obligation to provide jobs and technical expertise to the country they left behind (Lessinger 1999: 71). It is in this context that India re-engaged with its Diaspora, after disengaging from it after independence in 1947 to focus on the nascent Indian state’s own nation-building efforts and to avoid straining good relations with other newly independent African and Asian states that had sizeable Indian communities (Kudaisya 2006: 87).

The embrace of overseas Indian communities was marked by shifts in policy. For example, the “Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) Card” introduced in 1998 allowed those who are of Indian origin to travel to India without the need for a visa. More importantly, the landmark announcement in January 2003 granted dual-citizenship to Indians in Britain, Canada, Australia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and the U.S., which was a change to India’s forty-eight year old citizenship act. Thus, it is clear that popular culture responds to political shifts, where images of overseas Indians are constructed by India’s film industries not as foreigners, but very much as a part of the national imaginary.

Once associated with regional chauvinism, insularity and a narrower market capture compared to Bollywood, Kollywood has since reinvented itself to appeal to a wider audience. The impetus for this

change possibly arose from the reality that the Indian Diaspora market, consisting around 25 million NRIs and “persons of Indian origin,” is a potent economic force with an annual income of around US\$300 billion, providing a lucrative market for the consumption of Indian films (Hiscock 2008: 13). R. Radhikaa Sarathkumar, veteran actress and founder of Radaan Mediaworks, an Indian film production company spearheading the refashioning, states that Tamil cinema is “trying to be recognized globally” (Narayanan 2007: 25). She adds that in order to match what Bollywood is doing, Kollywood films have to market themselves better to overseas audiences (Narayanan 2007: 25). One such strategy is to appeal to members of the Indian Diaspora by giving their lives, culture, and locales greater prominence in the filmic narratives. Tamil cinema’s reassessment of diasporic representations has gained verve with the entry of national and multinational production companies into Kollywood. In 2007, companies such as Moser Baer Entertainment, Pyramid Saimira Group, Ayngaran International and UTV Software Communications pumped an estimated total of 800 crore (800 million) rupees into funding Tamil films (Subramanian et. al. 2007: 46). This recent flood of corporate capital follows the gradual entry of foreign corporations into Tamil cinema since the late 1990s. The most notable pioneering entry was that of American Indian Hollywood producer Ashok Amritraj, Chairman of Hyde Park Entertainment, who was also the producer of *Jeans*. The added capital and the commercial drive to expand market-share are almost certain to ensure that the lives of overseas Tamils in the Indian Diaspora would continue to feature in Kollywood films. With their financial clout, and pertinence to the strengthening of the Indian economy, it comes as no surprise that the celluloid “doubles” of overseas Tamils are no longer “aliens” but an integral part of the national consciousness.

## Essentially Indian

In both *Ninaithaalaie Inikkum* and *Jeans*, the “culture of consumption” is a metonymical signifier for the pervasive free-market capitalism evident in seemingly ubiquitous neon-lit advertising signboards, theme parks, casinos, skyscrapers and giant shopping complexes. It is in their assimilation into this culture that establishes the Nacheeappan family’s cosmopolitanism. In contrast, Chandru and Deepak find the foreign locale strangely alien and within days of arriving in Singapore, a Chinese merchant gathering a mob threatens to beat them up if they do not buy a vase (Deepak is actually gesticulating to them for directions). In this comic scene, Deepak ends up buying a 6-foot tall vase which he struggles to carry through the streets of Singapore. Compared to the NRIs in *Jeans*, the visiting Indians in *Ninaithaalaie Inikkum* find the uninhabitable “new world” of East Asia dangerous and threatening.



The notion of an exotic but dangerous foreign locale was a consistent trope in Tamil films set overseas before the 1990s. Films like *Priya* (Dir. S. P. Muthuraman 1978), *Varuvan Vadivelan* (“Vadivelan will Come”, Dir. K. Sankar 1978), *Japanil Kalyanaraman* (“Kalyanaraman in Japan”, Dir. S. P. Muthuraman 1985) and *Ooru Vittu Ooru Vanthu* (“From One Country to Another”, Dir. Ganghei Amaren 1990) are exemplary in this sense. In these films, beneath the magnificence of the modern, prosperous and high-tech East Asian cities lay underbellies of crime and vice, where the Indian-Tamil heroes have to battle murderous Chinese or Japanese gangsters. It is also instructive that most of these films set in overseas locations fall into the genre of action or crime thrillers, which uses the overseas locales for glamour and excitement.

This sense of danger and alienation is underscored when Chandru, Deepak and their band find themselves in the home of Sonia, the Singaporean Tamil woman Chandru is attracted to. The local Tamil man who is Sonia’s father challenges Deepak to the most unusual and disturbing gamble where the stakes are his “Toyota car” (a prized East Asian commodity) for Deepak’s finger if he can flick a cigarette into his mouth (a gimmick actor Rajinikanth has gained idiosyncratic notoriety for!) ten times. After much fear and hesitation, Deepak withdraws from the game in fear of losing his finger. Therefore, in the most corporeally synecdochic way, the intact body and self which signify identity are threatened by the vagaries of the commoditization of society.

A remarkable disjuncture from established Tamil cinematic idioms occurs over a game of *Antakshari* in *Jeans*, played at a picnic by Madhumita’s family and the family of the Twins.<sup>3</sup> The game of *Antakshari* is used to enunciate a hybridized identity, accounting for a number of cultural heritages, all of which are ultimately sublated under the paramount signifier of the Indian nation. Here, the metonym of the game show is an expression of the “culture of consumption” where material goods -from expensive luxury items to basic consumer products- and even money can be acquired free of charge via victory in the game. Studies of game shows in regional private cable channels in Tamil Nadu reveal that such game shows have become a means of bypassing the national to assert local and sub-national identities (Moorti 2004). While the imitation of the game show in *Jeans* also becomes “the site where questions of consumption, cultural citizenship, and national identity are worked out” (Moorti 2004: 550), it is instead used to valorize a national Indian identity. During the game of *Antakshari* the first participant begins with a song asserting the linguistic purism and superiority of the Tamil language from a 1950s film soundtrack. Another member continues with the songs of revolution, separatism, and Tamil nationalism from Tamil matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran’s film *Aayirathil Oruvan* (“One in a Thousand”, Dir. B. R.

Panthulu 1965), which was produced in the 1960s. This is an intertextual allusion to the political successes of the Dravidian nationalist party as the ruling entity in Tamil Nadu during that era. The song is a propagandist mythologizing of the Tamil “mother” as being enslaved by Hindi oppression, while her Tamil sons are fighting for liberation. The songs the family sings when “playing” *Antakshari* continue to borrow from Kollywood and one member of the family sings *Mukkala Muqabala*, from the film *Kaadalan* (“Loverboy”, Dir. S. Shankar 1994), a song that has been described as symptomatic of the “onslaught of globalized culture...[taking] on elements such as rap, MTV [and] the high-tech audio-visual apparatus” (Dhareshwar and Niranjana 2000: 192-193). Thus, metaphorically, the various identities such as the linguistic chauvinism of Tamil nationalism endemic in Tamil cinema and syncretized forms of global youth culture are all accounted for. The last member in the game establishes the final concentric circle of identity that bounds all other vernacular associations into its collectivity when he sings the patriotic Indian national song: *Sare Jahan Se Aacha Hindustan Hamara* (‘Better than the entire world, is our Hindustan!’). The moment the last contestant begins singing the patriotic song, all other participants in the game stand at attention and sing aloud in unison. Abandoning the referent of commodity culture, the game becomes a jingoistic ritual invoking cultural memory and a liminal connection with the homeland despite spatial differences. This is the most blatant expression of what can be termed the “complex phenomenon of diasporic nationalism” when national ideologies take on an increasingly transnational form (Alessandrini 2001: 336). Hence, in the imaginary of *Jeans* the overseas Tamil is not culturally diluted but one whose hybridism gains affirmation that despite “having a cosmopolitan mindset, speaking with an English or American accent...his [or her] heart and soul is in the right place, respecting all things Indian” (Dudrah 2006: 103).

## En-Gendering Change

Though *Ninaithaalae Inikkum* avoids overt discussion of the vernacular Tamil identity, it still valorizes the Tamil homeland as the site where ethnic identity is reaffirmed and stabilized. This is achieved through situating the marriage (the basic component of family, community, and identity formation) and the reunion of the estranged couple, Chandru and Sonia, back home in Tamil Nadu. Despite its proclamations of being “Dedicated to the Youth” and posturing the protagonists in the film as rock-stars in the mould of “The Rolling Stones” and “Queen”, *Ninaithaalae Inikkum* remains incongruently conservative in its gender relations. In Tamil cinema’s imagination, the diasporic Tamil woman, whose attire and speech marks her as modern, “automatically becomes an arrogant, ‘loose’ and sexualized object to be rescued

by the Indian Tamil hero” (Velayutham 2008: 176). This image has been entrenched in Tamil cinematic representations from as far back as *Pudhiya Paravai* (“New Bird”, Dir. Dada Mirasi 1964), a murder mystery film, in which the Indian Tamil protagonist’s first wife is a wild and hedonistic Tamil woman from Singapore, whom he cannot control and accidentally kills. Engendering similar formalizations is the female diasporic subject Sonia, whose freedom has given her too much space to transgress, degenerating into a moral corruption that needs union with the Indian Tamil hero Chandru to find redemption.<sup>4</sup> Here the commoditization of society takes the most nefarious form, as Sonia’s body is held as ransom by a Singaporean Tamil “loanshark” and she is made to dance in a cabaret till she pays off her debt. By bringing the diasporic, inauthentic, hybridized Singaporean Tamil girl “home to its classicist purity- Tamil Nadu” as the traditional, sari-clad wife desired by the punitive gaze of the Tamil cultural-patriarchal order, the difference is eliminated and the homeland valorized (Ravi 2008: 46). In *Jeans*, though Madhumita is depicted as a modern, cosmopolitan Indian national through her westernized dressing and command of English, she appears to retain the most traditional attributes of Indian femininity, such as unconditional love and loyalty, as her core values.<sup>5</sup> In short, there has indeed been a considerable change in the performance of the Indian Tamil Diaspora’s female identities from *Ninaithaalae Inikkum* to *Jeans*.

Most significantly, after *Jeans*, characterizations of diasporic masculinity were also recoded and new conventions introduced into Kollywood as a means of re-presenting the overseas communities. Tamil films before *Jeans* invariably cast all overseas Tamils in negative roles or as villains who brought the undesirable aspects of Western civilization with them. Instead, the twins Vishwanathan and Ramamoorthy in *Jeans* are shown to be intelligent, hardworking, well-versed in Tamil culture, respectful of Indian values and display a strong sense of filial piety to their father. The Nacheeppan family, like the diasporic families in *Time* (Dir. Geetha Krishna 1999), *Nala Damayanthi* (Dir. Mouli 2003), and *London* (Dir. Sundar C. 2005), are not entities devoid of cultural moorings but are deeply rooted in Indian family values. Though the films *M. Kumaran s/o Mahalakshmi* (Dir. M. Raja 2004) and *Pudhukottaiyilirundhu Saravanan* (“Saravanan from Pudhukottai”, Dir. S. S. Stanley 2004) persist in the older modes of presenting the diaspora, the majority of recent films has adopted a changed perspective in their depictions. Consequently, with the entry of American Tamils directing Kollywood films like *Meiporul* (“Truth”, Dir. Natty Kumar 2009) and *Achchamundu! Achchamundu!* (“There is Fear!” Dir. Arun Vaidyanathan 2009), one could see these positive representations, brought about by the process of recoding, becoming entrenched.

Particularly illuminating is the recent hit film

*Unakkum Enakkum* (“Between You and I”, Dir. M. Raja 2006), in which the hero is a London NRI and scion of a multi-millionaire who falls in love with a rustic belle from a village in Tamil Nadu. However, her brother, a village hick, is deeply suspicious of the wealthy and so he issues challenge for the NRI: to farm a given plot of barren land and beat him in the harvest for that particular season. Only then will the brother allow the NRI to marry his sister. While the NRI is initially presented as frivolous and happy-go-lucky, he eventually displays steel in meeting the challenge. Not only does he persevere in battling the harsh rural elements that he is unacquainted with, he also uses his intelligence to come up with newer and more innovative techniques in farming. The NRI eventually beats the heroine’s brother and wins the hand of his love. The basic plot of *Kannamoochi Yenada?* (“Why Hide and Seek?” Dir. V. Priya 2007) follows a similar progression as the NRI hero, a software architect from Malaysia, goes to India to win the heart of a girl he has fallen in love with. Despite the many setbacks in impressing her conservative Indian parents, the NRI eventually wins them over and marries his girl. These two films exemplify the change in conventions since the entry of *Jeans* into popular culture.

### Palatable Cosmopolitanism

The trope of consumption used in this essay to establish the binaries of local/foreign or parochial/cosmopolitan is manifest literally in the changing transnational nature of cuisine. In *Ninaithaalae Inikkum*, Tamil cuisine has a localized identity pegged to the geographical entity of Tamil Nadu. This interpretation stems from Chandru’s sardonic remark to his Mother upon his return home, that just as his Mother will prepare freshly made *dosa* at home, he had “freshly prepared on the spot- crabs, frogs and snakes” to eat in Singapore, to which his Mother reacts in disgust. These contrasting tastes in food between the “home” cuisine and the strange cuisines of the “foreign” locale prevent assimilation and the “foreign” is maintained at a distance.

In contrast, in *Jeans*, “Indian” or Tamil cuisine takes on a transnational nature in being available even in foreign locales besides just India or Tamil Nadu. This is evident when the heroine’s family is stopped from coming into the U.S. because they had brought containers of preserved pickles, mangoes and lemons; since foreign foods cannot be brought into the U.S., they have to be thrown away. However, when Vishwanathan first bumps into Madhumita and her family in the film’s exposition at the airport, he reassures them that they can find all of these preserved goods and other authentic Indian cuisines in his family restaurant. One can observe that the retention of Indian cuisine in the Tamil Diaspora stems from a feeling of loss of the familiar, which necessitated the need to remember, learn and practice cooking the food

from the “menu” of the homeland, consuming it as a palliative (Reeves 2006: 111-112). Furthermore, by naming the restaurant “Gandhi- India’s Cuisine” and through the restaurant’s presentation of Tamil and Indian cuisine as well as fusion foods, *Jeans* dissolves the binaries of local/foreign for an eclectic one.

and the world as binary oppositions are dissolved by a syncretic sensibility.

The transformation of cinematic representations and cultural configurations in embrace of consumerist cosmopolitanism is further augmented by the changing nature of Tamil film songs. While Kollywood songs have always been a musical pastiche of various genres and instruments, the industry has been dominated solely by Indian Tamils. However, in the recent hit film *Polladhavan* (“Ruthless”, Dir. Vetrimaran 2007), Malaysian Indian rapper, Yogi B remixed the classic rock song *Engeyum Eppothum* (“Anytime, anywhere”) performed in *Ninaitthalaai Inikkum* into a smash hit pandering to modern tastes. Following its spectacular success, Tamil cinema has embraced a new genre of music known as Tamil Hip-Hop, based on rap music rendered primarily in Tamil (Frederick 2009). Tamil Hip-Hop was popularized by Kuala Lumpur-based rappers like Yogi B, Emcee Jesz and Dr. Burns who were part of the Malaysian Indian Hip-Hop group Natchatra. Yogi B has gone on to sing in a number of Tamil films such as *Chennai 600028* (Dir. Venkat Prabhu 2007) and *Kuruvi* (“Courier”, Dir. Dharani 2008). In continuing the trend, Emcee Jesz has also recorded songs on the soundtracks of films like *Laadam* (Dir. Prabhu Solomon 2009) and *Maasilamani* (Dir. Manohar 2009). The seamless integration of Tamil hip-hop by Malaysian Indian artistes into the polystylism of film music reiterates the growing eclecticism that signifies contemporary Tamil cinema’s relationship with the diaspora and is symbolically inaugurated by having a song from *Ninaitthalaai Inikkum* remixed.

## Coming Home

Through attempting to find common thematic space between *Ninaitthalaai Inikkum* and *Jeans*, this essay has adopted a synchronic approach to the changing cinematic portrayals of the NRI through the semiotics of the culture of consumption. An apt conclusion to this paper is to reiterate how much Tamil cinema has evolved since its engagement with the overseas communities of India’s Tamil Diaspora. In their recent films *Sivaji* (Dir S. Shankar 2007) and *Dasavathaaram* (“Ten Incarnations”, Dir. K. S. Ravikumar 2008), Kollywood legends Rajinikanth and Kamalhaasan took on roles in which the NRI is a software systems architect and a biotechnologist respectively. More importantly, in both films, the NRI returns from America to save his native India from destruction. In a sense, it would not be incorrect to say that Chandru and Deepak have internalized the collective drift in *Weltanschauung* from parochial sojourners to cosmopolitans at home in both India



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## Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Dr. Rajesh Rai and Associate Professor Gyanesh Kudaisya for their feedback and ideas on an earlier draft of this research paper which was submitted as part of the coursework for the South Asian studies module: "Exile, Indenture, IT: Global South Asians." I am also thankful to Eugene Chew, Indran Paramasivam and Amitha Pagolu for their detailed and thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

The term 'Kollywood' is a portmanteau of the names Kodambakkam and Hollywood, just as 'Bollywood' is a portmanteau of the names Bombay and Hollywood. Kodambakkam is the centre of the Tamil film industry in the city of Chennai (formerly known as Madras), Tamil Nadu, India, where major film studios like A.V.M. Studios, L.V. Prasad Studios, and Vijaya Vauhini Studios can be found.

- 2 In using the term "Ethnoscape," Appadurai refers to the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons [that] constitute an essential feature of the world." Similarly, the term "Mediascape," refers to the "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to

## Filmography

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those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places.”

- 3 Antakshari is a musical game played in South Asia, particularly in India and Pakistan. The idea of the game is to start singing the first two lines of an Indian film song (usually from Bollywood or Indian movies). The game can be played by two or more people and is particularly popular as a group activity during commutes, bus rides etc. The singer has to sing two complete lines and then s/he may stop at the end of those or following lines. The last Hindi (or indigenous language) letter of the last word sung is then used by the next singer to sing another song, starting with that letter. It started as a family pastime; now there are several TV shows and competitions all over India based on it.
- 4 It would be of interest to the reader that other forms of cultural performances even in the Diaspora itself register this representation of the overseas Tamil woman as ‘loose’, ‘wildly out of control’ and morally corrupt. This is evident in a recent musical production by the National University of Singapore Hindu society: *Yaatra* 2008. One portion of the Tamil drama presents the story of an Australian Tamil girl Nacheemmal as Nancy, postured as a disloyal wife to her husband Ram and having an illicit affair with another married man Kannan. In contrast, Kannan’s wife is caricatured as a fiercely loyal and loving wife to the undeserving Kannan. In glorifying Kannan’s wife’s virtues as a native Tamil from Tamil Nadu, there seems to be condescension in the representation of the Tamil Diaspora’s women by the Diaspora’s own cultural productions.
- 5 Outside the text, Rai’s privileged position as India’s cultural ambassador, as the Miss World 1994 competition winner, and now her global popularity through the widespread proliferation of Hindi films, and roles in Hollywood films like *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *Mistress of Spices* (2005), *The Last Legion* (2007) and *Pink Panther 2* (2009), reaffirm her hybrid identity at once as a cosmopolitan and an Indian in the globalized media market.

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