

The Khushboo Case File: Reverse Culture Jamming

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Introduction

In September 2005, the Tamil edition of the weekly newsmagazine *India Today* invited popular Tamil film actress and television host Khushboo to write a column in the context of an all-India survey the publication had carried out on 'Changing Sexual Attitudes'. The column was intended as a commentary on the survey's findings. Khushboo had earlier written for the magazine on topics such as the freedom and education of women.

The turn of events after the article was published, and the proportion and vehemence they acquired, surprised everyone. A few days after the magazine hit the stands, an evening publication from the South Indian media giant Sun TV questioned Khushboo's right to speak about 'Tamil women', alleging that the actress had made "derogatory remarks about the chastity of Tamil women" (*Tamil Murasu*, 24 September 2005). Suddenly all hell broke loose. An organisation, ostensibly committed to the protection of Tamil culture, staged massive protests against the "North Indian" Khushboo. Their cadre, including women and members of the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI), staged broomstick-wielding, *chappal* (slipper)-waving demonstrations in Chennai, and defamation charges were filed against Khushboo in courts across Tamil Nadu.

In the six months since the 'Khushboo controversy' hit the headlines, a number of commentaries have attempted to dissect the imbroglio and identify the cultural fault lines along which it was expressed and played out. Apart from the oft-repeated charges of "patriarchy", "political vendetta" and "cultural chasm", the Khushboo 'episode' seems to straddle other dichotomies; Khushboo as a Hindi-speaking, Gujarati Muslim 'outsider' in the

Tamil film industry; Khushboo as a deified figure (there is at least one temple dedicated to her) in contrast to the general portrayal of women in Tamil films; a Dalit party springing to the defence of "Tamil culture"; E.V. Periyar's Self-Respect movement as an emancipator of women, as compared with the role the current Dravidian parties, supposed inheritors of Periyar's legacy, played in fanning the controversy, etc.

The Khushboo controversy lies at the intersection of a number of narratives about culture, myth, notions of female sexuality and identity. At one level, it could be read as a reaction to an attempt to push the boundaries of sexual expression in a conservative patriarchal society. But *l'affaire* Khushboo has also played itself out on multiple overlapping levels.

What Did Khushboo Really Say?

It is important to bear in mind that Khushboo did not actually write the column herself. She narrated her views to Peer Mohamed, an *India Today* journalist, who wrote them down. Therefore, it is possible that the essence of what Khushboo said could have been 'lost in translation'.

According to the text of the column:

Given our conservative Indian backdrop, women are slowly coming out. But I do have questions about this women's liberation when cases like Stefani's accident are happening^a" [this victim was chased and killed by drunken youths after a night party in a Chennai hotel].

And then:

But at the same time, I think sex education is a must in our schools. When the schools fail to teach about sex, parents should educate their children about sex. In my opinion, sex is not only related to body; it's got a lot to do with our minds. I can't understand how some girls could change their boyfriends every Friday. When a girl is sure about her boyfriend she can tell her parents that she's going out with him. When the girl has a serious relationship the parents should also allow it.

Followed by:

Our society should liberate itself from such ideas that brides should all be virgins at the time of marriage. No educated man will expect his bride to be virgin at the time of marriage. But when indulging in pre-marital sex, the girl should guard herself against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Nowhere in the text is there any mention of 'Tamil women' or 'Tamil culture'.¹ To extrapolate a threat to Tamil culture based on a reading of the column is therefore quite a conceptual leap. However, the article also seems to send out contradictory signals. On the

one hand, Khushboo welcomes the fact that women today are more liberal, but she also questions women's liberation; she remarks that educated men should not expect their wives to be virgins, but at the same time she can't understand how girls can change their boyfriends every Friday. In addition, the article seems to suggest that only pre-marital sex causes sexually transmitted diseases.

The difficulty is further compounded by the fact that *karpū*, the Tamil word for chastity, is open to multiple interpretations. *Karpū* can also imply virginity, loyalty, and selflessness. We don't really know in what context Khushboo meant to use the word.

The Advent of Periyar

The Dravidian movement, initiated in Tamil Nadu in 1916 with the release of the "Non-Brahmin Manifesto", first acquired a reformist character that was followed by a radical phase under the leadership of Periyar.

Periyar's construction of Tamil self-identity differed from the orientation later imposed by his followers. He rarely referred to the oft-invoked, supposed innate glory of the Tamils, and their ancient past and unique culture.² Periyar considered it a sheer accident that one was born a Tamil or a Malayali. What mattered more was the unjust practice, depending on the strata into which one was born, of human beings being enslaved in the name of caste and religion. This was unacceptable. Periyar's strong anti-Brahminism and his espousal of 'Tamilness' based on a notion of 'Self-Respect', were posited as a counter to the social order based on caste hierarchy. It is in this context that one should locate Periyar's views, not only on the north-south/Aryan-Dravidian divide, but also his crusades against religious superstition and his critique of Brahminical scriptures.

Periyar responded to Kamban's 11th-century Tamil *Ramayana* with the argument that Rama's war against Lanka signified the Aryan's brutal conquest of the culturally superior Dravidians. He also claimed that the monkeys that Rama encountered in the southern jungles were none other than the Dravidians, and that the epic was an insult to Dravidianism. Furthermore, Periyar also deplored Rama's behaviour towards Sita after she was rescued from Lanka.³ In this instance, Periyar was critical of the casteist and misogynist uses to which the epic had been put under centuries of Brahmin hegemony. He however ignored the fact that in all versions of the *Ramayana*, Rama is portrayed as a Kshatriya (of the warrior caste) and Ravana as a Brahmin.

But the Dravidian-Tamil identity was based partly in opposition to notions of caste oppression and Aryan supremacy, associated with Brahmins in Tamil Nadu. Even as Periyar refused to accord the Tamil language a cultic value, and questioned the claims of Tamil enthusiasts about the trans-historical validity of Tamil classical literature, he articulated Tamilness and anti-Brahminism to mean a certain kind of rationalism. This rationalism was grounded in his vision of a casteless Tamil society.

Periyar's rationalist ideology was particularly radical in that it sought to address the question of gender oppression in a way that has been unparalleled in the Dravidian movement. It was a break from anything that had been articulated till that point, and ever

since. He ridiculed the notion that women had to be 'chaste', and condemned all attempts to portray women as 'fragile' and 'gentle' in the literary texts of the past and the present. He even exhorted women to defend themselves against their unruly husbands by using broomsticks!⁴ The Self-Respect movement organised Self-Respect marriages during the 1930s and '40s, in which all the rituals and symbols of women's enslavement to men, including the *mangalsutra* (necklace signifying the status of married woman), were consciously rejected. The movement strongly advocated divorce, widow remarriage, abortion, equal rights; and argued for women's control over the reproductive process.

The legacy bequeathed by Periyar to the Dravidian movement was used (and abused) by his followers, particularly the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The circumstances under which the DMK was formed, and under which it sought to spread its appeal, led to an alternative interpretation of Periyar's vision. A combination of factors led to a large section of Periyar-led Dravida Kazhagam (DK) members to break away and form the DMK in 1949. One reason for the split was that Periyar refused to participate in electoral politics, preferring to keep the DK as a social movement.

During its early days the DMK did follow Periyar's social reform policies, with their focus on atheism, and non-Brahminism. Demands for an independent sovereign 'Dravida Nadu' were also voiced. The DMK also tried to evolve socialist ideas in this period.

However, once the DMK decided to enter electoral politics, it began to compromise on all these issues. The atheistic slogans were replaced with 'one caste, one god'⁵. In 1971, the DMK openly disassociated itself from Periyar and his followers, who had launched a campaign in Salem to desecrate idols of Rama on the festival of Ramnavami. Likewise, the DMK also gradually gave up its demand for Dravida Nadu. This was because the notion of Dravida Nadu had become anachronistic; and despite its claim of having branches in the other three South Indian states, the DMK's influence was really confined to Tamil Nadu.

In fact, the notion of Dravida Nadu as a political unit that would comprise the four southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, was a fanciful one. If the aim was to achieve Dravida Nadu by uniting the peoples of the four states under the umbrella of a pan-Dravidian identity, then this was bound to fail. Each state has very different linguistic, historical and cultural traditions. The proponents of Dravida Nadu did not take this reality into account.

Periyar and the Gender Question

The Dravidian movement, when led by Periyar, did address the gender question at length. Periyar's views on gender were radical. But even then, the discourse on female liberation was riddled with ambiguities. Thus, despite Periyar, the concept of the ideal Tamil woman as chaste and valorous was inserted into Dravidian discourse.

During the years that the Self-Respect movement was in the ascendant, it conducted many Self-Respect marriages that were free from the rituals and orthodoxy of traditional Hindu weddings. For instance, Self-Respect marriages eschewed the services of a Brahmin priest as well as the chanting of mantras in Sanskrit; moreover, these marriages held that

the bride and groom's mutual decision, and not the consent of the parents, was necessary and central for the marriage.⁶ A Self-Respect marriage required the man and woman to abide by each other's views, needs and concerns.

When it came to *karpu*, Periyar was even more scathing. In his writings in the Tamil journal *Kudi Arasu*, Periyar laid out his argument against *karpu*.⁷ Tracing the etymology of the word, he argued that the term must have originally referred to qualities such as firmness, steadfastness and honesty. Early in human history, *karpu* was probably considered a universal human quality that was believed to inhere in the human body prior to coitus; for after coitus the body becomes marked and comes to bear the trace of another. However, after Aryan Hinduism entered the Tamil country, *karpu* came to denote wifely chastity and was associated with and considered an index of selflessness, pure wifeliness and absolute commitment to a wife's essential duties.

Yet, argued Periyar, this did not mean that the Tamil language and culture were any less culpable with respect to women in this regard, as Tamil poets, time and again, had resorted to the rhetoric of *karpu* in their works. Even Thiruvalluvar, the renowned Tamil moral philosopher of the first century BCE, was not averse to lyricising the quality of *karpu*. Had he not written, "If a chaste woman who worships not god but her husband wills the heavens to rain, it will"?⁸ Given the unequal world of the sexes that we inhabit today, Periyar concluded, women had been coerced and persuaded to accept their bondage, and consent to an idea that stifled their desire and distorted their very being.

Periyar's views on *karpu* represented an implicit critique of masculinity. In an article titled "Masculinity Must Be Destroyed", he observed that the very term "masculinity" degraded women. As long as masculinity persisted as the hegemonic societal norm, women could not expect to be respected. He reasoned that men, whose selves were bound to and constituted by this norm, would continue to believe that courage and freedom inhered solely in the male subject. Further, society as a whole had come to accept this division of qualities into male and female as divinely ordained. Unless the category of masculinity and its obverse, femininity (which implied subservience), were destroyed, there would be no genuine freedom for women.

Periyar considered marriage the ultimate symbol of a woman's enslaved status, for it was marriage that thrust upon her the burden of motherhood.⁹ He often said that marriage, usually considered necessary for the propagation of the human species and for a good life, was in reality a deception practiced on women, a conspiracy hatched very early in history to keep women submissive. Of whichever caste or class she was, the bond of marriage invariably rendered a woman the property and slave of her husband. Periyar characterised the entire existent ritual of marriage as an Aryan-Brahmin imposition on the Dravidian south. Periyar saw Self-Respect marriages as a solution to liberation from Brahminical patriarchy. Moreover, since Self-Respect marriages were voluntary associations, Periyar insisted that they implicitly endorsed divorce.¹⁰

The chief virtue of Self-Respect marriages lay in the fact that they defined women as autonomous persons rather than as wives or potential mothers.¹¹ Moreover, such

marriages framed women as equal subjects, with equal rights to property and power within the household and outside of it. Periyar advocated birth control as an effective strategy to help women relieve themselves of the fear and responsibility of imposed motherhood. He pointed out that birth control afforded physically weak women a means out of the trauma of pregnancy.

The Aftermath of the DMK

The political life and culture in Tamil Nadu, according to some commentators,¹² are significantly marked by the ideology and practice of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The DMK's hegemonic grip owes much to its rhetoric to 'Tamilness', which was constructed in part by notions of *maanam* (honour) and valour. The concept of female chastity was posited and articulated within the confines of these notions, and reinforced by the media forms of popular culture ; so much so that issues politically relevant to the Tamil people cannot be posed outside this hegemonic framework.

The transformation of Dravidian politics under the DMK was nowhere felt as keenly as in the cultural realm; it was here that Periyar's ideology was distorted to serve populist interests. Periyar had articulated the concept of self-respect in order to define Dravidian/Tamil consciousness as a foil to Aryan/Brahmin dominance. This consciousness was accompanied by reform in specific practices such as widow remarriage, self-respect marriages, and anti-superstition campaigns. However, the DMK sought to project self-respect in a radically different way.¹³ They attempted to render this concept as essentially 'Tamil' in its origin, and constructed elaborate critiques of Aryan supremacy to this end. They aimed to demonstrate that the Dravidian past was inherently superior to the Aryan past, endowed as the former was with an inviolable sense of 'honour'. In other words, the medieval concept of *maanam* was substituted for the secular notion of 'self-respect'.

DMK leader C.N. Annadurai, for instance, claimed in his 1948 book *Arya Mayai* (Aryan Deception) that the Aryans had never set foot south of the Vindhya mountains.¹⁴ He also claimed that Tamil society before and after the Sangam age was secular in character, and that the only religions known to the Tamils were Buddhism and Jainism. However, the 'Golden Age' of the Tamils that Annadurai celebrated was not particularly egalitarian in the modern sense of the term. *Puranaanooru*, the Sangam text upon which Annadurai relied for his historical argument, indicates the existence of the four *varnas* (castes), the presence of Brahmins, and several forms of rituals and worship in Tamil Nadu.

DMK ideologues sought to project *maanam* as the sole defining principle of Tamilness, and embedded this concept within a complex genealogy of texts. This textual space was constituted out of three narratives: *Silappathikaram*, *Puranaanooru* and *Thirukkural*, which were repeatedly invoked to provide legitimacy to the pronouncements of the DMK.¹⁵

Silappathikaram, written in the 2nd century AD by Ilango Adigal, is a text that celebrates the powers of a chaste Tamil woman called Kannagi. Her husband Kovalan, an affluent merchant in the Chola kingdom, falls in love with a dancer called Madhavi and showers his wealth on her. A misunderstanding causes him to leave Madhavi and return to Kannagi. The

couple then sets out for Madurai (in the Pandya kingdom) where Kovalan hopes to sell Kannagi's anklet and raise money for a livelihood. A goldsmith who offers to buy the anklet finds that it resembles the one he stole from the Pandya queen, and accuses Kovalan of theft. On hearing the false testimony, the Pandya king orders Kovalan's execution. Kannagi rushes to the king's court and proves Kovalan's innocence. Shocked by his own injustice, the Pandya king dies. Kannagi rips off her left breast and hurls it at the city of Madurai, which goes up in flames because of the power of her chastity. Kannagi then ascends to heaven. Later, upon hearing that the northern kings Kanaga and Vijaya had insulted Kannagi, Tamil culture and language, the Chera king Chenkuttuvan leads a military expedition to the north, humbles the offenders and forces them to carry stones from the Himalayas to the Chera country. These stones were later sculpted into an image of Kannagi.

DMK leader M. Karunanidhi, formerly a scriptwriter for the Tamil film industry, has repeatedly evoked the Kannagi story in his political speeches and writings. He also wrote a play and a film script based on the epic. However, in his version the characters of Kovalan and Madhavi have been reinterpreted. Kovalan now becomes a defender of Tamil culture and womanhood rather than one who moved away from his chaste wife. Madhavi represents Tamil culture, and Kovalan is portrayed as Madhavi's saviour, otherwise she would have succumbed to the predation of an old Greek merchant. Kovalan emerges in Karunanidhi's narrative as an ideal Tamil hero whose chaste wife waits and hopes for his return. Not only is Kovalan deemed worthy of his wife's chastity, but is also accorded a 'chivalric' image. As a man of true Tamil honour, he courts the 'other' woman in order to save her from a repugnant destiny.

The Kovalan-Kannagi-Madhavi story has since become an archetype that offers an ideal resolution to the complex claims of marriage and sexuality. It is through this set of relationships that a man's honour is mediated. The man's honour depends on his safeguarding one woman's chastity and recognising another's devotion. The honour of a woman depends primarily on the legitimacy her virtue acquires as a consequence of her relationship with a man. The Tamil's *maanam* thus lies in the defence of a woman's purity. A woman's sexual purity in turn embodies an ideal Tamil society. Karunanidhi's rereading of the epic abounds in metaphors of sexual purity, sexual corruption and virgin innocence.

As a narrative, *Silappathikaram* served to bridge the present with the distant, mythical past. In Karunanidhi's version, there is a scene where Chenkuttuvan exhorts his courtiers to accompany him on the northern expedition to avenge the insults to Tamil culture and honour by the Aryan rulers. The Chera king appeals to the Tamil's innate sense of honour, and is willing to bury political differences with his Chola and Pandya rivals in order to forge a pan-Tamil unity. The courtiers with these particular names ; Aasaithambi, Chitrarasu, Nedunchezian, Arignar, Kalaiggar, Kavignar, and Kalaivanar ; were also names of DMK functionaries. Aasaithambi is not just the name of Ilango, the poet-author of *Silappathikaram*, but also the name of a leading DMK figure at that time. The name of the Pandyan king, Nedunchezian, was also the name of one of the founders of the DMK. Arignar, Kalaiggar,

Kavignar, and Kalaivaanar are generic Tamil names that refer to poets, scholars and artists, as well as the honorific titles of C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, Kannadasan (a well known lyricist and script writer, and a strong DMK supporter) and N.S. Krishnan (a stage and screen comedian and patron of the DMK), respectively.¹⁶ This allegorical transposition, eliding past and present, legitimised DMK leaders as true patrons and defenders of Tamil culture.

The Portrayal of Women in MGR's Films

The ethos of popular cinema has had a close, almost incestuous relationship, with the political culture in Tamil Nadu. The DMK also used cinema as a tool for the propagation of its ideology. Many leaders of the Dravidian movement were also involved in Tamil cinema in some capacity. C.N. Annadurai and Karunanidhi both wrote scripts for films, and several film personalities were actively involved in DMK politics. Of these, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), who later became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was the most prominent.

Cinema enabled a wider dissemination of DMK ideology. The practices of DMK theatre were infused into cinema; thus, for instance, the exuberant use of language, rhetorical flourishes and hyperbolic speeches were a hallmark of early DMK cinema. In the 1952 classic *Paraasakthi*, the hero Gunasekharan (played by the path-breaking Tamil film hero Sivaji Ganesan, then a DMK activist, in his first major role) speaks passionately to the camera in a courtroom scene, demanding justice for himself and his sister who have been wronged.¹⁷ Cinema also helped the DMK to articulate its political and cultural ideology through an array of signs and symbols. The party ideology was propagated through gestures, song-and-dance sequences and ritual invocations of party symbols. Several MGR movies reflect this. For instance, in *Kalankarai Vilakkam* (1965), MGR is shown watching a song-and-dance sequence called "*Sange Muzhangu* (Blow Ye, Conches)", a rousing invocation to Tamilness. Less subtle signs are found in several films scripted by DMK ideologues: a photograph of C.N. Annadurai on the walls of a poor man's hut; the DMK flag fluttering in a slum; the hero dressed in party colours; songs replete with anagrammatic devices that stand for names of leaders of the DMK.¹⁸

It is therefore not surprising that MGR, who for years had been an icon for the Dravidian movement, came to be subconsciously associated with all the ideologies connected with that movement in popular imagination. From 1953 to 1972, when he was a member of the DMK, MGR's films propagated a diluted but clearly identifiable strand of the DMK ideology. Given the DMK's overt allegiance to cinema as a vehicle for political communication,¹⁹ it consciously transferred MGR's cinematic popularity to the domain of party politics. But once MGR was forced to leave the DMK in 1972 for alleging corruption against his party colleagues in public, and formed his own organisation, Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [which was renamed All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) during the Emergency], all the support from the cinema hall 'front-benchers' went with him.

The explicit interaction between cinema and politics, a unique feature of Tamil politics, has been studied by a number of scholars.²⁰ They have argued that MGR's popular appeal rested on his screen roles as a subaltern hero combating everyday oppression. He

appeared on screen as a peasant, fisherman, rickshaw puller, gardener, shoeshine boy, cowherd and multiple other incarnations. In these roles, he usurps the exclusive privileges of his social superiors; the right to dispense justice, access to literacy and to women, right to adopt the language and posture of authority. But instead of developing a subversive critique of the iniquitous system that is portrayed, these films offer a resolution for the injustice that is derived from within the framework of the system itself. Most of MGR's roles in his movies portray him as a swashbuckling hero; a screen image that is located in the 'public domain' or 'non-domestic space', historically and culturally constituted as men's exclusive preserve. Given this, one would assume that the 'MGR phenomenon' would attract more male than female audiences. However, a major constituency from which MGR derived support was that of women.²¹

The scholar M.S.S. Pandian argues that the support from women is derived from the access that these films provide to certain "moments of freedom" with which the women spectators can identify; moments normally denied to them in their everyday lives. First, in these films marriage ceases to be a site of parental authority mediated by caste or class. The heroine marries a man of her own choice, not of her parents. The deserving hero, none other than MGR, thus dissolves the impending caste and class and parental structures of power. The limits of desire and emotional involvement are thus seemingly 'subverted'. In *Rajakumari* (1947), MGR as a humble villager wins the hand of a princess in marriage. In *Mattukara Velan* (1970), MGR marries the daughter of an affluent lawyer who had earlier thrown him out of the house for being a lowly cowherd. *Thaiku Thalai Magan* (1967) finds MGR marrying the only daughter of the local landlord. This pattern repeats itself in film after film, such as *Baghdad Thirudan* (1960), *Panathottam* (1963), *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965) and *Kumarikottam* (1967). In *Padakotti* (1964), MGR plays a fisherman who fights with a powerful fish trader for the hand of the village headman's beautiful daughter.

In rural Tamil Nadu, where upper-caste landlords treat concubines as status symbols, and access to and control over women is a sign of authority, women of the subaltern classes are invariably the victims of the sexual politics of caste and class. In this scenario, MGR's films present a strong inversion of reality.²² Equally important is the fact that when MGR appears in elite roles, he renounces his superior status in the marital context. In *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965), *Idaya Kani* (1975), *Naan Aanaiyittil* (1966), *Aasai Mugam* (1965), *Pallaandu Vaazhga* (1975) and *Netru Indhru Naalai* (1974), he renounces his position as a wealthy man and marries a working-class woman. He also renounces his upper-caste status.

Second, villains in MGR's films are lecherous, rapacious, and sadistic; they often employ force to oppress and overpower the women who try to resist them. But in characters played by MGR, one finds strong elements of the opposite tendency. He is an exceptional man who does not indulge in sexual violence. In *Oli Vilakku* (1968), a young widow leaves her home to escape ill-treatment at the hands of her in-laws, and lives with a thief, played by MGR. Throughout the film the widow is presented as sexually available: she admires with vanity her own image in the mirror, she accepts gifts and wears low-cut blouses and tight *saris*. Her own brother-in-law as well as the villain of the film attempt to rape her; however, she is saved by MGR. When she moves in with the hero, neighbours

suspect her of having loose morals and accuse her: "You have lost your *tali* (necklace signifying the status of being married) but not your desire"²³. In a world of sexual aggressors, MGR plays the role of protector. He distances himself physically by sleeping in the porch of his own home, and even in an inebriated state does not molest her. In Tamil society, where violence against women and sex is an intrinsic part of daily life,²⁴ the sympathetic masculine figures portrayed by MGR offer a much-needed counterpoint.

Third, the repressed sexuality of women in Tamil society finds expression in MGR films. It is culturally prescribed that women should earn their reputation as moral beings through controlling their physical desires. MGR films present an potent alternative: in their plots, it is the young and beautiful heroine who takes the initiative, persistently daydreams about the hero and pursues him, behaviour that would be regarded as brazen in real life. The heroine summons up extra-*risqué* dreams in the form of song-and-dance sequences. While the dances are choreographed to signify the sexual act, the lyrics are replete with metaphorical double entendre. The repressed sexuality of Tamil women finds its momentary and unreal catharsis in the course of witnessing these highly eroticised sequences. In a society where female voyeurism is censored as culturally unacceptable, the darkened atmosphere of the cinema hall is perhaps one of the few public spaces where women are able to practice it.

However, these moments of supposed freedom are ephemeral; they do not, in the final analysis, enable even an open-ended critique of the male dominance in Tamil society that is mirrored in Tamil films. Rather, the *dénouement* of these films inevitably reaffirms patriarchal values.²⁵ In addition, monogamy, chastity, and all the other symbols of male domination in conventional sexual relationships are carefully elaborated and defended as the embodiment of the highest womanly virtues.

Female sexuality is a social construct. An independent woman, one who is not under male control, is seen as sexually threatening and subversive. Male anxiety over female sexuality is heightened when the woman in question transgresses socially prescribed norms, be they related to dress, space, or in the case of Khushboo's comments, the conventional understandings of sexual behaviour. Men are supposed to establish their honour/virility by taming such nonconformist, autonomous women into docile wives ever-willing to perform the submissive gesture of touching their husband's feet.²⁶

In *Kanavan* (1968), not only is the heroine portrayed as a 'feminist', but the plot of the film was provided by MGR. The film revolves around Rani, the spoilt daughter of a rich man who declares that her aim is to "punish these headstrong men and live independently". She wears Western clothes, and insults and turns down suitors offering marriage. Her worried father writes a will stipulating that unless his daughter gets married within a month, she will not inherit any of his property. In order to obtain the property and retain her independence, she marries a prisoner who is condemned to death. The prisoner (played by MGR) has been convicted on false charges. Rani waits for the day the hero will be hanged, but the arrival of fresh evidence leads to his acquittal. The hero tells his wife, "How could there be a person like you in Tamil Nadu, where women treat it as a boon to die when their husbands are alive?" Without the hero's protection, a number of unscrupulous people try and take advantage of

the heroine. She realises at last that only her husband can protect her. She bids farewell to feminism; clad in a *sari*, she returns to the hero and says. "I am fit only to be at your feet".

This theme repeats itself in films such as *Kumari Kottam* (1971) and *Vivasayee* (1967). In the latter, the heroine's tight T-shirt incites a peasant to molest her. Pardoning the peasant, claiming it was not his fault but that of the woman's provocative garment, the hero covers the heroine's already-draped bosom with a towel as if it were the *pallu* of a *sari*. The woman thus doubly subordinated is invariably upper-caste/class, speaks English and is urbanised, while the hero is a rustic. This urban-rural divide serves to show the countryside as a repository of desirable cultural values.

In MGR's films, as in society, the woman's identity is dependent on that of her husband. And it is her married status, symbolised by the *tali*, which invests her with a wider social respectability. Its 'other' ; widowhood ; is a dreaded fate. The *tali* is treated as a marker for sexual purity, in the sense of a sexual belonging to the husband. The groom ties the *tali* around his bride's neck during the marriage ceremony, the ornament signifying his possession of the woman. The power of the *tali* is immense. In cultural understanding, even divine power retreats when confronted with the strength of the *tali*, manifested in a virtuous wife's commitment to fidelity and chastity. This raw power, symbolising latent female sexuality, is sought to be controlled and kept in check.

Khushboo Redux

When the Tamil Protection Movement, comprising the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) and Muventhar Munnetra Kazhagam (MMK), took to the streets to protest Khushboo's remarks, observers noted, with some irony, the fact of a Dalit group choosing to become a protector of 'Tamil culture'. The general assumption is that a Dalit party, representing the subaltern classes, would not be enthusiastic supporters of constructions about 'Tamilness' that rely in part on specific notions of caste. DPI leader Thol Thirumavalavan characterised Khushboo an "immoral woman" and assailed her for "lowering the dignity of Tamil women"²⁷. It has been suggested that if Thirumavalavan wanted to break out of the confining straitjacket of the narrow caste identity that his party has been associated with, and reach out to a wider section of the public, he would have to dilute some of his radicalism. Similarly, Dr. S. Ramadoss, leader of the PMK, a party that stood for Vanniyar (lower-caste) interests, might also be trying to reach out to other sections, hence the need to assume a pan-Tamil identity and embrace issues that concern 'Tamilness' or Tamil culture. This is exactly what happened when the DMK split from the DK to pursue electoral politics. The DMK was compelled to substantially tone down DK radicalism to gain wider acceptance.

Gender roles and sexual mores in Tamil society have been specifically constructed to represent women as cultural 'carriers': family honour, community honour and cultural honour are intimately bound with the honour and chastity of women. If a woman is humiliated, the whole community experiences humiliation. The three institutions of family, community, and culture lie in concentric planes of interaction: family is at the centre; community encircles it,

and in turn produces the reified notion of traditional culture. It can also be seen as an inverted pyramid: the family unit at the bottom, providing a foundation, that expands out to community and culture. Any change in one of these institutions, in either direction, tends to affect the entire pyramid. Changes that radiate from the lowest tier, i.e., the family, are especially dangerous since they have the power to destabilise the entire pyramid.

In order to keep this social pyramid firm (or in other words, to uphold the *maanam* of family, community and culture), it is anchored firmly to the entity of the woman, shackling her in a finite, inflexible space with minimal options for negotiation or movement.

What Khushboo actually said, combined with what people thought she said, was interpreted as a challenge to the carefully constructed, historical notions of 'Tamilness' as an ethnic characteristic and mode of being. These were created by weaving together many disparate local strands into an archetypal grand narrative about 'Tamilness'. Political mobilisation was successfully attempted on the basis of this coalition of cultural discourses.

It's a familiar tale of a gendered perspective culturally/politically appropriated and used to pursue a specific end. Khushboo (probably without realising she was doing so) is an instance of a public figure trying to claim greater space for uncensored choice and individual expression by women. We cannot know whether her comments, and the media-enabled cultural/political turbulence that followed, actually brought about any enduring or authentic change in claustrophobic conventional thinking about the social/sexual roles of Tamil women. However, we do know that in February 2006, the Madras High Court ordered a permanent stay on the trial in all six cases filed against Khushboo in various district courts in Tamil Nadu.

NOTES

1. <http://logtk.blogspot.com/2005/11/spectacle-of-bigotry-pre-martial-sex.html>
2. S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha. "DMK Hegemony: The Cultural Limits to Political Consensus". In (ed.) T.V. Satyamurthy, *Social Change and Political Discourse in India* (Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 557.
3. *Ibid*, p. 558.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*, p. 560.
6. S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha. *Towards A Non-Brahmin Millenium* (Samya, 1998, Kolkata), p. 381.
7. *Ibid*, p. 386.
8. *Ibid*, p. 387.
9. *Ibid*, p. 402.
10. *Kudi Arasu*, 29.12.29. Cited in C.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *op. cit.*, p. 403.
11. *Ibid*, p. 404.
12. S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha (1996). Cited in (ed.) T.V. Satyamurthy, *op. cit.*, p. 550.
13. *Ibid*, p. 561.
14. *Ibid*.
15. *Ibid*, p. 565.
16. *Ibid*, p. 566.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 573.
18. *Ibid.*
19. M.S.S. Pandian. "Women in the Films of M.G. Ramachandran". In (ed.) T.V. Satyamurthy, *op. cit.*, p. 534.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 535.
22. *Ibid.* p. 537.
23. *Ibid.* p. 538.
24. *Ibid.* p. 540.
25. *Ibid.* p. 541.
26. S. Anandhi. "Sex and Sensibility in Tamil Politics". In *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 November 2005.

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