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Research paper

To Sit, To Pee, To Sleep, To Protest: Scenes of Work in Contemporary Kerala

Navaneetha Mokkil *

Jawaharlal Nehru University, INDIA

***Corresponding Author:** navaneetha@jnu.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores mediated scenes of feminine bodies at work in contemporary Kerala, a state in Southern India. It demonstrates that regional cinematic practices, embedded in the changing media ecologies of the 21st century, have the potential to inject critical energies into the global discourse of feminism by prising open registers of the body. The key site of analysis in this paper is the film *Asanghaditar* (The Unorganized, 2022), directed by Kunjila Mascillamani, that recreates a protest for toilets lead by unorganised women workers. *Asanghaditar* traces how feminine bodies, often caught within the sticky meshes of shame, slip out and interrupt this enfolding. The paper examines the aesthetic practices of the film and its linkages to the tactical and tactile workings of digital media forms and embodied protests by marginalised women workers. Through a focus on sensory encounters generated by this film, the paper analyses how regional cinematic practices disrupt the framework of sexualization—the dual paradigms of sexual violence and desire—that often dominates the figuration of woman/women in national and global discourses on gender.

Keywords: body, women and work, cinema and digital media, feminism in India, aesthetics and politics

This paper explores mediated scenes of feminine bodies at work in contemporary Kerala, a state in Southern India. Kerala is one of the most literate states in India noted for its massive investment in literature, cinema, theatre, visual art and digital media practices. As a state with a long history of Left political movements as well as feminist movements there are a wide range of cultural practitioners from Kerala who experiment with visual forms to prise open registers of the body. I will analyse how contemporary feminist experimentations in cinema, that captures the dispersed rhythms of political protests, challenge the encrusted formations of the gendered body. I aim to show how vernacular cultural practices disrupt the framework of sexualization—the dual paradigms of sexual violence and desire—that often dominates the figuration of woman/women in national and global discourses on gender.

The key site of analysis in this paper is the Malayalam film *Asanghaditar* (The Unorganized, 2022), directed by Kunjila Mascillamani, that recreates a *samaram* (protest) for toilets lead by unorganised women workers in Kerala. *Asanghaditar* traces how feminine bodies, often caught within the sticky meshes of shame, slip out and interrupt this enfolding. I will examine how this cinematic encounter, that reworks the boundaries between the 'real' and the fictional, expose the limits of sexualization and shift the gendered body into other frames, such as work, laughter and resilience. I seek to see how regional aesthetic practices the potential has to inject critical energies into the global discourse of feminism by re-orienting our relation to the body.

Asangadithar, re-enacts the registers of a protest to open up the relation between embodiment, aesthetics and politics. I examine how this film puts us in touch with the body as "a living set of relations" that "cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and acting" (Butler, 2015, p. 80). It is important for my analysis to underline that even while feminist scholars insist on the materiality of the body, they have emphasised the technologies and mediations that craft it. The framework of embodiment draws attention to the practices, gestures, orientations and movements enacted in particular space-time regimes through which bodies comes to matter (Butler, 1993; Groz, 1994; Ahmed, 2008).

LOCATED ANALYSIS OF CINEMATIC PRACTICES

Cinema becomes an important medium to explore because it draws in the spectator in sensory ways and creates bodily encounters. Historically in India, documentary cinema has been a powerful medium in the hands of feminist practitioners. Today we see multiple regional films that recast the boundaries between documentary and fiction to explore the politics of gender. I place my analysis of *Asanghaditar* within the changing infrastructures of cinema in India today, especially in the last two decades with the proliferation of digital technologies. I interlink my close analysis of the formal aspects of *Asanghaditar*, such as cinematography, editing and mise-en-scène, to critical interventions on changing modes of perception due to an expansion of digital media practices. I seek to see how the tempo and the texture of this 40-minute-long film, its mediation of real events, and the sensory ways in which the film draws in the viewers, are key to the dissonances it produces in the shaping of the gendered body.[1]

My research methodology places this film in the historical and material specificities of the location that it is embedded in. The spatial and sensory geographies of Kozhikode, especially of the commercial area of S M Street[2], seeps into the idioms of this film. Since the film recreates a significant protest by women in the unorganized sector, I draw on existing scholarship on gender, labour and collective mobilizations in Kerala. I bring into the ambit of my study media reports, digital documentation and interviews on political protests and the process of filmmaking. An interview I conducted with P. Viji, a leading figure in organizing women workers in Kerala since the 1990s, who acts as herself in the film, provides significant insights about protest forms and its relation to cultural practices. Thus, I do not approach this film in any way as a contained and insular object. Rather, I analyse how the film is embedded in recent shifts in visual technologies with the spread of digital media forms and in changing registers of political protests. I examine how the foundational questions this film poses about the configuration of gendered bodies reverberates with the aesthetic and material dimensions of a women workers' protest.

UNORGANIZED WOMEN WORKERS AND CHANGING FORMS OF PROTESTS

Asanghadithar (The Unorganized) recreates the *Moothrappura Samaram* (Protest for Toilets) a significant political mobilization from 2008 to 2010 in the city of Kozhikode in Kerala that led to legal and infrastructural transformations. This was an unprecedented protest by low-paid women working in small-scale shops in S M Street for access to toilets during working hours. One of the main group of protestors were women working in the retail sector in textile shops, commonly referred to as 'sales girls' or 'sales women'. This mobilization can be seen as the first phase of the impact-making *Irippu Samaram* (Right to Sit Protest)[3] which gained strength in 2014 and 2015 as saleswomen in multiple parts of Kerala mobilized for better working conditions—an eight-hour work schedule and the right to sit during working hours were key demands. *Moothrappura Samaram* was initiated by the organization *Penkoottu* (Women for Each Other), a women workers' collective in Kozhikode functioning since early 2000s, led by the noted activist P. Viji.[4] These concerns are carried forward by Asanghadita Mekhala Thozhilali Union (AMTU) (Unorganized Sector Workers' Union) that was formally registered in 2016. Anima Muyarath highlights that even though Kerala has a long history of trade union movements AMTU, that evolved from *Penkoottu*, is the first women's trade union that has been recognised in the state (2016, p.5)

[1] Some of the key concerns of this paper resonates with Malavika Ajikumar and Ajanta Sircar's recent article on the same film that was published only in the final stage of my writing. Through an insightful comparative reading they demonstrate how the similarity between "*Asanghadithar* and work by Kerala's Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) can be considered together as paradigm-shifting interventions in the treatment and representation of women" (Ajikumar and Sircar, 2026, p. 20). I hope in the future to engage in more detail with their significant interventions.

[2] Sweetmeat Street (S M Street), *Mittai Theruvu* in Malayalam, is one of the oldest trading hubs in Kozhikode that gets its name from the multiple sweet-shops in the area (Narayanan, 2006). It is a bustling commercial area chock-a-block with a wide range of shops.

[3] *Irippu Samaram* (Right to Sit Protest) lead to labour law amendments such as the provision for rest rooms in workspaces (Muyarath & Rupak, 2018, p. 41). But scholars also point to the wide gaps between legal provisions and workspace practices: "despite the amendment of the Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, making workers' right to sit a legal assurance, it is not a practice in most of the shops. "Penkoottu" and AMTU are still striving to make it a norm, making the "Right to Sit" an ongoing movement" (Backer, 2023, p.233).

[4] P. Viji, who works in S M Street, is the founder of *Penkoottu* and played a key role in the formation of AMTU. She continues to hold leading positions in both these organisations and her activism has garnered recognition at regional, national and international levels.

Mapping the changing landscape of labour practices in post-liberalisation India since 1990s, Meera Velayudhan observes that "its key features were contract work and informalisation through subcontracting and casualisation of labour" (2020, p.110). She notes that the retail sector which is a booming sector in Kerala, employs a large number of low-skilled women workers who "worked longer hours than male workers, earned lower wages, had fewer toilet facilities and breaks than men and travelled, mostly by bus, longer distance than men for work" (Velayudhan, 2020, p.114). Jenny S provides an account of an initial meeting in 2008 to discuss the Unorganized Sector Worker's Social Security Bill where the lack of access to toilets emerged as the most immediate issue for these "under-paid and overworked women workers in the city" (2012, p.47). After this meeting the city witnessed "a unique protest" for access to safe toilet facilities that exposed the "violence of built environments" (Jenny, 2012, p. 47). These protests exposed chronic health conditions women workers faced such as "uterine problems, urinary infections and varicose veins" (Thomas, 2015, p. 6) because of the lack of toilets and gruelling work conditions, where they were not allowed to sit down during a regular work day that stretched up to 11 or 12 hours. Arya Thomas observes that these protests question "a deep culture of corporeal control of workers" (2024, p.302) and need to be seen as a struggle by women workers for the reorganisation of public spaces (2024, p.314).

The *thozhilali* (worker/proletariat) as a category has a significant place in the public sphere of Kerala marked by its Left political history. In 1957 Kerala became the first region in Asia to elect a communist government through parliamentary procedure, and in the years that followed parties on the Left have played an important role in shaping its political and cultural landscape. The Left Democratic Front, an alliance of left-wing parties, is currently ruling the state legislative assembly pointing to the continuing sway of Left parties in electoral politics. Because of the dominance of Left political parties and the impressive developmental indices of the state, especially in sectors such as reproductive health and women's education, Kerala is often projected as an 'advanced' state in India. But feminist scholars have countered this dominant narrative and demonstrate that the developmentalism of the state is anchored in spatial regimes, bodily practices and forms of labour that re-entrench hierarchical operations of gender and caste (Devika & Thampi, 2011, p.1148). J. Devika underlines how in the post-liberalization period, flagship state government poverty eradication programs such as Kudumbashree (prosperity of the family), comprising of women's self-help groups, "emphasised income generation, not wage labour, and did not violate dominant norms of gender segregation" (2016, p. 396). Changing modalities of protests and cultural expressions in the last two decades challenge these disciplined gender regimes and provide us with entry-points to explore the dissident formations of the woman worker.

There is a contested history of divergences and convergences between Left politics and feminist politics in Kerala. These interlinkages have often led to the projection of dominant women as the receptacle of feminism. Rekha Raj argues that Dalit and Adivasi women have been excluded from Kerala's history of development as upper caste women's issues are codified in Kerala public discourse as "women's" issues (2005, p.29). As a state that is deeply invested in mobilising the educated and aspirational dominant caste women as the ground for its projects of progress and development (Sreekumar, 2009), it continues to be a struggle to dislodge feminism from privileged bodies and locations. Reshma Radhakrishnan positions *Penkoottu* as one of the few organisations that unsettles these mainstream formations of feminism by foregrounding the workings of both caste and class (2017, p.176).

Moothrapura Samaram and *Irippu Samaram,* can be placed along with other powerful mobilizations by women workers in the unorganized sector in India in recent times that have fundamentally recast the category of the worker. In these struggles by dispossessed women, such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers, *anganwadi* (rural health care) workers, garments workers, and tea plantation workers, women organize separately from established trade unions, taking up issues that specifically affect them. These movements resonate with mobilizations in different parts of the world that attempt to resist the deepening vulnerability and lack of rights and protections for the majority of working women in the unorganised sector in the global economy. As Mary John and Meena Gopal argue, "the high degree of precarity characterising women worker's lives" has been countered through "collective mobilization" in which women insist on being "fully recognised for the workers they are" (2021, p.23).

Pamphlets, posters and reports by AMTU, news reports and ethnographic studies on women workers in the sales sector point to the exploitative and insecure conditions of work. The denial of bodily needs, "outlawed within capitalism" because they are not cost effective (Hennessy, 2006, p.889), and the collective demand for their recognition, catalysed protests such as *Muthrappura Samaram* and *Irippu Samaram*. These protest forms bring into focus registers and orientations of the body that have rarely been recognised within the terrain of the political in Kerala. Acts and gestures such as women workers carrying chairs on their head in a rally that launched the Right to Sit Protest on International Labour Day on May 1, 2014, and lugging a huge cardboard cut-out of a squat toilet on the International Women's Day March by AMTU on March 8th, 2016 force onlookers to encounter the everyday functions of the body and its relation to the object-worlds that surround it (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1

International Women's Day Protest by AMTU, 2016.

*Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1016377768435787&set=ms.c.eJw9zckNwEAIA8COIgysDf03FoVV~_158wMCQxMo4Kj24EHlgns0FQWzQFs4F~%3ByF7KoUfWJPw3kR8L~_W7QR~_wrdS9zb3VJNR4AVtOIi8~-.bps.a.*1016377218435842

AESTHETIC PRACTICES OF RECREATING A PROTEST

Asanghaditar can be placed in relation to debates on cinematic practices and its relation to the political. Scholars have analysed the potential of collectives in the practice of film making and in the form of cinema by filmmakers such as John Abraham in the 1980s in Malayalam cinema (Joseph, 2019, p.159) and the manifold dimensions of the interjections of the 'real' in cinema, such as the use of street footage of political processions in Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 1971* (Rajadhyaksha, 2023, p.58). These debates get a new lease of life, with the expansion of digital technologies in the early 2000s, that injects new energy into the form of realism and enables ordinary repertoires of places, bodies and gestures to be registered on screen (Biswas, 2024, p.24). Moinak Biswas lists an expansive set of regional films in the last two decades where "we see neighbourhoods and habitats marked by a sense of collective precarious living […] and actors are chosen to bring to the screen an immediate imprint of labour and privation" (2024, p.24). We see the engagement with feminist filmmaking practices, by groups such as Ektara Collective, and film makers such as Rima Sen, who explore networks of relationality set in peripheral locations. We also see at present multiple films such as Jayan Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* (2013), Haobam Paban Kumar's *Loktak Lairembee* (Lady of the Lake, 2016) and Payal Kapadia's *Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021) that intermingle documentary and fictional modes of filmmaking in order to recreate political protests and events.

While a range of feminist documentary films such as Deepa Dhanraj's *Something like a War* (2003) and Paromita Vohra's *Q2P* (2012) and *Working Girls* (2025) have drawn attention to gender and quotidian bodily practices in India, the amalgamation of the documentary and fictional reshapes the dynamics of proximity and distance in *Asanghaditar*. The film is significant not only because it is made by a woman director, in a film industry which has only a few women in the directorial position,[5] but also because it produces a tactile encounter with urban spaces inhabited by bodies, actions and effects of working women. Except for one sequence in the film that is in a bedroom, the rest of the film consists of interactions in public locations—shops, street corners, the trade union office, the beach, public toilets, restaurants and government offices. *Asanghaditar* does not use real-life footage of *Moothrappura Samaram*, but re-creates the non-linear trajectories of this protest. It has a cast that includes well-known and recognizable activists such as P. Viji, K. Ajitha and Sheetal Shyam, playing themselves, and places them along with popular actresses in Malayalam cinema.

A graduate from the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI) in Kolkata who had made multiple short films prior to this, the director Kunjila Mascillamani is on record that she initially started shooting the film as a crowd-funded documentary on *Penkoottu*. This filmmaking was stuck midway when the director Jeo Baby approached her to join in an anthology project and she thought that if she could fictionalise the documentary film "reshoot it and make it part of a film anthology, it'd get a wider reach" (Cris, 2022). *Asanghaditar* had an OTT (over-the-top media service) release on SonyLiv—a well-known streaming platform in India as part of an anthology film titled *Swatanthrya Samaram* (Freedom Fight, 2022) compiled by Jeo Baby, whose much-discussed film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) drew attention to the repetitive and unpaid labour of women propping up the glorified upper caste household in India.

[5] There was a public controversy when the filmmaker protested against the non-inclusion of the film in a Women's International Film Festival held in Kozhikode in July 2022. Mascillamani's protest followed by her forcible removal and detention brought to the forefront issues about gender, access and recognition in the cinema industry.

Both *Moothrappura Samaram* and *Irippu Samaram* are protests about the routine and often, invisibilised discomforts the labouring feminine body is subjected to, and aim at inciting outrage. The film forces us to ask: Why should sitting/peeing even be a matter of right? In a way, then, it's a rebellion against routinized discomfort; but the operations of the film are such that it mobilizes discomfort in a privileged spectator by recasting the form of realism. Repetition of gestures, the undramatic recording of the everyday, and the stretched time of uncomfortable waiting loop viewers into scenes that convey the physical strain and everyday discomfort in the workspace.

The film does not make explicit the caste location of all the women workers. The audience in Kerala may be able to read these positionalities in the case of activists such as Viji whose Dalit identity has impacted the trajectories of her life, work and activism.[6] In the collective of women, we see on screen, rather than a direct articulation of caste as identity, what is more palpable is how the field of interactions they are part of is formed through the workings of caste. We notice the manner in which working women's bodies are framed through looks, comments and gestures of those around them and how they respond to these perceptions. We also see the dynamics between the women workers—such as the amused look between the younger women when Viji wonders aloud why no one directs any sexual comments at her, opening up dimensions about caste, appearance, age and desirability.[7] The casting practices of the film point to how it is negotiating with industry practices. As a protest is recreated into a commercially viable film, along with activists, key roles are given to actresses such as Srindaa (cast as Aswathy) and Pooja Mohanraj (cast as Sajna), who fit conventional standards of beauty and desirability filtered through the formations of caste.

The 2019 trailer of the film promises a documentary mainly foregrounding P. Viji. "In the unorganized sector women were not allowed to sit, not allowed to pee—one woman decides to fight", are the words that appear in bold capital letters on screen. This is cut to a series of shots of Viji at work in her tailoring shop. The camera centres and follows Viji as she walks through S M Street recounting the struggle by women workers. Thus, the trailer fits the familiar format of a documentary cinema focused on a single protagonist. The fiction film that gets made and is released three years later is markedly different in style from this 2019 trailer. The records of the protest, through the format of frontal 'direct-to-camera' interviews with activists and lawyers, are only short segments in this film. This is placed alongside fictionalised sequences that narrativize the experiences of working women suffused with humour and candidness.[8] I will now analyse how the undramatic style of the film that graphically records bodily speech and functions is key to its capacity to dislodge entrenched ways of seeing.

BEYOND SHAME

The question about how the body can be presenced in ways that create dissonances in the 'distribution of the sensible' (Ranciere, 2004) is pivotal to the aesthetics of protest forms. Darlene Demandate reflects on Ranciere's theorization of aesthetics, politics and practices of embodiment. She observes that Ranciere "identifies the different ways of being a body, that arrests established logos, messes up the distribution of the sensible, and opens up new modalities of 'poietic' action" (Demandate, 2020, p.154). Whether it is a kiss in public or an act of standing still, shaving one's hair or the removal of one's clothes, these are bodily gestures that have been part of recent political protests in India, that create a wedge in "the distribution of the sensible which pertains to existing ways of doing, making, and seeing in the community" (Demandate, 2020, p.142). In the Indian context, these public gestures of the body and its capacity to disrupt entrenched regimes needs to be analysed through a careful engagement with how bodies and acts accrue differential meanings and value in caste-stratified spaces.

Dalit feminist interventions foreground how:

> *In the savarna discourse of the progress of culture and civilisation, touchable women were pitted against lower-class, Dalit women. To protect and amplify the former's sexuality and honour, they constructed the dangerous and sexually motivated Dalit male and depicted Dalit women working in the public realm as inherently less civilised because they were always–already unregulated, unruly, disorderly, and sexually promiscuous (Paik, 2021, p.131).*

therefore,n gender, caste and labour practices in India underline that "only a tiny segment of overwhelmingly urban upper caste women have gained entry into a workforce with no connection to a labouring body, who may

[6] Jenny analyses how Viji's location as a Dalit woman from a working-class background shapes the feminist practice of *Penkoottu* and their strong disagreements with trade unions, formed through a masculine ethos, as well as feminist organizations headed by privileged women (2012, p. 44).

[7] A news report mentions how Viji "wanted to be a salesgirl in a clothes showroom when she was 22. It wasn't meant to be. She was told she was fat, dark-skinned and not the 'right shape' for someone who would have to serve customers" (George, 2020).

[8] In an interview which I conducted with Viji on January 27th, 2023 she noted that many of the sequences in the film were scripted based on the accounts of women workers. I spoke with Viji in Arya Bhavan, a crowded and affordable restaurant in S M Street, where many of the interactions between women workers are shot in *Asanghaditar*, marking the continuity and layering between 'real' and filmic spaces. Viji said that she had earlier participated in the making of street plays and found that to be a more collaborative form than cinema. She observed that in more commercial modes of production, such as cinema, it is an uphill task to ensure that workers are adequately compensated for their time and labor; even though the reach of these forms are wider than street theater.

therefore work without social stigma" (John, 2013, p.185), while an overwhelming majority of women categorised as lower caste undertake forms of labour that are seen to be stigmatized and humiliating (Patil, 2024, p.458). Dalit women have been associated with labour practices linked to dirt, waste and bodily fluids and thereby denied dignity in public spaces. Drawing on Mary John's interventions on gender, caste and the stigmatization of public labour in India, Jenny observes that sales women in small retail shops in S M Street correlated their non-dominant caste locations to their exposed positioning in the work space. The stigma on their bodies and "the constant surveillance it has to face also trace back to the 'unprotected' history which that body bears" (Jenny, 2012, p.34).

The bodily practices of women, outside the boundaries of caste and class privilege, do feature in state practices on health and hygiene in India. At present in much-publicised government campaigns such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), launched in 2014 to eradicate open defecation, there is a disproportionate effort to interlink marginalised women's safety and dignity to having access to toilets at home (Taneja & Krishnan 2021, p.260). In these campaigns "an overweening focus on toilet and safety leaves out of consideration the question of access to public space" (Taneja & Krishnan, 2021, p.264). In visual media productions that spread the message of such schemes, women's access to toilet is rarely articulated within the context of paid work and mobility, but rather in domestic settings. In sharp contrast to this, *Asanghaditar* raises the issue of toilets in the context of paid work as women navigate public spaces to earn an income. This film, in keeping with the spirit of the *Moothrappura Samaram*, questions the positioning of marginalised women's bodies as docile receptacles of reform and upliftment. It presents working women's access to toilets as a collective need that they stridently demand and disrupts the positioning of women's bodies as sites of shame, privacy and modesty.

Shame, and its differential associations with bodily acts, is one of the key ways in which stratifications of gender are materialised. In discussing the etymology of the term *naanam*, Udaya Kumar observes that: "in Malayalam, it covers a range of meanings including shyness, modesty, and shame. Hermann Gundert's dictionary (1872) prioritises shame and the feeling of honour, and defines *nāṇakkēdu* as shamelessness and disgrace" (2022, p.3). Kumar tracks the subsequent entries by Gundert of the meaning of "*naanidam"* as "pudenda," which is the anatomical term that refers to external genitals of a human, especially of a female body. In his discussion of the term *naanam* Kumar underlines two features that are relevant to my analysis too:

> The first is the opposed senses of the word/concept, simultaneously signifying 'that which needs hiding' as well as 'the state breached by exposure.' In other words, the exposure of one's nudity (nāṇam) makes one lose one's modesty (nāṇam). The second notable feature of nāṇam is its inescapable but somewhat intangible corporeal dimension (2022, p.4).

The act of urinating without a *mara* (cover) when associated with the feminine body becomes perceived as a shameful act because it runs the risk of exposing in public what is supposed to be kept hidden and thereby leads to a loss of modesty.

Masculine bodies and genitalia, are also placed within discourses of concealment and exposure, but we must note that the emotional registers that attach to masculine acts of bodily exposure are not predominantly in the realm of shame. The nexus between caste, sexuality and gender can place masculine bodies in the realm of shame, especially in punishments devised for bodies marked as abject or deviant. But in the case of normative masculine bodies, exposure of the body or graphic references to male organs does not necessarily lead to feelings of shame. The exposed design of urinals, the acceptance of public acts of peeing by men, as well as colloquial expressions and jokes about male genitalia in Indian languages, show how the visual and verbal concealment of the organs of the body as a sign of modesty, as in the case of feminine bodies, does not apply to masculine bodies in the same manner. Therefore, it is possible for the privileged masculine body to be in public without running the risk of being labelled as shameless—because *naanam* (shame) is in the first place is overemphasised in the formations of respectable femininity. As Pragya Ghosh, Radhika Parameswaran and Pallavi Rao perceptively observe:

> In India's deeply unequal society, respectable upper-caste women cannot be figures of ambivalence associated with dirt, excrement, sexual fluids, impurities, and peripheral spaces and women's toilets become "taboo spaces that are simply excised from the imagination of feminine respectability" (2021, p.167).

Whether it is the breasts or the vagina, concealment of these female sexual organs through sartorial, gestural and linguistic practices are key to the construction of respectable femininity. Upper caste and Dalit women are positioned in differential ways within structures of visibility, and its linkages to dignity and respectability. Spectacular forms of punishment such as stripping and parading in public primarily targets Dalit women and operates on a tacit agreement between the perpetrators and the spectators to maintain caste hierarchies (Rao, 2009). In these scenes of violence, there is an atomisation and curtailment of the shamed body even as the aggressors act as a group. The dynamics of these scenes are formed through the operations of a spectating public/audience, and also through the presence of cameras in recent times, that hyper visibilises the shamed body.

Gestures, speech acts or looks produced in a relational field trigger feelings of shame as bodies careen between the dual axis of concealment and exposure. Yet, shame as an affect often congeals in such a manner that it leads

to the isolation of the subject: my shame becomes mine to bear even while it is predicated on others.[9] The effect of shame is an in-folding—uncontrollable sensations felt on the body that viscerally remind subjects of the boundaries of the social they have crossed through their disorderliness. To counter this enmeshing of shame and its role in the enforcement of gender regimes, there have been protests that embrace shamelessness through flagrant acts of public exposure. The Pink Chaddi (Underwear) Campaign (2009), 'Happy to Bleed' campaigns (2015), 'Besharmi Morcha' (Shameless Protests) (which is the Indian version of the transnational Slut Walk campaign organised since 2011 in different Indian cities)—we can locate a series of protests, lead primarily by privileged women, in the last two decades in India that is in this reactive register. But scholars have critiqued the enshrinement of the contained feminist subject at the centre of these protests and pointed to the limitations of a politics of visibility that does not take into account the interlinkages of caste and class in the formations of gender and sexuality in India (Vasudevan, 2015).[10]

Asanghaditar takes heed of the risks of quick transmutation from registers of shame to that of pride and shamelessness. In a protest such as *Moothrapura Samaram* and the cinematic re-creation of it to counter the effects of shame the tactic adopted is not an exposure of the sexualised body, because the bodies in the centre of these protests are always-already exposed and are not safeguarded by the privilege of caste and class. Rather, the viewer witnesses a series of contingent acts that insist on the manifold, material functions of the body. The film shifts the sexual speech on the body to other registers of hygiene, health, rest and safe working conditions. I provide here snippets of a conversation that we see in *Asanghaditar* as a group of sales women sit in Arya Bhavan, a restaurant which they visit primarily to access the toilet. The difficulty of accessing a toilet, how working women train themselves not to urinate for long hours, the problem of having to use the toilet at least to change sanitary pads, reading about the menstrual cup in a women's magazine and the option of using that—'I am not comfortable inserting it inside?' says one of them. 'What if you get married? What will you do then?' the other person responds. Later, in the interactions with shop managers and owners, government officials and trade union office-bearers we see these women workers translate speech on bodily functions into a political demand that needs redressal—even as these demands are often met with sexually charged comments, jokes and innuendo.

SONG OF THE UNDERDOGS

The publicity music video for this film, "The underdogs sing, don't push us over. We have someone watching out" (*Chatteem Paneem Padunne*), released in February 2022, consists of a series of fast-paced city shots synced to the beats of the song that describes the discomforts of the body—the familiar *bejaru*[11] of having to pee, of feeling a burning sensation from the lower belly, of being soaked in sweat, of wanting to sit but having nowhere to sit down (**Figure 2**). These anxieties are interlinked with the hopes of an upsurge through a clamorous struggle from the streets. The quick rhythms of the song and the visuals as well as its tongue-in-cheek lyrics and colloquial expressions, presents this *samaram* as woven through the animated push and pull of everyday enactments (**Figure 3**).

Figure 2

Screen-shot of publicity music video for Asanghadithar

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWiDSmGUlF8

[9] The recent public trial of the mass rape of Mme Gisèle Pelicot in France has created a rupture in the discourse on rape through Pelicot's call that 'shame must change sides.' Pelicot said she wanted to lift the shame felt by women who are raped and place it onto the perpetrators: "it's not for us to have shame, it's for them" (Gozzi, 2024).

[10] On the contradictions and limits of provocation as a political strategy see Jessica Mason's (2018) analysis of the Russian feminist punk-art group Pussy Riot.

[11] The term 'bejaru' can be translated as a nagging sense of anxiety or worry that seeps into the body. This colloquial expression is specific to the dialect of Malayalam spoken in the region of Malabar that Kozhikode is part of.

Figure 3

Screen-shot of publicity music video for Asanghadithar.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWiDSmGUfF8

The interactions between the workers do not fit into the model of an organised mobilization with worked out strategies of action. Rather what we see on screen is a group of workers constantly chit-chatting, joking, pulling each other's leg and even competing with each other as they come up with innovative tactics of protest. The opening sequence of the film is a dim-lit night shot of a group of workers jumping over the gate of a shopping complex, telling each other to be careful. Their plan is to break into a shop and build a toilet there since other modes of protests so far, including signature campaigns and negotiations with the district collector, have not produced the desired results. Even while they are breaking into the shop, they argue with each other about whether this is the right course of action. Aswathy suggests that they open the lock surreptitiously with a hairpin, while Viji bangs it open with a hammer. "Can we break the lock open without making any sound?" asks Sajna—adding to the confusion. "We have not come to steal anything; we have come to make a *kakkoos* (toilet)" says Viji in a deadpan voice to the men who confront them. The absurdity and humour as well as desperation of the opening sequence set the tone for what is to follow in the film that captures the friction and generative energies of the contingent process of working together.

Thus, the content and the formal operations of this film places it in the category of "tactical media" a term that acquires circulation since the late 1990s that refers "to a mediatized adaptation of synaesthetic cinema, specifically to deal with post-celluloid platforms" (Rajadhyaksha, 2023, p.126). Ashish Rajadhyaksha discusses how the 'light-weight mobility' of digital media technologies facilitates the proliferation of tactical media forms that are pragmatic, unfinished, dispersed and continually morphing (2023, p.126). The shape-shifting, embodied and dispersed forms of political protests by workers, who are precariously positioned in the economy, resonates with the tactical media forms that are part of the same assemblage. The title of the film *Asanghaditar* (The Unorganised) overtly signifies this interlinkage between the aesthetics of the film and the scattered rhythms of a protest.

A review of the film that captures its frictional energies says that the film tells all political beings: "you should have a sense of humour: it will show you many of the paradoxes of today's life" (Estappan, 2022). One such paradoxical situation in the film is when women workers approach the Left trade union to mobilize for toilets on their behalf. A bearded senior leader, sitting in an office decked with red flags, gravely tells them that this cannot be politically viewed as a *mothalali/thozhilali* (capitalist/worker) problem because it is an issue faced only by women workers. He goes on to proclaim that the male worker has found a "model solution" to this problem by urinating in relatively empty public spaces. The camera intercuts between close-ups of the union leader and the visual and verbal responses of the women; capturing the blatant misrecognition of the women's demands because of the gendered presumptions about the worker's body. In a tongue-in-cheek fashion the spectators are nudged into recognizing the erasures within 'progressive' spaces.

The affective tenor of this film and its capacity to merge together anger, pain, absurdity and laughter can be read alongside other digital media forms that have gained popularity. The raw, improvised quality of sequences in the film is akin to the tenor of popular comedy shows on multiple regional TV channels and online sites in India and other global contexts. Pragya Ghosh, Radhika Parameswaran and Pallavi Rao in their study on the popular YouTube show *Ladies Room*, consisting of six episodes set in different toilets in Mumbai argue that "Indian female-authored comedy sketches circulating in the spreadable ecology of social media draw upon 'observational humour'—verbal and nonverbal language rooted in critiques of everyday practices—to reference a host of issues raised by the women's movement, ranging from clothing to linguistic and bodily propriety, sexual pleasure, abortion, financial independence, and workplace abuse and inequality" (2021, p.166). *Asanghaditar* needs to be seen in this larger canvas of digital media productions and the circulation of issues about gender, body and sexuality in a popular format. But unlike the design of many of these shows where the central protagonists are from dominant

caste and class locations, here the focus on marginalised women workers who refuse to be docile, shapes the form of the film.

SENSORY ENCOUNTERS

While in most accounts about the *Moothrappura Samaram*, the focus is only on the woman worker, in Mascillamani's film transwomen workers also enter the frame. This is a supplementary move that places the film in the present; the discourse on transgender issues in Kerala garnered greater visibility in 2014, following the NALSA (National Legal Services Authority) judgement that aims to recognize and protect the rights of transgender persons. Thus, the framework of gender from a more recent time period is fictionally woven into the reconstruction of an earlier protest. Through such a recasting *Asanghaditar* pushes us to engage with the contingent and differential process of engendering bodies within material networks and infrastructures. Transwomen, including the actor and activist Sheetal Shyam who is part of the cast of *Asanghaditar*, reflect on their strategies of dealing with the sexualized looks and comments that they have to face in public. Thus, one common ground that links ciswomen and transwomen workers in this film is their struggle to articulate bodily needs so that it is not subsumed into a solely sexual register.

Asanghaditar shows us that the spaces that feminine workers navigate is a sexually charged one—they are subjected to jokes, obscene comments and innuendo as they articulate their need for toilets. For example, in the sequence where Aswathy brings up the need for a toilet in the textile shop where she works, her employer, as he moves mannequins around, tauntingly advises her to always have a smile on her face, look attractive and not displease customers. He asks suggestively, 'why do you have to urinate so much?' and says, 'Bring an empty bottle tomorrow!'. Aswathy flushes and stumbles over her words as she tries to respond to his attempts to silence her by shaming and by placing her body in a sexual register.

This sexual saturation of the feminine body is turned around in the follow-up to the conversation with the employer. Through a long take later in the film we see Aswathy literally act on her employer's advice (**Figures 4** and **Figure 5**). The camera follows her from behind as she takes a polythene bag and enters the dressing room. We are in the closed space of the dressing room with a full-length mirror and through shots of physical movements, gestures and facial expressions there is a minute capture of all the steps involved in this carefully executed exercise. We see mid-body shots of Aswathy pulling down her pyjama, squatting and urinating into a container. We see her facial expressions and hear the sounds she produces suggesting a sense of relief as she urinates. The camera moves closer to her hands and we see the urine being transferred into another bottle so that she can take it home with her to empty it. We hear a sound of disgust she makes as some of the urine trickles onto her hand. Multiple sensory operations of vision, hearing, and touch are at play in this sequence. Rather than any graphic exposure of parts of the body, what the camera captures is the discomfiting exercise of urinating in the dressing room. The shaky camera movements, long shots and minimal cuts do not accentuate the drama of these gestures; there is an unabashed ordinariness and banal tenor to the manner in which the scene unfolds. By shooting the sequence in this mode, as well as by showing other sequences of women peeing in street-corners while young men pass comments and sing suggestive songs, the film displays the sexualization of everyday bodily acts, and also troubles this framing.

Figure 4

Screen-shot from Asanghadithar. Dir. Kunjila Mascillamani. 2022. Open Access

Figure 5

Screen-shots from Asanghadithar. Dir. Kunjila Mascilamani. 2022. Open Access

This sequence points to one of the central aesthetic and political issues the film is working through: Is it possible to display women's bodies and intimate acts in a manner that disrupts their near-immediate insertion into a sexually charged field? I circle back here to key questions that have been long-term preoccupations in feminist debates on 'ways of seeing' and the exposure and framing of feminine bodies for the possession and enjoyment of a masculine spectator (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975; Weidman & Nakassis, 2018). Feminist film theorists have examined how since the 1970s, film makers such as Chantel Akerman and Agnes Varda, have brought to the screen everyday registers of the feminine body devalued in the mainstream economies of image-making, and thus paved the way for new modes of spectatorship. Even while the form and function of cinema has undergone multiple changes, feminist filmmakers at present, labour to "effect another vision" (Lauretis, 1985, p.163) that can dislodge the fixed frames through which women's bodies have been historically perceived.

I argue that *Asanghaditar* tackles this problematic about displaying women's bodies in public by drawing on the transactions between different media forms. Digital technologies, which can make anything and everything recordable and displayable, provide the discomfiting cinematic style of *Asanghaditar*. Here the process of objectification does not serve the end of framing feminine bodies as desirable sights for consumption. Rather the form of the film makes us confront the materiality of bodies by placing us in close proximity to its bare functionalities. The persistent look of the camera places the spectator in scenes that can be discomfiting *without* the graphic exposure of the feminine bodily functions. Bodily gestures are shot in a style akin to the low-quality phone cameras that can enter into private zones and capture a range of activities. As Lalitha Gopalan notes the changing techno-material conditions of recent Indian cinema and the insertion and evocation of other arts in cinema "occasions the opening of the medium of film to other representational regimes" (2020, p.6). *Asanghaditar* draws on the potential of contemporary media technologies, such as mobile videos and reels, that have posed new problematics about image-making, gender and embodiment.[12]

In contemporary feminist discourse, we come face to face with the dilemmas of how digital technologies can facilitate forms of protest and also simultaneously function as a mechanism of surveillance and violation. These technologies were key to the choreography of highly visible protests such as the 'Kiss of Love' Campaign in India in 2014 against the policing of sexual expressions in public and the #MeToo Campaign against sexual violence which had global resonances. At the same time, there have been multiple controversies over digital technologies that subject bodies to constant surveillance and render feminine bodies publicly available, as in the case of the online auction of Muslim women in the 'Bulli Bai' and 'Sulli Deals' cases (Mariya, 2022). In the accounts of women workers in the retail sector, they observe how the presence of CCTV cameras function as a surveillance tool that the management uses to extract labour and curtail opportunities for rest and interaction between workers (Thomas, 2015). Yet, digital technologies such as blogs, WhatsApp, Face Book page and Face Book Live have also been deployed by *Penkoottu* and AMTU in their protests (Backer, 2023, p.238). *Penkoottu* has tried to mobilize media technologies for political education by starting a YouTube channel in 2017, "Penkoottu Media Collective". Their first media production is a comedy-fiction series *Marivil Hostel* (Rainbow Hostel)**,** set in a working women's hostel that taps into the potential of "feminist laughter" (Shinjinee, 2017). They also registered the Penkoottu Film Society in 2024 to organise film screenings and film festivals that create public awareness on gender and labour issues and also provide entertainment for working women.

[12] In the conversation after the screening of *Asanghaditar* at Kochi Bienalle in January 2026, Kunjila Mascillamani observed that some of the scenes of the film that captured intimate gestures of women rarely shown on mainstream cinema, went viral on social media platforms and generated much debate. Thus, digital media forms are crucial to the reception of the film too.

By melding together multiple styles of visualizing—the documentary idiom of direct interviews, the 24/7 recording protocols of TV news cameras, the banter and conversational humour of comic videos on TV and digital platforms and the unfinished and every day idioms of mobile phone camera videos— the intermedial practices of *Asanghaditar* disrupt conventional regimes of perception of the gendered body. These explorations of embodied acts have the capacity to prise open what David Panagia describes as the "the self-evident dispositions of a sensing body" (2009, p.5). By using a slow and repetitive pacing, the film makes the viewers pause and pay attention to actions of "disposable bodies" (Tadiar, 2013, p.19) that are not usually recorded or recognized in popular cinema such as waiting, fidgeting, twitching, and itching—restless movements of bodies radiating discomfort as they are forced to function in space-time regimens that do not account for their needs. By capturing the embodied movements and speech of recalcitrant actors that exceeds the dual axis of sexual desire and sexual violence, *Asanghaditar* stages the challenges posed by working women's bodies in the precarious infrastructures of global economies. It compels the viewer to encounter anew the mise en scène of feminine bodies at work.

RESTLESS BODIES AND CREATIVE VISIONS

Feminist interventions in cinema from regional contexts in India compel us to think about how and why in the current juncture, when we have much speech and visibility about both sexual violence and sexual desire, visual practices plot the body in a wider register—highlighting the collective experiences of women workers in the unorganized sector. Changing forms of regional cinema are a significant site for feminist analysis because they put into circulation restless bodies and acts that spill out of the sexualised frameworks of shame, violence or desire. These scenographies that insist on a recognition of the many functions of the body—labour, hunger, urination, sex, and rest, to name a few, must be taken into account for a feminist politics that reckons with the predicament of bodies that are perennially at work.

Placing *Asanghaditar* in the living and breathing fabric of its production and reception, I invite the reader to engage with the aesthetic practices of the film and its linkages to the tactical and tactile workings of digital media forms and political protests. Drawing on scholarship, media reports, documentation of protests as well as interviews, I examine how *Asanghaditar* recreates the gestures, vocabularies and registers of a political protest that focused on the embodied struggles of caste and class marked feminine actors. The political potential of this film is in its capacity to make the viewers encounter registers of the body that are usually unrecognised and devalued. Thus, it has the capacity to dislodge the privileged spectator from familiar ways of seeing. The constitutive linkage between aesthetics and politics, or in other words the proposition that aesthetics is political, is at the heart of this paper that attempts to trace how both a film and a protest hinge on prising open entrenched modes of perception. Thus, bodily encounters made possible by films such as *Asanghaditar* resonates with the creative and unfinished energies of collective struggles. Through a multi-layered engagement with the journey of a film, this paper presents critical insights about how and why movements, orientations, sensations and expressions of feminine bodies in the scene of work have to be centered to build a feminist politics that can resonate in most parts of the world.

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Ethical statement

This study is based on textual and visual analysis of publicly available films, media reports, and published materials, along with an interview conducted with informed consent. No vulnerable populations were subjected to experimentation. Ethical clearance/IRB approval was not required as per the institutional guidelines of Jawaharlal Nehru University for non-clinical, humanities-based research.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author conceptualized the study, conducted the research and interview, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

Data availability

No new datasets were generated or analysed for this study. All sources used are publicly available or cited within the article. Interview material referenced in the article is not publicly shared to protect participant privacy.

AI disclosure

No generative AI tools were used in the writing of the manuscript. Digital tools were used only for standard editing, formatting, and reference management.

Biographical sketch

Navaneetha Mokkil is Assistant Professor at the Center for Women's Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India. She completed her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 2010 in English Literature and Women's Studies. Her areas of teaching and research include sexuality studies, feminist theory and methodology and print and visual culture. She is the author of *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala* (2019) and the co-editor of *Thinking Women: A Feminist Reader* (2019).

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