

# DANCING FOR RESPECTABILITY:

A STUDY OF *KARAGATTAM* AND *ADAL PADAL* DANCERS IN RURAL TAMIL NADU

*Shakthi Nataraj, Sutapa Majumdar, and Prabha Kotiswaran*





**Title:** Dancing for Respectability: A Study of *Karagattam* and *Adal Padal* Dancers in Rural Tamil Nadu

**Authors:** Shakthi Nataraj, Sutapa Majumdar, and Prabha Kotiswaran

**Report Design:** Mrinalini Godara

**Published:** July 2025

This report is published as part of the Laws of Social Reproduction Project, which seeks to study women's reproductive labour across five sectors bridging the marriage-market continuum: sex work, erotic dancing, surrogacy and egg donation, paid domestic work and unpaid domestic work. The project is headed by Professor Prabha Kotiswaran at The Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London and is generously supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (under grant agreement No. 772946).



For any inquiries or further information, please contact Professor Prabha Kotiswaran at [prabha.kotiswaran@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:prabha.kotiswaran@kcl.ac.uk)

**Citation:** Nataraj, S., Majumdar, S., and Kotiswaran, P. (2025) *Dancing for Respectability: A Study of Karagattam and Adal Padal Dancers in Rural Tamil Nadu*. The Laws of Social Reproduction Project, The Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London.



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

# DANCING FOR RESPECTABILITY:

A STUDY OF *KARAGATTAM* AND *ADAL PADAL*  
DANCERS IN RURAL TAMIL NADU

*by Shakthi Nataraj, Sutapa Majumdar, and Prabha Kotiswaran*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to Justice Anand Venkatesh for his support of our research and on whose instructions the Commissioner of Police in Salem shared the contact details of several troupe leaders. We also thank activists particularly Mr. Titus at Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices who introduces us to dancers. A special word of gratitude for Kausalya, a veteran dancer who warmly welcomed us into her world of dancing, never hesitating to help us understand its culture and economy and introducing us to her fellow dancers.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: SCOPE OF OUR STUDY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
HOW DO <i>KARAGATTAM</i> AND <i>ADAL PADAL</i> FIT INTO OUR PROJECT? .....	2
QUESTIONNAIRES AND TOOLS AND THE NATURE OF THE DATA .....	2
Choice of Districts .....	2
Number of Stakeholders Covered .....	3
Methodology and Sampling .....	4
Demographic Breakdown of Dancers in our Sample .....	6
<b>CHAPTER 2: <i>KARAGATTAM</i> .....</b>	<b>8</b>
HISTORY OF THE FORM .....	8
CHANGES IN THE SECTOR .....	9
ELEMENTS OF THE FORM .....	9
SIZE OF THE SECTOR .....	10
POLITICAL ECONOMY .....	13
Occasions for Performance .....	13
Contracts .....	19
Socio-economic Background .....	21
Sexual Stigma .....	23
Migrants .....	24
Government Schemes .....	25
<b>CHAPTER 3: <i>ADAL PADAL</i> .....</b>	<b>26</b>
HISTORY OF THE FORM .....	26
ELEMENTS OF THE FORM .....	28
SIZE OF THE SECTOR .....	29
POLITICAL ECONOMY .....	29

Occasions for Performance .....	29
Agents .....	30
Cost Breakdown .....	30
Procedure for Getting a Performance .....	32
Contractual Arrangements .....	33
Socio-economic Background .....	33
Sexual Stigma .....	34
<b>CHAPTER 4: THE REGULATION OF DANCING .....</b>	<b>39</b>
THE REGULATION OF DANCING BY THE HIGH COURT .....	39
Changes in the Past Decade .....	41
STIGMA AND CONTESTATIONS OF EROTICISM IN DANCING.....	43
The Role of the Police .....	44
Challenges Faced by Dancers .....	46
<b>CHAPTER 5: MOBILISATION AND SANGAMS .....</b>	<b>47</b>
KARAGATTAM SANGAMS .....	47
ADAL PADAL SANGAMS .....	48
OVERLAPS IN MOBILISATION AND THE SCOPE OF STATE RECOGNITION .....	49
KARAGATTAM AND ADAL PADAL: SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON.....	50
<b>CHAPTER 6: DANCER DEMANDS .....</b>	<b>53</b>
KARAGATTAM .....	53
ADAL PADAL.....	55
<b>CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>58</b>
CASE LAW .....	60



# GLOSSARY

<b><i>Adal padal</i></b>	A stage performance modelled on films, featuring movie star lookalikes, women in provocative costumes, and background dancers, performing on stage with recorded music
<b><i>Amman attam</i></b>	Performance where the dancer is dressed as the goddess Amman and channels her power
<b><i>Attakkari</i></b>	Dancer
<b><i>Bharatanatyam</i></b>	India's national classical dance
<b><i>Devadasi</i></b>	A courtesan community formed by women who were "dedicated" to the goddess and then became attached to the temple, conducting rituals, dancing, and being sexually attached to specific patrons. The practice was made illegal after India's independence.
<b><i>Dussehra</i></b>	A festival prominent in Northern India, occurring in October each year
<b><i>Kandhu vatti</i></b>	Interest deriving from informal loans, usury, which has been outlawed under the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Exorbitant Interest Act 2003
<b><i>Karagam</i></b>	Pot
<b><i>Karagattam</i></b>	A dance performed with water-filled pots ( <i>karagam</i> ) balanced on the head and with the accompaniment of a live band typically at temples
<b><i>Kuravan-kurathi attam</i></b>	A section of a <i>karagattam</i> performance where a man and a woman dressed as hill-people trade bawdy dialogues and sing songs about the festival patrons
<b><i>Lavani</i></b>	Courtesan dance form from Maharashtra
<b><i>Mayilattam</i></b>	Dance form where the dancers mimic peacocks
<b><i>Melam</i></b>	Live band

<b>Nadagam</b>	Drama, theatre
<b>Nattamai</b>	Village headman
<b>Nadaswaram</b>	A long reed instrument
<b>Oyilattam</b>	Dance form performed with handkerchiefs, literally means “dance of grace”
<b>Pambai</b>	A type of drum
<b>Poikkal kuthirai attam</b>	Literally means “false legged horse dance”, involves a performer wearing a wooden fake “horse” prop and dancing with a pair of fake legs.
<b>Sangam</b>	Collective association
<b>Thappattam</b>	Also called paraiaiyam, it is a vigorous dance performed by dancers with small drums; associated with members of the Paraiyar Scheduled Caste community
<b>Thavil</b>	A type of drum
<b>Therukoothu</b>	Street theatre
<b>Thevadiya</b>	<i>Devadasi</i> , used here as an insult in the sense of “prostitute”
<b>Thevarattam</b>	A dance associated with victory after war, typically performed by members of the Thevar caste
<b>Thirunangai</b>	Literally means “respectable woman”, the preferred Tamil term for transgender women
<b>Thunai karagam</b>	A <i>karagattam</i> dancer who supports and accompanies the main <i>karagattam</i> dancer.



# SCOPE OF OUR STUDY

## INTRODUCTION

This report investigates the working conditions, struggles, and demands of dancers involved in two forms of dance in Tamil Nadu considered by audiences to be erotic: *karagattam* and *adal padal*. Based on ten weeks of ethnographic research observing and interviewing dancers in these sectors in Tamil Nadu, we describe in granular detail the political-economic arrangements, state regulation, and lived experiences of women as they perform these dance forms, alongside other kinds of paid work they undertake at home and outside.

This research is a part of a broader project entitled “The Laws of Social Reproduction”, which examines the interconnections between five sectors of labour: sex work, erotic dancing, paid domestic work, unpaid domestic and care work, and surrogacy. We consider these kinds of work to be “socially reproductive labour”, that is, labour that is fundamental for the maintenance of life, but that tends not to be recognised as work at all. Social reproduction includes biological reproduction, unpaid work in the home, voluntary work meeting the needs of the community (social provisioning), the labour of raising and socialising children, and the maintenance of intimate relationships (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007), all typically performed by women within the context of heterosexual marriage (Kotiswaran, 2013, p. 318). Reproductive labour of this kind tends to be informal, stigmatised, feminised, poorly compensated, and is either unregulated or criminalised by law. Our project aims to enhance the bargaining power, legal protection, and economic empowerment of women who do these forms of work, by examining the political, economic, and legal interconnections between these five sectors of work.

We take our inspiration from a long tradition of materialist feminist (i.e., socialist feminist) theory that analyses the exploitation of women’s labour under patriarchy and capitalism. While most feminist scholarship on reproductive labour focuses narrowly on labour performed within the marital home such as housework and care work, our project includes reproductive labour performed for the market, such as sex work, domestic work, erotic dancing and surrogacy. We place these five sectors on a “market-family continuum” with unpaid housework at one far end, sex work and dancing at the other end, and domestic work and surrogacy in between (Kotiswaran, 2013, p. 322).

The place of the law is central in analysing the vulnerability and experiences of women in these fields. One clue to understanding exploitation is the difference between the legal governance of various kinds of reproductive labour, despite overlaps in the labour performed (Kotiswaran, 2013, p. 319). For example, in India, there are clear continuities between sex work and erotic dancing, and many women perform both. However, sex work is regulated by criminal law, with many aspects of such work criminalised by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA). The ITPA 1956 is deployed in combination with local government laws, anti-narcotics, and anti-trafficking laws to harass sex workers and force them to pay bribes to the police. On the other hand, certain forms of erotic dancing

such as bar dancing in Mumbai are classified as a commercial activity and governed by licensing law related to the provision of food, liquor, and public entertainment, used in combination with laws regulating obscenity and public nuisance. The contradictory treatment of sex work and bar dancing means that gains for workers in one sector might lead to costs for workers in the other. An illustration of this tension was the 2006 Mumbai High Court decision upholding the right to livelihood of bar dancers, where the outcome hinged on distancing bar dancing from sex work, which thereby increased the stigma faced by sex workers (Kotiswaran, 2010; 2013). Ultimately the arbitrary and contingent differences in their legal treatment erase the connections between these forms of work and set the women in each sector against one another. Our research project offers deeper insights into what legal reform would collectively benefit workers most, by studying these sectors side by side.

## HOW DO KARAGATTAM AND ADAL PADAL FIT INTO OUR PROJECT?

We learned about the importance of *karagattam* and *adal padal* as erotic dance forms in Tamil Nadu while researching High Court case law on bar dancing performances in the state. While dance forms such as *karagattam* are often treated in popular discourse as benign “traditional folk” art forms associated with temple festivals, we were intrigued to come across numerous Writ Petitions filed in the Madras High Court and Madurai High Court where the Court issued permission for performances, subject to a fixed set of conditions regulating their “vulgarity” and “obscenity” of the performances. Many such judgements used the terms *karagattam* as well as *adal padal* (meaning song and dance). To better understand the sexual stigma attached to these dance forms, we began fieldwork with *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers in Theni and Madurai in April 2021. We then conducted a second round of fieldwork in Madurai, Tiruchendur, Salem, and Coimbatore between October and November 2021.

## QUESTIONNAIRES AND TOOLS AND THE NATURE OF THE DATA

Prior to initiating fieldwork, we conducted preliminary interviews with academics and key stakeholders, as well as a literature review and a review of relevant case law. We developed our questions based on the themes that emerged, which we continually refined based on our discoveries in the field. Our questions spanned nine themes: the size and scope of the dance sector, the elements of the form, the procedure and costs when arranging a performance, the role of agents, the savings and debt of dancers, the role of migrants, the legal process, the role of *sangams* (collective associations), and the experience of government schemes, if any.

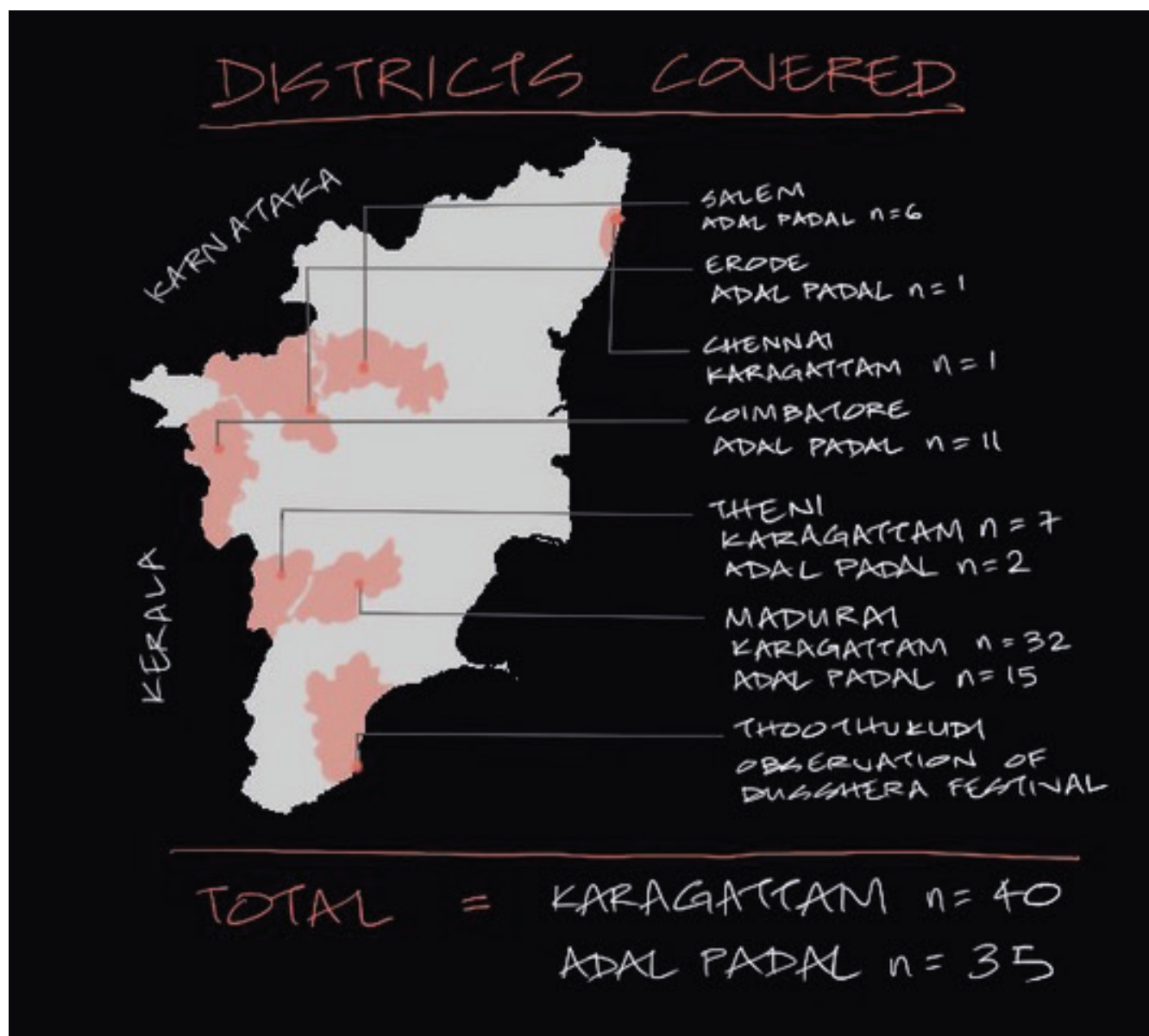
This report contains a description of the sector based on what dancers and other stakeholders reported in their interviews and focus group discussions. Since dancers’ experiences are diverse, interview settings are variable, and stakeholders have competing motivations influencing what they share with researchers, the descriptions in this report should not be taken as simple fact, but as offering insights into the experiences of those working in this field.

## CHOICE OF DISTRICTS

We began our research in Periyakulam in Theni district, a known hub of *karagattam* dancers, during the temple festival season in April 2021. While meeting *karagattam* dancers, we were also introduced to a dancer who performed *adal padal*. To understand the distinctions and overlaps between the two dance forms, we shifted our base to the larger city of Madurai to meet with both *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers. In April 2021, we met with dancers in Madurai city and the surrounding areas of Kallikudi (Madurai district) and Kariapatti (Virudhunagar district) and observed a dance performance in Ramalingapuram village. Unfortunately, our in-person fieldwork was cut short by



the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-April 2021. However, we continued to conduct virtual interviews with dancers over WhatsApp between June and September 2021 and then returned in October and November 2021 to meet dancers in Madurai, Salem, and Coimbatore.



**Figure 1:** Number of stakeholders sorted by region and dance sector, infographic designed by Shakthi Nataraj

## NUMBER OF STAKEHOLDERS COVERED

Most of our interviews were with dancers themselves, but we also sought meetings with activists, policymakers, and bureaucrats to gain a broader understanding of the sector. In total, over three phases of fieldwork across Tamil Nadu, we have met 37 artists in the *adal padal* sector (21 female, 14 male), and 39 artists in the *karagattam* sector (25 female, 12 male, 2 trans women). 42 of these dancers were covered over 8 group discussions, and 33 dancers in one-on-one interviews. We have also conducted one-on-one interviews with 9 external stakeholders including activists, police, lawyers, government officials, and one village leader.

In April 2021, we met a total of 34 artists and 5 other stakeholders. Between June and September 2021, we

conducted virtual fieldwork, interviewing 10 dancers one-on-one and three *karagattam* dancers in an online focus group discussion. In October and November, we had the opportunity to meet 41 dancers from both *adal padal* (29) and *karagattam* (12) sectors. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, performances were scarce. However, we watched two *karagattam* performances in the Madurai area, and during the *Dussehra* celebrations in Tiruchendur, we were able to see one event involving *adal padal* dancing.

*Adal padal* and *karagattam* are part of a larger ecosystem of performance traditions and dance forms in Tamil Nadu, ranging from historical drama to cinema. The two are not mutually exclusive, and our respondents often performed multiple kinds of dance, as Figure 2 the the right shows. Rather than presume the differences, we paid careful attention in our interviews to how dancers and stakeholders themselves distinguished these forms and why they did so.

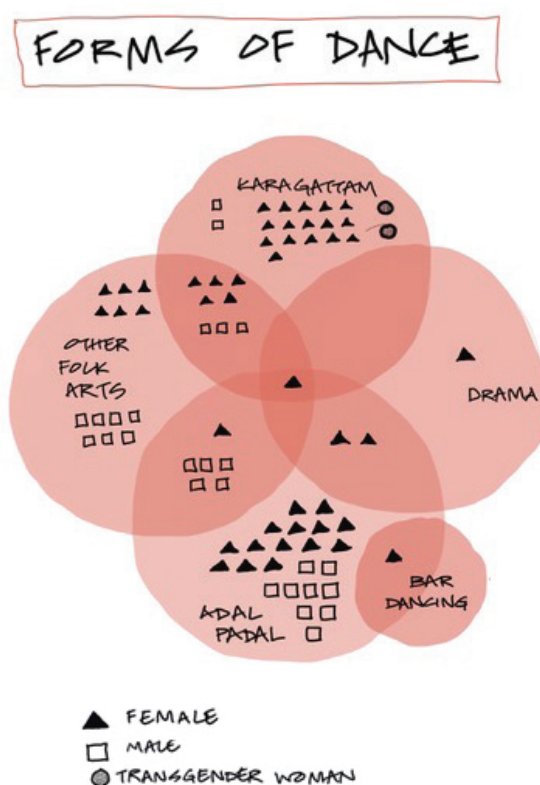
## METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

Our report is based on one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, using a semi-structured interview format. We met dancers through a process of snowball sampling.

When we began our fieldwork, we sought out “*adal padal*” dancers, which was the term that cropped up repeatedly in High Court orders. Initially we had difficulty locating dancers, since we did not have connections with their *sangams* (collective associations) or the non-government organisations (NGOs) that worked with them. Our primary networks were with sex worker organisations affiliated with the National Network of Sex Workers and the All-India Network of Sex Workers, as well as with HIV/AIDS prevention organisations which have long been key sites of sex worker mobilisation and advocacy. However, most sex worker organisers did not know much about the dancer groups, even if they had vague impressions that these dancers did sex work as well. We later found that dancers were also keen to distance themselves from the stigma of sex work and, consequently, sex workers’ groups.

It was through our search for *adal padal* dancers that we came upon *karagattam* as an erotic dance form. While we had initially assumed a false binary between *adal padal* as modern and erotic, and *karagattam* as folk and religious, we realised that both forms of dance had erotic elements that were policed by the Court and were, in fact, received by viewers as overlapping as well. After conversations with stakeholders, as well as observing dance performances in circulated videos, we learned the overlaps between *adal padal* and *karagattam*.

Since *karagattam* dancers were easier to meet than *adal padal* dancers, we decided to make first contact with them. We visited Periyakulam, where many dancers resided, and approached them directly to tell them about our research. We realised that they were keen to share their concerns and demands of the government after the COVID-19 pandemic. They felt they were rarely the focus of research and were not actively sought out by those implementing government schemes.



**Figure 2:** The spread of dancers and performers in our sample, Infographic designed by Shakthi Nataraj.



To gain access to *karagattam* dancers, it was key for us to meet a senior member of the family, who would open up and then give permission for other family members to speak with us. *Karagattam* dancers often reside in certain areas or villages that are profiled by surrounding groups as being caste-bound. For example, it was common for people in Periyakulam to say, “those people live there, near the bus stand”, simultaneously referring to caste and occupation. During in-person interviews, it was not possible for us to interview dancers alone as it would inevitably become a family affair along with other dancers in the neighbourhood coming to the house out of curiosity and then staying for the discussion. While this was helpful for the most part, it did hinder us from speaking to some of the female dancers alone to hear the viewpoints they might express when men in their community were not present. An unexpectedly helpful way to gain access to one-on-one interviews with them was virtual interviews conducted over WhatsApp during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person meetings were impossible. Ultimately, between in-depth one-on-one virtual interviews and in-person group meetings, we had a mixed sample of male and female dancers, as well as two transgender women.

We had an unexpected break when one of the *karagattam* dancers in Periyakulam introduced us to an *adal padal* dancer who had been abroad recently. She was evidently of a different socio-economic profile than the *karagattam* dancers and also saw herself as performing a distinct form of dance. After a long one-on-one interview with her, we had a connection to meet *adal padal* dancers across the districts through a process of snowball sampling. She put us in touch with *adal padal* dancers in Theni and Madurai. In Madurai, we were assisted by local researchers who knew the areas where *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers resided.

In April we had to cut short our in-person fieldwork because of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India and the lockdowns introduced across the country. Between June and September 2021, we continued to contact dancers virtually by phone and WhatsApp to introduce our research and virtually interviewed interested participants. We obtained a list of *adal padal* dance troupe leaders' names from the Commissioner of Police in Salem on the direction of Justice A. Venkatesh in our support. We compiled a list of *karagattam* artists registered with the Tamil Nadu Department of Arts and Culture. We conducted phone interviews and networking calls with several dancers from these lists and built personal connections that proved invaluable when we returned to Tamil Nadu in October. Between October and November 2021, we were able to meet dancers relatively easily, through a few key informants in Madurai, Coimbatore, and Salem. These sectors have very marked gendered divisions of labour, so we tried to ensure women were our key informants as they were also more likely to introduce us to other female dancers, who would then speak frankly about issues such as sex work and stigma when male *sangam* leaders were not present.

One unfortunate gap in our research is that we were only able to view two *karagattam* performances and one instance of *adal padal* during the Dussehra celebrations in Tiruchendur. The latter was not the typical *adal padal* performance that is highly policed, but instead a very different format of a series of short performances in the daytime with dancers performing in front of patrons' homes. COVID-19 led to a radical curtailment of performances over the past two years. In addition, performances usually occur in very rural and remote areas. Dancers are also wary of taking researchers or reporters to these events since permission is often granted at the last minute. For *adal padal* performances, we suspect that some occur without official permission. To be able to attend these performances, it is essential to have very strong contacts, and in the space of a few weeks it proved difficult to build the degree of trust necessary for dancers to take us along to performances.

A second gap in our research is that we were unable to meet the “glamour dancers”, as they are referred to, who migrate to Tamil Nadu from Karnataka. We travelled to Bengaluru and over two weeks tried to contact them by phone. However, they seemed extremely busy with performances and also wary of media coverage, so we were only able to interview two dancers. It is clear that more time and new strategies are needed to approach these

glamour dancers, which should be a focus of subsequent field research.

## DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF DANCERS IN OUR SAMPLE

### GENDER

Among the dancers, we made a concerted effort to focus on women, since the project is centred on women's labour and the unique challenges they face in the erotic dancing sector. In total, over three phases of fieldwork across Tamil Nadu, we met 37 artists in the *adal padal* sector (23 female, 14 male), and 39 artists in the *karagattam* sector (25 female, 12 male, 2 transgender women). 63% of the dancers we interviewed ( $n = 48$ ) were women, 34% were men ( $n = 26$ ), and 3% were transgender ( $n = 2$ ). In the case of *karagattam* dancers, we found that men in the community would act as gatekeepers and were often hesitant to let women from their family meet with the researchers on their own. In virtual fieldwork as well, we found that the husband of one female dancer insisted on closely observing the interview and the male teachers of two female dancers insisted on being interviewed first. For this reason, most of the female *karagattam* dancers were interviewed with other people present, primarily family members. In the case of *adal padal* dancers as well, most men only gave us the contact details of other men, so we contacted women through other female dancers.

### CASTE

About 70% of the *karagattam* dancers in our sample were Scheduled Caste, mainly from the Paraiyar and Pallar communities. Others belonged to communities such as the Nadars and Thevars, classified as Other Backward Classes. These numbers are partly skewed by nine of the dancers in our sample being three generations of women from the same family. We learned that the eldest woman had been born into an Other Backward Class community, but married a dancer from a Scheduled Caste background, making her Scheduled Caste as well. The younger women, similarly, took on the castes of their husbands. Another caveat is that many of the dancers performed other forms of folk dance alongside *karagattam*. Nevertheless, our percentage corroborates the findings of existing research on *karagattam*. In her research in 1994 in the Madurai area, anthropologist Sarah Diamond (1999, p. 57) reports that 77% of her interviewees were from the Paraiyar community, 20% from Other Backward Class communities (Thevar, Nadar, Pillai), and 3% from other Scheduled Castes such as the Chakkaliyar and Pallar communities.

Over half of the *adal padal* dancers in our sample are from castes categorised as Other Backward Classes including the Pillai, Nadar, Thevar, Chettiar, and Vellalars.

These statistics offer only a hint of the complex relationship between caste and dance. While *karagattam* is often considered a "hereditary occupation" or a "traditional occupation" related to caste and kinship, several of the *karagattam* dancers who described themselves as traditional dancers, in fact, had grandparents who were agricultural labourers or involved in other forms of work. Informants vehemently denied the role of caste in dancing and emphasised the inclusivity of the dance form. *Karagattam* is often associated in people's minds with Scheduled Caste communities such as the Paraiyars, and it is possible that artists do not want to encourage these caste-based stereotypes of dancers, and so they emphasise the inclusivity of the form.

Some dancers also asserted that folk artists are clubbed together based on the art form rather than caste, suggesting that caste and art form stand in as proxies for one another to an extent. Whether they are of different castes or not, there is a stigma associated with being an "artist" which is connected to a certain caste-based stigma and impacts all who enter. For example, *adal padal* and *karagattam* dancers alike described instances where their hosts refused to let dancers into their home, serving them food outside the house.

## RELIGION

All *karagattam* dancers were Hindu and were worshippers of Amman goddesses associated with the areas in which they performed at festivals. While most *adal padal* dancers were Hindu, there were two Christian dancers and one Muslim dancer who were very senior and experienced in the field. There are a mix of Muslim and Christian persons among the organisers of important dance troupes such as Abhinaya. *Adal padal* is seen by dancers as a more “secular” form which can be easily picked up by a person with dancing talent, regardless of their own family and upbringing. In the case of *karagattam*, however, the religious dimension of the performances and its important ritual role during festivals was extremely significant to the dancers.

## REGION

We began the research in Theni and Madurai since they are centres for both these forms of dance. Madurai in particular is a hub of *adal padal* dancing, and many of the original troupes that promoted this form, such as Abhinaya, started in Madurai in the 1990s. *Karagattam* is associated with Thanjavur, Madurai, and other temple towns, although dancers are present across the state. Both forms are associated with rural areas and are not very common in urban centres. In addition to *karagattam* and “normal” *adal padal*, as referred to by dancers, there are also “glamour” *adal padal* performances that have gained notoriety in the past decade. Migrant dancers traveling to Salem and Erode are associated with these glamour performances, and so we conducted research in Salem and also visited Bengaluru in Karnataka to meet glamour dancers. Lastly, we visited Coimbatore since we had contacts of several female leaders present there and it offered a good opportunity to speak to female dancers specifically.

# KARAGATTAM

## HISTORY OF THE FORM

While dancers and the public alike often regard *karagattam* as an unbroken ancient folk tradition, it is likely that the dance form we currently see as *karagattam* only emerged in the 1930s. Its core elements however have deeper roots in Indian history. As many scholars have demonstrated, devotional poetry and performance in Hinduism have long had erotic elements, as in the Tamil poetic genre of *padams* which could be simultaneously read as a devotional paean to a god as well as an erotic appeal to a lover.

Sarah Diamond (1999, p. 22) described longstanding *devadasi* dance practices in Tamil Nadu, with the temple performances including several elements found in current day *karagattam*, such as the drama segment, the clown character, the elements of comedy, ballad singing, and eroticism. *Devadasis*, in addition to providing sexual services to priests and patrons of the temple, acted as ritual specialists, and had the right to land, tax revenue, and education.

During the nineteenth century, patronage-based communities that did not fit the nuclear family model, such as *devadasis* and other performers, were increasingly deemed criminal and perverse (Diamond, 1999). With the anti-nautch movement of the 1920s, Indian elites joined with British reformist feminists to outlaw *devadasi* practices and kinship (see also Puri, 2015). They instead forged a more classical version of Indian dance that met Victorian standards of purity, eventually referred to as *Bharatanatyam*. In the same period, Tamil epics, as well as performance traditions such as *karagattam*, were reclaimed as “authentic Tamil folk traditions” by the Dravidian movement, with the connections to *devadasi* traditions erased in favour of a more respectable genealogy traced to the *Sangam* period. This was a part of the rise of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu led by E.V. Ramasamy (known popularly as Periyar) that opposed Congress-led nationalism and Hindi dominance and asserted an unbroken glorious Tamil past (see also Arni, 2024). Following several other South Asianist historians, Diamond called this an “invention of tradition” as part of a growing Tamil cultural identity politics in the 1920s and 30s (Diamond, 1999, p. 33). The artists and dancers we met themselves used the English word “folk” to refer to their own work.

Stripped of the political-economic complex that sustained the *devadasi* practices, *karagattam* dancers lost their status as ritual specialists who were considered auspicious. Words such as *thevadiya* (meaning *devadasi*) and *attakari* (meaning dancer) became insults, euphemisms for “prostitute”. In the dominant political discourse, they became labelled “vulgar entertainers” as opposed to the “decorum” of *Bharatanatyam*. *Bharatanatyam* became associated with nationalist movements and Brahmin supremacy, while *karagattam* and other “folk” forms became associated with supposedly “lower castes”, an association that continues to this day. Nevertheless, *karagattam* continues to play a dynamic and important role in cementing the social relations of the village, and socialising audiences into local ideologies of sexuality and desire (Diamond, 1999).



## CHANGES IN THE SECTOR

It appears that in the past few decades, there have been significant changes in the form and political economy of the sector. Some dancers told us that in the 1960s, male dancers dominated performances. Our informants also recalled a period when men would dance in female costume but not many cisgender women danced. Indeed, it continues to be the case that in folk arts other than *karagattam*, male artists comprise the overwhelming majority. In today's context, however, dancers report that there is a huge demand for female *karagattam* dancers, sometimes many more than would be required for a conventional *karagattam* performance. Younger women get paid considerably more and patrons specify which women they want based on photographs and complain if the same women are not sent on the day of the performance.

The older artists and dancers we interviewed (above the age of 60) said that before artists were given greater respect, while now they were treated with a lot of disrespect, especially the women especially. Dancers attributed the degeneration of the form to the popularity of *adal padal* and "glamour" dancing. They were keen to distance themselves from any reference to historical forms such as *lavani* or *devadasi* dance traditions, which were associated with courtesans or male patronage. They were markedly uncomfortable when asked if female dancers received tips, as this was perceived as a veiled question about sex work.

Another important change over time has been the introduction of recorded music, in the form of cassette tapes in the 1990s and now as pre-recorded CDs or files on an artists' phone, interspersed with live music. Indeed, even in the 1990s, cassettes and chapbooks were important sources for incoming dancers to learn the devotional songs generally sung at performances (Diamond, 1999, p. 103). *Adal padal* performances are also known as "cassette dance" and "record dance", and they likely emerged during this period as well.

Finally, there has been a significant change in how people become dancers. *Karagattam* is largely perceived as a "traditional" family occupation learned among members of a caste group. In our sample, many dancers did learn the form from their family members. However, since the 1980s, with the reclamation of *karagattam* as a traditional Tamil folk form in need of preservation, institutes for formal training in folk arts began to emerge across the state. One example is the Rural Arts Development Centre (RADC) which is run by Mr. Somasundaram in Madurai. It was established in 1987 and accredited by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a guardian of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 1991 (UNESCO, 2024)<sup>1</sup>. The RADC developed a diploma-certified folk arts course offered through the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA)'s Training Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM) program. They have taught over 5000 students since the 1980s, and have a *karagattam* curriculum, which they hope to integrate into university curriculum of places such as Thanjavur University. They have advocated for the allocation of Rs. 15 lakhs by the state government each year for the promotion of folk arts and cultural exchange, including arranging for talented dancers to travel both domestically and abroad to represent the state at performance events (UNESCO, 2008; 2023). In addition to institutionalised training provided by organisations such as the RADC, there are also several informal teachers (*vadyars*) who might take on an apprentice from a non-dancer background. Indeed, Mr. Somasundaram, founder of the RADC, said that the curriculum he established was in tribute to his own teacher.

## ELEMENTS OF THE FORM

A *karagattam* performance has a minimum of three performers: two *karagam* (that is, women balancing *karagams*

---

<sup>1</sup> More details about the activities and scope of the Rural Arts Development Centre can be found on UNESCO's website on Intangible Cultural Heritage accredited organisations in India.

or pots on their heads) and one buffoon character. There is often another pair of dancers, one woman and one man, playing the *kuravan-kurathi* couple (modelled on the *kuravar* “hill tribe” people). There is a band, or *melam*, comprising two *thavil* drum players, two *pambai* drum players, and two *nadaswaram* (a long reed instrument) players. The performance alternates between the *karagam* dance, cinema-style dancing, and segments where the *kuravan-kurathi* and buffoon characters sing songs and perform comedic dialogue, often with bawdy sexual overtones. The *melam* might stop playing during some segments, and pre-recorded dance music from films or devotional music may be played instead. Sometimes, there is an additional segment where the female dancers perform “stunts” like picking up a currency note with their eyelashes or threading a needle with their teeth. Performances take place on the ground, with some sections cordoned off for the audience to sit. After the performance, dancers generally go from street to street in the village, leading the procession of the deity and dancing in front of the homes of the patrons and sponsors of the festival.

The performances in the past used to take place from about 10 pm to 5 am. However, since 2012, the conditions set by the High Court have required that performances only occur between 7 and 10 pm. They have additionally imposed a number of conditions, including a ban on “double meaning” dialogues involving sexual innuendo, a strict dress code, and prohibition of caste, communal, or political themes in the songs and skits. In our interviews, we explored how dancers navigated these conditions, since these political themes, double-meaning dialogues, and audience participation are some of the defining features of the dance form.

During temple festivals, based on the needs of the village as well as their budget, village leaders may ask for just a *karagattam* performance or for other village art forms as well, such as *poikkal kuthirai attam* (horse dance), *mayilattam* (peacock dance), *Amman attam* (dressed as the Amman goddess) and so forth. They might ask just for two *karagattam* dancers to accompany the deity during the procession or may request a full-fledged performance which includes the *karagam* (pot) dance, the *kuravan-kurathi* comedic drama segment, and other skills or “tricks” such as picking up a rupee note with their eyelashes. *Karagattam* takes place at temple festivals alongside a range of other performance types, including *nadagam* (drama), *mayilattam* and other “folk arts”, as classified by the Department of Arts and Culture. *Adal padal* (dance-and-song) performances might also happen during the temple festival, often to pre-recorded music and containing elements from film songs.

## SIZE OF THE SECTOR

During her fieldwork between 1992 and 1994, anthropologist Sarah Diamond reported that there were about 400–500 *karagattam* dancers in Madurai district, and 250 dancers registered with the Tamil Nadu *Karagattam* and *Oyilattam* Teachers Folk Artists Association run by Mr. Somasundaram, the organisation now known as the Rural Arts Development Centre (Diamond, 1999).

Compared to the folk arts more broadly, *karagattam* is a small sector, and the only one with any significant female presence. Mr. Somasundaram, director of the Tamil Nadu Rural Arts Development Centre estimated that there were probably no more than 2000 *karagattam* dancers across the state, only 500 of whom were registered with the Folk Artistes Welfare Board (Department of Art and Culture, 2024b)<sup>2</sup>. He estimated that Madurai had about 150 dancers, Tirunelveli had 150, and Thanjavur had 100, with the others spread out over other districts. When it came to the broader set of all folk arts, he estimated that there were probably about 3 lakhs artists across the state, 40 – 45,000 of whom were registered with the Folk Artistes Welfare Board. Of all the people registered with the Welfare Board, he said that only 5000 were women because, aside from *karagattam*, there are very few women involved in

---

<sup>2</sup> The Folk Artistes Welfare Board was established in 2007 under the aegis of the Tamil Nadu Department of Arts and Culture.

the other folk arts. In fact, he said that in the other folk arts, only 1% of the artists were likely to be women.

Mr. Somasundaram's estimates align with the estimates of some of the dancers. One senior *karagattam* dancer in Alanganallur estimated that in her town there were likely to be about 60 *paraiyattam* dancers and 10-15 *karagattam* dancers. She estimated that across the state, there were around 7 lakh folk artists. Another *sangam* leader in Madurai estimated that there were 38,000 - 42,000 folk artists registered with the Folk Artistes Welfare Board, although the number of dancers in the state was likely to be in lakhs. During the COVID-19 second wave, the Hindu newspaper estimated there were 7 lakh folk artists across the state, 75 groups and associations, and 38,850 artists registered with the Folk Artistes Welfare Board (Gowri, 2021). Registrations were on the upswing in 2021, with dancers eager to claim the pandemic relief provided by the government, which explains there being about 42,000 artists registered with the Folk Artistes Welfare Board in early 2022.

### BOX 1: EVENING PERFORMANCE AT RAMALINGAPURAM: A FIELDWORK VIGNETTE

It's 9:30 pm on a warm summer night. We are at a dance performance in Ramalingapuram, a remote town about 80 km from Madurai city. It is a stroke of luck that we are here. We were meant to attend a different performance but got lost in the dark rural roads and had no cell reception. Just as we were about to give up, we heard some music in the distance. The tiny dark street we were following suddenly opened into a sprawling field lit up with giant images of gods and goddesses. The street was packed with crowds, all riveted by a performance happening at the centre, in the temple courtyard, right in front of the sanctum.



In the centre of the veranda, a striking young woman is gyrating suggestively to a raunchy item song from the recently released Dhanush film *Maari-2*. She is accompanied by a good-looking man wearing a singlet and shorts, over which a dhoti is loosely draped. He touches her suggestively now and then as he moves in time to her movements, but she is clearly the star of the show.

Inside the sanctum, the priest conducts the rituals undisturbed by the music outside. Groups of people are let in one at a time to see the goddess. When the priest steps out, the woman playfully taps him on the back with a long-stemmed rose and makes a suggestive gesture.

The troupe consists of four women who take turns dancing with the man. When offstage, sitting on the edges, they wrap a dupatta around their front, covering up their bosom and midriff with a plain tie-dye cotton cloth. They wear tight glittery blouses with a string tied across the shoulder blades. Below, they are wearing short, frilled skirts that flip up suggestively when they jab their hips forward. Under the





skirts, some of them wear full leggings while one of them is barelegged. Their hair is gathered up in a girlish style into two low ponytails, bouffed up with additional hairpieces. Their feet jangle with heavy anklets.

The stage is covered with a festive tent, decked with garlands, lights, bunches of bananas and coconuts, roses, and bottles of “colour”, the local term for colourful soft drinks. This is an occasion for ostentatiousness and showing off.

There is a professional videographer who darts about. The crowd parts respectfully to give him way. There are fireworks. I jump when a rocket goes off right next to me and the festive Diwali smell of gunpowder fills my nostrils. A little boy notices my alarm and giggles.



In the corner, there is a small circle of plastic chairs with one man in the middle scribbling numbers furiously into a book of accounts, surrounded by other men. These are members of the village committee, arranging the performance, noting accounts, and maintaining order in the crowd.

On one side of the stage is mostly men, the other mostly women. Children ring the immediate edges of the stage, dressed in new dresses and shirts, clutching flowers and balloons, and entranced by the dancers who occasionally playfully smacked them on the head with a rose or suddenly pulled a face and shocked them. One man grins toothily for a selfie with his small son. At 9:30 pm, when we got there, it was clearly still a family event.

At 9:45 pm, a hush sweeps through the crowd: the *nattamai*, or temple leader, is making an announcement. “Attention, attention! We are going to wrap up at 10 pm so these will be the last few songs, enjoy!” My heart sinks — we just got here! — but 10 pm comes and goes, and there is no sign of stopping.

The theatrical segment with the buffoon and the dialogues doesn’t begin until 11 pm. To open, a female dancer sings, honouring the important men as they troop through the centre, gruff and self-important,



into the temple sanctum to pray. Their names are announced with great ceremony. They are wearing blinding white shirts and *veshtis*, with lemon-yellow scarves.

After 10 pm the performance grows markedly raunchier. The dancers hold inflated balloons at their crotch and race towards each other, bursting the balloon by smacking their hips together. The buffoon character enters and staggers around sloppily, deliberately slack like a drunkard. His multi-coloured clothes are oversized, and dabs of red mark his nose and cheeks. "You've spilt my coffee. Now I am going to spill my milk," he warns the woman with mock gruffness. She responds cheekily, questioning his masculinity. Now he is absently slapping someone's breast and later rubbing his face right in between their breasts. He also kisses one of the dancers. R, a local contact, says it was a real kiss, with tongue. I thought it was just acting. Does it matter?

Meanwhile, two other dance parties have struck up behind us. A group of young men leap about, their feet are a blur. Across the way, some vivacious young girls are dancing with each other, a drummer beating a frantic rhythm. Though they use traditional instruments, some of the tunes they are playing are film songs.

We pile into the car for the three-hour drive back to Madurai, but the performance is still going strong. In the car I hunch over my phone, watching one of the videos. R grumbles "why won't you stop watching these *adal padal* videos?" To which I respond, "I thought you said this wasn't *adal padal*, this was *karagattam*?" He agrees, "Yes, yes, *karagattam*." Behind us the festivities continue, all the dance forms combined, as we embark on a long and eerily quiet ride home.



## POLITICAL ECONOMY

### OCCASIONS FOR PERFORMANCE

The primary occasions for which *karagattam* troupes are hired are (1) temple festivals, (2) political rallies, (3) weddings and other auspicious family functions such as ear-piercings, (4) deaths, (5) government programs and (6) hotel programs. *Karagattam* involves dancers of multiple castes, unlike some other folk arts such as *thevarattam* or *thappattam*, which are associated only with a specific caste. But dancing at a death ceremony is a marker of caste status, with dancers of higher castes distancing themselves from death performances. College festivals and cultural contests are a seventh category, but only a few dancers have access to these spaces. According to the Assistant Commissioner of Police in Madurai, both *karagattam* and *adal padal* also now feature in hotel programs, where *karagattam* is performed as an example of a decorous traditional form. She opined that *adal padal* was erotic, flashy, and overlapped with granting sexual favours to patrons.

In this report, we focus on government programs and temple festivals since these appear to be the most significant occasions for dancers.

## GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Government programs happen throughout the year and take the form of either (1) “cultural display” programs where a decorous version of *karagattam* is performed as a symbol of ethnic Tamil identity, or (2) awareness drives, where the dance, combined with street theatre and other “folk arts”, is used to spread messages about a social issue.

The annual Republic Day celebration in Delhi is one of the most prestigious government programs which a folk artist can be invited to. Many dancers highlighted their performances there as a major milestone in their career. Other government programs might involve a single performance at a launch or an inauguration, where a performance might last between 10 minutes to an hour. Government agencies might also invite dancers to travel abroad as part of a program to showcase Tamil culture, to countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand with large Tamil populations or histories of cultural contact with South Indian Hindu traditions.

The government “awareness campaigns” (*vilippunarvu nigalcchi*) generally involve three to four days of training, followed by a series of performances spread across multiple cities over 10-20 days. The programmes generally focus on raising awareness on current issues linked to a specific government department. For example, many dancers we met in October – December 2021 were involved in awareness drives about COVID-19 prevention. They were also involved in a statewide awareness drive about the *Illam Thedi Kalvi* scheme launched by M.K. Stalin, involving after school tutoring services at government schools for students who missed a year because of COVID-19 (Tamil Nadu Schools, 2024).

Government programs, of any type, pay relatively little but carry the most prestige, since dancers are felicitated with shawls, certificates, and prizes. Such programs are relatively hard to secure, however, and are generally procured through connections with an agent, a college arts department, or with a government office such as the *Iyal Isai Nadaga Mandram* or Centre for Arts, Music and Drama (Department of Art and Culture, 2024a) under the aegis of the Directorate of Arts and Culture. Receiving certificates of participation, prizes, or photographs with government officials are especially valuable for dancers, since these can serve as documented evidence to then apply for the Folk Artistes Welfare Board card, or prestigious awards such as the statewide Kalai Mamani award.

With government programs, the dancers would not have a contract but instead, a copy of the order with the details of the program, payment, number of performances per day, dates and so forth would be sent to the dancers. Dancers did not mention a formal tender process but they generally got the opportunities through other dancers or by building connections with bureaucrats.

### Form and Elements

Government programs involve a significantly different style of *karagattam* compared to performances at temple festivals. As one dancer said:

“ The *karagattam* artists who perform with a buffoon and so forth, that is not what we do. They are the ones who wear half-pavadai (skirt) and perform in an obscene way for the crowds with the buffoons, we don't do that, we perform the traditional forms at government programs, mostly. We wear full saris. We also perform a lot of street theatre for government awareness programs.”

They generally performed the “official” versions of *karagattam* that are codified as a “folk art” and dressed in saris rather than in the short skirts or glittery tops worn for temple performances.

### Procedure

Dancers are hired for government programs either through agents or by cultivating relationships with bureaucrats

in government departments. The organisers generally give the group a brief outline of expectations, and artists then have some freedom to compose the lyrics, write the script, or choreograph the performance. To illustrate, one of us was accompanying dancer M when she got a call asking for a team for a COVID-19 awareness program for 20 days. She assured the person calling that she could get a team ready and then contacted people she knew to gather three men and three women. They were due to leave the very next day. From what we could see, such last-minute appointments were typical in the field. M and her team attended three days of training with the arts department of Loyola University in Chennai before fanning out into the districts for 20 days of performances.

Another troupe leader who heads a group of *thirunangais*<sup>3</sup>, said she directly visited government departments and shared her card with bureaucrats. Her troupe was originally formed through a prominent HIV prevention initiative and was regularly hired for programs related to public health awareness about tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes, and others. The Assistant Commissioner of Police in Madurai that we spoke to had also engaged *karagattam* dancers to spread awareness about COVID-19 in the market areas, bus stands, and streets in Madurai.

## Income Breakdown

In the case of government programs, a significant cut of the payment (about 15-20%) goes to either the agent or the bureaucrat who connected the dancers to the opportunity. One dancer gave this as a sample breakdown:

“ For a government awareness drive, say they hire us and ask us to perform for 15 days at the rate of Rs. 10,000 per day. Rs. 2000 goes back to the government official who gave us the job. Each day we perform in two villages. The mic set is probably Rs. 500/day and the vehicle about Rs. 1000/day. Photos and documentation are a bit more, as is food for our troupe. We have about 8 dancers. So ultimately everyone gets about Rs. 500-800 per person per day. If there is any left at the end, I might get it as the troupe leader.”

The income is only Rs. 500-800 per day, which is significantly lower than temple performances. However, the work is more reliable and prestigious while continuing throughout the year, whereas temple festivals are seasonal.

## TEMPLE FESTIVALS

The main season for temple festivals is between mid-January (Pongal celebrations) and mid-June, corresponding to the Tamil months of *thai*, *masi*, *panguni*, *chittirai*, and *vaikaasi*. Earning potential is highest during the temple festival season, although dancers lamented that for the past two years, owing to COVID-19 related lockdowns, they have barely had any temple performances. Political rallies, weddings, family functions, and deaths happen throughout the year but pay considerably less than festivals.

## Form and Elements

It is conventional for a *karagattam* temple performance to have at least six dancers (three women and two men). There is one *Raja* (king) *karagam*, generally male, two *thunai* (accompanying) *karagams*, generally female, and one male-female pair who together perform a comedic bawdy segment called the *kuravan-kurathi attam*. There is a sixth dancer called the “buffoon” who provides bawdy comic relief. They are accompanied by a live band of 6 - 7 musicians.

However, in practice, this varies based on the needs and budget of the village committee in question. The village may request a full-fledged performance which includes the *karagam* dance, the *kuravan-kurathi* comedic drama segment, and other skills or “tricks” such as picking up a rupee note with their eyelashes. They may ask for just

---

<sup>3</sup> Tamil term for “transgender woman”, literally means “respectable woman”.

a *karagattam* performance or for other village art forms as well, such as *poikkal kuthirai attam* (horse dance), *mayilattam* (peacock dance), *Amman attam* (dressed as the Amman goddess). One dancer shared a prior contract with us that had requested a smaller performance of only two *karagam* dancers and a buffoon. This might have been not a full-fledged performance but an occasion in which the village needed two *thunai karagam* to accompany the deity in the procession around the village. Some villages may also ask for more dancers, with an apparent growing trend of requesting extra female dancers.

## Income Breakdown

The host can be charged anywhere from Rs. 10,000 to a lakh for a performance, with the median cost seeming to be around Rs. 40,000. A small performance with just two *karagattam* dancers and a buffoon might be Rs. 13,000, whereas a performance including multiple folk arts, expensive props, and travel, might cost up to Rs. 70,000. Each performer earns around Rs. 1500 – 2000, but some young, skilled, or beautiful women can earn up to Rs. 4000. Generally, the women earn more than the male performers. Young apprentices might be paid only a nominal amount. Musicians are paid similarly to dancers and earn anywhere between Rs. 1200–4000, depending on the performance. Dancers cover their own travel by bus or taxi/van and also pay for the costumes and props. Travel by van can cost up to Rs. 5000 and costumes/props can cost up to Rs. 4000. The village organising committee manages the costs of the sound and stage and also provides food and accommodation, if needed.

Sample cost breakdown for a *karagattam* performance fixed at Rs. 40,000. See Figure 3 (p. 17) for a sample cost breakdown of a *karagattam* performance fixed at a total of Rs. 40,000.

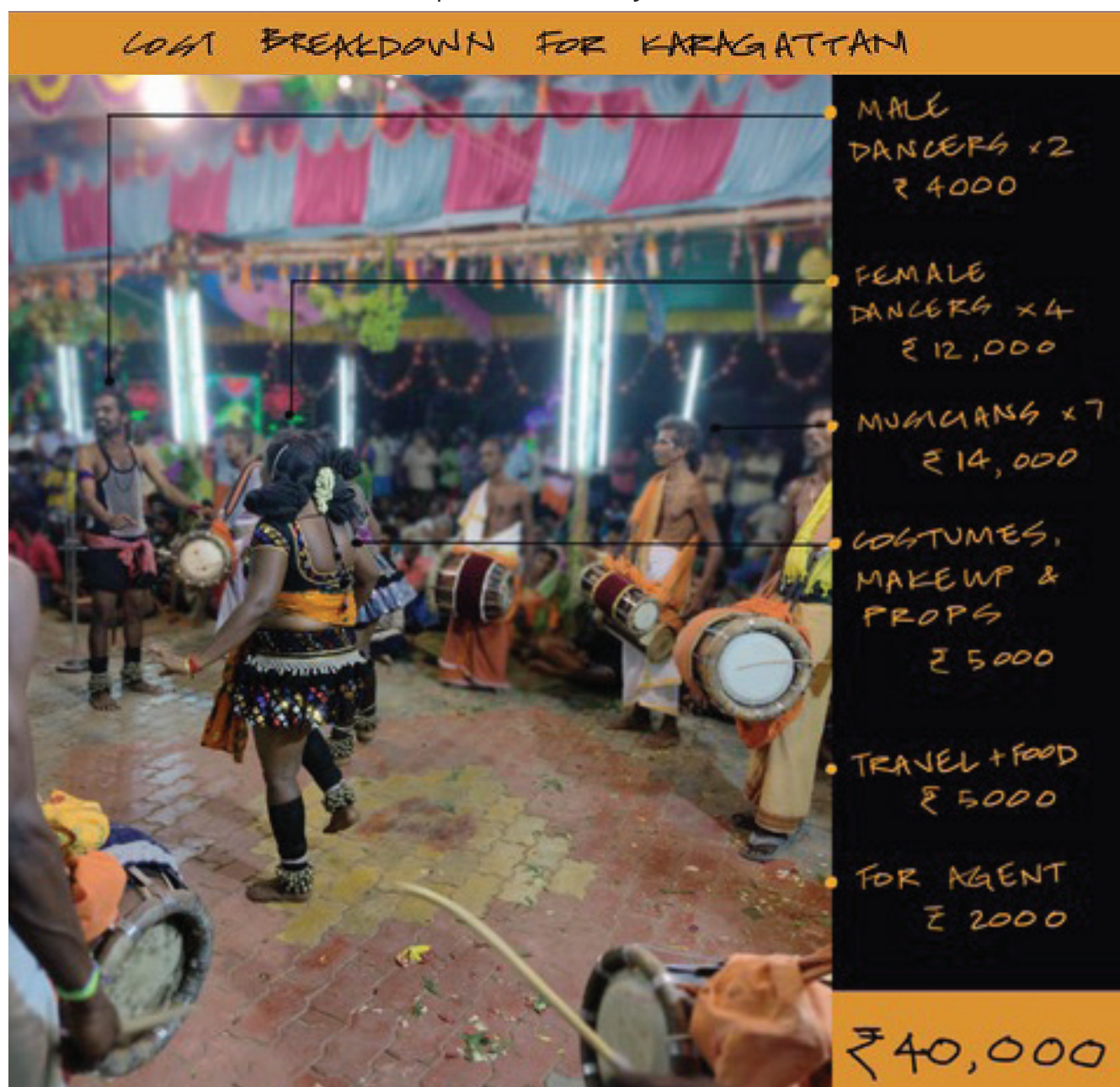
If an outside agent is involved (that is, not an elderly dancer or family member), they might negotiate with the village committee for a higher amount and pocket as much as 20 – 40% for themselves. Elderly dancers or troupe leaders might also function as agents, but they appear to earn less in the way of commission, around 5 – 10% of the total performance costs.

Some older dancers or agents have younger dancers who come to them “on advance” for a certain number of months. This is called an “advance”, a “contract” or an “agreement”. If this is the case, the younger dancers will receive an advance of anywhere between Rs. 20,000 to 1 lakh, after which they will only be paid half the salary for any subsequent performance, for example Rs. 1500 instead of Rs. 3000, until the advance amount has been effectively repaid to the older dancer or agent. For that period, the dancer cannot dance with any other troupe. Dancers unanimously stated that “going on advance” was not desirable since it constrained one’s autonomy and reduced one’s income. However, sometimes women were forced to take up such agreements out of financial need. In addition, there is a sexual stigma attached to going on “agreement”, similar to the sexual stigma more generally attached to single women who take loans (discussed in more depth subsequently in the section Sexual Stigma, p.23).

At the lowest end of the spectrum, dancers might only earn Rs. 500 – 1000 per performance. We met a family of performers near Madurai, who performed a range of art forms including *karagattam*. They were migrants from Maharashtra belonging to the Scheduled Caste community, who were originally associated with leather puppetry. They sometimes earned as little as Rs. 500 per performance. There were some notable features that distinguished them from the other interviewees. They were a large family of 10 to 15 people and would often perform as a family, lived in a family-owned house and so did not pay rent, claimed they did not take vatti loans (with interest) since they could manage their needs themselves, and primarily performed other kinds of village arts, not *karagattam*. They also belonged to a nomadic Scheduled Caste community and said that their people had originally spoken a variant of Marathi. The family was quite poor and were keen to get their children educated and out of the art form.



At the highest end of the spectrum, we interviewed KRJ, a *karagattam* teacher who has his own troupe of 50 folk artists who perform various kinds of folk art not limited to *karagattam*. He charges a minimum of Rs. 75,000 for performances and up to 1 lakh, if it is at a distant location. Performances include about 20 artists doing a variety of village art forms. The cost breakdown is Rs. 12,000 for five musicians, Rs. 5000 for each of the women, Rs. 3000 for the main artist (*raja karagam*) and Rs. 500-1000 each for junior apprentices. The cost of travel with props comes to Rs. 25,000, while renting the props is Rs. 5-10,000. Providing food for everyone comes to Rs. 8000-10,000. He receives about Rs. 5000 as profit. If invited as an individual performer, he charges Rs. 10,000 minimum. Some unique features about KRJ is that he is a college graduate with an M.Phil. in Tamil literature, with plans to enter a Ph.D. program. He is not from a dancer family but joined out of interest in the field. He is trained in multiple art forms, has received a Kalai Mamani award from the Directorate of Arts and Culture, is well-connected to universities both in Chennai and donors abroad, and is the Asian record holder for the longest performance of *marakkaal attam* (a dance performed on stilts), having performed for over 6 hours at a stretch. He is keen to recruit more students to enter the art form and to preserve these village arts.



**Figure 3:** Cost breakdown for Karagattam, Infographic by Shakthi Nataraj.

It would seem that the costs involved in and income from *karagattam* performances have increased significantly in the past two decades, even taking inflation into consideration. Anthropologist Sarah Diamond reports that in 1994, the total cost of a performance ranged from Rs. 2000 - 6000 and that each dancer received Rs. 250 - 300 per performance. Contract dancers received much less, about only Rs. 50 per performance. At the time, the daily coolie rate for agricultural labour was Rs. 25 - 50, and for other daily wage jobs such as auto driving or street vending, was Rs. 70 - 80 (Diamond, 1999, p. 47). Then, as now, dancing paid significantly more than other kinds of daily wage labour.

### Procedure for Arranging a Performance

During our interviews, we found that some *karagattam* dancer families used their home as a base for meeting “parties” that might want to hire them. In Periyakulam, a family of *karagattam* dancers and *thavil* (drum) artists had a board outside their home advertising their troupe. The dancers and musicians all tended to reside in the same area, with the street having mainly *karagattam* dancers mostly from the same Paraiyar (Scheduled Caste) community residing there. In Madurai, we did not see such boards, but it was clear that locals knew the areas where the “*karagattam* people” resided and that certain villages (Kallikudi, Kariapatti) tended to have many *karagattam* and village artists. Dance troupes also had visiting cards that they would give to village leaders to be contacted for future performances. Since other dancers’ homes were on the same street, there was a natural competition that arose among dancers when the “parties” come to meet them.

“Agents” or “brokers” exist in the field, with the term used loosely. It might refer to older dancers who no longer dance but gather dancers under them and arrange performances or might refer to outsider agents who take a relatively large cut of the total performance cost. As intermediaries between the artist community and the important people from neighbouring villages, the brokers can gain social power from their position.

The village head (*nattamai*) and festival committee members either directly call the dance troupe leaders or approach them at home to discuss the details of the temple performance. They specify the number of dancers they want of each gender, the length of the performance, the dates, the payments, and the various elements of dance required. There is also an increasing tendency for village leaders to request young or “fair” girls, sometimes even specifying that they want “unmarried” girls, and asking to see photographs of the girls on Facebook or on the phone before selecting them. Three dancers said that they had encountered village leaders who eventually paid only half of the agreed amount, complaining that the “right” girls had not performed. There appears to be a trend for villages to want more girls in addition to the regular dancers.

Until a few years ago, performances generally used to take place between 10 pm and 1 am, sometimes going all the way to 5 or 6 am. For the past few years, however, the Government has only been giving permission for performances to be from 7 - 10 pm. The performance we saw in Ramalingapuram in April 2021, however, went on at least until 12 am, which is when we left, and seemed like it would go on for much longer.

Dancers are generally paid an advance prior to the performance, with the remaining amount paid after the performance. Dancers reported that the advance was barely 10% of the total cost. Furthermore, the village leaders often reclaimed this amount if they were unable to get permission to host the performance. The dancers also claimed that a minority of village leaders would refuse to pay the full amount claiming that the performance did not live up to their expectations or that the “right” girls had not been brought. In a few villages, the leaders would mysteriously disappear when it was time to pay! On the other end, the *nattamai* (village leader) we interviewed reported that he paid dancers an advance of 50% and that he would not reclaim it, even if permission was not granted. Clearly, these two parties have conflicting accounts of the payment process. Some of the discrepancy

could also be because of the involvement of the agents or intermediaries. Further research is required to understand the difficulties faced in both making and claiming payments as well as to learn more about the role of these intermediaries.

## CONTRACTS

Initially when we began conducting interviews, most dancers said that there were no written contracts in this field and everything was agreed upon orally, which is how village leaders could renege on their promises. However, when we conducted phone interviews, three dancers told us that formal contracts were indeed used. There are two types of significant contracts: (a) the contract made between the dance troupe and the village committee before the temple performance, and (b) the contract made between a younger dancer and a senior dancer when going “on agreement”.

### TEMPLE PERFORMANCE CONTRACT

This contract is generally written by hand on the letterhead of the troupe leader and then signed by both the village leader and the troupe leader. Dancers told us that the contract could be enforced by approaching the Sub-Inspector’s office, as long as the performance had secured the appropriate permissions. One of the dancers told us that she was a member of a *sangam* where the leaders would ensure that formal agreements were made between the dancers and the village leaders or hosting parties.

### “ON AGREEMENT” CONTRACT

Another form of agreement or arrangement is when young dancers go “on advance” or “on agreement” with older dancers, typically for a period between six months to a year. In such cases, the younger dancers will receive a lumpsum advance that varies considerably from Rs. 20,000 - 50,000 for six months and Rs. 1 - 2 lakhs for a year. For each subsequent performance, the dancer will be paid only half the regular rate, for example 1500 instead of 3000, and they cannot dance with any other troupe during this period. If the older dancer learns that they have danced with another troupe, the older dancer can then demand the original payment back along with interest.

The dancers we interviewed unanimously stated that “going on advance” was not desirable since it constrained your autonomy and reduced your income. As one dancer explained:

“*That arrangement is only beneficial for the agent. If we take that Rs. 1 lakh from them, then you are bound to them. If they say sit, you sit, if they say stand, you stand. Then we go like that and if there is Rs. 2000, you only get Rs. 1000 back. They take you for 5-10 years and then you can’t do anything.*”

Still, women do go on agreement out of financial necessity. The lumpsum amount might help them in a crisis, and unlike a loan from a local moneylender with exorbitant interest rates, this amount is interest-free. The older dancer in turn would have borrowed the advance amount from elsewhere and will use the commission from each performance as a way to service that loan, while making a modest profit alongside. At least two of the older female dancers we met, both in mid-to-late-30s, had had other women on advance. Another dancer shared an example of an agreement from when she had gone on advance in her twenties. Figure 4 (p.20) is an example of a contract drawn up when a dancer agreed to go on agreement between February and October 2017. It would seem that generally younger women enter into agreements with older women who hire them.

Figure 4 (p.20) is an example of a contract drawn up when a dancer agreed to go on agreement between February and October 2017.



Dancer 1 Name and Address

Notary Public Name and Address

Karagattam Contract Document

The 24<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2017

On the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Masi, from Siva Rathiri in Tiruchandur district Kulasekarapattinam, until the Dusshera of Mutharamman, the agreement made regarding dancing Karagattam is as follows:

[Dancer 1] wife of [husband's name] of [place] has agreed to dance Karagattam with [Dancer 2] and has received an advance of Rs. 20,000 (Rupees Twenty Thousand) as munpanam (advance).

For dancing a single Karagattam occasion, [Dancer 2] will have to give [Dancer 1] Rs. 2300 (Rupees Two Thousand Three Hundred).

For the Karagattam work given by [Dancer 2], if [Dancer 1] fails to come even once, she is subject to the decisions made by [Dancer 2].

Both parties sincerely commit to this agreement.

Figure 4: Example of contract.

## SEXUAL STIGMA AROUND CONTRACTS

There is a sexual stigma attached to women who go on “agreement”, not unlike the sexual stigma attached more generally to women taking loans or being in debt. Some women did not want to share images of agreements they had drawn up because of this stigma and because they did not want their families to know that they danced.

There is also a stigma attached to taking on younger dancers “on agreement”. When we were chatting with a family of dancers in Periyakulam, the women hurriedly said, “most of the agent women are in the [neighbouring districts] of Thanjavur and Dindigul, not here”. They also associated Thanjavur with *devadasis*, which is a matter of great shame. In Kariapatti, when the issue of agreements came up in conversation with a family of dancers, they said *“No, there is nothing like that here, because we won’t allow our girls to go outside.”* A senior dancer one of us met in Madurai emphasised that as a matter of ethics, he would not take girls on “agreement”. One dancer who eventually shared a copy of such an agreement with us said that some women refused to share it because of the shame attached to it. She added that if it became known that a woman was a dancer on agreement, she might then have difficulty getting married. When one of us asked an activist leader whether there was stigma related to going “on agreement”, he said *“Naturally there is! If she is a decent girl, then there won’t be a problem, but if her character is not right...”*

The sexual stigma overlapped with a general stigma around debt and dependency associated with dancers and their relationships with outsiders. Indeed, as some scholars have shown, the “loss of face” associated with being in debt or depending on patrons of a higher caste is widespread in Tamil Nadu, particularly among women (see Guérin and Kumar, 2020; Guérin, Kumar, and Venkatasubramanian, 2023). If the dancers needed to cancel a performance because of an adverse event such as a death, they sometimes would not seek help or assistance from their regular patrons or others in their village community because of this loss of face. It also leads them to prefer informal lending, which gives them a certain degree of independence.



It is worth examining the link between debt, going on agreement, and sexual stigma more closely. This stigma is rooted in a much more fundamental patriarchal practice of “pledging” or giving as surety a women’s chastity for some other economic or gift transaction. The most widespread form of such an economic transaction is heterosexual marriage and the kinship networks that are reliant on it, which takes women’s chastity and reproductive capacity as a form of collateral.

The connection between dancers’ labour agreements, kinship patterns, and women’s sexuality was illustrated in the case of one of our interlocutors. M is a woman in her early 40s who has an extraordinary repertoire of artistic skills and talents: *karagattam*, which she learned from her aunt, *nadagam* (drama), *adal padal*, street theatre for government awareness programs, and “stunts” for entertainment events, such as dancing with fire pots on her head. Her father was the youngest of his siblings and deferred in most financial matters to his older brother, M’s paternal uncle, or *periappa*. She told us that when she was 16, her father gave her on “*othi*” to her uncle for the paltry amount of Rs. 3000, and she danced for him for three years. She described the period as highly oppressive, stating:

“ I had to do everything my uncle wanted me to do. I was sent for continuous dance performances every day. I only earned Rs. 600 per performance. Even if there was no temple festival, I was sent to dance for death rituals and whatever I earned, 80% of the earnings were taken away by him. If I had any extra, I gave it to my mother to help run the family. My father didn’t take any responsibility of the family. He always favoured my uncle’s children.”

M used the term “*othi*” which is generally used in the context of rentals and property to describe a long-term lease against a one-time lumpsum advance paid by the tenant. M also sets her labour within the context of a web of affective ties — her father feeling obligated to her uncle, her mother being left uncared for, her father indulging her cousins while leaving her to work — demonstrating the ways that kinship structures create a division of labour. While sectors such as this one are often described as “informal economies”, kinship and caste practices are highly structured, with each kinship role coming attached with certain obligations attached. These then provide certain patterns and structure to this labour market, formalising it in some sense.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Outsiders we spoke to often expressed their belief that dancers were relatively well-off compared to other daily wage earners. For example, the *nattamai* (village leader) we interviewed, said “*the folk artists are not poor or anything, don’t be fooled. Why, they came to our event in a car! Rs. 5000 per event gives them Rs. 50,000 for the year. What expenses are they going to need beyond that, tell me?*” He added the Department of Arts and Culture provides several schemes for their benefit. If they are forced to take loans, it was a result of their lavish lifestyle: “*They drink, they smoke, many ladies do ‘all this’ [sex work] at functions. So, they are bound to be the same way at home also, no?*” The perception of dancers as wealthy is intertwined with critiques of them as vulgar, disreputable, illicit and reliant on “easy money” from selling sexual services.

In reality, every dancer we met was in a difficult financial position because of the impact of the pandemic, which completely wiped out their savings. But even beyond the extraordinary circumstances of COVID-19, the dance season only lasts about 3-5 months in the year, forcing dancers to heavily depend on informal loans for the remainder of the year. These loans are provided by local moneylenders who charge exorbitant rates of interest, which often means the dancer has to take a secondary loan from elsewhere to pay back the moneylender. Dancers continually juggle different loan payments to meet their expenses. The sources they rely on for moneylending

are mainly informal *kandhu vatti* loans, where *vatti* (interest) is charged on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. The interest rate tends to be high, between 10 - 20%, and strict penalties are imposed if payments are not made on time.

In a monthly *vatti* loan, for example, the lender keeps 15% of the total amount and lends out the remaining sum and collects 15% interest amount every month. However, these monthly interest payments do not make a dent in the principal that is due, which means the borrower can repay the borrowed amount multiple times, without actually discharging the loan. Weekly and daily *vatti* loans are easier to pay off but can only be taken for smaller amounts. With a weekly or daily loan schedule, the lender keeps 15% of the amount and lends the rest. The borrower then pays it off weekly over ten weeks, or daily over 100 days. One dancer told us that “*daily seetu*” (daily sheet) loans were best for those with daily wage jobs.

Another common loan option is to pawn jewellery and take a loan at a reduced rate of 3-5% interest against the jewellery. Some interviewees mentioned there was also the option of self-help groups and local cooperatives based on caste or community ties. Most dancers do not use formal banks or microfinance institutions. In terms of amounts borrowed, people would borrow between Rs. 500 to Rs. 10,000 for living expenses and a higher amount of Rs. 40,000 to Rs. 50,000 for special occasions such as a marriage in the family. People may also take loans for *seimurai*, or in order to give gifts at ritual functions hosted by others in the family or community.

Although *vatti* loans have exorbitantly high interest rates (and indeed are deemed illegal under the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Charging Exorbitant Interest Act (2003)), most dancers favoured them because they lacked the government identity documents and time needed to apply for formal bank loans. Informal moneylenders are also more convenient as they visit the home directly for daily collections and are flexible, that is, they will return the next day if needed. On several occasions, we could hear dancers talking on the phone about a payment that was due that day.

Respondents, even within the dancer community, often said that there was “no culture of saving amongst dancers” and that some dancers spent money on drinking and living lavishly. Two dancers mentioned that a *santha*, or subscription-based collective, had been created with community members from the same area or caste making monthly donations, which at the time of need, one person could borrow from at low interest rates. However, the collective fell through because a few people were untrustworthy and fell victim to “drinks and *ganja*”.

The social stigma associated with debt also plays a role in where people go for credit. Dancers avoided taking loans from extended family members, friends, or acquaintances because of the “loss of face”. If she is unable to pay regularly, moneylenders also often loudly berate a woman and speculate about her moral and sexual character, if she is unable to pay regularly. In the large joint family that we met in Kallikudi, the men immediately said, “*we never take vatti loans, being a family we are able to manage it between ourselves*”.

If women were separated from their husbands or widowed, then they had the added financial burden of providing for their children and elderly parents on their own. Most of them did not want their children to take up this profession and wanted their daughters to get educated. But interviews with dancers’ families revealed that even when the daughters are educated, the stigma of being called an *attakari* (dancing girl) did not go away for them. Some of the poorer dancers were forced to take their daughters out of school and involve them in dance as younger women earn the most among dancers, with the growing demand for young *karagattam* dancers.

Most *karagattam* dancers did not grow up with any family property or wealth and lived on rent. Their foremost demands were gaining access to government housing schemes and owning their own home. Amongst *karagattam* dancers we met, a *thirunangai* woman was the only person who succeeded in obtaining a house, doing so through

schemes meant for transgender women. In Madurai, members of the Tamil Nadu State Association of Rural Folk Artists Federation (registered as a Trade Union by Mr. Somasundaram) have been advocating for homes to be allocated specifically to folk dancers in the new slum clearance board housing. So far, they have successfully claimed 36 houses, but some of these dancers have not been able to afford the necessary down payment.

However, the link between caste, wealth, and dance is not wholly straightforward. We met one family of comparatively wealthy dancers, in which the matriarch had grown up in a Thevar family but married a male dancer from the Paraiyar (Scheduled Caste) community, which changed her caste status. But, even after his death, she had a large house equipped with various modern amenities, while her daughters were all educated with several having college degrees. The family had been dancers for two generations, before which they had been a wealthy agricultural family. Her granddaughters complained of difficulty getting other jobs because even with their education, the stigma of being an *attakkari* (dancing girl) still affected them.

The periods of lockdown during the pandemic were especially difficult for dancers, most of who were forced to take up other jobs such as auto-driving, selling brooms and other small goods, selling vegetables, tailoring, construction work, whitewashing, domestic work, and cleaning work. They said, at times, it was difficult to find other work because of their lack of training, the stigma of being a dancer, or the exhaustion and bodily wear and tear that came with their profession. Furthermore, employers were aware that they would only work during the off-season and were hesitant to rely on them full-time.

## SEXUAL STIGMA

On the very first day we met the dancers in Periyakulam, we saw the kind of stigma attached to women in this art form. We had made our way to the street and saw some women seated outside one of the homes that had a sign featuring dancers. We told the women that we were there to learn about this dance form and the experience of dancers, and they gestured to the house we had just passed. We asked if they danced themselves and they all burst into mock outrage: *"No no! Not us, we only go for coolie work, ma. You don't want to do that kind of dance: people think it is very obscene! Yes, all these people are here but we don't mingle with them, they are not like us at all. They dress like that, showing everything"*. One woman indicated her thighs and said *"They wear short dresses like this, no? We don't like that"*. Another said, *"You know how all of us have one husband and we are just with him?"* She held up her thali as if for proof. *"Well, they have four, ten, even!"* They were saying there was something illicit about the dancers' relationship with their partners and they used the word *purusan* (husband) somewhat ironically.

It is interesting that even though all the female dancers we met were, or had been, married, they were portrayed as the antithesis of wives just by virtue of being dancers. Most female dancers were married to other dancers, but many male dancers had married women outside the dance field. If women married a non-dancer, he often would want them to stop dancing. A few women who were widows or abandoned by their husbands complained about how the married women were more respected. At the same time, however, when they were married, their husbands were often violent or jealous during the marriage.

The stigma of this dance form only applied to female dancers, while the male dancers helped perpetuate the stigma. When we asked one activist if it was possible to bring in protections against sexual harassment for the women, he said that the women brought it on themselves. This attitude was typical among male interviewees. Many non-dancer men also hinted that the women earned a huge amount of money from the "second work" (sex work) they did and that there was no need to pity them.

The women in the *karagattam* sector all complained about the disrespect and shame they faced, which made

it difficult to find suitors for their daughters sometimes and caused their husbands and sons to complain. The women had to balance this stigma against dancing in a way that befitted the form, pleased the audiences, and earned enough money to support their families. They navigated these opposing demands by drawing a distinction between “neat, decent” dancing and “glamour” dancing and distancing themselves from the latter. The terms of this distinction are contested continually by different stakeholders in the dance field, and it is in these contestations that the politics of this field unfolds.

The male dancers did not experience sexual stigma themselves, but were all too aware of how it affected “their” women. For example, our information sheet for the project mentioned sex work as one of the sectors we were studying, and we took pains to emphasise to dancers that we were studying sex workers as a separate group from them. Still, one young male family member took great offense at this and told his female cousins and aunt to stop talking immediately, “you don’t understand this term, you don’t understand what they are asking.” Other men suggested that drunkenness and sexual violence, among other issues, happened elsewhere but not in their own communities. Several men and women used the word “adjustment” to indicate sexual favours, a word we found used among non-dancer women involved in sex work and which other researchers have heard amongst Tamil women in a variety of sectors when they speak about debt and sexual favours (Guérin and Kumar, 2020). When we spoke to women on their own, they were much franker about both sexual stigma and sex work. While they denied doing sex work themselves, they readily acknowledged that some women did do sex work, that male parties expected it at times, and that for those willing, it was a way to earn and support their families.

Older female dancers struggled with the growing preference for younger women, with the assumption of sexual availability. “We don’t do such things or know how much they earn,” they said. They complained that they were dismissed as old “aunties” and paid half the amount of money compared to girls in their twenties. The preference for younger women is a powerful force that motivates families to send their daughters into dance. As one dancer explained frankly,

“ We need to earn and there is a huge demand for young girls and that is one reason my daughter also opted to discontinue school and go for dance. This happens in entire villages. So, then it is portrayed as a traditional occupation where women are sent to dance, but in fact the demand for women fuels it.”

Dancers of *adal padal*, *karagattam*, and other folk arts all deflected accusations of glamour and blamed it on either individual women’s character or an entire dance form.

## MIGRANTS

Most performances, whether government programs or temple festivals, occur outside the dancers’ hometowns, and it is common to travel to other districts and to remote rural areas for performances. There was a very large celebration of *Dussehra* each October in Thoothukkudi district, which featured a huge number of folk artists from all over the state. On occasion, dancers also cross state or national borders. There are some large annual religious events such as the *Dussehra* celebrations in Mumbai, which some dancers we interviewed had attended, in the same way they would go for temple festivals. Government programs offer another opportunity to travel, and many dancers had travelled to Delhi for Republic Day celebrations. Some dancers had also travelled abroad, to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, where they were either taken by government agencies or invited by the Tamil *sangams* there to perform *karagattam* as a symbol of ethnic Tamil identity. These programs are generally arranged by agents, who take a significant amount of the total payment. Dancers also reported that when they crossed national borders, the agents often kept their passports until it was time to leave the country.

While in the case of *adal padal* and stage dance, there is a clear seasonal migration of dancers from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala to Tamil Nadu, there are not many out-of-state migrants involved in *karagattam*. One exception was a Scheduled Caste community who had their roots in the Tamil Marathi community, spoke a Marathi dialect with one another, and were historically involved in specific folk arts such as leather puppetry and *poikkal kuthirai attam* (false-horse dancing). They were clustered in a village called Kallikudi near Madurai and appeared to be the poorest among all the *karagattam* dancers we met.

## GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

Since 2019, the Tamil Nadu government has offered a robust set of schemes for folk artists registered with the Tamil Nadu Folk Artistes Welfare Board (Department of Art and Culture, 2024a). These include Rs. 5000 to assist with either the folk artist or their children's marriage expenses; assistance for the education of their children from class X up to postgraduate level and select professional courses; Rs. 6000 towards delivery of children; and Rs.3000 for hospital expenses in the case of miscarriage or termination of pregnancy (Department of Art and Culture, 2024b). Each of these can be claimed a maximum of two times and the artist must have their membership properly renewed well as the necessary documentation for each scheme to be able to avail the same. The government also offers Rs.1500 for purchase of spectacles once every three years. Finally, in the case of death of the folk artist due to natural causes, the government offers Rs. 20,000 for family assistance along with Rs. 5000 for funeral expenses, and if the death is accidental, the government offers Rs. 1 lakh in financial assistance to the artist's nominee.

The Tamil Nadu government states 50,882 folk artistes are currently members of the Board, but only 9,011 eligible folk artistes have accessed the various welfare schemes (Department of Art and Culture, 2024a). Similarly, the Tamil Nadu government also offers Rs. 2000 to individual folk artistes and Rs.6000 to cultural troupes for the purchase of musical instruments and costumes, itself notes that only 1585 folk artistes and 307 folk troupes benefited under this scheme (Department of Art and Culture, 2024d). The biggest hurdle the dancers faced in accessing these schemes was a lack of awareness, as well as difficulty acquiring government documents. Registration with the Board requires filling an application form and supplying proof of residence, age, and family members; the Village Administrative Officer's certificate as a proof of artiste; and photos taken during a performance (Department of Art and Culture, 2024a). Most dancers said that even when they did know of these schemes, they were only able to apply with the help of middlemen who often turned out to be untrustworthy. Visiting a government office also took an entire day along with expenses for travel and food. Most respondents felt that it was only through connections and favouritism that some were able to access these schemes. Lastly, the Folk Artistes Welfare Board ID card needs to be renewed every two years (Department of Art and Culture, 2024a), and with the backlog of renewal requests, an artist might have to wait over a year for the renewal to actually go through.

We interviewed a government official at the social welfare department in Madurai who agreed that lack of awareness, complexity of procedures, and presence of middlemen were all obstacles preventing dancers from accessing benefits they are eligible for. However, she highlighted that dancers should still avail of schemes for the general population. For example, any family with an income certificate of less than Rs.72,000 is classified as below poverty line (BPL) and is eligible for several schemes offering assisting with marriage, education, and raising children. Widows and vulnerable women are also independently eligible for livelihood schemes. Mr. Somasundaram, head of the Tamil Nadu State Association of Rural Folk Artists Federation (registered as a trade union), acknowledged the existence of these schemes but complained that even obtaining a yearly income certificate could take over a year because of backlogs. So, it remains uncertain whether these schemes are, in fact, more accessible in practice.



# ADAL PADAL

## HISTORY OF THE FORM

*Adal padal* is also referred to as “disco dance” or “record dance”. In the past, it was known as “cassette dance”. The formal elements of the dance are quite different from *karagattam*. While *karagattam* performances are performed on the floor along with a band, *adal padal* takes place on a stage with only pre-recorded music and a special light set-up. In its current form, *adal padal* does not include a live band. *Adal padal* takes its cue from cinema, “light music”, and theatre traditions, with the performances involving girls and backup dancers dancing to film songs, often performing with some lookalike movie stars who are simply referred to as “artists”. There are also “variety” artists who might do stunts involving fire or snakes among others. Diamond (1999, p. 46) wrote that in the late 1990s in Madurai, the term “disco dance” referred to a kind of group dance based on Tamil film dances and often performed by non-professionals or boys in the village. It would appear that the form has become more professionalised now and is a distinct form called *adal padal*. The terms *adal padal*, record dance, and disco dance are also used to varying degrees depending on the region and district in Tamil Nadu.

All our informants described *karagattam* and *adal padal* as mutually exclusive, and even opposing, dance forms. Most informants from outside the *adal padal* field characterised the difference between *adal padal* and *karagattam* in these terms: the former is modern, English, Western, commercial, obscene, with moneyed performers whereas the latter is traditional, historically Tamil, devotional, decorous, folk, with the dancers living in poverty. However, the *adal padal* dancers themselves offered more complex histories of the form.

Some artists traced the genealogy of *adal padal* to dance forms that were labelled as “folk”. Several dancers told us that *adal padal* has its roots in the *nadagam* performance tradition (stage drama), where dancers were brought in between segments to keep the audience interested. Another origin story shared was that *adal padal* had its roots in *therukoothu* or street theatre, performed by traveling troupes at village festivals. These troupes would dance to film songs on a street which had perhaps 150 families residing in the area and then go from house to house collecting donations.

Some artists traced the history of *adal padal* through a nationalist history of cinema in Tamil Nadu, with one *sangam* leader located the origin in a moment in 1950s Tamil cinema, where films promoted nationalist values and incorporated elements of “folk” performance. The emergence of “item numbers” in cinema led to the deterioration of the original dance form. Many others, including a *sangam* leader in Madurai, suggested that the current form of *adal padal* emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with the cult-like craze around, popularity and mass appeal of movie stars such as MGR, Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth. The cultural and historical narratives around *adal padal* are a powerful testament to the historical overlaps and continuities between cinema fandom, religious devotion, and

political charisma, all of which are distinctive features of Tamil Nadu's cultural landscape.

In contrast to these divergences, artists were generally in agreement that the practice of *adal padal* troupes performing for pay at public events onstage was started in the 1980s by college troupes of male dancers. The current Abhinaya group was one of the first of such troupes, originally known as "Abhinaya Negro Boys" in Madurai and remains the oldest *adal padal* team in Tamil Nadu. The group gradually split into smaller teams, with similar teams then forming and taking shape in other districts. Based on insights from most artists, it is likely that only men danced on stage until about twenty years ago, sometimes even dancing in women's outfits. It was much later that women entered the art form to give "company" to the male stars.

The sharp distinction drawn between *adal padal* and *karagattam* has intensified in the past decade, with marked distinction in the legal and state orientation towards each form, evidenced by the language of the High Court and the Department of Arts and Culture when discussing these art forms. *Karagattam* is recognised formally as a "folk art" and a symbol of Tamil identity, and artists are eligible for the Folk Artistes Welfare Board membership and can access government schemes. On the other hand, *adal padal* has become increasingly policed and stigmatised in the past decade. There has also been an influx of migrant dancers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh who have changed the composition of artists performing the *adal padal* dance, which impacts its perception as well.

There is therefore much at stake in claiming a connection with one of these dance forms compared to the other, with such assessments generally having a political angle. All four of the *adal padal sangam* leaders we interviewed tried to establish their connections with *karagattam* and other folk arts, working to expand their membership by including folk artists and sometimes changing the name of the *sangam* as well. The Madurai *sangam* leader also tried to help *adal padal* artists access the Folk Artist Welfare Board ID cards by providing training in some folk art and then holding a function where photographs could be taken, to serve as evidence in support of such an application.

Despite the claimed differences, there were evidently many overlaps and continuities between both forms as well. For one, if needed, many artists were flexible enough to dance in both forms. This is also because dancers can pick up *adal padal* moves quite easily, in contrast to *karagattam* where they must train for a long time to be able to balance the *karagam* on their heads. One of the dancers in Coimbatore said that he would perform the buffoon role when he was in his hometown but did *adal padal* roles when in Coimbatore. Depending on the role and the performance he may need to speak double-meaning dialogues sometimes. One female artist performed *karagattam* on stage at government programs and variety acts, and so she was more involved in the *adal padal* networks than the *karagattam* ones.

When we asked dancers to introduce us to a folk dancer or an *adal padal* dancer, they would often take us to the house of an artist who performed other art forms as well, such as drama (*nadagam*). Our main contact in Madurai was trained in *adal padal*, theatre, *karagattam*, comedy shows, "orchestra" (involving both song and dance, more common in Karnataka) as well as "stunt" performances. She juggled performing these varied art forms and also arranged for dancers for other performances as a way of maximising her income. While the performance time for *adal padal* is described as far shorter than *karagattam*, she said that her programs would last around 5-6 hours. A single program organised by an *adal padal* troupe often involves a variety of acts, including some marked clearly as "folk" or "classical", some that involved "normal dance", others involving "glamour", and sometimes a variety act.

A performance could be attributed as *adal padal* after the fact, if someone feels the performance was lewd or related to sex work. For example, when we asked one *karagattam* artist about *adal padal* she inadvertently mixed references to both *karagattam* and *adal padal* in her answer. She drew a genealogy that connected them both, with a pure "folk" tradition becoming increasingly "westernised" and then changing into something like *adal padal*. After

one *karagattam* performance, the contact who was traveling with us in the car going home asked to see “that video of the *adal padal* again”. Our Madurai contact saw the video and said quickly, “Oh no, this is not *karagattam*, this is *adal padal*”, commenting on the cinema songs and the sexy moves by the dancers. The large family of village artists we met, who performed a variety of forms from *karagattam* to *oyilattam*, *mayilattam* and leather-puppetry, referred to what they did as “*gramiya adal padal*” or “*village adal padal*”. Indeed, when the *nattamai* we interviewed showed us a Court Order he received with permission to conduct a *karagattam* performance, the Order said “*adal padal*” and not *karagattam*. Similarly, one dancer told us about an upcoming performance she was doing with her daughter and some other young female dancers, describing it as “folk”. However, when she showed us the video later, it seemed to have the elements of “*adal padal*” or disco instead.

In stark contrast to this fluidity, there were artists who stated that they only did *gramiya kalai* (folk arts) such as *karagattam* or singing and had never performed in an *adal padal* show. Due to difficulties of conducting participant observation due to the pandemic, it was difficult to corroborate this statement in any way. It is possible that these artists wanted to distance themselves from the stigma of the form and instead align with the respectability associated with a “folk art”, particularly when speaking to researchers.

Artists in both dance forms can gain access to opportunities in the cinema, albeit in different ways. *Adal padal* dancers sometimes become backup dancers for films. Some even manage to get into acting either in serials or as comedians in films. *Karagattam* dancers are recruited less often into cinema, but other “folk” artists, especially singers, have appeared in several Tamil films. *Adal padal* dancers are also more likely to have opportunities to travel abroad to Dubai, Singapore, and other destinations for bar dancing. *Karagattam* dancers, if they travel at all, do so mostly for government programs or cultural showcases.

## ELEMENTS OF THE FORM

*Adal padal* is also called “disco dance”, “record dance”, or “cassette dance.” One *sangam* leader lamented the fact that *adal padal* as a term has become associated with obscenity and vulgarity. He said that his term of choice was *Thiraippada Nadana Nattiya Palsuvai Kalai Nigalchi* (Film, Dance, Drama Variety Art Program), since “*adal padal* is just dance and song, but this has varieties.”

The formal elements of *adal padal*, disco dance, record dance, and film-dance-drama-variety program (as the *sangam* leader calls it) are quite different from *karagattam*. Unlike *karagattam* performances which are performed on the floor, *adal padal* takes place on a stage, with only pre-recorded music along with a special audio and light set-up. Previous iterations possibly included elements of “orchestra” and “light music” in which singers sing film songs to the accompaniment of a small band, which is still popular in parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. However, in its current form, *adal padal* does not include a band. Until around five or six years ago, *karagattam* performances would go on from 10 pm till 4 or 5 am, whereas *adal padal* performances didn’t normally last beyond three hours. *Adal padal* takes its cue from cinema, “light music”, and theatre traditions. The performances feature girls dancing to film songs along with backup dancers, some lookalike movie stars referred to as “artists” as well as “variety” artists who might do stunts with fire or snakes.

*Karagattam* might in fact be performed as one of the variety acts in an *adal padal* program, removed from its temple context. One *sangam* leader referred to this as “public *karagam*” or “entertainment *karagam*.” The inclusion of *karagattam* as a token idiosyncratic item in the set reveals how it serves as a shorthand for “folk Tamil culture”, intended to offer a deliberate counterpoint to the more “filmy” cinema dancing. The costumes in *adal padal* performances are modelled on those from films, and women might dress in the costumes appropriate to the song. Women often wear a full-length bodysuit underneath (called a skin-dress), with a mid-length skirt and short sequin

blouse over it. Since 2007, costumes in some performances have become very short and revealing, gaining the notorious character of “glamour”, which eventually led to the gradual increase of conditions and police scrutiny after 2012.

## SIZE OF THE SECTOR

It is difficult to estimate the scope of the sector since *adal padal* dancers participate in many kinds of stage performances and are not registered with any government body. Numbers reported by stage artist associations vary wildly. Spokespersons from dancer associations cited in Outlook magazine last year suggested that there were 2000 troupes across the state, with up to 1 lakh dancers and “support staff” (Sharma, 2020). The Tamil Nadu Film and Stage Dancer Welfare Association claim a membership of 2 lakhs (*The Hindu*, 2016), and the leader of the South Indian Film Stage Dancers and Stage Actors Welfare Association in a letter to the Chief Minister in the wake of COVID claimed that there were 3 lakhs dancers in the state. We spoke to the secretary of the Tamil Cultural Stage Dancers Welfare Association (*Tamil Panpaatu Medai Nadana Kalaigargal Munnetra Sangam*) who instead suggests that there are 1000 – 2000 dancers in a district and about 60,000 dancers across the state. Indeed, while dancers are keen for their large numbers to be represented, with the dance form neither officially defined nor recognised, it remains difficult to estimate with any accuracy.

Most of the female dancers we interviewed were between 30 and 40 years old, while the men were generally between 30 and 50 years old. There is a general preference for younger female dancers. While some of the women we interviewed said it was a matter of makeup, experience, and skill; most of those we spoke to were out of work at the time, partly due to COVID-19 lockdowns but also because they were no longer in high demand after the age of 30, particularly with the influx of younger dancers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. We travelled to Bengaluru and tried to contact younger dancers there but they proved difficult to reach as they were occupied with back-to-back performances. It became clear that women dancers past their mid-30s often rely more on other kinds of work or switch to organising performances. However, men are able to stay in the field for much longer.

## POLITICAL ECONOMY

### OCCASIONS FOR PERFORMANCE

*Adal padal* is performed at varied occasions including temple festivals and political rallies. Increasingly performances happen at private functions, weddings, and other events where “welcome girls” are needed. There are also what dancers call “cottage events”, where they may be invited to perform at a hotel or cottage by a group of private patrons which would involve erotic, flashy dancing alongside sexual favours to patrons. One *sangam* leader mentioned conducting a ticketed event for the television manufacturing company BPL, who were in turn raising funds for charity. These kinds of events do not earn much money but can bring fame to the dance group.

As with *karagattam*, *adal padal* performances mostly take place during the temple festival season, between January and May each year. Dancers said that before COVID-19, they had between 15 to 30 performances each month during the festival season, sometimes having more than one in a single day. In the Dussehra celebrations in Tiruchendur, it is common for dancers to perform several short dance segments on the ground at the homes of different patrons, or in each village, before moving to the next one. On the very last day, sometimes there is a stage performance, referred to as “disco dance”. For the rest of the year, dancers generally survived on their savings, taking on loans, and often doing other kinds of work.



## AGENTS

Dancers had great disdain for “agents”, characterising them as opportunistic interlopers with no experience of dance at all. Many interviewees said that an agent might start their career by getting involved with organising events, as the “audio boy” or as the person carrying the costumes. By networking, they would then connect with powerful people in the town and offer to arrange the next performance for them and thus inserting themselves as brokers. One dancer referred to “agents” scornfully as “finance people”, the same people who gave out informal loans for *vatti* (exorbitant interest). He said that they kept up to 20% of the total amount for themselves, regularly paid dancers less than the promised amount, and organised shoddy performances relying more on “glamour” and sexy women than on true dance skill.

Some interviewees used the term “agent” to refer to organisers who hosted 10-15 women from Bengaluru in a flat at a time for about ten days to a month, sending them for performances, and paying them a regular rate while taking a cut. Women in Bengaluru seem to prefer this arrangement as the payments are better in Tamil Nadu. However, dancers in Tamil Nadu have a low view of these arrangements, seeing it as an example of agents, opportunists, migrants, and “vulgar women” all collaborating to jeopardise the livelihood of Tamil dancers.

The Coimbatore *sangam* members speculated that Bengaluru girls were part of an entire political-corporate nexus, wherein wealthy men and politicians from surrounding areas with large mansions and businesses, would bring 30-40 girls at a time to stay in their mansions under CCTV surveillance and send them out for sex work. They said that these men were powerful because they had both *panam* (money) and *ponnu* (girls), both of which were key to power in Tamil Nadu. They complained that these men were not dancers but were just pimps, who would pocket a large proportion of the girls’ income as well. The Coimbatore *sangam* leader hinted darkly at who one of such men was, all but saying the name. He said that this system formed an entire underground mafia, where girls go for “adjustment”, which is “glorified prostitution”.

The dancers thus pointed to two types of brokers who were ruining the profession: on the one hand, the callow and opportunistic “audio boys” trying to make a quick buck, and on the other, the crorepati politician-industrialists who pimped out forty girls at a time. In the middle, they positioned themselves as artists from humble backgrounds trying to eke out a living. However, it is also important to note that dancers and troupe leaders levelled these accusations against one another as well. For example, some leaders we interviewed described their own journey of falling in love with dance and then entering the field. However, others would denigrate them claiming “that fellow is not a dancer at all, just a money-maker.” But we also saw dancers themselves on phone calls arranging performances and recruiting dancers for the same. It appears that many dancers also play an organising role. Further research on agents, finance people, and other emerging players in the field would be beneficial to elucidating some of these complexities.

## COST BREAKDOWN

One of the *sangam* leaders told us that in the mid-1980s, the men would only get paid Rs. 50, the women a bit more, and the artists and singers would earn Rs. 1000. However, the importance given to these different elements has changed over the years. Then, as now, performances would last about 3 hours.

Costs vary widely based on region, the budget of the village organisers, the kind of girls hired, and the variety of acts involved. While Rs. 60-70,000 was the lowest rate, we were told that there were some parties in Erode and Salem who paid up to 7 lakhs or 10 lakhs for a performance. These grand performances generally happen in remote rural areas. Festivals are an opportunity for sponsors such as MLAs, village leaders, and caste leaders to garner

social capital by outdoing each other based on the cost of the festival, some parties go as high as 10 lakhs. In Coimbatore, the dancers told one of us, the performances didn't go over 2 lakhs and usually tended to be around 50,000.

The Coimbatore dancers told one of us that a performance costing 50,000 gets split up as below, not including travel. The organisers do not take much home:

- Per girl: Rs. 2500\*3 = 7500
- Per group boy: Rs. 1000\*10 = 10,000
- Movie star lookalike artists: Rs. 2000\*3 = 6000
- Varieties: Rs. 3500\* 2 = 7000
- Stage and audio: Rs. 20,000

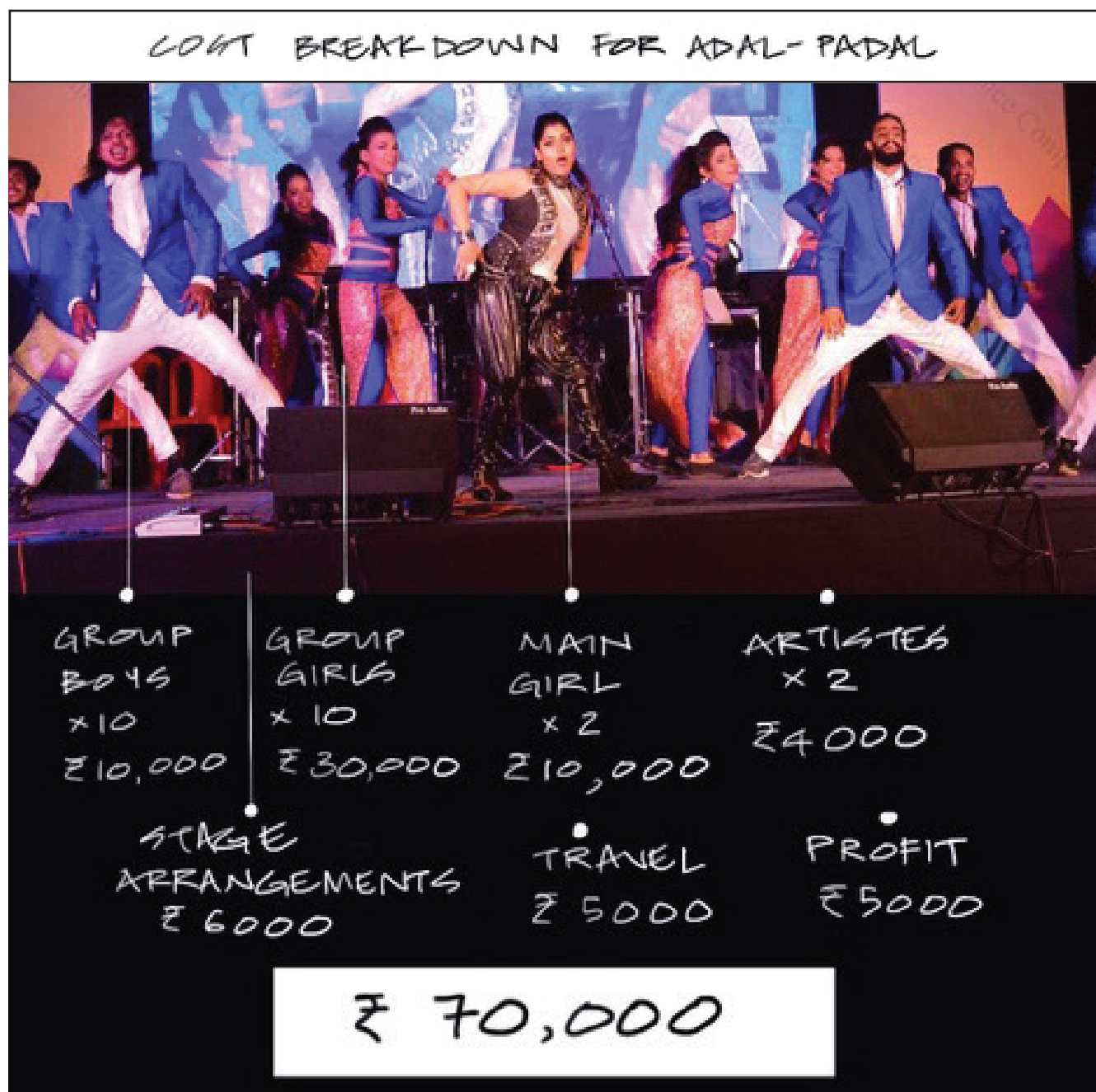
"Variety" artists get paid more, because they do special acts and can only appear once as the village is unlikely to want the same variety act in the following year's performance. Women, on the other hand, are more flexible with performances.

Artists in Madurai said a performance with ten girls amounting to a total cost of Rs. 60-70,000 looks something like this:

- Per girl: Rs. 3000\*10 = 30,000
- Per group boy: Rs. 1000\*10 = 10,000
- Lights and set etc: Rs. 6000
- Movie star lookalike artists: Rs. 3000\*2 = 6000
- Extra for herself: 8000
- Travel: 5000
- Organisers are also responsible for costumes and makeup which are one-time costs.

At the higher end of the spectrum, a dancer in Salem said he charged a minimum of 1 lakh for a performance, which looked roughly like this:

- Audio, stage, lighting, background: 25,000
- 5 "artist" girls: 15,000
- 2 "variety" girls: 6000
- 1 "solo" girl: 3000
- 2 girls for couples-dancing: 6000
- Cinema style girl (sometimes paid for by village committee): 6000
- 10 boys: 7000
- 2 skilled dancer boys: 4000
- 4 artists: 8000
- Travel, food, as well as extra payment for the organiser



**Figure 5:** Cost breakdown, Infographic designed by Shakthi Nataraj.

He added that cinema-style girls, or those who were celebrities, were sometimes arranged separately by the “parties” and could be paid anywhere between Rs. 10,000 to 25,000.

While tips are rare, dancers generally took any questions about tips to be a euphemism for sexual favours. One dancer said that they had stopped the practice of pinning money to the dancer’s clothing, because they wanted to distance themselves from the perception of this as an invitation for sex as practised among *karagattam* dancers. Male artists who played the role of a film star did sometimes get tips from fans of the star in question.

## PROCEDURE FOR GETTING A PERFORMANCE

Dance troupe leaders generally get performances either through connections with villagers or sometimes through referrals from other dancers. While there are numerous dance troupes, the dancers move between such troupes

depending on the performance and are not bound to any particular team. They may even start their own troupe, if they wish to. Independent dancers might get opportunities when they are contacted by organisers, which makes it highly beneficial for them to have good relationships with organisers and their *sangam* leaders.

Many of the more established troupes have an office, while some also have a manager. The “parties” will meet them at the office, explain the elements of the performance they want, check the available dates, and discuss the payment and advance. Details of the performance discussed include the number of different artists and dancers they want as well as details of the songs and set design. Sometimes “parties” want to see pictures of the female dancers and choose the ones they would like to perform. In many cases, a written agreement is drawn up on the head dancer or the troupe’s letterhead. It is only once the date has been fixed in discussion with the troupe, that the organiser applies for permission from the police. In light of this, dancers remain in limbo until the permission comes through, which also often happens at the last moment. On rare occasions, it seems that dancers are told that the permission had been obtained when in fact it has not, because of which they may face police raids.

We met several senior or retired dancers who organised performances and earned a commission in return, referring to themselves as organisers. However, dancers referred to a separate category of agents sprinkled across the districts, who come from non-dancer backgrounds. We did not meet any non-dancer agents, but were told that they may keep over 50% of the amount discussed with the parties. The dancers are generally unaware of the amount that the agent pockets. Our preliminary conversations with migrant “glamour” dancers in Bengaluru suggest that there is more to learn about the distinctions between agents, brokers, organisers and team “owners”, and the relations between these stakeholders, which ought to be the subject of further research.

## CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS

Unlike with *karagattam*, we did not hear any dancers describe arrangements of going “on advance” or “on agreement” with a senior dancer for six months to a year. This was the arrangement that two *karagattam* dancers had called “*othi*”, a term used for a long-term lease arrangement on a house. One *adal padal* dancer said that the agreements and *othi* arrangements made in *karagattam* were very unfair to dancers and that he would never be involved in something like that. We also met a group of younger *adal padal* dancers in Madurai who were staying under the protection of an older woman. They told us that they were free to go for other performances if they wished, though we could not verify if that was true. On the whole, however, it does appear that dancers in this field operate more like free agents or freelancers compared to *karagattam* dancers who are more tightly organised by a combination of kinship, locality, and *sangams*. There is an overlap of roles between organisers, agents, troupe leaders, and *sangam* leaders, with seemingly many middlemen involved, and dancers themselves taking commissions when they refer other dancers for a performance.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

By and large, *adal padal* dancers appeared to be financially better-off compared to *karagattam* dancers, although there were variations among the former as well. The best-off informant we met was the organiser of one of the Madurai *adal padal sangams*, who was also an office-bearer in the DMK. Before the pandemic, he said, he had a monthly income of 1 lakh from multiple income streams, but it had reduced heavily due to COVID-19’s impact on businesses. In addition to organising performances through his troupe, he owned a marriage hall which he rented out for events, as well as a cycle shop that he co-owned with his brother. He said only a miniscule fraction of dancers were well-educated. He himself had only studied till the 9th standard and grew successful because of his entrepreneurial spirit. The dancers in their late 30s and 40s had children who were in school or college, but they



themselves did not have a college degree generally.

All the residences of dancers we visited were pukka houses, some of which were newly built. One of the female dancers had purchased a cent of land and financed the building of her house with her earnings from *adal padal* and dancing in Dubai, as well as support from a government scheme. She had received 1 lakh on loan from the panchayat under the *Namakku Namey Thittam* or the By Us, For Us Scheme (Government of Tamil Nadu Rural Development & Panchayati Raj Department, 2024).<sup>4</sup>

Almost all the dancers were or had been married, a few having married fellow dancers or organisers. Some of the dancers were single mothers supporting their children, while some had stopped dancing after marriage because their husbands would not permit it. But women who married a dancer often began dancing after the marriage. One dancer told us that about 80% of female dancers were, or had been, married, with 10% bringing their mothers to performances and the remaining 10% bringing a rotation of boyfriends.

Most dancers did other work as well, especially in the off-season. For the past two years, since their jobs were seriously affected by the pandemic, virtually all of them have turned to other work. These include tailoring, jewellery-making, painting and masonry, domestic work, driving auto rickshaws, running a cycle shop, having a food stall, organising other kinds of events such as marriages or private functions, conducting dance classes, cooking in a hotel, and coolie work. Many dancers said that the stigma of their profession at times led to poor treatment by others. One dancer who did some painting work said, *“employers don’t respect dancers, so they pay us 300 instead of 500”*.

## SEXUAL STIGMA

The stigma attached to the dance form generally and “glamour” dance in particular makes many female dancers wary of telling people that they are dancers. Most often, their sons ask them to stop dancing, and their husbands oppose them as well, even when their husbands are dancers themselves. One dancer said that she did not want her children to be in this line. She says that there used to be less stigma before, but now she only tells outsiders about her sewing and tailoring business and not about the dancing. At one point, her sons were so opposed to her going to Dubai to dance that they actually threatened to burn her passport. Her dancing also made young men see her as sexually available, which she found frustrating. She said,

“*Nowadays when these young college boys come to dance and size me up, I slap them and say, ‘Do you know I have sons your age?’*”

For the past fifteen years, the term “glamour” has increasingly been applied to *adal padal* performances. While artists have different definitions of “glamour”, it generally refers to an *adal padal* performance involving more women dancers than other artists, often dressed in two-piece clothing showing their midriff and cleavage, who dance very close to the men, frequently with a lot of touching. In contrast, “neat” dancing involves wearing a “skin dress” or bodysuit underneath and the performances do not involve “artists”. Dancers sometimes used the term “glamour” to loosely refer to a person’s clothing or a specific dancer’s moves and at other times it referred to an entire *sangam* or troupe. In general, the videos we were shown of “glamour” *adal padal* featured young women who were either posing or doing minimal dancing on stage, and instead doing a lot of touching, with male dancers and with each other. One male dancer said contemptuously of the “glamour girls”: “they just gyrate and twist about

<sup>4</sup> While there is a *Namakku Namey Thittam* offered by the Tamil Nadu government, it is meant for development of public infrastructure and not residential buildings, meaning it might have been an error by the dancer of specifying which scheme she availed herself of.

like a mountain snake and call that dancing.” One notorious glamour performance was a *Pattukkottai* performance where the dancers were under a shower and danced completely drenched to a film song that featured shower dancing.

Female dancers identified themselves as doing either “glamour”, “normal”, or “folk”, and sometimes identified with more than one of the categories. Dancers from Tamil Nadu dancers said that all glamour dancers come from the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, while some were also Hindi speakers. It is clear that a woman who agrees to do “glamour” is paid more, up to Rs. 5000-6000 per performance, as opposed to the usual Rs. 2500. But a chunk of this is still taken by agents and intermediaries, so it varies how much of this actually reaches the dancer.

Since we were not able to observe *adal padal* performances or see how artists made such assessments and accusations of “glamour”, it was not possible for us to identify the precise elements they categorise as such. Sarah Diamond (1999) wrote that in the late 1990s, the term “glamour” when applied to *karagattam* dancers was considered a form of praise and was even announced during performances to applaud the female dancers. It is possible that the “glamour” emerged as a shifting category of blame/degeneration/vulgarity in the past 10-15 years as a result of the High Court barring performances since 2012 (discussed in Chapter 4: The Regulation of Dancing, p. 39) and broader policing of *adal padal* performances.

“Glamour dancers” are in high demand and are generally not allied with any specific troupe, so it is generally brokers who bring them. A big part of their appeal is their youth, their perceived class status (many called them “rich girls”, saying their skin colour and grooming gave them away), and that they are outsiders exempt from the cultural policing of Tamil women by Tamil men. There is also the perception that their upbringing and socialisation makes them blasé about sexual contact or being seen in a sexual way, so they do not have the same hang ups about chastity, honour, and shame. Some men said that these girls don’t even feel it in the body when they are “touched up”. While the perception was that many of the girls were rich, it was paradoxically assumed that they entered the field either because of poverty or the breakup of their family and marital relationships, which was seen as a tragedy. Ultimately, a lot of ambivalent “othering” tropes were projected onto them that served to validate Tamil men’s sense of “Tamil culture”.

“Glamour” dancing is also associated with more law and order issues, one of the reasons for police apprehension at permitting performances. At these performances, there tends to be more alcohol, a primarily male audience, and the potential for caste-based tensions or power struggles to erupt between powerful men in the village leading to violence. When this happens, although the organisers are the ones who take the responsibility of abiding by the conditions laid down by the High Court or police, it is often the dancers who instead shoulder the blame. Some female dancers described instances where payments were refused after such incidents erupted or when they were taken to the police station, with one dancer stating that following a police raid, she had been remanded for 15 days and her *sangam* and troupe leaders did not offer any help.

Female dancers are also at the risk of harassment and sexual violence at these performances. While the men in the troupe, as well as the “owners” or brokers, often do their best to prevent such occurrences, we were told of an incident of a female dancer being gang-raped and murdered by men in the village. Several female dancers described occasions where men from the village, either young boys or older men from the village committee, tried to blackmail them into having sex and they had to use their wits to get out of the situation. Dancers have to continually deal with men staring at them or trying to touch them during the performance. Boys and men would harass them at the venue, peer into the dressing room, including climbing a tree to get a look inside. The men accompanying the dancers can only do so much to provide protection.

However, it also appears that some female dancers might exchange phone numbers with people at the village to liaise later for sex work or a relationship, which might happen after the performance as well. The troupe leader generally lets such dancers do whatever they want to after the performance. As one leader said, *"once we are finished, the payments have been distributed and we have left, what they do in their private time is none of our business."* The Coimbatore dancers said that women could earn a lot in this field, if they were willing to "adjust". Most dancers blamed migrant women for this growing practice of "adjustment".

One reason for people to take the trouble of organising glamour performances is the power and social influence it represents, garnering a lot of social capital for the sponsor. We met one political leader in Theni who took a lot of pride in his managing to organise the only glamour performance of the season in that area, boasting about how he had done it through his influence. Others in the area said it was wrong of him to do it, but grudgingly conceded that it was a sign of his power and influence. Glamour performances represent this kind of power partly because they are expensive, they are so difficult to get permission for, and they feature modern, aspirational, and beautiful girls on stage.

The women in *adal padal* dance face considerable stigma even from their fellow male dancers. One *sangam* leader in Madurai in an offhand manner said that the majority of women were unmarriageable and had come into the sector from broken families and in need of money.

“ They might first enter after seeing a performance, as fans or out of interest. Many come from broken marriages or relationships and needing money. They are not wives, they are not whores, but they [are something in between]. They are all runaway women and they don't get married, just live with one man after another. They give all their money to that man; he lives off their earnings. This is why they earn well in their prime but are left with no savings later. The husbands make a fuss about the women continuing to dance but they still want the earnings. Some men are able to live a stable life by marrying a woman who is not a dancer. But not so for women in the field. No marriage. Living together only.

The female dancers who overheard his statement were very angry and outraged at it and privately accused him of living off women dancers in the very way he had denigrated them.

One point the dancers repeatedly made when they were pushed to define glamour exactly, was that it was "real" touching as opposed to "fake" touching, and in public versus private spaces. One artist said that if glamour was performed in private, there were no issues; but in public, it wasn't appropriate. Yet another dancer put it more bluntly: *"they are doing in public what a husband and wife do in private"*. A male dancer in Coimbatore expressed it pithily: *"With a cine-actress, you desire her but you cannot touch her through the screen. There is a difference between performance and reality."*

The paradox is that, as in the case of any performer, art and life are intertwined. A woman who is seen as "touching", even when it is an act, is assumed to be changed in some way in her "real" life as well, with this ambiguity in the minds of the audience and dancers. The ambiguity between "real" touch and "fake" touch comes through in this quotation from a senior female dancer:

“ In the past, if there was a scene where we had to embrace the man, we would just be acting, and the audience also knew that. Their hand won't really touch us, and we would do it normally, neatly. Now, because of these girls from other states, it has become a big issue. They do it for real, and at the end of the day the audience will think it is real.

Note that both "earlier" and "now", the audience is meant to think it is real, even though the dancer herself knows the difference. At the same time, she somehow also felt that audiences were being corrupted in the present and

becoming difficult to control because they knew the touching was “for real”. The Assistant Commissioner of Police in Madurai similarly pointed to the ambiguity between “real” and “fake”:

“ *But women are dancing, and men do not know how to differentiate between the real woman and the woman who is dancing on the stage. They feel that if the woman is dancing like a film star, she is a film star and want to touch her or draw her attention. It is the issue with men and their perception of women.* ”

Just as with the opinion of the dancer, the line between reality and perception is blurred, and it is difficult to demarcate where “acting” ends and “glamour” begins.

One dancer said that glamour was inappropriate because it was happening during a temple festival, and eroticism was not compatible with devotion and worship. This point rarely held up, however, because in the very next breath the dancers would denounce *karagattam* for being even more vulgar than *adal padal* but allowed to proceed unhindered just because it was legitimised as a “traditional” form. As many scholars point out as well, Hindu worship has a long history of intertwining devotional and erotic themes, expressed not only in *karagattam* but in many other temple worship practices across the nation (Nag, 1995; Schwartz, 2004; Olson, 2007; Doniger, 2011). The simultaneous ambiguity and intolerance of the state towards “obscenity” means dancers struggle to draw the boundaries of where “glamour” begins and “decency” ends. Ultimately it is impossible for them to do so, because the state could object to any element of “cinema” dance as obscene or glamorous. The power of the term “glamour” comes from its ambiguity.

The dilemma for dancers is that many cinema songs (as well as *karagattam* segments, for that matter) contain bawdy and sexual themes as a feature of the form itself. It is a struggle to perform the spirit of the song while still ensuring that “glamour” is in check. The struggle is especially intense because the boundaries of what glamour are determined by male audience members and fellow male dancers, not by the women who are dancing.

As one of the senior female dancers explained,

“ *We have to do some karacchal (teasing), involve the audience in some way, otherwise it isn’t dance at all. For example, if they say maama (meaning mother’s brother, a potentially marriageable partner in Tamil kinship) then we tease some audience member. Then they get all worked up. Depending on how much we retain the attention of the audience, that’s how much the dance is a success.* ”

Considering the ambiguity between “real” and “fake” touch, the female dancers can’t win either way because it is impossible to know whether they are miming or touching since the boundaries between the two are decided entirely subjectively by audience members and fellow dancers. Some male dancers paradoxically stated that even if a woman was “acting”, the physical experience of touching her male co-star was itself enough to corrupt her morals.

Speaking about girls from Bengaluru, one dancer opined that they have become so used to parading their bodies, they were immune to touch and felt no self-consciousness if men leered at them. Another dancer even spoke about the actress Nayanthara: “*Look at her [so indecent] now versus how [innocent] she used to be*”. As one of the male dancers noted, “In the cine field, let me tell you, for women, only if you lose one thing, you can gain another”. Even though there are some “protections” in film, where the actress has to sign a contract stating how far she is willing to go onscreen and so forth, female performers in any realm need to manage their reputations in a complex way.

*Adal padal* dancers do not describe themselves as “traditional artists”, even if they have parents and other relatives who were dancers. This might be because, in both the popular consciousness as well as state vocabulary, the dance form is not categorised as a “traditional” or “intergenerational” dance form like *karagattam*. Most of the dancers



we met had entered the field on their own, out of interest, through friends, or for women out of necessity after their marriages broke up and they needed to support children. Some dancers also began in another art field, often theatre or *nadagam*, and then moved into *adal padal*. Another common option is joining college dance troupes or being part of a dance school or dance class under a regular “master. For several *adal padal* dancers, their families were unhappy that they had entered the dance field, as their caste-based professions were considered more respectable. Another reason that families were unhappy was that the women would be touching and mingling closely with the opposite sex on stage. Even if this was only an “act”, the very physical experience of it is assumed to corrupt the person’s morals.

# THE REGULATION OF DANCING

## THE REGULATION OF DANCING BY THE HIGH COURT

Since *karagattam* and *adal padal* performances take place on public roads and streets, under section 30 of the Police Act (1861), they require permission from the police before they can take place. While the police have the authority to grant permission themselves, it has become common practice for organisers of such performances to approach the High Court through Writ Petitions seeking permission for the performance.

The typical process for securing permission is the same in the case of *karagattam*, *adal padal*, as well as other kinds of dance performances for temple festivals. Organisers typically approach dance troupes a few months before the actual performance, to fix the dates, the elements of the performance, and the costs. They then begin the process of seeking permission. First, the village organising committee approaches the local police station. If they have a good relationship with the police, if the village has a reputation for orderly conduct and few caste tensions, and/or if the performance will be relatively small, the police might directly give permission for the performance<sup>5</sup>. For the past ten years, however, it has become more common for police to direct the village committee to approach the High Court with a Writ Petition requesting permission. The village committee pays a lawyer Rs. 5000 - 6000 to prepare and file the Writ Petition, which generally specifies the details of the event and the folk arts they plan to host. The Judge might either refuse to grant permission altogether or grant permission with conditions attached.

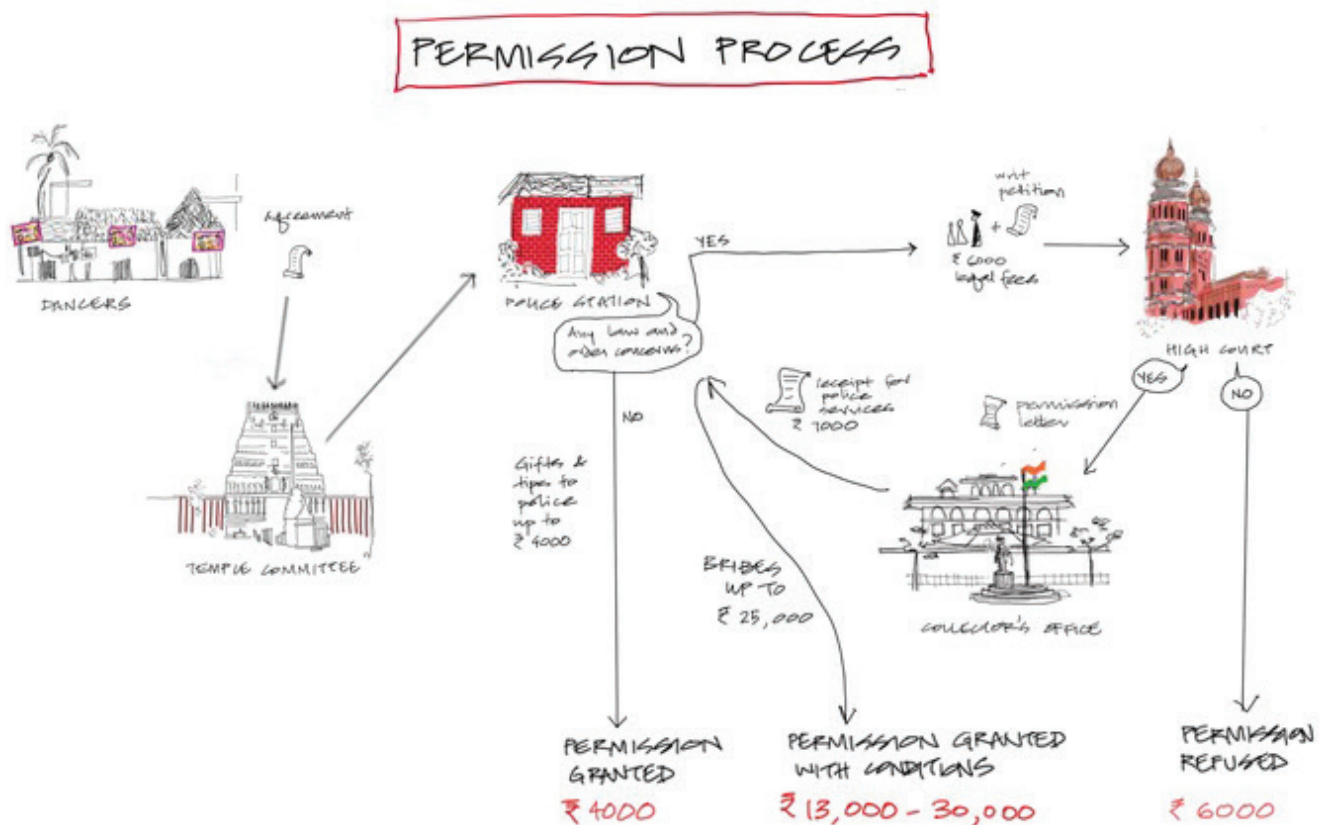
A typical list of conditions issued by the High Court are:

- "the *Aadal Paadal* programme in connection with festival or any cultural programme, SHO (Station House Officer) should specify the time and the same shall not be later than 10.00 p.m.
- double meaning songs should not be played so as to spoil the minds of students and the youth
- no songs, touching upon any political party or religion, community or caste be played
- organisers shall not erect any digital banners/placards on either side of the arterial roads, platforms, walkways/major roads and any other roads
- the function should not affect caste, religious or communal harmony and shall be conducted without any discrimination
- if there is any violation of any one of the conditions imposed, the concerned Police Officer is at liberty to take necessary action, as per law and stop such performance

<sup>5</sup> The police shared that the granting of permission also depended to some extent on the role that the *karagattam* segment will play in the larger program: for example, if it is only two *karagam* dancers hired to accompany the deity, permission might be given more easily and at the station level, whereas a full-fledged performance featuring the buffoon and all the other elements will render the process more complex.

- similarly, the Police is empowered to stop the programme, if it exceeds beyond the permitted time
- the participants of the programme shall not intake any kind of intoxicating substance or liquor during the programme
- if any untoward incident takes place, the organisers of the programme be made responsible for the same
- the authority concerned shall videograph the entire programme at the cost of the applicant and submit the CD to the [Superintendent of Police] concerned
- organisers shall have to obtain all other required permission from the authorities concerned
- any other conditions as the authority concerned consider to impose according to the ground reality
- petitioner was directed to pay Rs. 15,000 as charges for police protection.<sup>6</sup>

The parties then generally take the Court Order to the police station, after which the police issue a letter echoing the above conditions, which might include their own additions based on the area (for example, specifying the issues of vulgarity to be avoided, sound level, adjusting the time limit, among others). The village committee pays a fee to the collectors' office for police protection, which is around Rs. 5000 - 7000, and upon furnishing the receipt to their local police station, they may conduct the performance with police oversight.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 6:** Permission Process. Infographic designed by Shakthi Nataraj

<sup>6</sup> 'Devaraj v. State Rep by Inspector of Police, Erode' (2022) Madras High Court, Criminal Original Petition No. 22185 of 2022. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/117547992/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>7</sup> The *nattamai* we spoke with in Theni showed us a copy of the Court order, a second letter from the local police, and receipts for the fees paid to the collector's office: he had paid Rs. 3215 for the services of one Sub-Inspector and Rs. 3770 for the services of two police constables, amounting to a total of Rs. 6985.

## CHANGES IN THE PAST DECADE

It appears that the practice of approaching the High Court to seek permission for performances became more prevalent in the past decade. In addition to several dancers, we spoke to two lawyers in Madurai who had experience with the process of seeking permissions for performances. They told us that in the 1990s, conditions were not imposed at all, and in the early 2000s it was common to secure permission at the police station itself, without involving the courts<sup>8</sup>. Even when the issue went to the High Court, one of them said that obtaining permissions was purely a matter of routine through a Writ Petition and it was considered an easy process, even though the permission would be issued with conditions attached.

However, from 2012 onwards, there was increasing disagreement among High Court judges about whether to permit these performances (even with conditions), because of growing concerns about obscenity and vulgarity of the dance performances. In April 2012, Justice Chandru dismissed a slew of Writ Petitions, stating, “in most places ill-clad women gyrating their private parts to the tunes of obscene film songs...It is rather unfortunate that such cases are being filed before this Court day in and day out without there being any legal or enforceable right on the part of the petitioners to conduct such forms of dances that too in public places”<sup>9</sup>.<sup>5</sup> While the petitioners cited past instances where permission was granted with conditions, Justice Chandru refused to grant the police the authority to oversee the performance holding that “police cannot act as censor officials” and that “there is no guarantee that the conditions will be observed by the organisers” (The Times of India, 2012). Justice Chandru concluded his order stating “During the celebration of the festival, the petitioners cannot be allowed to have indecent portrayal of women through such dances which are the popular lingo called Record dances or otherwise known as Cabaret dance. Portrayal of women in an indecent fashion itself is an offence under the provisions of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1981. This Court cannot be a party for indulging in such illegal acts by the petitioners. The long arm of the Court cannot be extended to denigrate the culture during the festival.”. The lawyers we met suggested that following this decision, the police grew increasingly wary of directly granting permission for performances, leaving it to the court’s discretion.

Subsequently, there continued to be conflicting decisions from High Court judges on the conduct of *adal padal* performances (Imranullah, 2014). In 2014, Justice V. Ramasubramanian refused to grant permission even with conditions attached, since he felt these conditions were merely “cosmetic”<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, Justice Pushpa Sathyanarayana dismissed 35 Writ Petitions stating she doubted “whether the representations were sent by the petitioner themselves... Such practice has to be deprecated and cannot be entertained” (Imranullah, 2014). In contrast, in the same year, Justice R. Subbiah, Justice T.S. Sivagnanam, and Justice Venugopal repeatedly granted permission subject to conditions. In response to law and order concerns, Justice M. Venugopal stated that “one cannot assume or presume any illegality even before the grant of permission for the programme”.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019, the High Court repeatedly refused to grant permission for performances on the ground that on the ground that “obscene movements and dialogues are involved in the dance performances”<sup>12</sup>. Following this, the Court issued

---

<sup>8</sup> The lawyers’ view is perhaps corroborated by this news report describing a performance conducted without permission in 2010, which notably does not mention any court order and specifies that the matter was resolved at the police station level (The New Indian Express, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> ‘K. Poongudi v. The Superintendent of Police, Madurai’ (2012) Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No. 3768 of 2012. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/44097262/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>10</sup> ‘D. Veerappan v. The Inspector of Police, Namakkal’ (2014) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 4204 of 2014. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/113765292/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ashok v. The Superintendent of Police’ (2014) Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No.16901 of 2014. Available at: <https://vlex.in/vid/ashok-vs-the-superintendent-577327202> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>12</sup> ‘D. Mohana Sundaram v. The Inspector of Police, Malasamuthiram’ (2018) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 28477 of 2018.



directions based on which the Director General of Police issued a circular requiring those seeking permission for cultural programmes to file the necessary undertaking agreeing to comply with specified conditions<sup>13</sup>. In 2023, the Court noted that despite the 2019 circular (and a similar one in 2018), Writ Petitions were still filed before the High Court as the police had abdicated their administrative responsibility to permit or deny such public performances<sup>14</sup>. This forced the Court to exercise its constitutional jurisdiction to hear petitions that were not in the “public interest”, to fulfil what should be a police function. To stop this practice, the judges issued a new set of directions, subsequently incorporated into a 2023 circular issued by the Director General of Police, Tamil Nadu, Chennai<sup>15</sup>. The important shift in the 2023 directions was that it specified, “on the seventh day from the date of the receipt of the representation, for the conduct of the cultural program (*Aadal Paadal*), associated with any temple festival, if the authorities do not take steps either to grant permission or reject permission, there shall be a deemed permission on the eighth day”.

While it is difficult to estimate the impact of these circulars with any accuracy, a search on the Supreme Court Cases legal database indicates a significant drop in similar cases being heard by the Madras High Court after the 2023 circular was issued. There were approximately 635 cases between January and June 2023 before the 2023 circular and 161 cases between June 2023 and October 2024 after the issuance of the 2023 circular. It’s worth noting that while there seems to have been a drop in such cases, the High Court directions and subsequent circular did not entirely remove the need for intervention by the High Court. The police either reject permission for performances citing a law and order issue<sup>16</sup> or delay consideration of the request<sup>17</sup>, which results in the organiser approaching the High Court for relief. Justice G Chandrashekar held that petitioners were forced to approach the High Court for relief because the police shirked their responsibilities under the 2023 circular, which was also a violation of orders passed by the High Court<sup>18</sup>. He further directed the Superintendent of Police “to take appropriate departmental action against the respondent, Inspector of Police for directing the petitioner to approach this Court for getting permission to conduct Adal Padal program”.

In contrast to this approach, in October 2024, Justice N. Sathish Kumar commented that, “This Court in several occasions has seen that in the pretext of conducting cultural program, only obscene program are being exhibited in the name of *Adal Padal*. Though this Court also permits such cultural with so many restrictions, as the authority have already decided not to permit such dance program considering the likelihood of law and order issue, this Court cannot direct them to permit and guard the area. The authorities have other works, therefore, they cannot

<sup>13</sup> ‘R. Murugan v. The Superintendent of Police, Kallakurichi’ (2022) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 19495 of 2022. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/165654648/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>14</sup> ‘C. Sathasivam v. The Superintendent of Police’ Trichy (2023) Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No. 12535 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/20425811/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>15</sup> ‘G. Sivan v. The Superintendent of Police, Tiruppattu’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 16549 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/111428443/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>16</sup> ‘A. Ramachandran v. The Superintendent of Police, Ranipet’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 15541 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/75256007/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024); ‘A. Thirupathi v. The Inspector of Police, Thirupathur Gramiya’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 14268 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/59585736/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024); ‘M. Muniraj v. The Sub-Inspector of Police, Kadathur’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 17521 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/64887e16d72ae126cda9942d/amp> (Accessed: 13 December 2024); ‘Rangith v. Inspector of Police’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 17309 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/64833853afbb5e393d1f3d6f> Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>17</sup> ‘C. Kalirajan v. Deputy Superintendent of Police’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 13428 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/6481e6fce2788a042a6513cf> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

<sup>18</sup> ‘P. Kuppan v. The Inspector of Police, Pochampalli’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 18833 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/193242861/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024); ‘P. Thilagar v. Inspector of Police’ (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 19214 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/649c451aabb36f14367b58ff> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

be deputed to monitor this type of cultural event.” While this is only one case, it is indicative that varied legal contestations continue to affect *adal padal* performances, with the courts now treating the need for monitoring itself as justification to bar such performances.

## STIGMA AND CONTESTATIONS OF EROTICISM IN DANCING

The legal controversies surrounding *adal padal* performances grew to encompass other dance forms associated with temple festivals, including *karagattam*. For example, in 2016, Justice Devadass imposed similar conditions on kathakali and *karagattam* performances (Imranulla, 2016), leading cultural commentators to express outrage at the judge’s misunderstanding of India’s performance traditions (Narayanan, 2016). Likewise, *Karagattam* dancers complained that while they were established “folk” practitioners, the stigma of *adal padal* and allegations of glamour had been unjustly applied to them. They pinned the blame on agents, young migrant dancers, and an ignorant audience (Karthikeyan, 2016). For example, at a protest in 2017, Ranjit Balan of the Tamil Nadu Cultural Stage Artists Association referred to their performances as a “centuries-old art form” that had stopped getting permissions since 2010 because of dancers from Bengaluru who danced in skimpy clothes to record music (The Times of India, 2017). In 2019 as well, at a protest by the Tamil Nadu Stage Dancers Welfare Association, the leader Kadhar Moideen stated that the sexy dance moves by women of certain groups was “hurting the tradition” of his own group (The Times of India, 2019).

Ultimately, legal developments, media portrayals, and cultural attitudes came together to create overlaps between *karagattam* and *adal padal* in the popular imagination, with both classified as “erotic”. This overlap is perhaps reflected most strikingly when searching for videos on YouTube. During our research, we found numerous social media and YouTube accounts that regularly uploaded *adal padal* and *karagattam* dance videos as erotic videos, many of which have gone viral (see Karthikeyan, 2016). As one of the *sangam* leaders lamented, the word *adal padal* was itself becoming synonymous with erotic or sexy dancing, and he wanted to change it to “variety dance”. The constant changes in the name of the dance form, from cassette dance to disco dance to record dance and currently *adal padal* suggest that the dance form is continually trying to outrun the sexual stigma that inevitably attaches to it. Women who have made an appearance in such videos are sometimes afraid of the damage to their reputations. One Madurai lawyer mentioned an instance when a woman approached him to help with getting a video of her taken off the internet. While we did not meet many glamour dancers, one young glamour dancer in Bengaluru that we met mentioned that when she first began dancing, it was possible to pay organisers a fixed amount to have the videos taken down from their YouTube page.

The overlapping stigma of *karagattam* and *adal padal* has led to fierce contestation between different stakeholders on where “tradition” ends, and “obscenity” begins, within each dance form. These disputes unfold at the police station, before the courts, and in the media. On the one hand, stage dancer *sangams* have repeatedly submitted petitions to high level police officials and media outlets, complaining about rogue groups that perform “indecent” dances in violation of court-stipulated conditions<sup>19</sup>. They demand that the police strictly enforce the conditions against such errant groups, making it safer for the law-abiding troupes to perform in peace (see The Hindu, 2016; The Times of India, 2019; Sharma, 2020). One leader of the Tamil Cultural Stage Dancers Welfare Association mentioned to us that they had filed 36 complaints against the teams doing glamour performances, and had spoken

<sup>19</sup> We spoke to office-bearers from three *sangams*: the Tamil Cultural Stage Dancers Welfare Association (*Tamil Panpaatu Medai Nadana Kalaigargal Munnetra Sangam*) members in Coimbatore; the Tamil Nadu Cinema and Stage Dancers Welfare Association (*Tamil Nattu Thiraippada Medai Nadanakalaigargal Nala Sangam*) members in Madurai, Theni and Salem, and the head of the South Indian Film Stage Dancers and Stage Actors Welfare Association (*Thennindiya Thirai Medai Nadanakalaigargal Medai Nadigargal Nalasangam*) based in Erode. In addition to conducting interviews, we reviewed news articles, television clips, and correspondence that the *sangam* members voluntarily shared with us.

to 3 DGPs in Chennai, even sharing videos, names, and event details, but the police refused to take any action. The stage dancer *sangams* that we spoke to overwhelmingly alleged that “obscene” dancing went unchecked because of a nexus between agents, migrant women dancers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, and corrupt police and lawyers, which leaves local stage dancers in the lurch.

On the other hand, the High Court has also had to entertain numerous Public Interest Litigation petitions (PILs) seeking to ban *adal padal* performances, citing their vulgarity and obscenity. For example, in September 2017, an advocate filed a PIL to ban *adal padal* performances at Tiruchendur’s Dussehra celebrations, arguing that it was sacrilegious and offensive to Hindus (The New Indian Express, 2017). Judges KK Sasidharan and GR Swaminathan ruled in favour of said ban, ignoring a counter-affidavit filed by the Thoothukudi police stating that no such vulgar performances were organised during Dussehra. The court also told police not to allow dancers from “other places”. The following year, a member of the Folk Artist Welfare Board filed a PIL stating that *adal padal* performances violated the sanctity of the temple and hindered the efforts of the Department of Arts and Culture to support folk artists (The Times of India, 2018). Stage dancer groups have responded to such efforts by appealing to the police and the High Court not to issue blanket bans but to instead distinguish between dance troupes that abide by conditions and those offending groups that conduct glamour performances (Sekaran, 2016).

## THE ROLE OF THE POLICE

### DANCERS’ PERSPECTIVES

While permissions are generally issued by courts (with conditions), local police continue to be important local players that have a great deal of power and leverage. During our fieldwork, we found that while the police did not grant permission directly, they were the key middlemen standing between the dancers, village parties, and the High Court in overseeing the performance. Many stage dancers complained that the Court conditions were ignored because of a powerful collusion between the police, influential men in the village, agents, and migrant women dancers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Even when dancers were willing to abide by such conditions, many complained that enormous bribes, upwards of Rs. 25,000, were paid to local police stations for *adal padal* performances, so that they would turn a blind eye to any violations of the conditions. The Salem-based leader of the Tamil Nadu Film and Stage Dancers Welfare Association complained that while the court conditions mandate video recording of performances, police would actively prevent video recording in the crowd, so it had fallen upon the *sangams* to video-record each other’s performances and share the recordings on WhatsApp, as a means of community policing. He mentioned that he even knew of a police officer who had begun working part-time as an agent arranging shows, and thus profiting from performances at both ends. He said that the only way forward was to empower the dancers instead of the police.

The dancers’ complaints of police corruption were corroborated by some police officials themselves. For example, in an Outlook article from 2020, a senior police official accepted that the police might indeed look the other way when powerful village committee members stage a performance that violates court-imposed conditions (Sharma, 2020). Within the village as well, it is a mark of one’s status and prestige to successfully secure permissions for *adal padal* performances and depends on having close relationships with police. “It is all about politics,” said one *nattamai*, boasting that while the process could take up to two weeks for others, he managed to get the order “within an hour.” Another ward councillor similarly proudly showed us the permission slip, considering it a mark of prestige to have successfully organised an *adal padal* performance amidst COVID-19 restrictions. Both the village organisers and the police benefited from flouting the High Court conditions, while the dancers were the ones negatively affected.

Both *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers reported that the police were supportive of women in cases of harassment. In one of the performances that we saw as well, the village people caught and expelled a man from the performance because he was drunk and leering at the women. *Karagattam* dancers said that the police would generally support them if the village organisers refused payment or did not honour their contractual obligations. They said the police offered protection if they had a signed contract on an official letterhead, and even more so if they had some form of ID, either a Folk Artistes Welfare Board card, or an ID card issued by a *sangam*. In the case of *adal padal*, however, the dancers complained that police never took their side in such disputes.

## POLICE PERSPECTIVES

We also made efforts to speak to the police directly, at festivals when we could approach them, and in the local police stations, where they revealed a different side to the issue. Police officers said they had become wary of granting permissions directly, not only because of allegations of vulgarity and obscenity, but also for various law and order reasons.

The main issues for the police were pre-existing communal tensions or violence in the village, political factors such as an upcoming election, alcohol usage, and rowdy behaviour from the crowd. Since the events were typically arranged by competing groups as a display of social power and influence, there was always a chance that caste-based grudges would result in fights. Sometimes, the dancers were pressured to play certain film songs with caste and communal themes, for the dominant caste in the village or the caste leaders who were sponsoring the festival, which could lead to conflicts as well. Ultimately, the reputation and demographics of the village played a role in how easily the police could grant permission.

A second issue for police was that the combination of vulgarity or obscenity with alcohol usage among a young audience could easily fuel fights. Interestingly, the police were not taking a moral stance on the issue of obscenity but a thoroughly pragmatic one. For example, we asked a Sub Inspector in Salem whether sexual favours and "adjustment" might happen at a festival. He said that if women "went" with the men, it was "their own business", and there was no mention of the ITPA or of raids related to sex work. Obscenity was cited as a problem only in so far as it could incite violence in the crowd. One of the Madurai-based lawyers corroborated this view, stating that police generally did not register a criminal case unless it involved a major issue such as a death or murder. A third issue was that of manpower, since the festival season is marked by a large number of festivals taking place, often at the same time. For example, four events might happen in the same area on the same night, each of which would require two or three police personnel.

However, the violation of certain conditions, such as time limits, was not seen as a very serious issue, although this varied based on the village. While the Court orders generally state that performances must take place between 7 pm and 10 pm, both the performances we saw only began at around 9:00 pm. For one of the performances, at 10:30 pm the organisers made an announcement that the performance would shut down in thirty minutes. However, at 11 pm it was still going strong and continued till past 1 am. In the performances we observed, the police seemed comfortable with this extension. In one of the villages, the police officer told us that since it was a "decent" dance performance and the village had a reputation for law and order, they did not have a problem with allowing them to continue the festivities as long as the police were present. This was especially true if it was a *karagattam* performance, since *karagattam* was generally viewed as a benign cultural art for which permission was more readily given, in contrast to *adal padal*, which was viewed as a major threat to law and order. This also meant that nobody in the *karagattam* field complained about the police receiving large payoffs. One *nattamai* mentioned that police were generally given a gift as a token of their respect or as tips, but this payment did not have "illicit" connotations or spark moral outrage, as happened with *adal padal* dancers.



## CHALLENGES FACED BY DANCERS

It was difficult for the dancers we interviewed to balance the legal conditions on timing, double meaning, the nature of the songs, among others, with the demands of the performance and of the audience. One troupe leader in Salem likened it to the tension that emerges at a wedding when the thali is tied around the bride's neck and the music reaches a crescendo: everything needs to be just right, the organiser is on edge until it happens and is only relieved when it all goes off without a hitch. In short, the performances were risky for the dancers in multiple ways and represent a complex balancing act.

The first difficulty was making sure the payment happened as agreed upon. Dancers typically had a written agreement with the "parties", which specified the amount paid in advance and broke down the total amount to be paid. The dancers told us that if the parties refused to pay the total amount, for various reasons, they could go to the Sub-Inspector to demand the amount, sometimes backed by their *sangam*. In practice, though, this did not always happen. With *adal padal* performances, either the police backed the local parties or the *sangam* leaders refused to respond. Even with *karagattam* performances, sometimes the village parties said that the performance was not up to standard, the girls they had requested did not perform, among other reasons and reduced the total amount paid. Sometimes dancers were also deceived by parties who told them that they had gotten permission for the performance, when in fact they had not. In these circumstances, technically both the dancers and organisers are liable, but in practice it is the dancers who bore most of the risk.

The second issue dancers faced was entertaining the audience while avoiding allegations of "glamour". As artists, both *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers needed to react spontaneously to the moment to keep the audience's attention. Sometimes, they would be asked to dance to a few glamour songs because the hiring parties would otherwise refuse to pay them the full rate. They would also be asked to sing specific caste songs honouring the caste of the festival patrons, and this would lead to conflicts in the crowd. Still, if dancers didn't abide by these conditions, the hiring parties would cut the payment down by as much as 40%.

The female dancers said that police generally offered protection during performances and were supportive. However, if a law and order issue arose, such as a fight between different caste leaders, then it was often the female dancers who were blamed and taken into custody, not the organisers. One female dancer in Salem told us that once during a performance there was a police raid, and the women were taken to the police station and remanded for 15 days. They called their *sangam* leaders, but the latter did not come to help. Some of the leaders in the Coimbatore *sangam* joked that the *sangam* leaders would refuse to help the dance troupe, so they could be sure to get the contract the following year. There appeared to be a lot of competitiveness and undercutting among the *adal padal* dancers themselves. In the case of *karagattam*, we did not hear of any incidents of police arrest or remand. If there were law and order issues it was unlikely that an official case would be filed, with the police more likely to follow up in the rural police station with the offenders.

The last issue affecting the dancers was the inherent uncertainty of performances, which was only aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. Dancers often did not know if the performance was confirmed until the day before it was scheduled to take place, because of the need to get permission from the High Court. This uncertainty fell most heavily on the performers who remain in fear of losing the job and having to return their advance, since they could usually only earn during the five months of temple festival season.

# MOBILISATION AND SANGAMS

The differences between *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers was most evident in the arena of mobilisation, with varied demands and patterns of *sangam* formation. Since *karagattam* is officially recognised as a dance form by the Department of Arts and Culture, with a dedicated welfare board for the artists, dancers across the state have common goals around which they mobilise. The main problem for the *karagattam* dancers is that the more marginalised dancers are unaware of the schemes available to them and face structural barriers in accessing their rights. However, *sangam* leaders are relatively united in their demands of the government.

In contrast, since *adal padal* is not recognised by the government as a legitimate dance form and seen as the cause for deterioration of morals in society, the *sangams* do not have a clear basis on which to claim government benefits or a clear issue around which to mobilise. Should demands be framed on behalf of the community as artists or as informal workers? Currently, they try to preserve their own livelihood while their performances are heavily policed and stigmatised. In response, they have taken it upon themselves to regulate glamour dancing while often also feeling forced to incorporate elements of glamour into their own performances, all of which has led to fragmentation and competition between the *sangams*.

## KARAGATTAM SANGAMS

There is currently a major rift in the leadership of folk artists in Tamil Nadu, which almost all artists we met were intimately aware of, while sorting themselves into one of two camps. On the one hand was the Tamil Nadu State Association of Rural Folk Artists Federation (henceforth referred to as the Rural Artists Federation) under the leadership of Mr. Somasundaram, who also heads the Rural Arts Development Centre in Madurai, which had begun in 1992 and was then registered as a state level trade union in 1996. The federation now has around 2000 members statewide. However, of late, Mr. Somasundaram's federation was criticised by another powerful state-level gathering of folk artists under Dr. Kaliswaran of the Alternative Media Centre at Loyola College, Chennai. Dr. Kaliswaran is the head of a collective of folk artists who have networks in every district through the universities located there. They organised trainings and awareness programs for artists to participate in and have also offered relief during the pandemic lockdowns. The artists we met had very clear loyalties towards one of the two leaders.

We spoke to Mr. Somasundaram of the Rural Artists Federation in Madurai. He stated that the main goals and tasks of the federation were to (1) resolve conflicts involving dance troupes across the districts, for example, in cases such as non-payment, (2) advocate with the state for improved access to ID cards and for livelihood and social entitlements, and (3) regularise the process of performances, such as ensuring that artists have signed agreements on official letterhead with the village parties. The *sangams* do not offer access to credit or financial services. Instead, they primarily deal with mobilisation, facilitating access to government schemes, and helping

dancers deal with crises that emerge.

Mr. Somasundaram was well-respected, being a folk dancer himself and the founder of the Village Arts Preservation Society in Madurai, which taught *karagattam* and promoted the arts more broadly. One of the main problems articulated by the Federation was while various schemes do exist, there is a lack of political will to prioritise them. Mr. Somasundaram said that while they were able to lobby certain ministers in favour of the artists, the ministers were transferred to another department before anything concrete could come out of it. Ultimately, the artists and the *sangam* leaders alike needed to interact with the lower-level bureaucrats, who generally did not prioritise dancers' issues.

The conflict between Mr. Somasundaram and Mr. Kaliswaran came to a head when the former was briefly appointed as head of the Tamil Nadu *Iyal Isai Nadaga Mandram* in Chennai. While his supporters welcomed the move, stating it was the first time that a person who was a folk dancer himself, and one from a Scheduled Caste had been elected as the leader of the *mandram*, Mr. Kaliswaran and his supporters from the folk artist community staged a protest in response (see Red Pix 24x7, 2021). In our meeting with Mr. Kaliswaran, he highlighted the corruption he felt was rampant in the system and accused Mr. Somasundaram of similar corruption himself. Mr. Kaliswaran also disagreed with Mr. Somasundaram's push to reduce the list of officially recognised folk arts, arguing that there were over a thousand unique folk arts which ought to be both recognised and celebrated. The highest priority for him was addressing the abuse faced by female dancers, which could happen through changing the culture and format of performances to reduce the exposure to potential abuse, such as focusing on government awareness programmes instead of seasonal temple performances late at night. More broadly, he argued for the removal of male intermediaries and promoting female dancer leadership, which would promote equitable distribution and social justice.

While this controversy rages at the state level, there are also numerous small local *sangams* of *karagattam* dancers and associated music artists, ranging from an informal group of 10-15 people in the area to larger groups of 50-100 members. We were told that Madurai had about 15 such folk artist *sangams*, with the union leader Mr. Somasundaram estimating that about 80% of dancers were covered by these *sangams*. However, *karagattam* dancers only form a small proportion of all the folk artists in the state, and he estimated that across Madurai there would likely be no more than 50 *karagattam* dancers. Local *sangams* generally ask for Rs. 100 per month as subscription costs and then advocate for demands on behalf of the artists they support. Only half the *sangams* would be officially registered as a society, and in most cases the dancers neglect to renew the registration in a timely manner.

## ADAL PADAL SANGAMS

When it comes to *adal padal*, there is less central and coordination and instead more competition between the *sangams*. Indeed, there are several *sangams* with the title of "statewide *sangam*". We interviewed leaders and members of four such state-level *sangams* and one of them jokingly said that there were at least eight such *sangams*. In addition to the state level *sangams*, there are several district level and local ones. The membership of a *sangam* ranges from 70 to 500 people and the majority tend to be men as *adal padal* is a male dominated field with a limited number of female dancers. *Sangams* generally demand a monthly subscription between Rs. 100 and 200, although this is not strictly enforced. The *sangams* commit to providing support in case of a crisis, or for events such as weddings of the dancers or their families. Some also provided help during the pandemic. The *sangams* are very loosely structured and often not registered.

While there were smaller *sangams* in existence since 2003, *sangams* have grown in significance since 2010 with the

rise of “glamour dancers” and the High Court banning *adal padal* performances in 2010. With “vulgarity” becoming a big issue in the past ten years, one of the major concerns for *sangams* is to oversee and report incidents of “glamour”, which has led to fierce competition. One *sangam* leader in Salem looked over the list of dancers we would interview and rapidly categorised them as “those who are with us” and “those who are against us”. The apparent bone of contention was around the conduct of “glamour” performances. Each district has a WhatsApp group of dancers and the *sangams* often take videos of other troupes’ performances and share them on the group as a method of condemning dancers who break the rules. In this way, the *sangams* take on a task that the police are required to do as the police rarely do it themselves. This had led to several feuds and splits between the *sangams* because accusations of glamour dancing are subjective and dancers also seek legitimise their own groups and *sangams* through accusations against other dancers. One of the *sangam* leaders had disagreements with the other *sangams* because of their continued production of “glamour” performances, so they split off and formed their own *sangam*.

There is wide variation in the economic resources of each *sangam*, which is reflected in the number of performances they can put on, the number of dance troupes under them, and the wealth and influence of the leaders. The wealthiest *sangam* we came across, which had a reputation among other groups as being the “glamour” *sangam*, appeared to be considerably wealthier than the others we saw. The leader told us that the *sangam* had over 1000 members. Members were given INR 1000 pension per month, INR 5000 for marriages, INR 5000 for deaths along with flowers and garlands from the association, INR 5000 per month for five months on the delivery of a child, and up to INR 50,000 loan for medical expenses. Since many *sangams* don’t regularly collect subscriptions, it is unclear how the leaders had raised funds for these expenses. This issue could be explored in further research to better understand the support such dancers receive.

Many dancers said that it had been very difficult to collectivise because the egos of the different *sangam* leaders would get in the way. *Sangams* seemed to operate like competing factions. *Sangams* served as support to dancers as all the *sangam* leaders we met were also organisers with their own troupes, which meant belonging to their *sangam* would have a direct impact on securing opportunities to dance in performances they organise. Some female dancers, in particular, were cynical about the *sangam* leadership, complaining about the lack of transparency with the accounts, the lack of a dedicated office space, and the *sangam* being used by the leaders as a vehicle to grow their political influence. One female dancer shared that when they were stranded at the police station, *sangam* leaders would avoid answering their phones or charge money for helping the women secure release.

## OVERLAPS IN MOBILISATION AND THE SCOPE OF STATE RECOGNITION

As the state recognition of *karagattam* and “folk arts” has grown, so has the policing of and stigma associated with *adal padal*. This is why many of the *adal padal* dancers we met were keen to gain recognition as “folk artists” by gaining basic knowledge of at least one folk art and gathering evidence of performances so they can apply for the Folk Artistes Welfare Board card or changing the *sangam* name to include folk arts and including both folk and *adal padal* dance artists within the *sangam*.

Despite the keenness of *adal padal* dancers to either unite with “folk” artists or gain government recognition in some capacity, they have had little success. Even the few who had secured Welfare Board cards, through their involvement in other art forms like drama, said they had not received any scheme benefits thus far. Many *adal padal* dancers, cynical about *sangam* politics, said that there wasn’t any scope for government recognition because the dancers were unable to find common ground. “There is nobody there to make demands, and there is nobody [on the state side] to listen”.



There have been attempts to bring *adal padal* and *karagattam* artists together under a single umbrella, but their differential treatment by the government has also increased the distance between different types of dancers. More than one *adal padal* dancer complained that *karagattam* was actually even more vulgar than *adal padal* but managed to slip by because of its categorisation as a "folk art". For their part, *karagattam* leaders countered that unscrupulous agents and *adal padal* dancers were pretending to be folk artists and trying to avail of benefits not meant for them. They also blamed the "vulgarity" of *adal padal* dancing for the degeneration of folk culture more generally.

## KARAGATTAM AND ADAL PADAL: SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

	KARAGATTAM	ADAL PADAL
History of the form	The <i>karagattam</i> of today possibly emerged from temple-based performance traditions from the 1800s. Gradually with the anti-nautch movements of the 1900s, temple-based dance was banned and stigmatised at the same time that <i>karagattam</i> was being claimed as an emblem of Tamil culture and folk art. <i>Karagattam</i> is regarded ambivalently, both as hallowed Tamil culture, but also associated with the stigma of temple dancing.	Contains elements of Tamil film, stage-based historical drama and theatre (called "special drama" in Tamil Nadu), street performance traditions like <i>therukoothu</i> and circus, and political spectacle (for example having lookalikes of stars like MGR). Was called "cassette dance" or "record dance" in the 1980s and 90s and then called <i>adal padal</i> or variety dance now.
Elements of the form	4-7 performers, generally a buffoon (M), <i>kuravan</i> (M), <i>kurathi</i> (F), two <i>thunai karagams</i> (F) and other women as demanded by the village committee.	Anywhere from 10 – 40 performers, a typical performance that takes its cue from film songs will have 2 male movie star lookalike artists, 3-4 female dancers, and 8-10 "group boys" who are background dancers.
	A live band of <i>thavil</i> , <i>pambai</i> (types of drums), and <i>nadaswaram</i> (reed instrument)	No live band, only pre-recorded music.
	Dancers dance on the ground or move down the street	Dancers dance onstage with lights and sound system.
	One section where dancers balance the pot ( <i>karagam</i> ) on their heads and dance, a second comedic song and dance segment featuring bawdy dialogue, third segment with some film dancing and often with pre-recorded music.	Performances include some classic old melodic film songs, some newer item numbers, and often "variety" acts such as a magician, a folk dancer, or a performer with special skills such as juggling.
	Used to take place from 10 PM – 5 AM, although in recent years courts have imposed a curfew.	Generally, lasts only 2-3 hours.

<b>Caste and religion</b>	Associated with specific Scheduled Caste communities such as <i>Paraiyars</i> , although we encountered dancers of Other Backward Class backgrounds as well. Also associated with specific ritual functions at Hindu temple festivals.	Not associated with specific castes or religions, though a common feature at temple festivals.
<b>Political economy</b>	Typical cost is Rs. 30,000 to 50,000: Rs. 1500 – 2000 per dancer; younger skilled women up to Rs. 3000 – 5000; musicians Rs. 1200-4000. Dancers pay for taxi/van (up to Rs. 5000) and costumes/props (up to Rs. 4000). The village organising committee arranges the sound, stage, and provide food and accommodation if needed.	Typical cost is Rs. 50,000 upwards, up to several lakhs for very grand performances. Rs. 3000 per woman, celebrity or star women can earn Rs. 10,000 and up. Group boys earn Rs. 500-1000 each; male artists Rs. 2000. Lights and set cost Rs. 6000, travel about Rs. 5000, with an extra Rs. 5000 – 8000 for the agent to take home.
	Contracts between village committee and dancers.	Contracts between village committee and dancers.
	Longer-term contractual arrangements between younger dancers and senior dancers.	No contract arrangements between dancers themselves, even within the same troupe.
	Senior dancers as agents	Senior dancers and outside entrepreneurs as agents.
	Fewer earning possibilities	Greater earning scope, possibility for a few to move into cinema field, politics, bar dancing, dancing abroad in Dubai.
<b>Migrants</b>	Dancers are mostly local and dance with troupes run by family members and kin networks	Dancers are a mixed group of out-of-state migrants and migrants within the state, dance with a mix of troupes and settings based on income
	Travel out of state for government programs or specific religious festivals	Migrant dancers from Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh perform “glamour dance”
<b>Mobilisation</b>	Relatively centralised with many local <i>sangams</i> united under either the Rural Folk Artists Federation, Madurai or the leadership of the Alternative Media Centre, Chennai.	More fractured with dancers splitting off to form new <i>sangams</i> , competition between <i>sangams</i> , and policing of “glamour dancing” by one another

<b>Regulation by the state</b>	Police more often give permission at the station level itself. If referred to the High Court, it is easier to get permission than for <i>adal padal</i> . Police bribes are less of an issue.	Since 2010, has been increasingly controversial with several judges hesitating to give permissions, others granting it with conditions attached. Failure to police “glamour dancing” has led to stage dancer groups complaining about police corruption; members of the public and folk artists filing periodic PILs requesting a ban on <i>adal padal</i> performances, and dancer associations regularly petitioning district collectors for assistance.
<b>Government recognition</b>	Designated a “folk art” by the Tamil Nadu Department of Arts and Culture in 1990s. Dancers eligible for a folk artist welfare board membership card and associated schemes. Dancers can also be nominated for district and state-level honours such as the Kalai Mamani award.	No recognition by government, and <i>adal padal</i> increasingly seen as a threat to culture and decency. The dancers are ineligible for schemes.

# DANCER DEMANDS

## KARAGATTAM

Below are the demands articulated by the Rural Folk Artists Federation and echoed by the artists we interviewed. The state federation has taken up specific issues listed below, but we also discuss demands made by dancers during our interviews.

### » Revisiting the list of folk arts

A major complaint for the union leaders was that the list of officially recognised folk arts has not been revisited for years. They opine that the list was prepared in a haphazard manner as it includes repetitions and many art forms that are not folk arts at all. It is interesting to note that *adal padal* dancers advocate for an expansion of the list, while *karagattam* dancers and folk artists under Somasundaram's union advocate for streamlining the list. Dancers complain that the list was prepared by academics who do not know much of folk arts.

### » Streamlining the process for Welfare Board ID Cards

A key advantage of associating with *sangams* is that they help dancers get government documents, including welfare board ID cards. The government's announcement during COVID-19 that they were going to give funding for artists prompted a rush of applications for welfare board ID cards. One of the *sangam* leaders in Madurai shared that he had assisted close to 1000 artists to get their ID cards during the pandemic.

The application for the welfare board ID card requires evidence in the form of certificates and photographs, and also an older dancer to vouch for the person. For these reasons too, it is important to be connected to a *sangam*, or an influential senior dancer, that can organise all of this for the dancers. The *sangam* leader mentioned above had received the Kalai Nanmani (district level) award in the past and had his own letterhead, which was part of the reason he was able to recommend dancers for the ID card.

Mr. Somasundaram complained that the Department of Arts and Culture does not recognise the Rural Folk Artists Federation as the main representative of dancers. If they did so, then the ID card applications could go through the union, but at present the artists need to go by themselves or through some powerful intermediary. The frequency with which the ID cards need renewal is likewise a problem, since there is a large backlog of renewal requests.

There is also not enough clarity about the requirements for the ID card. For one, should the members be full-time artists? How would that be assessed, given that the work is seasonal? On the one hand it is impossible to prevent artists from going for other work, but on the other hand it is also not possible to be a member of

two welfare boards at the same time. It is also the case that women sometimes "age out" of the sector at a younger age than the men do, so should there be a different age specification for women to access pension? All of these issues need to be clarified for the dancers to benefit from the schemes that are meant for them.

#### » **Expediting the process of getting state documents**

One of the main complaints of the union is the long backlog and delay in artists securing the necessary government documents. For example, it can take artists up to one year to get a direct income certificate.

#### » **Increasing pension amount and improving access**

The federation advocates for an increase in the pension given to dancers from Rs. 2000 to Rs. 3000 and to streamline the process of applying. At present, it takes over 2 years for the pension applications to be considered and approved. Two artists we spoke to also wanted to have larger sums for pensions, such as Rs. 10,000, to compensate for the lack of employment during the off-season.

#### » **Providing affordable housing to dancers**

Housing is the foremost among the list of demands from most marginalised communities in the country and dancers are no exception. Presently in Madurai, the *sangam* is trying to get dancers houses as part of the new colony constructed by the Slum Clearance Board. While the homes have been allotted, the dancers are not able to pay the Rs. 1.75 lakhs advance needed to actually get the house. The *sangam* is pushing for low interest loans from government banks to help the dancers pay this amount. Arrangements along these lines have been made for groups in Chennai to access Slum Clearance Board homes (at rates of 4-5%), or Central Government schemes where the person needs to only pay 10% or 20% of the total amount upfront and can take a loan for the rest. They are also advocating to lower the advance amount required to between Rs. 1.25 and 1.5 lakhs. So far, they have succeeded in assisting 36 dancers to get homes allotted with an advance of just Rs. 35,000. The homes are part of a scheme meant for the general population, but as members of the *sangam* they advocated on behalf of the dancers for benefits owed to them as artists. However, the process of lobbying for the homes took nearly 5 years.

#### » **Awareness about welfare board and schemes**

Most dancers complained that they, or most of the dancers in their field, had minimal awareness about the actual benefits offered by the Welfare Board and, in some cases, about the existence of the Welfare Board at all. There was some amount of ambiguity regarding the difference between the regular artists card (which doesn't provide benefits) and the Welfare Board ID card (which looks more like a "book" and affords access to schemes). There needs to be greater awareness about the schemes as well as a clearer and easier process to apply for the schemes. Many dancers rely on connections with powerful individual celebrities or patrons to raise funds, rather than government resources.

#### » **Standardising performance rates**

The Rural Folk Artists Federation has explored the possibility of regulating dancers and artists' labour by establishing fixed rates based on the number of hours and the type of performance. However, there is also the fear that it could backfire on dancers since both the length and nature of each performance is so variable.

#### » **Prevention of and grievance redressal for non-payment and disrespect**

One of the primary issues faced by dancers is the disrespect from the hiring parties and the lack of



guarantee of full payment, even when they have a signed agreement. Even when artists do get the payment, they sometimes need to wait until the early hours of the morning to secure it and then face varied safety concerns while returning home. The parties may take the advance back or cancel the performance halfway or altogether, claiming that the quality of the performance did not meet the expectations of the parties, that the specific girls they requested were not sent, or due to adverse events beyond the dancers' control (lack of permission, rain, and so forth). Dancers reported that, sometimes, even after applying pressure, they would get less than half the agreed upon amount. Dancers even said that, on occasion though not frequently, the parties who had hired them would conveniently disappear when the time came for payment. Non-payment is accompanied by other forms of disrespect, such as calling the female dancers by pejorative terms like *attakkari* (dancing girl), *koothukkari* (street theatre girl), and *thevadiya* (meaning *devadasi*); not feeding the dancers properly; not allowing them into the host parties' homes; not giving them adequately comfortable, safe, or private quarters to change clothes and rest in; pressuring them to extend the performance by several hours; and allowing the youth in the village to harass and grope the women.

### » Streamlining criteria for *Kalai Mamani* Award

The prestigious state-level *Kalai Mamani* award given for artistic excellence is highly coveted, to be considered for which one must be nominated. It can transform an artist's career, giving them access to funds as well. One complaint is that neither the eligibility criteria for the award nor the application procedure are clear. For example, the conflict between the two major factions of folk artists came to the fore in the past year when the *Kalai Mamani* was awarded to a young artist. Mr. Somasundaram who had been elected the President of the *Iyal Isai Nadaga Mandram* opposed this particular award and Mr. Kaliswaran advocated on behalf of the awardee. While Mr. Somasundaram's critics accused him of being a sellout to moneyed patrons, Somasundaram's allies accused Mr. Kaliswaran of being an outsider and a non-artist academic earning money on the backs of artists by claiming to "organise" for them.

## ADAL PADAL

The primary demands made by dancers were as follows:

### » Simplification of permission process for performances

Dancers unanimously stated that they agreed with the High Court and police that "glamour" performances needed to be curtailed. However, they objected to all *adal padal* performances being treated as "glamour" dancing and treated with the same degree of suspicion. The current permission process, where it is the police who oversee the conditions of the performance only encouraged village parties to bribe the police, while the dancers bear all the risk. Furthermore, the reality of making both official and unofficial payments to middlemen including lawyers, the police, and brokers, which get multiplied by the complex nature of the permission process, makes performances prohibitively expensive and risky to organise. This has led parties to opt for other kinds of performances such as of *karagattam*, or to be more interested in "glamour" oriented performances, since they anyway had the funds to bribe the police.

Indeed, dancers state that the current arrangements benefit police so much that they may receive bribes of 25,000 - 40,000 for a performance. Instead of overseeing the performance, the police then work to protect the village parties by disallowing video recording and allowing the performance to continue in violation of conditions. The dancers demand that the permission process be simplified such that the police are forced to enforce the rules, dancers are protected rather than bearing the primary risk and responsibility, and the village parties are held accountable when conditions are not complied with.

### » Freedom to self-regulate regarding "glamour" with support from police and courts

While there is widespread condemnation of the obscenity and immorality associated with *adal padal* performances, the concepts remain ill-defined, even in the High Court orders. Since police are incentivised to take bribes and allow performances, dancers have taken the onus of monitoring each other's performances by sharing video recordings of performances, filing complaints against "glamour" troupes, and publicising these issues in the media. Without the police or courts backing the dancers' accusations, these practices then weaken the mobilisation among dancers by turning them against one another. It also scapegoats the women in the field, including the seasonal migrant dancers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The dancers demanded clearer guidelines as well as better enforcement regarding "glamour" so that the livelihood of regular dancers are not affected by this regulation process.

### » Legal guarantees and safeguards against non-payment

A regular complaint from the dancers was that they were not paid the full amount, with village parties claiming they were unsatisfied with the show, that the girls they requested did not perform, the dancers did not perform to their preferred songs and sometimes the parties simply disappearing when the time came to pay. The dancers complained that it was even more common for agents and organisers to blame the village parties for the lack of payment to dancers, while secretly pocketing the money themselves. The dancers felt that it would be helpful to have a way to ensure that they are paid, such as requiring a contract that safeguards them against non-payment.

### » Government recognition of the art form

Dancers are keen to be recognised by the government, either under the aegis of the Department of Arts and Culture, or under another category such as that of entertainers, artists, or workers.

### » Easier access to schemes and documentation

While *adal padal* dancers are not eligible for government schemes in their capacity as dancers, they would nevertheless like to be included in awareness efforts and outreach programs that would help connect them to the opportunities for which they are eligible. Many dancers also perform other dance or art forms and can access schemes, such as pension, based on those skills or they could access schemes meant for women generally. One dancer complained about senior dancers deceiving them by claiming they would help with applications to government schemes. She describes an incident where some older dancers tricked younger dancers by claiming they would get some official documents on the younger dancers' behalf. These dancers would then continually ask them for money for photocopies, travel and so forth – about Rs. 350-500 each time. But then, the older dancers disappeared. Dancers say they would benefit from having a dedicated service to help them access government benefits, such as those created for women and other marginalised groups.

### » COVID-19 relief

The first lament of the dancers was the degree to which COVID-19 affected their livelihood, as it has most workers in the country. They have held several protests complaining against permissions being granted for temple festivals but not dance performances.

# CONCLUSION

This report offers an in-depth look at the political-economic arrangements, working conditions, and lived experiences of dancers in the *karagattam* and *adal padal* sectors in Tamil Nadu. Since these dance forms are deeply intertwined with the larger landscape of performance traditions in the state, the insights from this report invite reflection on the status and experience of such workers more generally, particularly women in the “entertainment” and “artistic” sectors in the state.

It is important to view dancers not only as artists, performers, and entertainers, but also as workers. Dancers were keen to emphasise that their main issues related primarily to livelihood and regulation, themes that are often overlooked when they are seen purely as artists or bearers of tradition. By focusing on the political-economic arrangements governing these forms, we can see the way they overlap with other kinds of labour, and the differences within the dance sector as well. For example, senior female dancers might have more in common with other women in their community engaged in informal labour and housework, than they do with the younger “glamour” dancers from Bengaluru or with male *sangam* leaders. In terms of the sexual stigma they face, these dancers exist on a continuum with other kinds of stigmatised reproductive labour performed by women. Amongst *karagattam* dancers, the mode of entry into the dance form might produce fairly different outcomes for different dancers based on their caste. The same policy might also benefit each of these stakeholders in different ways. The advantage of a legal realist analysis is that it can demonstrate these complexities. Further research could offer even greater insights into how best to advance the interests of women in fields such as these.

The report documents key demands of the dancers we met, at a time when social entitlements and other forms of relief assumed particular importance for them after the pandemic. But their narratives showed far deeper concerns, revealing the precarious employment that both *karagattam* and *adal padal* dancers continually faced along with the complex moral and legal regulation of their performances. We hope this report contributes to material improvement in the circumstances of these dancer communities, with the recognition of their rights as workers and the realities of the stigmas attached to their employment. Ultimately, it is time we move beyond the vague and problematic focus on ‘obscenity’ and ‘vulgarity’, to recognise and support the people unfairly harmed by such policing.

# REFERENCES

- Arni, A. (2024) 'Taking Periyarism Seriously: The Dravidian Identity as a Universality', *Global Intellectual History*, pp. 1–22. doi: 10.1080/23801883.2024.2386600.
- Department of Art and Culture (2024a) *Tamil Nadu Folk Artistes Welfare Board*. Available at: <https://artandculture.tn.gov.in/tamil-nadu-folk-artistes-welfare-board> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Department of Art and Culture (2024b) *Folk Artistes Welfare Board Welfare Schemes*. Available at: <https://artandculture.tn.gov.in/folk-artistes-welfare-board> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Department of Art and Culture (2024c) *Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram*. Available at: <https://artandculture.tn.gov.in/tamil-nadu-eyal-isai-nataka-manram> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Department of Art and Culture (2024d) *Schemes implemented by Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram*. Available at: <https://artandculture.tn.gov.in/schemes-implemented-tamil-nadu-eyal-isai-nataka-mandram> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Diamond, S.L. (1999) *Karagattam: Performance and the Politics of Desire in Tamil Nadu, India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Doniger, W. (2011) 'From Kama to Karma: The Resurgence of Puritanism in Contemporary India', *Social Research*, 78(1), pp. 49–74.
- Government of Tamil Nadu Rural Development & Panchayati Raj Department (2024) *Schemes: State Schemes: Namakku Naame Thittam*. Available at: [https://tnrd.tn.gov.in/schemes/st\\_nnt.html](https://tnrd.tn.gov.in/schemes/st_nnt.html) (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Gowri, S. (2021) 'COVID-19: Contemporary Artistes Help Folk Performers Across Tamil Nadu Through the Second Wave', *The Hindu*, 27 May. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/society/artists-step-up-to-help-folk-performers-during-covid19/article34658534.ece> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Guérin, I. and Kumar, S. (2020) 'Unpayable Debt: Debt, Gender, and Sex in Financialized India', *American Ethnologist*, 47(3), pp. 219–233.
- Guérin, I., Kumar, S. and Venkatasubramanian, G. (2023) *The Indebted Woman: Kinship, Sexuality, and Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- The Hindu* (2016) 'Crack the Whip on Obscene Performers, Say Artistes', August 13. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Crack-the-whip-on-obscene-performers-say-artistes/article14567874.ece> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Hoskyns, C. and Rai, S. M. (2007) 'Recasting the Global Political Economy: Counting Women's Unpaid Work', *New Political Economy*, 12(3), pp. 297–317. doi: 10.1080/13563460701485268.

- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956* [India]. Available at: [https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15100/1/immoral\\_traffic\\_prevention\\_act\\_%28itpa%29\\_1956.pdf](https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15100/1/immoral_traffic_prevention_act_%28itpa%29_1956.pdf)
- Imranullah, M.S. (2014) 'Aadal Paadal 'Divides' High Court Bench', *The Hindu*, 24 October. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/aadal-paadal-divides-madras-high-court-madurai-bench/article6529852.ece> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Imranullah, M.S. (2016) 'Avoid Obscenity in 'Kathakali' and 'Karagattam': Madras HC', *The Hindu*, 18 July. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/Avoid-obscenity-in-%E2%80%98Kathakali%E2%80%99-and-%E2%80%98Karagattam%E2%80%99-Madras-HC/article14495864.ece> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Karthikeyan, D. (2016) 'Karakattam: A Folk Art Languishing in the Web of Morality', *The News Minute*, 1 August. Available at: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/karakattam-folk-art-languishing-web-morality-47443> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Kotiswaran, P. (2010) 'Labours in Vice or Virtue? Neo-Liberalism, Sexual Commerce, and the Case of Indian Bar Dancing', *Journal of Law and Society*, 37(1), pp. 105–124.
- Kotiswaran, P. (2013) 'The Laws of Social Reproduction: A Lesson in Appropriation', *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 64, pp. 317–333.
- Nag, M. (1995) 'Paradox of Eroticism and Sexual Abstinence in Hindu Culture', *Global Bioethics*, 8(1–3), pp. 21–34. DOI: 10.1080/11287462.1995.10800921.
- Narayanan, R. (2016) 'Madras HC's View on Kathakali, Karagattam, Seems Obscene', *Daily O*, 26 July. Available at: <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/madras-hc-kathakali-karagattam-south-india-p-devadass-sadira-bharatnatyam-aadi-mariamman-tamil-nadu/story/1/12010.html> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The New Indian Express* (2012) '17 Youth Held for Obscene Dance', 16 May. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2010/sep/03/17-youth-held-for-obscene-dance-183600.html> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The New Indian Express* (2017) 'Madras High Court Bans Obscene Dances During Dussehra Festival, Public Upbeat', 18 September. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2017/sep/18/madras-high-court-bans-obscene-dances-during-dussehra-festival-public-upbeat-1658873.html#:~:text=Madras%20High%20Court%20bans%20obscene,meaning%20songs%20for%20Dussehra%20celebrations> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Olson, C. (2007) 'Hindu Devotionalism, Tantra, and Celibacy', in Carl Olson (ed) *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 165–180.
- The Police Act, 1861* [India]. Available at: [https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2264/1/AApolice1861\\_\\_\\_05.pdf](https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2264/1/AApolice1861___05.pdf) (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Puri, S. S. (2015) 'Dancing Through Laws: A History of Legal and Moral Regulation of Temple Dance in India', *NAVEIN REET: Nordic Journal of Law and Social Research*, (6), pp. 131–148. doi: 10.7146/njlsr.v0i6.111057.
- Red Pix 24x7 (2021) *Folk Artist Protest Against Appointment of BJP Somasundaram in Department of Art and Culture*. 23 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOr2G00INc4> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Schwartz, S.L. (2004) *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.



- Sekaran, S. (2016) 'Judge Regrets Grant of Permission For 'Adal-Padal', *The New Indian Express*, 26 November. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2016/nov/26/judge-regrets-grant-of-permission-for-adal-padal-1542780.html> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Sharma, S. (2020) 'A Slippery Slope Meets Tamil Folk Culture', *Outlook India*, 14 March. Available at: <https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/entertainment-news-a-slippery-slope-meets-tamil-folk-culture-news-302948#:~:text=In%20the%20Tamil%20film%20Varuthappadaadha,village%20temple%20festival's%20cultural%20programme> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Charging Exorbitant Interest Act, 2003* [India]. Available at: <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/20494/1/2003tn38.pdf> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- Tamil Nadu Schools (2024) *Illam Thedi Kalvi*. Available at: <https://illamthedikalvi.tnschools.gov.in/Welcome> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The Times of India* (2012) 'High Court Refuses to Permit Dirty Dance Shows', 5 April. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/high-court-refuses-to-permit-dirty-dance-shows/articleshow/12540194.cms> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The Times of India* (2017) 'Stage Artists Say Police Curbs Hitting Art Form Hard', 10 January. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/coimbatore/stage-artistes-say-police-curbs-hitting-art-form-hard/articleshow/56430555.cms> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The Times of India* (2018) 'Folk Artist Files PIL Seeking Ban on Aadal Paadal Events', 19 September. Available at: [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/65863539.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/65863539.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst) (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- The Times of India* (2019) 'Petition Seeks Action Against Obscene Dancers', 6 April. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/erode/petition-seeks-action-against-obscene-dancers/articleshow/68746892.cms> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- UNESCO (2008) *Request by a Non-Governmental Organisation to be Accredited to Provide Advisory Services to the Committee*. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/NGO-90068-ICH-09.pdf> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- UNESCO (2023) *Report by a Non-Governmental Organisation Accredited to Act in an Advisory Capacity to the Committee on Its Contribution to the Implementation of the Convention*. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/60957-EN.pdf> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- UNESCO (2024) *India: Accredited NGOs Located in this Country*. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en-state/india-IN?info=accredited-ngos> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).


## CASE LAW

- 'A. Ramachandran v. The Superintendent of Police, Ranipet' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 15541 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/75256007/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'A. Thirupathi v. The Inspector of Police, Thirupathur Gramiya' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 14268 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/59585736/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

- 'Ashok v. The Superintendent of Police' (2014) Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No.16901 of 2014. Available at: <https://vlex.in/vid/ashok-vs-the-superintendent-577327202> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'C. Kalirajan v. Deputy Superintendent of Police' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 13428 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/6481e6fce2788a042a6513cf> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'C. Sathasivam v. The Superintendent of Police' Trichy (2023) Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No. 12535 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/20425811/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'D. Mohana Sundaram v. The Inspector of Police, Malasamuthiram' (2018) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 28477 of 2018.
- 'D. Veerappan v. The Inspector of Police, Namakkal' (2014) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 4204 of 2014. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/113765292/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'Devaraj v. State Rep by Inspector of Police, Erode' (2022) Madras High Court, Criminal Original Petition No. 22185 of 2022. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/117547992/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'G. Sivan v. The Superintendent of Police, Tiruppattu' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 16549 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/111428443/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'K. Poongudi v. The Superintendent of Police, Madurai' (2012) Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, Writ Petition (MD) No. 3768 of 2012. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/44097262/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'M. Muniraj v. The Sub-Inspector of Police, Kadathur' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 17521 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/64887e16d72ae126cda9942d/amp> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'P. Kuppan v. The Inspector of Police, Pochampalli' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 18833 of 2023. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/193242861/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'P. Thilagar v. Inspector of Police' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 19214 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/649c451aabb36f14367b58ff> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'R. Murugan v. The Superintendent of Police, Kallakurichi' (2022) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 19495 of 2022. Available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/165654648/> (Accessed: 13 December 2024).
- 'Rangith v. Inspector of Police' (2023) Madras High Court, Writ Petition No. 17309 of 2023. Available at: <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/64833853afbb5e393d1f3d6f> Accessed: 13 December 2024).



 [lawsofsocialreproduction.net](https://lawsofsocialreproduction.net)

 [lawsofsocialreproduction](https://www.instagram.com/lawsofsocialreproduction)

 [LawsOfSocialRep](https://twitter.com/LawsOfSocialRep)

 [lawsofsocialreproduction4773](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4773)

### **Contact Us:**

The Dickson Poon School of Law

King's College London

Strand

London

WC2R 2LS

United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7836 5454