

**THALAIMARAI**

Echoes of Generation

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## ABSTRACT

THALAIMARAI - Echoes of Generation

Farzana Valiyaveetil Yussuf

This dissertation accompanies *Thalaimarai* (Echoes of Generations), a research-creation film examining elder neglect and the practice of Thalaikoothal, a ritual in parts of rural Tamil Nadu, India in which an elderly person's death is deliberately hastened and later reframed through spiritual narratives. The title *Thalaimarai*, meaning "head covering," refers to the act of covering the head after death and gestures toward broader themes of concealment, ritual transformation, and cultural reframing that shape the practice of Thalaikoothal. Emerging from a childhood experience of witnessed abandonment, the project developed through sustained engagement with elders at Akshaya Trust in Chennai, India and through collaboration with folk artist R. Kaleeswaran (Ayya), who provided access to a firsthand account of Thalaikoothal.

Rather than employing conventional documentary methods, the film operates through mediated strategies including still imagery, spatial sound, shadow puppetry, Parai drumming, a traditional percussion form historically used to mark communal announcements and death, and Therukoothu, a Tamil street theatre tradition known for its stylized embodiment of moral conflict. These traditional forms function not as aesthetic embellishment but as culturally embedded narrative structures through which difficult truths can be collectively staged and processed. Central to the work is the methodological framework of the "distant mirror," a practice of ethical mediation that approaches traumatic or culturally sensitive material through reflection, collaboration, and positional awareness rather than direct exposure. The written component situates the film within sensory ethnography, trauma representation, and research-creation methodologies.

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I am grateful to R. Kaleeswaran (Ayya) for sharing his knowledge of Tamil folk traditions and for entrusting me with a story he has carried for many years. Working alongside him, the Therukoothu performers, the Parai drummers, and the shadow puppet artists from Kanyakumari were central to the development of this project. Their artistic practices form the core of this film. I thank the residents and staff of Akshaya Trust, Velappanchavadi, Chennai, for allowing me into their space and for the time and openness they offered. Their presence shaped both the direction and the ethics of this work.

I extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Daniel Cross, whose questions consistently challenged me to clarify the stakes of this project and its place within my practice. His guidance was instrumental in shaping this research-creation. I also thank Raj Kumar for his work on sound and for his early understanding of the project's conceptual grounding. My thanks to Sufiya, whose support and connections were essential to initiating and sustaining this research.

Finally, I thank the faculty and staff of the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University for providing the institutional support, resources, and intellectual environment necessary for this work.

*Thalaimarai is dedicated to those whose stories are carried quietly across generations.*

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## **VIEWING THE FILM AND VISUAL EXPERIMENTS**

The film *Thalaimarai* (Echoes of Generations) and the visual experiments documented in the appendices are available for online viewing.

**Access information and URLs can be found on page 62.**

References to works by other artists appear in the text and are documented in the Bibliography.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When I was a child in Kerala, India, there was a small shop near our house run by an older woman I called Ammachi. After school, I would take the same road and stop there without thinking. She would already be sitting outside, and when she saw me, she would smile and call me in. The shop smelled of fried snacks and old wood. She would begin telling stories, sometimes about people I had never met, sometimes about a past I could not fully picture. I did not grow up with grandparents, and she became the closest thing to a grandmother I had.

Then one day, the shop was closed. The house next to it stood empty. I kept going back, thinking maybe she was sick, maybe she would return soon. But days passed, and nothing changed. Eventually, the neighbors started talking, and the story came out in pieces. Her family had been struggling financially. They had left her at the roadside, simply abandoning her there. I did not understand what that meant at the time. I was too young to grasp the full weight of it. What I felt most was hurt that she had disappeared without saying goodbye, and confusion about why no one seemed particularly shocked by what had happened. That personal hurt made it easier to move on, to let the deeper implications remain unnamed.

The image stayed with me: someone who had been part of my daily life, suddenly gone, left at the side of a road where people simply keep passing by. It was my first encounter with something I could not yet articulate, the gap between what we are taught to believe about respecting elders and what actually happens to them when circumstances become difficult.

Years later, after moving to Canada at fifteen and spending six years building a life there, I returned to India with a different perspective.

Walking through the streets of Chennai, I began to see what had always been present but which I had not fully comprehended. Elders sitting outside temples with nowhere to go. Older people at bus stops with a particular stillness that suggested they were not really waiting for anything. Their presence had not changed; what had changed was my ability to understand what I was witnessing. What lingered in childhood as an unprocessed image was beginning to take conceptual shape. Some were clearly homeless. Others occupied situations I could not fully interpret but that felt precarious in ways I was only beginning to grasp.

What had been woven into the fabric of everyday life in Chennai, the elder at the corner chai stall asking for leftover food, the woman sleeping on temple steps with no family to claim her, the man pushing a cart with all his possessions, now demanded sustained attention. I realized that what happened to Ammachi was not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern. Upon returning as an adult, I was old enough to comprehend the structural dimensions of what I was seeing. Older people were being neglected, quietly pushed aside, or outright abandoned. Conversations about it were careful and indirect, framed as unfortunate but ordinary realities that required little explanation. The normalization itself was what unsettled me.

This is when the contradiction began to trouble me deeply. Indian culture places profound emphasis on respecting elders. It is embedded in the structure of joint families, where multiple generations live together under shared economic and emotional responsibility. It is encoded in

language, terms of address that carry built-in deference and hierarchy. It is reinforced through religious teachings that frame elder care as dharma, a sacred duty. Yet alongside these ideals were practices that contradicted them. Not only extreme cases such as abandonment, but everyday forms of neglect: withholding medical care because it is expensive, emotional withdrawal, financial exploitation, the gradual erosion of attention that signals someone is no longer valued. What struck me was not overt cruelty but quiet tolerance. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement not to look too closely. The gap between cultural ideals and lived reality was wide, and most people were stepping over it as though it were not there. I began to understand that my childhood experience was not simply about losing someone I cared about. It was an early encounter with this contradiction—a moment when the narrative I had internalized about family, care, and reverence fractured against lived reality. Ammachi was not only an individual loss; she represented a breakdown in the systems of care we claim to uphold, a crack in the social bonds meant to sustain communities.

This became the seed of my research. But it took time to understand what I was actually trying to do. At first, I only knew that I wanted to make work about elder neglect, to address the gap I had witnessed. I did not know what form it would take, how to approach it ethically, or whether I had the right to tell these stories as someone who had left India and built a life elsewhere.

The truth is that many families live under impossible conditions. In rural areas especially, poverty is not simply about scarcity; it is about being forced into decisions that should never have to be made. When families struggle to feed their children, when healthcare is inaccessible,

when younger members must migrate to cities for survival, caring for an elderly parent requiring constant medical attention can become genuinely overwhelming. Some families abandon elders not from cruelty but from desperation, believing there is no alternative. This does not make the act justifiable. It shifts the question from “Why would someone do this?” to “What conditions produce situations in which people feel they have no choice?” In the absence of institutional support, healthcare infrastructure, and social safety nets, families carry the full burden of elder care. When that burden becomes unbearable, abandonment can appear as the only remaining option. This structural reality coexists with cultural contradiction. Both shape how elder neglect manifests and persists.

My position within this inquiry is complicated. I left India. I built a life in Canada where I am not navigating these same pressures. I can afford to make art about elder neglect precisely because I am not struggling to provide care without resources. That distance grants perspective, but it also demands caution. I must resist simplifying or judging circumstances I no longer inhabit.

As I continued researching, I encountered a practice I had only vaguely heard of before: Thalaikoothal, a ritual in rural Tamil Nadu in which families hasten an elderly person’s death through specific methods, including oil baths and forced ingestion of liquids designed to resemble natural causes. I will examine Thalaikoothal in detail in Chapter 2, but learning about it reframed my understanding. The practice is deeply troubling. It operates through communal silence and spiritual justification, often framed through ritual and cosmological belief. Yet it emerges from the same structural conditions—the absence of alternatives—that underpin other

forms of elder neglect. Understanding its existence does not mean condoning it. It means recognizing that moral condemnation alone cannot address the systems that allow it to persist.

The past two years have been about finding ways to approach this material responsibly. I made three trips to Chennai between 2023 and 2025. I volunteered at the Akshaya Trust old-age home, not with a camera at first, just listening and spending time with residents. I experimented with different approaches such as recording ambient sounds, taking photographs that showed details, layering sound with still images. I met R. Kaleeswaran, Ayya, as everyone calls him, a folk artist and cultural organizer who personally knew someone connected to Thalaikoothal.

The work is situated in Tamil Nadu, South India, where the culturally embedded practice of Thalaikoothal persists within specific rural districts. Thalaikoothal refers to a ritualized hastening of death in which families deliberately accelerate an elderly relative's passing through methods designed to resemble natural causes. The practice is often framed within the language of mercy or release, particularly in contexts marked by economic strain, illness, and limited access to healthcare. While rarely discussed openly, it operates through communal silence and ritual transformation.

The narrative core of the film draws from the story of Kaaliamma, a woman whose death through Thalaikoothal was shared with me by Ayya. Her story is not presented as direct documentary testimony but is translated into performance through traditional Tamil forms including Therukoothu street theatre, Parai drumming, and shadow puppetry. These forms function as culturally embedded narrative structures through which moral conflict, communal

complicity, and ritual transformation have historically been staged and processed. Through this mediated structure, the project approaches material that resists direct representation while remaining attentive to cultural specificity.

This process of working indirectly, of using mediation and reflection rather than direct documentation, became what I call the "distant mirror," a methodology born from necessity. I needed distance to engage with material that was too painful to confront head-on, but I also needed that distance to be ethical, to protect the people whose stories I was working with. The distant mirror is not about hiding or softening the truth. It is about approaching difficult realities through reflection, creating space for viewers to engage without turning suffering into spectacle.

❖ The Research Question:

Through this trajectory, from Ammachi's disappearance to volunteering at Akshaya Trust, from meeting Ayya to collaborating with traditional performers, a central research question emerged:

*How can listening to culturally held stories of elder neglect be translated into a cinematic form that navigates care, distance, and personal responsibility?*

This question shaped every aspect of the project. Listening became the foundation of my methodology, understood not as the extraction of testimony but as a relational practice built over

time. Culturally held stories acknowledge that these narratives are not solely individual experiences, but are embedded within specific cultural frameworks that shape how they are understood and transmitted. Cinematic form refers to the use of sound, image, and performance to approach experiences that resist direct documentary representation. Finally, care, distance, and personal responsibility articulate the ethical tensions central to the project: how to remain close enough to listen attentively while maintaining sufficient distance to avoid exploitation, and how to take responsibility for representation without claiming authority that is not mine.

This dissertation unfolds through a research-creation film titled *Thalaimarai* (Echoes of Generations). The cultural contexts explored in the following chapters, elder care, abandonment, and the practice of Thalaikoothal, form the social and historical ground from which the film emerges. The work does not follow a linear trajectory; instead, it reflects an evolving process shaped by uncertainty, revision, and adjustment. The thesis paper therefore functions not only as a reflection on a completed film, but as an examination of how research-creation can engage with material that is deeply personal, culturally complex, and ethically sensitive.

## CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL CONTEXT AND TRADITION

### 2.1 THE UNSEEN LIVES

In December 2023, I made my first visit to the Akshaya Trust in Velappanchavadi, Chennai. My sister-in-law, Sufiya, was working in the IT sector at a company that partnered with non-governmental organizations, and through her I was able to establish contact. I arrived with a specific objective. I was searching for someone who had experienced or had direct knowledge of Thalaikoothal. I also needed to assess my own capacity to remain present in such a space without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. I needed to understand whether I could sit with elders living in conditions of abandonment and create work from that space responsibly.

What I encountered was not Thalaikoothal itself, but a quieter and socially normalized form of abandonment.

The residents presented themselves as content. Daily routines were structured and visible: morning exercises, shared meals, birthday celebrations. On the surface, Akshaya Trust appeared stable and communal. Yet beneath this order was a palpable weight. Each resident carried a history that had led them there. There was a performance of adjustment that did not entirely conceal displacement.

One older man, who had worked as a postman for thirty-five years, agreed to speak with me. He narrated his story calmly, in a tone that suggested repetition. After his wife passed away,

his relationship with his two sons deteriorated. He described emotional and physical abuse and showed me marks on his arms where they had struck him. Eventually, he left home. With no alternative support system, he brought himself to Akshaya Trust and asked for assistance.

What unsettled me was not only the violence he described, but the ordinariness with which he described it. His account carried resignation rather than outrage. During my time at Akshaya Trust, I recorded several similar conversations with other residents. While these interviews do not appear directly in the final film, they shaped my understanding of institutional abandonment and informed the ethical framework through which I approached representation. Selected audio excerpts from residents at Akshaya Trust are included in **Appendix B2**. The decision to mediate rather than include direct testimony emerged from these encounters and is developed further in Chapter 3.

This was not the ritual practice of Thalaikoothal, a culturally embedded form of hastened death examined later in this dissertation. No one had attempted to end his life. Yet as I sat with him and noticed the marks on his arms, I began to understand abandonment as a continuum rather than an isolated event. He had been beaten, displaced, and forced to seek refuge independently. He remained alive and articulate, yet the structural pattern he described mirrored the conditions that, in other contexts, can escalate toward more extreme outcomes.

After that conversation, the old-age home appeared differently to me. It was undeniably a site of care. Residents received food, shelter, and medical attention. They participated in shared routines. Yet it was also a site produced by fracture. Nearly every resident carried a version of

the same narrative: children who could no longer, or no longer wished to, provide care. Some framed their relocation as practical or mutual. Others spoke more plainly of rejection.

The question that brought me there—whether I could find someone who had experienced Thalaikoothal—began to feel insufficient. What I was witnessing was a recurring structure: elders removed from family systems under economic strain, interpersonal conflict, or exhaustion. The mechanisms varied. The outcome, isolation, remained consistent.

I did not find a direct account of Thalaikoothal at Akshaya Trust. What I found instead was a deeper understanding of abandonment as a patterned social response, one that echoed the unresolved memory of Ammachi and revealed how personal loss was embedded within structural conditions. The old-age home represents one legally sanctioned endpoint. It is institutional, visible, and often framed as responsible when families lack capacity. However, the pressures that lead to institutionalization—including financial precarity, limited healthcare access, and changing family structures—are the same pressures that, in rural contexts with fewer institutional options, can escalate toward practices such as Thalaikoothal.

Through Ayya's account of Kaaliamma's story, I encountered a further complication. Like the elders at Akshaya Trust, Kaaliamma was considered economically unsustainable. Unlike institutional abandonment, however, she experienced Thalaikoothal. The practice operates through cultural concealment and ritual reframing. The deceased may be elevated as a deity or protective ancestral presence. This transformation performs a dual function: it provides

spiritual justification and diffuses legal and social accountability. The elder is not described as abandoned but as transformed. The act is not framed as violence but as transition.

Such narrative reframing enables the practice to coexist within a broader cultural framework that simultaneously emphasizes both economic survival and reverence for elders. As Ayya described it, it becomes a form of hiding, a ritual language through which communities reconcile economic desperation with moral expectation. The violence is not denied; it is absorbed into symbolic elevation.

## 2.2 FINDING THE STORY

After my time at Akshaya Trust, I had developed an understanding of institutional abandonment, yet I had not encountered anyone able to speak directly about Thalaikoothal. Academic sources confirmed the practice's existence, often citing regional prevalence, statistical data, or media reports. However, they rarely detailed the procedural dimensions of the act, the cultural reasoning that sustained it, or the communal frameworks through which it was understood and justified. It became clear that a meaningful engagement with the subject required dialogue with someone situated within the rural social contexts where the practice persisted. I needed to understand not only the act itself, but the kinship structures, ritual logics, and collective permissions that allowed it to endure.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, through connections within Chennai's folk arts community, I met R. Kaleeswaran, known as Ayya. We arranged to meet at his home. Before discussing the practice, he questioned my motivations. Why return to such a culturally sensitive subject? Why

approach it from abroad? I spoke about Ammachi and about witnessing forms of abandonment as a child. I described the tension I had long perceived between the cultural rhetoric of elder reverence and the lived realities of families under strain. The conversation shifted when it became apparent that my interest emerged from personal history rather than detached academic inquiry.

When I described my difficulty in finding individuals willing to speak openly about Thalaikoothal, Ayya responded directly. The practice, he explained, is protected by layered social systems. Village panchayats (*local governing councils*), kinship networks, and shared communal understandings establish tacit structures of permission. Silence is not accidental; it is organized. Those who disrupt it risk retaliation or social exclusion. This reframed my understanding. Thalaikoothal was not simply an isolated act carried out discreetly. It was collectively sustained through normalized non-disclosure.

Ayya then told me that he knew of a specific case and had direct knowledge of the events. This marked a decisive shift in the project. Rather than pursuing generalized accounts, I was presented with the possibility of grounding the film in a particular narrative.

As our conversations continued, Ayya spoke about his longstanding work with traditional performance practices, including Therukoothu street theatre, Parai drumming, and shadow puppetry, as well as his support of rural artists through the Alternative Media Centre. I had already been considering mediated representation as a means of protecting identities and creating reflective distance. Within this context, performance ceased to be merely protective. It emerged

as a culturally embedded language capable of carrying the narrative itself. These forms are not ornamental additions. Historically, Therukoothu and related traditions have functioned as vernacular public pedagogy — transmitting epic narratives, ethical codes, and social history to largely non-literate audiences. In many villages, they have operated as a form of communal education, a kind of public archive through which moral conflict, collective grief, and socially fraught subjects could be staged and negotiated.

Ayya documented what he knew of the case in a semi-scripted format. This was not a fictional composite. It concerned a specific woman, Kaaliamma, whose life ended through Thalaikoothal. The details he provided, including her age, the family's financial precarity, the methods employed, the community's complicity, and her posthumous transformation into a deity, were drawn from his first-person lived proximity to the events and those involved. From this account, we began translating the narrative into performance structures informed by Therukoothu conventions, Parai rhythms, and shadow puppetry.

This collaboration shifted the project away from conventional documentary toward a co-constructed form of testimony. Ayya's lived familiarity with Tamil folk traditions intersected with my approach to cinematic structure, sound, and visual composition, discussed in later chapters. Kaaliamma's story emerged from this exchange. It is neither solely Ayya's narration nor solely my interpretation. It is a mediated reconstruction grounded in a factual case and articulated through culturally resonant forms that provide ethical distance.

The specificity of Kaaliamma's case is central to how the film operates. The narrative is framed as a story told to me by Ayya, knowledge entrusted rather than directly witnessed. This framing clarifies my position. I am not an eyewitness, but a recipient and translator of testimony. The use of traditional performance forms does not obscure this mediation. Instead, it makes it visible, signaling that the film is an intentional reworking of lived experiences into cultural language designed to hold difficult truths within a collective frame.

### 2.3 THALAIKOOTHAL: A CULTURAL SHADOW

Thalaikoothal is a practice found in rural Tamil Nadu, particularly in the southern districts, in which families deliberately hasten an elderly person's death through methods structured to resemble natural causes. The term derives from Tamil: *thalai* meaning "head" and *koothal* referring to bathing or cooling. In English-language scholarship and media reporting, the practice is often described as senicide, meaning the killing of elderly individuals (Chatterjee, "Thalaikoothal" 1843). This terminology, however, is rarely used within the communities where the practice occurs. Families instead frame the act through cultural and spiritual language that avoids direct acknowledgment of killing, positioning it as mercy, release, or ritual transition.

Although Thalaikoothal is regionally specific, the abandonment or killing of elderly individuals under conditions of prolonged famine, medical inaccessibility, and economic collapse is not unique to Tamil Nadu. Historical and anthropological research documents comparable practices across cultures during periods of famine, war, and social collapse, when older members of a community were perceived as unable to contribute economically or as placing additional

strain on limited resources. Anthropologist Anthony Glascock's comparative study of more than sixty societies found that in situations of critical scarcity, communities across distinct cultural contexts developed practices ranging from passive neglect to active killing, each justified as necessary for collective survival (Glascock 43-56).

Glascock's phrase "death by any other name" captures how such acts are culturally reframed to preserve moral coherence. Among some Inuit communities during severe food shortages, elders walked into the snow and families did not intervene, interpreting the act as voluntary sacrifice rather than abandonment. In historical Japan, *ubasute* involved leaving elders on remote mountains, framed not as expulsion but as spiritual departure. In Tamil Nadu, the ritual of *Thalaikoothal*, includes oil baths and forced liquids, are administered in ways intended to produce death that appears natural, often attributed to age-related decline. Within this broader anthropological pattern, *Thalaikoothal* represents a contemporary South Indian configuration of ritualized elder death, shaped by Tamil kinship structures, ancestor practices, and localized rural economies. After death, the individual may be transformed into a protective ancestral presence within the household. In some reported cases, families erect small shrines, a stone marked with vermilion powder, or cloth tied to a nearby tree to designate sacred status. Through this ritual reframing, the deceased is elevated rather than condemned, incorporated into the family's spiritual life rather than remembered as a victim of violence. The ritual does not erase the act, but it recodes it within a moral language that renders it socially survivable.

Situating *Thalaikoothal* within this broader historical pattern does not diminish its cultural specificity. Rather, it underscores how extreme economic and social pressures can

generate comparable responses across distinct societies. Its significance within this project lies not in its uniqueness, but in the specific cultural, ritual, and kinship frameworks through which it is enacted and interpreted in Tamil Nadu. Recognizing this comparative context is essential to understanding the methodological position of this project. The distant mirror approach emerges from the awareness that these practices operate within moral frameworks shaped by survival imperatives, healthcare inaccessibility, and structural poverty. I approach from a position in which such choices were never materially imposed upon my family. Acknowledging that distance is not an abdication of critique; it is a refusal to flatten cultural complexity into moral certainty.

Ayya explained that Thalaikoothal has existed in parts of Tamil Nadu for several centuries, though broader public awareness emerged only in recent decades. The practice is not uniform across the state, but concentrated in certain southern districts where poverty remains severe and access to medical care is limited. Within these regions, Thalaikoothal occupies a space between secrecy and shared recognition. It is seldom discussed openly, particularly with outsiders, yet its occurrence is widely understood within the community.

The methods employed are deliberate and structured. One approach involves applying powdered seeyakai oil to the elder's head under intense midday sun, weakening the body and rendering the person bedridden. This is followed by the forced consumption of water or coconut milk in continuous quantities, leading to aspiration pneumonia (Issac and Sandhya 105). Ayya also described a more direct method in which animal fat is tied around the nose and mouth, allowing oil to seep into the airway and inducing respiratory failure. Across variations, the

objective remains consistent: to produce death in a manner that can be attributed to natural decline. Hypothermia, aspiration pneumonia, or respiratory collapse leave minimal external evidence of violence, reducing suspicion (Ramalingam and Ganesan 225).

Ayya identified three primary motivations articulated by families:

- Mercy, when an elder suffers from prolonged illness and medical care is inaccessible, and death is framed as relief from suffering.
- Property, when inheritance disputes or financial pressures accelerate the decision.
- Burden, when continued care is perceived as economically unsustainable.

The transformation into deity or ancestral spirit following death is central to the practice's endurance. By incorporating the deceased into the spiritual architecture of the household, the act is repositioned as transition rather than termination. This reframing draws on longstanding Tamil traditions of ancestor veneration, yet within the context of Thalaikoothal it also performs a social function. It diffuses blame, redistributes moral weight, and integrates death into collective belief structures. Whether rooted in sincere conviction or pragmatic justification, the effect is consistent: the act becomes culturally protected.

The practice persists through a calibrated balance between shared recognition and formal denial. Within affected communities, its signs are widely understood, yet they are rarely named directly. Ritual language, spiritual reframing, and communal non-interference converge to describe the death as natural or divinely sanctioned. This collective maintenance of ambiguity

stabilizes the event within acceptable discourse and minimizes external scrutiny. Until recently, no specific statutes addressed Thalaikoothal directly. While prosecutable under homicide law, cases have rarely proceeded to conviction. Once death is ritually integrated into spiritual practice, challenging it legally requires challenging the community's religious framing, a move that risks social unrest and retaliation.

Thalaikoothal thus operates at the intersection of poverty, kinship obligation, ritual tradition, and silence. It is structurally enabled and culturally rationalized. For me, raised within a moral vocabulary that emphasized reverence for elders, this convergence remains difficult to reconcile. My childhood memories of witnessing abandonment within my own family did not involve ritual transformation or communal sanction, yet they exposed similar fractures between declared values and lived realities. Thalaikoothal amplifies that contradiction to its most extreme expression. It is both deeply unsettling and, when situated within the material conditions that produce it, tragically intelligible.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH-CREATION METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 APPROACHING THE UNAPPROACHABLE

The collaboration with Ayya resolved one immediate challenge: I now had access to a culturally grounded narrative connected to Thalaikoothal. Yet this access produced a more complex question. How can a film approach material that is ethically volatile, culturally embedded, and emotionally destabilizing without reproducing harm? The issue was not only how to represent the story, but how to inhabit the role of filmmaker responsibly within it.

My hesitation toward direct documentation did not emerge abstractly. It was shaped by an earlier failure. In my final year of high school in Vancouver, I was placed in an old-age home through a Media Arts program run by Leave Out Violence (LOVE). I entered with technical competence and creative confidence. I understood framing, lighting, editing, and interview structure. I believed that sensitivity and participant consent would be sufficient safeguards.

They were not.

Even when residents agreed to be filmed, the interaction revealed an imbalance I could not ignore. I controlled the camera. I determined what was recorded, what was excluded, and how it would be shaped in post-production. The footage belonged to me. I would circulate it. I would be credited. What began as documentation increasingly felt extractive. I was gathering fragments of lived vulnerability and reorganizing them within my own authorship. The ethical

discomfort did not arise from participant refusal. It arose from recognizing that access does not equal equity. That experience forced me to confront the limits of technical proficiency. Skill does not neutralize power.

Years later, when I returned to India and began working at Akshaya Trust in Chennai, I carried that earlier discomfort with me. Rather than entering with a camera, I approached the space differently. I volunteered without filming during my initial visits. My role was participatory rather than observational. I assisted with meal distribution, organized small activities, accompanied residents during evening routines, and remained present during extended periods of unstructured time. These encounters were not interviews. They were conversations unfolding gradually, often in fragments, sometimes in silence.

Across three research trips between 2023 and 2024, my relationships evolved in intimacy and complexity. Duration mattered. Trust was not granted; it had to be earned through repeated presence. At the same time, I remained aware that I was there as a filmmaker working toward a thesis project. That awareness did not disappear, but it became something I held cautiously rather than asserted. The work involved listening to repeated stories, responding to requests for assistance, and remaining attentive during ordinary moments. This sustained engagement reshaped my understanding of research. Knowledge did not emerge through singular dramatic testimony. It accumulated through repetition, patience, and relational continuity.

During this period, I began cautiously experimenting with form. Rather than filming faces, I recorded ambient sound: ceiling fans, distant traffic, utensils striking steel plates,

devotional songs playing faintly from a radio. I photographed architectural details: worn thresholds, shadows along corridor walls, the arrangement of slippers outside a room. I observed how bodies occupied space and how daily routine produced rhythm. Selected examples of these early field experiments are presented in **Appendix D**. These were not aesthetic afterthoughts. They were methodological decisions grounded in the recognition that proximity to trauma does not automatically justify visual capture. Research-creation practices such as those articulated by Chapman and Sawchuk, which position creative production as a mode of inquiry rather than illustration, provided an academic framework for understanding these experiments as research rather than preliminary sketches.

This was not passive immersion. It was a research practice structured by relational commitment. The labor of repeated presence, the withholding of the camera until ethically necessary, and the willingness to allow the environment to determine its own tempo constituted methodological formation. Expertise did not derive solely from theoretical reading; it emerged and was sustained through lived engagement. This does not mean that the film avoids proximity. Close-ups of elders' faces do appear. However, they are not structured as confessional moments. The camera lingers in stillness rather than interrogation. Faces are treated as presence rather than proof, as duration rather than disclosure. Wrinkles, pauses, and gazes are held without prompting explanation. The close-up becomes a study of time and embodiment rather than an extraction of testimony. In this way, intimacy is retained without converting vulnerability into spectacle.

As a child, my reaction to Ammachi's disappearance was dissociation. Distance was an instinctive strategy when comprehension felt impossible. In adulthood, that instinct became a

deliberate method. Distance need not signify avoidance. It can function as mediation. Rather than confronting trauma through direct representation, it can be approached obliquely, through reflection, translation, and aesthetic transformation.

This approach developed into what I term the distant mirror. The phrase echoes Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, in which the crises of the fourteenth century are examined to illuminate modern instability. While Tuchman employs historical distance as interpretive strategy, my adaptation relocates distance into aesthetic form. The mirror does not obscure reality; it refracts it.

On the artistic level, mediation becomes central. Puppetry, Therukoothu performance, song, fragmented imagery, and layered sound operate as interpretive filters. This includes formal decisions such as maintaining a locked, tripod-mounted camera during performances, allowing events to unfold without reframing or dramatic intrusion. Instead of presenting an elder's suffering as evidentiary spectacle, the film translates lived experience into stylized form. This decision addresses the problem of documentary authority. The conventional documentary close-up often implies unfiltered access to truth, yet it conceals the constructed nature of framing, editing, and narrative sequencing. By foregrounding performance, artifice, and fixed spectatorship, the film refuses claims of transparency. Instead of transparency, the film offers declared construction, an acknowledgment that every image and sound has been shaped through selection, collaboration, and restraint.

It signals that what is presented is mediated, collaborative, and interpretive.

Rithy Panh's, *The Missing Picture* provided a crucial precedent. In his film, Panh reconstructs memories of the Khmer Rouge genocide through clay figurines rather than archival footage. The figurines remain visibly handmade, emphasizing reconstruction rather than simulation. Panh's film clarifies that indirect representation can generate ethical depth precisely because it highlights mediation rather than concealing it. Absence becomes its own mode of presence.

Theoretical frameworks later provided articulation for practices already emerging intuitively. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory describes how subsequent generations inherit traumatic histories not through direct experience but through stories, images, and silences that shape subjectivity (Hirsch 5). My relationship to Ammachi's abandonment and to Thalaikoothal occupies this terrain. These are not events I enacted, yet they structure my ethical and imaginative orientation.

Sarah Pink's work on sensory ethnography further affirms embodied engagement as legitimate research practice. Pink argues that knowledge emerges through multisensory immersion, through attention to atmosphere, rhythm, and materiality (Pink 28–35). My time at Akshaya Trust was therefore not merely observational. It was sensory attunement. This attunement extended beyond the institution into the city and countryside: train journeys between districts, motorbike rides along rural roads, the hum of traffic in Chennai. These sensory transitions appear throughout the film not as illustrative cutaways, but as spatial grounding devices. Movement through these spaces situates the narrative within lived geography rather than

abstract argument, emphasizing that elder neglect and Thalaikoothal are not isolated events but embedded within material environments. Lived experience became expertise not through appropriation, but through sustained responsiveness to place, movement, and atmosphere.

The distant mirror thus operates simultaneously as emotional strategy, artistic device, and research methodology. It does not eliminate intimacy. It structures it. By introducing mediation, the film creates sufficient distance to prevent spectacle while preserving calibrated proximity necessary for ethical engagement. This methodology informed every subsequent decision. It shaped the choice to maintain a locked camera during performance rather than manipulate framing for dramatic emphasis. It guided the use of still photography and ambient sound in place of testimonial close-ups. It grounded collaboration with Ayya and traditional performers as co-creators rather than subjects. Each aesthetic decision reflects an attempt to negotiate care, cultural complexity, and personal implication without collapsing into accusation or detachment.

In the context of Thalaikoothal, where ritual itself transforms violence into culturally legible symbolism, the film adopts transformation as its ethical grammar. Here, transformation refers not to beautification or concealment, but to translation: the reworking of lived experience into mediated form in order to hold it without reproducing harm. Approaching the unapproachable did not require avoidance. It required transformation understood as ethical recalibration.

## CHAPTER 4: VISUAL APPROACH AND PERFORMANCE IN

### *THALAIMARAI*

The distant mirror shaped the ethical foundation of this project, but it also required a visual structure. Once direct documentary representation was set aside, I needed to determine what forms could carry the narrative without collapsing into spectacle or detachment. The question became not only what to show but how to show it.

*Thalaimarai* unfolds through two interconnected visual registers. The first draws from traditional Tamil performance practices, including Therukoothu, Parai drumming, and shadow puppetry. The second emerges from still photography and location-based audio recordings gathered during my research process in Chennai. These registers operate differently. Performance carries narrative momentum and collective voice. Photography and ambient sound introduce pause, reflection, and personal proximity.

Traditional forms offered more than aesthetic texture. They have historically served as mechanisms through which communities hold, circulate, and negotiate social knowledge, narrative traditions, and collective values. Rather than constructing a new visual vocabulary, I worked within these inherited systems, allowing their conventions to shape how the story could be told. Within performance itself, distinctions of embodiment become important. Live performance such as Therukoothu foregrounds dance, gesture, and full-bodied presence. Shadow puppetry, by contrast, flattens figures into silhouette. This visual differentiation between

embodied dance and mediated puppet form structures how intimacy, responsibility, and distance are distributed across the screen.

Still photography operates according to a different logic. The images were produced during my volunteer work and field research. They are not reenactments. They function as traces of attention. In the film, they interrupt, slowdown, and frame the unfolding live performance sequences rather than competing with them.

Together, these visual strategies translate the distant mirror into form. Performance reflects through tradition and stylization. Photography and sound reflect through lived presence and restraint. The following sections consider how each contributes to the film's negotiation of care, distance, and cultural complexity.

#### 4.1 TRADITIONAL FORMS AS VISUAL LANGUAGE

The decision to work with traditional Tamil performance forms did not arise from aesthetic preference alone. It emerged from the methodological position established in Chapter 3. If the film could not ethically rely on direct documentary testimony, then the narrative required forms already structured to hold moral tension, collective responsibility, and transformation. Therukoothu, Parai drumming, and shadow puppetry offered not merely visual texture but established cultural frameworks through which difficult realities have historically been archived, staged, and negotiated.

Ayya's Alternative Media Centre became the site where this possibility materialized. The Centre provides accommodation and informal education for students who have left formal schooling, many due to financial constraint. Alongside academic support, students are trained in traditional performance practices such as Therukoothu and Parai drumming. These forms are not relics but living practices. In communities where economic hardship restricts access to formal education, performance functions as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and generating income. Historically performed in streets and temple grounds, these traditions address communities directly in shared public space. The preservation here is not nostalgic but grounded in material necessity and continued cultural relevance.

Witnessing the students as they rehearse and perform clarified the direction of the project. Rather than constructing an external visual language to interpret Thalaikoothal, I could work within an existing one. Performance became a methodological solution. A Tamil story concerning a Tamil practice could be articulated through Tamil artistic traditions. This approach provided ethical mediation, protecting individuals connected to the narrative by translating lived experience into stylized representation. It also foregrounded the labor of artists who sustain these traditions under significant economic pressure.

Therukoothu, often translated as street theatre, originated in rural Tamil Nadu and remains an important folk performance tradition. It is characterized by elaborate costumes, bold facial makeup, heightened gesture, and vocal intensity. Historically, it stages narratives drawn from epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, externalizing moral conflict through

archetype rather than psychological realism. Characters do not function as individualized interior subjects. They embody positions within a moral field.

This structural emphasis on archetype and collective tension makes Therukoothu particularly suited to Kaaliamma's story. Rather than isolating her death as an individual tragedy, the form situates it within a communal system of action and consequence. Kaaliamma is visually centered within the performance sequences, her presence dimensional and embodied. Yet she is never presented as a naturalistic victim. The stylization signals representation. The audience encounters translation rather than reenactment. This is precisely what the project required: a cultural form capable of creating the reflective distance I describe as the distant mirror, but one emerging from Tamil tradition rather than imported theoretical abstraction.

#### ❖ Performance, Improvisation, and the Locked Camera

Therukoothu performers differ fundamentally from conventionally trained actors, and this distinction shaped how the film had to be made. In mainstream cinema, actors work from fixed scripts, repeat takes, and adjust performances in response to direction. Therukoothu operates differently. Performers work from a narrative outline but improvise extensively within it. They do not memorize lines in isolation; they inhabit stories transmitted through tradition, adjusting rhythm, emphasis, and gesture according to the energy of the moment and the response of the audience. This mode of performance privileges embodied knowledge over scripted repetition. As Ayya describes it, the performer enters a state of cultural being in which character emerges from long immersion in the form rather than from constructed psychological interpretation. To

interrupt this flow through repeated takes, directional correction, or fragmented coverage would not simply alter the performance; it would disrupt the form itself.

Recognizing this required a shift in my role as filmmaker. Rather than treating the performance as material to be shaped through cinematic control, I positioned the camera as a witness. The decision to lock the camera was therefore not only aesthetic but methodological. The frame remains static during the Therukoothu sequences. There are no zooms, no reframing, no inserted close-ups. The camera occupies a single vantage point within the temple ground, surrounded by people situated around me. I am one viewer among many. The film does not elevate the camera above the community; it situates itself within the communal field.

This approach respects the spatial logic of Therukoothu. The form is not structured for cinematic fragmentation. It is meant to be experienced in its entirety, with attention to how bodies move in relation to one another and to the ground they occupy. Gesture unfolds across space rather than within isolated facial detail. By maintaining a fixed frame, the film preserves the integrity of that spatial choreography.

The locked camera also aligns with the distant mirror methodology. Conventional documentary grammar often uses close-ups to intensify emotional identification, directing viewers toward singular expressions of suffering. Such framing risks narrowing complex social dynamics into individualized spectacle. By contrast, the static frame resists emotional manipulation. It does not demand intimacy through proximity. Instead, it allows the viewer to observe relational dynamics as they unfold collectively. Because Kaaliamma is visually centered

within these sequences, her presence anchors the frame. Yet she is never isolated through cinematic emphasis. She remains within a shared performance field, surrounded by other figures whose gestures, movements, and responses situate her within communal structure. The viewer witnesses embodiment without intrusion.

In relinquishing certain forms of cinematic control, the film adopts a different kind of authority. It does not assert interpretive dominance over the performance. It allows the performance to structure the image. The camera does not extract; it attends. Through this restraint, distance becomes generative rather than evasive. The performance is neither captured nor dissected. It is encountered.

### ❖ The Temple Ground

Identifying an appropriate location required more than logistical planning. Because the filming would take place in a small village near Pondicherry, approximately four hours from Chennai, permission was sought from the local panchayat before any arrangements were finalized. This step was not a procedural formality; it acknowledged that Therukoothu is not an extractable aesthetic object. It is embedded within village governance, temple space, and communal rhythm. With approval secured, the performance was held at the Shri Pachavazhi Amman Kovil temple grounds. This choice was both deliberate and necessary. Historically, Therukoothu is performed in temple courtyards or open communal land, where the audience and performer occupy a shared social space rather than a ticketed theatre. The temple ground is not

merely a backdrop; it forms part of the practice's spatial architecture. Performance unfolds within a sacred–secular continuum, where ritual, gathering, and storytelling intersect.

Maintaining this environment was essential. Had the performance been relocated to a studio or isolated setting, it would have been severed from the cultural ecology that sustains it. By situating the event within the temple grounds, the film preserves the relational conditions under which Therukoothu traditionally operates. The performers were not acting solely for a camera. Local villagers attended and positioned themselves alongside the filming apparatus. Their presence maintained the communal function of the event. This spatial arrangement shaped not only the viewer's experience but also my own position within the work. While I functioned as director, I was not external to the gathering. I stood within a community to which I belong, returning from Vancouver yet embedded in familiar ritual space. The audience visible in the frame is not a cinematic insert; they are integral to the event and occupy the same field as the performers, the camera, and myself. Spectatorship becomes layered: villagers observe the performance, the camera records the performance, and the eventual viewer observes both. This multiplicity of gazes aligns with the distant mirror. Meaning emerges through reflection and relational positioning rather than direct confrontation.

The refusal to transform the site into a controlled film set was equally significant. No artificial lighting was introduced. The crowd was not directed or repositioned. Environmental unpredictability was not corrected for aesthetic smoothness. These decisions resist the impulse to domesticate performance through cinematic polish. Instead, the film acknowledges that it enters an existing space rather than constructing one. In this configuration, the temple ground operates as more than a location. It becomes a mediating field between ritual practice and cinematic

translation. The viewer encounters not a staged reenactment but a performance unfolding within the social world from which it emerges and to which it remains accountable.

### ❖ The Performers and Embodiment

Kaaliaamma's story, as shared by Ayya, centers on a woman who became economically unsustainable within her family's structure. Her aging body, once productive within the household economy, came to be viewed as a burden rather than family. The decision to perform Thalaikoothal did not emerge from spectacle, but from financial strain, communal normalization, and ritual justification. When translating this story into performance, the question of embodiment became central: who carries her body on stage, and how?

In the Therukoothu tradition, all principal roles are historically performed by men. Female characters are embodied through codified gesture, costume, and vocal modulation rather than biological gender. This convention was maintained in the film. However, an unanticipated dimension emerged through the composition of the troupe itself. The performers who portrayed both Kaaliaamma and her daughter were transgender artists.

This was not a curatorial decision imposed for symbolic effect. It reflected the existing makeup of the troupe. Both performers had long histories of enacting female roles within Therukoothu. Through sustained practice, gesture and posture had become embodied knowledge rather than imitation. One performer described this simply: 'I am a whole human,' resisting reductive categorization. The statement resists rigid categorization and affirms performance as a

space where identity is practiced, expanded, and inhabited rather than concealed. While this condition may invite comparison to other cultural frameworks that recognize gender plurality, the film does not impose external terminology onto the performers' self-understanding. Their presence is grounded in the lived realities of the troupe and the tradition itself.

Their embodiment introduced layered complexity. A transgender performer enacts a woman whose life was deemed economically expendable within her own kinship structure. Gender here is not decorative casting. It intersects with the film's broader concerns about value, visibility, and social positioning. Bodies that exist outside normative structures carry the narrative of a body pushed outside familial survival systems.

Importantly, the film does not foreground the performers' gender identities through commentary or exposition. The camera does not isolate this aspect for didactic emphasis. Instead, embodiment operates within the conventions of Therukoothu. At the same time, the film includes close-up sequences during the preparation process. The application of makeup, the layering of costume, and the tying of ornaments are filmed in detail. These images do not aim to expose identity but to emphasize transformation as process. The close-up here draws attention to construction rather than to psychological interiority. The viewer witnesses the labor through which the archetypal figure emerges.

Therukoothu itself destabilizes naturalistic realism. Heavy makeup, elaborate costume, and codified gestures transform the human figure into a stylized presence. Kaaliamma is not presented as a mimetic reconstruction of a specific woman. She appears as a cultural figure shaped through performance conventions.

This stylization is crucial to the distant mirror. The exaggeration of costume and gesture signals translation rather than replication. Viewers understand that what they encounter is mediated. The emotional weight of the narrative is conveyed, while the specific identity of the real woman remains protected. Embodiment becomes interpretive rather than evidentiary.

The performers who enacted neighbors and relatives similarly moved between roles. Multiplicity is inherent to the form. A single body may represent different positions within the social field. This fluidity reinforces the understanding that Thalaikoothal is not reducible to a singular villain or victim. It operates within a communal structure.

By allowing Therukoothu's conventions to guide embodiment, the film avoids imposing external realism onto a culturally specific form. The body on screen does not claim to be Kaaliamma. It carries her story through a language already structured to hold collective moral tension. In this way, embodiment functions not as exposure, but as mediation.

#### ❖ Parai: Announcement And Sorrow (*Visual / Performance Focus*)

The Parai drum occupies a distinct position within Tamil cultural history. Traditionally used to make public announcements, it signaled events that required collective attention: festivals, royal decrees, communal gatherings, and death. Its sound does not whisper; it summons. It is an instrument of declaration.

Historically, the Parai has been closely associated with Dalit communities and was often restricted to contexts marked as ritually impure, particularly funerary rites and the announcement

of death. To play the Parai was to occupy a socially marginalized position, yet also to carry indispensable responsibility. The drummer made public what others preferred to avoid naming. In recent decades, the instrument has been reclaimed by Dalit activists and artists as a symbol of resistance and dignity, transforming a sign of caste stigma into one of cultural assertion (Sherinian 45).

This layered history matters in *Thalaimarai*. Kaaliamma's story concerns a woman whose life was ended because she was perceived as economically unsustainable. Her death, reframed as ritual, is absorbed into spiritual language to prevent legal and social scrutiny. By opening her narrative with Parai drumming, the film situates her story within a longer genealogy of socially marginalized bodies and suppressed histories. The drum precedes explanation. It announces that something must be heard before it is understood.

In the film, four drummers perform on the temple ground, moving as they play. Parai is not a stationary instrument. The drum is held against the body, tilted, struck at different angles, and activated through full-bodied movement. Rhythm emerges through motion. Watching the performers dance as they play reveals that sound and body are inseparable. The announcement is physical before it is verbal. Unlike the Therukoothu sequences, which are filmed with a locked camera, the Parai section is captured handheld. The camera follows movement rather than containing it. This shift in filming strategy reflects the nature of the form itself. Therukoothu unfolds within a defined performance field; Parai travels through space. The handheld camera responds to rhythm, remaining proximate to the drummers without staging them into compositional stillness.

This change in camera language does not contradict the distant mirror. It extends it. If the locked frame creates reflective distance through restraint, the handheld Parai sequence creates immersion through proximity. Yet even here, the camera does not aestheticize suffering. It follows the energy of announcement, not the spectacle of pain. The emphasis remains on collective address rather than individualized trauma.

Filming the Parai at the temple ground further situates the sequence within its cultural ecology. The sound reverberates across open communal space, reinforcing its function as public declaration rather than studio performance. The viewer does not encounter Parai as soundtrack decoration. It functions structurally. It prepares the ground for Kaaliamma's story, marking it as an event that belongs to communal hearing.

In this way, Parai operates as both narrative threshold and ethical positioning. Before the film speaks about Thalaikoothal, it insists that the audience listen. The drum does not explain. It summons.

### ❖ Puppetry: Neighbors, Gossip, And Community Complicity

The shadow puppet sequence introduces a distinct visual register within the film. Unlike Therukoothu, where Kaaliamma is embodied by a live performer and occupies the center of the frame, the neighbors and relatives appear as flattened silhouettes projected in shadow. This differentiation is deliberate. Puppets create a different kind of distance than live performance.

They are unmistakably constructed figures, eliminating the possibility of confusing representation with the actual individuals connected to the event. Their stylized movements and visible dependence on a puppeteer foreground mediation rather than conceal it.

In the narrative structure of *Thalaimarai*, the puppets embody the community members who gather, speculate, and circulate gossip about Kaaliamma's condition. Through conversation, repetition, and shared commentary, the act becomes normalized. Gossip functions as a mechanism of social alignment. It transforms private deliberation into communal understanding. The flatness of the puppet figure becomes conceptually resonant. They appear as individual shapes, yet their movements are guided from behind the screen. Visible but never fully dimensional, present yet partially obscured, they reflect how responsibility operates within collective structures.

Shadow puppetry has a long history in South India, where it has been used in temple and village contexts to recount epic and moral narratives. The form relies on silhouette rather than facial expression and abstraction rather than psychological realism. Characters stand in for social roles and ethical positions rather than individualized interior lives. This mode of storytelling allows complex moral tensions to be staged without isolating a single body as the site of accusation. Audiences recognize patterns of behavior and communal dynamics rather than focusing on singular blame.

Employing shadow puppetry to represent neighbors and relatives situates Kaaliamma's story within this broader cultural practice of mediated moral reflection. It also visualizes the

communal structure described in Chapter 2. Thalaikoothal persists not solely through individual decision but through shared language, ritual framing, and collective non-interference. The shadow form renders this diffusion of responsibility spatially legible. Figures overlap, converse, and recede into darkness, suggesting that accountability is dispersed rather than concentrated.

The use of shadow also resonates with the film's title, *Thalaimarai*, which gestures toward covering and concealment. The puppets are visible only because of light, yet their identities remain partially obscured. What is revealed is inseparable from what is withheld. Where Therukoothu centers Kaaliamma's embodied presence, puppetry externalizes the surrounding community. The contrast between dimensional performance and flattened shadow constructs a visual grammar of responsibility: the individual rendered visible, the collective partially concealed.

## 4.2 STILL IMAGES AND PHOTOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES

The still photographs in *Thalaimarai* originate from a larger body of work produced during my research in Chennai and rural Tamil Nadu. These images were not initially conceived as film inserts. They functioned as a visual journal of movement, attention, and encounter. Over time, this body of work developed into a photobook titled *Moonga*, which exists as an independent research artifact created during my MFA residency and accompanies the film. While selected images appear within the cinematic structure, the photographic practice itself operates as a parallel form of inquiry rather than supplementary illustration. Over time, this sustained photographic practice shaped not only the visual language of the film but also the ethical framework through which images were approached.

This approach aligns with what Sarah Pink describes as “emplaced ethnography,” in which the researcher’s bodily presence within specific environments generates situated knowledge (Pink 65). The photographs record not only external subjects but also my trajectory through space: corridors of Akshaya Trust, temple thresholds, roadside shrines, architectural fragments, and quiet domestic interiors. They index where I stood, what held my gaze, and how duration shaped perception.

Some images include elders at Akshaya Trust, photographed with consent and ongoing relational awareness. Their inclusion was not guided by a desire for visual completeness or representational authority. Rather, it was shaped by trust developed through repeated visits and participatory engagement. Other images focus on objects and environments: worn floors, barred windows, plastic chairs arranged in waiting formation. These details resist spectacle. They frame atmosphere rather than event and emphasize the spatial conditions within which lives unfold.

Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us that representation is always partial, shaped by decisions of framing and omission (Trinh 89). The photographs in *Moonga* and in the film do not claim objectivity. They are marked by selection, proximity, and restraint. By acknowledging this partiality, the work refuses the illusion of comprehensive documentation and instead foregrounds a situated perspective.

By presenting the photobook as **Appendix C**, the thesis isolates the photographic practice as a distinct component of the research-creation process. The film does not exhaust the

photographic inquiry; it translates only a portion of it into cinematic form. The remaining images extend the research beyond the screen, reinforcing that the visual methodology exceeds any single medium.

### ❖ Creating Motion In Stillness

One of the central visual experiments in *Thalaimarai* involves transforming still imagery into perceived motion. Early cinema relied on sequential still frames to produce the illusion of movement through persistence of vision (Anderson and Fisher 5). Rather than pursuing seamless animation, however, this project emphasizes interruption and material process.

During coursework at Concordia, I conducted a series of experiments in morphing, layering, and opacity modulation. These tests are documented in **Appendix A** (see Figure A1), where still images are manipulated to examine how motion can be suggested without conventional animation. The illusion of movement in these sequences emerges through the interplay of visual fragmentation and sound design. By interrupting visual continuity through material alteration, the image resists seamless progression, while temporal flow is sustained acoustically. As Michel Chion observes, sound has the capacity to activate static imagery, generating perceived dynamism even in visual stillness (Chion 112). In these trials, rhythm, ambient layering, and subtle sonic shifts provided continuity where the image deliberately fractured it. Movement is therefore experienced audiovisually rather than optically alone.

Although these early experiments did not fully achieve the spatial and conceptual precision I later pursued, they were formative. The process of testing motion through

fragmentation revealed how sound could sustain perceptual continuity across disrupted visual fields. This insight carried forward into the photographic strategies in *Thalaimarai*, where material intervention, layered opacity, and fractured sequencing reappear in more integrated form. What began as exploratory experimentation evolved into a structural component of the film's visual language.

The stretcher sequence in the final film extends this experimentation. I sourced a brief archival clip depicting individuals carrying what appears to be a wooden bier. Rather than incorporating the footage directly, I extracted alternating frames, printed them individually, cut them into strips, and re-photographed them (see Figure A6, **Appendix A**). The resulting sequence produces a fractured rhythm in which movement is implied but never seamless. This intervention aligns with Laura Marks' concept of "haptic visuality," in which images foreground texture and material presence over illusionistic continuity (Marks 163). The visible paper edges, slight misalignments, and stuttered progression call attention to mediation. The viewer is not invited to forget the image's construction. The experiment also operates as a research inquiry into archival manipulation, materiality, and ethical distance, even as it remains embedded within *Thalaimarai*.

The stretcher itself carries cultural weight. In Tamil funerary practice, the bier marks transition from life to ritual passage. By fragmenting and reconstructing the image, the sequence mirrors the broader methodology of the project: difficult histories are neither erased nor reproduced intact, but transformed through material intervention.

In this sense, motion in stillness becomes more than a formal experiment. It reflects the project's broader engagement with histories that cannot be approached directly. The fractured progression resists seamless narrative closure, just as the film resists unmediated representation. Movement is suggested but never fully resolved; continuity is constructed rather than assumed. This visual strategy parallels the distant mirror methodology, where proximity is negotiated through transformation rather than exposure. The image does not animate the past into coherence. It allows it to persist as partial, interrupted, and materially present. Through this approach, motion becomes not spectacle but inquiry, and stillness becomes a site of ethical attention.

#### ❖ Photographs: Different Temporalities

While the previous section examined how still images can generate the illusion of motion through fragmentation, the photographic passages in *Thalaimarai* also operate in the opposite direction: they suspend movement entirely, altering the film's temporal rhythm. Performance unfolds in continuous time. It develops through gesture, rhythm, and collective movement. Photography, by contrast, arrests duration. It isolates a moment and suspends it. The alternation between these two modes creates a shifting experience of time for the viewer.

In certain passages, a single photograph remains on screen longer than narrative convention would dictate. This sustained stillness interrupts momentum and resists emotional escalation. The viewer is asked not to follow action but to inhabit pause. In these moments, the image does not function as illustration. It becomes a site of contemplation. The extended

duration foregrounds details that might otherwise be overlooked: posture, spatial arrangement, light falling across surfaces, the quiet geometry of institutional life.

At other moments, the photographs appear in succession. Similar frames repeat with subtle variation. Corridors reappear. Plastic chairs remain arranged in rows. Thresholds recur. This repetition produces a different temporal effect. Rather than suspension, it suggests accumulation. Days blur into one another. The rhythm of institutional time becomes perceptible not through dramatic incident, but through recurrence. The film thus moves between temporal compression and expansion, using stillness to articulate both waiting and repetition.

This modulation of time reflects the broader logic of the distant mirror. Instead of driving the viewer forward through narrative urgency, the film periodically withdraws into stillness. The photograph creates reflective space between performance sequences, preventing emotional saturation and encouraging slower engagement. It functions as a counterpoint to theatrical embodiment, reminding the viewer that the story emerges from lived environments rather than from performance alone. The existence of *Moonga* as a photobook further extends this temporal inquiry. In the book, images are encountered through tactile progression. The reader determines pace, lingers, returns, or moves forward at will. In the film, duration is structured. In print, duration is chosen. Together, these forms explore how time shapes perception. The same image, when held on a screen or held in the hand, generates different modes of attention.

Through this interplay, photography does not compete with performance. It recalibrates it. The still image interrupts spectacle, diffuses intensity, and situates the narrative within

material space. In doing so, it sustains the ethical balance the project seeks to maintain: proximity without intrusion, presence without exposure. Importantly, these photographs are not detached aesthetic exercises. They emerged from a return. The camera moved through spaces that had once felt familiar and later estranged: temple courtyards, roadside shrines, institutional corridors. What began in childhood as an experience I could not comprehend became, years later, a deliberate act of looking. The images record not only elders and environments, but the act of returning to them with different awareness.

In this sense, the photographic work anchors the film in lived encounters. The distant mirror does not float above experience; it grows from it. The still image becomes a site where memory, fieldwork, and formal inquiry converge. It is both trace and translation, shaped by the movement from childhood witness to adult researcher working within the community.

## CHAPTER 5: SOUND AND AUDITORY EXPERIENCE

### 5.1 SOUND AS NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL PRESENCE

The visual strategies in *Thalaimarai* rely on mediation, stylization, and restraint. The sound design, however, operates through spatial immersion. Rather than reinforcing visual distance, it constructs a field of acoustic proximity that situates the listener within the environments the film engages.

Binaural recording became central to this approach. Using two microphones positioned to approximate human ears, binaural techniques capture subtle spatial cues that allow listeners, particularly through headphones, to perceive depth and directionality. Sounds are not experienced as flat layers but as located events within three-dimensional space. A footstep passes behind the listener. A voice seems to lean in from the side. A ceiling fan hums overhead. Spatial perception becomes part of narrative structure.

This method aligns with the project's broader ethical concerns. The film avoids intrusive visual proximity; it does not rely on close-ups of vulnerable faces to produce emotional intensity. Yet it does not seek detachment. Through binaural recording, the acoustic environment carries presence without requiring exposure. The listener is placed within corridors, beside temple grounds, inside rooms where air moves slowly through concrete walls.

Salomé Voegelin argues that listening positions the subject within sound rather than outside it, making detachment difficult (Voegelin 4). Sound surrounds and implicates. In the

context of Akshaya Trust, this insight became practical rather than theoretical. My research there was grounded in sustained presence. I listened before I recorded. I learned the institution's rhythms through repetition: utensils striking metal plates, murmured conversation, devotional music filtering through distance. Binaural recording allowed these textures to remain spatially intact.

This creates a deliberate tension within the distant mirror methodology. Visual form introduces interpretive distance through performance and stylization. The acoustic field, by contrast, generates immediacy. Yet that immediacy remains technologically mediated. Headphones remind the listener of constructed presence. One occupies the space acoustically while remaining physically elsewhere. The effect is neither raw immersion nor detached observation, but a calibrated form of proximity.

Laura Marks' writing on haptic experience is relevant here (Marks 162). While often discussed in relation to visual texture, the concept extends to sensory encounter more broadly. The sound design in *Thalaimarai* does not prioritize informational clarity alone. It foregrounds texture, reverberation, and atmospheric density. Echo becomes expressive. Distance between sound sources becomes meaningful. The environment is not background; it is structural.

In a film concerned with practices that convert violence into ritual language, the acoustic register preserves what cannot be visually displayed. Architecture speaks through reverberation. Silence carries weight. Listening becomes a form of ethical attention. Rather than compelling viewers to look more closely at suffering, the film invites them to inhabit the spaces in which that suffering circulates.

The movement from childhood witness to adult researcher is echoed here. What once registered as confusion now becomes deliberate listening. Binaural recording transforms that listening into form. This orientation toward listening did not emerge fully formed. It developed through earlier experimentation with spatial sound.

An earlier sound experiment that informed this approach was developed in the short work *Kaazcha* (Malayalam for “seeing”), included as supplementary material (see **Appendix B1**). The title signals the conceptual inversion at the core of the experiment: an exploration of “seeing” through sound. Created prior to the formal development of *Thalaimarai*, the piece investigated spatial immersion through constructed binaural design. Ambient recordings gathered during my time in Kerala formed the foundational layer of the composition. These were combined with selected online archival materials to build a narrative soundscape centered on a solitary figure seated at a tea stall. Around this figure, radio broadcasts, surrounding conversations, environmental textures, and the gradual movement of a protest procession unfold spatially. The work examines how layered sound can generate social density and narrative tension without reliance on visual imagery.

The recordings used in *Kaazcha* were not originally captured for binaural reproduction. Consequently, the spatial field was shaped primarily through exploratory post-production techniques rather than optimized three-dimensional recording practices. Depth and directionality were constructed through panning, equalization, reverberation, and dynamic layering to simulate embodied presence. The experiment prioritizes atmospheric storytelling over technical precision, and headphone listening is recommended to experience its intended spatial effect.

Although *Kaazcha* operates as a standalone experiment, it functioned methodologically as groundwork for *Thalaimarai*. It revealed both the expressive possibilities and the constraints of constructed spatial sound. More significantly, it demonstrated how acoustic layering could produce narrative presence while maintaining visual restraint. This realization became foundational to the later development of binaural recording in *Thalaimarai*, where spatial immersion is pursued not as technical novelty but as an ethical strategy aligned with the distant mirror framework.

## 5.2 BINAURAL RECORDING, WHISPER, AND SPATIAL INTIMACY

If binaural recording situates the listener within space, the film's vocal and atmospheric design structures how memory moves through that space. In *Thalaimarai*, sound operates not simply as accompaniment but as temporal layering. The auditory register becomes a site where recollection, ritual, and present inquiry coexist. The voiceover, delivered in a restrained whisper, carries a poetic cadence rather than documentary assertion. It does not present events in linear clarity. Instead, it reflects, hesitates, and circles around what resists direct articulation. Meaning is approached rather than imposed.

This tonal choice is deliberate. The subject matter involves practices sustained through indirect language and communal silence. To narrate such material declaratively would contradict its cultural conditions. Brandon LaBelle suggests that the whisper contracts acoustic space, drawing the listener inward while maintaining vulnerability (LaBelle 48). In the film, the

whisper performs this contraction by creating intimacy without theatrical emphasis. The listener must lean in, engaging the material through attentiveness rather than passive reception.

Meaning is approached rather than imposed.

The poetic quality of the voiceover signals that it emerges from memory rather than report. The childhood experience of witnessing abandonment did not arrive as analysis but as atmosphere, held in sensory fragments rather than structured explanation. The language in the film therefore does not seek reconstruction but resonance. Pacing, breath, and restraint acknowledge that memory persists first as sensation before it becomes interpretation. The voice does not attempt to resolve what was once incomprehensible; it allows uncertainty to remain present within the listening experience.

Beneath portions of the voiceover, another sonic layer becomes perceptible: dhikr, a form of devotional recitation in Islam involving rhythmic repetition of phrases remembering God. In many Muslim communities, collective recitations are held on the fortieth day after a death, marking a transitional moment within the mourning cycle. This sound is not included as ethnographic reference but as lived inheritance. I am Muslim, and the cadence of dhikr forms part of the acoustic structure through which I understand death, accountability, and remembrance. It exists in memory as embodied repetition, breath synchronized across bodies, phrases returning to hold what cannot be resolved through explanation alone. The recitation is not foregrounded or translated in the film. It remains partially submerged beneath the voice, woven into the acoustic environment rather than isolated as a discrete subject. Its presence

introduces a parallel ritual temporality. While Thalaikoothal transforms the deceased into a protective deity within one cultural framework, the dhikr invokes another mode of remembrance structured around prayer, repetition, and submission before God. These systems are not positioned in opposition but occupy the same acoustic field. The film allows them to resonate together, acknowledging plurality without forcing comparison or resolution.

At the same time, the inclusion of dhikr carries a personal dimension that operates beneath theoretical framing. As a child, I remember Ammachi through sensory impressions: the smell of fried sweets, the texture of old wood, the warmth of unsolicited affection. Her care did not arrive as articulated instruction; it was given freely and received without analysis. Only later, through returning and re-entering these cultural spaces as an adult, did I begin to understand the weight of what had been offered. The dhikr functions in part as an act of return. If her presence shaped my early understanding of generosity through embodied memory, then placing prayer within the film becomes a way of holding her within remembrance rather than abandonment. It does not repair what occurred, nor does it sanctify it. Instead, it acknowledges that memory and ritual are intertwined and that care can be reciprocated through the structures one inherits.

This layering reflects the plurality shaping the project's perspective. My return to Tamil Nadu was not culturally neutral; it was informed by migration, religious identity, and multiple inherited ways of understanding death and responsibility. Allowing the dhikr to remain beneath the voice acknowledges that plurality without foregrounding it as an argument. The soundscape carries it quietly as part of the structure of listening. In doing so, it mirrors how certain forms of care operate: not announced or explained, but present, shaping perception from within.

Ambient recordings from Akshaya Trust further anchor the work in live encounters. Repeated sounds such as utensils, footsteps, and devotional music persist beneath performance sequences, preventing ritual enactment from detaching from the material environment. The soundscape becomes layered memory, bringing together childhood witness, field research, religious ritual, and aesthetic translation within the same auditory plane.

Through whisper, dhikr, ambient texture, and silence, sound becomes the medium through which proximity and distance are negotiated. The film does not rely on visual exposure to convey weight. Instead, memory circulates acoustically, extending the distant mirror into the auditory register.

### 5.3 PARAI: (*Sound / Post-Production Focus*)

The Parai sequence represents the most complex sonic construction in the film, the point at which cultural performance, direct location recording, and post-production design converge most deliberately. What begins as a live performance filmed at the temple ground in Ezhumedu becomes, in the completed film, a layered acoustic structure built from the materials of that specific moment. The sequence retains the immediacy of its origin while functioning as a constructed sonic field shaped for cinematic reception.

The foundation remains the direct location sound recorded during the performance itself. Four Parai drummers performed alongside musicians playing the urumi, a traditional hourglass drum whose higher, sustained tone contrasts with the deeper resonance of the Parai. The

performers wore chilanga, ankle bells whose metallic articulation punctuates the rhythmic base of the percussion. All of this was captured as it occurred. No studio instruments were added, and no overdubbing replaced the live environment. What was present at Ezhumedu is what entered the recording.

In post-production, the recordings were separated into component layers, cleaned for clarity where necessary, and reassembled with attention to internal balance. The aim was not to smooth away the grain of live performance but to articulate relationships within the sound field. The Parai anchors the lower frequencies; the urumi sustains tension through the middle register; the chilanga cuts through with high-frequency accents. Ambient temple sounds remain embedded, preserving spatial depth. These elements were layered relationally rather than sequentially, allowing meaning to emerge from juxtaposition. In this sense, the sequence operates as sound montage, where interaction between layers generates structure rather than simple accompaniment (Vertov 67).

Ayya's vocal cry was recorded in the same location as the drums. His introduction to Kaaliamma's story occupies a space between lament and proclamation. It resists conventional melody, carrying instead the tonal intensity of oral transmission. In post-production, his voice was isolated and reintroduced into the layered mix with a restrained echo. The echo does not function as dramatization but as extension. It introduces temporal depth, suggesting that the story reverberates beyond the singular event of performance. His voice does not dominate the percussion as explanatory narration; it remains embedded within the rhythmic field, one element among others.

The rhythmic intensity of the Parai produces what Martin Clayton and colleagues describe as entrainment, a bodily synchronization between listener and pulse (Clayton et al. 15). This physiological alignment precedes cognitive processing. The drums register first in the body before narrative comprehension follows. In this way, the sequence functions as a threshold. It prepares reception through vibration rather than exposition.

Within the larger structure of the film, this moment marks a shift in how the distant mirror operates. Earlier, mediation relied on visual restraint and stylization to create reflective distance. In the Parai sequence, immersion and mediation coexist. The listener is drawn into rhythmic proximity while remaining aware of constructed layering and studio intervention. Distance does not disappear; it becomes permeable. The viewer is neither outside the material nor absorbed without awareness.

By retaining and reshaping direct location sound rather than replacing it with a composed score, the film preserves cultural specificity. These sounds belong to Ezhumedu, to that temple ground, to those performers. Post-production serves not to universalize them but to carry their particularity into the cinematic space with clarity and care. The sequence thus enacts the project's broader movement: from witness to return, from silence to articulation, from separation to negotiated proximity.

## CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION AND CONTRIBUTION

When I began this MFA program, my intentions were loosely defined. I planned to travel to Chennai and, if possible, encounter someone with direct experience of Thalaikoothal. At that stage, I had not fully acknowledged my personal history—my relationship to Ammachi and my experience of witnessing abandonment in childhood—as central to the research. I treated those memories as background rather than as methodological entry points. The process of making the film gradually altered that position. The distant mirror did not emerge as a theoretical framework applied from the outset; it developed as a practical response to material that felt emotionally destabilizing, culturally complex, and ethically volatile. Direct confrontation through conventional documentary methods felt insufficient, yet disengagement was not possible. Mediation became necessary. What began as a strategy for approaching difficulty evolved into a method of inquiry that reshaped both my understanding of Thalaikoothal and my relationship to it.

Through performance, sound, photographic fragmentation, and collaborative translation, I came to understand Thalaikoothal not simply as an isolated act but as a structure embedded in economic strain, ritual language, communal silence, and inherited systems of belief. The distant mirror created space to examine how violence can be reframed as ritual and how ritual can function as social stabilization under conditions of scarcity. It allowed me to analyze the cultural mechanisms surrounding the practice without collapsing them into either condemnation or justification.

This reframing also transformed how I hold Ammachi's abandonment. As a child, I experienced her disappearance as rupture and confusion. Through research-creation, that memory became situated within broader patterns of elder neglect and survival economies. The method did not excuse what happened, but it enabled me to recognize how individual events are entangled with structural pressures that exceed personal intention.

At the same time, the process reshaped how I understand my homeland as an adult returning after migration. What once appeared as isolated incidents or moral failures revealed themselves as embedded within logistical realities: healthcare access, property disputes, generational migration, and economic compression. This shift in perception directly influenced how I navigated the thesis. It informed where I positioned the camera, how I approached collaboration, and when I chose mediation over exposure. The distant mirror became not only a representational strategy but also a framework through which I recalibrated my relationship to home.

The process also clarified the limits of my position. I may comprehend, to some extent, the framing of Thalaikoothal as mercy in contexts where elders endure prolonged suffering without access to medical care. However, motivations tied to property disputes or financial reduction operate within logics I cannot claim to inhabit. My perspective is shaped by migration, urban life, Canadian education, and the institutional privilege of studying and creating art about survival rather than negotiating it daily. The distant mirror does not eliminate that distance; it renders it visible. For this reason, the film does not attempt to explain Thalaikoothal from within. Instead, it offers an encounter shaped by partial understanding and ethical restraint, making

visible the tension between cultural reverence and lived contradiction without presuming authority over either.

The project contributes to research-creation methodology through this calibrated mediation. The distant mirror demonstrates that structured distance can enable sustained engagement with material that might otherwise overwhelm or exploit. Mediation through traditional performance, spatial sound, still imagery, and reenactment did not dilute the subject; it generated analytic and affective insight. By refusing the illusion of documentary transparency, the project foregrounds interpretation as an ethical practice.

Traditional forms such as Therukoothu, Parai, and puppetry functioned not as ethnographic objects but as methodological agents. These forms have historically processed moral tension within Tamil communities, and working within them shifted the project away from extraction and toward collaboration. Similarly, sound operated as an epistemological tool. Binaural recording, rhythmic entrainment, devotional layering, and ambient texture produced embodied modes of understanding that visual framing alone could not achieve. Through this process, I came to understand research as calibration: an ongoing negotiation between proximity and restraint.

The project has clear limitations. It does not resolve the contradictions surrounding Thalaikoothal, nor does it offer policy intervention or comprehensive economic analysis. Some aesthetic experiments remain rough, and certain visual sequences reveal the constraints of working with existing material. Yet that roughness mirrors the instability of the subject itself.

The film resists polish where polish would imply authority or closure. Several questions remain unresolved, including how culturally specific work can remain accessible without flattening its particularity, how collaborative authorship can be acknowledged while maintaining accountability, and what responsibilities extend beyond the completion of the work. Although the film bears my name, it emerged through collaboration, translation, and mediation across multiple registers. As Roland Barthes argues in “The Death of the Author,” a text does not belong solely to its maker but is activated through interpretation ((Barthes 147). Thalaimarai similarly exceeds my initial intentions; its meaning will shift across audiences and contexts. These uncertainties are not failures but conditions of the project’s ethical terrain.

Making Thalaimarai did not erase the image of Ammachi at the roadside. What changed was my relationship to that image. The distant mirror transformed an unprocessed childhood rupture into sustained inquiry. I now understand my position as neither detached observer nor cultural insider, but as someone implicated through inheritance, migration, and privilege. That implication requires ongoing humility regarding what I can know, what I cannot, and which stories remain inaccessible. This project does not conclude the inquiry into elder neglect or Thalaikoothal. It marks the beginning of a practice shaped by that roadside memory—a commitment to return, to listen, and to hold difficult histories without turning away.

\*\*\*\*\*

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## FILM ACCOMPANYING THIS DISSERTATION

Thalaimarai | 27 min | 2025

[\*Link\*](#)

# APPENDIX A

*IMAGE ILLUSION OF MOTION  
EXPERIMENT*



## Motion Sequence

The illusion of motion in this sequence is produced through the interplay of still imagery and sound. Visual fragmentation activates perceptual mechanisms associated with motion inference, while the sound design sustains temporal flow, allowing movement to be experienced audiovisually rather than optically alone.

[LINK](#)

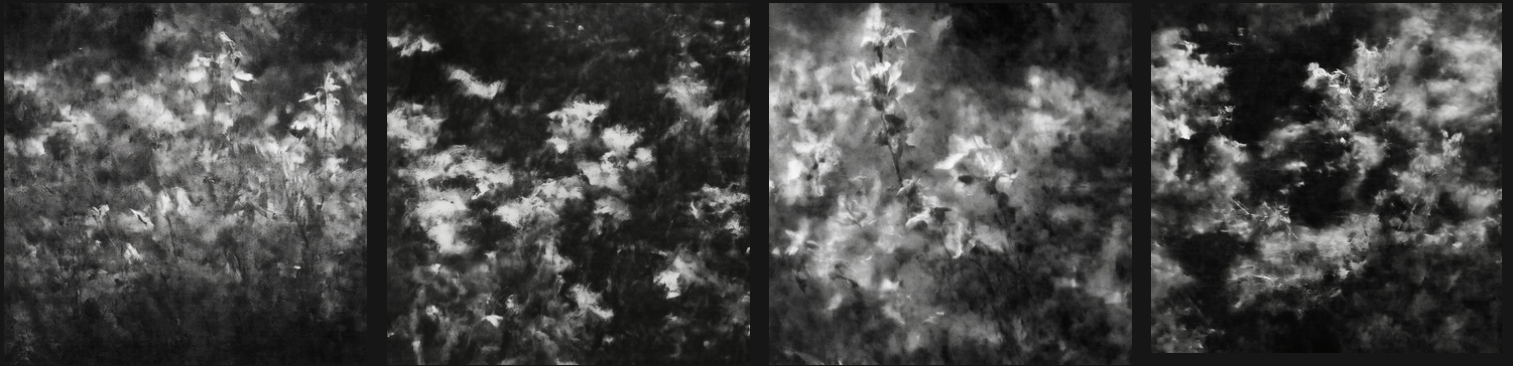


Figure A1. Original photographs: Friends | Theyyam, Kerala, 2023-24

[Return to Text](#)



Figure A2. Original Photograph (Wildflowers, Akshaya Trust, Chennai, 2024).



Digitally manipulated series examining progressive abstraction through blur and texture overlay.



Figure A3 and A4. Original Photograph (Coconut Grove with Small Structure, Kerala, 2024).



Digital composite images developed in Photoshop and Illustrator by layering and manipulating the original photographs (A3–A4), exploring atmospheric depth and spatial ambiguity through digital intervention instead of in-camera methods.

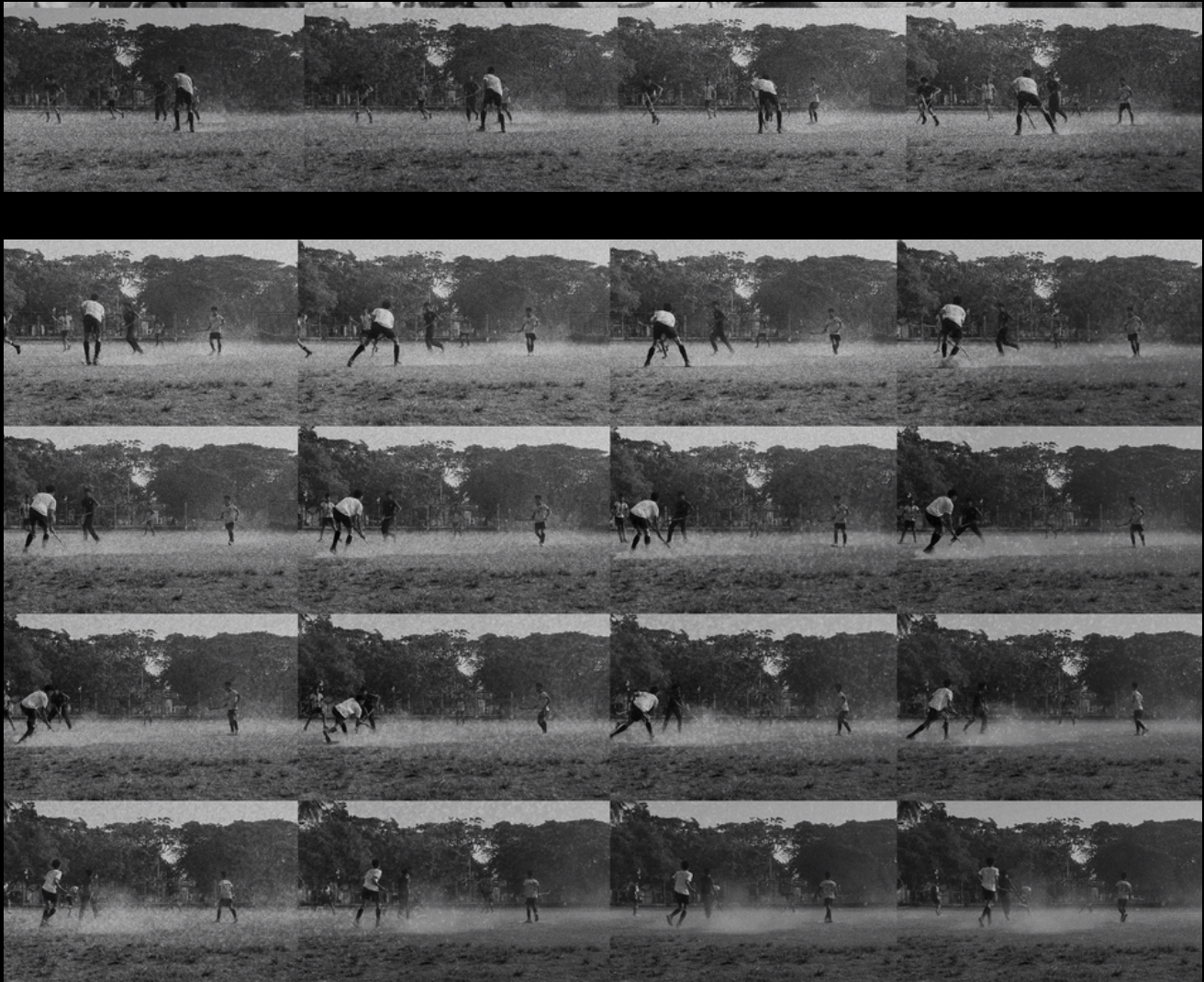


Figure A5. Contemporary Footage Sequence (Cricket Players, Chennai).

Self-recorded material was altered using the same print–cut–rephotograph process and was never re-recorded, emphasizing motion fragmentation through material intervention.

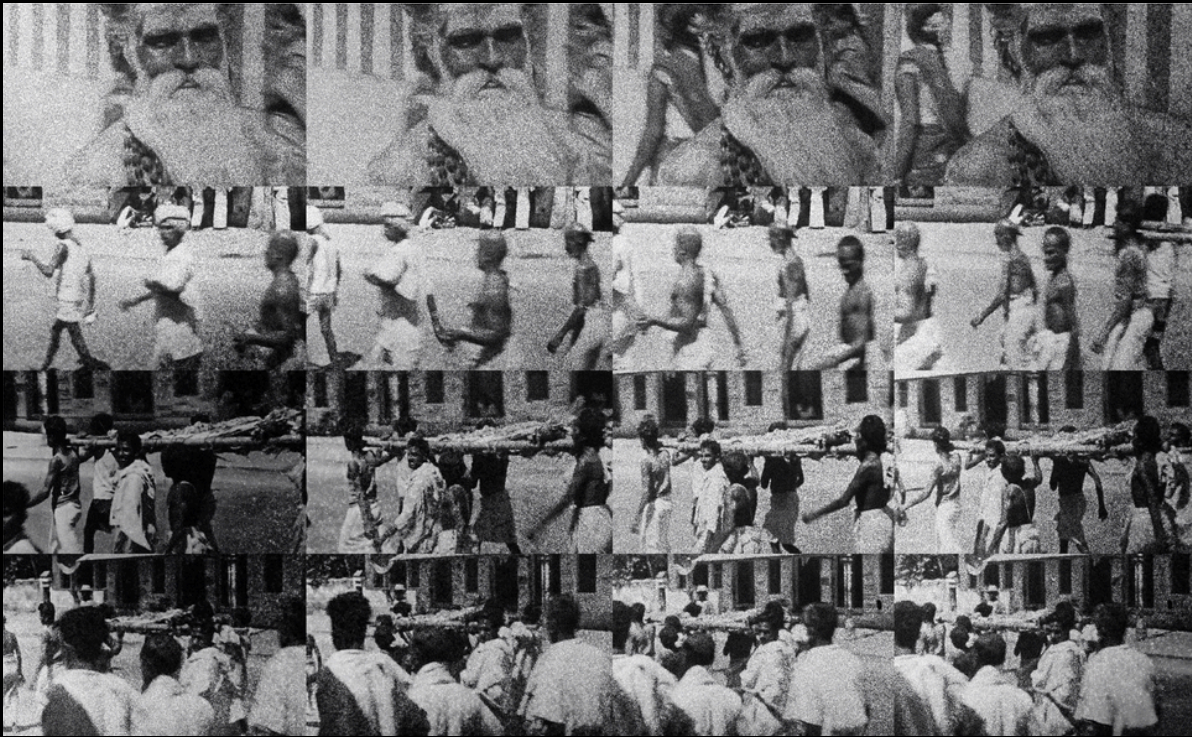


Figure A6. Archival Animation Sequence Strips (Funeral Procession, Madurai).  
Every second frame was extracted, printed, cut into strips, and re-photographed.



Source: Michael Rogge, Madurai, South India, in 1945 and now, 1945.

[LINK](#)

[Return to Text](#)

## **APPENDIX B**

*SOUND MATERIALS*



# KAAZCHA - Exploring Immersive Audio Experience

This audio experiment is presented as supplementary material to illustrate sound-based experimentation discussed in the thesis. The recordings were not originally captured for binaural reproduction, and the work reflects exploratory post-production techniques rather than optimized spatial recording. Headphone listening is recommended.

*LINK*

(use headphones for the best experience)

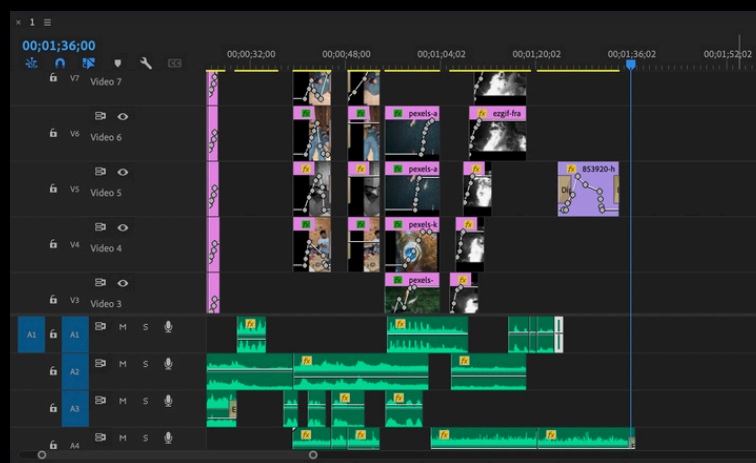
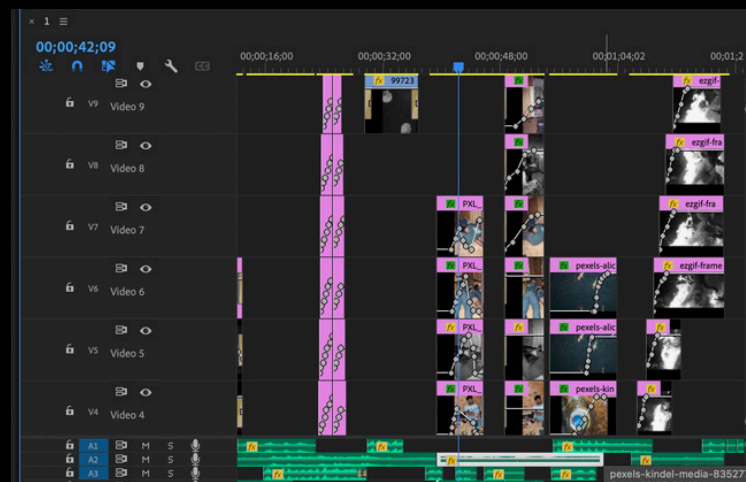


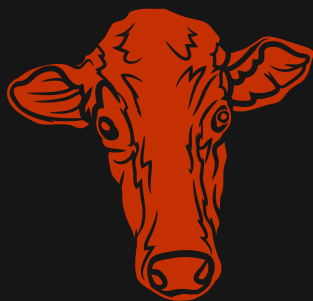
Figure B1. Original Timeline: Kaazcha

## VOICES : AV EXCERPTS

Excerpts B2. Interview Recording – Akshaya Trust Residents.

*[LINK](#)*

[Return to Text](#)



## **APPENDIX C**

*PHOTOBOOK (REFERENCE PRINTS)*

vapi

This photobook is a testament to everything you've taught me about focus, perseverance, and the power of a unique perspective. Throughout this journey, your encouragement has been like a steady hand on my shoulder, guiding me through challenges and helping me see possibilities where others might see obstacles.

Every photograph in this collection tells a story, shaped in part by the values you've instilled in me: the importance of hard work, the beauty of simplicity, and the joy of discovering something new.

As you turn these pages, I hope you see not only my work but also the influence of your support and wisdom in every image. Thank you for believing in me and for being a constant source of strength.

TRANSPERANT PAPER

mamma :

as I bring this journey to a close, I find myself reflecting on the foundation that made it all possible—you.

You've always encouraged me to see the world with curiosity and kindness, teaching me to find beauty in the smallest moments. That perspective is woven into every image in this book. The colors, textures, and stories I've captured are reflections of the values you've instilled in me: resilience, creativity, and a deep appreciation for life's subtle wonders.

Thank you for being my compass and my cheerleader. I hope these pages make you as proud of me as I am grateful for you.

TRANSPERANT PAPER

Figure C1 & C2: Original Copy, Moonga Photo-book.



എല്ലാവരും



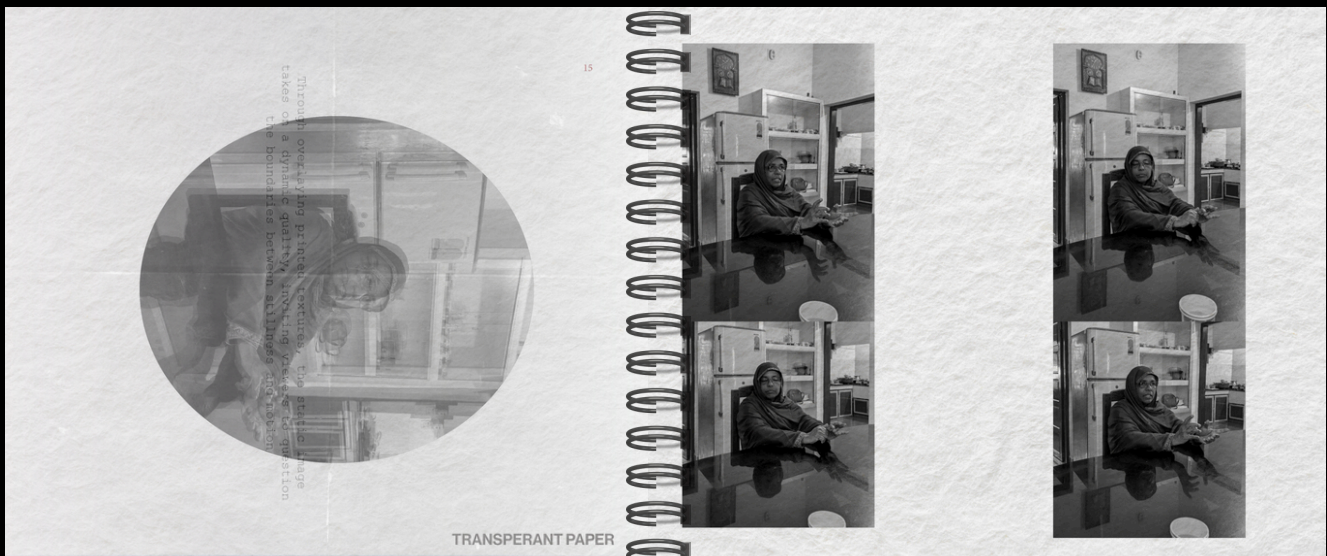


Image can be reedited to juxtapose colors and textures, creating a layered effect that evokes a sense of fragmented memory.

TRANSPARENT PAPER



The re-edited elements in this piece blur the line between reality and perception, encouraging introspection.



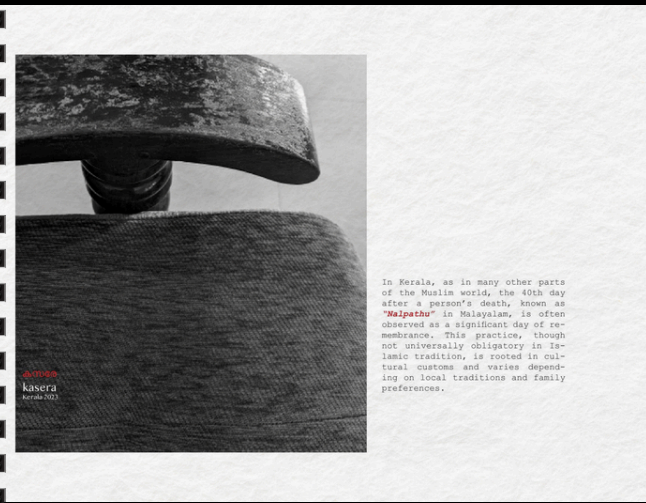
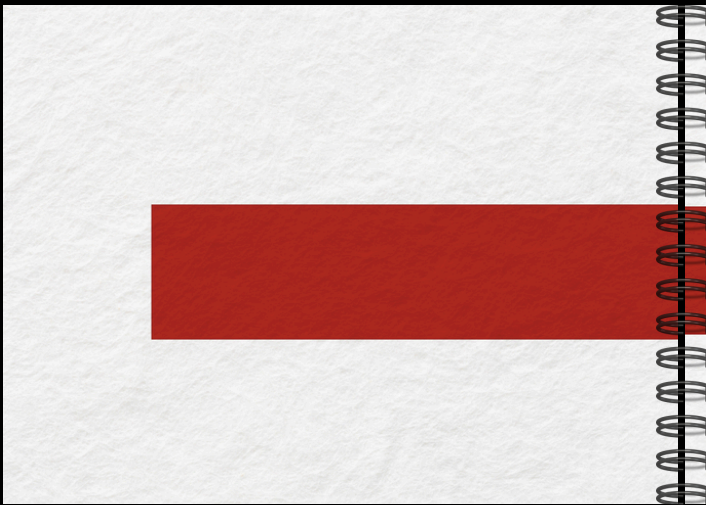
15

Through overlapping patterns, textures, the static image takes on a dynamic quality, inviting viewers to question the boundaries between stillness and motion.

TRANSPARENT PAPER



TRANSPARENT PAPER



www.kasera.com

In Kerala, as in many other parts of the Muslim world, the 40th day after a person's death, known as "Maipathu" in Malayalam, is often observed as a significant day of remembrance. This practice, though not universally obligatory in Islamic tradition, is rooted in cultural customs and varies depending on local traditions and family preferences.

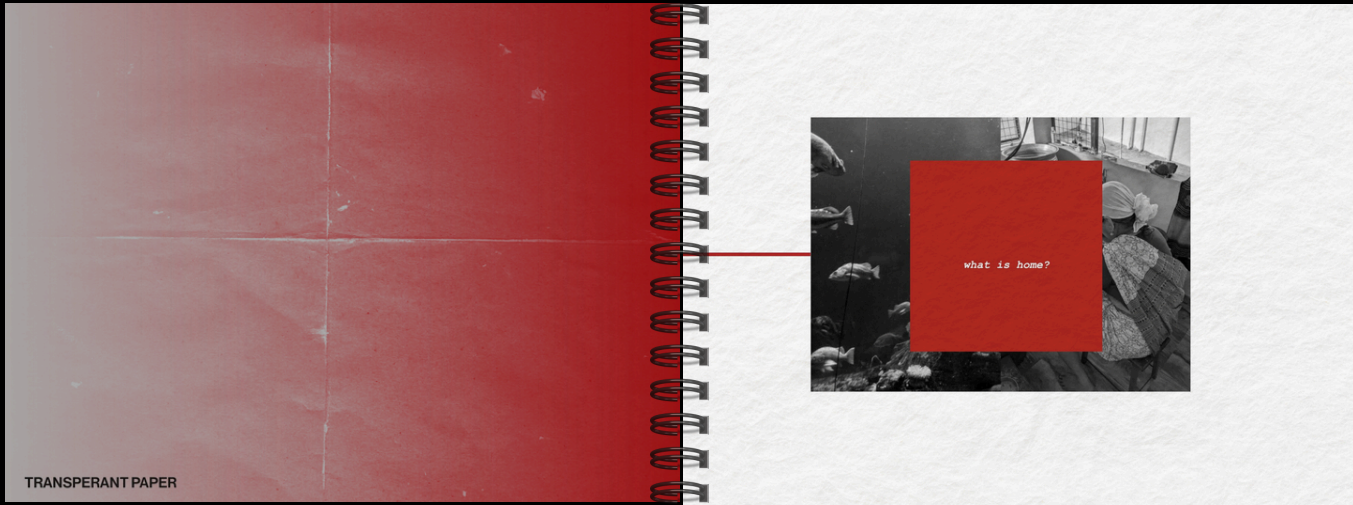
a poignant reminder of the threads that connect us all.



ബന്ധു  
Bandhu  
Kerala 2023

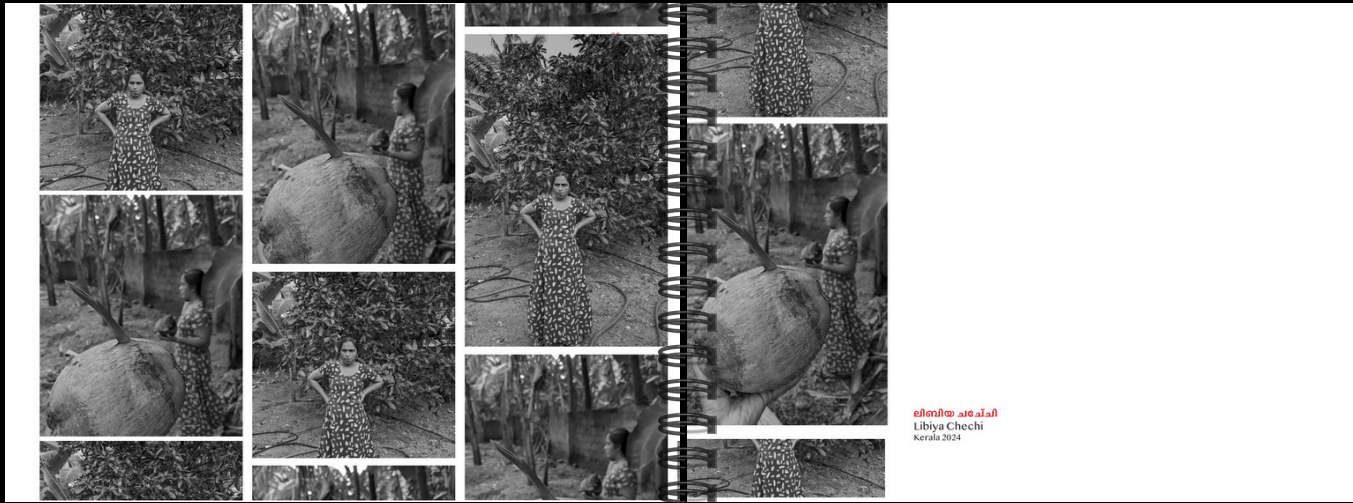


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TRANSPERANT PAPER

what is home?



ലിബിയ ചെച്ചി  
Libiya Chechi  
Kerala 2024

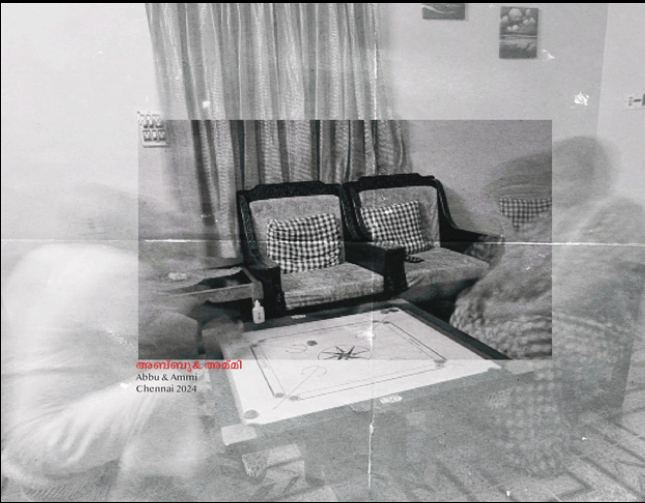




Image can be re-edited to juxtapose colors and textures, creating a layered effect that evokes a sense of fragmented memory.



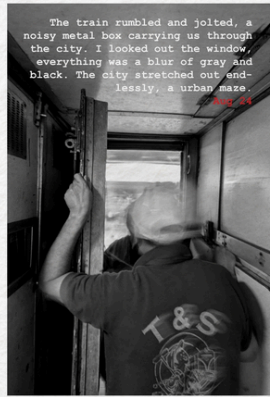
ജെറുസലേം കെട്ടിടം കട  
Jerusalem Kanji Kada  
Kerala 2024



അബ്ബു & അമ്മി  
Abbu & Ammi  
Chennai 2024



விசிறல்  
Spinning Rope  
Chennai 2024



The train rumbled and jolted, a noisy metal box carrying us through the city. I looked out the window, everything was a blur of gray and black. The city stretched out endlessly, a urban maze.

Oct 24

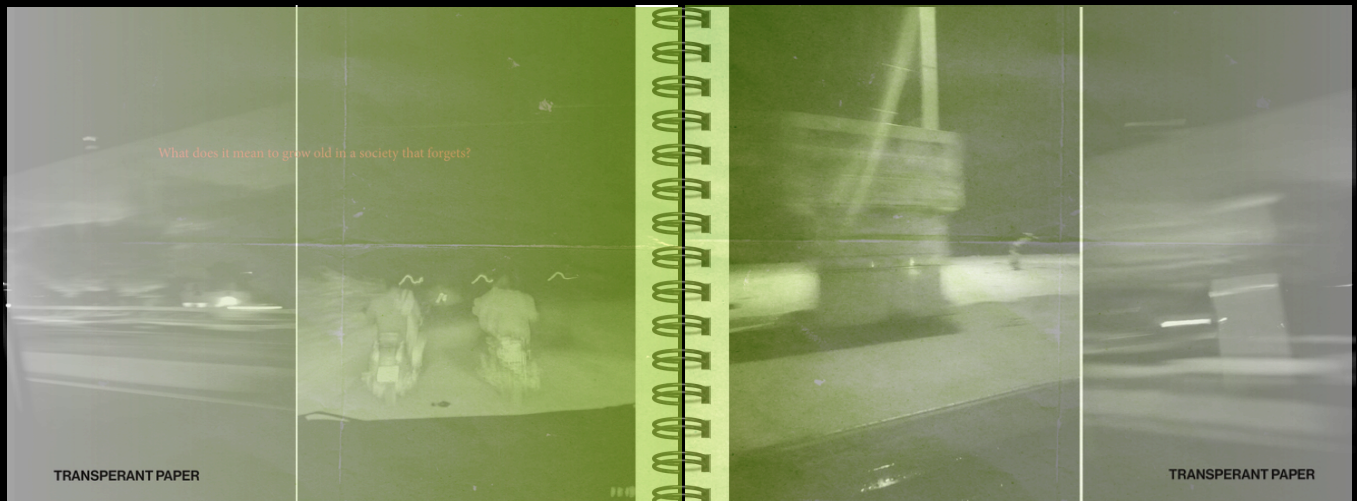
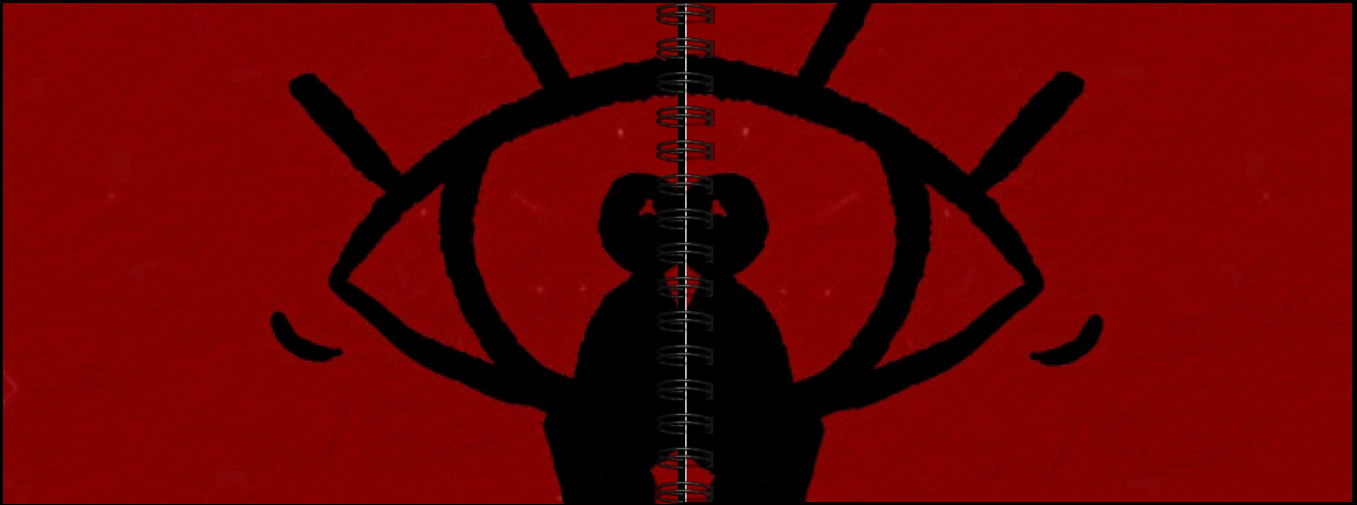
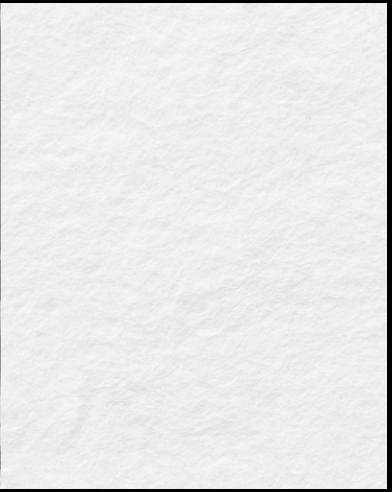


cluttered but fun  
Sep 14



a parking ticket but right on time  
Oct 3





What does it mean to grow old in a society that forgets?

TRANSPARENT PAPER

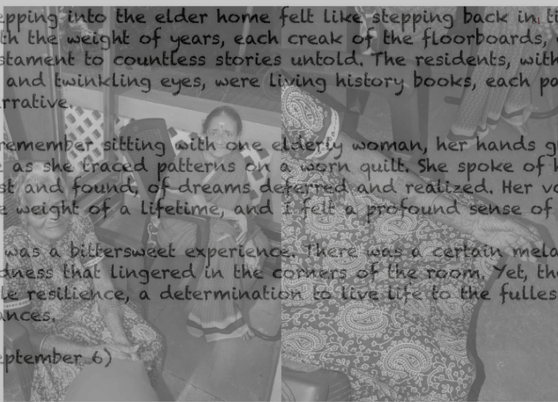
TRANSPARENT PAPER

Stepping into the elder home felt like stepping back in time, with the weight of years, each creak of the floorboards, a testament to countless stories untold. The residents, with their eyes and twinkling eyes, were living history books, each page a narrative.

I remember sitting with one elderly woman, her hands gentle as she traced patterns on a worn quilt. She spoke of her lost and found, of dreams deferred and realized. Her voice carried the weight of a lifetime, and I felt a profound sense of connection.

It was a bittersweet experience. There was a certain melancholy sadness that lingered in the corners of the room. Yet, there was also a resilient spirit, a determination to live life to the fullest, no matter the circumstances.

(September 6)



The air was thick with a hushed whisper, a weathered face filled with a unique

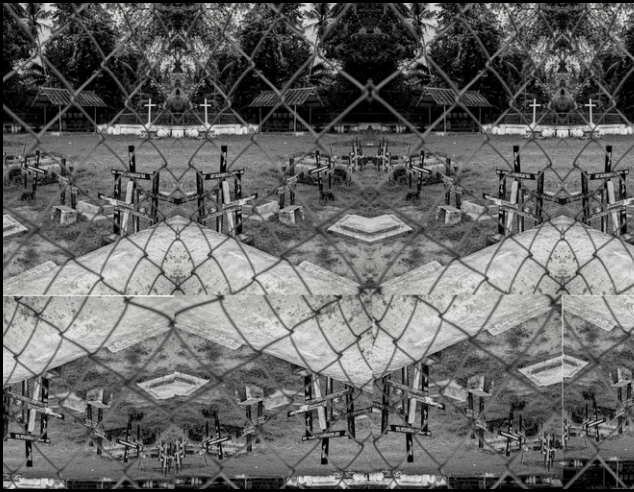
wisdom, etched with age, yet gentle in its touch, a kindness that spoke of love though soft, carried a quiet strength.

It was a presence felt in the air, a quiet strength that spoke of love though soft, carried a quiet strength.

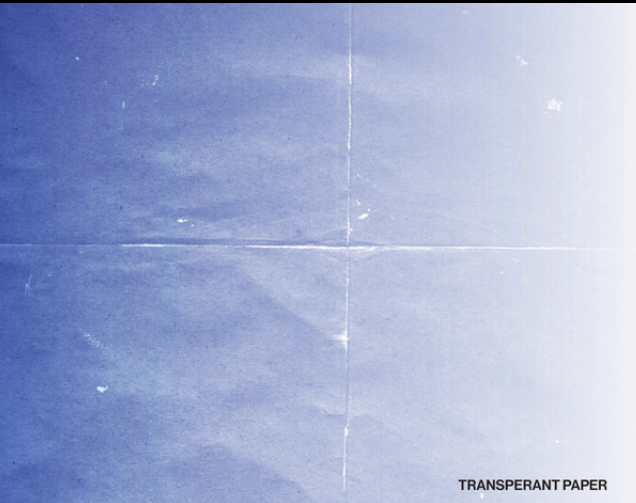


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99

ഇന്ന് ഷൂട്ടിംഗ് ചെയ്യാൻ പാടില്ലെന്ന് പറഞ്ഞ് വന്നവർക്ക് ഇന്ന് വീണ്ടും എത്തിയത് അത്ഭുതം വളരെ ഭയപ്പെടേണ്ടിയിരിക്കുന്നു. പാവമേ അങ്ങനെ കൂട്ടിക്കൊല്ലി വന്നുകൊടുക്കുകയും ചെയ്തത് അതിനെ സാധാരണമാക്കിയിരിക്കുന്നു.

ഒരു കൂട്ടി അതിനെ നയിക്കുകയോ ചെയ്യാൻ പാടില്ലെന്ന് പറഞ്ഞ് വന്നവർക്ക് ഇന്ന് വീണ്ടും എത്തിയത് അത്ഭുതം വളരെ ഭയപ്പെടേണ്ടിയിരിക്കുന്നു. പാവമേ അങ്ങനെ കൂട്ടിക്കൊല്ലി വന്നുകൊടുക്കുകയും ചെയ്തത് അതിനെ സാധാരണമാക്കിയിരിക്കുന്നു.

പാവമേ അങ്ങനെ കൂട്ടിക്കൊല്ലി വന്നുകൊടുക്കുകയും ചെയ്തത് അതിനെ സാധാരണമാക്കിയിരിക്കുന്നു.







TRANSPARENT PAPER

"PANNUTY... TACHU! ITO NEAR POWDI... POWDI... NEAR"



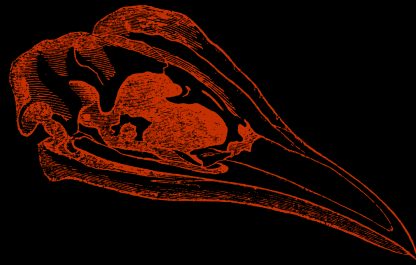
TRANSPARENT PAPER



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## APPENDIX D

*FIELD EXPERIMENTS AND  
OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES.*





#### Appendix Note:

The images included in this appendix document photographic work undertaken alongside field sound recording. In several instances, ambient audio incorporated into the film was captured at the same locations as these photographs. The material is presented as documentation of process rather than as finalized visual outcomes.



**ADDITIONAL**

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காளியம்மா தலைக்கூதல்

கூத்திசைப் பாவை நாடகம்



ஆக்கம் : முனைவர்.பேரா.இரா.காளீஸ்வரன்

அச்சு வடிவம் : பா.அப்பு - முதுநிலை தமிழ்

Figure 1. Original Therukoothu Script (Tamil)





# தலைமறை THALAIMARAI

THALAIMARAI MUSIC BY SANJAY PRASANAN CINEMATOGRAPHER MOHAMMED AJMAL & KACHU PRODUCTION  
COORDINATOR SUFIYA BEEGAM EXECUTIVE PRODUCER SAKEENA YUSSUF  
WRITTEN BY R. KALEESWARAN AND FARZANA  
DIRECTED BY FARZANA YUSSUF