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Chennai and Videoconferencing:

Videoconferencing for Performing, Teaching,

and Discussing Tamil Language and Performing Arts

Eric Miller

Ph.D. candidate, Folklore Program,
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA
emiller@sas.upenn.edu

Summary of paper:

This paper discusses ways in which the people of Chennai could use videoconferencing to perform, teach, and discuss Tamil language and performing arts.

Ours is a 24-hour world. That is to say, the world is increasingly connected, and at least half of the world is always awake. Holidays aside, at least one third of the world is always open for business. Consider the times around the world when, in Chennai, it is 12:30 AM at night. To the east, it is the following morning: in Melbourne, 5 AM; in Singapore, 3 AM. To the west, it is the previous day: in London, 8 PM; in New York, 3 PM; and in San Francisco, 12 noon.

Facing Singapore – and beyond, the nations of the Pacific Ocean – the seaport of Chennai is halfway between Africa and Australia, in the center of one of the most culturally rich and economically promising regions of the world.

Perhaps in part because so many Tamil people speak English so beautifully, USA telephone customer and technical assistance is often given in Chennai. When a person in the USA buys a computer, car, etc., and calls a number for technical assistance, the odds are good that the answering person will be in Chennai.

Catering to an international clientele, such telephone service providers must work when their employers and the public demand their services - in many cases around the clock, in multiple shifts. Thus, the 9 to 5, or 10 to 6, workday is in many Chennai businesses today a thing of the past, a provincial concept, a quaint relic of a bygone era.

It is well and good for people in Chennai to use communication technology as employees for foreign companies, but Chennai-ites should not just be actors in other people's scripts in this realm. They should also be offering their own unique services, and owning the communication businesses that would provide these services. Chennai should also be using the technology on her own terms, for providing her own cultural offerings in her own way. By offering interactive performance of, instruction in, and discussion about arts, culture, beauty, morality, tolerance of diversity, etc., Chennai could truly help make herself, and the rest of the world, better places.

Chennai is an education, technology, and performing arts capital not only of India, but of the world. She has many ancient and rich traditions on which to build, and which could be applied to, and transposed into, videoconferencing. Videoconferencing, a form of video-mediated communication, can be defined as communication in which all participants can send as well as receive audio and video; it may occur via the Internet or other technologies. Web casting, which occurs via the Internet, involves transmitting but not receiving audio and video (audience members may be able to respond with e-mails).

One style of teaching/learning that is practiced in Chennai – actually, in all of India – is known as the "lead-and-follow" method. In the lead-and-follow method, the teacher's statement (for example, a few notes of music) is often meant to be repeated by the student. Sometimes it is meant to be improvised upon, or replied to. Sometimes the student is meant to join in and, alongside the teacher, finish the statement. Chennai could specialize in using this technique to teach via videoconferencing.

At present, Subbu Arumugam is attempting to begin a Villupattu school. Dr. Premeela Gurumurthy, head of the Dept. of Indian Music at the University of Madras, is a scholar and performer of Katha Kalakshebam (also known as Harikatha). Villupattu and Katha Kalakshebam are, respectively, folk, and orthodox Hindu, styles of discourse, or, storytelling. In both cases, the lead speaker alternates between speaking, chanting, and singing.

Villupattu and Katha Kalakshebam instruction should be available via videoconference. These art forms need to develop and evolve in order to stay alive. In Katha Kalakshebam, there is a complex system that must be adhered to in regard to referring to traditional commentators (poets, scholars, saints, pundits, etc.) according to what episode of an epic, such as the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, is being narrated. Much of the information to be learned can be placed on websites (in Tamil, English, and other languages), but teaching and performing requires presence – whether physical presence or tele-presence. (Numerous studies have shown that for videoconferencing to give its best results, the participants should also periodically meet physically.)

There is a tremendous market around the world composed of youngsters of Tamil background, who speak just a little Tamil. It would be wonderful if such young people could experience aspects of traditional Tamil culture and the most modern of communication technologies at once – this could increase their interest and proficiency in both the ancient and the modern forms of communication.

Today, if children of Tamil descent around the world wish to learn and practice a Tamil form of performance, the main opportunities are for Bharata Natyam dance and Carnatic music. Other options, including from folk and popular culture, should also be there.

The Lakshman Sruthi Light Orchestra, which recently toured the USA, has opened an instrument shop and instruction and rehearsal centre in Ashok Nagar. As this light orchestra, like most in Tamil Nadu, plays mostly Tamil cinema songs, the Lakshman Sruthi Light Orchestra's participation in video-mediated events would in a sense signify an entry of the Chennai cinema world into the realm of video-mediated communication.

More than once I have heard young men in Chennai Internet browsing centres wearing the headset earphone and microphone, and singing Tamil cinema songs to distant parties via Yahoo Messenger and other instant message software programs, which increasingly enable near-instantaneous audio and video communication, along with text. The sharing of such music could be channeled into structured (and profitable) activities.

Due to Chennai having been, and continuing to be, a world capital of cinema production, the infra structure, facilities, and expertise (directors, composers, choreographers, playback singers, etc.) are here for cinema production and post-production work. Much of this activity has been expanding into the television industry. It could also expand into the web casting and videoconferencing industries: in these cases, it is not a matter of entertaining people, but rather of engaging them in artistic, intellectual, and educational relationships and experiences. Chennai's historic cinema studios should be consulted with regarding how this might best be done. Cinema people could contribute both in terms of teaching and discussing the cinematic arts, and also in terms of applying their production abilities to videoconferencing projects.

The Karaoke industry is large in much of East Asia, although to date it is minor in India. Karaoke involves clients entertaining themselves and others by singing songs. Often the lyrics appear on a video screen, and are read by the singer. Sometimes the singer's live image is also placed on the screen. Karaoke practices thus utilize many cinematic techniques, such as superimposing foreground figures onto various backgrounds, and displaying subtitles in different languages.

In the cases of web casting and videoconferencing, instantaneous subtitles may be called for, which may call for computer voice-recognition and translation capabilities. Specialized software needs to be developed for such applications.

Chennai shops such as Pro Music in Egmore sell musical instruments (mostly electronic) and install sound systems. People are coming there for DJ lessons, even though there are very few opportunities to do public, professional DJ-ing in Chennai, in part due to music and dance venues closing early.

The world-music, fusion-music scene is almost non-existent in Chennai, and this, again, is largely because, at present, music is not allowed to be played late at night here. Much experimenting is going on around the world by DJs and musicians, who are mixing pre-recorded and live music for crowds of dancers. At such discos, video is often projected onto large screens. Sometimes computers enable aspects of the music to directly affect the visuals. Sometimes people can see images of themselves as they are dancing, mixed with other images.

Developing audio and video for the international disco (or "club") scene is a significant component of the computer hardware and software industries. Why should Chennai exclude herself from these techno logical and artistic experiments and developments? Why should the rest of the world be denied Chennai's presence and leadership in these realms? Why should musicians be forced to go elsewhere to work and to develop their ever-evolving arts?

North Indian cinema music mixed, sampled, and otherwise processed has for some years been played in discos around the world. This is known as "bangra" music. What is the name for south Indian cinema (and folk, and classical) music transposed into dance/disco music? It may be that there is not a widely known name for this yet because to date it has only rarely been done in public.

In sum: Chennai should build on her glorious traditions – her already-existing strengths, successes, and achievements – including the above-mentioned lead-and-follow teaching/learning method, and the music and cinema industries, by expanding them into and applying them to video-mediated communication such as videoconferencing and web casting.

Presently, the British Council and the USA Consulate have two of the finest videoconferencing facilities in town. Dishnet's videoconferencing suite in Sterling Tower is available for approximately 5000 Rs per hour. The Satyam I-Way Internet centre on Radhakrishnan Salai

claims they will soon have a video conferencing booth. Chennai's Indian Institute of Technology is involved in numerous innovative video-mediated communication projects, many of them related to the Dept. of Engineering's Dr. Ashok Jhunjhunwalla's world-leading work with wireless Internet.

There are a number of Internet centres in Chennai where one can go to videoconference with instant message programs. However, the picture comes slowly, and the image is small; and only one or two individuals can participate on this end of the event.

A few of these Internet centres are open 24-hours (presently, national franchise branches only). These 24-hour Internet centres, for many people, greatly enhance the quality of life in a city. Businesspeople, journalists, tourists, and many others find it a wonderful convenience and relief to be able to use such facilities at irregular hours, to always be able to go out to work on academic or professional projects, and perhaps most importantly, to be able to arrange to participate in text, audio, and/or video meetings with people around the world, in all of the different time-zones, around the clock.

Chennai has the telecommunication infrastructure and the technological know-how for excellent video-mediated communication, as has been demonstrated, for example, by the recent telecasts of heart surgeries from Apollo Hospital (both the surgeries and the telecast were successful!). Educational ventures such as Direcway are just getting underway here. The Tamil Virtual University, based in the Tidel Park complex, has made a wonderful start and is positioned to help lead the way.

But today, where in Chennai can cultural, civic, professional, and other groups go to hold a video conference with colleagues in other Indian cities, or in other nations? The options are few and are not especially practical. What is needed are "teletoriums."

Tele is Greek for, from a distance. It seems the word, teletorium, is derived from the word, auditorium. As an auditorium is a place one goes to in order to hear, a teletorium is a place one goes to in order to communicate with distant people, that is, to telecommunicate with them. Teletoriums, as the word is usually used in the USA, is a space equipped with technology for videoconferencing and large screen display (usually video projectors and screens). With the addition of such technology, a rehearsal centre could be a tele-rehearsal centre. A seminar centre could be a tele-seminar centre. A disco could be a tele-disco.

A DJ could be a tele-DJ. A tele-DJ would need to see a video image of the people on the dance floor, so as to be able to judge what music to play next. A tele-DJ in Chennai could transmit music to tele-discos anywhere in the world – at all different hours. Of course, the music could also be a collaboration, coming from numerous sources.

Public activity at 3 AM in Chennai need not be associated with drunkenness or other bad behavior: rather, 3 AM public activity could be associated with international educational and business meetings; performance and discussion of the arts; upward social-economic mobility; a service economy; and the teaching of language, management, and all other subjects.

Let us imagine for a moment, what an ideal Chennai teletorium complex might look like.

First of all, it would be in a central location, such as on Mt. Road near the centre of town, or perhaps on or near Nungambakkam High Road. Its facilities would be accessible 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week.

Our ideal teletorium would be available to individual citizens, as well to groups of all sorts, including people of Chennai's many universities. There would be small rooms for individual

meetings, slightly larger rooms for groups, and a large space (seating and non-seating) for crowds. The facilities could be used for family reunions, as well as for sales, educational, and many other types of events. Web casting could accompany launches, announcements, and openings for products, services, and causes.

Among the options would be low-cost, low-quality videoconferencing (over the regular Internet), more expensive videoconferencing via ISDN lines and specialized hardware, and videoconferencing via Internet2. Internet2, a new generation of the Internet, was originally developed by universities in the USA (including the University of Pennsylvania, where I am presently a Ph.D. candidate), and is now being used in many places around the world (www.internet2.org). Internet2 enables multi-party near-broadcast-quality videoconferencing. Sites that are Internet2-capable become places where the international community that uses such technology can visit and form collaborations. It seems that the sea-floor cables that have recently reached India from Singapore may be Internet2-capable.

The only way that such a teletorium could come into existence and be maintained would be as a combined venture of businesspeople, engineers, academics, people in the arts, and civic leaders, led by the government.

One or more restaurants might be included in the teletorium complex. This would enable people, for example, to dance and then eat and drink, if not in the same room, then in adjacent rooms. People should be able to send an e-mail, or videoconference with friends or family, especially if they have just been tele-dancing and tele-music-making with them. Fax and telephone services should also be at hand, as one never knows what communication channel will work best in a particular case. The separation between conversational, artistic, and business communication is artificial and unnecessary: all such events can happily co-exist in the same facility (the walls would be sound-proof, of course). All of this would lead to people discovering new ways of working via videoconference, as the technology enables access to more employers, and to more customers.

It is sadly true that in many places and times late-night music has been associated with bad behaviour such as overuse of alcohol, and rowdyism – but this need not be so in the future.

Today, for many people around the world – especially the producers, craftspeople, and performers involved, and many members of the public – the late-night music and dance scene is more about learning about and using new audio-video software and interactive telecommunication, and about career-building, than it is about getting drunk. Part of the fun and glamour of attending a disco, or tele-disco, is participating in an intellectually stimulating technological and artistic experiment.

Everyone knows that cyber-communication and heavy alcohol consumption do not mix well. Excessive drinking can lead to reckless and belligerent behavior, and these are the last things that one wants in the vicinity of expensive and delicate telecommunication equipment. Also, to overcome possible imperfec tions in intercontinental interactive telecommunication processes, one needs to be alert, and sensitive to the smallest cues from the distant parties – which is not likely if one is drunk. People often want to look their best in a videoconferencing environment: for one thing, they might be seen by prospective employers.

I would suggest that in our teletorium complex no alcohol would be sold or served after a certain hour, say, 12 midnight. Our teletorium would develop drinks other than alcohol, such as fruit drinks (with sugar to the customer's taste), and vegetable drinks. Dancing is good for weight

loss and getting and staying in good shape, as well as for developing one's creativity. Dancing in our teletorium to excellent music could come to be seen as a healthy and intelligent activity.

I am from New York City, and I recognize in Chennai many of the same wonderful qualities that are found in my hometown. Both cities are by the sea, and both are trade-, university-, and arts-centred.

Today, Chennai stands at a moment of decision. The rest of the world needs Chennai at this moment! Chennai's developing of videoconferencing – especially in regard to the performing, teaching, and discussing of language and the arts – could help set the world on a wonderful new track, lay a new international cultural foundation, set an excellent example, and inspire people around the world.

Let the government work together with businesspeople, engineers, artists, and academics to form new cultural, business, and artistic institutions! Let Chennai develop new forms of facilities and practices for meeting, performing, and teaching! The rich cultural background that would support such an effort is here to a degree unsurpassed by any other place in the world.

The establishment of teletoriums such as the one imagined above would benefit Chennai's music, tourism, and computer businesses, as well as her academic institutions.

Most of all, let us rescue late-night music from the association with rowdiness, and instead associate it with high-technology entrepreneurial efforts, and the spread of beautiful culture around the world!