

Keyword

---

# Fan

BioScope  
12(1–2) 83–86, 2021  
© 2021 Screen South Asia Trust  
Reprints and permissions:  
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india  
DOI: 10.1177/09749276211026075  
journals.sagepub.com/home/bio



S.V. Srinivas

Fandom, understood here to refer to the love of/obsession with a film *star* that is performed as a collective activity in actual or virtual public spaces, brings into sharp relief the multiple intersections between the cinema, religious practice and politics. Tracking fan activity allows us to gain insights into the place of cinema as a public institution especially in South Asia where the consumption of mechanically reproduced images evolved coevally with mass politics (Pinney, 2004).

The fan is the point of convergence between the **audience** on the one hand and the film star on the other. From the early years of the twentieth century, the audience has been a brute empirical fact of modern life and politics alike. The star has often enough been the magnet that gathered an audience for the cinema. Like audience, fan is an unwieldy analytical category, especially at a time when the line between cinema and other forms and screens is practically non-existent. Further, the fan has been the subject of filmic representation in several dozen films from *Devatha* (K. Hemambaradhara Rao, 1965 [Telugu]), if not earlier, to *Fan* (Maneesh Sharma, 2016, [Hindi]).

The fan today is a content creator working on the margins of the nation-state and ‘inspired’ by transnational digital media (Kuotsu, 2013), a digital archivist (Subba, 2017) and an internet troll (Mitra, 2020), among other things. Fan activity has various forms and manifestations including organized fan clubs with close linkages to political and caste mobilisations, well-endowed expatriates who attempt to replicate the festive cheer of theatrical screenings in faraway lands, individuals and small groups that build ‘temples’ for their idols and virtual communities that do not meet in the real world. This diverse range shares almost nothing in common, except of course the fan’s obsession with stars and screens. Also, it is difficult to delimit the category and distinguish fans from other ‘active viewers’, unless we focus narrowly on those who are formally affiliated to a fan club. Therefore, focusing on fandom as a magnification of, rather than an exception to, tendencies and practices among audiences in general allows us to gain a richer understanding of the place of cinema, and possibly other media forms, in public life. Important among these ‘universal’ tendencies among audiences is the productive-performative response to the screen. I return to this point after discussing a particular variant of fandom that poses the research question, which is by no means new, sharply for us. The question simply put is what the focus on viewing/

consuming practices might add to ongoing discussions of cinema and other media forms alike.

History of academic writing on fandom dates back to the 1970s (Hardgrave & Neidhart, 1975). The Indian variant of the phenomenon was primarily of interest to social scientists, with the relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu rapidly emerging as a special focus. More recently, anthropologists and sociologists have made major contributions though, in cinema studies, the fan is, for the most part, a south Indian exception or a born-digital entity, with the two rarely sharing common ground.

Organized fandom, whose emergence coincided with the admission of the Tamil star M. G. Ramachandran into the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1953 (Hardgrave, 1973), was for long assumed to be a uniquely Tamil phenomenon based on the DMK's attempts to use cinema for political propaganda. Fans were barely acknowledged by researchers working on linguistic and **regional** settings beyond Tamil Nadu till the 1990s.

From the 1990s, there has been mounting evidence of the prevalence of fan organizations inhabiting public spaces, albeit in varying numbers, across southern India (Nair, 2005; Osella & Osella, 2004; Radhakrishnan, 2002; Srinivas, 2009). M. Madhava Prasad notes that during the early sound period, Madras (Chennai), capital of a Presidency traversing many linguistic territories, housed a single *industry* producing films in all four major south Indian languages. The post-Independence drive to form distinct linguistic states was also associated, he argues, with the emergence of major stars to represent these new constituencies (Prasad, 2014). It is therefore likely that fan clubs dedicated to Tamil film stars in the 1950s Madras were paralleled by similar organizations for other language cinemas. Fan organizations and networks have been observed beyond the southern region too (Mitra, 2020), but not much is known about their history and spread.

Organised fan clubs in southern India have a history of coordinating activities with each other, even without central leadership. Fandom here tends to intersect with political mobilizations and/or identity politics. Members are overwhelmingly urban, lower/middle class and male. Starting with Dickey's pioneering work (1993), several studies point out that fan activity spills over from the cinema hall to other public spaces (Gerritsen, 2012; Rogers, 2011; Srinivas, 2016; Srinivas, 2009). Youth and urban culture are key focuses in research on fan culture. Dickey (1993) locates fandom in the larger context of film consumption among the urban poor. Osella and Osella (2004) note the importance of fandom for the intergenerational re-fashioning of masculinity in Kerala. Nakassis (2016) argues that style, a key feature of youth culture, is inextricably aligned with the fandom particular stars in Tamil Nadu. Gerritsen (2012, p. 13) draws attention to the image-making practices of fans which mark urban landscapes.

However, Punathambekar (2008) has questioned the centrality of fan (hyper) visibility in cinema halls, street corners and wider urban space to fandom. He shifted attention to online interaction, anticipating the explosion of virtual fan following for Indian stars in more recent times. Punathambekar thus expands the conception of public spaces and publics beyond physical locations and alerts us to continuities among fan cultures otherwise differentiated by class, caste and location.

Among the themes that dominate fan activity as well as the literature on it are religion and politics. Fans frequently adopt and mimic (mostly Hindu) religious practices.

These often include performing rituals of worship before images of stars in theatres and worshipping the screen itself during the show. There have been occasional reports of shrines being constructed for stars. Although Hardgrave (1973, p. 124) does not describe actual worship, he uses the term 'star worship' in his writing on fandom in Tamil cinema. In her study of fan *bhakti* (devotion), Kakar (2009, p. 404) argues that even where fans perform religious rituals, fan devotion is a performance fully aware not only of a viewing public but also the media. Rogers (2011, p. 46), while insisting that fandom is *embedded* in (Hindu) religious practices, and contingent on the subordination of film consumption to religion, nevertheless points out that displays of devotion are attempts at *gaining recognition among fans*. In other words, the addressee is the community of fans, and not the star misrecognized as a divine entity in human form. The star is of course the pretext and facilitator of exchanges between fans. Discussing Rajnikant and his fans, Prasad steers the discussion of fan *bhakti* away from religion proper and towards political representation. He argues that fandom is *pressure from below* exerted by the faithful, a manifestation of subaltern sovereignty. Stars, he famously states, 'are kings chosen and anointed by the people: kings of democracy!' (Prasad, 2014, p. 176).

Fan discourse is saturated with exaggerated declarations of loyalty that recall feudal social relations (Srinivas, 2009). Declarations of loyalty, like acts of literal star worship performed by fans, are instances of citationality in fan activities. Nakassis (2016) argues that citationality in fan practices and youth cultures alike *decentres* the very forms that it entangles. The princes, kings and emperors that populate the fan universe may not be a sign of persisting feudal relations so much as pointers to the paradoxical ways in which fans articulate a highly evolved sense of entitlement, which extends from what should/should not appear on screen to career choices and personal and family lives of stars (Prasad, 2014; Srinivas, 2009). Instances of organized south Indian fans protesting against the films of their idol, even as they claim to be protecting the image/reputation of the star, point to the inseparability of loyalty and entitlement in fan activity. The Hindi film *Fan* captures the obsessive nature of fandom and its insistence that the idol acknowledge the fan and address their demands.

As a socially and electorally significant phenomenon, fandom's presence is no doubt limited to certain pockets. Nevertheless, the fan as a viewer who amplifies tendencies among audiences at large is heuristically useful to enrich our understanding of the contemporary. The proliferation of screens engenders the leakage of fan-like responses well beyond the cinema. Our present requires researchers to pay closer attention to site and form-specific spectatorial (read 'prosumption') practices. In southern India, for instance, fans of film stars who are now 'online and not on the streets', actively troll each other as well as critics of their idols. The latter include television reporters and film reviewers. Sreya Mitra (2020) notes that online fans of Hindi film stars collude with right-wing trolls to attack 'rivals'. These developments, inter alia, suggest that celebratory claims on digital, internet-based 'participatory cultures' (e.g., Jenkins, 2012) need to be moderated. The gap today between fans, trolls and devotees has indeed narrowed. This is not surprising since they/we are all media consumers invited to respond actively and publicly, to take sides, assert allegiances and decry opponents.

The fan, then, is like a magnifying glass, both for seeing up close what the audience does, while at the same time giving us a way into seeing the evolution of spectatorship alongside the transformation and proliferation of screens, formats and media. Needless to add, the film star co-evolves with the fan.

### **Acknowledgement**

Many thanks to Ravi Vasudevan and Lotte Hoek for their comments on earlier drafts of the entry.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Key Readings**

Dickey, S. (1993). *Cinema and the urban poor in south India*. Cambridge University Press.

Nakassis, C. V. (2016). *Doing style: Youth and mass mediation in South India*. University of Chicago Press.

Prasad, M. M. (2014). *Cine-politics*. Orient BlackSwan.