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## Fandom and Performative Political Regimes

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# FANDOM AND PERFORMATIVE POLITICAL REGIMES\*

*S. V. Srinivas*

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That images move individuals and invite them to form collectives—*masses*—is a fact of modern life. The rise of populism across the world, arguably on the strength of near-universal access to electronic media and the enthusiastic participation of ‘ordinary people’ in mobilizations initiated by leaders, returns us to a question that is close to a century old: how, and what, is political about media consumption? If, as Govil and Baishya (2018: 80) state that ‘it is [hard] to argue against the constitutive relationship between digital social media and right-wing populism in the newly configured “illiberal state”’, what do prior instances of media forms’ imbrications with politics tell us about our present?

The equivalences, and the suturing of antagonisms, that form the bedrock of populism are not only technologically mediated in the present but are in fact *technogenic*. Affordances of what we called ‘participatory cultures’ not so long ago are among the necessary conditions for populist mobilizations, especially of the kind we are witness to in India. While social media is at the heart of populist politics today, prior instances of media forms’ imbrications with politics have something to say to this context. My focus here is film

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star fandom, which in India has a long association with publics that had limited access to print and now has a significant presence on social media platforms. Further, from the 1950s till the present, the variant of fandom that I examine here has had an intimate and complex relationship with social and political mobilizations.

Studies of populism suggest that, among other things, it is a political idiom predicated on permanent mobilization. William Mazzarella, for instance, draws attention to ‘the predilection of populist leaders for continual mobilization, the never-ending plebiscite of rallies and referenda’ (Mazzarella 2019: 52). In the Indian context, we have been alerted to the ‘banalities’ of messages emanating from the leader (Pal 2015) as well as the mediatization of politics to a stage when the election mode of campaigning and mass contact does not end (Stromback 2008: 240). Fandom, by virtue of its singular focus on media *consumption* that is anything but ‘passive’, offers insights into contemporary regimes that invite large-scale participation of political subjects in mobilizations that may not be self-evidently political as, say, an election campaign.

The organized and hyper-visible variant of fandom that is characteristic of film star fans in southern Indian states has had historical linkages with politics. This variant of fandom lies at the cusp of a foundationally populist cinema, one which revolves around the rescue of the common people by the leader, and from a coalition of villains (who came to be increasingly identified as the political establishment), and populist electoral politics, powered by highly publicized schemes that supposedly benefit the poor directly and are also presented as evidence of the leader’s love and generosity (Pandian 1992). This is a context in which there is a deliberate obfuscation of the world of fiction and real politics with spectators and the electorate invited to make comparisons between the character in the fiction and the politician (Hardgrave 1973: 299). The spectator here is already/always the political subject, and vice versa.

The film star fan, to restate the obvious, is firstly a media consumer. Long before the television and Internet revolutions, fans were distinguishable from the rest of the audience in terms of quantity of films and related media they consumed, degree of immersion in media and insistence on ‘talking back’ to their idols. Fandom is thus analogous with and anticipates a mediated populism which

has as its twin pillars the media-savvy leader and enthusiastic followers who are anything but silent and are also easily incited into (sometimes violent) action.

Several terms used to capture the specificity of interactive media, including ‘user-generated content’ can be applied, albeit anachronistically, to fans in the analogue era.<sup>1</sup> Like social media posts, fan work was and is spectacularly banal. Even in its pre-digital days, it generated a great deal of *crap*, which in Lawrence Lessig’s dictionary is a category of artefact that is—at least at first glance—derivative and *un-aesthetic* (Lessig 2008).

It is not my case that theories of fandom can be generalized to offer insights into mediatized populism. On the contrary, it is necessary to rescue fandom from accounts portraying it as a space for ‘good politics’. Precedents and parallels between fandom and other mobilizations that are more recognizably political point to the need for a theory that can account for the multiple sites where media consumption and mobilizations converge in the present. My turn to fandom in South India is *not only* an attempt to make sense of the mostly urban poor and lower middle class neighbourhood fan club of this region but also those cultures of consumption that power populism in this region, and elsewhere.

Fandom studies is a well-established specialization. Further, there is now a steady trickle of research on Indian fans as well (Gerritsen 2012; Kakar 2009; Nakassis 2016). Literature on fandom from Anglo-American and Australian contexts tends to be celebratory, at least in part due to its focus on certain variants of fandom and/or activities that lend themselves such accounts. Take, for instance, the back-to-back, coordinated and spectacular interventions by the global K-pop fan community in US public life in June 2020 had K-pop fans ‘jamming’ #WhiteLivesMatter and other Right-wing hashtags with a ‘barrage of videos of singers, gaming clips and even anime GIFs’ (*The Guardian* 2020).<sup>2</sup> These actions support assertions made over the past three decades in an influential strand of fan and audience studies research that fandom is that good place

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed accounts of fan activity, see Dickey (1993) and Srinivas (2009); for a discussion of the parallels between fans and Internet users, see van Zoonen (2004).

<sup>2</sup> van Zoonen et al. (2010) note that a much-publicized anti-Islam video was jammed by using the name of the video and its producer to (mis)direct YouTube searches to posts which apologized to Muslims, made statements in support of Islam and so on.

where mass consumption meets civic activism, provides marginal subjects a space for exploring their sexuality and asserting their identities, and force the powerful entertainment industry to accede to the will of the (fan)public.<sup>3</sup>

Fan work in southern India paints a very different picture and points to the need to reassess claims made about fandom. Within weeks of K-pop fan jamming of #WhiteLivesMatter, in a very different universe, Tharun Bhascker, a Telugu film director, lodged a police complaint after a barrage of threats by fans of Mahesh Babu whose recent film Bhascker was critical of in a social media post (*The News Minute* 2020).

Flagging similar responses to Hindi cinema and its stars, Sreya Mitra (2020) argues, ‘the emergence of cyber culture has engendered a new kind of fan, the troll, who no longer conforms to the earlier norms of the star–fan relationship.’ Mitra ends her essay with a call to ‘revisit discourses of popular film fandom culture and examine the phenomenon of the fan-as-troll’ (Mitra 2020). While fully agreeing with her conclusion, I would like to point out that the troll does not signal a shift in the star–fan relationship but an *amplification* of decades-old behaviour on/by social media platforms. In saying so, my intention is not to present the (South) Indian film star fan as a counterpoint to the K-pop fan. Neither do I wish to argue that ‘Western’ writings on fandom fail to capture ground realities elsewhere. Even as I draw on the insights provided by this body of literature, I would like to shift my focus away from the quest for good subjects of politics in fandom to the excesses of fandom, which are constitutive of the phenomenon, regardless of temporal and geographical location.

The constitutive excesses of fandom have something to say about the politics of media consumption. And, therefore, the relevance of fandom for understanding populism, which we know is a specific and thoroughly mediatized mode of ‘doing’ politics.

## FANS AT LARGE

First, the widely known history of violence in South Indian fandom, which illustrates my point that social media may only have

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Jenkins (2014) on the activism of Harry Potter fans.

amplified well-established patterns of collective behaviour among this group of media consumers. There have been reports of fan violence beyond fan rivalries in cinema spaces from the early 1980s. Among the more politically significant ones are about the fans of the Kannada star Rajkumar allegedly participating in an agitation against the Karnataka state government (Nair 2005: 257). The frequency of such reports only increased in the past decade. Fans of several male stars have been involved in virtual and/or real-life acts of violence and none more often than those dedicated to the Telugu actor Pawan Kalyan. This star and his fans are therefore obvious points of focus for this chapter.

Spike in his fans' acts of violence coincided with Kalyan's forays into electoral politics. In 2009, he was a star campaigner for the Praja Rajyam Party, established by his actor brother Chiranjeevi and later merged with Indian National Congress. Kalyan went on to establish his own Jana Sena Party in the run-up to the 2014 elections to the Parliament (and assemblies in the Telugu states). However, violent actions by his fans are not directly related to political campaigns in which he participated. In 2015, more than a year after elections, fans of Pawan Kalyan and Prabhas (of *Baahubali* fame) clashed over an issue that has proved to be a trigger since the 1960s: damage to publicity material of a star's film by a rival group of fans. In 2017, Kalyan's fans attacked the anchor of a television channel for his poor rating of the star's film.<sup>4</sup> I note in passing that fan hostility to film journalists is not a new development. In 1995, Chiranjeevi's fans issued threats on a satellite television channel to the noted film critic Gudipudi Srihari for a 'negative' film review. Fans of Kalyan and Prabhas clashed again during the release of *Baahubali: The Conclusion* in 2017.

Media infrastructure played no small part in the rise of fan violence, and various forms of *uncivil* behaviour as well. As fans moved to social media platforms—YouTube and Facebook to start with and Twitter and others subsequently—we notice the emergence of new equivalences, antagonisms and alliances between fans and other groups of social media users. Hitherto unprecedented attacks on

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/pawan-kalyan-fans-beat-up-tv-anchor-for-giving-katamarayudu-three-stars-watch-video-4590428/> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

Telugu film stars by ‘the public’, which is to say people who were not themselves stars, activists or politicians, began during the agitation for Telangana state when supporters of the statehood demand called for boycotts and other actions against celebrities who were either silent or opposed the demand.<sup>5</sup>

This was around the time Facebook ‘troll pages’ dedicated to individual stars sprang up.<sup>6</sup> Initially, such pages remained on the fringes of fandom, attracting relative few likes and dedicated followers. As far as Telugu cinema is concerned, the now familiar practice of fans working in tandem with other online groups to attack ‘enemies’ became apparent when fans of Prabhas (and those who claimed to be in awe of the *Baahubali* franchise) joined Hindu Right-wing trolls to abuse and threaten Anna Vetticad, the film journalist who trashed the *Baahubali* sequel in her review.<sup>7</sup> A pattern like the one noted in political trolls targeting minorities and women on social media platforms was thus established.

Around this time, in another disturbing development, Pawan Kalyan’s ex-wife came under vicious attack by his fans when she announced that she was considering remarriage.<sup>8</sup> The announcement of her engagement in 2018 was met with death threats.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, Kalyan’s fans also issued rape and death threats to the actor Sri Reddy—who was protesting sexual exploitation in the film industry—for abusing the star in a television statement. Cut to July 2020

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the ‘controversy’ around the film *Cameraman Gangatho Rambabu* featuring Kalyan at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/south/story/chiranjeevi-brother-telugu-film-kicks-up-telangana-andhra-row-119262-2012-10-21> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.facebook.com/pawalapa1/> and <https://te-in.facebook.com/pawalagadupspk> (accessed on 1 November 2021), which are both dedicating to trolling Kalyan. Naturally, Kalyan’s competitors, like NT Rama Rao Jr, too, acquired their own dedicated troll pages created by anti-fans. See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Comedian/JAI-ZOO-NTR-Kojjaism-121762257970836/> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

<sup>7</sup> See the report on the incident: <https://www.dailyo.in/arts/baahubali-the-conclusion-anna-mm-vetticad-trolling-film-review-hindutva-intolerance/story/1/16922.html> (accessed on 1 November 2021). To read what Anna Vetticad, the journalist in question, wrote on her trolls, see <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/dissecting-the-language-of-baahubali-trolls-hindu-film-urduwood-chrislamist-critic-3425664.html> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/celebrities/story/pawan-kalyan-ex-wife-renu-desai-trolled-for-remarriage-1058128-2017-10-05> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

<sup>9</sup> See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/telugu/movies/news/pk-fans-threaten-to-kill-renu-desai-if-she-gets-remarried/articleshow/64735097.cms> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

and we have Kalyan's fans raiding film director Ram Gopal Varma's office in Hyderabad.<sup>10</sup>

The sociopolitical context in which fan violence unfolds is one in which there are complex linkages between film star fandom, caste and political mobilizations. I noted elsewhere that the figure of the star facilitates the creation, or reinforcement, of equivalences and antagonisms between social groups and political mobilizations (Srinivas 2009). These are not easily mapped on to narratives of star vehicles. That is to say, films themselves don't make explicit references to caste differences or political formations. The multiple points of intersection between fandom and messy real politics make it difficult to isolate celebration, and criticism, of actors and films from real or perceived political positions.

Does the growing body of literature on audiences and media consumers offer us points of entry into a world of fandom, which is also one of caste and electoral politics?

Studies of audiences note that consumption of cultural commodities is an *active* process. While fans are among the most active sections of an audience, Henry Jenkins (1992: 293) cautions in his classic work on *Star Trek* fans, 'The fan audience is in no sense representative of the audience at large, nor can we go from an understating of a specific subculture to an account of *the active spectator*....' He goes on to add, 'I am not even sure that the types of fans I have discussed here...are necessarily identical with other varieties of fans....'

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<sup>10</sup> See report here at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/rgv-s-office-attacked-hyderabad-ahead-power-star-release-129314> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

Varma's run-in with the star and his fans is not in fact comparable. For some years now, Varma has made something of a second career of trolling politicians and media celebrities. He has also harnessed his social media fame as a troll to make biopics and satires of politicians. He has repeatedly ridiculed Kalyan and his fans on social media platforms and television interviews. He also admitted to advising Sri Reddy to abuse Kalyan to attract media attention. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/telugu/movies/news/rgv-steps-into-sri-reddy-pk-fiasco-lands-his-foot-in-the-mouth/article-show/63832619.cms> (accessed on 1 November 2021). The trigger for the attack on his office in 2020 was the satirical film *Power Star* (Kalyan's honorific title) he was making on a failed star politician who, he claimed disingenuously, was not modelled after Kalyan. Even as teasers of the film generated much anger and hilarity, he announced a biopic on television anchor Arnab Goswami titled *Arnab: The News Prostitute* (see <https://www.siasat.com/ram-gopal-varma-shares-first-look-of-arnab-the-news-prostitute-1946856/>; accessed on 1 November 2021).

Some of Jenkins' inferences are directly relevant to our discussion. He states, '*Fandom recognizes no clear-cut line between artists and consumers; all fans are potential writers* whose talents need to be discovered, nurtured, and promoted and who may be able to make a contribution, however modest, to the cultural wealth of the larger community' (1992: 286, emphasis added). We can see that these features of fandom are only amplified in Web 2.0 platforms, whose most celebrated affordance is the democratization of content creation and erasure of distinctions between producers and consumers. However, Jenkin's own later work and a great deal of literature on fandom inspired by writings on popular culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s proved to be far too invested in reading good politics into fan activity to be (a) persuasive and (b) useful to understand mediatized (read bad) politics of the present.

Around the time of Jenkin's study, and the wave of audience studies inspired by cultural studies, film star fandom in southern India, which was organized, and publicly staged within and outside cinema halls, became the subject of academic study. The focus of research in South India was the intimate connections between fandom and social and political mobilizations (Dickey 1993; Pandian 1992). Also in focus were the affordances of the cinema and fandom for sections of the audience to inhabit public spaces (Dickey 1993; Srinivas 2009), and refashioning speech and appearance (Nakassis 2016). The heuristic value of this 'regional' phenomenon, like the counterpart that Jenkins wrote about, lies first in its *anticipation of modes of 'prosumption'* that characterize the new normal in which consumers churn out and distribute content. Further, this regional phenomenon is not only linked with political mobilizations but is also publicly staged. Obsessions, alliances and antagonisms are nurtured and *acted out in public spaces*.

## **OF FANDOM, REACTIVE CONSUMPTION AND POPULISM**

Fandom is first of all *performative*. The performativity of a fan is in response to another, always/already mediated performance by the idol. The fan–star relationship therefore needs to be seen as a dialectic between two sets of mediated performances, separated

by time and space. Second, fandom is *excessive* by the standards of consumption cultures in which it is located. For example, in a town where large numbers of viewers whistle their appreciation, fans are likely to stand up, dance and toss coins in the direction of the screen. Third, the South Indian variant of fandom as mentioned above, has a long and well-documented history of linkages with caste and political mobilizations. Fandom here is also linked to the performance of masculinity. This locates the fan in a web of alliances and antagonisms and privileges certain practices of giving and taking offence. Finally, film star fandom is a response to films and their textuality. It is not a site where pre-existing caste, class, gender and other identities are played out. In other words, it is inseparable from *textuality and affordances of a media form and the sites of its consumption*. To take a trivial example, fans of Chiranjeevi don't whistle at random intervals during screening—they do so at particular moments, which are elaborately choreographed to *invite* participation (Srinivas 2009). Fans also behave differently in different exhibition spaces because there are well-established, and rudely enforced, site-specific protocols of viewing behaviour.

Fans in South India alert us to a mode of media consumption that is *reactive* (call it active, after L. Srinivas [2016], if you will, but only if the term is not value laden). Take, for instance, the reports of fans of Pawan Kalyan allegedly targeting a Twitter user for being critical of the star. They tracked him down, beat him up, captured the incident on camera and circulated the video on social media (Sundar 2018). It is tempting to draw parallels between such actions by fans and 'cow vigilantism' videos which show people being lynched, supposedly for smuggling cattle to slaughterhouses.

The subject of populism—who in contemporary India is the subject of 'bad politics' in that he is casteist, male chauvinist, Islamophobic, easily manipulated, ultranationalist and so on—is a variant of the *fan*. Or rather, s/he is a fan whose idols are no longer media celebrities and are instead leaders whose actions determine the fate of nations. What we are witnessing today is the explosion of *fan-like* excessive, mediatized responses and *uncivil* behaviour in the public domain.

Taking the cue from Swati Chaturvedi's (2016) report, lets approach the Internet troll as the most visible virtual manifestation of the subject of populism in our time. Emerging alliances between Right-wing trolls and fans (noted by Mitra [2020] too in the context of Hindi cinema), as well as the importance of fans for populist film star politicians of South India necessitate a comparative study of the two groups. While concurring with Swati Chaturvedi's findings that the Internet troll is part of a massive propaganda machine which includes paid employees and consultants, I would like to leave room for voluntarism, which Chaturvedi herself notes among her interviewees.

The examples I mentioned earlier allow me to make the provocative claim that *the troll who attacks opponents of the political icon in question is taking a leaf out of the manual that has been followed by South Indian fans from the 1990s, if not earlier.* Attacking real and imagined opponents of their idols is a well-established means of demonstrating one's loyalty in fan circles. However, I am neither suggesting that film star fandom is Right-wing cyberbullying by another name nor claiming that regardless of their geographical and social location, fans of South Indian stars are everywhere the same. Instead, I would like to draw attention to *convergences at the level of consumption practices between fan and other online publics.*

## **PERFORMING REACTION: YOUTUBE AND BEYOND**

Social media activity by fans of South Indian film stars points to two convergences: first between fans and supporters of political leaders and second between different categories of fans who were hitherto distinguishable by how they presented themselves in public. Differences in dispositions and behaviour, made by educated, middle-class 'online' fans between themselves and rowdy elements 'on the streets' in Punathambekar's study (2008), are no longer evident. Even as small town, resident Indian fans went online, well-heeled non-resident Indian fans began mimicking their resident, rowdy counterparts to organize their very own celebrations of film releases in suburban North American theatres. These celebrations are then recorded meticulously and uploaded on

social media platforms like YouTube to be ‘liked’ and recirculated by resident fans as evidence of the global popularity of their icons.

Fan videos on YouTube have continuities with past fan practices. A popular subject of fan videos is ‘first-day-first-show’ (FDFS) celebrations outside cinema halls. ‘Theatre reaction’ of audiences within auditoria (during screenings) have increasingly found their way to YouTube and other social media platforms. The earliest theatre reaction videos I was able to locate were shot and uploaded in 2007 and featured sequences from the Rajinikanth-starrer *Sivaji* (Tamil, S. Shankar, 2007) within days of the film’s release (Geonift 2007). Early FDFS videos focus primarily on the screen, and like screen-recorded pirated copies of films, capture the ambient cheering in the auditorium *inter alia*. The presence and ‘reaction’ of fans is an *accompaniment* of the star’s actions on the stage. In more recent videos, the focus shifts to fans with the screen serving as a backdrop for *their performances*. In some videos, the camera repeatedly moves away from the screen to capture streams of paper flung by the audience and other off-screen actions (Sachin 2013). In others, we can see countless illuminated blue screens of mobile phones recording the whistling and dancing, creating something of a collective selfie of fans’ enjoyment of their idol’s film (Sunny 2016).

Professionally produced theatre reaction videos, uploaded by commercial content creators and channels on YouTube, by virtue of their superior quality camerawork and location of the videographer at the rear end of the auditorium, provide even clearer images of fans recording themselves. Fans’ *theatrical celebration is now a cultural commodity in its own right*.<sup>11</sup> Of late, reactions to non-Indian films in (mostly South Indian) cinema halls too have found their way to YouTube.<sup>12</sup>

Theatre reaction videos are a sub-genre of the ‘reaction video’ which is an established YouTube genre. Videos by reaction

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<sup>11</sup> Rohini Cinemas, Chennai, is the location of several FDFS celebration videos including well-produced ones. See, for example, Ebenezer (2019).

<sup>12</sup> There are several theatre reaction videos of *Avengers: Endgame* which attracted millions of views—an impressive number for this sub-genre. See, for instance, the profile Pranav N who has just four videos—all of which are reaction videos that appear to have been shot during the same screening of this film (see [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA-NkwwgBIK-5cizkM\\_vlU5g](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA-NkwwgBIK-5cizkM_vlU5g); accessed on 1 November 2021) and attracted between 140,000 and 3.5 million views on YouTube.

specialists on YouTube tend to be disdainful.<sup>13</sup> Whether they are posted by fans or commercial entities, theatre reactions of/by Indian fans are almost never disdainful. Despite the global popularity of the reaction video, fan videos return our gaze to a much older, and local, archive.

Fan videos on social media like other fan texts and activities remind us that performativity is a defining feature of fandom. Even as a new generation of fans make the transition from real to virtual spaces, others act as relays between online and physical spaces. To this day, as Sara Dickey (1993) noted close to three decades ago, fan clubs make elaborate preparations to ritualize their enjoyment, arriving at the screening armed with confetti, balloons, etc. (see also S. V. Srinivas and L. Srinivas for fans' theatre-based activities). In more recent times, bursting of firecrackers, fan processions to screening venues, animal sacrifices, washing of film posters and 'flexi' (PVC) hoardings with milk or bottled soft drinks are regularly reported by the media and fans themselves on Facebook and YouTube.

The most striking aspect of the theatre reaction video is the *presencing* of fans in the space where the fan–star encounter occurs. As in the encounter between the 'photos of the gods' and the consumer–devotee in Christopher Pinney's work, here too we notice a *corpothetic* response to the image.<sup>14</sup> Presencing has been a prominent feature of fan performances in other spaces as well and organized fan activity points relentlessly to it. The 'publicity' material produced by fans typically carries names, photographs and at times even phone numbers of individual fans who created it. Literature on social media flags the tendency among users to draw attention to themselves, whether or not this may be considered appropriate by others (see, e.g., Meese et al. [2015] on the funeral selfie). Bucher and Helmond (2018) argue that *visibility* is among the affordances of social media platforms (the others being editability, persistence and association).

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<sup>13</sup> Prasad (1998: 67) draws attention to 'disdainful engagement with the popular' as 'a supplementary pleasure of readerly superiority' in English language film magazines from the 1930s. The term 'anti-fan' in audience studies literature captures a similar response.

<sup>14</sup> Pinney argues that 'in popular Indian art...consumers started to demand images... that fundamentally addressed their presence and invoked a new corpothetics' (2004: 22). I return to the notion of spectatorial demand/entitlement below.

Arriving at Web 2.0 and social media via fandom, we notice that forms of engagement with media texts and personalities that were once limited to a highly organized minority (namely fans) are now universal. On social media platforms, non-fans can do what fans were doing: they can all ‘talk back’, make demands of films and stars, issue threats and go to town with their obsessions. The social media platform affords, and invites, fan-like, excessive performances. *The platform becomes the driving force of equivalences between fans, and between fans and other groups.* It is on the platform that articulations of interests, invocation of symbols, conspiracy theories and narratives of discrimination and victimization bond disparate groups which come together as allies, and act against enemies.

The subject of populism does not merely inhabit a media ecology that is shared by fans but also one in which fandom anticipated the routine excesses of social media. For a student of fandom, criticisms of populist leaders and their followers sound like writings against ‘bad’ (formulaic, regressive) cinema, manipulative stars and their blind fans. The metaphor of devotion, earlier deployed in (self and other) representations of fans, is increasingly heard in discussions of politics. Today, the *bhakt* (literally devotee but meaning blind follower) is to politics what the fan is/was to cinema.

Shalini Kakar (2009) makes a case for conceiving of the star as deity and fan as devotee by drawing attention to instances of fans literally worshipping their stars. M. Madhava Prasad’s (2014) discussion of ‘fan *bhakti*’ which predates the arrival of the *bhakt* on the political arena moves away from a literal reading of fan devotion. His reading of fan devotion is more political and raises a question that can be taken to populism: is devotion *pressure from below*, exerted on the star leader? Prasad argues that fan *bhakti* is in fact an expression of ‘subaltern sovereignty’, and an attempt at ‘wresting sovereignty from those who inherited it from the British and bestowing it upon monarchs of their choice’ (2014: 176–177). This is a process in which ‘kings [are] chosen and anointed by the people: kings of democracy!’ (2014: 176). Such a political deployment of devotion, he states, is traceable to the long history of the deployment of *bhakti* to ‘wrest the divine away from kingly dominion’ (2014: 176).

Prasad's attempt to reconceptualize expressions of devotion and loyalty as pressures from below points to instances in which fans make demands on stars and film-makers. Fans of South Indian stars have on occasion boycotted films. While there is no denying the parallels between fan activity and expressions of loyalty and 'devotion' to populist leaders, do these parallels throw light on contemporary politics?

## POPULISM AS 'FAN DEMOCRACY'

Is fandom democratic, asks Liesbet van Zoonen in her widely cited essay on television fandom. She answers in the affirmative, arguing that 'fan groups are social formations that are structurally equivalent to political constituencies...they make use of and value similar repertoires of activity; and...the strength of their respective relations to their "objects" is built on corresponding emotional investments' (2004: 43). I drew attention to historical linkages and evolving intersections between both groups in our context. van Zoonen's notion of fan activity is shaped by then current literature on fandom.

Fans...participate in strong communal *discussions and deliberations* about the qualities of the text, they propose and *discuss alternatives* which would be implemented as well if only the fans could have their way. These are, in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: *information, discussion and activism*. (2004: 46, emphases added)

van Zoonen's fan is traceable to Henry Jenkins' *Star Trek* fan who is engaged in critical interpretive practices, cultural production and alternative cultural production (Jenkins 1992: 278–290). Her focus on fandom allows her to find a place for emotional investments in politics which, she says, 'have hardly been *theorized* as indispensable, desirable and commendable components of political involvement'. Notably, her conception of politics is predicated on *information processing, cognitive evaluations and rational assessment of alternatives* (van Zoonen 2004: 48, emphasis added). Surely, this is not the kind of politics we are familiar with today, in India and several other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, her term *fan democracy* is arguably an accurate description of mediatized electoral democracies. This is a good time for us to reflect on whether we are indeed living in democracies populated by fans—of film stars and also celebrity politicians. The numerous examples of bad behaviour of fans cited earlier in this chapter are uncannily like the reactions of social media followers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi himself has an extraordinary presence on social media platforms—much more so than any other contemporary Indian celebrity. His followers have drawn the attention of journalists and academics for joining campaigns that systematically target opponents (Chaturvedi 2016, among others). Analyses of Modi's Twitter handle indicate that his followers' reactions are, among other things, platform and technogenic: the 'followback' strategy adopted by the leader, for instance, is seen as enthusing his committed followers to do more political work voluntarily (Pal 2015). Modi's refusal to distance himself from handles accused of hate speech and verbal violence against opponents can be read as an indirect endorsement of such actions (Jawed 2017; Karnad 2017).

Compare fans-turned-political followers of Pawan Kalyan who occupy a liminal space between the interconnected domains of politics and cinema in the Telugu states. I am not particularly interested in Pawan Kalyan's political positions, which have changed frequently over the years: he is an avowed admirer of Che Guevara but aligned with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2014. He then broke with the NDA, publicly ridiculed the BJP and the prime minister too and fought an election as an ally of the two major communist parties. He then returned to the NDA and become an ally of the BJP once again. The larger question Kalyan's career throws up is the place of the star, and the populist politician, in a public domain that is at once open to all, uncivil and illiberal.

Contemporary populism is usefully approached as a political idiom in which political subjects are invited to *perform their presence* in real and virtual public places. The performance too, like the invitation itself, is thoroughly mediatized: the call to make myself seen and heard is made on a medium and my ability to respond hinges on access to media technologies and devices. Cinema and

film star fandom foreground the process by which *textual cues* and modes of address, often involving the star, invite so-called active viewing. Take, for instance, the direct-to-camera look of the male star, one of the set pieces of South Indian stars' vehicles, which is a cue for whistling and cheering in exhibition spaces.

Moving the discussion beyond cinema and devotion proper, the two domains where corpothetic responses to media texts are commonly observed, Francis Cody conceives of an *embodied* public that is constituted by mass-mediated subjects of politics. The medium in question—the (Tamil) newspaper—and its public are quite unlike their liberal counterparts. Notes Cody, 'Tamil dailies have the capacity to make and break political careers, and they quite frequently *provoke* those involved as cadre members in party politics to take to the streets themselves in defense of their leaders' (2015: 55, emphasis added). Ram Gopal Varma's recent films and social media posts (mentioned in passing above) are remarkably similar in intent and consequence at one level. Varma provokes and invites attacks on himself by ridiculing and satirizing popular leaders and celebrities. Every troll campaign Varma launches results in threats but also the support of anti-fans and/or opponents of the personality under attack. Our mediascape is populated not just by leaders and their followers but also opponents and provocateurs.

The capacity of media texts to provoke, intentionally or otherwise is thus not limited to the context Cody discusses. Protests and 'controversies' involving South Indian fans are often directly traceable to the semantic surplus generated by images and other texts. Dismissed as misreading, or wilful misinterpretation, this mode of reactive consumption presents us with an interesting set of problems related to what Nakassis (2020, after Mol 1999) calls *ontological politics* of the image. The very being of images, argues Nakassis is the subject of contestation. In the context of Tamil cinema, fans of film stars are key players in such contestations. It is a fact that fans of South Indian stars see themselves as guardians of the star-image-body. Nakassis points out that mass heroes of South India, who are stars at the centre of large fan organizations 'are not simply auratic, presented bodies to be seen and desired in images. They are also political bodies on whom demands for

representation may be made' (2020: 77). Deployment of stars in films or their offscreen appearances have had to reckon with the reality of fans' claims over their idols.

Investment in the star is founded on an acute sense of entitlement which in turn has been an affordance of theatrical viewing (Rajadhyaksha 2000). Star vehicles of South Indian stars acknowledge and reinforce the fan-spectator's entitlements: the assemblage of formulaic set pieces *appears* to unfold according to spectatorial demands. Cinematic populism is the hallmark of vehicles of South Indian mass heroes (S. V. Srinivas 2009: 73–128; S. V. Srinivas 2013: 203–206).

The idol's ability to command loyalty is not a fallout of pre-existing cultural (caste differences and assertions) or religious (*bhakti*) factors but an outcome of the relationship between screen and the fan. Strikingly feudal or religious language and rituals notwithstanding, fandom necessarily involves the *donation* of loyalty. The gift of loyalty however comes with its obligations: fans' role in maintaining the idol's prestige must be constantly acknowledged and reaffirmed by the star himself. After all, the star is beholden to this collective that affords him, in turn, his publicness.

In southern India, fandom was mediated populism by another name. Mediated populism *per se* is a state of permanent mobilization in which media consumers are invited to acquire stakes in a variety of issues, from taking on public enemies (such as 'Urban Naxals') to ensuring justice (#SSR), and of course participating in the fight against the pandemic. The fulcrum of this permanent mobilization on multiple fronts is the figure of the leader. Invitations by him, and by others purportedly acting on his behalf, take the form of an acknowledgement of the centrality of the political subject's support—often in the most obvious terms—to a cause of great national importance. The promise of mediated populism is the presencing of the subject: I matter, and no less a man than the leader says so.

The two calls given by Modi, avowedly to raise awareness, and spirits, during the early days of the pandemic are excellent illustrations of how mediated populism works by inviting participation. These '*taali, thali and diya* initiatives', as the prime minister

himself called them, were not in any obvious way relevant to the public health crisis at hand. Instead, they were publicly staged performances. They are comparable to fan activity in which rituals are taken out of the religious context and re-enacted in the (virtual) presence of a secular idol. Like fan activity, and unlike the older conception of politics in which there is a unidirectional flow of messages from leaders to their subjects, the thali–diya type initiatives locate the subject in a space of content production. These two calls by the prime minister spawned pseudo-scientific explanations of the antiviral properties of sound and light. They also produced evidence of the nation constituting itself around individual and group selfies.

A populist regime is thus a fan democracy in which the ‘new hunger for immediacy: for the direct and unmediated apprehension and acknowledgment of embodied experience, for a presencing of the political’ (Mazzarella 2019: 50) is thoroughly *mediated* by performative–spectatorial practices. Fandom and populism are both about ‘doing stuff’ before screens and on screens, archiving passions and finding audiences for (our) performances. The observer-camera, noted James Clifford (1983), has the effect of transforming ritual. Today, the consumer of mediatized messages is also a producer of content in which she is herself the protagonist. Most importantly, the star leader too is watching the show.

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