

HERO
AND
HERO-WORSHIP
Fandom in Modern India

Edited by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Foreword	ix
1. Introduction: Hero and Hero-Worship: Understanding Fandom in Modern India	1
Rahul Chaturvedi <i>Banaras Hindu University, India</i>	
Hariom Singh <i>Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, India</i>	
Anita Singh <i>Banaras Hindu University, India</i>	
2. Discourse on Fandom in Modern India: Where do We Stand?	17
Priyanka Shivadas <i>University of New South Wales Canberra, Australia</i>	
3. Stardom: Deceiving the 'Self'	29
Himanshu Khosla <i>Punjab Technical University, India</i>	
4. Discursive Power of Enigmatic Stars: Dynamics of Celebrity Culture	41
Ruchi Sharma <i>Chitkara University, India</i>	
5. The Cult of Aamir Khan: A Cultural Study of Indian Fandom	53
Vishakha Sen <i>University of Lucknow, India</i>	
6. Soap Opera Stars as Corporate Commodities: The Political Economy of Television Stardom	67
Ritika Pant <i>University of Delhi, India</i>	

7. Celebrity Endorsements in Advertisements: Influence on the Buying Behavior of the Youth	87
Saket Kumar Bhardwaj <i>Tezpur University, India</i>	
Uttam Kumar Pegu <i>Tezpur University, India</i>	
8. Bewitching Bombay: A Reflection on the Fandom of an Urban Space	107
Shipra Tholia <i>Banaras Hindu University, India</i>	
9. Fandom of Banaras: Beats' Guiding Star of East	117
Ashima Bhardwaj <i>Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado, USA</i>	
10. Cultural Politics of War-heroes: Revisiting the Soldier Bio-icons of Jammu	133
Jamiel Ahmad <i>University of Kashmir, India</i>	
11. Indigenous Heroes of Nature and Culture: Fashioning Environmental Fandom in <i>Hodesum</i>	145
Rajanikant Pandey <i>Central University of Jharkhand, India</i>	
12. What My Hero Means to Me: The Confession of a Batman Enthusiast	165
Amar Singh <i>Banaras Hindu University, India</i>	
List of Contributors	177
Index	181

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

- Figure 5.1: Neo-Marxist Relations Between Celebrity as Star and Audience as Fan by Vishakha Sen. 57
- Figure 10.1: Statue of N.K Rifleman Kuldeep Raj who died while fighting against the enemies in Baramulla, Kashmir. His martyrdom turned out to be the hero-making factor for him and he is an iconic figure for his villagers, his cult, and for the nation. 142
- Figure 10.2: This figure represents NK Rifleman Kuldeep Raj's war-statue at his native village in Samba, Jammu and his prominence as a regional war bio-icon. We can see the title 'shaheed' given to him, which means a 'martyr'. 143
- Figure 10.3: People visiting the statue-site of Kuldeep Raj on his martyrdom anniversary. It seems to be a festival organised by his village people. This very event has turned Kuldeep Raj's existence to a sort of bio-icon, who has a specific space in the cult of male valour and sacrifice. 143
- Figure 10.4: People relishing meals served in the compound of Kuldeep Raj's statue-site. 144

Tables

- Table 5.1: Engagement of Star with Fan at Different Intermedial Levels by Vishakha Sen. 56
- Table 7.2: Top 10 Celebrity Endorsers in 2016. 88

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Foreword

In modern India the concept of heroes as symbol and metaphor, and its interlinking with hero worship, fandom, *bhakt* cult, that is fan as devotee and fan clubs is about iconizing or deifying a public performer or a personality or teams of performers ranging from political icons to superstars in the fields of cinema, sports, music and spiritual counselling along with the seduction of real and imagined spaces. The given assumption is that the hero is an extraordinarily talented, handsome, masculine, cerebral brave-heart. In contemporary parlance, a hero is often addressed as an achiever and, therefore, a celebrity and superstar. The transformation of an individual from the average to the heroic is about admitting the greatness of the person concerned. Who decides who is an achiever or a hero? It is predominantly the digital fan communities that are decision-makers, in the pre-internet era the fan clubs in a more limited span, functioned similarly. In contemporary times, the rating is based often on the commercial success of a performer, a team, a place or space or a best-selling writer.

It is the fan who is the consumer of the heroic attributes and to the fan the hero becomes an inspirational icon who 'prosumes' the mind of the fan. A fan is a prosumer who consumes and produces a product. So addictive is this propensity to idolize a hero that the fan becomes completely obsessed, wallowing even in the trivia that superstardom or hero worship generates. A fan runs the risk of pathological imbalance due to obsessive besotted deification of a person that can be either edifying or self-destructive. In his book *Textual Poachers* (1992) H. Jenkins has analysed fan psychosis and referred to the 'pathological deviant subjectivities' that determine fan behaviourism. The fan, therefore, is the reader who reads and consumes the hero as text. It is the response and the reception of fans and fandom that creates, constructs and transforms outstanding performers to the stature of heroes. The concept of heroes and fans, aficionados or devotees has been present throughout human history. The heroes in religious texts and epics have been glorified and romanticized monumentally. At present, however, the common semantic usages have now reinvented themselves to such variables as leaders and followers.

In contemporary times however the reinvention of both signifiers, heroes and fans, has been primarily due to digital technology, media platforms and the rapid creation of fan communities through social networks that create digital or virtual communes where sharing is interpreted as caring, without any concerted effort. The much more sophisticated roles of heroes and fans of the 21st century are of course linked to economic globalization and the consumerist culture that the market economy has ushered in. Referring to the

relevance of Carlyle's classic text *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*, first published in 1841 and re-published as recently as 2013, the critic Brent E Kinser stated, "It is true that the inanities associated with the new social media, including Facebook, the blogosphere, YouTube, and Twitter, represent a form of triviality that is striking in its pervasive and subliminal influence...The new social media has become the engine for a digital age of revolution, the priorities of which frequently intersect with Carlyle's notion of the heroic" (Kinser 274).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a hero is 'a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good'. The hero may be a main male character in a story, novel, film/movie, etc., a person, especially a man, who is admired because of a particular quality or skill that he may have. Hero-worship is also defined as the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity, a person or principle. Lexically, hero worship and fandom are regarded as synonyms, the word fan emanates from the Modern Latin *fanaticus*, meaning "insanely but divinely inspired". The word originally pertained to a temple or sacred place [Latin *fanum*, poetic English *fane*]. The modern sense of "extremely zealous" dates from around 1647; the use of fanatic as a noun dates from 1650.

Carlyle was an advocate of elite excellence, a feature critiqued in one of the essays in this volume, stating that one needs to look for the heroic in the resistance of the wretched of the earth and not just among great men. So Carlyle stated, "For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these..." (Carlyle 21).

Elaborating further, Carlyle stated with impassioned fervour,

And now if worship even of a star had some meaning in it, how much more might that of a Hero! Worship of a Hero is transcendent admiration of a Great Man. I say great men are still admirable; I say there is, at bottom, nothing else admirable! No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of man. It is to this hour, and at all hours, the vivifying influence in man's life. Religion I find stand [sic] upon it...Hero-worship, heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission, burning, boundless, for a noblest godlike Form of Man... (Carlyle 28)

The six essays of Thomas Carlyle in the book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* defined in detail the roles of the hero as Divinity, Prophet, Poet, Priest, Man of Letters and King respectively, and interestingly arranged in that order in the contents. Carlyle referred to Odin, Mahomet, Christ, Dante, Shakespeare, Martin Luther and Knox as heroes in his essays. In Sorensen's introduction to Carlyle's essays, he observed, "Numerous heroes of the twentieth century, among them Anna Akhmatova, Winston Churchill, Mohandas Gandhi, Vasily Grossman, Václav Havel, Martin Luther King, Rosa Luxemburg, Nelson Mandela, Osip Mandelstam, George Orwell, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn—pursued paths that frequently fulfilled Carlylean notions of the heroic. By their words and their actions, they inspired others to transcend self-interest in a wider battle against injustice and falsehood" (16).

The editors have provided a cogent introduction to their book and included essays on diverse aspects of heroes, hero-worship and fandom. They have outlined some of the crucial elements that define hero-worship that may be categorized as infatuation, aesthetics, self-esteem and entertainment triggering pleasure, arousal, vicarious pleasure and obsessive syndromes of hysteria. The example of the Shahrukh Khan's film *Fan* as an element of intertextuality between the Bollywood production of *Fan* in 2016 and the Hollywood film *The Fan* released in 1996, starring Robert De Niro, tracks the evolution of fandom and the cultural differences between modern India and Hollywood.

Undoubtedly, this book will provide cutting edge material in this emerging field of fandom studies to students, faculty members and researchers. Each of the 12 essays included in the book ranging from stardom, celebrity culture, fandom of Banaras and Bollywood to environmental fandom, Aamir Khan and Batman, open new doors of perception and theoretical discourse, through discursive argumentation and scholarly interventions.

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1.

Introduction:
Hero and Hero-Worship:
Understanding Fandom in Modern India

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This book has its origin in increasing usage of the word *Bhakt* in Indian public discourse, especially in relation to the political following. *Bhakt*, originally implies a devotee, a spiritual seeker of God. However, its contemporary usage in Indian public discourse has nothing to do with its etymological meaning. Rather it refers to the hyper-active followers of any political leader. Political bhakti, which is perhaps equivalent to political fandom, initially intended to constitute the core argument of this book. However, there are other kinds of *bhaktis* as well, which were originally planned to be a part of this book. The spiritual fandom of trans-national and regional *babas/gurus* (spiritual leaders) — which differs from the membership of organised religions like Hinduism, Islam or Christianity in its nature and structure— along media fandoms of ‘superstars’ from the cinema and cricket and the emotional over-investment of the audience in the consumerist culture of today, originally intended to constitute the fundamental premise of fandom discourse in India. Despite its limitations, the focus of the book has been throughout on understanding the fandom as a phenomenon and how it has found expression in the Indian public sphere.

I

How 'We' are not 'Them': Ethical Iconographies of Fandom

It is certainly very difficult to offer a universally accepted definition of who a fan is. Everybody, in some ways, is a fan of someone or something. Some arguments suggest that fans are, in fact, the most dedicated and ideal audience/followers. Nonetheless, in the popular opinion, a fan is a person with 'obsessive attachment' for someone or something whose admiration borders on 'threat', 'abnormality', and/or 'stupidity' (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 10). To be a fan, in this sense, implies to live with a stigma (this is one of the reasons perhaps that fans continue to 'refuse their fanhood' in the public space). Generally, fans are considered as people with "pathological and deviant subjectivities" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 10). More than often, a fan is usually considered a potential fanatic having excessive fixation and abnormal admiration for the popular (media) figures. Fan obsessions, therefore, are mostly viewed as instances of (im)proper social behaviour which result from a programmed representation of popular celebrities on media, internet, and television intending to reinforce 'the consumerist agenda' through fandoms.

Traditionally, a fan is understood as an effect of a star. Thus imbibing an inherent passivity, a fan is understood to be unreflective and emotionally vulnerable consumer of mass media produced images who considers celebrities as heroes/role models based on an imaginary relationship s/he 'imagines' to have with the star. The model of fandom as envisioned by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* and Joli Jenson in "Fandom as Pathology" considers fandom pathological and deems fans to be either an obsessed individual with 'a child-like subjectivity' or a member of a hysterical crowd without 'an evolved ego'. Therein, fandom refers to "individual obsessions, privately elaborated, and public hysteria, mobilized by crowd contagion" (Jenson 13). This pathological model of fan phenomenon was wittily summarised by Henry Jenkins in his *Textual Poachers* through a set of characteristics wherein fans

- a. are brainless consumers who will buy anything associated with the program or its cast;
- b. devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge;
- c. place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material;
- d. are social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience;
- e. are feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture;
- f. are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature;
- g. are unable to separate fantasy from reality. (10)

Jenkins' outline of fandom suggests a moral framework of fandom which is based on the binary of 'normal audience/viewer' and 'abnormal fan'. Definition of a fan as an abnormal 'other' who is ridiculously infatuated with an individual celebrity or any cultural item/form, with the latent possibility of being violent, stands in close relation to a good, critical normal audience. Jenkins' approach to fandom is surely psychological and indicates a kind of moral dualism wherein the 'ideal' (non)fan audience lacks an abnormal psyche in apparent contrast to the 'perverse' fan-viewer. Jenkins argues that

[T]he fans still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire. . . . The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. (*Textual Poachers* 15-16)

Similar to the moral/pathological approach, there is another quite significant model of fandom which views fans as ignorant and uncritical people with very little brain who are vulnerable to powerful coercive forms of media. They are seen as 'cultural dopes', childlike and passive consumers of popular culture, having morbid tastes belonging to low culture. Writing about this model of fandom, Lawrence Grossberg contends that

a second approach attempts to begin by characterizing the particular sorts of people who become fans, and the basis on which their relationship to popular culture is constructed. In this model, it is often assumed that popular culture appeals to the lowest and least critical segments of the population. These audiences are thought to be easily manipulated and distracted (not only from 'serious' culture but also from real social concerns), mobilized solely to make a profit. The various forms of popular culture appeal to the audience's most debased needs and desires, making them even more passive, more ignorant and noncritical than they already are. Fans are simply incapable of recognizing that the culture they enjoy is being used to dupe and exploit them. A second, related view of fans assumes that they are always juveniles, waiting to grow up, and still enjoying the irresponsibility of their fandom. (51)

In addition to the two aforesaid models of fandom, there can be a third approach to understand the fan phenomenon, which is slightly more liberal and emancipatory from the perspective of a fan. This model considers fans as people possessing higher creative and communicative capacities, who can engage with and interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and unexpected ways. They, as a collectivity, give birth to what can be called fan communities. Since these groups of fans participate in communal and communicational

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Index

A

Affect, 139
Agitprop, 62
Auratic identification, 70
Autobiography, 174

B

Banaras, 117
Batman, 166
Baudrillard, Jean, 112
Beats, iv, 14, 117, 120, 121, 122,
124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 131
Bhakt, 1, 10, 15
Bio-icon, iv, 14, 133, 136, 138, 140
Booth, Paul, 16
Brand, 9, 13, 47, 48, 49, 51, 56, 58,
67, 68, 69, 79, 80, 81, 82, 87, 88,
89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98,
99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105,
106, 168

C

Celebritisation, 30, 31
Celebrity endorsement, 13, 88, 89,
90, 91, 93, 94, 96, 98, 100, 101,
103, 104
Charisma, 8, 34, 157, 158, 162
Commercialization of Fear, 168
Commodification, 30, 32, 108
Consumer behaviour, 91, 92
Corporatised stardom, 70, 84
Cosmic cartography, 118
Counterculture, 128, 129
Cultural memory, 114, 122

D

Desire, 3, 12, 20, 27, 33, 36, 44, 45,
53, 61, 77, 87, 89, 99, 113, 161
Digital fandom, 5, 16
Dyer, Richard, 30, 39, 41, 50, 68,
70, 85

E

Elective belonging, 14, 107, 108,
109, 114
Environmental Fandom, iv, xi, 14,
145
Environmental justice, 145, 159

F

Fan culture, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 15, 55,
64, 110, 114
Fellahin, 120

G

Ginsberg, Allen, 14, 117, 120, 121,
122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127,
128, 129, 130, 131
Grossberg, Lawrence, 3, 4, 7, 15

I

Iconography, 14, 133, 134
Image-essay, 134, 135
Indigenous, iv, 14, 145, 146, 147,
148, 152, 153, 157, 158, 159,
160, 161, 162, 163, 178
Intermediality, 54, 56, 64

Interpretive communities, 55, 58,
60

J

Jenkins, Henry, ix, 2, 3, 4, 15, 17,
18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 53, 56,
66

K

Kinetic city, 112, 113

L

Lewis, Lisa A, 15, 66

M

Martyrdom, v, 14, 133, 134, 138,
139, 142, 143

N

Nayar, Pramod K, 70
Nolan, Christopher, 14, 169, 170,
175, 176, 177

P

Para texts, 75

S

Semiotic productivity, 4, 55
Soap opera, 12, 13, 56, 69, 70, 71,
74, 76, 78, 80, 82
Spectacle, 6, 14, 85, 133, 139, 140,
141, 172
Star culture, 30, 31, 42

T

Tantric, 118, 128
Television stardom, iii, 13, 67, 68,
69, 70, 84
Three-gaze theory, 38

U

Urban fandom, 108

V

Virtual tourism, 110
Visual culture, 44, 133, 135, 138,
140
Visualism, 140

Y

Yoga, 121, 125, 127, 129, 130