

HERO
AND
HERO-WORSHIP
Fandom in Modern India

Edited by

Rahul Chaturvedi

Banaras Hindu University, India

Hariom Singh

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, India

Anita Singh

Banaras Hindu University, India

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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 Sorenson'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.

Dr. Sanjukta Dasgupta
Former Professor, Dept of English
Calcutta University

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1.

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

Rahul Chaturvedi

Banaras Hindu University, India

Hariom Singh

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, India

Anita Singh

Banaras Hindu University, India

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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List of Contributors

Amar Singh is an Assistant Professor in English at Banaras Hindu University, India. His research interest lies in the area of Popular Culture, Film Studies and Cultural Studies. His Doctorate research is on *Hyperrealism and Christopher Nolan's Cinematic Texts*. He is currently pursuing Post-Doctorate research from Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Germany. He has been a visiting scholar at Osnabrück University and Wuppertal University, Germany.

Ashima Bhardwaj is a Fulbright-Nehru Postdoctoral Research Fellow from Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado, USA. She received her Doctorate from the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, India. From 2012 to 2016, she was an Assistant Professor at UILS, Panjab University. Her areas of expertise include Beat Studies, Sub-cultural traditions, and Counterculture activism. Bhardwaj resides in Toronto, Canada, and is an independent researcher; she is currently working on the Drag-Cosplay traditions in Canada.

Himanshu Khosla is the Director Sales of Namco Asia, a private manufacturers' representative and trading firm in India. He is a post-graduate from Punjab Technical University, India with specialization in Pharmaceutical Chemistry on Quantification of *Plumbagin* by HPLC. Khosla is a former Professor at V.M.S. College of Pharmacy, Batala, Punjab (India). He has effectively contributed to research by presenting his articles and research papers in national and international conferences. With a keen interest in theater and production of films, he has observed the dynamics of the pharmaceutical industry and larger social foundations. Tracing how cinema is shaped, his writings focus on the narratives of Indian Cinema and Television; his current project investigates the gendered and racial perspectives in Bollywood.

Jamiel Ahmad is from the province of Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir) and is currently working in the Department of English at North Campus, University of Kashmir (India). He completed his Ph.D. at the School of Languages and Comparative Literature, Central University of Jammu (India), where he also received his M. Phil. on the topic "Exploring *The Half Mother*, *Curfewed Night*, and *Haider*: A Biopolitical Study". Ahmad has published several research papers in journals, including *English Studies in India*, *Literary Herald*, *Langlit*, *Nuances*, and also published chapters in various books such as *Studies in Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Studies in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*. Two of his book chapters on *Kanthapura* and on "border-related trauma" are in press. Email: herespeaksjames@gmail.com

Priyanka Shivadas is a Ph.D. student at the University of New South Wales Canberra, located at the Australian Defence Force Academy. Her research focuses on global indigenous literary studies. She has published “The Bone People of New Zealand: Identity Politics in the South Pacific” in a book which is a collection of essays called *Homogeneity in Heterogeneity: Memory, Culture, and Resistance in Aboriginal Literatures from Around the World* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2018) and “The Practice of Public Apology: Australia Says Sorry to the Stolen Generations” in *The Culture of Dissenting Memory: Truth Commissions in the Global South*, edited by Veronique Tadjo (Routledge, 2019).

Rajanikant Pandey teaches Anthropology and Tribal Studies at the Central University of Jharkhand, India. He has published several articles and book chapters with national and international publishers. His major areas of specialization are Environmental Anthropology, STS Studies, and Organizational Ethnography. Pandey has a keen interest in exploring the life-world of indigenous peoples of South Asia.

Ritika Pant is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism, Kalindi College, University of Delhi (India). She has submitted her doctoral thesis at the School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. A gold-medalist from the AJK MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia, Pant is a recipient of the Junior Research Fellowship from the University Grants Commission, India. She has also worked as a media practitioner in the Indian television industry. She has presented papers at various national and international conferences. Her research interests include gender, transnationalism, stardom, fandom, television, and media studies.

Saket Kumar Bhardwaj is pursuing doctoral research on Human Trafficking and Media at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University, Assam (India). He has completed his five-year integrated M.A. in Mass Communication from the Central University of Jharkhand, and has qualified in Mass Communication and Journalism through the National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET). Bhardwaj has worked as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Culture and Media Studies, Central University of Rajasthan, and as a full-time news reporter for a Ranchi based English newspaper. His teaching and research interests include Communication for Social Change, New Media, Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations, Sociology of Communication Technology, and Media.

Shipra Tholia is an Assistant Professor at the Department of German Studies, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, India. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. as a DAAD research scholar from Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Germany. Her research interest lies in the area of German Literature and Culture Studies with a special focus on Narratology. Tholia's M. Phil thesis is

on “Adventure of Tintin: An Intermedial Phenomena” from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has been awarded several fellowships by the DAAD and the German Ministry of Education and Culture and has been a visiting scholar to Osnabrück University and Wuppertal University, Germany.

Uttam Kumar Pegu is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University, Assam (India). He has also taught at St Anthony’s College and EFLU, Shillong. Pegu completed his doctoral research on “Information and Communication Technology Implications” at AJK Mass Communication Research Center, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. His research interests include ICT Implications, Political and Cultural Communication, Conflict Communication, Film Studies, and Social History. He has published articles in prestigious national and international journals. Email: uttamkp@tezu.ernet.in

Vishakha Sen is a creative writer and poet. Passionate about creative writing, painting, and traveling, she expresses deepest emotions fossilized in places and people. She is a lecturer by profession and recipient of the prestigious JNMF doctoral scholarship for her Indian Psychoanalysis research. A prodigy of the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow (India), her performance poetry is featured at VTS Contest, West Coast Tagore Festival, Richmond (Canada), Lucknow Society, ‘Kavya-Sangoshthi’ by Youth Eve, ‘Arz Kiya Hai’ by Lucknow Society (2019). Sen’s critical writings have appeared in book chapters and reputed journals like *Muse India*, *Purakala*, and *Gnosis*. Her research areas are Indian Psychoanalysis, Psychoanalytic and Cyber Feminism, Cultural Studies in new media, films, Postcolonial Literature, and Indian Theatre. Email: vishakhacrusader@gmail.com

Ruchi Sharma is an Assistant Professor at Chitkara University, Punjab, India and teaches Culture Studies, Literary Theory, Aboriginal Literature, and Communications, with a specific focus on the impact of visual and textual literacy. She has also worked at the Department of English, St. Xavier’s College, Jaipur. Sharma is currently the Secretary of Digital Humanities Alliance for Research and Teaching Innovations, India. Her research interests include Aboriginal Writing, Women’s and Gender Studies, Star Studies, and Digital Humanities. She has contributed chapters to different books, published research papers in prestigious national and international journals, and has also been an invited speaker for All India Radio talk.

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Hero-worship definition is - to feel or express hero worship for. How to use hero-worship in a sentence.Â 2019 But the hero worship of health care workers only goes so far to protect them from mental anguish. â€” Jillian Mock, Scientific American, "Psychological Trauma Is the Next Crisis for Coronavirus Health Workers," 28 Apr. 2020. These example sentences are selected automatically from various online news sources to reflect current usage of the word 'hero-worship.' Hero worship may refer to: Hero cult in ancient Greece. Apotheosis, raising a person to the level of a deity. Cult of personality, a political weapon used mainly in dictatorships. Hero Worship (Sandra Bernhard album), a 2003 album released by Sandra Brnhard. Hero Worship (Hal Crook album), Hal Crook's fifth album as a leader. "Hero Worship", an episode of the sitcom The King of Queens. "Hero Worship" (Star Trek: The Next Generation), a 1992 episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation. Title: Heroes and Hero Worship. Author: Thomas Carlyle. Release Date: July 26, 2008 [EBook #1091] Last Updated: November 30, 2012. Language: English. Character set encoding: ASCII ***. Start of this project gutenber ebook heroes and hero worship ***. Produced by Ron Burkey, and David Widger. On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history. By Thomas Carlyle. Transcriber's Note Hero-worshiping can degenerate to a point where it becomes an obsession, which can be quite dangerous to both the hero-worshiper and the person being worshiped. NB . A person does not necessarily need to be famous or a celebrity to be hero-worshiped. TAGS. hero-worship.

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