Chapter 15

"We’re Online, Not on the Streets"

Indian Cinema, New Media, and Participatory Culture

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On September 14, 2005, Tamil film star Vijaykant announced his entry into politics by converting his fan association into a political party. The Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMK, National Progressive Dravidian Party) was launched at a conference organized by the Tamilnadu Vijaykant Fan Association, with the secretary of the fan association (Ramu Vasanthan) assuming the role of general secretary of the DMK. The fan association’s flag was adopted as the party flag as well. For several months preceding this conference, members of the fan association worked tirelessly to publicize and raise funds for the conference. Pointing to their preparedness for political activity, one magazine noted, “What stood him in good stead was the organization and structure of his fans’ association, which is built in the form of a political party with units at the village, panchayat, town, district and State levels” (Subramanian 2005). In fact, in local body elections held in 2001, as many as 575 of Vijaykant’s fans were elected to posts at various levels across the state of Tamilnadu (Subramanian 2005).

Around the same time in 2005, fans of renowned music director A. R. Rahman were hard at work organizing a concert in Bangalore. Fans managed everything from promotions and ticket sales to stage construction and crowd control on the day of the concert (October 8, 2005). As part of their effort to gain recognition as the “official” Rahman fan group, they also decided to present Rahman with a gift—a montage, composed of thumbnail images of all his album covers, which formed the contours of his face. Faced with the prospect of buying expensive software, a group of fans (who run a design company called 3xus.com) went on to develop their own software. After many sleepless nights of painstaking coding, they finally got to meet Rahman and present the gift. Acknowledging these fans’ perseverance, technical and marketing savvy, and global network established through online activities, Rahman and his team have decided to collaborate with them to promote and organize concerts in different cities worldwide, evolve new modes of music distribution, and work together to tackle piracy. This story of fan activity went unreported in mainstream media. Referring to news stories of violent clashes between Vijaykant fans and activists of a political party who took offense at Vijaykant’s remarks directed at their leader, the moderator of the Rahman fan community remarked, “We’re online, not on the streets. We would never venture into street battles, and that does not attract media attention” (Interview, October 15, 2005).

Violent conflicts between fans of film stars and cadres of opposition political parties, cinema halls being vandalized, and film stars contemplating a career in politics by mobilizing their fan associations certainly make more sensational copy compared to a group of highly educated, technically skilled fans who discuss film music on the Internet. To those familiar with the history of cinema’s links to politics in states like Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, Vijaykant emerging as a political candidate is no great surprise. Indeed, when one raises the question of fan activity in Indian film culture, the standard response, among journalists and academics, is to point to Tamil and Telugu film cultures where fan associations devoted to former stars like M. G. Ramachandran and N. T. Rama Rao have played pivotal roles in their political careers (Pandian 1992; Srinivas 2000). As the editor of Filmsare remarked, “You’ll find crowds outside Amitabh Bachchan or Shahrukh Khan’s house. But never the level of passion you’d find in the south. There is no organized fan activity around Bollywood. No one asks Shahrukh Khan to float a political party or threatens to commit suicide just because his film flops!”

In this chapter, I argue against framing fan activity in Indian film culture in terms of devotional excess or in relation to political mobilization in south India. Detailing the formation and activities of the Rahman fan community, I suggest we shift our attention away from the cinema hall and heroes like Vijaykant to the realm of film music and the figure of the music director. This move will force us to take into account how cinema, as an experience and an object of study, is constituted in fundamental ways through convergence with other media. In other words, developing
fan activity surrounding film music as an entry point entails rethinking
the history of cinema’s publicness as a history of media convergence, i.e.,
a history of cinema’s intersections with various “new” media (radio, TV,
internet, and mobile phone).

Such a reconceptualization of cinema’s publicness will help us steer
away from treating fan activity as mere epiphenomena of politics and
transitions in the political sphere proper. This, in turn, compels consider-
ation of fan practices surrounding Tamil or Telugu cinema that may have
no connections to political parties and elections, and also to pose the
question of fan activity in relation to Bollywood. Following this, I reassess
the figure of the fan, arguing that we locate the “fan” along a more expa
sive continuum of participatory culture by dismantling the binary of
fan-as-rowdy versus fan-as-rasika. Finally, I situate fan practices in relation to
the experience of cybertulture in India (Sundaram 2000) and suggest that
fan communities constitute a privileged site for mapping, in historically
grounded fashion, the emergence of the Internet as a vital new space of
public culture in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India.

Film Music and Fan Culture: The Case of A. R. Rahman

Among other distinguishing elements of popular Indian cinema, the presence of at least five or six songs with varied narrative functions is cited often. Choreographed into elaborate dance sequences, songs have been an integral part of Indian cinema ever since sound was introduced. As Majumdar explains, “Film songs and song sequences have their own circuit of distribution, both official, or industrial, and unofficial [...] they permeate the aural environment of India’s public spaces, from markets and festivals to long-distance buses and trains” (Majumdar 2001: 161). The commercial value of film music has also meant that music directors and playback singers have occupied a key role in the industry from the very beginning.

Music directors have been central to developments and transforma-
tions in practically every aspect of the process—lyrics, expansion of or-
chestras and introduction of instruments from around the world, sing-
ing styles (transition from actor-singers to playback singers), and from
the perspective of producers, responding to and shaping audience tastes
(Arnold 1988). In fact, from the early 1940s, producers have been giving
prominence to music directors. Film songs became a central component
of pre-release publicity of films, and advertising began emphasizing the
music director. Arnold points to a practice that continues to this day: ma-
jor producers began to select commercially successful music directors to work on their new productions (1988: 206). Having their names displayed prominently on posters, billboards, and gramophone record sleeves, and radio shows such as the nationally popular Binaca Geet Mala (on Radio Ceylon), led to the construction of what Majumdar terms “aural stardom” (2001). Over the years, songs came to be associated with music directors (and playback singers) just as much as with actors/actresses lip-syncing on the screen.

Rahman started his musical career as an ad-jingles composer and
emerged as a music director in the 1990s—first in Tamil cinema and
post-1995, in the Bombay-based Hindi film industry. While translations of
his work for Tamil-language films such as Roja (1992, Mani Ratnam) and
Bombay (1995, Mani Ratnam) were highlysuccessful, it is with Rangeela
(1995, Rangopal Varma) that Rahman made his mark as a “national” mu-
sic director. Rahman’s non-film projects have also been highly success-
ful—for instance, his 1997 album Vande Mataram, released to coincide
with the fiftieth year of Indian independence, sold millions of copies
worldwide.

There are at least two things to keep in mind that set Rahman apart
from other important music directors. First, projects such as Vande Ma-
taram (1997) that involved Rahman in music videos, and promotions on
cable and satellite TV channels like Channel [V] and ZEE, gave him a
strong visual presence in addition to the aural stardom conventionally
associated with music directors. In fact, Rahman figures prominently in
posters advertising “Bollywood tours” worldwide—his performativity,
in other words, extends beyond recorded sound. Second, his rise coin-
cided with the Bombay film industry attracting mainstream attention in
transnational arenas, in main part due to the Indian diaspora’s close ties
to cinema. This led not only to an expanded audience and fan base, but
also to visibility generated in “world music” circles (Talvin Singh’s music
from the Asian Dub Foundation in London, for example), and compos-
ing music for international projects such as Bombay Dreams (2002) and
the stage version of Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2006). The
multiple boundaries that Rahman (and his music) traverses—linguistic
(Tamil-Hindi-English), religious (Hindu converted to Islam), regional/
national, diasporic, and global—are strongly reflected in the online fan
community.
At a broader level, it is also important to locate Rahman's music as a defining element of films like Roja that inaugurated, as scholars like Niranjana have shown, a new Indian nationalism "premised on a detaching of the new middle class from the Nehruvian state of the post-Independence years" (Niranjana 2000: 138). Roja and Bombay, among other "patriotic love stories" during the mid- to late 1990s, tapped into and articulated a new and aggressive middle-class sensibility that acquired an unprecedented level of visibility "owing to a new configuration of forces which include[d] the rise of the Sangh Parivar and the liberalization of the Indian economy" (138). Rahman's music, one might argue, was a critical aural dimension of this articulation of a new nationalism. Rahman's music served as a soundtrack for the new middle classes and for those outside this sphere, an aspirational sound. This is also reflected in the composition of the Rahman fan community—not only are India-based fans a part of this new middle class, their sense of being a "fan" is shaped strongly by the idea that Rahman's music represents a global yet Indian sound.

The Rahman fan community is an online forum that was formed on January 1, 1999 and today involves nearly 8,500 members from 26 different countries. This is a space that brings together, for instance, fourth-generation Tamil-Malaysians, second-generation Indian-Americans, Indians in Gulf countries like Dubai, youth in urban India, and a growing number of non-Indian fans. Embedded as citizens in disparate ways, each fan brings her/his own linguistic/regional background, experiences of varying racial/ethnic politics, religious affiliations, different registers of knowledge and affiliation with India and "Indian" culture, to bear on her/his engagement with Rahman's music and Indian cinema in general.

Ar rahmanfans.com, like most online fan groups that cohere around film, consists of a filmography, a member directory, a folder for creative works where fans post various clips of music, a music library where mp3 clips are stored, and a list of FAQs for new members. The group also maintains a large collection of photographs of Rahman from various occasions, and has recently developed a collection of Rahman-related videos hosted using YouTube. The "links" section contains URLs to a range of Rahman-related resources such as fan sites and blogs, newspaper and magazine articles, interviews, and websites about others in the film industry who work with Rahman.

Within the group, there is an emphasis on the need for all members to participate, and an acknowledgment of different competencies—knowledge of Tamil and Hindi, for instance, in order to translate complex lyrics, or knowledge of technicalities of music that might be helpful in discussions. Rahman fans also monitor print publications, radio and television shows, and different websites for news and trivia about their star and, like other fan communities, perceive themselves as guardians of Rahman's image and attempt to control the circulation of negative coverage of Rahman's music or personal life. The community also includes people who work with Rahman on a professional basis, and these members have played a key role in getting this group recognized as Rahman's official fan group. Over the last two years, fans based in different cities around the world have also begun meeting offline to extend discussions conducted online, help organize concerts, and in some cases, to form bands and perform film songs.

Discussions are generally structured around the release of a film for which Rahman has composed music and revolve around lyrics, the use of different instruments and musical arrangement, songs' narrative functions, song picturization (and choreography), playback singers, and so on. Fans locate and post articles from various news sources and these become the basis for a discussion regarding previous collaborations between Rahman and film directors, lyricists, rumors about plotlines, and more generally, the "sound" of the music. Reviews in newspapers, magazines, and online portals such as rediff.com and indiatimes.com are considered crucial, and fans make it a point to post feedback on these sites if they feel the reviews are exceedingly negative.

As soon as the music is released, discussion returns to the lyrics. Translations (from Tamil or Hindi into English) are posted and the poetic worth of the lyrics becomes an important component of evaluation. This is usually followed by talk about the instruments used—fans with formal knowledge of music, or who are musicians themselves, write about new instruments introduced, the amount of mixing involved, and what the instruments signify in terms of traditions and genres. These discussions also include the question of playback singers—why Rahman has used particular singers, the singers' track records, their performance in the song under question, whether their voice "fits" the song and the actor/actress in the film, and so on. Once the film is released, discussion shifts to the picturization of the song in the film and how the song works in relation to the overall narrative.

Enabled by the Internet, constituted by individuals from different parts of the world, and driven by interest in film music that reaches around
the world, there is no doubt that the Rahman fan community is strikingly different when compared to fan associations such as those that form around stars like Vijaykant. We could begin by noting that the Rahman fan community is an elite space and one that is defined explicitly in opposition to “rowdy” fan associations. We could point out that compared to fan associations that meet at street corners, tea-shops, and in and around cinema halls in India, online fan communities are not dominated by men. It is also evident that the Rahman fan community is not invested in mobilizing around caste or linguistic identity. Given that it is first and foremost a community realized online, and that fans bring diverse stakes and affiliations to bear on their participation, mobilization along axes of caste or language is, at a basic level, rendered structurally impossible. For example, fans based in Malaysia, for whom participation in the Rahman fan community is part of a larger process of claiming a Tamil ethnic identity, share little in common with second-generation Indian-Americans for whom dancing to a remixed Rahman song at a club speaks to a very different set of concerns.

Therefore, while useful to start with, such comparisons only take us so far. It is not enough to merely point out that the “fan” in question here is a middle-class subject or a diasporic subject. We are still left with the problem of approaching and defining such new modes of participatory culture, an increasingly central aspect of Bollywood, in opposition to a specific and idealized mode of participation that is explicitly political. The pressing challenge, then, is to reconceptualize the relationship between cinema and public culture by looking beyond the cinema hall and its vicinity, and rethinking the figure of the “fan” before we begin examining the social dynamics of spaces like the Rahman fan community.

From Radio Ceylon to Arrfans.com: Participatory Culture beyond the Cinema Hall

Sivathamby provided what is perhaps the earliest articulation of cinema and the public sphere in India. He argued that “the cinema hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with all and sundry” (1981: 18). As Srinivas observes, this “formulation can be read as pointing to the democratic possibilities of cinema” (2003a: n.p.). While there was a certain mode of policing this “democratic” space (e.g., seating codes, from the “gandhi class” all the way up to “dress circle”), this does “permit us to conceive of the cinema hall as a kind of public institution that had no precedence in India” (Srinivas 2003b: 20). Following this formulation, several scholars have grappled with how cinema relates in complex ways to the civic and the political, but fan practices have not been a focus of systematic research (Prasad 1998; Rajadhyaksha 2000; Virdi 2003). The two notable exceptions are Srinivas’s pioneering work on fan associations in Andhra Pradesh (2000) and Dickey’s analysis of audiences in Tamilnadu (1993).

Dickey locates fan activity at the intersection of the formal realm of politics and civil social activity (charity work, blood donation campaigns, and other “social services”). Building on work that examines relationships between the construction of stardom and the politics of mobilization (Pandian 1992), Dickey provides a very useful ethnographic account of this aspect of fan activity in Tamilnadu. However, she ignores the possibility of fan activity that might not necessarily be “public” in the sense of there being a neighborhood fan association that meets at street corners, at tea-shops, or outside cinema halls. Indeed, her analysis circumscribes fan activity in Tamilnadu as that defined by working-class (often lower caste) male youth in visible, public spaces.

In his path-breaking work on the Telugu film industry, and viewing practices in the state of Andhra Pradesh more broadly, Srinivas theorizes fan activity as being structured by a dialectic of devotion and defiance (2000), as a struggle between fan expectations and the industry’s careful management of the star persona to derive maximum mileage from fan activity. Focusing on “megastar” Chiranjeevi, Srinivas situates the formation of fan clubs in Andhra Pradesh in relation to a broader history of subaltern struggles (dalit movements, for instance) and considers fan practices as a domain of political activity that does not fit within classical liberal accounts of citizenship and political representation, but one that has clear links to linguistic/regional identity (Srinivas 2000). As Liang argues, “the history of early postcolonial cinematic space is also marked by sharp social conflict and anxiety. For Srinivas, it is this public space marked by its histories of exclusions that fans seek to occupy” (Liang 2005: 372). Thus, for Srinivas, the performative dimensions of fan practices, especially as they cohere in and around the cinema hall, lead to a conception of a cinematic public sphere where “the consumption of film becomes an occasion
for a range of performances that are broadly political in nature” (Srinivas 2003a: n.p.), one manifestation being the links to party politics and election campaigns. Further, while he argues that we also need to understand the political nature of fan associations beyond their “linkages with the politics of linguistic/identity nationalism,” he maintains that fan activity is political mainly because it “develops around the notion of spectatorial rights.” He writes:

The cinema exists because of my presence and for me. Further, the “I” at the cinema is always a member of a collective: we make the film happen. Anyone who has watched a Chiranjeevi or Rajnikanth film knows exactly what I am talking about. Not only do these stars address spectators in rather direct ways (including by looking at the camera) but seem to perform according to “our” demands. (2003a: n.p.; italics in original)

Even as he exhorts us to examine the various “webs of public transactions” involving cinema, and to rethink what constitutes the “political” beyond the narrow sense of the term, Srinivas’s analyses remain bound by one particular, highly visible, mode of fan activity and the film industry’s perception and management of such activity. He goes on to say: “Much work needs to be done across the spectrum of activities and organizations that fade into the cinema hall at one end and the political party at the other” (2003a: n.p.).

In the light of Indian cinema’s flows worldwide, the question of who comprises the “we” in the cinema hall and what “our” demands might be complicates the notion of “spectatorial rights” (Rajadhyaksha 2000). For it would be difficult to maintain that third-generation Tamil-Malaysian fans of Rajnikanth are positioned as spectators in precisely the same way as fans in Tamilnadu or, for that matter, Japanese fans who watch subtitled prints. “Spectatorial rights” certainly does not help us explain the kind of activity that Rahman fans are involved in, as we saw earlier. While opening up an important line of inquiry, Srinivas’s analysis needs to be extended in at least two directions.

The first question we need to address is: are the two poles of the spectrum—the cinema hall and the political party—useful analytic categories to begin with? If one were to consider film music, a component of films that circulates in the public realm much before and long after the film itself does, it forces us to consider the radio, television, the Internet, and mobile phones as sites constitutive of the publicness of cinema as much as the cinema hall itself, if not more. Considering audience activity surrounding film music also contributes to recent debates concerning the spatial dimensions of cinema. As Vasudevan writes:

Let us consider the cinema as a more matter of fact everyday space: composed of the hall, its internal organization of foyer, auditorium, seating and the projected film, and its public presence, as in its facade, advertisements, marquees, hoardings. And let us see this space in relation to a broader space, in the market, near factories, schools, office blocks, in a mall, in residential areas. (2003: n.p.)

If we were to think more broadly about cultural geographies of Indian cinema, it becomes clear that accounts such as Vasudevan’s would remain incomplete without a consideration of spaces formed by cinema’s intersections with new media.

Consider, for instance, the story of Rameshwar Prasad Bharnwal, a resident of Jhumri Tilaiya in the northern state of Jharkhand (formerly a part of Bihar), who has mailed at least 10 cards a day to Binaca Geet Mala when the show was broadcast on Radio Ceylon (Krishnan 1991). Bharnwal, a member of a radio listener’s club that discussed films and film music, recalls sending hundreds of requests for popular songs. Embedded in this vignette of participatory culture are traces of a larger narrative of struggles over defining a “new” medium’s role in shaping postcolonial India’s “national culture.” I would argue that Bharnwal’s story should not be read as mere fan obsession but rather, as a way to think through a moment of media transition that involved India’s first Minister of Information and Broadcasting (B. V. Keskar), who deemed film music cheap, vulgar, and unfit for broadcast on All India Radio, millions of Indians who bought radio sets equipped to receive short-wave frequencies and tuned in to Radio Ceylon, and film producers and music directors who helped channel advertising money and licenses to the one-hour hit- parade Binaca Geet Mala (Awasthy 1965).

In other words, shows such as Binaca Geet Mala on radio, Chitrabhaar and Showtheme on state-regulated Doordarshan, the popular game show Antakshari on ZEE TV, and other film-based shows on MTV-India and Channel V, and websites like wahindia.com are all key sites of what we can term “participatory film culture” outside the cinema hall. Radio, television, internet, and cell phone networks are spaces of public culture with intimate ties to the cinema hall, but with distinct institutional, cultural,
and political histories that have shaped our experience of cinema and indeed, cinema itself. I would argue, then, that a focus on fan practices that emerge at and shape the intersection of cinema and “new” media opens up the possibility of rewriting the history of Indian cinema’s publicness as a history of media convergence, and as a history of participatory culture that does not necessarily originate in the cinema hall and culminate in the sphere of political parties and electoral campaigns.

**Between the Rowdy and the Rasika**

The second question we have to grapple with concerns the image of the fan that we derive from a focus on the cinema hall and its surroundings, and fan associations of stars like Vijaykant: offensive, male, working class, and rowdy. The “excessive” behavior that marks viewers in front rows of cinema halls, what Liang (2005: 371) calls the “protocols of collective behavior”—whistling and commenting loudly, throwing flowers, coins, or ribbons when the star first appears on the screen, singing along and dancing in the aisles, etc.—is routinely cited as what distinguishes fans from the rest of the audience. Further, the publicness of fan associations’ activities—celebrating a star’s birthday or 100 days of a film, organizing special pre-release functions, adorning street corners with giant cutouts of the star, decorating theaters where the film has had a successful run, etc.—and press coverage of such activities have further served to both marginalize and circumscribe fan activity as undesirable, vulgar, and at times, dangerous. As Srinivas, drawing on Dhareshwar and Srivatsan’s analysis of rowdy-sheeters, writes:

> The fan is a rowdy not only because he breaks the law in the course of his assertion or his association with criminalized politics—the fan becomes a rowdy by overstepping the line which demarcates the legitimate, “constructive,” permissible excess, and the illegitimate [...] as far as the “citizen” is concerned, the fan is a blind hero-worshipper (devoid of reason) and a villain. The rowdy/fan is an agent of politics which is de-legitimized. (Srinivas 2000: 314)

Fans, in this view, are imperfect citizens in aesthetic, sociocultural, and political terms. Middle-class constructions of norms of excess are, with out doubt, designed in part to maintain hierarchies of cultural production and taste. In other words, it is clear that the *fan-as-rowdy* is constructed in semantic and social opposition to the idea of the *fan-as-rasika*—rowdy fans of the actor Rajnikanth as opposed to rasikas of Carnatic musician M. S. Subbulakshmi, for instance. Where, then, do we position film music fans, like members of the radio club in Jhumri Tilaia, who wrote hundreds of letters to Ameen Sayani, the famous anchor of *Binaca Geet Mala*, and played a critical role in the consolidation of singers and music directors’ aural stardom? In what terms do we describe the desires and attachments of thousands of “respectable” English-speaking middle- and upper-middle-class men and women who constitute the primary readership for magazines like *Filmfare*? How do we account for shows such as *Pepsi Ungal Choice* (SUN TV) that rely so centrally on fan participation? Finally, how do we understand online life-worlds of fans in diverse locations worldwide who come together as online and offline communities on the basis of shared attachments to film culture? I wish to argue that dismantling the *rowdy/rasika* binary will allow us to reframe participatory culture and broaden the arena of inquiry to include spaces such as the Rahman fan community.

First, academic interest in “rowdy” fan associations has resulted in a romanticization of fan associations as belonging to the realm of “political society.” Political society is a term that Partha Chatterjee has proposed to conceptualize relationships between individuals or groups that are outside the rule-bound and legal framework of bourgeois civil society and the state in postcolonial societies such as India. He writes:

> Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. But it is not as though they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics. As populations within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, they have to be both looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies. These activities bring these populations into a certain political relationship with the state. (2004: 38)

Chatterjee argues that the “sites and activities characteristic of . . . political society” have become particularly visible since the 1980s owing to changes in the techniques of governance and a “widening of the arena of political mobilization, prompted by electoral considerations and often only for
electoral ends” (47). This is shaped, Chatterjee points out, not only by organized political parties but also by “loose and often transient mobilizations, building on communicative structures that would not be ordinarily recognized as political” (47). Thus, political society, for Chatterjee, is the domain of the population, not citizens. Using the example of illegal settlements in the city of Calcutta, Chatterjee further argues that such individuals/groups are not completely outside the purview of the state. As individuals who reside within the territorial and juridical boundaries of the state, they have to be cared for and controlled by government agencies. Even if it is clear that such individuals/groups “transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work,” the state cannot ignore them and is forced to enter into different kinds of negotiations.

Chatterjee’s formulation can certainly be employed to understand relationships between fan associations and the democratic process, especially given that such extra-legal domains have typically been neglected in political theory. Using the term “political society” accords this domain of participation a certain visibility previously denied it. For example, the story of the Vijayakanth fan association that I described in the opening section of this chapter is about participatory culture surrounding cinema serving as a staging ground for contests over regional and linguistic identity. Vijaykanth’s decision to articulate a vision of a “Dravida Nadu” (Dravidian Nation), one in which there would be “no blind opposition to Hindi,” was seen as a significant departure given the history of conflict over the imposition of Hindi as a national language and the resistance that this faced in states like Tamil Nadu, where film stars-turned-politicians campaigned on a pro-Tamil platform (Subramaniam 2005).

However, to bracket fans as a nonelite public and theorize “rowdy” fan practices as an expression of subaltern politics can also be misleading if it leads us to ignore the overlaps and intersections between different sites and modes of fan expression. Consider the issue of “illegal” networks of film and music piracy in a city like Bangalore and the Rahman fan community, a space of participation constituted by a large number of elite youth with access to new media. While the Internet remains the main site of interaction, it is crucial to recognize that in cities like Bangalore, Rahman fans also navigate and participate in the extra-legal world of pirated VCDs, DVDs, and mp3 collections. The extra-legal world is not an exclusive and closed-off subaltern space but rather, one that intersects with “elite” spaces like Internet fan communities and, in fact, informs the practices of Rahman fans online. It is critical also to recognize the ambivalence that marks Rahman fans’ attitudes and practices when it comes to the issue of being part of the “illegal city” (Liang 2005). While some Rahman fans create ftp sites and upload collections of Rahman’s songs and pieces of background music ripped from DVDs, others police music stores (makeshift stores set up on pavements in busy shopping areas, in shopping complexes, and so on), threatening to call the police if pirated CDs of Rahman’s music are not taken off the shelf.

Part of the work for scholars interested in fan practices, and participatory culture more broadly, thus involves shining a bright light on a range of sites and modes of fan expression around cinema that have so far been obscured by the sterile binary of rowdy/rasika. Doing so will allow us to rethink the figure of the fan: part rowdy, part rasika, part pirate, part copyright-enforcer, the “fan” is no longer a figure operating in the margins of public culture, defined in opposition to the subject position of the citizen (Liang 2005). The “fan” is in and of itself a subject position that is claimed and acted upon in myriad ways in Indian film culture.

Second, a more wide-ranging focus on fan activity would also recognize the many ways in which industry practices, modes of consumption, and social networks that criss-cross regional, national, and transnational boundaries, are being shaped by convergence between cinema and “new” media. Interrogating the rowdy/rasika binary cannot be an end in itself—we need to specify the contexts and conditions in which fan activity operates. We need to treat the “fan” not only as a fluid subject-position taken up by individuals in different locations, but also as a dynamic construct that is industrial, textual, and social. In other words, I am suggesting that we examine how the “fan” operates in a circuit of cultural production—in this case, the flow of film content across multiple “new” media platforms. How do media producers (dot-com journalists, for example) understand “fans,” and how is this understanding translated into their practice of developing interactive content? In what ways do “new media” texts invite and structure fan activity? What does an examination of online spaces like the Rahman fan group tell us about the many new and complex relationships between cinema, new media technologies, and social lives? Such a shift toward examining the “fan” as a construct that is not eternal and essential, but rather, as shaped equally by industry practices, textual properties of film-based content that flow across multiple media, and social interactions in identifiable fan communities, is critical if we are to understand how the current phase of media convergence is altering the circulation and reception of Indian films and film music worldwide.
Conclusion

I have argued that thinking through cinema’s public-ness in terms of its convergence with new media and opening up the category of the “fan” will be a first step toward radically revising our understanding of fan culture surrounding Indian cinema. In this section, I wish to situate fan practices in relation to the experience of cyberculture in India, and make the case that fan communities can serve as ethnographic sites par excellence for mapping the emergence of “cinematic cyberpublics.”

Let me begin with a sketch of how the Rahman fan community was formed. In 1998, a few months after the state-owned telecommunications provider VSNL offered dial-up connections to the Indian public, Channel [V] announced that votes for “best music director of the year” could be sent via the Internet. Gopal Srinivasan, a Rahman fan based in Bangalore, spent the next few months surfing websites and discussion forums, gathering email addresses and coordinating an online campaign that would ensure Rahman won the music award. Gopal came into contact with a large number of Rahman fans around the world, mostly students and young expatriate Indians in the United States, United Kingdom, and Singapore, participating in newsgroups such as rec.arts.movies.local.indian. Having developed a database of close to 100 Rahman fans, Gopal decided to launch a group focused on Rahman and his music. As he explained, “Initially the group was dominated by people outside India, mainly because Internet access here was expensive and connections were slow. But once private service providers entered the business, and with cybercafés at every street corner, more fans from India got involved.” Many of the fans Gopal contacted in 1998 continue to participate in the group, and many have gone on to develop contacts with Rahman and his team in Chennai, India.

My goal in providing this brief description is to suggest that fans, as informants, offer the opportunity to carry out not only an ethnography of fans and online fandom—of the presentation of selves and a mode of sociality on the Internet—but also of the processes that shaped Indian cinema’s convergence with the Internet. During the early years of the Internet, cinema-related content was entirely fan-produced. It was only in 1997–98 that dot-coms like IndiaFM.com and Indiatimes.com began offering film content on the Web, and it took until 2000–2001 for dot-com businesses to stabilize and begin forging relationships with the film industry to provide content that was previously unavailable on the Internet. As explained earlier, one of the primary activities of fans involves monitoring, collecting, and circulating content on Rahman and his music. However, fan discussions around these topics often spiral out to deal with issues concerning film music and the film industry more broadly. Browsing through the discussion archives yields valuable information on industry dynamics that gradually led to dot-com companies becoming an integral part of film industries. At the same time, the collective intelligence of fans can also be conceived of as an archive that can help us account for the role of grassroots cultural production in the emergence of a cinematic cyberpublic over the past decade, and remain attuned to the influence that fans continue to exert on the development of a vast, transnational network of Indian film culture.

NOTES

1. This is a significantly revised version of an essay published in Jonathan Gray et al. (eds.), Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

2. The term “rasika,” derived from an aesthetic theory (rasa) of performance, connotes a highly developed sense of appreciation of various “high art” forms. Rasika can be roughly translated as “connoisseur.”

3. Majumdar argues for “an aural conception of stardom to account for the dual pleasures and recognitions in song sequences, a concept of stardom in which even the absence of glamour and the invisibility of playback singers can be regarded as defining features of their star personas” (2001: 171).

4. The term “Sanh Parivar” means the Sangh Family, and refers to a group of right-wing Hindu political and cultural organizations including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

5. The moderator of the group informed me that over the last 2 years, over 50 percent of new subscribers have been non-Indians. A look at the conversations in the newsgroups indicates, however, that it is fans of Indian origin who participate the most and non-Indian fans are lurkers for the most part and have yet to assert their presence in the group.

6. A significant problem with this notion of a fan association as constituting a “public” relates to the question of gender. For instance, Dickey uncritically accepts responses from women who claim that they are not members of fan associations because it would not be looked upon kindly by their family members and would make their reputations questionable in the neighborhood (Dickey 1993: 153).

7. Indeed, this move might even be what is required for posing questions
concerning fan practices that cohere around texts and stars in television, where
fan involvement can be traced back to the earliest soaps on Doordarshan (Hum
Log) and has only intensified with the entry and establishment of cable and satel-
line television.

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