

Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity

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Three thousand fans' associations (FAs) with a membership varying between 10 and 500 members, spread across all the three regions that comprise Andhra Pradesh, are devoted to Chiranjeevi, the most popular Telugu movie star today. Every major 'hero' and 'heroine' has a FAs, with numbers that roughly correspond to their popularity. In this paper I shall discuss fan club activity, explore its relationship with stardom, and examine some of the implications of such activity to the culture industry. For the purposes of my argument, I shall restrict my use of the term 'fan' to refer to one who is an actual member of an association. Most of my observations are based on my interactions with Chiranjeevi fans in Vijayawada and Hyderabad, although I shall use insights gained from discussion with fans of other stars and from other parts of the state.

I focus on Chiranjeevi (Konidela Sivashankar Varaprasad) fans because, popularity of the star apart, his rise to prominence corresponds roughly with the exit of N.T. Rama Rao from the industry (1982-83: although he continued to make films sporadically over the next decade), and the eclipse of Krishna, who, after NTR, had by far the largest fan following in the state. This also coincides with the introduction of the 'slab system' of tax on film exhibition, in 1983, which in turn enhanced the economic importance of organized fan activity, as we shall see. The year also saw the release of *Khaidi* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1983), a turning point in Chiranjeevi's career as the most popular star which also saw a vast increase in his fan following.

It has been argued that FAs were created by the film industry, following their successful promotion of M.G. Ramachandran in Tamilnadu. Motivated by profit, the industry encouraged and funded FAs of both NTR and A. Nageswara Rao in the hope that fans would provide free publicity to the actors and their projects. The production companies and studios that actively manufactured the star system in the 1950s and 60s, therefore, created fans' associations as a logical extension of that activity.

However, when the slab system of taxation was introduced, theatres were graded and a flat tax was imposed regardless of tickets actually sold (Grade A paid 28 per cent of capacity, B 18 per cent, C 14 per cent). Distributors had to bear these expenses as well as the increasing rent of theatres. In consequence, they began to lose money for all screenings of less than 50 per cent of capacity. For them, the safest bet was a film that ran to packed houses simultaneously in a number of halls, even if only for a few weeks. Distributors, who generally bought films under production, had to rely

entirely on common categories like the star's 'image', the music, the promise of 'action', the 'comedy track', etc., in order to estimate the film's potential worth. These are elements that conventionally attract the 'repeat audience' or those who watch a film more than once. Fans became important in this scheme because their active participation on the opening day attracted crowds who then returned to see the film, as well as, more directly, because the fans themselves constitute a major part of the repeat audience.

Two recent books have addressed the fan phenomenon in Tamilnadu: M.S.S. Pandian's *The Image Trap* (1992) and Sara Dickey's *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (1993b). In Tamilnadu it has been the active political participation of fan clubs, especially the use of film by the Dravidian movement, that remains the focus of scholarly attention (Hardgrave and Neidhart, 1975; Pandian, 1991, 1992; Dickey, 1993a, 1993b). Although in itself a major phenomenon that seems to radically distinguish the South Indian variety of fandom, it is possible that the unprecedented involvement of fans in party politics in Tamilnadu has restricted debate on fans as being (potential) political cadres, and therefore reduced political debate itself to its narrow implications. In Andhra Pradesh, despite the presence of FAs from the 1950s, and despite their demonstrable effectiveness in the political careers of NTR and others, like Krishna himself, Jamuna (a Lok Sabha MP), Mohan Babu (Rajya Sabha), Nutan Prasad and Rao Gopala Rao (both MLCs for a term), the phenomenon has received little critical attention. Although I am concerned with the political implications to the extent that I am interested in questions of power (to define, to control), my study does not restrict itself to the kind of fan activity that furthers potential politicians, or fans as potential political cadres. I shall instead argue that fans constantly negotiate between what is *expected* from them by the industry (and by the stars themselves) and what empowers them. Fans deploy the vocabulary of excess, hyperbole, adulation/devotion/admiration often in order to articulate their own social-political cultural and economic aspirations. Even if it is true that FAs were created by the industry, fans have today come a long way from being unpaid servants of the industry. My endeavour would be to show the process and the result of fan activity overcoming its 'original' functions.

In Part 1, I discuss stardom and its expectations from fans as well as the occasionally uncomfortable relationship between a star and his fans. Part II deals with how the fans' aspirations are worked into their FA activities, and the results of those activities.

'Stardom is a blessing' - Chiranjeevi

Chiranjeevi, whose first film was *Pranam Khareedu* (K. Vasu, 1978), has acted in over 120 films, including 3 in Hindi. His films have been dubbed into Tamil and Hindi. He has been reputedly the highest paid star in Telugu, and even, briefly, the country, starring in productions that could cost between Rs. 3.75-5 crore. He has

repeatedly stated that he has no intentions of entering politics. Remarkably, he has been associated with few scandals and has received very little 'negative' publicity in the film press.

On screen, he introduced a new form of dance with quick, vigorous, choreographed steps, which stood in stark contrast to the more leisurely style of his predecessors. He did his own stunts, often in a far more spectacular fashion than the norm in early eighties' Telugu films. Fans often mention his portrayal of the wronged and angry fugitive fighting feudal oppression in *Khaidi* as his 'most important' early hit.

Chiranjeevi has himself asserted that a 'star' is anyone who can draw audiences to theatres, not necessarily a 'hero' (Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995). This emphasis on the *business* prospects of stardom exists, primarily, in relation to fans. Chiranjeevi realized that he was a star when he 'saw devotion in the eyes of [his] admirers' (he used the word *abhimani*: literally admirer. 'Fan' and *abhimani* are considered synonymous. Interview, Hyderabad, 19 July 1995). Stardom brings wealth, prestige and enormous satisfaction. 'Anybody can be a (good) actor if he tries hard enough. But there are very few stars...Only one or two in a generation' (Interview, Madras).

Fans ensure a sustained interest in the star. Indeed they are a 'bulwark against changing audience taste' (Interview, Hyderabad 19 July 1995). Their commitment to the star is unquestionable. They stand solidly by his side when he needs them. In May 1995, when women's and students' groups had called for the banning of his film *Alluda Majaaka* (E.V.V. Satyanarayana, 1995), they took out a large procession in Hyderabad and threatened to immolate themselves. The film was not banned.

In my interviews with him, Chiranjeevi mentioned several instances of 'hero worship' and the forms this took. His fans often cut their thumbs to apply the blood on his forehead; they have died in accidents on their way to one of his public meetings; they are undeterred by police cane-charges; they remain prepared to pick violent fights with anyone who passes a derogatory remark against him; they imitate his hairstyle, use his gestures and phrases from films, etc. Given this devotion, and in this environment, his responsibility is to provide them not only with two-and-a-half hours of entertainment (comparable to a 'six-course meal') that enables them to 'forget everything else', but also ensure that his films have the right 'message' (Interview, Madras).

Unfortunately Chiranjeevi's 'message' movies - *Swayamkrushi* (K. Vishwanath, 1987), *Rudraveena* (K. Balachander, 1988), *Apadbandhavudu* (K. Vishwanath, 1992).

despite winning critical acclaim (and occasionally awards), have not been very

successful commercially. Nor has his recent *S.P. Parashuram* (Raviraja Pinisetty, 1994) done well, although he plays the role of an honest police officer fighting corrupt politicians. His fans claim they enjoyed the first three films (it was *others* who didn't) and argue that he ought not to have made the last one, since its Hindi original had been seen by most town and city-dwellers. They blamed the actress, Sridevi, and asserted that films with a policeman hero rarely do well in Andhra Pradesh. In short, for the first three 'class' movies they blamed the audience, and for the fourth found plenty of reasons for its failure but stopped short of blaming the star.

Despite their commitment fans are a constant source of anxiety to the star. They write angry letters and make abusive long-distance calls when they are unhappy with him. They also reject films. This unease, and effort to 'discipline' the star leads to occasional attempts, in turn, to discipline the fans, trim fan responsibilities and activity to meet certain criteria. A crucial attempt in this was the establishment of the fanzine *Megastar Chiranjeevi*.

The first issue was published in August 1989. Although announced as a monthly, the journal publishes only three or four issues annually, usually on occasions like the star's birthday or the release of a film. Edited by Vijaya Bapineedu, a prominent film director who calls himself a fan of the star, and published by Allu Aravind, a major producer and Chiranjeevi's brother-in-law, it has an average print run of 15,000 copies, extended to 40,000 for special issues. It is usually published as three booklets, including at least one glossy pin-up, colour photographs, information about forthcoming Chiranjeevi releases, biographical notes, chronicles of the star's achievements, fan mail, lyrics from unreleased titles. The inaugural issue called for a photographs of FAs along with details of the nature of social service rendered by each. These were published in subsequent issues. Priced at between Rs. 15-20, it is easily the most expensive film-related journal in Telugu. Despite this, it has reportedly sustained an aggregated loss of Rs. 1.5 lakh. According to its publisher, it remains the first 'official' fanzine in Andhra Pradesh.

The inaugural incarnated Chiranjeevi as the 'Mega' star, explaining that mega meant ten raised to the power of six. 'If anyone in the industry imagines himself to be ten times greater than others, Chiranjeevi is many times greater than him' (inside cover, inaugural issue).

The establishment of this periodical constituted the first major effort to consciously harness fan energies, to ensure that they performed controlled, 'productive' activities. The stress on social service is common (cf. Dickey, 1993b, pp.148-72), and it is aimed at using the FAs to earn the star some goodwill as well as delegitimizing some--although not all--of fandom's 'excesses'. The magazine, like other popular productions including those by the fans themselves, tries to collate the 'real' Chiranjeevi in order to create a real-hero figure. The July 1991 issue, for instance,

chronicled his concern for the victims of a cyclone. There are, however, both legitimate and well-established modes to compare, or construct, this figure as well as illegitimate ones, as the official mouthpiece makes clear.

The April 1992 issue published a letter from an angry fan and Chiranjeevi's signed response. It is possible that the fan's letter and the star's reply were manufactured by the editorial staff of the magazine. The point is not the authenticity of the exchange but the need for it. This example needs to be read in the light of the tense relationship between the star and his fans and not as a historical event. The fan was scandalized and angry that the actress Nagma is seen to address Chiranjeevi with abuse during a song in *Gharana Mogudu* (K. Raghavendra Rao, 1992: unreleased at the time of publication). The fan sought the withdrawal of the song as this damaged the image of the 'Megastar's Natakishore' (a play on two of the actor's titles). The fans of other stars were ridiculing the song, the letter said, to the extent that the author was insulted and wished to die.

Chiranjeevi's response asserted that it was only in the 'acting' that he was insulted, and not in real life. *In the film* the abuse is addressed to the character's husband Raja, not to himself. He pleaded, 'Watch *Gharana Mogudu*. Even after doing so if you feel the song denigrates me, write to me.' He added:

Dont' pick fights with the fans of other stars. It is not good to do so. I have said so a number of times. Here (in the industry) all the heroes are very friendly and cordial with each other. You fans, being the admirers of heroes, should not abuse each other.

So, hereafter, I hope you will be an admirer I admire. Don't even think of committing suicide.

- (Megastar Chiranjeevi, April 1992)

Chiranjeevi is not the only star who has had to convince his fans not to indulge in violence: Venkatesh and Nagarjune, the other leading male stars in Telugu, have also asked their fans to stop fighting amongst themselves. Krishna indeed issued newspaper advertisements appealing to his fans not to boycott *Varasudu* (E.V.V. Satyanarayana, 1993) in which he played a 'negative' role.

Part of the problem comes out of the fans' perception of themselves as guardians of the star's image. In Chiranjeevi's words, 'even the man who pays three or four rupees thinks he owns the star and has a right over him' (Interview, Madras). There is tremendous pressure on the star to maintain and reinforce this image.

R. Nandakumar, in his essay on the star system, argues that

On the part of the spectator, it is not the individual roles in which the star is cast so much as the one cumulative image that emerges from the totality of his various performances that comes in handy to be accepted. This consciously maintained image of the star is enforced on the spectator as a concrete reality through the whole paraphernalia of its popular culture--mammoth hoardings, the rosy fan adulations, slushy gossip, glossy advertisements and so on that crowd on him breaking all resistance.

(Nandakumar, 1992)

While correctly drawing attention to the importance of reinforcement, and therefore of the 'totality' of performances, Nandakumar assumes (i) that the 'spectator' is essentially a pitiable, but passive, victim; and (ii) that fans are agents of the industry's propaganda. The second assumption is evidently incorrect, as my paper shows. As for the first, I want to argue that it forecloses the entire possibility of any site for contest, or even struggle, against the manipulative designs of the industry (as a political and cultural entity). I shall argue, instead, that once a star's image begins to gain currency--in itself by no means a 'natural' consequence of its creation--it is very difficult for either the star or the industry as a whole to maintain control over it, or to manipulate it at will (cf. also Ellen Seiter et al, 1989; Lisa Lewis, 1992; Ellis Cashmore, 1994 for elaborate accounts of the larger problem of control).

Stardom exists within a complex network of fan/audience expectations which, in part, result from what Nandakumar calls the 'cumulative image'. These expectations are not restricted to the star's image, but in fact extend to the cinema itself. They do not spring from a specific set of films ('starring' the star) but from a larger set of cinematic and cultural referents. Chiranjeevi says of his fans, 'They expect me to dance like Michael Jackson and fight like Jackie Chan'(Interview, Madras). Far from being willing slaves of their masters, fans can be 'like cane-wielding school masters', ready to punish and difficult to please.

Pandian's *The Image Trap* correctly draws attention to the careful and systematic orchestration of images that, in turn, construct the figure of the 'real' hero: a generous MGR who fights oppression and is a friend of the poor (Pandian, 1992, pp.95, 99, 102). Such orchestration is evident in the case of Chiranjeevi as well, although the image projected is somewhat different. It is perhaps indicated by the fact that Chiranjeevi remains untouched by scandal, by the striking similarities between the

`official' life-story and popular print biographies produced by fans, providing evidence for the success of the enterprise.

However, even as it alerts us to the manner in which popular culture is (always/already?) a site for the production of ruling class ideologies, Pandian's book offers an insight that comes more as a surprise than as a logical extension of his study:

The fact that politics is always a contested terrain and that even among the devoted followers of MGR there exist indelible marks of dissent, however emasculated they may be, are quite important. Therein lies the possibilities (sic) of constituting the `other' of MGR-style politics and creating a new progressive common-sense.

(Pandian, 1992, p.145)

Dickey's work (1993a, `Fans and Politics', 1993b) takes up the question of how fan club activity is related to the daily lives of fans and the social and political spaces it provides. Her failure in designating what these are, and the possibilities they offer, is summed up in her own conclusion:

Like the movie themes that oscillate between promising the poor wealth in the future and telling them they have true (i.e. moral) wealth now, these activities express a tension between the desire of poor people to be other than they are and to be proud of who they are.

(Dickey, 1993b, p.172)

Is this tension a dead-end? Or does it manifest itself in something we could call subversion, or defiance?

II. USING THEIR ILLUSION

`A fan is the only selfless supporter' - Vijaya Bapineedu

Fans are a distinct section of the audience. In addition to their `loyalty' over a period of time, fans are characterized by their excess, hyperbole and even obsession. A fan is

never 'objective' in his/her assessment of the Star's performance. Commitment and 'excessive' admiration are integral to fandom (norms in this regard are set by the middle class audience). This excess, surplus investment becomes evident in the fan's response which is almost always a public statement --- be it the imitation of the hair-style or a charcoal sketch of the star.

Fans and other sections of the audience iconize the star (who is in any case an already iconized figure) around whom the 'meaning' of a film revolves. The star has a set of attributes at any given point of time which may change over a period of time. A villain can thus become a hero (like Mohan Babu) and hear a 'character-actor', etc. These attributes are not limited to the star's screen performances but also his 'real' life. Fans suppress and contest the circulation of any thing that is perceived as being 'damaging' to the star--this could be a film or a biographical detail.

The icon assumes crucial importance to fans possibly because they deploy it to negotiate their social, political and cultural location in the public sphere. In the process they often invest the star-icon with a valency that has little to do with the 'real' or official version of the star. Not surprisingly Chiranjeevi became the rallying point of Kapu youth in coastal Andhra during the 1980s, although he himself never associated himself with Kapu mobilization.

Most FAs have 10-20 members. These are almost always young males, between 16-30 years, belonging to a wide cross-section of castes. The caste composition of an average FA depends on a variety of factors, including the star's caste, his/her political affiliations and, in turn, the caste equations and antagonism at play in the FA's area of operation. A few members hold regular white-collar jobs. Some organizers are businessmen. Most of them have some formal education, graduates are not uncommon, illiterates are. Every association has a President and Secretary, and many other office-bearers. Most associations function autonomously, though they do interact and coordinate their activities with other FAs sharing the same affiliations as theirs.

None of the FAs I visited in Hyderabad and Vijayawada had conventional office space. They usually met in public places: bylanes, tea shops, cycle-repair shops. They usually ensure that their meeting places are in the vicinity of cinema halls. Shopkeepers and their assistants in these areas know the important figures by name as well as their working hours. However small the FA, it usually describes itself as a town-wide, state-wide or nation-wide organization depending on where it is located. A number of FAs have their own letterheads, and their office-bearers printed visiting cards.

Why do young people join FAs? Dickey quotes a fan, 'to promote and support the

star' (Dickey, 1993b, p.163). She does not ask why anyone would want to do that. The answer would usually be, 'because I/we admire/like the star'. That these answers reinforce what a fan is expected to say and are not explanations is clear when we contrast them with the response of Parachuri vijayalaxmi, the only female member of an FA that I have ever come across. Vijayalakshmi, a graduate, is President of All India Vijayashanti Cultural Organization, Vijayawada; Vijayashanti is perhaps the most popular female star in the state today. She said, 'Of course I like Vijayashanti, but I started this association because 'someone [in the industry who is a friend of the family] requested me to' (Interview, Vijayawada, 20 July 1994). She went on to add that her fan activity would help her gain public exposure which in turn would help her enter politics. (She wanted to contest as a Municipal Corporator).

A dissimilar response from another fan would help further illustrate the point I am trying to make. Ramu Yadav, President, *Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvata*, is among the most prominent Chiranjeevi fans in Hyderabad, and also, as restaurateur, the wealthiest FA organizer I have met. He and his friends formed their association not only because they 'like watching Chiranjeevi', which they did on the opening day of any release, but because the FA gave its members access to tickets.

These non-standard responses come from atypical fans: Vijayalaxmi's gender and Ramu Yadav's economic status set them apart (in Yadav's case, apart from even the members of his own association). These distinctions made it necessary for both to provide explanations in terms of practical benefits, something most fans prefer not to discuss. Their responses do however alert us to the unstated agendas of FAs, which become clearer as we examine their actual activities.

Recent studies on fans in the west have focused on their productivity, rather than their passivity (Vermorel, 1985; Grossberg, 1992). They discuss how fandom helps fans cope with the pressures of life, how it makes socialization possible (Hobson, 1989), how it is potentially empowering (Brower, 1992; Grossberg, 1992). These studies however address either unorganized, or informally organized, fans which usually operate in contexts far removed from mine.

The most striking thing here about fan activity is its sheer 'excess' (cf. Jenson, 1992; Fiske, 1992, on the supposed excess of fans). The number of times they watch their star's films, the ease with which they pick up quarrels or bloody fights to defend their nominee; their obsession with the most trivial of details of stars' lives and their films; the superlatives they use in describing/praising their star. Practically all that they are seen or heard doing is usually sneered at by decent, reasonable, respectable people as being unnecessarily extravagant, hyperbolic excessive.

Implicit in the condemnation is the norm, or what constitutes the permissible

response to actors/stars on screen. Those who would see no point in defending these responses, or more usually of using them to condemn fans on this account, could note that (i) fan activity usually takes place 'without regard' to social (i.e. middle-class) acceptability, and (ii) in the fans' own domain there is intense competition between groups and individuals to surpass whatever has been considered the 'limit' in terms of a public expression of their adulation. Since a fan is defined and recognized by his/her active participation in the whole business of film-seeing, the spectacular act of 'devotion' is in itself evidence of commitment.

The intensity of FA activity is in direct proportion to its local influence. Participation in this activity itself sets privileged fans apart from others with possibly similar socio-economic backgrounds but without access to its organized response. As is evident in the letterheads printed by fans, admiration and hero-worship is inextricably linked to the fan's own quest for social recognition and power. Fan activity is supposed to exist in order to project a star's image, to advertise their latest films. Less wealthy FAs plaster walls with handwritten posters announcing new releases or praising its merits. Others with more access to funds print posters, hang banners, place plywood cut-outs in the vicinity of cinema halls. Some compose collages from stills in cheap fan magazines which are then used to decorate movie theatre lobbies. Thousands of flyers are distributed elaborating a film's merits or celebrating its success. Prominent in each is the name of the association, its office-bearers and, occasionally, the entire list of its members.

FAs actively contribute to the mood of celebration with which new releases are greeted. A quiet first day spells financial disaster for the product. When fans do not participate in these activities, their 'boycott' not only sends a clear message to the general audience but also changes the atmosphere within which new films are watched.

Fans thus *create* a space for themselves not only in the transaction between the movie and its viewer, but also in the broader social cultural context of film-watching. They take over public spaces and literally leave their signatures across the entire urban space within which they operate. Etched in public toilets for instance, you could see a cryptic 'NBK ZBD', i.e. 'Nandamuri Balakrishna Zindabad' (Balakrishna is NTR's son and current star). Charcoal and brick drawings of major stars are a common sight, though these could be by individual, i.e. 'unorganized' fans. Their regular meeting places are no more owned by them than the movie theatres that they take over, quite literally, when the occasion demands.

This tendency to take over, in various ways, public spaces that do not acknowledge their presence in official transactions with the public is an important aspect of fan assertion. In Vijayawada it has led to the carving up of parts of the city into fan territories. These territories usually reflect with some accuracy the control over the

city's centres by political parties to which the FAs are affiliated. (Disputes over these spaces have sometimes occurred even between FAs with otherwise identical affiliation). In this city, Chiranjeevi associations succeeded in driving away their rival Balakrishna fans and their allies from the Gandhinagar area, which has thirteen theatres. As a result, Balakrishna fans cannot perform fan activity in and around the theatres of this area. In the past, when tensions within FAs resulted in a split, it was the more powerful splinter that retained the `office'/meeting place. Translated into day-to-day functioning, territorial limits impose severe restrictions on FAs: they may not be in a position to, for example, defend themselves in the competition for wall or hoarding space, or exert influence over theatre managements outside their `areas'.

The influence FAs exert over theatre managements is an important indication of their `clout' another important example of fan assertion. The prestige attached to this assertion relates to the power theatre managements have, over the years, arrogated to themselves. It is not unusual in parts of coastal Andhra for guards to indulge in cane-charges to control crowds, or for ushers and other staff to abuse and man-handle members of the audience.

In addition, influential FAs and their office-bearers have access to first day/week show tickets, otherwise impossible to acquire in the open market. Viewing a film on the day of its release is considered an achievement even by middle-class, upper-caste youth. When a star's film is released, hundreds of people approach FAs for tickets. Depending on the importance of the FA, a pre-determined number of tickets are reserved for it. Violence has erupted over this issue on occasion when managers have refused to supply tickets to fans. Today, `quotas' are treated as a matter of right.

In recent times Chiranjeevi FAs in Vijayawada have become so influential that they organize special benefit shows on the opening day, booking an entire hall and selling tickets at high premiums. On special occasions (such as the 100th day) FAs buy all the tickets for the night shows and sell or distribute them, not always at a premium.

During such `special' shows, and during other shows on, for example, first days, fans take over the cinema halls. Theatres are elaborately decorated by them, and during the show there is much slogan-shouting. Police frequently cane-charge crowds of unsuccessful ticket-hunters who often attempt to storm the halls. Throughout the show, whistling and shouting drown the sound track. Fans once caused considerable damage to a theatre in Hyderabad when the management refused to replay a song sequence (for the third time), and dispersed only after a cane-charge. Such incidents are common when fans `liberate' cinema halls, as is the sight of rifle-wielding policemen patrolling aisles during the screening.

Theatre owners and distributors accuse FAs -- only in private, off-the-record

conversations -- of extorting money. Fan-leaders, it is argued, use their associations as a pretext for making money. If this is true, it is further evidence of fan activity's links with their aspirations. If false, it means that the industry which supposedly created and funded FAs is discrediting them, an indication that fans are not just repeat audience but also a threat.

Fan assertion often leads to friction with distributors. The immediate origin is disagreement over how long a star's film should run. As mentioned earlier, the distributor begins to make a loss whenever the occupancy rate falls below 50 per cent. When this happens, the distributor usually withdraws the film. Fans, on the other hand, ever-conscious of records and jubilees, insist that the film be allowed to run till it touches the 50- or 100-day mark. In early 1994, Balakrishna fans allegedly burnt a distributor's office over one such dispute. When a star's film fails, fans blame the distributor or producer for the failure, accuse them of withdrawing prints when collections did not warrant such an action, of poor publicity, poor timing of release, and so on. Central to the conflict with the industry, whether manifested at the level of theatre managements, distributors or producers, is the question of who controls the medium itself. Fans create and use the opportunities they get to send the message that they matter. Although not articulated in these terms, the signal is clear enough. Acts of assertion are articulated in terms of commitment, admiration for the star, and their self-assigned responsibility to protect the star's image. Fan assertion is a response to the film industry's indifference to and contempt for the audience. The industry does not have a mechanism for receiving audience opinion. The only feedback it receives, and is interested in, is collection figures. This does not prevent the industry from making claims of behalf of the audience about what 'they' want. Apart from petitioning the government to ban a film, members of the audience have few legitimate means of venting their grievances or seeking redressal. By virtue of being organized, FAs happen to be the only section of the audience that has not only forced the industry to listen to their views but to take them into consideration. So far, it must be added, FAs have not demanded 'clean' or 'socially committed' cinema. On the contrary, they have rallied against such demands when their star's film is involved. Their 'political incorrectness' is a consequence of their mode of articulation, and it is worth arguing that it will probably continue until they transform themselves so radically that they will no longer be fan associations. Battles with the industry over the degree of control exerted are not always open ones. Quieter, less spectacular, activities of FAs too become sites of this struggle. The communication networks of FAs is one such site. Fans of a star functioning from different parts of the state keep in constant touch with each other by writing short letters at regular intervals. The letters inform fans in other areas about the performance of films (of all major stars) in their town/city, about the activities undertaken by their FA, the possibility of coordinating activities, or of visits to the star. More important FAs receive requests for stills from forthcoming titles, which are usually distributed by producers through FAs free of cost. Information regarding the performance of films

can be inaccurate, but these letters do provide fans with a sense of belonging to a larger collective, one spread across parts of or even the whole state, and potentially a source of considerable strength. Other occasions, like public functions organized by producers to celebrate a film's success, also allow fans to gauge the extent of their community. Letters provide space for a more sustained interaction which is invisible to and independent of the industry. Apart from letters, FAs provide their members and non-members with a direct interaction on a daily basis. Most fans spend the better part of an evening at their regular meeting places. The meetings are attended by unorganized fans and non-fans as well. Discussions are not restricted to the cinema but often revolve around it. On these occasions, films are analysed and judged.

When a film is discussed, participants discuss what is good and bad about it, as well as *how* it should be viewed and analysed. Films are broken up into compartments: star, story, dance, fight, music, photography, comedy track, etc: each component is compared with its counterparts in other films in Telugu and other languages: English and Hindi. Given the sheer number of films that the debators watch, the filmic intertext could be reasonably said to include the entire range of popular cinema available to a generation. In the light of this intertext, categories are invented, altered or reinforced ('class' films, 'mass' films, or 'class' elements of a 'mass' film). Cinema is watched in the light of the networks of this expectation. I do not claim that FA discussions are the only source of such expectations, or that fans are the only sections of the audience that invent them. FAs merely provide an institutional space for the creation and circulation of opinion and expectation. I would however venture to claim that opinions thus generated do have a much larger circulation, and also that there are significant differences between these and the products of non-fans who otherwise share similar socio-economic backgrounds. The crucial significance of the space provided by FAs lies in its autonomy, no matter how partial or limited, from the industry and its designs. The existence of such spaces goes a long way in preventing the industry from achieving total success in deciding the shape of the cinema to come. Fan discussions, like their other activities, open up social and cultural spaces that may not even exist, and enable them to assert their importance vis-a-vis the industry itself and to gain some control over the medium. Acts of fan assertion are not always with reference to cinema, but address other fans and the rest of society as well--eg., the prestige of a fan among sections of the lower class audience. The links between FAs and political parties in places like Vijayawada is evidence of yet another attempt by fans to seek larger and more meaningful roles for themselves. 'Social service', which I have only mentioned in passing, but which is today one of their official functions, may also be viewed in this light. In Vijayawada, a number of Chiranjeevi fans are supporters of the Congress (I). Some important fan organizers are former student activists of the party who established FAs even while they were active in student politics. An overwhelming majority of Balakrishna fans are Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supporters and continue to do party work (Balakrishna is NTR's son). Krishna and Nagarjuna fans are Congress (I) supporters. Suman fans are TDP supporters who work in tandem with Balakrishna fans, as do some Venkatesh fans.

Interestingly, Chiranjeevi, Nagarjune and Venkatesh have not openly declared their political sympathies so far. The choice of both star and political party is partly influenced by caste factors. This is evident from the composition of both Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna FAs. During the mid-1980s, Kapus and individuals from other castes which had an antagonistic relationship with Kammas joined or formed Chiranjeevi FAs and stayed away from or left Balakrishna FAs (formed largely by NTR fans). Chiranjeevi FAs also attracted anti-TDP and/or pro-Congress (I) youth regardless of caste. Parallel developments took place in Balakrishna FAs. All of this resulted in a large concentration of Kapus and Congress (I) supporters in Chiranjeevi FAs and Kammas and TDP supporters in Balakrishna FAs. Similar developments are evident in other coastal Andhra towns. While caste and party affiliations do not fully explain the reasons for the 'choice' of a star, the very fact that they played, and continue to play, any role at all, should caution us against treating fans as passive victims of mass-produced images. The reasons given by fans themselves for joining or supporting political parties vary from the chance such affiliations offer to 'serve the people better', to the protection that party affiliation offers, both from other fans as well as from theatre managements and the police. Most fans, when asked why they did not become (or continue as) full-time activists, were unanimous in their answer: it was too dangerous. Vijayawada's party politics, an extension of gang rivalry, can be extremely violent even by Andhra standards. There have been dozens of murders of party activists and leaders in the past fifteen years. There are interesting similarities between fans and party activists, especially at the lower levels. Both are largely poor or lower middle-class youth who belong to Sudra 'forward' castes (Kapu, Kamma) or to backward castes, and a significant number are dalits. Few hold regular white-collar jobs. And their activities, including distribution of pamphlets, flyers, wall writing, poster, hanging banners, slogan shouting, and even processions, are often common to both. It would however be wrong to assume that fans are future political cadres, or that FA activities prepare fans to enter conventional politics. Regardless of the success of their star in the political arena, and in spite of the similarities between FA activities and those of political parties, not all fans involve themselves directly in party politics. Most NTR fans became Balakrishna fans, not TDP activists. The few who did went beyond the lowest levels of the party. On the other hand, minor Congress (I) activists became major Chiranjeevi fans. While it is not surprising that some fans sought places for themselves in conventional politics and FAs did, at times, become fronts for political activities, it must be stressed that the transformation is neither natural nor a one-way process. FAs and political parties attract people from similar social-economic backgrounds, who share a common quest for social recognition and power. The leaking of one activity into the other is perhaps due to these factors, and not because fans and their associations evolve in any inevitable way into party cadres and political parties. It is difficult to disentangle fandom in its present form from criminality. This is not to suggest that FA members are criminals. They are constructed and perceived as criminals by respectable (middle class, upper caste) citizens. 'Rowdy' is a term frequently bandied about with reference to fans.

One police officer actually described a major fan organizer in Vijayawada as a 'noted rowdy-sheeter'. Indeed, the fan in question happens to be accused of murder-- something he carried over from his past involvement in party politics. Interestingly, the 'rowdy' is a central figure in party politics of Vijayawada (as well as other parts of the country). Dhareeshwar and Srivatsan's analysis of the rowdysheeter offers useful insights to this shadowy figure. They argue, 'In the middle-class imagination the "rowdy" inhabits the dark zone of the city [the "basti"], trafficking in illegal, immoral activities, a zone that is always in need of law and order, and always threatening to spread to the safer, cleaner habitat of the city' (Dhareeshwar and Srivatsan 1996: 202). The rowdy or 'lumpen' is the subhuman 'other' of the globalizing, upper caste, middle-class 'citizen' and is invoked to explain 'all that the [middle-class] find[s] disturbing in the social and political life of the nation'(2).

It is not surprising that the rowdy makes an appearance in FAs. The fan is a rowdy not only because he breaks the law in the course of his assertion or his association with 'criminilized' politics. The fan becomes a rowdy by overstepping the line which demarcates the legitimate -- 'constructive', permissible excess -- and the illegitimate. As I have argued, fans cross this line and thus become a criminal. It is irrelevant whether a particular fan actually has a criminal record (rowdy-sheet). 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 a politics which is delegitimized. In my paper I have tried to show that there is no such thing as 'pure' hero worship. Fan activity neither constitutes the surrender of young people to the will of the industry, nor prevent them from articulating aspirations, which fans share with other members of their caste and class groups.

I would like to conclude this paper with a summary of one of my interviews. Ambati Venkateswara Rao, a dalit Congress activist and a former fan, argues that unlike the past, present-day fans lack discipline, are motivated by selfishness and caste loyalties instead of admiration. They are interested in money, and in projecting themselves as leaders. He condemns the degeneration of fans and laments that fans are getting involved in politics (Interview, Vijayawada, 9 July 1994). I don't share his nostalgia and disgust. I hope my paper pays due attention to this other observations.

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