

Reel to Real: The Star–Hero Convergence in Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

The enduring allure of popular cinema in India lies in its ability to fuse two seemingly divergent archetypes, the charismatic “star” and the morally weighted “hero,” into a single figure that entertains while embodying collective ideals. This paper traces how that fusion emerged, explaining how screen personas migrate beyond narrative frames to become devotional icons, folklore avatars, and everyday companions for millions. Moving from early mythological adaptations and mythologicals to the sculpted physiques and sentimental romances of the contemporary multiplex era, it identifies recurrent narrative devices, visual strategies, and fan practices that transform marketable celebrity into moral authority. The study shows that the star-hero dynamic is not merely a by-product of publicity campaigns; it is a cultural engine that negotiates India’s rapid social change, enabling audiences to reconcile tradition with modern aspiration. Crucially, this cinematic authority extends into the political realm, where film stars leverage their heroic personas to create alternative forms of democratic participation that challenge conventional political structures. By following the moment when the star crosses into heroic symbolism, the paper reveals why viewers continue to invest these figures with emotional labour that outlasts box-office cycles. Readers will encounter the ways devotional gazes, folklore riffs, and shifting masculinities silently collaborate to keep Indian popular cinema imaginatively sovereign long after the closing credits roll.

Keywords: *Star, hero, Indian cinema, archetype, cine-politics*

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I. Introduction:

Indian cinema functions as both a reflection of society and an active force in shaping cultural values. It creates a distinctive space where entertainment meets identity formation in postcolonial India. The film industry operates with inherent tensions between its commercial imperatives and cultural responsibilities, particularly evident in how it constructs two distinct archetypal figures: the “star” and the “hero.” Stars embody personal magnetism and market appeal, whereas heroes represent moral authority and societal ideals. The idea of hero helps probing about who holds cultural influence and how popular media bridges individual desires with collective identity. India’s remarkable linguistic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity finds expression within this shared cinematic framework, which simultaneously functions as entertainment industry, cultural repository, and space for social experimentation. This dynamic between stardom and heroism offers crucial insights into how rapidly transforming societies navigate the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ambitions. Cinema serves as a contested space where cultural authority and public identity are formed. It offers a crucial perspective for understanding how popular culture shapes collective imagination and negotiates the complex relationship between cultural heritage and India’s place in global modernity. The paper uses a multidisciplinary approach and reviews literature on relevant topics to posit its findings.

II. Methodology:

To examine these complex intersections between stardom, heroism, and cultural authority in Indian cinema, this study uses this literature review as a multidisciplinary methodological framework that integrates varied approaches including comparative theoretical analysis, close reading, and textual analysis. These techniques have been chosen to examine scholarly discourse on star-hero relationships in Indian cinema, the study draws upon established practices in film studies and cultural studies.

This review addresses three primary research questions that emerge from the existing scholarship: First, how do theoretical frameworks from Western star studies apply to or require modification when examining Indian cinema’s unique cultural context? Second, what are the mechanisms through which Indian film stars achieve transformation from commercial entertainers to culturally significant figures embodying heroic ideals? Third, how

does the phenomenon of star-hero convergence in Indian cinema intersect with broader sociopolitical structures, particularly in relation to regional politics, religious devotion, and postcolonial identity formation?

Comparative theoretical analysis serves as the lens that aids contrasting Western star studies paradigms against the Indian theories. Texts such as Richard Dyer’s “star” concept and Barry King’s persona theory are juxtaposed against the Indian-specific theoretical constructs such as *darshan(a)* by Madhava Prasad and devotional fandom theories developed by scholars like Kakar, Dwyer, Pandian, etc. The comparative framework incorporates theoretical convergences and deviations, revealing how cultural specificity shapes the applicability of Western celebrity studies to Indian cinematic contexts. A close examination of key scholarly arguments and theoretical formulations, claims about star-hero relationships are analysed through specific textual evidence and cultural examples. Texts are explored to comprehend the arguments shaped by authors, and how their work connects to broader academic traditions. This approach looks at both contemporary debates and traces the evolution of scholarship on Indian cinema stardom and its progress from the post-Independence period through to today’s neoliberal context.

Understanding Indian cinema’s star-hero dynamic requires first examining how stardom emerged as a cultural phenomenon. The Hollywood star system provides a comparative framework for understanding how Indian cinema both adopted and transformed these foundational concepts. So, before understanding the unique dynamics of Indian cinema’s star-hero convergence, this study first aims to explore established Western frameworks of stardom.

Theoretical Foundations: Western Star Studies

The emergence of film stardom began around 1907 in Hollywood Cinema, when trade magazines started discussing the unique qualities of screen acting and singled out those who excelled at these skills. As this discourse spread, public interest in film actors grew, but because audiences barely knew them off-screen, recognizable acting styles became a tool for promoting films. Around 1909, the industry began consciously promoting actors’ names through billboards and advertisements, giving rise to the idea of the “picture personality”, a performer known and identified primarily through their professional, on-screen presence. According to Richard DeCordova, this period marked the start of the American star system, with actors’ identities constructed mainly around their roles in films and the way their names were circulated by the press and media (50–97).

Later, in *Stars* (1998), a foundational work in star studies, Richard Dyer introduces the concept of the “star text”, the composite of media representations through which audiences come to know a star. He argues that stars are not directly known as real people but are constructed through media texts such as films, interviews, publicity materials, magazine features, television appearances, advertisements, and fan publications. These representations form a complex mix of visual, verbal, and aural signs that circulate across various media, shaping the star’s image (34). Dyer emphasizes that stars exist only within these texts, which serve as the primary site for constructing and interpreting their cultural meaning. This means studying stars requires analysing their textual construction across multiple media platforms, as the star text is the primary site where audiences engage with and interpret star meanings. Though we encounter stars only through media and rarely in person, they are different from the fictional characters they play on screen because they also exist in real life.

Building upon Dyer’s conception of the star text, King expands this framework by introducing the notion of a continuous star persona that transcends individual film narratives. Barry King argues that a star’s persona is a character that extends beyond any single film or story, operating within the broader cinematic universe rather than being limited to specific movie narratives. This persona which is distinctive to a star, instead of being confined to filmic time and space, transcends individual film appearances to maintain continuity throughout the star’s career and cultural presence. He also opines that an actor goes through the process of impersonation and the star as an entity favours personification. Impersonation represents the traditional acting ideal where the actor’s real personality disappears under the personality of the character, while personification involves the actor essentially playing themselves or a consistent persona across different roles. King argues that film technology and market pressures tend to favour personification over impersonation, as it becomes more practical for actors to develop marketable personas that can be sustained across multiple projects (169–185)

Extending King’s emphasis on persona personification, McDonald reframes stardom as an integrated system of image, labour, and capital, demonstrating how market forces shape these sustained identities. Paul McDonald views stardom in Hollywood as an intricate integration of image, labour, and capital, each aspect inseparably linked within the star system. He argues that stars are not merely glamorous images constructed through films and media, but also specialized workers whose labour, both in performance and in promotion, creates and sustains these images. At the same time, the star’s image becomes a valuable form of capital for the film industry, functioning as a marketable asset that can be owned, controlled, and exploited for profit. McDonald insists that to truly understand stardom, one must see how these dimensions interact: the star’s image is produced by their labour, yet it is also commodified and circulated as capital, often leading to tensions between the star as

a person and as a commercial property. Thus, stardom is best understood as a dynamic system where meaning, work, and money are fundamentally intertwined (5–14).

While McDonald foregrounds the commercial dimensions of stardom, Povedák offers a contrasting perspective by distinguishing stars, individualized, media-driven figures, from heroes, who emerge organically as communal role models. Though the star system is a commercial and marketable entity, the stars symbolise a completely distinct ideal. According to István Povedák, heroes and stars represent fundamentally different value systems and social functions. Heroes embody community values and tradition, emerging organically through local recognition to serve collective interests rather than personal achievement. They become symbolic embodiments of their communities, with fame spreading through word of mouth from grassroots origins. Stars, conversely, operate on individualistic principles that mirror fashion rather than tradition. They achieve fame through self-promotion and mass media, appearing immediately before wide audiences as created personalities. While heroes provide models for community identification and collective values, stars offer individual patterns of identification while creating a “false illusion” of achievable success (7–17). This distinction reflects different cultural phenomena: heroes serve communal spaces where individual and collective identity merge, while stars promote pure individualism.

The seemingly clear and distinct definitions of concepts such as the “star” and the “hero” become considerably more complex and contested within the Indian cinematic context. In particular, the overlapping cultural, social, and political functions that these figures perform in Indian popular cinema challenge the fixed or universalised notions often associated with these terms in Western frameworks. The boundaries between the star and the hero frequently blur in Indian cinema, where off-screen persona, on-screen character, and fan reception are deeply intertwined. Therefore, any effort to define these ideals in a rigid or monolithic way must account for the fluid, dynamic, and culturally specific ways in which stardom and heroism are constructed, performed, and received in India’s diverse film cultures. While these Western theoretical frameworks provide valuable analytical tools, their application to Indian cinema reveals both convergences and significant departures that reflect India’s unique cultural landscape. Having examined how Western theory distinguishes stars and heroes primarily along commercial and communal lines, we now turn to India’s distinctive sacred–secular interface, epitomized by the concept of darshan.

The Sacred–Secular Interface: Darshan in Indian Cinema

Madhava Prasad’s concept of “Darshan” in Indian cinema draws from the Hindu religious practice where devotees seek the sacred sight of a deity, believing that the act of seeing and being seen by the divine is spiritually significant. Darshan is a culture-specific or religion-oriented perception of the hero as on par with Gods (in Hinduism); this justifies the term being borrowed from Hinduism. Darshan refers to the auspicious sight of a deity, guru, or holy person. It is believed that when a devotee sees the deity, they are also seen by the divine, a two-way act of visual exchange that has spiritual and emotional potency. Prasad argues that this notion of *darshan* profoundly shapes the Indian cinematic experience. In the context of film, the movie star on screen assumes a quasi-divine presence, and the audience’s act of watching becomes akin to a devotional ritual. The star is often presented in iconic, frontal poses that invite the viewer’s gaze directly, echoing the way deities are displayed in temples for worshippers. This “aesthetics of frontality” distinguishes Indian cinema from Western traditions, where narrative immersion and identification are prioritized over direct address.

For Prasad the Darshan is an extended metaphor, the cinema hall itself functions as a modern temple, with the screen as the sanctum and the star as the deity. The audience’s collective gaze is not merely passive observation but an active, almost sacred engagement, reinforcing the star’s god-like stature. These dynamics transform film viewing into a culturally resonant act of devotion, blurring the lines between entertainment and worship. Thus, “darshan” becomes a structuring principle in Indian popular cinema, shaping both the style of filmmaking and the nature of audience engagement. Through this lens, Prasad reveals how Indian cinema embeds traditional religious sensibilities within modern mass culture, making the act of seeing a star a powerful, almost spiritual experience for viewers (53–56).

While Darshan explains how audiences look, folklore supplies what they look at, heroic figures resonate with the collective memory of the viewers. Folklore stories have significantly influenced the construction of heroic star images in South Indian cinema, grounding them in familiar cultural narratives. These stories often portray stars as embodiments of bravery, virtue, and justice, reinforcing their appeal and authority among audiences.

Folklore and Mythic Narrative in Star Construction

MGR’s portrayal of Madurai Veeran (1956) in cinema elevated the subaltern hero’s legacy on a grand stage, amplifying the values of resistance and justice for marginalized communities and establishing MGR himself as a transformative, unifying figure in Tamil society. Even when not exactly portraying any particular folk hero per se, there is a striking similarity between MGR’s on-screen persona and the heroes depicted in traditional folk ballads. He frequently played characters from marginalized or oppressed backgrounds, like peasants, fishermen,

rickshaw pullers, cowherds, and labourers. And also, similar to folk tales, where heroes avenge wrongs and restore community honour (maanam) and defend it with valour (veeram), MGR's screen persona is that of a *defender* of family, village, and the oppressed, often righting wrongs through dramatic confrontations. By using the widespread reach of cinema to present a less radical version of traditional heroes, MGR became a pan-Tamil folk hero while the original figures from ballads remained localized (Pandian 70).

A similar yet a slightly deviant form transpired in Telugu cinema between 1940s to 1960s. With successes from movies like *Balanagamma* (1940), *Raksha Rekha* (1949) and *Swapna Sundari* (1950), the folklore genre became a staple for the Telugu cinema goers. The movies are inspired by legends or pseudo-legends from *Burra Katha* (a local folk form) or other odes and tales from *Kasi Majili Kathalu* and stories from the *Chandamama* magazine (which are modern creations) (Narasimham; Rajadhyaksha and Willeman 293). These films featured storylines set in medieval-style worlds, where key elements such as wizards, fairies, and magical curses played central roles in the narratives. The fantasy genre was later cemented by movies from the production house, Vijaya Pictures: movies like *Maya Bazaar* (1957), *Patala Bhairavi* (1951), and *Jagadeka Veeruni Katha* (1961), have added the charm of Oriental fairy tale to the narratives (Rajadhyaksha and Willeman 234). With all these changes, folk movies in Telugu differed slightly from the folklore movies in Tamil. Telugu movies borrowed stories freely from various forms (sometimes even creating novel folk stories) and lacked the local specificity akin to the Tamil counterparts. One of the most important stars of Telugu cinema, viz., Nandamuri Taraka Ramarao (NTR), was born from the folklore movies. In his movie *Patala Bhairavi*, set in medieval Ujjain, the protagonist Tota Ramudu (played by NTR) is publicly nominated as a hero by the people before he actually performs any heroic deeds. This ceremonial nomination happens in a city square, where a song about heroism is performed. When the singer asks if the bravest man of all is present amongst them, someone in the crowd shouts Ramudu's name, and the crowd later cheers for him, wrapping him in a turban and shawl as a mark of honor. This mode of presentation of a "hero" paved the way for the development of the star system in the Telugu film industry as it exists today (Srinivas 2001).

Beyond South Indian folklore traditions, Bombay cinema's icons like Amitabh Bachchan also drew on pan-Indian oral and ritual forms to elevate their personas. Amitabh Bachchan's enduring appeal and authenticity as a star are significantly attributed to his engagement with folk idioms and oral traditions, which ground his performances in the lived rituals and popular cultural practices of India. Amitabh Bachchan's persona and performances in Bombay cinema are deeply shaped by the oral traditions, folk music, and ritual practices of Indian culture, despite not being directly modelled on specific folk narratives or heroes. Bachchan's films frequently incorporate folk idioms, most notably, entire folk songs, such as the well-known *holi* song in *Silsila* and the *hijra*-associated song in *Laawaris*, which are woven into key narrative and ritual moments within the films. These song sequences draw from the fabric of Indian folklore, using familiar melodies and lyrics that resonate with audience memories and customary celebrations. Moreover, Bachchan's dialogic style and the construction of his roles, marked by memorable, rhythmic, and orally vivid exchanges, echo the patterns of Indian folk performative traditions, such as those found in *nautanki*, *tamasha*, and village dramas. The article further highlights that, as a product of Bombay cinema, Bachchan's characters and their cinematic contexts inherit the forms and discourses of these folk genres, even if they do not directly reproduce folk stories or heroes.

The integration of folklore narratives into star personas represents one dimension of a broader mythologization process. While folklore provides narrative content, mythologization encompasses the visual and ritual techniques through which stars acquire divine attributes. Amitabh Bachchan's characters were also similar to mythological figures through their connection to complex, morally ambiguous epic heroes rather than idealized gods. The authors argue that while traditional Bombay heroes were loosely modelled on divine figures like Rama and Krishna, Bachchan's persona draws more extensively from tragic and rebellious mythological characters such as Karna, Indra, etc. These figures, often marked by moral complexity, social marginality, and personal suffering, provided richer templates for Bachchan's angry, rebellious characters who frequently embody injustice and vengeance (Mishra et al. 49–67).

As discussed above, folklore provides the everyday idiom but mythologization elevates that idiom to divine iconography. Together, they chart a continuum from village legend to temple-like spectacle.

Mythologization and Devotional Spectacle

Talking of divine iconography, Rachel Dwyer, in *Filming the Gods*, explores how Indian cinema systematically borrows from Hindu religious iconography to construct the stardom of its actors, elevating them to near-divine status. Dwyer notes that Indian films often use visual techniques and symbolism drawn directly from temple art and mythology, such as specific lighting, costuming, and camera angles that mimic the way deities are depicted in religious settings. This deliberate use of iconography transforms actors into mythic figures, making their on-screen presence resonate with the power and aura of gods.

Dwyer emphasizes that the mythologization of actors is amplified by Indian cinema's preference for melodrama and a non-realist aesthetic. Stars are frequently cast in roles that echo mythological heroes or divine beings, and their performances are marked by heightened emotions and grand gestures reminiscent of epic tales.

This narrative strategy blurs the boundaries between the mortal and the divine, allowing audiences to perceive stars as embodiments of cultural ideals and spiritual virtues.

Moreover, Dwyer highlights that the star’s image is carefully curated both on and off the screen, with media, publicity, and fan practices reinforcing their god-like stature. The result is a unique form of stardom where actors are not merely entertainers but become symbolic figures who embody collective aspirations, moral values, and even spiritual authority. Through this process, Indian cinema sanctifies its stars, making them enduring icons within the cultural and religious imagination of the audience.

Devotional Fandom and the Rise of Citizen-Devotees

Building on Dwyer’s argument that Indian cinema systematically borrows temple iconography and mythic visual codes to sanctify its stars as near-divine figures, Bhrugubanda manoeuvres the focus to how these consecrated images give rise to ‘citizen-devotees,’ the fan communities in South India whose devotional practices in cinema halls mirror temple worship and serve as a form of political participation. Bhrugubanda’s *Deities and Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India* explores how Indian cinema, especially Telugu mythological and devotional films, blurs the boundaries between film stars and gods, producing what she calls the “citizen–devotee.” Bhrugubanda argues that the relationship between stars and gods is not just a matter of naïve audiences confusing actors with the divine, but a complex, historically contingent process where cinema, religion, and politics intersect to shape new forms of subjectivity and public life

She shows that actors like N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), who famously portrayed gods such as Krishna and Rama, became an embodiment of both divine and political authority. Through iconic and frontal cinematic presentations, these stars were visually framed for worship, and their on-screen personas fed directly into their real-world status as representatives of the people. Bhrugubanda emphasizes that this process is not simply about religiosity but involves the mutual shaping of citizenship and devotion, where the film spectator is simultaneously a citizen and a devotee, and the star is both a political leader and a divine figure. The cinema thus becomes a space where myth, history, and modern identity converge, and where the viewing experience itself can mirror religious ritual, including acts of prayer, worship, and even possession in the case of goddess films.

Shalini Kakar adds to Bhrugubanda’s arguments on how fans enact certain sanctifications off screen through devotional fandom. In her book *Devotional Fanscapes*, Kakar explores how fans in India and beyond transform film stars into objects of religious devotion, constructing what she calls “devotional fanscapes.” Kakar argues that this devotion is not a superficial extension of fandom but a complex, performative, and material practice that blurs the lines between cinema, religion, and politics. Fans build temples dedicated to stars like Amitabh Bachchan and Madhuri Dixit, perform rituals such as *puja*, *arati*, and *abhishekam* (milk offerings), and treat film posters and cutouts as sacred objects, mirroring the treatment of Hindu deities. These practices are deeply embedded in public spaces, marking cityscapes and even extending into the transnational sphere, with diaspora communities participating in similar rituals.

Kakar emphasizes that fans actively construct their identities as “devotee–fans,” or *bhaktis*, and frame their chosen stars as deities, using Hindu ritual vocabulary to legitimize these acts. This devotional fandom is not limited by class or geography; it brings together diverse communities and challenges traditional boundaries between the sacred and the secular. By foregrounding the agency of fans, Kakar’s work highlights how star devotion in Indian cinema is a powerful social and cultural force, creating new forms of religious experience and collective identity.

While devotional fandom reveals the audience’s external projection of star-hero virtues, these virtues are themselves shaped by evolving on-screen masculine archetypes in Hindi cinema. A “hero” in the context of Hindi cinema is a culturally and politically charged masculine archetype that reflects the aspirations, anxieties, and dominant ideologies of a particular historical moment in Indian society.

Evolution of Masculine Archetypes in Hindi Cinema

The post-Independence masculine ideal was embodied by the “Five-Year Plan (FYP) hero” who was “typically, portrayed as an engineer (building roads or dams), a doctor, a scientist, or a bureaucrat,” representing the fusion of scientific knowledge with national development goals. Srivastava calls it epistemological masculinity, where the movies positioned post-colonial Indian men as the progressive agents of modernization who would transform the “irrational” masses into modern citizens (2019–2028).

Amitabh Bachchan’s “Angry Young Man” redefined cinematic masculinity in 1970s Hindi cinema, emerging out of a period of Indian urban crisis, disillusionment, and rapid social change. Unlike earlier romantic or idealist heroes, Bachchan’s urban protagonists were marked by a brooding, wounded masculinity, his anger was internalized, simmering, and born from social injustice and personal trauma, such as poverty and loss. This masculinity was not simply a display of external aggression, but one forged in vulnerability, repression, and a deep moral ambiguity. The “Angry Young Man” operated on the margins of legality, often as a smuggler or

vigilante, but his defiance was justified as a righteous response to corruption and systemic failure (R. Majumdar 1–40).

India's post-1991 economic liberalization reoriented cinematic masculinities from Bachchan's righteous anger to Shah Rukh Khan's globally inflected romanticism. Praseeda Gopinath in a paper analyses Khan's transformation of male stardom in Hindi cinema during India's neoliberal economic transition. The presentation contrasts Khan's "feeling male body" with Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" archetype, showing how Khan's emotional expressiveness and romantic sensibility aligned with India's new economic aspirations. Khan represents the neoliberal ideal of a romantic family man who balances global mobility with traditional Indian values, using emotional intelligence rather than violence to resolve conflicts. The analysis positions Khan's stardom as embodying the shift from socialist-era disillusionment to neoliberal optimism, where success is measured through both international achievement and familial devotion.

From mid-2000s, Hindi cinema has undergone a fundamental transformation in masculine portrayal, systematically integrating physique displays into mainstream productions where shirtless scenes showcasing "chiselled" bodies a standard expectation in virtually every blockbuster movie. This new approach completely abandoned traditional Indian masculine ideals such as "midriff rotundity" in favour of lean, muscular bodies. This evolution extends beyond cinema through sophisticated media amplification and commercial integration with the fitness industry, fundamentally redefining heroic masculinity to align with contemporary middle-class aspirations of professionalism and urban success (Baas 444–456).

Negotiating Female Stardom: Dance and Respectability

While male stars have dominated heroic archetypes, female stardom in Indian cinema operates within different constraints and possibilities, revealing how gender shapes the star-hero dynamic. Male stars were almost always cast as heroes, celebrated for their versatility and box-office appeal, often playing multiple roles that showcased their mastery and action without lasting moral burdens. In contrast, women rarely got true hero roles. Just as male stars signal heroism through sculpted physiques, female stardom negotiates respectability and sexuality through controlled performance spaces, most notably in dance sequences. Female stars were usually confined to roles judged by strict moral standards, such as the virtuous wife, mother, or love interest, and when given double roles, these were typically split into "good" and "bad" women, with the "bad" persona punished or eliminated. Heroic roles for women were extremely rare and, when they did occur (like Fearless Nadia's stunt films), were treated as novelties or exceptions, not as mainstream heroism. Even in celebrated films like *Mother India*, female courage was framed as maternal sacrifice rather than adventurous heroism (N. Majumdar).

Usha Iyer adds to the above argument of stardom of women in Hindi cinema, where she analyses film dance through a body-space-movement framework, analyzing how dance sequences function differently from narrative segments in popular Indian films. The dissertation explores four iconic dancer-actresses from the 1930s to 1990s - Sadhona Bose, Vyjayanthimala, Waheeda Rehman, and Madhuri Dixit - to understand how dance constructs female stardom and negotiates questions of respectability and sexuality. The author proposes a taxonomy distinguishing between narrative numbers (integrated with story and character development) and production numbers (spectacular displays of dancing bodies that halt narrative progression). The study reveals how dance creates specific spaces of performance and how movement vocabularies produce gendered representations, with female performers dominating production numbers while male actors typically participate only in narrative numbers.

The populism surrounding movie stars in India, particularly in the South, has often extended beyond cinema into the realm of politics. Their on-screen heroism, marked by justice, sacrifice, and moral authority, translates into real-life charisma, enabling them to mobilize mass support. This crossover blurs the line between reel and real, allowing stars to cultivate political legitimacy through their cinematic personas and fan base.

From Reel to Real: The Cinema-to-Politics Trajectory

"The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics" by M.S.S. Pandian is a seminal 1992 academic work that analyzes the phenomenon of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), the legendary Tamil film star who became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Pandian examines how MGR meticulously constructed a stereotypical cinematic persona that served as the foundation for his political success, despite consistently violating the interests of the very subaltern classes who supported him. The book explores the cultural elements that were strategically mobilized to create MGR's on-screen image, investigating why this persona gained such widespread acceptance among the poor and marginalized communities. Central to Pandian's analysis is the concept of "constructed biography" - popular narratives that ingeniously blur the lines between cinematic fiction and reality, presenting MGR's film roles as authentic representations of his character. The work demonstrates how MGR's cinematic image became deeply integrated with Tamil cultural contexts, creating what Pandian terms an "image trap" that enabled political hegemony over subaltern consciousness. The book also pays special attention to MGR's remarkable popularity among women voters, analyzing the gender dynamics of his appeal. Written as a blend of

essay-writing, political rhetoric, and scholarship, Pandian’s work includes MGR’s complete filmography and serves as a critical examination of how media and political processes intersect in contemporary Tamil Nadu politics. The study represents a significant contribution to understanding how ruling elites manufacture consent from the very classes they exploit through carefully crafted cultural manipulation.

On the other hand, N.T. Rama Rao represents one of the most remarkable examples of successful transition from cinema to politics in Indian history. NTR’s political success can be attributed to his masterful use of performance strategies that went beyond conventional political campaigning. His ability to embody cultural and religious symbols gave him a unique advantage in connecting with voters who saw him not just as a politician but as a cultural icon. This performative dimension of his political identity allowed him to transcend traditional caste and class divisions by appealing to shared cultural values and regional pride. The use of mythological references and religious symbolism in his political speeches and public appearances drew directly from his cinematic experience. Not to forget, NTR’s campaign rhetoric resurrected the folk-hero aura first forged in *Patala Bhairavi*, translating cinematic folklore into real-world populist myth. Just as he had convinced audiences of his divine roles on screen, he was able to project an aura of moral authority and cultural authenticity in the political arena. This performative continuity between his cinematic and political careers created a powerful narrative that resonated with voters seeking leadership that embodied their cultural values. The timing of NTR’s political entry in 1982 was particularly significant, as it coincided with growing regional consciousness in Andhra Pradesh and dissatisfaction with national political parties. His formation of the Telugu Desam Party capitalized on these sentiments while leveraging his established cultural credentials to present himself as a genuine representative of Telugu identity and pride (Srinivas 2013).

For Srinivas, the star-politician phenomenon represents a distinctively Indian form of democratic participation where cinema serves as a vehicle for post-colonial elite mobilization, with fan associations acting as grassroots political organizations that are closely linked to caste and regional political formations.

The cine-political phenomenon in South Indian states represents a unique transformation where film stars like MGR in Tamil Nadu, NTR in Andhra Pradesh, and Rajkumar in Karnataka transcended conventional celebrity politics to create alternative forms of political existence. This phenomenon emerged from fundamental contradictions in post-independence India, where linguistic regions found themselves caught between their own cultural distinctiveness and the Indian state’s centralized nationalist project. After linguistic reorganization of states, South Indian regions experienced a paradoxical condition of “simultaneous surplus and lack of sovereignty”, possessing rich cultural and linguistic identities but lacking genuine political autonomy within the federal structure. Cinema became the crucial institution through which “virtual political communities” were forged between stars and their fan followings, operating independently of formal party politics and providing surrogate political existence to populations otherwise marginalized from meaningful democratic participation. Unlike mere celebrity endorsements or propaganda tools, these cine-political formations constituted alternative sovereignties that allowed “demobilized populations to attain subjecthood”. The phenomenon represents a transformation where individual fantasies about stars suddenly occupied the position of political reality, with fantasy itself becoming law rather than remaining private consolation. This creates a genuinely historical event that fundamentally challenges conventional understandings of democratic participation and political representation, demonstrating how cultural institutions can provide alternative paths to political existence when formal democratic channels prove inadequate for expressing regional identity and aspirations (Prasad 2013).

Prasad argues that this phenomenon of film stars achieving spectacular electoral victories through their own political parties is a unique phenomenon developed in South India. In contrast, North Indian film stars from the Hindi film industry typically joined existing political parties rather than creating new ones.

III. Conclusion

The convergence of stardom and heroism in Indian cinema reveals a fundamentally transformative cultural phenomenon that transcends conventional Western frameworks of celebrity studies. Rather than operating as discrete categories, stars and heroes in Indian cinema function as fluid, interconnected archetypes that serve as crucial mediators between competing cultural forces in postcolonial society. This literature demonstrates that Indian cinema’s unique synthesis of commercial entertainment with devotional practices creates hybrid forms of cultural authority that simultaneously preserve traditional values while enabling modern identity formation. The transformation of film figures into objects of religious devotion through darshan, the integration of folklore narratives into contemporary stardom, and the evolution of heroic masculinities across different historical periods collectively illustrate cinema’s role as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation. Most significantly, the phenomenon of cine-politics in South India reveals how popular culture can generate alternative forms of democratic participation and political sovereignty, challenging formal institutional structures through the creation of virtual political communities. The star-hero convergence thus represents more than entertainment or celebrity worship; it constitutes a distinctly Indian form of cultural mediation that enables marginalized populations to articulate regional identity, transcend social hierarchies, and participate in collective meaning-making processes that bridge

individual aspirations with communal values, ultimately positioning cinema as both mirror and architect of India’s ongoing cultural transformation.

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