



October 2024

Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities, Devotee-Fans, and Cultural Politics in India and Beyond

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Recommended Citation

Suganthan, Ajiththa (2024) "Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities, Devotee-Fans, and Cultural Politics in India and Beyond," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 20.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.02.20>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss2/20>

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Abstract

This is a book review of Shalini Kakar, *Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities, Devotee-Fans, and Cultural Politics in India and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023).

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Author Notes

Ajiththa Suganthan is a Ph.D. student in the History and Ethnography of Religions at Florida State University, specializing in South Asia. She holds a master's in art history specializing in Museums and Cultural Heritage Studies at FSU and a BA in Archaeology, from Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Her research spans cultural heritage, ethnography, and South Asian religions.

Kakar, Shalini, *Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities, Devotee-Fans, and Cultural Politics in India and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023).

Shalini Kakar's *Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities, Devotee-Fans, and Cultural Politics in India and Beyond* stands out as an insightful exploration of Bollywood star worship and its intersection with religious and cultural practices. Kakar thoroughly engages with existing literature on this topic and skillfully integrates perspectives from religious scholars, film scholars, and South Asian historians to support her claims. Her analysis prominently features influential scholars of South Asian film such as M.S.S. Pandian, Sara Dickey, Lakshmi Srinivas, and Madhava Prasad. Notably, Kakar focuses on how Indian scholars interact with the concepts of religion, worship, and cinema stars in South Asia, adding depth and nuance to her examination of the devotional practices of Bollywood fans.

Kakar raises some excellent points about the religious art objects created by fans for their star idols, focusing on three iconic Indian stars: Amitabh Bachchan, Madhuri Dixit, and Rajinikanth, which make up the three sections of the book. Through meticulous analysis, Kakar explores how fans construct temples, perform rituals, and engage in social activism in the name of their beloved stars. However, in her effort to cover an extensive range of topics, the reader may find a desire for more in-depth development of these arguments. Nonetheless, this book serves as an excellent starting point for scholars interested in exploring the intersection of star worship, religious artifacts, and cinema.

Kakar's book offers a broad perspective on star worship across India, focusing on the devotion to Hindi and Tamil Nadu superstars. However, by focusing mainly on these regional industries, Kakar misses the unique religious practices and symbols tied to Telangana's fan culture, which has the second largest film box office revenue in India. This lack of regional depth makes

her analysis feel incomplete, and it seems like a missed opportunity to exclude the specific fan culture around Telugu superstars. Kakar's work could be read in conversation with Uma Maheswari's detailed study of how films in Telangana shape religious and political identities in *Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India* (2019), in order to broaden the patterns of star devotional worship across India.

Shalini Kakar stands out as the first scholar to point out how cinematic fans' religious objects have shifted over time, a perspective not thoroughly examined by other South Asian film scholars. She employs the term “*palimpsest*” to illustrate the layering of contemporary devotional practices over traditional ones, offering a nuanced viewpoint on the ongoing continuity and evolution of fan devotion. This innovative use of the palimpsest metaphor helps trace the shifts in fan devotion from the past to the present, making it a valuable resource for understanding the dynamics of modern religious and cultural practices. Kakar's book is an excellent starting point for those interested in studying how the religious fan bhakti movement has evolved.

The introduction lays out the background of religious drama with figures like Rama and Krishna, transitioning into a focus on North Indian films made in Bollywood and the phenomenon of worshipping actors who portray divine roles. Kakar interweaves her childhood experience of knowing “Uncle Ram.” She ends the introduction with a clear layout of the different chapters, providing the necessary background on the film industry and addressing previous scholarship.

However, while the introduction does a fantastic job of addressing the scholarship on the film industry, it falls short in its coverage of regional film industries. Kakar covers Tamil Nadu and Hindi film stars but fails to cover Telugu and Malayalam films, leaving a significant gap in South Indian cinema exploration. Additionally, the book's title, *Devotional Fanscapes: Bollywood Star Deities...* suggests a focus on Bollywood, which traditionally refers to Hindi films. Yet,

Kakar's argument extends to Tamil Nadu's superstar Rajinikanth, whose films predominantly come from Tamil cinema, also known as Kollywood. This discrepancy between the book's title and its content creates confusion about its primary focus and scope, potentially misleading readers about the breadth of its coverage.

In Part I: Chapters 1 and 2 of her book, Shalini Kakar delves into the actor Amitabh Bachchan, exploring the unique ways in which fans worship him and highlighting the diverse expressions of devotion in Indian fan culture. Kakar scrutinizes how his fans revere Amitabh Bachchan, comparing him to the Hindu deity Lord Rama. The All-Bengal Amitabh Bachchan Fans Association (ABFA) conducts various rituals and *pujas*, drawing parallels between Amitabh's film roles and Lord Rama's attributes. For instance, they place Amitabh's shoes from the film “Agneepath” on a chair from “Aks,” echoing the story of Bharat venerating Lord Rama's shoes in the Ramayana (50–60).

Kakar critically analyzes how fans of Amitabh Bachchan chant mantras that replace his name with those of the gods, such as “Har Har Amitabh,” “Jai Shri Amitabh,” and “Amitabh Namha,” adapting traditional religious chants to venerate their cinematic idol (47). The ABFA fans travel to Mumbai to seek his darshan on his birthday, experiencing a deepening bond with their guru-god through this visual exchange (48–49). Kakar exposes the complex ways in which fans adapt ritual objects and practices to worship Amitabh Bachchan as a “*star murtis*” (sacred image). Kakar demonstrates the transformation of traditional religious symbols and practices within the context of cinematic devotion by examining how fans use items from his films, such as shoes, and perform *pujas*. This highlights a fascinating blend of religious fervor and modern celebrity worship, providing insight into how fans create a new form of devotion that intertwines their cultural and spiritual lives with their admiration for a film star.

In Part II, chapters 3 and 4, Kakar delves into the second case study of actress Madhuri Dixit. In Chapter 3, “Starring Madhuri as Durga,” Kakar explores the ardent devotion of Madhuri Dixit's fans, specifically emphasizing the practices of Pappu Sardar, who has dedicated a temple to the actress. To honor Madhuri, fans perform *arati* and *puja*, rituals traditionally reserved for deities. They participate in ritualistic practices like *rath yatras*, akin to religious processions, to express their devotion and seek her *darshan*.

After the cake-cutting ceremony (129), Pappu Sardar, a devotee of Madhuri Dixit, brings images of the actress to the Madhuri Dixit Temple and offers cake as *prasad*. This chapter effectively showcases how fans blend traditional religious practices with contemporary fandom by conducting *pujas* and processions chanting mantras that use the actress’ name in place of a god, such as “Jai Shree Madhuri Devi Aye Namaha” and “Madhuri Dixit Ki Jai,” thus transforming Madhuri into a divine figure (123).

Chapter 4, “Transforming the Object of Art,” critically explores how fans recontextualize objects associated with Madhuri, such as posters and images, treating them as sacred artifacts akin to those found in art galleries. Kakar's methodology is particularly robust in this section, as she conducts extensive interviews with Madhuri's fans to collect data, providing a rich qualitative insight into their practices and beliefs. This approach not only strengthens her arguments but also adds a personal dimension to the analysis, allowing readers to grasp the depth of devotion these fans have for Madhuri Dixit. Her interviews reveal how fans perceive and interact with these transformed objects of art, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersections of cinema, religion, and contemporary culture.

Kakar’s focus on Hindi superstars like Madhuri Dixit and Amitabh Bachchan, as well as Rajinikanth from Tamil Nadu, tells an interesting story, but it would be stronger with more

comparisons to other regional film cultures. For instance, looking at the fan devotion for Pawan Kalyan in Telangana or Mohanlal in Malayalam cinema would give a better picture of how fan worship varies across different parts of India. Similarly, exploring the fan culture around Marathi star Swapnil Joshi could show how these fandoms are shaped by local languages and traditions. This kind of comparison would help us see how fan devotion is unique in each region, but also part of a larger trend across the country. Even with this gap, Kakar's analysis of how movie fandom mixes with religious devotion is fascinating and gives valuable insight into how modern fan culture works. This part of her analysis is an important contribution to understanding how fans worship their favorite stars in India and the kinds of artifacts—such as posters, T-shirts, and other memorabilia—they use as sacred objects in their devotion.

Chapters One and Three build on Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (2006), where Dwyer explores how gods and religious themes are portrayed in Hindi cinema, focusing on narrative and symbolic elements. Dwyer, for instance, discusses how stars like Amitabh Bachchan and Madhuri Dixit have played mythological figures like Lord Rama and Durga. Kakar, on the other hand, extends this conversation by focusing on the material and performative aspects of fandom, highlighting how fans interact with and ritualize these cinematic representations through objects such as postcards and images (140–143). While Dwyer's approach is rooted in textual analysis of the films, Kakar's ethnographic study shifts the focus to the fans, providing a contrasting view of how these representations are practiced and experienced in everyday life.

In Part III, Chapter 5, Shalini Kakar focuses on the third case study of actor Rajinikanth, exploring how the Tamil Nadu superstar's fan devotion has expanded from India to the USA. Rajinikanth's fans participate in what Kakar calls “*gestural darshan*” by reenacting the star's iconic

gestures and mannerisms. For instance, during the release of the film *Enthiran (Robot)*, devotees gathered at Serra Theatres, bringing large images of the star for worship, performing *arati*, and distributing cake as *prasad*. Fans of Rajinikanth embrace his “punch dialogues” from movies as their mantras, creating a new visual language distinct from traditional religious practices (187). His fans worship Rajinikanth as a god, without directly comparing him to any specific deity. His devotee fans form various fan associations, such as Rajini Biggest Superstar of India (RBSI) and Rajini Makkal Mandram (RMM), to celebrate his film releases and engage in social activities in his name (190–212). The devotion to Rajinikanth is characterized by fervent celebrations, ritualistic offerings, and a deep reverence that elevates him to a godlike status, transcending the need for a direct comparison to a traditional Hindu deity.

Kakar explores how Rajinikanth's elevated status in Tamil Nadu stems not from any direct affiliation with Hindu gods, but rather from his unique persona and actions (190). His advice on meditation and his spiritual journeys—such as his visits to the Himalayan cave of Mahavatar Babaji—are well-documented and resonate deeply with his fans, further enhancing his image as a spiritual figure. The fan devotion toward Rajinikanth also manifests differently compared to other stars. For example, members of Chicago's Rajni Fan Club wear black shirts bearing his image, and fans perform dances in Rajini masks outside theaters (195–198). These practices highlight a form of devotion that centers around his cinematic persona, rather than traditional religious imagery.

Kakar's methodology includes extensive interviews with Rajinikanth's fans, providing a robust qualitative insight into their practices and beliefs. This approach adds a personal dimension to the analysis, allowing readers to grasp the depth of devotion these fans have to Rajinikanth. However, Kakar's detailed exploration is not the only way to argue from the same material. Fans worship other cinematic deities like Amitabh Bachchan and Madhuri Dixit as incarnations of

Hindu gods like Ram and Durga, but Rajinikanth's worship stands out due to its lack of religious anchoring. This unique form of devotion reflects the cultural and linguistic unity of Tamil Nadu, where the Tamil language, rather than religion, binds people together. A comparative analysis with other regional film cultures could have further enriched this perspective and provided a broader understanding of fan devotion across India. The conclusion effectively ties together the book's arguments and highlights areas for further exploration in future research.

Overall, Shalini Kakar's book is a significant contribution to the fields of religion, art history, and film, serving as a valuable tool for both research and teaching. It bridges the gap between academic scholarship and classroom learning, enhancing our understanding of the cultural and religious dimensions of cinema. Scholars and enthusiasts of film studies, religious studies, and cultural studies alike highly recommend this book.