

Keyword

Stardom

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Film actors retain their hold as the ultimate stars in South Asia, even in the age of multiple mass media, varied audiences and celebrity culture. Film stars are celebrated in the films themselves, and in news media, gossip, fashion and lifestyle, and often seen literally as gods. Theories of stardom which have evolved from studies of Western cinema have been applied, contextualised and refined within the wider cultural context of South Asian cinema, although the biographical study of the star is more popular among non-academic readers.

While many topics in film studies seem removed from the experience of ordinary audiences, the study of stardom straddles the everyday viewing of films as well as its academic theorising. Stardom is familiar to all as stars attract us to cinema and are the subject of much discussion beyond the viewing experience. Within film studies, stardom is explored theoretically as a way of finding meaning in films, linking production, text and audience. Richard Dyer's (1979, 1986) foundational work on stardom offers lucid and convincing studies of how the star becomes a figure of meaning through a range of performances with frequent intertextual references, through images on- and off-screen, and through rumours and gossip circulated across a wide range of media.

It is useful to distinguish stardom from celebrity, where the focus is on the person's private and personal life. Stardom has more to do with their professional life since the star has to be a successful performer. Yet the star is more than a performer – a manufactured image, trained, shaped and styled as a commodity who sells cinema. Several studies of stardom in the Indian context, most recently the edited volume by Michael Lawrence (2020), have developed in tandem with scholarship on Western cinema stars. Some distinctive features of South Asian stardom are necessitated and produced by the films themselves, in the widespread use of melodrama, reinforced by an excess of emotions in songs and dialogue, and a preferred non-realist aesthetic. These ingredients produce a heightened stardom enhanced by the two-way scopic regime of **darshan** where the pleasure lies in looking at the star and the feeling of being looked at, complicating Laura Mulvey's (1975) theorisation of the visual pleasure where women become passive objects of the male gaze.

Studies of the female star in South Asia have highlighted the contradictory nature and inherent instability of gendered stardom, evident from the screen image of the

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ideal Indian woman as domesticated, self-sacrificing and respectable vis-à-vis the off-screen image of an often-scandalous figure. Rosie Thomas' (1989) early work on Nargis showed how her stardom was constructed by networks of obsessive gossip alongside her on-screen portrayal of maternal chastity in *Mother India*. Neepa Majumdar (2009) has mapped the rise of early female stars such as Sulochana, Durga Khote and Nargis onto coeval discourses of nationalism and femininity. In more recent decades, Madhuri Dixit's meteoric rise as a dancing star and her self-determined retreat into family and celebrity life represents a unique trajectory of stardom (Bose, 2019). Some female stardoms, especially of a sexually exoticised nature, can be precarious. Shakeela's stardom in the 1990s, for instance, marked her out as the 'hypervisible author' in Malayali soft-porn films where most crew members used aliases to exercise anonymity (Mini, 2019a).

The great male stars have often represented their times with a distinctive image of Indianness, seeking to find stability in a changing world that would allow romance and marriage to be reconciled with the wider family and nation. The stardoms of Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor were emblematic of Nehruvian ideals of socialism and secularism, while Rajesh Khanna's immense popularity as the non-metropolitan romantic hero was soon eclipsed by Amitabh Bachchan whose urban rage represented the breakdown of political consensus in the 1970s (Dwyer, 2014b). Bachchan's complex screen identity of the 'angry young man' embodied the socio-economic instability and crisis in legality during that decade (Mazumdar, 2000).

Action stars too are historical products of different narrative, industrial and technological strategies that commodify physical energy (Vitali, 2008). While the agility of Master Vithal in the silent era and 'Fearless' Nadia in the early talkies tapped into the sensationalism of early stunt films, significant changes in both international and domestic film distribution patterns as well as Dara Singh's wrestling fame and muscular figure accelerated the rise of small-budget action cinema in the 1960s.

The transnational **Bollywood** of the 1990s found its quintessential star in Shahrukh Khan as the romantic, tear-jerking hero who embodied the diasporic Indian (Mader et al., 2015), whereas Salman Khan, famed for his comedy and action as well as his off-screen exploits, is probably the last great Bollywood actor with a bankable star appeal. Aamir Khan and Akshay Kumar have become associated with issue-based cinema, while Ranveer Singh's zany personality has found roles in comedy and historical films. Over the decades, star culture has spilled over from film magazines such as *Stardust* (Dwyer, 2000b) to television liveness (Mazumdar, 2012), and also witnessed the proliferation of social media **fan** groups associated with these Indian stars.

Cine-political stardoms in South Indian cinemas offer important insights into the sociology of fandom as well as the cinematic trappings of political ambition. M. S. S. Pandian's (1992) study of M. G. Ramachandran's (MGR) popularity in Tamil cinema and politics departed from contemporaneous studies of subalternity as a site of political resistance. MGR's on-screen images and off-screen hagiographies held sway over the poor masses in Tamil Nadu which resulted in his 10-year term as the chief minister of the state. In a similar vein, S. V. Srinivas (2009) has studied the Telugu star-politician Chiranjeevi's fans and films to investigate the complex cine-political liaisons that characterise South Indian film industries. Chiranjeevi's transformation from a 'screen rowdy' to a paternal figure in Telugu cinema was fuelled by the spectatorial desire of his fans and eventually channelled into electoral politics. Despite their incredible

popularity in **regional cinemas**, few male South Indian stars have succeeded in North Indian markets, with the notable exception of 'Thalaivar' (The Boss) Rajnikanth. More recently, however, the blockbuster *Baahubali* films have produced new national stars from the Telugu/Tamil industries, notably Prabhas, who may be indicative of a new trend of male beauty.

The geographical area that became Pakistan produced many of the greatest stars of Hindi cinema as large numbers of Punjabis, traditionally admired as tall and fair, migrated to Bombay in 1947. Pakistan found its own stars including migrants such as Mallika-e-Tarannum, the Queen of Melody, Noor Jehan, as well as 'The Chocolate Hero', Waheed Murad, while Sultan Rahi found stardom as the axe-wielding Maula Jatt (Khan & Ahmed, 2016). Pakistan's films and television series produce Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking stars who enter Indian cinema when political circumstances allow, the most famous being Fawad Khan. The mutual intelligibility of languages has allowed films to cross borders, most notably into Pakistan, while Bengali cinema is viewed in Bangladesh and Tamil cinema in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. Aamir Khan's popularity in China today is only comparable with Raj Kapoor's 1950s and 1960s stardom in Soviet Russia, and points towards newer trends of transnational stardom beyond the South Asian **diaspora**.

Stardom in Indian cinema is more than just a visual phenomenon. During the 1930s–1940s, the predominance of the singer-actor produced singing stars such as K. L. Saigal and Suraiya. In the following decades, the playback singer's disembodied voice not only advanced the visual stardom of on-screen actors but also ushered in an aural stardom unique to popular Indian cinema (Majumdar, 2001). Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi and Kishore Kumar were playback stars in their own right. The popularity and ubiquity of the Hindi film song has also spawned the stardom of yesteryear lyricist-poets such as Sahir Ludhianvi and Majrooh Sultanpuri as well as the likes of Gulzar and Javed Akhtar in more recent years.

The pairing of star couples such as *mahanayak* (great actor) Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in Bengali cinema (Gooptu, 2010), or Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone in contemporary Bollywood historical dramas, has often ensured commercial success. Indian cinema has produced not only many self-made stars but also stars whose charisma is hereditary. Dynastic stardom is seen at its most excessive in the famous Kapoor family, which has produced top stars throughout the history of Indian cinema, including Prithviraj, Raj, Shammi, Shashi, Rishi, Karisma, Kareena and Ranbir (Dwyer, 2015). However, if 'star kids' fail to establish their own stardom, the family name has not been able to carry them too far. Largely sensationalised by news and social media, contemporary public debates on nepotism in Bollywood have highlighted the difficulties faced by outsiders in the industry. While the media attention has been on 'star kids', ethnographic research shows that most professions in South Asian film industries are hereditary occupations (Ganti, 2012).

Bollywood seems to be largely on the retreat with the new Indie cinema and OTT platforms producing their own stars, just as middle cinema and art-house cinema have historically produced theirs. However, this stardom is tempered by gritty realist narratives and a frequent association of the stars with activism and politics, such as Radhika Apte and Swara Bhaskar. Moreover, with increased online releases, the success of a star cannot yet be easily determined due to a lack of transparency about

viewership data on OTT platforms. With the boom in internet consumption, streaming platforms and audiences have privileged more script-driven films, and even established film stars such as Anushka Sharma and Farhan Akhtar have turned producers for web series and films. The future of star value remains unclear in relation to new modes of film distribution and exhibition, and emergent forms of stardom will introduce newer complexities for South Asian film scholars, contributing to the rich and growing body of scholarship on the subject.

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