



Lakshmi Srinivas, *House Full: Indian Cinema and the Active Audience*

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 315 pages.

Hardback, \$112.50; paperback, \$37.50; e-book, \$37.50.

ISBN: 978-0-226-36142-0 (hardback); 978-0-226-36156-7 (paperback);

978-0-226-36173-4 (ebook).

THE ACT OF PUBLIC spectatorship encodes learned and socially conditioned behaviors that show considerable variation across time and cultural space. Contemporary Euro-American disciplines of film viewing—including the maintenance of silence and composure in a darkened hall and concentration on the images projected on its screen (still regularly reinforced by messages flashed up before the movie begins)—would have seemed bizarrely authoritarian to audiences at, say, Shakespeare’s Globe, or to European opera-goers from the beginning of that art form until the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was only then that technology made possible the dimming of halls and bright illumination of their stages, compelling audiences (as some viewers noted grumpily) to concentrate on the staged production rather than on the encompassing, participatory spectacle that had generally included conversation, periodic snacking, the display and observation of fashion—and, of course, intermittent attention to the music, singing, and staging of what was usually a well-known story. That such practices of reception, even in darkened cinema halls of the late twentieth century, remained quite “normal” for a significant segment of humanity has been richly documented by sociologist Lakshmi Srinivas in *House Full*, her engaging study of the “active audience” of South Asian popular cinema. Based on extensive fieldwork, primarily in the late 1990s, in the burgeoning metropolis of Bangalore (now officially Bengaluru) in Karnataka state, Srinivas’s book (its Indian-English title phrase appears on signs announcing that a particular film screening is, in American jargon, “sold-out”) turns its focus away from the “reading” of films as “texts”—the predominant mode of cinematic analysis, which, she argues, is itself a byproduct of the learned discipline of silent, individualized reading—to look seriously at audience reception and its attendant practices, permitting her to conceptualize and examine the presentation of films as collectively-staged “performance events.”

An introductory chapter explains the choice of Bangalore as fieldwork site; admittedly a somewhat anomalous Indian city, it was familiar to the researcher from her youth and, as a decidedly cosmopolitan and multilingual metro, offered her opportunities to sample, refreshingly, the reception of not just one but several cinemas (Hindi- and Kannada-language film events figure prominently, although a number of Hollywood movies that were popular in India—especially *Titanic*—also generate observations, and there are interesting asides concerning the hyper-cinephilic audiences of Tamil- and Telugu-language productions as well). Much of the chapter, however, is devoted to a spirited defense of the researcher’s project and approach—“an immersive ethnography of film reception” (4)—and to her well-argued critique of “the mainstream reception aesthetic of niche-marketed Hollywood films in Anglo-American settings and the (Eurocentric) model of film and spectatorship ... normalized and generalized as a ‘universal’ film experience” (9). Srinivas is equally critical of what she calls the “film-centered” readings of most other scholarship on Indian cinema (11),

resulting in “preoccupation with the film and its texts and messages,” particularly as these are received by a hypothetical “individualized” viewer (13).

Chapter 2 highlights the author’s fortuitous interactions with the small but vibrant Kannada film industry, since Bangalore is also “Sandalwood”—the teasing, Bollywood-derived name of its home base. Unexpected research contacts led her to visit film studios and location shoots and to interview producers, directors, technicians, and actors. The result is not only an interesting glimpse of a little-studied regional cinema, but the insight that its practices and products themselves reflect and anticipate the “active audience” that will be highlighted in later chapters. Srinivas’s observations of the “constitutive” effect of audience behavior on this niche industry seem equally relevant to the more widely-distributed “blockbusters” of Hindi cinema, particularly those that became dominant from the 1970s on under the genre label “*masāla* film”—a spicy mix of main and sub-plots with varied emotional moods (comedy, suspense, pathos, and so on), interspersed with “item number” song and dance sequences. Such films, with their “loose” narrative structure, deliberate flaunting of cinematic artifice, and even auto-parody and intentional referencing of other films, seem expressly designed for the kinds of raucous audiences and participatory viewing practices that Srinivas’s study especially highlights.

Chapters 3 to 5 focus on cinema halls and the practical logistics and social rituals involved in going to them. After providing a guided tour of the “space cultures of cinema” in two areas of Bangalore that boast an unusual number of movie houses (albeit catering to different audience demographics), Srinivas considers the many factors that influence viewers’ decisions regarding which films to see—ranging from “theater merit” (which may include such pragmatic perks as functional air-conditioning, unbroken seating and non-smelly toilets, and a good concession stand for the obligatory “interval” snack), to the ease or difficulty of securing tickets (which may involve long waits in unruly queues or, alternatively, paying exorbitant prices to scalpers) and negotiating transportation and traffic, to the choice of “class” of seating—for India’s large cinema halls have always been, like so much else in its society, hierarchically structured. Additional attention is given to the sociality and playful quality of most cinema-going, such as the fact that family groups of a dozen or more are common and invariably include small children, that such groups’ arrivals in theaters do not always correspond to showtimes, and that their behavior toward other filmgoers may range from warmly interactive to openly antagonistic—the latter casting the theater as a “contested” space.

The book’s thick description and scholarly arguments both reach a kind of crescendo in chapters 6 and 7. The former offers vivid accounts of hyperactive audience behavior, which can include loud conversation, the translation of dialogue for a friend into another of India’s many languages, crying and playing children, and (especially among young men) peripatetic viewing, horseplay with friends, dancing in the aisles or on top of seats, outbursts of whistling, applause, and mimicry of onscreen action—and much more. The latter chapter focuses on the excitement that often accompanies first-day screenings or re-releases of films by adored stars, and that may include street processions by jubilant, dancing fans accompanied by marching bands, the draping of forty-foot flower garlands on even larger cutout images of the star adorning a theater facade, the ceremonial worship (by a hired priest) of cans delivering film rolls to the theater, and even occasional “lathi charges” by club-wielding police. The role of fan clubs in coordinating this (apparently) chaotic activity—what Srinivas drolly calls “a

paroxysm of cinema”—is highlighted, as is the extreme devotion of fans (often lower-class “informal sector” workers) who affirm their willingness to “die for” a star and his family, and who will never miss a “first-day, first-show” screening, even if it means spending a significant portion of their meager income. The frenzied and sometimes scary ambience created by such devotion is vividly evoked, and the author suggests that these carnivalesque events may have roots in traditional folk performance forms such as Ram narrative dramas (*rāmlīlā*) in the north and Yaksha dance performances (*yakṣagāna*) in the south, as well as in religious fairs, temple processions, and indeed the ambience of the crowded bazaar. Though these parallels are interesting, the author’s fascination with the “improvisation” and “inversions” of fervent fan behavior (217) seems to sidestep the fact that it, too, surely has “rules”—as does, for example, the (rather similar) performance activity of young Western fans at rock ‘n’ roll concerts (think: “front-benchers” = “mosh pit”).

The book’s concluding chapter reiterates its principal arguments, but also, and importantly, discusses changes in exhibition and viewing practices that followed the “liberalization” of the Indian economy in the 1990s, and that led in Bangalore and elsewhere to the gradual closure of many of the thousand-plus-seat theaters that especially favored the economically diverse and “active” audiences featured in the study. India’s new film-viewing landscape, especially post-2000, is increasingly typified by mall multiplexes that charge much higher ticket prices for classless but cushy seats in small (two- to three-hundred viewer) halls and that encourage viewing by “homogenized and atomized individuals” (234). Though this transformation is still far from complete (and may never be), it highlights the importance of the author’s research not only as sociology and performance study but also as social and cultural history.

Srinivas’s writing style is readable and refreshingly free from the sometimes opaque jargon of the text-centered film scholarship at which she regularly takes aim. If there is a flaw in this welcome book (apart from its hyper-abundance of distracting endnotes—which average more than a hundred per chapter), it is that the author’s repeated and dismissive critique of much film analysis begins to seem overstated, and even something of a disservice to both popular Indian cinema and its enthusiastic audiences. To be sure, she has a point: audience reception is notably under-researched in film studies (and not just for South Asia), and the agency of the region’s exceptionally “social and interactive audience” (13) has been largely ignored. But it is also true that films, as complex textual artifacts, *do* have enduring lives that transcend the ephemeral contexts of their reception, and (despite her examples of people choosing to see movies based on factors other than their content, or of fans who watch every film featuring a beloved star regardless of its quality) that Indian mass audiences, however unruly, are notoriously discriminating about their so-called “formula” films, quickly making some into triumphs and others into flops—usually based on criteria that hinge in some measure on a film’s content. Srinivas’s presentation, in chapter 7, of the hyperbolic fan-phenomena centered on Dr. Rajkumar, the most acclaimed Kannada-language star of the last four decades of the twentieth century, lacks even a brief introduction to the types of roles and films that brought him such remarkable celebrity, and hence seems oddly decontextualized to a reader unfamiliar with that regional cinema. Moreover, a number of the “active” performance practices that Srinivas richly documents (such as repeat viewing and the consequent ability of audience members to sing and recite along with songs and dialogue, or to enact particular scenes in tandem with onscreen

action) all presuppose some degree of attentive film-watching, which in turn depends on the film delivering a “message” that resonates with viewers. The examination of such messages must remain, in my view, a desideratum of comprehensive film studies, though additional and supplemental research on the context of film reception—so excellently pioneered in *House Full*—should be equally welcomed.

Philip Lutgendorf  
*University of Iowa*