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**Fandom on display: intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle**  
Gerritsen, R.

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**Author:** Gerritsen, Roos

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# 3

## THE POLITICS OF FANDOM





I ended the previous chapter with Rajini Shankar's efforts to organize a grand spectacle around the coming of age ceremony of his daughter.<sup>1</sup> While certainly an important family event, Shankar clearly also used the occasion to show off his political connections to a wider public. Shankar has been involved in politics for some time now. He has been connected to the AIADMK, has been active in canvassing for parties which Rajinikanth supported during the last few years and he knows the Chief Minister (CM) of Pondicherry well. He has underpinned this latter connection by buying the CM's former Ambassador car,<sup>2</sup> its interior covered with shabby upholstery. The personalized number plate and flashing light on top of the car make its appearance look important.

Shankar has been able to use the fan club environment to establish his political networks. He started his fan club because he enjoyed Rajinikanth's acting and his films. Once leader of the fan club in Pondicherry, he gradually became part of political networks. The way in which he used his daughter's function to demonstrate his political power illustrates the involvement of fans in political practices and the way in which fan clubs, family events and politics go together.

In this chapter we will see more of these occasions which fans use to impress others and establish political relations. Fandom has a wider significance beyond cinema, as fan activity becomes political during a fan's life. When I started my research and spoke to the first fans I met in Pondicherry, the conversations we had were all about political issues: hierarchies among fans, their involvement in local party politics and their connections with influential people to name a few. Thinking that this was not the "real" issue about which I had come to do my research, I tried to change the subject to what I thought was more relevant to fandom: the ways in which fans connect to cinema and a movie star and relate these to their political aspirations once their hero starts his own party. It was only after some time that I realized that these vernacular political issues were intrinsic to fan activity.

Politicking, or political activity, becomes the most important aspect of fan activity in the later stages of many fan careers. Firstly, it brings fans recognition and status. Secondly, it has a practical side as via patronage or broker relationships it opens up domains otherwise not accessible to people of lower socio-economic backgrounds. These brokerage relationships give access to state institutions and provide networks that make the system work for fans. Fan clubs are environments in which these relationships get established more easily, as men work as a group and under the banner of a famous name, i.e. Rajinikanth. But the ways in which these brokerage relationships work are not unique to fan clubs – it is part of the more common men-to-men relationships in Tamil Nadu in general.

What makes fan activity and particularly the close relationships fans establish with political parties exceptional is the ambivalence towards political work that comes to the surface time and again. In Chapter 1 I demonstrated how fans negotiate the fine line between excess and keeping in control in relation to cinema. In the same way, I will demonstrate in this chapter how politicking becomes essential in a fan's life but how at the same time it should not be seen as self-promot-

<sup>1</sup> The photo on the title page depicts a hoarding in front of the marriage hall in which Rajini Shankar's daughter's coming of age ritual took place. Besides his close fan club associates and various images of Rajinikanth, a large close-up of the CM of Pondicherry was shown (right) (Pondicherry 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout India the Ambassador has been a characteristic car produced by Hindustan Motors. The model hasn't changed much since its first production in 1958. The car is mostly used as a taxi and for government personnel.

ing. Most fans, once they are older, expect to be active in political networks through their actor's fame, the fan club network and public visibility. For many fans with whom I worked, these connections seemed particularly important, with Rajinikanth being simply a common denominator for their network. At the same time, Rajinikanth has clearly expressed his own political preferences which made his fans campaign actively for the party he supported during elections. Fans that did not want to join the fan club were deemed to be disloyal by their fellow fans.

However, political practice is not supposed to be part of fan activity, as fans are dissuaded by the head office and Rajinikanth himself from participating in party politics. Also fans themselves consider an obvious use of the fan network for political gain to be self-centered. In other words, this fine line between misuse and proper fan activity as it is seen by other fans suggests a complicated relationship between politics and fandom, one that will be explored in this chapter and the next.

The ambiguity surrounding fans and politicking brings me back to the common explanations of cine-politics in Tamil Nadu which I addressed in the Introduction and Chapter 1. Film and politics are always bracketed together, with explanations of fan activity being sought in the desire for a political career in the wake of a movie star. Fan clubs have repeatedly been described in terms of their unquestioning devotion and therefore their usability for the political careers of their heroes (Dickey 1993b; Pandian 1992) or for their own political agency (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009).

I will not provide an extensive overview of political practice in India or Tamil Nadu in particular, as several other scholars have already described its many facets extensively (e.g. Chatterjee 2004; V. K. Chopra 1996; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Kaviraj 2010; Kohli 1990; Price 1996; Subramanian 1999). Here I am more interested in the vernacular political practices in fan clubs, as they can tell us more about the grassroots ways in which political personae are produced and the ways in which socio-political relationships are reinforced.

In general, I demonstrate in this dissertation that film and politicking cannot be separated in fan club membership. If we look at the life trajectories of fans, film and the politicking networks that they establish, we cannot single out one way of engaging in the fan club, just as we cannot consider fans as one cohesive entity. We therefore cannot simply conclude that fan activity is related to high-level political expectations of movie stars starting their own party. Rather, fan clubs are networks, I argue, which can make the system work for them more easily because of their connection to Rajinikanth and because of their considerable size. This can range from practical advantages such as film tickets, access to school for your children and government access, to more conceptual feelings of respect and prestige. Everyday political and social networks, I suggest, are much more important for most fans than the state-level politics in which their star is or eventually comes to be involved in. However, now that Rajinikanth is reaching an age at which he might stop acting at any time, fans hope he will finally do what they have expected him to do: start his own political party and make them as fan club members part of it. This chapter therefore investigates the intricate ways in which networks, hierarchies and relationships are established and solidified and how slowly but surely fans expect something in return for their devotion: a real political career.

Throughout this chapter I will explore the nature of these forms of mobilization and political constellations, modes of agency, hierarchy and status that fans enact through their public and

political activities. First of all, I will show how fan clubs are involved in social welfare activities which parallel political displays of generosity. Besides the activities that I have described in relation to film watching in previous chapters fan clubs conduct what they describe as social welfare activities. By doing social work, fans say they want to nurture their actor's name and do good for society. Activities are set up around and in honor of an actor. But importantly, fan clubs invite "big men", i.e. politicians or other eminent men, with whom they establish patronage relationships. In addition, by showing their generosity in public, fans establish their own position as genuine fans and nurture their image as big men themselves.

Secondly, I will explore how generosity through welfare is a means of establishing oneself as an individual fan and of maintaining broker or patronage relationships with local big men. Agency and praise are two important markers of these connections. Thirdly, I will address the expectations fans have of their membership. These expectations are fulfilled in a practical way by getting access to networks and ideologically by obtaining power and prestige. A climax to these expectations many fans feel would be Rajinikanth's entry into politics. Why is the expectation of their star's own political party so great if fans can already engage in politics in their own name? As I will show, the level of prestige and recognition as a fan is limited, many fans feel. Even though they engage in social welfare activities and establish connections with local political big men, they are still to receive the benefits they would have as proper politicians. Moreover, fans feel they have put a lot into their devotion to Rajinikanth and want something in return from him.

This chapter also anticipates the next chapter where I address the images that fans produce and exhibit in public spaces for the events that I discuss here. The very presence of the images as

34. People handing in their token in order to receive a bag of rice during a social welfare event on Rajinikanth's birthday. Chennai 2009.



well as their form are part of the imaginations and desires of fans in relation to their film hero (as discussed in Chapter 2) but they also articulate the political aspirations as discussed here.

I end this chapter with two related discussions that reinforce the relevance of visibility and respect. But first I describe the motives of various female fans to start a fan club. Their age and way of being a fan club show that the incentives to start a fan club are, even though inspired by Rajinikanth's cinematic image, mostly related to the achievement of respect and of being heard, though the meaning of respect and visibility is somewhat different for women than for men. I end the chapter with a short discussion of the rise and fall of the Vijayakanth fan clubs. Vijayakanth started the DMDK party in 2005 and his fan clubs automatically became cadres of the party. Fans welcomed his decision and expected a political career. However, this did not happen for most fans due to a lack of financial capital. Vijayakanth launched a new fan club recently in the hope of fulfilling his fans' wishes. But the spirit seems largely to have ebbed away. The rise and fall of his fan clubs tells us something about the political ideal and political requirements that are part of vernacular political practice. The failure of Vijayakanth's fans in "real" politics shows how, despite the aspirations of a political career, the economic and social situation of most fans holds them back from becoming actual politicians.

## **Public events: social welfare**

December 24<sup>th</sup> 2007. It is Rajinikanth's birthday. Fan clubs all over Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry have prepared themselves for the festive occasion in their neighborhoods. In earlier years, Rajinikanth celebrated his birthday at his home in Chennai and many fans headed to the city to be near him on this special day. That was until one day, when a number of fans died in a traffic accident on their way to Chennai. Rajinikanth decided it was the end of the celebrations and from that year on he has left town to retreat to a pilgrimage in the Himalayas. Many of the fan club members I worked with did not really appreciate this decision as Rajinikanth is now even further out of reach for them. But this frustration is part of other issues and frustrations that have to do with Rajinikanth's staying out of politics, something I will address below in more detail. Even though the number of fans who are actively involved in fan clubs has declined to some extent, fans continue to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday with public events in their neighborhood, with special *pujas*<sup>3</sup> in temples and with posters and hoardings wishing the star a happy birthday.

In 2007, for Rajinikanth's 57<sup>th</sup> birthday I joined Rajini Shankar, Pondicherry's fan club leader, his district team and their supporters to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday. As they do every year, they started the day with a special *puja* in the Sri Manakula Vinayagar temple which is situated in the historic center of Pondicherry. Television and newspaper journalists were invited to cover the celebrations. I noticed that Shankar was particularly attentive as to the correct positioning of his group for the journalistic attention of the video and photo camera. He made sure that his close friend and committee associate Tharagai Raja posed next to him in the photo. One of these photos was published in the newspaper the next day. The evening before Rajinikanth's birthday,

<sup>3</sup> Act of reverence.



35. Men arranging the packages with bread, fruit and a Rajinikanth image in buckets. They make sure the images of Rajinikanth are visible. Pondicherry 2007.

36. Borrowed buckets and gurneys from the hospital to carry the packages for distribution. Pondicherry 2007.

37. The men around a hospital bed in the female emergency ward of the government hospital. Pondicherry 2007.

38. The press taking pictures of the men distributing their packages in the emergency ward. Pondicherry 2007.





39. Local women and children waiting at the place where Selvan Nathan's fan club will distribute their social welfare items. Pondicherry 2007.

40. A photo opportunity when interim committee leader Jothi Kumar (in the orange *dhoti*) and the local MLA (to the right of Jothi Kumar) hand over saris to women. Pondicherry 2007.

41. Poster made by children in the fan club style hanging near the spot where the event was due to take place. Pondicherry 2007.

42. Banner on the main road, around the corner from Selvan Nathan's fan club event. I will say more about the content of banners like these in the next chapter. Pondicherry 2007.

the interim *talaimai manram* in Pondicherry performed the same kind of *puja*.<sup>4</sup> At their *puja* more members showed up, which suggests that this group had more support. Interestingly however, even though the press was there to cover the event as well, their photo did not end up on the front page of the newspaper. It shows once more Rajini Shankar's eminence and power as a public person in Pondicherry.

After the visit to the temple Rajini Shankar's team headed to the government hospital where they were to distribute food packages on the female emergency ward (figures 35-38). Before they could start their activities they had to wait for a long time for the local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) Jayapal, who they had invited to the event and for the press to arrive. In the meantime, the members of the committee arranged the packages that were to be distributed to the women in the emergency ward. The packages were assembled in large buckets lent by the hospitals and contained two bread slices, an orange and an apple. Some of the packages had a color image of Rajinikanth and Rajini Shankar in them. They made sure that these packages were on top of the others, with the image facing forward. Even though Jayapal arrived after some time, the press was still not present, so they waited a bit longer until everyone was there. Once a group of around ten photographers had gathered, the ceremony began. The group of fans, press, and the MLA Jayapal, a group of around 20 men in total, entered the female emergency ward. The ward was now completely packed with people. The women lying on their beds seemed to be taken by surprise by the amount of people in the room. The MLA and Rajini Shankar started to hand out the packages with a Rajinikanth image and made sure that the image was visible for the photographs that the journalists took. After handing out a package to each of the women, the women were given extra packages to empty the buckets. Within a couple of minutes the men left the ward again and the peace and quiet of the room was restored. Several buckets with packages were left over, though. Some fans suggested that they could distribute these later on to other wards in the hospital.

In the meantime, local neighborhood fan clubs conducted public events in their neighborhoods as well, handing out items such as notebooks and rice to the poor and needy. Selvan Nathan, for example, an auto rickshaw driver and active fan club member in Pondicherry had, along with his branch fan club in Nellithope, organized the distribution of saris and rice to deprived women, packages of biryani to the poor and notebooks and pens to children (figures 39-42). After my visit to the temple and hospital I went to attend Selvan Nathan's celebrations.

The day before the festivities we had met up with Selvan Nathan as well and he was tense and excited about the activities the next day. He tried to plan the event in the utmost detail so that the day would run smoothly; from the flags and other decorations where the events were being held to the invitation of local big men who would attend the function. From early morning on Rajinikanth's birthday loud music from Rajinikanth films blasted out of the loudspeakers that had been set up for the occasion. Selvan Nathan and his club exhibited a hoarding of about six meters in width directly in front of the bus terminal on the main road (figure 42). Its location and the music that could be heard on the main road gave the event maximum visibility. Children

<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 2 I described how in Pondicherry the fan club leadership of the Rajinikanth fan club is divided into two groups. Rajini Shankar has officially been expelled but is still acting as the leader while an interim-committee, which has already been in charge for several years now, is responsible for the fan clubs. Both were acting as official *talaimai manram* throughout the years of my fieldwork.

had made small posters from photocopied letter-size paper with cuttings of Rajinikanth's images and texts written with pen mimicking their fathers' fan club posters and hoardings (figure 41). In the street where the event was about to take place Selvan Nathan's fan club had set up a table and decorated the street.

The fans and their small audience of children and several older women who were attracted by the *filmi* music and the items that were going to be distributed had to wait patiently for the big men to arrive. The event could only begin once interim committee leader Jothi Kumar and the invited local MLA had arrived at the scene. As the two men had to visit many local fan club events, they were easily held up. At Selvan Nathan's festivities they arrived hours later than planned. Once there, the distribution of items had no sooner started than it was over. With much effort the men tried to keep the eagerly waiting children and old women in line to distribute the items one by one in return for the token that they were to hand in. Fan clubs commonly distribute tokens to the people that they want to distribute items to. Only with a token can people collect what has been designated to them. Again, journalists were present to record the event and the local fan club made sure that the journalists took shots of the MLA, Jothi Kumar, and themselves distributing the items. When the MLA and Jothi Kumar had left again, within thirty minutes, the celebration was over.

At many of the fan club events I attended the local fan clubs used quite some force to keep order during the distribution. They tried to keep the recipients in line with forceful words and gestures and they sent away others who were not designated to receive distributed items. The officiousness and importance shown at the heightened moment of the actual celebration – with the use of tokens, the lines in which people have to stand to collect their items, the strictness with which others without a token are sent away, the presence of local big men and photographers—stand in stark contrast with the relaxed atmosphere after the event when the leaders and big men have gone or when the importance of the moment has passed. Remaining items are randomly distributed and tokens are not necessary anymore to receive an item. The local group of fans that stays behind now shares and enjoys the leftovers and a moment of excitement with neighbors and friends.

## Shaping the figure of the fan

Most Tamil film stars have an ambivalent relationship with their fans. Even though the presence of fans has proven useful for several actors, for example in their political careers, most actors have tried to discourage fan clubs from starting in the first place or have emphasized the social role these fan clubs have to fulfill. This ambivalence can be seen in the addition of the word *narpani* (social service) to the name of fan clubs, apparently in an attempt to justify their existence. Now most fan clubs are actually called fan welfare organizations. Rajinikanth regularly instructed his fans to give priority to their family, then to social service and last of all to him. This is also what most fans considered an important reason for becoming a fan: their hero gives preference to charity and not to cinematic leisure activities. Here again fans and the way their actor approaches them suggest that the figure of the ardent movie-loving fan is set aside in favor of the seriousness

and philanthropy of fandom. But this image is not easy to maintain. Sudhakar, the present Rajinikanth All India Fan Club leader, expressed it to me in the following terms:

*On the one hand you cannot blame fans or forbid them from doing what they do because they are fans after all. But on the other hand fans do crazy things with milk, beer and sweets [the religious worship of images] or use politics for self-publicity, so you should bring them into line, reprimand them, but not throw them out of the fan club.*

Sudhakar refers once more to the image of the excessive fan and the use of politics for his own gain. Social work seems to be a way of sending across a different message. By showing the good deeds of the fan club not only do actors justify the existence of fan clubs in their name, fans also justify their devotion to fan clubs. But the image of the excessive fan often occurs in representations of fan clubs, as I have shown earlier and also in narratives by fans if others misuse the fan club environment for personal gain. Even though most fans joined a fan club because of access to tickets and a collective fan community when they were young, young fans nowadays are often tested on their seriousness and willingness to do social work.

Older fans do not attend the first day first show films in the same way as younger fans do, if indeed they watch the first days at all. Film becomes of less importance and older, more established fans disassociate themselves from the younger, ardent fans. Social service becomes a means to see whether younger fans are actually interested in more than movie tickets. Rajini Shankar:

*If a group asks permission to start a new fan club I give them instructions regarding what kind of social activities they could do. With the opening of a new fan club we do some kind of inauguration, but we only cut the ribbon if the members have an interest in social activities.*

Social welfare has become the most recurrent activity of fan club membership and includes a wide range of activities. These include blood donation camps and the distribution of notebooks for children, dresses such as saris and *dhotis*, or food items such as rice or sweets at fan club events. The fan clubs carry out social work on special occasions, in particular on Rajinikanth's birthday, around movie releases or when a new club is being founded. The way in which items are given away is similar to political events where often the same kind of social welfare is undertaken. For political as well as fan events, a stage is erected or there is a simple demarcation of the space for the event. The area is decorated with flags, posters and banners and often loudspeakers blast music from films. These meetings are further marked by speeches by fan club members and their special guests. These guests are the *talaimai manram*<sup>5</sup> members and local leader figures such as MLAs. After the speeches, the distribution of items begins. The people who are designated to receive something now come forward to be handed their items. The photographers present take photos of particular important people handing over items to the masses. The presence of local fan clubs and political leaders is necessary for the press to cover the activities and often an amount is paid to the reporters to ensure their presence. Tharagai Raja: "Rajini Shankar is at the front and we join him. Only then do the media convey the message. They mention Shankar first and only then do they mention us and we get some recognition."

The recording of these events is an important way to prove fandom. Documentation in the form of photo albums, news clippings and VCDs is kept at home and sent to the local *talaimai*

<sup>5</sup> Leader association, or head fan club.

*manrams* of the district and the head office in Chennai. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

The recipients of welfare are generally people who live in the neighborhood where the fan club is located. Young children from less affluent homes, a disabled person, people working in the neighborhood as tailors, or poor women from the area are usually the ones who receive tokens for a fan club's welfare event. Most people are known to the fan club members.

Dickey argues that fan clubs identify with the poor with their aid to people from their own area and class (2001). At the same time they distinguish themselves from this group as a whole through their social welfare activities, designating the recipients as "the poor". In this way, Dickey argues, fans are the embodiment of their heroes' ideals (2001, 237). Even though I agree with Dickey that certain fans do nurture a feeling of responsibility to help others we should be careful in defining the wish to do social work as merely an impersonation of a star's ideals. Fan club membership, as I showed in Chapter 1 is also about obtaining movie tickets. And, as I demonstrate in this chapter and the next, social welfare activities are also a way of promoting a fan's own image. Not everyone is keen on organizing activities, and if they do, it is also in large part a celebrative occasion for the neighborhood. For the organizers their own visibility is crucial, even though this visibility is partly established through the attractiveness of Rajinikanth. I will return to this point below.

Fans spend a considerable amount of money on the activities they are involved in. It is commonly said that the money for fan club activities comes directly from the star. Fan clubs and the stars themselves strongly deny this. The fan club books that I have been able to look at in detail make no note at all of money that might come from the star. Most Rajinikanth fans claim that only "little" (*chinna*) actors give money to the fan clubs to attract members. According to the fans, these actors are eager to start fan clubs because they see the strength and political power of Rajinikanth's fans, so they give money to start fan clubs and in this way receive support. While explaining this, Rajini fans always mention that all the members of "little" actors are actually Rajinikanth fans who were not able to start a fan club in his name because of the registration restrictions that Rajinikanth implemented in the late 1990s. In their heart they are Rajinikanth fans, they claim. This is also visible in their banners as they often use Rajinikanth's name or picture.

Fans can spend anything from tens to thousands of rupees on activities, depending on what they can afford and what their position is within the club. Tharagai Raja, the public relations officer of the district fan club in Pondicherry explains:

*For example in Napoleon Raja's manram there are twenty-five members. If they spend approximately a thousand rupees on books, notebooks or food, anything, Napoleon Raja gives five hundred rupees and the other people will make up the remaining five hundred rupees.*

Even though less active fan clubs do not spend much I was amazed by the sums some fans spend on activities and on the accompanying visuals, given their incomes. Selvam, for example, whose images we encountered in Chapters 1 and 2 would sometimes spend two or three times his monthly income on the images he made for Rajinikanth's birthday. In addition to the other occasions on which he spent money (murals for a film release, posters and banners for birthdays of some friends or family members, volunteering for the organization of activities), a large amount of this income was spent on Rajinikanth.

The amount a local fan club decides to give is subject to competition with other clubs. They notify the *talaimai manram* of what they will do in a particular year but the amounts they plan to give are subject to competition. Tharagai Raja: “if another club gives small notebooks, we give big notebooks and on top of that we give a variety of costly saris or *dhotis*.” But competition and comparison also occur between the fan clubs of different actors. Remember the story of Tharagai Raja, who when he was young, made Xeroxed posters for Rajinikanth just to make the number of images for his release greater than that for Kamal Hassan. Also in terms of social welfare, fans legitimize their fan club membership with the amount and grandness of social welfare in comparison with fan clubs for other actors. Almost every fan club member I have spoken to claimed that the fan clubs for his actor were the most actively involved in social welfare activities whereas fan clubs for other actors were not active at all. Again, narratives of particularity and “specialness” of an actor are conveyed in generic terms within the landscape of fan clubs that keep an eye on each other.

Within the fan club environment, the amounts spent and the activities that are organized by fan clubs and individual fans are closely observed and discussed by other fans. The harder a fan works for the fan club and the more he spends, the more he is considered a real fan. In this way, a fan club promotes itself as a real fan club but individual fans also promote themselves as genuine fans. Thengai Selvam:

*He [a fan] has to work hard, he has to face difficult things as well as good things within the fan club. Once Rajini supported the DMK and asked fans to support the party. That time many fans followed his words but some of them didn't. So we considered the person [that followed him] as a diehard fan as he worked hard for his fan club. He has to be loyal to his leader and the fan club.*

*According to their [a local fan club's] activities we can identify how serious they are. Someone can contribute rs 1000, someone else can contribute rs 5000, another person can contribute rs 500; it varies from person to person according to his financial background. But how he involves himself is the deciding factor in seeing how serious he is. There are some fans who are very calculating; they are always keen to collect tickets from the fan club and wait to make a huge profit. We notice them from the beginning so we can say [who is a hard worker and who isn't].*

Fans explain their involvement in social work as a way of helping people. They regularly accuse authorities or individual politicians of lining their own pockets and not working for the people. Through the fan community they have the power to do something, they feel. A Rajini fan:

*If we are alone, we can't do anything. If we are with twenty people as a fan club, we can do anna dhanam [donation of food] or help the poor. We can give help to the village if we are in a group. For that we need the fan club. If we go to an MLA or MP alone it does not work, as a group we get a benefit. So we started an association.*

This fan expresses how the formation of a group gives them the power to help others. But he also emphasizes how it helps them as fans. He suggests here something I have seen with many other fans as well, that MLAs and other politicians take you more seriously as a group. Moreover, many politicians know fans of Rajinikanth have been actively supporting their party or their po-

litical opponents. In other words, their size makes people take them seriously. In this way, a local political person such as an MLA will more easily dedicate himself as intermediary to a group of fans than to a mere individual.

## **Big men and access to the state**

Local powerful people with political or government appointments are important intermediaries between ordinary people and authorities. To have access to various institutions, permits, benefits, documents and the like, one often needs to visit a local government official or political person who is in charge or who can mediate one's needs. An MLA for people is most important in his constituency services (V. K. Chopra 1996) as he helps to get access to a person's entitled pension, helps people to participate in one of the available schemes in which they can get money or he secures money for roads, water and other basic infrastructural amenities. MLAs function within a particular area or neighborhood and should be approachable for all kinds of issues that residents have to deal with. As MLAs are always elected from a political party, their relationship with the people from an area is susceptible to selectivity. Being in the same political party or having some kind of patronage link therefore often benefits these relationships.

Access to state institutions is not evenly distributed in India. People belonging to lower socio-economic classes often need connections or have to resort to bribery to get access to state institutional processes (Appadurai 2001; Chatterjee 2004; Jeffrey 2010; L. Liang 2005). The importance of brokerage has been described repeatedly in scholarly work on Indian politics (Bailey 1963; Chatterjee 2004; Fernandes 2006; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; T. B. Hansen 2005; Harriss-White 2003; Jeffrey 2010). Chatterjee speaks of political society to indicate the ways in which the urban poor negotiate with the state (2004). In theory, he suggests, everyone in India belongs to a civil society, as all citizens have equal rights. In reality however this is not always the case. This does not mean that subaltern groups cannot access the state. On the contrary, the activities undertaken by active associations of urban poor bring them into a *political* relationship with the state (2004, 38). Even though I will not use the expression "political society" as Chatterjee does, due to its supposed dichotomy between political and civil society and citizens and the state, I do think the way in which he describes political society as a constant negotiation and shift of allegiances is useful in understanding the brokerage relationship with which fan clubs access state institutions and political groups.

Thomas Blom Hansen (2005) describes how in West India people from the lower classes establish themselves as local "fixers" who form relationships between the local communities and government officials. These men are often motivated by job insecurities and a feeling of having to compete with "outsiders," a feeling exacerbated by the right-wing Hindu nationalist *Shiv Sena* party. The fixers that Hansen describes often resort to violence to establish their position. The way in which these relationships are established parallel other forms of patronage and big men relationships that underlie political life. Jeffrey has written about the unemployed or underemployed lower middle class young men who put themselves forward as local brokers between the state and local communities (2010).

These studies (see also Fuller and Bénéï 2001) show how individual brokers or big men play

an important role in giving people access to state institutions. Big men in turn need to establish and maintain relationships with their community in return for support. Mines (1994) argues that leaders establish and maintain relationships with their community through the display of generosity. Generosity is an important individual attribute of political and other kinds of leaders. Mines uses the term big man (*periyavar* or *periyar* in Tamil) to indicate the preeminence of people within their community. Big-men need to establish their relationship with their supporters by showing generosity and trustworthiness.

In his work on the Melanesian big man Sahlins describes how he derives leadership status from personal attribution and authority in which the big man has no institutional affiliation but indirect influence (1963). In Tamil Nadu we can also see how individual power plays an important role in the construction of an image of a leader figure. One of the ways to achieve popularity is by being an altruistic benefactor by, for example, donating to charities, temples, schools. etc. "It is in these institutions that a would-be big-man undertakes to establish his social credit as a generous and trustworthy individual (*nambagamana manidan*) and to establish publicly his fame (*puhaR*) and honor (*maanam*), attributes that distinguish him as an individual" (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 763). What is important about the argument Mines and Gourishankar make is that they emphasize the individual status that these men establish through their public image as welfare givers. They clearly oppose Dumont's view of India's lack of the individual. According to Dumont the "world-renouncer" is the sole type of socially valued individual in Hindu culture (Dumont 2004). And even here it is only the case because he is an individual-outside-the-world (Dumont in Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 762). Instead, the big man as described by Mines and Gourishankar is framed as an institutional position but "depending on the idiosyncratic charisma of their heads" (*ibid.*).

Big men rely on the relationships with their constituency for building up their support. Political parties show their generosity in highly visible rallies or events in which they always give away items for free to a group of poor people. The display of philanthropy or state largesse is an important feature of political practice in Tamil Nadu and is noticeable at all levels of party politics. Party politics of the DMK and AIADMK in particular have revolved around the giving away of subsidies and gifts in order to gain electoral advantage (Price 1996, 360).

Philanthropy is always staged as if it comes directly from the head of the party. Public events put on by politicians, their supporters or other public figures are almost always accompanied by charity in staged embellished events in public spaces. The events comprise speeches in order of importance of the political guests present for the occasion.<sup>6</sup> One is led to believe that the philanthropy shown during meetings comes directly from the leader or is philanthropy in his name. Government schemes, such as the free television scheme which was promised for the 2006 elections by the DMK, are named after the Chief Minister as if he or she is giving away the items personally.<sup>7</sup> Their generosity in welfare schemes is seen as part of their true character.

Several authors have argued against the over-emphasized role of caste and community relations in Indian politics (e.g. Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Price 2005). In Tamil politics it is

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Bate has written extensively on the poetics of rhetoric at political events in Madurai (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Corruption and other forms of inappropriate governing and personal behavior for which the Tamil Nadu leaders are well-known and for which they have even been taken to court, on the other hand, become of minor importance (Bate 2009).

commonly said that political people rely simply on their caste and community constituencies. Even though community background plays an important role in political ties, many of the fans I worked with were not loyal to a party just because of their social background. People chose local leaders on the grounds of what they had done or seemed to be doing for the local community. A person will decide whom to vote for based on personal achievements and not the state-wide party.

Leaders therefore need skill and charisma to have sufficient followers (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 762). Skill and charisma depend on what a leader can do for a community, family or person. Thengai Selvam describes this as follows:

*He [the local MLA] has to do what the government scheme has offered us, whether it is a road or drinking water or something else. He has to spend the government money on us. And we invite the local politician to our family functions. He may not attend all functions. If it is a funeral he can come because there is no invitation for it but for other functions the public invites him and he should attend; some politicians will attend only their party members' family functions. We do not encourage that.*

A local intermediary of the government, in this case an MLA, has to show his presence and willingness to help not merely his party members but everyone. Family events or other public events are important moments of display. Political leaders use occasions such as temple festivals or family functions “to establish their instrumental role among their fellows and their individual reputations as patrons of the public” (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 773).

## **Fan clubs and big men relationships**

Local politicians, particularly at the level of MLA, are key figures in the relationship that fans seek with the state. Having connections with such local influential people gives access to authorities and other domains that are otherwise difficult to access because of fans' lower socio-economic background. Many fans feel that as a collectivity they are taken seriously and have this access more easily through their contacts with local big men. Fan clubs could therefore be seen as platforms of agency and participation in the democratic political process (Rogers 2009).

The Rajini fan I quoted above already suggested that relationships with big men are also important for fan clubs. Fans consider the fan network as a means to access these big men and establish relationships with them. Ari Krishnan, the *talaimai manram* leader of the Kamal Hassan fan club, for example, is very explicit in expressing this need:

*If you need a signature from the MLA, or any other work is to be done, there should be a fan club member in a political party, otherwise you will not get the signature for your important document or your work will not be finished by the government officer. Most of the fan club members look after their area or team, so he will be the mediator between the government and the people in his area or his friends and relatives. Our constituency MLA is approachable. You can get his signature easily. Previously when we approached other MLAs, they asked us to bring a party member from our fan club. Whatever we needed help for, for example if someone was disabled, or for elderly people, whatever the problem, they asked us to get a party*

*member from our fan club. The present MLA is easily approachable and whoever it is he is helping and whatever problem it is he is helping us with, he never asks who belongs to which party. I am not with any political party.*

This feeling that Ari Krishnan expresses is central to the political and social constellations that fan clubs are establishing. It suggests the relevance of patronage in everyday life and in the fan club network. The MLA Ari Krishnan describes plays a central role for people to have access to government institutions. One of the most obvious ways to do this is through public events that show the generosity of the fan club as well as that of the big man. Fan clubs commonly try to invite local politicians to preside over their function. Often these leaders sponsor the event to a certain extent, paying for a part of the items that will be given away as charity. The presence of local big men gives the event authority, attracts bigger crowds and as a result (re)-establishes relationships (Mines 1994). The relationships are complementary as fans need influential people to be present to show their own position to the people who attend the events and they need them for the benefits they provide. In return the local big man widens his reach by being present and visible on such occasions and he establishes his position and support in the community where he operates.

The obvious presence of journalists and hired photographers for the events on Rajinikanth's birthday celebration in 2007 with which I introduced this chapter, heightens the importance (see also Gerritsen 2006) and confirms the significance of the display of generosity. The banners and posters which depicted images of Rajinikanth and Rajini Shankar suggested from whom the gifts were coming. The visual and aural presence during events with stages and decorations and the photo opportunities of the fan club leaders handing out their items in front of the camera make these events public markers of power.

## **Praise**

*"Social service is a must. Only then do you become familiar and famous."*

Rajini Shankar

An important notion with which we can further deepen our understanding of the singularity of the political figure for fans is praise. At events and on the images made for them (see Chapter 4) fans praise their movie hero, fan club leaders and local political figures for their generosity. Several scholars have indicated that praise in India has historically been contextualized in the realm of divinity and sovereignty in which the political and the religious cannot be separated (Appadurai 1990; Bate 2009; Dirks 1993; Mines 1994). Bernard Bate identifies similarities between political practices such as public meetings and practices associated with worship. He argues that people relate to political leaders in a similar way as they do to deities in which praise and *bhakti* (religious devotion) serve to explain the practices of devotion.

The idolization of leaders is not a one-sided activity. Praise also brings visibility to the one who conducts the activity. Here, the emphasis on the "would-be big-man" as described by Mines (1994) is relevant; people, such as Rajini Shankar, who want to establish themselves as leader

figures need a certain interaction with big men in the form of praising them. Fans see the social welfare activities of their fan club as a way to establish their own position in their neighborhood, in politics or in the fan club environment. Therefore, praise should not be considered as simple adoration but also as a form of publicizing oneself. Arjun Appadurai has identified more direct forms of praise that can be related to divinity and indirect forms of praise or flattery that are more concerned with publicizing the one who praises (1990). Praise, or flattery, is not merely a means of marking out hierarchy between the worshipper and worshipped, it is also dependence upon a superior (1990, 97). Appadurai singles out the indirect form of praise for those lacking direct contact with the superior. Praising the good deeds, capabilities, powers, and reputation of the superior sets the speaker him or herself in a privileged relationship with the superior:

*The mode of praise here is not direct flattery but publicizing, which is directed not to the emotional satisfaction of the superior but to the increment of his or her own following ... But the hope your superior will hear of your praise, and thus think better of you, is not crudely manipulative (as with alternative topographies of the self, which permit both acts and judgments of hypocrisy), but a mixture of adoration and expectation of reward that characterizes Hindu ritual generally. Praise of the superior is, therefore, part of a complex series of acts of mutual benefit that characterize the ethos of Hindu worship itself (op.cit. 98-99).*

Both forms of worship are highly personal and praise as publicizing as Arjun Appadurai has described it shows how fans promote their movie hero but also themselves. It authorizes their own power and status (Mines 1994, 11-12). Rajini Shankar's wife explained that even though she doesn't like her husband spending so much money on non-family matters, she does not dislike his activities: "If he does social activities, he has recognition among the people. Sometimes people came and asked for books and sometimes he arranged blood donations. At the time, I felt so much happiness that they came and asked for my husband."

In other words, through praising a movie hero and the presence of local big men at a public event a fan heightens his own visibility. In speeches at events the members venerate their movie hero and name local benefactors who support their activities. The welfare is conducted in the name of a hero and seems to come directly from the actor in person. At the same time it is clear that the welfare is coming from the fans themselves. In this way, local fans establish social credit. It shows their fellow fans and others in their community that they are committed fans. The publicness and visibility of the event is therefore crucial. Events take place in public spaces with visual and aural stimuli that make it hard to overlook the event. In the next chapter I will specifically deal with the ways in which banners are key markers of events.

What fan activity makes clear is that the political is a broad field in which one operates and negotiates. In other words, film has become a crucial mediator that inflects politics and enables one to become more politically powerful. Fans use the fan club to gain visibility in their neighborhood, have access to government institutions otherwise inaccessible, win local elections or pursue personal ambitions. These motivations can all be part of the political motivations of being connected to the fan club.

Public fan events and their accompanying visual displays play a key role in mediating the visibility and political and social agency of fans. The agency or "action" that is displayed here is also subject to transformation and is not a straightforward individual asset but transcends the individual level and the temporal moment in which it acts (Keane 1997, 7). This observation by

Keane is important as it acknowledges that individuals, i.e. individual fans in this case, only have agency because they are part of a collectivity of fans, because of their connections to political people and on top of that, because success is not a univocal process that comes out of the action of a fan.

## **A fine line**

However, a fine line separates selfishness and importance. Generosity suggests “seemingly selfless agency” (Mines 1994, 65) in which people seem to act for others and not merely for themselves. In reality however, competition is fierce in how powerful men try to establish and maintain their position. The fans I worked with constantly commented on other fans and how they were “good workers” or calculating, self-centered individuals. The proof of their dedication or otherwise was found in the ways in which they worked hard (or not) to organize activities and how they presented themselves on images displayed at events. The latter is the subject of the next chapter.

Ari Krishnan, who I quoted above, also described the difficulties with the former MLA for who always requested someone who was a member of the same political party. Ari Krishnan’s words articulate one of the ambiguities of fandom: even though on the one hand a fan club membership does help to gain access to the state and other networks of power, at the same time a fan club is not sufficient to be always taken seriously. Even though it is not officially approved within the fan club network, most fans, once they are older, get involved in political parties as well. It shows how the developmental cycle of a fan means that fandom is no longer expressed in terms of cinematic devotion but in terms of prestige and political networking. However, this is articulated via cinematic devotion and through images of the star as fans, stars and politics work together.

## **Style and the power of fan collectivity**

While political networks create a feeling of agency, hierarchies within the fan club are created and reinforced by means of the activities fans organize. Fans who already have the right social or economic capital can climb up the fan club hierarchy more easily and establish political networks. Dickey (1993b) suggests that it is inappropriate for young people or for someone with little social or financial capital to make claims to power and therefore the fan club offers a place to seek this power. However, even though I agree with Dickey that age or social and economic capital can hold people back from establishing themselves as powerful people, political parties in Tamil Nadu attract people from similar socio-economic backgrounds with similar interests in social recognition and power (S. V. Srinivas 2005). Politicians as well as fan club leaders need economic capital to act as a leader. But these leaders also need a particular style. The following description of a trip I made with the Rajinikanth fan club leader of Villupuram district, Ibrahim, shows how style becomes crucial in the experience of being a fan.

In February 2008, my research assistant Gandhirajan and I received an invitation from Ibrahim to join him on a trip to Gudalur, a town situated almost 400 kilometers south of his home town of Villupuram. Ibrahim for his part received an invitation from Stalin, his fellow district

fan club leader of Teni to attend his son's ear-piercing function. Gudalur is a small town in South Tamil Nadu on the border with Kerala, surrounded by a lush landscape of mountains, paddies and rivers so Ibrahim saw this trip as a small vacation as well. He arranged lodging in Teni for the first night after which we headed on to Gudalur the next day to attend the function. Ibrahim's car was packed with the seven travelers, our luggage and a considerable amount of alcohol.

The two lower-level fan club members who sat in the back of the car were particularly cramped, sitting on top of our luggage. As many of the cars in the state carry the flag of the affiliated political party of the owner, the hood of Ibrahim's car was decorated with a Rajinikanth flag. Throughout the journey Ibrahim and Kannayram, his right-hand man, talked primarily about fan club politics: who was doing what, meetings, etc. Jokes were also made about the other fans in the car who were of lower rank within the fan club but also from a lower socio-economic background. There were also jokes about the failure of actors Vijayakanth and Sarath Kumar in movies which had led to them starting political parties instead. No one was really talking about Rajinikanth, let alone about his movies.

We often stopped during the journey to eat, drink, get some snacks or smoke. Ibrahim explained that he smoked the same cigarettes as Rajinikanth: expensive imported Benson and Hedges cigarettes. It was a coincidence that on the day we set off an article had appeared in a popular daily about my research. As is common, highlights of the paper were published on cheap posters displayed around the vendor selling the paper. Even though we noticed the posters everywhere, we were not able to obtain a copy of the paper itself. Once we found it, it became the subject of much fun, surprising people on the streets who were just reading the article with my presence in that small place deep down south in Tamil Nadu.

When we approached Teni, local fan clubs were awaiting us. We stopped in several villages where fan clubs honored Ibrahim and me by garlanding us. After a day-long journey we arrived in Teni, where one of the higher level fan club leaders waited for us in our lodge. After a conversation with the district leader, Ibrahim wanted me to have dinner after which they accompanied me to my room, making sure I was settled and safe. The men, now "free" of their responsibility for this foreign guest, did not eat because they planned a night of drinks – so-called hard drinks. When people, generally men, drink it is common in Tamil Nadu that they usually do not eat in advance but have snacks accompanying the drinks and eat later on.

The next morning the men were up early again, preparing themselves for the next part of the trip. We headed on to Gudalur, where the function was to be held. Before we left however, Ibrahim wanted a photo of Rajinikanth in front of the windshield because the Rajinikanth flag, he thought, looked too much like a flag of the Dalit Panthers. One of the group immediately went to a local photo studio and returned a couple of minutes later with an A4 size photo of Rajinikanth. Ibrahim was not too happy with this photo because it was a "natural" photo instead of a *filmi* one but he placed it in front of the windshield anyway.<sup>8</sup> Ibrahim's shiny white car with tinted windows is not uncommon in Tamil Nadu but does attract attention in more remote areas. In addition, the flag and photo of Rajinikanth enhanced the importance of the car. People noticed it, pointed at it and small children waved at the car when we passed by. Perhaps they thought they had just seen Rajinikanth passing by.

<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 4 I elaborate on the suitability and categorizations of different images made by fans of Rajinikanth.

Once we had arrived in Gudalur, we paid a short official visit to Stalin, the district leader. But then it was leisure time. All the men changed into comfortable *lungis*, short pants and towels. We went to see famous waterfalls in the area. Normally, visitors have to pay but when the guard saw the Rajinikanth flag and photo, he let us through. The waterfalls are a popular spot for people to bathe and just a bit further downstream we settled with the food and drinks. The two lower-rank fans carried all the alcohol and food that had been made by a fan club member's wife in Gudalur.

After everyone had become sleepy from the alcohol, they dozed off, and Ibrahim and Kannayram got an oil massage from a lower-rank fan club member. When everyone had slept it off and had had his lunch, we headed off to the waterfall. Part of the crowded passage to the waterfall was closed due to construction works. In their slightly drunken state all the fans nevertheless took the closed off but easy steps. A commotion started and a guard tried to prevent them from taking that route but the men continued, stating that they were from the Rajinikanth fan club and therefore had a right to do this. And so it was; people let them take the stairs instead of the detour.

The next morning Ibrahim wanted to wash the car and bathe somewhere. We drove for a few kilometers in the lush landscape of paddies in search of the place where the mother of the famous music composer Ilayaraja is buried. An old watchman opened the gate of the property and Ibrahim told him that we were sent by Ilayaraja. The confused watchman could not refuse us entry after this remark and thus allowed the car inside. The men started washing the car and themselves in the compound.

The ear-piercing function was our last activity of the day. At the event no attention was paid to the ritual itself. The men used the event to speak with their fellow fan club leaders from other areas and I met a lot of local fans who wanted to speak to me. We ate a heavy lunch and after some time we were on the road to Villupuram again. At two in the morning we arrived in Villupuram and Kannayram then gave me a lift home on his motorbike, another forty kilometers away from Villupuram.

The hierarchy amongst the various fan club members in our car and the ones we encountered during this trip was expressed by where they sat, who carried the bottles of alcohol, who washed the car and by how different members addressed each other by their fan club position. Jokes were made about the lower-level fans and Ibrahim was addressed by the others as *thalaivar* (leader) and sometimes even as a future MLA.

Rajinikanth, who brought these fans together, was playing a role in the background. During our journey to Teni, when Gandhirajan and I were waiting for the others who were having a quick drink on the road, Rafiq, Ibrahim's nephew, put on the film *Baatsha* (1995) for us in the car. The film ran for two hours while we drove further south but no one was actually paying attention. Only Kannayram looked at the film once in a while. His eyes twinkled during particular fighting scenes or scenes in which Rajinikanth makes bold statements. Besides that, Rajinikanth seemed to be merely touched upon as an object of status and power. It was through his name and affiliated authority, I would suggest, that Ibrahim was able get access to the memorial place of Ilayaraja's mother. It seemed almost a symbolic act to wash the car – it was not the place per se but the fact that Rajinikanth's fame opened it up that made it Ibrahim's wish to wash his car

there. And of course it must have impressed the others that were present, reemphasizing Ibrahim's status to his close followers.

I have described this trip at some length as it shows how, through the fan club, status is ascribed to local fan club leaders. Moreover, it shows the style of leadership that Ibrahim exercises and the style of obedience of the other fans towards him. This becomes clear for instance in dress, ways of speaking to each other and to outsiders and in the behavior of who carries what, who drinks what, etc.

Ibrahim is the district Rajinikanth fan club leader of Villupuram district. He is a businessman who has an office at the main bus stand in Villupuram. He has been the fan club leader of Villupuram district since the 1980s. He is said to be one of the longest running leaders, liked by many because of his service to the fan club and for keeping fan activity and party politics separate. The emphasis on Ibrahim as one of the few fan club leaders who always clearly separated the fan club and party politics is noteworthy. As I try to show throughout this chapter, politicking is an intrinsic yet unofficial aspect of fan activity. Most fans get involved in politics once they are older. However, using the fan club for one's own political gain is not appreciated. Many leaders throughout Tamil Nadu have already been removed from their post because of their involvement in party politics. Ibrahim is actually engaged in all kinds of political activity but as he is not using the fan club explicitly for his politics, it is considered permissible. Through his long service to the fan club and his position as a money lender he has a large patronage network of fans and others around him. The way in which he is addressed, as a future MLA, by his fellow fans, as an important person who can avoid rules as exemplified in the situation of the waterfall drinking outing and the washing of the car refers to a certain performance that brings him into the political domain. Ibrahim, on holiday and with his lower-level followers around him, clearly needs to perform in a certain way to prove his status. It would be completely different in the context of his meeting politicians with whom he works closely. In that case he is the person who is expected to behave humbly and to praise his superiors.

In order to maintain his role as leader of the fan club, Ibrahim attends many of the kind of functions described above. Just as Selvam sent an invitation to Rajinikanth for his wedding and son's first birthday (see Chapter 2), fans invite their superiors to their family functions. Big men of the fan club or local leaders are supposed to attend the event as well as donate money as a present.

His various roles as businessman, fan club leader and in politics seem to reinforce each other. It is noteworthy that most fan club leaders are usually small businessmen who are more economically well-off than others. They need money to be a leader as they are expected to attend the functions of people from the area and contribute financially, help people in emergencies and celebrate their own functions in a grand manner. They also need a car, in case of fan club or other functions that they have organized or have been invited to. Indeed, several poorer fans and fans from rural areas said that the lack of resources would always mean a lack of power and mobility in political environments. So even though the fan club could be seen as a space for mobility, economic background does play a role in someone's possibilities to climb up the fan club ladder.

## Respect: Political practices and mobilization

From the many conversations I had with fans throughout my research, it became clear that a large number felt that the fan club environment and particularly their connection to the star and powerful people provided them with respect. Before being part of the fan club and in particular before involvement in politics, many fans suggested that they were not respected, even by their family members. Several of the wives or parents of fan club members I spoke to complained about the money their husbands or children spent on the fan club. Tamizhvanan's wife:

*He [Tamizhvanan] spends a lot of money. He doesn't do anything for the children and he does not want to purchase any gold ornaments for them. But he always spends money on Rajinikanth. I asked for a cupboard to keep our clothes in but he will not spend money on that. I asked for a dining table but he won't spend money on it. But if someone calls and says "we're going to Chennai to meet Rajinikanth," he immediately takes money and goes.*

As I argued in the previous chapter, derogatory opinions about fan behavior in journalistic accounts or as commonly heard opinion are connected to the cinematic activities of fan clubs. Feelings of respectability and power by fans themselves, on the other hand, are related to active involvement in social welfare and affiliations to local politicians. Tharagai Raja:

*If you need something from a politician, hospital or doctor, an ordinary person will be rejected. If I belong to the Rajini manram, suddenly they give me what I need, anything. Because they don't only see me but also the strength behind me. That strength will help the politicians in the elections. For that reason alone they give help to us, they do not give any help to a single man. For example, I asked for a place in a school. My second son is going to join a Christian school. They did not give him a place. They only give places to the A category, which means high class people only, not people like me in the middle classes. So we wanted a recommendation. For that recommendation I went to the Pondicherry Education Minister: "Sir, I would like a place for my son." There they asked: "what is your job?" I replied: "I work in real estate, Sir." "And then what else?," "Sir, I am from the Rajini manram, I am Rajini's PRO." Then they simply gave me a letter which said: I know this man very well, could you please give him a place for his child. Just like that he recommended me and gave me his signature. I got the letter and took it to the head of the school, the principal. He said: "oh, you have been to the Education Minister, Okay, I agree to your request." If I hand in an application and try to pressure them I get no response. But when I get a recommendation, they agree to my request. That is because of the Rajini manram. It helps us.*

These stories show how the fan club network acts as a powerful tool with which fans can navigate through bureaucratic institutions and class distinctions. Tharagai Raja feels the strength of the *manram* helps him to be taken seriously by politicians and government officials. Tharagai Raja emphasizes the mutual benefit of this relationship. They benefit from being respected and in a practical way by gaining access to domains that otherwise would remain inaccessible. At the same time, he explains how government officials give their support as they understand the mutual benefit. The Pondicherry Rajinikanth fan club has regularly supported local politicians or particular political parties during elections. So the kind of politicking that is at work here provides politicians with votes and support. At the same time it gives fans a way of letting the

system work to their advantage, especially for people who, due to class distinctions, would not be able to access certain domains otherwise. This makes fan clubs a route to power one that preserves hierarchies, patriarchies and male culture.

In Vannur, an area of Villupuram, Saktivel is the popular local fan club leader. In 2006, Saktivel was selected as Panchayat president with the help of the fan club. Before Saktivel became fan club president, the fan club was not very active. Fans complained that the former leader was not trying to unite fans. So when the former president was expelled by the head office in Chennai, Saktivel was appointed and the fan club started to shine. Saktivel is known to be a sincere fan who spends his money on screening films and organizing events in the name of Rajinikanth. A friend of Saktivel described his popularity as follows:

*Saktivel used to distribute sweets to the entire village when a Rajinikanth film was released. He also regularly hired a TV and VCR, which were still very costly at the time, and played Rajinikanth and MGR movies for the entire village. He organized this whenever he had the money and sometimes we pushed him to organize it. The TV was put up in the village somewhere and everybody gathered around. First we used black and white TV and later color we used to fan the VCR to cool it down. This was in the early 1990s. The MGR films were screened mainly for elderly people. Later, the temple authorities bought a TV. The shows were screened on special occasions and sometimes even on ordinary days but mostly on Saturday nights as Sunday is a holiday for everyone. We enjoyed those moments. We admired and respected Saktivel a lot. We tried to follow his path. He spent his own money.*

Generally, Saktivel is known for his commitment to social issues. In 2006, Saktivel decided not to join the PMK, which draws many members and voters from the Vanniyar community to which both its leader Ramadoss and Saktivel belong. Ramadoss lives a couple of kilometers further north. Tensions between Rajini fans and Ramadoss supporters have been expressed in fights but also, as I will later show in Chapter 4, in the demolition of hoardings on the important Koot Road junction. Saktivel stood as a candidate for the local Panchayat elections and won with the help and support of the fan club. The Rajinikanth fans helped him canvass for the elections and helped in all other ways to accompany Saktivel in his activities. Actually the Panchayat position is allotted to a woman so officially his wife Nalini is registered for the position. But as often happens in India, Saktivel carries out the job. Nalini did not want to stand for the elections as she is afraid of speaking in public. But Saktivel reassured her and promised that she would not have to do anything. Only for official events such as Independence Day does Nalini join Saktivel on a trip around the area to hoist the flags at schools.

Saktivel is extremely busy with his job as local spokesperson for the area. He has a circle of friends who are also fan club members and who always support him to help solve issues in the neighborhood. The acquisition of land to give people ownership of the land they live on, family feuds and fights are some of the issues that Saktivel is involved in. He is always on the road. Almost every time we tried to meet, he was called away to solve an urgent matter and his phone rang constantly. Despite his extremely busy life, Saktivel always tried to make time to talk about his passion, i.e. Rajinikanth: "I would leave my family for Rajinikanth, if he starts a party, I would follow him immediately."

A Panchayat president is not a political position per se so Saktivel could perform his role without clashing with the rules from Chennai that fan club members should not be actively

involved in politics. The way he was elected was clearly with the help of the fan club, his prestige and visibility were shaped by his work as a fan club leader.

Being a member of a party is not problematic but being an active politician is. The main reason why Rajini Shankar got expelled from the fan club was because he crossed the line separating a supportive fan club member and an active political member as I will discuss in more detail below. Different kinds of politicking are differently perceived. Practical benefits and prestige gained through the fan club are accepted but using Rajinikanth's image for a political career is not.

Still, many fans, however, hope that Rajinikanth will start his party. Party politics, many fans think, are more effective; not merely for their own benefit but for what a star such as Rajinikanth can do for society. It would resolve the contradiction of political practice in name of the star and the alleged selfish use of the fan club for a fan's own political career. The problem for most fans however is that Rajinikanth has not started his party. Not yet.

## The politics of Rajinikanth

I have now described several ways in which fans engage in politicking. From the reinforcement of patronage relationships to social welfare events and fan club leaders who are actively involved in party politics or Panchayats. It is mostly fans higher up in the fan club who have the right access and social (and economic) capital to engage with local politicians and become active in a political party. Poorer and younger fans or fans of lower hierarchy within the fan club do not have these attributes.

Rajinikanth fans have become restless with Rajinikanth's reluctance to start his own party. For fans, political affiliation with a political party affirms their longtime activities in the name of their movie star. Rajinikanth's hints in films such as "no one knows when and how I will come but I will be there at the right time"<sup>9</sup> have kept his fans hoping that he will finally take the big step but so far nothing has happened or seems to be happening. Once in a while, a fan club somewhere in Tamil Nadu announces the party flag and as such a political party in the name of Rajinikanth after which this fan club is expelled from official fan club membership. Many fans expressed their disappointment with Rajinikanth as he keeps them waiting and hoping but in the meantime does not take the step into politics.

Even though Rajinikanth was displeased that people were joining his fan clubs for political reasons, in recent years he has affiliated himself to political parties and has indicated his political preference in public during elections. At the elections in 2004, Rajinikanth gave a public statement in a speech in favor of the BJP-AIADMK alliance. In the speech, Rajinikanth commented on his dispute with the politician Ramadoss (see Introduction). In the second part, he switched to the water problem in India and especially Tamil Nadu. He said he had offered one crore<sup>10</sup> rupees to link south Indian rivers but politicians were not listening to him. The only party that listened was the BJP. That is the reason he was going to vote for the BJP. At the end of his speech he said:

<sup>9</sup> "Naan eppo varuven eppadi varuvettu yarukum theriyathu...aana varavendiya nerathile correctaa varuven..."

<sup>10</sup> A crore is a unit used in India to indicate 10 million.

*My beloved Tamil people and fans. I want to tell you again: this is not my support for any particular party. It is my vote, that's it. I won't insist that my fans and the Tamil people vote for the same party I voted for. It is not a must that my fans vote for the party. I will not take away your right to vote. But you have to think, think, not only Tamil people, all Indians, especially mothers, youngsters, students and educated people. When you go to the polling booth, don't think that my party has to win or my caste party should win. Think about the water problem and decide: your life is in your hands.*"<sup>11</sup>

In this part of his speech, Rajinikanth emphatically states that it is his vote and not his support for a party or a command for the people of Tamil Nadu and his fans to vote for that same party. Nevertheless, he states this in such an insistent manner by addressing some groups in particular that it is not a mere expression of his preferences but a personal address. He must be aware of his status as icon in Tamil Nadu and therefore must know that his words have influence, especially considering former elections in which fans followed his vote unquestioningly and campaigned and voted for the party he supported, despite personal preferences or memberships of other parties. And in fact this happened during these elections as well. Local fan clubs even punished various members for not listening to Rajinikanth's words. Tharagai Raja:

*For the 2004 elections, Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP. But here, the DMK was against the BJP. Some people in the Rajini fan clubs ignored this and did not give any respect to Rajini's words. They did some shadow campaigning to support the DMK personalities. They did some illegal activities: not obeying Rajini's words. When we got to know about this we took action against these people. We went to Sathyanarayanan and asked: these people are acting like this, what are you going to do? Sathyanarayanan accepted our decision: I do not give my blessing to those supporting the DMK so our association finds it immoral. So Sathyanarayanan put the matter to Rajini and he also gave permission to dismiss the people from the association. So they suspended the people. After the suspension, they gave us a letter that confirmed that these people were suspended because of immoral activities against the Rajini manram. This man is suspended for two years, temporarily. This man is suspended for five years, etc.*

What is interesting in this story is that people can be suspended for supporting another party, even though Rajinikanth has clearly indicated that people should vote the way they want. Tharagai Raja himself was obedient, even to the extent that he supported a Hindu nationalist party, which for him as a Christian was a big step. Tharagai Raja:

*Before Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP in 2004, we had a local meeting in Pondicherry to ask everyone's opinion about the election and to discuss who to support. Rajini Shankar chose to support the BJP but some of us had problems with that party. I can't support the BJP as a Christian! So we told Rajini Shankar that all fans have a different background. Then Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP. For Rajini we never speak about our aversion to voting for something because we like his decision. He never takes a wrong decision. But locally, if I support the BJP I need something. If they give me something, I will work for them. Thalaivar simply mentioned in the media: I am going to support the BJP, I will not*

11 Translation by Chakravarthy.

*put any pressure on my fans to work for the BJP. If they want to vote for them, they'll work, if they don't like the BJP, they will not work. So whatever they want, they will vote that way. In Pondicherry we decided: we are supporters of thalaivar, of Rajini, why should we work for another party? So we worked. Another reason to vote for the BJP was our resentment against the PMK. Ramadoss' party was putting a lot of pressure on with the release of Baba. They simply took out the film reel, so we became very angry with that party. During the elections we had no opportunity to vote for another party since all parties were in some way related to the PMK, so we supported the BJP. I am a member of the communist party and resigned. I simply mentioned that the communist party is supporting the PMK which I do not agree with. I did not tell them that the reason that I do not want to work for them is because I am a Rajini fan, I simply told them that I am not prepared to work for the PMK.*

After the elections, Tharagai Raja joined the communist party again. As we saw in Tharagai Raja's story, he followed Rajinikanth's choice even though he questioned the same party earlier. He states that his hero "never takes a wrong decision" and therefore he followed his choice. What makes people vote for a party they otherwise would never vote for? Why is Rajinikanth's decision never wrong? I will show below how the unconditional loyalty for movie stars as expressed by Tharagai Raja is conditional at the same time (see also S. V. Srinivas 2009).

Most fans I worked with, even those who were not really involved or interested in politics became somewhat frustrated about the situation. For years, they say, they invested in the fan clubs, spent their own money on social welfare and had not really received anything in return. Only fans higher up in the fan club really benefited from their position. Now it was time to get something in return. Otherwise it was useless to continue spending all that money on social work. This has resulted in fans being less active in the fan club, knowing that they will not accomplish what they had slowly started to expect. Many feel that Rajinikanth has missed the right moment for his political entry. At the end of the 1990s, when he hinted about his possible entry into politics in a film, Rajinikanth was in his heyday. Most fans think that if he had started his political party at that time he would be definitely have won the elections. Now, even though they do not want to be unfaithful to their hero, they think that his political heyday is over. First of all Rajinikanth is older but secondly he has too many connections to the ruling leaders of the state. As Rajinikanth is not showing any sign of what he will do in the future, fans are becoming restless and are starting to doubt their investment. Once in a while fans start their own party in his name or rallies are organized by local leaders to show their desires. Other fans become less active and spend less money and time in the organization of events. Gnanavel, a member of the fan club and an AIADMK member:

*We are all ready to give our lives but he doesn't understand that yet. Even though he is acting like this we still love him. See, a political party gives power. That's why we are asking him to start a political party. Last year I had a problem and my political party [AIADMK] helped me overcome it. Likewise, the fans who are struggling to get a better life will be helped if Rajini is a politician. He doesn't see what his power is. Lakhs<sup>12</sup> and Lakhs of fans are behind him but he never ever uses them. I think he is frightened of starting a party and managing it. Many film stars start a political party. Look at Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar, Karthik: they*

<sup>12</sup> A Lakh is 100,000.

*don't have as much power as our Rajini but they have started a political party. These actors give a voice to their fans, to the people who believe in him but Rajini hasn't done this. All his films after Mannan contain politics; they contain dialogue that refers to his entry into politics. It's so irritating you know. We've lost hope but we still love him. We don't know why he speaks about politics but doesn't do anything. He says that he loves Tamil Nadu and the Tamil people but he doesn't act as if he does. He has a mill in Karnataka where four thousand people work, he owns lorries and much more but everything is in Karnataka. Then how can we believe that he loves Tamil Nadu? Many of the members of his fan clubs will quit if this continues. The day will come when there are no more fan clubs.*

Gnanavel's frustration highlights several issues. First of all, he recognizes the power that many fans want to obtain with Rajini's entry into politics. They want something in return for their efforts and dedication. But he also highlights the fact that despite Rajinikanth's behavior, their love for their hero is unconditional and they continue to love him. But another issue that needs attention is Gnanavel's point about Rajinikanth's loyalty to Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. Rajinikanth is sometimes criticized for his questionable loyalty to the state of Tamil Nadu. This feeling of belonging to a state should be contextualized within the linguistic political paradigm that has developed in Tamil Nadu (see Introduction). Notions of belonging are primarily attached to linguistic background. Even a descendant of a family that settled in Tamil Nadu more than three hundred years ago refers to him or herself as actually being from the state "of origin". Rajinikanth was born and raised in Karnataka after which he settled in Tamil Nadu to study at the Madras Film Institute. His fans always defend him and often the metaphor of marriage is used: when a girl comes to live with her parents-in-law they include her in the family as their own daughter. Likewise, Rajinikanth has chosen Tamil Nadu and we as Tamils should treat him as family. It was surprising for me to hear a fan commenting on Rajinikanth's origins. It seems as if, in difficult times, crucial issues of origin, loyalty and the like are heightened and revealed.

For Rajini Shankar, who started as a dedicated fan of Rajinikanth and who founded the first fan club in Pondicherry, Rajinikanth's attitude towards politics and his own fans has been the limit. Shankar has become a dynamic businessman and active political supporter of the AIADMK over the years. But his fortune and prosperity within and through the fan club has changed as well. In the previous chapter I explained that he was expelled from his post due to the frustrations of other fans about his handling of the fan club and particularly the distribution of cinema tickets. For the head office in Chennai, his political affiliations were the main reason for expelling Shankar from his post. Even though Shankar continued to act as a president because of his long-established position in Pondicherry, he also developed anger and frustration towards Rajinikanth.

Rajini Shankar was frustrated about the investments he had made in the fan club in the name of Rajinikanth and for which he had received nothing in return. In 2007 he was angry with the head office in Chennai in particular:

*I met her [Jayalalitha] because I was thinking of working for the political party. Since the headquarters of the Rajini fans association's administration is not doing anything, I cannot stick with them forever. They never listened to my requests. We [Rajinikanth fan club members] cannot work for a political party, the president of the headquarters of the Rajini fans association does not allow us to get paid by a political party if we work for them. ... So how*

*will we survive? I have been in the fan club for twenty-eight years, and I have worked hard for him. He is not doing anything for anyone, in the end where will I go for my survival? I have had no direct contact with him while working like this. So I thought of working with a political party directly.*

*I went to Cuddalore, Chidambaram, Kanyakumari, and Kerala to build up the Rajini fans, but in the end what did I get? In 2001, a popular weekly magazine Kumudam wrote that Rajini fan clubs were not functioning properly. I was upset when that weekly wrote about us. I celebrated his fifty-second birthday in a grand manner to prove that they were wrong. I hired a theater costing me seventy-five thousand rupees. How long can we spend money on him – we also need money for survival. I could have bought a flat or land for myself with that money!*

*I met her [Jayalalitha] because I wanted to work with the party to increase my income. I thought of getting some posting in a political party. For instance if I were appointed president of the youth wing in the party, I would get paid for my work. Or for example if I am in the party and somebody calls me to the police station to settle a problem, they will pay the police and they will pay me for acting as a middleman between that person and the police. That's how I can earn money, whereas I don't get any money for working in this fan club. When I joined the fan club I was 15 years old, today I am 43 years old. How many years have I wasted without getting any recognition! If I had worked as government staff or if I had been with a political party I would have achieved more.*

During this period, Rajini Shankar expressed his frustration towards the head office as he was expelled as president because of his political interests. But it was primarily because of his status as fan club leader that his active involvement in party politics made it problematic. As a lower level fan is not so much in the limelight as higher level members, their political activities are less problematic. Shankar is a known person in Pondicherry and has well-known political contacts. His party support would be related too directly to the fan club, something that Rajinikanth would not appreciate.

Although in 2007 Shankar was primarily frustrated with the association, in 2008 his attitude started to change. In one of our many conversations Shankar turned emotional when he spoke about Rajinikanth. He talked of Rajinikanth with disdain and irritation, as someone not helping his fans but rather exploiting them. Therefore, Shankar decided to start his own career with the aim of becoming famous, by, among other things, producing a movie and trying to end up in Pondicherry politics. Shankar likes thinking about the release of his movie. When it is released, he says, he will invite Rajinikanth to the premiere but he will not be allowed to sit next to him. This is Shankar's revenge.

Around the time of his daughter's coming of age ceremony, which I described in the previous chapter, Shankar's father died. Two weeks after the function, Shankar organized another function, this time to distribute saris in Nellithope in commemoration of his father. This was quite exceptional; usually someone's death is commemorated in the family and not with a public function such as Shankar organized, let alone a "political" function. The stage on which the event took place was set up just next to one of the busiest incoming roads in Pondicherry. A four meter long banner showed Shankar's father and mother and in the center the blown up faces

43. Small flyer made for the function commemorating Rajini Shankar's father.



of Rajinikanth and his wife Latha, the CM of Pondicherry and Shankar himself. The speeches during the event were of considerable length but the public present was not really paying attention. Only during one more animated speech did people start to pay attention. Shankar was the last speaker. His speech lasted an hour. He explained how he was not trusted by the fan club and as a result was expelled from his post. Now he has started his own organization, he said. He addressed the area's problems: roads, water facilities etc. about which the government was not doing anything and as a result of which he had decided to take action himself. Later on in the speech he also spoke about more common political themes, invoking the sentiments against "migrants" from North India who are accused of taking away the jobs in Pondicherry. Shankar said openly that these migrants should be sent away. In short, Shankar's speech was clearly political in the sense that it addressed or raised issues and sentiments of an urban poor area. He used images of Rajinikanth and his fan club status to attract attention but at the same time he did not organize the event "in Rajinikanth's name".

In the meantime, Shankar's close friends and fan club colleagues know about his turning away from Rajinikanth. But as Tharagai Raja explains:

*In Tamil Nadu you need Rajinikanth's photo to sell tea. You need Rajinikanth's photo to sell coffee. To sell bed sheets, soap, computers, for everything you need Rajinikanth's photo. But if there is a problem, you also need Rajinikanth? Is that justice? There are people in our fan club, like Rajini Shankar, who do not understand this. On that day, I heard that he [Shankar] spoke harshly. For me, this is not done, but what can we do? ... I felt sad. In spite of that he is the secretary of our association and I know that he benefits from him [Rajinikanth]. ... If you go and talk about real estate using Shankar's name, who will respect you? If you introduce yourself as a Rajini fan club secretary, then they ask you to sit and talk. We have given you a label. Rajinikanth gave a label to him.*

So even though others know about Shankar's move against Rajinikanth, the other fan club members do not say anything about it. As Tharagai Raja explains, they are friends, and as friends, it does not help to criticize Rajini Shankar. But Tharagai Raja also emphasizes that Shankar is not able to go his own way with the support of the fans:

*They [other fan club members] are not ready to work with him. The fans only support Rajini not Shankar or Tharagai. The fans just support Rajini. If you always speak badly about Rajini, then how will people accept it? They are only there for Rajini.*

With Rajini Shankar turning his back on Rajinikanth, I do not want to suggest that the real Rajinikanth is of no importance to his fans. Shankar is an exception to the rule in his disappointment. But his story does describe how he, from being one of the first fans in Pondicherry to use images to attract customers to his shop, has started to turn against Rajinikanth, still using his images but now far removed from the Rajinikanth he wanted to be close to initially. It shows how fandom starts with a love of film and a particular actor but how during the course of a life political motivations take over. Even though social welfare is said to be about generosity, a fan feels he needs something in return for his dedication. Again it is mutual, praise and dedication do not merely idolize, they give something in return to the one who praises (Appadurai 1990). And when this final gift of a personal political career does not work out, generosity is not worth it anymore. Many fans described how Rajinikanth having his own party would give them political posts. But at the same time, people like Selvam were skeptical about their future careers. Selvam, who also expected Rajinikanth to enter politics as a return for his efforts, also realized that due to his own relatively poor background he could never obtain a political post. But most fans still do hope for this career and the longer this is postponed the less active fans become, as they see that the chance of him entering politics is becoming smaller and smaller every year.

## **Gendered spaces: female fans**

What we have seen in the last two chapters is that fan activity ranges from cinematic devotion towards a movie star to political mobilization in the name of that star. Before I come to the conclusions of this chapter, however, I need to address one important aspect of fan clubs that I have not paid much attention to yet, i.e. gender. Up to now, I have spoken only in terms of male fans because the cinematic activities that fans are involved in are a male dominated space. Fan clubs themselves are also gendered spaces as they consist of men and are usually devoted to male actors. Nevertheless, there are a few fan clubs consisting only of women and there has been fan activity devoted to actresses such as Trisha and Kushboo as well. But even fan clubs for these actresses were mainly joined by men. What I want to address in particular is the virtual absence of women fan clubs in Tamil Nadu. It is less easy for women to join a fan club because of the stigma of the fan club and the male-dominated space of the movie theater and social welfare events. Young women in particular are not supposed to engage in such male behavior and to visit these male spaces. This does not mean that women are not interested in movie heroes. Almost everyone, men and women, have a particular preference for an actor or actress. Women, and particularly young girls, also talk about their favorites and collect images at home. But to join a fan club is not considered normal for young women.

Some female Rajinikanth fans that I know were frustrated that they could not start their own fan club. For the most part they were married to a fan club member and participated actively in the events by preparing food for the occasion. But they did not participate on the same level, as

they did not have a fan club structure and therefore did not operate fully independently as a fan club. They, with a few exceptions, did not join the first day release of a film. It is seen by both men and women as a male space that would be too aggressive for women. The women I worked with were frustrated about not being able to see the first day first show but also about not being able to display themselves on banners and posters. I will elaborate on this last point further in the next chapter. The female fan club I know about that does operate almost entirely as other fan clubs is an exception in this regard.

I met Saroja, a woman in her thirties, for the first time at her neighbor's home. She was eager to tell me about her activities as a female fan. One of the first things she emphasized was that she saw all of Rajinikanth's films within a week of their release. Although seeing a film on the first day is not appropriate as a woman, at least she managed to see it within a week. Saroja:

*I had been thinking about starting a female fan club for a long time. I always cooked for Rajini's birthday and provided meals to the fans and villagers. But no one gave me advice on how to start a fan club. Later I told my brother [Baba Ganapathi] about it. I told him that I wanted to become a member of the club. Baba Ganapathi replied that to start an association I should gather twenty women. Now women are still joining in the club for Rajini. I can't manage it!*

Saroja does not see Rajini's movies on the first day but she does see the film several days later and several times. For her, the fan club was not a means of getting tickets at all. For Saroja the acknowledgment as a fan was the most important thing. Some days later I met Saroja again, now in the context of a group interview which she had organized with many of her fellow female fans. The women were mainly older, the youngest thirty years old and the oldest in her sixties. It was noticeable that, in contrast to their male counterparts, most members were already married and not adolescents anymore. As young girls or recently married women, it would not be appropriate to take part in the same kinds of activities as young masculine fans. Later on, as elder, established women in the village, their help at fan events is not associated with the negativity surrounding young fans which makes it all right for them to call themselves fan club members. During this interview, the women emphasized several times how important it was to be displayed on banners on Koot road. They considered it to be proof of their independent existence as a fan club. The women felt proud that now they were visible to a wider group than merely that in their own area in which they navigate in their everyday lives. Saroja expressed it as follows:

*For the opening ceremony of the fan club we put up a banner at Koot road. And from then onwards we have put up a banner for his birthday every year. When we started there were twenty fans, so twenty photos were displayed. Now I am known in ten to twenty areas, before I was only known in my street! Now everyone says that the chief of the female fans is coming. Now even gents respect me. So, I got all this because of Rajini!*

This acknowledgement was emphasized repeatedly and brought with it lots of laughter during the conversation. Their laughter reveals their being unaccustomed to the situation in which they as women are now also taken more seriously outside their everyday spaces. Despite the laughter, Saroja and the others are serious about their feeling of making women more powerful. They gave ample examples of how their fan club membership has helped them take their rights into their own hands. For example, an older woman present explained how her husband

died some time ago. She was entitled to a widow's pension. Even though the amount was small, for her it was a crucial amount to survive. She had all the papers she needed but even so the local MLA kept sending her away with specious arguments. When Saroja and the others heard the story they went along with the woman and told the MLA that they were all from the Rajinikanth fan club and he should do his job. And he did. The name of Rajinikanth and the power of the fan club in the area convinced the man to give this woman what she was entitled to. The women had several other similar examples of how the fan club has given them status, how people, particularly men take them seriously.

What these expressions of power by Saroja and her fellow fans make clear is that the fan club environment provides a space for power relations and agency in various fields, from acknowledgement as a fan to access to government institutions. Rajinikanth is given as the main reason for this power but I would suggest that even though it is indeed his name and fame that brought fans together, is it primarily the local fame of fan club president Saktivel that makes these doors open.

## **From fan club to party politics and back again: Vijayakanth**

October 21, 2006. On *Deepavali*, one of the most important festival days in India, the movie *Dharmapuri* (Perarasu 2006) starring the actor and politician Vijayakanth was released. I was excited at attending a first day show, an event that is a must for fans. Chakravarthy, who worked for me as a research assistant, and I tried to obtain tickets somewhere. I had never been to a film release of a Vijayakanth film and all his fans who I know told me it was a must: "all the fans shout and dance during the show, it is spectacular!" everyone asserted. The first indication that the spectacle would be less electrifying than described was the timing of the film's screening. In Pondicherry, the film was not screened until late morning rather than early morning. Outside the theater a handful of banners made by Vijayakanth party members and fans were displayed in the theater compound, wishing the actor well with his new film. The banners were in the party colors of the DMDK, Vijayakanth's party, and did not suggest any connection to cinema or this specific film at all. To my surprise we were still able to buy tickets for the same day's show, for double the price though. Before the movie started, a crowd assembled at the theater compound. I noticed how diverse it was: young and old, men and women and not the ardent fans wearing party colors that everyone had told me about.

Unfortunately Chakravarthy and I got so-called box-tickets, first class tickets with seats in a glass box with around 20 other spectators. Spiders' webs and dirt on the glass through which we had to watch the movie gave the film a grayish tint. With the sound cut off from the rest of the theater we could only look down upon the rest of the audience as if they were part of the film as well.

Throughout the movie the audience was not the spectacular audience that the Vijayakanth fans had described. Only a handful of young men on the first row danced during two songs and performed *aarti* (burning a light in front of an image) as a way to bless Vijayakanth in his new film. One young man on the front row was completely immersed in the film: he waved his arms frantically as if trying to help Vijayakanth during his battle against the enemies.

The movie made obvious references to Vijayakanth's politics just as the banners outside did. Signs and symbols in the film, such as Vijayakanth's ring, related to the DMDK's party colors and he is described as an honest superhero who knows how to rule. Just after the climax of the film, even before it actually ended, people began to leave the theater hall.<sup>13</sup> After the film was over Chakravarthy and I stayed and talked about it for a while. We were both slightly surprised about the relative tameness of the public in comparison with audiences at other actors' movie releases and the descriptions given by Vijayakanth's fans who urged me to see the enthusiastic audiences. What was the reason for this?

As I learned later, what was going on here was the decline in fan activity for Vijayakanth *because of* his political career. Fans who encouraged Vijayakanth to set up his party have gradually lost interest in the actor due to a lack of prospects for them in the party. Even though film watching was still relevant, the enthusiasm which fan clubs displayed was lost. Even the young fans who usually made their presence felt at the theater had lost their enthusiasm.

The rise, decline and new start of the Vijayakanth fan clubs and party cadres is worthwhile discussing as it tells us something about the trajectory of visibility from the start. It shows how the political success of both movie star and fan club cadres is not a spontaneous process. Fans begin to see an image of a political leader before he becomes one. Vijayakanth started his party in 2005 after consulting his fans to see if they were willing to start a party. The intention to enter politics had been there for some time already, as Vijayakanth's films contained political messages with him as the promising leader and images of a party flag. Vijayakanth's fans and many others expected a lot from the party and even expected him to win elections easily despite the strong presence of the wide-reaching DMK and AIADMK parties.

When he announced his party in 2005, his fan clubs were converted to party cadres in their respective areas. Vijayakanth's DMDK party has not reached the heights to which people might have expected it to rise but it is an important player in Tamil Nadu politics. However, at a grass-roots level, its relative success played out unexpectedly for his fans. Many fans did not experience any change in their position. What's more, fans were replaced by politicians from outside the fan club to lead the party in many areas. In Pondicherry in particular this was explained by the dominance of personality politics among local politicians and the large amount of election money that is distributed. Politicians need to adopt a certain style to perform as a politician. They need a white *dhoti*, followers, a car to travel around in and money to give away when invited to family functions within a politician's constituency. The failure of Vijayakanth fans to obtain political positions highlights the issue of economic and social capital that is needed to be a politician. Most Vijayakanth fans are from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and are therefore not able to hold a position in politics. This was a particular problem in Pondicherry where politicians are expected to pay voters money.

Around the time of the elections many parties distribute money to their constituency in the hope that people will stay loyal to their party. The amounts have risen during the last few years. In another context, the chairman of a constituency in Pondicherry told me that politics in Pondicherry is very much based on the person. For politics you need money he said: around 1 crore

<sup>13</sup> This is common with most film screenings.

(10,000,000) rs per constituency. First of all for the votes for which you have to pay, something almost all parties do and secondly for the secondary expenses such as meetings and donations. For unknown and less well-off fans it is impossible to adopt that style and enter the political field.

But Vijayakanth fans are not the only fan clubs that did not succeed in the imagined political career. R.M. Veerappan, politician and movie producer, who was involved in the initial stages of organizing the MGR *manrams* stated that most MGR club members did not receive any political benefit from their membership either. Most *manrams* were converted into youth wings of the party but this did not bring them any political benefit in terms of posts.<sup>14</sup> Sara Dickey has also described how MGR fans never served in high posts in the AIADMK (1993b). Officially they became part of the political structure of the party but in reality they remained a separate group. The most important reason for this is the lack of money that Vijayakanth fans needed to perform the role of politician. As a result, fans who had perhaps hoped for a political career by being converted into party cadres were overlooked because they lacked sufficient funds to be a politician.

To provide fans with a platform for their membership Vijayakanth has reinitiated the fan club. But Vijayakanth has lost his luster. Films are not watched as fervently as they were in the past. Most of the members I spoke to were not keen on seeing his films anymore and only went to see them after a couple of days. The importance of the first day show had completely gone. The number of ever-present billboards put up by fans for movie releases diminished along with the fans' enthusiasm.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the political and social structures that fan clubs are part of. The fan clubs see themselves as important networks of generosity in which they help the poor and needy, mirroring the generosity of their movie hero. The ways in which these activities are staged parallel political forms of generosity and the different forms they take. Social welfare events serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining local patronage relationships. Fans aspire to these relationships as they help them to access authorities and political parties.

But social welfare also brings with it visibility and recognition for fans who aspire to gaining access to socio-political networks and political power themselves. With social welfare events fans make visible to others how active they are. Fans expect the visibility and display of connections at the events they organize to engender prestige and power. But these activities and the political connections that fans establish are also informed by a paradoxical notion of politicking. A fine line separates patronage relationships from taking advantage of the fan network for a person's own political career. Even though political activity does not officially belong to fan activity, most fans are in one way or another involved in party politics or related to political people and parties.

However, after many years spent in the fan club, gradually more and more fans expect political careers via Rajinikanth. As fans cannot be fully immersed in politics while still a fan club member, they hope that Rajinikanth will make the move into politics. This would solve their sense of in-betweenness between political aspirations and loyalty to Rajinikanth.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with R.M. Veerappan, May 20 2008.

In this and previous chapters I referred to the role of imagery in the enhancement of visibility for individual fans. For fan clubs as collectives as well as for individual fans, public images play an important role in showing their adulation and dedication to a wider world. In the next chapter I will show how cinematic adulation and the politicking of fan clubs plays out in public visibility and how this articulates and engenders power and prestige on the screens and canvasses of public imagery.