

**The Political Economy of SRK Fandom: An Affective Labour
Analysis across Class and Place in Shrayana Bhattacharya's
*Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh***

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Abstract

Fandom encompasses collective enthusiasm, practices, and communities that emerge around shared interest in cultural texts, public figures or ideas fostering a sense of belonging, identity, and emotional support through shared passions. Shrayana Bhattacharya's *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh* (2021) uses Shah Rukh Khan fandom to explore how Indian women navigate patriarchal capitalism across class and geography. His romantic persona enables imagining alternative gender relations and self-worth. Beyond leisure, fandom drives

cultural production and discourse through fans' interpretations and challenges to dominant narratives. This article argues that fan affect itself is a productive labour and an economic activity, with class and place functioning as interlocking determinants of how fandom is experienced, practised, and mobilised. Drawing on Karl Marx's labour theory of value and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital the article demonstrates how Shah Rukh Khan's female fans generate value through immaterial fan labour, even when they cannot consume his films. The article further argues that fandom operates differently across class positions and spatial contexts structuring the relationship between affective attachment and economic value. This analysis contributes to celebrity studies, feminist political economy, class and geographies of fandom.

Keywords: Fandom, Fan labour, commodity fetishism, feminist political economy, class, place.

Introduction

Fan cultures are often described as spaces of pleasure, identification, and participatory engagement. Fandom is a community built on shared passion. This connection transforms a solitary experience into a collective one. This sense of belonging creates a tribe for people who might otherwise feel like outsiders. In a world that can often feel fragmented, it offers a space where people can come together to celebrate the stories and ideas that resonate with them. It is a testament to the power of narrative and its ability to not just entertain us, but to bring us together, inspire us to create, and help us understand ourselves and each other a little bit better.

The global circulation of celebrity culture has increasingly drawn attention from scholars interested in the intersections of media, affect, and political economy. Scholarly reviews trace fandom studies to the 1980s-1990s cultural studies era, influenced by Stuart Hall and John Fiske's work on active audiences resisting media hegemony. Early texts like

Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) shifted focus to fan production portraying fans as creative, subversive communities, often women-dominated. Post-2000s scholarship critiques early utopianism amid digital transformation. Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002) and Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and Robert Lee Harrington's *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007) examine internet-enabled fanvidding, intellectual property conflicts, and globalisation, highlighting commodification and power dynamics.

Piotr Siuda's "From Deviation to Mainstream – Evolution of Fan Studies" (2015) outlines evolutionary waves from "deviant" pathological fans to mainstream integration through online economies and identities. "A Literature Review on Fans' Identity Construction" by He, Haoyang, et al. (2022) analyses identity via idol interactions, self-performance, and gendered digital communities. Hermawan, Jasmine Syifa, and Margaret Ginting's "A Study on Fandom and Fan Culture" (2024) addresses socioeconomic impacts like crowd funding, gatekeeping, and cultural shifts. Emerging frameworks, such as those in "Friends, Fandom, Family: A Framework for a Future in Fan Studies" (2025), emphasise joy-driven mutual aid and global fan networks.

In a country like India, where gender, class and spatial location are deeply consequential, fandom emerges as a site in which labour, value, and social hierarchies are both reproduced and actively negotiated. Interrogating the economic possibilities of women's fandom through the intersecting hierarchies of class and spatial location thus becomes imperative. In Shrayana Bhattacharya's *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh: India's Lonely Young Women and the Search for Intimacy and Independence* (2021), fandom emerges as a strategic toolkit for Indian women contending with the intersections of patriarchy, capitalism, and spatial inequality. Bhattacharya uses Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) as a rhetorical device, and a sophisticated tool for understanding "India's lonely young women and the search for intimacy

and independence". Thereby Khan functions as a research methodology, a unifying metaphor, and a lens through which to examine the economic and social realities of Indian women in post-liberalisation India. This article builds on her work to argue that fan labour constitutes immaterial labour within both celebrity economies and fan economies, where emotions are commodified.

Shrayana Bhattacharya's *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh* (2021) spans India's vast spatial and class hierarchy—from Delhi's elite enclaves to small-town Uttar Pradesh, from rural Bihar, to metropolitan Mumbai's flight paths. Bhattacharya's work uses fandom to navigate through the economic lives of Indian women. This ethnographic range poses questions like: how does a single star generate such different meanings across these contexts, how do women who cannot even afford cinema tickets contribute to the same celebrity economy as women who attend international film festivals? How this fandom affects celebrity economies and fan economies? This article argues that *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh* provides ethnographic evidence for understanding fandom itself as productive labour, with class and place functioning as interlocking determinants of how fandom is experienced, practised, and mobilised. Marx's labour theory of value and Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital are used to demonstrate how SRK's female fans generate exchange value through immaterial labour, even when they cannot consume his films. It further argues that fandom operates differently across class-place configurations. This analysis proceeds in giving theoretical foundations, discussions on immaterial fan labour, ethnographic dissections by class-place nexus and implications for fan based feminist political and celebrity economies.

Marx's Labour Theory of Value

Marx's labour theory of value helps illuminate how emotional investments in celebrity culture contribute to economic circulation even when fans lack direct purchasing power. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital further helps explain how different classes

mobilise fandom in distinct ways to accumulate symbolic distinction, social mobility, or collective solidarity. Celebrity studies have long grappled with fans as passive consumers, but recent scholarship reframes them as co-producers (Stanfill; Hills). Bhattacharya's ethnography provides empirical grounding for this shift, showing SRK fandom as productive labour: immaterial, affective work that generates surplus value for the star's empire while yielding personal gains for fans. By examining women's engagements with Shah Rukh Khan across different class positions and geographical locations the book demonstrates how fandom becomes a resource for negotiating dignity, aspiration, and social mobility.

The study of fandom has increasingly shifted from viewing fans as passive consumers toward recognising their role as active participants in media production and circulation. Scholars of digital culture and media studies have described fans as producers of cultural value through activities such as online discussion, content creation, and promotion. These practices and many more can be understood as forms of immaterial labour: work that produces cultural meaning, affect, and attention rather than material goods. Within the framework of political economy, this affective labour becomes central to the functioning of celebrity culture. Fans generate visibility, discourse, and symbolic value for celebrities, which in turn translate into economic profitability through film revenues, endorsements, and brand partnerships.

The theoretical framework of Karl Marx provides a useful starting point for understanding fan labour. Marx's labour theory of value posits that value is created through labour that contributes to the production and circulation of commodities (Mandel). While Marx's analysis focused primarily on industrial production, contemporary scholars have expanded this concept to include immaterial forms of labour such as communication, creativity, and affect (Hardt and Negri; Lazzarato; later Marxist-feminists and post-Fordist theorists). Marx's *Capital* (1867) theorises value as crystallised labour (Marx 128), but in

immaterial economies, affect itself becomes productive. Karl Marx's labour theory of value distinguishes between use value, a commodity's utility or subjective significance, and exchange value, its worth in the market (Marx 127). Matt Hills's analysis of the use value/exchange value dynamic deepens this framework. Hills argue that "use value" and "exchange value" are not opposed but interdependent: objects "being intensely subjectively valued by fans... take on a new 'exchange value'" created "through the durability of fans' attachments" (Hills 117). Marx's labour theory of value posits that value arises from socially necessary labour time, but in post-Fordist economies, affective and cultural labour blurs the line between use-value and exchange-value (Marx 168). From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics also reveal the hidden economy of fan labour. Scholars of fan studies have long emphasised that fans contribute cultural and economic value through their emotional investments and participatory practices. For instance, Henry Jenkins argues that fans actively produce meaning and circulate cultural texts through participatory engagement rather than passive consumption (Jenkins 30). Similarly, Matt Hills highlights the ways in which fandom involves affective labour that sustains media industries by maintaining long-term audience attachment (Hills 117).

Applied to fandom, these frameworks illuminate how SRK's fans perform unpaid labour that sustains his brand while advancing their own agency. Fans' devotion which manifest in memes, fan fiction, and communal viewings fuels SRK's marketability, from endorsement deals to global streaming revenue. Shah Rukh Khan's star image appears naturally charismatic which is a function of his talent, his persona and his "king of Bollywood" status, while in fact depending on millions of women's affective labour. Bhattacharya's observation that "the economy is nothing but our moods and relationships, which define who produces and transacts what" (372) is remarkably consonant with this Marxist insight: economic value is rooted in human relationships and affective states, not

autonomous market forces. Fan engagement, whether through discussion, emotional investment, or social media activity, generates attention and visibility, which function as forms of economic value within media industries. Even fans who cannot afford cinema tickets or streaming subscriptions contribute to the circulation of celebrity value through storytelling, collective viewing practices, and everyday conversations.

The stardom of Shah Rukh Khan provides a particularly illuminating case. As one of the most recognisable figures in global popular culture, his celebrity persona is sustained not only by the film industry but also by the affective investments of millions of fans. Countless women excluded from the market by economic scarcity nonetheless produce value. In this way, women's emotional labour operates within celebrity capitalism without necessarily translating into direct consumption of its products: a paradox that highlights both the expansive reach of the star economy and the structural inequalities that determine who ultimately benefits from the value fans generate.

In a Marxist framework, fan affect constitutes a form of productive labour that is essential to the creation of a celebrity's value but is rendered invisible by commodity fetishism. Central to this framework is the concept of commodity fetishism, the process by which commodities appear naturally valuable, obscuring the social relations of production that actually generate their worth (Marx 163–65). When applied to celebrity culture, this framework reveals that a star's exchange value depends on collective cultural labour that remains largely invisible. Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value clarifies how a star like Shah Rukh Khan functions as a commodity: his "use value" is the emotional utility or pleasure fans derive from him, while his "exchange value" is his market worth, determined not by his inherent qualities but by the vast, collective cultural work that sustains his fame. This process is obscured by commodity fetishism, which makes SRK's stardom appear as a natural, almost magical attribute of his person. In reality, his charismatic image is

a social product, continuously manufactured by the often-unacknowledged affective labour of millions, particularly women from diverse class and spatial locations, whose daily investments of emotion, time, and identity formation are the true, unseen engines of his economic and cultural value. The invisibility of this fan labour is precisely what allows the celebrity commodity to appear autonomously valuable. This deeply resonates with Marx's understanding that economic value is ultimately rooted in human social relations rather than autonomous market forces.

Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

While Marx helps explain the economic dimensions of fan labour, Pierre Bourdieu offers a framework for understanding how fandom intersects with social hierarchies. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1986) complements Marx's theory of value by showing how tastes and dispositions convert into economic advantage, often reinforces class hierarchies (Bourdieu 243–48). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the knowledge, tastes, and cultural competencies that individuals use to establish social distinction. Fandom can operate as a form of cultural capital when fans demonstrate expertise, critical interpretation, or aesthetic appreciation of cultural texts. However, the capacity to convert fandom into cultural capital is deeply shaped by an individual's social position. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework of economic, cultural, and social capital, one can see how inequalities structure fan practices. Material or objectified forms of cultural capital are more accessible to the affluent, while embodied cultural capital, expressed through fandom as habitus, allows individuals to cultivate distinction. Institutionalised forms, including participation in media discourse around fandom, can even open pathways to economic advancement. Spatial context further conditions these dynamics: metropolitan centres enhance visibility through English-language publics, whereas rural and peripheral spaces often sustain alternative, gift-based economies, challenging the logic of capitalist

individualism. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the intersection of class and place within Shah Rukh Khan's fandom demonstrates how diverse forms of capital are accumulated and mobilised differently across social fields, each governed by its own norms and possibilities.

Fandom as Fan labour in *Desperately Seeking Shahrukh*

Bhattacharya's book highlights how women across class backgrounds participate in these processes, transforming personal admiration into fan labour, its use value and exchange value and the collective cultural practices that sustain the symbolic economy of fandom. An analysis of Bhattacharya's ethnographic text reveals how these investments are produced across diverse social class and locations, suggesting that fandom itself constitute a form of labour embedded in capitalist cultural economies. This insight illuminates how SRK functions across India's class-place spectrum.

Among elite women in metropolitan centres such as Delhi, fandom often manifests through intellectual and critical engagement. These women frequently participate in English-language media discourse, academic discussions, and social media conversations that analyse Shah Rukh Khan's films and public persona. Bhattacharya's description of elite women shows this clearly:

Everyone used English to talk about sex, love and marriage. The women I met believed they had more in common with characters on American TV shows than heroines in Hindi films. About half of the fan-women were married, a quarter was in what they described as happy relationships and the remaining quarter was single. Everyone was straight. Two out of every five married women I interviewed said they had married for love without any family involvement. Most were pleased with their marriages but wanted their husbands to spend more time with them. One fan-woman said, 'It's strange, the difference between men and women. When I've had a long day, I want to talk about it. He just vanishes into his TV. I think this is why many women like Shah

Rukh's films—he goes on talking to women about his feelings and everything. My husband jokes that Shah Rukh talks too much'. (118)

Women critique men in their social and professional circles as emotionally unavailable and contrast this with Shah Rukh Khan's attentive, expressive romantic persona. This reflects on how films shaped their expectations of love, marriage, and respect. These women know SRK is a constructed fantasy, they acknowledge that such men may not exist in reality. Yet choose to value this fantasy because it represents what relationships should feel like, a hallmark of sophisticated cultural engagement. In this context, fandom becomes a form of cultural distinction. Knowledge about cinema, gender politics, and popular culture allows these fans to position themselves as sophisticated cultural commentators. Their engagement reflects the intersection of fandom with education, language, and urban privilege. Rather than simply consuming films, elite fans reinterpret Shah Rukh Khan's romantic hero persona through feminist critique, discussing themes such as gender equality, consent, and modern relationships.

They comment on SRK beyond films: His interviews, wit, and global image, his ability to maintain relevance across decades and his positioning as both "romantic hero" and "smart businessman". This indicates media literacy and understanding of celebrity as a constructed, strategic identity. "Soon, you start reading Shah Rukh's interviews (your aunts and cousins ferry film magazines from Delhi) and following him on TV. You recall feeling manipulated, like he's selling himself. But even his approach to self-marketing is refreshing" (138). For an elite Delhi woman, SRK's use value lies in intellectual engagement and community with peers, this translates into the exchange value contributions of legitimacy, prestige coverage, and transnational reach.

For middle-class women in India's small towns and expanding suburban landscapes, fandom functions differently. These women often encounter Shah Rukh Khan's films and

interviews as sources of aspirational narratives that resonate with their own experiences of navigating education, careers, and romantic relationships:

For his fans, Shah Rukh's films and interviews mean whatever they want them to mean: he becomes an archive of all that remains unattainable in banal personal lives; or a call to freedom for working-class fangirls; or a self-help guru for self-helping-women; a soppy balm to soothe the rough and-tumble of an ordinary female life full of struggle, surveillance and tactical bargaining; an urge to explore bodies and their sexual appetites; or he can serve as the symbol of a metaphysical absence. (371)

In Bhattacharya's ethnographic accounts, many middle-class women describe the actor's public persona as embodying ideals of respect, emotional intelligence, and gender sensitivity. His romantic roles provide alternative models of masculinity that contrast with everyday experiences of patriarchal expectations. Within neoliberal economic contexts, these fans use fandom as a resource for self-fashioning. Shah Rukh Khan's narrative of upward mobility from a middle-class background to global stardom mirrors their own aspirations for professional success and independence. The Accountant sees Shah Rukh Khan as someone who worked his way up through discipline and intelligence. She connects his success narrative to her own struggles in precarious white-collar work and uses his films and persona to sustain professional hope and resilience. Bhattacharya in her talk with the Accountant

asked her to explain what being middle class meant to her. She scoffed and cited ten Shah Rukh interviews from the late 1990s and 2000s. She quoted the actor's self-proclaimed need to buy a home to ensure financial security for his family. How he accepted roles which other actors refused. Shah Rukh did things people born with money would not because he prioritized providing for his family above personal pride, she said. 'That is what it means to be middle class.' She ended with a discussion of how

his family was unable to afford cinema tickets, expensive health treatments or shoes. Being middle class was a state of mind, a series of moral choices. (166)

Another girl, Gold uses Shah Rukh Khan as a cultural resource to negotiate between romantic desire and material necessity. Fandom is transformed into a practical framework for evaluating relationships and imagining a more dignified life by Gold:

As the wedding date drew closer, Gold began to panic. ‘I’ll never forget —a DDLJ song was playing on TV at home and I burst out crying. My mother and sister immediately understood. They consoled me, telling me how love like that was for films and wealthy people. They knew I was crying because there would be no love or travel in my life. I began to avoid Shah Rukh songs and movies, except I was so sad that I was always thinking of him!’ (194, 195)

Middle class women use fandom not as an escape from reality, but as a way to interpret and navigate it. Their fandom is practical, reflective, and shaped by their social position. The most striking dimension of Bhattacharya’s work emerges in the exploration of fandom among working-class women in rural India. Many of these women lack access to cinemas, digital streaming platforms, or even personal televisions. Despite these constraints, fandom persists through collective viewing practices and informal networks of cultural exchange. Women gather to watch films together on shared screens or borrowed devices, transforming the act of viewing into a communal event. These gatherings operate as gift economies, where participants share resources, stories, and emotional support. This is evident in Manju’s village:

That evening, a week after Eid celebrations in November 2004, Manju’s village blossomed into a Bollywood hotspot. It was revolution. Nearly all the home-based embroidery workers fell in love with Shah Rukh. Manju had assumed the role of

curator now. Portable electronic devices, the existence of TVs in rural homes and the women's own earnings allowed a new Shah Rukh fan club to emerge. (281)

In contexts where economic opportunities and personal freedoms are severely limited, fandom becomes a space for imagining alternative possibilities. Through these practices, Shah Rukh Khan's films serve not merely as entertainment but as cultural texts that facilitate conversations about love, dignity, and self-worth.

For a rural woman like Zahira or those in Manju's village, his use value as a source of dignity, recognition, and felt meaning paradoxically contributes enormous exchange value through cultural penetration, moral authority, and the cultivation of future audiences. The crucial insight here is that even women who cannot afford to watch SRK's films in theaters—Zahira, the village women who gather for collective viewings, nevertheless constitute productive labour for the celebrity economy: they sustain his cultural prominence as a pan-Indian phenomenon who reaches "everywhere," confer upon him the moral authority that comes from mattering to "ordinary Indians" in the "real India," create future audiences in children who grow up hearing their mothers speak of SRK in rural homes, and ultimately provide the deep emotional penetration across all class and place locations that makes him valuable to brands seeking legitimacy (260-70).

The fan labour that produces SRK's exchange value takes different forms across class-place locations. Metropolitan elite women contribute critical discourse and English-language commentary that legitimates SRK as a serious cultural figure and attracts transnational prestige to his brand. Middle-class women in small cities and suburbs generate word-of-mouth and workplace conversations that build a loyal audience and create aspirational associations around his persona. Working-class women in rural India engage in collective viewing and oral transmission that generate cultural penetration, create future audiences through intergenerational transmission, and confer the moral authority that comes from his

matter to "ordinary Indians" in "real India." Each of these labour forms, though unpaid and often unrecognised, contributes to the economic value of the SRK brand. When applied to Shah Rukh Khan's stardom, this framework reveals how fans across diverse class and spatial locations perform distinct but equally invisible forms of productive labour. These differentiated uses of fandom reflect the broader dynamics of cultural capital and social stratification.

This labour is not uniform: elite urbanites leverage it for distinction, middle-class suburbanites for neoliberal self-optimisation, and working-class rural women for communal resilience. In Delhi's elite enclaves, SRK fandom manifests as sophisticated critique, converting affect into Bourdieusian distinction. Their labour curating "critical fandom" accumulates symbolic capital, positioning them as cosmopolitan tastemakers. This echoes Bourdieu's "cultural intermediaries" as those involved in "presentation and representation" (Bourdieu 325), where elite women parlay fandom into professional networks. Delhi's public spheres (Twitter, lit-fests) amplify this, unlike rural isolation. Fandom "legitimises" their voices in male-dominated arenas, revealing affective labour's gendered extraction. Ethnographically, Bhattacharya notes how these fans "read against the grain," critiquing SRK's neoliberal turns while defending his vulnerability.

Elite women in metropolitan centres such as Delhi's elite enclaves and South Mumbai, who "have the resources to travel, host gatherings and write about love and fantasy in English" (152), accumulate cultural capital through English fluency, sophisticated analysis, and access to industry insiders at film festivals; social capital through networks spanning Delhi-Mumbai-London-New York; and symbolic capital through the prestige of being taken seriously as critics rather than dismissed as "hysterical fans". Their metropolitan location matters fundamentally: spatial proximity to centres of cultural production provides access to premieres, interviews, and English-language media, enabling forms of distinction unavailable

to fans in small towns or villages, and producing the class-place intersection of elite plus metropolitan that creates the transnational fan citizen whose fandom circulates in global English-language public spheres.

Middle-class women in small cities and suburbs occupy an interstitial space that mediates between local patriarchal constraints and transnational neoliberal aspirations, as exemplified by the small-town Uttar Pradesh Accountant who talks of *Om Shanti Om* the way a corporate coach might reference a manual on excellence, extracting from the film hope and consolation as she navigates the treacherous terrain of promotions and increments in a private firm:

Shah Rukh became a map through which the Accountant navigated and made sense of the world. He also assumed the role of a personal life coach and self-help guru, one she would summon whenever she needed encouragement to pursue her independence. In particular, she repeatedly watched *Om Shanti Om*, his hilarious and heart-warming 2007 release. The film features Shah Rukh reciting a set of iconic dialogues on how our lives are similar to the stories of Hindi cinema. He suggests that the universe conspires to ensure we all find our respective happy endings. If our current circumstances are unhappy, his character says, we should know that the film is far from over. *Picture abhi baaki hai mere dost.* (169)

For these women, cultural capital takes the form of film dialogues, lyrics, and character knowledge that serve as professional navigation tools; social capital manifests in workplace friendships organised around fandom and in navigating family expectations; and aspirational capital emerges from models of how life might be different—whether through corporate success or the romantic tenderness that the suburban Mumbai flight attendant observes in SRK's heroes. This class-place intersection of middle-class plus small city or suburb produces the aspirational fan, which uses SRK to navigate the gap between where

they are and where they want to be. Navigating gig economies and arranged marriages, they mine his characters, vulnerable yet ambitious, for workplace scripts and partner benchmarks.

Here, fandom is entrepreneurial labour. Foucault argues that neoliberalism recasts the subject as an "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital" (Foucault 226). "Film critics and historians credit him with being one of the most media-savvy icons of independent India, revolutionizing Indian celebrity culture. Khan is an entrepreneur as much as an actor, at the head of an empire of endorsements and film-production plans fuelled largely by his persona" (29). SRK embodies aspirational masculinity modelling resilience in precarious jobs. Class enables partial consumption (cable TV, YouTube clips), but place constrains matters. Small-town anonymity limits public discourse, channelling labour inward. SRK's "King" archetype habituates emotional intelligence, convertible to social capital. Yet, this extracts value upward. Fans' devotion bolsters SRK's "everyman" brand, masking his billionaire status.

Working-class women in rural India practice a fundamentally different mode of fandom shaped by material constraints and collective necessity, as revealed in Zahira's seemingly inarticulate declaration: "A woman firmly committed to the realm of the real. Not a woman of fantasy and fangirling. So I was surprised when I asked my usual ice-breaker question—'who is your favourite actor?'—and she smiled and said Shah Rukh. When I asked her why, she shrugged and replied, 'Meri marzi.' That was the Zahira I knew" (243).

This is an apparent inarticulateness that is not lack of meaning but a different mode of meaning operating outside elaborated cultural capital, in oral and embodied registers. For Manju, who organised secret viewing parties for women in her village before fleeing an arranged marriage to become a Delhi garment worker, fandom created spaces of female solidarity away from male surveillance that ultimately enabled transformative life decisions. Rural location fundamentally shapes this fandom through limited access (no cinemas,

unreliable electricity, no disposable income), collective viewing as necessity rather than choice, the requirement of secrecy under male surveillance, and oral transmission of knowledge. Here cultural capital resides in oral culture of songs and film fragments, social capital in secret viewing parties and networks of mutual support, and symbolic capital in the dignity, recognition, and courage attainable within severely constrained circumstances. The class-place intersection of working-class plus rural spaces produces the collective fan, whose fandom is necessarily communal, embodied, and resistant, and whose value contribution, cultural penetration, moral authority, and the cultivation of future audiences, paradoxically rivals that of more privileged fans despite their non-consumption within the formal market.

In the clandestine gatherings of women like Manju, who, barred by patriarchal norms and economic constraints from accessing cinema halls, create their own spaces of devotion. In the hidden corners of their villages, perhaps in a home temporarily free of men, or a secluded spot known only to the group, these women meet to watch pirated or borrowed content on whatever screen is available. There is no transaction at the door; admission is free, making this a pure gift economy among the participants. This act of collective viewing is more than just entertainment; it is a deliberate carving out of a space away from male surveillance, where women can laugh, cry, and react without censorship. It is here that community is forged through shared devotion, as the women bond over their love for the star and, through him, find a language for their own unspoken aspirations. This solidarity, built in the shadows, can have transformative power. For Manju, this collective dreaming provided the courage and the network necessary to imagine a different life. Her eventual flight to Delhi, where she enters the world of garment work, is a direct outcome of this fandom. It altered her life trajectory, turning a fantasy nurtured in a village viewing party into a tangible, if difficult, reality.

To understand these gatherings, we must turn to the concept of fandom as a gift economy, a framework powerfully articulated by Tisha Turk. Turk notes that fandom's gift economy values "gifts of time and skill," where worth stems from labour invested (Turk 10). In her analysis, fandom operates on non-market logic where creative works, experiences, and emotional investments are shared freely within a community, existing in a state of constant tension with the formal market economy (Turk 12-15). However, this dynamic is profoundly shaped by spatial location, creating a crucial distinction in how the gift economy functions. In metropolitan contexts, the gift economy typically supplements market access; fans with the means to purchase official content choose to share it, adding value through communal discussion and transformative works (Turk 18). But in a rural context like Manju's, the gift economy does not supplement. Instead it substitutes for the market. Collective viewing is not a lifestyle choice but the sole means of access. The pirated DVD or borrowed hard drive is not an alternative to a cinema ticket; it is the cinema. This distinction reveals that the "gift" in rural India is not an abundance of choice, but a necessity born of exclusion, making the community it builds all the more vital (Bhattacharya 258-59; Turk 20).

This rural gift economy brings us to the theoretical heart of the matter. Many of the women who love him can't even afford to watch his films, so it's not like they are even transacting at that level. This defines a limit case for theories of fandom and consumption. These women represent an attachment to the star that is entirely unmediated by market exchange: fandom as pure affect, existing outside the transactional logic of buying a ticket or a piece of merchandise. This phenomenon carries profound theoretical implications. It demonstrates a core Marxist insight: that value is not identical with price (Marx 126). The women generate immense cultural value for the SRK brand without ever paying a price for it. They are at the spatial periphery of India, yet they are central to the star's cultural penetration and moral authority. By loving SRK in spaces where the market cannot reach, they confer

upon him a form of legitimacy as a star who matters to "real India"—a form of moral capital that the film industry and corporate brands find invaluable. Furthermore, their devotion plants a seed for the future; their children will grow up in homes where SRK is a beloved presence, ensuring the reproduction of his audience for generations to come.

The power of this non-transactional fandom, however, is not merely a resource extracted by the culture industry. As Manju's trajectory shows, gift-economy fandom in rural contexts can produce real, material transformations, not just psychic compensations for a lack of resources. The fandom provides a rare form of solidarity with other women, breaking the isolation imposed by patriarchal structures. It gives them the courage to imagine alternatives to their prescribed lives, to dream of a different kind of masculinity, a different kind of future. The networks formed in these secret viewings can become lifelines, providing information, contacts, and emotional support that enable escape from untenable situations. Manju's journey to garment work in Delhi is a testament to this, showing that fandom can be a catalyst for material life change. The implication is clear: in contexts where market access is denied, fandom operating as a gift economy produces tangible use values of solidarity, courage and dignity that enable women to resist and navigate the constraints of patriarchal capitalism, even while their love remains embedded within and valuable to that very system. Unlike elites, their capital is social: networks sustain migration to cities, challenging urban-rural divides. This honours Bhattacharya's anti-patronising gaze, framing rural fandom as agented world-making.

Economic Transformations Driven by SRK Fandom

For many women, particularly those who earn their own income, the ability to watch a film, purchase a poster, or repeatedly listen to songs of Shah Rukh Khan using their own money becomes a subtle yet significant assertion of financial autonomy. Bhattacharya highlights how select fans can "flex their economic muscle" to engage more directly with the

star (73), transforming fandom into a socially acceptable space where they can exercise economic agency. Spending on personal pleasure, rather than restricting expenditures to household needs, therefore becomes a quiet but meaningful challenge to patriarchal norms that traditionally regulate women's financial choices.

Fandom also functions as a gateway to broader economic resources. Bhattacharya's ethnographic observations indicate that engagement with Shah Rukh Khan's cultural persona often facilitates access to material and symbolic resources that influence women's economic lives. His public advocacy on issues affecting women, including sanitation and dignity, provided cultural legitimacy for women's presence in public and professional spaces. In some cases, fandom motivated struggles for technological access, as women negotiated with their families to acquire televisions or mobile phones in order to watch his films or songs. This pursuit of media access had implications beyond entertainment, indirectly expanding women's technological literacy and connectivity. Additionally, SRK's cinematic roles and public persona offer psychological resources for navigating professional life. Bhattacharya recounts instances where fans drew emotional resilience from films such as *Om Shanti Om*, using its themes of perseverance and reinvention to cope with workplace pressures and career advancement. For middle-class women in particular, Shah Rukh Khan's narrative of success as an outsider who rose through merit embodies the aspirational ideal of upward mobility within India's liberalising economy.

One of the most striking illustrations of fandom's transformative economic potential is the case of Manju, a Muslim garment worker from rural Bihar. Manju organised secret film-viewing gatherings for women in her village, creating collective spaces of fandom that existed beyond the surveillance of patriarchal authority. These gatherings gradually fostered solidarity among the women and encouraged them to imagine alternative futures beyond the confines of arranged marriages and domestic restrictions. For Manju, this sense of collective

courage ultimately led to a decisive life change: she fled an arranged marriage and migrated to Delhi to work in the garment industry. Her journey represents a profound economic transformation, from a rural woman with limited prospects to an urban wage earner with independent income. In this instance, fandom functioned not simply as emotional attachment but as a source of social capital and psychological empowerment that enabled tangible material change.

Fandom operates as a proxy indicator of women's economic freedoms. Participation in fandom presupposes access to free time, disposable income, technology, and markets, the resources historically restricted for many women. As she notes, the ability to follow an artist's work requires precisely those forms of economic autonomy that women have long struggled to secure. Consequently, fandom can function both as an expression of economic empowerment and as a diagnostic indicator of structural inequality. When women possess the freedom to earn and spend according to their preferences, fandom becomes one of the ways in which that freedom is expressed. Conversely, examining who can participate in fandom reveals the uneven distribution of economic autonomy across class and geographic contexts.

Despite generating such value, however, fans rarely receive material returns for their participation. Instead, the economic benefits are largely captured by the star system and the broader entertainment industry. This dynamic reveals a striking paradox within the political economy of fandom. Many of the women who express deep admiration for Shah Rukh Khan are unable to participate fully in the consumer market surrounding his films. Some fans cannot afford cinema tickets or lack access to theatres altogether. Yet their devotion still contributes to the expansion of SRK's cultural influence through storytelling, shared memories, and oral transmission of his cinematic narratives. Their fandom therefore produces exchange value for the star's brand even when it is not accompanied by direct economic transactions. This phenomenon reflects a key insight of Karl Marx, who argued in *Capital: A*

Critique of Political Economy that value can be generated through social labour even when it does not immediately appear in the form of market price (Marx 129).

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that fandom produces multiple forms of economic change. In some cases, women directly assert economic agency by spending their own income on leisure and entertainment. In others, fandom indirectly supports economic mobility by providing psychological resources, technological access, or aspirational narratives that influence career trajectories. At the same time, fans collectively generate cultural value that strengthens the celebrity economy while receiving little economic compensation in return. This dynamic reinforces a class differentiation within fandom: elite and middle-class women often participate through consumption, while working class women contribute primarily through emotional and cultural labour.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that fandom produces economic change more significantly within the celebrity economy than within the fan economy itself. While individual fans may occasionally experience material transformation through the social networks and psychological empowerment fostered by fandom, the broader system primarily converts their affective investments into market value for the star and entertainment industry. Recognising this tension allows a more nuanced understanding of fandom as both a site of empowerment and a mechanism through which cultural capitalism extracts value from emotional labour.

Conclusion

The journey from the village viewing parties of Bihar to the theoretical conclusions of a feminist political economy reveals a complex and interlocking set of arguments. First, fan affect must be understood as a form of productive labour across all class and place locations. From the elite woman in Delhi to the landless labourer in rural Bihar, the emotional investments of women generate real economic value for the SRK brand, a reality that

commodity fetishism typically obscures. Second, class and place are not mere backgrounds but interlocking structures that shape fandom itself. Bourdieu's concepts help us see how the same star functions differently across India's differentiated spaces: as a marker of distinction and transnational capital in metropolitan elite spaces ; as a symbol of aspiration and professional extraction in small cities; and as a source of collective solidarity and embodied devotion in rural working-class spaces. Third, rural gift economies force us to complicate our theories of value. Women who cannot consume the commodity still produce immense value through cultural penetration, moral authority, and future audiences, proving that value can radically exceed price. Finally, place is not a backdrop but a determinant, shaping everything from the mode of engagement (individual criticism vs. collective viewing) to what fandom can produce (transnational prestige vs. survival solidarity). This reveals a constitutive contradiction at the heart of the phenomenon: rural women's fandom enables escape from patriarchal arrangements while remaining fundamentally dependent on the commercial culture it springs from, a contradiction that is not a flaw in the analysis but an accurate reflection of life under neoliberalism across India's uneven terrain.

Shrayana Bhattacharya's *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh* offers an ethnographically rich account of how fandom operates within the intersections of gender, class, and geography in contemporary India. This article has argued that the book provides crucial insights into the political economy of fan affect, demonstrating how emotional attachment to Shah Rukh Khan functions as a form of productive labour. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, the analysis highlights how fan practices generate both economic value and cultural capital. At the same time, the article emphasises that fandom cannot be understood outside the contexts of class and place. Elite, middle-class, and working-class women engage with celebrity culture in distinct ways, reflecting broader social inequalities while also creating spaces of creativity, aspiration, and solidarity. In doing so, fandom

emerges not simply as a form of entertainment but as a significant cultural practice that reveals the complex relationships between affect, labour, and power in neoliberal India.

The analysis centers on Shah Rukh Khan fandom among Indian women, limiting generalisability to male fans, non-Indian contexts, or other celebrities where affective labour dynamics differ. Reliance on Bhattacharya's ethnographic accounts risks interpretive bias, overlooking quantitative metrics of fan labour's economic impact or longitudinal shifts post-2021 amid streaming and social media evolutions. However, by theorising differentiated forms of fandom, this article contributes to feminist political economy, celebrity studies, and cultural geography. It demonstrates how fan affect circulates within broader structures of labour, class, and space. Fan labour exposes women's hidden contributions to celebrity capital and celebrity studies, mapping affective value chains. It aids cultural studies curricula examining intersectional identities and can guide media industries in ethically harnessing fan affect for value co-creation. Future research could pursue comparative analyses of male or queer SRK fans, incorporating digital ethnography of social media practices, or assess affective labour's scalability within AI-mediated fan ecosystems.

In sum, *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh* proves fandom's productivity, urging scholars to value women's emotional economies. Metropolitan women navigate anomie amid abundance; small-town women navigate aspiration and constraint; rural women navigate survival with few resources. SRK fandom is both a symptom of and a response to these spatially differentiated conditions, serving as a lens through which women articulate their relationship to a world that often excludes them.

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