

## **Shall we dance, Rajni? The Japanese cult of Kollywood**

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### **Abstract:**

In 1998, the Indian film *Muthu* became a surprising hit in Japan, which then led to a craze for popular Indian films in the country. While Indian musicals have been frequently screened in the Middle East, Russia, and in China, until that point, such films received virtually no distribution in Japan. Moreover, unlike the popular Indian films that travel globally — Bollywood's Hindi-speaking productions — *Muthu* is a Tamil speaking film from the south of India, a product of the industry known as Kollywood. The South Indian film actor Rajnikanth, who stars in *Muthu*, subsequently began to enjoy a rather small, yet devoted circle of fans in Japan.

This paper explores the exhibition of popular Indian films in Japan. However, I argue that rather than transnational-flows, the Japanese reception of South Indian cinema actually exemplifies a localized, specifically Japanese, form of viewership. Screenings of popular South Indian films in Japan are events for audiences to interact with one another as a collective in ways that render the films themselves much less important than the cinema experience. Instead, communal aspects of participating and appropriating the images and sounds are emphasized. Thus, unlike the assumption that audiences of international films are taking part in a global phenomenon, the exhibition in Japan of South Indian films is a collective form of viewership that exemplifies how localism obfuscates the otherwise seemingly buoyant forces of globalism.

**Keywords:** Japanese cinema, reception, trans-national and trans-cultural flows, television, audience studies

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In 1998, a surprising film swept the box office in Japan: *Muthu* (titled *Mutu: Odoru maharaja*),<sup>2</sup> a South Indian production starring a local South Indian star, Rajnikanth. Although foreign films dominated the box office in Japan in the late 1990s and Indian films

had been circulating wildly throughout Asia, only a handful of popular Indian films, let alone South Indian films, had been distributed in Japan at that point. Tamil-speaking films like *Muthu*, known as Kollywood productions, typically are not shown where there is no significant Tamil-speaking population. However, the success of *Muthu* has led to a rapid succession of films starring Rajnikanth in Japan, where he became known as Rajni, and a dedicated fanbase and fan club emerged.

Despite the cross-border aspects of the reception of Indian cinema in Japan, and the potential of discussing this phenomenon in light of media flows beyond the paradigm of geographical proximity, scholars have shown little interest. Two scholars who are exceptions in this regard are S.V. Srinavas, and Matsuoka Tamaki,<sup>3</sup> the most prominent writer on Indian cinema in Japan and author of a blog about Indian and other Asian cinemas. However, neither Srinavas nor Matsuoka consider the wider dissemination of Indian cinema across different media within Japan or the particularly participatory way it is often consumed there.

In the following discussion, I introduce the reception of Indian cinema in Japan, the historical context that Matsuoka partially lays out, while also largely accepting Srinavas' concept of the 'B-circuit,' which refers to a local limited-scale exhibition of international films. Yet I also widen the discussion to address aspects that are not acknowledged in previous discussions of this cult movement. Specifically, I discuss the factors that enabled this phenomenon in the first place, Rajnikanth's role in the movement, and the special mediating forms through which fans and Japanese audiences watch Indian films. Above all, I argue that modes of participation in and domestication of popular Indian cinema in Japan exceed what scholars otherwise have considered transcultural, border-crossing dialogue. Rather than an example of international flow, I argue that the phenomenon is indicative of the power of localism over globalism, and that it is precisely the act of participation – the creative and somewhat institutional aspects of the reception of Indian cinema in Japan – that reduces these otherwise seemingly diversifying cultural flows into a phenomenon that ignores the global for the sake of the local.

## **A Brief History of Indian Films in Japan**

The creative, appropriative and intermedial vectors responsible for the reception of Indian films in Japan began with one of the earliest screenings of an Indian popular film in the postwar era. In 1955, Bimal Roy's 1952 *Baiju Bawra* aired on NHK (Japan's public broadcaster) with its original Hindi soundtrack and without subtitles. However, the soundtrack was partially muted, and the dominant sound on the film was the voice of Doi Hisaya, who appeared in a small bubble during the film's broadcast, and simultaneously translated all the dialogue (Matsuoka 2006, 85). This performative translation by Doi is reminiscent of the role *benshi*, or narrators, played during the introduction of cinema in Japan in the 1910s. As Hideaki Fujiki discusses, *benshi* were oral guides (*kōjō ii*) or expositors (*setsumeisha*). These narrators, Fujiki points out, also often 'explained' or 'orally guided' both foreign and locally produced films (Fujiki 2006, 78-79).

Two Indian films screened at theaters in Japan before *Baiju Bawra* aired on television, but the distributors of those films cut most of the song and dance sequences. After this early exposure, no popular film from India received a general release in Japan for several decades. Although Indian films occasionally screened at film festivals, nearly all those films were globally distributed and had already screened at other international venues.

In 1988, Tokyo held a large-scale Indian film festival, at which many films, including popular classics, were screened. Nearly a decade later, at the 1997 *Tokyo International Fantastic Film Festival*, another expansive list of films from India screened, including animated Japanese-Indian co-production *The Ramayana*, as well as *Muthu*. There are no particularly fantastical aspects to *Muthu*, nor a clear rationale for why the film was included in the festival program where, not surprisingly, it failed to attract any special attention. However, a year later, the film received regular (albeit limited) distribution in Japan, and became an unprecedented success for any non-Japanese, Asian production. In fact, the film was more successful in Japan than it was in India, including in the Tamil-speaking region from which it originated.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Muthu* in the Context of Fandom**

To date, the only scholars discussing the reception of *Muthu* in Japan have been interested solely in the reasons for the film's success. Here, however, I deal mainly with different questions: in what particular ways was *Muthu* successful, and what aspects of the film made it a cult phenomenon. Moreover, my focus is less on the film itself, and more on its Japanese audiences, and the terms by which they receive Indian popular films. Particularly, I highlight collective participatory activities in the reception process of the film, and other films that followed it.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha briefly mentions the reception of Indian cinema in Japan in the context of what he calls the Bollywoodization of Indian cinema, or the immense domestic influence of the Mumbai-based film industry over all other Indian regional cinemas, as well as its global appeal. Rajadhyaksha makes the point that Indian films are not a mainstream phenomenon in Japan, but rather a trend limited to fans of the star, Rajnikanth (Rajadhyaksha 2009, 70-73). In other words, Rajadhyaksha belittles the importance of this phenomenon in terms of global Bollywood, reducing it to a mere cult phenomenon. Although Rajadhyaksha never argues that this cult following is insignificant in Japan (nor does he use the term 'cult'), I argue that the cult/mainstream divide is more complicated in this context because popular media outlets play a crucial role in the reception of Indian film in Japan.

Concerning the Japanese fans of Rajnikanth, Rajadhyaksha writes that some of the most devoted among them even visit India for *darshan* (Rajadhyaksha 2009, 74).<sup>5</sup> However, not only is *darshan* a term probably unfamiliar to most Japanese, including devoted fans of Indian cinema, the religious context of cult stardom does not exist in Japan in the same way it exists elsewhere.

Although religious devotion and film fandom are different phenomena, Matt Hills argues that terminology is important, and that scholars should not forget the religious context from which the term 'cult' emerged. He does not equate religious devotees with dedicated fans of popular culture, but he argues that scholars should discuss devoted fans in terms of religiosity, or what he calls 'neoreligiosity,' because some fans refer to themselves in these or similar terms (Hills 2002, 85-96).

Even if religion and religious terminology might be different in Asia than in the West, religion does play a significant role in fandom and film spectatorship in India. For example, Aswin Punathambekar draws a distinction in Indian film fandom between two degrees or modes of spectatorship: rowdy and *rasika*. The term 'rowdy' is commonly associated with audiences who demonstrate a more unrestrained and indifferent form of viewership. Punathambekar borrows the term *rasika* from Sanskrit *rasa* aesthetic theory and religious devotion to denote a more sophisticated form of cinematic appreciation (Punathambekar 2007, 271-288). She discusses the semi-religious devotion to Amitabh Bachchan, probably the most popular North Indian film star of all time,<sup>6</sup> as well as audiences' more complex reception of composer A.R. Rahman (who also composed the music for *Muthu*).

In many respects, Rajnikanth is the South Indian equivalent of Amitabh Bachchan, at least among Tamil-speaking populations, as seen, for instance, in the documentary film *For the Love of a Man* (dir. Rinku Kalsy, 2015).<sup>7</sup> However, despite the religious aspects of Rajnikanth's fandom in India,<sup>8</sup> it is doubtful that any religious connotations carry over to the Japanese fandom context.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, rather than an Indian religion-related fandom phenomenon, Punathambekar ultimately wants to see beyond localism or the nation state, and to consider instead a new global kind of film fandom in India. Although the Japanese fandom around Indian cinema might suggest such a possibility, it is questionable how far Japanese audiences ultimately distance themselves from a Japanese cultural point of view.

### **Japanese Viewership in Global and Local Terms**

Several scholars have pondered tensions between global and local aspects in the reception of other foreign cultural products in Japan. The most visible scholar in this regard is Koichi Iwabuchi, who, in one study, focuses on the reception of popular culture from Hong Kong in the 1990s. Koichi Iwabuchi argues that Japanese consumers of Hong Kong cinema and pop stars mostly wanted to prove 'modish and sophisticated tastes,' by consuming such products (Iwabuchi 2002, 186). Iwabuchi also explains this seemingly niche fandom phenomenon as a nostalgic and somewhat patronizing contemplation of another Asian nation that reminds Japanese audiences of earlier times in their own country, before more sophisticated technological developments occurred.

It is questionable whether the Japanese cult of Rajnikanth and South Indian films<sup>10</sup> can be explained along similar lines. After all, the sociological, geopolitical, and cultural differences between the media environments in Japan and India are significant. Moreover, with the lack of any shared historical references or even a sense of familiarity, Japanese fans are unlikely to develop feelings of nostalgic sympathy toward this region. Iwabuchi himself

urges caution in describing something as a cross-boundary flow, even in the plausible case of the reception of South Korean culture in Japan. In a study on the Japanese reception of recent Korean popular culture or what is known as *hallyu*, Iwabuchi acknowledges the increased interest in South Korea, including a growing interest in studying the Korean language that resulted from the popularity of the TV drama series *Winter Sonata* (*Gyeoul yeonga*, 2002). However, Iwabuchi argues that the popularity of non-Japanese media in Japan does not translate into acceptance of non-Japanese people living in Japan, particularly, because he does not find any improvement in the lives of Korean residents of Japan (*zainichi*), who have long been under pressure to assimilate or leave (2008, 243-264).

Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto have criticized Iwabuchi's general position on transnational media consumption. Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto propose an alternative approach based on the notion of transcultural, cross-border fandom. In part, they claim, Iwabuchi's argument is predicated on (yet simultaneously rejects) Henry Jenkins' ideas about 'pop cosmopolitanism,'<sup>11</sup> which they explain as 'the ability of cross-border fan activity to engender and advance cross-cultural awareness and understanding' (Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto 2013, 97). It is within this context that another, arguably more influential, concept of fans as 'poachers' has emerged (Jenkins 1992). Rather than sticking with the concept of 'poaching,' however, Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto argue that Jenkins and other fandom scholars have now moved on to discuss fans as activists.

Jenkins himself in his early work on 'textual poachers' already discusses the possibility of seeing fans as activists, so the two notions may not be oppositional as Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto suggest.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, even if a direct comparison of poachers and activists is missing from Jenkins' earlier work, scholars should likely acknowledge media poachers as activists. The only tension between these two concepts is that the former, poachers, has negative associations, while the latter largely has a positive connotation. It was not Jenkins' intention to create a good/bad divide between forms of fandom. Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto too strive to see beyond such a dichotomy, and as a result they too hastily characterize Iwabuchi's analysis of transnational cultural consumption as a critique. As an alternative, Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto propose predicating fandom on transcultural desire shared by subjects who may 'supersede national, regional and/or geographical boundaries' (2013, 99).

The case of the Japanese cult of Rajnikanth, and South Indian cinema can therefore be an ideal litmus test for this theory, because this cult encompasses a regional cinema that is markedly distanced in physical and cultural terms from the fan community. However, the proactive nature of this community of recipients makes them, somewhat counterintuitively, less receptive to foreign cultural flows—that is, they become a group of individuals who enhance boundaries rather than superseding them. Considering this community as, in a way, reclusive or introverted, is appropriate not only because Japanese consumers engage in literal poaching (due to piracy or copyright violations that are often the only means possible for them to access South Indian films), but also because of an active mode of participation that suggests a form of collective cultural appropriation.

Iwabuchi has actually softened his initial warning against celebrating the free flow of inter-Asian cross-border content. He added a section to a re-publication of his critical analysis of the impact (or lack thereof) of the Korean Wave in Japan in which he notes the potential for 'transnational dialogue through media consumption' (Iwabuchi 2015, 95). He also calls for further research into media representation, particularly of sexuality, race, class, and migration, because he thinks these issues 'go beyond the resilient national-cultural borders' (Iwabuchi 2015, 112).

In contrast to Iwabuchi's suggestion to study images or narratives, as well as his tendency to embrace transnationalism as a fact of life in the twenty-first century, I argue that rather than representation, it is still more important to examine issues bound up with distribution and promotion, as well as the nature of audiences' reaction to, and participation in, the reception of any given film culture, in order to assess how 'trans'-national media consumption has really become. This is because, firstly, audiences in Japan do not enjoy free or direct access to Indian popular media and are reliant on mediators, translators, and informers for providing them with the products they desire. Secondly, and more significantly, I share Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto's basic premise that in the study of film fandom the focus should be the viewers, or *how* they watch films, rather than *what* exactly they view. The examples discussed by Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto of fans transversing national borders by means of creative reception, provides another indication of the shift in power from images or cinematic texts to the viewer, who is free to make use of them on her own terms.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto link such consumption of foreign media with liberalism and a progressive openness that could potentially undermine the resilience of national borders, I see also conservative, isolationist, and perhaps even backward-looking social mindscapes.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Muthu* in Japan**

My critical position challenging the emancipatory potential of Japanese consumption of Indian popular films is not unique. S.V. Srinivas, too, explains the Japanese Kollywood cult phenomenon as simply a successful distribution mechanism. He points out that unlike Rajadhyaksha's description of the cult as a fad centering on Rajnikanth, the marketing of *Muthu* actually revolved around Meena, the film's leading actress (Srinivas 2013, 626). Indeed, Meena appears alone on the film's original promotional material in Japan and on its local DVD cover. Moreover, fans formed several clubs dedicated to the South Indian actress, and invited her to the country several times. Furthermore, Japanese fans sometimes refer to films starring Meena as *Mīna-mono*, as if they were a sub-genre.<sup>15</sup> Yet, even more crucial, according to Srinivas, was the lack of value, or the obscurity of the product for its foreign receptive community, as well as the increase in mini-theaters that allowed what he terms its B-circuit, or limited-scale distribution success (Srinivas 2013, 627-630). By this term, Srinivas refers to a low-key distribution of films that cater to consumers of either art-house or niche cinematic products. Similar marketing and distribution channels exist elsewhere, for



example, in the U.K, as Oliver Dew shows in his study on the distribution of Japanese films as part of an on-going 'hype' (2007).

Matsuoka Tamaki offers another perspective on Rajnikanth and Indian cinema in Japan. Matsuoka, who assisted Srinivas' research, acknowledges the importance of the space chosen for the public screenings of *Muthu*. The film screened in the fashionable district Shibuya, at Cinema Rise, where cult-like (*karuto teki na*) screenings are more likely to occur. Matsuoka adds that the timing of the film's release in Japan was good for this kind of film. The release occurred after a long period during which Indian popular films did not receive general distribution. The timing of the film was, according to Matsuoka, bolstered by the small community of Hong Kong film fans, already open to exposure to non-Japanese Asian culture. Moreover, Matsuoka credits the film's Japanese distributors, Edoki Jun and his associates, for astutely reading the spirit of the time. However, Matsuoka and Edoki attribute most of the film's success to its visual and narrative qualities. Matsuoka writes that the film is particularly well-made and entertaining, that it effectively solicits an emotional response, and that its depiction of the Indian countryside resonated well with popular perceptions of India in Japan (2006, 99-100). Edoki attributes the film's success to its overall message of peace, and its 'ultra-happy' mood (1998, 25).<sup>16</sup>

None of the Indian films released in Japan after *Muthu* have been as successful despite the fact that many of these films share similar visual qualities and plotlines. The 1993 film *Yejaman* (released in Japan in 1999 as *Yajaman: Odoru maharaja 2*, as if it were *Muthu*'s sequel) also stars Rajnikanth, similarly showcases images of South India's rural landscapes, and, much like *Muthu*, can also easily be interpreted as promoting a peaceful or harmonious society. Despite these similarities, *Yejaman* did not attract such big audiences. However, although Matsuoka, Srinivas, and Rajadhyaksha suggest that the cult of South Indian films in Japan is limited to *Muthu*, the biggest revenue-producing Indian film in Japan is probably *Enthiran* (distributed in Japan in 2012 as *Robotto*).<sup>17</sup> *Enthiran* stars Rajnikanth in a double role, but unlike *Muthu* and *Yejaman*, the film has an urban and futuristic plotline.

Yamashita Hiroshi, the leading Japanese scholar of Tamil media and culture, as well as the person who subtitled *Muthu*, provides greater insight into the surprising reception of *Muthu* in Japan.<sup>18</sup> Yamashita points out that shortly before the public release of the alleged first 'dancing maharaja' film in Japan, a Japanese dancing film, Suō Masayuki's 1996 *Shall We Dance?*, made headlines. *Shall We Dance?* became both a local and global success.<sup>19</sup> Hollywood even produced a remake of the film, but it was only after the success of *Muthu* that Suō himself and others started to think about similarities between the reception of the two films in Japan. Suō took his film to India, and reported on his visit in a book titled *Indo mochi*, or *Possessing India* (Suō 2001). Similarly to Suō's book title, Yamashita notes how the circulation of a certain image of India on public television in Japan facilitated a process of 'possession' (Yamashita 2002, 27-28). Numerous television programs at the time featured segments that referred to India and Indian cinema, often condescendingly, parodying in particular the ubiquity of dance and song sequences in Indian popular films.<sup>20</sup>

## Indian Cinema in the Japanese Media Eco-system

One example of Japanese media's treatment of *Muthu* is the *monomane* (mimicry)<sup>21</sup> segment in variety shows such as *Ucchan Nanchan no Urinari!!* (known as *Urinari*)<sup>22</sup> in which comedian Yamaguchi Tomomitsu sang part of the film's theme song in Tamil, making the audience laugh (see **Figure 1**).<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 1:** Yamaguchi Tomomitsu mimics Rajnikanth

As Yamashita indicates, televisuality or intermediality played a decisive part in *Muthu*'s Japanese reception. However, in contrast to Yamashita's somewhat neutral depiction of this process, I contend it ushered in an overtly compromising image of a cultural Other. Yamashita points to the importance of the television show *Urinari* in popularizing a certain image of Indian cinema in the country. While not directly referring to the film, after *Shall We Dance?* became a box-office hit, *Urinari* started to incorporate dance sequences, and at one point introduced highly popular ballroom dance contests. Participants in these contests were famous celebrities who frequented the small screen but had little or no previous dance experience, much like the fictional characters in Suō's film. Unlike the film, which does depict some comical moments yet takes this amateur dance scene quite seriously, Japanese television largely presented song-and-dance acts in Indian cinema as jokes.



**Figure 2:** A screengrab from the VHS version of *Muthu* that circulated in Japan.



When Yamashita subtitled *Muthu*, he did not merely render Tamil into Japanese. For example, in an interview with the *New Indian Express*, he noted that, in Tamil films, people talk too much and too fast for the common Japanese viewer, so he omitted some of the dialogue in his translations and avoided certain jokes that he found less appealing to the Japanese public.<sup>24</sup> For example, in one scene, the film's protagonist, Muthu, finds himself in Tamil Nadu's neighboring state. He is ill-informed about how to ask for directions in the local language, but Yamashita does not reveal this joke to the Japanese viewers; instead, he presents them with gibberish (see **Figure 2**).

The subtitle simply gives the viewer some of the sounds that Muthu is making: *unma tarū*. This is unlike the version circulating in the Indian subcontinent (see **Figure 3**).



**Figure 3:** A screengrab from the Indian DVD version of *Muthu*.

In addition, Yamashita reportedly added subtitles to explain aspects of Indian life that Japanese viewers might not be familiar with, such as applying *sinndoor* on the foreheads by women to 'indicate chastity.' His intrusive textual guides on the screen parallel the increasing use of inscribed text, known as *telop* (*teroppu*, in Japanese), in shows aired on Japanese television.<sup>25</sup> Aaron Gerow, who singles out in particular the use of *telop* in *Urinari*, ironically calls this practice a 'kind form of participation.' That is, while acknowledging the participatory avenue the text allows audiences, the practice constantly also favors one interpretation, and thus limits other ways to engage with what the show presents on the screen. Gerow therefore suspects not only that the practice puts forth 'politics of less kindly forms of participation,' but also that this technique might involve also 'making viewing an issue of collective agency' (Gerow 2010, 146).

This sense of the audience as a coherent cultural group is felt also in the way Japanese audiences are at times specifically addressed as a defined collective. For example, in 1999, one of the hosts of *Urinari* released a short Tamil-speaking film that expanded on the joke of Indian cinema appearing on Japanese television. The film's title, *Ucchan Nanchan no Nattu!!*, refers to *Muthu* (commonly called *Mutu* in Japan), as well as the television program most directly linked to its popularization. Like the television program, the short film was known in its abbreviated form as *Nattu*, and was mainly the work of host Nanbara

Kiotaka. In the film, Nanbara<sup>26</sup> plays Nattu, a low-class South Indian man who, like in *Muthu*, reveals at the end of film that he is actually of royal descent. The Nippon Television Network Corporation produced the film, and released it as double bill with a fully-fledged Kollywood production, *Jeans* (its Japanese distributors added the subtitle: *Sekai wa futari no tame ni*, or 'the world is [made] for two'). Although *Nattu* features Tamil dialogue, even by its non-Indian cast, more than half of its thirty-six minutes consists of fighting and song-and-dance sequences, which is more than in an average Indian production.

*Nattu* does not emphasize its Japanese connections, but it does not hide them, either. The most striking non-Indian aspect of the film is the main character, Nattu. Rather than dressing like an Indian man, as in the *monomane* segment, Nattu appears in the short film with exaggeratedly long hair stitched to the sides of his head, as if to assure the audience that this is a comedic act. Nattu's theatrical fighting style is the other notable non-Indian element of the film. At the climax of the film, Nattu uses a sumo-fighting technique, the Japanese wrestling sport that is never used for actual fighting. The full-length pseudo-sequel of the film with which it shares only the main character, *Nattu: Odoru ninja densetsu* (Natu: The Dancing Ninja Legend), was released a year later and features Japanese dialogue and more direct Japanese references in the fighting scenes.<sup>27</sup>

*Natu: The Dancing Ninja Legend* does not continue the narrative of its shorter predecessor. Rather, in this episode, Nattu discovers that he is actually a descendant of a great Japanese ninja legacy. Most significant in the context of viewership, however, is the opening of the film, where Nanbara and another regular cast member of *Urinari* (they are known as *Nanami gumi*), directly address the audience, and explain that the film is meant to be experienced like an Indian film (see **Figure 4**). This means, they elaborate, that rather than 'watching,' the audience should participate (*sanka*) by clapping their hands, cheering for the main characters, and booing the villains.



**Figure 4:** Nattu (left) explaining how to watch an Indian film.

Indeed, active participation by Japanese viewers has greatly contributed to the process of appropriating *Muthu* and other Indian, or Indian-themed films into the local imaginary as a product for collective consumption.

Nanbara's call for audience participation has since extended to screenings of films that were not produced in anticipation of participatory action. Often, before the screening

of Indian films in Japan, the organizers provide instructions to the audience, similar to the one Nanbara offered his viewers (see **Figure 5**).



**Figure 5:** Dancers in Indian outfits explaining how to dance during song sequences before a screening of *Dabangg* (dir. Kashyap, 2010, 'Daban daitanfuteki' in Japanese) in Shinemāto Roppongi, Tokyo, July 18, 2014.

Subtitles, too, continue to serve as means toward a similar goal, particularly during song sequences (see **Figure 6**).



**Figure 6:** This is a sequence from the 2007 Hindi speaking film, *Om Shanti Om* (released in Japan as *Koi suru rinne: Ōmu shanti ōmu*), screened in Osaka, May 7, 2014. The subtitles are rather faithful to the words of the song, 'well, sing! Raise your hands high in the air, and shout!,' but the audience is instructed by the organizers to take this as a literal invitation to get up from their seats, and to sing and dance.

Thus, the communal aspects of participating and appropriating the images are emphasized, and the possibility of participatory action is part and parcel of the cinematic attraction.

## From *Muthu* to Masala

What the above examples suggest is not so much an interest in a foreign culture, as a unique mode of Japanese appropriation of Indian cinematic imaginary. This appropriation is already apparent in *Muthu*'s marketing strategy. The film's distribution team produced a special pamphlet (*chirashi*) to promote the film, which described it as 'ultra-happy,' and stressed that it was not a regular film. The Chinese characters of the Japanese text (*kanji*) proposed instead that it was a 'dai goraku eiga,' or a grand cinematic amusement, and the reading imposed on the characters (*furigana* or reading aid above the *kanji*) asked potential viewers to pronounce these characters as 'masara mūbī' (masala movie). The back of the pamphlet describes this seemingly unique genre in five points that are alternatively informative and instructive:

First, during screenings of a masala movie, it is encouraged to clap one's hands and shout when the hero or heroine appears. It is also permissible to whistle, or do what audiences can do during kabuki performances.<sup>28</sup> Second, when a song or dance sequence begins, audiences are encouraged to clap their hands and stamp their feet, as if they were at a live concert. Third, when the film presents a gag or a joke, audiences should not restrain themselves, and can feel free to burst out laughing, like in a live comedy show. Fourth, screening time is long, easily exceeding two hours, but in terms of the experience, it is more than twenty times more condensed, and two hundred times more interesting than a regular film. The point is that audiences should allow the rhythm and tempo of the film to sway them to rich (*ricchi na*) India. Fifth and last, after the screening is over, on the way home, the audience should stop by an Indian restaurant for curry, to complete the Indian experience.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, tickets to masala movies in Japan are often sold with a coupon with discounts (*waribiki*) for Indian restaurants. Because there are not many South Indian restaurants in Japan, most of the theaters collaborated with North Indian restaurants. Some theaters, however, were able to arrange South Indian bento (lunch box) for consumption during the screening.<sup>30</sup> At any rate, however, more than any other aspect, the most innovative factor that the pamphlet introduces with masala movies is its emphasis on audience participation.

Matsuoka had hinted at the possibility of more participation during screenings of popular Indian films, but she could not have anticipated how this element would expand. Although the *Muthu* pamphlet invites audiences to do more than appreciate the film quietly, it seems as if Japanese fans of Indian popular cinema have taken this invitation as an opportunity for further modes of engagement with one another, creating a collective action that renders the film and its cultural properties secondary. Online, through blogs and social media platforms, audience members share information about scheduled screenings, and prepare for these screenings like social events. Japanese fans prepare banners to cheer



Rajnikanth. They also make special sound cracker devices to heckle his enemies and other evil characters (see **Figure 7**).



**Figure 7:** This image appears on a fan's blog that details how to make this and other devices for a *masara jōei*, or a screening of a masala movie.<sup>31</sup> The word written on the cracker, *bukkurosu*, can be loosely translated as 'I'll kill you!'<sup>32</sup>

Some fans prepare in a more organized fashion, like those behind the event that some claim to be the first to introduce the 'masala system' in Japan: the 2003 'Rajni Summer Festival' that occurred in Osaka. The organizers screened *Baashha*, a 1995 film that was one of Rajnikanth's most popular films in Tamil Nadu, and grossed more in India than *Muthu*, which was released the same year. At the event, fans were able to purchase Rajni-related memorabilia such as this Rajni-shaped Daruma doll (see **Figure 8**).<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 8:** Rajni-shaped Daruma doll

In addition, fans sold more elaborate devices to use during screenings, including copies of the special yellow towel that Rajnikanth wears around his shoulders in *Baashha* (see **Figure 9**).



**Figure 9:** Osaka Rickshaw Association's yellow towels

The writing on the towels depicts the name of the group of fans in Osaka, the Osaka Rickshaw Association (see **Figures 10 and 11**).<sup>34</sup> This group and others use the towel as a scarf not just during screenings, but also when the groups meet to engage in non-film-related activities, such as traveling and visiting amusement parks.



**Figure 10:** The Osaka Rickshaw Association



**Figure 11:** The Rickshaw Gundan (corps)<sup>35</sup>



## **Anthropological Perspectives**

It is not surprising that fans are demonstrating growing creativity, socializing and manipulating their shared object of fandom. William Kelly writes that Japanese fan groups ‘fan-tasize’ the object they consume and he terms these fans excessive consumers (2004). This observation seems to easily fit the example of Japanese Indian film fans. Kelly identifies fans as aggressive appropriators, and the most brazen producers among consumers. Such fans know and care more about what they consume than average consumers, whereas their act of fandom is a type of serious play, as they seek intimacy with the object of their attention, whether as a group or as individuals (Kelly 2004, 2-10).

The same or similar attributes that Kelly numerates can be associated with the cult phenomenon around masala movies in Japan. One case that seems particularly relevant to the discussion here is Ian Condry’s essay on Japanese fans of hip-hip and rap music. Condry writes that these fans of American music in Japan form their own closed space ‘that generates its own cosmology of value,’ one that is meant for only them to inhabit (Condry 2004, 34). Thus, one might infer that forms of domestication, or the process through which foreign media content is interpreted in local terms, could occur in benign ways, without overt cultural appropriation. This notion of benign domestication might seem to clash with Kelly’s discussion of fans’ wishes for intimacy with the object of their fascination, as intimacy usually requires familiarity. However, due to the remoteness, both culturally and physically, between fans and the object of their consumption, one might explain both Condry’s example and the case of Rajni in Japan along similar lines of benign domestication.

Another way to explain the seemingly deep and collective appropriation of Indian cinematic culture in Japan is along the lines of a ‘natural’ communal interpretation that is restricted by local cultural circumstances, and media ecology. Such an idea infuses Mizuko Ito’s anthropological work on children’s media mixing in the consumption of the franchise *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Ito claims that fans of this multi-media text foster a mediated cultural space that is not indicative of ‘a decisive shift in technologies of the imagination’ but rather is emblematic of a rising generation, technologies, and practices, as well as an ‘increasingly transnational network of *otaku* media hackers’ (2007, 105-106).

Anthropological work in India too points to globalizing forces at play in media consumption, such as in Vamsee Juluri’s work on music television, in which she argues that the dichotomy between global and local in this context is unnecessary. Rather, he writes, consumption is more about a local ‘construction of a new sense of the ‘global’ under renewed conditions of modernization’ (Juluri 2003, 120). Following Malcolm Waters and Roland Robertson, Juluri associates the new sense of the global with universal consciousness and the political nature of globalization, or international economic networks that bring local consumers to imagine themselves as global citizens. In this light, the Japanese sense of an ‘India’ in the consumption of masala movies can be seen as constructed under the conditions of Japan’s own (late) modernism, particularly those set by the influences of international commercial networks.

Perhaps it is also possible to consider screenings of masala movies in Japan in the same way as screenings of films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Dir. Jim Sharman, 1975). Although quite distinct from this iconic cult film, the Japanese-created masala genre similarly feeds what Gina Marchetti calls subcultural pockets that allow audiences to hold an 'ironic position vis-à-vis the film[s'] narrative[s]' (1986, 71-72). Indeed, according to Horikawa Shingo, who is seemingly unaware of the growing fandom around masala movies in Japan, participatory screenings like those associated with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, are nearly impossible to find within Japan (2008, 159). There is thus room to speculate that Indian films fill a certain lacuna in the need for a participatory film experience. However, fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* did not choose the film randomly and, as Bruce A. Austin suggests, it is likely that the film's affinity with Susan Sontag's notion of Camp (or 'deliberate Camp') ushered in its cult following (1981, 44-45).

The problem in associating *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with South Indian cinema is, of course, the myriad cultural differences at play, as well the fact there are many differences between individual films within the masala category. For example, *Baashha* is much darker and more violent than *Muthu*, which was promoted as an 'ultra-happy' cinematic adventure, whereas the same distributors released *Ejamaan*<sup>36</sup> as *Muthu*'s sequel, promoting it as a tear-jerker.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, although I term the reception of Indian film in Japan as a cult, it is not a subcultural phenomenon, as mainstream television played a crucial role in popularizing, and perhaps even creating, the Japanese masala trend.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, unlike the ironic interpretation of works in areas where they have originally distributed as camp, any interpretation of mainstream, popular Indian films outside of India as such subcultural works, would necessarily rely on cultural differences, and ostensibly cultural superiority, as its basis.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, the Japanese masala phenomenon is not really about international cinema, or what Juluri calls a new sense of the global, but rather a localized sensation that frames a state of cultural isolation, and much less concern for the global. Saying this is not meant to place ethical judgment on the phenomenon, but it seems that unlike the subcultural groups that Marchetti discusses, who are able to appreciate, for example, exploitation films, in the reception of Kollywood in Japan, the audience does the exploitation. In fact, domestication of Indian cinema in Japan has recently expanded beyond films from this part of India. It is not surprising, and might even be expected, that Japanese audiences appreciate films from other parts of India, particularly Hindi-speaking films, in the same way they watch Tamil-speaking films starring Rajnikanth. After all, the term 'masala film' itself, according to Sangita Gopal and others, originated in Bollywood, the most well-known and most lucrative film industry in India (Gopal 2014, 115). However, the term *masara mūbī* has developed to designate a participatory mode of collective viewership. *Masara mūbī* now means an exhibition mechanism of any film, from any country or genre, as the following image from a television segment on the subject indicates (see **Figure 12**).



Figure 12: The large caption says: 'Really, a masala screening can be everything!!'<sup>39</sup>

### From Masala Movies to the Masala System

There are many examples of the extended use of the term masala in Japan as a type of screening mechanism. For instance, the distribution company Uplink released *Om shanti om* in the masala mode in areas such as Tokyo, Hyogo, and Hiroshima. Similarly, Suzuki Takashi of T-Joy distribution organized a special screaming (*zekkyō*) night show of *Hentai kamen* (literally, The Masked Pervert), a strange Japanese comedy-superhero action production.<sup>40</sup> An even more surprising example is the masala screening of the latest film version of the *Gāruzu ando pantsā* (Girls und Panzer) animated series, at the Tsukaguchi San San film theater in Amagasaki, which often screens Indian films (see Figure 13). The film and the television series showcase cute little girls who drive German World War II tanks. Like Nanbara's introduction before his *Nattu* film, the organizer of the event, Tomura Fumihiko, explains that he wanted to allow audiences the option to participate, rather than simply watch the film, like audiences in India who, he claims, sing and dance during film screenings.<sup>41</sup> The theater promoted this participatory event as a technological innovation, calling it a 4D screening and 'absolute cinema experience'.



Figure 13: An Image of the entrance to the San San film theater in Amagasaki during the time when it hosted the *Girls und Panzer* screening events.

This promotion was apparently a winning marketing strategy, as Tomura reports that all 300 tickets for the event were sold within two minutes. Journalist Kinuwa Shin'ichi repeats this claim and reports on other types of 'masala' screenings in Japan, such as *haassei kanō jōei* (screenings in which speaking is allowed), *ōen jōei* (cheering screenings) and 'sing along version.' In this way, he states, Japanese theaters have successfully screened a variety of films throughout 2016, including *Frozen* (English, Japanese, as well as mixed languages versions) and *Shin Godzilla*.<sup>42</sup> Fans on the Web also use other terms like 'live-concert screenings,' but all seem to originate in what fans, film theaters, distributors, and the media call a masala system, based on the premise that Indian audiences sing and dance during screenings.

Although there are blogs dedicated solely to the 'masala system,' as well Twitter<sup>43</sup> and Instagram accounts following the hashtag *#masara shisutemu*, there is no telling whether the definition of Rajnikanth or Kollywood fandom is flexible enough to include all types of films. That is, it is difficult to assess how many fans would equally enjoy a masala screening of a Hollywood, Bollywood, or local production. However, participatory screenings are usually limited to theaters that at least occasionally screen Indian films, and the concept applies to all these types of active screenings.

Although the 'masala system' has an emancipating potential, in the sense that it frees audiences from the dominance of the projected images and sounds, the idea of Indian filmgoers singing and dancing is a mere Japanese fantasy. Lakshmi Srinivas, who conducted an anthropological study on audiences at film theaters in India, does acknowledge that during screenings in India 'some [viewers] may even dance' (Srinivas 2016, 1). However, she does not indicate that there is any systematic way of watching films in India, nor that it is common for Indian audiences to sing, dance, or attend a screening as if it were a social, participatory event. Similarly, in other parts of the world, Indian film fandom does not seem to revolve around a participatory mode of engagement. For example, Giovanna Rampazzo conducted an ethnographical study on fans of Indian films, with a particular attention to South Indian ones, in Dublin, Ireland. She states that some screening events include servings of Indian food, songs, and dance. This is specifically the case during an annual event that she critically labels a 'boutique festival,' emphasizing its commercial, rather than cultural inclinations (Rampazzo 2016, 133-140). She also acknowledges that many fans study Bollywood dance, and that Indian dance is an important component of their fandom. However, there are at least three significant differences between the type of fandom she portrays, and the kind described above in Japan. First, in sharp contrast to the situation in Japan, Rampazzo's findings are limited to one urban area where there is a relatively large diasporic or immigrant community of South Indians. Members of this community are the main organizers of and participants in such screening events. Second, Rampazzo does not indicate that there is any unusual activity during the screenings of the films themselves. Rather, commercial and cultural activities take place before or after screenings. Third, she

does not mention any sort of migration of fans from Indian film to other film genres, or the creation of a mode of participation that can be labeled Indian or 'masala.'

It can still be the case that some Japanese fans of the 'masala system,' are not attuned to the cultural integrity of Indian cinema because they simply buy into a local commercial mechanism. After all, film distributors anywhere would occasionally use hyperbolic language or inaccuracies as means to attract potential consumers, which may result in a distorted image of the film they promote. Yet, notwithstanding how ignorant about Indian culture Japanese fans may be, or how crudely manipulative distributors and television producers may be, the overall reception of Indian popular cinema in Japan indicates how the local media environment can render global, trans-national or trans-cultural flows meaningless. From this perspective, 'masala system' reduces Indian cinema in Japan to an empty signifier to which a multitude of meanings can be attached. Moreover, in the reception of popular Indian film in Japan, a collective mode of appropriation is emphasized. Thus, despite the proliferation of smaller screenings, and the ever-growing number of easily accessible communication channels between individuals around the globe, it seems to be too early to translate these technological advantages into political progressiveness that promotes diversity and any recognition of other cultures on equal terms.

## Conclusion

The Japanese cult of Kollywood, and its later developments are a retroactive 'fan-aticized' production that strips a regional Indian cinema from its original meanings, and reimagines it as a Japanese mode of engagement on local terms. As an imagined system, the cult further grounds this mode of participation in a way that can mark it as shift in technologies of the imagination. Although the Japanese cult of Kollywood is, undoubtedly, a form of fandom that relies heavily on social media, its popularity derives also from older media forms such as television, and collective modes of watching films at theaters, while ignoring the original cultural elements that the films themselves feature. As such, the cult marks a local social phenomenon as much as it showcases an overtly *unsocial* attitude, at least from a global perspective.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the editors of this themed section, Jennifer Coates and one anonymous reader for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Actual box-office figures are difficult to obtain, but Matsuoka Tamaki states that the film's revenues exceeded 200,000,000 yen (2015, 178).

<sup>3</sup> The Japanese proper names in this paper follow the Japanese convention, with the surname placed before the given name.

<sup>4</sup> Again, it is difficult to obtain box-office figures, but given that ticket prices in Japan are much higher than in India, even a modest success there would make a film more profitable than it would have been otherwise. Kohli-Khandekar Vanita indicates that *Muthu* was the only Tamil speaking film that became an international success, and given that outside of India it was only distributed commercially in Japan, it is highly plausible that it indeed propagated more revenues in Japan than in India (Kohli-Khandekar 2010, 191).

<sup>5</sup> *Darshan* means seeing, particularly in the context of deity worship; the deity also sees the devotee. For more on the concept of *darshan* in the context of cinema see, for example, Rachel Dewyer's discussion in *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (2006, 19).

<sup>6</sup> On the celebrity branding associated with the star, see, for example: Subhadip Roy's 'An Exploratory Study in Celebrity Endorsements' (2006, 139-153).

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison between the two stars see: S. Rajanayagam's *Popular Cinema and Politics in South India: The Films of MGR and Rajinikanth* (2015, 194-195).

<sup>8</sup> See also, for example, the *New York Times* article from August 17, 2016, 'Stardom in India Has Its Price: Thousands of Gallons of Milk.'

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the centuries-long religious tradition in the West, academics trace the Japanese creation of the term 'religion' to the nineteenth century. See, for example: Jason Ananda Josephson's *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (2012).

<sup>10</sup> I follow Matt Hills and do not differentiate between discourses on Rajinikanth and Indian popular cinema in Japan, because I consider them part of the same phenomenon. See, Hills (2013, 21-35).

<sup>11</sup> The idea seems to be quite similar to Punathambekar's notion of a global Bollywood fan. Like the range she describes between rowdiness and *rasika*, Jenkins describes a 'thin line between dilettantism and connoisseurship, between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture, between assertion of mastery and surrender to cultural difference' (Jenkins 2006, 164). Interestingly, one of the best examples of this type of fandom that Jenkins mentions is the Japanese special form of fandom, *otaku*. Jenkins also mentions American consumers of Japanese media content, particularly animation.

<sup>12</sup> For example, he discusses some fandom of the TV show *Quantum Leap* as social activity and refers to some fans of the comedy-drama series *Frank's Place* as fan 'activists' (Jenkins 1992, 157, 131).

<sup>13</sup> This is also a long-held theoretical position that is associated with the literary movement known as the 'New Critics,' and with theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, Michel de Certeau, Stanley Fish, as well as with Jacques Rancière, and Henry Jenkins specifically in film or media studies.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike Appadurai's famous concept 'mediascape' (1996, 35-36) that refers to mobility of culturally produced images around the globe, my attention is given primarily to the individual groups who make sense of such images.

<sup>15</sup> *Mono* literally means a 'thing,' and in the past the word categorized types of Kabuki plays. With the rise in popularity of cinema in the prewar years, studios and critics used the term to advertise and discuss certain common tropes in films; most famous, probably, are *haha-mono* or mother films (Wada-Marciano 2008, 44, 139). *Ajia kyōdai*, one of Japan's most prominent online retailers specializing in Asian films, sells Meena films on DVD as *Mīna-mono*. See:

<http://asiabros.jp/movie/ind/meena01.html>

<sup>16</sup> Edoki also used the phrase ‘ultra-happy’ as a slogan on some of the film’s promotional material.

<sup>17</sup> Again, box-office figures are difficult to obtain, particularly in this case because, as Matsuoka writes, the film’s distributors, Anpuragudo, released different versions of it, including one dubbed in Hindi, a shorter versions, as well as the original Tamil one (2015, 179).

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Yamashita for generously sharing his work with me.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Motion Pictures Producers Association of Japan, the film was the second most profitable Japanese production of the year, during an era when foreign production dominated the local film market. See: <http://www.eiren.org/toukei/1996.html>

<sup>20</sup> One might single out song sequences in *Muthu* as the cinematic textual quality that initially attracted audiences. This is undoubtedly true, but it does not explain why audiences chose *Muthu* over the few other popular Indian films circulated in Japan previously, and why many other films sharing similar qualities did not become as popular afterwards.

<sup>21</sup> The term does not necessarily refer to a vulgar or devalued practice. In fact, the word derives from the Noh Theater, which scholars consider among the most dedicated premodern art forms in contemporary Japan.

<sup>22</sup> The official name of the program is *Ucchan Nanchan no Urinari!!*, but it is commonly known simply as *Urinari*. The longer title references its two hosts, Ucchan (Uchimura Teruyoshi) and Nanchan (Nanbara Kiyotaka).

<sup>23</sup> The program introduces the song as Rajinikanth’s, but S. P. Balasubrahmanyam sang it in the film.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Indian Express*, September, 7, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Telop is an abbreviation for television opaque projector, and refers to all form of textual and graphics superimposed on small screens (Maree 2015, 171-175).

<sup>26</sup> Credited as Nanami Kyōya, a comical name that uses the Chinese character for ‘crazy.’

<sup>27</sup> The auditions for *Nattu*, as well as its live performance cast, occurred on a special *Urinari* program. For these auditions, regular participants on the TV program competed amongst themselves in a variety of strange contests, including one in which the winner consumed the largest quantity of extremely spicy curry the fastest.

<sup>28</sup> During kabuki performances, some devoted fans, known as *omuko-san*, occasionally voice their opinion aloud in what is called *kakegoe*. However, their appreciation and criticism are actually meant to be heard by either the performers or the theater’s management (Raz 1983, 223–224).

<sup>29</sup> My translation of the pamphlet distributed around the time of the film’s release.

<sup>30</sup> For example, organizers of a special new screening of *Muthu* December 21, 2013 in Amagasaki, Hyōgo prefecture arranged a South Indian bento.

<sup>31</sup> See: <http://osolove.exblog.jp/18933048/>.

<sup>32</sup> This blog, like many other of its kind, is easily accessible on the web through simple search.

<sup>33</sup> Daruma dolls were originally made to represent Bodhidharma.

<sup>34</sup> In *Baashha*, Rajni is a former gangster who drives a rickshaw. A member of the Hokkaido group of Indian popular film who runs the blog *Kita no masara* (*masala* of the North) provided these images. See: [http://www.hokt.jp/indo/raini/raini\\_festa02.html](http://www.hokt.jp/indo/raini/raini_festa02.html).

<sup>35</sup> These images appear on a Rajinikanth fan blog: <http://www.rajini.jp/b-kiroku.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Released in Japan in 1999 as *Yajaman: Odoru Maharaja 2*, or the Dancing Maharaja 2.

<sup>37</sup> The *chirashi* (pamphlet) of the film announced: ‘Sorry for keeping you waiting! This time [the film] will make you cry,’ and ‘prepare your handkerchiefs, and for a spectacle that plays tears and anger on a dance of love and sadness.’

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<sup>38</sup> While it may seem that mainstream television and any cult phenomena are opposites, as Matt Hills points out, fan activity can make the two ‘interpenetrate’ (2010, 69).

<sup>39</sup> The image is taken from a segment known as *Maru toku zip* of a local Kansai television channel’s morning show, *Asa nama waidō su matan*, aired on December 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Reported by Ishimimori Yūta for the Nikkei on October 9, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> See: <http://news.nicovideo.jp/watch/nw2079223>.

<sup>42</sup> See: <http://www.oricon.co.jp/special/49355/>.

<sup>43</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/masalasys>. This hashtag is associated also with a Facebook account of the *Masara jōei* fan club.