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Talking Film Icons, Understanding Society

By: Shrayana Bhattacharya

What can social science researchers discover if they stepped out of rigid frameworks of understanding deprivation and asked 'subjects' about their joys and pleasures?

In 2006, I was in my early twenties, and a devoted member of the 'Survey-Wali Didi' tribe. After completing my master's in development studies with a specialisation in intra-household economics and gender relations, I had found a pulpit for my inner zealot at a feminist think-tank, conducting action-research into the lives of women working in ad-hoc and poorly paid jobs.

My first project aimed to collect data on home-based workers in the informal economy. 'Home-based work' was a catch-all phrase for those engaged in paid jobs within their own homes. Our findings would be used to make the risks and working conditions of such workers more visible.

Upon reaching our first research site, in Ahmedabad, my enthusiasm to administer a traditional survey questionnaire met the ennui and eye-rolls of the women I was supposed to interview. They were thoroughly disinterested, even tired, in answering the same old questions on wages and working conditions.

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Like many students of development, I was academically groomed into the cult of the survey: to find the 'field,' produce 'rigorous research', and urge 'policy-makers' to reassess interventions. But these communities of women workers did not need a survey by outsiders for advocacy. They were fighting for their rights every day. They had actively unionised and themselves had conducted a survey on wages and hours of work. Yet their findings, even when presented to government officials and partner NGOs, had not yielded tighter regulations or improved their earnings.

"You ask these questions and think it is useful. It really is not," one of the women told me. "Why do you ask questions when we all already know the answers will not help?"

These utterances were made with bemused boredom, without any hostility. To ease conversation and help us go through the motions of our survey questionnaire, we decided to take a recess from the formal research and started talking about our favourite film stars. Suddenly, many women began giggling. The tone and texture of the conversations opened up.

I would notice this same shift in energy across the various other places I went to do "fieldwork," from Ahmedabad to Uttar Pradesh. I did not know it back then, but this accidental atmosphere of joy and fun triggered by the mention of actor Shah Rukh Khan would introduce me to a set of women I would follow for most of my adult life.

What fandom can tell us

In November 2021, my book, *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh*, was published. I used Khan's icon as a research framework to highlight what social science might discover if we asked our "subjects" about their joys and pleasures, as opposed to approaching them from the rigid framework of understanding deprivation alone.

The book's title often engenders the refrain: "Is it a serious book? Is it erotic fan-fiction?" After a decade of following several women to see how they usher social change in their families and immediate environments by simply seeking fun and economic independence, I must confess that it would have been dishonest not to highlight the role a popular film icon played in the fieldwork process and in eliciting enthusiastic participation from respondents. In the years since I unknowingly began the research that culminated in the book, for the women I've followed and chronicled, the ability to watch a movie star was an easier way for them to catalogue and discuss their difficulties in finding jobs and financial independence. Talk of fun and leisure consumption would eventually lead to discussions on exclusion, social discrimination and economic precarity. After all, the fandom for Khan required women to be able to access markets, money, mobile-phones, and media to watch his interviews, songs, and films.

Popular cinema allowed many women to openly discuss their belief systems, experiences, and philosophies. In telling me about why they loved Khan's imagery, the women told me about how he had become a spiritual timeout from the alienation, rational trade-offs, and determinism of modern life. His songs and scenes provided respite when the world did not feel human, when these women felt disposable. When families and workplaces refused to treat women as people with desires and rights. When love became a chore. A break when practising accountability in intimate interactions felt lonesome. When the moral burden of propelling social change within their immediate relationships became too taxing or lonely-making.

> A tapestry of encounters […] allowed me to explore how leisure, fandom, and fantasy help ordinary women navigate discrimination and loneliness in modern India.

Much of the data on gender-gaps is well known, and there are enough platitudes and lip-service paid to women's rights in general discourse. Instead of anchoring the book in a more straightforward way in gender and society, I decided to use fandom for actor Shah Rukh Khan as a prism to explore the voices and stories of women. I wanted specialists and non-specialist readers to grasp the tears, triumphs and textures hidden behind the depressing aggregate statistics on women's employment; to make some of the dense academic literature more accessible to those afraid of numbers and economics; to explore how notions of love were mediating economic outcomes; to unpack how each one of us can help shift gender norms to a better equilibrium through scrutinising our own everyday intimate inter-personal behaviours.

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

(The Field, *by Mark Strand*)

When I say I "followed" a set of women, I wish to clarify that this was no ethnography, no product of constant immersion. I don't claim to exhaustively document and dissect the everyday lives of the women I met. My stories rely on all that I perceived and gleaned from 15 years of conversations, eavesdropping, phone calls, film screenings, weddings, watching women love and labour—a tapestry of encounters that allowed me to explore how leisure, fandom, and fantasy help ordinary women navigate discrimination and loneliness in modern India.

Through the several years that I managed to remain in contact with the various women featured in the book, I never asked direct questions about their income or economic freedoms. Instead, I talked to them about their favourite actor—his annual film releases and how difficult it was for many of these women to watch these movies with their own money in safe and inclusive spaces—to document stories of how much women must struggle in our country to claim their fun and pleasure.

In writing about the labours and loves of others, I adhered to facts where available (chronology, dates, wages) and where respondents felt comfortable sharing these. It took a considerable period to retrace some of the women and read or narrate translated versions of our conversations to ensure their privacy and identities were well protected.

For several women who were uncomfortable being identified, I incorporated changes they suggested and used fictional composites. One woman, who chose to use the pseudonym Manju, could participate in the book only after her in-laws agreed she could share her story. Such is the sorry state of women's freedoms in India that women need in-laws to sign off on sharing their narratives.

Leaning into the idea of a movie star as a research tool to understand women's lives better helped collapse the divide between the 'field' and myself. The process made me acutely aware of how much more difficult it was to study the elite than the marginalized. This insight pushed me to be more reciprocal in the text – to only ask questions that I would also answer for myself in the book. I realised that my own life was as much a field of study as the poor neighbourhoods I was sent to survey. I decided to include my own story in the book and broaden the socio-economic scope of the research to include elite upper-caste women.

The street outside Khan's home, Mannat, on Bandstand became the field. Posh drawing rooms became the field. My local café and bars became the field. I studied myself and my dear ones, as much as I studied strangers.

The virtues of meandering

What did my research teach me about fieldwork?

First, remarkable stories lie in seemingly banal spaces that we may usually discard in the research process. Most social scientists conducting fieldwork have probably encountered film icons during their research, and we may think there is not much value in studying fandom for popular movie-stars. I decided to pay attention to the conversations that were not considered necessarily "useful" in research on women's labour.

> The banal popularity of a Hindi filmstar created an unusual set of shared metaphors, concepts and idioms across deeply different classes and communities.

By following this path, I spent more than a decade talking to a diverse cohort of women about a movie star. His images were ubiquitous in mass culture; his popularity was a bygone conclusion. However, each woman I met experienced his imagery uniquely. While Bollywood may seem frivolous and trivial to the high-minded, through these conversations I realised how the banal popularity of a Hindi film star created an unusual set of shared metaphors, concepts and idioms across deeply different classes and communities. Khan's filmography marked important milestones (marriage, festivals, exams, job interviews, episodes of violence) in the lives of the women I interviewed; these women turned to Khan's films during critical moments in their lives. Such an indirect research approach—where I relied on an actor's filmography to create a timeline of each woman's trajectory—helped capture oral histories in a more tactful and effective manner.

Second, the tools and techniques of social science survey research—particularly the variant deployed in development and policymaking— tend to socialise students into entering the lives of others through the narrow prism of a "research question." We end up forcing all conversations to focus on a rigid framework. We might be better able to capture people's voices, aspirations, and experiences if we allowed them to go 'off-topic' and meander with them, like I did by accidentally meandering into discussing Khan.

Third, the only reason I was able to implement this unusual research design was because I could afford to waste time. Talking to people about their lives and a film star takes time. This sort of dialogue risks reaching a dead-end. I could afford to take these risks: I held a day job with certainty of pay and social security benefits.

These are privileges most survey investigators or student researchers do not possess in our resource-starved research ecosystem. Often, surveyors are paid through piece rates and have limited social insurance if they face accidents or need to manage contingencies. Imagine the depth and quality of research we could produce if survey teams felt psychologically assured that they could indulge in 'time-pass' while talking to communities and explore unusual patterns in these conversations.

Beyond 'data collection'

Over the years, I became a node in a large sisterhood of Shah Rukh fangirls. Some of these women were close friends; others were colleagues, clients, and mentors. I met fans at airports and malls, befriending them through swapping fan tales. Others I pursued as research subjects to better understand their fandom. Their stories comforted me. And I collected them, meticulously writing up life histories and episodes as diary notes. I owe the deepest debt to the scholars who offered feedback and the women who allowed me to enter their lives, however briefly.

In a country as divided as India, I am grateful that fandom and fun allowed me a window into the lives of women so very different from myself, and that an actor offered us a topic of mutual learning and interest. I am obliged that all talk of a film icon liberated me from a researcher's extractive gaze of 'data collection'; that his films and songs allowed me to look at the lives of women through the prism of pleasure and joy, as opposed to deprivation and poverty exclusively.

I may have no robust answers or theories, but I've learned to ask better questions. I understand my place in the field better, and I see the field more clearly.

(Sections of the piece draw on text from the author's book.)

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